

THE INNER BULLY

Working with Negative Self-Talk

STOP BULLYING? How long is that going to take? And in the meantime, how are our children going to navigate the unrelenting, painful and potentially life threatening moments they are faced with every single day? We may not be able to stop bullying any time soon. What is required is a profound social/cultural shift and it will take a long, long time. And while we are busy going out to WAR ON BULLIES, how many more kids will take their own lives?

It seems clear to me that the root of bullying needs to be extracted in order for this paradigm shift to take place. And it seems to me that the place we need to begin is with our own deeply rooted mental habit of inner-bullying. In order to heal this great festering wound in the culture, we need to heal it in ourselves first. How could it be otherwise? Whichever form it takes, verbal, physical, emotional; bullying is a dark gift, passed on to us and passed on by us. Our own self-hatred, our own feelings of inadequacy, our own need to feel powerful, projected onto others.

We've all had those moments when we've "lost it", be it with strangers, our colleagues, students, life-partners, beloved pets or our own children. We've said and done things we instantly regret. And just at that moment when what we need most is self-compassion, the "inner bully" wakes up and self-hating begins.

All human beings experience negative and critical thoughts. We all experience judgments about others and about ourselves. If we imagine that our negative thoughts are the voices emanating from our original wound, whatever that may be, we can see that these thoughts are simply beliefs that we have formed through negative judgments or behaviours projected onto us when we were too young to refuse or block them.

It's as though the wound and the beliefs formed around the wound have a magnetic pull...we struggle to push them away, but somehow we find ourselves pulled back in. The wounded voice puts words in our heads that try to convince us that we are not deserving of love, that we are bad, or invisible or whatever it was for us...and these voices are insidious and clever...they sneak in or randomly pop up, they whip us and blindside us and try to pull us down into the mouth of the wound; the abyss of shame, the pit of rage, the tunnel of fear, the bottomless well of grief. These thoughts work very hard at pretending to be necessary. They disguise themselves as "tough love", they coach us to try harder, be better, and improve ourselves. They convince us that we are not enough, not forgivable, not loveable and eventually that we do not deserve to live. The more we listen, the more we allow those thoughts to dominate and the more we buy into them as the truth about ourselves, the stronger the pull into the ever hungry mouth of that original wound...the mouth that wants to consume us...ultimately, it wants us dead so the pain will stop. We may cope with our

suffering by medicating with substances (alcohol, drugs, food). Or work addiction, disordered eating, cutting and other self-harming practices. A downward spiral right into the gaping maw.

WORKING WITH MINDFULNESS

When the wounded voice appears we cannot simply ignore it or push it away. However, we can learn how to work with toxic thinking habits through cultivating a mindfulness practice. We can practice acknowledging those voices in a neutral, non-reactive way. We can say things like, “Ahhh that voice is here again...I know you. You are the wounded one.” We can tell ourselves, “These old thought patterns no longer have power over me.” And we can practice loving kindness: “May I be free from suffering.”

When the suffering triggered by the thoughts arises suddenly, perhaps like a stab in the gut/the back/the heart. A blinding headache or intense anxiety, an inability to breathe deeply, we can sit still and use our awareness and our breath and our hands to track where the sensations are in our body. Rather than turning away, we can breathe through the raw physical sensation *without the old story that is inevitably attached*. When we become obsessed with the stories attached to our suffering, we are getting on a “Pain Train”. A one-way track to “Suffering Station”. The stories keep us cycling around and around like a hamster stuck on a wheel.

When we can let go of the stories, sit still and track our feelings we can cultivate the skill of dissolving our suffering. When we bring mindfulness to the present moment and track the pure sensations in our bodies until we can locate where they are trapped in our body we can begin the process of letting them go. If we can allow ourselves to move toward the painful feelings, as though we are looking through a magnifying device...closer, closer until the pain becomes a cellular experience...simply “sensation”. Then we can name it, “suffering...suffering...” and stay with it until it changes. And it will change. It may get more intense before it eases. When we make the intention to let it go, when we release the persistent stories that justify, blame and keep us in anger, shame, fear or grief we will experience a sense of the suffering dissolving. We may have to repeat this process many times to uproot the original wound.

Cultivating a daily mindfulness practice is a profound way to encourage a lasting transformation of the old neural pathways...the pain train may open it’s doors to us over and over and eventually, as we practice not getting on that track, the train will stop there less and less often.

We can support new neural pathways with our mindfulness practice. We can find our own mantra to counter the pull of that dark place. We can create a ritual of sending ourselves loving kindness.

Metta (Loving-Kindness) Prayer

May I be happy
May I be filled with loving-kindness
May I be free from suffering
May I be healthy in mind and body

May I be safe from inner and outer harm
May I be compassionate and wise
May I be peaceful

Exercise: ask group to remember a moment when they failed in some way. Ask them to identify the word, or words they use to “beat themselves up”. Ask them to write down some of the words their inner-bully uses.

Collect the papers, shuffle them up and hand them back out to the group. Ask them to read what is written on their paper out loud.

Ask the group to reflect on the differences and similarities between the statements. Ask the group to ask themselves if they have ever used these words on others. Ask the group to imagine how it would feel if another person said those words to them, or if they witnessed those words being said to a loved one, a friend, a student or colleague.

Now ask the group to make a decision not to be a *silent bystander* when their own inner bully starts in on them. Ask them to become an up-stander for themselves. They can come up with an assertive statement that they can say to their inner-bully when negative thinking and self judgments arise. For example:

“I don’t like how you are talking to me.”

“That is so not true about me.”

“I know you are suffering but it’s no longer ok for me that you take it out on me in that unkind way.”

“That is not useful, that is not kind, and that is not true about me.”

When we cultivate loving kindness toward ourselves, we can pass it on, a gift of light, to all other beings:

May all beings be free from suffering.