

### How The Stories We Tell Ourselves Hurt Our Work and Life

Every day, David begins his work by telling himself his favorite story: *I'm not valued around here. They're heaping on the work just to see when I'll quit. I'm sure to be passed over for promotion.*

Jamie has her own favorite story: *Our president is a critical and demanding control freak, who shuts me out of every decision but expects me to know everything.*

Every day, we tell ourselves enough of these kinds of stories to fill a library: Why my supervisor closed her door today. Why my volunteers are meeting on the one night I can't be there. Why everyone is being so difficult.

Years ago, before I began working for myself, I often told myself horror stories. And I even "trained" my patient, understanding supervisor to add the phrase "and no, you're not in trouble" to the end of her requests to meet with me – just to help snap me out of my stories!

And that's just at work. What about the stories we tell ourselves at home?

Too often, we live our lives as if the stories are true – and we act and react based on these assumptions, falsehoods and limited points of view. We want to blame someone (anyone!) other than ourselves, but in reality, it's usually our thinking that is causing the discomfort, says Byron Katie, author of the best-selling book *Loving What Is*.

What we need to do to ease the pain and experience more freedom in our lives is learn to get beyond our stories, to get under our beliefs to what's really living there.

"The result of investigation is often a deeper appreciation of the people in our lives, and a realization that it was not their words or actions that really harmed us, but our uninvestigated thoughts about their words or actions," Katie says.

In her book, Katie outlines a simple path of inquiry into these horror stories we tell ourselves that revolves around four questions:

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you react when you think that thought?
4. Who would you be without the thought?

I'd like to add three more questions:

5. How else might you view the situation/behavior?
6. Who do you rely on to reinforce your story?
7. Who might offer you a different perspective?

### **Doing the Investigative Work**

First, state your belief about someone and ask yourself if it is true and whether you can know absolutely, without a doubt, that it is true. For example, let's take Jamie's belief that her president is a critical and demanding control freak, who shuts her out of every decision but expects her to know everything.

Is it true her president is critical? Demanding? Is there some other way she might view the behavior? Do others hear constructive, well-intentioned suggestions where she hears criticism? Does Jamie surround herself with people who support and reinforce her story? Does she know without a shadow of doubt that her chair's actions are about wanting to control her every sorry action?

The next question for Jamie is: How does she act and react when she thinks these thoughts? Does she find herself angry and resentful? Does she go out of her way to avoid encounters with her president? Does she respond defensively to any sort of comment? Does her work suffer? Does her body tense up or her stomach ache when she interacts with her chair? Does she enjoy any of her time at work? Talk about lack of peace and harmony!

Imagine that she doesn't have this story any more. Who would she be?

Perhaps she would be more content at work and enthusiastic about the new learning she's receiving. Perhaps she would be less concerned about what others thought of her and more intent on contributing in unique ways to the work at hand. Perhaps she would be next in line for a promotion. Or perhaps she would be working for another organization. She's likely to be calmer and more peaceful.

### **The Turnaround**

The final step in this investigation is for Jamie to turn around the statements she's been making. Does she express criticism in other areas of her life in ways that are harsh and hard to hear? Does she try to control her spouse, her children, her co-workers? Is she critical and

demanding of herself? Our “stories” often point to our own traits that we project onto others so as to disclaim them.

It’s important to note that with inquiries like this, there is no right answer. The goal is not perfection, but truth – and some freedom from the stories that put life in a negative, difficult light.

“Who would you be without your story?” Katie says. “You never know until you inquire.”

Which story would YOU like to start with?

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