

4 Simple Questions Resolve a Stressful Situation: Inquiry with The Work of Byron Katie

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It really only takes one person to resolve a conflict. And that would be me. After all, I am the one who is experiencing the stress about it. So just like they tell us on an airplane, I must put my oxygen mask on first and clear my own head before I attend to others. For me the oxygen that leads to peace of mind and clarity is the practice of inquiry.

A simple and amazingly powerful process for inquiry that I use in my personal life and in my work facilitating leadership and team development is called, The Work of Byron Katie or simply, The Work. Byron Katie, the founder of this method, describes The Work as “a way of identifying and questioning the thoughts that are the cause of all stress and suffering.”

The Work consists of 4 simple questions and what Katie calls a “turnaround”, which is a way of experiencing the opposite of what you are thinking and believing. The Work works for anyone with a pen and paper and an open mind.

One of my clients, a CEO, was experiencing paralyzing conflict with his executive management team. Frustrated and angry, his stressful belief about them was, “They’re not open to my new ideas”. Believing this thought without inquiry, his mind faithfully showed him all the proof of how they were not open: “They refuse to try anything new.” “They don’t understand these new markets.” “Resting on past success is going to ruin us.” “They need a good kick in the...!”

“All conflict belongs on paper. Judge your neighbor, write it down, ask 4 questions, turn it around.” - Byron Katie

Behind our emotional reactions to seemingly difficult people or situations are stressful beliefs and often old defensive judgments. Through inquiry with The Work our emotional reactions become a valuable “wake-up call” to identify our stressful thoughts so that we can meet them with understanding. When we do, our life “turns around” in amazing ways! Byron Katie calls this, “Loving What Is”.

So let's do The Work. I invite you to think of a person and a specific stressful situation, past or present when you also had the thought:

“They’re not open to my ideas.”

The Work is meditation. It's about awareness; it's not about trying to change your mind. We let the mind ask the questions, then contemplate. Take our time, go inside, and wait for the deeper answers to surface.

Picture your situation with that person and inquire.

“They’re not open to my ideas.”

1. Is it true? (answer simply yes or no only, if no go to #3) Is it true that they are not open to anything new? Be still. Wait for the answer to come to you.

2. Can you absolutely know that it's true? (yes or no) Can you absolutely know that they have no openness at all? Can you absolutely know how they or anyone truly feels inside?

3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?

“They’re not open to me!” Do you experience anger, stress, or disappointment? How do these reactions feel? How do you treat them when you believe this? How do you treat yourself? Does this thought bring stress or peace into your life? Be still, notice how you react when you think this.

4. Who would you be without the thought? Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Picture yourself in their presence, in that situation. Now imagine looking at them, just for a moment, without the thought, “They’re not open to me.” Without this thought, how do you feel? What do you see? What would your life/work look like without that thought?

The Turnarounds: Let yourself fully experience the turnarounds. For each one find at least three specific, genuine examples where the turnaround is true for you in this situation. Note: this is not about right or wrong. It's about widening your perspective and discovering insights that can bring you clarity, peace of mind, and creative action.

A statement can be turned around to the self, to the other, and to the opposite.

Original statement: **“They’re not open to me”**

- **I’m not open to myself.** (turnaround to the self)

My client found that he had been working so hard to push his agenda, he had not been open to himself, to exploring and re-evaluating his own approach. He also had not been open to how exhausted and isolated he felt. And he saw how he had resisted asking for help, when he really needed it. These were all deeply healing realizations for him.

- **I’m not open to them.** (turnaround to the other)

He saw how he did not listen to them or really try to understand them. He saw how he put down or dismissed his team’s ideas. And he also recognized that some of their ideas actually made sense and he had just not been open to them.

- **They are open to my ideas.** (turnaround to the opposite)

He realized that in many ways, they were actually more open than he was! He remembered that they had actually implemented a number of his ideas already. And most importantly, he felt deeply grateful that they had hung in with him through tough times, even though he was often irritated and critical of them. And he saw that actually, after all they were united in wanting the new project and the company to succeed.

In this one session, my client’s approach to leadership radically changed from thinking he had to have “vision” and that it was his job to “lead” others, to an attitude of gratitude that fostered openness, creativity, and collaboration. We also did The Work with his team as a group, in pairs, and in individual coaching sessions. Inquiry with The Work was a positive turning point for my client, for his team and ultimately for his company.

Welcome to The Work!

The Work has helped millions of people around the world find peace of mind and fearless creative action in their lives; from board rooms to refugee camps, in therapeutic settings to executive coaching.

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