

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Weakness, Your Most Hated Best Friend

I did *not* want to write a newsletter about weakness. Not one bit. Because, as some of you know, I am a recovering perfectionist. And since perfectionism may be defined as the inability to tolerate faults or weaknesses in one's self, others, and/or the world, then you can imagine that weakness, as it applies to *me*, is not something I'm particularly excited about.

I recently emerged from a prolonged and painful encounter with my own weakness in which, over and over again, I had to face my absolute inability to control even those things in life that seem most simple and small. This of course reminded me that I also *really* can't control the big, important, scary things in life either, though I try hard to pretend I can. Having so freshly emerged from such an intimate encounter with weakness, begrudgingly, I have to admit that I've gained a new respect and even a gratitude of sorts for it. And since I've spent most of my life mercilessly beating at my weakness in hopes that it would go away forever, it seems only fair to spend at least the space of this newsletter honoring my weakness for the important services it performs for me, which I have often overlooked.

My hope is that when you also encounter a time where you cannot dodge, numb, or effort your way through your weakness and lack of control, as we typically prefer to do, then perhaps you can take comfort and maybe even a little joy along with me in the good work it may be doing in you, despite the fact that you hate it and it's making life miserable.

Six Hidden Treasures of Weakness

Refining and Solidifying Self Worth. When we feel strong, we can analyze ourselves and ask others to help us assess whether we are living our lives in meaningful, worthwhile ways to a certain extent. But it's only when we are shaken by weakness (usually, the inability to make a certain kind of suffering go away) that we really get to see what we are made of and what we really believe about life. Weakness asks the deepest, most life-changing questions that can, if we let them, prevent us from living narrow, shallow lives.

For example, if we take comfort in being able to take care of ourselves and "pull our own weight" and then we encounter the weakness of a prolonged illness or injury that forces us to delegate work tasks and require daily help, we'll likely enter grief over the loss of that sense of control, complete with shock, strong attempts to change the situation, anger, sadness, and gradual discernment about what parts we can change and what we need to accept. In the midst of that process, we can, if we let ourselves, respond to weakness' invitation to examine where we get our value, perhaps thinking:

I thought I just had a healthy work ethic and didn't like to inconvenience people. But the fact that it's hard for me to feel worthwhile at all when I can't do what I used to is letting me know that I really based my sense of worth on how much I could get done a day and on standing on my own two feet. Since it's becoming clear that I won't be able to do that in the foreseeable future, what, if anything, makes my life feel worth it? Where else do people find meaning? All my friends are strong achievers and I'm pretty sure they get their worth that way. What do non-

achievers do to feel meaningful? How do I need to change my life so that I know I am worthwhile whether I can do lots of things by myself or not?

If we are willing to go into that level of questioning, we can explore changes in work, relationships, belief, self care, and activities that can diversify or strengthen our foundation of self worth. Then, in the future, we will not be so easily shaken and our weaknesses will not be as terrifying. Following the example above, that might eventually turn to:

I'm learning the value of just being with people, without doing anything It can be comforting and rewarding for me and other people, too. I'm making new friends who are excited about a wide range of things, not just how impressive their calendar and achievements look. I'm asking my friends with different belief systems questions about why they believe people have fundamental worth, regardless of how they perform. And I'm trying to decide what I think about their answers. Even if I get better, I'm never going to base my life just on independence and achievement again. I know now that that is not all there is to life and I'm committed to finding what else there is out there.

On the other side of this question and exploration process, we can grow to be much more balanced, much less prone to making ourselves all about one thing that can be so easily taken from us.

Growing Compassion and Patience. When we are out there on our A-Game with no weakness in sight and someone blows us off, is rude, is slow, or is just a bother to be around, it's pretty easy to be frustrated with them. After all, with all we've got going for us, we would never be like that. But when we are in the middle of weakness, it's a different story. We have painful, constant reminders of how hard it is just to get through the day, just to accomplish a simple task. And when that's what we are dealing with, we tend to wonder whether other people might also be experiencing the same level of energy drain that we are. Rather than railing at the car that cuts us off, we're more prone to think, "I did that just the other day when I was tired and confused. I wonder if that person is a new mom who's having trouble sleeping, too." When our friend calls saying he's depressed, we're far less likely to think, "Man, this is going on forever. Why can't he just get his act together already?" It will be easier to think, "I bet he's trying as hard to fix his mood as I am trying to fix my marriage. Life really is hard sometimes for a long, long time. I guess I can handle listening to him a little longer." Weakness *can*, if we let it, open our eyes to the suffering around us and help us to have more patience and compassion for our fellow sufferers.

Allowing Real Relationship. Weakness can also show us who our real friends are. Relationships based on common interests or conversations about strengths and skills tend to remain shallow until they are tested. When weakness arrives in the form of a crisis or change in circumstances and we are no longer convenient or entertaining to hang out with, that's when we get to see who our real friends are. They are the ones who keep coming around because they genuinely care for us, even when we don't have as much to offer them. Once friends have successfully weathered a season of weakness with us, we can rest in the fact that they really are there for us. If someone can accept us and show us compassion in the midst of our most embarrassing weaknesses, we don't have to pretend we are perfect with them anymore. We can be ourselves, knowing they haven't run away from the hard parts about us. Letting other people go through rough things with us helps to show us who our friends really are *and* it helps us drop the pretenses of having it all together that actually block close relationship. Real relationship involves mutual sharing of strengths and weaknesses over time.

Focusing Priorities. Insane busyness is among the greatest curses of our time. Driven by the need to feel important or to make sure that everyone is cared for and no one is offended, we pack our calendars to the gills until there is no time left to rest, enjoy nature, and delight in just being. Weakness has a way of clearing the calendar. Faced with our inability to do everything, we are much more motivated to identify which things and people are most important and give the reduced energy that we have left to them. For the people pleasers among us, it's much easier to not have to meet everyone's needs when we've sprouted a glaring, public weakness that others have a hard time denying. Finally, it can feel okay to say "no." Sometimes weakness can be the catalyst we need to take down the pace of life to something much more reasonable, leaving us less interrupted time with loved ones and more time to snatch up good moments in the midst of weakness that we would have missed in the rush of strength.

Noticing the Good. When we are operating at top capacity and perhaps even beyond what we can sustain, that tends to leave us feeling deprived. Nothing breeds a sense of entitlement like deprivation. Pretty soon, we're thinking, "I work hard so I *deserve* a break," or, "I help a lot of people and put out a lot of fires. It's my turn, now. My family *should* be serving me right now." When weakness leads us to a place where we know we are under-functioning, we can choose to let it de-activate our entitlement and down shift us into gratitude instead: "Wow, I know I'm not pulling my weight and my family is chipping in to help me through. I'm so thankful for that," or "Today, I actually had energy to take a walk outside. That felt so good. I never realized before, when it was always so easy, how good it feels to walk with the sun on my face." When weakness has troubled us to the extent that we no longer can expect good, beautiful things to happen as a matter of course, we have the chance to notice more acutely when they do happen and to soak in the joy of them in ways that would not have even crossed our minds when we were fully functional.

Growing Deep Strength. You'll notice that each of the previous "treasures" of weakness focused on making life less unconscious and reactionary and more intentional and personally meaningful. Each honed in on the growth we could choose in the middle of weakness as we courageously resist the temptation to wallow in joy-blocking bitterness about the fact that our strength was stolen. The result of courageously choosing to focus on growth and purpose in the middle of weakness, rather than anger and despair, is that over time, we become increasingly able to continue making those kinds of choices. We get better at distinguishing solid places from which to derive our worth from those that are easily toppled. We practice compassion until it is more natural to us, even when we are not actively in pain. We learn to discern which people can do meaningful relationship and we learn how to build solid friendships. We become gratitude "junkies" who can find things to celebrate even in the worst of times. We develop a low tolerance for activities and "obligations" that are really just schedule clutter that distracts us from those people and tasks that are most deeply meaningful to us. When we persevere, these repeated choices can build in us an iron strength of resilience and clarity of purpose that goes way beyond the showy surface displays we so often mistake as strength: unbridled ambition, spastic and constant activity, long lists of degrees, pounds lost, number of volumes written in impressive words, net worth, etc. Persevering and seeking growth through weakness over and over again can give us the strength of knowing deeply who we are and what we most value in ways that no one can take from us.

Yes, It Sucks. But It's Better Than the Alternative.

In pointing out the treasures that are potentially hidden in weakness and suffering, I am not at all minimizing the suffering. It is just awful. It does make life miserable. I hate it and would wipe it all away today if I could. I hate it in my life, I hate it in your life, and I hate it everywhere it rears

its ugly head in the world. That's the heartbeat of perfectionists, remember: the desire to make the world as it should be.

But I'm also a realist. Weakness happens. I can't make it stop with even my best A-Game effort. So we can either let it totally consume us, and decay into bitterness, enraged entitlement, and despair, or we can mine it for the treasures our weakness and suffering have to offer and pull for that deeper strength with every ounce of energy we have left, even though we have been repeatedly hit by the bus. There's nothing about it that's easy. But it is worth it. And if nothing else, it beats the alternative.

If you or someone you know would like help working through a time of weakness or suffering, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com*.

Thanks for reading!

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