

Standing at the bathroom sink this morning I was, as I messed with my razor and shaving foam, thinking about how our need for control lies at the heart of so many of our psychological problems and stresses. Everyone everywhere is trying, to greater or lesser degrees, to have control over their life and the people in it. Everybody has their own set of problems that they strive to control and manage. All of us face stresses and difficulties and come up with ways of trying to sort out these problems. We conclude that if we do X then Y will happen and everything will be okay. Our solutions to life's difficulties always involve doing something to change things. This is healthy agency and control over one's life. However, we run into problems when life presents us with challenges or difficulties over which we believe we have no control. This presents us all with a serious challenge. How do we cope with this?

American psychologist, Martin Seligman, found that if animals were put under stress that they could not control, they would become very passive and behave like depressed people. This did not happen if animals could control the stress. These extremely important findings were taken up by other researchers who found that changes in brain activity in animals subjected to uncontrollable stress were very similar to that of depressed people. Areas of the brain that control positive emotion were inactive, while depressive chemicals were overactive. Interestingly, the animals that were subjected to the same stress, but had control over it (by for example nudging a lever to stop an unpleasant noise) the opposite happened in the brain.

What this showed was that if you are stressed and can do something about it your brain will react in one way; but if you believe you can't do something about it, it will react a different way. The more control we exert over the stresses in our lives, the less likely it is that our mood chemicals will take a dive and drive our stress systems out of control. Thus, however, is not always easy because in cases of depression or stress there is a combination of stresses or setbacks. There may be financial worries, worries over jobs, conflicts at home or I work, children having problems, relationship tensions, etc. Over time these cumulative stresses increase stress arousal and edge us closer to chronic anxiety and depressiveness.

What happens then for most people is that small things get more difficult. Things that would have been easy now present a challenge – like taking the car to the garage or having someone over for a visit. They start putting these things off and at the same time worry that they have not been done. Suddenly small things become big things.

If this is not bad enough, what also tends to happen is that the stress and depression gets worse when people dwell and ruminate about the negatives. The more you worry, ruminate, and obsess the more you are also activating the depressive chemicals in the brain and the worse you feel.

When you reach this point in your life there are two things you must do:

1. Acknowledge how bad things have become and confide in a mentor or friend who can help you to take control of some of the small things in your life.
2. Let go trying to control certain genuine big things and, as they say in AA, hand them over to a higher power – at least for a while. (The fact that the problem is still there suggests that your worrying has not solved it!)

Paradoxically then what you must do is gain control over the small things in your life and let go some of the big chronic ones. 'Letting go' is not the same as 'giving up'. The emotional attitude of 'letting go' is one of acceptance, tolerance, and trust. The emotional attitude of 'giving up' is one of depression, defeatism, and despair. So though they may look the same, they feel very different. You know the difference yourself.

Many stressed-out or depressed people become so obsessed with controlling certain people or situations that they fail to see how small their emotional and psychological world has become. Learning to control what you can, and to let go what you cannot (as the serenity prayer suggests) is central to mental health and wisdom.

The truth about human existence and one's life is that we are all ultimately powerless over the fate of others. Every parent should send their child out into the world with a prayer that they would be watched over and an acceptance that, once having done everything they can do as a parent, that their children have a life and destiny that is beyond their control.

Do a quick inventory of your life and imagine the relief you might feel if you were to let go, even for a week, particular problems that has been consuming you. In a meditative if not prayerful way, try saying something like: "I let go and hand over my worries to the source of all life and, for this week, I let go my need for control."

This is why many psychological problems are, at their root, spiritual problems. The spiritual challenge of all of life is to cope with our inevitable inadequacy and helplessness in the face of many of life's challenges. We inhabit it with grace or defiance. A bit of both serves us all well. Try to let go with grace and gratitude this week!