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Lifeskills: Give-and-Take II

Recovery is about reality, about living in the now with respect for the past—mine and Bob’s. Reality says he went through hell. I went through another kind of hell, trying ineffectually to fix him. I developed a lot of dysfunctional patterns myself along the way.

The reality is we both are recovering. It is not some abstract goal or ideal of fairy-tale perfection, but a process of growth and change that I see as life-long—one of its fruits is a give-and-take relationship.

At one time I felt I was the most giving of people (and boy did I dish it out) and Bob was a taker. Today, I no longer discount all his good qualities because I’m too angry to see them.

I’ve thought a lot about give-and-take because it is such a great pleasure to me—being supported and supportive—helping each other, talking, cuddling with the guy who once thought hugs were a waste of time, being able to say no or not now to each other without hard feelings—all of these are miracles to me. This is the unexpected result of me letting go of fixing Bob and working on myself. I didn’t want to. I didn’t see how it could possibly work, but it did. When I was trying to change and fix him, all the energy that might have gone into his own recovery was spent, had to be spent, on resisting my attempts. Trauma survivors resist being controlled and manipulated even if it’s in the nicest possible way for their own good. Just like me!

When I looked at me, at my defensiveness, my inability to tolerate his pain, my own chaos-creating behaviors which gave an outside focus to my misery so I didn’t have to feel the pain of not being the perfect wife (because if I had been, I thought he wouldn’t be having problems), I saw things I wanted to change. This gave Bob the room he needed to find his own ways to recover. As we recovered we re-learned give-and-take.

Two great principles underlie give-and-take: honesty and acceptance. If I am honest, yet balance honesty with acceptance of you where you’re at now, we can begin to make a relationship that is a sanctuary. Give-and-take

is about balance, about helping each other; balanced work loads, not workaholism, not thin blue lips and being “giving” and perfect. You can’t give what you haven’t got. You have to set limits. Mine are pretty flexible now because rigidity seems to be incompatible with give-and-take. You may need to start out rigidly, however, to break old habits.

Self-care is an important element of give-and-take because it models healthy behavior for the other. Setting limits is okay. People with PTSD and their partners often are terrible at self-care. Self-care is the reverse of self-indulgence (sprees—eating, drinking, smoking, spending, drugging). Self-care is learning to make healthy choices for yourself (good food, enough water, vitamins, naps, quiet time, alone-time, fun, work).

Give-and-take involves **learning to know yourself and what you like**. Survivor guilt or rescuer guilt (that’s what I call what partners feel when they can’t fix the world for their loved ones but believe they should be able to) may make the word “like” seem like a four letter word, but it is important in recovery to reclaim parts of you you’ve lost, including things you once liked to do. You’ll also discover new things that help you feel more whole. Nothing can erase the trauma, or the pain of living with someone who was traumatized without being able to help, but pain can motivate healing.

Change the wording: Part of changing for me has been dropping the words *should*, *have to*, and *ought* (they evoke rebellion or despair in me, depending on whether I am feeling pushed around or perfectionistic) and using *might like to*, *want to*, and *willing to*. Changing those words in your head is something that takes effort and practice.

Wanting to do something and *being willing* to do something are two different things. They are even spelled differently. Sometimes I am willing to do things that I don’t want to do because I think they will improve my life.

Start small: I have never been able to make grand sweeping changes in my life or the way I act. I have had some success with small steps taken one day at a time. What ever you do, start small and don’t have huge expectations. Change is generally a slow and difficult process even when you want to change.

Necessary Pain: For me, change is always accompanied by pain. Now that I expect pain, I deal with it better.

In the give-and-take of family life, I've observed three kinds of pain. The first says "Don't do this." When, once again, I find myself telling Bob how to think or feel about something, or when he gets mad at me because I have, it hurts. The pain helps me make an effort to stop.

The second kind, a great wave of pain, is probably from a different time zone: When have I felt like this before? Is my reaction way overboard? If it is, I am not going to be able to heal the pain by forcing the response that I want today, even though it may seem like it. It is going to take time and work on myself, rather than making someone else do something for me so I'll feel good. This is hard to face. Urgency and the feeling that "This time it is different," are my clues that I am doing it.

The third reason for pain may be that I am feeling pain from this new healthy action I am taking, so it is okay to be in pain, and I need to see it through.

An example: For much of my married life, I complained that Bob wasn't "nice" to me. One day, he stood up to get me hot water for my tea. I could hardly bear it. I wanted to do it myself. The urgency was intense, but I said to myself, "You're always bitching about how he doesn't help you, but here he is trying to help, and you want to stop him. Sit still!" I had to grab the seat of the chair and hang on for dear life to keep from taking over. It is hard and painful to change long-practiced patterns, to bite your tongue or let someone do something their way, but it is really worth the effort.

Ask early and ask often: I felt if I didn't get what I asked for, I was nothing, no good, not worth helping. This fear kept me from asking for help until I absolutely had to have it, which is not asking: it is demanding. When you are making demands, there is no give- and-take. I had to learn to ask early and ask often and be willing to take no for an answer. Then I was really asking.

You might talk over this concept with whomever you are trying to start a bit of give-and-take. You could decide to ask each other for, say, 10 silly things a day, just for practice. Develop a system for indicating moments when help would really be appreciated. Use it sparingly.

Ask specifically and let go:

Along with accepting no for an answer, I had to practice letting people do things their way. I also had to practice saying what I wanted more

specifically. At first I was afraid to say, “Would you put those groceries over by the refrigerator?”

Observe your voice: When I began to try to ask more specifically for what I wanted, I was so nervous that my requests would come shooting out in what I call Hitler voice. Speaking like a dictator made Bob mad and sometimes he’d say “No,” so I got to practice asking and not getting at the same time. It was pretty funny. With practice, I gained control of my voice, and now I can usually ask in a nice way. When I don’t, Bob gives me the eyebrow and I say, “Was that in Hitler voice? Sorry!” I can’t tell when I am doing it. Most of us can’t. Perfectionism would once have thrown me into despair for using Hitler voice. Today, I just acknowledge the mistake and say, “Sorry.” “Sorry,” is a nice word to hear, so I like to practice saying it. Working on my perfectionism!

Another problem I had with give-and-take was **asking for stuff I really wanted in such a wishy-washy way** that it didn’t seem like I cared. “I’d like to go see Thelma and Louise, unless you don’t want to...” Noodle voice. This wasn’t honest. It made it very hard for Bob to figure out what I did want. Can’t have give-and-take if one partner won’t say what he or she wants. Both sexes have difficulty with this. Finding out what you like and want is part of recovery.

Another version of this is no voice, not asking because you think they should know. Mind-reading is for magicians. Words work better in daily life.

Observe what you say:

Sometimes verbalizing what you want can bring a moment of insight. I remember steaming inside while Bob was putting the groceries in the wrong place, then saying to myself, “but you haven’t even told him where you want them.” I realized that I wanted Bob to do things without me having to take the risk of saying what, where, or how I wanted it done! Now that’s funny. When you say what you really want, even if only to yourself, you might realize that what you really want is to be able to stay drunk all the time, or be right all the time, or be mad all the time. Such desires are probably damaging your relationships. You can’t change it until you see it. On those lines, If I say “Don’t be sad,” it sounds much nicer and much different than “I don’t want to let you feel sad even though you obviously are.” “You don’t want to do that,” becomes “I don’t want you to want to do that.” Oops.

Give-and-take: When I could ask and be okay with not getting what I wanted, my life got easier. I no longer felt it was a measure of my worth if someone did something for me. It was nice, but no longer necessary. I stopped keeping score and dragging a bag full of resentments with me everywhere I went. Give-and-take doesn't mean that I always get what I want, nor do I always have to do what you want. Give-and-take means we ask early, ask often, don't have to get what we have asked for, but pretty often we either get that or something better! Those moments of happy eye contact come more often because we are on the same team. Sulking and glaring vanish. "Why can't you ever—" is replaced by "Thanks, dearest." It sounds too good to be true but it can be achieved if you are willing to make a persistent effort. It is not without pain.

One day at a time: Practicing a new skill like give-and-take is a one-day-at-a-time thing: try it today and see how it works out. It is easier to do things just for today than it is to project it all the days of your life. Most people can practice give-and-take for one day. Make it today. You already know something your spouse (or friend or family member) would like you to do. You may feel that if you do it once, you'll always have to do it or be expected to do it. Talking about it will help. "I want to do this for you today, but I'm afraid you'll get mad if I do it once and don't keep it up." The other person may not like this, but that's okay. You are trying to learn give-and-take not people-pleasing.

Make a gratitude list: For me, a change in attitude really increased my ability to change and grow. Is your glass half-empty or half-full? It's a matter of perspective. When you live with PTSD, you may focus more on negatives than positives. My glass was half-empty, so that when someone did something for me, it was about damn time, and I knew it wouldn't last, so why enjoy it? When I wrote my first gratitude list at the suggestion of someone in a 12-step program, I began to look at everything in my life, particularly my family members, with new eyes. I had seen what they weren't doing. Now I saw things I had taken for granted or discounted. "Well, yeah, he never left me, but..." became "He never left me, no matter how self-righteous I was." That is something for which I can be grateful. My old thinking was "He should stay with me so why should I be grateful?" followed by a list of complaints. When I could see that he never left me, I felt more loving and much more giving. Put all the things the

other person does, like laundry or mowing the grass on your gratitude list, even if they are done imperfectly and occasionally. Put arms and legs that work on there, too, if you have them. Make it a game. I do one every day. Make some of it funny: my septic tank has been on there. “That I’m not so-n-so” shows up when I get reminded of what my life used to be like.

You can also make a list of what you do and what the other person does. What do you do that you feel he or she discounts? Ask for appreciation and let go. You may not get it, but you have done your part. What does s/he do that you discount? Start saying thank you for those things. This may make your family nuts. For a lot of people, being thanked is almost worse than being criticized. I watch people’s faces when I thank or compliment them and say, “Take that!” in a kidding way if I see they are uncomfortable. Part of recovery for me has been learning to say thanks and give compliments. I’ve had to learn to take them, too. Ouch! Some people are amazed and gratified when their efforts are noticed.

For free and for fun: If you find yourself thinking about something you know your partner would like and saying, “I’m not gonna’ do that for him/her. He/she never does anything for me!” My suggestion is to do it anyhow, for free and for fun, not for a payback, even if you want a payback (it is okay to have two different feelings at the same time). It is good practice. Recent studies of altruistic behavior have shown that doing something for someone else is empowering and enhances physical health. Doing something for your nearest and dearest might be, too. See what happens. Maybe the other person will reciprocate. Maybe not. Say to yourself, “Let it begin with me.” Afterwards you can write about how you feel, what you hoped for, whether it really killed you not to get it, or even how it felt to get it.

Keep track of what you try, what you liked (or liked the reaction) well enough to do again. You might even write it down. See if there is a pattern.

Keeping track: Keep track of what you are doing, to see if you are over-or under-doing. Write down what you do, how you felt while you were doing it and how you feel having accomplished it, what you wanted, what you got. Then look at your energy level and your emotions. Look for patterns.

Acceptance: This is a chance to practice self-acceptance (I have limits and need to respect them) and acceptance of others (s/he has limits and I

need to respect them, too). You can't be perfect. The other name for saint is pain-in-the-butt. Most of us are not saints and we don't have to be.

Giving attention: I used to think giving stuff was required. Now I know the best thing I can give is my undivided attention. Having an almost-two-year-old grandson really illustrates this, the way he lights up when he's showing me something. Believe me, even a fifty-seven-year-old man can light up when he is telling you about something or open up when he is sharing some deep feeling when he knows you are interested. If you think people shouldn't want or need attention, it says more about your family's patterns than about human nature. It may also explain some of the difficulties you may have with relationships. Why be in a relationship if you don't want attention and aren't willing to give it?

There will always be times when you simply can't give attention. Saying "I can't right now," is okay in a give-and-take relationship. Make a date for later.

You always/you never: Drop these phrases from your vocabulary. They are two of the most common patterns of hidden verbal aggression between intimates. They also represent a cognitive distortion called globalization (always-and-forever-izing). Both phrases are communication stoppers and enrage the other person, so they are ineffective. Would you rather be right or happy? (Don't answer that till you've tried being happy. The question of who's right doesn't come up that much). As Suzette Hadin Elgin says in *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense*, it "should be looked upon as a bad habit to be broken, like spitting in public."

Practice conversation: Having a conversation with some people is hard. In a normal conversation a person says about three sentences and then pauses so other people can speak. If you are very isolated or don't really talk to that many people, you may overwhelm others with a barrage of words whenever you get the chance to talk. Oddly enough, this makes people reluctant to talk to you. Develop a variety of sources of support. If you are home alone all day, have some people you can communicate with on topics relevant to your recovery so you don't overwhelm your partner with a flood of words when s/he walks in the door. Or so you don't monopolize the group's time. This will also give you the opportunity to be supportive and practice your listening skills, too. Meanwhile count your sentences.

If I talk for more than three sentences, I need to ask myself, “What is going on with me?” Usually I’m afraid. Identifying that, even if it is ridiculous, means I can slow down and relax.

If someone does this regularly to me, I may turn to talk to someone else after the third sentence. If we are alone, I might mention it to them quietly and kindly, “I have something to say, too.”

Be a safe listener: In my family, conversations often open with the phrase, “No, you’re wrong.” Not that I noticed. One of my brothers recently pointed it out. Some family pattern! No one is safe talking in an environment like that. A safe listener really listens, the way we do at our Adult Children of Alcoholics meetings, without crosstalk (interrupting, commenting, hostile questioning, giving advice). Crosstalk recreates the experience of not being heard, being ridiculed, criticized, belittled, corrected, or told not to feel what we feel (and that includes saying don’t feel bad!) which many of us have had.

If I want to be heard, I have to learn to listen, really listen, listen to the whole sentence before I start thinking of my response. This is hard and takes practice. It is okay to ask a question if you don’t follow what the person is saying, or don’t understand a reference to something.

If I’m thinking what I’m going to say by the fourth word, I’m in trouble. People can tell when you are doing it, too. It is one reason why there is such difficulty in many marriages over talking to each other. Listening to correct or advise isn’t really listening. It used to be the only way I listened. I also used to complain that Bob never listened to me.

Effective talking: When it is my turn to talk, I use the word “I” and talk about my feelings (“I feel,” is empowering, “You make me feel,” is giving away my power). I avoid the word “you.” People get defensive when you start you-ing them. They can’t hear what you are actually saying. Part of give-and-take is being heard, too, saying things in a way that can be heard. If you are wondering why no one listens to you, you can always tape yourself. Do you order people around, whine, whisper, speak in a contemptuous tone? Are you you-ing everyone? Do you talk non-stop? If you do, you can’t change it till you can hear it.

Control talking: If you don’t feel heard because people are not doing what you say, remember most people are not going to suddenly change because we have expressed our feelings or opinions or desires. It is good to

prepare for this. My responsibility in the give-and-take of conversation is to say my part, express myself. One way to tell that you are not simply expressing yourself—as opposed to trying to control someone else—is the number of times you say something.

Mr/s. Annoying: I've heard that if someone is doing something that really annoys you, you probably do it, too. Well, looking back, I never really listened to Bob, yet I was very angry at him for not really listening to me. Pretty funny! You might try writing a list of the things people do that tick you off and then look at how you may be doing them too. Thinking “Yeah, but I'm right!” is a signal that you also are doing the thing that annoys you in others. Being human, they are probably thinking, “Yeah, but I'm right,” too. You could say to yourself, “Would I rather be right or happy?” and “How effective is it?” Somehow, being right is rarely effective. Annoying, yes. Effective, no.

Self-knowledge: “Recover” means to regain, to restore. We are trying to restore ourselves amid the welter of damaged self-concepts and survivor skills we have adopted in order to live with PTSD. To recover parts of ourselves lost in traumatic events requires a lot of self-examination. Although it is easier to look at other people and criticize than to look clearly and kindly at ourselves, self-knowledge is the beginning of change. Remember no one is perfect. Recovery is progress not perfection.

Finding yourself is an internal process. It isn't totally internal. Most of us need help. We need our goodness and worth mirrored back to us by a therapist, a 12-step group, or a group of fellow survivors or other family members, until we can feel it ourselves. I've found that the major changing and growing had to be inside me, however. I was never able to change or grow anyone else. Believe me, I tried! When I began to work on myself, it gave the other people in my life room to grow—and the opportunity to choose and supply their own fertilizer instead of my endless supply of you-know-what.

Tools that have helped me with self-knowledge are journaling, working the 12 steps with a sponsor, going to meetings with people who share my problem, hearing them say something, and realizing I do that too, talking to other people, reading about co-dependency, trauma and recovery. Therapy is another avenue.

Kindness and courtesy: are important for me to give. This is really hard for me. I'm a sarcastic, cynical tease, which is okay some- times, but I have to be aware of who's laughing, and if it's only me, I stop. I tend to take people for granted, too, especially my nearest and dearest, and forget they deserve care and consideration. Today, this is an important part of the give-and-take in my marriage, saying, "Thank you for carrying that basket of laundry down," or "Thank you for washing those dishes," "Thanks for doing the bills." Yes, they are everyday chores. No, I don't have to take them for granted. Giving and taking appreciation is good practice.

Test your giving: I have to be aware of several things which help me determine if I am being codependent (i.e. overly-giving) or not. If I feel urgency, that white-hot must-do-it-now flame, I don't do it, no matter how much it hurts not to. If I feel that this time it is different, (can show up as "Yes, but—") that's another signal to me that I am acting out old patterns. I ask myself if I am doing something for someone that they could very well do for themselves? If so, there is no need for me to do it. My final question is "Would I let them do this for me?" If I would, I'm not being overly-giving. The same guidelines apply when I want to give some "constructive criticism." Criticism is rarely constructive. My guide- lines for today are "Is it true?" "Is it kind?" "Is it necessary?" It has to be all three for me to say it.

Buying into BS: Another problem that can arise in learning normal give-and-take is believing someone who says, "I never took anything from anyone in my life ." The implication is that you are a wuss. I remind myself such people are altering reality. Are they claiming they gave birth to themselves or took care of themselves as an infant? Created their own genes? Made their own jeans?

We all depend on others to some extent. People who deny it have a very human area of blindness, which, I believe, says more about them than it does about me. Or you. Just don't let them kid you into believing them. (Sometimes I mention this to them in a nice way.)

Work and sharing chores:

When I cook, Bob washes the dishes. I know how awful it is to always wash the dishes, however, so I try to beat him to it at least once a week. We try to help each other with large and small projects. I don't keep score anymore! Now, that is a miracle!

Since give-and-take is about balance, balanced work-loads are important. In the *Tightwad Gazette*, Amy Dacyzyn suggested that if one person works outside the home the other puts in 8 hours at home.

Housework is endless. If you both work, divide up the chores in a way that works for you, aiming for balance. If she likes mowing the lawn and you like to vacuum, who cares what other people think? Alternate doing the chores you both hate. How can you make bath-room cleaning fun? Do it together naked? I don't know, but it might be fun trying.

Have fun: Do you remember the excitement you felt as a youngster when you gave someone a present, waiting to see their joy? Giving is fun. Getting is fun, too. If you make give-and-take a duty, a score-card, a job, it loses its spontaneity, and you lose.

It is really important to be able to laugh at yourself. Sometimes you may be seriously trying to change and find yourself asking your partner how the day went in Hitler voice because you are pushing yourself to be perfect. In the old heavy-does-it days this would have been an occasion for shaming and blaming yourself unless you could ingeniously twist it enough to make it the other person's fault. (I was great at that.) Today, it is an opportunity to laugh with your partner at yourself, "I'm sorry honey. Here I am trying to be nice in Hitler voice!"

Bob and I tease each other a lot. When I notice I've used Hitler voice, I say I'm sorry. Bob often twinkles at me, rolls his eyes, sighs deeply, and says, "Don't worry, dear. I'm used to it!" in a very martyred tone. We both crack up. At one time he wouldn't have been able to accept my apology. He would have said the same words in a bitter tone. I would have reacted by twisting things until it was all his fault. Man, am I glad not to have to live that way anymore.

Today he came back from the post-office and said, "You got some orders," handing them to me. "I didn't get any orders," he said in a sad voice. "Well, if you want I could give you some orders," I said with my best evil grin. "Yeah, I bet you could," he said. "Stand up straight!" We both cracked up. I'm sure it isn't the greatest humor, but we have fun, and it makes us feel very close to be laughing together.

Anyhow, I wish you the best with your efforts to learn give-and-take. It isn't rocket science, but it can sure make life easier.

Six things to try:

1. Say thank you to someone you don't usually thank. This is especially good if it is something you take for granted like laundry or having a job.
2. Do one thing right away when you are asked.
3. Decide on 3 things you could ask for and be willing to take no for an answer and do it. Tiny things or funny things are good to start with.
4. Say no to something small that you don't really want to do. You might want to check and see if it is small to your partner, too.
5. Ask a question and really listen to the answer.
6. Observe your next 5 conversations. Do you let other people talk? Do you talk? Or do you give one- word or very short answers?

Spouse Group:

My spouse group is growing, and we are using many of your articles. We just finished discussing the one on boundaries from the PTG, and I combined it with an art exercise on boundaries from a wonderful book, *Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art*, by Cohen, Barnes and Rankin,

We are also reading your book, and one of the women read both *Chickenhawk* and *Chickenhawk: Back In The World*. They wanted to begin at the beginning with yours (*Recovering From the War*), but found the chapters on the war overwhelming. The way you go about it is riveting, and gives the reader an authentic opportunity to imaginatively enter into the experience as much as one who wasn't there possibly can, and for them this was more than they could handle.

So we are going slowly, and I'm selecting excerpts that dovetail with the other readings; active listening, for example, in relation to boundaries.

Your work is an essential part of everything I'm doing these days, and I'm grateful for your insightful, aware, and informed writing, and glad to have it available to me.

I haven't used it with the Spouse/ Partner Support Group yet, but the exercise titled "Layered Feelings," Chapter 12, [*Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art*] possesses a mysterious power to help one gain genuine insight into the relationship between feelings. I tried it myself, and if you have the book, I expect you would find it illuminating as well.

Joan Fiset, MA Seattle Vet Center

And I did-PM

Thoughts about Nightmares

Art Blank, MD, said in a workshop on nightmare resolution a few years ago that he considers nightmares messengers. Unfortunately, most people think of them as messengers of pain. I tend to look at them as messengers of hope.

When something is unresolved, like a traumatic rape, an ambush in which buddies died, the loss of a loved one in a plane crash right after you had had an argument, most people tend to feel guilty about it, constantly thinking, “I should have...” or “I shouldn’t have...” or “If only...” These are normal reactions. If we lived in a society where there was a lot of support for people who have been through hell, they would probably resolve through talking and listening to others who have had similar experiences. Resolution can happen in therapy, too, but many people try to deal with the worst of what they experienced on their own. Shame and guilt about something that happened have a lot to do with this. They are painful feelings and most of us suppress or avoid them, at least during the day. At night they seem to take on a life of their own.

Nightmares seem to be a messenger from your inner-self telling you to get help, that what you have been through is too much for anyone to deal with alone. I suspect this cry for help is an in-born capacity, like the instinctive way babies cling to their mothers or kids become friends.

That the nightmare is a messenger can also mean that along with being a cry for help, the nightmare is telling you something you need to know. Suppose you were having a nightmare about someone you killed in Vietnam. The usual interpretation most people would put on this is “Feel guilty! I’m after you! You’re gonna get yours!” or some such variation. Most people would recoil from this and suppress the feeling of guilt that accompanies it. However, suppose the nightmare is telling you that you do feel guilty? Suppose the message is that suppression doesn’t work. If that’s the message, then the solution is that you need to think and talk about it, not go around and around in your own head trying to forget. You can evaluate your guilt with someone like a therapist or fellow recovering vet, forgive yourself (and probably the dead person for being dumb enough to have been at the wrong place at the wrong time), and find a way to make amends if you decide you need to.

The fact that you are suppressing and ignoring a strong emotion that you need to resolve, like guilt or fear, may be the cause of the nightmare.

A person who was raped may be telling herself that it shouldn't bother her now, that she is over it, that she shouldn't have worn that dress, that she is safe and shouldn't feel so afraid. The message of the nightmare would be that it does still bother you, that you are feeling guilty for wearing the dress, and that you do (quite naturally) feel afraid.

In therapy, you may have been told not to feel guilty for wearing the dress, or shooting the guy, or whatever; or not to feel afraid, sad, or any other of a number of so-called negative feelings.

To me, negative feelings are information. I need to know how I am feeling so I can know what I need to do to take care of myself. I need to accept them and feel them and evaluate whether they represent external or internal truth. If they represent external reality (i.e. I am living in a dangerous neighborhood, and don't lock the doors and windows), I can act on them. I can lock the doors.

If the feelings represent internal truth, I can act to heal my feelings. If my internal reality is that I feel afraid, I can take steps to feel more secure whether it's a bigger lock, a dog, or a teddy bear.

If my internal truth is that I feel guilty for wearing the red dress, I can tell myself, "Studies show that rapist rape people in their 80's as well as people in red dresses. I did not cause him to rape me." Then I can sit with and experience the feeling of guilt, without believing it, until it passes.

Beverly Donovan of the Brecksville VA works with veterans' nightmares. Instead of trying to change a historical nightmare, the vet adds on a piece at the end where he may tell his buddies how much he misses them, or tell the person he killed how sorry he is. "Your death gave me my life." For a rape survivor, the added piece could be telling the rapist that he hurt her, and she did not deserve it, nor did she do anything to cause the rape. "I am healing my life. I give you back this pain and shame, because they belong to you. Shame on you for raping me. I did not deserve it!"

Edward S. Kubaney of the Honolulu VA has developed a Cognitive-Behavioral treatment for Trauma Related Guilt.

Lori Daniels of the Honolulu VA has developed a way of resolving nightmares using, of all things, a sand tray and small toy figures which represent the trauma. Perhaps it works because it is easier to see the actual circumstances when you are looking down on the scene (probably why God is said to be so forgiving) and to stop blaming yourself for something beyond your control.

Thoughts on talking to each other

Trust a little, share some, and see what happens. If the person responds without judgment or advice and with support, share a little more. I learned this at my first ACOA meeting.

When two people are learning communication most will occasionally slip into advice or criticism. When this happens it is good to have a plan. I used to follow a couple of patterns when this happened to me. I would think they were right (gullibility) usually followed by waves of shame because I was wrong if they were right (black-and-white thinking), or I would cut myself off from the person (withdrawal and isolation—often just in my head, “Nag, nag, nag!”) because I didn’t want their advice and they should have known that. In recovery I learned another option, one which is much harder to do at first, but which brings us closer whenever I do it. Ask for what you want. “Bob, I just want to whine and snivel for a bit about this and I just need you to listen. I am not asking for advice.” This is a healing action. It is also hard to do, which is why I use humor.

Knowing what you want involves self awareness and speaking clearly (not noodling or bossing). The possibility of not getting it can be paralyzing. Today I look on this as an opportunity to grow. Taking no for an answer increases my flexibility and strength. At one time, if someone said “no” to me, I was worthless. Today all it means is they can’t do what I’m asking right now. I am all right with that.

Asking for what you want is part of the give-and-take of relationships, giving up mind-reading (they should know what I want) (I know what s/he wants) and learning to *talk*. The interchange of ideas and feelings is part of give-and-take. If the interchange is based in self-compassion, you will have compassion for each other. This takes practice: “I am feeling worthless at this moment because s/he doesn’t want to do X, but the fact that s/he doesn’t want to do X does not mean I am worthless. I am worthy and valuable and I can value myself even when people don’t do what I want.” That is self-compassion. Follow it by compassion for your partner. (S/he looks tired, etc.)

A word about gullibility: If someone you don’t know says “Trust me,” and you do, this is gullibility, not trust. Trust has to be earned over time.

Trying to get the right answer for you from someone else, as if they were the expert on your life, seems to be a common pattern. If you always ask for advice, ask yourself why? Are you seeking approval? Are you seeking perfection? Do you think finding the right advice means you will never make a mistake? Do you think there is one right choice that will keep you pain free? Are you aware that there are many healing choices and if one doesn't work out, you can try another?

There will always be some pain in life and no one's advice will prevent it. When I came to that understanding, my life got better because it wasn't this constant effort to avoid the natural pains of living.

One of the pains (notice I assumed that someone else would slip into advice-giving above) of my life is that I still slip into judging and advising people. Humor helps me there too. "Whoops! That was an entirely free sample of my codependency and advice-giving. No charge and sorry about that!"

As Bob puts it, "It is tough work, getting things to laugh about later."