

HOLDING THINGS IN By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Marlene recently read a novel by Anne Tyler in which the elderly grandfather says, "In my childhood I was trained to hold things in, you see. But I thought I was holding them until a certain *time*. I assumed that someday, somewhere, I would again be given the opportunity to spend all that saved-up feeling. When will that be?" (p. 221, *Searching for Caleb*).

In our work with couples, we meet some people who have learned to hold things in. And we meet other people who do the opposite; they have not learned impulse control. Both patterns cause difficulty for healthy relationships. It is easy to see how people who act or speak on impulse can wreck havoc in relationships. Holding things in, can also cause havoc both in personal health and in relationship.

Holding things in can impact your health. Holding and non-expression cause tightening and constriction. This can lead to back and shoulder problems. There is evidence that there are certain personality traits present in the cancer-susceptible individual. Dr. W. Douglas Brodie says that one of these traits is a person who "harbours long-suppressed toxic emotions, such as anger, resentment and/or hostility. The cancer-susceptible individual typically internalizes such emotions and has great difficulty expressing them." (www.drbrodie.com)

Dr. Alan Levy, clinical psychologist offers the following:

"Often, poor expression or 'repression' of feelings, results in a snowball effect, escalating lower levels of irritability into increasingly toxic degrees of anger and even rage-fueled explosions. Those who are plagued by chronic anger describe their internal state as one that resembles a raging inferno of negativity and even aggression. Whether it appears in the form of ongoing, simmering muscular tension or as a storm of pure rage, anger is too strong an emotion to be held inside without dire consequences to one's health....

"Unfortunately, simply pretending to remain calm may save an angry person from embarrassment, but it won't save him from the deleterious effects on his health. Medical journals and self-help books are overflowing with studies and anecdotal evidence that demonstrate the danger of swallowing negative feelings. Those who bottle up their emotions are usually the same people who find themselves unwilling or unable to assertively express their needs or dissatisfaction. Often they find themselves caught in a feedback loop of repression and increasing frustration. The implosive force of this cycle poisons the body over time and causes measurable damage to the cardiovascular system.

"Happily, those who learn to express their anger productively can reduce their risk of heart disease while improving their quality of life. Learning to express feelings which precede anger --such as helplessness, dissatisfaction -- before they escalate, can stem the tide of poisonous emotions, clearing a path for better health and well-being and the prevention of heart disease." <http://www.alanlevyphd.com>

Holding things in can cause problems when a person can no longer hold them in and the feelings leak out or explode. Either way, this kind of acting out our feelings causes hurt, and often defensiveness in others.

Holding things in creates a cycle of withhold-withdraw-project-withhold.

When we withhold something from another we have to withdraw. When we withdraw, the other person no longer looks or feels safe to us. We then project our feelings on to them, whether they are accurate or not. We then have justification for our withholding, which leads to more withholding.

We recommend revealing. Sometimes revealing is done in ways that are hard for others to hear. As soon as possible, it is important to take healthy responsibility for what you've revealed and say it in a more conscious way.

Don't be like Grandfather Peck whom I mentioned in the first paragraph. Later that same day, he dies, and the last words he says are "Well...I had certainly hoped for more than *this* out of life." (p. 223, *Searching for Caleb*).

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. For more information call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com