

The Rewards of Really Listening

Joanna and Cyndi are sitting at a coffee shop. Joanna has just gone through a divorce and is telling her friend all about it.

To a casual observer, it looks as if Cyndi is listening. But take a look at the thoughts running through Cyndi's head: *Really, people get divorced all the time; it's time to move on. It would help her if she got a job and lost some weight; that's what I'd do. I hope this never happens to me.*

Cyndi thinks she's a good listener. After all, she's not interrupting or fidgeting, is she? But what Cyndi is actually doing is *hearing* her friend. Like so many of us, she's just not listening.

As toddlers, we learn to speak and to hear what others are saying. As we grow up, we learn to read and write, along with other useful skills. But few of us ever learn one of the most vital skills of all—how to really listen.

To really listen takes our whole attention and focus. The rewards are huge though: happier marriages and families, better communication at work, fewer misunderstandings between friends and others, calmer and less stressful lives. And another bonus: when you listen well, you become someone other people want to listen to.

Real listening can be learned. Research and books such as *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, by Michael Nichols, and Mortimer Adler's *How to Speak, How to Listen* agree on these key points about listening:

Anyone can learn to be a good listener. While some might be better at this skill than others, listening isn't about being educated, rich or popular. (Although being a good listener can lead to

being well-liked.) Men as well as women can learn to listen, and some of the best listeners are young children who have the ability to drop everything and focus intently on something or someone.

Listening is active. Many of us think of listening as a passive act, just showing up. But real listening requires paying attention, not just to words, but body language and sometimes to what is not

being said. It also means responding, not in words but with our facial expressions, head nods and exclamations

("uh huh") that show we are present.

Listening means turning off the noise inside ourselves. To listen we have to ignore all those voices inside, those judgments and criticisms...*Oh, I would never have done that* or *He just doesn't see how he's making a big mistake.* It means ignoring the urge to advise and give suggestions (unless asked) and not trying to "fix" the problem or change the other person. Most people don't want advice, solutions, criticisms or our own stories—they just want to be heard.

Listening means no defenses. Often, when someone tells us something we don't want to hear, we shut down. Or we lash out or justify. True listening requires putting aside our emotional responses and need to defend ourselves. Perhaps we believe the talker doesn't have the story right or is being unfair; that's okay because it's his story and it's not about right or wrong, fact or fiction.

Listening is unselfish. Listening takes time—and it's worth finding the time. It's about ignoring distractions and the urge to interrupt with your own great story. As author Nichols puts it, "Listening isn't a need we have; it's a gift we give." ■

"It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen."

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

10 Ways to Lower Stress

From the daily, regular stress that comes from living in our highly active culture to specific life events that knock us for a loop, the impact of stress accumulates. Recognizing our stress "hot spots" is a critical first step to reducing stress. The following are daily ways to help you maintain balance or get back to well-being following a particularly stressful period.

- 1. Do something physical.** Exercise, walk, play a game, dance, weed/garden.
- 2. Breathe.** Deeply. Especially when you find yourself irritable or angry.
- 3. Retreat.** Find a place—your bedroom, a park bench, your car—where you can be quiet and restful. Go there when you need to.
- 4. Watch what you eat.** Don't over/under eat; drink water; eat fruits and veggies. Easy on the sugar, caffeine, fatty foods and alcohol.
- 5. Get it out.** Talk to trusted friends or a counselor. Write in a journal. Pound a pillow.
- 6. Say no.** Take care of yourself first or you'll have no well to draw from when helping others.
- 7. Smile/laugh.** Force it at first, if necessary. It's impossible to stay negative or burdened with a grin on your face.
- 8. Change.** Shift locations, activities, jobs, people you're with, beliefs.
- 9. Relax.** Take a nap, bath, or shower. Sit in the sun/shade. Get a massage. Do nothing.
- 10. Have fun.** Don't forget to take time to play, be creative, do things that nourish your soul. ■

A Letter From Yvonne Blockie M.A. MFT



When a mass tragedy occurs—be it natural, such as Hurricane Katrina, or man-made—those directly impacted by it are not the only ones who grieve. Watching the devastation and suffering on television can also be traumatizing.

We may find ourselves distracted, unable to sleep or irritable. Or we may be re-traumatized: We grieve not only for the victims, but also for our own buried hurts, which may be reawakened.

One way or another, tragedy often leads to feelings of being overwhelmed and helpless. It's the helplessness that ends up depressing us.

The message of The Serenity Prayer is good to ponder during these times: to accept what cannot be changed, to change what can, and to use wisdom in understanding what we can and cannot do.

Change requires action, and there are numerous ways to take action after a mass tragedy. But sometimes we feel helpless, and it is this feeling that ends up depressing and immobilizing us.

It's important to take care of ourselves during such times. It might be a good idea to minimize the amount of media we expose ourselves to during a tragedy. Caring for ourselves can also mean ensuring our own emergency preparedness.

If you are experiencing any of these things and are unable to sort through them, or are having trouble shifting your feelings, please don't hesitate to call.

How Well Do You Handle Failure?

Because we are human, we cannot help but fail. We lose relationships. At times, we parent in ways we later regret. We make mistakes at work. We fail to win or succeed at all we do. How we handle these failures make all the difference in the world to our ability to learn, grow and move forward. Take the Thriving quiz below to see how you tend to handle failure.



True False

Set 1

- 1. I make realistic (safe) choices about what to do. If I'm unsure whether I can succeed at something, I don't do it.
- 2. I feel so ashamed after losing a job that I can't bear to see colleagues from that workplace again.
- 3. If I fail at something, I give up and take it as evidence that I'm not "meant" to do that.
- 4. I gave up thinking about what I *want* long ago, because I know I'm never going to get it.
- 5. I'm better off by myself; experience proves that I'm a failure at relationships.
- 6. I act as though failure means nothing to me. I don't want people to see my pain and humiliation.
- 7. Failure does nothing but point out my deficiencies and flaws. I do everything I can to avoid it.

Set 2

- 1. I work hard on self-forgiveness after failing at something. I replace "if only..." with "next time..." so that I keep focused on the future.
- 2. I know what I want, and *no failure* will stop me from getting there.
- 3. I expect to make mistakes. I incorporate the possibility for failure into everything I do so that I'm not devastated when it happens.
- 4. I may feel inferior and humbled when I fail, but I use that to point the way to where I need to change or grow.
- 5. I try to see the humor in a situation. It helps me accept failure with more grace and self-acceptance.
- 6. If I've made a mistake, I take responsibility for it and work to fix it. Guilt doesn't become part of the equation.
- 7. Rather than beat myself up for failing, I get curious. I reflect on the experience and ask myself questions such as: What have I learned and gained? How can this failure serve me? What am I really trying to accomplish?

If you answered true to more questions in Set 1 than in Set 2, you are missing excellent opportunities to learn from your mistakes, improve your feelings about yourself and live more courageously. These lessons allow us to retain hope and the instinct for joy, and make us better prepared for life's journey. Please call if you'd like to explore your response to failure.

Befriending Anger

What's Really Going on Underneath?

Anger is the unannounced visitor that keeps dropping by, again and again.

Some of us hide, hoping this troublesome guest will go away. Others of us let it take over, turning our home into a nightly rage-fest, one that leaves us even angrier, friendless and with the police on our doorstep.

There is another way. We can greet our anger like a welcome guest and try to understand what makes it tick. In doing so, we can learn a lot about ourselves and make real, lasting changes in our relationships.

Anger is one of the most powerful emotions, and one of the most difficult to deal with. It's also probably the least understood. We get angry at our partners, our children, the man at the dry cleaner's, the woman cutting us off on the freeway, our boss who just doesn't understand, our dogs for barking too much. We get angry, but we rarely understand why.

Expressing Anger

There's widespread agreement that expressing anger is much healthier than suppressing it. However, giving free rein to anger has its dangers. Recent studies on anger indicate that venting our rage doesn't bring resolution, but can just fuel the flames. Left unchecked and unconscious, anger can destroy everything we care about—our friendships, our intimate relationships, our children, our jobs and our health.

The idea of controlling our anger has lost favor in recent years, yet there's much to be said for stopping, taking a deep breath and waiting before blasting the world with self-righteous indignation. Sometimes it can be as simple as Thomas Jefferson's advice: "When angry, count to ten before you speak; if very angry, a hundred."

Is Anger Real?

The newest research on anger is turning the volatile emotion upside down. Anger just might not be real, the thinking goes, but a way to cover the real issue—our pain. We react in anger because we can't bear the pain underneath. Byron Katie, author and popular motivational speaker, takes it one step further: underneath the pain is a thought or story that is causing us to lash out in rage and frustration. If we investigate the story, the anger often just dissolves.

Taking an everyday example, Sue is angry at her son, Nick, because he constantly drops his socks on the floor. She has nagged, threatened, yelled and even cried. She's tried tamping down her anger and soliciting "agreements" from him that don't stick. Her friends agree with her, which leaves



her more convinced her anger is justified. But underneath, she feels miserable when she yells at her son, but she can't break the pattern.

Using new techniques, Sue could try some of the following approaches to shift her anger:

Look at the anger, not the issue.

In Sue's case, getting repeatedly angry over her son's socks might be a distraction from looking at her inner dissatisfaction. Perhaps she's ready for a change but afraid to take the first step. Or she could be upset that her son is growing up and away from her. "Follow the trail of anger inward, and there you find the small, still voice of pain," writes psychologist Carol Travis in her book *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*.

Look at the belief that triggers the anger.

If Sue questions her belief that Nick should pick up his socks, she might find that really, Nick's socks are his business. All she can control are her own socks! As author Byron Katie puts it, "When you're in someone else's business, you're suffering." Sue can make a choice without anger: pick up Nick's socks because she wants his room to be clean or leave his socks and let him sort out his own laundry. She can also use this technique to investigate similar beliefs she might have: *teens should be neat, moms should do the laundry, friends should always agree with us, my son doesn't respect me, my life would be happier if the people I lived with weren't so messy...* It's always a good idea to stop and ask ourselves if a thought is actually a belief that we can change.

Transform the anger. Deep breathing, meditation, taking a long walk in nature, painting and writing are all ways to turn the anger into peace. In his book, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh suggests ways to transform anger into compassion, gratitude and love. Instead of focusing on Nick's socks, Sue might think of the many ways her son is loving, responsible and helpful. The socks may stay on the floor but Sue will be free of her anger. (And Nick might be more likely to pick up his socks for a loving parent than an angry one.)

It's been said that anger separates us from ourselves. It doesn't have to be that way. Instead, anger can be the new friend we are curious to get to know better. And in understanding this new friend, we can come to understand ourselves even more deeply and make more lasting change in our lives. ■



Making Sleep a Priority

Getting Enough Sleep is Essential for Mental & Physical Health

Over the last half a century, we have shaved off an average of two (precious) hours of sleep a night. According to a National Sleep Foundation poll this year, 40 percent of adults say they get less than seven hours of sleep on a weeknight, compared with the seven to nine hours recommended.

Of course, most of us know this. We burn the midnight oil, we get up way before the kids just to get things done. Our days are go, go, go! And it's often hard to stay asleep once we get there.

And while most of us know that too little sleep makes us cranky, less focused and less available to those who need us, did you know this?

- Bodies deprived of sleep produce less leptin, an appetite-regulating hormone; this increases our craving for sweets and salty carbohydrates.

- Shortened sleep produces metabolic changes. These may lead to diabetes or may alter the nervous system in a way that could contribute to high blood pressure and heart-rhythm irregularities.
- Insomnia substantially increases the risk of developing depression.



In short, not getting enough rest can affect both our mental and physical health much more than we thought. Here are some DOs and DON'Ts that will help you get healthful, renewing sleep more often.

DO structure your sleep. Try to go to bed and arise at the same times every day. Irregular hours can throw off the internal biological clock.

DO create a soothing bedtime routine. Watching the news or reading the latest page-turner are not good sleep inducers. Meditation or soothing music help bring the day to a relaxing close.

DON'T work, eat or watch TV in bed. Keep your bedroom for sleep. **DO** keep it quiet, dark and cool, and your feet warm. However, within five minutes of waking, expose yourself to bright light.

DON'T exercise or eat heavily within several hours of bedtime. Both energize the body. However, **DO** exercise in the late afternoon or early evening. This reduces tension and makes falling asleep easier.

DO avoid stimulants and alcohol late in the day. Caffeine, nicotine, sugary snacks and alcohol all can cause wakefulness.

DO head off potential anxieties at the bedroom door. Make lists of chores or tasks for the next day, and/or gather things you will need. (It's like laying out your school clothes!) If worries keep you awake, write your concerns down and list possible solutions.

DON'T look at your clock if you wake up in the night. Figuring how much sleep you're missing intensifies the wee-hours stress of insomnia. Cover your clock, if you need to. ■

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Yvonne has an MA in Counseling/Psychology from Santa Clara University and a BS in Business from San Jose State University. Her professional experience includes managerial positions in a high-tech company and career consultant inside a Fortune 100 company. Yvonne has been a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist for 10 years and a National Certified Career Counselor for 9 years. She combines her industry, management and consulting experience to work with you to improve your life.