

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Shrinking Down . . . Not Good

Stalled in Chicago traffic wasn't Carrie's idea of a wonderful day.

Planted in the driver's seat, she silently broiled. Her anger didn't stem from her two passengers, her husband and mother-in-law. Instead, she was furious with herself. Getting trapped in traffic was ohhhh soooo avoidable, because Carrie was adept at driving Chicago, maneuvering skillfully and comfortably through the maze of tangled highways.

So what went wrong? She failed to assert herself. Although situated behind the wheel, she let others "drive." Carrie's experience illuminates how things go wrong when we shrink down and take on a passive role. For one thing—as with Carrie—such behavior impairs our ability to take charge when a situation calls for solid leadership.

Limping, when fully capable of walking upright, is an act of self-betrayal. It's felt at the soul level—a sickened feeling deep within. It was this anguish that prompted Carrie to seek help.

In our counseling session, she conveyed that she typically abandons the driver's seat in all areas of her life. The result is frustration in her relationships and a general dissatisfaction with how her life takes shape.

Seeking a root cause, I started out by asking Carrie for a detailed description of the Chicago incident. She recalled that her mother-in-law "began her typical back-seat driving routine" as they neared Chicago, merging onto a busy expressway. Within minutes, fretful with worry, her mother-in-law became convinced they were lost. Although Carrie was certain they weren't lost, she suggested that her mother-in-law look at a map.

"I was hoping it would keep her busy doing something else," Carrie said. But the suggestion backfired. It sent the message that, "Yes, indeed, we're lost!"

As for her husband, he joined his mom in "helping" Carrie find her way. In a short span of time, Carrie aborted her well-earned, self-assured stamina—she kowtowed. Suffering from a deflated spirit, she turned the reins of control over to her husband and his mother. Following their suggestion, she switched to a slower lane. Soon, they weren't moving at all. And there they sat—stuck—for a very long stretch of time.

"What prevented you from speaking up?" I asked.

"I was afraid of hurting her feelings," Carrie said.

“Why don’t your feelings matter?” I asked.

She said nothing, as a wave of sadness spread across her face.

“When did you start deserting yourself?” I asked.

After a long silence, Carrie brought up her childhood. Children, in her household, were expected to be seen and not heard. Her parents didn’t welcome or encourage conversation in which their children could freely and comfortably express their thoughts and feelings. Instead, Carrie learned that “the way to please them was to be quiet and not be an interference.”

Passivity was considered a good thing in her family. Not only was speaking up frowned on, but being sure of yourself—standing tall—was seen in the same light as arrogance and therefore, bad.

So Carrie learned at an early age that limping was the acceptable way to be. Change, for Carrie, will necessitate overriding such self-defeating programming. Carrie’s innate tenderness is evident in her concern for her mother-in-law’s feelings. One of her blocks to being assertive is the fear of hurting someone’s feelings.

I explained that truth presented in a warm-hearted manner doesn’t inflict pain. Assertiveness isn’t the same as aggressiveness. It doesn’t attack and it doesn’t aim to be hurtful.

If Carrie could replay that Chicago trip, she could take this assertive approach: “I want to assure you that I’ve driven Chicago for many years. I know what I’m doing and know exactly where we are right now. You two can help me best by letting me concentrate. I’ll let you know if I need you. But thanks for trying to be helpful.”

There are no guarantees with the assertive approach. Carrie’s mother-in-law could end up with hurt feelings no matter what. But Carrie wouldn’t be responsible if tact were used.

“She may be hurt by the truth,” I said reassuringly, “but not by you. See it as the natural growing pains of consciousness expansion.”

We’re challenged daily to remain in the driver’s seat, taking control of our day-to-day lives as well as our destiny. There will always be people who “know what’s best for us,” willing to run our lives. Our duty to ourselves and others is to be our own authority—boldly and unflinchingly. To do otherwise is to risk getting stuck in life’s traffic.

Benjamin Disraeli, the late English statesman and writer, summed it up in a single statement, “Life is too short to be little.”