

“Ism You Ready for This?”

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Has cynicism, sarcasm and negativism crept into your heart and displaced the optimism that once dominated your attitude on life? A lot has to do with how life has treated us along the way and, quite possibly, our career choice as well. Those two reasons may have been a major factor in how we view the world – and its diverse inhabitants! Sadly, that explains a lot of heartache, despair, and negative attitudes that surface when personal bias infiltrates and dominates our hearts!

With all the negativity in the world today, how then do we strive to be more positive people with more receptive, open minds and less cluttered, outlooks on life? It's easier said than done, because old habits and perceptions, once well formed, become almost automatic in nature. The older we get, the more we depend on those habits – including our thoughts, words, and actions! In short, what we say and do is done almost automatically, well before we measure the consequences. We must think before we speak!

When faced with a question that inquires how we feel about something or someone (whether verbally presented or written), our automatic response is to quickly pump out the usual answer without much thought or further contemplation. Here is where the difficult part comes in - taking the time to think and really concentrate on all the ramifications of that response. Yes, it is usually easier to just quickly dismiss people with the usual abrupt response. However, if attitudes and mindsets are to be challenged and altered, it has to start with us. We have to be willing to re-think our position, and (to quote the overused phrase) “walk a mile in the other person's shoes” before quickly reverting to the sarcastic, cynical and/or negative answer that will undoubtedly stifle dialog and raise a barrier between you. It has to start with us being willing to accept; accept that meaningful conversation and understanding only come when both (or all) parties are truly listening and giving credibility to the possibility that there is another valid perspective they may have missed – or misunderstood!

After almost thirty years as a hostage/crisis law enforcement negotiator, during four decades and hundreds of call-outs, I learned and truly comprehended the importance of listening intently to what was actually being communicated – especially the critical, all-important non-verbal messages being displayed. Those numerous one-on-one experiences over the years have taught me the need to be non-judgmental and look more intently for the actual message being sent in my direction. Now that I have stated my previous experience, let me re-emphasize – it's easier said than done. Having studied human behavior, at a graduate and post-graduate level, I have come to realize how much more I have learned from an up-close-and-personal level! Yes, “education is important – but experience is priceless!

Words, and especially the actions combined with those words, do make a difference! One of my favorite and most-used quotes, while teaching, was taken from a long-forgotten law enforcement and crisis intervention book. It stated: “Your most powerful skills are psychological ones; patience, tolerance, tact, good humor, and the ability to set an example by your own conduct.” From a less academic perspective, my grandmother said, “Actions speak louder than words!” Not to be outdone, my grandfather shortened the meaning by always saying, “Talk is Cheap!” Need I say more? OK! Maybe a little more. To summarize, even though we know what we should say, and usually how to empathically and tactfully say it, it's a constant battle to redirect our automatic response with a kind, non-judgmental reply. We need to dig down deep when we feel the need to dismiss people quickly; specifically, those whom we have stereotyped over the years!