

SESSION 9: OVERCOMING BLAME

Who/what do you blame for your suffering? What would your life be like without blame?



PRACTICE DEEP BREATHING

Start class by practicing the deep breathing method discussed on page 15.

INTRODUCTIONS

Last week we discussed healthy and unhealthy coping strategies.

- *Does anyone want to share what they learned from last week's discussion?*
- *What did you learn from tracking your coping strategies activities this week?*

BEHIND THE SCENES

"The true definition of blame is a way of discharging pain and discomfort."
- Brene Brown, author and speaker⁷

Blame is a normal reaction to pain and discomfort. We naturally seek protection and predictability in life and when the unexpected/overwhelming occurs, we need a way to explain it ourselves—to try to make sense and gain control over angst and uncertainty. Blame gives us an opportunity to direct our aggression and regrets. Yet, regrets often become a pinball amidst the flood of memories: *"If only he had been caught the first time..." "If only I could have gotten there sooner..." "If only I had stayed later at work that day..."* The "blame game" cycle often feels endless and inescapable.

In Brooks' and Leslie's case, they blamed the two men who broke into their house and changed their lives. They blamed the broken criminal system for years of delays, injustices, and retrials. But deep at the heart of their suffering was self-blame, an unyielding sense of regret and responsibility for being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

MOVIE CLIP – *Play Session 9: Overcoming Blame*

In these scenes, Brooks and Leslie both share an underlying belief they have held close to their heart—they both partially blame themselves for the events that led to their parents' deaths. As you watch, think about who/what you blame for the trauma in your life and why.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

[First, write responses to the questions below (*think*), then share your responses with a partner (*pair*), then discuss the questions as a group (*share*):

- 1) Why does Brooks partially blame himself for the events that led to their family trauma?

- 2) Why does Leslie partially blame herself for the events that led to their family trauma?

- 3) Who/what do you blame for the events that led to your trauma?

- 4) Can you relate to a sense of self-blame? If so, why?

- 5) CHOOSE ONE of the following statements to focus on for the following questions:
 - a. Brooks believes it is partially his fault that his parents died that day.
 - b. Leslie believes it is partially her fault that her parents died that day.
 - 1) Is it true? (Yes or no. If no, move to question 3.)
 - 2) Can you absolutely know that it's true? (Yes or no.)
 - 3) How does s/he react, what happens, when s/he believes this thought?
 - 4) Who would s/he be without this thought?

CLASS DISCUSSION

The four questions within Question #5 from the Think-Pair-Share stem from the work of Byron Katie⁸, a groundbreaking author and speaker who has helped millions over the last 30+ years overcome deep suffering caused by blame of self and others. In 1986, at the bottom of a ten-year spiral into depression, rage, and self-loathing, Katie woke up one morning to a state of constant joy that never left her. She realized that when she believed her stressful thoughts, she suffered, but that when she questioned them, she didn't suffer, and that this was true for every human being. Her simple yet powerful process of inquiry is called *The Work*.

The Work consists of four questions and the turnarounds, which are a way of experiencing the opposite of what you believe. When you question a thought, you see around it to the choices beyond suffering.

The Work's four questions are:

1. Is it true? (The answer is one syllable: yes or no. If no, move to question 3.)
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true? (Yes or no.)
3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without the thought?
5. The turnarounds: Turn the thought around (e.g., if the original thought is "*Brooks is to blame for his parents' death*," one turnaround would be "*Brooks is not to blame for his parents' death*.") Then find at least three specific, genuine examples of how the turnaround is true in this situation.

To see an example of Byron Katie doing *The Work* with someone who regretted a decision he made, go to www.thework.com and search for "I Made the Wrong Decision." (Total running time: 6:29) or go directly to: <http://thework.com/en/video/introduction-to-the-work-of-byron-katie--i-made-the-wrong-decision>.

After watching the video, *discuss*:

- **What decision did the man in this example regret making?**
- **What were his emotions around that regret?**
- **How did Byron Katie help him question and turn around his thoughts about his decision?**

Now apply *The Work* to your own thoughts around any blame you feel toward yourself or others about the traumatic event(s). **Complete Handout 9.1: Applying *The Work* to My Life.**

After completing Handout 9.1, continue the class discussion:

- **How many of you found that your blame statement was not completely true, or even not true at all?**
- **What did you learn from question #3, “How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?”**
- **What did you learn from question #4, “Who would you be without the thought?”**
- **What would happen if you deliberately started focusing on your turnaround thought rather than your initial thought? How would that affect your mind and emotions?**

The steps of *The Work* are not just about overcoming blame but also learning the power your thoughts have over your emotions and actions, and the power of questioning these thoughts. Doing *The Work* requires deep and deliberate effort, and enough inner stillness so that you can fully question the negative thoughts that are unproductive and/or self-destructive. You don’t need to replace those thoughts with healthier thoughts. The healthy thoughts will arise by themselves.

HOMEWORK

For homework, spend time at www.thework.com. Go to the “video” section of the website to see other examples of her helping people break down the perceptions they hold to be truths and helping them move forward with by contemplating opposites of their original thoughts. If applicable, repeat the questions of Handout 9.1 with additional thoughts you hold to be true—but now question.

Also for homework, continue with another week of the Assessing Coping Strategies log (Handout 9.2).

⁷Brown, Brene. (2012). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. NY: Gotham Books.

⁸Katie, Byron. (2002). *Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life*. NY: Harmony Books.

How have you come to overcome blame and regrets in your life?



FROM BROOKS: *In The Amendment there is an example of one of the great regrets of my life. I call it “The Cat Story” and it is completely true. Literally within 15 or 20 minutes of Ake and Hatch showing up at our door, my father came to my room. He closed the door behind him and told me that one of my dogs had killed one of Leslie’s Persian cats earlier that day. He told me specifically to go down to the garage and get the cat and take it down by our creek and bury it. He said, “Don’t just go out and throw it over the fence. I want you to take it down and bury it.” What did I do? I went down and got the cat,*

took it outside, threw it over the fence and went back to my room. The truth is, I frequently wouldn’t do things the way I was told to do them. My conduct that evening wasn’t unusual for me.

Ultimately I have had to accept that I made a mistake, but it’s impossible to know if or how things would have turned out differently or perhaps even worse, although it’s hard to imagine how. Ake and Hatch decided to rob our home and shoot us. Chances are the result would have been the same almost regardless of what any of us did that night. I’m sure that my parents, had they lived, would have regrets about things they did and didn’t do that night. I know Leslie lives with regrets of her own. But at the end of the day, we were in our own home, living our lives the way we normally did. Ake and Hatch coming to our home and doing what they did is something none of us could have foreseen or protected ourselves against, especially given that we were about helping people.

One of the strongest marks of maturity is simply learning to listen to that voice inside of us that tells us to do what we know is right. But the hard part is actually following it—especially when the pressure comes from circumstances or friends and family to do otherwise. Some of us require getting beaten up enough times by not doing what we know is the right decision that we finally realize it just isn’t worth it to do otherwise.

HANDOUT 9.1: APPLYING *THE WORK* TO MY LIFE

Use Byron Katie's *The Work* to assess the effects of holding blame in your life. If self-blame is something you can relate to, focus on self-blame for this exercise. If not, focus on any blame you hold for someone else.

- 1) When you think back on the traumatic event(s) of your life, who/what do you blame for your suffering?

I blame _____ because...

- 2) How do you think the person listed above should have handled the situation differently?

I wish...

- 3) What is it about this situation that you don't ever want to experience again?

I don't ever want...

THE WORKS INQUIRY: Four Questions and the Turnarounds.

Use your statement in question #1 above ("I blame _____ because _____") for the questions below:

1. Is it true? (The answer is one syllable: yes or no. If no, move to question 3.)
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true? (Yes or no.)
3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without the thought?
5. The turnarounds: Turn the thought around (e.g., if the original thought is "*Brooks is to blame for his parents' death*," one turnaround would be "*Brooks is not to blame for his parents' death*." Then find at least three specific, genuine examples of how the turnaround is true in this situation.

HANDOUT 9.2: ASSESSING COPING STRATEGIES

In follow-up to the previous lesson, continue to use this log to monitor daily activities. Begin on whatever day tomorrow is (e.g., Mon.) and fill in answers for each day of the week.

	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Weds.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	TOTAL
<i>Sample</i>								9
HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES								
Ate a healthy meal								
Exercised or did relaxation activities								
Talked to a friend or family member								
Had "quiet time," prayer/meditation								
Read or journal wrote								
Took 5+ deep, deliberate breaths								
UNHEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES								
Drank more than two alcoholic drinks								
Smoked a cigarette								
Used drugs								
Watched more than 2 hours of TV								
Slept more than 9 hours								
Ate too much								
COULD BE HEALTHY OR UNHEALTHY (<i>consider long-term effects and possible alternatives</i>)								
Took prescription drugs								
OTHER (<i>enter any activities you think may be helping or hurting your trauma recovery</i>)								

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