

New Agreements

Create New Lives

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom by Don Miguel Ruiz is a small, powerful book that's evoking positive change for my family, and I believe it can do the same for you. The four agreements are:

Be Impeccable with Your Word.

Don't Take Anything Personally.

Don't Make Assumptions.

Always Do Your Best.

The author details these four agreements within the 138 pages of this easy-to-read, thought-provoking manual for living. While this book isn't about disability issues, the agreements described by Ruiz are extremely relevant to the lives of individuals with disabilities, family members, and people who work in the field. In the following paragraphs, I've put a "disability spin" on Ruiz's concepts.

Be Impeccable with Your Word

Ruiz writes, "The word is a force; it is the power you have to express and communicate, to think, and thereby to create the events in your life." Being impeccable with your word means that you say what you mean, you don't use words against yourself or others, and your words represent truth and love.

The words we use about people with disabilities are a powerful force that can create positive events or negative events. We have given so much power to disability descriptors, that we use these words to decide how and where a child is educated, how and where an adult works and lives, whether or not the person can participate in community activities, and so much more. The words we use, how we use them, and with whom we use them can make or break the lives of people with disabilities. I can't think of any other group of people in today's world where the words used about them can so profoundly impact their lives.

A person's disability is often thought to be the Truth about the person. But it's *not* the Whole Truth—it tells us only one characteristic of the person, and it's not even the most important characteristic! But to many, the disability *is* the defining characteristic, overshadowing—or even erasing—every other characteristic of the person. If we're impeccable with our words, we will "speak the truth" and not use words, nor give weight to words (like a diagnosis), that result in the separation, segregation, or devaluation of individuals who happen to have disabilities. We will use other words that reveal the person's abilities, interests, and dreams. Those words tell us more Truth than a diagnosis. Make an agreement with yourself to be impeccable with your word.

Don't Take Anything Personally

"Nothing other people do is because of you. It is because of themselves," Ruiz writes. When a doctor gives a dire prognosis about a baby with a disability he's giving *his opinion*. When a physical therapist says, "If your child doesn't learn to sit up by age two, he never will," she's sharing *her opinion*. When a service provider says a child with a disability needs early intervention or early childhood services, she's giving *her opinion* (and it's her *job* to say that). Parents should not take these opinions personally, nor should they embrace them as the Truth with a capital T!

Ditto when other professionals provide recommendations and/or make statements about a person with a disability—what they can do, where they should work, etc. People are giving opinions, not facts—opinions that reflect *their own personal values, bureaucratic policy, or something else*. We can respect another person *and* disagree with her opinions, and we can also realize her opinions are driven by her position.

We should not take anything personally in other situations, as well. When I present at a seminar of 50 people, for example, 50 different messages are heard.

2 - New Agreements Create New Lives

Some in the audience might say my ideas are “dangerous” or “too radical,” while others say, “fantastic” or “a great life-changing presentation,” and others are somewhere in the middle. In all cases, I cannot take such comments personally—and believe I’m an awful person *or* a wonderful person—as each person’s words represent their unique experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and so forth.

While we need to learn not to take things personally, we also need to help others learn this valuable lesson. For example, we need to help children learn that much of what other people say—including their own parents—are *opinions* that represent the speaker’s reality, not facts. We can improve our communication skills if we say things like, “in my opinion” or “it seems to me.” And when we’re on the receiving end of advice or prognoses, we can respond with, “So your *opinion* is [blah, blah, blah].” This can clarify that the statement *is* just an opinion, not a fact. Make an agreement with yourself to not take things personally.

Don’t Make Assumptions

Ruiz writes, “The problem with making assumptions is that we *believe* they are the truth.” As discussed previously, many of us believe a disability diagnosis tells us the Truth about a person. But this Truth is really a series of assumptions. We may assume things like, “All children with cerebral palsy need therapy,” “All people with autism have difficulty communicating,” or other generalizations and stereotypes. These types of assumptions can be very dangerous because they limit our interest in learning more or considering other options, for we think we know it all! In addition, these assumptions may result in diminished opportunities for individuals with disabilities—a terrible, terrible loss.

We also assume a great deal when we think we understand *what someone else said*. Miscommunication has probably been occurring since humans first spoke, and it still creates dilemmas today! It’s helpful if we

ask things like, “What do you mean?” or “Could you clarify?” When we do, we’ll get more accurate information that’s less likely to be misunderstood! Make an agreement with yourself to not make assumptions.

Always Do Your Best

Many of us are very conscientious and thoughtful—we try hard to do our best. And some of us may be more careless—we make assumptions, don’t consider what outcomes our actions might have, and more. All of us, however, can always do better at doing our best! We owe it to ourselves, and we certainly owe it to the children and adults with disabilities whose lives we influence.

We also need to recognize that doing our best is an ongoing process. My presentations, the articles I write, the information on my web site, and my book represent ideas and strategies about how to do things differently to ensure children and adults with disabilities lead REAL LIVES, included in all aspects of their communities. My philosophies often go against the status quo, but to me, they represent common sense. After hearing one of my presentations or reading my materials, some parents and professionals state that they’re ready to embrace new ways of doing things, but they simultaneously feel bad about what they did in the past. They say they “should have” known to do things differently, and they beat themselves up. They shouldn’t.

All of us are imperfect humans, and we’ve all done the best we knew to do, *based on what we knew at the time*. That’s all any of us can do! The world changes and we change. What was “my best” five years ago, six months ago, or two days ago is different from “my best” today. We can use our past actions to learn from; we shouldn’t use them to punish ourselves. *That’s* not doing our best! Make an agreement with yourself to do your best. And one way we can each do our best is to follow the first three agreements detailed here.

Don Miguel Ruiz’s *The Four Agreements* presents powerful messages that can help us achieve greater wisdom and personal freedom. In the process, we’ll improve our own lives, as well as the lives of those we care about.