



TEN WAYS TO BE POWER POSITIVE

#9 OFFER YOURSELF CARE AND COMPASSION

Sounds easy. However, just offering care and compassion to yourself can be challenging. Some years ago, I opened my door to a new psychotherapy client. He sat down on the chair. He looked very uncomfortable – almost emotionally frozen. It was hard for him to look directly at me. “Tell me what brings you here,” I asked. “I am required to see a therapist by the Grievance Board. They found me guilty of an ethical violation. This is only one of many things I need to do to avoid losing my physician’s license. It wasn’t sexual, but my patient accused me of flirting and being emotionally intimate with her. She complained about how hurt she was several years after we stopped seeing each other. I didn’t even know she was hurt. Now, I just feel mortified.”

I took a moment to find my compassion for this man who had caused harm. I am more accustomed to clients who come to me because they have been harmed. So, our first process was to help Jim come out of his frozen shame. I think of shame as a kind of dungeon in which you are stuck for life because you feel there is something irreparably bad about you. When you understand that it is not your “self”, but only your behavior that might have been bad, you can experience it with the less devastating emotion of guilt. As soon as Jim was able to understand that he, himself, was not irreparably bad, but that his behavior had caused harm, he was able to come out from the shame dungeon and into social contact with me. In the shame state, understanding, repair and learning are not possible. On the other hand, in the less-traumatizing experience of guilt, Jim could talk about his behavior, understand that he was lonely in his marriage and needed an emotional friend. He found compassion for himself. He could then understand the pain this brought to his patient and why it isn’t appropriate to get your emotional needs met through your patients. Jim took an excellent course in ethical boundaries for physicians, and he and his wife engaged in couple’s counseling to work on rebuilding their marriage. At the completion of therapy, he was able to say, “I forgive myself. And I have learned a lot about good boundaries. I also know that my patients are now safe with me.”

“Compassion,” says Marc Barasch, “is resonating concern and an ability to see and respond to the connection between everyone and everything.” In Jim’s learning process, he needed to come to a personal reckoning about the mistake he had made. He couldn’t repair it with his patient directly, but he could and did make sure it wouldn’t happen again. To do this he needed to find “a resonating concern” for himself and for the patient he harmed.

Another aspect of offering care and compassion for self and others involves the practice of self-care. One of my students put it this way: “I just didn’t get the ethics of this until now. Self-care never even got on my priority list. It was like a luxury or a reward for over-working. Now I understand how my lack of self-care seriously disrupts my ability to be present. So, my question now is going to be: ‘What does it take for me to show up for my clients in a way that I feel good about?’ For me, that means getting enough sleep, exercise, and meditation.”

In terms of being power-positive here’s the equation: A. Lack of self-care contributes to stress, burn-out, and dulled awareness. B. These conditions interfere with your normal abilities to feel resourced and to handle difficult situations. C. Being under-resourced increases your vulnerability to misusing your power. There is a way that offering yourself care and compassion helps you in offering it to others.

TRY THESE ACTIVITIES:

1. Recall several times when you felt and acted caring and compassionate toward yourself. Notice the feeling you experience inside by remembering these instances. Let this feeling resonate throughout your being.
2. Research by neuroscientist, Dr. Richie Davidson identifies four qualities that contribute to Well-Being: 1. Resilience, 2. Focus on Positive Emotion, 3. Generosity, 4. Attention. Self-reflect on how well you are doing in each of these categories. Pick one to practice.
3. Make a list of four things that answer the question: “What does it take for me to show up in a way that I feel good about?” For a week, at the end of each day, note which ones of these four you did, and how it affected your quality of showing up.
4. Another client of mine habitually put himself down. His self-critic was on the job 24-7. In one of our sessions, he noticed himself projecting his criticism onto people who annoyed him, even people he didn’t know in a coffee shop. I suggested that he try standing in line for coffee, or anywhere, and looking around at people and silently saying a Buddhist prayer--“May all beings be happy. May all beings find peace,” over and over. Try it out yourself and see what impact it has on you.

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