

BEING THE CAPTAIN OF YOUR SHIP

Recently my wife had arthroscopic surgery on her shoulder. One of the many get well cards she received has on its cover a delightful young blond girl age four or five dressed in a warrior costume with a helmet and cowboy boots. The caption reads, "Never Forget—underneath your sweet exterior beats the heart of a warrior princess." Of course the same would be said for a young warrior prince; gender equality!

The purpose of this article is to give you a few tools to ensure that as you age you stay in command of your ship - yourself; be a warrior prince or princess. The total package necessary for feeling or being powerful as we grow older contains too many items for us to address in this brief article. We will restrict ourselves to three foundational issues, which will equip us to deal with any and all challenges that threaten our equanimity. The three issues or topics are Awareness, Self-Talk and Trusting Ourselves.

Awareness

One of my first clinical supervisors while learning the craft of psychotherapy asked me what was the purpose of therapy? I was young and thought I knew everything so I answered that the purpose was to facilitate change in thinking, feeling and behaving. He replied that the purpose was to facilitate awareness of thought, feelings, behaviors, patterns, etc., so the client or patient could exercise choice and freedom about the path they would follow.

Take a moment now to focus your eyes on a distant object of your choice while simultaneously focusing on your breathing. While looking outside practice balancing awareness of what is happening inside of you while holding awareness of what is happening outside of you. The core idea is to stay in touch with yourself while dealing with another person or the outside world in general. Staying with your breathing while observing without judging, experiencing without thinking.

Of course, developing self-awareness may require months and years of daily practice. Becoming nonjudgmental and open to multiple perspectives is fluid and readily attainable for some while seemingly impossible for others. Marcel Proust expressed it well when he said, "The real voyage of discovery comes not in visiting new lands but rather seeing with fresh eyes, new eyes."

Awareness is strengthened by practicing being observational of how we feel in our body, what is happening with our mind, and what we are inclined to say and do. The more we strengthen our observational ability or "muscle," the more choice and freedoms we have about what we say and do, think and feel.

Another tool is to practice saying I feel or I am followed by one word. For example, "I feel excited" or "I am excited." When we tell each other how we feel, we tell each other who we are. Whenever we say, "I feel like" or "I feel that" we can substitute "I think" and the sentence will make sense. Unfortunately, we will not

then be connecting with ourselves. How I feel equals who I am. I feel lonely equals I am lonely.

Self-Talk

We humans are amazing. Our self-talk is so powerful. It is the equivalent of the software that drives the hardware in our computer-like brains. Henry Ford famously said, "Whether you say I can or I cannot, you will be right!" Our thoughts are essentially electrical neuronal clusters. Whatever thought we choose to believe becomes our reality.

The challenge with our negative or limiting self-talk is that it is so automatic and subtle and seemingly true that it is super easy to not notice what we are doing to ourselves. Our brains believe and accept whatever we tell ourselves about ourselves. If we say out loud or to ourselves, "I am a great procrastinator," this belief creates our feeling, e.g. low energy and our subsequent procrastination behavior. To replace our Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANT's) with positive thoughts and beliefs, we must repeat the positive self-talk until it is so fully believed that it creates a new identity for us. For example, "I used to procrastinate but now when I think of something I need to do or would like to do, I either do it right away and feel accomplishment or I write it down with when I will do it. I do it and I feel great!"

Trusting Ourselves

Unfortunately for many of us, when we ask ourselves what we should do to heal or resolve the issue confronting us, we may tend to second guess ourselves. A more effective process is to evaluate the answer that comes into our awareness. Then, if it fits or makes sense, to go with that rather than confusing ourselves with second or third or fourth guessing. If our selected course of action proves to be incomplete, we can revisit the issue.

Another aspect is to first do a brain search with our conscious mind. This will frequently be sufficient to arrive at a solution to our problem. If a viable solution fails to surface, we then proceed to connect with our unconscious mind.

Our unconscious mind is a limitless reservoir of richness in that it contains everything we have ever experienced. To access your unconscious, relax your mind and body as in meditation. Ask your unconscious for an appropriate course of action. Do not struggle or strain as you might do with your conscious mind. Rather, ask the question, "What should I do?" and then wait for the answer to come to you effortlessly. If it doesn't arrive in a few minutes, do not be discouraged but instead sleep on it and the answer will fluidly and effortlessly come into your mind upon awakening. The critical variable is to trust yourself. To believe in yourself in that your answer is more valid than anyone else's answer. This is labeled as having an Internal Locus of Control rather than being dependent upon others or having an External Locus of Control.

Empowerment

As we age, we may unwittingly begin limiting ourselves by not noticing our self-talk. We might say, "I don't know what I want to do" or "It's too far" or "I hate waiting in line." The list is endless. It may help to ask a friend for feedback. "Am I becoming overly negative in my thinking?" Remember Yoda in Star Wars? He said, "Try not! Do or do not! There is no try!"

To be optimally healthy we need to balance Being and Doing. Being is what we achieve in being still and silent. We discover we are okay in our essence just as we are. Doing is achieved by overcoming denial, avoidance and procrastination. We experience feelings of accomplishment and fulfillment when we get things done. Being the captain of your ship is a better way to live.

Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD. Visit his website at www.askdrdavidnow.com or email at jimsue63@gmail.com.