

## Stop—Look—Listen—Choose

There are many tools we can use to respond rather than react during key moments (upsetting, challenging events). We can take deep breaths, count to ten, alter our posture or physical stance, take a momentary time out, recall our principles, pray, challenge our negative thinking, and so on. The goal is to draw upon resources or techniques that can help us assume a more positive state of mind.

Stop—Look—Listen—Choose is one such tool. It's a structured process which we can use to interrupt our tendency to react in negative ways. At the heart of the process is the principle of free will. This principle means that we have the ability to step back and choose our response when in the middle of a difficult situation. Doing this requires that we accept the reality of our free will and make a deliberate decision to take personal responsibility for our emotional reactions. Here is a process for doing so.

**Stop** is recognizing that something harmful is happening. It is a decision to refuse to act out in a harmful way. It sometimes helps to do something to change our physiology, such as breathing deeply, relaxing our face or torso, stretching, softening our eyes, or even taking a short break.

**Look** is the second step. This is noticing our thoughts, feelings, and behavior but without acting them out. Initially, I recommend writing down our thoughts, feelings and behavior associated with our key moments. Although it seems cumbersome, writing slows the process, expands our awareness, and empowers us to take responsibility for our reactions.

Of course, we can't do this in the middle of a key moment. However, our most troubling key moments are recurring, so we can write between events. Writing takes discipline and even courage. But by taking time to go through this process, our negative feelings give way to stillness, insight, and personal power. It is how we choose to act rather than react.

Most important is to spend time looking at our thoughts, which drive our feelings and behavior. Inevitably, our thinking is driven by automatic, negative thoughts. We can challenge these thoughts by seeing their distortions:

- **Oversimplifying**—seeing in black-and-white terms
- **Mind-reading**—assuming we know what's going on without checking it out
- **Filtering**—dwelling on a single detail, usually negative, until it influences our entire vision (like putting a drop of ink in a beaker of water)
- **Catastrophizing**—making events worse than they really are
- **Fortune-telling**—predicting the future, which we really can't know
- **Personalizing**—believing it's our fault when things go wrong

Most negative thoughts have two or three distortions. By being alert to them, we become more positive and learn to think in a clear and calm way.

**Listen** is step three. We listen to our heart, our deeper wisdom. We think about our higher vision. What is most important in the long run? What outcomes do we want from this situation? Clarifying outcomes is extremely powerful. It is so much easier to react when we lack clarity. That is when we allow negative feelings and motives (defensiveness, over-control, emotional reactivity, manipulation, getting even) to take over. On the other hand, being clear about the outcomes we desire (for ourselves, the other person, and our relationship) empowers our higher, spiritual self and gives us the wisdom to know how to respond.

**Choose** is the final step. This step is moving into positive action. It begins by identifying choices that coincide with our vision or desired outcomes. These choices not only have to do with actions but our thoughts and feelings as well. How can we look at the situation differently? How can we change how we feel? And what actions can we take that will lead to positive results?

Stop—Look—Listen—Choose enables us to be much more deliberate in handling our key moments. Some key moments can be resolved rather quickly by following this process. Others are deeply ingrained habits that developed over years and will require time to overcome. Practice makes perfect. Initially, we need to think through the steps and even write them down. As we remain conscious and keep at it, we will learn to respond in better and better ways.