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# Healthful Changes

**Proven  
Strategies for  
Taking Charge  
of Your Life**

by  
**Poonam Sharma, Ph.D.**



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# Introduction

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Thank you for reading this book. As a licensed psychologist, I have personally helped hundreds of individuals get unstuck, gain clarity, and take action to improve their personal lives. My intention in creating this book is to make the rich information and tools from my profession accessible to *anyone* interested in moving toward greater emotional, psychological, and physical health. By implementing the strategies outlined in this book, you can dramatically increase your odds of success. I hope the words in this book inspire you to embrace the personal power you have to make healthful changes in your life...

Dr. Poonam Sharma



## Subscribe to **Healthful Changes**

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This book was inspired by a newsletter I have been publishing since 2003. To continue adding to this book, please subscribe to the Healthful Changes newsletter at the link below:

<http://www.healthfulchanges.com/subscribe.htm>



# ACCELERATING PERSONAL GROWTH

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## **Autobiography in Five Short Chapters by Portia Nelson**

### **I**

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost ... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes me forever to find a way out.

### **II**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place  
but, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.



**III**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in ... it's a habit.  
my eyes are open  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.

**IV**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

**IV**

I walk down another street.

# The Cycle of Change, Part One

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“The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.”

~M. Scott Peck

***Many of us need to change our lifestyles. However, changing our behavior is not as easy as it may seem. Understanding the Stages of Change model can tremendously increase the odds that you will be successful in reaching your goals.***

## The Stages of Change

Many of us need to make significant changes in our lifestyles to become healthier. We may have poor eating habits, spend too much time sitting and watching TV, or drink more alcohol than we really should. More and more health problems, such as diabetes, heart disease, and certain types of cancer are being linked to our lifestyles.

Your physician may have told you in the past that you need to "exercise and eat right." Easier said than done for most people. Why is it that we may want to change our behavior, but just can't seem to be able to do so? Naively, many of us (including our physicians) think that making a change is just a matter of willpower and that those of us who don't make a change are just "lazy" or lack commitment.

In the 1970's, a team of psychological researchers led by James Prochaska, Ph.D. began studying thousands of people in an effort to understand how people intentionally change their behavior. The people in these studies were trying to improve their health by doing things such as eating a low-fat diet, spending less time in the sun, or giving up smoking.

Out of Prochaska's research came the Stages of Change model, which suggests that making lasting changes in our lifestyles is not that easy. Change is a process that happens over time, not overnight! Making lasting change takes considerable persistence and tolerance of failure.

The Stages of Change model outlines the process of change and specific things we can do to help change come about more easily. Incidentally, this model has been used in many research projects by prominent organizations such as the National Institutes of Health, American Cancer Society, and the Centers for Disease Control. Understanding something about the Stages of Change model can help you set realistic expectations as you begin the process of changing your lifestyle. Let's review the five stages involved when we try to change a behavior.

### **1. Pre-Contemplation**

During this stage, you do not see any reason to change. Others may tell you that you need to change ("You need to stop smoking!"), but you are perfectly content with your behavior.

### **2. Contemplation**

In the Contemplation stage, part of you considers making a change within the next six months, but you are still not sure. You may know that you need to eat less fat or exercise more, but you may not feel confident enough to make a commitment to do so.

At any given point, about 80% of us are in the first two stages of this model!

### **3. Preparation**

After you decide you want to change, you enter the Preparation stage where you are willing to take personal responsibility for the changes you want to make and you start planning to take action.

### **4. Action**

In this stage you actively pursue the change you want to make. For example, you actually start engaging in regular exercise or you decrease the number of sodas you are drinking every day. When someone is in this stage, others can observe that they are making an effort to break an old habit or develop a new one. Unfortunately, only about 20% of us are in Action at any given time, but most programs to help us lose weight or increase exercise assume we are ALL at this stage of change.

### **5. Maintenance**

When you reach maintenance, you have sustained change for more than six months. It takes much less effort now to go to the gym on a regular basis. You don't have to force yourself to say, "no" to that box of doughnuts. Your main task at this stage is to prevent yourself from slipping back into old habits.

### Three Myths about Change

So what does the Stages of Change model teach us about change? Let's review three common myths people have about change and see if they hold up to the findings from Prochaska's research.

**Myth:** Change is easy. You decide to change and then you "just do it."

**Fact:** Change is not that simple. Most of us will "fail" many times before we make a permanent change in a behavior. I like to think of making a change as akin to climbing a mountain. You may know where you want to go, but at times you can slip and go back down a few feet, or even fall all the way down to the bottom! Although having a setback can leave you feeling like a "failure," it is important to realize that when you "fall," you never go all the way back to the beginning because you have gained some experience on the journey. You can use what you have learned to increase the odds of success the next time.

With reference to the Stages of Change model, do NOT think of these stages as being a one-way street starting at Precontemplation and ending with Maintenance. It is much more realistic and helpful to think of the stages as being more like a spiral staircase where you can move up, but you can also come back to a place you have been before.

**Myth:** If you don't make a change the first time, you will never change.

**Fact:** At any given point, only 20% of us are able to make a permanent change with only one try. Prochaska's research confirms that people typically go through the stages of change several times before they achieve success. Those who eventually reach their goal are determined and don't let their "failures" stop them!

**Myth:** It only takes willpower to make change happen. If I can't change a habit, it's because I'm weak.

**Fact:** If changing habits were only a matter of willpower, we would all be more successful at making changes and sticking to them. Making changes in your behavior is more about being smart than being strong. If you are going to attempt to make a change, it really helps to understand what you are up against. There are specific things you can do at each stage of the model to help you move through the process of change much faster. For example, from research it is known that in order for a person to move from Contemplation to Action, the pros of making a change MUST outweigh the cons of changing. There are techniques you can employ to help shift that balance in favor of moving into Action.



# The Cycle of Change, Part Two

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"It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear...It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to."

~Marilyn Ferguson

*In this chapter, specific strategies for facilitating movement through the Cycle of Change are discussed in detail. Use of these strategies can help you avoid some of the more common errors people make as they attempt to change.*

## Moving through the Stages of Change

As most of us attempt to make changes to improve our health, we tend to go about it in a haphazard manner. Our "plan" is often inspired by the latest, greatest diet or exercise guru being promoted in the media. We all want to believe so badly that we can lose weight, stop smoking, or decrease our risk for a heart attack quickly and without any effort. All too often, we end up back at square one, feeling more demoralized and confused.

So why don't we hear about what really works? The truth is that the approaches that have withstood the test of time are not sexy, glamorous, or quick fixes. They require some long-term thinking, specific knowledge, and persistence. Achieving your specific health goals is possible, but a gradual, individualized, "smart" plan works best. By understanding the Cycle of Change, as well as how it works, you can formulate a plan that is effective for you.

Let's go through each of Prochaska's Stages of Change and identify what you can do to move through the stage more efficiently. A working knowledge of the model and the strategies should help you avoid many of the common mistakes people make when they attempt to change a behavior.

### **1. PRE-CONTEMPLATION: Not ready to change**

Simple as it may seem, in order to change, it is necessary to be aware that something actually needs changing. When someone does not realize that a change is necessary, they will typically remain unaware unless others help them to see

things differently. If the problem is one that the person has unsuccessfully tried to fix in the past, they may feel embarrassed, hopeless, or resigned to their "fate." Loved ones and professionals can help the person see beyond their own blind spots by using the strategies outlined below.

**Strategies:**

**Be gentle.** When someone is resistant to change, it may be because there are not emotionally ready to acknowledge the problem, don't like to be told what to do, or don't believe it's possible for them to ever change. Especially if they have not been successful before, they may want to protect themselves from "failing" again. People sometimes "lie" to themselves because they are not ready to face what is real. This defensiveness is there for a reason and we must be careful not to rip defenses away from people. Bullying someone into changing simply does not work, it usually only increases resistance to change.

**Provide information to raise awareness.** Learning about the problem, the risks of not changing, and the benefits of change can help a person move out of this stage. Pass along reliable information about your loved one's "problem." For example, if you run across an interesting article on ways to decrease the risk of developing diabetes, give it to the person to consider. It is very important, however, to give this information without any expectation that the person will use it or even be open to looking at it. If the person's behavior affects you directly, as in the case when a person smokes or drinks heavily, you can also help raise the person's awareness by giving honest feedback about the impact their behavior has on you and others.

**Sometimes it's just plain luck.** We cannot always anticipate what will eventually cause a person to become motivated to change. Sometimes people will move to the next stage because of a milestone in their lives, such as getting married, experiencing a severe illness, or having a child. With a 40th birthday coming up, for example, they may decide that it's time to finally do something about their weight. Don't underestimate the power of unplanned events in our lives to motivate us to change.

**2. CONTEMPLATION: Thinking about change**

All the strategies useful in the Pre-Contemplation stage also help a person who is in Contemplation. People in Contemplation are ambivalent about change and need tools to motivate them and help resolve their indecision.

**Strategies:**

**Get your emotions involved.** Most of us will not take action until we feel emotionally moved to do so. We can become more motivated by tuning into either the inspiring accounts of others who achieved their goals OR to the stories of those who suffer the consequences of ignoring their problems. Watch movies, read stories, or use your imagination to picture the best or worst case scenarios for changing or not changing. For example, if you know you are at risk for developing diabetes, let yourself imagine what it would be like if your leg were amputated because of this disease. This is not a fun thing to do, but letting yourself feel the anxiety and pain of not changing can get you motivated. Getting emotionally charged by positive or negative feelings can "light a fire" and help you get moving.

**Use your head too.** It is helpful to examine your problem and the impact it is having on your life. An excellent tool to help you do this is the *Decisional Balance Scale* inspired by the work of psychologist Irving Janis. (See Figure 1.)

Looking at the pros and cons of the problem can help you decide whether you want to take action. There are four areas you should consider when making a list of pros and cons:

1. Consequences for myself if I change
2. Consequences for others if I change
3. My personal reactions if I change
4. Reactions of others if I change

To use this tool, simply go through each of these areas and identify pros and cons for changing the target behavior. Here is an example of how you would fill out the Decisional Balance Sheet if you are considering improving your eating habits. (See Figure 2.)

People typically do not make a change until the pros of changing outweigh the cons. It is not the number of items on the pros and cons list that matters, but rather the value and meaning you place on each of those items.



**Figure 1**

**Decisional Balance Sheet**

**CHANGE YOU ARE CONSIDERING:**

	<b>Pros/Benefits/Positives</b>	<b>Cons/Losses/Negatives</b>
<b>Consequences for Myself</b>		
<b>Consequences for Others</b>		
<b>My Personal Reactions</b>		
<b>Personal Reactions of Others</b>		

\*Based on the work of Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann (1977), *Decision Making: A psychological analysis of conflict, choice, and commitment*.

Figure 2

**CHANGE YOU ARE CONSIDERING: IMPROVING MY EATING HABITS**

	<b>Pros/Benefits/Positives</b>	<b>Cons/Losses/Negatives</b>
<b>Consequences for Myself</b>	Healthier Lose weight Lower cholesterol Reduce risk of diabetes Look sexier Fit into old clothes Buy new clothes Spend less on junk food Look younger More energy Feel healthier	Must be aware of what I eat Can't eat some of the foods I currently enjoy Have to spend money on new clothes Might spend more money--healthier foods tend to be more expensive
<b>Consequences for Others</b>	My spouse would have me around longer Would set a positive example for others	Others might be inconvenienced by my eating habits
<b>My Personal Reactions</b>	More self-confident Feel proud Would feel relieved to be healthier	Might feel restricted or deprived
<b>Personal Reactions of Others</b>	My spouse would find me more attractive Others might be inspired by me	Others may feel more self-conscious eating around me because of their bad eating habits. Others may not support decisions about what food I want to eat

### **3. PREPARATION: Getting ready to change**

Before you jump into action, it is important to take some time to prepare. Doing so will help you anticipate potential problems and allow you to get a clear picture of how to proceed. Two important aspects of moving through the Preparation stage are strengthening your commitment to change, as well as formulating a clear plan and strategy for action.

#### **Strategies:**

**Commit to taking small steps to change.** Although it is tempting to set lofty goals, it is much more realistic to set small goals. If you want to stop spending so much money, lock up your credit cards. If your goal is to eat less when you go out, don't go to buffets. Breaking your larger goals into small steps ensures a greater likelihood of success. Taking small steps will also help prevent you from feeling overwhelmed and discouraged.

**Commit to a date.** Decide when you will start working on your goal. Timing is important, so don't start working on weight loss during the holidays (unless you have an amazing amount of self-control!). Also, don't jump the gun. If you are not ready, don't say you will start in two days if you don't mean it. However, if you find yourself delaying the date over and over, consider that you may still be in Contemplation and are not simply not yet ready to act.

**Let others know what you are doing.** If you are serious about change, let others around you know about your intention to change. Yes, this can be scary and takes courage, but if you are truly ready to commit to change, these public commitments can be a powerful tool to motivate and support you.

**Develop your OWN plan for action.** You are much more likely to stick to a plan you create yourself than a generic plan made by someone else. For example, if you are working on eating better, be sure to compile a list of foods that YOU like. Someone may tell you salad is good for you, but if you are repulsed by lettuce leaves, they should not be anywhere in your plan!

Your action plan does not have to be very complicated or long, but it must be specific. For example, think about how you will deal with specific things that might sabotage your success. What will you do when it's time for you to go running, but it's raining outside? What will you do if someone brings donuts to work and you hear them calling your name? Recall other times you may have attempted to

change and use the strategies that worked for you in the past, no matter what other people think about them.

**Identify skills you need to reach your goals.** Before you act, make sure you have the necessary skills. If you are trying to lose weight, do you understand how you need to change your diet or what type of exercise will help you most? Explore resources that can help you acquire the information or skills you need. Consider a consultation with an expert, such as a dietitian or a personal trainer. Ask a friend who is more knowledgeable if he or she will teach you what they know.

#### **4. ACTION: Actively making a change**

O.K., so you've done your homework, you have a plan, and you are committed to taking action...now it's time to move!

##### **Strategies:**

**Make substitutions.** If you want to stop a bad habit, it is important to replace it with something better for you. Sometimes our bad habits serve some positive functions. People who smoke may be damaging their lungs, but they are also using smoking as a way of coping with stress. Substitute a healthy response in place of the problem you are attempting to change. You can refocus your energy into activities such as exercising, meditating, cooking, cleaning, reading, or even talking with a friend. Make sure that you substitute something that is healthy, enjoyable, and different from the behavior you are trying to change.

**Manage your environment.** When you are seriously working on change, be sure to pay attention to the things outside yourself that can interfere with your success. If you are trying to stop smoking, remove all cigarettes and ashtrays from your home and minimize contact with people while they are smoking. For those attempting to lose weight, remove fattening foods from the pantry and don't look at the dessert menu. It is foolish to rely on willpower alone. Very few of us can handle the temptation. Clean up your environment and stack the odds in your favor.

**Reward yourself.** When you are in the Action stage, be sure to notice the hard work you are doing and reward yourself with something you like. Buy yourself a new outfit for losing ten pounds or treat yourself to a massage with the money you save from not buying cigarettes. Change can sometimes require tremendous self-control. Reward yourself for your willingness to walk down this difficult path.

**Seek support.** Although you can certainly attempt to go at it alone, it really helps to have at least one other person to support you as you work on your goals. Ideally let several people share your burden. Having an exercise buddy who can push you when you don't want to go to the gym could help tremendously. If a group of friends share the goal of eating better, they may work together to prepare more healthful meals or gently remind one another to pass on the tempting, yet extremely fattening piece of cheesecake.

**Revise your plan for action as needed.** As you start to take action, you will acquire additional skills and information about yourself that should be used to fine-tune your action plan. For example, if exercising in the morning simply does not work for you, exercise in the evening. Be flexible and you will be more successful.

**Don't give up!** It often takes 3-6 months in the Action stage to establish a new behavior. So don't give up if things don't feel easy after a few weeks. Just step back, modify your plan, if necessary, and try again.

## **5. MAINTENANCE: Sustaining change**

In the Maintenance stage, you continue to use all the strategies that are already working for you so that you can sustain change over the long run. Although sticking to your plan may be much easier now, remember that you can still be vulnerable to slipping back into an earlier stage in the cycle.

### **Strategies:**

**Congratulate yourself.** You have worked hard to integrate change into your life. Notice the positive effect changing your behavior has on you and others. You are awesome!

**Develop a plan of attack.** Think about potentially tempting situations that could derail your success and develop a plan to handle them. The more you can anticipate what might cause you to slip, the less likely it will really happen.

**Keep doing what works.** By now, you know what does and does not work well for you. You are an expert on your personal change process and can fine-tune your plan as new challenges arise. The advice here is simple. Pay attention to what is working and do more of it.

### **Important Tips for Success**

1. It is important to allow yourself to go through each one of the stages. Don't skip stages because important skills and learning are acquired at each stage. Wherever you are in the Cycle of Change is fine. Remember most people are in the first two stages, so it is actually statistically uncommon for people to be in Action at all.
2. Most people go through these stages three or four times before they exit the Cycle of Change. If you have a slip, view it as an opportunity to learn and you will save yourself wasted time beating yourself up.
3. Lapses are not a weakness. They are a normal part of the change process. Don't let these lapses make you feel bad about yourself. No one does it perfectly.
4. You do not have to attempt change alone. Pair up with a friend, join a support group, or get a coach. Do whatever it takes to get you moving.
5. If you want to learn more about the Cycle of Change, an excellent book is *Changing for Good* by Prochaska, Norcross, Diclemente.



# Simplify Your Life

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“Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage - to move in the opposite direction.”

~E.F. Schumacker

*Our busy lives constantly pull us away from what is important to us. Simplifying your life is one way to make sure your time is focused on the activities that bring you the most satisfaction. Applying the Pareto Principle, as well as other strategies, can ensure your time and energy are being channeled in a way you value.*

## Reasons to Simplify Your Life

Most people say they want to simplify their lives because they feel like they have lost control of their time. They want to have more time to do the things they want to do, both at work and at home. Every few weeks, there is another newspaper or magazine story about how people feel that they aren't spending their time on things they enjoy. A recent poll, for example, found that 65% of people are spending their free time doing things they'd rather not do. Isn't that amazing? It's great if you have created a full and interesting life for yourself, but how frustrating if you don't have the time to enjoy it!

## The 80/20 Principle

The 80/20 Principle, first stated by Vilfredo Pareto in 1897, says that 20% of our effort produces 80% of the results. This means that a small number of resources are highly productive, while a large number (80%) are not very productive at all. Here are a few examples:

- 20% of the things in your house are used 80% of the time
- 80% of the things in your house are used 20% of the time
- 20% of your activities give you 80% of your satisfaction
- 20% of the members of an organization do 80% of the work
- 20% of the books in a bookstore account for 80% of the sales.

The challenge is to identify those few vital items that produce the greatest value for you. Focus on the activities that result in satisfaction, better health or more free time. At the same time, identify those many trivial items that do not lead to things like satisfaction, better health, or more free time. These unprofitable activities are taking up 80% of your time. Doesn't it make sense to deemphasize them in favor of the vital 20%?

## **Strategies for Simplifying Your Life**

### **Making Time Takes Time**

The first challenge to simplifying your life is that it takes an investment of time. If you want to discover how to make time for the things you enjoy, you have to examine how you are spending your time now. If you keep living your life the same way you always have, it will stay complicated.

For some, the excuse, "I can't slow down because everything is important," is a way to avoid seeing what they don't want to see: a relationship that is no longer fulfilling, a job that no longer satisfies, an emotional distance that has emerged between them and their family members. Some people keep their lives going at a furious pace to avoid seeing what they don't want to see.

If you really do want to simplify your life, you will make the time. You don't have to do anything radical; in fact, it is best to start small. Set aside just 30 minutes each day for a month. During that time, think about a simple question: What are the elements that contribute to my life feeling so complicated? Make a list of the factors in your private journal and write about them. Begin to think about what can be changed or eliminated.

Finding this time is not as impossible as it may seem at first. Maybe you can leave work 30 minutes early for a month and use the extra time for this exploration, possibly at home. Perhaps you can take the train instead of driving, or give up your exercise time for one month, or turn off the television during the evening news and write in your journal instead. Set aside 30 minutes a day for one month, ask yourself some important questions, and be prepared to learn some remarkable things about yourself.



### **Fewer Responsibilities**

You may think that this sounds too simple. Most people who seek to simplify their lives think that the answer is to get more help. But this probably won't help. In fact, if you hire someone to help you get more done, you will actually have added another complication to your life rather than making it simpler. You probably don't need more help; you probably need fewer responsibilities.

### **Learn to Say "No"**

If you want a simpler life, you must learn to say "no." In *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things That Really Matter*, author Elaine St. James says that people get into trouble because they agree to do things they really don't have time to do. This leads to a constant state of being overcommitted and frustrated. Our culture makes it difficult for us to say "no" to requests to attend extra meetings, dinner engagements, or to take on new responsibilities. Many of us feel obligated to always be participating at a high level. We are proud of our high productivity and involvement, but it comes with a high price: a complicated life that leaves no time for you. St. James suggests that you actually schedule time for yourself on your calendar at the beginning of every month. When you are invited to participate in something, turn down the request because you already have a commitment.

### **Clear away Clutter**

Get rid of things you don't use. Think of all the stuff you have acquired in the past five or 10 years. Most of it is designed to make life simpler, but in fact most of it brings along its own set of complications. Think of what typically happens when you buy a new electronic gadget: Consider all of the time required to earn the money to pay for it, shop for it, buy it, set it up, learn how to use it, fix the unexpected problems it causes with another gadget, and then the time you spend actually using it. Most of us have rooms in our houses filled with stuff that seemed like a good idea at the time, but ends up sitting on a shelf or in a drawer, unused. St. James suggests that you go through your house once each year and get rid of everything you haven't used during the previous year.

St. James also has an idea for not acquiring new stuff in the first place. She suggests a technique called the 30-Day List. When you start thinking that you must have a certain product, add it to your 30-Day List and wait. At the end of 30 days, ask yourself if you really still need it. Chances are, you will have lost your enthusiasm for the product and will cross it off the list.

### **Get a Life Coach**

Simplifying your life can be much easier with the assistance of a coach. A life coach can support you in taking the necessary action to achieve your goals and can also gently remind you when you get off track. A coach can help you honor what is truly important in your life.

### **Suggested Reading**

Richard Koch, *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret of Achieving More With Less*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998.

Elaine St. James, *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things That Really Matter*. New York, NY: Hyperion, 1994.

# Stop Procrastinating

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“Procrastination is like a credit card.  
It’s a lot of fun until you get the bill.”

~Christopher Parker

*Most of us procrastinate at one time or another. There are many reasons why people procrastinate, but one of the reasons is that we find it harder to start something new than to maintain what we are already doing. Implement the strategies discussed in this chapter to help you make progress on the things you would rather put off indefinitely.*

## Why Do We Procrastinate?

All of us procrastinate on occasion. For some people, it is a chronic problem; for others, it is only a problem in certain life areas. Procrastination is always frustrating because it results in wasted time, lost opportunities, disappointing work performance, and generally feeling bad about yourself. Procrastinating in making changes to improve your health can be down right dangerous.

When you procrastinate, you allow less important tasks to take up the time and space that should be devoted to more important things. You do things like visiting with coworkers when you know an important deadline is approaching rapidly. You watch TV instead of beginning that exercise program your doctor wants you to start. Or, you talk about trivial things with your partner to avoid discussing important issues in your relationship.

Most people do not have a problem finding time for things they want to do. But once they see a task as too difficult, painful, boring, or overwhelming, the procrastination behaviors begin. You are not alone if you have ever made any of the following excuses to yourself:

1. I'm too tired to exercise today. I'll wait until tomorrow when I have more energy.
2. I've got too many other things to do first.

3. I'll do a better job when I can concentrate on this project.
4. I still have lots of time to get this done.
5. I feel fine right now and my cholesterol isn't really that high anyway.
6. I work better under pressure.
7. It's too noisy to work when everyone else is home.
8. I should get the shopping done now because the stores will be more crowded later.
9. I can eat this pie tonight, because I'm starting my diet tomorrow.
10. This problem is too hard to talk about. I wouldn't know where to start.

Most of the time, these excuses seem fairly innocuous, but they are not as innocent as they seem. These excuses can keep us from accomplishing important goals and lead us to feel bad about ourselves.

### **So why do people procrastinate?**

Obviously, there is no simple answer to this question. There are many reasons why people put things off. Here are a few of the most common (check those that apply to you):

**Avoiding discomfort.** Wanting to avoid pain makes many people shift into procrastination mode. However, the longer we delay, the worse the discomfort usually becomes. The pounds keep adding up, the tooth hurts more, or the brakes squeak even more loudly.

**Perfectionism.** Those who believe they must produce only perfect results may spend so much time and energy seeking perfection that they never make any real progress toward their important goals.

**Laziness.** Sometimes people delay tasks that involve slight inconvenience or minor discomfort.

**Thinking you are not good enough.** Some people are certain that they are incompetent. They think that they will fail and so they procrastinate to avoid ever putting their skills to the test.

**Self-doubt.** If you second-guess yourself, you probably suffer from procrastination. You may avoid new challenges and opportunities unless you are certain that you will succeed.

**Workaholism.** Many people who work excessively procrastinate about dealing with other important tasks in their lives. Work becomes an escape from other things that need attention, such as their health or an intimate relationship.

### Why Don't We Just Say "No?"

Since procrastination produces mostly negative outcomes in the long run, why don't we just change our behavior and eliminate these undesirable consequences? The reason for this is that we have a built in resistance to change. If you have ever taken physics, you may remember Newton's First Law of Motion, which basically says that an object at rest tends to stay at rest, whereas one in motion tends to stay in motion. In other words, we tend to keep on doing what we are already doing. This principle certainly describes how we humans behave. For some reason, it is more difficult for us to start making changes than to maintain a change we have already made. We avoid getting started by cleverly diverting our attention and energy from the things we really should be doing.

### How to Stop Procrastinating

Although awareness will not automatically cure your procrastination, being aware of the "creative" ways you put things off is a good place to start. Once you are aware of the ways you procrastinate, you can start to change your behavior. Here are some tips to help you get started.

Choose a few of the strategies outlined here. Keep working at it until you understand what you need to do to stop putting things off.

1. **Set Specific Goals:** The most effective goals are specific, measurable, and achievable. An example of a good goal is, "I will order tuna salad and water when I go out to lunch on Friday." This is better than saying, "I am going to get healthier."

2. **Set Priorities:** Write down all the things that you need to do, and place them in order of importance. The most important tasks belong at the top of your list and the distractions go at the bottom. Start at the top of your list and work your way down.

3. **Organize Your Work:** Set up a system for yourself. Prepare a daily schedule and keep it within view during your working time. List the tasks for each day. Check things off as you complete them. When you are working on a project, lay out all of the needed supplies or materials before you begin.

4. **Divide and Conquer:** Sometimes a project is overwhelming if you think about all of the work that is involved. Do yourself a favor: Break the activity down into smaller steps and set progress goals for each of the steps. This is especially helpful when you are beginning a writing project, studying for a degree, or building a new set of skills.

For example, if you need to write a report, make an outline before you start writing. If you have to clean your house, make your goal to do the first two rooms by 10:00, two more by noon, and two more by 2:00. Check tasks off your outline as you complete them.

5. **Make It a Game:** Turn the temptation to avoid working into a challenge. Use your imagination. For example, if you need to study the first five chapters of your history book, pretend that you will be teaching the material to someone else later. Take notes and organize the information into an outline that you could speak from. Sometimes changing the frame around a situation makes it more interesting and less of a chore.

6. **Schedule a Small Amount of Time:** Tell yourself that you will only spend five minutes on the task right now, just to get your feet wet. For example, walk for five minutes and then choose whether to continue for five more minutes. Continue doing this until you decide to stop, or when you are finished with the amount of walking you ideally want to do. Most of the time you will find that if you can just get started, the activity is not as bad as you imagined.

When you are tempted to substitute a fun but unimportant activity (such as reading a magazine or watching the weather channel) for an important project (such as exercising), make the substitute activity your reward for doing the important task. Do the high-priority task first and then reward yourself with the fun activity.

7. **Ward off Self-Defeating Thoughts:** Telling yourself that you are going to do a poor job or even fail can seriously undermine your ability to function. It is important to realize that your negative statements are not facts. Keep your focus on the present moment and the positive steps you can take toward accomplishing your goals. If these thoughts are based on a need for perfection or low self-esteem, you may want to work on these issues.

8. **Make a Commitment:** Make a verbal and written commitment to completing the task or project. Write a contract and sign it. Tell someone about your plans and ask them to follow up with you. For example, one way I got over procrastinating about writing a newsletter is by making a commitment to my readers that the newsletter would be published monthly. If you are working with a coach, ask your coach to hold you accountable for the tasks you want to complete.

9. **Remind Yourself:** Write notes to yourself and post them in conspicuous places. Leave them where you will see them, like on the outside of your briefcase, the bathroom mirror, refrigerator, television, your front door, and the dashboard of your car. The more often you remind yourself of what you plan to accomplish, the more likely it is that you will follow through with action.

10. **Reward Yourself:** Reinforcement is a very effective way to motivate yourself. When you complete even the most minor task, be sure to acknowledge what you have done. This is especially important in the beginning when you are struggling with procrastination behaviors. After you have successfully overcome your procrastination, don't forget to celebrate your accomplishment. You worked hard for your success and shouldn't take it for granted.

# “SMART” Resolutions

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“Goals are dreams with deadlines.”  
~Diana Scharf Hunt

*Anyone can make a New Year’s Resolution, but what does it take to really keep one? In this chapter, discover how to set goals in a way that improves the chances of achieving them.*

## The Problem with New Year's Resolutions

At the beginning of each year, many of us will reflect on our lives and resolve that things will be different in the year ahead. Thousands of us impulsively make life-changing promises to eat less, exercise more, stop smoking, spend more time with our families, and get our finances into shape.

“I will never eat junk food again.” “I’m going to get in the best shape of my life.” “I’ll find balance between work and home.” Any of these sound familiar? No sooner than the list of New Year’s Resolutions is made, many are broken within a few hours, days, or weeks. With little thought being put into our goals, most of us are doomed to fail before we even begin to work on the things we most desire.

## "SMART" Goals

So how do you increase the odds of keeping your New Year’s Resolutions?

Goals we set at New Year’s are similar to goals we might set at any other time of the year. If these goals are vague, unrealistic, or extreme, the odds of reaching them are low, no matter when we decide to work on them. There is a strategy for streamlining the goal-setting process to stack the odds in your favor.

The acronym SMART describes five important characteristics of a meaningful goal and each is described below. Learning to set SMART goals will give you an important tool to develop your New Year’s Resolutions or other aims you may have.



**SPECIFIC:** Get clear on your target. Most people have a general idea of how they want to be (“happier, richer, or thinner.”), but don’t have a clear enough sense of the specifics. Make your goal as specific as you can. Rather than saying, “I want to get in shape,” set a goal such as “losing 10 pounds.” Also, be sure to think through the particulars of how you’ll reach your goal. Have a detailed plan, such as “I’ll eat dinner at home during the week, take a 10-minute walk at lunch, and keep junk food out of the house.” Thinking through these details will definitely increase your odds of success.

**MEASURABLE:** Phrase your goal in a way that allows you to track your progress. When you state that you will “exercise for 10 minutes a day” or “eat 1400 calories,” it is easy to assess if you actually did. Having measurable goals allows you to answer the question, “How am I doing?” at any given point.

**ATTAINABLE:** Make sure your goal is one you can actually attain within the constraints of your life. Goals should be set so that they are slightly out of reach, in order to be challenging, but not so much so that there is no hope of achieving them.

**REALISTIC:** Make sure your goal is one that you are actually likely to achieve. Although setting the goals of stopping smoking and sticking to a new diet may seem sensible, it may not be realistic for you to do both these things at once. Ask yourself, “Do I honestly feel confident that I can really achieve the goals I have set?” If your answer is “no,” you probably need a reality check.

**TIMED:** Set a time frame around achieving your goal. Mark target dates on your calendar for completing the specific steps in your plan. For example, “By February 1st, I’ll drop two pounds.” Establishing a time frame will help you stay focused.

**EXAMPLE:**

In order, to understand how to apply the SMART strategy, let’s review an example. Let’s say you want to “be less stressed” this year. Most people will declare that “being less stressed” is their goal and never realize the complexity of the goal they have identified.

By applying the SMART technique of goal setting, you realize that you need to be more SPECIFIC. You can see that “being less stressed” involves many other things, such as having more time with your family, exercising three times a week, or

getting more sleep each night. You select just one of these specific activities as your goal and establish a clear plan for how you'll achieve it.

Assume your specific goal is to get more sleep each night. Your detailed plan is to get the kids to bed by 8:00 P.M., stop whatever work you are doing by 9:00 P.M., take a hot shower, wind down by watching TV for 30 minutes, drink a cup of hot milk, and be in bed by 11:00 P.M.

Make sure your goal is MEASURABLE by listing exactly how many hours you hope to sleep. The number of hours should be ATTAINABLE AND REALISTIC for your life. Sleeping 11 hours may be a nice idea, but not attainable or realistic for someone with three kids and a full-time job. Make sure your goal is TIMED by identifying a particular point in time by which you'll achieve your goal. For example if you are sleeping 4 hours per night right now, you might say, "By the end of the month, I'll be sleeping at least 6 hours a night."

Although the desire to overhaul your life is an admirable one, it is not typically realistic to do it all at once. There are many smaller goals hidden within the larger goals you hope to pursue in the year ahead. Remember that you can set additional goals at times other than the New Year as well. Work on just one or two meaningful things at a time. Hopefully on the next New Year's Day, your list of goals will be different from the year before!



# The Power of Being Real

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"To be nobody-but-yourself -- in a world which is doing its best night and day, to make you everybody else--means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting."

~E. E. Cummings

***From the moment you were born, the world began to define who you are, how you should live, and what you must do to be accepted. With all this external influence, it is easy to lose touch with your authentic self. Learn ways to discover your real self.***

## Losing Authenticity

Very young children exude authenticity. They speak their minds, express their emotions generously, and radiate tremendous energy. They are comfortable in their own skin and delight in their own uniqueness and that of others. We can't help but be drawn to these wonderful qualities.

Over time, life has a way of chipping away at our authenticity. The world continually bombards us with messages about how we must behave in order to be accepted. Our parents teach us the things we have to do to be a "good" boy or girl. The media tells us how to dress, what to eat, and how to be "cool." What's "in fashion" changes constantly, so it's hard work to keep up.

This sea of influence around us makes it all too easy to lose touch with ourselves. Do you still know exactly what you like and don't like? Do you still feel comfortable voicing your opinions openly? Do you dress in ways that feel right to you? Or are you so out of touch with yourself that you automatically transform yourself to gain acceptance?

There certainly is no shame in wanting to fit in or to belong. It is a very human need that runs deep within all of us. For those who have been hurt by others, acceptance may be exactly what we need to start healing. However, the danger is that when we regularly sacrifice our true selves for this acceptance, we start to live a lie. As with all lies, they take a tremendous amount of energy to sustain.

Putting a false self out there day after day drains you emotionally, physically, and spiritually. “Faking it” over and over can lead to deep sadness, feelings of emptiness, and a sense of being alone. Sadly, the fear of rejection can keep your true self imprisoned within you. By living inauthentically, we all support a “cookie cutter” culture where none of us really feel free to express the real person within us.

### **Finding Your True Self**

To experience life fully, you must get back in touch with your real self. Start by asking yourself some very basic questions, such as:

- Who am I when no one else is around?
- Who am I when others are present?
- What is most important to me?
- Do I behave in ways that reflect my values?
- Do I typically express my true feelings?
- When do I feel most comfortable showing up as myself?
- When do I have a tendency to run and hide? Why?
- What price do I pay when I’m not real?
- When do I feel energized?
- If I could be myself all the time, what would my life look like?

Answers to these questions can give you important clues about how much work it will take to excavate your true self. For some people, the real self has been hurt so early in life that their work is less about excavation and more about having a chance to develop an authentic self in the first place.

Certainly, learning to express your true self takes courage and involves some emotional risk. Not everyone will be comfortable with the “real” you. You may lose some relationships in the process, but most likely you will find that these are relationships that tend to drain you anyway.

### **10 Ways to Develop Authenticity**

Try these tips for developing the real you:

1. Risk telling a friend or loved one what you really think next time you are asked your opinion.

2. When you are with a group that is trying to make a decision, let your true choice be heard.
3. Find a safe way to practice expressing your real thoughts and feelings, such as in a journal or to your pet.
4. Think of one thing you've never told anyone else and share it with someone who is usually supportive of you.
5. Make a list of your core values and determine if your life reflects them.
6. Do more of the things that bring energy into your life.
7. Take some quiet time to meditate or reflect, so you can be more in touch with your inner voice.
8. Develop a talent you have secretly wished you had.
9. The next time a friend or family member asks you how you are doing, tell them the truth.
10. Accept people that seem a little different. They may be working on being themselves, just like you.

The rewards of authenticity are having integrity, a sense of serenity, and abundant energy for the things that you love most!

The interesting thing is that the more authentic you are willing to be, the more you will draw other authentic people to your life as well. Being part of a community of people who are willing to be real with one another frees everyone up to focus on what is truly important in their lives.

# Honoring Your Values

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“Values are tapes we play on the Walkman of the mind: any tune we choose so long as it does not disturb others.”

~ Jonathan Sacks

*Values provide an important tool for guiding our actions in life. Take steps to reduce the discrepancy between your stated values and your actual behavior.*

## The Importance of Values

In any election year, there is considerable talk about values. All sides hold passionate opinions about which particular values are important and accurately reflect our identity as Americans. Various groups lobby to have their personal values influence the decisions made in Washington D.C., rousing considerable controversy in the process.

So why does all this talk about values stir people up so much?

Values are intimately connected with our core sense of self. In many ways they define who we are as human beings. Our values make choices clear, even in the face of increasing information overload and personal stress.

Whether you are a country or an individual, a clear internal compass, such as a solid personal value system, can help you more easily navigate your course through life. If you have an interest in gaining clarity on your personal values and how to use them more effectively, read on.

## Discrepancies between Values and Actions

Can you name your top five values? When asked, most of us will come up with a list such as: (1) health, (2) family, (3) career, (4) spirituality, and (5) financial security. It is easy to make a list of values, but much more difficult to align your life with those values. Research shows that merely coming up with a list is insufficient to bring about change. Instead, identifying your values and then working on narrowing any distance that might exist between your stated values and your

actions is essential.

So what does your actual behavior reveal? If family is important to you, do your actions over the past year make this fact obvious? Was "maintaining good health" on your list of top five values? If so, what did you do this year to take care of your body? If you have a passion for learning, how did you further your knowledge and nurture your curiosity?

When your behavior is out of line with your core values, you are out of integrity, and this makes most people at least slightly uncomfortable, confused, or frustrated. Rather than changing, many of us tend to tolerate things that drain our energy and chip away at our very souls. The hesitation to change makes it difficult to experience the fulfillment and peace that are the rewards of honoring your values (and yourself).

If your personal values and your behavior are mismatched, don't worry. Most of us need work in this area.

### **Aligning Yourself with Your Core Values**

The following are some suggestions for bringing your life more in line with your personal value system.

1. Clarify your personal values. Write down a list of your top 5 values. Examples include: learning, connection with others, financial security, wisdom, humor, and spirituality. (If you need help coming up with your list of values, check out the list of over 500 values at <http://humanityquest.com>) Be sure to list your values in order of their importance to you.
2. Determine if you are out of alignment. How well are you honoring your values in your daily life? Really be honest with yourself. Examine how you actually spend your time. It might be interesting to look at your calendar for the past few months and see how your time was allocated. Or, perhaps, ask a family member or close friend to give you their impression about what it looks like you value.
3. Allocate your time wisely. Your life can be lived more closely in line with what you cherish, but you must be willing to devote some time to those things. So, slowly work on eliminating the time you spend on things you are tolerating and

make choices that bring you closer to what's important. Each choice you make either moves you more into integrity or further away from yourself.

4. Give the very best of yourself to the people and things you value most. Many of us make the mistake of devoting too much of ourselves to "thankless" people and activities that fail to bring us satisfaction. Isn't life just too short to "put up" with activities and people you don't even care about? At the passing of another year, make a conscious decision to direct your energy into that which brings you ultimate peace and fulfillment.

5. Review your progress periodically. Most of us get motivated to make changes around the end of the year, but lose momentum with time. Make an appointment with yourself three months from now to see if it's time for another alignment.

Remember, that when you honor your values, you honor yourself. Ultimate fulfillment can be found by living your life in integrity, with your actions revealing who you are to the world, no matter what your values.



# The Gift of Forgiveness

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“Forgive all who have offended you, not for them, but for yourself.”

~Harriet Nelson

*People often discuss forgiveness in simplistic ways, advising us to just “forgive and forget.” It is not always so easy to forgive and usually unrealistic to forget. In this chapter, gain a greater understanding of forgiveness, its benefits, and the process of forgiving yourself or someone else.*

## The Choice to Forgive

It is impossible to get through life without being hurt by somebody. All of us know how painful it is to be the target of gossip, lies, or thoughtless remarks. Some have even been wounded by infidelity, abuse, or an unhappy marriage. When the emotional pain runs deep, some people respond by hanging onto the hurt and building a wall around themselves to keep from ever being hurt again. That is certainly one way to respond in such a situation. Another alternative is to find a way to move beyond the pain you currently feel by exploring forgiveness.

## Defining Forgiveness

Forgiveness is making a personal choice to leave behind the feelings of anger, bitterness, or resentment you may feel because someone hurt you. You forgive for your OWN sake, not necessarily for the sake of the person who wounded you.

It is ironic that as long as your negative feelings go unresolved, you stay emotionally connected to the person who hurt you and they continue to have power over your life. Forgiveness is like choosing to open the cage door, so that your hurt does not imprison you forever. When you forgive, you free yourself from burdensome feelings that make it difficult for you to move forward in your life.

Forgiveness does NOT mean that you forget what the other person did to you. Especially when you are deeply hurt, you should not forget. Instead, sift through what happened and learn from the experience.

Forgiveness does NOT mean that you condone what the person did to you. You are not saying that you believe the other person was right or that you excuse their behavior.

Forgiveness also does NOT mean that you want to continue a relationship with that person. You can forgive someone AND choose to never have any contact with them again.

Forgiveness is completely a choice you make. You have the power to decide whether you want to forgive someone or not. No one can force you to do either.

### **The Process of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is a process. Depending on your situation, that process can take a long time or it can be relatively quick. For example, forgiving your best friend for saying something mean to you may not take as long as forgiving someone who has been severely abusive to you. Below are some ideas for facilitating the process of forgiveness.

1. It is important to start by being honest with yourself about how injured you feel. If you cannot acknowledge the emotional impact a situation had on you, it will prolong the pain.
2. Find some way to express your feelings in a constructive manner. You may choose to talk to a friend, a therapist, or to even God. Typically, talking to someone who can be supportive and neutral helps you get clearer about your situation and identify the emotional wounds that need healing.
3. If you were abused in some way and the person who hurt you still poses some physical or emotional threat, be sure to take steps to protect yourself from future harm.
4. At some point, you will fully understand that you are paying a heavy price for hanging onto feelings of hurt or anger. You may then become motivated to do what you can to stop hurting. Rise to that challenge.
5. Attempt to see the situation from the other person's point of view. That point of view may not be rational or emotionally healthy by your standards, but taking the perspective of the other person moves you out of the role of victim and restores

your power. Sometimes compassion can develop for the other person when you take this step. You may see their weaknesses, true intentions, or the complexity of the situation for the first time.

6. Think about any responsibility you have in the situation that transpired and forgive yourself. If you also hurt the other person, remember that you did not intend to do so and would have made a different choice if you could “rewind the clock.”

7. If it is relevant, think about a time when that person forgave you and how much gratitude or relief you felt. Consider giving this same gift back.

8. Write down what specifically the other person did to harm you. As objectively as possible, state what actually happened, so that you can concretely identify what needs to be forgiven. Did they make a hurtful comment? Did they lie to you? Perhaps, they damaged something meaningful to you?

9. Write a letter to the person who hurt you. Express all of your positive and negative feelings. Describe positive aspects of your relationship with the other person and express forgiveness for the hurtful behaviors. Be aware, that you may experience many different emotions as you engage in this task. You may feel tearful, angry, or even resentful as you revisit the hurt. NOTE: You do not need to mail this letter!

10. Make the forgiveness tangible. At this point you may choose to mail the letter you wrote. You may also choose to destroy the letter if you no longer want to have a relationship with the person. Sometimes telling a trusted friend what you are doing can make the experience feel more “real” and bring closure.

The process of forgiveness can really challenge you to grow as a person. When done properly, it can be a liberating and empowering experience that allows you to regain emotional freedom and a sense of well-being. Remember that you do have a choice about whether you live your life with bitterness or resentment. You CAN choose to let down those walls and embrace life to its fullest.

# IMPROVING HEALTH

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“Our health always seems much more valuable after we lose it.”  
~Author Unknown

# Thriving in the Face of Stress

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“When written in Chinese, the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents the danger and the other represents opportunity.”

~John F. Kennedy

*Some people thrive, even under stressful conditions. What is their secret? Researchers have found that three attitudes are prevalent among people who are "stress hardy:" (1) commitment, (2) challenge, and (3) control.*

## Being "Hardy" in the Face of Stress

In 1975, a team of psychologists headed by Suzanne Kobasa began a 12-year study of managers at Illinois Bell Telephone. IBT experienced a 50% reduction in workforce in the 1980's after deregulation and divestiture of its parent company, AT&T. Not all managers in this highly stressful situation responded the same way. Some clearly handled the stress of the situation better than others.

These researchers found that managers who coped best with the high level of stress shared three common attitudes. This mindset, along with physical exercise and support from friends and family, prevented stress-related illnesses in this group. What three characteristics do stress hardy people share?

- (1) **Commitment:** Stress hardy individuals are very involved in life, rather than detached and isolated. They have a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives and are committed to being involved with people and situations around them.
- (2) **Control:** People who deal best with stress believe they have some personal control over what happens in their lives. They tend to be active and try to have an influence on what happens to them, rather than being passive and powerless.
- (3) **Challenge:** Those who are stress hardy look at life as a challenge. They believe you can learn from all your experiences, good or bad, and are willing to take calculated risks.

All three of these attitudes work together to buffer a person from stress-related health problems.

## **Developing Stress Hardiness in Your Life**

Research shows that people who are stress hardy are much less likely to become ill or emotionally distressed when they are in stressful situations. Here are some strategies for developing a stress hardy mindset.

### **Increasing Commitment:**

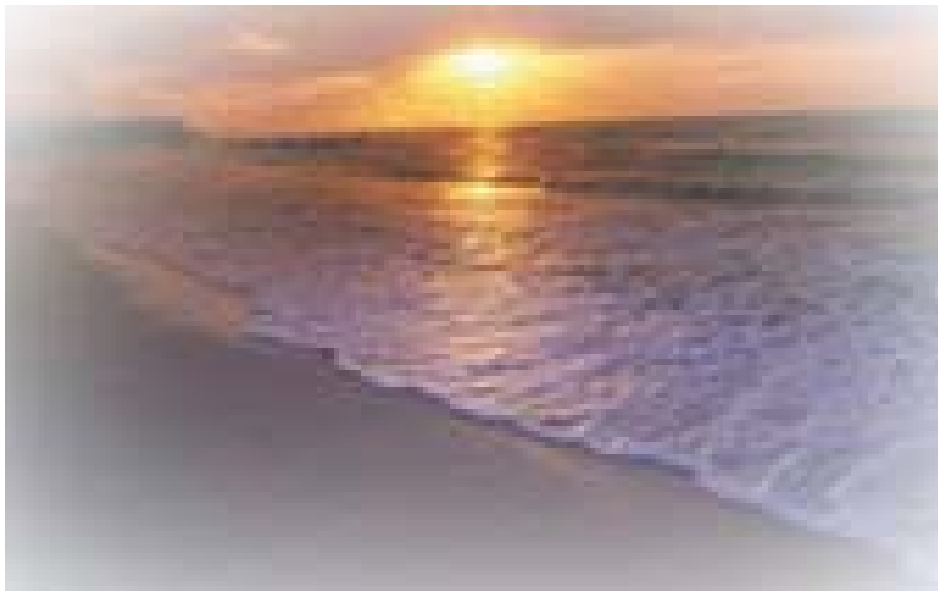
1. Think about what you really want to accomplish in your life and write it down. Why are you here on the planet? What does your life mean?
2. Make a list of what gives your life meaning, purpose, and passion. For the next month, say, "yes" to things that add meaning to your life and "no" to those that don't.
3. Think about how you would want to be remembered by your family, friends, and colleagues. What kind of person do you want to be? What types of relationships do you want to cultivate? Start taking steps to make that vision a reality.

### **Maximizing Personal Control:**

1. Focus on things you can personally change. You may not be able to change the fact that you have diabetes, but you can control whether you adequately manage your blood sugar on a daily basis.
2. If you are chronically frustrated, think about how you spend your energy. Is it primarily where you have real personal control or on situations beyond your control?
3. Make a list of changes you would like to make in your own life and identify the next small steps to start making those changes today. If you want to lose weight, reduce the number of sodas you drink from 5 to 4. If you want to exercise more, park your car a little further away from the store. These changes may seem small, but they add up quickly and feel doable.

**Cultivating Challenge:**

1. Think of difficult situations in your life that you could view instead as a challenge. Could you view the job you're "stuck" in as an opportunity to learn something that may be useful to you later? Are your conflicts with your teenager really opportunities to learn about patience and sacrifice?
2. Take a risk, just to learn something new. Think of something you've always wanted to do and make it a priority to try it. Take that voice class to learn how to sing. Take that trip you've always dreamed about.
3. Support others who are willing to make mistakes and learn from them. It's not easy venturing into new areas. We all need support and encouragement to do our best.



# Resilience

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“Our greatest glory is not in never falling,  
but in rising every time we fall.”

~Confucius

*Tragic circumstances challenge us all to become stronger. Resilience is your ability to bounce back from misfortune. Ten specific actions can help you become more resilient when faced with adversity.*

## Tough Times

As a nation, we've been through some tough times. September 11th, the War on Iraq, "Terror Alerts," recession, and corporate corruption, are just a few of the upsetting events we have faced. On a personal level, you may also have been dealing with other crises, such as a serious injury, death in the family, or job layoff. With so many challenges to face, it can be difficult to see how things could be better.

However, distressing events do not necessarily tear everything apart. Research indicates that eventually people typically recover, even from the most tragic circumstances. Although it has certainly been painful and difficult, even after 9/11, people are slowly rebuilding their lives.

Resilience is your ability to bounce back from adversity or a traumatic event. There are things you can do to facilitate the process. Being resilient does not mean you don't experience stress or emotional pain. It just means that you eventually find your way through and move on with your life, hopefully learning some important lessons along the way.

## Building Resilience

Have you personally been through any hard times this year? Do you think you'll eventually bounce back? What's the best way to deal with the challenges you are experiencing?



Luckily for all of us, resilience is a skill that can be learned. The American Psychological Association (<http://www.apa.org>) has outlined 10 strategies for developing this skill. The next time you feel discouraged by your life circumstances, draw on these suggestions for coping more effectively with adversity.

1. **Make connections.** Good relationships with close family members, friends or others are important. Accept help and support from those who care about you. Assisting others in their time of need also can benefit the helper.
2. **Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems.** Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations.
3. **Accept that change is a part of living.** Certain goals may no longer be attainable as a result of adverse situations. Accepting circumstances that cannot be changed can help you focus on circumstances that you can alter.
4. **Move toward your goals.** Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly--even if it seems like a small accomplishment--that enables you to move toward your goals.
5. **Take decisive actions.** Act on adverse situations as much as you can. Take decisive actions rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses, wishing they would just go away.
6. **Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss.
7. **Nurture a positive view of yourself.** Developing confidence in your ability to solve problems and trusting your instincts helps build resilience.
8. **Keep things in perspective.** Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing the event out of proportion.

9. **Maintain a hopeful outlook.** An optimistic outlook enables you to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualizing what you want rather than worrying about what you fear.

10. **Take care of yourself.** Pay attention to your own needs and feelings. Engage in activities that you enjoy and find relaxing.

Remember, with practice, you can develop the skills that will make you stronger in the face of life's inevitable challenges.

# THE RELAXING BREATH

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“The time to relax is when you don't have time for it.”

~Sydney J. Harris

*Most of us suffer from chronic exposure to high levels of stress. Use deep diaphragmatic breathing to access your body's powerful relaxation response.*

## The Stress Response

Stress is what you experience when there are physical or psychological demands being placed on you. A small dose of stress can be stimulating. However, when you are exposed to high stress, your body activates an automatic “stress response” called the “fight or flight response.” In response to significant stress, your body releases adrenaline and cortisol into your blood stream. Blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration rise, while blood flows away from your hands and feet to your large muscles. From an evolutionary standpoint, the fight or flight response prepares your body to either escape from danger or face the threat. A caveman being pursued by a dangerous animal couldn't have survived without this response!

In our modern lives, we are exposed to stressful events all day long and our brains have a difficult time distinguishing which of these events are genuinely threatening. For example, if you are crossing the street and a car almost hits you, a stress response would be activated because this is a real threat to your physical safety. However, if you are running late for an appointment or stuck in traffic, you might still experience the same stress response, but it would be a “false alarm.”

Some estimates indicate that in a city the size of Boston, a person might engage the stress response about 60 times a day! Think of times when you are driving. Does your heart ever jump when someone suddenly pulls out in front of you? What about at work? Do you ever feel tense because there are so many things to do and not enough time? How many times this week have you already said, “I'm really stressed out”?

Persistent stress can really wear on your health. Stress can decrease the strength of your immune system, making you much more vulnerable to infections. Stress also leads to increased muscle tension, especially in the jaws, neck, shoulders, and

lower back. Headaches, stomach problems, and palpitations can result from long-term exposure to stress. From a psychological standpoint, chronic stress can lead to anxiety, depression, irritability, trouble sleeping, and difficulty concentrating.

## **The Relaxation Response**

To calm the stress response, you must elicit the "relaxation response," originally described by famous Harvard cardiologist Herbert Benson in the early 1970's in his book *The Relaxation Response*. This counterpart to the stress response decreases heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, adrenaline levels, and muscle tension. While the stress response is automatic, the relaxation response must be elicited purposefully. One easy way to engage the relaxation response is to use a technique called deep breathing.

## **Deep Breathing**

Most of us never stop to think about our breathing. About 25,000 times a day, our lungs automatically inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. We take this process for granted and seldom notice how sensitive our respiration is to pressures, worry, and the general level of stress in our lives. Stress causes us to breathe in a shallow, rapid manner and decreases oxygen flow into the body. Have you ever noticed that people often hold their breath when they are very tense? Proper breathing plays an essential role in decreasing high levels of stress and restoring our bodies to a relaxed state.

Babies provide us with the perfect example of how we should all be breathing. When a baby is sleeping, you can clearly see its little belly filling up like a balloon, inflating and deflating in a slow, steady rhythm. Because babies have little stress in their lives, they tend to be physically relaxed and naturally engage in deep breathing. When we are sleeping or relaxed, adults also breathe in this manner.

In order to learn how to breathe deeply, it helps to understand how your respiratory system functions. Did you know that your lungs extend all the way down to the bottom of your ribs and are basically in a "cage," encased by your chest at the top and the diaphragm at the bottom? When you breathe, muscles between your ribs (intercostals) move your rib cage up and out, while your diaphragm muscle pushes on your stomach to create plenty of room for your lungs to fill at the bottom. During a normal, relaxed breath, your stomach gently rises and your lungs fill completely, bringing in plenty of life-sustaining oxygen.

## **Learning to Breathe Deeply**

Stop right now and pay attention to how you are breathing. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly. When you take a deep breath in, which hand moves first? If the hand on your chest rises first, you are upper-chest breathing and filling only the top of your lungs. If the lower hand rises, you are engaging in deep diaphragmatic breathing and filling your lungs completely. When you use your diaphragm, you empty and fill your lungs more effectively and reduce levels of stress simultaneously.

You can learn to breathe more deeply with practice. Remember that your body knows how to breathe properly and that you simply just have to allow it to do so. Physically relaxing, loosening your clothes, and letting go, help this process tremendously. Below are some simple steps you can do to become better at deep diaphragmatic breathing:

1. Lie down flat on your bed or the floor. Take a minute to allow you body to get comfortable and relaxed.
2. Place one hand on your chest and one just below your belly button. Just observe how you are currently breathing.
3. Focus on the hand that is on your belly. As you inhale, imagine a big balloon inside you filling up, expanding your rib cage, and causing that hand to move up.
4. As you exhale, imagine the balloon deflating, causing the hand on your belly to sink down. The muscles in your body relax on the exhale, so each time you breathe out, tell yourself “relax” and allow your body to respond.
5. Repeat this cycle with slow, deep breaths until you are feel comfortable breathing using your diaphragm. The more you can relax your body overall, the easier it will be to engage in deep breathing.

## **Tips for Success**

1. When you first practice belly breathing, you may feel lightheaded. This is just your body reacting to the extra oxygen. Slow down or stop deep breathing for a few minutes and this feeling will pass. With regular practice, your system will adjust.

2. Don't give up if you cannot shift the movement from your chest to your belly. It does take practice. At first, you may have to push your stomach in and out in order to get familiar with your diaphragm muscle. You might try putting an object (like a cup) on your belly and practice flexing the muscles of your abdomen until you get familiar with the sensation of your belly moving.

3. Use your mind to help you. Each time you breathe in, imagine that you are breathing in relaxation. When you breathe out, imagine the stress leaving your body through your breath.

Just practice, practice, practice! The wonderful thing about deep breathing is that once you learn it, you don't have to take extra time out of your busy schedule to use it. You can practice deep breathing when you are at a traffic light, being yelled at by your boss, or getting bored in a meeting.

Habitual slow, deep breathing helps prevent stress build up, increases your energy level, and reduces both anxiety and insomnia. The good news is that there are no side effects to eliciting the relaxation response, except improved health and vitality!



# 10,000 Steps

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“He thinks that the moment my legs begin to move,  
my thoughts begin to flow.”

~Henry David Thoreau

*Despite important gains in health over the last few decades, being overweight has become an epidemic in the United States. Decreasing activity levels play an important role in this problem. The 10,000 Steps Program provides a sensible, gradual approach to integrating increased activity level into your life.*

## **America's Problem with Weight**

In 2001, U.S. Surgeon General, David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., published “The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity.” This report identifies the numerous health gains in the U.S. over the last several decades: life expectancy has increased by 30 years; infant mortality rates are down; and people with infectious or chronic diseases are living longer. However, high rates of overweight and obesity threaten to undermine this success.

In 1999, it is estimated that 61% of the adult population and 13% of children and teens were overweight. Since 1980, obesity rates among adults have doubled and overweight rates for adolescents have tripled! About 300,000 annual deaths are related to problems with weight.

Besides our unhealthful diets (i.e., junk food and extremely large servings of high fat foods), inactivity is a major contributor to this health crisis. A 1996 U.S. Surgeon General’s report on physical activity and health indicated that Americans of all ages are just not active enough. The Surgeon General recommends that we engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on a daily basis on top of our typical daily activities. Less than one-third of us actually meet this standard and one-quarter of the population does not engage in any exercise at all. Regular exercise is a crucial part of any long-term weight-management program and healthy lifestyle.

Recent thinking from health experts is more focused on increasing overall levels of activity in a more manageable way. The 10,000 steps program, developed over 40

years ago in Japan, aims to help us incorporate activity with minimal thought and planning.

Basically, all you do is buy a low-tech pedometer, clip it on at the beginning of the day, and start tracking how much you walk. In the course of a typical day, most of us will walk anywhere from 900 to 3,000 steps without thinking. Within a few weeks, you should be able to work up to 10,000 steps, which puts you in the ballpark of the Surgeon General's recommendation for daily activity. Some studies now suggest that walking 10,000 steps a day can be a highly effective tool for weight management.

Dr. C. Everett Koop founded Shape up America! in 1994 to provide Americans valid scientific information about weight loss. Below are guidelines from Shape Up America! to get started with the 10,000 steps program.

### **10,000 Steps Program**

PLEASE NOTE: Especially for people with certain medical conditions, it is important that you consult with your physician before beginning a regular program of exercise.

In order to start this program, you just need a comfortable pair of shoes and a pedometer. Remember to work up slowly to avoid injury.

**Weeks One and Two:** Establish a baseline. Simply track the number of steps you take on a daily basis for two weeks. Every night, take off your pedometer, and write down the number of steps you walked that day. Remember to reset your pedometer before the next day.

**Weeks Three and Four:** Increase the number of steps. Take the highest number of steps you walked during the previous two weeks and set that as your goal for each day of the following week. If this feels like too much, it is fine to set a smaller goal.

**Week Five:** Add another 500 steps if you are ready. If you cannot add 500, add whatever feels achievable for you.

**Week Six and Beyond:** Continue adding steps slowly on a weekly basis until you reach 10,000 steps. Contact your physician if you have any significant pain or



discomfort. Remember to take things at your own pace. This is a marathon, not a sprint!

Mark Fenton, host of PBS's "America's Walking" suggests that you can increase the number of steps you take by 20% each week after figuring out your average daily steps for one week. So, after establishing your baseline in week one, calculate your average daily steps and multiply by 1.2 to get your goal for the next week. Continue in this fashion by boosting your steps 20% each week until you reach your goal.

For substantial weight loss, many experts recommend 12,000 to 15,000 steps a day. For aerobic fitness, 3,000 to 6,000 of these steps should be taken quickly.

### **Important Tips for Success**

Look for easy ways you can increase the number of steps, such as:

1. Take a five-minute walk whenever you get a chance.
2. Choose the stairs over the elevator or escalator.
3. Park farther away.
4. Take a walking break instead of a coffee break.
5. Take your dog for a walk, rather than just letting the dog run around in the yard.
6. Be more active around your TV watching. Change the channel on the TV manually and get up during commercials.
7. Walk your children to school.
8. Take a walk after dinner.
9. Don't call your office colleagues; walk over to their offices whenever possible.
10. Walk around while you are on the phone. You can add about 100 steps in a five-minute conversation.

Keep an exercise log so you can monitor your progress and stay motivated.

Remember that change takes time and that setbacks are a part of the process. If you skip a few days because of work, illness, or other obligations, get back into your program to avoid losing momentum.

Consider finding a partner to exercise with to keep you motivated. However, be prepared to move forward alone if your partner's enthusiasm begins to waiver.

# Dealing with Infertility

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“Everything is always okay in the end.  
If it's not okay, then it's not the end.”

~Author Unknown

***Infertility poses many physical, emotional, and financial challenges. The long-term stress of coping with infertility can take an emotional toll on a person or couple. Help is available to work through the various decision points in the infertility treatment process.***

## Introduction

Infertility is a medical problem that results in the inability to conceive a child or carry a pregnancy to full term. A couple is usually diagnosed as infertile after one year of frequent, unprotected, sexual intercourse. Of the 10 to 15% of couples who are infertile, about 35% of the causes of infertility can be traced to physical problems of the female and 35% of the male. In the remaining 30% of cases, infertility is either unexplained or is caused by problems stemming from both partners.

## Why Infertility Can Be Devastating

The inability to have children can be one of the greatest challenges that a person or couple will ever face. Infertility affects people emotionally, physically, and financially. It can place tremendous stress on a couple's relationship and on their relationships with family and friends.

On a physical level, the experience of being examined and tested monthly, weekly, or even daily is embarrassing, exhausting, and very expensive. Medications often have side effects, and daily injections may be required. Surgery is often necessary, and sometimes several procedures are needed.

As the process continues over months and years, the couple's privacy is invaded time and again, physically and emotionally. One or both of the partners learn to put aside their feelings as they lie on the examining table, have fluids taken, or give sperm for the tenth, twentieth, or fiftieth time.

At the same time, family, friends and coworkers are waiting to see if this month will bring good news. The couple becomes used to hearing, “Anything new?” with an expectant smile. They also hear comments like, “Maybe you should take a month off and just relax,” or “A vacation would do you good” or “This sounds like a good problem. At least you can have fun trying.” To make it even worse, throughout this experience, the couple regularly hears of others who have become pregnant. In fact, it sometimes seems as if the whole world is pregnant.

These experiences often make the infertile person feel like a failure. The feelings come up each time there is a treatment failure or when yet another friend or acquaintance announces a pregnancy.

After each expensive procedure or round of treatment without a resulting pregnancy, the disappointment turns to devastation. Many infertile people become depressed and anxious. The strain in the marriage and among family members sometimes becomes unbearable. The self-esteem of one or both partners plummets. They often feel lonely, sad, and angry. The long series of disappointments that many experience can cause a numbing effect, and depression can result. If one partner has the medical problem that is causing the infertility, he or she often feels guilty and may even offer the other a divorce. At the same time, the infertile person may fear that the other partner will leave the relationship. All of these changes can make people feel emotionally distant and needing to avoid intimacy.

Some people cut themselves off from friends and family. They look for ways to avoid attending social gatherings and family events, fearing that they will be subjected to discussions about pregnancy, children, or infertility. Socializing with friends and family who have children or who are pregnant is a special challenge. Sometimes these feelings are intensified, especially for women, when they are taking large doses of drugs that can affect their emotions.

### **Emotional Self-Care during Infertility**

Almost no one expects to be infertile. Most people think they will grow up, get married, and have children, just like everyone else around them. So when a couple learns that they are infertile, they are often surprised at how devastated they feel. After all, they reason, they don't have cancer or a deadly disease (in most cases); it's just infertility. So why do they feel so badly? Most couples gradually come to realize that it is a distressing experience. Many eventually seek the help of a team

of professionals, realizing that it is a good idea to create a support network and take advantage of the help that is available.

When one or both partners start to feel the impact of infertility, it can be a good idea to seek the services of a mental health professional, especially one that has experience working with the issues of infertility. Since these issues are so complex, it is important to find a counselor who has experience and training in dealing with the impact on individuals, couples, and families. Many couples also find relief in support groups where they can meet regularly with other infertile couples, share experiences, and support each other. Such groups are offered through organizations like RESOLVE, a national infertility support organization. RESOLVE also provides referrals to medical practitioners who specialize in infertility. Visit <http://www.resolve.org> for information.

Infertility is primarily a medical problem, but during treatment it is important to address the emotional implications of infertility. Joining a support group or seeing a qualified professional is especially important at any of the following points:

- When you begin a new phase of your treatment
- After a course of treatment has failed
- When you are faced with difficult decisions about treatment
- When you are thinking about options such as surrogacy, egg or sperm donation
- When you are considering stopping medical treatment
- When you are thinking about adopting
- When one or both of you have troubling feelings that won't go away
- When you experience strained relationships with your partner, friends, or family
- When you avoid being with others because of the infertility

Although a mental health professional cannot directly influence the outcome of the medical treatment, he or she can certainly help the couple get through the process by helping them communicate better with each other and gain support from family and friends.

# Falling Asleep

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“Insomnia is a gross feeder. It will nourish itself on any kind of thinking, including thinking about not thinking.”

~Clifton Fadiman

*Sleep deprivation can cause many physical, emotional, and thinking problems. Use the tips in this chapter to help you improve your sleep.*

## The Consequences of Inadequate Sleep

Although the average adult needs 7-9 hours of sleep, most of us get by with very little sleep. The demands of work, children, and managing our lives can make it hard to get the rest we need. It can be challenging to “turn off” any worries we may have about things such as medical problems, financial difficulties, or an ailing marriage, when it’s finally time to go to bed. The combination of stress and lack of sleep can leave anyone feeling grumpy and impatient, with little energy left to deal with the people and problems in our lives.

Research now shows that getting enough sleep is essential to good health. Lack of sleep can actually make you vulnerable to infections because sleep deprivation affects your immune system. Researchers at the University of Chicago concluded that chronic lack of sleep affects your hormonal and metabolic systems, sometimes accelerating the onset and severity of obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Other research has shown that insufficient sleep can actually increase the odds of having a heart attack.

Impaired concentration, memory, and reaction times are other consequences of poor sleep. Lack of sleep can be downright dangerous. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that more than 100,000 vehicle crashes each year are caused by drivers who fall asleep at the wheel.

Sleep time is essential for restoring your physical, mental, and emotional energy. Without enough sleep, you’re like a car that’s low on gas. Take time to refuel and you will have much more energy to embrace the challenges and opportunities of your life.

## **Tips for Improving Your Sleep**

Many problems with sleep are actually caused by poor sleep habits. Fortunately, there are several things you can do to improve the length and quality of your sleep. Try these tips from The National Sleep Foundation's website (<http://www.sleepfoundation.org>) to help you get a good night's sleep:

1. Keep a regular sleep schedule. Our sleep-wake cycle is regulated by a "circadian clock" in our brain and the body's need to balance both sleep time and wake time. That is also why it is important to keep a regular bedtime and wake-time, even on the weekends when there is the temptation to sleep-in.

2. Avoid caffeine. Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it can produce an alerting effect. Caffeine products, such as coffee, tea, colas and chocolate, remain in the body on average from 3 to 5 hours, but they can affect some people up to 12 hours later. Even if you do not think caffeine affects you, it may be disrupting and changing the quality of your sleep. Avoiding caffeine within 6-8 hours of going to bed can help improve sleep quality.

3. Avoid nicotine. Nicotine is also a stimulant. Smoking before bed makes it more difficult to fall asleep. When smokers go to sleep, they experience withdrawal symptoms from nicotine, which also cause sleep problems. Nicotine can cause difficulty falling asleep, problems waking in the morning, and may also cause nightmares. Difficulty sleeping is just one more reason to quit smoking.

4. Avoid alcohol. Although many people think of alcohol as a sleep aid because of its sedating effect, it actually disrupts sleep, causing nighttime awakenings. Consuming alcohol leads to a night of less restful sleep.

5. Don't eat or drink too much close to bedtime. Eating or drinking too much may make you less comfortable when settling down for bed. It is best to avoid a heavy meal too close to bedtime. Also, spicy foods may cause heartburn, which leads to difficulty falling asleep and discomfort during the night. Try to restrict fluids close to bedtime to prevent nighttime awakenings to go to the bathroom, though some people find milk or herbal, non-caffeinated teas to be soothing and a helpful part of a bedtime routine.

6. Exercise at the right time promotes sleep. In general, exercising regularly makes it easier to fall asleep and contributes to sounder sleep. However, exercising sporadically or right before going to bed will make falling asleep more difficult. In

addition to making us more alert, our body temperature rises during exercise, and takes as much as 6 hours to begin to drop. A cooler body temperature provides a signal that it is time to sleep. Finish your exercise at least three hours before bedtime. Late afternoon exercise is the perfect way to help you fall asleep at night.

7. Use relaxing bedtime rituals. A relaxing, routine activity right before bedtime conducted away from bright lights sends a signal to your body that it is almost time to go to sleep and will make it easier to fall asleep. Avoid arousing activities before bedtime like working, paying bills, engaging in competitive games or family problem-solving activities. Try an activity that is relaxing, such as soaking in a hot tub, reading or listening to music, or having a massage. Some studies suggest that soaking in hot water (such as a hot tub or bath) before retiring to bed can ease the transition into deeper sleep, but it should be done early enough that you are no longer sweating or over-heated. If you are unable to avoid tension and stress, it may be helpful to learn relaxation therapy from a trained professional.

8. Create a sleep-promoting environment. Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you need for sleep: cool, quiet, dark, comfortable and free of interruptions. Also make your bedroom reflective of the value you place on sleep. Check your room for noise or other distractions, including a bed partner's sleep disruptions such as snoring, light, and a dry or hot environment. Consider using blackout curtains, eyeshades, earplugs, "white noise," humidifiers and other devices. Make sure your mattress is comfortable and supportive—the one you have been using for years may have exceeded its life expectancy—about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses. Have comfortable pillows and make the room attractive and inviting for sleep, but also free of allergens that might affect you and objects that might cause you to slip or fall if you have to get up during the night.

9. Associate your bed with sleep and sex only. Use your bed only for sleep and sex to strengthen the association between bed and sleep. If you associate a particular activity or item with anxiety about sleeping, omit it from your bedtime routine. For example, if looking at a bedroom clock makes you anxious about how much time you have before you must get up, move the clock out of sight. Do not engage in activities that cause you anxiety and prevent you from sleeping.

10. Limit sleep time in bed. If you do not fall asleep within 15-20 minutes of going to bed and turning out the lights, it is best to get out of bed and do another relaxing activity until you are feeling sleepy again. If anxiety about something you need to



do prevents you from sleeping, it is sometimes helpful to jot down notes in a "worry" or "to do" book. Nap during the day only when needed to maintain alertness and plan on napping 20-30 minutes.



# Living with Limits

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“Once we accept our limits, we go beyond them.”

~Albert Einstein

*Coping with a change in your health can pose a tremendous challenge, especially when you face new limitations. Use the information in this chapter to help you deal with your limits more effectively.*

## Changes in Health and Limitations

A change in your health, whether from normal aging, a medical illness, or an injury, can quickly put you in touch with your own physical, mental, and spiritual limits. When your mind or body does not work in the way it used to, you cannot help but experience a reaction to that change.

If the change in your health is a temporary one, you may feel frustrated, but can take comfort in the fact that the experience is a time-limited one. Your surgical incision will eventually heal. Soon or later, you WILL get that cast off your leg. However, when changes are permanent, grief is a common response. It is not unusual to feel sad, angry, disappointed, or even guilty about alterations in your health.

When you experience a decline in your physical, mental, or emotional functioning, you become acutely aware of what you can't do anymore. When an athlete who has always been able to run fast loses her leg because of an accident, she will obviously react to the new limitation. A professor who could always think quickly and clearly may be devastated when he has a brain injury. Any individual who is typically energetic and optimistic can feel tremendously trapped in the midst of a severe depression.

New limits can make you feel like you are locked in a box. The harder you push against those limits, the smaller the box feels. One of the great lessons in life is learning that you must stop fighting limits and learn to work with them in order to be successful. When you do so, the walls of the box begin to move outward in reaction to your own emotional and spiritual growth.

The way our society views limitations makes it even harder to cope with them. Many people believe that limits are weaknesses, when in fact, they are just a reality of our existence. We may not be aware of it at all times, but we always have limits. None of us can live under the water or run 500 miles per hour. Yet, we don't think of these things as limits, we just accept them as realities of our existence.

Certainly, limits can be tough to live with, especially if they are permanent and affect major areas of functioning. However, within every crisis, there is opportunity for growth. Dealing with a new limitation allows you to mature emotionally and spiritually if you are willing to take on the challenge. How "limited" you truly become ultimately depends in large part on your perspective and your openness to the important life lessons hidden within those limitations.

### **Tips for Living with Limitations**

1. Allow yourself to move through your grief. Journal, cry, talk to a loved one, or work on a project. Just do something that allows the energy of grief to be channeled in some constructive way. Remember, you have an innate capacity to heal emotionally if you will work with the healing force within you.
2. Remember that you are not alone. Everyone has limits. To be human is to have limits. We all want to hang onto the illusion that we are invincible, but sooner or later we are all confronted with our frailty as human beings.
3. Be kind to yourself and patient with others in your life affected by your difficulties. It takes time to make sense of major changes in your health and your life. Move at your own pace and let others help you on this journey. Over time, things will feel easier, but you need time, support, and practice to adjust.
4. Be willing to manage whatever health limits you have before they manage you. The more you participate and educate yourself about your health problems, the more powerful you will feel. Remember that acceptance of limits takes strength and is not a weakness.
5. Focus on your strengths. Even though you may have some new limitations, there are still things you can do. Don't forget that. Having a limitation does not mean that you are limited in EVERY aspect of your life. Put your energy into building on your strengths.

# Communicating with Your Physician

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“The doctor is often more to be feared than the disease.”  
~French Proverb

*Being able to communicate your health concerns to your physician is a vital part of maintaining good health. This chapter offers some tips for improving communication with your doctor.*

## Communication and Health

An important key to good health is maintaining excellent communication with your physician or other health care professional. Most physicians would agree that many serious medical problems could be prevented if symptoms were caught early. You have important information about what is happening to your body and your doctor can assist you better if you are willing to share that knowledge.

So, why is it that most of us are reluctant to talk to our doctors? A Harris survey of 1008 adults and 230 primary care physicians was conducted in the late 1990's. In this survey, patients identified the following reasons as the main barriers to communicating with physicians:

1. Feeling embarrassed (25%)
2. Thinking symptoms are not important (11%)
3. Fearing bad news (8%)
4. Not wanting to waste the doctor's time (8%)
5. Fearing treatment options (7%)

Can you relate to any of these reasons? Have you ever held back information because you were too embarrassed or scared about how your doctor might respond? Most of us have been embarrassed at one time or another about a medical problem.

Unfortunately, sensitive medical conditions are often left untreated because of this silence, causing unnecessary discomfort and distress. For example, it has been estimated that most people wait an average of two to three years before seeking attention for urinary incontinence. That is a long time to suffer! Similarly, people

often hesitate to discuss problems they are having with depression and anxiety, even though help is available.

### **Make the Most of Your Visit**

A visit to the doctor's office is not like it used to be. Everyone is in a hurry, doctors and patients alike. Managed care plans increasingly pressure physicians to see as many patients as possible during their workday and often impose time limits on those visits. To complicate things further, many physicians have not had much training in communication with patients, so they may not know how to draw out information when you hesitate to open up. The end result is that you may not speak up and the doctor may not have the time or know how to help you do so. Ultimately, it is YOUR health at stake.

Coming to your visit as prepared as possible should help you get the most of your time with your doctor. Here are some tips to help you convey the important information you bring.

#### **GET ORGANIZED**

Take some time before the visit to make a list of the questions you want answered. Be sure to write the questions in order of importance so that the most vital ones are addressed first. Typically, the doctor will speak and then you will have a chance to respond. When it is your turn to talk, take that opportunity and be very concise. Some research shows that patients speak an average of 18 seconds before they are interrupted by their physicians! So, be prepared with a question or information that is important to you and get to the point.

#### **KEEP GOOD RECORDS**

Be sure to keep an accurate record of your symptoms, medications, or other useful information. A study by the American Society of Internal Medicine indicates that information provided by the patient is the basis for seven out of ten correct diagnoses. So, the better the quality of the information you give your doctor, the easier it will be for him or her to diagnose and treat you correctly.

#### **BE ASSERTIVE**

Your health is incredibly important. Learn as much as you can about your body and your health. Ask questions and seek information until you clearly understand what is happening. Remember that other staff members in the doctor's office may also be able to help you. They often have more time to address your concerns.

Also, if you have questions about medication, remember that your pharmacist can be a great resource. Speak up if your concerns are not addressed adequately. Your health depends on it.

### **Be Honest**

Both patients and physicians need to be candid with one other, even if it causes some discomfort. Remember that it is your doctor's job to know about the human body and all the things that can go wrong with it. Whatever you bring up, it is highly unlikely that this will be the first time your doctors has heard it. So, don't let embarrassment stop you from revealing the truth. If you don't think you can tell the doctor directly, consider writing your concern down on a piece of paper and handing it to your physician. You can also tell the nurse or another staff member, with whom you might be more comfortable, to convey the information to your doctor.

Remember, good communication with healthcare professionals is a vital part of maintaining your health. Get the most out of your visits by asking questions, providing necessary information, and being educated about your health. By doing so, you will make it much easier for your doctors to give you the best care possible.

# NAVIGATING THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

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“Come to the edge.”  
“We can’t. We’re afraid.”  
“Come to the edge.”  
“We can’t. We will fall!”  
Come to the edge.”  
And they came.  
And he pushed them.  
And they flew.

**~Guillaume Apollinaire**

# Powerful Thoughts

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“Your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens.”

~Kahlil Gibran

***The way you think about the events in your life has a powerful affect on how you feel. Learn to identify some of the most common thinking errors people commit and how to fix them.***

## **The Power of Your Thoughts**

What if you were to fail a test, lose your job, or make a big mistake in front of others? Would you respond with feelings of sadness, worry, or shame? It wouldn't be human not feel some emotion when difficult things happen in your life, but is there anything you can do to change your emotions? Or do you simply endure your feelings until they magically change?

A type of psychotherapy called cognitive therapy offers us important insights into how our emotions work and how we can influence them. Most of us think that we have no control over our emotions--we simply feel what we feel. Cognitive therapy proposes that it is not what happens to us that causes our emotional reactions, but rather, the way we think about the events in our lives.

For example, let's say you're stuck in traffic. Is it inevitable that you will feel angry and upset because you can't go anywhere? Well, it all depends on how you think about it. If your thoughts are "I can't believe I'm stuck here. I wish these incompetent drivers would get out of my way. My whole evening's going to be ruined," you're likely to be quite distressed. On the other hand, if you say to yourself, "Well, I'm not thrilled to be sitting here in traffic, but I guess this gives me a chance to listen to the end of this talk show and relax for a while," you might actually experience the time as pleasurable.

So, the basic idea in cognitive therapy is that your thoughts are the key to managing your emotions. You can't always change what happens to you, but if you



can change how you think about those events, you can actually influence the way you feel.

## Cognitive Distortions

David Burns, M.D., author of *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, points out that our thinking is not always very accurate. In fact, he has identified a list of some common ways people think that actually lead to a more frequent experience of distressful feelings such as anxiety, depression, guilt, or anger. Here is a list of cognitive distortions from *Feeling Good*:

1. **All or Nothing Thinking:** You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
2. **Overgeneralization:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. **Mental Filter:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water.
4. **Disqualifying the Positive:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or another. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.
5. **Jumping to Conclusions:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.
  - A. **Mind Reading:** You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check this out.
  - B. **The Fortune Teller Error:** You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact.
6. **Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization:** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement) or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick."

7. **Emotional Reasoning:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

8. **Should Statements:** You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

9. **Labeling & Mislabeled:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: "He's a damn louse." Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

10. **Personalization:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you were not primarily responsible for.

When people have severe anxiety or depression, it is inevitable that their thinking is playing an important role in keeping them emotionally stuck. All of us engage in these thinking errors, but people experiencing severe disturbance of their mood, do so much more often.

## **Untwisting Your Thoughts**

So what do you do? How do you change the way you feel?

1. Notice your automatic thoughts. Watch how you respond to the events in your life. Is your automatic response to think something negative or positive? We all have a "tape" playing in our minds and may not be aware of the content. Important people in our lives, such as our parents, often influence what's recorded on the tape, early in our lives. So, if you had a very critical parent, you might automatically think very self-critical thoughts when things happen. For example, let's say you fail a test. Do you automatically tell yourself, "I'm such a loser. I always mess things up." Do your automatic thoughts sound like the voice of an important person in your life?

2. Notice your emotions. Take note of the emotions you experience in response to your thoughts, especially when you mess up. Are your thoughts causing you to feel upset, angry, or anxious? What specific thoughts are triggering these emotions?

3. Look for cognitive distortions. Write your thoughts down on paper and objectively examine them, looking for any thinking errors you may have made. For example, if you tell yourself, "I always mess things up," you are overgeneralizing. What evidence do you have that you ALWAYS mess things up? Can you identify any instances when you might actually have done some things well? Isn't your statement a bit extreme?

4. Change your thinking. Substitute more reasonable thoughts for any of your twisted thoughts. For example, if you failed a test, you might say, "I didn't do well this time, but I'll study harder and do better next time."

5. Notice your new feelings. When you change what you are telling yourself, your feelings will also change. Once again, with the example of failing a test, your new thoughts might lead you to feel slightly disappointed, but able to move on.

Changing your thinking habits takes time. It really helps to use the strategies outlined in this newsletter, but if you need even more structure, consider doing some additional exercises outlined in the handbook that accompanies Dr. Burns's book.

When depression or anxiety spins out of control, it can be extremely difficult to engage in the exercises described here. If you are having trouble examining and changing your thoughts, please seek some professional help. Sometimes when you are entangled in very intense emotions, you need an outsider to help you get some perspective. The good news is that a cognitive therapy approach can be a powerful antidote to mild depression, rivaling even antidepressant medication in its efficacy.

# Healthy Optimism

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“Optimism is essential to achievement and it is also the foundation of courage and true progress.”

~Lloyd Alexander

***Healthy optimism has been linked to several benefits, such as improved health, enhanced longevity, and greater resilience to life stressors. For those who are naturally more pessimistic, the good news is that optimism can be learned.***

## Healthy Optimism

*For Sale: One Pair of Rose-Colored Glasses. The following accessories included: improved health, increased longevity, greater resilience to life stressors, and better mental health.*

For those of you who have a skeptical outlook on life, you may be paying a hefty price for being overly cautious. Research states that individuals who have a healthy optimism about the world tend to fare better in all aspects of their lives. Optimists have much lower risk for asthma, ulcers, and heart disease. Optimists may also do better financially. Two studies found that optimistic salespeople sold 40-60% more life insurance than their colleagues who were more pessimistic!

The explanation you place on events in your life can make a difference in how healthy, happy, and resilient you are in the face of life's challenges. Martin Seligman, Ph.D., a top-notch research psychologist and an authority on optimism, notes that optimists differ from pessimists in three main areas of thinking.

**1. Personalization:** Optimists take credit for good things that happen and tend to share the blame with others when bad things occur. Pessimists blame themselves for bad events, but do not take credit when good things occur. For example, when winning the lottery, the optimist might tell herself, “I picked the right numbers,” while the pessimist would attribute winning to luck.

**2. Permanence:** Optimists see bad events as being temporary, while pessimists tend to believe that bad things will last. For example, given signs of a possible health problem, an optimist will believe that with treatment, the problem will

resolve. However, a pessimist might assume that the condition will likely be chronic.

3. **Pervasiveness:** When bad events occur, optimists compartmentalize, separating these events from other aspects of their lives. In contrast, pessimists tend to globalize, letting bad events permeate their lives in general. If an optimist loses his job, he might continue to exercise, socialize with friends, and enjoy hobbies, while looking for a new position. Conversely, a pessimist might tell himself “I am a bad father, husband, and person. I am a failure.”

Optimists can be just as realistic as pessimists. Realistic optimists do not pretend things are wonderful when faced with real tragedies. However, even in a difficult situation, an optimist will be more likely to see the silver lining on the cloud or retain a sense of hope that things can get better.

## **Developing an Optimistic Outlook**

Research states that if cultivated correctly, optimistic thinking can become a positive habit that will lead to a variety of benefits in all areas of your life, including improved health, job success, and even slowed aging. The following is a list of tips for acquiring optimism:

1. **Manage blame.** Give yourself adequate credit for good events. When bad events occur, do not automatically assume complete responsibility (even if you tend to be a “responsible” person).
2. **Learn to compartmentalize.** In other words, practice “flood control” when bad events occur. Consciously prevent bad events from spilling over into other areas of your life. Continue to exercise, socialize, pursue hobbies, and so forth, even though you may not completely feel like doing so.
3. **Form friendships with optimistic people.** The old adage that “misery loves company” is still true. In fact, miserable company can create more misery. Instead, surround yourself with positive people who build you up, find humor in life, and feel good about themselves.
4. **Skew positive.** Negative expectations produce negative outcomes. If you skew positive, you may be disappointed at times, but in the long run, this strategy will buffer you against negative thinking.

# Conquering Anxiety

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"Nothing diminishes anxiety faster than action."

~Walter Anderson

*Many people experience anxiety in the course of dealing with their busy, challenging lives. In this chapter, discover effective strategies for managing the anxiety you feel.*

## Understanding Anxiety

As a child, did you ever believe that there were monsters under the bed? Many of us lay frozen under the blankets, afraid to make a sound because doing so might alert the monsters of our presence. Have you outgrown your monsters, or have their names simply changed? Most adults have a number of "monsters" or "fears" that secretly terrify them from time to time. These fears might include fear of failure, fear of public speaking, fears about not being successful and so forth.

Anxiety is based in underlying fears that may seem beyond our control. It can produce many negative consequences that can interfere with optimal performance on the job or with life in general. Most would agree that anxiety can cause chronic worry and negative thoughts that distract us from doing our best. However, this feeling can also result in a number of additional negative consequences. For example, anxiety can be directed inward, causing self-doubt and hesitation that keeps people from acting confidently and effectively when needed. In the extreme, being anxious can produce chronic procrastination and avoidance of important tasks that could seriously jeopardize one's effectiveness and success. Anxiety can also cause a host of physical and mental problems such as sleep difficulties, problems with concentration and focus, and general uneasiness. At its worst, anxiety can result in panic attacks, during which a person experiences symptoms such as a very rapid heart rate, chest tightness, a choking sensation, hyperventilation, and a fear of dying.

Any of these sound familiar? Anxiety might seem like "the enemy," but if channeled properly, a low level of anxiety can be an ally. Anxiety is energy that can help to charge us up and prepare us for action. Feeling anxious might signal that something

needs attention--that there is something in your life you may need to face. It can also help spur us on to greater personal growth and achievement.

Anxiety is often born from busy, challenging lives. Changes such as a new job, the birth of a child, or an illness can lead your life to feel uncertain and unstable. Although some changes may be positive, you might still find yourself feeling anxious about financial pressures, adjusting to new roles, and balancing the competing demands of work and your personal life. Your feelings of anxiety can also come from internal sources. Some of us start with temperaments that are more prone and sensitive to anxiety. We may place too many demands and expectations on ourselves, or have a fear of being out of control.

### **Breaking the Cycle of Anxiety**

Our natural instinct is to run from what we fear the most, or to freeze, hoping that what we fear will go away. However, just like turning on the lights helped to dispel the monsters under the bed, turning around and facing your fears directly can have an empowering and liberating effect from anxiety. As you confront your fears, they WILL become smaller. Here are some suggestions for breaking the cycle of anxiety:

1. **TAKE ACTION.** Don't procrastinate, hide, or run away. Believe that you have the power to overcome your anxiety. Immediately, it may not feel good to face your fears directly, but if you apply this strategy consistently, it typically works.
2. **GET SOME PERSPECTIVE.** Often anxiety is rooted in exaggeration of one's worst fears and negative thoughts. If you are the kind of person who embraces "worst-case scenarios" regularly, you may need a cognitive tune-up. Strategies such as thought stopping might be helpful. Whenever a negative or anxiety-based thought occurs such as "I'm going to make a fool of myself" or "I don't measure up," tell yourself to **STOP!** Stopping these types of thoughts is essential to interrupting the cycle of anxiety.
3. **TUNE OUT.** If anxiety causes physical problems such as sweaty palms, heart-racing, shallow breathing, or nervousness in general, it is important to distract yourself from these physical sensations. Deep breathing and simple counting can be effective. Use any of your five senses to distract yourself. For example, count the tiles on the floor, focus on background voices or music, and so on. Remember, what you focus on tends to grow.

4. **REPACKAGE ANXIETY.** Sometimes relabeling anxiety as "energy" or "excitement" can cause a positive transformation. An interesting study compared the thoughts of beginning and expert skydivers. Beginning skydivers reported a lot of fear and apprehension about their jump; whereas, expert skydivers reported feeling excited or exhilarated. However, on actual physical measures, both groups were experiencing the same physiological reactions. The only difference was in the label they attached to them.

5. **TAKE SMALL STEPS.** If your anxiety has you "stuck," focus on a small step you can take to get yourself moving again. Be willing to seek support from a good friend or a perhaps a professional coach if you feel you cannot do this alone. Sometimes another person can see exactly what you need to do to get going again.

*NOTE: If you are experiencing extreme or chronic anxiety (i.e. panic attacks), consider talking to a healthcare professional to learn effective techniques that might work for your particular situation. Even severe anxiety can be treated. You can learn to manage and even conquer anxiety.*



# RELATING WELL TO OTHERS

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“Imagine life as a game in which you are juggling some five balls in the air. You name them - work, family, health, friends and spirit ... and you're keeping all of these in the air.

You will soon understand that work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back. But the other four balls - family, health, friends and spirit - are made of glass. If you drop one of these, they will be irrevocably scuffed, marked, nicked, damaged or even shattered. They will never be the same. You must understand that and strive for Balance in your life.”

**~Bryan Dyson**

# Real Love

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“You learn to like someone when you find out what makes them laugh, but you can never truly love someone until you find out what makes them cry.”

~Author Unknown

***Many of the things we learn about real love are highly inaccurate. In this chapter, discover how to identify real love and what sustains it.***

## What's Love?

Where did you learn everything you know about love? Observing your parents? Reading a Harlequin romance novel? Watching Cinderella? It is ironic that we are taught very little about one of the most important endeavors in life: forming and maintaining intimate relationships. Instead, much is left to chance.

Images abound of “beautiful” people “magically” falling in love, living “happily ever after” with 2.5 kids, never having an argument or experiencing any difficulty along the way. We are constantly exposed to the romantic fantasy that our soul mate will “complete” us, respond intuitively and eagerly to our every desire, never having to ask how to make us happy or even needing anything in return.

Certainly, it can be fun to indulge in fantasy occasionally. However, relationships are hard to the degree that we buy into the fantasy. When fantasies become our reality, they are downright dangerous to the survival of our intimate relationships.

Although most of us never went to “love” school, grasping how to form and maintain a close relationship with another human being is vital to our happiness and long-term well-being. The reality of relationships is quite different from most of what we have learned.

## 10 Realities of Relationships

1. In reality, people do indeed fall in love, but the initial intensity cannot be sustained indefinitely. Love characterized by respect, intimacy, and acceptance is what survives.

2. In reality, we initially see one another as perfect, but then slowly begin to discover each other's quirks, frailties, and humanness. No one can live up to the idealized image. It is simply impossible.
3. In reality, our partners cannot read our minds. Good communication skills are developed with conscious effort and practice.
4. In reality, our partner cannot meet all our needs. We also need other relationships to help us feel consistently loved, accepted, and appreciated.
5. In reality, we all bring some emotional baggage into relationships. If appropriately handled, unpacking this baggage in the relationship can ultimately create more intimacy.
6. In reality, there is little social support for our relationships and our families. Hard work, consistency, and some luck (not "magic") are what keep our loved ones close.
7. In reality, our lives are often hectic, leaving little time for ourselves, let alone our relationships. Moments of authentic connection are what allow our relationships to stay strong.
8. In reality, playing games in a relationship does not bring you closer. Sincerity and kindness are crucial for real love to survive.
9. In reality, your relationship must grow with you. Experiences such as the death of a loved one, parenthood, personal illness, financial hardship, or relocation can change you and the nature of your relationship. Relationships that can adjust to new life circumstances are more likely to survive.
10. In reality, relationships are give and take. Sometimes it's your turn to give and sometimes it's your time to take. Everyone needs a turn.

### **How True is Your Love?**

If you are trying to determine whether you and your partner really love one another, ask yourselves the following questions:

- Do you have a deep respect for one another?

- Are you best friends?
- Do you and your partner accept one another when you are...not so perfect? stressed? down? broke? self-doubting? vulnerable? annoying? feeling ugly? having a bad day?
- Is your relationship safe enough to share your real thoughts, feelings, and needs?
- Are you both tuned in to one another's needs?
- Is it difficult for you to see your partner suffering in any way, and vice versa?
- Do you hold one another up when things are hard?
- Do you work together to get through the hard times?
- Do you speak respectfully about your partner to others in your life?
- Do you support one another's dreams?

The more "YES" answers, the greater the likelihood that you have a love that is real and will stand the test of time.

## **Conclusion**

Real love takes courage. Sharing yourself openly and deeply always involves emotional risk. However, there is nothing more romantic than curling up in the arms of someone who knows the real you, accepts you as you are, and longs for you to feel safe, loved, and secure. That's real love.

## **Learn More about Real Love**

*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, John Gottman, Ph.D.

*The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships*, John Gottman, Ph.D.

*Getting the Love You Want : A Guide for Couples*, Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.

*The Dance of Intimacy: A Woman's Guide to Courageous Acts of Change in Key Relationships*, Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

*Relationship Rescue*, Phillip McGraw, Ph.D.

*We Love Each Other, But: Simple Secrets to Strengthen Your Relationship and Make Love Last*, Ellen Wachtel, Ph.D.



# Marriage and Health

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“It is not a lack of love,  
but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.”  
~Friedrich Nietzsche

*The nature of your marriage has a significant impact on your health. A good marriage can do wonders to protect you from illness, while a bad one can literally make you ill. Learn some effective strategies for improving your relationship with your spouse.*

## Marriage and Health

A bad marriage or long-term relationship can have detrimental effects on your health, while a good one can protect you from disease and speed recovery. Sociologist Linda Waite, Ph.D., says, "Marriage is sort of like a life preserver or a seat belt. We can put it exactly in the same category as eating a good diet, getting exercise, and not smoking."

John Gottman, Ph.D., a well-respected psychologist and marriage researcher reports that an unhappy marriage can increase your chances of becoming ill by 35% and take four years off your life! He believes “working on your marriage every day will do more for your health and longevity than working out at a health club”.

## The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Although many of us believe that anger is the root cause of unhappy relationships, Gottman notes that it is not conflict itself that is the problem, but how we handle it. Venting anger constructively can actually do wonders to clear the air and get a relationship back in balance. However, conflict does become a problem when it is characterized by the presence of what Gottman calls the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse:” criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

1. **Criticism.** Criticism involves attacking your partner’s personality or character, rather than focusing on the specific behavior that bothers you. It is healthy to air disagreements, but not to attack your spouse’s personality or character in the process. This is the difference between saying, “I’m upset that you didn’t take out

the trash” and saying, “I can’t believe you didn’t take out the trash. You’re just so irresponsible.” In general, women are more likely to pull this horseman into conflict.

2. **Contempt.** Contempt is one step up from criticism and involves tearing down or being insulting toward your partner. Contempt is an open sign of disrespect. Examples of contempt include: putting down your spouse, rolling your eyes or sneering, or tearing down the other person with so-called “humor.”

3. **Defensiveness.** Adopting a defensive stance in the middle of conflict may be a natural response, but does not help the relationship. When a person is defensive, he or she often experiences a great deal of tension and has difficulty tuning into what is being said. Denying responsibility, making excuses, or meeting one complaint with another are all examples of defensiveness.

4. **Stonewalling.** People who stonewall simply refuse to respond. Occasional stonewalling can be healthy, but as a typical way of interacting, stonewalling during conflict can be destructive to the marriage. When you stonewall on a regular basis, you are pulling yourself out of the marriage, rather than working out your problems. Men tend to engage in stonewalling much more often than women do.

All couples will engage in these types of behaviors at some point in their marriage, but when the four horsemen take permanent residence, the relationship has a high likelihood of failing. In fact, Gottman’s research reveals that the chronic presence of these four factors in a relationship can be used to predict, with over 80% accuracy, which couples will eventually divorce. When attempts to repair the damage done by these horsemen are met with repeated rejection, Gottman says there is over a 90% chance the relationship will end in divorce.

## **Tips for Improving Your Marriage and Your Health**

Given that having a strong marriage is such an important key to staying healthy and happy, it makes sense to direct energy into making your relationship the best that it can be. The investment will truly be worth it. Below are some tips for making your relationship a much healthier one:

1. **Nurture your friendship.** Do you know your spouse’s likes and dislikes, dreams, worries, fears and hopes? Do you know in detail what your spouse did all day

yesterday? Do you know what types of pressures he or she faces at work? The basis of a good marriage is a solid friendship. If a marriage is not built on a strong friendship, it may be difficult to stay connected over time. Make sure you take some time each day to confide in one another. During these times, make it a priority to listen and learn about your partner's thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

2. Actively take steps to foster your liking and admiration for your partner. Gottman says this is the antidote to contempt. Remember your partner's good qualities. Why were you attracted to your spouse in the first place? What did you originally love or admire about your partner? By nurturing your fondness for your spouse, you can foster a much more positive attitude toward him or her.

3. Always behave respectfully toward your spouse. In relationships that deteriorate over time, respect becomes increasingly absent. Sadly, sometimes people end up treating their spouses worse than they would ever treat a complete stranger. By tolerating or engaging in disrespectful behavior, you actively contribute to the demise of your relationship. Do you ever call your spouse names? Do you ever berate your partner in front of your friends or family? Do you consider how your spouse will be affected by your cruel comments or actions? Take stock of ways you or your spouse may cross the line of respect. Remember that without respect, love cannot survive.

4. Accept and validate your partner. Recognize how much power you have to build up your spouse up or tear him or her down. You can help make your relationship a safe haven or hell on earth. Remember, everyone needs to feel accepted for who they are as a human being. Instead of attacking your spouse, try to understand his or her point of view. Also, compliment your spouse for ways he or she supports you and your relationship. It's easy to get so focused on what is wrong in a relationship that you miss what is actually working.

5. Forgive one another. When your partner genuinely reaches out to ask for forgiveness, do not turn away. Hurt feelings and conflict are inevitable at times. When attempts to repair this hurt are repeatedly rejected, the relationship takes a hit. You may need time to let go of a grudge, bitterness, or feelings of hurt, but don't close the door completely on your partner's attempts to make things better. Reach deep inside and work on healing together.

6. Calm down. When conflict escalates, people can become "flooded" by strong emotions, leading to physical distress, stonewalling and defensiveness. Take a few



deep breaths or call a time out. Most people need about 20 minutes to actually calm their bodies down. Take the time and come back to the issues at hand when you can actually listen to what the other person is saying without being overwhelmed.

7. Let your partner influence you. In general, men are less likely to look for common ground with their wives. Gottman notes "When a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81% chance that his marriage will self-destruct." Remember that good marriages involve give and take. You are on the same team and need to work together for the sake of your relationship.

8. Warm up your relationship. Keep your relationship healthy by ensuring that there are at least five positive interactions for every negative one. Gottman's research has identified that a 5:1 ratio of positive interactions to negative ones is linked to the stability of a marriage, no matter what your typical style of resolving conflict. If there is too much negativity, the relationship suffers.

9. Learn to let some things go. Although your spouse may do things that drive you crazy, remember you can cope. It is not worth it to struggle over every little thing. Solve the problems that are solvable and let the others go. You must learn to pick your battles carefully.

10. Don't forget to work on yourself. A relationship is just like a dance. You move in unison to create something that is truly unique. What type of partner are you? Do you work with your partner or pull hard in another direction? Do you step on her toes? Do you gaze in his eyes or focus only on your next steps? Remember you control 50% of what happens in your relationship. Be sure you are a good partner.

# Fair Fighting

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"An eye for an eye, and the whole world would be blind."

~Kahlil Gibran

*Disagreement is part of any relationship. However, the way you argue does affect whether your relationship is strengthened or damaged. Discover some effective strategies that help assure that your disagreements actually make your relationship healthier.*

## To Argue or Not to Argue

Do you ever worry that if you argue too much with your spouse you'll end up getting a divorce? Some people believe that when two people are happy in their relationship, they should never argue. However, in real life, disagreement is inevitable at some point in any relationship.

Excessive fighting can certainly take a toll on you and your relationships. Heated arguments with your partner in which there is a great deal of blame, criticism, or withdrawal are bad for your health. Several studies show that immune system response decreases and blood pressure increases in individuals who argue in a destructive way. When parents engage in negative, hostile arguing, children also suffer. A study at the University of Washington showed that when parents routinely attack one another's character, feelings, and beliefs, their children tend to be less psychologically healthy and exhibit more antisocial behavior.

In order for your marriage to remain healthy, it is important to evaluate how you currently fight and then take steps to become more effective at managing conflict when it arises.

## Masters of Marriage

John Gottman, a marriage researcher for over 20 years, has identified a group of people he calls the "Masters of Marriage." These individuals have found a way to make marriage work, despite their personal differences and conflicts. Here's what we know about the Masters of Marriage:

- The Masters say and do five positive things for every negative one, even when fighting. In other words, although negativity is expressed in the relationship, this is heavily outweighed by the positive. This ratio of 5:1 keeps the relationship feeling emotionally warm and supportive.
- The Masters are not quick to compromise, but instead, are willing to work hard to resolve issues. They don't take shortcuts and do resolve the issues that are possible to resolve.
- The Masters tend not to clash or confront too much. Overall, they present their disagreements in a softened way, while expressing appreciation for their partners.
- The Masters acknowledge and honor one another's aspirations and goals. They are also able to identify to their spouse which dreams they can truly support and which they cannot.
- The Masters fight fairly and have ways to handle an argument when it is spinning out of control.

Believe it or not, research shows that *HOW* you argue about things is much more important than *WHAT* you are arguing about. Some issues in a relationship can be resolved and others cannot. It is important to have a process for working through the problems you can solve. Regardless of whether you're arguing about picking up the socks off the floor or how to manage the finances, following certain guidelines helps you work through your disagreements more effectively.

### **Creating a Climate of Safety and Respect**

It is very difficult for two people to work through an issue if they do not feel emotionally and physically safe enough to bring up a problem. Maintaining a respectful environment for discussion is imperative for openness. Try the following strategies to help you get through conflict without damaging the relationship or hurting one another's feelings.

1. Don't threaten your partner physically or emotionally. Try not to yell, call names, use foul language, or curse. Don't say you're going to leave unless you mean it. Do not leave the house without telling your partner that you will be back.

2. Don't hit below the belt. You know your spouse well and need to be aware of the power you have to hurt him or her. The words you choose can be a weapon to hurt your partner deeply, so please be respectful and loving.
3. Be aware of timing. Don't discuss issues when you are tired or irritated by other things. Don't argue while you're lying in bed in the dark. Mutually select a time when you can really talk.
4. Face the music. Don't run away. You have an opportunity to work through your problems. Don't give up the chance to do so.
5. Hold hands and make eye contact as you converse. By being physically in touch with your spouse, you are less likely to engage in a "free for all."

### **Communicating Effectively**

How you communicate with your spouse can make a huge difference in whether or not you are truly heard. The more you are willing to use the strategies listed below, the greater the likelihood that your partner will actually hear your concerns.

1. Listen, listen, listen. Most of us want to get our point across when we are arguing. It is natural to want to interrupt when your partner is talking, but this does not help move you toward resolution. Listen to what your partner has to say. Try to put yourself in their shoes and see things from their perspective. Everyone needs to feel understood and heard. If neither party listens, the conflict will naturally escalate. Take turns. No lectures allowed. Show the other person you are listening by briefly summarizing what you heard them say.
2. Remember the positive. Although it may be natural to focus on what is WRONG during an argument, it is also important to remember that you and your spouse share areas of agreement. Your partner is likely making some valid points, so go ahead and acknowledge those points. If the other person feels you are considering their perspective, the conversation will typically stay calm. Remember, neither one of you has a corner on the truth.
3. Approach the argument with a problem-solving attitude. Come up with some solutions or compromises, rather than just complaints. Don't just tear things down. Help build up your relationship.

4. Take responsibility for yourself and don't point fingers. Own your part in creating the problem. Use "I" more than "you" when beginning a sentence in order to keep you focused on your OWN behavior.
5. Make reasonable requests. Rather than criticizing, ask for what you want. What's done is already done. Focus on the future and sincerely request what you need from your spouse.
6. Stick to the topic at hand. Don't bring up every complaint you have ever had. Otherwise, you will probably make little progress. Remember, one issue at a time.
7. Beware of being too dramatic. Watch out for words like "you always/never."
8. Refrain from being provocative. Avoid statements so critical that the other person feels they must retaliate. You know your partner's buttons—don't push them!
9. Take the time to collect your thoughts. If you don't have an immediate response, it's fine. It is better to take time to be thoughtful, rather than responding reactively.
10. Be direct. Avoid using hints to get at your point. Remember that your partner cannot read your mind. Trust that your partner can hear what you have to say.

### **Conflict Management 911**

If an argument feels like it is getting out of hand, use the following strategies to calm things down:

**RELAX.** Stop what you are doing and take a few deep breaths as you count to 10. This will decrease your physical arousal and make it less likely that you will get too aggressive with your partner.

**REVIEW.** Think about what is happening at the moment. Is the approach you are using going to get you where you want to go? Would something else work better?

**REACH OUT.** Say something positive to your partner or physically touch him or her in a nonconfrontational way. Try to create an atmosphere of resolution, not destruction.

## **Conclusion**

The process of resolving an argument should ultimately result in the two of you feeling closer, not further apart. You have an important choice to make. Either you can help improve your relationship or contribute to its demise. Do you want to "win" an argument at the cost of ruining your relationship? Remember that when just one of you wins, both of you ultimately lose.



# Asserting Yourself

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“When all other means of communication fail, try words.”

~Author Unknown

*We often encounter situations in which it is necessary to stand up for ourselves, tell others what we really think, or say, “no” to a request. Do you know how to express yourself directly, honestly, and respectfully, even in very difficult situations? In this chapter, examine the process of becoming more assertive.*

## Assertive Communication

What would you do in the following situations?

*A good friend calls to ask if he can borrow your car. You know he’s had several speeding tickets and accidents and you really don’t want to take a risk with your car.*

Would you tell him “no,” make up a story about why you can’t loan him the car, or let him borrow it even though you don’t really want him to?

*You go out to eat at a restaurant and have a terrible experience. The person waiting on you is hard to find, the food is cold when it arrives, and you get charged for a cup of coffee you did not even order.*

Would you talk to the management? Would you be likely to make a big scene or yell at the waiter? Or, would you leave without saying anything, vowing never to return?

*Someone cuts in front of you while you are in line at the grocery store. They glance at you and then start unloading their full cart of groceries onto the conveyor belt. It’s clear to you that they know they’re cutting in line.*

Would you ask this person to get behind you in line or would you go ahead and let them cut in? If you let them cut in, would you be secretly angry about their behavior the whole time?

We run into situations like these every day and often have to make split decisions about how to handle them. What is your typical style of responding when someone asks you to do something you don't really want to do? How good are you at expressing yourself in a truthful and direct manner? Are you able to take a stand when necessary to take care of yourself?

Do you wish you could express yourself more directly, even in hard situations?

Assertiveness is a style of communication that allows you to be direct and honest without being angry or unfair. Assertive behavior is about being able to stand up for yourself, making sure others don't take advantage of you or treat you disrespectfully. People who are assertive communicate clearly and thoughtfully, seeking to respect the feelings of all parties involved.

Many people confuse assertiveness with aggression. Unlike assertiveness, when someone is aggressive, they are not concerned about the other person's rights or feelings. For example, yelling at the waiter because your food is cold is aggressive behavior because you are conveying your dissatisfaction with the service in a manner that fails to protect the dignity of the other person involved. The basic message of aggressive behavior is "you don't count." The goal is to win at any cost. People who are being aggressive in their communication may stare in an intimidating manner, step into someone's physical space, yell, call names, and be threatening, demanding and punishing.

Many people, especially women, are taught to communicate in an unassertive/passive manner. Nonverbally this can mean making little eye contact, speaking in a soft or muffled voice, and taking up very little physical space (i.e., acting like a "mouse"). Passive individuals tend to put the needs of others before their own nearly all the time. They don't challenge things even when they have different feelings or opinions. The primary goal is to be accepted and liked by everyone. The unstated message of passive behavior is "you're more important than me." A passive communication style sets you up to carry around feelings of resentment. You may feel as if others make too many demands on you, without considering your needs.

### **Your Rights**

As children, we are taught certain ideas that can actually interfere with the ability to be assertive. For example, we are often told that it is selfish to put our own needs



before that of others. Consequently, as adults, we may find it hard to ever take care of ourselves without feeling a little “selfish” or “mean.”

Below is a list of some rights that all adults have. However, depending on your upbringing, you may have some difficulty truly believing they apply to you.

**YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO:**

1. be treated respectfully.
2. put yourself first sometimes.
3. say, “no” without feeling guilty.
4. hold and voice your own opinions.
5. be the final judge about what you feel.
6. be listened to and taken seriously.
7. make mistakes.
8. make and change your decisions.
9. ask for what you want or need.
10. not take responsibility for someone else’s problem.

**Practicing Assertiveness**

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned. The following are four common types of assertive statements you can practice and become comfortable using over time.

1. BASIC ASSERTION. This is a simple, direct expression of your feelings, thoughts, or opinions indicated by an “I want” or “I feel” statement.

Examples:

“I want you to speak to me in a respectful tone.”

“I feel too tired to go to the movies tonight.”

2. EMPATHIC ASSERTION. This type of assertion focuses on being sensitive to the other person. The first part of such an assertion is an acknowledgment of the other person’s feelings or situation. The second part is a statement in which you stand up for your rights.

Examples:

“I know work has been extremely demanding, but I really need you to make a little time for me as well.”

"I know you're in a bind and need a babysitter, but I can't watch your kids on Saturday night."

3. ESCALATING ASSERTION. This type of assertion is used when you have already tried a basic assertion, but have not received an appropriate response from the other party. You become increasingly firm and even threaten further action if the other person does not respond to your requests.

Examples:

"I've asked you several times to clean your room. If it is not clean by tomorrow morning, I'm going to ground you for the entire weekend."

"You have had two weeks to fix my car and you keep telling me, "it'll be ready tomorrow." If it is not repaired by this evening, I'm going to contact the regional manager."

4. I-LANGUAGE ASSERTION. This type of assertion is useful for expressing negative feelings or for requesting a change in the other person's behavior. There are three elements to this type of assertion:

WHEN YOU DO (describe the behavior)

THE EFFECTS ARE (describe the impact)

I'D PREFER (what you want)

Examples:

"When you continually leave your barking dog outside at night, my baby wakes up and I get very upset. Please keep your dog in the house at night."

"It seems to me that you always watch whatever YOU want to watch on TV. I sometimes feel disappointed and upset about missing the shows I like. I'd like us to work out a way to share control of the TV."

With practice, you can become much more effective at communicating assertively. Remember to also pay attention to your nonverbal behavior when you communicate. Direct, comfortable eye contact, respect for another's personal space, and a relaxed posture are nonverbal aspects of assertive behavior. Remember that being assertive allows us to take care of ourselves, express

ourselves honestly, and promotes a sense of fairness and respect in all our relationships.

To read more about assertiveness, check out the following books:

*Your Perfect Right* by Alberti and Emmons

*The Assertive Option: Your Rights and Responsibilities* by Jakubowski

*When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* by Smith



# Learning to Listen

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“We were given two ears, but only one mouth. This is because Mother Nature knows that listening is twice as hard as talking.”

~Author Unknown

***To be truly heard is a powerful experience. Understand the importance of listening, what gets in the way, and how you can improve your listening skills.***

## Listen

*“Can you stop what you’re doing for just one second and listen to me?”*

*“Why do I have to constantly repeat myself?”*

*“You’re not really listening. Do you even care what I have to say?”*

Most of us have a great deal of room for improvement when it comes to our ability to listen. Do any of these words sound familiar to you? Has anyone recently accused you of not listening? Do you often pretend you are listening when you are actually thinking about something else?

Although we all enjoy the experience of having someone truly listen when we are talking, we are not always very skilled at providing that same experience to others. We tend to think we are great communicators when we possess great speaking skills. However, talking is only one half of the communication process. Listening is the other.

Listening is not the same as hearing. Obviously, if you have two ears that work, you can hear. Listening, on the other hand, is more about making an active and sincere attempt to understand what someone is trying to communicate to you. Contrary to common belief, listening is not something that comes naturally; it is a skill that requires practice to refine. Good listening skills are an important key to establishing rapport, maintaining good relationships, and avoiding misunderstanding.

## **Common Obstacles to Listening**

Only a few of us truly give 100% of our attention to someone else while they are talking. We are often preoccupied with our own responsibilities, plans, and worries. Below is a list of things listeners often do that can get in the way of comprehending a speaker's true message. Do you do any of these things?

**Mindreading.** You feel like you already know what the other person is “really” trying to say, so you make little effort to listen.

**Judging.** You make a negative judgment about the other person and then do not pay attention to anything that person says, unless it supports your negative opinion.

**Rehearsing.** You are so busy focusing on your next statement or response that you do not pay attention to what the other person is saying.

**Filtering.** You listen to only some of the things that are being said and let your mind wander.

**Advising.** You are mostly focused on “fixing” the problem you hear, rather than understanding the other person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

**Identifying.** No matter what the other person says, you tie it in with your own experience and launch into your own stories.

**Comparing.** Rather than listening, you try to figure out how you measure up to the other person.

Based on this list, do you feel your listening skills could be improved? If so, take heart in the knowledge that there are some simple strategies you can employ to become a more skilled listener.

## **Ground Rules**

Let's imagine that your spouse or a very good friend tell you they want to talk to you about something and they really need you to listen. If you really want them to feel heard, it is important to implement some ground rules for better listening before you sit down with that person:

1. Reduce the distractions around you. Turn off the TV, silence your cell phone, or put down that book you are reading.
2. Establish a listening attitude. Make your goal to understand things from the other person's perspective, whether or not you agree with how they see things. Be curious and interested. Control your own emotional buttons—ignore your anger and focus on being constructive. Remember that true listening can help you clear up misunderstandings and increase trust, intimacy, and respect.
3. Let your body language show you are listening. 70% of communication is nonverbal, so face the other person, maintain comfortable eye contact, and keep your posture open. No crossed arms, yawns, or staring off into space, please.
4. Do not interrupt while the other person is speaking. Let them complete their thoughts.
5. Be encouraging of the other persons attempt to communicate. Nod your head or say things like, "Uh huh", "Go on," or "Tell me more." Asking open-ended question (i.e., questions that do not have "yes" or "no" as a response) can keep communication going. For example, you could say, "What makes you feel this way?" or "How did that affect you?"

### **Structured Exercise to Improve Your Listening Skills**

If you are really dedicated to improving your listening skills and have a willing partner to help you practice, here is an exercise you can try with that person. Be warned that you may feel awkward at first, but practicing listening in this way will definitely help you improve your listening.

1. Start by deciding who will be the speaker and who will be the listener. If you are the listener your role is to be encouraging, not to give you personal response to what they are saying.
2. Now the speaker talks about something for five minutes. If you are the speaker, your statements should primarily begin with "I," rather than "You." Your goal is to relay your own experience, not play the "blame game."
3. After five minutes, if you are the listener, give the speaker a summary of what you heard. It is important not to interject your own personal opinions when you

give this feedback. Try to be a “mirror,” so that the speaker can clearly hear what he or she said. Remember to “reflect” back not only the content, but also the feelings that were being communicated. You can start the feedback with a simple statement like, “I heard you say...”

4. Next, if you are the speaker, tell the listener what was accurate or inaccurate about the summary. If necessary, give the listener additional information to clarify your views.

5. Now switch roles. The speaker becomes the listener and vice versa.

It is very important to be open, calm, and self-controlled during this exercise. Remember, that the goal is for each one of you to feel heard, not for you to win an argument. You can use this structured exercise until your listening skills are stronger and come to you more naturally.

## **Conclusion**

If you think back to people that had a positive influence in your life, you may find one thing in common—they tend to be good listeners. Being heard is a truly powerful experience. Listening is a great way to build rapport quickly and relate with someone at a deeper level. As you express genuine interest in what another person has to say, you will find that others are much more likely to also listen to you. You can certainly make a positive difference in someone else’s life just by listening.

## About the Author

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Dr. Poonam Sharma is a licensed psychologist in private practice in San Antonio, Texas. She earned her Ph.D. in counseling psychology from The University of Texas at Austin in 1994. Dr. Sharma provides counseling for adults, couples, and families and specializes in working with people dealing with health issues such as infertility, traumatic injury, and stress. Her coaching work focuses on helping people increase their fitness levels, find balance in their lives, and achieve their most important personal and professional goals.

Dr. Sharma has served on the faculty of The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio for several years in the Departments of Rehabilitation Medicine, Psychiatry, and Community Dentistry. She was President of the Bexar County Psychological Association in 2000-2001. She is currently a professional member of the American Psychological Association, Texas Psychological Association, Bexar County Psychological Association, American Society for Reproductive Medicine, Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology, American Fertility Association, and Resolve. She is also credentialed as a Health Service Provider in Psychology through the National Register.