

The Right Response to Success

This was a week for successes in therapy – and for people with depression that means it was a hard one. It seemed as if one person after the other this week brought a story of success and fear. One person is doing much better on her job than previously. It could be she will get a promotion. One won an award that made her feel proud. One completed a certificate program. And one got a small windfall of cash. (Well, that last one is not a success, but it was a good thing to have extra money.)

Yet, all of them need help in one way or another to handle being depressed by their good fortune. “What if I blow it now?” was the question that followed the report of a particular boon. As one of my clients put it, “Success is such a burden. You have to live up to it.”

Success. Why should that be trouble when you are depressed? Aren’t you longing for things to go right? Of course you are! But your depressed brain can take away your pleasure and replace it with guilt, worry, fear or disappointment in a flash.

When you have a success it is as if you get a multiple choice response list:

- a) Guilt: “I did not really deserve this. Other people deserve it more.” “If only you knew how messed up I am you would know I don’t deserve it.”
- b) Fear: “I am sure the next thing that happens will be bad.”
- c) Disappointment/fear of enjoyment: “This is not going to last. And I will be sad again.”
- d) Worry: “What if I do not handle it the right way? What if I blow it?”
- e) All of the above

Consider Abby, when she got a promotion, running through the multiple choices:

- a) “I feel guilty – there is someone in my department who probably needs the promotion more than me.”
- b) “I probably won’t be able to handle the responsibility and now I will get fired for not living up to the job.”
- c) “I won’t be able to enjoy this because now I will have to work really long hours. I should probably just turn it down rather than end up being exhausted by the work.”
- d) “What if I lose my friends at work because they are mad or jealous that I got the promotion?”
- e) All of the above

Abby could not rejoice or get excited with all that negative anticipation of trouble. She was actively considering turning down the promotion.

And here is Lou’s response to good fortune: When she sold her company for a big sum of money, more than she ever imagined she would have, her thoughts immediately dominoed from the sale and the money to ending up broke and homeless. How? She was terrified she would blow the money, investing investing it badly and thereby losing it, so she would end up in poverty and then, without her company, she would have no way to earn more money, and would be broke. And no one she knew would be willing or able to help her. Her multiple choices ended in disaster.

Success is not congruent with the depressed way of thinking, and too often the habit of depressed thinking wins over a new response. I want to suggest there is a right response to success. It is a multiple choice list with only two choices and both are necessary and both are correct.

1, Gratitude

2. Stewardship

Most of us understand what gratitude is: a sense of thanksgiving for a gift. And that feeling is outward directed. Gratitude flows out to another person, to God, to the universe or to whomever or whatever we believe has granted the good thing to us. It is a warm, wonderful sense of appreciation. It allows us not to worry about “deserving” because people do not *earn* gifts. The right response to a gift of good fortune is to be appreciative and to say “thank you.”

Stewardship is your second multiple choice responses. When you have a gift – it does not matter if why you got it or what others have or do not have – you have a responsibility to care for it. Stewardship means to maintain and nurture what you have been given. If you have a promotion, then your stewardship of that good fortune is to do your best, get whatever help you might need to do well, and work in your position for the benefit of your company and your co-workers. If you do, you will help to maintain the company and thus the jobs of everyone as well as your own.

If you have literal good fortune of money, stewardship would suggest being prudent with how you handle it. I have seen several clients who felt frozen about the right thing to do. Good stewardship involves not wasting and doing the best you can to maintain or grow it. You cannot predict the future but you can make a careful investigation of choices to maintain and nurture the sum of money.

When you have success, you can work around the depressed fear of it by giving thought to your two right responses to success:

To whom will you express your gratitude?

How will you be a good steward of the success?