

NOTES from the COUCH

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Because Sometimes...You Need More Than a Friend

Reclaiming a Lost Wisdom Give the Gift of Listening for Better Relationships

Teresa and Jennifer are having dinner together. Teresa has just gone through a divorce and is telling her friend all about it.

To a casual observer, it looks as if Jennifer is listening. But take a look at the thoughts running through Jennifer's head: *I remember when I got divorced. I wonder if she's going to start dating soon. Oh, shoot, I forgot to stop by the garden store to pick up the wasp repellent.*

Jennifer thinks she's a good listener. She's not interrupting or fidgeting. But what Jennifer is actually doing is *hearing* her friend. Like so many of us, she's just not listening.

As toddlers, we learn to speak and to hear what others are saying. As we grow up, we learn to read and write, along with other useful skills. But few of us ever learn one of the most vital skills of all—how to really listen.

To really listen takes our whole attention and focus. The rewards are huge though: happier marriages and families, better communication at work, fewer misunderstandings between friends and others, calmer and less stressful lives. And another bonus: when you listen well, you become someone other people want to listen to.

Real listening can be learned.

Research and books such as *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, by Michael Nichols, and Mortimer Adler's *How to Speak, How to Listen* agree on these key points about listening:

Anyone can learn to be a good listener. While some might be better at this skill than others, listening isn't about being educated, rich or popular. (Although being a good listener can

lead to being well-liked.) Men as well as women can learn to listen, and some of the best listeners are young children who have the ability to drop everything and focus intently on something or someone.

Listening is active. Many of us think of listening as a passive act, just showing up. But real listening requires paying attention, not just to words, but also to body language and what is not being said. It also means responding with our facial expressions, head nods and exclamations ("uh huh") that show we are present.

Listening means turning off the

noise inside ourselves. To listen we have to ignore all those voices inside, those judgments and criticisms...Oh, I would never have done that or He just doesn't see how he's making a big mistake. It means ignoring the urge to advise and (unless asked) and not trying to "fix" the problem or change the other person. Most people don't want advice, solutions, criticisms or our own stories—they just want to be heard.

Listening means no defenses. Often, when someone tells us something we don't want to hear, we shut down. Or we lash out or justify. True listening requires putting aside our emotional responses and our need to defend ourselves. Perhaps we believe the talker doesn't have the story right or is being unfair; that's okay, because it's his story and it's not about right or wrong, fact or fiction.

Listening is unselfish. Listening takes time—and it's worth finding the time. It's about ignoring distractions and the urge to interrupt with your own great story. As Nichols puts it, "Listening isn't a need we have; it's a gift we give." *

"It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen."

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

10 Steps to Fierce, Fulfilling Love

Love is messy. It's unpredictable and never what we expect. During its magnified highs, the world is one continuous rainbow; during its lows, we might be tempted to cower in fear. But if we approach love with the courage of a warrior, we can have relationships of heroic proportions. Here are 10 ways:

- 1. Stay open.** Fear's favorite pastime is to shut us down. But when we are vulnerable, true connection to others is possible.
- 2. Be yourself.** If we want to be loved for who we truly are, why put on an act?
- 3. Don't believe your stories.** Our interpretation of events and feelings is, in fact, just one possibility for what is actually true. Focus on what IS to get closer to the truth.
- 4. Speak up.** We become silent when we desperately want to connect.
- 5. Get mad.** Learn the difference, though, between expressing anger responsibly and dumping it.
- 6. Stop looking for perfection.** More than likely, what we call "high standards" is a mask for our own feelings of inadequacy.
- 7. Embrace the messiness.** It gives us the gift of growth.
- 8. Love with no thought of what you'll get in return.** This is fearless love in action.
- 9. Take responsibility.** Be accountable for your own emotions, thoughts and actions.
- 10. Love yourself.** Only then can you love others and be loved. *

A Letter From

Cynthia A. Henrie



The Covid-19 global pandemic—including the economic nosedive that came with it—has led many to feelings of overwhelm and helplessness. It's tested marriages and immediate family relationships with 24/7 togetherness during lockdowns. And everything has been compounded for those who are now out of work.

During times like these, it's good to ponder the message of *The Serenity Prayer*: to accept what cannot be changed, to change what can, and to use wisdom in understanding what we can and cannot do.

It's important to take care of ourselves during such times. It's also important to redouble our patience with others. As the page 1 article suggests, this is a good time for listening. It's also a time to be advocates for our love relationships, to approach loving and all its challenges with courage and steadfast conviction. The rewards to your relationship health can be substantial.

The quiz this issue addresses a syndrome that seems to affect our culture in epidemic proportions. The pandemic lockdowns may have even cast a spotlight on it for some. It's the "people-pleasing syndrome," that tendency to put others' needs and happiness ahead of our own.

The back-page article suggests ways to use playfulness to make getting healthful exercise fun, not drudgery.

Finally, the page 3 feature article deals with the issue of healing the emotional wounds and scars of trauma.

If you are experiencing feelings that you are unable to sort through, or are having trouble shifting your feelings, please don't hesitate to call.

Do You Ignore Yourself to Focus on Others?

We're trained from an early age that it's a good thing to consider the needs of others, to be gracious, to be nice. But for many, the desire to please becomes an addictive need to please others, even at the expense of their own health and happiness. It can take a toll on health, relationships and quality of life, and drown out the inner voice that may be trying to protect us from overdoing it. "As a people-pleaser, you feel controlled by your need to please others and addicted to their approval," writes Harriet B. Braiker, Ph.D., in *The Disease to Please*. "At the same time, you feel out of control over the pressures and demands on your life that these needs have created." Take this quiz to see whether you can benefit from learning to say no to others more often—and yes to yourself.



True False

- 1. I put others' needs before my own, even when the cost to me and my own happiness is great.
- 2. If someone needs my help, I can't say no. In fact, I often find it difficult to say no. And when I do, I feel guilty.
- 3. To avoid reactions I'm afraid of, I often try to be who others want me to be, to agree with them, to fit in.
- 4. I keep my own needs and problems to myself; I don't want to burden others with them.
- 5. It's my job to make sure everyone else is happy.
- 6. I always have a smile on my face and an upbeat attitude, even if I feel sad or angry or hurt.
- 7. I go out of my way to avoid conflict and confrontation; it's better just to keep the peace.
- 8. I am often on the go, rushing to get things done. When I take a moment for myself, I feel selfish, indulgent and guilty.
- 9. I should always be nice and never hurt others' feelings.
- 10. I'll do whatever it takes to get someone to stop being mad at me.
- 11. I hold back from saying what I really think or from asking for what I want if I think someone will be upset with me for it.
- 12. I want everyone to like me...all the time.
- 13. I feel like a failure if I've displeased someone.
- 14. If I don't make others happy, I worry that I'll be alone and unloved forever.
- 15. I spend a lot of time doing things for others, but almost never ask anyone to do things for me.
- 16. If I ask people for help and they agree, I'm sure they must be giving out of obligation; if they really wanted to help, they would have offered without my asking.
- 17. It's difficult for me to express my feelings when they are different from those of someone I'm close to.

*The motivations for being a people pleaser are varied and usually quite unconscious. Transforming these patterns requires that we understand our pleasing behaviors and motivations, and heal the childhood wounds that usually underlie people-pleasing. Please don't hesitate to call if you would like to explore this or any other issue. **

Harness the Natural Trauma Response to Heal Unresolved Trauma

Not everyone reacts to trauma in the same way. One person who experiences a robbery feels overwhelming helplessness and has a hard month. But by the end of that time, she has pretty much resolved and integrated the incident into her life. Another person is also robbed but experiences intense rage. Years later, he is still struggling with the negative, life-changing aftermath of the trauma.

Just as pain thresholds differ, so do trauma thresholds. But as William Shakespeare wrote in his play *Othello*, “What wound did ever heal but by degrees?”

Having studied trauma intensively over the past couple of decades, researchers now know that a traumatic event’s impact depends on the *perception* of it. Perception is influenced by a number of factors including age, physical characteristics, level of support, etc. Thus, emotional trauma can result from a single extreme and deeply felt experience or from a series of low-intensity events. Even everyday happenings—falls, difficult births, betrayals, medical/dental procedures—can cause the same lingering traumatic effects as extreme or violent events, such as physical abuse, combat or serious accidents.

Fortunately, even traumatic effects that linger for years can be resolved, and the result can be a new present-day reality that includes, but is not dominated by, a traumatic past.

“The same immense energies that create the symptoms of trauma, when properly engaged and mobilized, can transform the trauma and propel us into new heights of healing, mastery and even wisdom,” writes Peter Levine, author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*.

The Natural Trauma Response

Levine and others contend that emotional trauma goes unhealed when the natural trauma response is interrupted and feelings unleashed by the event remain unresolved. Because of this, anxiety, anger, depression, guilt, hopelessness, self-blame, shame and other feelings freeze up inside of us.

That “freeze” is not just emotional, but physical as well. Recent research indicates that parts of the brain become altered by traumatic events. These disruptions are actually visible on brain scans.

Just what is a natural trauma response? It’s the whole continuum of emotional and physical sensations that occur with the first inclination that something is wrong or dangerous. To understand it, Levine suggests looking at how animals respond to danger, real or perceived.

After the animal has instinctively chosen to fight,



flee or freeze, and the danger has passed, the animal trembles throughout its entire body, “shedding” the tension required for alertness and quick response.

Human response to danger—real or perceived—can also involve shaking, sweating, crying, laughing or shuddering. Just like the animal, such responses are natural and part of the body’s effort to return to a state of equilibrium. They are crucial to the recovery process, and they may go on for hours, days or weeks.

Too often, however, we deny this process or don’t give it its due. We say to ourselves or hear from others, *Pull yourself together. Forget about it. Get up and shake it off. It’s time to get on with your life.*

And when we do that, when we ignore the emotional and physical sensations that continue after a traumatizing event, we interrupt the natural cycle, short-circuiting our natural ability to heal. It is this, more than anything, that sets us up for a damaging traumatic aftermath.

“The animal’s ability to rebound from threat can serve as a model for humans,” Levine writes. “It gives us a direction that may point the way to our own innate healing abilities.”

Trauma's Effects on Basic Human Needs

The incidence of serious negative events that typically evoke traumatic response is surprisingly pervasive in our culture today. A 20-year study released by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that of the 17,337 middle-class participants, a startling 64% had experienced one or more of eight categories of traumatic childhood events.

The study showed a significant connection between this childhood trauma and disease, depression, drug use and/or suicide.

Perhaps that is because unresolved trauma can undermine basic human needs. Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams, authors of *Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing*, identify these basic needs as safety, trust, a measure of control over one’s life, self-worth and intimacy.

These writers and others stress that it is not necessary to relive one’s emotional pain in order to heal trauma. For some, doing so may trigger re-traumatization. Focus on what you can do today. Pay attention to your feelings and reactions, seek helpful support, learn from others who’ve “been there,” allow yourself to grieve and above all, take your time. *



When You're Having Fun, You'll Forget You're Working Out

Mary was bored. Every day after work, she would drag herself to her health club to climb the stair machine, jog on the treadmill and pedal up "huge inclines" on the stationary bike.

She began to dread the gym.

Cindy was too busy to be bored. She had *very important work* to do, so she "couldn't" take time out to exercise. But a near-miss with breast cancer woke Cindy up to the need for physical activity and a reprieve from her previously high-stress, sedentary living.

Fortunately, both women found their answer by adding the simple childhood ingredient of play to either enhance or encourage physical activity.

We all know how important exercise is and what a lack of it can do to us.

Or do we?

Researchers recently described sedentary life as the second largest threat to public health, saying that chronic diseases have increased dramatically because of physical inactivity.

There must be a way to help ourselves get the regular physical activity that has long been associated

with better health, longer life and greater well-being.

Perhaps play is the way.

Play is the ultimate in cross-training, as you move your body through many ranges of motion at different intensities. You are likely to see gains in strength, stamina and even weight loss—not to mention an increased feeling of liveliness and enthusiasm. And when you're having a good time, you'll forget you're actually working out.

Here are a few ways to inject fun into your physical activity. Be as zany as you want in adding to this list.

- Infuse a little "silliness" into your walk by skipping or doing a bit of hopscotch.
- For the super-adventurous, learn how to swing on a trapeze.
- Create little obstacle courses out of trees, curbs, creek beds, park benches.
- Learn to juggle. It's so fun you'll

forget how much you're doing for your upper arms and back.

- Jump rope—alone or with a partner.
 - Play tag with your own children or the neighborhood kids.
 - Bounce on a trampoline.
 - Turn on your favorite dance music and shake your bootie right there in the living room.
 - Head for the nearest roller-skating or ice-skating rink, or rollerblade in your neighborhood.
 - Rent a canoe or find a rowing group, and enjoy being on the water.
 - Run through the sprinklers at your neighborhood school.
 - Challenge a kid to a bike race.
 - Throw a flying toy around. Chances are you'll have to run for it!
 - Chase the dog.
- You may be surprised at how good it feels to act five years old again. ✨



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Ms. Cynthia A. Henrie is a Licensed MFT & Board-Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress. She graduated from Antioch University with her MA in Clinical Psychology with a focus on Adolescence & Feminist Theory.

Ms Henrie specializes in helping women, adults, teens & their families. She works with women's issues, life crisis or life transitions, trauma of all types, gay & lesbian issues, teen/adult survivors of childhood abuse, incest/sexual abuse, sexual assault/rape, victims of violent crimes, adolescent issues, gender identity issues, & dissociative disorders.

Ms. Henrie uses a variety of treatment modalities, which include talk therapy, sandplay, art & creative therapies, EMDR, TAT & Developmental Needs Meeting Strategies.

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