



Dr. Andy Erlich

A good friend and Town resident, Andy Erlich, is a nationally recognized psychologist. He was recently honored as one of the nation's "Top 5 Diversity Speakers." He is also a sought-after motivational speaker and transcultural consultant. I hope you will enjoy his insight this week.

Working on my Private Practice

Last week at yoga class, I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen in a long time. He asked what I had been doing. "Working on my private practice," I replied, referring to my work as a clinical psychologist. "Andy, aren't we all working on our private practice?" he asked, interpreting my words in a totally different way than I had meant them. My friend was referring to the challenges we all struggle with in our private lives.

Every day in my office, I listen to people talk about their private struggles, secret traumas, losses, and the daily stresses we all face, very often alone. It might be the break-up of a relationship, an illness, a bankruptcy or even aging. With the great recession, these struggles have only intensified.

What each of these private battles have in common is that they, in one way or another, deal with change. Although change is unavoidable, it is something that we human beings have a great deal of difficulty accepting. We spin elaborate and often costly strategies to deny or resist these changes, and the losses they represent, even when the change is in our best interest. We fight against change, very often in solitude.

So, who does psychological research and clinical experience tell us best copes with change? What can we learn from them so that we can more effectively deal with the changes we must face? There are several characteristics of people who most successfully handle change. They include the ability to tolerate ambiguity, self confidence, a sense of purpose, not being overly concerned with what others think, and being resilient.

For the purpose of this article, I would like to focus on just one of them - resilience, or the ability to bounce back. Researchers who study why some people bounce back from the challenges of change and others do not, list factors that influence one's resilience. Some of them are genetic. Others are environmental. One of the primary characteristics that makes a person resilient, and better able to cope with change, is their connection with others. In other words, one of the best ways to deal with change is to step out of your "private practice" and reach out to others.



Dr. Erlich teaching yoga to Incas in Peru

Scientists and clinicians know that accepting help and support from those who care about you, and will listen to you, makes you more resilient, and able to bounce back. Resilience not only comes from accepting help from others, it also results from reaching out and offering help. Assisting others you care about when they are in need not only helps them deal with change, but it aids the helper as well. When you reach out to others for their help, or offer your help, you take a positive step to deal with whatever changes you are experiencing.

The power of interpersonal connections is not just *California touchy-feely, pop science*. Neuroscientists have discovered mirror neurons in the prefrontal cortex of the brain which facilitate empathy. They light up when we feel that another understands us and when we empathize with someone else. Scientists use this research to conclude that we human beings have evolved to connect with others. The positive effects of human connections are not just about mirror neurons. When we connect with others in a meaningful way, a stress reducing, feel good hormone, called Oxytocin, courses through our brains resulting in the experience of calm and joy. These feelings can occur in a loving relationship, at a house of worship, or if necessary, when talking with a mental health professional.

As I looked around the yoga studio after digesting my friend's comment about "everyone working on their private practice," I became aware that I was not alone. Sure, part of the positive effects of yoga class result from the breathing and the postures. But something else is involved as well. It isn't a private practice. It is something you experience in a community of like-minded individuals. Yes, each of us in that room had individual challenges and changes to face, but at that moment we were together.

Something about that togetherness is powerful, energizing and healing. As I rolled up my yoga mat at the end of class and prepared to leave, I looked over at my friend and thanked him for sparking some new ideas. "I don't think I will ever look at my private practice quite the same," I said with a smile.

To read or learn more about Andy, please visit his website at:

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