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Building Personal Power

by Mitch Meyerson

(Before developing the GMC Program, Mitch Meyerson has been a prominent therapist and author of three personal growth books. Here is an excerpt of one of his articles. He [coaches](#) on personal growth issues as well).

Penny, a thirty-one-year-old public relations specialist recalls her worst experience. "Basically, my job was to convince feature writers at the local newspapers to write a story about a client's charity event. I phoned the first reporter on the list and went into my pitch.

"Look," he yelled, cutting me off mid-sentence, "there's some damn charity event in this city every other week. Why are you bothering me with this?"

"I started feeling like an idiot. "But this is for muscular sclerosis," I stammered.

"Big deal," he said, hanging up.

"I knew he was just a jerk, but I couldn't make another one of those phone calls the rest of the afternoon. I felt completely shut down."

Shut down. That sinking feeling that begins like butterflies in the stomach then turns into something that feels like a fist is an event most people can identify with. Like a balloon deflating, our entire emotional state sinks down in seconds. We become quiet, withdrawn, ashamed. Curiously, only certain situations and people tend to "shut us down" and make us lose our personal power. One person criticizes us, and we shrug it off. But another person so much as looks at us the wrong way and we're devastated.

What shuts us down? Usually it is a combination of the following:

Fear of rejection. Carole, 38, admits, "I'm a peacemaker; I hate to upset anyone." Carole doesn't realize that many of the people who get "upset" do it as a way of controlling her. She misinterprets other people's anger as an invalidation of herself. If you believe you can't assert yourself because it might make someone else unhappy, you're stuck avoiding confrontation--and your personal power-- at all costs.

An overdeveloped sense of responsibility. Some people are emotional sponges who soak up all the tensions in a room. "I'll bet John's depressed; I wonder if it's because I didn't return his call; Barry seems upset; maybe I should forget about asking for that new software program."

When your antenna for other people's emotions is tuned that high, the noise (and your imagination) is loud enough to distract you from your goals. Your unwavering focus on pleasing everyone around you is what's shutting you down.

Fear of emotional independence. Louise, 29, came from a long line of 'victims' who confused suffering with sainthood. "Everyone in my family was depressed about something. If you acted like you believed in yourself, everyone thought you were conceited and the way you got attention was to pretend to be sad." If you believe you're going to get what you want by showing how much others have hurt your feelings, you're shut down before you even start talking.

Fear of risking a relationship. Do you believe that if you made your feelings and desires known, exactly as they are, no one could possibly accept you? You're a good candidate for getting shut down. The payoff for hiding your true self is always distance from other people. You're bound to be powerless in relationships in which the fear of being fully yourself keeps you on constant guard.

Fear of change. You can be quite comfortable feeling one-down to everyone else if that's what you're used to. Plus, when you exert your personal power, the feedback from others--especially those who have something to gain by your powerlessness--can be quite negative.

You may resist using your personal power because you fear loss. Sometimes this fear is justified. But if you're carrying around unresolved feelings of rejection from the past, this fear will be magnified. To let go of the fear of change, it may be necessary to work with a supportive therapist or group. The more centered you are in your self-esteem, the less you need to fear change.

If you feel shut down by other people, these tips should be helpful:

List your payoffs. What do you think you'll achieve by giving up your power to other people?: "If I don't fight with him, he'll like me; If I tell her what I really think, it will make things worse; If I'm too pushy, everyone will hate me."

Ask if you achieve your goals via your present behavior. One woman did this exercise and wrote that the payoff for being the 'perfect employee' and swallowing her feelings was supposed to be her boss's confidence in her. Then she looked at the most recently promoted people in her company. Their qualities differed markedly from hers. They make mistakes. They argued with the boss on occasion. They won their boss's confidence by being fully themselves.

Visualize. A potent tool for building greater personal power is utilizing the positive experiences in your own past. Create an internal file of memories of success. These don't have to be huge triumphs, just times you felt good about yourself. Build on these feelings and create new visions for future successes. Visualize these experiences in detail as often as you can. What you concentrate on in life increases.

Find your emotional link. People who are easily shut down usually share a common history: they were invalidated--made to feel as if their feelings, thoughts and actions were unimportant or undesirable--by parents, teachers or early employers. Now they link the use of their personal power with shame and fear. If you blush or smile automatically when you confront a person who's made you angry, that's a giveaway.

Put that shame back where it belongs--on the people who shamed you. Write a letter. You don't have to mail it. You don't have to be fair. Get those feelings out so that they no longer choke your personal power.

You may have grown up in an environment that sabotaged your self esteem. But personal power can be developed. By identifying self-defeating patterns you can learn to empower yourself. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

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