



Sorting the Mental Files

"Some things are within your power to control and some aren't." ~Epictetus

Epictetus, the Roman philosopher, was one of the first to identify concepts that lead to greater happiness and peace in the human experience. His ideas influenced the loftiest of Roman thinkers including the emperor Marcus Aurelius, and continue to influence modern society.

A primary teaching of Epictetus is that you can be happy if you know this secret ... *"some things are within your power to control and some aren't."* Yet how many of us focus on and try to control that which is out of our control? We want to control the behavior and feelings of others – our partner, our children, our boss, our friends. We want to control our weight, ageing, the stock market, gas prices, etc. Much worry, frustration and stress comes into our lives as a result of wanting to control the uncontrollable.

Trying to control that which is out of our control requires tremendous physical and emotional energy ... pushing, managing, manipulating, arguing, etc. And we are met with resistance, ambivalence, rebellion, and all kinds of negative energy. The bottom line is that all of our efforts to control the uncontrollable result in being over-stressed, upset and exhausted. And, in the end, we don't get the results we wanted so our efforts are futile.

In contrast when we focus on what we can control we experience greater ease and flow. The physical and emotional energy expended can be effortless, energizing and invigorating. Stress is radically reduced and we find ourselves in a natural flow in harmony with the universe. The outcome of putting energy toward that which we can control is greater health, self-esteem, and self-love. Our productivity is increased and our energy is high because instead of squandering it in futile attempts, we use it to serve our choices in life.

Experiencing inner peace and living a happy fulfilled life can in part be achieved by learning to distinguish between what you can control and what you cannot, and then acting on what you can. **What you can control is determined by your ability to affect a situation right now, in real time.** If you can't do it now, then it is out of your control. *Example:* You might think that you can control your weight. In actuality you cannot. Try standing on your scales right now and making your weight change. Impossible! What you do have control over is what you put in your mouth and whether or not you exercise.

Generally speaking here are categories of things you can and cannot control:

Things you cannot control: Your feelings ... other peoples' feelings and behaviors ... the past ... the future ... other peoples accomplishments ... the outcome of any situation especially those that involves other people.

Things you can control: How you respond to your feelings ... how you respond to situations, other people's behavior and feelings ... all choices you make ... all actions you take ... all thoughts you choose.

Activity: Try this experiment for one week.

Step One: Tune into yourself and give yourself a rating on a scale of 1 – 10 (1 = Poor, 10 = Excellent) for each the following questions:

What is my energy level? How peaceful do I feel inside? How optimistic and positive am I? How much do I love myself? How in control do I feel in my life? What is the quality of the relationship with myself? What is the quality of my relationship with others?

Step Two: Imagine that you have two files, one labeled "things I can control" and "things I cannot control." As you go through your day tune into your situations, interactions and even your own mental chatter. Begin filing everything that comes up in the appropriate file ... "Things I can control" ... "Things I cannot control." Then exert energy towards only that which you can control and let the other go. At the end of each day I encourage you to journal your observations.

Step Three: At the end of the week once again tune into yourself and give yourself a rating based on the questions in Step One. Notice what is different for you as a result of this activity. Give yourself a healthy dose of appreciation for being willing to face into your life in this way and perhaps make choices that serve you more fully.

Suffering is optional in this life of ours and most of us don't know that! If you are someone who is interested in suffering less, then I encourage you to learn how to sort your files. The gift you will give to yourself is greater peace, happiness and freedom.

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