

CHAPTER 5

Survival Tip # 3:
You Cannot Control or “Fix” Another Person,
so Stop Trying!



*“Never try to teach a pig to sing;
it wastes your time and it annoys the pig.”*

~ Robert A. Heinlein

Is it difficult for you to believe that you can't control another person—at least to some extent?

Like most people, you have probably tried repeatedly to change the behaviors of others in your life. Perhaps you have thought there must be a secret to this ability, and if you could only find it, then you could successfully make others behave the way you want them to.

Your Growing-Up Years

Survival Tip # 3 tells you that you are not able to control another person. That is because it is absolutely impossible for you to control anyone other than yourself. Many of you will want to argue this point with me, but ultimately you will find that to be a waste of your time. No matter how hard you try to fight it, the truth still remains that you simply cannot control or change anyone else—it is only with the other person's agreement and permission that you will experience the semblance of control over anyone other than yourself.

The reason this may be difficult for you to accept is that, although they probably meant well, your parents, teachers, and mentors that you could, in fact, change or control another person. Actually, our whole society seems to have been built around that premise. As children, we were taught by our elders that we could control and change another person's feelings and, as we grew up, we became aware that by behaving in certain ways, our parents would either feel upset or happy with us. Our songs, television shows, and even the magazines we read continually informed us that we could indeed make a person love us if we would just look better, smell better, *be* better in some way.

You also may have learned at an early age how to best maneuver a situation so that you could get your own way, which could have led you to think you were changing or controlling someone. Perhaps your teary tantrums or angry outbursts scared other people and appeared to give you control over them.

For example, as a child trying to persuade Mom to let you stay up late when she wouldn't hear of it, you may have learned that if you cried or told her “I hate you!” she would give in and change her mind. Or if you wanted to borrow your best friend's favorite sweater even though she was resistant to that idea, you may have been able to persuade her by becoming insistent or by offering to lend her something of yours. Perhaps you became skilled at playing the guilt card on occasion, believing people would then do what you asked of them. Some of you may have even been able to convince a teacher to raise your B to an A by using some form of learned manipulative behavior.

Although these kinds of experiences may have helped you get what you wanted in childhood, they could have also caused some confusion for you as you grew older and found yourself in a world that does not actually exist. In the real world, you can't control anyone but yourself, and you especially cannot change an addicted person who chooses not to change.

To illustrate, what was the emotional effect on you the first time you discovered there was somebody whose behavior you couldn't seem to change? If you had an alcoholic father, for example, and you wanted Daddy to stop coming home drunk and belligerent yet he continued to do just that, how did it affect you to see that his choice to behave this way was something you could not control no matter how hard you tried? When you saw that you weren't able to change another person, after being erroneously taught you could, the confusion and despair you felt may have led you to believe that you just weren't doing things right or trying hard enough. Although nothing could have been further from the truth, the seeds of low self-esteem are planted in this way, as you begin to believe that you are somehow simply not good enough.

The fact is that we live on a planet of free will. We are all making choices every moment of our lives. Most people decide the course of their behavior on the basis of cause and effect, with the inherent understanding that whatever they choose will have positive or negative consequences. However, some people have no such acknowledgment of how free will really works, preferring instead to ignore potential results just so they can have what they want when they want it. People with addictions generally fall into that category.

Unlearning Old Behaviors

In order to benefit from Survival Tip #3, you will need to “unlearn” some dysfunctional behavior patterns and core beliefs you developed in childhood. It will be imperative for you to become willing to explore the possibility of having developed your own addictive behavior of trying to control others. In order to stop living in a fantasy and instead opt to be part of the world that actually exists, you will be required to control only yourself.

Let's look at your life today, as an adult. When you try to convince your partner, child, friend, boss, or anyone else do things your way, your success or failure depends entirely upon whether that person *decides* to do it your way. It is always the other person's choice. And the same is true of you—nobody can make you do something you don't want to do, because you will choose how you want to do things in your own life. In your adult life, even if someone is abusively attempting to coerce you to act in a certain way, you are still really choosing your own behavior. It all comes down to personal choice—yours as well as other people's.

This is how life is on a planet of free will: anything that has to do with anyone other than you is not in your realm of control. And although you may find it easier in the short run to choose not to believe this, that doesn't make it any less true, nor will that decision help your life in the long run.

The Serenity Prayer Can Help

If someone you care about is grappling with addiction, you may have been expending a lot of time and energy trying to change a person or situation that you simply cannot change. Once you can fully understand the difference between what you can and cannot change, life with your addicted loved one will become much easier.

The Serenity Prayer is a tool that may help you understand that there are things about your life you can control and change, as well as things you simply can't.

These days, many people have heard of the Serenity Prayer. Although no one seems to be sure who actually wrote this short but powerful piece, anyone who has attended a meeting of a 12-Step group such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or Al-Anon for relief from addictive behaviors will recognize this prayer as the group recitation at the end of each meeting. The Serenity Prayer will provide you with an extremely helpful gauge to see whether you are trying to control people and situations that, in reality, you cannot control.

Let's take a look at the four lines of this prayer.

*God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

God, grant me the serenity...

Although the word "God" is used in the first line, alternatives such as Higher Power, Goddess, Creator, or Universal Force can also be used. Spiritual beliefs are very much a personal thing, and it is important to find your own way on that part of your journey. For example, rather than asking an all-powerful God to "grant" serenity, some people find it a better spiritual fit to say, "I want to have the serenity..." or "My intention is to develop the serenity..."

To have serenity means to have tranquility, calmness, or peace of mind. If you are not feeling a sense of serenity in your life, then your stress levels will be high. A lack of serenity will cause you to feel worried, anxious, and frustrated, and your physical and mental health will suffer.

...To accept the things I cannot change...

As we have discussed, although you may have believed that you can change another person if you just try hard enough, the truth is that we can't *make* anyone do something against his or her will. As human beings we ultimately have free will, and the only time people change anything is when *they make the decision to change*.

You always have choices as well, and one of your most important life decisions could be to accept the things—including the people in your life—you cannot change.

When you have chosen to see the reality of this concept, you will understand that you have no

power over anyone who does not choose to give that power to you.

...The courage to change the things I can...

Now comes the hard part. You will need to come out of your own denial to fully acknowledge and accept that the only thing you can change is yourself—and then *make the courageous choice to do it*.

If you are in a relationship with an addict and have chosen to keep this person in your life, you may feel you are giving far too much of yourself emotionally and physically without getting much back in return. You might be angry with the addict for not giving you what you need, such as respectful behavior, and this could fill you with a variety of resentful thoughts. In simply trying to get some of your own needs met, you might even find yourself becoming emotionally manipulative with your addicted loved one.

Instead of attempting to “make” the addict change, a healthier choice would be to decide what you are and are not willing to put up with any longer and set clear boundaries. If those boundaries are crossed, or if you feel you are being treated disrespectfully on a consistent basis—which is likely when you are dealing with someone in active addiction—you then have the option to make more courageous choices for yourself, such as limiting or ceasing contact with the addict temporarily or permanently.

It will probably not be easy for you to take this kind of responsibility for yourself at first—and that is why this part of the Serenity Prayer calls for “courage.” It doesn’t take courage to do the easy things in life. It takes courage to be willing to change yourself if you are not happy with something in your life—a much more difficult goal.

It may indeed have been easier for you up until now to put all the blame squarely on your addicted loved one. But a different, more courageous choice would be to decide to look inside yourself to discover what your part might be, and to work on changing whatever dysfunctional behaviors you may be bringing to the relationship. It is only when we let go of our need to change other people and instead decide to change ourselves that we can truly begin to heal.

...And the wisdom to know the difference.

This last line is the most important part of the Serenity Prayer. When you have the wisdom to know the differences between what you can and cannot change, you will save yourself a lot of time and energy, because you will begin to concentrate on what is realistically possible rather than focusing on fantasies. You will stop trying to control what you absolutely cannot control.

In addition, when you start to set healthier boundaries with your addicted loved one, you will feel more respect for yourself. As you find yourself taking more personal responsibility for yourself and your own choices, you will also change the ways in which you allow other people to treat you.

Having the wisdom to know the difference between what you can and cannot change, and knowing how to change the things you can control, will create the serenity that you have been wanting to find in your life.