

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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NOVEMBER, 2013

VOLUME 9, NUMBER 11



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Relationship Counseling
Personal Life Coaching
Medication Management
Speaking
Evaluations/Assessments

How to Improve Your Life Relationships: *Draw a Circle around Yourself*



There is a well-known saying often shared amongst friends in recovery circles, support groups, therapy offices, and marriage ministries: "If you want to fix your relationship, draw a circle around yourself and fix everything inside of it."

Most people come to this realization by doing the opposite for a long period of time, drawing a broad circle around themselves and their loved ones and trying to fix everything inside of the populated circle. The result is typically chaos, confusion, and a sense of powerlessness leading to anger, resentment, and discouragement. Within the encompassing circle, personal boundaries are blurred, blaming ensues, and a sense of powerlessness reigns.

People tend to apply the same reason and logic to solving relationship problems as they do to solving other problems in life. That is, address the problem directly and proceed to an action plan to "fix" the problem. We often try to fix relationships by trying to fix the people with whom we share relationship. There are two primary errors in applying this strategy to relationships.

This first error is when the *focus* of the problem-solving is "fixing" the other person. People are not problems. People are people who also happen to have problems and behave in very problematic ways. Therefore, you cannot "fix" people. Trying to heal the relationship by "fixing" the other person represents a false belief about control. People are not objects to control. **We relate and respond to others and we control ourselves.** If someone's behaviors are hurtful, we exert our own personal power by expressing our needs and creating boundaries that honor our needs and provide safety. If a person intrudes upon our boundaries, then we can address the boundary intrusion through setting firmer boundaries and making decisions about how we will respond to the boundary violation. This may result in consequences in the relationship. Possible examples of relationship consequences include removing ourselves for a period of time, creating more space, or specifically requesting a time to share and discuss meaningful behaviors that will help repair the relationship rupture. Regardless of the consequences, we can choose to respond in ways that are thoughtful, respectful, but also direct.

In severe situations, we may need to bring in professional help to support us in our boundaries if a person is not able or willing to respect them. In receiving help, we can unveil the barriers that impair our ability to hold boundaries and consequences. *We tend to try to control others when we are afraid to enforce our own boundaries; we may be afraid of retaliation, anger, or disconnection in the relationship.* Many times, our fears are entrenched in previous loss, rooted in our past.

The Healing of the Heart: An Examination of Your Own Circle

We understand that we cannot repair a relationship by fixing the other person. Therefore, we need to bring the focus of control back to ourselves. This can be very challenging, as we may have reasons for avoiding self-work. Self-work involves the hard work of owning your own personal history, which will include truthfully acknowledging not only the positives about childhood and adolescence, but also the losses and woundings. Because looking into your past means acknowledging and confronting painful experiences and emotions, there is a tendency to avoid, minimize, or ignore the past or pieces of the past. Strong impulses to avoid, gloss over, or deny parts (or all) of the past indicate high levels of unresolved pain and trauma.

In reality, when we minimize or ignore the pain of our past, we cannot heal and we cannot be fully emotionally present to our current relationships and to life. This is because part of ourselves and part of our emotional energy is stuck in the past. Our current thinking and behavior in relationships is a strong indicator of the degree of healing from past loss. In noting this, it is important to realize that familiar emotions can surface in the present, but our awareness and response patterns reflect whether we have

Treatment for

Depression
Anxiety / Panic Attacks
Eating Disorders
Bi-polar Disorder
Obsessive –
Compulsive
Disorder
Compulsive Behaviors
such as sexual
addiction
Post-traumatic Stress
Disorder from past
abuse
Ryotional issues
Adjustment to life
changes

Ages Served

Adult
Adolescent
Children ages 10 & up



worked through this and experienced healing. If we have developed strong defense mechanisms, we may be relatively unaware of unresolved pain and losses. Or, we may just be terrified to address them.

We need to understand though, that we are deferring the inevitable. Significant grief, trauma or loss from the past will patiently wait for only so long, before it finally surfaces through depression, anxiety, anger or rage, personality or character issues, compulsive issues, and/or present-day relationship strife. Many times, unresolved loss rears its head when we least expect it, catching us by surprise and leaving us feeling intimidated and overwhelmed.

The Healing Journey: The Process of Fixing What's Inside Your Circle

Fixing what is inside your own circle involves addressing and processing the good and the bad of the past, with the support of emotionally safe people. We understand that trusting people is typically a mammoth-sized issue for people coming from a painful past. We can appreciate then, that choosing to work on one's circle can feel like a huge undertaking. As such, many people stall out in healing and character development because they are afraid to trust. Much of the delay in people experiencing emotional healing is directly related to their isolation and/or their unhealthy participation in toxic relationships.

Experts in neurobiology, attachment, and relationships such as Dan Siegel, John Gottman, Sue Johnson, Harville Hendrix, Karyn Purvis, and Curt Thompson all explain that the wounding that takes place in relationship needs to heal in the context of relationship. The importance here is that the wounding is addressed in the context of caring, safe relationships. Caring, secure relationships may include safe family or friends, pastoral care, support groups, and therapeutic relationships such as in counseling.

With the support of safe relationships, we can confront personal history; we can name and grieve hurts, losses, and wounding. As this healing process takes place in the context of safe relationships, we receive care and compassion. In short, we get what we need so that we are empowered to release the past and move forward with our full selves into the present.

With emotional healing comes the capacity to see more clearly the present, and to make healthier choices that bring stability. One of the greatest gifts of this process is the empowerment to clearly view ourselves and others, no longer colored by the unresolved fears and emotions of the past. We can confront half-truths and we are emboldened to admit shortcomings and areas needing further growth and maturity. Admitting shortcomings is no longer personally threatening because shame and guilt is replaced with healthy connection and empowerment. We can be accountable to safe people and they can be accountable to us, choosing to replace old coping patterns with healthy coping. When someone we love is unwilling to be accountable and reciprocal in relationship, we can acknowledge this reality. We are free to make a decision about how to handle that relationship, without controlling the other person. Rather, we choose to be responsible and truthful in relationship and address issues through healthy boundaries. This reflects sane living.

The Healing Place: The Gifts of Working Inside Your Own Circle

Many incredible gifts of healing flow from tending to your own circle. Courage truly pays off. When we choose to be courageous, we step into the freedom that comes with loosening the binds of a painful past.

Along with a sense of restoration and wholeness, comes a sense of stability and emotional regulation. We begin to grasp the meaning of personal power and we deepen in our ability to connect meaningfully with others. We get in touch with real hope.

In this journey, many experience spiritual growth, more attuned to the healing power and presence of God in their lives. In the same way that we can get stuck in the past and therefore have less emotional energy available to our human relationships, a similar pattern can tend to follow in spirituality. Our defense mechanisms, intended to protect us, also inhibit intimacy. This can limit or impair our sense of spiritual connection. As we courageously work on ourselves and embrace healthier ways to care for ourselves, we can also invite God to bring healing to the past and present of our lives. This is often an extremely exciting time, as people enter into a new awareness of the healing presence of God.



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