January 2019

At the Heart of Wellness

Message from Maria

Maria Coutant Skinner, Executive Director

Dear friends:

I’m writing to you a little after 5pm on Friday the 25th. I had all sorts of wonderful intentions of getting my message done by January 15th so I wasn’t doing the last minute rush to try to come up with something wise, pithy, interesting and meaningful to share with you all. So….yeah. Progress, not perfection, right? Well there it is – for me, anyway. Did you read those expectations I put on myself for this little note? Wow! A pretty tall order, and one that I’m bound to NOT achieve. That’s not to say there won’t be a little nugget in this month’s message that

New Year, New You…or is it?

With the arrival of the new year, many of us will strengthen our resolve toward self-improvement. For some, the goal may be to get to the gym. For others, to reduce debt. For yet others, the goal may be to break the debilitating cycle of addiction. Whatever our resolutions this year, we’d do well to commit to developing a greater sense of self-acceptance if we hope to achieve them. In the absence of self-acceptance, judgment and negative thinking can prove an intractable impediment to positive change.

The reasons for this are manifold. Dr. Srini Pillay, writing for Harvard Medical School’s Health Blog, notes that low-self acceptance may derive from a lack of experienced empathy in early childhood. Sufferers seek external approval through a demanding quest for achievement, not understanding that the source of their discomfort is instead a lack of connection. The issue is not that we aren’t good enough, it’s that we think we need to improve in order to feel connected. This misunderstanding prompts us to treat ourselves in a demeaning and even, when we feel our need to change is especially urgent, cruel manner.

“Self-control may be less powerful than we think”, Dr. Pillay writes. “When you do not accept or forgive yourself, ‘you’ are still split from ‘yourself’—you do not feel together. Both of these parts—the one that needs to forgive and the one that needs to be forgiven—are at odds with each other”.

That has powerful implications for our efforts at self-control and self-improvement. Self-judgment is associated with excess right-hemisphere brain activity, leading to pessimism and decreased motivation. Ego-weakening and emotionally dispiriting, such thoughts do not serve their intended purpose of enforcing self-discipline. Moreover, they can create physical stress responses, feelings of fatigue, pain, and insomnia that may interrupt the formation of healthy habits or encourage us to relapse into unhealthy coping mechanisms, defeatism, or despair.

Conversely, self-acceptance, Dr. Pillay notes, is associated with improved serotonin transporter availability in the limbic system,
someone will find resonant. But, how often do we not start the THING because the result won’t measure up to our expectation? And when we self-assess, and the result is less than those expectations – how do we talk to ourselves about that? Every single one of us, whether you’re an Olympic athlete, an ivy league graduate, a CEO or a person working to put 24 hours of sober time together – we have all fallen short of what we expected and hoped would be the result of our efforts. When we remonstrate ourselves harshly, we are bound to head down a path that will not serve us. And we can sometimes convince ourselves that we are only worthy if we’re achieving - or - perfect.

As Brene Brown tells us:

Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. It’s a shield. Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield that we lug around thinking it will protect us, when, in fact, it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from being seen and taking flight.

The last time you had someone dear to you fall short of a goal, how did you speak to them? Were you kind? Supportive? Did you let them know that they can, in fact, try again and that they have it in them to keep moving forward?

What if we changed a couple of ways that we think about progress? Let’s try! How

The McCall Center for Behavioral Health is fortunate to have a remarkable group of employees who are dedicated to our clients, our community and our agency. Beginning this month, and continuing throughout the year, we will be featuring a staff member. We know how amazing our staff is and we think it is important for you, our readers, to get to know a little bit about them as well. For McCall employees this is not just a job, they love this agency, believe in its mission, have hope for their clients (even when those clients feel lost and hopeless) and know that their work is critically important to turn the tide of the ravages of addiction toward the journey of health. Our employees are the heart of McCall.
about in thinking about a task or goal, we stopped worrying about what others might think and focused on compassionately setting about the work of self-improvement. Small, achievable steps toward a larger goal sets us up for success and lasting change. Celebrate those successes. And, in those moments when we are human and fall short? Let’s talk to ourselves the way we do to our dearest ones. We can do hard things….and are worthy of the effort.

All my best to you,

Maria

Name: Stephanie Sanders
Hometown: Torrington, Connecticut
Position: Counselor at Hanson House.
Quote/Mantra: “Those who are hardest to love need it the most.” Socrates

What do you love about McCall/your position:
I enjoy being part of a team that provides a safe, trusting, and compassionate environment to the women in our program so that they can openly communicate about issues related to their Substance Use Disorder.

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