

Mary Cannon, LMFT

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Mary Cannon is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in San Jose. She sees individual teens and adults as well as couples and families in her private practice. Her work with clients is to build on their strengths, to foster insight and understanding, and to improve communication skills. She has advanced training working with survivors of sexual assault, individuals with alcohol and other drug challenges, parenting issues, and couples.

I really appreciate Aletheia giving students a chance to consider “In Retrospect” past experiences in this month’s edition. Taking a moment to reflect on where we’ve been and what we’ve done is an opportunity to better understand ourselves. As a therapist, a big part of the work I do with clients is exploring thoughts and feelings about a client’s past as it impacts their present and future. Sometimes, but not always, we talk about shame, disappointment, regret, hurt, and loss. These difficult feelings are explored with curiosity. The goal is not to judge the client but to improve the client’s insight and to empower them to make any necessary changes because of the new insight. One of the tools I have to share with the client is perspective.

High school can be a very intense time. A teen is becoming an individual within the confines of their environment, which may or may be reflective of how the teen wants to be. Teens are learning who they are and how they fit in while often being harshly judged for mistakes. Many teens are working furiously toward future success but “success” may be ill-defined and nebulous or someone else’s definition of success. How does anyone examine an event in life “In Retrospect” with all this pressure?

Imagine that your feelings are like the contents of a suitcase. If you have returned from a wonderful trip, you might want to leave your suitcase out, opened and slowly put things away as you savor pleasant memories from your adventure. On the other hand if your time away was a bad experience (e.g., maybe the weather was bad, maybe you got sick or hurt, etc.) then you can (1) stuff the suitcase in the back of the closet and vow to never open it, (2) put the suitcase aside and agree to open it sometime later, or (3) open the suitcase and deal with what’s inside.

In these situations some may try to keep things packed away but you can imagine the mess that will you have to deal with later when wet and smelly things have been stored in a dark place. Feelings are very similar. When bad or regretful things happen some people try to ignore or forget them (understandable in many cases, no one relishes talking about difficult things); but much like the colorful beach towel stuffed into a dark suitcase when it was wet, stuffed away feelings can come out completely unrecognizable. For example, when hurt is not expressed or acknowledged what usually gets expressed later is anger and it might even be anger over something completely (or seemingly) unrelated.

Part of life is to have bad experiences, slip ups, regrets, failures, unmet expectations; we all make mistakes, lose our cool, hurt other people’s feelings. How we incorporate these inevitabilities into who we are is important. Unpacking our unfortunate experiences is similar to unpacking from a bad vacation. Unpacking thoughts and feelings and exploring things “In Retrospect” is important.

Someone with depressed thoughts and feelings might unpack their feelings and figuratively sit in them. Imagine the depressed person engulfed in a suitcase of dirty clothes and feeling overwhelmed,

ashamed, guilt-ridden and worthless. Overwhelmed by the feelings they come to believe that those feelings validate the negative thoughts the person has about themselves. Meanwhile, a person with anxious thoughts and feelings is going to be a little more active going through each item one by one verifying how each of these “proves” the negative thoughts and feelings the person has about themselves. A proverb says, “We count our miseries carefully, and accept our blessings without much thought.” Both depressed and anxious thinking counts miseries carefully. You can imagine being caught in either a depressed or anxious spirals would be incredibly painful at best and completely debilitating at worst.

Looking at our lives “In Retrospect” is something to be done with curiosity and kindness. Examining an unfortunate event with curiosity and a goal for understanding is a good start. “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago,” no one disagrees with that but, “The second best time is now.” We can lament not having avoided some negative thing or we can learn from it.

Give yourself some time so the intense feelings are not so intense. This might be the length of time to take a few deep breaths, a walk around the block, or a good night's sleep.

Try to think about or reflect on the event without judgment, like you would a box sitting on the floor. All facts, no judgments, assumptions, conclusions, or meaning attributed to the box. Remember the proverb about Sai Weng and His Lost Horse, <http://www.wisebread.com/good-luck-bad-luck-who-can-tell>. The wise man did not judge the circumstance, he just acknowledged it.

Acknowledge how you feel about the situation. Sai Weng looked at the events in his life without judgment, we can acknowledge our feelings in much the same way. Events can make us feel hurt, frustrated, anxious, disappointed, sad, confused, etc. It's ok to have any number of feelings and even conflicting feelings.

Be curious, think of questions that will help you come to a better understanding of what happened. The insight you gain from looking at the situation will help you next time.

Appreciate the intensity of feelings during or immediately following an event; and that all feelings dissipate over time. It's really hard for anyone in the moment to realize that moments pass, that one's perspective can be very focused and narrow and stepping back, widening one's view of things can lessen the intensity of the feelings. The person with depressed or anxious thoughts has a very difficult time with this. Sometimes you can get the courage to address a negative event or feeling by thinking about making things better for your Future Self.

Now that you've taken a look at what went wrong and some curiosity about what can be done differently next time, what resources might be helpful? Who are the people in your network you can talk to? Who are the people who boost you up and support you? If you feel overwhelmed by your own thoughts and feelings about yourself, consider talking to a trusted adult about them. A trusted adult might help you reflect on and gain insight from your situation and may help guide you toward resources helpful given

Additional Resources

Suicide & Crisis: 1-800-273-8255

Teen Line you can call, text, email or post on their message board.
<http://teenlineonline.org>

Get help, Get involved, Get perspective:
<http://www.itgetsbetter.org>