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How to Stop Being a **CONTROL FREAK** in Your Relationships

You like it or not, there are quite a few control freaks around, and I admit I am one of them. Now I realize and accept I am a control freak, I am learning to monitor and short circuit my excessive need to be in control so as to lessen the negative impact of excessive control on people and loved ones in my life. The desire to have a sense of control is a basic human need. In order to take charge of our lives, we need to have some control of our environment. However, when our need to be in control becomes excessive, we will see collateral damages in relationships. The boss who wants to micromanage everything in the office, the mother who stalks her teenage daughter when she goes out on a date, the husband who explodes in anger when his wife breaks her promise not coming home on time, the mother-in-law who makes you feel you are never good enough for her, the parent who demands every corner in the house to be perfectly clean and in order. These are examples of people whose need to be in control has become excessive and as a result causing relationship injuries in workplaces, marriages, and family lives. In extreme cases, the relationship injuries turn into casualties. In November 2005, Lori Dupont, a Registered Nurse at the Hotel-Dieu

Grace Hospital in Windsor, Ontario, was stabbed to death in the recovery room by her former lover, Dr. Marc Daniel, an anesthesiologist in the same hospital. Dr. Daniel, a married father of two teens, died later of a suspected overdose. According to court affidavits, Ms. Dupont wanted out of what she described as a controlling relationship and had the home's locks changed as well as applied for a peace bond to keep the doctor away from her. Dr. Daniel attempted suicide and was ordered by the hospital administration to seek anger management and other counselling. This tragic ending of a romantic relationship is a classic example of someone who is extremely controlling and has a mindset that "if I am not happy, no one should be happy; if I cannot have you, no one should have you either."

Controlling persons usually have plenty of upsides in their personality. They are loyal, reliable, dependable, organized, sentimental, romantic, goal oriented, results based, big picture people, and someone whom you can count on. Their demons are the downsides of the controlling personality. When they allow the demons to lash out, watch out, it is like living in hell with them.

Downsides of a Controlling Person

Based on my counselling experience and personal observations, the followings are the downsides of a controlling personality that might cause relationship injuries:

- Perfectionist thinking
- Very high and usually unrealistic expectations on oneself and others
- Black and white, right vs. wrong thinking, i.e., no allowances for different viewpoints
- All or nothing thinking, i.e., either I am successful or I am a failure, nothing in between
- Afraid to make mistakes or no allowances for mistake making
- Fear of failures
- A gnawing sense of anxiety that something wrong is going to happen
- Focus on the negatives
- Unhealthy self esteem and lack of self confidence
- Prone to depression and anxiety
- Might have explosive anger
- Described by others as an "anal" and insecure person who want all the ducks in the row right away
- Wanting to take care of others too much
- Not trusting people
- High tendency to internalize thoughts and feelings
- Living a life that is performance based and driven by fear

How to Let Go of Excessive Control and Avoid Relationship Injuries

Face Your Fear

All excessive control comes from one source: fear and an excessive need to feel secure. The opposite of fear is safety and security. Controlling persons are usually insecure; otherwise there is no need to control everything in their lives. They are lacking inner security; therefore, they exert control on people and their outside environment in order to temporarily feel secure within. In order to face your fear, you have to identify your fear first. Ask yourself, "What am I afraid of?" Are you afraid that you are not going to make it in your business? Are you afraid that people do not like you or approve you? Are you afraid that your children are not going to make it in their lives? Are you afraid that your staff is not doing their job as good as you do? Are you afraid that you are not good enough for your father? Fear robs the joy of living in the present. Fear makes a person afraid of the future and regrets the past. Fear immobilizes a person's capacity to maximize his or her true potential. Fear increases a person's need to control excessively.

Externalize Your Fear

Do not keep your fear a secret to yourself. Externalize your fear, talk to someone about it. Research has shown that internalization of unhealthy secrets is the culprit for planting seeds for depression, anxiety, and resentment. After you label your fear, talk to a person you trust. Sometimes talking to someone helps you label your fear. I remember a few years ago I was feeling very insecure about my new practice, I was afraid that no one would come to see me. I kept the insecurity to myself and became a very controlling person in my relationships. Somehow I gathered enough courage to share my insecurity with my wife. She listened to me; she did not give me a lecture. She shared with me how her father started his business and that helped me put things into perspective. That was the turning point for me let to go of my fear and insecurity and re-focus on what I needed to do to establish my practice.

Redirect Your Fear

It is tremendously energy consuming to try to control something that you have no total control. Using an investment terminology, it is not a "good buy" to invest in something that you have no control. For example, after your children

have become adults, you have less control on where they want to go to school, whom they want to date, and what they want to do with their lives. It is not that you have no responsibility to let them know of the consequences of their choices, but you are no longer responsible for their well-being, they are. Make a conscious choice to understand the difference between "responsible to" and "responsible for," and learn to let go of stuff that you are not really or no longer responsible for. A controlling relationship usually means someone is losing his or her own identity in the relationship. As a client told me recently in her session, she has lost herself in her 10 years common law relationship. Your spouse is more than a wife and a mother, she is also a woman. A woman has her own thoughts, ideas, opinions, wants, and needs which represent her own identity. Most women know how to be a wife and a mother, but they might not know how to take care of the woman within them. Husbands, redirect your energy and investment to allow and encourage your spouse to pursue and flourish in their own identity which lays the cornerstone for healthy psychological and emotional health.

Reconstruct Your Fear

Excessive fear usually stems from unrealistic expectations. For example, controlling persons usually cannot stand an untidy and noisy house because they see it as chaotic and they feel like they are losing control. When they come home from work and see there are toys on the floor, they want to put them back to where the toys belong. Their spouse will probably complain why put the toys away so early in the evening, let's wait until the kids go to bed and then clean up the rooms. To the spouses, it is about practicality. To the controlling persons, it is about responsibility, i.e. someone has not been responsible to put things away. In this case, it is my job to help the controlling person reconstruct the meaning about the toys. It is not about responsibility. It is about the reality that during the developmental stage of toddlers and young children, toys on the floor or the sofa are a normal thing in an average household. As long as it is not a life and death situation or a compromise to personal safety, I coach the controlling parent to walk over the toys, and pay attention to the children instead.

Remember, money can buy you a house; money cannot buy you a home. A home is about people, a house is about things. Do you want a house or a home? In 1995 my wife and I bought a brand new mini van. Since it was new, I told myself I would not allow any scratch on the van for one year. When I noticed scratches on the van, I would be very upset and wanted to find out who did it. Then, my wife said if you want to use the van, you should expect wear and tear on the vehicle. I decided to reconstruct my meaning on the van. I wanted my family to remember the good times they had with the van. The ski trips, the summer vacations, not my anger about who scratched the van again. When I discovered scratches, I just touched them up with paint I bought from the dealer.

Strengthen Your Own Identity

It is very important for controlling persons to identify, develop, exercise, and polish their upsides. The upsides of a controlling person make good manager, dedicated parent, romantic lover, responsible care giver, and excellent event organizer. A strong personal identity stimulates inner security and decreases the need for excessive external control, and in turn, creates healthy self esteem, contentment, and inner peace.

Seek Professional Help

For some people, their need for excessive control has created many relationship injuries. Just like physical injury, relationship injury requires proper rehabilitation, otherwise chronic pain will set in, and for some cases, permanent damages and restrictions are the results. There are times you are no longer equipped to help yourself anymore. It is not too late to consult your doctor and seek professional counselling to start doing some serious rehab and damage control.

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