

THRIVING

A JOURNAL OF WELL-BEING from
MARGARET HOOD BLACK, MA, LPC
 Licensed Professional Counselor
 Adolescent, Adult, Family & Marriage Counseling
 713-562-7819

Your Story and You

When we think of "story," we tend to think of three bears, a girl with loathsome stepsisters, or the latest novel we've read.

Seeing your life as being made up of stories that are every bit as interesting and meaningful as any published work is a powerful way to recognize the significance of your life. It also can help awaken you to the false stories you tell yourself about yourself.

Jim Loehr, author of *The Power of Story: Rewrite Your Destiny in Business and in Life*, says the success of our lives is at stake: the stories we tell ourselves about our work, relationships, accomplishments and shortcomings become our destiny. Thus, it's important that we bring the core stories of our lives to consciousness.

"Your story is your life," Loehr says.

We tell stories to ourselves about being powerful and deserving, about being capable and in control, and we also tell them about being a victim or worthless or powerless. We tell them to ourselves for a day, a month or a lifetime. Far too many of our stories undermine us. See if you recognize yourself in any of these dark tales:

- Life is supposed to be hard.
- Marriage gets dull after a while; I just have to live with it.
- Who am I to expect attention?
- I can't trust men.
- I can't trust women.
- It doesn't matter how hard I work. I'll never get ahead.
- Life is easier if I don't make waves.
- It's normal to feel a little run down at my age.
- Dreams are for people with money.

Those "stories" don't really serve us. And we don't actually know that they are absolutely, without exception, true.

If the story you've been telling isn't serving you, perhaps your story needs some rewriting. Here are a few exercises to facilitate awareness of the stories that shape your life, and to diminish the influence of stories that work against you:

Discover your core stories.

Explore how you see yourself in five areas: Work, Family, Health, Money, and Love. Write a page on each subject. How do you feel about this area of your life? What did you learn as a child? Does the story you tell in one area sabotage your values and beliefs in another?

Discover what you have learned from the stories of your life.

Divide a piece of paper into two columns. On the left, list significant stories—your version of events that occurred—from all stages of your life. In the right-hand column, write a brief description of what you learned or decided as a result of that experience.

Heal past experiences by transforming the story.

Choose a difficult incident from your childhood, or one that prompted you to form an unhelpful belief, and write it down. What happened? How did you feel? Now, rewrite that story with a different ending. Be imaginative. Any outcome is possible.

Seeing your life as a story is a powerful way to emotionally connect with your experiences. And when you recognize that the negative stories you tell yourself can be altered, you have the power to improve your life. *

10 Ways to Plan to Thrive During the Holidays

If you start now to look at what you want, you may be able to thrive during the holidays. Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Plan ahead.** Don't be at the mercy of the season. Decide what YOU want your holiday experience to look like, and make necessary arrangements now.
- 2. Make gifts this year.** It'll help you not over-spend, and handmade gifts are almost always more appreciated.
- 3. Set a financial budget.** Start shopping sales now to get better prices—including for the supplies for your handmade gifts.
- 4. Set a time budget.** How much time will you need for shopping or making gifts? For holiday baking or family visits? Schedule more time than you think you need.
- 5. Get creative.** Think of new things to do while the kids are at home or different ways to arrange childcare (swap with friends?).
- 6. Build in self-care.** Whatever helps you, do it. Everything works better when you feel better.
- 7. Scratch off to-do items.** This isn't about completing tasks on your to-do list. Take tasks OFF your list! Prioritize.
- 8. Keep communications open with your loved ones.** Consider weekly meetings to talk things through.
- 9. Exercise.** Start now to develop a plan so that it's a habit when the holidays actually hit.
- 10. Consider alternatives.** If family gatherings cause anxiety, do something different! Make your plans well in advance. *

A Letter From

Margaret Hood Black



We all have stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and about life in general. These stories were often formed from childhood experiences. Too often, the story we tell ourselves is negative, such as a person whose parents struggled telling herself as an adult that life is supposed to be hard.

That person may never consider the validity of what she's telling herself, and, as the cover article explores, may not even be aware of what that story is. To help you uncover your core stories, the article offers exercises, which also help you discover what you've learned from your stories and how you might transform them.

The past can lay a big claim on the present, keeping us locked into old patterns and preventing us from having the kind of life we want and deserve. Letting go of the past, however, is much easier said than done, so the article on page 3 offers several exercises for letting go of people, places and ideas that no longer serve you.

Also in this issue are 10 ways to thrive during the holidays, as well as the quiz, which asks how well you handle anxiety. Finally, on page 4, is an article about how to recognize and manage mild depression.

Enjoy this issue of the newsletter. If you have questions about any of the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

May this season bring you raised awareness, more freedom within and more nourishing self-care.

How Well Do You Handle Anxiety?



Anxiety is different than fear but is related to it. Fear is a feeling of tension that is associated with a known source of danger. Anxiety is also a feeling of tension, but in this case, the danger or the threat of danger is unknown. Anxiety is often anticipatory—worrying about the future. Without apparent reason, a person may worry about the success of their business or fret over the health and well-being of a child or feel apprehensive about their own health.

Physical symptoms can include trembling or shakiness, clammy hands, dry mouth, sweating, shortness of breath, nightmares, night terrors and

insomnia, frequent urination and heart palpitations.

Mild anxiety is normal in our daily lives and can be eased with some basic tools. Answer the following questions to find out how well you use some of these tools.

True False

- 1. When I feel anxious, I take deep breaths to ground myself and calm myself down.
- 2. To ease some of the tension, I relax my body and physically release the tightness in my shoulders, neck, arms and chest.
- 3. I vent my feelings of anxiety by writing or talking to someone. This helps get the strong emotions off my chest and out of my body.
- 4. I channel the tension into some kind of physical activity like walking or sweeping the floor, doing the dishes or watering the yard.
- 5. I get a reality check by talking to someone I trust about my reasoning or thinking or the conclusions I've come to.
- 6. If I know I'm going to be in an anxiety-producing situation, I plan through how I will handle it; I get myself ready.
- 7. I watch how others get through stressful situations and model them; I ask questions about the best way to handle situations or events or people.
- 8. When the same anxiety comes up over and over, I log and assess possible causes and solutions.
- 9. When it doesn't interfere with my normal life, I generally try to avoid people, places and events that I know will produce anxiety.
- 10. Sometimes, when I have to face a situation that I know will cause anxiety, I take someone with me.
- 11. I face and take responsibility for problems and commit to a plan of action, rather than avoiding, denying, minimizing or blaming.
- 12. I nurture a positive attitude.
- 13. I seek support from friends, counselors, self-help groups, etc.

Anxiety is a normal emotion that most people experience during the course of their daily lives. Some of it is healthy and can motivate us to get the hard things done. However, more intense feelings of anxiety are emotionally painful and can interfere with a person's daily functioning. If you answered false to several of these and/or if you're concerned about your feelings of fear and anxiety, please don't hesitate to call. *

Letting Go. Great Idea. How Do I Do It?

Hot shot kid in a too-fast car cut you off this morning; it's noon and you're still seething?

Clerk at the grocery store wouldn't let you in his express line because the guy behind you ratted on your 11th item?

Husband had an affair 15 years ago and even though you've been divorced for seven, your stomach still knots up when you think about it?

You moved to a new city for a great career opportunity but long so for your old home and friends that you can't find anything to like about the new place?

Your son stays home to care for the kids while your daughter-in-law works at her law practice and this just doesn't seem right to you?

You know you should let it all go and you try, but there it is, that same old stuff still getting rent-free space in your head.

Just exactly how does one let go so that the residue of the past is put away, forgotten or transformed into memories that can be called upon at will rather than those that show up like telephone solicitors at dinnertime and demand attention?

Letting go has to do with living in the present moment rather than the past. It happens when the past isn't projected into the future, but is left behind where it belongs. It is about making amends when called for, taking care of that which needs attending to, forgiving rather than re-living.

- Try this: next time a thought about something that happened in the past floats into your mind let it pass through without jumping aboard and going along for the ride. If you focus on it, like a weed that gets watered, it will grow. But if you acknowledge it and then disregard it, it will go away.

- However, if the thought that comes along is about something that's left undone, you may need to take some action before you can let go. Make amends to someone, clear up some misunderstanding, write a letter or make a phone call. Maybe you need to make a list and set some goals. Begin with some small, manageable step of a larger problem or situation.

Whatever you must do, begin it. Taking action sometimes precedes letting go.

- Stay in the now and be where you are. Create a supportive environment with what you have. Make a gratitude list of what you like about wherever you are, not just your living arrangements, but other parts of your life, too. Get rid of what doesn't fit and give yourself space to be.

- Write letters that you may or may not send to people you need to let go of. (Caution: if you have any doubts about the appropriateness of the letter, always wait a few days and check with someone you trust.) Write unsent letters to places, events, and situations or to people who have passed away. Write what you feel, say what you need, and say goodbye.

- Let go by putting away pictures, memorabilia, clothes, gifts and anything else that keeps you actively connected with someone who's no longer with you and whose presence you keep alive when it would be more beneficial to move on.

- Make a ceremony of letting go. Burn old letters or journals. Dig a hole and bury what needs to be buried. Or send it away on a receding tide or on a flowing stream. Write a letter or vow for the occasion, read it aloud. Light candles, sing songs, burn sage. Weep. Include others in your ceremony to witness or assist you.

- Let go of old ideas by getting information about what's new or different. People, lifestyles and cultures change. Talk to others, get other perspectives. Focus on what's good with change, find ways it benefits you and others. Holding on to how it used to be keeps you from participating in the present.

- Release thoughts and words that categorize people, that measure or evaluate or that judge or condemn or hold with expectations. Eliminate words like should, ought, can't, if only, however and impossible.

Gerald Jampolsky, M.D., author of *Love is Letting Go of Fear*, wrote, "When we cherish or hold onto grievances, we cannot let go. We become imprisoned." Perhaps the highest level of letting go is to practice forgiveness. *



When Depression is Mild



At some time, nearly every person experiences feelings of depression—sadness, discouragement, the blues. These are common, normal feelings that come and go—mild depressions that can be seasonal or event-related.

Depression becomes an illness when symptoms intensify and persist over an extended period of time.

Depression can be treated; however, nearly two-thirds of depressed people don't get appropriate treatment. Even with all we know, some still believe depression is a personal fault or weakness, and that the person who is suffering could just "snap out of it" if he or she wanted to.

Like with other illnesses, denial that anything is wrong may be one reason help is not sought. Other times people don't seek help because they don't recognize the symptoms.

Following are some common characteristics of depression and some dos and don'ts if you or someone you care about is experiencing mild depression.

Some Symptoms of Depression

- **Persistent sad or "empty" feelings**, feeling discouraged, blue or down.

- **Negative feelings**—feeling guilty, unworthy. Self-criticism, self-blame.
- **Loss of interest in ordinary activities.**
- **Decreased energy**, feeling fatigued, restless, irritable or lethargic.
- **Increase of sleep or insomnia.**
- **Loss of interest in sex.**
- **Changes in appetite**—eating more or less, gaining or losing weight.

If symptoms persist and the following additional symptoms appear, then professional help is needed.

- **Difficulty concentrating**, remembering, making decisions.
- Excessive weeping or crying.
- Thoughts of suicide or death.
- Persistent physical symptoms such as headaches, chronic pain, digestive disorders.

When Depression Is Mild, What Should a Person Do?

Try to be with supportive, understanding people. Do those recreational activities that you have always liked. Participate in social activities or community gatherings. Exercise is helpful—go for walks, work in the yard, plant some flowers.

Also, break large tasks into smaller ones; set priorities. Only do what

you can and check your expectations of yourself. Talk about how you're feeling with friends, family and your therapist.

What Should a Person with Depression *Not* Do?

- Don't isolate or hide out.
- Don't set difficult goals or take on too much responsibility.
- Don't expect too much of yourself.
- Don't set yourself up for disappointment or failure.
- Don't make major life decisions—changing jobs, getting married or divorced—without first consulting with others who know you well and have a more objective view of your situation.
- Don't expect to suddenly get over the depression. Most likely, feeling better will happen gradually.
- Don't accept negative thinking and feelings as reflecting your true situation.

If you're experiencing mild depression, keep hope. With time and treatment, if necessary, the symptoms will dissipate. You will come back to yourself. *

For more information on her services, please feel free to call: 713-562-7819.

Margaret is a Licensed Professional Counselor and psychotherapist. Margaret provides couple, individual and group therapy. In addition to working with adolescents and young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues. Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 & SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellaire (Galleria Area).

713-562-7819

Kingwood, TX 77325

P.O. Box 5731

Licensed Professional Counselor

Margaret Hood Black, MA, LPC