THE SERENITY PRAYER – A CALL TO ACTION

***God grant me***

***the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,***

***the courage to change the things I can,***

***and the wisdom to know the difference.***

It's safe to say that we all know this prayer and many of us will say that we use it often. It’s almost like a mantra. If you're stressed, say the Serenity Prayer. If someone is pissing you off, say the Serenity Prayer. If you're waiting on a long line and getting annoyed, say the Serenity Prayer. Help me accept the things I cannot control!

This is all well and good if it helps calm you down like taking a deep breath might, but the Serenity Prayer is much more than a mantra. It's actually a call to action. It has us actually praying for the courage to make changes in our lives! It's not just about accepting things that are out of our control, but it calls us to actually change the things that are within our control! That's huge!

Of course in a stroke of genius that shows a true understanding of human nature, we are finally called to ask for the wisdom to know the difference, because when we truly examine our lives, we will likely find that we spend an awful lot of time and energy worrying about things that we, in fact, cannot change, and when we do this we have little energy left to work on the things we actually can change.

***God grant me***

***the serenity to accept the people I cannot change,***

***the courage to change the people I can,***

***and the wisdom to know that's me!***

Many of us may not have heard this version. The first time I did I laughed, and felt very exposed - I really hadn't expected to be attacked like that! Of course I knew what was best for people. If they couldn't see what was best for them, then I was obligated to enlighten them. I didn't need to "change me". Yeah…well luckily my prayer for wisdom was answered!

I have faced a decent amount of adversity in my life, but I've never dwelt on it. My desire for joy always outweighed my reasons for sadness so I would try to bounce back stronger for the experience. When the pandemic hit, I joked with a few of my friends, sort of seriously, that I was grateful to have a child that suffered from addiction because if there's one thing I learned from that experience, it was how to accept things that were completely out of my control! It's a skill that I have honed and continue to work on.

Although the concept seems pretty obvious and easily accepted, actually identifying what we can and cannot change, in other words, what is and is not in our control, can be more complicated than we may realize. When we spend all of our energy on things that we don't realize we can't control, we end up depleted and often feeling disempowered in our own lives. Like we have no control. We become a victim of circumstance instead of the hero of our own lives.

It's like Superman and his X-ray vision. He has X-ray vision, we all know that, but if he tries to stare through a lead wall, his X-ray vision doesn't work. He still has it, he's just not using it correctly. If he stepped 6 inches to the side and looked through the drywall, it would work again. It's the same thing with us. We all have tremendous power in our own lives even though we often feel powerless because we are using all of our power in a way that it simply doesn't work! Our super power only works when we use it to control how we behave in our own lives. The moment we try to use the power on something that doesn't belong to us, it stops working. Other people's behavior, events that are out of our control, the weather, the pandemic, anything that isn't ours to control is our lead wall. We can spend all day and sleepless nights exhausting ourselves thinking about it, worrying about it and trying to change it. But, if we have the wisdom, and then the courage to just shift our focus the slightest bit onto what we can change, our super power would explode!

**Change and Control**

The Serenity Prayer talks about what we can and cannot change. The implication is that we have been trying to change things we can't. In other words, we have been working on controlling things that are out of our control. Understanding what control can actually look like can be far less intuitive than one might think.

We can all accept, in theory at least, that we can't change another person, even if we continue to try. It's important to understand that the things we "cannot change" are actually simply things that are out of our control to begin with. In order to really find serenity, we must first be able to identify when we are trying to control and change things that we can't so that we can stop! This can be very tricky because oftentimes, without realizing it, the thing we try to control is an outcome, and we do this by trying to exert control over other people's behaviors, which can often look an awful lot like loving and caring. We go into these situations with the best of intentions, only wanting what's best for others. The big problem is that we assume we actually *know* what that is. Believe it or not, we have no idea what the best outcome is in 99% of situations, yet we will fight for what we think it is with all our power, rallying the troops to see it our way and fight our fight because we know what's best. The big secret to serenity….letting go of outcomes and trusting that you'll be able to manage, no matter what life throws your way. Being able to manage your life and find joy no matter what is the best outcome we can hope for, and the only one that we can actually control. It can be as tough as it sounds, but it gets easier!

**Go to the Control/Change worksheet**

Think of all the things in your life that you worry about on a regular basis or cause you angst, as well as all the things that you do/responsibilities you feel you have that seem to zap your energy or that you resent, and start to list them in the **first column**. Be as specific as possible. Don't just put Joe, put specific things about Joe that irk you the most. Don't put "the kids". What specifically about each child is always on your mind? Same thing with work, be specific. Just dump it on the page. The more honest and detailed you are the more effective this will be. And don't feel guilty if you answer that you resent taking care of your ailing mother or your kids. Just be honest, specific and non-judgmental.

In the **second column**, answer the simple question, "is it mine?" according to the following criteria:

**Answer NO if**

It involves someone else's behavior

It involves someone else's decisions

It involves someone else's actions

It involves someone else feeling consequences for their own decisions/action/lack of action

It does not directly involve you physically

It does not directly involve you financially

It is something another person is capable of doing for themselves

It is something another person should be capable of doing for themselves.

It is about someone else's finances/bills/spending

It is about someone else's future

It involves concern for what other people might think

**Answer YES if**

It involves your own behavior

It involves your own financial decisions

It involves your own actions

It involves you physically

It is your own direct responsibility and you are capable of taking care of it

It is about your personal future/health/well being

**What's the real underlying outcome that we fear?**

Now, look at the worries again along with the second column. Chances are there are a ton more NO'ss than YES's. The more no's we have, the less empowered we feel because we are spending too much energy worrying about things that we can't control. Studies show that anywhere between 88% and 94% of our worries never come to be and often involve things that are out of our control! A huge percentage of our emotional energy is not just being wasted, but it's actually being used to make us even more unhappy! It's like Joe and his self fulfilling prophecy. We think bad things will happen and we will be unhappy so we end up making ourselves unhappy by worrying about bad things! What a vicious cycle!

We are usually driven to control things out of fear that if we don't try to control it, something bad will happen. It's important for us to try to identify what the root fear is that is causing the worry. It helps to look at the fear as an undesirable outcome. We worry about our spouse's health because we are afraid he will get sick. The worry is the health, the underlying outcome that we fear is that they will get sick. Once we really know what we are afraid of, we can then ask ourselves if our fear is real, and if we actually can control it.

We may find ourselves, for example, worrying about a loved one's weight. What's the underlying fear? That they will get sick or die. Ok, well, can we control if another person is going to get sick? Obviously not. People with very healthy lifestyles get sick all the time, and smokers and drinkers can live to a ripe old age. We have to recognize that by worrying about what someone else is eating we are trying to control an outcome, their health, which is clearly out of our control. We are also, most likely, badgering them about what they are eating thereby diminishing the quality of our relationship with them because no one likes to be badgered.

Control we try to exert over other people, no matter how much love is backing it up, has a direct impact on the health of our relationships. Notice, I didn't say it affects how good our relationships are. Many co-dependent, enmeshed people mistake closeness and getting along well as indicators of a healthy relationship. If you're doing for your adult child what they should be doing for themselves, and they're not complaining and you don't mind, it's still unhealthy.

In the third column, identify the real underlying fear that is causing us to worry about that particular thing.

**Can we actually control it?**

Now look at your answers row by row, and in the 4th column of each row answer Yes or No to the question "Can I control it?".

Take some time to digest what you see in front of you. How many of your worries are completely out of your control? How much time and energy are you wasting on things that you simply cannot change? How much control do you feel you have over your own day, week, life? If something bad happens in your day or life, do you feel it happened *to* you? Are you putting as much time into your own happiness and well-being as you're putting into other people's? Do you allow your day or your plans to get sidelined by someone else's needs? Do you treat every request as urgent and regular responsibilities as exhausting?

**The action plan**

Now that you've identified what you can and can't change or control, you can start shifting your focus. It takes lots of practice to develop the tools and skills you will need, but you can learn how to detach with love from other people's problems and lives, and begin to focus on your own problems and life. Even better, you can start focusing on what actually brings you joy and makes YOU happy.

Go to the next worksheet, "Things I Cannot Change and Things I Can", and categorize your worries according to your answers in the 4th column. Everything you answered “No” to in Column 4 goes under "things you cannot change". If you answered Yes in column 4 then list them under “things to work on.”

Now, you have a clear to-do list of things that you need to let go of, and things that you need to work on. Of course, letting go isn't always easy. and focusing on your own stuff isn't any easier, but as we start filling our tool box, developing skills to use the tools, and start to practice, practice, practice, we can become more empowered in our lives than we ever imagined and we can find more peace and joy than we ever thought possible. That's a promise.

**Where to start the action**

It mustn't go unacknowledged that the Serenity Prayer starts with "God grant me". God. That can be very tricky for a lot of people. Some people are very comfortable with the concept of God, while others want no part of it.

I encourage you to not get caught up in the semantics here, but rather, to understand how developing faith that there is something out there that is bigger than you, and more importantly, that it is actually on your side working with you, can be a tremendous help in letting go of things and in finding the courage to make changes in yourself.

Life will do as life does whether you want it to or not. Some optimists say everything happens for a reason and we need to look for that reason. Others simply say that it is what it is and we each have to adjust to what life gives us, and find the opportunity and learning experience in the good and the bad. Either way, our serenity, our happiness, and our very quality of life depend very much on how resilient we are to things not working out the way we hoped for, or planned for, or expected. When we have an underlying faith that there is always opportunity for joy in our lives, then we will be able to find it, even in our darkest hours.

*"Happiness can be found in even the darkest of times if one only remembers to turn on the light"….Dumbledore*

We are the light. We are the source of our own happiness. The more connected we feel with the energy of the world: God, Source, Universe, nature, the power of a group of people that support us, the more faith we will have in our own inner energy, in our own inner light, and we will never forget how to turn it on.



