

WHAT CAN YOU REALLY CONTROL?

We've all heard the serenity prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." This idea is not new. Christ wrote "let tomorrow worry about itself". Epictetus, a Greek philosopher born shortly after the time of Christ said that the secret of happiness was in knowing the difference between what we could control and what we couldn't control.

So what can you really control? Recently I asked a client if she could control her weight. She answered yes, and I suggested that she go into the bathroom next door to my office and make herself weigh more or less. She laughed and said that she really couldn't control it that way, but that she could control what she ate or how much exercise she did. "Exactly," I said, "what would happen if you let go of thinking about your weight and focused on what you were eating and how you were exercising". "A lot less energy would be spent in worrying, beating myself up for the past or planning for the future" she replied.

We frequently spend a lot of emotional energy focusing on things we can't change or control. Just reflect on the things you think about. Chances are they would include some of the following:

- the past
- the future
- what other people think
- what other people do
- what other people feel
- your own feelings

You can't control or change any of the above. You can only control what you do about the above.

This gets even more complicated when it comes to relationships. We spend a lot of energy trying to control something in our partners that we have no control over. Frequently, couples focus on trying to get their partners to act in certain ways or to feel certain ways. One of the couples we were coaching was stuck trying to make each other feel happy. At first this might seem like a laudable goal, however their happiness was dependent on each other feeling happy. For example, he would expend a lot of energy trying to make her happy. When she was sad he thought he was a failure. He would often then end up feeling angry and blame her as well as beat himself up for not having succeeded. She would take his anger as a sign that she was a failure. She would try to hide her sadness and withdraw from him. This would contribute to both of their unhappiness.

Think about this as a filing issue. You have a two-drawer filing cabinet. One drawer is labeled "things I can change or control" and the other drawer is labeled "things I cannot change or control". The first drawer contains only your own choices or actions, things you can actually do. The other drawer is full of everything else. When you try to misfile things then you feel stuck, lacking energy and exhausted. Happiness comes from putting everything in your life into the right filing drawer.