Speaking Kindly to Yourself

People seek out psychotherapy for a wide range of reasons, although it usually boils down to some sense of dissatisfaction and/or pain in their lives, particularly in the areas of relationships and work.

Although each person is unique, I find that some themes tend to present themselves frequently, so I would like to use this space to address some of those themes.

I have heard the distinction made, in the Buddhist tradition, between pain and suffering. In overly simplified terms, pain would be the given reality of a situation, and suffering would come from the extraneous stories we create around the pain.

I see varieties of this in people with whom I work. For example, the pain may be a feeling of sadness or anger, but the suffering occurs when one adds additional layers of, “I shouldn’t be feeling that sadness and anger because…”(pick one or more of the following):

It isn’t nice to feel that way

People won’t like me if I feel that way

It isn’t safe to feel that way

If I feel that way it may trigger other bad feelings

I’m a bad person for feeling that way

It’s selfish of me to focus on my feelings

Other people are worse off than I am

There are usually understandable reasons why we have created these layers which separate us from our feelings. Often they are coping mechanisms which helped us survive in childhood, but which may no longer be serving us today. By not allowing ourselves to feel the feelings, we keep the pain and anger buried yet alive in us, and it often finds ways to express itself which feels beyond our control. (Please take note: feeling one’s feelings is different than acting on them).

I notice that it can take a great deal of energy to avoid feeling one’s feelings, or to punish oneself for feeling what one is feeling. I work with my clients to help them observe what they are feeling, allow themselves to feel it, experience the feeling, and through that process be able to let it go.

This is often easier said than done! It really takes practice to find another way of talking to oneself. Just as learning a second (or third) language is much easier to do as a child than as an adult, so can it be very difficult to learn a new language of self-acceptance, self-kindness, and self-gentleness as an adult. Especially in times of tiredness, loneliness, stress, and hunger, the early childhood language will often resurface.

A related theme I often encounter is the frustration from clients when they aren’t able to make changes in their lives at the pace they would like. They may berate themselves for being able to understand something on an intellectual level but not being able to implement that understanding into their lives. The next message they often give themselves is, “I am bad, stupid, lazy, etc. for not being able to do what I want.”

As an outside observer, I can see that there are childhood wounds which make it difficult to make changes. And I see the unnecessary suffering that is caused by the negative self-talk. I try to model for my clients the voice of compassion and patience. I acknowledge the longing for growth, but I also point out the progress they are making, and the fact that they are in a process of moving towards something.

Some of my ideas about psychological and emotional well-being are informed by my experience with yoga. One of my yoga teachers often used the phrase, “extension without tension”, suggesting that her students find the place of ease and joy in the movement, encouraging the body, challenging the body, while listening attentively to its messages and respecting its limits. This is quite a different experience from pushing and straining and being angry with your body for not doing what you want it to do. She sometimes used the metaphor of plants, which grow and thrive with water and sunlight, not by being yelled at to grow!

I encourage my clients, my friends, my colleagues, myself and all of you to use the water of self-acceptance and the sunlight of compassion and patience as we grow!

 Tina Smelser, MFT