

ENCOURAGEMENT 101: The Courage to Be Imperfect¹

Timothy D. Evans, Ph.D.

From the President: Our theme for training this year has been empowering women in their personal, professional and volunteer lives. Last month, at our General Membership meeting, Forget Perfect author Lisa Earle McLeod spoke to actives about ways they can take control of their lives and live more in the present.

As women, we are often our own worst enemies. We want the best for our kids, our marriages, our careers and our personal lives and so, with the best of intentions, we become the worst of discouragers. I have invited my friend, Tim Evans, to be our Guest Editor and share with you some ways in which you can be a kinder, more encouraging person. Enjoy!

Introduction

Encouragement is the key ingredient for improving your relationships with others. It is the single most important skill necessary for getting along with others – so important that the lack of it could be considered the primary cause of conflict and misbehavior.

Encouragement develops a child's psychological hardiness and social interest.

Encouragement is the lifeblood of a marriage. And yet this simple concept is often very hard to put into practice.

Encouragement is not a new idea. Its spiritual connotation dates back to the Bible in Hebrews 3:11 which states, "Encourage one another daily." Encouragement, as a psychological idea, was developed by psychiatrist Alfred Adler in the early 20th century and continued to evolve through the work of Adler's follower Rudolph Dreikurs. However, even today, relatively few educators, parents, psychologists, leaders or couples have utilized this valuable concept. Most of the time, people mistakenly use a technique like praise in an effort to "encourage" others.

Moving Beyond Controlling Behavior

Half the job of encouragement lies in avoiding discouraging words and actions. When children or adults misbehave, it is usually because they are discouraged. Instead of building them up, we tear them down; instead of recognizing their efforts and improvements, we point out mistakes; instead of allowing them to belong through shared decision-making and meaningful contributions, we isolate and label them.

Most of us are skilled discouragers. We have learned how to bribe, reward and, when that fails, to punish, criticize, nag, threaten, interrogate and emotionally withdraw. We do this as an attempt to control those we love, bolstered by the mistaken belief that we are responsible for the behavior of everyone around us, especially our spouses and children.

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These attempts to control behavior create atmospheres of tension and conflict in many houses.

Most commonly, we discourage in five general ways:

We set standards that are too high for others to meet because we are overly ambitious.
We focus on mistakes as a way to motivate change or improved behavior.
We make constant comparisons (self to others, siblings to one another, our marriage to our friends' marriages).
We automatically give a negative spin to the actions of others.
We dominate others by being overly helpful, implying that they are unable to do it as well.

What Is Encouragement?

Encouragement is not a technique nor is it a special language used to gain compliance. Encouragement conveys the idea that all human beings are worthwhile, simply because they exist. In one sentence, Mr. Rogers does more for a child's sense of adequacy than a hundred instances of praise when he says, "I like you just the way you are." Not I like you when you do it well enough, fast enough and get it all correct. Encouragement develops children's psychological hardiness -- their ability to function and recover when things aren't going their way.

Encouragement enhances a feeling of belonging which leads to greater social interest. Social interest is the tendency for people to unite themselves with other human beings and to accomplish their tasks in cooperation with others. The Junior League mission of "developing the potential of women and improving communities through the effective action and leadership of trained volunteers" is rooted in the idea of social interest.

The first step to becoming an encouraging person is to learn to distinguish encouragement from discouragement. As a rule, ask yourself: **Whatever I say or do, will it bring me closer together or farther apart from this person?**

Families who believe in the power of encouragement follow several practices:

They make relationships a priority, not the last event of the day.
They make shared decisions at family meetings (involvement=responsibility=commitment=belonging).
They practice encouragement daily, recognizing effort and improvement, focusing on strengths and conveying acceptance (the idea that you always have a place in the family no matter what).
They have fun on a regular basis.
They conduct daily respectful dialogues (such as a daily five minute conversation for couples).

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Suggestions for Developing Encouragement:

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| For your Marriage | List 10 things your spouse can do that you would find encouraging. |
| For your Young Child | Draw a picture for your child that illustrates her contributions to the family. |
| For your Teenager | Seek your teen's advice about a problem you're having. Spend fun time together. |
| For your Family | Hold family meetings. Begin each meeting with encouraging statements and end each meeting listing each member's strengths. Use these meetings as a basic approach to solving problems. |

Learn to distinguish encouragement from discouragement and praise. Praise is outcome-oriented and always has an element of evaluation or judgment. Praise perpetuates the belief that human value is based on performance and achievement.

Some examples to illustrate these points:**Encouragement**

"I think you can do it."

"You have what it takes."

Discouragement

"Here, let me do this for you."

"Be careful, it's dangerous."

Encouragement

"You put lots of effort into your work."

"Your contribution helped the family."

Praise

"I know if you work harder you can do even better."

"You did an excellent job mowing the lawn."

We all have the power to be more encouraging people. The choice, as always, is yours.

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