

The Art of Being Your Own Best Friend

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"Friendship with one's self is all important, because without it one cannot be friends with anyone else in the world."

Eleanor Roosevelt

Are you hard on yourself at times? Is it difficult for you to make time for exercise, healthy food, or nurturing your spiritual life? Do you take time for yourself to do the things you love to do – those things that feed your soul? What would your life be like if you treated yourself like your own best friend?

Sharpening Your Saw

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes about the Seventh habit in the chapter titled "Sharpen the Saw – Principles of Balanced Self-Renewal." He tells a story of encountering an exhausted, irritable man in the woods, sweating as he's trying to cut down a tree with a dull saw. When asked why he doesn't take a break to sharpen his saw so the work would be easier he replies irritably, "I don't have time to sharpen the saw, I'm too busy sawing!"

Covey emphasizes that the habit of caring for ourselves mentally, physically and spiritually forms the essential foundation to support the other six habits of success.

Perpetual Stress

While being too busy sawing to take time to sharpen our saw doesn't make sense in terms of results, isn't this how most of us approach life? We feel overwhelmed by our monster "to do" lists and the complexities of modern living. We put off taking care of ourselves each day "until things settle down," but does that time ever come? If we do begin a program of self-care, how do we find the commitment to stick with it? We often feel too overwhelmed, and focus on struggling just to keep up.

How did life get to be so crazy? For most of us it was a slow process as we were growing up and gradually:

- lost touch with our inner core and what was truly important to us
- adopted incorrect beliefs about ourselves, others and the world (which we're often unaware of)
- developed our thinking minds far more than our compassionate hearts
- lost our nurturing connection with nature

Being Your Own Best Friend

Looking at your life through the lens of being your own best friend will bring a new awareness to your relationship with yourself. You may discover some things that are undermining your health, well-being or effectiveness in life. Using this awareness in combination with the desire *and* commitment to really *be* your own best friend, can drastically reduce your stress and open up your life to many wonderful new possibilities.

First, let's consider the qualities of a best friend. Here is my list, and you may like to add some of your own.

- A best friend simply wants what's best for us, without a hidden agenda of their own.
- They treat us with honor and respect, accepting us as we are without trying to fix or change us.
- They really listen to what we say (and what we leave unsaid), as if they can "hear between the lines."
- They're observant, noticing how we react to people or situations and offering us helpful feedback.
- They support us with acceptance, encouragement, and sometimes tough love, to help us get out of our own way and be the person we really want to be.
- They stand by us when we're experiencing big challenges or tough times.
- They're thoughtful, compassionate and generous in many ways, helping us feel appreciated and cared for.

How Would Your Life Look and Feel?

Take a minute and imagine what your life would be like if you treated yourself like you were truly your own best friend. What would you be doing differently than you are doing

now? What would it be like to honor and respect your heartfelt needs and humanness? How would you feel mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually? Simply stop for a minute right now and imagine . . . , and allow that to sink in.

Consider the possibility that what you just imagined is actually your *natural* state – it's simply being blocked by some things you've accumulated along the way. While there's no "quick fix," your commitment to inner exploration and consistent practice can gradually dissolve those dusty accumulations (unsupportive habits & beliefs) that inhibit your natural relationship with yourself and your life.

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

Most of us long to be loved and cared for; to be supported in this "best friend" way that generates feelings of trust and safety. Yet, how many of us really experience that? As a culture, we have been so busy looking for love outside ourselves or giving love to others that we have forgotten how to love ourselves *unconditionally* on the inside.

Most of us have been trained by society and millions of media messages to believe that peace and happiness lie somewhere outside of ourselves. We've sought fulfillment in relationships, jobs, automobiles and stereos, only to wind up dissatisfied in the end. Seeking happiness outside of ourselves never works for long because the source isn't "out there." It rests in our own hearts.

This inner source needs tending, like a garden. The seeds require some quiet time and careful listening in order to sprout and flourish. When we nurture those seeds by treating ourselves like our own best friends, things in our outer lives usually begin to reflect this new pattern back to us. The rest of this article offers many suggestions to help you develop your "pink thumb."

Keep the "best friend" qualities listed above in mind as you explore your relationship with yourself. It may seem like a tall order, but with a little persistence you'll find yourself growing in each of these areas. Now, let's explore the possibility of being our own best

friend from the viewpoints of Mind, Body & Spirit.

Being Your Own Best Friend in the Realm of Your Mind

In the area of mind, there are two main indicators to notice: your thoughts and feelings. Do you pay attention to your thoughts, listening to what you're telling yourself in your mind? Is the voice inside usually optimistic, or worried? It is friendly and supportive, or harsh and judgmental?

Much of our mind chatter focuses on concerns about what might or might not happen in the future, otherwise known as worry. It's so common that it seems to be part of being human. Dr. Charles Mayo, the founder of the Mayo Clinic, said, "Half the beds in our hospitals are filled with people who worried themselves there." Worry and other forms of stress have a profound impact on our health. Fortunately, it is an unnecessary habit – one that can be changed.

Self-critical thoughts come from an aspect of the mind called the Inner Critic, which nearly everyone has to some degree. When the Inner Critic is active, we can be our own worst enemy! The bad news is that you can't stop the inner critic from tormenting you by force of will. The good news is that there's a better way to go about it.

An alternative to fighting with your Inner Critic (which only makes it stronger!) is what some spiritual disciplines refer to as mindfulness. Mindfulness could be defined as a combination of awareness, acceptance (non-resistance), and commitment to the process.

Practicing mindfulness develops an aspect of ourselves I like to call the Compassionate Witness, which feels like a loving presence and embodies the qualities of a best friend listed earlier. The more we practice, the stronger it becomes. The Compassionate Witness knows the Inner Critic is only a programmed part of the mind (often an internalized authority figure), and doesn't take what it says personally.

Noticing the thoughts running through your mind will bring awareness to your patterns of inner dialogue.

Here's an interesting exercise: write down all the thoughts you have about yourself during the day. You won't catch them all, but do the best you can. You'll soon recognize a pattern of recurring themes. If you're like most people, some of your "self-talk" will be negative in nature.

Once you have this awareness, you can practice being "present" with the troubling thoughts each time they arise. Being present means bringing the qualities of mindfulness to your inner conversation - being a Compassionate Witness to whatever you are experiencing right now - and observing it in a loving way, without resisting or trying to change it. It helps to approach any negativity with an element of neutral curiosity, this is, without judgment, expectation of a particular outcome, or trying to figure it out mentally. "Hmm, isn't *this* interesting?"

Also be sure to include any emotions or physical reactions that accompany your self-critical thoughts. Bringing your Compassionate Witness to these reactions will give rise to new insights. The troubling thoughts & feelings will usually diminish over time as you practice this new awareness.

You can practice being present to your thoughts and feelings during prayer or meditation, and while doing mundane activities. This will develop your ability to live in the present moment. It will also strengthen your ability to be a Compassionate Witness when you experience challenging situations like an argument with someone you care about.

I found this process very difficult at first, but with practice it became easier. Bringing your Compassionate Witness to your inner and outer challenges will gradually shift your experience from one of emotional suffering to inner peacefulness.

Applying this simple approach to negative habit patterns, or reactions to people or events will dramatically reduce your stress.

It's simple, but it isn't easy, and this is where the commitment comes in. When you notice you have fallen off the wagon, just acknowledge it, accept your "slip" and climb back on. No blame. Developing your Compassionate Witness is like taking a giant step toward being your own best friend!

Being Your Own Best Friend in Your Relationship with Your Body

If you'd like to see if you're being a best friend to yourself in regard to your body, a useful question to ask is, "Do I care for my body at least as well as I care for my kids, pets, or car?" Everything in life seems to require a certain amount of maintenance, and our bodies are no exception!

Most of us approach taking care of our bodies like household chores - it's the last thing on our list and we do as little as possible to get by! Do you like your body? Do you wish you could trade it in on a new model? Have you noticed how difficult it can be to care for something you don't like? Are you willing to accept it the way it is, and the way it is not - like a best friend would do?

We have only two choices: to accept our bodies or to reject them. Virtually everyone has something they reject about their body, even models who regularly appear on magazine covers!

Here's a simple exercise: take a good look at your body in a full-length mirror (without clothes on) and notice what comes up in your mind. Acceptance supports a healthy relationship and the potential for change, while rejection feeds an inner war (stalemate).

Practice bringing your Compassionate Witness to that conversation and notice how it changes over time. See if you can uncover the beliefs you've had about your body. You may or may not have insights about where these beliefs came from, but the most important thing is to ask yourself (or your best friend) is, "Are they really *true*?"

Some other questions to consider: do you eat healthy food in moderation & drink pure water, or frequently grab some junk food on the run? Do you avoid caffeine, alcohol,

cigarettes & other drugs? Do you get regular exercise that you *enjoy*, or avoid it like the plague?

Do you get adequate rest & sleep, or push yourself to the limit, trying to fit everything in? When you're feeling sick, do you take time off for healing, or keep on pushing? Do you get appropriate health care when you need it, or do you put it off and try to tough it out? Do you notice any parallels between your responses to these queries and the patterns of your inner critic?

Many people find it's easier to encourage others to care for their bodies, than to do so themselves. Ask your body what it needs and listen inside to sense its reply. Practicing the mindfulness technique previously described in regard to your physical sensations and general body awareness will enhance communication between you and your body, and help you to be "better friends."

Being Your Own Best Friend in Your Spiritual Life

Do you nourish your spirit as well as you nourish your partner, best friend, kids or pets? Do you spend time on the care and feeding of your soul on a regular basis? Do you frequently take time to do something you really love to do? This would be something that lifts you up, like art, music, dancing, playing, being creative, reading, gardening, being with nature, etc.

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey talks about chief executives who write in time for themselves on their calendars before they schedule anything else. You could call this "Sacred Time," which can be used for anything that feeds your spirit.

Do you take time for *stillness*, as in prayer-meditation, reflection or journaling? We need some stillness to access our intuitive nature and connect with Spirit. We call it the "still, small voice within" for good reason. It doesn't shout - it whispers, and without some quiet space in our lives we're likely to miss its precious guidance.

Many of us have a fear of being with stillness because it feels uncomfortable. Since

stillness isn't part of our culture, we're not used to it. At first, going into the stillness might be like opening a door that's been closed most of our lives. We don't know what we'll find in that old closet. For most of us it can be downright scary at first.

We might discover memories or feelings we buried long ago. Some of us fill our lives with busyness in order to avoid unpleasant feelings we've tucked away. Bringing our Compassionate Witness to these old feelings and offering them a place in our hearts allows healing to take place and eventually lightens the load we carry.

At the same time, stillness can be the greatest gift we ever give ourselves. We may find parts of ourselves we left behind - parts we really liked as kids - creative, playful & adventurous parts! That old closet could actually be the entry way to a whole new world of adventure & possibility.

Stillness also allows us to touch our Essence (Soul) and our connection with the Divine. This is where we find the love and peace we seek, and replenish our wells so they can continue to flow freely. When we "come home" to this inner source, we no longer fall for the illusion that happiness is somewhere else.

What Stops Us From Being Our Own Best Friend?

Our habitual patterns, beliefs and cultural conditioning get in the way of being our own best friend. Since we were little children, we've been taught the general beliefs of our culture so we can fit in - the "Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots" of society.

There are still places in the world today where going against these cultural beliefs can result in being killed, but the worst most of us suffer is rejection. Considering the fear of rejection that most of us carry, this can still be a powerful factor in determining our behavior!

In addition to cultural conditioning, we each have our own personal beliefs. These influence how we think and what we do. While we may consciously choose a few of our beliefs, most of us are unaware of many

others, which operate beneath our awareness (subconscious). Having a belief we aren't aware of is like being hypnotized without knowing it! And *what we don't know, runs the show!* In other words, non-conscious beliefs secretly control our choices and behaviors in life.

Here's an example. Do you have talented friends who don't believe they are very good at what they do? Who doesn't, right? What happens when you try to tell them otherwise? They deny their own gifts and abilities, and there is no convincing them otherwise! You could say they were hypnotized by a belief that they weren't good enough. *You* can clearly see that it's not true, but *they* are blind to that fact.

A similar dynamic is often at work for people with weight challenges. It's only when we bring our beliefs and automatic patterns to conscious awareness that we begin to have a choice. Otherwise we're literally in a trance, unable to be a best friend to ourselves.

Common Beliefs That Get In The Way Of Being Our Own Best Friend

Do you believe that it's *selfish* to want time for yourself? Many of us believe it's selfish to take time away from our kids, spouses, or work for our own needs, so we often put our own wants and needs aside. There they sit, awaiting that mythical "someday" when we "have more time."

It is a sad state of affairs when we have *self-care* mixed up with *selfish*. Here's another way to look at it. A selfish person has no real concern for others (just themselves). Self-care is taking care of our well-being so we actually have something to give to others without draining our own reserves.

When an airline attendant demonstrates how to use the oxygen mask, they advise parents to put their own masks on first, and then put on their child's. There is a good reason for this: if the caregiver doesn't take care of themselves, they will put those who depend on them at risk! Yet, what emotion do you usually feel when you put on your "oxygen mask" in life by taking some time for yourself? Quite often it's guilt!

It's practically a cultural sin to take time for yourself, especially if you're a parent! But if we neglect our own needs in order to care for others, we are likely to find ourselves depleted and resentful. This eventually leads to unhappy consequences, such as angry comments or outbursts that hurt those we love.

Unresolved stress like this can even lead to life-threatening illness, making us a burden on those we were trying to care for. We can help prevent such suffering by balancing being a good friend to others with being a good friend to ourselves.

Not Good Enough?

Deep down, many of us carry a belief that we don't *deserve* to be supported, nurtured, loved, or to take special time for ourselves. It could be a belief that we're not quite good enough – that we're not worthy of such support.

Like the Inner Critic, a sense of unworthiness is very common. Most of us have it to some extent, but we do our best to hide it from others and even from ourselves. It often manifests as constantly striving to prove ourselves, or gain approval from others by living up to their demands or expectations. We pay a heavy price for such approval in terms of our own well-being.

Basing our priorities on the demands or expectations of others make us slaves to their whim. It also teaches others to be dependent on us (or controlling).

Looking at it from another point of view, isn't it our responsibility to take good care of ourselves in body, mind and spirit, and to teach those in our care to do the same by being healthy role models ourselves? How else will our children learn how to do this?

But I Don't Have Time!

Another "popular" belief that gets in our way is reflected in our modern day mantra, "I don't have time!" Because practically everyone agrees with this, we don't think to question it. While we each have 24 hours, most of us have so many commitments that there seems to be no time left over for the

things we really want to do. But is it really true that we don't have time?

Try observing how you spend your time for a week and see if it is a good reflection of what is truly most important to you. If we consciously identify what's truly important to us and set our priorities accordingly, it is easier to create some open space for those things that really matter.

Set aside some quiet time to ask your heart what's most important to you. Try doing some spontaneous (uncensored) writing from your heart in response to this question. Discussing this topic with people you trust will often bring forth a new awareness.

Notice if you tend to base your priorities on what other people want or think, or on your own inner wisdom. It's easy to become resentful when you feel obligated, or if you've allowed others to dictate how you spend your time. You'll become a much better friend to yourself (and others) when you reclaim your natural right to make those choices!

Rewriting Your Belief Software

Most of our beliefs take root when we're very young. They come from our parents, schools, and culture in general. Children naturally absorb language, behaviors and beliefs from those around them, especially their authority figures.

Most of this information is stored in the subconscious mind, outside our conscious awareness. It becomes our "template" for how to survive in the world.

This is fine if the values we've absorbed are positive, affirming and wise. Research has shown that children who are raised in a loving environment are much more likely to grow up to be happy, healthy and successful than those who are raised in more stressful situations.

As anyone who's made resolutions to change their behavior can attest, subconscious beliefs are relatively impervious to willpower. While highly motivated people seem to overcome their negative programming, many do so at a cost to their well-being, and their "success" can levy a heavy price.

Fortunately, some modalities have evolved that allow us to rewrite our subconscious negative beliefs with positive versions.

PSYCH-K was developed by psychologist Robert Williams over the last 20 years, and appears to have a reasonable track record in helping people find freedom from old limiting beliefs. Please see "Useful Resources" below for more information.

Hypnotherapy, which works with the subconscious mind, can also be very helpful in changing our old belief structures.

Self-Care is the Best Health Care

How we treat ourselves is one of the biggest and most neglected issues in health care. Treating ourselves poorly is a major cause of physical and mental-emotional stress, and 90% of all illness is thought to be stress-related.

In spite of high-tech medical advances, health care costs are soaring and record numbers of people suffer from anxiety, depression, and all manner of physical diseases.

Here's a simple, common sense fact: no amount of technology, surgeries or medications can ever replace the need to be your own best friend!

However, being your own best friend can reduce the need for expensive medical care. Practicing the qualities of true friendship with yourself will definitely enhance any therapeutic options you choose to pursue in your quest for better health and vitality.

Making it OK to Have Fun

Many of us, myself included, have become overly "serious" in our approach to life. Faced with multiple real or perceived threats to our survival, everything seems so important!

Many of us act as if our lives will surely come tumbling down if we don't stay right on top of everything. Have you ever noticed that there always seems to be something new to be concerned about? But is this really true? I lived much of my life through the belief that I have to work all the time to keep things

going, along with a sense of urgency that I had to “do it all now.”

Needless to say, this viewpoint created a lot of unnecessary stress in my life. After seeing this unsustainable pattern in action, I allowed more time for play in my weekly schedule, and it’s made a *big* difference in my attitude, mood and energy level.

In case you need permission to include more fun in *your* life, here are your doctor’s orders:

Each week, invest a few hours in your well-being by doing things that tickle your funny bone, light your candle or feed your soul!

It’s Possible!

It really is possible to find what you have been searching for. Willingness is the key - willingness to explore your relationship with yourself, developing your inner awareness and bringing loving attention to areas where it’s needed – and willingness to face your fears and let go of familiar but worn-out beliefs and behaviors that keep you toiling on the treadmill to nowhere.

How to Practice Being Your Own Best Friend

You can choose from the list below, implementing those steps you find attractive, at a pace that works for you.

Useful Resources to Explore

1. My website, <http://GracefulWayHealingArts.com/> has many supporting articles on this and other themes. The intent is to provide valuable information and thought-provoking ideas to support you in your own *Health Empowerment*.

For more information on PSYCH-K, see:

<http://gracefulwayhealingarts.com/therapies/psych-k/>

2. Check out my Cultivating Peace series on developing more peace in your life:

<http://gracefulwayhealingarts.com/healing-library/stress-mastery/self-care-wisdom/cultivating-peace/part-1-nature-as-healer/>

3. For a **relaxing nature break**, visit Dr Dane’s photography galleries @

<http://drdane.smugmug.com/>

4. **The Enduring Peace DVD** is an empowering tool for relaxation, stress-reduction, nature connection, and personal & spiritual growth. Announcements will be posted on my website and blog when *Enduring Peace* is available for purchase.

- Develop the qualities of your Compassionate Witness by practicing awareness, acceptance and commitment with yourself and others.
- Do some writing about what’s most important to you, and where you want to invest your life energy. Notice where you actually spend your time (energy) each day and take small steps to introduce your new priorities.
- Listen to your body and ask it what it needs. Find a movement activity that you (and your body) enjoy doing, and practice it on a regular basis. Walking, swimming, yoga, Chi Gong or Tai Chi would be great for starters.
- Set aside regular “*Sacred Time*” for yourself for stillness, rejuvenation and doing what you love.
- Make time to be with nature’s nurturing beauty on a regular basis.
- Get support for your new intentions from people whom you know to be “best friends.”
- Consider starting a small group to focus on developing these qualities and support each other in the process.
- Get some coaching in this area for yourself or your group from someone who has developed this skill in his or her own life.
- Take a class in PSYCH-K, Emotion Code or EFT, and learn how to use one or more of these approaches for yourself (and other “friends”).