

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **Indiana Jones and the Stalker Playpen**

I bet that at some point you've been stalked, though some of you might not know it. Thanks to the movies, we all have a rough idea of how stalked people act. They glance over their shoulders to see if the stalker is still there, half a block behind, or take three left turns in a row to see if the person follows. They might take steps to avoid being out in public alone, screen their calls, block certain email addresses, post Facebook pictures that only show their left eyeball, or even change their names and social security numbers. The worst thing about it is that even though it is the stalker who is messed up, it's the stalked person's life that gets constricted—like someone's gone and made them live in a playpen.

Those of us who are breathing a sigh of relief right now because we are convinced that we are much too boring to catch a stalker's attention might need to inhale a bit of that breath again and keep reading. It's actually pretty easy to allow ourselves to be stalked right smack into playpen living. Consider this: We allow ourselves to be stalked by whatever we refuse to think about.

#### **Ways We Get Playpenned**

Let's think through a few examples. Say you just had a bad breakup in a really important relationship. You don't want to think about it 'cause thinking about it is painful, so instead you start avoiding places you used to go that remind you of that person. You cut the person's head out of your photos. You avoid hanging out with people who knew the two of you together. Suddenly, there are places you can't go, good memories you can't look at, and people you used to like who you don't get to be with now. You just got playpenned.

Or say you have an immature sibling who keeps calling with new crises, asking you to drop everything or to send more money. Maybe dad makes you feel guilty if you don't behave the way you are "supposed to." Maybe mom bosses you around like a child even though you are 50. You know that if you changed your response to stop the painful behavior, you'd risk losing the few good things that are left in these relationships. Plus, you'd have to deal with the anxiety of change. So you keep coming to the rescue; you follow "supposed tos" that make your friends roll their eyes; you just have an extra drink or two at each holiday meal. You've lost money, time, respect, sobriety—playpenned again.

Trauma's perhaps the most notorious stalker. Some things are so painful to think about that folks will avoid sleep to stay away from dreams that touch on it. They might go way out of their way to avoid people, places, or activities that remind them of the trauma. Eventually, out of long-term habit, the mind may even "seal off" portions of memories so that not only the present, but also the past slips beyond the playpen walls.

#### **Indiana Jones' Guide to Facing Fear**

What do we do when we get tired of playpen living? We follow Indiana Jones. Remember in the Last Crusade movie when Indie has to get the grail in order to save his dad's life, but to get

there, he has to cross what looks like a bottomless chasm? He's got a book based on others' research and experience that tells him there's a bridge there, but he sure can't see one. Still, he decides that the risk of death is worth the possibility of saving his dad's life and his own. So he steps out into what looks like thin air, only to discover that the ancient researchers were right! There was a bridge there all the time, but it was painted to look so much like the chasm that he could not see the bridge until he stepped off the ledge.

That's kind of what leaving the playpen is like. Rather than turning away from what we fear and resigning ourselves to a life of increasing constriction, we:

1. **Figure Out What We Fear** by turning to look at our "fear chasm" straight on,
2. **Consider the Pros and Cons** of changing, weighing what we might gain by facing our fears against the increasing cost of restricting our freedom,
3. **Get Information** about how to face our fears from the "book" of the experience and support of those who have faced fears similar to ours, and then
4. **Take the First Step** toward making the changes that we fear, but that will set us free.

Some of us may already have done step one. We know what it is that we won't let ourselves do or think about. We know which things we have given permission to stalk us and keep us from experiencing a free, joyful life. Others of us may have been running from our fears for so long that we couldn't actually name what it is that we fear. We're afraid to even think about it!

If you don't know what it is you fear, but you know you don't like silence, alone time, sobriety, not snacking between meals, down time, or whatever behavior it is that you find yourself doing to avoid thinking about something, try stopping the behavior for a little while and take note of any thoughts that come to mind. Turn off the TV or the radio for an evening. Spend two hours by yourself without productivity or distractions. Avoid alcohol at the next family dinner. Wait half an hour before contacting the constant crisis friend or parent.

As you feel anxious, rather than dodging the anxiety with your usual behaviors, see if you can dive in and identify what the feeling is. Tell yourself that you can return to distraction in an hour or so, but not before you get a good look at what's been stalking you. Once you have a better idea of what it is, then you can decide whether it would be worth taking some steps to face this fear, moving outside the playpen walls to a life of increased freedom and joy. It probably won't be easy, but it may just be worth it.

If you or someone you know would like some help figuring out and overcoming fears, *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com).*

Thanks for reading!

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