

Feeling Invisible - 3 Steps to Speaking Up

Wouldn't life be simpler if the people around us could just know what we need without our having to ask them for it? It is so easy to blame others for not listening to us, or for not giving us credit for our ideas or thoughts, when in fact we might never have expressed them in a way that others are able to understand. This can happen in many settings and situations, but it always involves relationships.

Do we really have to keep putting our needs out there? It sure is easier to ask why others haven't listened to us than to ask ourselves whether we effectively explained and asked for what we needed. Likewise it is easier to be frustrated by others' disrespect for our ideas or positions than it is to ask ourselves whether we have expressed ourselves in a way that could be heard and understood. It turns out that feeling frustrated with others is often a clue that we are frustrated with ourselves.

This happens a *lot*. We are quick to notice and point out the faults of others, and are often thinking too fast or are too distracted by other concerns to notice our own contribution to the situation. And often, this same distraction or lack of focus is directly related to the time it takes to behave appropriately – in this case, to communicate clearly. Maybe we're distracted, or maybe we're worried that the person won't like what we have to say, or worse, maybe we aren't sure that we ourselves like what we have to say and so we talk ourselves out of speaking up. Maybe we simply don't know how to say what we need to say. Whatever the reason, one thing is for sure: If we avoid speaking up, if we continue to ignore rather than to focus on the way we communicate, our frustrations will continue to grow. By avoiding saying what we need, we cause our needs to continue to be unmet, and through this avoidant process, those unmet needs get bigger, not smaller.

But if that's not bad enough, there's more. In addition to compounding the negative results of unmet needs and unsolved problems, every time we act with avoidance we strengthen our avoidance response. Like any bad habit, the habit itself begins to germinate problems of its own. In this case, the more we avoid it, the bigger and scarier the object of our avoidance. Avoidance actually makes the problem worse by habituating us to believe that we can't do it, so we have continue avoiding it. By avoiding the uncomfortable or scary task of clear communication, for example, we begin to make the task of communication even more uncomfortable and scary. It's sort of like our minds are underscoring and assigning meaning to our choice to avoid. "It worked the first time," we think, "so it must have been the right thing to do." We see the task (in this case, communication) as bad or scary. And every time we avoid it, we don't just reinforce our avoidance, but we reinforce our fear and the fear just becomes bigger and stronger. This is how phobias develop – and it can happen with anything we allow ourselves to habitually avoid.

To this slop of unmet needs/unsolved problems and a developing pattern of avoidant communication, add the kicker third element: self-disappointment. If our unmet needs and unsolved problems feel like a growing mess that needs our attention, and

the avoidance habit feels like a decreasing ability to attend, to the mess this last piece feels like putting a blindfold on. Over time, that mess of unmet needs becomes intolerable and we can't take it anymore. So what do we do? We pick on others for neither noticing our strife nor making it easier on us.

This isn't always just a defense mechanism; sometimes it is true. But through all that avoidance, and the guilt we feel from disappointing ourselves, we come to believe that we are incapable of changing anything ourselves and absolutely need somebody else. We feel sure somebody else needs to step in – that we just can't do it anymore. And most of this thought process isn't even conscious. Our minds are just trying to get out of feeling miserable and we want someone else to blame so that it will go away somehow.

This is how it feels to be overwhelmed, and beaten down.

The problem with this strategy of blaming a scapegoat or depending on someone else to get us through the situation is that we are allowing ourselves another opportunity to avoid the issue. We avoid our fear, we avoid discharging our anxiety into productive action (a solution) and, once again, we make the issue we are avoiding even bigger than it actually is. Every avoidant action – or lack of action – pays a dividend of fear.

So what do we do in this mess?

We face the fear. We try our level best to avoid avoidance. The good news is facing fear is neither as hard nor as mentally strenuous as we think it is. How could it be? Much of this is the creation of our own fears, and is in our minds. Not only is this avoidance a farce, the only thing we're really avoiding is the solution to our problem! We certainly aren't avoiding anxiety. Actually, our anxiety grows stronger as we continue to avoid. By avoiding, we end up experiencing all the consequences, all the frustration and all the fear we set out to avoid, while experiencing none of the solution.

So how do we get out of this? How do we reverse this cycle?

1) The first step is to realize the cycle you're in. Assess what you can take control of and what you can't. Look for something you can do even if it's small and especially if it is scary, and buoy yourself for action.

2) Step two is to reverse the avoidance cycle and *do* something – take action. Make the time, force yourself to focus, and do it – do anything other than avoid! In this case, speak up. Speak up to your partner; speak up at work, even if it's small and especially if it's scary. Choose bravery over fear, courage over avoidance.

3) The third step is to notice how good it feels to face your fear – even if everything doesn't magically and instantaneously improve. Recognize how empowering it feels to channel your angst and anxious energy into action instead of letting it fester and

escalate. Notice how bravery feels – feeling the fear and doing the thing you’re afraid of anyway. Not only are you reversing the avoidance cycle and reducing your fear, but you are reversing the secondary shame and guilt that are byproducts of avoidance. But even better and more exciting than this is that you are building your self-esteem. Every time you do something scary, you build up your self-esteem a little bit more – the very self-esteem that will help you to feel brave enough to take a risk next time, and the very self esteem that will be there to help you learn from the situation even if it doesn't work out. With every single small act of bravery, you build up your self-esteem and fortify yourself to be able to be brave in the next scary situation.

So the next time you feel frustrated that you aren't getting your needs met by your partner, or being recognized appropriately at work, and you are wishing a person could read your mind and meet your needs, recognize the trap you are in. Think about the terrific opportunity this situation presents for you to be brave, speak up, and demonstrate your worth. In resisting the temptation to place the blame on others, we have the opportunity to examine ourselves, to stop avoiding our fear and to take control of our own role in the situation and our own fate.

So speak up - you may just be surprised at how much easier it is than you expected, at how well it works, and at how strong you really are!