

Learning to Love Ourselves

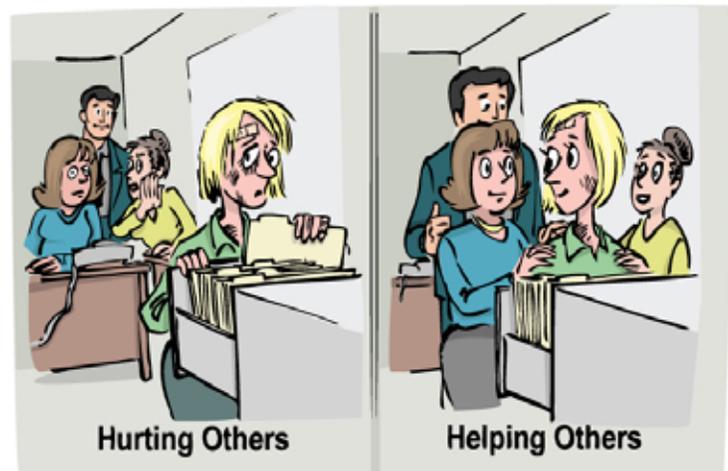
Mary is 70 pounds overweight. She eats indiscriminately and doesn't walk anywhere—uses her car even for a two-block errand. Money slips through Jack's fingers. He's usually broke several days before payday. Rebecca sometimes comes to work with bruises on her face. She lives in an abusive relationship. Office gossip often centers on Mary, Jack or Rebecca and their problems.

The climate in this office is competitive. Susannah, the CEO, fosters this competitive environment. Office friendships develop in cliques. Those within the clique feel safer as they know they have support if mistakes are made. Gossip and complaining are a way to be included. Mary, Jack and Rebecca know they are talked about behind their backs. It hurts but they bury their feelings. This office environment is harsh ... and closes hearts.

Many of us accept a competitive work environment as natural. Could it be otherwise? Couldn't co-workers participate with an attitude of cooperation rather than competition? Friendship could be something everyone feels. Mistakes could be treated as a natural part of the learning process. Work can be a place each person feels comfortable being himself or herself. Office talk can center on how each is learning from their personal challenges.

Individual problems can be viewed with compassion. In this office environment, Mary, Jack and Rebecca would feel safe confiding in their co-workers—providing opportunities for hearts to open rather than close.

We live in an age of ridicule. I cringe at some comments directed at my ideas or actions—they hurt and make me feel threatened and defensive. I also see this reaction in others if I act impatiently or am intolerant. The media reflects our need to belittle—those who have differing ways or beliefs are subject to ridicule. To avoid feeling devastated by ridicule we learn to hide our more intimate thoughts and true feelings.



Living With Fear

Why do we gossip and engage in remarks that do harm in some situations and at other times show compassion? What do we need to learn to be able to live our lives with compassion for all? Could there be one issue common to all that makes Mary overeat, Jack over spend, Rebecca accept an abusive relationship, and their co-workers gossip?

Many counselors and therapists agree that we live with a fear ... the fear that "I am unlovable." As Soul, we are loved. No matter what happens to us or what we do, we are loved completely and unconditionally by our Creator. We are born into this world eager to learn, to love and to be loved. As children, however, we mistake our parents actions to mean either 'I am loved.' or 'I am unloved.' If a parent scolds us, is impatient with us, or doesn't give us enough attention, we shrink inside with the feeling we are not loved. If a parent praises us, is patient, or gives us the attention we need, we flourish with the feeling we are loved. Eventually we learn to suppress the part of ourselves that we fear is unlovable. Like a hidden sliver, the feeling of not being loved festers to a fear that we are unlovable. We quickly learn to pattern our behavior so we feel loved. But do we feel loved for who we are? Or are the feelings that we are not lovable hidden deep within our being? Are our actions on the stage of life secretly driven by the belief that we are not lovable? Do we accept that in order to be loved, we can't be who we truly are?

Morrie, a former professor slowly dying from neuro-muscular failure known as ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease opened his heart to a former student to share his wisdom. Morrie said, "People are only mean when they are threatened and that's what our culture does. That's what our economy does. Even people who have jobs in our economy are threatened, because they worry about losing them. And when you get threatened, you start looking out for yourself. You start making money a god. It is all part of the culture."

Morrie bravely faced his fears. He spoke directly about his failing abilities, "Take my condition. The things I am supposed to be embarrassed about now—not being able to walk, not being able to wipe my ass, waking up some mornings wanting to cry—there is nothing innately embarrassing or shaming about them."¹

Morrie faced his growing disability and dependence bravely. He accepted himself as a worthy being despite his adversity and spoke out to help others. Is there a purpose to the harsh experiences that cause us to feel unlovable or threatened? Could it be that we are here to learn to love ourselves? Perhaps all our experiences—those that seem damaging as well as those that are supportive—are necessary for us to grow as individuals. Perhaps, all our experiences are meant to help us accept that we are loved, to learn to love ourselves, and to learn to share our love with others.

Mary, Jack, Rebecca and Susannah are each starting to question their lives. They want something more. They are each ready to recognize the need to listen to their hearts. How do we learn to listen to our hearts? The years of burying feelings and pain creates a prison for our hearts. We must be willing to look honestly at our past experiences if we are to fully experience our potential for love and happiness.

Here are three keys to the process of healing:

Recognize and accept all our feelings—good or bad ... with love.

Accepting painful or seemingly negative feelings stops the fear from controlling us. After overcoming bulimia, my daughter was suffering from chronic fatigue. In her search to heal herself, she discovered her hidden feelings and the pain and hurt that shrouded her heart. A turning point came in the wee hours one painful night. Her feelings suddenly became crystal clear. She realized that as a child she had not felt loved for who she was. Yes, she felt loved when she was good or behaved appropriately. But she had temper tantrums and a need for more attention than she received. As parents, our reaction to these behaviors made her feel unloved. Such a simple truth yet a common reaction ... to hide how we feel to protect ourselves. It seems a bad thing to think we have parents that don't love us. It seems worse to feel that we are unlovable. Acknowledging that she grew up feeling unloved was one step. A harder step was owning the feeling without judging herself or being ashamed that she harbored such feelings about her parents—to know that listening to her heart was more important than anything else. It can be difficult to acknowledge the pain we suffer at the hands of loved ones. And yet we all do. Feeling these feelings is a major step towards healing oneself and often others.

Honestly express our feelings.

When our daughter recognized and accepted the feelings she had harbored toward us as her parents, she arrived on our doorstep in the middle of the night, roused her father and I from sleep, and told us she had never felt we loved her for who she is. I felt numb at the shock of her words but knew the truth of them. I couldn't think of much to say at the time nor could her father. Years later, she confided to us how hurt she was at our reaction. With the painful realization from her childhood so fresh, she thought we would immediately throw our arms around her and tell her how much we loved her exactly as she was. She returned home to sob uncontrollably in her husband's arms for a long while. Her healing had begun. For me, it was a few years later and a different confrontation that opened my heart to trigger an overwhelming desire to hold her in my arms like a baby and express my love for her—for who she is.

A Poison Tree

*I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.*

William Blake

Expressing your feelings may mean just being honest with yourself. If you have someone who is a good listener, sharing these feelings is therapeutic. Sobbing in her husband's arms was part of my daughter's healing process. It enabled her to acknowledge, express, and eventually let go of the painful childhood experience. The important thing is to be honest with yourself whether or not you have someone with whom you can confide.

Talking is an important step as Jeanne Blum, author of *Woman Heal Thyself* points out. If we stay in that mode, however, it can be counter productive to change and healing. Jeanne has moved on after recovering memories of a traumatic childhood with sexual and emotional abuse. "I want to heal all my childhood issues, and no longer be trapped in the person my childhood created from abuse and dysfunction. That desire to heal is so intense that I push myself to look at issues that are difficult to confront. It is scary; however, I have lost the desire and the patience to sit on a therapist's couch talking about the same issue week after week."²

Bring love to the situation.

It is easy to lay blame for our experiences. There is nothing wrong with feeling that way. But don't stay there as it stops the healing process. For a time, my daughter blamed me for her problems. When you are ready to move on, bring love into the experience. How?

By realizing that those that make us feel unlovable also feel they are unlovable. My daughter realized in blaming me she wasn't loving me for who I was.

By feeling compassion for those who make us feel unlovable. By feeling grateful for even the harshest experiences—seeing how these experiences have strengthened us.

By recognizing how feeling unlovable is a step to learning to love ourselves for who we are and learning to love others for all that they are.

A spiritual exercise can be helpful with this process.³ Sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Imagine your parent or the individual you blame sitting facing you. Notice how the room is flooding with warm, bright sunlight. Think of someone or something you love (it may have been a favorite teddy bear or a pet) and allow this love to fill the room. This love bathes both of you. Singing the sound HU (like hue), or any sacred word comfortable for you, can help to open your heart to the love in the room. Ask the person to forgive you for whatever you may have done to them. This part is often difficult because we feel the other person needs to ask us for forgiveness. It may take several attempts before self-righteous anger dissipates enough to ask the person to forgive you. Next forgive that person for their actions. Do this exercise as often as necessary. At some point, you may even be able to give the person a hug.

If we want to feel loved and accepted for who we are then we need to make others feel loved

and accepted for who they are. We can't ask anyone else to change. We can only change ourselves and learn to love those close to us. We can also appreciate others for who they are. As each of us makes the change, we allow others to change. It may be a slow process. That's okay. What's important is that we're growing and learning.

When we start the process of healing and opening our hearts, we act as a pebble dropped into a pond. The ripples reach out to touch others.

References

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