Healthy Communication – With Love from Dr. G

We all experienced something incredibly traumatic on Oct 1, 2017. So why am I writing about communication? I was prompted to bring up this topic now because of the ongoing flood of posts I have read especially in more recent weeks, in which folks are reporting uncomfortable, unhealthy, unhelpful, or highly distressing interactions or conversations that they are experiencing with other people (who may or may not have been involved in the Las Vegas massacre). There are some very simple tools that may help you manage these situations more easily and with less emotional distress. We cannot expect all the people we encounter to be understanding, emotionally sophisticated, and psychologically-minded. We cannot expect everyone else to be healthy and always know the “right” thing to say or do to show support. However, we CAN get ourselves healthy…sooo healthy that we are no longer impacted by the thoughts, comments, feelings, or behaviors of others. Remember every human being is ultimately responsible for him/herself.

Learning how to communicate effectively and in ways that are healthy for us (and our relationships) is a skill. It’s a bit of an art, and a bit of a science. Let’s start with the science. You may wish to refer to the “Dr. Ghaed’s Rules” PDF (see the “Files” link on your Facebook homepage) since these are fundamental concepts that will help you keep things in perspective and reduce your likelihood of over-personalizing the comments and actions of other people.

Quick summary of the 5 Bucket Rules (here’s the G-rated version so it’s family friendly and you can share it forward!): You don’t get to worry about things that have not happened yet. You don’t get to worry about things that are not in your control. So, what’s in your control? Only you, specifically, YOUR thoughts, YOUR feelings, and YOUR behaviors. These 3 things live in your bucket, and we each have one of our own. So, focus on your bucket, and if it’s not in your bucket…chuck it. In trying to manage your own thought-processing better, which will in turn help you manage your emotions and reactions to other people better, remember a few more things. Don’t “should” on other people or yourself. And there are no “musts, need-to’s, or have to’s” – these words and ideas make us feel pressured and set us up for expectation. You can “wish, want, hope, and would like” all you want, but try to eliminate the “should” and “musts” from your thought processing and speech. Acceptance does not mean approval, but learning acceptance (sometimes ‘radical’ acceptance) will benefit your health.

Here is an example of a hypothetical verbal interaction (that many of you have experienced in some form or other):

Other Person – “How are things?”

Route 91er – “Okay I guess, but things have been difficult. I’m struggling.”

Other Person – “Really? Why?”

Route 91er – “Can’t stop thinking about what happened. Still having nightmares, feeling really emotional. Triggered all the time.”

Other Person – “Wow. You’re still feeling that way? It’s been almost 3 months. I thought you would be back to normal by now. I mean you didn’t get shot, you lived!”

So, take pause, take a long slow breath, and recognize that this is where you have a choice. You can personalize the other person’s comments and feel insulted, minimized, or invalidated. OR, you can recognize that you have NO control over his/her 3 things that live in his/her bucket, and there is free will and autonomy. (S)he is allowed to think, feel, and act however (s)he may choose, and any comments (however you may judge them) made by another person are ONLY an indication of THEIR level of health, thought-processing, and sensitivity or compassion. The other person’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors actually have nothing to do with you at all. You are simply a bystander and observer of his/her comments about a certain topic. Yes, this topic hits home and you may feel highly sensitized, but that’s YOUR bucket, not theirs.

In a moment that someone else makes a comment that you do not appreciate, you can choose to react in anger (which is less often about anger and more about other emotions such as sadness and fear)…or you can choose to feel compassion for this person. If this person is making comments like this to you, imagine how the rest of his/her life is experienced? If (s)he emotionally constipated or lacking in compassion towards you, just imagine for a moment, the quality of his/her relationships with other people. Imagine how alone and disconnected (s)he may actually be from others under the surface. Imagine what may have happened in this person’s life to cause such an abrasive or unkind approach. And now, once you have considered these possibilities, do you really want or need to react in anger?

Route 91er Response Option A (What you REALLY want to say): “F@%\*$ YOU! I can’t believe you’re being so insensitive. You’re an A\*\*hole.”

Route 91er Response Option B (The much healthier option): “Yeah. Actually, not only am I still having trouble, but many other people are too! 3 months is not a long time at all when you’ve been in such a horrific situation. It impacts your mind and body.”

By not letting the emotional “noise” color your response, you are able to communicate honestly, openly, and also educate this person. You are also setting an invisible firm boundary and by being honest and calm on your end, you are taking full responsibility for yourself, you are advocating for yourself. By default, this type of authentic communication actually forces other people to be accountable for themselves. If you wanted to even take this conversation further perhaps to find more meaning, which might help YOU also foster compassion for this other person and allow you to understand where they are coming from (rather than mind-reading or jumping to conclusions and judging them)…

Route 91er: “So, just out of curiosity, why would you think that people would be over it or back to normal after 3 months?”

If you are willing to consider and generate alternatives in the ways in which you choose to respond to the people around you, then you will be happier and healthier (and so will your relationships!). It does take practice because it is a skill. And that’s the art part of communication. The more you use these tools, the more they become second nature. And we all benefit since compassion for others and compassion for ourselves are simply two sides of the same coin.

“Be the change that you wish to see in the world.” --- Mahatma Gandhi