

Claiming the Empty Spaces

You're about to leave for your dentist appointment when you receive a phone call saying the dentist has been called out on emergency and will have to reschedule your appointment.

Congratulations! You are the winner of one unexpected free hour!

What will you do with your winnings?

Pay bills? Answer your email? Return to the project you were working on before you had to leave? Start a load of laundry?

Ever consider doing nothing?

If you're like many of us today, the thought of doing absolutely nothing for an entire hour seems as wasteful as throwing a week's worth of groceries out with the garbage. Indeed, free time with nothing to do can generate near panic among some of us who are overloaded and time-starved.

"We seem to have a complex about busyness in our culture," says Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*. "Most of us do have time in our days that we could devote to simple relaxation, but we convince ourselves that we don't."

And yet, the harder we push, the more we need to replenish ourselves. As Stephan Rechtschaffen, author of *Timeshifting*, says, "Each of us needs some time that is strictly and entirely our own, and we should experience it daily."

The importance of this downtime cannot be overstated. We see more clearly, we hear more keenly, we're more inspired, we discover what makes us feel alive.

On some level, we know this already. But claiming time to ourselves—time that is often labeled "unproductive"—and sticking to it can be difficult. We need to establish formal boundaries around our idle

time to ensure that others—and we, ourselves—honor this time. Some ways to do this are:

- **Make a date with yourself.** Get to know someone who deserves your attention—you.
- **Stand firm.** Learn how to say "no" to co-workers, children, a spouse or a friend. In just a short while, you can say "yes"; now is *your* time.
- **Be clear about your needs.** It's not, "I need more time to myself." It's more like, "I'd like to spend 20 minutes by myself in the morning before everyone gets up."
- **Be on the lookout for stolen moments.** Use the canceled dental appointment to sit on a park bench watching pigeons.
- **Practice doing nothing.** "Doing nothing" is an art, and like all art, you need to practice it to reach your highest potential.

How we define idle time varies by individual. For one person, gardening may be meditative downtime, whereas for another, it is one more item on the to-do list (to be done as quickly as possible). A walk through the woods is, for some, an opportunity to be in and with nature; for others, it's a great place for a power walk while dictating letters into a small tape recorder.

Our idle time should be like a beautiful flower: it has no purpose—it's just there—yet it refreshes us and reminds us of nature's glory.

Do something that has no purpose other than joy. Take a half-hour a day to surprise and delight yourself. Keep it simple, and keep it consistent. If your idle time becomes a "program," or becomes progress toward some productive goal, begin again.

It's stunning, how simple it really is. *

10 Ways to Chase the Winter Blues

Winter blues color the mood of those in the higher latitudes most often, but even residents of milder climes can experience a touch of after-the-holidays seasonal heaviness. Symptoms may include feeling sad or bored, a lack of energy, and maybe some loneliness.

Following are ten ways to relieve those winter blues.

- 1. Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy diet.**
- 2. Keep a regular sleep schedule.**
- 3. Pamper yourself—**massage, beauty salon, spa. Paint your toenails.
- 4. Take a vacation—**even a weekend away can help.
- 5. Make dates** for special occasions with friends and family.
- 6. Do things that make you laugh.**
- 7. Tackle a project you've been meaning to do,** even if you can do only a bit at a time.
- 8. Participate** in activities that enhance your spiritual well being.
- 9. Volunteer—**give something of yourself to others.
- 10. Do something creative.** Make art. Paint a room. Take dance lessons.

*The good news is that Winter Blues will pass. However, if symptoms intensify and include signs of depression such as loss of energy, sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, feelings of restlessness, worthlessness or inappropriate guilt, please seek professional help. **

Groups Can Empower You

We believe that at one time or another, most people face family, workplace, financial, emotional or interpersonal concerns and life struggles. Group experiences can be a great way to work through these challenges and help us to know that we are not alone.

Together, Debra and Cindy offer **Writing for Self-Discovery** groups and workshops. Writing is a powerful tool for helping you know and understand yourself better, grapple with a life change or dilemma, and find deeper meaning in your life. It is personal, creative, flexible and accessible. These group experiences provide tools, support, techniques, ideas, encouragement, and energy in an emotionally safe place.

In addition, Cindy offers groups for people who are grieving. Connecting with other bereaved people who are coping with a similar experience can help you feel less isolated and more hopeful. **Growing Through Grief** is a group for adults in their early or middle adulthood who have experienced the death of a loved one. Other situation-specific groups are formed on an ongoing basis when there is sufficient interest.

Debra offers **New Mothers' Groups** to help new moms adjust to motherhood. Are you a new mother? Concerned about changes in your priorities or relationships, your work-life balance? Feeling isolated and lonely? Maybe you're just struggling to get in a shower every day. Groups meet for six weeks; babies are welcome. Enjoy meeting other new mothers; learn that you are not alone! Groups starting now in Oak Brook!

Group work can complement your work in individual therapy or provide a different healing experience. Please don't hesitate to call or email either Cindy or Debra if you'd like additional information.

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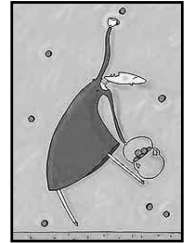
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How Well Do You Fulfill Your Needs?

A number of years ago, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow realized that the foundation for physical and psychological wellness had to do with getting certain needs met. He developed the "Hierarchy of Needs," from which the following quiz is adapted. Answer the questions to determine how well your basic and growth needs are being met.



True False

Physical

- I get adequate sleep and rest.
- My basic nutritional needs are met.
- I have a place to live that provides warmth and shelter and I am physically comfortable.
- Exercise and recreation needs are met through regular routines and planned activities.
- My need for sexual expression is fulfilled.

Safety and Security

- With very few exceptions, I feel secure and safe from harm.
- There is adequate stability and routine in my life.
- I experience financial security and a sense of prosperity that isn't based on money.
- I feel emotionally safe.
- I can expect consistency and fairness in my daily life.
- My need for meaningful work is filled.

Love and Belonging

- I feel loved—important, wanted, valued, and desirable.
- I am able to love myself as well as others.
- I have intimate or affectionate relationships with significant others.
- I have a sense of belonging in my family.
- I am able to understand others and feel understood by them.
- I have a few very close friends and a larger circle of other friends and associates.
- I am involved in communities such as clubs or teams, spiritual groups, professional, cultural or social organizations.
- Though I am sometimes alone, I don't often experience loneliness.

Esteem of Self and Esteem of Others

- I feel competent and up to the rigors of day-to-day life.
- I live with integrity and respect for myself.
- I trust my opinions, my thoughts and ideas, and my intuition.
- I have confidence in myself and my abilities.
- My self-care includes physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of my life.
- I feel useful and I make valuable contributions to others.

Having our needs met doesn't mean we begin at birth with the need for adequate food and shelter and move forward as we age until we fulfill our needs for self-actualization. Life is not lived in a straight line. Nor does being self-actualized mean everything is perfect. Rather, this quiz offers checkpoints along the way of gratification and personal growth. If you have any questions about this quiz, or want more information, please don't hesitate to call. ✧

Oh, the Tales We Tell: Getting Beyond Our Stories

Every night, Joanne tucks herself in and tells herself her favorite bedtime story: *My husband is weak, irresponsible, overly interested in sex and a complete idiot about parenting.*

Her husband, Jerome, has his own favorite story: *My wife is a critical and demanding control freak, who shuts me out of family life and out of our bed, and nags so much my head pounds.*

Every day, we tell ourselves enough of these kinds of stories to fill a library: Why my spouse left this morning without saying goodbye. Why my friend hasn't called in a long time. What the tire salesman meant when he laughed at my question. Why my father is so judgmental. Why my daughter is being so difficult. How my boss has it in for me. How I'm such a failure.

And on, and on, and on.

We live our lives as if the stories are true. We act and react, often in pain, from our often mistaken understanding of another's words or actions, our assumptions about why they are saying or doing what they are, and our thoughts about how those people—and we, ourselves—*should be different.*

Yet, it is these stories, and the emotions that come from the stories, that are usually the source of pain in relationships. We want to blame another, but in reality, it's usually our thinking that is causing the discomfort, says Byron Katie, author of the best-selling book *Loving What Is.*

For example, Katie says, when you think the thought, "My father shouldn't be so judgmental," you might get angry, resent his criticisms, his advice, his belief that he knows best. You might avoid him or not listen to what he has to say about anything. You might be silent or rude when you're with him.

But while you believe your father to be judgmental, another might hear his judgments as good advice, or as one man's opinion, while someone else might find his words amusing. Your belief that your father shouldn't act the way he does or say the words he says are what cause you the anger, resentment and possibly even separation.

What we need to do to ease the pain and experience more freedom in our lives is learn to get beyond our stories, to get under our beliefs to what's really living there.

"The result of investigation is often a deeper appreciation of the people in our lives, and a realization that it was not their words or actions that really harmed us, but our uninvestigated thoughts about their words or actions," Katie says.

In her book, Katie outlines a simple path of inquiry into these horror stories we tell ourselves that revolves around four questions:

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you react when you think that thought?
4. Who would you be without the thought?

First, state your belief about someone and ask yourself if it is true and whether you can know absolutely, without a doubt, that it is true. For example, you might say, "My children are uncooperative ingrates." Is it true they are ungrateful? Uncooperative? Have they ever expressed appreciation

or done their chores without complaining? Are they cooperative at school or at grandma's house? Do you know for sure that their unwillingness to help around the house is about wanting to make your life miserable?

The next question to ask yourself is: How do you react when you think these thoughts? Do you find yourself angry and resentful? Do you grumble all the while cleaning up after them? Do you yell at them, starting a fight and making chore day more like war day? Are you embarrassed when they forget to say "Thank you" for a gift?

Talk about lack of peace and harmony!

Imagine that you don't have this story any more. Who would you be?

Perhaps you would be a happy parent who merrily modeled the joy of having a clean house or work space. Perhaps you would be less concerned about what others thought of your parenting. Perhaps you would be a parent who expressed love rather than resentment to your children, and whose children then expressed it back to you. Perhaps you would be calmer and more peaceful.

The final step in this investigation is to turn around the statements you've been making. Try them on. See if they fit. Do you express your gratitude enough? Do you thank your children, express appreciation to your mate, your parents, your co-workers? How about to yourself?

And how cooperative are you? Do you work together with your children on *their* wishes and desires? Would your boss say you are a team player? Do you cooperate with your different inner "parts" to make sure you get enough rest and good food, new things to learn and fun time off, mixed in with all of your work?

With an inquiry like this, there is no right answer. The goal is not perfection, but truth.

"Who would you be without your story?" Katie says. "You never know until you inquire. There is no story that is you or that leads to you. Every story leads away from you." ✱



One-Liners to Avoid in an Argument

They slice and dice, cutting wounds not easily healed by apologies.

They inflame like a lit match near gasoline.

They suck the life out of all they touch.

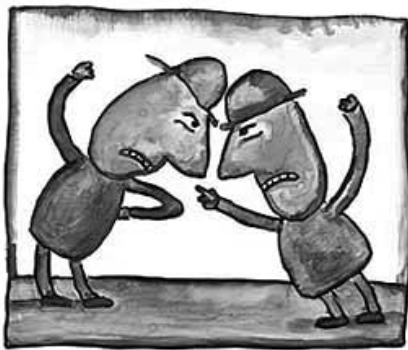
They're the zingers we fling at each other during arguments, the cruel and aggressive wisecracks or retorts that escalate a fight like nothing else. And when the zingers begin to outnumber the kind words

spoken to each other, it may be too late to fix the relationship because the love has dried up and blown away.

Learning how to communicate well in a conflict—how to argue without hurting and insulting each other—is possibly the most important relationship survival skill ever. Doing so reduces divorce and domestic violence rates—and increases

personal happiness, relationship satisfaction and peace of mind.

Here are a few one-liners you'd do well to avoid:



“That’s not what’s happening here!”

This is one of many versions of: “I’m right and you’re wrong!” Whether you say it or think it, the only thing “You’re wrong!” creates is a lose-lose situation.

“You always...” or “You never...”

Starting a sentence with either phrase is guaranteed to raise temperatures. How about stating instead that the other person does XYZ “more times than feels good.” Rather than, “You never listen to me,” try something like this: “When you respond that way, I can see that you’re not understanding me the way I’d like you to.”

“You really know how to hurt me.” This line assumes that the other person is intentionally trying to hurt you. It also implies that someone other than yourself has power over what you feel. It places you in the role of emotional “victim.” But you can choose whether or not to be hurt by someone’s actions or words.

“How can you be that way?”

This isn’t really a question. It’s an aggressive statement something to the effect of, “You’re a terrible person; you should be ashamed of yourself.”

Of course, these are mild, compared to the doozies we come up with in the heat of an argument. But for love to flourish and deepen, for healthy and long-lasting relationships, we need to learn how to incorporate acceptance, self-understanding, compassion and tolerance into our conflicts.

And maybe one-liners like, “I love you!” *



A note from Cindy Thelen

All of life involves change, and all change involves elements of loss. The death of a loved one, a divorce, serious illness, job/career changes, midlife and aging issues – losses of any kind can leave us feeling ungrounded and uncertain.

Unfortunately, many of us are told to bury our feelings, to “be strong,” to get over it and get on with our lives. The problem is that feelings don’t disappear. Sometimes the complex and intense feelings that loss and change naturally evoke are just too frightening or painful to face on our own. I can help you create some space around the intensity of your experience.

Cindy Thelen, LCPC, CT, is a psychotherapist specializing in grief, loss and life transition therapy in Oak Brook. While she has a special expertise in helping people through loss and change of all kinds, her work is not limited to commonly defined “grief” situations, and naturally extends to working with people who are challenged by other concerns such as depression, anxiety, troubled relationships, and family of origin issues. Find out more about Cindy at cindythelen.com or call her at (630) 530-0405.



A note from Debra Gilbert Rosenberg

Even the healthiest, most well-adjusted among us may find themselves out of sorts, confused, or seriously depressed on occasion. Even wonderful events (getting married, or having a baby) can cause emotional stress. And sometimes, for no obvious reason at all, you may feel blue, lack energy, find yourself enjoying life less, and realize that you are in need of emotional support.

If you or anyone you care about seems out of sorts, have changed their eating or sleeping habits significantly, lacks energy, or are just not managing life well, consider psychotherapy. I have been fortunate to have helped countless people, adults, children, teens and couples, to lead more comfortable, productive, and happy lives. Help is available.

Debra Gilbert Rosenberg, LCSW, has a private psychotherapy practice in Oak Brook, and runs discussion/support groups, including those for first time mothers, as well as groups using writing for self-discovery. She is the author of two books about motherhood, and speaks at schools and businesses on a wide variety of family-life issues. Check out Debra’s website at: debrarosenberg.com or call her at (708) 704-1208.