

Invisible Shackles

By Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

“Whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you’re right.”

– Henry Ford

So many capable, competent and intelligent people are struggling unnecessarily in life. Why? If they’re fortunate they will see the true state of their lives but only when they are ready and not a moment sooner. Their level of readiness may be up to the fates, the stars or just their stage of willingness. Sometimes, it happens when they feel brave enough to let go of their old attachments. Sometimes, they need to hit a very desperate bottom to fully realize what is going on.

Witness the invisible and very powerful shackles of the mind. These are incredible, commanding and imperceptible forces that hold people back from a more fulfilling and rewarding life. Many times, there is no real, physical or concrete barrier - just the invisible shackles as are found in a refusal to admit an abusive relationship; the disproportionately dim view of ones’ self; living in constant fear of fictitious possibilities; favouring a purely bleak outlook; or remaining trapped in perpetuity by the ghosts of the past.

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

– Barack Obama

As with learned helplessness- some people have been conditioned to believe that they are powerless to affect change so they don’t even try and all the money, wishing and motivational guidance in the world isn’t going to change that fact until some kind of magical and elusive coin drops and the lights come on. Some

people are so attached to their ideas that they are blind to the pain and suffering those ideas and beliefs are causing them. They somehow believe that it is not their thinking but something innately unworthy or incapable about them that is the cause of their suffering. Very dysfunctional thinking, indeed!

In many ways this is about self-efficacy: knowing you have the skills and abilities to achieve a goal, master a skill and not compare yourself to others or their abilities. People with low self-efficacy will likely see tasks as being harder than they actually are; choose to avoid them more often; see problems with a sense of hopelessness and futility and believe that they are incapable or unworthy so they give up. People with high self-efficacy will likely try harder, longer and make more of an effort. Neither are better, more equipped nor more worthy, it is simply their belief system charting their course of action.

Much of this nature is established early in life: at home; then within our social group; then school and finally entering young adulthood. This is where we learn about our ability to face challenges with mastery or failure. Where some children are encouraged, with adult guidance, to try new and different things: ride a bike, tie a shoelace, go to school alone; they also learn a sense of self-mastery. Where other children are taught to be anxious and afraid; have things done for them; and are given the message that they are incapable, their self-efficacy can be greatly diminished and follow them through life. These negative lessons can be unlearned however.

Sometimes people incorrectly believe that their mood or emotional state will make them more or less effective depending on their state. Someone who is nervous or depressed might believe that this means they aren’t capable of over-

coming obstacles. Moods and emotions do not indicate our capacity - often they are normal emotional responses to life’s challenges. The individual with a high sense of self-efficacy will experience these emotions as natural states that can be endured and survived. They may even see ways to use them to motivate them to try harder.

Those who limit themselves because they have depression or anxiety, for example, treat it like a fatal sentence. They sigh with resignation and defeat and stay where they are. It’s kind of like putting yourself in a jail cell without a conviction and not even locking the cell. But there you are in solitary confinement - sentenced for life with no chance of parole. Why? Deep, deep down this has become the security blanket for your soul. If you hang on to this, you won’t have to endure uncertainties; hold yourself accountable; or take difficult steps.

One of the principal beliefs common to depressed people is that they don’t believe they can affect any change in their lives or on the people around them. They are powerless. They look forward to a grim future with a sense of finality. Again, a misled belief that keeps them imprisoned in misery and hopelessness. The fact is, they can affect change and influence others to the same level and extent that everyone else can. They just don’t know it.



With the anxious mind, people see only the worst-case scenarios. They are oblivious to what is presently safe; don't consider the best-case scenarios; and certainly are blind to the most probable scenarios. Focusing on how things could go wrong or how you've failed in the past never, never, never leads to solutions so why even go down that path? Again, it is a kind of 'bad religion'. A faith-based belief system with no facts, no future, and no hope.

The logical mind may even know the truth. It may know that this path of logic is hurtful and confining and yet it persists. Why? Sometimes, letting go of our patterns means we will become fully accountable for the state of our lives. Externalizing (or blaming) our woes onto the cruel world, unfeeling neighbours, insensitive partners, unfair family members, and inadequately paying jobs is a way of denying our role and responsibility in our lives. So, we continue to deny, deflect, distract, defer, and otherwise obfuscate the true issue at hand. We alone can make changes for the better or worse or even status-quo in our lives and we alone will feel the consequence of our actions whether we choose to accept responsibility for them or not. "This is just the way I am", is an excuse not an explanation.

"Leap, and the net will appear."

– John Burroughs

Self-acceptance is vital to happiness but acceptance of abject misery is not. If you are miserable for extended periods of time, chances are you are resisting facing some invisible shackles. Resistance is at the heart of so many emotional difficulties.

The solution? Focus on what you can do and how you can problem-solve. Problem-solving means identifying the problem in a clear and succinct manner, gathering information or creating ideas for solutions, weighing the pros and cons of each, selecting a solution, creating a plan for implementing the solution (such as breaking it down into manageable steps) and proceeding.

Identify and challenge your beliefs. Ask yourself where you got them. Ask yourself if they still hold true today. Ask yourself what a more mature outlook might be that contributes to your health and growth and well-being. Challenge

yourself to consider new viewpoints.

Let that pain and despair motivate you to discover that constructive change is possible. Give yourself permission to change your mind; relinquish your beloved belief system and become the change you seek. Where are you stuck in your life and what do you believe about that? Consider the possibility you may be very, very wrong about your negative beliefs.

"You cannot prevent the birds of worry and care from flying over your head. But you can stop them from building a nest in your head."

– Proverb

Focus on what you are able to do, not what you fear. Welcome challenges and grab your fears by both horns - you may discover you're more able to cope than you thought. Ask yourself what you'll miss if you love and accept yourself as you are. Others have done it - why not you? There are only your invisible shackles in the way. Choose your path today - deliberately - towards your prison or towards consciously carving out a life of your own choosing. What are you waiting for? The great cosmic "permission" to come to the door? You are a human being just like any other and just as entitled to and capable of what everyone else is. Other people have made the change. No need to re-invent the wheel - follow success stories.

If you do not drink in and savour what is good about you, accept compliments with grace, and acknowledge your capabilities, your belief in your ability to accomplish and overcome can be greatly diminished. Much of motivation comes from being able to appreciate who you are, what you are capable of and what you have accomplished. Valuing yourself is vital to self-efficacy. Remember a time when someone encouraged you and said you were capable of doing something. Write down a list of your past successes and what skills and abilities it took for you to be able to accomplish these. Look at those around you and observe them accomplishing similar goals to what you'd like to achieve - if they can do it, so can you.

Setting small, meaningful, specific, and achievable goals also go a long way towards increasing your sense of self-efficacy. Write single goals, one at a time, and then write down what it is that you are

capable of or possess to achieve those goals. They can be in any aspect of your life, as long as they mean something to you personally. With the accomplishment of each goal, you can feel an increased sense of ability, which, in turn, can motivate you to do more...and break free of those invisible shackles!

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