

HOW TO FEEL MORE IN CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE

Sandra is a working mom with two kids in high school and a husband who travels frequently for work. She has difficulty sleeping, frequent headaches and anger outbursts that seem like they come from out of nowhere. She's been to her doctor for help with the sleep and headaches but nothing he's suggested has really worked. At work she is often the one her boss asks to fill in when others are out sick and although this means she has to take work home to keep up with her workload. Even though she resents the extra work, she doesn't want to say anything to her boss and look like a complainer. Her husband is often tired from being on the road so she tends to take on the majority of the housework, bill paying and decision making related to the kids. She wishes he'd help more but feels guilty asking him when he's so tired. Her kids are busy with school and sports and though she has made a list of chores they are responsible for they seldom follow through. When she talks to them about it they fight her but eventually agree to do better but this only lasts for a few weeks and then they get busy with friends, homework and sports. She's frustrated that she has to keep nagging them so she ends up doing their chores because it seems easier. She'd like time to herself but then feels guilty for being so selfish.

In the above story, Sandra's low self esteem causes her to believe that her wants and needs aren't as important as those around her. She has lots of valid reasons for not asking others for help. It seems easier to do things herself. She doesn't see a way out. She's overwhelmed yet she doesn't want to be a bother or a nag; her husband is tired and her kids are busy. She's stuck in a trap she's created and it leaves her feeling powerless. The stress of trying to do her job and keep her family and household maybe causing psychosomatic symptoms like headaches and sleep problems. The anger outbursts are likely a result of being overwhelmed, stressed and stuffing her feelings.

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In an effort to make friends, coworkers, your boss, or loved ones happy, you may ignore your wants and needs. It may seem like there's no solution. If you do something for yourself you may disappoint others, appear selfish, or risk someone's love or friendship. It can lead to feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. This is a process that happens slowly over time until one day your frustration, anger or feelings of helplessness overwhelm you. You may realize something needs to change but it can be hard to figure out what to do differently.

1. Recognize the feelings when you feel powerless.

Often we're not aware when we feel powerless. You may feel angry, frustrated, hopeless, discouraged, depressed, or sad and not understand why. The feeling may seem as if it came out of nowhere. What's true is that you probably react in other ways before these feelings come up. Some physical reactions are increased heart rate; shallow breathing; tightness in neck, chest, or shoulders; shaking hands, hyperventilating. The sensations in your body are the signs that something is affecting you. The feelings I described earlier are often what come up afterwards. When you recognize the feeling in your body or the emotions that come up afterwards, these are indicators that something isn't right.

2. Identify where and when you give up control.

You're probably aware of situations where you put your needs aside or give in to others. Make a list of when this happens or ways you think you do this. Next, prioritize the list. The priority may be which ones cause you the most trouble, which has the most negative impact on your thoughts, feelings or health or which seem the hardest to change. Now pick one to work on.

3. Set a reasonable goal for change.

When we want to make changes we're often impatient. We rush in and make lots of changes which are hard to maintain and not all successful. This can often lead to feelings of disappointment so you throw up your hands and say, "see, I knew this wouldn't work!" What's true is we are more successful when we take small steps toward a bigger goal. If you have some success you'll have the momentum to keep moving forward.

Here is an example of small steps to take to reduce stress:

1. make a list of things you can do to manage your stress
 - go for a walk with a friend
 - read a book for pleasure
 - go to the gym
 - watch a movie
2. try to do one thing on your list regularly (daily, every other day, weekly)
3. once you're regularly doing something, extend the length of time you do it or increase how often you do it
4. add in another item on your list so you are doing one or two things regularly

4. Change is a process.

In our instant gratification world, we often believe that once we start to do something different the only outcome is success. We don't allow any room for failure. So if we slip into our old ways we see it as a sign that things can't change and we give up. In reality, change happens gradually. You may have success one day and not the next. Or you may be able to consistently ask for what you want with one person and not another. Doing something different than what you've been doing, even one time out of ten, is a success. Slipping up is part of the process of change so pat yourself on the back for trying and vow to do better next time.

Martha has always been a caretaker. Her friends know if they're in a pinch they can call Martha. Martha's boss knows he can count on her to come in if someone calls in sick or doesn't show up for work. Martha has sometimes worked 14 days straight! Her pastor knows that if he can't get someone to help with a church function or to serve on a committee Martha will do it. Martha has sometimes asked her friends for help or her boss for a day off or her pastor for a favor but the answer is often "no," or, "I can't this time," or, "not today." She has been feeling resentful of others more and more over the years but feels so guilty if she says no that she ignores her feelings. Martha recently ended up in the hospital with heart problems and the doctor told her she has to manage her stress level better and take better care of herself.

5. Forget what you've been taught.

In the above story Martha's self worth is tied up in helping others. She doesn't see that she has value if she isn't doing something for someone else. This makes it hard to say no to others. You may have been raised to believe that it's selfish to put your needs before others. If you follow that advice, who takes care of you? The healthiest thing any of us can do is to take care of ourselves first and the others in our lives second. Because if you don't take care of yourself how can you be there to take care of others? Consistently ignoring your needs and stuffing your feelings can cause depression, high blood pressure and other health issues. Treat yourself the way you want to be treated.

In the last example, Martha is a caretaker but she's taking care of others at the expense of her own health. Unfortunately, some people prey on the caretakers in the world. They may not do it intentionally but some people do. Unless Martha stands up for herself and her needs, others aren't likely to either.

Sam always said yes even when he didn't want to. He thought it was easier because that way it didn't cause a fight or hurt anyone's feelings. Sam struggled with feelings of resentment toward his friends, boss and even his wife, which made him feel terribly guilty. After struggling with depression and going to therapy he realized that it was healthy to say no sometimes. That if he decided when he wanted to say yes or no he was being honest with himself and those around him. It was hard at first because he hated disappointing others. Initially, people around him had a hard time adjusting but he stuck with it. One friend doesn't call as often since he started saying no but mostly people have gotten used to the change and he feels better and healthier. His wife has actually started taking a gardening class and admitted it was something she'd always wanted to do but that she had thought he liked doing all the gardening so she let him! When he quit saying yes to the additional work his boss tried to give him, his boss hired a part time employee. The good news is that productivity for the department went up which pleased the owner.

6. Learn to be comfortable with conflict or intense emotions.

The above story is an example of giving up your personal power to avoid conflict. The reason many of my clients say they don't stand up for themselves is because they're worried about upsetting someone else. They spend their life trying to please others because they're afraid of confrontation. So they're doing something to **avoid** something instead of doing something to **get** something. It's nearly impossible to avoid confrontation. It is possible to learn how to be comfortable with confrontation and strong emotions.

Walter has a son, John, from a previous marriage. Walter felt bad that he'd been an absentee father so when John was growing up he often said yes to him or bought him things even when Walter's ex-wife had said no or refused. John finished high school and started college but after one term flunked out. When his mother told him he couldn't move back home, he asked his dad if he could move in with him and his wife, Nancy. Walter agreed but at Nancy's urging told his son he'd have to pay rent. John got a job but never paid rent. He went out with his friends when he wasn't

working and bought an iPhone and a new computer. He complained that his job was boring and that it didn't pay well but he didn't make an effort to look for another job. After six months Walter told his son that if he didn't pay rent the following month he'd have to move out. John stormed out of the house and the next day he moved out without telling Walter or Nancy where he was going. Walter worried that John might be living on the streets. After a week his son called Nancy and told her he was living with some friends. John eventually called his dad to complain that's his friends told him he'd have to move out if he didn't start paying rent. Walter listened and sympathized but he didn't offer to help him out and John didn't ask for money. John got a second job and paid rent when it was due. The following year he reenrolled in college and graduated with a degree in Accounting. He went to work for a company that recruited him out of college. Last night John came over and paid Walter the money for the car he'd bought him in high school and for the rent for the time he lived with Walter and Nancy. Walter told his son he didn't need to do this but John assured him he did. He thanked his dad for holding him accountable for the rent and for not offering money to bail him out of this situation with his friends. He told his dad it was a turning point in his life.

7. Practice standing up for yourself with a loved one.

Walter's guilt about "leaving" his son when he left his first wife makes it difficult for him to set boundaries with his son. Often when we don't set boundaries we enable others to stay stuck. Clients often worry that if they stand up for themselves someone will get hurt. In an effort to please or not cause problems they let others walk all over them. They avoid hurting others and instead hurt themselves. They don't have equal relationships with others because they aren't being honest in their relationships. They may not feel close to those around them because they're full of resentment.

8. Try to imagine what would happen if you didn't do everything for everyone. Can you trust that things will be okay? It might feel scary but chances are that family and friends are stronger than you think.

It's hard to make changes and risk the love and acceptance of others. However, understanding what keeps you stuck doing the same things and getting the same results, learning some tools to help you make changes and getting support from family, friends or a counselor, your life can be so much more. You can have less stress and closer relationships if you're not angry and irritable. You can enjoy your work and family more when you're not resentful and frustrated.

If you'd like to learn more, sign up for my free newsletter or if you'd like to understand more about what being unhappy is costing you, paste this URL into your web browser:
<http://www.dontworry-behappy.com/quiz.html>.