

CHAPTER 32

Resolving Inner Conflict

A story from Zen Buddhism

Two monks were walking along the banks of an overflowing river. They saw a young woman who was afraid to cross. Although the monks had taken vows never to touch a woman, the older monk picked her up and carried her to the other side of the river. The younger monk seethed in anger all day. The two didn't speak until sunset, when they were allowed to break their vow of silence. Then the younger monk, enraged, accused the older monk of defiling not only himself but also the whole order. The older monk simply answered, "I put the woman down on the other side of the river early this morning. It is only you who have been carrying her around throughout the day."

Surely we all have had an experience of having to make a difficult choice. Sometimes we choose to betray a friend, promise or principle in order to preserve another relative, group or belief. Often inner conflict arises because we either regret the consequences of our choice or we realize that we made the wrong choice.

Inner conflict and turmoil can affect our emotional and physical health. If you realize that you have made a mistake in a relationship or that one of your decisions





resulted in hurting others, the best thing to do is to make amends immediately or very soon. This can be a difficult process. It sometimes helps to write out specific things that you would like to say to the offended person. “Jane, about the other day when we...”. You can rehearse it all in your mind or verbally so that when the moment comes the words are not stuck in your throat or somehow your mind suddenly goes blank. You can also:

- ✘ Admit to a third person the exact nature of your wrongdoing in order to get it out where it can be examined.
- ✘ Be willing to experience the pangs of guilt from your conscience. This is our inborn guide, our wise teacher. Our

conscience will hurt if we have treated others unjustly. Be thankful for such a sharp and active conscience. There’s a song that says “I wouldn’t feel so very bad if I weren’t so very good.”

- ✘ Learn to apologize – practice makes perfect. Admitting when you are wrong is not the end of the world and actually can turn out to be a very wonderful experience.
- ✘ Be willing to make amends by doing greater positive actions – more than what is required. This is like insurance to prevent further offenses in the future, because the ones you hurt but then helped surely will remember your actions.
- ✘ Forgive yourself – remind yourself that mistakes are part of the path of life. Sadly, some people carry their guilt around with them for years, allowing it to destroy what could have been a happy and productive life.

Other times you might be the offended person as the recipient of an injustice, misunderstanding or betrayal. It’s nearly impossible to go through life without people stepping on our toes, insulting us either consciously or unconsciously, or taking advantage of our trusting nature. No matter how much we may try to protect ourselves from the hurts and pains of life, some degree of it will happen anyway.

If you are seething in anger, resentment, disappointment or the “why me?” syndrome, you probably are taking energy from other important areas of your life – your goals for sports, schoolwork, time with your friends and family, etc. Ann Landers, a famous American newspaper advice columnist, once wrote, “Hate is like acid. It can damage the vessel in which it is stored as well as destroy the object on which it is poured.”

Here are some tips for dealing with the experience of being mistreated:

- ✘ Although painful, admit to yourself that a bad thing really DID happen – you are not making it up. Face the fact honestly that you were betrayed or hurt in some way. Remember, bad things happen to good people. Just because someone hurt or betrayed you, it doesn’t mean you deserved it.
- ✘ Tell someone whom you trust about the situation. Many times the perspective of an older or wiser person can immediately relieve some of our emotional

stress. As well that person can give practical advice about the next step to take in seeking to resolve the situation.

- ✘ Write things out. Pretend you are a newspaper reporter and interview yourself on what happened. Use “who, what, when, where, how and why” questions to clarify your experience and put it in a non-emotional perspective. Then write out your feelings on another piece of paper. Be honest, clear and use as many descriptive adjectives as you can!
- ✘ Request a meeting with the offender and try to explain calmly your thoughts and feelings on the matter at hand. Ask for the presence of a mediator if necessary – someone who can help to clarify misunderstandings or difficulties as they arise in the conversation.
- ✘ Meditate or pray about the situation. Many people find that talking with God, or imagining a conversation with a loving parent, is a very helpful tool in resolving inner conflict, forgiving others and coming to deeper insights about themselves and their relationships with others.
- ✘ Forgive those who cannot forgive or apologize. Maybe the person who hurt you is a chronic liar, a cheat or a weak-willed character. The fact is that he is creating his own destiny through his response to life’s challenges and you are creating yours. Your act of forgiveness may indeed help both of you toward a more enlightened state of mind. No one of us is perfect. We all commit mistakes in our relationships with others, hurting those around us either wittingly or unwittingly. In those times if we want to experience forgiveness, we must be willing to forgive.



Group Exercise



Discuss the following moral dilemmas in groups of two or three. Come up with a plan of action for resolving the inner conflict of the parties involved.

- A friend at school wanted to place her desk near yours, and you convinced the teacher that you two would really be a positive influence on each other. But now you suspect that your friend has been stealing your favorite new pens! You discuss the matter with her after school, but she denies it and your pens continue to disappear. What might you do to resolve the situation? Refer to the steps above.
- In an unusual moment of jealousy and envy, you tell a lie about your friend – that she is addicted to diet pills – that’s why she is so thin. The rumor finds its way to the school nurse, who wants to bring your friend to the doctor for psychological help. Your friend is totally confused and you confess the truth. She slaps you in the face and says that she’ll hate you forever. What might you do next? Explain things to the nurse? Apologize again?
- Your test answers look suspiciously similar to the ones of the student sitting next to you, who has the reputation of being the brightest in the class. The teacher accuses you of cheating and tears up your test. You explain that you weren’t cheating, that you studied all night and that it was just a coincidence that you had similar answers. In this case, there is no fairness or justice. The teacher gives you a zero and no chance to make up the test. What might you do to release the anger and difficult emotions that you feel toward your teacher? Is it worth it fighting to prove your innocence?