

Control: The Master Addiction

Root Causes

A chaotic personal history in which you've frequently felt threatened, unsafe, frightened, vulnerable and powerless often results in one of the following patterns:

- **Illusion of Victimhood.** This is a pattern of pervasive helplessness marked by the belief that you have no effect on anything and there's no use trying. Depression is a common companion experience. It's completely maddening to those around you, and you tend to feel misunderstood and rejected by their frustration.
- **Illusion of Control.** You are driven by an irrational desire for everything to be predictable. It feels as if constant vigilance to this end is a necessary skill for functioning in the world. You are like the vaudevillian plate spinners; let one drop and everything will shatter. It's baffling to you that others don't understand how important things are.

Six Keys for Freeing Yourself from the Illusion of Control

1. Self-compassion. This is the safety net for letting go. Here's a big idea for you: when you feel the fear that something bad, imperfect or unmanageable is happening (or will happen), that event is not what you're afraid of. What you are *truly* afraid of is the lashing you'll take from your inner critics. Your own mind will be very upset and make you wrong and inadequate and generally just be mean to you about it. Making the choice to be kind and compassionate with yourself rather than turning against yourself is a huge step on the path to freedom and empowerment. Your grandma was right: strength lies in being nice.

2. Acceptance. Acceptance is the opposite of resistance, and the thing we tend to resist most is change. Change is quite the bugaboo for a control addict, yet it's the only constant in life. Making friends with change is a key step in the process. It's helpful if you can discern between *being prepared* for change and *having the resources* to deal with change; we simply won't be prepared for every change that comes our way, but we certainly can have the resources to handle it, such as self-compassion, flexibility, creativity, resourcefulness, ingenuity, courage and competence. When you can trust yourself to do your best, no matter what happens, acceptance becomes much easier.

3. Patience. The average control addict has a very low tolerance for grey times. These are the moments when you don't yet know, when the information isn't clear or available, when figuring-it-out-now is not an option. Cultivating patience is very important to the process of releasing

control patterns; it's also a key step toward emotional maturity. Develop a discipline of taking your time; avoid making decisions until they are truly necessary, and in the meantime, be compassionate with yourself. This patience with yourself can then expand into more patience with others and the world.

4. Curiosity. All problems eventually work themselves out. While there is plenty of chaos in the world, there is also a natural tendency toward order. There are literally hundreds, even thousands, of possible ways any one problem could be resolved, and some of them are wonderful. In attempts to control, we are usually pushing an agenda that encompasses only one or two very limited solutions. An attitude of curiosity, however, allows other, better solutions to come forward. Being curious involves (1) remembering that you have the resources to handle whatever happens and (2) trusting in the possibility of a positive outcome that you couldn't have anticipated.

5. Spirituality. For many people, spirituality involves trusting there is a higher order or a creative force that has more power over the world than we do. Whether or not such a power exists, this we know: it isn't you. This is good news! It means you aren't responsible for doing more than is possible, which is exactly what you're attempting. You also can't know the larger, cascading impact of any situation, for better or worse, no matter how positive your intentions. Take your place as a human among humans. Do your best and leave the rest to the universe. Relieve yourself of needing to know more than you can know.

6. Humor. Learning to take things less seriously and to laugh at life's little surprises are shortcuts to overcoming the siren call of control. The majority of situations in life are low-stakes; their outcomes really don't impact our quality of life significantly. This is true. However, many of us are extremely talented at making up stories about what things mean and how X will lead to Y if we can't manage to ABC, and we easily turn low-stakes situations into very high-stakes situations in our own heads. Spotting our ability to do this is helpful; laughing at it is even better. Albert Einstein said, "The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them." You may find that pondering problems while not taking them too seriously brings forward simple, elegant solutions you would never have thought of at the same level of seriousness.