

Family Life... A silent night

Situation:

Our son came to visit last night. During dinner he wasn't very talkative. We tried different subjects and asked a few innocent, general questions about how he was doing, and just about all we got back were one word answers.

Symptoms:

After Josh left and I was straightening up the kitchen all I could think about was how uncomfortable dinner had been. I was thinking: "He's so secretive. He's never seems to be at ease with us. We're his parents, if he can't be comfortable with us, he'll never be comfortable around other people. Families are supposed to be close. We're not, and that bothers me. I wish I could do something about it." The thoughts kept swirling around and then I noticed that my dinner wasn't settling well. I could feel the familiar acid twinge in my stomach. That was my signal to do something to calm down. I sat down, picked up a magazine and started to read. That didn't really help, thoughts about dinner kept coming up in my mind.

Solution:

I've learned that doing something to distract myself is not the final solution. If I don't get rid of this frustration, another one will pile on top of it, or the same one will keep replaying until a new one comes along. And, that's not healthy for me.

So I went to work working on my mental health.

Everyday life is full of irritations, frustrations and disappointments, and this visit was a disappointment in a sense. Of course I was glad to see Josh. He had called earlier in the day to say he was coming over, and I was hoping it would be a good visit – by that I mean that he'd communicate more than he did the last time he was over to see us.

So it didn't work out the way I wanted it to – that's where the disappointment came in. It wasn't an emergency – something I had to fix. It was a disappointment. Period. The event was distressing, not at all dangerous. My symptoms, the racing thoughts and acid stomach, were distressing, not dangerous.

It was anger, me judging Josh wrong for not being talkative and fear, me judging me wrong for not coming up with a topic we could talk about, which were causing my tension and the tension was causing my symptoms.

Josh isn't wrong, he is average for not talking a lot. And, I'm not wrong, I'm average for being disappointed. And I'm not wrong for trying to come up with something to talk about.

Although I wish things could be different, I know that Josh, and everyone else for that matter, is my outer environment. I can't control people or things outside of me. I may influence them sometimes, but I can't control what they say, do, don't say, or don't do.

The key word that helped me recognize that I was accusing Josh for being wrong was when I described his behavior as “secretive.” The fact is, lots of people aren’t very talkative for lots of reasons. Josh just happens to be one of them. My interpretation, my insecure interpretation, was that “quiet” equaled “secretive.” When I substituted “Josh was quiet” for “Josh was secretive,” that removed the hint of danger that I was attaching to the event.

I also realized that I was thinking that Josh was “never” at ease with us – another insecure interpretation. The truth, and the secure interpretation, is that sometimes he appears very at ease around us. Not as often as I’d like, but “never” wasn’t totally correct. Again, my use of the word “never” was adding a hint of danger to what had happened. Realistically Josh was acting average for Josh.

Insecure, unrealistic thoughts are what rob my inner peace. Secure, realistic thoughts are what calm me down.

In the past:

Once upon a time Josh chose not to visit. Other times we’d get into big arguments, him accusing us of things that he believed were true. He’s more stable now than he’s been in a long time. For that I’m grateful. And that’s the secure thought I need to keep in my mind.

In the past I would have stayed a lot more upset over a trivial incident like one dinner. I would have talked, no, I would have complained to my wife about Josh’s behavior. I would have continued to blame him for the way he was and tried to think of what we were doing wrong. I would have insisted that we had to do something to fix the situation.

So many times before I’d let the little irritations, frustrations and disappointments build up and build up. Work stress piled on top of the stuff that was happening in our family. I didn’t know that I could or should de-stress and handle each incident as it came along. Now I know that my mental health is as important as Josh’s mental health. Because if I’m not emotionally healthy, I won’t be able to help him if he needs me.

