

## From Powerlessness to True Personal Power

Carla can't leave her work as a university professor, work that she now finds unfulfilling, because she'll lose her tenure. Her thought: "I have no control over the system."

Manuel's co-worker doesn't take feedback well, so Manuel works at home each night "cleaning up" the co-worker's projects so their unit will look better. His thought: "I can't control how other people are."

Henrietta wants to be promoted to senior management but has been told she doesn't have what it takes to make the leap. Her thought: "I can't control what others think of me."

It's true. It's not possible to control a system, another person's behavior or others' impressions. But that doesn't mean either that Carla, Manuel or Henrietta have no control over their situation. What they—and we—can control ultimately has more power to affect a situation than any control we might try to exert over others.

Consider the power available to us when we pay attention to these areas—things we can actually do something about:

**Our words.** Spoken or written, the words we choose impact our lives and the lives of others. Manuel, for example, could learn ways to approach his colleague that stand a better chance of being heard. (Consider reading *Non-Violent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg or *Taking the War Out of Our Words* by Sharon Ellison.) His cover-up does the co-worker no good, and eats away Manuel's alone time with his wife.

**Our beliefs.** We can always change our beliefs. Carla, for example, might want to examine her belief that the only way she can feel financially

secure is to have tenure. Or her belief that doing something else that is fulfilling and stimulating won't provide well enough for her.

**Our actions.** We alone are responsible for what we do. Henrietta, for example, can find out exactly what leadership and/or managerial qualities her superiors think she lacks. She can take courses to learn skills. She can work with a coach to bring out leadership qualities or to look at other work possibilities.

**Our values.** What's important to us is our call. No one else can tell us what to value. Where we truly tap into power is when we align our values with our actions.

**Our work.** Although many of us complain of being stuck in a job or profession, we DO get to choose what our work in the world is. If yours is chronically unfulfilling, begin exploring your options.

**Our friends.** Those we associate with say a lot about what we think about ourselves. We can choose to have friends who support us and who mirror our best qualities or who bring us down.

**Our time.** Though it sometimes feels as though we have no choice, we do choose every day how we will use the 24 hours that a day gives us.

**Our basic health.** While we cannot control our genetic make-up, we can choose to exercise, sleep enough, eat healthy food, get routine check-ups.

The bottom line is: we are more powerful than we might believe. If you'd like to explore how to rediscover the personal power that is yours, don't hesitate to call. \*

## 10 Tips to Thrive Despite Tension During Family Get-Togethers

*Family gatherings are not always roses and cotton candy. For some families, they're masked balls, with everyone straining to maintain a façade of harmony. For others, they're Wild West shootouts. Try some of these tips, if your family get-togethers are tense.*

- 1. Make a pro-and-con list.** Clear your head, find a calm moment and decide whether it is best for you to go.
- 2. Consider smaller portions.** Plan your visit for only appetizers or dessert.
- 3. Educate yourself.** Seek information on the issues or dynamics that tend to come up in your family.
- 4. Dig deeper.** How do you contribute to the tension? Can you adjust your understanding of other points of view?
- 5. Seek to understand.** Get to the heart of things by asking questions in a relaxed, open, non-defensive way. Focus on the questions.
- 6. Be prepared.** Holiday-related emotions may arrive early. Recognizing the source can help you deal with them more effectively.
- 7. Take care of yourself.** If the atmosphere isn't safe, leave. Gather with friends, do volunteer work or pamper yourself.
- 8. Call a friend.** Debrief after the visit with someone you trust.
- 9. Be patient.** Real change—in you and in your family—takes time.
- 10. Be gracious.** Aim for maturity and compassion in dealing with family situations. \*

## A Letter From

*Margaret Hood Black*



In today's world, it's not hard to feel like you have no power to control or affect a situation. This issue's cover story suggests areas in which we DO have control. Consider the power that is available when you pay attention to these topics.

One such area is how you show up at family gatherings. Even the healthiest families generate their own brand of tension. This issue's Top 10 suggests ways to deal with tense family gatherings that will keep you in control of your own emotions and reactions.

The quiz this issue provides some direction in assessing the difference between sincere caring for others and caretaking, in which we take inappropriate responsibility for others' emotions and actions.

Meanwhile, the page 3 feature explores the topic of envy. Rather than compare ourselves to our own goals, many of us get stuck comparing ourselves to others, and this results in envy. But this green-eyed monster is actually telling us something important about ourselves, and we would do well to listen to it.

Finally, the back page article shows us how to cultivate an attitude of gratitude in our families, which helps all of us slow down and notice our bounty.

As always, the content of this newsletter is intended to provide food for thought along with some tools to help you build your sense of personal empowerment.

Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like more information about any of these articles, or if you have any questions.

## Are You Being of Service or Is There a Hidden Payoff?

On the outside, taking care of children, spouses, friends or parents seems to be an act of service. But did you know that true service includes drawing appropriate boundaries, taking your own needs into consideration and knowing when to say no?

What's often mistaken for caregiving is what's known as "caretaking." This is more about rescuing and taking inappropriate responsibility for others' emotions and actions.

The difference is in the intention. If there are "payoffs" — even subtle ones — it could be caretaking. For example, caretaking may help you relieve guilt, feel better about yourself, or get attention or validation. But caretaking can also result in resentments, emotional and physical depletion, and/or feeling disconnected from your inner self. Take this quiz to discover how much caretaking you do.



### True False

- 1. I feel safer when giving rather than receiving.
- 2. I am "on call" to friends with problems at any hour of the day or night.
- 3. I'm great at being nurturing and compassionate with others, but not so great at giving it to myself.
- 4. I feel responsible for others' thoughts, feelings, behaviors, problems, choices, well-being, health and destiny.
- 5. It's more important to me to please others than to please myself.
- 6. I hate to see people feeling sad or angry or jealous; I try to fix the situation so that they don't feel bad any more.
- 7. I prefer to focus on the needs of others; if I focus on my own emotions and needs, I feel selfish and afraid that the other person won't want to be around me.
- 8. I take care of other people by fixing their flaws for them. I just want to help them be the best they can be.
- 9. I feel unappreciated much of the time. I give and give and give, and no one ever notices or gives anything back.
- 10. I feel controlled by the needs of others, yet my needs are never met.
- 11. I often give unsolicited advice. I really want to help others see the light.
- 12. I give away my energy to others in order to be loved and accepted.
- 13. I see other people as the source of my problems.
- 14. I don't really know what I need and want—but I always know what other people need, want and should do.
- 15. I'm often exhausted from taking care of everyone around me.
- 16. I've always been the Giver in my relationships.

It can be hard to differentiate between helping that truly helps and helping that actually harms. But you can still love people without needing to fix them. More True answers than False may indicate that you need support with self-care. If you have questions about caretaking or any other matter, please don't hesitate to call. \*

## Facing the Green-Eyed Monster: Learning from Envy

As Jordan's classmate was excitedly telling of his winning soccer goal over the weekend, Jordan interrupted to describe a movie he'd just seen—without even acknowledging his classmate's joyful report.

When Wesley's neighbor drove up with a new Mercedes sports car, Wesley suddenly felt "less than." *Spoiled little inheritance baby*, William thought. *At least I work for my money.*

Felicia pretended to be happy for her friend—who had just landed a lucrative book publishing contract and had a new boyfriend—but inside she fumed, ticking off all the reasons her friend didn't deserve it.

Envy isn't pretty, is it?

Even on a good day, news of someone else's good fortune can send us spiraling into a pit of bitter—though silent—accusations and weak self-righteousness. It poisons our confidence and undermines our sense of worth. Given enough energy, envy can balloon into outright hate.

But facing this green-eyed monster without flinching can tell you powerful things about yourself—what you really want, what needs to change and what you need to let go. Envy is information. It shows us the good we thirst for and points out our mistaken belief that good is out of our reach.

"It's really our getting mad at ourselves," says Debrena Jackson Gandy, author of *All the Joy You Can Stand*. "The other person is the character stand-in. It's about not being okay with where you are."

It's not the movie star or the seven-figure executive we envy but those closest to us in age, profession and life situation.

Felicia was working in a low-paying office job, with no love in her life, when her friend called with

her good news. Felicia examined her envy and discovered that it wasn't about her friend, but that she was really feeling unfulfilled, stuck and lonely. Underneath that, she believed that fulfillment and love could never happen for her. Thanks to the guiding light of envy, Felicia thought about what she really wanted in her life and decided to start her own business and join a singles group.

Entitlement is what fed Wesley's green monster. He compared his long hours of physical labor with what he perceived to be "the easy life" of his neighbor. Wesley thought that if anyone deserved lots of money, he did.



He later learned that the neighbor had inherited money as a child, after his entire family died in a plane accident. When Wesley looked at his life, he realized he loved his work trimming trees

and felt blessed to have a healthy and alive family. Acknowledging the goodness and grace abundant in his life helped him free himself from envy's grip.

And Jordan's parents helped him to see the envy in his ignoring his classmate's good news. It got him in touch with his need for competence in the sport he liked best, basketball. After that, Jordan shot hoops every day and improved his skills to the point that he made the all-star team the following year.

As writer Bertrand Russell put it, "Where envy is unavoidable, it must be used as a stimulus to one's own efforts, not to the thwarting of the efforts of rivals." \*

### Taming the Envy Monster

*Acknowledging envy's power in our life opens the first door to the treasure that envy so closely guards. Here are steps to take to tame this monster and gain access to its gold.*

**Have the courage to catch yourself.** As awful as it may seem, let yourself fully feel the needs, desires, longings and yearnings behind your envy. Recognizing this begins to open you to the good that you seek.

**Ask yourself: What brings me joy?** Be very specific about what fulfills you in key areas of your life (finances, career, health, relationships, family, etc.). What actions can you take to make your life the way you want it to be?

**Tell the truth.** What have you done to further your own dreams and goals? Or, are you, perhaps, aspiring to goals that really aren't yours?

**Destroy your yardsticks.** In other words, don't compare. If you're happy and satisfied with your life, it doesn't matter what someone else has or does.

**Count your blessings.** When we feel envious, we often discount the good that is in our life. Notice what fortune life has bestowed upon you. Do you have use of all four limbs? A warm bed to sleep in? Make a gratitude list to post around the house or keep in your wallet.

**Let go, when necessary.** If you are 5' 4" and have brown eyes, you will never be 6' 2" with green eyes. This kind of envy is a true waste of time. Put it where it belongs: in the "waste" basket.

**Trust life's abundance.** Envy often stems from the unconscious belief that when someone else gets something good, there's less for us. Every time you feel envy, remind yourself that there is enough good in the world for you to have some, too. \*

# Cultivating an "Attitude of Gratitude" During Holidays and Throughout the Year

The words *thanks*, *gratitude* and *giving* derive from the word *grace* and refer to meaningful, authentic ways to acknowledge the grace in our lives.

Too often, however, we are trained to notice what is broken, undone or lacking in our lives.

Gratitude is a perception, a way of looking at things, and an attitude of gratitude is a cornerstone of long-term mental and physical health.

It balances us and gives us hope, makes us happier.

Numerous long-term studies suggest that a positive, appreciative attitude contributes to greater success in work, greater health, peak performance in sports and business, a higher sense of well-being and a faster rate of recovery from surgery.

But for gratitude to meet its full healing potential in our lives and the lives of our children, it needs to become more than just a Thanksgiv-

ing word. When we practice giving thanks verbally for all we have instead of complaining about what we lack, we give our children—and ourselves—the chance to see all of life as an opportunity and a blessing.

There are many things to be grateful for: autumn leaves, legs that work, friends who listen and really hear, chocolate, cars that work (usually), warm jackets, jump ropes, garage sales, the ability to read, swings, rain boots, being alive, butterflies. The list is truly endless. To cultivate gratitude, we begin by noticing the concrete ways in which the world supports us each day.

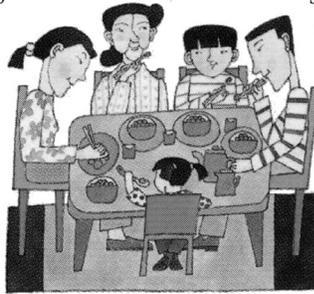
This may mean overcoming the three main obstacles to gratitude: self-preoccupation, expectation, and entitlement. Self-preoccupation leads us to focus our attention on our problems, difficulties, aches and pains. Similarly, it's only when our expectation isn't met that we notice, such as

when a light bulb goes out. And when we think we're entitled to something, we won't consider it a gift.

Some ideas for helping the whole family learn the attitude of gratitude:

- Keep a family gratitude journal or "Gratitude Attitude Calendar." Younger members can write one-word answers.
- Make a gratitude collage by drawing or pasting pictures.
- Practice gratitude around the dinner table or make it part of the bedtime routine.
- Make it a game to find the hidden blessing in a situation.
- Let each family member have his or her own day on which the rest of the family tells why they are grateful for his/her life.
- Assign a gratitude list to counteract a litany of complaints.

Bit by bit, an inner shift begins to occur, and we may be delighted to discover how content and hopeful we are feeling. This sense of fulfillment is gratitude at work. \*



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