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The Five Steps to End Abuse

The premise underlying this practice is that *anything negative you say to yourself is abusive*. When we discussed the **Ten-Minute Practice**, we noted that “negativity harms the person who’s doing it.” The natural extension of this premise is that when you repeat negativistic dialogues to yourself, you don’t just harm yourself; your *actions* are also likely to be negativistic and you are likely to harm others, the situation, and/or the environment. Harming yourself, other persons, situations and/or the environment is a basic definition of abuse.

The degree to which you view life as positive or negative was set before you were six years old, and is the result of interactions between you and your family of origin. You can think of these positive and negative experiences as having been incorporated into a thermostat within your personality—a mechanism that controls your *experience of life* more than real life does. Where a household thermostat measures and regulates degrees of heat and cold, the thermostat inside you, created by your early experiences, measures and regulates the degree to which your outlook is positive or negative.

You can set the household thermostat to a temperature that feels comfortable to you, and the thermostat will work to maintain it. As the house cools, and the temperature drops below a certain threshold (a set limit), the furnace turns on and the house begins to warm up again. Likewise, when the temperature rises above a set threshold, the furnace turns off and the process of cooling begins again.

Your unconscious thermostat operates in exactly the same way. By the time you were six years old, you had set an “average internal temperature” for how positively or negatively you would experience life, complete with positive and negative thresholds; and you have been going through life bouncing back and forth between these thresholds ever since. When your

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internal thermostat reports that life has become too negative, you begin to take action to shift into the positive. You visit a friend, perhaps, or treat yourself to some activity you enjoy. You do so because your system is trying to get back to a level of experience closer to the average you set in childhood—the level you’re therefore comfortable with. But because the system is unconscious, you will pass the average and begin to move toward the positive threshold. Things seem to really go well for a change.

The part of this analogy most people don’t realize is that *limit setting occurs unconsciously on the positive side of the thermostat, as well.* Eventually, your experience of life becomes “too positive” (more positive than the best of your childhood), and the thermostat begins to demand more negative thinking. As it does, your experience of life descends toward the average again. Unfortunately, because the system is unconscious, you don’t stop at the average, going this direction, either. You keep going down until you hit your negative threshold again; and the process starts all over. Many people describe this experience as being on a perpetual roller coaster, always going up and down, seemingly at the whim of circumstance.

Here are two examples to illustrate the effects of the unconscious thermostat:

1. If a child learns to expect a certain amount of distance, denigration and dramatic conflict from her family of origin, she will grown up believing that such negativity *belongs* in otherwise intimate and loving relationships. As a consequence, when she finds herself in a relationship (or even a potential relationship) that does not have these negative elements, she will compulsively sabotage the relationship.

2. A person pours his life into reaching a goal, achieves it and then begins an abusive internal dialogue, berating himself that he should have done it better, or sooner, or may never be able to create this achievement again. Instead of celebrating his achievement, he descends into a level of suffering that approximates the sense of “not being able to do it right, no matter how hard I try” that he experienced before he was six years old.

Whenever you discover yourself beginning to react (literally, repeating the same old action, even if it has failed to serve you in the past), and that your behavior is becoming defensive, immediately go through the **Five Steps to End Abuse**.

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THE FIVE STEPS TO END ABUSE:

1. Use self-observation to notice your discomfort. Every time you speak negatively to yourself or to someone else, you experience discomfort—a specific “yucky” feeling in your body that you incorporated along with the negativity, drama and conflict you learned as a child. *Your body even reproduces the exact chemical imbalance that was a part of the original experience.* That’s why, though “yucky” differs from person to person, and can vary in intensity, yours will always feel the same to you. You only get one flavor of yucky, not thirty-one.

But why would anyone want to pay attention to discomfort? It’s a question I’m often asked when I teach this step: “You mean you want me to be *more* uncomfortable?”

The answer is, “Yes.” In order to end the abuse, you need to first “wake up”—to become aware of how often this unconscious negativity is guiding your life. Practice identifying the discomfort, and refusing to accept it as okay for you. At first you may discover that you don’t “wake up” until you are already frightened, angry and/or hurt—until you are already behaving defensively. That’s fine. It doesn’t matter when you “wake up”; what’s important is that you notice the discomfort and begin to resolve it.

2. Correct your faulty thinking. As you become aware of the discomfort, you will automatically begin to hear your negativistic internal dialogue. In this step, you simply begin to reverse the faulty thinking in your head, just as you do in the **Ten-Minute Practice**. Nobody will know you are “changing your mind”; you can do this step while you are in the middle of a business meeting, or even during a disagreement that is getting heated. If you think that you need to do a written **Ten-Minute Practice**, take a time-out and do it. The important issue is to change your negative frame of reference.

3. Breathe and relax. You will discover that when you are repeating a negative dialogue to yourself, you stop breathing correctly and your body begins to tighten in response to the stress. Your breathing becomes shallow and restricted to your upper chest (the upper lobes of your lungs). You may need to alter your posture to one that allows your body to relax and to breathe deeply, gently and slowly until the physical discomfort in your body dissipates.

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Any deep, relaxed breathing practice will work. The one I practice and teach to other people is drawn from Aikido as taught by Koichi Tohei (1966). In this practice, you breathe in through your nose, gently and slowly, allowing your whole body to fill with air, beginning at a point three inches below your bellybutton and three inches inside your body. The last part of your body to expand will be your upper chest. Exhale in the same manner. Push your breath out through your nose, slowly and gently, from the point three inches below your bellybutton and three inches inside your body, until the last part of your body to deflate is your upper chest.

4. Develop an awareness of consequences. In this step, you will want to make yourself aware that if you continue to react, to engage in old, predictable patterns of behavior, then you already know the consequence: Something bad! This is your opportunity to recognize that you have a choice. You can respond by doing something new and different in the situation, something you haven't done before. When you do this step, literally say to yourself, "*When I change the pattern, I change the result.*"

5. Act in a positive manner. If you are recognizing the discomfort, correcting the faulty dialogue, breathing and being aware that you can change the pattern, there will never be a time when you don't know the "right" thing to do. Please notice that I didn't say, "You'll have an epiphany," "become healed," "become enlightened," or even that "you'll want to do what's right." You will, quite simply, know.

But knowing is only the start. When I say "act in a positive manner," I mean act. Do something. Act in a positive manner consistently enough, and eventually you will become your actions. As the Dalai Lama reminds us, "The thought creates the word, words create actions, and actions solidify into our character. "

So congratulate yourself for having become aware and having stopped the negative escalation, and do something positive in the moment.

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The Five Steps to End Abuse were adapted from Edleson (1984) and
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