

Change yourself to solve problem

by Rob Burkham, Post-Crescent 5-16-12

For 30 years, I spent my working days as a psychologist, meeting with people who were in great emotional distress. My job was to help them find ways to change their patterns of thinking and interacting with others so their lives would be better.

I had the honor and privilege of working with a whole range of people, those with relatively minor problems and those with debilitating, lifelong problems.

Over the years, it became clear to me that one of the most powerful forces causing the pain in my clients' lives — and in the lives of most of us — is the all-too-human tendency to unreasonably justify our own behavior, unfairly blame others for what is wrong, and then try to change those others to make things right. Our knee-jerk reaction is to see ourselves as blameless and to see others as the problem.

It's easy for us to think that, because others are the problem, they're the ones who need to change and we need to make them change. Every day in my office, I saw this pattern play out — spouses desperate to change their partners, parents trying with all their might to change their children, and children doing their best to change their parents.

The problem with blaming others and then trying to make them change is that it doesn't work. No one can directly change someone else, unless that other person allows himself or herself to be influenced.

If someone feels responsible for making that important other person change, they will be struggling hard to reach an unreachable goal. And there are few more powerful ways to bring distress to a person than to have him or her feel responsible for accomplishing an impossible task.

Most of my clients came to me because they were feeling intense stress and often that stress was the result of their belief that they were responsible for getting someone else, someone very important to them, to change.

Unfortunately, a fair number of my clients never changed that belief. They held on to the idea that others were to blame and that others were the ones who needed to change. Those clients often left therapy as unhappy as when they started.

Fortunately, many of my clients came to a life-changing insight in the course of working on their problems and this insight made a huge difference in their lives. They were often startled when they came to see how they themselves were part of the problem. They saw how their own way of thinking and their own style of relating to others was contributing greatly to the problems that had brought them to therapy in the first place.

They also came to see that they were powerless to change others. The first step in Alcoholics Anonymous is “we admitted we were powerless over alcohol and our lives had become unmanageable.” The insight I’m talking about is very similar — “I admit that I am powerless over my husband, wife, parent, child, boss, co-worker, etc.” Then, they could begin to work on the only person they could do much about: themselves.

These fortunate clients went from working hard at an impossible task — changing others — to a possible task — changing themselves. And they began to make things better.

There are literary and biblical precedents to this insight. In Sophocles’ ancient tale of Oedipus the King, Oedipus wants to find the man who through his sinful deeds has brought great calamity to the city state of Thebes. His hunt for this man leads him to himself — it turns out that he is that man.

In the Old Testament, King David of Judea, a wealthy king with many wives, has Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, killed so that he can marry her. David doesn’t see that he has done anything wrong.

The prophet Nathan tells David about a rich man stealing from a poor one and David’s first response is outrage; he wants that rich man brought to justice. Nathan shows the king that he, David, is that man. David sees clearly the wrong he has done and repents.

The cartoon character Pogo stated this insight humorously in his famous statement, “We have met the enemy, and it is us.” My years as a therapist have taught me that, when we see how we’re being enemies to ourselves and when we see how we are powerless over others, we can begin to improve our lives.

Oddly enough, when we realize we cannot change others and we begin to work on ourselves, sometimes we can actually influence others for the better.