

## Enjoy the freedom not to...

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We're pulled and prodded by financial pressures, [other people's demands, prison policies, advertising, yard politics], and the people we work with and live with. As well, internal forces yank the proverbial chains, including emotional reactions, compelling desires, "shoulds," and internalized "voices" from parents and other authority figures.

Sometimes these pressures are necessary, like a flashing light on your car's dashboard telling you to get gas. Even a broken clock is right two times a day.

But on the whole these pressures are stressful and breed a sense of helplessness. Plus, a lot of the internal forces come from childhood, irrational fears, unfair self-criticism, ancient tendencies in the brain (e.g., its negativity bias), or the darker corners of human nature; acting out these forces is bad for us and others.

Giving oneself over to these pressures is un-free, like being a puppet tugged by many strings. It's the opposite of well-being to be "hijacked," "obsessed," "addicted," "plugged in," or "compelled" – which all imply mental servitude if not slavery.

On the other hand, a sense of inner freedom is a hallmark of emotional healing, mental health, self-actualization, and the upper reaches of human potential. For example, a common term for enlightenment is "liberation."

In plain English, we all know what it feels like to be pushed around . . . and what it feels like to have choices and be autonomous [self-directing or self-governing].

So, lately I've been softly saying this phrase in my mind – the freedom not to – and seeing what happens. And what's been happening is great. A feeling of ease, of room to breathe, of not needing to jump to some task or to agree or disagree immediately with someone. A sense of shock absorbers between me and my emotional reactions, of not making a mess that I've got to clean up later, of not embarrassing myself, of not swapping a minute of pleasure for an hour of pain.

Being intimate with life while feeling free within it. How?

For one or more of the items just below, imagine what it would feel like for you to have the freedom not to:

- Press your point home
- Struggle to get someone to change his or her mind
- Have a second drink.
- Or a first one.
- Worry what other people think about you
- React to what is swirling around you
- Act on an impulse
- Get into an argument
- Be swept along by anger
- Identify with a mood or point of view passing through awareness
- Take something personally
- Take responsibility for the experiences of other people
- Resist what's unpleasant
- Drive toward what's pleasant
- Cling to what's heartfelt

For one or more of the items above, imagine how your greater freedom would help others. Also, let others be freer themselves with you; give them room to breathe, time to think and feel.

Faced with things that grab you in daily life, play with phrases like these in your mind: I'm free not to . . . I'm free not to \_\_\_\_\_ . . . I'm free . . . there is choice . . . Slow things down, pause, buy yourself some time, that space of freedom between stimulus and response. If others are getting intense, try gently talking to yourself, reminding yourself: You are free . . . you can choose your response . . . they are over there and you are over here . . . there is a freedom . . .

Notice what it's like to feel freer. Enjoy it. Let this experience sink in.  Be at peace.