



Drinking poison

People often come to see me about “anger issues,” feeling they’re always on edge and mad at everyone. It doesn’t take long before their “anger” begins to be explained by other, more critical (vulnerable) feelings such as hurt, shock and a sense of betrayal and resentment.

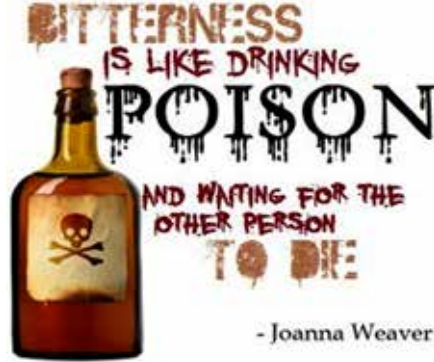
The problem with anger is that it can sometimes spread from being aimed at one person and situation to every other situation and person. Your anger may be justified you were passed over for a promotion or assignment despite being the most qualified, for example. Perhaps someone else got it because they had a personal relationship with the deciding supervisor. I have certainly seen that in policing.

Holding onto this anger contributes to resentment, which is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies. I’ve witnessed clients agonize over how someone else needs to change (boss, co-workers, parents). I remind them that there is no point in this suffering because we can’t change another person, no matter how much we agonize over it.

It seems as though they keep saying in their head, “but they must change for me to be happy.” If this is your logic, you’ll likely never be happy. You will likely keep circling that thought, feeling powerless and defeated. You have to figure out how to let it go and not let your happiness depend on someone else’s behaviour.

Unacknowledged anger and resentment tend to wreak havoc in our lives, affecting our physical and emotional health, relationships, work and, consequently, financial health. Physically, ongoing anger leads to headaches, stomach aches, muscle tension and poor focus, sleep and diet. It can wear us down emotionally, causing depression and/or anxiety from obsessive thoughts.

Our personal and professional relationships suffer because the pent-up anger is released while interacting with others. You might be passive aggressive, directly aggres-



sive and/or inattentive to the needs of others because you are so preoccupied with your own anger. You’re probably not very fun to be around. Have you been around a person who is always angry? Every conversation somehow finds its way back to how they have been wronged. At the beginning, friends and family are empathetic to their feelings. After a while, it gets tiring for others and they tend to stop coming around.

This is not to say that we should just accept abuse from others. There are situations where we should act and the “this/they must change” idea is the motivator behind advocating for that change. We just have to look at the situation and the way we are thinking about it to know whether to let it go or push for change. Do we or someone else have the power to change the situation? If so, what do we need to do to act on it? If we don’t, then we must move on and stop thinking about it.

Reflect on the serenity prayer “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.” It might feel like defeat to accept the situation or person, but it really is like drinking poison if you don’t. It doesn’t mean that you condone or approve of it. It just means you’re wise

enough to know that you need to put your energy somewhere else in your life.

How do you let it go? First, watch how you think about letting go. Some people have said it felt like they were losing and the other person was winning if they let it go. Yet, they don’t feel like they are winning at all. So give up that idea. You’re not winning if you’re suffering.

Is there anything you can change about the situation? Maybe even ask someone else if they think there is anything you can do to change it. If the answer is “no” then it’s time to shift your mindset. Remind yourself that you can’t change another person or situation. If they are a jerk then they are probably just as miserable on the inside as they are to others on the outside. They’re not winning either. Say to yourself “I can’t change this. I can’t waste my life and my happiness thinking that I can. What can I focus on to be happier?” Then focus on that.

Remember, nothing besides death is permanent (and that hasn’t been confirmed either). If you move on to other things you can control you might be surprised to find that down the road you get that promotion or assignment. You may also determine that you’re glad you didn’t get it after all. I know that has happened to me. How many times have you thought to yourself, “I’m glad that didn’t turn out as I had hoped. This is so much better.”

I’ll close with a quote from Helen Keller, which I hope summarizes my message: “When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.” I urge you to look toward that open door.

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