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JOYFUL MUSINGS

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Don't Should On Yourself

In a recent column I wrote about the Four Agreements, the first of which says to be impeccable with your word. It suggests that words are our most powerful and magical tools and cautions us not to use the power of your words against yourself or others. One of the words I hear most often used in just such a negative way is "should."

Shoulds give away the authority over your life. They express mandates that come from outside ourselves, hand-me-down beliefs of what must be done. Shoulds come from internalized ideas implanted by outside "authorities" such as parents, friends, and societal expectations. They express what we think we ought to do, not what we want to do.

A person operating largely from shoulds makes few decisions of their own. They perform what they believe is expected of them, without conscious thought as to whether they are doing something of their own choosing and desire. Often they're actions we agonize and procrastinate about because the pressure to do them is from outside.

Shoulds are also eroders of self-esteem. When a should is internalized, there's potential self-criticism ("My house should be spotless all the time in case anyone drops in") and feelings of guilt and inadequacy ("I should have known better").

How do we get out from under what has been called the "tyranny of the shoulds"? First, it takes awareness; you can't change what you don't notice. Shoulds camouflage themselves in several disguises: supposed to, ought to, have to, got to, and must. Train your ear to hear all these variations and have a figurative bell go off. Then, dispute the shoulds by asking yourself "who says so?" or "by whose standards?" Acknowledge you have choices and decide what results *you* desire. Consider that desired result and give thought to your motives for doing it. Let your desire for the outcome be your motivation rather than an adopted mandate.

Let me give you a simple example. Have you ever put off cleaning out your closet, repeatedly telling yourself, "I really should sort through all those clothes and clear out some closet space" but never quite get around to it? Simply changing a wording to "I *want* to clean out my closet" won't quite do the trick. That's not true, and your subconscious won't buy it!

Focus instead on the result you desire. You can use "I want to have more space in my closet," "I'd like to make room for some new stuff," or "I'd like to pass a lot of this stuff on to others who can use it." Recognize your

personal truths: "I want it done" and "I don't want to do it." Or perhaps, "I really don't care, it just seems like I should because my mother always scolded me about my messes."

Now you can make a decision. You can choose to do it or not. Simply through awareness, you've taken responsibility. Whatever you do, you have made a decision. If you clean, you have the result in mind, and you'll find it's done much quicker and easier. If you don't clean, you've made a decision based on your own values or time schedule. Those actions would be from *your* desires, not your mom's or your friend whose house always appears perfect. Best of all, you'll realize that this takes no will power, no thought or effort, only awareness and permission!

You will notice that "I want" feels much more self-respecting and empowering than "I should."

Some shoulds are more like personal attacks: "I should be able to this by myself," "I shouldn't have done that." Counteract these with more supportive self-talk: "There's no way I could have known it would happen that way ahead of time," "There's nothing wrong with asking for help, in fact, it takes courage to do so."

Shoulds are a way to avoid choices, and thus decisions. That can be a fearful situation to some people. Mindfully selecting your own standards to live by takes the confidence to trust your own judgment. It takes awareness, clarity, and strength to develop your own unique identity. It's so much easier to take on a pre-digested identity and forget that we have the ability, even a responsibility, to make our own choices.

Just adopting this new habit is not the cure-all for all psychological ills, but for nearly everybody, it's a first step that permits further steps. Self-respect and empowerment is really what this is all about. Empower yourself with your own words.

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