

Let-Go for Health Sake

Brendan Lloyd PhD, February 2020. b: 01.5

We are all somewhat capable of holding-on, for example, to a grievance or desire. The need to let-go comes out of the suffering associated with holding-on. When letting-go is the issue it is usually because we have made the connection between the holding-on and the suffering.

We know about our suffering through our felt experience. We often use terms such as stress, anxiety or depression to describe this felt experience.

There is a reason for our holding-on. For example, if we have a grievance then we need accountability and justice to achieve closure. We will hold onto desires because we have hope; and hope is a good thing, right.

Often there is the struggle between letting-go and holding-on. There is the tug-of-war between two competing forces. In some situations letting-go could even sound like a win-lose situation. For example, letting-go might be seen as giving up.

We need some way to make letting-go a win-win situation. Does letting-go need to be about giving up anything? Do you ever need to give up on the need for justice? Do you even need to give up on a dream? What you can do without, of course, is the suffering in the meantime. The question to ask is do **you** need to suffer because there is no justice for your grievance? Or, do **you** need to suffer because you can't just go out and fulfil your dreams?

The other way to ask the question is how does your suffering help you to achieve justice? Or, how does your suffering help you to achieve your dream? These are of course questions of logic. Holding-on is very much

about emotion.

Again it looks like a conflict, this time it's between *reason* and *emotion*; but again I ask, why can't it be both? The emotionality of the grievance or desire could well serve a purpose. These emotions will provide the motivation necessary to take up the challenges and to persevere and to exhaust all possibilities. But really, do you want to break yourself in the process? Do you think that you might want to live another day to fight the other battles of life?

There is purpose in the reason and logic. Reason and logic are not the party poopers. Sure, they are the brakes on your car; so when you're speeding head-on for the brick wall, you can prevent your death if you like by applying the brakes.

Let me develop the brakes analogy further. What if you found an exciting object called a car? What if you discovered that you can get in it and travel very quickly over vast distances? There's the accelerator-pedal that makes you go. But hang on a second, what's this other pedal on the floor? It's in the way. Its only purpose is to slow you down. Stuff that, so you rip it out and chuck it out the window. This is the defenestration of the brake pedal.

We need both. We need emotion to make life interesting and we need reason to remain healthy. This is the sense of proportion. Do you even have a sense for the need to balance emotion and reason? Or more to the point, do you have a sense that you actually need to temper your passion with reason? This is a mind skill. It's something that you can practise and get better at.

With a renewed sense of proportion we can

develop thinking as a mind skill; and when I say thinking I don't mean the head-chatter.

For starters, think about how it all works. Look at the process instead of being transfixed by the content. The content for grievances and desires is boundless whereas the process for letting-go is the same for every example.

For our efforts in letting-go, what we want is an end to the suffering. We don't need to feel stressed all the time; or to feel limited by anxiety; or to be held back by depression. We need some way to change the way we feel. This means that you need to develop a good relationship with your nervous system; with a particular focus on your autonomic nervous system.

We all have the same autonomic nervous system which has two main functions. These are the *go* and *relax* functions. In general terms we can talk about the *Emergency Button* and the *Relaxation Switch*. To be technical these are the *sympathetic response* and the *parasympathetic response* in our *autonomic nervous system*.

Our default setting is *Go*. The emergency button and the relaxation switch can't be on at the same time; and the emergency button will over rule the relaxation switch anytime all the time. This is why relaxation cannot be the cure for stress. The only cure for stress is the satisfactory resolution of the issue in whatever form that takes.

If the emergency button is in use then the relaxation switch doesn't work. So if the emergency button is off, and the relaxation-switch is on, then it will be switched-off the instant the emergency button is activated. Our body makes the choice of survival over relaxation any time.

If you are engaging with the world then there is at least your hand hovering over the emergency button. Whilst there is unfinished business or there are unresolved issues then your hand remains at least hovering over the

emergency button.

At the end of the day you can put your hand away. You can do this once all the tasks are done; or you can do this if you are able to let-go of the unfinished issues until tomorrow. Then you can relax.

Relax is exactly what you should do after a hard day at the grind stone. You need your body to repair itself and to put everything back in place. We need this ability because we have to go through the whole story again tomorrow. This is the cycle of life; work and rest.

Letting-go, therefore, is immediately identifiable as a necessary step in the processes of basic survival. We're not talking about simple forgetting. Although it is true that forgetting is a wonderful way to let go. If we truly forget that some issue had existed then for sure it's resolved one way or another.

The natural letting go that we do is better than forgetting. We finish the day; there may well be unresolved matters at the end of the day. We put them aside; we disengage the emergency button; the relaxation switch then becomes available. Come the next day we pick-up where we left off. No stress, no anxiety, no depression. The chemicals of our body need to ebb and flow as required. We work; we rest.

If you have an unresolved grievance or desire then it could be that there are times when it is on your mind and times when it's not. Whether there is suffering involved would depend on the balance between *work* and *rest* on the issue.

When I say "work" in relation to an unresolved issue I'm referring to the grind of the head-chatter. Or if the head-chatter is out loud, we call it venting. Whenever we are deeply embroiled in our head-chatter or on a roll with our venting, regardless of its content, then we are whacking away at the emergency button. The process is the same regardless of

the content.

Of course our head-chatter or venting is an attempt at resolving the issue. With our head-chatter or venting we churn it over and over in our minds; like a pair of sandshoes in the clothes dryer, thump thump, whacking away at the emergency button.

The felt experience of suffering is due to the particular chemical structure of your body at the time. You feel something and you call it stress, anxiety or depression. The adrenaline is largely responsible for that ill-at-ease anxious feeling; the cortisol is largely responsible for that fatigue, low energy, depressed feeling.

So for stress reduction generally the question has to be: **how do I allow my adrenaline and cortisol to ebb and flow normally?** We don't need these emergency chemical at elevated levels all the time.

Every time your mind wanders onto the subject of the *grievance* or *desire* you alter the chemistry of your body. It's not the content of the head-chatter that does it so much. **It's what your mind is doing with the content that counts.**

For example, if in your mind you express a threat (or demand or challenge) then your body responds with the emergency chemicals. If your mind is wandering into this head-chatter regularly then you are regularly topping up the adrenaline and cortisol in your blood stream. This is not a good thing.

If we get bogged down in the content, particularly for those unresolved issues, then we are destined for confusion and more stress. The content is infinitely variable and it is impossible to give advice on letting-go when dealing with the content.

On the other hand the process (how it works) is the constant. The process of letting-go is the same for everyone. The trick is to understand what it is that you need to let-go of.

The term "letting-go" to begin with is a model; it's not a thing. What I mean here is that letting-go does not actually exist outside of your mental landscape. We use the term "letting-go" because it's 'as if' we have a grip on something. We don't actually have a grip on something physical.

In Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Monkey Trap Story*ⁱ the monkey is trapped because of his grip on the banana. The *Monkey Trap* story is just that, a story. It's an allegory. In other words it is a story that models an idea. Again, we need to take care that we're not sucked in by the content of the story; the story is not about traps, monkeys, bananas or even desire. The story isn't even about letting-go in the sense of opening your hand to release your grip.

The *Monkey Trap* story is about the conscious choice. That's it. There is no more to the story other than to illustrate the conscious choice. Even though there is a tug of war between letting-go and holding-on, the letting-go bit comes down to a conscious choice. This choice will come out of your deliberate sense of proportion.

Also it would be a mistake to believe that letting-go is a one-off event. In other words it would be a mistake to believe that you let something go, and then it's gone.

There might be examples of where a matter is done-and-dusted with just a letting-go. For example, someone makes an appointment with you and he doesn't turn up. You will be annoyed. Objectively it is annoying and inconvenient. There's no getting around that point. In the end you find that you need to let-go of the *head-chatter* and get on with something else.

Sure, for the example above, for that particular grievance you can permanently drop it; but still you needed the sense of proportion to make that conscious choice in order to move on; and what is more you'd need to make that choice every time this type of challenge occurs.

Letting-go is an ongoing process. This is particularly relevant where the issue is unresolved. This is where letting-go becomes the resolution.

It's the head-chatter that's the issue. Your need for justice is not the issue. The fact that you have an ambition is not the issue. When we talk about the active ingredient for suffering, go straight to the source, the head-chatter.

So far I have mentioned mind skills to do with a sense of proportion and thinking for reasoning.ⁱⁱ We also need something that resembles *mental discipline*; and we also need *remembering*. There is an effort required for stress-reduction and we need to keep track of why the effort is required. We need to keep the ball rolling.

The issues of managing and letting-go of the head-chatter come down to the nature of the head-chatter.

For starters there is head-chatter because the issue is unresolved. The head-chatter is not part of the solution; the head-chatter is the problem. For example, if on a grievance you are not getting an apology, and there is ongoing head-chatter about the lack of apology, then the head-chatter is the source of suffering; not the lack of an apology.

The head-chatter will not get you the apology. The head-chatter will not fulfil your desires. Head-chatter will not get you perfection; it will not get you satisfaction. It will only deepen your resentment. The head-chatter will only serve to highlight the threats of deprivation, shame, catastrophe, abandonment, powerlessness, failure, isolation, unfairness, etc. The head-chatter will just bang away on the emergency button; which in turn will flood your body with adrenaline and cortisol.

Head-chatter is diverting our attention to elsewhere. There is real-time and there is elsewhere. Whilst our mind is off elsewhere there is no one left in charge and the damage

is done. The damage to which I refer is the flooding of our bloodstream with adrenaline and cortisol over extended periods of time; this is the direct cause of the felt experience of stress, anxiety or depression.

The solution is to bring your focus of attention back to real-time when the head-chatter takes your mind off elsewhere. It's the head-chatter that takes us into the grievance or the desire.

The head-chatter expresses threats;ⁱⁱⁱ such as dissatisfaction, resentment, wrong-doing, deprivation, shame, catastrophe, abandonment, powerlessness, failure, isolation, unfairness, etc. Whilst our mind expresses these threats, regardless of the content, our emergency button is getting a jolly good whack, then another one, then another one, and so on.

It's not really a matter of being free of these threats in our head. It's asking too much of ourselves to be entirely free of our head-chatter. It is a matter of proportion. How much time do you actually want to spend in your head-chatter given what it can do to you?

The triggers are beyond our control. We will be triggered by the reminders or symbolic representation of our grievance for desire. The solution is to develop the skills for *Noticing* and *Focusing*.^{iv} That is to notice your mind wandering off into the head-chatter, then to deliberately focus back to real-time.

Chances are you'll feel the adrenaline first, and then you'll become aware of the head-chatter. It is impossible to predict a trigger and thus prevent getting on the emergency button.

It comes down to how long before you notice the head-chatter and how long it takes you to come back to real-time; then how long it takes to get off the emergency button. We can call this the recovery-rate.

Recovery-rate is a term that originates in

relation to psychical fitness. It's the measure of how long it takes for your heart-rate to return to baseline after a period of exertion. The quicker your recovery-rate the fitter you are. Likewise we can model mental fitness by observing how long it takes for you to get off the emergency button once you have found yourself on it.

The head-chatter is basically a subconscious mental activity. We find ourselves doing it. Quite often we don't notice the head-chatter. It doesn't matter whether you notice it or not; it will still be there banging away on your emergency button. So, the sooner you can bring it to consciousness and the sooner you can let it go, the sooner you'll be off the emergency button.

The threat that you express in your head-chatter does not exist in real-time other than in your head-chatter. When we say "real-time", or "the present moment", we're referring to our focus of attention. If the content of our head-chatter is about a grievance, then our attention is not real-time, it's in the grievance. Your grievance or desire is elsewhere in terms of your attentional focus.

Letting-go becomes the ongoing resolution for those otherwise unresolved issues. Letting-go as an ongoing resolution is an ongoing process. The outcome for this ongoing process is the reduction of adrenaline and cortisol in your bloodstream. With this reduction of the emergency chemicals in our bloodstream we will alter our felt experience; you will change the way you feel.

You can develop a healthy relationship with your nervous system to manage your ongoing felt experience. The focus for this relationship is the mind-body connection. In other words we're talking about the effect of your mind on your autonomic nervous system. There is at least the daily requirement to disengage the emergency button and to allow the relaxation switch to turn on and do its job.

Additionally we need to take care that during the course of each day we are not spending too much time whacking away at the emergency button for no good purpose other than to create the felt experience of suffering. To do this we need to understand, manage and ultimately let-go of our head-chatter.

The mind skills that would help you to let-go the head-chatter are...

- a sense of proportion, to temper emotion with reason;
- thinking for reasoning, ask the how-question not the why-question, focus on the process not the content so much;
- mental discipline, effort is required, it's an ongoing project;
- remembering, we need to remind ourselves of the reason for the effort that is required;
- noticing and focusing,^v observe your mind wandering off to elsewhere and bring it back to real-time.

Happiness requires effort; suffering requires no effort at all as it turns out.

ⁱ Jon Kabat-Zinn PhD (1990), FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness.

ⁱⁱ Mind Skills: change the way you feel: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/Why-Mind-Skills.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Threat Thesaurus User's Guide: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/onlineconsult/md-articles/The-Threat-Thesaurus-2019-11-13.pdf>

^{iv} Three-Minute Breathing Meditation to practice the Noticing and Focusing: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/onlineconsult/md-articles/02-Meditation-threeminutesbreathing.pdf>

^v See note iv.