

Being Your Better Self

Regina Sewell, LMHC, PCC, PAT 1/7/2022



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Many people who come to therapy to sort out relationship issues come with the hope that somehow, in the process of therapy, they can make other people change. People want others to be less critical, more attentive, more affectionate, more responsible, less needy, or simply different. But therapy doesn't work this way. It turns out that try as we might, we can't make other people change. All we can do is work on ourselves to try to become our better selves.

This means that we have to accept that people are who they are. If your husband abuses alcohol, it's important to accept the fact that this is the truth. As tempting as it is to try to make him stop drinking by nagging, hiding his bottle of Jameson, grabbing on to the car door handle as he pulls out of the driveway to try to stop him from driving drunk or shaming him the next morning, it's futile. Similarly, if you are frustrated that your sister doesn't respond to your texts or is late to every event you host, or that your father can't seem to not point out that your pants seem a bit tighter than they were the last time you saw him, it's important to

accept that that's the reality you are facing. Sure, they might change at some point, but you can't make them change. Besides, if they were different, if your sister responded to all your texts and showed up on time, if your husband didn't drink, if your father didn't comment on your weight, they would all be different people. Lyle Lovett gets to the heart of this in the chorus of a song by the same name: "If I were the Man That You Wanted, I Wouldn't Be the Man That I Am."

This doesn't mean that we are doomed to unsatisfying relationships. At some point, you may need to make decisions about which relationships to hold on to, which to let go of and which to just not give so much energy to. You may also need to look at your piece of the responsibility pie. If you get angry or feel ashamed by their behavior, it's not because THEY are making you angry or feel shame. That's all happening inside you. No one else can make you have the reaction that you have.

This is where your better self comes in. Think about those moments when your heart is open. You feel calm, relaxed, and grounded. It's easy to feel compassion for those around you. In these moments your responses to others tend to reflect your open heart. When you are in this state, if someone says or does something annoying, insensitive, critical or has a "tone," you can respond calmly and possibly even with empathy. But if you are anxious, cranky, irritable, self-absorbed, stressed out of your mind or harboring resentments, you are likely to snap at people, even if they are just being themselves. If they aren't grounded themselves, they are likely to snap back at you and most likely, you'll have an argument on your hands.

Being open hearted is an important part of being our better self. Unfortunately, most of us have a hard time keeping our hearts open because we let the stressors of life get in the way. We let our metaphorical plates get too full, take on too much and hit a place where we are overwhelmed. Our thoughts race to the future and mull over all the terrible things that are likely to happen, so we go into a spin to try to stave off disaster. Despite how necessary this feels, it's not helpful, especially if we are facing an imminent disaster. When things are particularly stressful, what you need to do is stop, take a breath, release it slowly, and repeat. Bring your awareness to now, to this moment. Take a moment to scan your body. Notice what feels tight or painful, what feels relaxed or good, and what feels neutral. It's important to keep breathing as you do this. In the longer

term, it's helpful to have some sort of meditation practice. Even if you only do it for five minutes, taking time to meditate or just be in your body is very helpful. There are a lot of apps like that can help. According to Wirecutter, the best meditation apps in 2021 were Headspace, Calm and Healthy Minds.

Story telling is another thing that gets in the way of being our better selves. We constantly interpret people's responses (or lack of responses) and if we aren't careful, that small interpretation can lead to a full-fledged story. Your history, if left unexamined, will flavor your interpretation. For example, your wife might say, "It's slippery out. Be careful." If you grew up with a controlling or critical mother, you assume might she thinks you are not smart enough to notice that the deck is slippery or automatically assume that she is trying to convince you not to go outside and snap back at her. If this happens, taking a breath before you react can be helpful. If you hear a story starting to form in your mind, you might ask, "Is this really true?" For example, "Is it really true? Do I really believe that she thinks I'm stupid?" It's also helpful to come up with alternative interpretations. For example, "Another way to think about this is that she cares about me and doesn't want me to get hurt." And of course, you can always check it out. "When you say things like that, I think that you think that I'm stupid. Is this true?"