How to Stop Bothering Yourself About What Others Think

By Jerry Minchinton

If you find it difficult to accept yourself just as you are, perhaps you are too critical and too demanding. Perhaps you take yourself so seriously that instead of laughing about your mistakes, you feel humiliated. Errors you willingly overlook in others seem unforgivable when you make them yourself. Just why are you so hard on yourself? Are you as awful as you think, or could it be you are just looking at matters the wrong way?

The biggest obstacle to self-acceptance is believing it is important to maintain a certain kind of image — to make a favorable impression. This over-concern with others' opinions can make you work yourself into a frenzy trying to imagine exactly what people are thinking about something you have done or said.

What a waste of time and energy! Few things are more futile than trying to guess how you appear to others. (Are their opinions more important than your own?)

While you are busily trying to imagine what others think about you, they may well be wondering just what you think of them. For the most part, other people are just like you; they have the same kinds of needs and desires.

If it were possible to get inside people's minds, and experience their memories, you would discover that many people have had the same sort of events happen to them that you have. But more important, you would discover that others' ideas of what constitutes an awful or horrible occurrence can be vastly different from your own. It is purely a matter of personal interpretation.

But it is no wonder you believe it to be important that others regard you favorably: When people whom you like, like you, you feel good, and you like yourself; when they do not like you, neither do you.

Yet it is no one else's responsibility to assure your emotional welfare; it is your own. This fact may be hard to accept, but once you stop letting external sources determine your mood, you can take charge of yourself, and feel calm and happy —

no matter what others say or do, or whether or not a certain person likes you. Your emotional well-being rests in your hands and in no one else's. You can choose your mood from moment to moment, and you can make a different choice whenever you wish.

Telling yourself that others actually have no emotional power over you is like throwing away a crutch you have leaned on for years. At first you will feel uncomfortable, but the longer you are without it, the stronger you will grow.

Living in the hope that others will always be kind enough to look out for your feelings is like hitting your head against a wall while begging the wall to stop hurting you.

Your emotions originate inside you, beginning with what you think. Therefore, you are 100% responsible for them yourself. Regardless of what others may do or what awful events may take place, the only way anything outside you can enter your mind is through your thoughts, and you have absolute control over them. Nothing that happens can cause you to experience any kind of emotion, unless you willingly cooperate with it.

In all your searching for relief from your emotional problems, you have neglected to try the only solution guaranteed to work every time: That of changing yourself so you no longer respond the same way. It is your response that causes your emotional pain — not persons or events.

If others appear to be able to influence your emotions, it is only because you have agreed to let them do so. The wonderful part is, you are free to withdraw your permission at any time.

If you force your body to absorb the shock of negative emotions over a long period of time, you are likely, sooner or later, to suffer ulcers, high blood pressure, premature aging, any number of stress-related diseases, and other physical disabilities, along with an immune system too weakened to fight them. On the other hand, if you stop bothering yourself about what others think about you, you will not only feel happier and more loving, you will discover an unsuspecting reservoir of energy.

"Everyone Makes Mistakes"

Making mistakes does not set you apart from the crowd; it identifies you as a human being.

Any Monday-morning quarterback can tell you how the game should have been played — once it is over. What this clearly demonstrates is that if you had hindsight, you would always make the best decision.

Understand that you will make mistakes, and that complaining to yourself about yourself will improve nothing. Heaping blame and guilt on yourself increases the chances that you will make even more errors in the future.

Rather than showing yourself mercy when you make a mess of things, you are critical, demanding, and unforgiving. Errors in judgment that you overlook when made by others, assume massive proportions when you make them yourself. You look back on your incorrect decisions, agonizingly wishing you had handled certain situations differently. Because you associate your feelings of self-worth with your ability to avoid mistakes, you guarantee yourself a continual series of emotional ups and downs. Somehow you have arrived at the totally incorrect conclusion that you should never make mistakes. In fact, just the opposite is true.

If you do not insist on perfection from yourself, you will feel less pressured and more relaxed, and consequently, will be less likely to make mistakes. Once you grasp that all your actions need not be perfect, you will eliminate a substantial amount of stress and discomfort from your life.

Guilt is a combination of feelings: Anger, because you have behaved below your standards; shame, because you believe you have done something that is beneath you; and embarrassment, because of what you think others think. Guilt is the wish that you could undo something you have done.

"The more you mentally review an unpleasant experience, the more you chip away your self-esteem."

You have the ability to consciously recall memories with great clarity. You replay

some of them so vividly they almost seem to be happening again. While you may sometimes use this talent to good advantage, you may abuse it by bringing the past into the present more often than you should. It would be one thing if the memories you recalled were happy ones, but you may tend to focus your attention more on unpleasant recollections.

You remind yourself of every detail — feeling the hurt or embarrassment anew.

Although this kind of mental review may seem harmless, it is actually just the opposite. The more you mentally review an unpleasant experience, the more you chip away your self-esteem.

The good news is that it is unnecessary to be troubled by unpleasant memories because you can eliminate the pain whenever you like. You cannot go back and change past events, but it is not the events themselves that bother you; it is your thoughts about them, and you can change those.

Are these occurrences truly as awful as you think they are, or do you give them more significance than they deserve?

Unless you make a special effort to keep particular memories alive, even the most distressing are likely to lose their importance as memories more recently acquired take their place.

There is a circus act which illustrates how you keep disturbing memories fresh in your mind: In it, a performer places a plate on top of a pole; then he spins the plate. This done, he picks up another pole and another plate and repeats the process until he has five or six plates in motion. As the speed of the plates begins to slow, he runs from one pole to the next, giving each a few more spins to keep it going. If he doesn't, the plates stop spinning and fall to the ground.

This is remarkably similar to how you keep painful memories alive: Every time you recall something from the past, you continue to "spin" it by giving it attention. The less you recall it, the fainter it grows.

Specific parts of your life may stand out in your memory because you consider them times of great unhappiness. Life is rarely all good or all bad. Generally, life is a mixture of good and bad, happiness and unhappiness.

Unless you are determined to make yourself miserable, it is unwise to make an unfortunate event or condition the focal point of your life, no matter how devastating it once seemed. To change your feelings about a particular time, reverse the process by reviewing that period, and focusing only on its positive aspects.

Will thinking about past problems actually improve anything, lessen your pain, or decrease your anguish? Can wallowing in old misery make you happier, more relaxed, easier to get along with, or a more pleasant person? Does it make you more successful, more generous or more loving? Does it — in any way — add to the quality of your life?

You can use painful incidents from the past as excuses for your failures, but there is no advantage in poisoning your mind with toxic emotional residue.

There are, though, plenty of good reasons why you should not weigh yourself down with the anchor of a painful past.

Except for what you can learn from it, your past is unimportant because it no longer exists. The only period of time with any value, and the only time for which you are truly responsible, is right now, this present moment.

Think of an irritating experience that happened to you a short while ago, but review the scene as though it were happening to someone else. If you feel yourself starting to tense up, consciously relax. Repeat this process of objective observation until you feel no irritation. After a number of repetitions it will become so boring you will no longer feel like thinking about it.

Then make a game of recalling pleasant aspects of the same experience, while ignoring the unpleasant ones.