

*I Don't Need Therapy,  
But... Where Do I Turn  
For Answers?*

Laurie Weiss, Ph.D.

©1991, 2001 - 2007 by Laurie Weiss, Ph.D.

# What it's all about...

Even conscious, aware, growing people are often puzzled about what to do to solve specific problems in their lives. Although you may realize that you have influence over what happens to you and have been examining your life for some time, when a problem arises you want an answer, a solution, and you want it quickly. Here are answers to questions often asked by people who are growing. They are practical guidelines for getting unstuck and moving on with your life.

*Published by:*

Empowerment Systems

506 West Davies Way

Littleton, CO 80120

USA

<http://www.EmpowermentSystems.com>

Phone: 303-794-5379

Fax: 303-784-5408

[weiss@empowermentsystems.com](mailto:weiss@empowermentsystems.com)



# Here's What's Inside...

## **Section I:**

### **What Should I Do about My Feelings?**

1. How Can Anger Ever Solve Anything?  
    Anger: Energy for Solving Problems  
    I'm Still Furious, What Can I Do?
2. When is Grief Reasonable?
3. How Can I Stop Feeling Scared?
4. Will I Always be Depressed?
5. How Can I Overcome Jealousy
6. Why Do I Overreact?

## **Section II:**

### **Who Is Responsible for What?**

7. How Can I Avoid Hurting Someone's Feelings?
8. How Can I Say No?
9. Victim or Volunteer?  
    Translating  
    Building a New Belief
10. How Can I Help My Parents without Losing Myself?
11. What If Someone Was Sexually Abused?

## **Section III:**

### **What's Normal? What's Right?**

12. Will I Ever Get Over Feeling Inferior?
13. Why am I Turned Off?
14. What Is A Healthy Relationship?  
    Co-Dependence  
    Power Struggle  
    Independence

Interdependence

15. How Can I Be Fair?
16. How Can I Stop Procrastinating?

**Section IV:  
Why Is Change So Difficult?**

17. Can I Change Without Losing Myself?
18. How Can I Keep my Promises to Myself?
19. I've Changed For the Better, Why is Everyone Angry
20. Why Can't I Be the New Me with my Family?
21. Do I Need a Therapist?
22. Does Having Problems Mean There is Something Wrong with Me?
23. What are Some Tips for Living Effectively?

## **Section I:**

### **What Should I Do about My Feelings?**

"Don't feel:" a basic rule in many families. It is taught by saying "Only babies cry; Scaredy cat; You don't feel that." It is reinforced when parents ignore, ridicule or react abusively to a child's feelings. Correct information about how to identify and what to do with various feelings is missing.

As children, some people learned to turn off all feelings, others learned that some feelings were all right to express and others were forbidden. Some children learned to feel but not to communicate about their feelings. As an adult you may still be operating from one of those positions that you learned when you were small.

## Chapter 1

# How Can Anger Ever Solve Anything?

In some families a person who is angry becomes either loud and abusive or silent and destructive. Children learn to dread anger and swear they will never ever allow themselves to be angry. Some indeed find a way to repress almost all angry feelings and are not even aware of their own anger in adulthood. Others learn to keep their angry feelings under control until they feel justified in releasing them. As a grownup you may now express anger the way one of your parents did. If it didn't work for them, it probably is destructive now, too. This gives more weight to your belief that anger is dreadful and should be controlled at all costs.

"You do not have to worry about that person losing his temper! He can always find it at the most inappropriate times." This bit of sarcasm could be directed at many of us. A seemingly simple inconvenience or annoyance can lead to an unexpected explosion. These explosions can result from "saving up" unexpressed feelings. We all talk about some incident being "the last straw." The straw count is just different for different people. Five little upsets can be enough for a door slam or phone hang-up. Several hundred (or more) unexpressed feelings can produce a divorce.

As children we learned and created rules about when, how, and to whom we could express anger. We also learned to do whatever resulted in gaining recognition--and it did not matter if that attention was in the form of punishment or praise. We just repeated the behavior that worked. Eventually, we built rules for our behavior. These rules could include:

- Getting angry doesn't solve anything, so keep your anger to yourself.
- Getting angry is bad.
- Don't let your boss (spouse, children, friends) know you are angry.
- Don't express anger until you just cannot stand it anymore.

## **Anger: Energy for Solving Problems**

Logically, we know that repressing or exploding anger rarely solves problems. Doing either one often creates new problems. Instead of criticizing yourself one more time for your behavior, you can learn a new perspective on anger.

Anger is merely pent up energy--like a river at the top of a waterfall. You can consciously harness and apply that energy to solve a problem. You can practice thinking about why you are angry. What is the problem you want to solve? What outcome do you want to achieve? Is the goal worth achieving? If so, what are appropriate action steps to reach it. If the goal is really not something you want, you can use all that energy for projects, hobbies, or play.

With each successful expression of your true feelings your vulnerable child self will eventually notice what actually happens when you don't follow the old rules. Breaking your old rules about the expression of anger may be uncomfortable at first, but soon the new process will feel more satisfying. You will notice that you can consciously use the angry energy, even from the small incidents.

Tom was angry because his son had not refilled the gas tank after he used the car. Instead of doing the chore himself and fuming, he asked his son to take care of it immediately or lose driving privileges for a week. His son interrupted a TV show, filled the tank, and washed the windows.

When the anger does not get in your way, you will also find how much easier it is to ask for what you want as soon as you recognize what it is. Getting a lot of the "little things" in life usually results in some great relationships with yourself as well as with others.

## **I'm Still Furious, What Can I Do?**

Sometimes angry energy can't be used to solve a problem. Some problems are unsolvable. Ginny complains, "My father abused me and I didn't even realize it until recently. The more I remember the abuse the angrier I get. He's dead now, and I feel stuck."

Lots of us are carrying around anger from situations that happened long ago, or even from current situations where trying to solve a problem would only make it worse. That angry energy causes tension, physical problems and sometimes inappropriate outbursts at other people. We don't need it, we can't use it, and we have to find a safe and appropriate way to get rid of it.

If you are stuck with old unresolved anger, about unresolvable problems, try some of these activities; lots of people have found them useful.

- Do something physical and intense: scrub something that needs cleaning; beat a rug; destroy something unimportant; chop wood; pound on your bed with a tennis racket; pull weeds in the garden; and pretend that what you're doing you are doing to the person you're angry at. Symbolically carry out your fantasy of revenge.
- Imagine the person that you're angry at in the room with you. Tell them, loudly, what you're angry about. Yell. Cuss if that helps. And imagine them reacting the way you want them to.
- Write a letter. Don't send it. Say all of the things you couldn't say before. Then write a letter to yourself from the other person in response to your angry letter. Make sure this letter says exactly what you want to hear. Share both letters with a friend.
- If you've suffered silently, ask another person to listen to you express your anger without interrupting, questioning or offering advice or suggestions.
- Think about what you would want from the person you're angry at--something that would solve the problem, or that would satisfy you. If you can't get it from that person, ask someone else who cares about you to give you what you're wishing for. You can even give it to yourself, perhaps a special treat -- a party, a massage, will help you complete this.

Sometimes we hold onto anger because of a fantasy that, if we save it long enough, we'll magically be able to use it to get back at the other person to even the score. If you have such a fantasy decide how long you want to keep it. For another hour? For a week? For a lifetime? Or perhaps you want to give it up right now.

Giving up anger often means giving up hope that a problem can be solved. This "letting go" often leads to grief, a healing response which frees your energy to

move on to other things. When you're ready to give up your anger, there will be time to grieve your loss.

## Chapter 2

# When is Grief Reasonable?

Many of us live life trying to maintain the illusion that we are in full control of our own lives. Even knowing that there are many things (like aging and dying) that we do not control, we prefer to maintain the illusion by not thinking about these things. The wish to hold on to this illusion can be very intense.

Karl wanted more than anything in the world to get custody of his two sons after his divorce. It just didn't happen. He hired an expensive lawyer and did extensive research on his own. The judge gave him visitation rights only on alternate weekends. Nothing more could be done. Karl's disappointment was getting him down. He was irritable at work and turned down invitations to go out with friends. He felt he should be coping better, but just couldn't find the energy. What could he do?

Like others who have suffered a keen disappointment, Karl needs to recognize that loss of a hope is just as real as loss of some tangible thing. Our culture gives us permission to grieve major losses, but unfortunately expects us to react "maturely" and have minimal responses to relatively minor losses. "After all," his mother scolded, "your children are healthy and happy and you do get to see them every other week."

When a loss occurs, we first try to deny it. "This isn't happening to me," Karl kept thinking. Then we turn to fear and anger. When anger doesn't work, we often start blaming others. Karl blamed his wife for his situation, when he was the one who initiated the divorce.

Karl, like all of us, must face that as an adult, there aren't any bigger, more powerful people who can fix things for us. Mother's kissing our scraped knee will no longer solve all of our problems. We need to move on to feeling our sadness. Once we grieve, we can let go of the energy we've invested in trying so hard to get what we wanted. Only then can we move on and look for other important things.

Karl finally accepted an invitation to go fishing with a friend he had been turning down for weeks. As they drove to the mountains, he poured out his

disappointment to Jacob. How good it felt to grieve out loud and get Jacob's support! They caught their full limit and ended up laughing uproariously when a sudden thundershower drenched them as they ran back to the truck.

What Karl learned that day was simple: trying *not* to experience an unpleasant feeling only serves to keep that feeling there almost indefinitely. The harder he had tried not to grieve, the more it had festered inside. Pretending it was not there did not make it go away, and crying in front of Jacob had not damaged their friendship. In fact, Karl felt even closer to his friend than ever.

When we have no model for appropriate expression of feelings, we tend to hold them inside. *It never occurs to us that expressing how we feel about a problem (in Karl's case a very real loss) can help us change how we feel.* Sealing over the uncomfortable feelings that were not permitted also seals over happy joyful feelings. All that is left is depression. The expression of one kind of feeling makes the expression of other kinds of feelings possible. It's like unlocking a locked box. Everything in it is now available to come out.

Dealing with loss is a highly individualized process. Grief from minor loss may be gone in minutes - other deep losses may take years to resolve. What is important is to pay attention to your own internal signals (like getting tearful or angry) about what you need to do. Then go ahead and do it, preferably with the support of people who care about you - until you feel your own energy available for moving on to live your life as you choose.

## Chapter 3

# How Can I Stop Feeling Scared?

I keep up a good "front." Most people I know wouldn't believe that I feel scared most of the time. Vague uneasiness, nervousness, and terror are common when you don't know what is going to happen next and you expect something negative to occur.

If you grew up in a family battle zone, you never could predict when the next verbal or physical barrage would occur. You learned a protective alertness (which may now show up as continuous tension) so you could take appropriate action when the attack came. You may have learned to be a peacemaker, to run and hide, or to fade into the woodwork.

For some people, lack of approval can be as potentially frightening as attack. If you grew up under the constant threat of emotional or physical abandonment, you probably learned to carefully intuit what others expected and meet their expectations quickly and automatically.

Although you no longer live in your family of origin, the alertness patterns you created for self-protection become an integral part of your personality. The child you once were, sometimes called your "Inner Child" or your "child self," doesn't know that you are now a grownup, living in a different world, with far more resources than you ever had when you were actually a child. (Another way to describe this is that your brain reactions are permanently altered by traumatic experiences.)

Fear is a healthy and natural response to the perception of danger. It is our recognition of physical sensations caused by the release of chemicals (adrenalin, etc.) in our bodies. These chemicals increase our alertness and prepare us to either run from or defend against a threat. When we were small, vulnerable children, many things seemed threatening. If we lived in a healthy family, we could call on our parents to protect us from these frightening experiences. They would hold us or tell us what to expect and what to do. In distressed families our parents often created the threats in the first place, and gave us no information about protection.

We learned to always stay alert -- afraid. We had no place to go for protection, and did our best to protect ourselves.

Now our fears are often triggered by experiences that activate the old brain patterns. Usually these experiences instantly remind us of the things we feared when we were children. Fear is a signal to *pay attention* and prepare to deal with any threat. As a grownup you can learn to do this consciously, and to do whatever is necessary to reassure and protect your own child self.

When you feel scared (nervous, fearful, terrified, etc.), answer these questions:

- Is there something happening or going to happen that is dangerous? If so, what is the danger. Is it real or imagined? If not, is there something I am excited about? (The physical sensations of fear and excitement are very similar.)
- How likely is it that the danger will cause me harm? (You may need information to make this assessment -- ask questions.)
- Is there anything I can do to protect myself?
- If the very worst thing I can imagine happens, what will I do?

These question help the mature parts of you take charge of the situation. If you are still scared, your child self probably needs reassurance. Try telling him/her that you are a grownup now and will protect him/her. If this doesn't work, ask someone who cares about you for reassurance, information, protection, and/or a hug.

Some things are frightening to almost everyone, and we need each other for support. At other times, we are trying to cope with fears from the past. Feeling afraid is a signal that you need something, not something to be ashamed of. Learn to figure out what you need and take action to get it.

## Chapter 4

# Will I Always be Depressed?

"I try so hard. What's the use. I have no energy for anything. I hate to face another day." Depression is more common than the common cold.

Jennifer's doctor told her she would have to increase the amount of anti-depressant she had been taking in an attempt to maintain her sense of equilibrium. Frightened of becoming dependent on medication, she decided to explore therapy. She discovered she was still trying hard to be the good child in her family, automatically complying with other people's expectations without considering her own needs, wants, and feelings.

When she learned to pay attention to her own feelings she discovered she was angry about doing so much for so little reward. Afraid of expressing her anger, and sad about all of the good things she was missing out on because of her commitment to being responsible, she was also physically exhausted. All of these other feelings were masked by her ever-present feelings of depression. The medications sometimes helped her feel better but did nothing about the underlying problems which were getting worse and worse.

Like many of us, Jennifer needed to learn to pay attention to what she wanted, and to consider it to be as important as (not *more* important than) what other people want and need.

If you have forgotten how to know what you want, a good way to find out is to take some quiet time and think about it. A simple relaxation exercise can help a lot. Either sit or lie down in a quiet place where you can spend 5 to 15 minutes. Close your eyes and breathe slowly and regularly. As you inhale, say to yourself, "I Am." As you exhale say, "Relaxed." Repeat this exercise for at least 5 minutes. If you think of other things, gently bring yourself back to the statement, "I am... relaxed." Then take a few minutes to think about what you want or need and how you might get it.

Another way to avoid depression is to practice saying no to the things you don't want to do. If it's impractical to not do those things, still let yourself know that

you don't want to. *It's O.K. not to want to.* You can choose to do something even if you don't want to do it.

A wonderful temporary cure for depression is to get meaningful attention from other people. Remember everyone needs 7 hugs a day just for maintenance (Virginia Satir).

As Jennifer practiced these activities her physician cooperated by reducing her medication. After several months of treating herself as an important person, she felt fine without any medication at all.

## Chapter 5

# How Can I Overcome Jealousy?

Unless you "walk on water", you have probably been jealous of someone at some time. For some people, it may even be at the heart of their inability to fully experience love in a relationship. Jealousy, unlike feelings of fear, anger, sadness and joy, is *learned*. It can be disarmed by starting with some basic understanding of its process.

Jealousy is a clear signal that we need or want something we do not have. It is most often associated with (or misinterpreted as) a fear of not getting that thing and anger that someone else seems to have it instead. Living in an imperfect family (*all* families are imperfect in some way) we learn to believe that there is a scarcity of approval, love, satisfaction, and material resources. We learn to measure what we want by what someone else has (or we think they have). We try to hold on to, or control, whatever we have and take more whether we need it or not. Our drive to control the uncontrollable can override our ability to examine our own needs and tastes and to figure out if certain resources are really in short supply at all.

As an exercise, take some time to think about what you would put into your life if you were starting over from scratch. Would you need and want the same things you think you do now? This exercise may take some practice to begin to surface your genuine needs and wants. Jealousy will become a signal to you to tune in to yourself. Ask yourself whether the person you are jealous of is getting something you need or want (or think you "should" have). Get specific about what the item is and then start finding our how to get that need met yourself - possibly in a new way.

If you want time or attention from a special person, try two steps. First, *ask for what you want*. Negotiate for it instead of expecting the person to read your mind. If you get it, fine; nothing more is needed. If you don't get it, at least you know that it is not available. You can free your resources to look elsewhere. It is a common misconception that only attention (strokes) from one particular person will fill a particular need. Second, see if you can fill that need with strokes from other sources.

If you will practice asking, negotiating and persisting until you find someone who is willing to provide what you want, eventually your child self will be convinced that there are more than enough strokes to go around. You may even discover that the most important things in life are not scarce after all. Knowing that you can get what you need will reduce the number of times you feel jealous.

In the meantime, when you feel jealous, recognize that it is something you have been *taught* to feel. You don't need to act on your jealous feelings. Instead, go through the steps mentioned here instead of kicking yourself for feeling the way you do. Remind yourself that you are simply responding to old, erroneous messages. If you let yourself experience the feeling, it will subside much faster than if you try to stop it because it is "wrong". Be gentle with yourself! Concentrate on figuring out how you can identify what you need and ask people who care about you to help you get it – whatever it is.

## Chapter 6

# Why Do I Overreact?

When Jim's steady girlfriend called and said that she'd have to change their plans to go out to dinner that night, Jim found himself shouting over the phone, "If that's all you care about me I never want to see you again." A few minutes later he called back and apologized. "Why do I over react to such insignificant things?" He wondered.

Like many of us, Jim has forgotten many uncomfortable things in his past. He felt instant overwhelming anger and disappointment when his girlfriend called, without realizing that those were the same feelings he couldn't express when he was a little boy and his alcoholic father would break a promise to take him somewhere. The problem now is that he's expressing these leftover feelings without even being aware of the memory that stimulated them. If you're experiencing strong feelings at what seems like inappropriate times, they're probably old feelings that you now have an opportunity to complete.

One way to complete these feelings is to allow yourself to recover the memory of the early stressful time that you've forgotten. When your reaction to something seems out of proportion take some quiet time and think about when in the past you experienced a similar feeling. Go back as far as you can to as early in your childhood as you can remember. As the memory returns, recapture it in as much detail as you possibly can: who was there, what was happening, how old were you, how big were you, what did you need, what actually did happen?

Several people in one psychotherapy group all had memories of hiding in a closet. Each one of them was hiding to avoid some violent or angry outburst in the family. Each had the common complaint of feeling afraid any time they experienced any conflict. They finally formed "The Closet Club". As they talked about those scenes they found themselves reacting less and less irrationally to current conflict situations.

Once you have recovered your own memory, imagine what you would have needed when you were a child and see if you can provide that for your own child self. You may need an opportunity to feel sad and cry, or to tell somebody how angry and frightened you were. Your child self may still need information that you

have as a grownup that you didn't have then. Learn to nurture your child self, talk to him, talk to her. If you can't do this for yourself, get help from a friend or even a competent therapist.

When you feel those extra strong and irrational feelings again, remind your child self that s/he had a right to be scared, angry or sad then, but this is a new situation, a different time. You're a grownup and you have more resources and you can solve the problem. As you complete the trauma from the past the overreaction will diminish.

## **SECTION II:**

### **WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT?**

Many people are confused about boundaries. In some families, boundaries are either very rigid or almost non-existent. An important part of the self-development process is learning to set appropriate boundaries between yourself and other people. Although you may know what boundaries you want to establish in a given situation, knowing how to set those boundaries can be a problem.

## Chapter 7

# How Can I Avoid Hurting Someone's Feelings?

Marcella sat in her office wondering how to respond to a co-worker who was gently pressuring her to date him. Her thoughts tumbled over each other. "I like this man. Our working relationship is good. I don't want to get involved with him. I don't want to wound his ego, and I don't want to put a strain on our working relationship. If I say the wrong thing I know I'm in trouble. If I hurt his feelings that'll be the end of everything." She felt increasingly agitated.

Marcella grew up in a family where she learned to believe that she had the power to make another person feel good or feel bad. Her parents frequently told her, "you hurt my feelings, you make me so mad, you're driving me crazy." She learned to be especially careful about everything she thought or said in order to avoid "causing" others to feel bad. This common but false belief was paralyzing her.

Although we each have instant feeling responses to what others say or do, we can learn to choose whether to dwell on or let go of those feelings. We can think about our first response and modify it. We may choose to feel hurt by the words and actions of others or to respond in another way. Others may create the situations that we react to but we each ultimately create our own responses.

Reminding herself that she had learned how to change her feelings by changing her physiological state, Marcella began to breathe deeply. After she calmed herself, she called a friend from a communications class. Together they decided she could approach her co-worker as if he too were a responsible person and in charge of his own feelings. She also decided to be sure to communicate carefully about her own feelings and avoid provocative, blaming statements such as "If it weren't for what you did..."

She finally told her co-worker, "I like you a lot and I don't want anything to get in the way of the good working relationship we have. I'd prefer that we see each other only during business hours." To Marcella's enormous relief, he responded by accepting the boundaries she set and they continued working together.

## Chapter 8

# How Can I Say No?

If you grew up in an authoritarian family you probably weren't allowed to quietly refuse to do something you didn't want to do. You may have learned to refuse by getting angry and over-reacting; or you may still be in the position of feeling like you must acquiesce to anyone else's requests. Now it is difficult to say no graciously to something you know you don't really want to do. You may not want to go to a family reunion, drive an acquaintance to the airport, bake cookies for a bake sale, babysit, be on a committee, etc. You may be stuck in an internal struggle about how to handle the situation. Take a few minutes to examine some of your conflicting internal voices:

Listen to:

***Your Inner Parent:*** What would your parents say if they were being critical? Perhaps, "Do it because I say so." What would your parents say if they were being nurturing? What do they say when they want to protect and care for you? Perhaps-"You should do it, it will make everyone like you."

***Your Adult:*** What would you say as a responsible adult? What are the facts that you can view objectively? What is likely to actually happen if I do say no?

***Your Inner Child:*** What would your child self give as a response when s/he is trying to *do what would please someone else*? "O.K., sure I will." On the other hand, your child self might *do what s/he really liked to do* without considering anyone else. How would s/he respond? "I don't want to."

You can choose among these basic responses, when you understand where they come from. You may choose to obey the internal parent or do what the inner child wants, depending on your adult evaluation of the situation. Remember the other person's feelings are important and so are yours. A good test question as you form your response is "How would I feel if someone said this to me?" Are you presenting your own viewpoint with "I" messages (I feel, I wish, etc.) or with critical judgments (you should have, you hurt me, etc.) Creating a positive experience for the other person, while recognizing and caring for your feelings, usually leads to a favorable and pleasurable outcome. You can use this basic

Transactional Analysis (TA) technique to address all kinds of problems. (For more information about Transactional Analysis, visit the International TA Association website at [www.ita-net.org](http://www.ita-net.org).)

## Chapter 9

# Victim or Volunteer?

Are you a victim of verbal abuse, threatened emotionally, psychologically and/or physically? Or are you a volunteer who chooses to remain in a victim position? When we are growing up we often learn to assume blame for any interaction that doesn't work. As we get older we may switch to the persecutor position in which we assume that all the blame belongs to the other person.

Maturity requires switching from blame to self-responsibility. Responsibility means that I have contributed to a situation and I can change what I'm doing in an attempt to change the situation. If these changes don't work I can then decide what to do.

Sometimes just changing the words we use to think about a situation helps us see how we have contributed to an ongoing problem. Once we have an understanding of our own contributions we then have the groundwork for a plan to make effective change.

Gail reported these common complaints: "My spouse is always telling me what to do," and "How can I live with a person who tries to control everyone?" Many of us have days when we might say this about our relationships. In co-dependent relationships, however, this happens regularly. For some people this situation occurs at home; for others possibly at work.

Does someone else seem to control your life now? Did someone else try to control you before? Have you had at least one person like this in your life for as long as you can remember? To effect a lasting change in this part of your life, the real issue is to discover how you are cooperating in maintaining such an unproductive relationship. Only then can you explore your options for change.

## Translating

Practice with some of your most common "complaints" and rephrase them. See yourself as a fully functional, mature individual who is a participant in the discomfort of the relationship. Since you are probably sure that the other person needs to change first, this may be a difficult task. Stick with it. This is a process to move beyond blaming anyone. Just observe the mechanics of how you and the other

person have played out some agreements that you may have never recognized before. Here are examples to work from: (You do not have to like the restatement, but see if it holds true).

"My husband rules our house with an iron hand." This could turn into "I have agreed to be ruled by my husband in our marriage. I have done this by doing what he has told me to do (probably) since the beginning of our relationship. I have also taught our children to follow his instructions directly or by setting an example for them."

"He makes all the decisions. He tells me what I will do." This could be: "I ask him for his guidance before I choose to do anything. When I want to do something on my own, I ask permission; then when he refuses, I do not do what I would like to do."

"How can I learn to live with a person like this?" might become: "I choose to live with this man because he provides things for me that I want and need, even though I sometimes resent the cost. I am afraid to stand up for what I want because I feel I'll risk losing the emotional and physical security he has provided for me all these years. I am also not sure I could make it on my own without him. I have very little confidence in my own ability to take care of myself (and our children)."

## **Building a New Belief**

Look at the way each of these problems have been restated. As frightening and unfamiliar as this new perspective may be, keep translating these common complaints. Each restatement is another building block to move to a position of responsibility. You develop an attitude that you can solve this part of the problem--just like exercising builds and tones muscles.

Even if the other person does not participate, there is a great deal you can do. Look to other people who are taking positive, directed action in their lives. Changing a belief you have lived with for so long may take the active support of a counselor, therapist, Al-Anon and/or a co-dependency support group.

Many people progress from a victim position to an autonomous position in their relationships. They have changed their belief that they need to relate to their spouses as if they were controlling parents who have the right and responsibility to control their lives. Once the basic belief system is changed (and this is the hard

part), then the steps of re-establishing your own responsibility and autonomy can proceed.

Gail worked with this procedure for several months. One day she triumphantly reported to her support group, "I told my husband that I am registering for two classes at the Junior College. He said I needed to spend more time with the children. I repeated that I was starting school and asked what problems he saw with the children. He backed off and we didn't even argue."

## Chapter 10

# How Can I Help My Parents without Losing Myself?

When boundaries between you and your parents weren't ever clearly defined, the challenge of deciding on care for an aging parent becomes overwhelming. Often the old conflicts with our parents haven't been resolved. Even if we forgive our parents it may be very difficult to be with them.

As you grow and mature, you are probably trying to learn to balance your own needs with the needs of other people. Clarification of your decision making process helps you understand the old pressures that are influencing you now. It also encourages you to look at new options. You can use this process to examine any problem in which you feel strong pressure to do things you don't want to do.

As our parents get older, many of us must decide whether to take our parents into our homes or help them to choose competent assisted care. This is one of the most emotional decisions we will make. These are our parents, the people who cared for us the best they could when we couldn't take care of ourselves. As your parent becomes dependent on you the role switch is confusing for both of you. You may feel like a child again, just by being in the same room with your parents. Maybe they still try to control your activities. You may feel guilt -- that even if your father would be happier in a nursing home, you would still be abandoning him.

A crucial question at this point is: Are you considering having your mother move in to care for her or to avoid your own guilt?

You may also be equating being responsible for your parent's physical care and providing a nice home to making her happy. Using all the health-care capabilities you can develop, you may be able to care for your parent physically. It is impossible, however, to control her happiness, no matter how hard you try. Taking care of her because you feel guilty will almost certainly produce unhappiness for both of you.

To clarify the best alternative for you and your parent, here are some good beginning questions:

- What would my parent think, feel and do if s/he were in my situation?
- What is actually happening now? How do I feel? How does my parent feel? How is the current situation working for both of us?
- What are the available options?
- What are the available resources? (This may take some research.)
- What do I feel I *should* do?
- What would I do if I could do *anything I wanted* and nobody would ever know my decision?
- Is there a creative way to achieve a compromise between what I want to do and what I think I should do?

Go over your answers with a friend or a trained professional to help you design a solution that you can live with. If possible keep in communication with your parents. Treating them as capable adults will encourage them to take responsibility for their own lives. Encourage them to plan for their own comfort and happiness. Your parents may have spent a lot of years focused on you: they need to create a balance between their new dependency and their ability to live their lives without you.

After you have done all that is realistically possible, decide to stop feeling guilty about your inability to do the impossible, and to enjoy the improvements that have resulted from your creative solution.

## Chapter 11

### What If Someone Was Sexually Abused?

Do the emotional "scars" of sexual abuse ever really heal? Are some of them so deep that a person does not even know they are there? Violation of sexual boundaries between adults and children is so uncomfortable even to think about that we try to pretend it doesn't exist. More and more people recovering from addictions and compulsive behavior are beginning to uncover evidence of childhood sexual abuse. Experiencing these memories can be devastating.

Sexual abuse, like other emotional and physical abuse in childhood, can be healed--and can be safely brought to awareness for healing. As the survivor of sexual abuse reaches the time when she/he is ready to face the past, s/he begins to uncover some of the following concerns, fears, feelings:

- Maybe I am making it up. I am not even sure it happened.
- I suspect it happened--I don't remember--I just have a physical reaction each time I think or hear about sexual abuse.
- It wasn't all that bad.
- I can't stop crying--will I ever get over this?
- I feel like I am bad/dirty. I am so ashamed.
- I want to hide/kill myself. I am mad enough to kill them.
- I can't believe s/he would do a thing that bad.
- I feel like everyone knows I am no good.
- I hate him/her.
- I know s/he couldn't help it; s/he was hurt, too.
- Why didn't my mother/father protect me?
- I do not want to remember.

- I have never told anyone before.

As the survivor begins to be able to say these things to a trusted person , s/he needs to hear that trusted person saying:

- I'm sorry it happened.
- I believe you.
- It is very important to be able to tell now.
- If I had been there I would have made him/her stop.
- Even if you enjoyed part of it, you are not wrong or bad.
- You have a right to be angry.
- He/she should not have done what they did to you.
- I am sorry no one believed you.
- I am sorry you did not have a grown-up to talk to about what happened.
- Knowing this makes me care more about you, not less.
- It is OK not to remember everything. You forgot in order to protect yourself. The memories will only come back as you grow strong enough to handle them. Take your time.
- It's OK to cry for as long as you need to.
- You really were not big/strong enough to make him/her stop.

Go out and look at a little child, or picture yourself as a child. See how little and vulnerable you were. You couldn't help it. It is not your fault. It is not your job to protect the person who did this to you.

You need to know you are not alone in your experience. An estimated 34 million women in the United States have been victims of some type of childhood sexual abuse. The figures are less certain for men. You have taken a first important

step by getting your concerns into the open with someone you trust to care for you. You are laying the groundwork for a whole new future for yourself and for those you love.

## **SECTION III:**

### **WHAT'S NORMAL? WHAT'S RIGHT?**

As children, statements like "mind your own business", labels of "stupid", and having observations and questions laughed at, lead us to hide our natural curiosity. Without accurate information we try to figure things out anyhow. Our conclusions are usually erroneous. We decide we're to blame for the bad things that happen. We decide we're stupid because we don't know how to do things. We feel different and ashamed. As grownups we try to hide our sense of incompetence by pretending we really do understand. Going into a situation in which we do not already know all the things we're going to be expected to learn can be very frightening. The culture we live in reinforces this problem by continuously comparing us with each other.

## Chapter 12

# Will I Ever Get Over Feeling Inferior?

As the students filed in the first evening of the continuing education class, Larry panicked. He berated himself: "I shouldn't be here. They obviously know more than I do. I'd better not let them know how dumb I am."

This type of comparative thinking is very common. We learn to compare ourselves with others from infancy. At birth, we are weighed, measured and compared with other babies. We're compared with *norms*. Our parents want to know if we eat, cry, sleep, and learn as fast as other babies.

When we reach school age, our work is constantly compared with that of other students. Larry is still afraid he will perform as poorly as he did 35 years ago in fifth grade math.

This comparative pattern follows us into adulthood. We are compared with other workers on the job, and the media invites us to compare how we are doing with others. "Are you successful enough to afford a 'world class' watch or car?" the ads ask.

Unfortunately, comparative thinking becomes such a way of life that we no longer stop to consider whether there are any reasons for making comparisons. Instead of making choices based on options to fit our needs, we often make choices on the basis of other people's preferences instead of our own. When we do that, we seldom get what we want and often feel vaguely dissatisfied.

Comparative thinking can also damage our self-concept. If comparisons with others continually force you into a "worse than others" mode, you can get so discouraged you might not take the steps that would help you grow and change.

How can you break the comparison habit? You need to cultivate the habit of *starting with yourself*. You must first become conscious of the old pattern and then work to establish a new one. Practice revising your self-talk to fit your needs. For example, when Larry observed his new classmates, he could have stopped the demeaning internal chatter about how dumb he was. Instead, he could have told himself he could do whatever he wanted in this class. "I came to learn, and it doesn't matter what other people know," would have helped Larry look forward to the class instead of wallowing in destructive comparisons.

To avoid making comparisons:

- Identify what *you* want
- Consider the available options for achieving what you want
- Pay attention to how you feel during the process of getting it

If you feel yourself slipping back into comparisons, keep a self-designed instruction ready. Try "You're the best judge of what's good for you, so think about that instead of what other people might choose," or "You can measure yourself by your own standards."

## Chapter 13

### Why am I Turned Off?

"It's not worth making a big deal about," Ann told herself when she came home from work and discovered Ron hadn't done the breakfast dishes. She did the clean up, made dinner, and for the third time in a week "just wasn't interested" in making love. Ann and Ron were proud of their trouble free relationship. "We don't fight, we talk to each other. We get things settled. We're reasonable people and forgive and forget the insignificant things like squeezing the toothpaste in the middle, forgetting to leave a minor message, getting the wrong kind of breakfast cereal, and stuff like that."

The problem is that Ann and most of the rest of us don't really forgive and we don't really forget. We store up so many little frustrations because we decide they're so unimportant that nothing needs to be done about them. We may believe that nothing can be done, so we do nothing. Finally our irritation expresses itself by feeling turned off. We don't take responsibility for expressing our irritation and asking firmly for what we want. We just lose interest and sometimes even go away.

Ann decided to start being honest with herself. She listed all of the irritations at Ron that she could think of. For each item on her list she completed the sentence, "I wanted \_\_\_\_\_, and if I had gotten it I wouldn't still feel angry (hurt, frustrated, resentful.)" When she looked over her list she discovered that she most wanted Ron to keep the agreements he had made with her. When she finally shared her frustration about the broken agreements Ron took extra care to make sure to keep up his end of things. Their sex life improved dramatically.

## Chapter 14

# What Is A Healthy Relationship?

As we attempt to change our culturally-approved, ubiquitous co-dependent relationships we are often confused. Change them to what? What is a healthy relationship anyhow? Few of us understand that relationships move in cycles repeating the pattern of our earliest relationships with our parents. In healthy families, dependent children struggle and are encouraged to become independent people. If we missed doing this when we are growing up, we try to do it in our relationships.

### Co-Dependence

The necessary dependence of a young child on a parent is distorted to become the co-dependent relationship we have learned to believe is normal. We give up our separate identities and become unnecessarily dependent on each other. We seem to become incapable of doing certain things we used to do quite well. Sometimes one person forgets how to cook, another forgets how to manage money. A competition develops about who gets to have fun and who gets to work. When we recognize this co-dependent pattern we may try to change it.

### Power Struggle

Often one partner tries to change and the other tries to keep it the same. Each partner may try to change the other. Each is sure he or she is right and the other is wrong. A power struggle ensues with each one blaming the other because the relationship no longer works for either of them. Neither takes responsibility for their own life. A common refrain is "if it weren't for you I could do what I want to do." This struggle can continue for years, especially if we never resolved it with our parents.

## **Independence**

If both partners work hard and establish separate independent existences, they may panic: "What's the use of being together if I'm not needed? I need to be needed." This is an important stage for each person to establish their own individuality. In co-dependency people stay together because they need each other. During the independent stage of the cycle it becomes clear that we don't need each other, that we can survive on our own. It may seem like there's no reason to stay together even though we now admire and respect each other. The relationship seems very dull.

## **Interdependence**

If a couple manages to stay together they may enter into the mature phase of their relationship, called interdependence. They each know that they can be independent, but it's more fun and rewarding to be together. We learn to cooperate instead of compete, and become full partners in the relationship, staying by choice rather than by necessity.

Sometimes relationships go through this cycle many times about different issues like money, sex, food, child care and work. Relationships also go through this cycle when important life changes occur. Cycling is normal and healthy. Getting stuck in any stage, as you did in growing up, is what causes the problem. Each time the cycle is repeated successfully a relationship becomes stronger and more stable. Don't hesitate to get help if you need it.

## Chapter 15

# How Can I Be Fair?

In competitive families the needs of one person take precedence over the needs of everybody else in the family. In a desperate attempt to counter this situation, some of us try to make sure that everything is fair and equal. Both of these positions ignore the fact that each person needs different things. The needs of each person are valid and the needs of everyone involved in a situation should be taken into account.

If you grew up in a family in which you needed to struggle for what was available it is very difficult to be an effective parent when your own children try to manipulate you to give them everything they want. "You love my brother (sister) more than you do me!" As parents your children will "get you" almost every time they say this. Usually we are most vulnerable when we want to be fair and love our children "equally." The truth is that neither you nor anyone else loves their children just the same. In trying to have things equal, your children can miss out on discovering what they need as individuals.

Explore your own beliefs. Recognize your fear of not having enough love, time, things. Then ask yourself, "What is the worst thing that could happen if I did not have enough of what I want? How would I, or do I now, handle it?" You may realize that you believe that love is getting equal things and treatment. This belief generates an artificial scarcity: a grabbing for what someone else has, in order to make it "equal", rather than an exploration of what you need.

The same can be true for your children now. In reality, it is perfectly normal and natural to have different experiences with different children and to respond to them individually. Your children are not being cheated, they are being acknowledged by your attention to their unique needs and characteristics.

If your children accuse you of not loving them the same, you could tell them, "I don't love you the same. I love differently because you are very different people." Talk with them about your new attitudes and ask them what they think is unique about themselves individually. Begin to have them explore their strengths and talents and share what they are learning.

As each child develops his own interests, there are new family decisions to make about money, time, and other resources. Let everyone help to decide how to use family resources with the new perspective that everyone does not need exactly the same things. You may even provide a reward for them for arriving at a working solution. Shifting from a fear of scarcity (inequality) to a comfortable belief that there is plenty for everyone takes some persistence and cooperation.

You may also start with the recognition that you truly cannot get enough of what you do NOT need. Addiction and compulsions cause people to seek more and more of something in an attempt to provide a satisfaction that becomes increasingly elusive. When you discover and then take action or request what you actually need, it is easy to know when you have enough. You will find you and your children share effortlessly when you all no longer fear not having enough.

Once you get accustomed to abundance, instead of scarcity, you may find you have an abundance of all kinds of things in your life: love, money, joy and time.

## Chapter 16

# How Can I Stop Procrastinating?

Do you procrastinate? In many families children lack models for doing things effectively. You may have spent lots of time trying to figure out how others accomplish complex tasks and figured out rules that you should follow. You may put off doing things until the last minute and then your parent self may kick your child self for the dreadful crime of procrastination.

What would happen if some extremely successful, highly publicized business figure produced brilliant results by doing everything at the last minute (and maybe they do!) And more importantly, if productivity-conscious parents and "significant others" no longer touted to us the virtues of getting things done early. Would procrastination's bad reputation disappear? Would we quit feeling bad about getting things done "at the last minute"?

Procrastination will probably never disappear, but seeing its internal workings can open up the possibility of procrastinating creatively, enjoying it and producing excellent results.

If you are a person who puts tasks off, you may want to listen to your own internal dialogue from the first "rescheduling" through to completion of the task. The conversation always involves a parent self telling the child self to do something and the child self not wanting to do it. The child self goes to great pains and much worry to calculate how long he or she can delay until s/he actually has to do the task in order to avoid some consequences or to get something s/he wants.

In this form of procrastination, the problem is *not* to get the task done; it does get done and usually gets done on time! (how often we forget that part!) Instead, the problem is the discomfort you feel until the task is finally carried out. The solution is to learn your own rhythms of working and to be comfortable with them, instead of worrying about adapting or not adapting to somebody else's definition of the right way to get a task completed. Parental messages often keep us from examining our own patterns of working effectively. See which ones you recognize: "Keep busy," "Work hard", "You can't play until the work is done", "You have to suffer to make something good", "Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today".

With all of this internal dialogue and possibly even physical discomfort going on, is it any wonder we have not really examined how we are most effective and productive? Some people do their best work when they are close to the deadline. They clear their schedules and then put their entire concentration on one thing until they are done. Others need to spread out a task to keep "fresh" or meet other commitments.

Check into your own patterns by asking "When and how do I usually get my best work done?" Whatever you are doing now may already be the most effective way for you to work, even though your inner parent does not approve of it. If you are not sure of your best pattern, do some experimentation. Ask yourself:

- Is the task something I want to do?
- How do I want to do it?
- What will be the consequence if I do not do it?
- What will be the reward if I do do it?
- What is the most effective way for me to do this task?
- What is the latest possible, realistic time for me to start this task and still accomplish it to my satisfaction?
- What am I going to do with the time I would ordinarily spend in the internal parent-child argument about the task?

You may just find that you are doing something enjoyable during that time when you would have historically been worrying and feeling bad. Remember, the suffering is optional!

## **SECTION IV:**

### **WHY IS CHANGE SO DIFFICULT?**

Familiar pain is often easier to face than the uncertainty of change. We fear the unknown. Most of us start a personal growth process without any real understanding of where it's going to lead. We start the process when the familiar pain becomes unbearable. We feel that something has got to change. As we learn to take charge of our unproductive thoughts and actions we are sometimes left with feelings of emptiness, "What now, what am I supposed to do?" When there isn't any supposed to, we have to create something new. As we begin to choose our own lives, pressures both internal and external come to bear. We may even start to wonder if change was such a good idea after all.

## Chapter 17

# Can I Change Without Losing Myself?

Louise surveyed the shambles of the most recent of a series of painful relationships. Never again, she decided. I'm going to change this pattern. Then she began to panic. Who will I be if I do this? Do I have to give up everything important about myself? Will anybody I know still care about me if I change?

One way to gather courage for meeting and making changes is to look at the present direction of your life. Ask yourself these questions:

- If things continue the way they are, where will I be a year from now?
- Five years and ten years from now?
- How will I be remembered by the people who know me?

If the answers show you a picture you want to change, draw a new picture of how you would like things to be and figure out ways to make that happen.

To begin the process, let's understand and have some compassion for your child self. It is the part of you that decided on the beliefs and behaviors you now hold. These decisions were made when you were small. You adopted particular ideas, attitudes and behaviors that the child part of you felt would ensure that those around you would stay around you and would continue to provide whatever you needed for survival.

Even now we operate within a limited set of options based predominately on a perpetuation of childhood assessments and feelings. We are just as responsible for those choices now, however, as we were then. This gives us the freedom to change limiting decisions at any time. We can see change as adding options to our "self-ness" rather than taking something away from what we already have.

Many of the steps in changing and growing are new, risky and probably frightening. A way to deal with these fears is to share what you are doing with your friends and colleagues. Tell them what new behaviors and changes you are practicing. Ask them to reassure you that you have made the right decision. Ask for the support you want.

The more often you engage in new behaviors, the more rapidly your fear will dissipate. You will also become more assured that you are not your beliefs and behaviors. You will still be you, no matter what options you add. Your newly expanded self may find life to be increasingly rewarding and fulfilling.

If the changes you plan to make are profound, it will probably be useful to find support for yourself in making those changes. Support can come from a variety of sources: new friends, support groups -- and if necessary, therapists and other professionals.

## Chapter 18

# How can I Keep my Promises to Myself?

Its easy to get overambitious about making changes without considering the support we need to maintain them.

Robert whistled happily as he headed back to the assembly line from the company cafeteria . Sticking strictly to his diet for the ninth day in a row, he had eaten only a salad for lunch. He was proud of keeping his resolution so well.

Then disaster struck. One of the machines malfunctioned while he was on break and his supervisor unfairly criticized him in front of his co-workers. By 5:00 p.m. he was still seething with anger and had only half and hour to get across town to an important meeting. Unable to face the long wait for his Spartan dinner, Robert loaded up on candy bars at the vending machine and ate them while he roared down the highway.

How many times have you, like Robert, made resolutions with the best of intentions, only to break them again and again: Keep in mind that there are different kinds of resolutions. One is a promise to be good; another is a decision to make changes in your life. The easiest way to keep from repeating your old cycle is *not* to make "New Year's resolutions" that are promises.

Resolutions made only to placate your parent self don't work. If your child self doesn't like the resolution, you are likely to act as you did when you were actually a child. When you were little, you probably followed a rule you didn't like only as long as a grown-up was around to keep an eye on you.

Now you are an adult, a desire to make life satisfying will motivate your changes. If changes don't feel good, you don't really want to make them. Before making resolutions, try contracting with yourself to make the change. For example, state what you want to change in a positive framework. Robert could have said, "I will create healthy new eating habits and gradually achieve my ideal weight.," instead of "I want to lose 10 pounds." If he didn't like the change he was proposing, he could have abandoned the project before he started.

Robert might also have asked himself how the proposed change would satisfy his parent self, adult self and child self. Perhaps his child self needed the promise of a movie or an extra tennis game a week to feel satisfied.

He could have also helped himself keep his resolution by asking what he might do to stop himself from meeting his goal. Robert knew the candy in the vending machine was a temptation. It would help if he carried high-protein, low-calorie snacks, especially on the days he has a meeting after work.

Take a look at the plans you make to change and see how they fit the needs of your inner selves.

## Chapter 19

# I've Changed For the Better, Why is Everyone Angry?

As we work hard on our own recovery it's very disconcerting not to not be supported by people we've been close to. It's important to remember that we don't live in isolation; we're part of many systems. When one part of a system (you) changes, it has an impact on all the other parts of the system. Sometimes your changes force others to do or face things they would rather deny. There are some things that you can do to make your changes easier on the people around you.

"Did you see the way Susan spoke up in that meeting this morning?" asked one of her co-workers. Her supervisor nodded "I sure did. And just yesterday, she talked back to me when I gave her feedback on her project." He shook his head. "I just don't know what's gotten into Susan. She used to be so easy to work with!"

What's "gotten into" Susan is personal change. She's been working on increasing her personal power and effectiveness. To her astonishment, people are not congratulating her on her new behavior. They seem confused, frightened and in some cases, downright angry.

Why? The problem has to do with changing previous unspoken social contracts. Susan, for example, used to act helpless with certain people. Their response was to be helpful and take care of her. Now that she no longer needs that response, they are thrown off balance.

Susan's associates are likely to try to make the situation familiar again. They will put her down to see if she will return to her usual behavior. If she gives up her new effectiveness, then they won't have to learn how to deal with the new Susan. If she sticks to her new behavior, people will eventually forget her old ways of responding and look for new ways to relate to her.

Have you, like Susan, recently changed for the better? Here are some ways you can help others adjust to the new you:

- Make sure you aren't secretly thinking others are bad or wrong because you have changed and they haven't. Any hint of superiority is a sure invitation to a negative response.
- Talk to people about the unspoken social agreements you have had with them in the past. Acknowledge that the old relationship was important to both of you at the time and thank the person for the old connections. Then explain how and why you have made changes and discuss how you will relate to that person in the future. Also indicate how you would like that person to relate to you. This forewarning helps people to become allies instead of enemies.
- Learn to calibrate your new personal power and effectiveness. If you first learn effectiveness at a loud or high-energy level, beware. Train yourself to use the smallest amount of energy to get the job done. Coming on too strong will turn people off.
- Experiment and find out what works best. Most people will become comfortable with your changes. However, others may no longer wish to relate to you when you exhibit your effectiveness. Those relationships may gradually end. You will find new ones to replace them --with people who *rejoice* with you in your new-found power.

## Chapter 20

# Why Can't I Be the New Me with my Family?

It's natural to want to show off your newly gained self confidence, self-awareness, and serenity to your family of origin. You go to them hoping for enthusiastic approval. When you don't get that approval you may feel like you're a failure. You're not. Your family of origin is the most difficult place of all for you to maintain your new way of being in the world.

Diane was well along in her growth process when she risked visiting her parents. Fortified by successful relationships with her friends and co-workers she was stunned to find herself almost immediately feeling like a helpless little girl trying to resist her father's orders. Like Diane, you may find that you regress to old feeling and behavior patterns, when with your family. Why? There are so many subtle communications among people who have been close to each other for a long time. These communication cues are so deep and basic they often operate below your level of awareness.

Diane responded to a whole range of cues, from verbal to visual to physical and emotional, that reminded her of how she was supposed to behave when she was a child. She soon felt like she was about 8 years old again.

Here are some things you can do to avoid slipping back into old patterns:

- Don't go with an agenda to change your family. It's an impossible job for you to do.
- Avoid flaunting your new behaviors. They probably will not be appreciated in your family.
- Become an observer. Notice as much as you can about the cues that invite you to regress. Notice the communication patterns. Are they indirect? Who talks to whom? About what?
- Be prepared to give your family as much as you can of what they expect from you. If you've always helped with the dishes this is not a good time to stop. If you've always been your mother's confidante, listen sympathetically but this time avoid trying to help her solve her problems.

- Use the language that's familiar to your family. Avoid using any kind of jargon.
- Think about what you want from the visit. Ask for it – diplomatically. If you don't get it be prepared to retreat.
- Be prepared to withdraw from conflict and redirect the conversation. Try saying, "I think I didn't make myself clear. What I was really trying to tell you is..."

If you still get caught up in your old patterns, forgive yourself. When you get away from your family, write down a description of what happened, step by step. Include as many of the words as you can remember. In the margin add a description of your feelings and thoughts at the time you made each statement. Look at your reactions and try to figure out an alternative response for each step of the conversation. Don't be discouraged if progress is slow. Old patterns have been around a long time, and it may take a long time to change them.

## Chapter 21

# Do I Need a Therapist?

Self help groups can be very effective in supporting the changes you need to make in your life. However sometimes even that doesn't seem to be enough. It may be difficult to reach out for additional help because of the lifelong position of "I can take care of it by myself." You may believe that no one out there could help or understand anyhow. Sometimes a therapist can help.

After 2 years in a 12-Step group Martin realized that every time he had a promising relationship with a woman he would find some way to end it before it could turn into the type of close and committed relationship he said he was looking for. The more likely any woman was to be loving and supportive, the more quickly Martin would choose to end the relationship. Finally other members of his support group suggested therapy.

Martin resisted at first: "Can therapy really help? Isn't seeking therapy a sign of failure? How can I find a competent therapist?" When he decided to research the problem he discovered that there are several important times to see a therapist. One is when you, like Martin, are stuck in the same problem over and over again and can't seem to find a way out. This indicates that the problem may be a symptom of something else that a therapist can help to discover. Another is when you feel overwhelmed by an external event such as the death of a loved one or major life change.

Even though you might be able to work through this on your own or with a support group, this process can be long and painful. A therapist who has helped many people over the same path can provide a road map and support along the way, making the process much easier.

Another reason to seek therapy is when you know you need to do some inner child work and the memories are too painful for you to deal with alone. A therapist can help you access those memories and provide needed protection for your child self to explore and work through them.

A therapist can also be helpful if you're trying over and over again to solve a problem and your methodology just isn't working. Some people are predominately thinkers and attack problems by thinking them through. Others are predominately

feelers or doers and address problems through those modalities. Sometimes the problem itself is an imbalance between your own attention to thinking, feeling and doing.

Healthy people can apply the appropriate technique to whatever problem comes up. Others may have learned just one approach because of its survival value in their family. They lack information about how to manage the others. Logical thinking people may need to access emotions. Emotional people may need to learn to think something through in order to solve the problems. "Human Doings" may need to learn to stop to think and/or feel.

Some therapists and therapy methodologies focus predominantly on thinking, others on feeling, or doing. It is wise to choose a therapist who can help you develop those areas in which you are less skilled. It's also important to choose a therapist who can provide the appropriate protection for the work you need to do. Your child self needs to feel safe and comfortable to deal with some of the trauma of the past.

Trusted friends, fellow support group members or professionals can help refer you to an appropriate therapist. The therapist's credentials (social worker, psychologist, drug and alcohol counselor, psychiatrist) are less important than your feeling of support and comfort with the particular person you choose. Therapy itself is often an uncomfortable process because by its very nature it helps you examine the parts of your self and your life that you've been avoiding. Your own sense of relief, acceptance and growth will let you know when you're working with someone who's right for you.

When Martin found a therapist he felt safe with he discovered that he needed to let himself feel the terrible panic and loss he'd experienced when his alcoholic mother was not available to take care of him. As he gradually worked through this problem over many months he began tentatively to risk a closer relationship with a woman.

## Chapter 22

# Does Having Problems Mean There is Something Wrong with Me?

Growth continues throughout life. Knowing how to recognize the difference between ordinary problems of living and signals that there is something really wrong is a challenge. Many people don't really know what "healthy" people are like. Some confuse health with perfection. You might even be functioning as a healthy person right now, and like Connie, be unaware of it.

Connie thought she might need to go back into therapy because of a number of problems in her life. She was struggling with her adolescent children about reassigning family responsibilities. Her divorce was final and she was completing the training for a career change. She was aware of feeling sad, and came to discuss the problem. In discussion with her former therapist she was affirmed for effectively handling transitions in her life. Her sadness was an appropriate response to those transitions. She was getting support from her friends while going through those changes; she was beginning to become aware of the excitement and scare of creating her life the way she wanted it to be. There were no barriers, only feelings.

Connie is a good example of a healthy person. She still has problems, and she knows how to address them and get appropriate help when she needs it. Most of the time she enjoys her life. She enjoys other people. She lives a relatively balanced life. When she has a problem she thinks about what it is. She acknowledges any feelings that are associated with it and uses those feelings to discover her own wants and needs in the situation. She takes appropriate action to solve the problem, and, although she may feel discouraged when others resist, she doesn't abandon her beliefs.

Whenever she deals with people she takes into account what she wants, finds out what they want, and does her best to find cooperative solutions that take into account what is possible in any given situation. This sometimes means setting limits for her teenagers – even though they aren't happy about those limits. Her son wants to leave her home and live with his father. She's helping him explore the options even though she would like to have him with her during his last year in high school. He wants to go now but she is not letting him leave without thinking through the problem.

Connie knows where she wants her life to go. She has general goals for her new career and is exploring how to make them more specific. She has definite short term goals about where she would like to do her practicum work. She also has goals about her relationship with various members of her family, taking sufficient time for play and her own spiritual development. She no longer needs her safe support group and has developed friends in work, at school, and in her community.

Although Connie has her own objectives, she is sometimes willing to put them aside to help one of her friends. (She also says no sometimes.) She doesn't hesitate to ask for and accept help when she needs it. And she's often, but not always, available for her friends when they need help. She's either forgiven or made friends with most of the people she used to see as adversaries. When she finds herself feeling that somebody is creating problems for her, she takes time to consider their needs and feelings. Instead of automatically blaming them or herself, she tries to find a creative solution.

Connie is willing to look at her own contribution to any problem that arises and when she does discover that she is engaging in an old pattern she takes the time to refer back to her previous growth work until she understands and can change what's going on. She has already shifted her focus from recovery to growth and keeps moving towards creating her life the way she wants it to be.

## Chapter 23

# What are Some Tips for Living Effectively?

There are some important principles to remember when faced with the problems that arise in the ordinary course of living.

### **1. Clearly identify the problem.**

Having a feeling may be a problem, or the feeling may represent a different problem. Take the time to think through what the problem really is.

### **2. Take the time to decide how you would like the problem to be solved.**

What do *you* want to happen?

### **3. If other people are involved then the next thing to do is to find out what they would like to happen in the situation.**

If other people are not involved, go on to the next step.

### **4. Assess what resources are available to you to solve the problem.**

What effects will each solution you create have on either creating or eliminating new problems? If you're lacking any information that you need, be sure to find it from an appropriate resource.

## **5. Ask for what you want and be willing to be flexible.**

It is important to acknowledge what you don't want and it is important to take the information about what you do and don't want into account whenever you try to solve a problem.

## **6. Allow yourself time to play with your ideas.**

This is serious work, but it doesn't have to be grim. Laugh about silly things and to enjoy yourself at any opportunity.

# About the Author

## Official

**Laurie Weiss, Ph.D., Master Certified Coach**, is the author of:

- **I Don't Need Therapy, but Where do I Turn for Answers?;**
- **What Is The Emperor Wearing? Truth-telling In Business Relationships** (also available in Chinese and German);
- **Recovery from CoDependency: It's Never Too Late to Reclaim Your Childhood** (with Jonathan B. Weiss);
- **An Action Plan for Your Inner Child: Parenting Each Other;**
- **Being Happy Together: How to Create a Fabulous Relationship With Your Life Partner in Less Than an Hour a Week;**
- **124 Tips for Having a Great Relationship**

She is an internationally-known executive coach, consultant, psychotherapist, speaker and author. She has presented her work throughout the US and in eight other countries. She and her partner/ husband, Jon Weiss, have practiced in Littleton, Colorado, since 1972, focusing on helping clients create dynamic, effective personal and working relationships.

## Informal

I am committed to helping people learn to love and appreciate themselves and each other. I have an unshakeable belief, based on over 29 years of experience as a coach, therapist, and consultant, that people are doing the very best they can with the resources they have available to them at any given moment. As a coach, I listen “between the lines” and respond to what people mean instead of just to what they say. I search for the essential aliveness in my clients and encourage their uniqueness.

I help my clients to clarify their intentions, especially in difficult situations, and then help them find the resources they need to achieve their goals. I am not afraid to speak difficult truths, and I help my clients discover what is true for them and learn to communicate it with compassion, grace and skill. My passion for experiential learning has led me on many strange and wonderful paths. I have been blessed by elephants in India, walked on hot coals, visited Camelot, flown over the Pyramids, and viewed the temples at Khajurajo.

I am available for Coaching and consultation. You can contact me through my office (303-794-5379 or 800-594-4594) or by email at laurieweiss@empowermentsystems.com.

## **Additional Resources**

### **Empowerment Systems Blogs:**

**Business Communication:** [Http://www.DareToSayIt.com/blog](http://www.DareToSayIt.com/blog)

**Relationships:** <http://www.RelationshipHQ.com/blog>

**Personal Development:** <http://www.IDontNeedTherapy.com/blog>

### **Empowerment Systems Websites**

<http://www.EmpowermentSystems.com>

<http://www.RelationshipHQ.com>

<http://www.IDontNeedTherapy.com/>

<http://www.TheIntegrityCourse.com>

<http://www.BeingHappyBook.com>

<http://www.DareToSayIt.com>

<http://www.YourGreatRelationships.com>