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Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



Toxic Environments

Genuine beginnings begin within us, even when they are brought to our attention by external opportunities. — William Bridges

An alarming external crisis has shocked citizens into action mode. Recently, a section of Los Angeles at the northern end of the San Fernando Valley, Porter Ranch, has been experiencing a toxic environmental crisis, a massive natural gas leak that had been brewing underground for years, but until it reached near-catastrophic proportions, no one took action to correct it. Incredibly, 65,000 tons of climate-wrecking methane had been spewing into the air, threatening the health of thousands, and forcing California's Governor Jerry Brown to declare a state of emergency. This gas leak is an indication of California's outdated infrastructure: water pipes, roads, schools, all set against a backdrop of fiscal mismanagement and wrongdoing. Thousands of people had to move out of their homes. This gas leak is a wake-up call to be taken seriously — a call for people to band together to demand change.



Most of us know that when it comes to the physical world around us, it often takes a crisis such as a tornado, earthquake, or flood, to make us grasp that something must be done. Undercurrents of disaster can stare us in the face for a long time before we finally decide to take action.

But What About Toxic *Emotional* Environments?

Unlike the Porter Ranch gas leak, toxic *emotional* environments are not due to bureaucratic bungling. Rather, they are unseen but *felt* emotionally. Repeated “slights” or a “cold shoulder” from someone you care about or a “heated argument” can be painful and can have a way of making us feel guilty about nothing. Often this occurs when *immature* warrior energy rules the roost, resulting in resentment and dependency that leaves little room for loving or affection. Even when angry outbursts are not physical, that energy is as toxic to the relationship as a methane gas leak! Communication styles that use shame, put-downs, or verbal abuse, mean everybody loses: self-esteem, intimacy, trust, security, autonomy, and independence.

Cynthia, was a 40-year-old wife and mother of two teen daughters when she realized she needed a husband to love her, not treat her like an object. She states, “Up to a point, I was perfectly comfortable with relationships that replicated the lack of communication, the rage, and the frustration that I’d witnessed in my family growing up. It was a real comfortable old shoe. But then one day I realized, ‘No, that’s not comfortable at all. No more!’”

Like Cynthia, we often fail to recognize the unconscious story behind toxic emotional environments, the residue of the past that gets played out in the present, resulting in a perpetual state of chaos, confusion and fear. The big question is, is the crisis an event, or is it ongoing? Ideally, crisis can become a turning point, a path of awakening, a chance for self-reflection, and opportunity for growth. They become turning points that lead to change so that our lives, our emotional environments, become more joyful, caring, and more meaningful.



What motivates change?

Psychologists have long researched what motivates people to change. It is two-fold: *external* and *internal* — and when people actually create change, it's like turning lead into gold!

We all experience life crises and seem to find a way to just muddle through it. But when crises are a way of life, then muddling leads us nowhere but back to the status quo. So, the impetus for a significant life change is often that kick in the pants that comes from an *external* life-event, such as a divorce, illness, or the death of a spouse. In dealing constructively with those external toxic situations we move out of the comfort zone, away from learned patterns, away from shut down and emotional withdrawal. This requires self-reflection, facing ourselves squarely in the mirror, and suffering through painful states of anxiety.

External life crises provide opportunities for turning points, but they are not turning points in and of themselves. It is what one makes of them. By accepting perpetual crisis as the norm — which continues to replicate the non-communication, the rage, the trauma, or the frustration witnessed growing up — then nothing changes. Tolerating crisis as a way of life is a learned behavioral pattern, an unconscious choice; it does not *have* to be a way of life. Accepting toxic emotional environments as “my lot in life” can be a real comfortable shoe; it's difficult to give it up.

Hard decisions

“Before, I knew I was hollow. I had very hard feelings, very cold feelings.”

There comes a time in our lives when we need to make some really hard decisions. It is empowering to understand the emotional bond, the invisible ribbons, and toxic internalized messages that we swallowed to survive. If we are listening to our hearts about what is brewing underground, we can break free from toxic relationship patterns. Crisis opens that doorway! It is an opportunity to address short-term goals as well as major issues. Long-term therapy shines the light on deeply embedded, destructive beliefs that keep us stuck in the muddy waters of resentment, fear, or in a victim position. Walking that “yellow brick road,” “leaving home,” leaving a “comfortable shoe” turns continual life crisis from a life-style to an event.

In a therapeutic environment, we are being asked to reverse the wheel of history, to change our unconscious inner myths, our perceptions, and transform deeply embedded belief systems, thereby radically transforming ourselves and our relationships. From a psychological perspective, crisis is the vehicle for that transformative journey during which we get to evaluate those toxic beliefs, and tease out the weeds of shame and blame that block us from achieving our full potential. Welcome to the journey!

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