



Life's Choices Aren't All Easy... But They Are All Yours

Life is about making choices. Imagine belying up to the counter at your local Ben & Jerry's ice cream shop and asking the server for "whatever flavor you think I'd like."

Of course you wouldn't do that. With a veritable rainbow of ice cream flavors tempting you, making a choice might be difficult, but you'd do it. "Give me Cherry Garcia and New York Super Fudge Chunk, put the chocolate on the bottom and get a scoop with lots of cherries in it for the top."

Granted not many of life's choices are as lightweight as choosing between chocolate and vanilla, but what you choose and how you make choices, or don't make them, is as central to your self-esteem as taking responsibility for yourself.

Choices come in two flavors: Active—when you make something happen and live with the consequences, and passive—when you "choose not to choose," and continue to live with the status quo because the stakes appear too high for any changes choice might bring.

Active choices can be painful; feelings of fear and vulnerability often accompany these decisions. Just because we know what's best for us doesn't make it any easier. This kind of choice-making is risky, too. The most difficult choices don't have any absolute right or wrong; there is no perfect solution. It takes great courage to face these hard decisions.

On the other hand, the postponement of choice can have serious backlashes in the way of stress, depression, discouragement, apathy,

even physical illness. Procrastination seldom has any favorable results.

Though in the end the choice is yours, getting to the place to be able to make a decision doesn't have to be a solo trip. Ask for help. Talking things out with another person can be helpful, especially someone who is on your side but has nothing at stake in your decision.

Just putting voice to your concerns may help you sort things out, and writing down the pros and cons will give you more clarity than keeping everything in your head. Getting some distance (emotional or physical) may make assessment easier, especially if that distance allows you to see the reality of the situation, rather than the way you wish it could be.

Even with thoughtful consideration, not every choice will be the right one. But wrong decisions don't make you wrong. And, trite as it may sound, one of the ways we learn is through the mistakes we make.

Not each of the choices you make will have a profound effect on the whole of your life. But the ongoing and continuous act of making choices will.

Making choices you believe in, choosing intentionally and with moral deliberation, taking responsibility for your choices, these are some of the markers on the road of self-esteem. The way William James put it was, "The first act of freedom is to choose it." *

10 Things to Say to Yourself

Often, the things we say to ourselves we wouldn't think of saying to another person. We blame, shame, call names of the meanest sort, nag, belittle and bully ourselves through self-talk. What if, instead, we were gentler with ourselves, asked ourselves questions and listened to the responses? What if we treated ourselves as we treat a best friend, someone we love dearly? Here's a Top 10 list of loving things to say to yourself.

1. What do you feel? Listening for the response is like taking our emotional temperature.

2. What do you need? Pay attention to your needs, they're about caring for yourself.

3. Good job. Congratulate yourself on a job well done, whether it's mowing the lawn, writing a poem or cleaning the bathroom.

4. I apologize. Saying "sorry" for the wrongs we've done ourselves can be the first step in healing.

5. Let's play. Lighten up and have some fun. Listen to what comes up when you suggest play.

6. Breathe. Breathing helps relieve tension, gives us that moment we sometimes need to center and ground ourselves.

7. I forgive you. To have closure and to move on, we often need to forgive ourselves.

8. Let go. Release worries, resentments, anger and fears to make room for growth.

9. Be present. Staying aware of the moment keeps us feeling truly alive.

10. I love you. We say it to others, why not say it to ourselves? Say it again. *

A Letter From

Margie Freeman, LCSW, CEAP



In the Jewish calendar, the week between the New Year and the Day of Atonement marks a time for reflecting on the past year and contemplating the future, crystallizing new goals for the coming year. It is a time to make amends and ask forgiveness from those we have hurt. It is also a time to forgive ourselves so that we may forge positive intentions and begin the new year with a clean slate.

I encourage you to resolve during the coming year to take care of yourself, both mentally and physically. Remember that your emotional well-being has a tremendous impact on your physical health. You can probably think of many times in your own life when your emotional pain—loneliness, sadness, resentment—manifested itself physically. People with chronic pain conditions often experience flare-ups under stress. Stress can also manifest itself in headaches, insomnia or sore muscles. Stress can cause impaired concentration and memory problems. It can shorten our lives by contributing to heart disease and diabetes. These stressors could include a fight with your spouse or frustrations with misbehaving children, dealing with a difficult boss or caring for an ill or impoverished family member. Daily stress and anxiety wreak havoc with our sense of well-being.

Take time each day for relaxation, for doing something pleasant for yourself. Have someone to talk to about your stresses. Meditation or listening to a hypnosis tape can offer you a state of profound relaxation. Call me so that we can work together to help you take care of yourself and achieve a sense of well-being.

—Margie

Are You a Good Listener?

Good communication is a two-way street: speaking and listening. Listening doesn't mean just not speaking. To be an effective listener requires certain behaviors and attitudes. Listening is an action. Find out how well you listen by answering true or false to the following statements.



True False

- 1. Listening means paying attention. When I listen to someone, I look directly at him or her, and concentrate on hearing what he or she is saying. When I cannot give my full attention, I say something like, "Now's not a good time for me to talk about this, can we discuss it later?" then agree to a specific time to have the discussion.
- 2. Listening means accepting what the other person says. When I listen to someone, I withhold judgment and accept what he or she is saying "as is." I acknowledge what the person is saying without labeling it right or wrong, good or bad, true or false.
- 3. Listening means being interested in what the other person says. When I listen to someone, I invite the speaker to give his or her opinion, say what's on his or her mind, or say how he or she feels about the topic or issue.
- 4. Listening means confirming and clarifying what I believe I heard. When I listen to someone, I ask specific questions such as "What I heard you say is ... is that right?" or "I think I understand what you said, but will you elaborate on ...?" or "When you say ..., do you mean...?"
- 5. Listening means being empathetic. When I listen to someone and I begin to feel defensive or impatient or angry, I try to put myself in the other person's shoes and appreciate what he or she might be going through.
- 6. Listening means letting go of control. When I listen to someone, I don't always jump right in with a solution, or try to fix things, or have to say the "right" thing.
- 7. Listening means not judging the speaker. When I listen to someone, I really try to not get hung up on the delivery, even if it's awkward, hesitant or garbled, or if his or her voice or speech mannerisms are irritating.
- 8. Listening means withholding any rebuttal until the speaker is finished. When I listen to someone, I listen to the entire message before I mentally begin my rebuttal, defense, argument or denial. Then, I wait a bit before I begin speaking to make sure I've let the speaker finish, and I am centered in my response.
- 9. Listening means paying attention to the whole message. When I listen to someone, I take in their non-verbal messages, too—facial expressions, gestures, eyes, tone of voice and posture because I understand these can contradict or confirm the words that are used.

Remember, just because we're born with ears, doesn't mean we start off life as good listeners. Becoming a good listener is a skill we learn, and like other skills, it takes practice to get better. Being a good listener is also a gift we can give to other people. Letting someone know he or she has really been heard is one of the finest things we can do for each other.

The Holidays: Here They Come, Ready or Not

When the weather changes and the leaves begin to wither, it starts. By Halloween, it's gathering momentum and by Thanksgiving, it has us in a full-body press. "It" is *The Holidays*, and whether you celebrate Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa or simply "the season," what everybody has in common this last quarter of the year is stress with a capital S.

No wonder. All those events and activities, family gatherings. The kids are out of school again, house guests are coming, or you're planning a trip. Don't even mention shopping for gifts, sending greeting cards or decorating the house. The credit cards are maxed out, you've got more chores than you can shake a stick at and your "to do" list is longer than Santa's beard.

And you swore it would all be different this year.



Take heart. It's not too late. With intention, it really can be different this year.

First thing to remember: take good care of yourself: Eat healthfully, get plenty of rest, exercise, drink lots of water. Breathe deeply. Relax and have fun.

During the holidays when already too-busy lives become even more hectic, some serious time manage-

ment is in order. Write down a list of all the things you want to do. Prioritize. Assign some chores to the children. Consider scratching a few items off your list.

Make a budget and stick to it. Remember, it's not the price, but the thoughtfulness of the gift. Use gift certificates if you're unsure of what to give.

Remember, adults aren't the only ones who feel more stress during the holiday season. Children experience it, too. Keep communications lines open and spend quality time with your youngsters. This is a wonderful time to share your family's holiday traditions through storytelling or special seasonal activities.

Getting the young ones outside the house, for full-body exercise will help them and you to work off stress. Go out and play together.

Having house guests? Try to make them as self-sufficient as possible. Ask for help. And even though it might be fun, don't wear yourself out by staying up late every night, or stuffing each day as full as a Christmas goose.

Family gatherings may be complex, given blended families and special holiday arrangements. Conflicting family expectations and demands can create guilt and resentment. If family gatherings cause tension and anxiety, consider alternatives that can lessen the effects.

Make plans well enough in advance to avoid any last minute surprises or disappointments.

Finally, take time for yourself. Find a place where you can be quiet and restful. Take a walk, breathe in the fresh air. Look around you, notice nature's response to the season and let yourself be amazed.

Those Holiday Blues Are Real

It's not unusual to feel down during the holidays. In fact, so many people experience feelings of sadness or loss, of being overwhelmed at this time of year, even the name for it has become a cliché: the Holiday Blues.

As the name implies, these blues are seasonal. When the holidays are over, they'll probably disappear right along with the decorations and last of the Christmas cookies. But they are real and their symptoms can dampen an otherwise joyous holiday experience. Here are some symptoms and some solutions:

- Feelings of loss or separation from loved ones may be intensified during the holidays.
- Fatigue from holiday stress affects you emotionally as well as physically.
- Families and family traditions change. Are you hanging onto old ideas or pictures?
- Media images of the perfect holidays seldom match anyone's real life. Check your expectations against the reality of your situation.
- Over-indulging in food and drink will have aftereffects. So will lack of physical exercise, sleep and rest.
- If you're feeling "the blues," get support from friends and family. Don't isolate.
- These feelings are real and valid. Acknowledge them.
- Make time to refill yourself. Reconnect with your source through whatever spiritual practices you use.
- Understand that this is a stressful time. And that it will be over. Experiencing the holiday blues is part of the common experience.



Feelings beyond "the blues" and feelings that are more debilitating, or that extend beyond the holiday season, may signal depression. If this is true for you, don't hesitate to ask for help. *

Make Your Worrying Work for You

Worrying may have a bad rep, but worrying, if it's done right, can actually be helpful.

Effective worrying can anticipate—and avoid—problems, devise artful solutions and expand creative possibilities. It leads to constructive action. On the other hand, ineffective worrying is what keeps us awake at night, distracts us during the day and gives our physical systems a workout they don't need.

When you find yourself in bed at night, tossing and turning, plowing the same field again and again, you're in the midst of worry of the worst kind: self-perpetuating. The more you worry, the more stress chemicals feed back to the brain, telling it to worry more.

If you find yourself mired in this worry bog, try some of these actions to put your worries to work for you:

- **Get physical.** Get up, move around. Action will temporarily relieve the worrying. When you come back to the problem, you may have a better perspective on it.

- **Take a walk, work out, go for a bike ride or a run.** Exercise increases blood flow, meaning more oxygen to the brain. Exercising regularly means you will probably worry less.

- **Write down your worries in a journal.** Simply writing your fears and concerns down takes some of the power out of them and gives you a sense of control.

Writing your worries also gives you an opportunity to write possible solutions. Try this: write down the worry and, without thought to how workable or realistic the solutions are, write them down as fast as they come to mind. Don't stop to think, just write idea after idea.

Given this creative outlet, the same brain that was nagging you with worries, can offer ingenious and often elegant solutions.

- **Tell a friend.** Ask for feedback, another perspective. Or someone to simply listen. Giving voice to your worries can take some of the wind out of their bedraggled sails.

- **Make gratitude lists.** Oprah Winfrey isn't the only one to recommend them. A gratitude list doesn't have to be long or well thought out. In your journal or on a sheet of paper, jot down several things you're grateful for. They don't have to be big deals—the way the sun falls on the roses in the morning is just fine, if that's what you thought of.

It certainly is not as simple as the song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," makes it sound, but somewhere underneath its whining, nagging voice, worry might have something important to tell you. *



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