

mind peace

How to ease
restless emotions

by Chrystle Fiedler

I love to make a clean sweep of my house. Clearing out clutter feels like I'm making a fresh start. Wouldn't it be great if we could do the same thing with negative thoughts and emotions? Rather than have your afternoon consumed by coulda, woulda, shoulda's, let's toss that mental trash out the door. It's easier than you think.

create space for something new

Organizing your life is a little like organizing your closet. You want to put the things you value the most in front, and toss what doesn't fit into your life now. This allows you to make more room for good things to happen.

Look at how you prioritize what's important to you. Is it working? "Some days I felt like Lucy racing against the chocolate-spewing conveyor belt. I was busy, busy, busy, but I wasn't getting the most important things done," says Connie Dieken, 46, an executive and single mother of two teens in Avon Lake, Ohio. "I didn't know how to separate the must-do's from the nice-to-do's."

To change this, Connie decided to tackle the most challenging things first. "I write a one-page summary of the week's priorities every Sunday and post it next to my computer. This ensures that I don't get sidetracked with little things and I meet my goals every week."

Or prioritize in the moment by asking yourself, "What really matters right now?" says MJ Ryan, author

of *This Year I Will...* "It helps you get clear about what's really important, whether it's getting something done or having a conversation with a friend."

Learn to set boundaries, too. "When I first started my business, I felt like I had to make myself available to my clients every minute," says Vicki Kunkel, 44, who has a marketing company in Chicago. "One client even called me on Thanksgiving and wanted me to drop everything to work with her. I now have a special emergency number that I monitor on evenings, weekends and holidays in case there is a true client emergency. If it isn't, I return the call the next day. This has allowed me to reclaim my life and my sanity."

Vicki also sets limits when friends ask for favors. "If they ask me for something, instead of saying yes or no, I give myself a little leeway and give my friend two options: How does A or B sound?"

relabel your emotions

Emotions can be messy. But even the most difficult ones can sometimes point you in a better direction. "Women often think of emotions like envy and anger as bad," says Susan David, Ph.D., a psychologist in the Health, Emotions and Behavior Laboratory at Yale University. "But they give us useful signals about our needs, desires and goals, and how we're doing in relation to them. Think of them as telling you a story and ask what the message is behind the feeling."

It may be time to reevaluate your career plan or your personal relationships. Colleen St. (Please turn to 80)

MIND PEACE

Continued

Clair Queeney took the unusual step of reevaluating herself after she was diagnosed with cervical cancer at age 27. "I really felt that my attitudes had contributed to my illness. I don't think I was a very nice person back then," says Colleen, now 36, of Asheville, North Carolina, a mother of two and a computer systems engineer. "But I also knew that there was a person inside that I liked a lot. I just needed to get in touch with her."

To do this, she surveyed the people she knew. "I asked them, 'What do you think of me?' and got some really shocking answers. Even though it was incredibly difficult, I grew through the process. Today, I can say that I'm absolutely a better person, and I'm proud of that. I couldn't have come this far if I hadn't started with myself."

downsize your worries

Nothing clutters up the present moment like worrying about the future. It often helps to keep an eye on the big picture. "When I'm feeling stressed or worried, the first thing I ask myself is, 'Will this make any difference to me or my family in a year?'" says Colleen. "If I can categorically say to myself that it won't affect me, my family, my marriage or my work, I let it go."

Just before she goes to sleep, Karin Grossman asks herself a simple, direct question about something that's weighing on her mind. It might be how to handle the next phase of a project or a decision about a family matter. "Without fail, I've found that when I wake up the next morning, the answer seems to rise to the surface," says Karin, a writer in Montclair, New Jersey, and mother of a teenage boy. "It might be a word, fragment of a song, or a phrase, but it always seems to point me in the right direction."

stack up self-esteem

The way we talk to ourselves can be our biggest source of mental clutter. The word *should* is a great guilt generator. "We can eliminate at least 35 percent of our stress immediately by erasing victim words from our vocabulary, since they imply we have no power or choice," says Sue Patton Thoele, author of *The Woman's Book of Courage*. "Replace them with empowering words such as *choose to*, *want to* and *will*, and see how much better you feel."

Connie agrees. "Your mind is like a computer—it functions on the software you install in it. The thoughts you program in your brain shape your life," she explains. "A computer virus, like negative self-talk, causes your mind to slow to a crawl and malfunction. I stopped looking for flaws and started looking for new opportunities. It really helped change how I think."

Daily affirmations can also help boost your self-worth. Visit Louise Hay's, author of *You Can Heal Your Life*, website at louisehay.com/affirmation.php for a daily pick-me-up.

"When I start criticizing myself, I try to remember to tell myself, 'I'm doing the best I can,'" says Michele Parisi, 38, a working mom of two from Concord, California. "It reminds me that I can't beat myself up because, given what I have to work with, I'm doing the best job possible."

toss more mental trash

Sometimes other people's opinions of our abilities and talents are what weigh us down. Is it your mother, father or boss who's telling you that you can't succeed or can't lose weight? "Everyone has her own inner cast of characters," says Ryan. "The problem is when we take them seriously and get stuck." Instead, catch yourself when it's happening and either vigorously dispute it by saying "No, that's not true," or just say, "Thanks for sharing," and then take steps to accomplish what you want.

To lighten your load even further, you may need to practice a little forgiveness. "We all have people

stop those feelings

Instead of letting emotions build up, ask yourself these questions to deal with them and move on.

what am I feeling? It helps to focus on recognizing and identifying your emotions.

why do I feel the way I do? What has caused this? Is it likely to change over time? Is it something that is important enough for me to take action on or will it dissipate by itself? For example, if a waiter drops a drink on you, it's one thing; if someone disappoints you, that's another.

how will it affect me? What's the impact of the way I am feeling on my thinking and behavior? For instance, if you're down on yourself, you might also be hypercritical of others.

what can I do about it? How can I manage these feelings? If something is weighing you down, get proactive about handling it. Take a walk or talk it out with a friend. *Susan David, Ph.D.*

in our lives we need to forgive for our own peace of mind," says Thoele. "The first step is to be willing to give up the hurt, which isn't easy."

The trick is keeping all these toxic emotions and thoughts in check. Make it a habit to do a regular "spring cleaning"—no matter what season it is—whenever you feel out of balance. Not only will you keep mental clutter under control, you'll also open your mind and heart to lasting joy. **wd**