



Burying the hatchet is essential for your health and happiness.

by *Kindra Gordon*

We've all heard stories of someone who has stopped speaking to someone else because of an argument or misunderstanding. Maybe one of those someones is you. But did you ever stop to think what holding a grudge does to your health and happiness?

Holding on to bitter feelings can begin to dominate your life and affect your marriage, family and health.

"If you can't let go of things that upset you, you give it the power to ruin your life," says Marcie Moran, who has more than 20 years of experience in the health care field as a psychiatric nurse and psychologist. Based in Sioux Falls, S.D., Moran is currently project director for Sewing Seeds of Hope, which brings mental health services to rural communities.

Limiting your happiness

Moran says holding on to bitter, angry feelings tends to punish only you. "You suffer, and the one you are bitter against likely doesn't even feel bothered by it," she says.

She tells of a man she knew who held a grudge and was in the hospital being treated for depression. His wife wanted out of the marriage, he had no relationship with his

kids, and the person he was mad at (his brother) was living a successful life without any concern for the anger still harbored toward him.

If you want to experience happiness and rewarding relationships in your life, you need to be willing to let go of the past, Moran says. "If you have an argument with someone or are upset by something, tell yourself, 'It wasn't fair, but I'm going to let it go because I have all this other stuff to do in my life.'"

Noel McNaughton, a Canadian-based life coach and author of the column "Ranching Over 50," agrees that people need to work through their anger and move on.

People try to get through difficult challenges by "toughing it out" instead of admitting mistakes and learning from them, he explains. As an example, he points to men in their 60s, 70s and 80s who are often bitter.

"Those are men who have lived in denial," McNaughton says. "They may have wanted their life to be one way and it wasn't, and they didn't accept it and move on."

He suggests that people should use difficult times in life to find meaning and renewed focus.

"Life is a spiritual, inner journey," he says. "If we go consciously, we have a different experience. If we go unconsciously, the same stuff happens to us, but we often feel like a victim rather than learning from it."

The toll on health

To further convince people how important it is to let go of negative feelings, Moran emphasizes the effect stress has on your health.

"Stress takes a toll on the body," Moran says. "It's maybe not as noticeable at age 20 or 25, but by the time you are in your 40s, 50s and beyond, it does impact your health."

She explains there are two kinds of stress — general stress, which includes pressures encountered in everyday living, and cumulative stress, which builds up throughout time and is ongoing.

General stress is usually fairly manageable from day to day; continuous stress can have more serious health effects.

For example, when our bodies experience stress and get worked up, our hormones move into overdrive. A common early sign is high blood pressure. As stress continues, our organs begin to be affected, which can result in illnesses such as ulcers, back pain, and cardiac and digestive problems.

In short, Moran says, "stress compromises the immune system. For instance, have you ever noticed when you get stressed you often get a cold or the flu?"

Managing stress

Moran says the first rule to managing stress is to stay healthy. "To do that, you need to stay smart and recognize the symptoms of stress," she says. "Be honest about what's bothering you." She adds that if you are sick

and visit the doctor, be sure to tell them if stress is affecting your life so they can accurately diagnose the cause of your illness.

Moran also likes the phrase, "Be well to do well." In other words, your physical well-being will help your emotional well-being, so eat well, exercise and get

adequate sleep. Balancing work with social activities is also healthy. Find hobbies you enjoy, maintain friendships, take care of your spiritual self, and find someone you can talk to about issues that trouble you — if you can't talk to a friend, find professional help such as clergy or a counselor.

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 388

Secondly, Moran says a key to a happier, healthier life is to accept change.

“We are scared of change, but it’s a natural part of life,” she says, adding that making the most of change is a lot healthier than worrying about it. “Worrying gets you nowhere. It’s stressful, and it uses up our positive energy.”

To get through change, Moran says it is also essential to take time to grieve your losses. “We all have losses,” she says. “Loss is something we didn’t want to happen. It could

be financial, a bitter relationship, or the death of a loved one.”

That said, Moran says people need to grieve.

“We get too caught up in needing to be strong,” she explains. “You should allow yourself grief; grief is a process. It’s unique to every one of us, and everyone has their own timeline to recover. That’s OK. We get better if we learn how to grieve — be it a job loss, a financial stress, a death, etc. Let it out.”

Last, and most important, Moran says,

maintain your self-esteem. “Rule number one is we have to like ourselves. That’s what gets us through. If you don’t like who you are, then you need to make changes so you are the person you want to be,” she says.

“Focus on the things about you that are good,” she concludes. “Realize you are a valuable person and have many qualities. The better you feel about yourself, the better you can help others.”

