

The Nuts and Bolts of Not Taking Things Personally

With Miki Kashtan

I can't think of much personal advice that we hear more frequently than the idea of not taking things personally, and still, despite being told repeatedly and even being committed to it, we rarely know how to implement it. Why is it so difficult, and is there any clear practice that can help us get better at it?

Why We Take Things Personally

Unfortunately, the answer to this question is quite simple. It's because everything reinforces the sense that whatever is being said is indeed about us – both from without and from within.

Here's an example of how that works from the environment. I was sitting at a management meeting where the finance person was expressing her huge frustration that when she comes to other managers with feedback about how their departments are doing relative to their expenditure budget, they become defensive and provide excuses about why things can't change. One of the managers immediately started arguing with her, whereupon she expressed even more frustration.

After a while I stepped in, because it was clear neither of them was able to hear the other. I wanted to see, first, if I could hear what she was saying. I asked her if what she wanted was to have some sense of trust that people on the team would come together to hold accountability for the whole instead of advocating for their own departments. She breathed a sigh of relief, and said that was exactly what she was trying to express. That wasn't, however, how she had expressed it. Instead, her language was full of expressions about the other manager. So I was entirely unsurprised when, at one point, he exclaimed that he didn't want to be blasted each time he spoke with her. I said to him that I was hearing something different, and repeated what I had said previously. I added that I can see that he could take it as an accusation, whereupon he said: "It was an accusation."

This is where the external and the internal magnify each other. The finance person's language was definitely about him, spoken in words that so easily lend themselves to being heard as an accusation – why would he not take it personally? Especially when that is what we are used to hearing all the time, and what we were raised with, so many of us. At a very impressionable age it was drilled into many of us that this or that was our fault, and that we were this or that. In my case it was obstinate and selfish, both of which I knew deep down somewhere were just not true of me. Not only were we told things were our fault, it was also the case that if someone was upset we would suffer personal consequences to us. That fear stays with us, and the pattern is formed. Then, because that is also how we have been raised to speak given what we saw modeled, we pass it on to others, both our children and other adults in our life.

The net result is that, as adults, we so easily fall prey to habit. We take things personally, and we either defend or collapse. The capacity to hear through the words of another who is speaking of us, and to imagine that their words are placeholders for deeper human needs and wishes that are not articulated – that is simply beyond the reach of most of us without extensive and ongoing practice to overcome the habit.

The ultimate goal is to become strong enough internally that even when someone is actively saying: “You are responsible for this calamity;” “You are making my life miserable;” “Because of you this project failed;” “Our relationship is breaking up because you didn’t show up” – or any of a host of similar statements we are all afraid of hearing – we can still remember with utter clarity and poise that the person is speaking about themselves, they are telling us the extent of their pain, not a statement about ourselves. This is, simply, the only language and form available to most of us to express pain.

It was a huge stretch for the manager in question to fully take in that he was the one doing the interpreting. This was a meeting, not a context in which people ordinarily are open to doing healing work, and so we agreed that I would meet with the two of them to continue. I do believe, or hope, that the two of them got at least that much: that how we speak and how we hear what others say has a lot to do with how much suffering we incur.

A Two-Part Practice

Shifting our focus in this way, being open to multiple interpretations, creating a distance between the words and our own experience, can be a very tall order. I think of it as a major spiritual accomplishment and a practice that can take years. All the more reason to get started, one small step at a time, because I do believe that we get better over time.

To begin with, I see the habit of taking things personally as keeping us enmeshed with the other person. This gives me the clarity that the way forward is to create some distance between me and my reaction, enough to create connection with myself. Then, or sometimes even without this part, we can also create some separation between the words of the other person and myself. When we can understand that our reaction is about our own need, and that the other person’s words, no matter how they sound to us, are an expression of their needs, then we can be more present and available to navigate the situation. I am happy to have two very concrete examples to illustrate these options, both of which took place in a context that included openness to healing, which allows for more of the careful excavation to happen, to see how that practice can begin.

Story: Rejection by a Sister

The first example comes from a woman, let’s call her Donna, who was profoundly upset when, after an extended period in which she offered material and emotional help to her sister at a time of crisis, her sister said this to her: “I don’t want to even remember that you helped me.” Donna was so completely devastated, that she couldn’t imagine any way that she would ever be able to let go of this pain.

I imagine that most people reading this story now can completely and easily identify with Donna. One of the core principles I use in working with anything – within me and with others – is to question the obvious and self-evident. So I probed deeply into what exactly was upsetting for Donna. This is what any of us can ask ourselves when faced with a situation in which we take something so personally and deeply: “Why is this upsetting me? What am I telling myself about this situation? What is the meaning I assign to it?”

In this particular case, the storyline was one of the quintessentially painful human stories: “My sister doesn’t want to have anything to do with me.” This is the story we know as “rejection.” So much pain can be encapsulated within such a story, that we can literally disappear into it. This is why creating some distance is so essential, so that we can be available to reflect, connect with ourselves, and have some choice. With Donna, this happened through an additional question, an invitation to her to imagine what, deep down and underneath the anguish of the “rejection,” she would want to have with her sister. It wasn’t so hard for Donna to find: she wants to have a close relationship of trust with her sister, for her efforts to count, and for her love to matter. When we are able to articulate and make emotional contact with what we really want, then we can sink into it, and find ourselves in a deep place that has nothing to do with what anyone else says about us. This longing for connection with the sister is purely about Donna’s heart and needs. As odd as it sometimes seems to some people, our own needs and longings, if we are not fighting them, are a source of strength and energy, not a weakness. It’s the innermost core of our being, the purest expression of our humanity, our open heart. If nothing else, it’s an opportunity to get to know ourselves more fully.

After Donna relaxed into her needs for a bit, I had some trust that we could broach the more difficult task, which is the one that creates the freedom: finding a different way of making sense of what the person could possibly have meant. In this case, after some back and forth, we were able to come up with a simple and sad theory: that her sister is so desperately wanting to feel independent, to trust her own capacity to attend to her life and issues, that it was shameful for her that she needed to rely on Donna’s help. I wish I knew what the end of the story was, and that rarely happens for me in the way that I work with people. I was, however, touched to see how much willingness Donna had to explore things with her sister after being previously so hesitant to engage with her at all.

Story: Being Asked to Change

The second story comes from a couple I was assisting in a very difficult moment in their relationship, whom I will call David and Lisa. When I talked with them, neither of them was particularly able to hear the other, and my heart was going out to both of them. Lisa wanted us to focus on David, because she knew he had been wanting to be heard for a while and she just was unable to hear him for days on end. And yet I sensed that unless we found a way for Lisa’s heart to open up a bit, there was no point in David speaking. I gently inquired about the obstacle, which was not easy to find, as Lisa was deeply protected given her own immense anguish about the situation. Pretty soon it became clear that one of the obstacles was Lisa’s persistent belief that David wanted her to be different from who she was. As is so often the case when we take things personally, it’s easy to understand why the message would be so painful. Believing that the only way someone we care about could be happy is by us being different is unimaginably depressing – I can neither change myself nor do I want this person to suffer.

Stuck between these, I can see why Lisa ended up shutting her heart down. Of course she would want to be accepted, to have faith that being herself would be a source of support rather than challenge to her partner, not to mention wishing to be in a relationship where there is mutual personal responsibility for creating the conditions of our own happiness.

In hindsight, I have some wistfulness that I skipped this entire part when talking with them, and instead went directly to the second part. Why did I choose that? In part because I wasn't even sure that Lisa's heart could open to herself wide enough to make a difference, and in part because I know how much Lisa wants to walk the path of nonviolence. It is my hope that Lisa is reading this and perhaps receiving some empathy in seeing my understanding of her pain. Perhaps David, too, will find some meaning in this.

With all my wistfulness, I am also aware that I want to remember the option of this "shortcut" – going straight to the attempt to re-read the expression of the other person, finding a different interpretation, and thereby releasing some of the pain, because its source is the interpretation, not what the other person says in and of itself.

And so this is what I asked Lisa: "If, indeed, David wants you to change and be different, why would he want that? What would it give him?" It took some effort to get there, and it was worth the effort. Ultimately, what she came up with is that David wants peace of mind within the relationship. Then, the next part of the "emotional surgery" I offered her was to compare the effect of these two different interpretations on her inner well-being. I literally asked her to shift her attention back and forth between the idea that David wants her to change, and the idea that David wants peace of mind within the relationship, and see how it affected her. Needless to say, the latter was significantly less stressful. The final freedom comes from recognizing that, once we get to that deep level of imagining what the other person truly wants underneath the part that is personally about us which is superficially expressed, it's rarely the case that we would have any opposition to it. Why would Lisa not want David to have peace of mind? Only if she believes it's at cost to her, which, sadly, Lisa was indeed believing. As we managed to separate out that last piece, she could see that, in principle, she would want that for him.

In Humility

With this piece, I am starting the 4th year of my blogging. Wow. I think I may have never been as detailed in presenting a practice on this blog as this time, and I am sitting here with the hope that this may actually serve people in attending to their lives. My heart is a little broken thinking about all the pain we suffer and bring to others by this deeply entrenched habit to take things personally and to encourage that in others by how we speak to them. Who am I to speak, anyway? I am far from free. I fall into the trap of taking things personally far less often than I used to, and yet when I am in it, it's just as consuming as it's ever been. I almost want to pray, despite there being no god in my life: may we all find relief, may we all learn to see our own and others' core humanity, regardless of outward presentation.