

Not My Circus. Not My Monkeys

The downfalls of trying to control what is not ours to control



I really wanted my daughter to change some plans we had so that I could fit in several other things I wanted to get done. I wanted her to make my life easier at some cost to her own plans. And she just did not think she should have to rearrange things to suit me. She calmly said, "Not my circus. Not my monkeys." I stopped in mid-protest and burst out laughing.

What a lot of meaning in those two simple phrases!

I thought about how it might be good if I took the implications to heart. I had to let go of changing her and just make my own decisions about what I could fit into my schedule. And I realized that those two sentences reflect the central problem whenever we try to control what is not ours to control.

Not My Circus

I suddenly saw a ringmaster, directing so many different parts of a three-ring circus. Performers, workers, equipment, animals. The ringmaster has the whip and the authority to use it; with practiced ease he signals where people should be and what they should be doing. And those performers, equipment and animals *all have agreed that they will pay attention* to these messages. They are willingly part of the circus, accepting directions to make it work.

But what if someone else walked into that circus and tried to take over? What a mix-up would follow! No smooth signals, nothing happening when it should, nothing happening as it should. Confusion reigning as the equipment goes one direction and the performers another. The lion is brought to the ring where the bareback riders are waiting to balance on a horse. Tightrope walkers are given little cars to squeeze into. Even the clowns can't make this funny.

This is so like the frustration of depressed people who devote their energy to thinking and talking over problems over which they have no control. They are trying to be the ringmaster in someone else's circus. For example

- Celene is worried that her partner's attitude at work is too flip and he will miss out on a promotion. She tries to make him dress and act more "like a contender" on the job. The more she makes suggestions, the more he finds her condescending and resists the suggestions.

- Hector is worried that his boss's mismanagement is wasting money. His depression deepens as he anticipates only negative outcomes - the store is going to close, he won't get a raise - his constant bad mood affects his colleagues who are now irritated by him and not by the boss.

- Kristin wants her son to value good grades so she makes him re-do his math more neatly. She wants him to be a child to whom this effort is important. Jon won't let his daughter play a video game because he wants her to *learn to like reading*. Trying to change the child not just the behavior may be directing the wrong circus.

When people are depressed they get ruminative: part of their brain that should function smoothly, like a gear shift between emotion and thought, gets stuck. Then old ideas go around and around. They can't shift gears to find new solutions. In a depressed state, you may feel out of control, which creates stress that feels unmanageable. You can get even more discouraged that you cannot improve situations such as your marriage, your job frustration, or your children's choices. Repeated failure to 'fix' what cannot be fixed intensifies stress and then depression gets worse. How do you break this cycle?

"Not my circus" is code: you are not the ringmaster here. You can watch the show, and certainly decide whether you stay in that tent, but you cannot control what happens there. Learning which circus is yours can diminish your stress remarkably.

Figure out if this is your circus. Ask:

1. Am I, and only I, responsible for this situation? This is the very first stress-reducing thing to figure out. When you are the only responsible one, then it is time to take action. Depression can lessen when you take action instead of just spin in your mind around negative thoughts.
2. Learning which action to take means asking, "If I am the ringmaster, what is going wrong here?" This is not to complain, but rather a question that leads to new ways of thinking. That stuck brain needs a new path to follow.

3. Then, "What are the possible ways to correct what is going wrong?" You may need help figuring out what to do first, because your depressed brain is stuck, so talk to friends and colleagues about ideas of how to change..
4. Next, consider, "What is going right?" *If you are depressed, you are probably focused on what is negative*, so you might not think of asking this. Sometimes everything is fine as far as the performers in the circus are concerned. Sometimes everyone else is happy and it is only you who suffers that distress of not getting what you want. (As in, maybe your significant other is happy with his job and does not need to "be a contender.") Realizing "I do not like it this way," is not the same as identifying a problem. Try noticing how much is right - you might not need to change anything but your attitude!

Giving up the role of ringmaster in someone else's circus might give you emotional space to find your own circus is much more manageable. Read my blog next week "Not My Monkeys" to finish this thought!