

I WANT THE OTHER PERSON TO CHANGE

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Do you find yourself frequently wishing someone else close to you would change? Are you oftentimes committing on why they should change? Do you believe you're life won't be happy until they change? If you find yourself dwelling on another person changing and they aren't, I can guarantee that you are more invested in their changing than they are. For instance,

- You wish your best friend would quit drinking, but they say they're not ready.
- You want your spouse to be better organized, but they are fine with the disorganization and clutter, as long as you keep out of it.
- You want your children to stop eating junk food, but they think vegetables are gross.
- You wish your elderly parent would be more social and mingle at the new assisted living facility, but they say they're not over the death of their spouse.

While you may have these loved one's best interest in mind, wishing they would change and nagging to bring it about is likely to go nowhere! In fact, you can nag, reason, explain, and cajole until you're blue in the face, and others may still have no real desire to change their pattern of behavior. If you keep this up, you'll feel like you're on a treadmill, going nowhere.

Since the others don't change (and yet, it would be prudent for them to do so), why don't they? They simply see the problem very differently from you. Indeed, in the examples above, drinking is not the problem; clutter is not the problem; eating healthy is not the problem; and socializing is not the problem. From the other's perspective, the problem is quite simply, "you". You are the problem because you're making these things in their life a big problem. You're constantly bringing it up and making everyone miserable.

So, if a specific behavior of someone else is frustrating to you, what should you do? Before I answer this question, I want remind you of two misguided, but opposite notions that you need to stop believing:

- 1) We can achieve anything we put our mind to. This is simply not true, even though we would like to believe it is.
- 2) We are 'victims' of our past, including genetics, conditioning, peer pressure, or whatever and hence, cannot change. This is also not true, yet many people who feel like a victim in the world hold onto this belief. The reality is that people can and do change (but, not always right away) when *they* see the need for it and when *they* become motivated and committed to make the change.

Just reflect on your own life and you'll see what I mean. Our needs change with our age, stage of life, etc. We get motivated and committed to change a habit or behavior when it makes sense to us, given our circumstances. You can probably recall something you changed about yourself that you wouldn't have changed a few years earlier. For instance, a friend who smoked a pipe while writing his book had no interest in stopping smoking until the book was published and he no longer had to sit alone for hours at his desk. I suspect his pipe was a source of comfort during all the isolation of writing and he wasn't

ready to give it up until he rejoined the human race once it was published. Our needs change from time to time. A teenage, for instance, might be more motivated by the need for social acceptance than for the need to eat healthy food. This doesn't mean this teen, when grown up, won't consider eating a more healthy diet when peer pressure to eat pizza in the dorm room is absent.

Now for some practical advice for those situations when you are more invested in somebody else's change than s/he is in his/her own change?

- Offer your thoughts and beliefs, but STOP saying them when you begin to sound like a broken record.
- Don't engage in co-dependent behavior (i.e. like purchasing junk food for the house and then becoming upset when your kid goes on a sugar binge.).
- Be firm on ground rules for behavior that directly and negatively affects you, such as no smoking inside the house.
- Don't enable by protecting a person from the negative consequences of his own behavior (i.e. such as assuming the role of full time social companion to your lonely, elderly parent).

Dr. Linda Sapadin, a psychologist reminds us that the "tipping point" for change often occurs after one hears the same message from 3 *different* sources. The key is that hearing something 50 or 500 times from the same person is never impactful in a positive way and often just leads to resentment. The chances of someone deciding to change goes up once they've heard similar feedback from numerous other people (not your cohorts who are doing your bidding). We are more like to trust a message and adopt it for our own when we hear it from many diverse sources.

Once another person arrives at their own decision to change, you can play a useful role by suggesting resources and offering encouragement. But until then, as frustrating as it might be, what you need to do most of all is develop patience. None of us like to feel helpless, but we can only help our self or those who directly ask for our help. Until then, acceptance and patience are necessary.

(Dr. Blume is grateful for many of the ideas contributed by psychologist, Dr. Linda Sapadin)