

Finding Courage

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

When you tell yourself to have more courage, you might be attempting to encourage yourself to take action and the result may be supportive. But sometimes telling yourself to "have more courage" is a thinly veiled self-criticism. Underneath the vague directive to have more courage there may be unconscious thoughts like, "Why am I such a wimp?!" or "Everyone is braver than I am." or "There must be something wrong with me that others can do it and I can't."

When you say to yourself, "I should have more courage." What is probably true is that you need more support to take action. When you want to take action, but can't quite get yourself to do it, often a small shift in support is enough to give you access to agency.

That support could come from the inside or outside. For example, reminding yourself of all the times you've succeeded in a particular way may be enough support. Taking a moment to acknowledge the fear with compassion may be enough. You probably already do a few things like this when you are telling yourself to have more courage. Becoming conscious and specific about exactly how you support yourself will give you greater access to that support in times of stress and prevent self-criticism from derailing you.

Support from the outside might also be simple and easy for others to offer once it is named. Simple support from the outside might look like words of reassurance, someone holding your hand, a reminder about what your strengths are, or sharing more information.

In sum, telling yourself to be a certain way or have more of a certain quality, is a set-up for self-criticism and possibly freezing or avoiding. When you hear yourself giving directives like this you can access effective action by asking yourself questions like: If I could be or have that, what actions would be different inside or out? If I could be or have that, what needs would be met and knowing those are the needs, what could I do or ask for that would meet those needs?

Of course, the same is true when you hear yourself telling someone else to be a certain way or have a certain quality. Those directives are veiled expressions of your own thoughts, feelings, needs, and unformed requests. When you tell your partner to "be more considerate", you are expressing a need for consideration. Taking responsibility for your need means making a specific doable request.

Those who you call "courageous" are accessing particular forms of support that enable them to take courageous actions. They are making specific doable requests of themselves or others to get that support. Knowing what those forms of support are may provide clues to help you find the support you need to take courageous action.

Practice

Take a moment now to identify one supportive thing you could say or do for yourself in a moment when you want more courage.