

Practicing Vulnerability...

How to Let Go and Let True, Honest Emotion Lead the Way

In their earliest years, children are right up front with communicating their feelings. They cry when they're hurting and laugh when they're happy. Anger, frustration, confusion, fear—every feeling is right out there in the open.

But as we grow up, through many complicated and sometimes confusing scenarios, we learn to rein in our emotions. Often it becomes clear that talking about feelings isn't the best idea, either; communicating what we really feel can cause conflict. Over time, we develop communication defenses to protect ourselves.

Substituting anger for fear, blaming for anger, defensiveness for self-doubt, denial for sadness, brusqueness for hurt, defense becomes the style of communication until any and all signs of vulnerability are masked over and sealed shut.

Some of the ways used to block honest communication include: defensiveness, blaming others, denying responsibility, placating, creating guilt, criticizing, becoming angry or abusive, making excuses, refusing to talk (the silent treatment), withholding, ignoring problems, minimizing and downplaying, and bringing up the past.

These and other equally outward-directed methods of communicating don't work in relationships. Yet they are used, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly, while true and honest emotions linger beneath the surface.

By adopting defenses that protect them, partners avoid communicating their most intimate thoughts and feelings. Ironically, it is this very vulnerable expression of oneself that allows people to connect as human beings. And this connection—intimacy—is what we long for most.

It may seem a long, long way from that early vulnerability and honesty to the defended place that blocks true communication. So how can a person get back home again? As always, slowly and one thing at a time.

The first thing to accept is that trying to change the other person's behavior is not the way to change our own. Personal change, as always, belongs with us. In order to reach down beneath all that masking tape that keeps us from expressing our own feelings, we must both let go and accept.

Let go of the blaming, the posturing, the excusing and the placating. Let go of all the "other" directed defenses that keep you separate.

Accept the hurt, the sadness, the fear, the pain and the vulnerability that accompanies them. Accept responsibility for your own feelings. Claim them and own them.

One way to begin is to look under the habitual response—the need to blame or defend—to what's beneath the feeling. Before the first reaction, pause and listen to the truth that speaks below the surface.

Acknowledge any fear by prefacing what you really want to say with, "I'm afraid to say this because ..." and state what scares you.

Practice telling your true feelings with a safe person, a neutral friend or your therapist. Role-play the situation until you feel safe and sure of yourself.

Fear is natural. Honest, real communication that opens the door for intimacy requires effort and courage. Take heart. You don't have to do it alone. In fact, true communication happens only when there is both a sender and a receiver, so ask for help when you need it. *

10 Tips to Help You Make Changes in 2015 That Stick

January 1 is a fresh start, and many of us want to change habits and meet goals, beginning now. Here are 10 ways to make changes that stick throughout the year.

1. Make goals you care about. Forget about things you think you "should" do and focus on what truly matters to you.

2. Be specific and concrete. State your goals in measurable, attainable terms, such as "I want to lose five pounds by March 15."

3. Make the time. If you want to exercise three times a week, write the dates and times in your calendar.

4. Easy does it. Start slowly. Don't expect to run a marathon by February if you can't make six miles now.

5. Do it differently. If you've made the same resolution for 10 years and never been able to keep it, do something different this time. If nothing changes, nothing changes.

6. Accentuate the positive. Better to say what you can do rather than what you can't. Instead of "no fatty foods," say "just fruit for dessert."

7. Start over if you need to. Don't let a slip cause you to quit the whole program. Like the song says, "pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again."

8. Share your goals with a buddy. It's easier to exercise with a friend, join a book club with your cousin, or quit smoking in a supportive group.

9. Believe in yourself. Use positive self-talk, affirmations, encouraging notes on the bathroom mirror.

10. Celebrate your successes. Congratulate and reward yourself. *

A Letter From

Margaret Hood Black



Winter brings with it such possibility and potential. A chance to re-start. A time to gather all our potential, like plants gather their forces, in preparation for bursting forth in the spring. Articles in this issue focus on topics ripe for renewed focus and commitment.

The front page article describes some communications styles that may have developed over time but aren't effective in voicing how we really feel or in creating intimacy in our relationships. And, this issue's quiz gives attention to managing anger so that it becomes constructive rather than destructive.

Other features include a Top 10 list with suggestions on how to make those beginning-of-the-year changes stick this time. And the page three feature on self-love considers this: *If you take care of yourself, and love yourself, you will naturally experience more compassion and love for others.*

But after holiday time, it can be especially difficult to move back into the ordinary rhythms of life. This may leave some more susceptible to the post-holiday blues. The article on page four describes some of the symptoms of this seasonal affliction and offers a few suggestions for managing its effects.

If you have questions about any of the articles, or would like more copies of the newsletter — or if there's anything else you'd like to talk about — please don't hesitate to call.

Does Your Anger Help or Harm?

Anger itself is neither bad nor good, though the behavior that follows the feeling can be harmful or destructive. But while anger is usually associated with aggression or violence, anger can also fuel constructive change. It's important to know the difference. Take the quiz below to find out if you use your anger to help or harm yourself. You won't be scored at the end, but you may wish to elaborate a bit on those that feel especially relevant.



True False

- 1. I try to be aware of the physical responses in my body and mental signals in my mind when I'm angry.
- 2. When I feel angry, I take a few deep breaths and pause before I react, rather than strike out verbally or physically.
- 3. Sometimes my anger is not based on the current situation; I realize I am responding to something else in my life that is unresolved.
- 4. When I feel angry, I try not to bury, minimize or discount my feelings. I acknowledge my emotions.
- 5. I take responsibility for my anger. I don't blame someone else.
- 6. I work on understanding what provokes my anger so I can develop techniques for managing it.
- 7. I use techniques such as writing an unsent letter to who or what I feel angry about, putting all my feelings down on paper without holding back. I never send these letters.
- 8. I also use physical outlets for my angry feelings, such as exercise, housework or other kinds of physical expressions. I stomp my feet or close myself in my car and yell or beat up my pillow.
- 9. When I'm angry with someone, I talk to him/her about it. I make clear, specific "I" statements: "I'm angry because..." rather than "You make me angry because...."
- 10. I try to put myself in the other person's shoes. I realize that I am wrong sometimes and acknowledge when I am.
- 11. I find a neutral person I can talk to about my anger. Sometimes we role-play the situation, and sometimes he/she just listens while I talk it out.
- 12. I try to avoid or eliminate annoyances and nuisances so that they don't progress to anger. (Broken screen doors, long lines at the bank, loud music, rush hour traffic)
- 13. I never become physically or emotionally threatening, or physically or emotionally abusive.
- 14. I use relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing exercises or imagery-focusing, to help diffuse my anger.
- 15. I understand that the world is sometimes unfair, unjust and out of my control. I do what I can to change the things I can and accept the things I can't.
- 16. I recognize when I need help managing my anger and ask for it.

If you have any questions about this anger quiz, or would like to talk about managing your own anger, please don't hesitate to call. ✱

The Impact of Loving Yourself

The ancient Greek myth of Narcissus tells of a young man overly proud and fixated on himself. Upon seeing his reflection in the clear waters of a spring, the young man fell hopelessly in love with himself. Unable to tear his gaze away from his reflection, he could not eat or sleep and finally died.

Unfortunately, this myth still often informs how we think, feel and behave related to self-love. We believe that if we love ourselves, we are selfish and self-centered, that falling in love with self means conceit and self-absorption.

In fact, the opposite is true. Self-love is an honoring of the self that requires a high degree of independence and courage. The love we give others will be enhanced by the love we give ourselves.

A lack of self-love is a sign of low self-esteem or self-worth and shows its face in many ways: a refusal to enjoy life, workaholicism, perfectionism, procrastination, guilt, and shame.

Those who lack self-love avoid commitments, stay in destructive relationships, and fail to experience true intimacy with anyone. They practice negative self-talk, compare themselves with others, compete with others, caretake others and fail to take care of themselves. Unlike Narcissus, when they look in a mirror, they turn away.

The primary difference in those who practice self-love and those who don't is their belief about themselves.

"Tell me how a person judges

his or her self-esteem," said pioneering psychologist Nathaniel Branden, in his book on self-esteem, *Honoring the Self*, "and I will tell you how that person operates at work, in love, in sex, in parenting, in every important aspect of existence—and how high he or she is likely to rise. The reputation you have with yourself—your self-esteem—is the single most important factor for a fulfilling life."

Unable to love ourselves, we are our own harshest critics, fault finders, nay-sayers and naggers.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "No one can do to me what I have not already done to myself."

And just the opposite is true, too. We can be our own heroes, nurturers, lovers and champions.

Acting from authentic self-love, people are gentle, attentive and kind to themselves. They develop their gifts and talents and live according to the values and standards they have set for themselves. Theirs is a beauty that shines from within; they laugh readily and are at ease in the world. Theirs is not a conceit, but a sureness of self.

"To honor the self," Branden said, "is to be in love with our own life, in love with our possibilities for growth and for experiencing joy, in love with the process of discovery and exploring our distinctively human potentialities."

So rather than turn away from our image, perhaps we could all use a little more fondness for ourselves. *



How Do I Know I Love Myself?

- I ask myself what I want and need. I do this often throughout the day.
- I tell myself that I am loved.
- I acknowledge when I am in pain or hurting and ask what I can do about it.
- I am willing to cry as well as laugh.
- I forgive myself when I make a mistake or a false step.
- I ask myself what I can learn from my mistakes. I make amends when I need to and clean up whatever needs cleaning up.
- I never criticize or speak harshly to myself; I speak only with love.
- I celebrate my successes.
- I comfort myself when I fail or don't succeed.
- I surround myself with people who treat me with love and respect and who want good things for me.
- I take good physical care of myself.
- I give myself time to have fun.
- I care about my appearance and take care of myself.
- I accept compliments.
- I accept myself—all of me—the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual self of me.
- I am willing to learn more about myself and to change what needs to be changed.
- I acknowledge my feelings and my right to have them.
- I live by standards and values I have thoughtfully developed.
- I am passionately committed to myself. *

After the Holidays: How to Keep Those Seasonal Blues at Bay

The Christmas tree, once fragrant and green, now lies wilted and dying on the curb. The brightly colored lights are unplugged and, along with the treasured decorations, boxed up and stored away. Gone too, are family and friends. And where so recently nights were filled with gala social gatherings, the only thing left on many to-do lists is return gifts and mop up.

To top it off, in many parts of the country dreary, gray days lengthen into cold, dark nights.

No wonder so many people find themselves at a loss once the holiday season is over. Feelings of sadness, of let-down, of depression—are not at all uncommon this time of year.

These blues are seasonal and are likely to disappear as the routine of daily life sets in again and things get back to normal. But the symptoms are real and can make a return to that ordinary rhythm hard to come by.

Symptoms of the post-holiday blues can include feelings of fatigue or lethargy, increased need for sleep, lack of interest in activities and a sense of

loss or sadness. To help get through this time, here are some things you can do:

- **Extend the time of giving** by continuing to be generous. With so many new toys, children can clean out their toy boxes and closets and give to a charity or church those which they no longer use or want. Adults can do the same with clothes, household items or their own “toys.”

- **Recount the good times** by writing thank you notes. Handwritten notes acknowledging the gift of time shared can be meaningful too—for the writer as well as the recipient.

- **Be creative.** Instead of putting this year’s holiday pictures away in a drawer along with all those other photos of years gone by, set aside the time to put them in a holiday scrapbook. Make it a family project.

- **When the weather permits, take walks outside.** When the weather doesn’t cooperate, exercise inside. Put on some music and dance.



- **Every day schedule in a pleasant activity for yourself.** Even if it’s only a hot bath or a half-hour with a favorite book.

- **Bring beauty into your home and your life.** Taking down the holiday decorations can make a place feel dull and empty. Fill it up again with art, candles, flowers, bowls of fruit.

- **Plan a trip or a project.** Working on something and making plans gives you something to look forward to.

- **Volunteer for activities** through one of your favorite organizations.

- **Recognize that this time and these feelings too shall pass,** as the night to day and winter to spring.

However, feelings beyond “the blues” or feelings that are more debilitating, or that extend much beyond the post-holidays, may signal depression. Seek help when you need it. Remember, you don’t have to do it alone. *

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 E SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellaire (Galleria Area).

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