



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

clearing toxic thoughts & feelings

Several years ago I was surprised to read that in 2005, almost twice as many people, 32,000, killed themselves as were killed by someone else (*New York Times Magazine*, July 6, 2008). With so much attention focused on the violence in our communities, the fact that suicide outstripped homicide at almost a two to one ratio came as a shock to me. Clearly inner pain and distress seems to be far more toxic threats to our lives than threats from the outside.

How do we bear the unbearable? How do people cope with toxic experiences in a way that enables them to not only endure, but to heal and thrive? While most of us may not experience the kind of pain that leads to actual suicide attempts, all of us will experience the loss of a loved one, many will cope with life threatening illnesses, financial or other crises and in the end we all face our own deaths. At some point most of us will have toxic thoughts and unpleasant feelings that can weigh us down or cripple us in one way or another.

Toxic thoughts usually have to do with unwarranted self-criticism. We can often “beat ourselves up” over small mistakes, our looks, our weight, or our accomplishments. While there is nothing wrong with self-improvement, harsh critical thoughts never help; they just make us feel worse.

Fear and anger are probably the most toxic emotions. Fear and anger can cause us to lash out in unhelpful self-protective ways. Fear can cripple us and prevent us from taking healthy risks. Fear can cause us to mistrust and stereotype those who are different from us.

Anger is often a response to stress. When we are stressed, things that normally we would not react to can irritate us. Anger can literally eat us up on the inside, keeping us from thinking clearly and wisely. Anne Lamont (*Traveling Mercies*), writes, “Being angry is like eating rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.” Feeling angry often makes us feel a little crazy and out of control. While sometimes anger can motivate us to make necessary changes, often it is simply a very unpleasant and disturbing emotion.

Learning to tolerate our inner pain is not something that our society emphasizes. Commercials all point us to pills and quick fixes to problems. Often it is only our spiritual communities that emphasize living with grace in the face of difficulties.

Obviously the first step when emotional pain seems overwhelming is simply staying alive, enduring until the pain begins to subside. While it is tempting to numb ourselves with food, alcohol, or other distractions, it is actually extremely important to be able to bear the pain of loss or fear. Running away from our feelings leaves them to become in the words of a wise client: “emotional abscesses.” Even the most difficult feelings will often subside in 20 minutes and over time the pain recedes.

In the face of a crisis, reaching out to others is essential. Talking to family members, friends, physicians, or pastors can dispel a little of the acute pain and allow some light, hope and faith in. Other people can offer perspectives and suggestions for how to get through the most acute phase and to begin to look at ways to handle things over the long term.

A counselor can provide a confidential space to vent all of the painful feelings without having to be concerned about overwhelming, offending, hurting, or frightening another person. In that private, safe space, new understandings and ways of looking at things can arise, and one can learn concrete ways of changing thoughts and behaviors to achieve a more balanced and peaceful inner experience.

Finally, examining beliefs about the nature of our human experience and the suffering that is inevitably a part of life can lead to a new spiritual awareness that can bring comfort during the hard times. I read a button once that struck me as inexplicably funny: “Life is hard and then you die.” I think to be fully aware we must accept the truth of that statement. However, to be fully free and joyful we must go on to know the other half of the truth—that life is awe-inspiringly beautiful. Only by recognizing both truths can we learn to live gracefully through times of crises and to feel an expanded sense of joy in the good and beautiful things available to us in this brief and wonderful life. ❧❧

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