

"Normal" Is a Very Big Playing Field

Harold likes to take his drum to the park, where he wails and beats on it in solitude.

Susan talks to her grandmother's ghost.

Jamie has 60 potted plants around her house—all in purple pots.

Is there something wrong with these people? Are they normal?

Most of us live with an internal struggle. Each of us yearns to be different, special, an individual. At the same time, we don't want to lean too far out of the tree—we also want to fit in, be accepted...be normal.

But what does it mean to be normal? Even experts struggle with the word; medical textbooks use words such as "usual" and "not ill" and "conforming to a cultural norm." However, what is usual to one group of people—tattooing, to give one example—may be completely weird and repulsive to another group. Does that make it normal or abnormal?

The real danger comes in labels—the ones we put on each other and the ones we call ourselves. People who don't fit in are often labeled as abnormal or different, and that stigma can eat into their feelings of self-worth and belonging. Our culture, with its narrow definitions and media depictions of the "right" way to be, doesn't help.

We harm ourselves when we agonize that something we feel, believe in, dream about or just wear on our bodies is not normal, or when we feel shame and hide things. Normal is a big playing field and most of us fit somewhere on that field.

Or, as comedienne Whoopi Goldberg puts it, "Normal is nothing more than a cycle on a washing machine."

Still, we worry about being normal. Is it normal to sleep 12 hours instead of eight? Is it normal for my five-year-old son

to dress in high heels and pink tutus? Is it normal to grieve a loved one for years? Is it normal to be happy so much of the time? Am I at a normal weight? Is it normal to want to be alone a lot? Is it normal to spend hours on the computer? Is it normal to be afraid of dogs? Is it normal to be the only person crying in a movie theater when everyone else is laughing?

We limit ourselves when we try to fit ourselves into a box labeled "normal."

It can be an awfully unimaginative, stifling, boring place to be. In trying to be normal or to fit in, we may shut down those parts of us that define who we really are.

So, take a deep breath, and know that you may be different, you may even be a little strange in some areas—but most likely, you are as "normal" as the rest of us. *



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Rewriting the Myth of Perfect Togetherness

The story goes like this: Two people fall in love and from that moment on, they go everywhere and do everything together. They are a perfect match sexually, and their interests and values coincide in every respect. If they spend much time apart or socialize separately, people wonder if there is trouble in the relationship.

This is the myth of togetherness: two lives merge into one melded front.

But it's a story fraught with perils, for it most often leads to exactly the opposite of togetherness: one partner feels smothered and withdraws, while the other feels rejected and abandoned. This push-pull dance of too much closeness or too much distance sets up a high level of anxiety for both partners and too often ends in heartache and separation.

It's possible, however, to rewrite this story of togetherness in a way that makes a better ending possible. Instead of togetherness being a merging of two people in which two halves make a whole, what if togetherness meant a deep commitment to supporting each other's fulfillment, both as individuals and as partners?

"A co-creative relationship is one in which two people access more of their creativity as a result of their loving interaction," write Drs. Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks in *Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment*. "Out of the harmony of a co-committed relationship springs an enhanced energy that enables both partners to make a greater contribution than either one could have made alone."

In this kind of togetherness, there is deep, mutual support for cultivating the unique gifts that each partner brings to the other and to the world. Individual needs for both closeness and space apart are honored, and the

communication channels are open to express each person's needs and desires. Greater individual fulfillment enables each to contribute more richly to the relationship, and growing feelings of aliveness spark the relationship itself, infusing it with greater passion and energy.

Here are some suggestions to help you move toward this different model of togetherness:

Pursue your own interests. Take a class or work on a project because it interests YOU. When you are fed creatively, intellectually or emotionally, you'll contribute more aliveness to the relationship.

Cultivate friendships outside of your relationship. Your partner cannot meet all of your relational needs. Besides, it's fun and enlivening to experience different facets of yourself through contact with others.

Take time alone. Whatever helps you connect with yourself and your spiritual source can bring a sense of rejuvenation. You might: spend time in nature, enjoy a hot bath, journal, garden, meditate.

Create special time with your partner. Relationships flourish with open, loving communication. Make time to share with your partner, to nourish the bond of intimacy. That loving bond will support you both in powerfully contributing to the world outside your relationship, as well as within it.

To paraphrase author Anais Nin, a strong relationship is one in which, rather than facing inward toward each other exclusively, two people stand side-by-side facing outward—together. *

10 Tips on Moving Through Depression

The crushing blackness of depression can seem insurmountable when you're in it. But there are things you can do to help lighten the darkness and even project a feeling of well-being and joy.

1. Stay connected with others. Isolating yourself doesn't protect loved ones or help you. Just being around others in silence is better than hiding away.

2. Set priorities and do what you can. Acknowledge (even celebrate) the completion of everything.

3. Do physical work. Chop wood or scrub the bathtub or prune trees. Physical effort helps to shift emotional blockages and numbness.

4. Feed your senses. Look at beautiful artwork. Listen to your favorite music. Indulge yourself with fragrant oils. Surround yourself with vibrant color.

5. Soak up the sun when you get the chance. Its warmth helps penetrate even the bleakest of moods.

6. Get your hands in the dirt. Gardening or working with the earth in some fashion can be energizing.

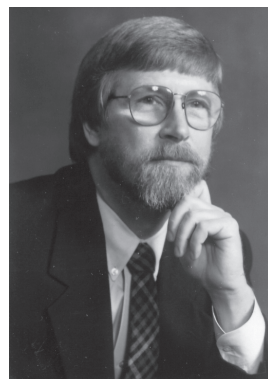
7. Sing. Whether you hum a quiet melody or belt out Broadway tunes, singing gives voice to hope.

8. Look to your nutrition. Eat healthfully; consider a vitamin/mineral supplement. Don't forget to drink lots of water.

9. Take hot baths or cold showers. One or the other—or both—can help to lift you out of despair.

10. Connect with nature. Take a long, slow hike, or sit still, and notice nature at work. It helps give your mind a rest from negative thoughts. *

A Letter From Charles L. Gustafson



The topics in this issue of Thriving might at first seem diverse and unrelated: togetherness, depression, listening well, gratitude and the question "What is normal?"

Yet through them all seems to be a subtle thread that speaks to the importance of acceptance. For example, the front-page feature on "togetherness" looks at how the healthiest relationships thrive on mutual acceptance of, and support for, one another's individuality.

The Top 10 on depression reinforces the need for self-acceptance. When we accept that we are in a bleak place—AND that there are tiny steps we can take that will help us move through it—we're not likely to get stuck there.

Acceptance is a big part of listening well to our children, and to all kinds of other people in our lives. When we accept our children and others as naturally resourceful, creative and whole, we help communication rather than hinder it.

The page 3 feature kicks up the notion of acceptance a notch, suggesting that we focus on gratitude for what we do have, rather than continually seeing things from a "glass half-empty" perspective.

And finally, the article on "What is normal?" explores the positive effects—to ourselves and to others—of accepting our own and each other's quirks and differences as part of a healthy and exciting diversity.

If these topics bring up matters you'd like to explore further, please don't hesitate to call.

How Well Are You Listening to Your Children (or to Other People)?

When our children come to us with a problem, we usually want to help them. So we console, interpret, advise, distract or praise. Other times, we feel we must teach our children, and so we interrogate, lecture, moralize or order. And probably more often than we'd like, we respond angrily—blaming, criticizing, ridiculing, shaming or withdrawing.

However, all of these responses are problematic—whether with our children or with the adults in our lives. They often serve to stop the communication of real feelings and the development of individual solutions. Take the quiz below, adapted from the classic Parent Effectiveness Training, by Dr. Thomas Gordon, to assess your listening skills.



True False

- 1. I let my children feel their difficult feelings, knowing that comments such as "Everyone goes through this" deny the strength of their feelings.
- 2. I listen for the need beneath the words and respond to that.
- 3. I check in to see if I've understood something in the way my child intended to mean it. When I do, I try to keep my own feelings, opinions and guidance out of it.
- 4. When my child tells me something, I try to respond with either noncommittal phrases (such as "I see") or with an invitation to say more (such as "Go ahead, I'm listening").
- 5. I notice that when I listen to my children's problems (rather than make suggestions or give advice), my children often come up with their own excellent solutions.
- 6. When I hear out my children fully, they are often much more willing to listen to my thoughts and ideas.
- 7. When I let my children express their feelings openly and completely, the feelings often seem to disappear quickly.
- 8. If I don't have the time to listen to my child right at that moment, I say so and make time for it later.
- 9. I've learned to trust that my children can find good solutions to their problems on their own.
- 10. I understand that my children are separate, unique individuals, and that their feelings and perceptions are not necessarily the same as mine.
- 11. When I stay away from moralizing, interpreting, ordering and advising, I find that I learn a lot more about my children. Sometimes, I even learn from my children.
- 12. I know that just listening doesn't always bring about immediate change and that it's sometimes OK to leave things on an inconclusive or incomplete note.

Authentic communication with our children (and friends) has rewards more valuable than a pot of gold. Real listening may be the rainbow bridge we need to get there. If you scored fewer "true" answers than false, you may benefit from improving your listening skills. *

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Living and Loving from Gratitude vs. Grievance

"Be joyful even when you have considered all the facts."

—Wendell Berry

Jennifer has recently been through a painful divorce and she's not sleeping well. She's having difficulties with her children, who blame her for the divorce. Her work life is rocky as well, and sometimes she's unsure if she's in the right career.

What she thinks:

Yes, life is rough right now, but every life has difficult times. Really, I am so grateful to be alive, for my children, for my home, my good health, all that I have.

Robert has lots of everything—nice apartment in the city, a well-paying job, new car, nice clothes.

But he didn't get that last promotion at work. His last vacation was a disappointment, and no matter how hard he tries, he just can't save money.

What he thinks: I just don't understand why things are going wrong. It just doesn't seem fair when I work so hard. People don't appreciate me and I deserve better this.

One approach is about holding a grievance—about what's missing or wrong. The other is about being grateful for all you have.

Gratitude isn't a new idea; most spiritual practices and philosophies emphasize gratitude and compassion for others. But in recent years, gratitude has shifted from being an idea to a concrete tool that people can use to become happier and healthier. This practice focuses on appreciating what you have and what others have done for you and de-emphasizes being angry or blaming others for your problems.

"When we develop a sense of appreciation for those around us and cultivate a sense of gratitude for life itself, we are relieved of the burden that comes with seeing ourselves as 'victims,'" writes Greg Krech in *Gratitude, Grace and the Japanese Art of Self-Reflection*.

Krech calls this state of appreciation "grace," a term used in many religions. However, grace as a practice is not a belief as much as a shift in thinking. Or as Krech puts it: "It's the difference between seeing life as an entitlement and seeing it as a gift."

However it is practiced, gratitude isn't a blindly optimistic approach in which the bad things in life are whitewashed or ignored. It's more a matter of where we put our focus and attention. Yes, pain and injustice and cruelty exist in this world. But when we focus on



the gifts of life, we gain a feeling of well-being. We often feel more energized to reach out and help others; we feel we have some power to positively affect our world. This again leads to a feeling of well-being...and gratitude. It's a self-sustaining cycle!

In her book *Radical Gratitude*, author and speaker Ellen Vaughn tells the story of a soldier in Vietnam, imprisoned as a POW for seven years. When he returned to the United States, he was startled at the small things people complained about. He decided then he would never stop being grateful for everything in his life, no matter how difficult.

Of course, most of us don't have such extreme experiences to help us count our blessings. In their book *Seasons of Grace: The Life-Giving Practice of Gratitude*, authors Alan Jones and John O'Neil write that practicing gratitude can be as simple as writing a thank-you note, working in the garden, walking on the beach aware of nature's gifts or telling someone you love what you appreciate about him/her. According to them, it's even more than what you do, it's the attitude with which you do it.

Consider the following exercise for putting gratitude into action in your relationships, whether they be spouses, friends, children or business partners:

- Find 10 minutes to tell the person what specifically you appreciate about him/her.
- It may help to ask yourself a few questions in advance: What were some of the highlights—the fun times when you laughed—when you first met? What specific qualities do you admire about him/her? What efforts by this other person have helped your relationship make it through difficult times?
- Share the results with the person, requesting that he or she not make judgments or negate any of the appreciative comments.



This simple exercise helps you stop taking the important people in your life for granted and can effectively reawaken an awareness of the gifts of your relationship with that individual.

Now try it on yourself! *