

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

You Can't Change if You're Worthless

While mending some clothes recently, I was thinking about the fact that fixing things takes so much time and effort that we only bother with it for things we really value. When my great-fitting \$80 pants lose a button or tear a seam, I make the time to repair them. When my \$3 socks get a hole in the toe, they're heading for the trash. Typically, I only spend time and effort on things that feel really worthwhile to me.

I wonder if that same principle applies to our efforts to change ourselves. If our life experiences give us the message that we are worthless overall, or in important aspects of our lives, does that impede our ability to accomplish change? I bet it does. Because how can we justify pouring the kind of focused, long-term effort that behavior change requires into something we believe to be worthless? It seems like we would need to feel some degree of worth to invest in ourselves that way.

To make matters worse, if our belief that we are worthless keeps undermining our efforts to do things that would make us feel worthwhile, how can we ever have enough evidence that we are in fact worthwhile to change that inhibiting belief? Hmmm. Vicious cycle.

How We Get "Worthless"

To get out of this mess, it's important to understand where worthlessness comes from. It starts with experiences of being treated as if we are not valuable people. Of course violent trauma and abuse give us that message. But so do repeated "mild" experiences like insults, teasing, being ignored, rebukes or punishment that intend to shame us, or not being given things we need like good physical touch, time really being together, listening, teaching, or modeling that prepares us for life. Each of these things, if repeated, especially by people who are important to us, can gradually teach us that we are worthless.

Hurtful experiences grow into feelings of worthlessness when we come to believe that if we were worthwhile people, those who should care for us would have treated us that way. As adults, some of us can realize that the ways others treat us often have *nothing to do* with our actual worth. The ways others act toward us may have everything to do with their own issues and struggles, not our intrinsic value. But since our perceptions of our own worth often form when we are children and our minds haven't developed sufficiently to understand that yet, we often end up believing that it's because we actually *are* worthless that we were treated that way.

Once we conclude that parts (or all) of us are worthless, we typically try to hide those parts from other people so that they will not realize just how worthless we are and then run screaming. That would confirm again to us that we are not only worthless, but also scary. So we pour a lot of energy into acting like we have it all together and hiding the parts of us that we feel are messy and shameful so we will not experience rejection again.

When we try to change behaviors or habits that we have often adopted to numb out our feelings of worthlessness (overeating, drinking too much, hyper-productivity, compulsive caring for

others, snapping at people, etc.), we're often so maxed out from all the energy we've poured into hiding and numbing our worthless feelings that there is just not enough left to face the difficulty of change for long. Our will power energy runs out and we just fall back into the habit. Plus, it seems stupid to pour *that* much effort into someone who is worthless anyway.

Blessing Heals Worthlessness

We can't just decide to snap out of worthlessness and start behaving as if we are indeed worthwhile. The draining worthless belief + hiding + numbing combo is just too strong. Long term, it will undermine our will power-based efforts 99% of the time. To really change, we need to find an outside source of energy to jump-start the process.

Usually, this energy jolt comes on gradually from repeated experiences where other people *see the parts of us we are ashamed of and THEN don't run away*. Only then can we come to believe that we are not actually worthless, because, "Hey! All these other people saw this part of me that got hurt or neglected in the past and these new people didn't run screaming, so I must not be as bad as I thought!" Hiding our shameful stuff traps us in worthlessness. Admitting our feelings of worthlessness and shameful experiences *to people who are mature enough to bless us* sets us free.

Hold on there. What the heck is "blessing"? Others may define it differently, but right now, I like the definition: *expressing delight in people for who they are and their intrinsic worth as a person, whether or not you approve of what they've done in the past or agree with their present choices*. A blessing says, "Regardless of what you have done or are doing right now, you are a valuable person and I am excited about who you are."

When either by accident or intention, someone finds out about the things we are ashamed of that make us feel worthless, and that person essentially says, "Yeah, that sucks, but it doesn't change how I feel about you. You are still cool with me," that creates a small beach head in our enemy territory—a place where we don't have to hide or numb out because we know we're not going to be shamed or abandoned there. This person has seen a good chunk of the worst we've got and they're still around. They see value in us anyway. So the energy we would have had to apply to numbing and hiding with *this* person, at least, is now free to be applied to change.

The more this process happens in our lives, the more of our energy gets set free and the weaker our belief in our worthlessness becomes. This is why counselors rave about "unconditional love" and "unconditional positive regard." When people sense that there's nothing they've got to disclose that's gonna scare you away—that you will still believe they are a valuable person and treat them as such—that frees them to change. It's pretty awesome, actually.

On the flip side, interventions with addicts often don't work, largely because the message they convey is, "Unless you change, I'm out of here and you're gonna find yourself totally alone." Implying "You're not valuable unless you do what I want" feeds worthlessness and takes away energy for change. A blesser doing an intervention with an addict, on the other hand, might say, "It hurts so much to see you in all of this pain. It's so painful for you and for me. As long as you aren't willing to respond to my efforts to help, there is only so much I can do because I'm limited and I need to make sure that I feel safe and have what I need, too. But regardless of whether you choose to change, I will still love you and you are very valuable to me. That part doesn't depend on whether you change." The blesser has just said, "I see your worst and I still believe you are valuable, even when you hurt me." She's just freed up some of the addict's energy for

change.

Hiding our shame and feelings of worthlessness freezes us inside them. Exposing them to blessing frees us.

Surrounding Ourselves with Blessing

So how can we grow in self-worth and become free to change?

Learn to identify blessers, and try to be like them. Blessers come in all shapes and sizes, but often the best way to spot them is to watch what they do when someone in their life is not doing what they want or disagrees with them.

- Do they strive to see the value in the other person's perspective and strive to retain respectful relationship (even if they need a bit of time to get there), or do they *quickly* pull back from the other person through labeling, snide comments, sarcasm, gossip, or other ways of creating relational distance?
- Are they always trying to persuade other people that their beliefs or opinions are the *absolutely hands-down, no-contest* way to go, or even when they believe they are right about something, can they consider other viewpoints, be open to change, and show love or respect for those who will probably never agree with them?
- Do they let their coworkers, friends, significant others, and kids be themselves, try hard things, fail, and have second chances, or do they keep trying to squeeze them into a tight mold of who they want them to be?
- Does conversation typically end up being all about them, or can they do a balanced rhythm of listening well to you without jumping in, responding in ways that showed they heard you, talking about what's important to them, and hearing your response to what they said?

Increase the time we spend with a variety of blessers. The more people we have in our lives who can see our shame and still reflect our value back to us, the more chances we will have to dismantle our worthlessness. Blessers can be a bit tricky to find, since the maturity required is considerable. So when we find a good one, it's worth going to great lengths time-wise and money-wise to find ways to spend time with that person often and, hopefully, long term. Longer term relationships with blessers allow for deeper shame disclosure and deeper healing. Put some hard work into gradually assembling a group of blessers in a bunch of areas of your life. You'll need back-ups when moving, crises, or life transitions disrupt relationships with your favorite blessers.

Gradually increase what you talk about with blessers. When we back up the full truck of our past and present drama and hurt on people right away, especially if they're not paid professionals, it tends to scare them away, even when they're awesome people. It may have nothing to do with how shameful the stuff we shared is. It often has more to do with blessers' past experiences of people disclosing lots of things to them and then just moving on to another situation or relationship and doing the same thing. That can make them feel used, like they're just a garbage dump and their own needs don't matter. Healthy people look for relationships that are mutual, gradual, and sincere. So as you build relationships with blessers, see if you can gradually increase what you talk about with them over time—maybe one revelation for every other time you see them, with lots of time talking about other things and shared interests, and showing interest in them in between. Certainly, the pace with a professional counselor can be

faster, but slow is usually better with non-paid people.

I wish you all the best as you bravely increase the exposure to blessing in your life and strive to bless others as well. Hands down, this has been the most effective strategy in my own healing process and I am excited for the ways that it can work for you, too!

If you or someone you know would like help navigating concerns about self worth and shame, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC
Licensed Professional Counselor

303-931-4284
info@jenniferdiebel.com
www.jenniferdiebel.com
5370 Manhattan Circle, Suite 203
Boulder, CO 80303

Jennifer Diebel, MA, LPC is a Licensed Professional Counselor who works with adolescents, adults, couples, and families in her private practice in Boulder, Colorado. For more information about her areas of expertise, background, and methods, as well as additional helpful resources and past newsletters, go to www.jenniferdiebel.com.

Please Try This at Home is a monthly newsletter containing tips for increasing the joy in your life, as well as information about counseling discounts and helpful local seminars and resources. To request a future newsletter topic, include a friend on the subscription list, ask a question, or offer feedback, email Jennifer at info@jenniferdiebel.com. To unsubscribe, simply reply to this email with "unsubscribe" in the heading.