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Numbness 2: Finding Your Feelings

Patience Mason

Finding and feeling those pesky emotions:

For those of us who have become expert at numbness, whether we developed this skill from being traumatized, from living with a traumatized person, or for some other reason, finding feelings takes time and effort.

I try to think of numbness as a survival skill, not as a given, not as the way it ought to be. Numbness is not necessarily a shortcoming, not willful wickedness or “not wanting to face things” or “not wanting to admit things” either, although it can be all of those at times.

I think it is good to be able to move from one state to the other, from intense emotion to numbness, when it is helpful to me. If I am looking on numbness as a survival skill, it is always going to be useful to me in some situations. As my judgement about situations develops through paying attention to my feelings and needs, I am able to tolerate and work through more uncomfortable situations and feelings than I could at first. As a result, I don't have to use numbness as often as I once did, nor for as long. I have developed the capacity to tolerate distressing emotions, and pleasant ones, too. One of my funnier moments was realizing that I wasn't comfortable feeling peaceful and serene. I wanted something to worry about

because was used to worrying and was good at it. I had to laugh at myself and resolve to practice feeling good. I could get used to it!

So can you.

Some ways to identify when you are avoiding a feeling

1-feeling nothing.

2-feeling “fine.” (especially if uttered abruptly with a large period after it).

3-feeling angry (anger is often a secondary emotion which covers up pain and fear. Anger feels like power, but if it is easily provoked, anger gives your power away to the provokers).

4-feeling guilty/no good (the shaming voice inside drowns out feeling of loss or helplessness).

5-going into an old pattern of behavior (drinking, drugging, eating, shopping, cooking, cleaning, work-

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ing all the time, watching sports all the time, etc).

6-thinking about something obsessively. (It blots out the current feeling, sometimes with worse ones, but they are familiar and comfortable).

7-feeling critical of others.

8-daydreaming/fantasizing about how it should/could/would have been or should/could/would be—if only...

9-feeling like you just have to do something. Urgency is the cue.

10-following a familiar well worn thought pattern.

As you get to know yourself better through compassionate observation, you will be able to add to this list and make it more specific to you. My major ones are feeling nothing, feeling critical of others, fantasizing and wanting to buy things or eat something. Today I use them as cues that I am avoiding a feeling, so when I notice that I am doing one of them I look for my feeling instead. It makes my life a lot easier.

Emotional reasoning: Emotional reasoning (“I feel it therefore it must be true.”) is a cognitive distortion, meaning our thinking can distort reality. Because I feel hurt does not mean the other person meant to hurt me. This concept, which has helped me a lot, came from *Feeling Good*, a book about Cognitive Behavioral Therapy by David Burns, MD. CBT is as effective against depression as drug therapy. Edward Kubaney uses it in his *Cognitive Treatment of Trauma Related Guilt*, mentioned in several issues of the newsletter. Finding my feelings does not mean that I must believe them or act on them. I only need to identify and feel them.

Intensity The intensity of my feelings is often from a different time zone. I learned this from working on issues common to Adult Children of Alcoholics and other

dysfunctional families. When I'm swept by a wave of emotion that seems overwhelming, it is usually from a different time zone. The intensity is a direct result of how much and how often I have suppressed it. I look for family patterns. If you feel bad in my family, you find someone whose fault you can say it is and shame them and blame them till you feel better. Underlying that pattern is a core belief that everything is someone's fault, and if you are good enough and careful enough, nothing bad will ever happen to you. I believed that for years. It never occurred to me that luck and chance and circumstances beyond anyone's control often play a big part in life. Trauma survivors know this at a gut level.

Time: My feelings came back over the course of time. It was kind of a detective story identifying them and naming them. Even the good ones were uncomfortable at first and I had to tell myself repeatedly that I could learn to be happy as well as learn to tolerate bad feelings. Good feelings made me nervous. I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Finding our emotions can be done through many avenues and using a broad range of techniques and methods. I think it is important to be in a support system while doing this kind of work so you can stop and get support if the feelings become overwhelming. The 12 Step groups I am in suggest the use of meetings, sponsors, reading program literature, the telephone, and writing for dealing with feelings.

If you get overwhelmed, back

off and get help!

Here are a few things that have helped me and others find their feelings:

Mindfulness: When I started on my quest for recovery, I thought mindfulness and meditation were things loonies with gurus did. I just needed directions on how to fix Bob. Today I spend my best moments practicing mindfulness whether it is meditation in the morning or cuddled up to Bob being conscious of his physical presence, his care for me, his funny way of observing the world, how much he has been through, how happy I am to be here now, and how much I love him. I never used to notice those moments because I was too busy reliving the past or worrying about the future.

Mindfulness is focusing your attention on now.

Mindfulness takes practice, like any skill.

To develop mindfulness Dr Marsha Linehan has a whole set of skill building exercises and handouts which are available in her book, *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*, (Guilford, 1993, \$24.95). Bob and I use Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go There You Are* and a book called *Breathe! You Are Alive* by Thich Nhat Hanh. There are lots of other books out there. Workshops, tapes, videos and courses on meditation and mindfulness are available from various sources. If you find a group that claims it is the right answer for everything and everyone (as opposed to having an answer that works for me, which I am willing to share), that it is the only source of salvation or knowl-

edge or recovery, and that suggests you cut off contact with people who don't share these beliefs, that is a cult, no matter how nice they seem. Get away fast!

Mindful awareness of now, right now, this minute, can help you find out what you are feeling. Trauma trains you to focus on danger. Mindfulness can retrain the focus of your attention so that you can see that everything is not a life-or-death situation, and it is safe to attend to what you feel. Mindfulness has great advantages. First of all, automatic reactions cannot occur when you are being truly mindful. Mindfulness helps you see that a feeling is a feeling, not necessarily reality. Feeling threatened does not mean something is a threat. Feeling sorry for someone does not mean they need your help. Mindfulness helps separate feeling and action, which gives you time to consider the consequences of your actions.

Am I reacting from a different time zone? Mindfulness brings me back into today where I don't have to repeat old patterns learned in childhood, or in basic training, or in battle, or some other trauma.

Mindfulness also helps me to accept other people's feelings as true for them in this moment, like mine are for me.

Mindfulness is about paying attention. Feelings are there to help us take care of ourselves. Paying attention to them can change our life for the better.

Reading has helped me a lot. I put a list of feeling words in the last issue because it has helped me so much to read such lists and say "Oh, that's what that was—irrita-

tion, not anger,” or exuberance or awkwardness or any of a hundred other words. For someone who used to have two major feelings, anger and depression, this is richness!

The Hazeleden catalog (a wonderful resource for recovering people. Get a copy by calling 1-800-328-9000) carries a poster and a T-shirt with the names of feelings and corresponding faces on it. They have books and pamphlets, too.

Emotional Intelligence, by Daniel Goleman has an entire chapter on Trauma and Emotional Relearning. He explains PTSD, anger, empathy, and discusses identifying and managing emotions. There’s a wonderful appendix on the Neural Circuitry of Fear.

Being a Man by Patrick Fanning and Matthew McKay has chapters on Being Aware: Clarifying Your Feelings, and Being Open: Expressing your Feelings. In *I Can’t Get Over It* by Aphrodite Matsakis Chapter 3 is called Feelings, Thoughts and Traumatic Events, and Chapters 7-9 (Stage 2) are titled Feeling the Feelings, Living with Anger, and Understanding Grief and Sorrow. Find a book about emotions and read it. Read one on particular emotions you have a hard time with.

If you don’t have the money for books go to the library. If you have never spent any money on a recovery book for yourself, think about what that says about your priorities. If you spend money on cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, food, sex, clothes, cars, a big tv, cable service, or whatever, perhaps you can spend some on a recovery

book or two.

Books about other trauma survivors, other traumas, or PTSD sometimes put you in touch with feelings you have numbed for years. I cried all through reading the DAV pamphlet, “Readjustment Problems of Vietnam Veterans,” because it put me in touch with how alone and screwed up I had felt through all the years I hadn’t known about PTSD.

The feelings, particularly “bad” ones you have suppressed for years, can come up in a flood when the dam breaks. This can be frightening. It may feel like there is no end to the pain. There certainly isn’t if you stuff it back down, but if you feel it, it will pass eventually. You may have unrealistic ideas of how quickly it should pass. It takes time to feel and heal. If you made it through the trauma, you can make it through the pain. I picture myself riding in a nice sturdy little boat on top of the flood, seeing which parts of the countryside are affected by this feeling. I’m seasick, not comfortable, but I’m safe. I am not going to drown in these feelings. I know they are feelings and not me. I am more than my feelings. This was not my first perception of floods of feeling. It is one I have developed with practice. You can too.

“This is what I am feeling now,” is a really helpful concept to me. My experience has been that if I feel it, it will pass. *“This too shall pass,”* is a really helpful phrase. Knowing my feeling pass if I experience them also tells me that other people’s feelings pass, too, which has helped me let go of trying to tell other people what to feel or

how to “get over” stuff. Whatever they feel right now is their right. When I first read “Doctor, Alcoholic, Addict,” (now re-titled “Acceptance is the Answer” in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, The Big Book of AA, I was shocked by the words, “I can tell her she ought not to think a certain way, but I certainly can’t take away her right to feel however she does feel.” I had always granted myself the right to tell others their feelings were wrong. Now I don’t.

Reading widely in the recovery and PTSD fields will probably help you find phrases and quotations which help you deal with feelings too.

“I have come to understand that I must let myself feel the pain before I can recover.” OA’s For Today, July 9

“Emotional problems cannot be reasoned away or removed by the scientific method. Logic is wasted on nameless fears that appear to have no basis in reality. I feel what I feel, not what my head says I ‘ought’ to feel. My persistence in trying to control my emotions through reasonableness ends in dismay and frustration.” OA’s For Today, July 31.

Talking about feelings with a respectful, understanding person or in a 12 step group where there is no crosstalk or uninvited feedback can be really helpful. I tend to minimize my feelings or suppress them. It is a big risk for me to say I am feeling pain. Trying to cheer me up is like a punch in the head. Comforting words feel like I’m being discounted. Identifying this feeling has helped me stop saying “Don’t feel bad,” to others.

That is why the no cross talk suggestion we follow in our 12 step meetings is really important to me. If I start attending a meeting that doesn't follow it, I suggest it. I don't go to meetings where there is crosstalk because crosstalk is controlling others, and that is not the kind of recovery I want for myself.

Part of mindfulness is *not judging*. Twelve step programs suggest that part of recovery is not judging. I know I do better when I accept myself and my emotions and don't judge them. So if I am talking about how I feel, I do best with someone who doesn't judge or advise.

Therapy is a different situation in that the therapist, or the group leader if you are in group therapy, basically is paid to help you sort out and reframe your perceptions and feelings. Skillfully done, there is no feeling of being discounted. If it is not skillfully done, you may wind up feeling worse. That is one reason why I like Traumatic Incident Reduction. When you reach and process the trauma and the associated feelings, other than the most minimal directions which keep you processing the incident, the facilitator gives you his or her total attention and accepts whatever comes up. There is never any interpretation. The session ends when you are done with the incident, whenever that is, not at the end of an hour. It may be the only time in your life you get to tell the whole story without interruption.

Some people find discussing feelings with a spiritual advisor helps.

Signal Flags: The words should, ought, and just are signals of dis-

counting and controlling attitudes in the other person (and in myself if I'm using them).

Listening to and observing other's feelings: Listen to other people talk about their feelings. This is one of the great benefits of 12 step meetings, hearing how others feel and handle feelings using the steps. How do you react? Do you find them annoying? Astonishing? Perhaps you have been comparing your insides to other peoples' outsides. Do you want them to straighten out? You probably tell yourself the same thing, which is ineffective in the long run.

Try encouraging your inner voice to say how it feels, keeping in mind that you are more than your feelings which are temporary. So are other people's. With practice, acceptance will follow. You will understand yourself and others better.

You might also look at other people and see if you can tell what they are feeling. Ask. See how accurate your perceptions are. Be aware that other people may not know what they feel either. Look at yourself in the mirror and see what you look like when you are mad and sad and glad. Then look when you can't tell what you feel to help you put a name to it. Look for those expressions on other people's faces.

You can also analyze what your face does, lips curving up in a smile or down for sadness, what your eyes and forehead do, etc. when you have a feeling. Is it disgust or despair? Fear or anger? Paying attention will help you identify your own and other people's emotions, and you will get along better in the

world.

Writing: For me one of the best tools for getting at my feelings is writing. In the first issue I mentioned Kathleen Adams' *The Way of the Journal* (www.sidran.org, a site which has many resources), which contains exercises designed specifically for trauma survivors. Another of her books, *Journal to the Self*, (Warner Books), is also a good resource for writing about feelings. Each chapter suggests ways to write that can help you find out what is going on with you. PTG #7, Solace For the Self, has writing exercise on pages 6-8. There are thousands of other books on writing and journaling. One of them may help you.

I follow a simple pattern when writing to find my feelings. First I write the old pattern I have noticed: "I just noticed I am thinking that so and so is a jerk and going over how he could improve, so I know something is going on with me and I need to find it." Or "I am feeling nothing, numb as a stump! So I know something is going on with me and I need to write." Next I will describe the situation over the past hour or day or few days to see what has been going on. Is it an old pattern recycling, like feeling like I am no good because I made a mistake? If so I reassure myself in writing that it is an old pattern and I am a human being and do not have to be perfect. I can be me. I am fine the way I am, mistakes and all. It is okay for me to feel no-good, but I don't have to believe it! When I identify the feeling, I write it down and my mood lightens. I also like to write out the fact that

I have more resources today than I did in the past. I have a program of actions I can take, a circle of recovering friends who will listen to me, effective patterns of behavior I am developing and practicing (and I need to practice a lot!) and my life is much better than it was when I was numb and desperately trying to fix Bob. I find that I have to do this almost every day, but when I do, I have better days, so I am willing most days.

When I've had a bad day, writing a list of all the things I have that I am grateful for, starting with a face, can lift my mood.

Physical: Getting at your feelings through your body is another approach. During physical activity it is possible to become more aware of the moment and the feelings you are having in the moment. Sometimes the feeling of competency acquired through the practice of a physical discipline like yoga or a martial art makes it easier to face and feel emotions which once sent you running.

You can also look at and listen to your body. What is it telling you? Look in the mirror. If it is rigid and tense, you might be angry and afraid. If your throat is sore and your sinuses running, you may be full of unexpressed grief. If you have a pain in your neck, you may be mad at your spouse. Being unable to breathe deeply may be related to fear and dread. Nausea or a cold may mean something or someone makes you sick. Slumping may mean you are overwhelmed.

Watching people walk often gives insight into what they may have been through. They can appear defiant, defensive, rigid,

pushy, or running scared.

Eating healthy balanced meals and getting regular exercise, avoiding long bouts of television (which makes most people tense and depressed even when they think it is relaxing), high fat and sugar foods, drugs and alcohol—all of which are frequently used to numb painful emotions—may have a positive effect on one's emotional life. Replace them a little bit at a time with healthy things that you like! Experience will teach you what is healthy and enjoyable for you.

I find physical activity especially useful for finding good feelings. When I am paddling my kayak on the river around 7 AM, and the rising sun illuminates the water and the trees, joy rises up in me.

My personal recovery plan includes physical fitness. I walk three mornings a week and paddle three others. This, like most of my life, is a one day at a time thing, which I find I am willing to do today almost every morning. I no longer feel helpless, because I am helping myself in the most literal physical way. Exercise is empowering.

Two recent books, *Yoga* by A. G. Mohan and *The Modern Book of Yoga* by Anne Kent Rush talk about body, mind and spirit reintegration. I like the idea and I like to stretch so I'm thinking of trying yoga to see if I like it.

Massage and other kinds of body work have helped many trauma survivors connect with feelings. If you try body work it is important to find someone who is safe and licensed (which means they feel that ethics and rules apply

to them) with whom you feel comfortable. Listen to your gut feeling. It is good practice!

So what are some of the feelings you may find yourself feeling? Trauma survivors avoid feeling emotions that remind them of the trauma. If they were happy when it happened, they may avoid happiness. More common is avoiding grief, sadness, pain, shame, guilt, and despair, all of which are often covered up by anger. Survivors who are afraid of what they might do when they get angry, avoid anger if they can. Many veterans who lost beloved buddies avoid love so no one else they care about can die on them. People who were traumatized may find the feelings of gratitude, humility, forgiveness, generosity, and compassion totally foreign after all they have been through. Others embrace them and find a lot of healing in them. People can be proud of surviving or ashamed of it, or guilty about it.

Sometimes people say "You have to forgive." I disagree. I do not have to forgive. On the other hand as the result of developing compassion for myself as an imperfect human being and also from laughing at myself, I have reached the place where I have forgiven much. It is a pleasant place.

People can be surprised at how healing it can be to feel amusement. Laughter can lead to serenity or to a burbling up of pure joy. Peace is a feeling that often follows on joy. It can follow the expression of great sadness also. Relief is another feeling tears can bring.

People can feel frustrated when they recycle a feeling they thought

they were over. Impatience is common but it will pass. Acceptance is easier to handle but takes practice for most of us.

Some people are disgusted by their feelings, afraid that their feelings are wrong or indicate some great defect. An example of this is feeling relief that you survived an incident that killed others. People often feel guilty for this natural reaction. Some people are not aware that feelings can be ambivalent and one can feel relief and grief at the same time, or relief, grief and also anger at someone who has died.

Many survivors are troubled by their sexual feelings like desire and lust. Others find great relief in them, and closeness, trust, and pleasure. People who were not touched enough as children may crave touch or find it repellent. So may sexual abuse survivors.

Keeping a list of your feelings is a good idea if you have been stuffing them for years.

Writing a list of what you felt during the day can really be enlightening. It helps you see that feelings do flow if you let them. Acceptance is the key.

Forcing a feeling that you think you should be feeling is as bad as numbing one that is rising to the surface. *Feelings are not logical, and they do not have to be reasonable.* They arise. If you allow the natural flow of feelings, you learn that they will come and pass, peak and fade. You can develop effective tools to help you deal with feelings that are uncomfortable.

I used to think I was going to die or explode if I felt bad. I would do anything to avoid feeling bad.

Today I am grateful for all my feelings. I am so glad I'm not numb. It says in *Emotional Intelligence*, "Emotions that simmer beneath the threshold of awareness can have a powerful impact on how we perceive and react, even though we have no idea they are at work." This is even more true for trauma survivors and their families. It was for me!

Knowing my feelings helps me care for myself and this makes me a better wife, mother, grandmother, writer and friend.

Awareness of my own feelings, how they rise out of nothing, overwhelm me sometimes with pain, which seems so huge and important, has also given me a lot more compassion for other people.

I have learned to coach myself when I feel bad, identifying it's nature (sad, despairing, embarrassed, uncomfortable, afraid, guilty, stupid, silly), telling myself it will pass, giving myself permission to feel badly, reminding myself that it isn't necessarily true and that I will still be there when it passes. I can still function no matter what I feel. Sometimes the function is to sit down and cry but that is as much a part of the natural flow of feelings as joy is. If you don't let yourself feel the one, you will probably remain too numb to feel the other.

I hope this will help you in starting to find your feelings. The natural flow of feeling is freedom!

Readers Write

You're doing good work here. Keep it up. I just posted my views on the EMDR treatment I have been taking. It is the simplest, easiest, and strangest thing I have ever seen, but bottom line is, it worked for me.

I have no more nightmares.

I sleep like a baby all night long.

I get up feeling good for the first time since I went to Viet Nam.

I have renewed hope and love for my wife, family and life in general.

Sounds like I should be selling something here but I'm not....

Check it out! It is a wonder treatment.

Ric o'd.

Ric was a Marine grunt in 1st Bn, 9th Marines in 1966-67, extended for 6 months and then went back for a second tour.

My thanks to Ric for his letter and to him and all veterans of all wars

Thanks and Welcome Home!

Patience □

Father's Day at the Wall

Jim Schueckler

On Tue, 17 Jun 1997, Jim Schueckler wrote:

Promises that Father's Day at the Wall would be exceptionally worthwhile were an understatement. This particular weekend was even better than usual because it was the third reunion of Sons and Daughters In Touch [an organization of people who lost a parent in Vietnam]...

While driving to DC, I watched the sun pop up in the tiny bit of clear sky to the east but then it disappeared into the overcast for the rest of the day. I told myself that one of these days I'll actually see a sunrise at the Wall. I reached the National Mall exactly at 6 AM. I don't know why people complain about parking in DC, I found a spot right away!

As I walked to the Wall the first bus of sons and daughters arrived. The National Park Service washes the Wall once a month with soft scrub brushes and a very mild soap. The 63 sons and daughters present took turns with the 6 scrub brushes—in most cases they were able to wash their Dad's name and panel. I heard one daughter joke about giving her Dad a scrubbing. After rinsing, the hoses were put away about 7:30, but the Wall remained wet for several hours.

First-time visitors started trickling in. Armed with my Yellow Hat that identified me as a National Park Service Volunteer and my Directory of Names, we began to find names, make rubbings, and have conversations about those whose names were on the Wall. As usual, very few gave a terse reply to my question "Was he a friend or relative?" Most people wanted to talk. I was reminded that the most important part of my job was to allow people to talk.

Grandchildren who came with their SDIT parents began arriving at 10 o'clock. At almost every panel, children of all ages were being told about their grandfather or about growing up without a father. I overheard one boy tell his brother "I've never seen Dad

cry before."

The Wall became crowded with other visitors: tour busses, girl scouts, cub scouts, and boy scouts in uniform and groups of students on class trips. Most of the children were children—rambunctious and disinterested—yet almost every such group had one or two children with a special mission who said something like "My Mom wants me to find my Uncle's name," or "My Dad wants me to bring home a picture of his buddy's name."

Several groups of visitors were led by a tour guide speaking loudly in a foreign language. I desperately wished I knew what they were saying. I also wished that I understood the connection to the Wall that made one foreign-speaking tour guide choke up and wipe tears from her eyes. I'm sure that her group left with a much better understanding of the Wall than those who saw it only as a tourist attraction.

There is a certain look or gait that marks those coming to the Wall for the very first time, and I always seem to shock them when I ask "Could I help you find a certain name?". Many shrug or shake their head "no" but then come back to me within a few minutes. Frequently a man will say "no thanks" but the woman with him will say "Yes." then turn to the man and say "Honey, how do you spell his name?"

They came all day long; wives, children, grandchildren, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends from high school. Veterans looking for names of men they had served with. One vet had two buddies killed on the same day at different places in Vietnam.

Before I knew it, it was 5:30 and I had to be at our niece's place at 6. Even though there were 5 or 6 other volunteers at the Wall, I felt bad that I was leaving while visitors were still searching for names and needing to talk.

Sunday morning, Judy was with me as we found the Friends of the

Vietnam Veterans Memorial. They were preparing some 700 roses, red for KIA and yellow for MIA, with tags for the Friends' Father's Day Rose Project. Each tag had a Father's Day message from a relative or buddy, submitted to the Friends by mail, telephone, or email. After attaching our assigned tags, Judy and I made up a few for some friends from flight school, a Polecat, and some relatives of internet friends.

The volunteers formed into a circle and were briefed on our duties, then, while still in the circle, each of us, in turn, read aloud a message from one of the tagged roses we were holding.

We then walked to the Wall. Each volunteer would find the name from the tag and stand before it, read the message aloud, touch the rose to the name, and then stand the rose at the base of the panel.

Judy and I had to leave just before 10 AM to go to church with our niece and daughter, but I was fortunate to bump into Sally Griffis and talk with her briefly on her way to speak at the SDIT ceremony. We also missed hearing the son of Harry Cramer, the first US casualty in Vietnam, sing at the ceremony.

At the east end of the memorial, I looked back to see the black Wall stand in stark contrast above it's new foundation of red roses, yellow roses, and messages of love.

Love and Peace,
Polecat (aka Jim Schueckler)
192AHC Phan Thiet 1969

A "Yellow Hat" National Park Service Volunteer at The Wall
Jim Schueckler is founder of the web site The Virtual Wall at www.VirtualWall.org

This story brought tears to my eyes.

I felt sadness for the fatherless children and for the men who died. What feelings does it evoke in you?

when someone is finding their feelings

It is really hard not to jump all over someone who is either numb or finally finding their feelings, saying “Aha! there’s one!” or “See, I told you you felt guilty!”

Don’t do it!

People need space to recover. If you are hanging over them, urging them on, reading them excerpts out of books, asking how they feel every few minutes, you have a problem. It is the same one I had. I call it codependency but you can call it anything you like. We’ve all been brought up to think of this as nice, caring, sweet, and it starts out that way but it develops into being quite controlling and annoying.

Traumatized people have very sensitive control detectors. They need to regain a sense of control in their lives. They do not need your advice, no matter how good, because it comes from outside. They need space to take action on their own behalf, actions that they choose.

Examples: I wanted Bob to get therapy at the VA about his combat experiences. He wrote a book which helped him more. I wanted him to get into a 12 step program and do what had helped me. By then I was in one myself and knew that I did not know what was good for him because I hadn’t even known what was good for me, so I only suggested it a few hundred times instead of thousands! He took up meditation instead, and that helped him.

When I was the big director of our lives, there was not space or energy for Bob to find what would work for him because he had to defend himself daily from my pres-

sure and suggestions.

If that is where you are today, it will be very hard to stop. It was for me. I was fine if Bob was fine. If he wasn’t I was devastated and would do anything to fix it, including tell him what I was sure would fix it. I also saw myself as very loving and giving, but everything I did was to make him feel good so I could feel good. That was my payback.

When I identified the hidden agenda in my caretaking and people pleasing, it didn’t look quite so unselfish to me. It hurt not to be perfect and noble, but I found being human is easier.

Today, I work on finding my feelings and sharing them with Bob. I used to hide them or yell

let go

about how bad he “made” me feel, but today I know that my bad feelings are not because of Bob. He may trigger a bad moment for me, but it is not intentional. Everyone has bad moments. I often recycle some of the pain of my childhood (which was a pretty normal American childhood and therefore full of scolding and spanking as well as good times). I took the scolding and spanking to heart and have felt unlovable and therefore unloved ever since. That ‘s my problem. When I used to blame Bob for not being loving enough, I was expecting him to fill the hole in my soul which was not his responsibility.

Here are some of the things I

have found helpful in letting go:

At first I had to put my fist in my mouth, close my eyes, and recite the serenity prayer, to keep from saying something I felt I just had to say. It worked. You can’t talk with a fist in your mouth.

If I did say something controlling or inappropriate, I followed it with “That is a free sample of my codependency. No charge and sorry about that.” Bob found that funny.

Today if I feel urgency about saying something, or think “this time it is different,” I don’t say it. Those are my signals that I’m controlling. You need to figure out yours.

Bob and I talk a lot more now. When we do, I’ve learned to listen, not be composing responses in my head (most of the time). I have learned to respond with phrases like “that must be painful,” instead of “Oh, don’t feel bad,” which is controlling and discounting. Who am I to say how he should feel?

I’m working on not interrupting which is really hard for me. Interrupting is rude.

I also ask questions if I don’t understand or feel hurt by something.

I phrase things using the word “I.”

I think about what I want to say and try to make it short because I could go on and on forever, and often did in the past.

I accept silence as part of intimacy.