

Are you having a roommate problem with yourself? Shaking the “shoulds”

by Kelly Bryson MA, MFT

I should have written this article a long time ago. It would have saved me a lot of distress. I should have known how to “shake the shoulds.” Or maybe someone should have taught me.

Have you ever noticed that the more you think you should do something the harder it is to do it? Like doing your taxes (thank God for extensions) or stopping smoking, losing weight or going to sleep.

Do you ever think, “I should be able to move past these shoulds and become a creative/productive person!” Then I bet you a dollar you were shamed as a child for being lazy or for taking time to be idle.

Usually when I try to should me into doing something it doesn’t work because I am just as rebellious as I am coercive. It’s kind of like trying to bend over to pick yourself up by your own ankles. It only leads to procrastination. Or if I do whip me into doing a ‘should,’ I feel exhaustion, depression and subtle self hate for oppressing myself.

Should is a little hairball of fear that clogs the pipe connection to self and blocks our natural flow of passion, compassion and creativity that would otherwise be there. Compassionate self acceptance is the Draino that frees our passionate being up so it can experience itself through doing.

Sometimes this should concept has gotten so lodged in our consciousness that we need the help of others to escape it’s paradoxical bind on us. Certain friends, therapists or groups can give us a quality of acceptance that can act as a catalyst for our own self acceptance.

However, be careful of certain kinds of therapists I call *their pisseds’*. These are the ones that use clinical shoulds to try to fix you and then get pissed when you don’t make the progress they think you should. They say stuff to you like, “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself!” Great, so now besides just being hard on yourself you feel guilty about it. Or maybe you get a new age therapist that implies that you shouldn’t should on yourself. It’s easy to get stuck in the “Should House of Mirrors,” and it’s not a fun house either.

A therapist with a high quality of presence will hold a space that will allow the shroud of should-filled-fear to recede, revealing your being and its desire for self knowledge through self expression.

Self knowledge is one motive for seeking self expression. But maybe there is an even stronger motive for shaking your shoulds. Poet laureate of the U.S., Mark Strand once said, “I think it’s inevitable that you learn more about yourself the more you express yourself through writing, but that’s not the purpose of writing. I don’t write to find out more about myself, I write because it amuses me.” Hum, could the purpose be amusement? Could it be true that if you have fun you win?

It would be fun to do all kinds of things if I didn’t think I should do them. For instance, writing could be fun if I didn’t think I should do it. Lots of people write for fun and don’t even get paid for it. Lots of people should themselves into doing a lot of stuff they hate, that a lot of other people would love to do. Take my



partner Deb. It is the dessert of her day to take an hour long bike ride at sunset along the beach. On the other hand, for my friend Scot it's like crossing a desert. He whips himself into occasionally exercising on his bike to try to keep his weight down and then mentally beats himself up unmercifully when he doesn't. Also his guilt about not exercising when he should takes all the fun out of his attempts to take leisure time.

What Scot is trying to do is to do his duty to himself. But even when Scot is successful in getting himself to do his duty and exercise, it does not add to his self appreciation. Yes, he finally met his expectation and maybe his self hate lessens for a minute, but he still resents himself for being such a hard task master. He is not really loving himself because he has learned to be a 'duty-giver.'

The 'duty-giver' has no appreciation for himself because what he gave himself did not come from caring but from coercion. The 'duty-giver' gives to avoid guilt. The 'duty-giver' does not know that it's not how productive you are, but how you are productive.

I'm scared I'll punish myself if I don't “work hard.” How? By thinking I'm lazy; thinking that I'm missing out on life's potential, angrily telling myself I should be doing more with the potential that God has given me. In other words if I were truly grateful, I would be doing more. When I think this way it is very difficult to get in touch with and give to myself from a compassionate caring space. It is also difficult for me to contact any sort of creative energy when I have my Akilla the Fun image in my head holding a whip saying, “Alright now, be spontaneously creative!!” When I relate to myself from that fear based, harsh, Puritan work ethic belief system I often get caught up in, I submit with great resentment or rebelling in defiant or devious forms. The saddest part though, is that I cut myself off from compassionately caring for myself or creatively contributing to others.

One thing that is really scary to me about the 'shoulds' is that as soon as I come up with something I really want to do, something that would be really good for me, the Jackal part of my brain hijacks it and converts it into a should. For example I really enjoy writing, amusing myself with word play, learning more about myself in the process and turning people onto helpful ideas. So I told some people about my longings to write and a successful author friend of mine, Diana Loomans (author of *Full Esteem Ahead*) introduced me to the president of a major publishing company (the *president* mind you, not just one of the editors). We met and had a very powerful, deep, meaningful, moving experience and dialogue. At the end he expressed a sincere interest in helping me publish a book. It was starting to look like a story book plot, boy meets publisher, publisher likes boy — but wait — enter the evil empire's antagonist, keeper of the shoulds, Akilla the Fun. This tyrant of the should is a savvy political operant. Whatever position you take he will join your side. Whatever you think you want to do he will agree that you should do it. This dark, Plutonian force kidnaps needs, wants, and delightful dreams and converts them into have to's, obligations and nightmarish demands.

A good way to invite this devil into the workshop of your consciousness is to create more idle time for yourself than you need. Now in this vacuum the brain's genetic survival instructions take over. They are “adaptive,” trying to increase the likelihood of our survival by thinking more scary, negative should thoughts. Joe Caveman says, “I should build the fire bigger in front of the cave to keep the saber tooth tiger away. I should go get more food in case we run out,” etc. The more you lay on the couch waiting for a good mood to descend on you, the more the unpleasant fear about what you should be doing will appear. Many people deal with this by becoming depressed, making themselves do the minimum to survive, and numbing out. Did I mention that there are 88 NBA playoff games on TV this month?

Stimulus deprivation studies, where people are put in solitary confinement, show that without ordered feedback people start having uncontrolled, scary fantasies. The mind needs clear goals and feedback if it is going to avoid the paralysis of paranoid analysis. Csikszentmihalyi says, “Even the experience of working at a job, which people often claim they hate, has the characteristics of order and continuity. When these elements are missing, chaos (shoulds and fear) returns.”



I am realizing that one form of self-caring is to provide myself with interesting challenging activities to keep my consciousness in the sweet flow of life. But I want to be sure that my motivation is compassion to my need for challenge and aliveness, and not submitting to the inner tyrant saying, "You should get busy, you lazy sloth."

Submission to, or rebellion against, 'should' are both coming from fear. Some say if I don't make myself do stuff or whip myself into action I won't do anything. This is probably true and if so how sad for you. It's very much like a slave who really won't do much without the threat of punishment. When the slave is set free there is some confusion and difficulty getting in touch with what he wants to do and why. He's so used to responding to the loud voice of fear that it may take a while to tune into the more gentle voice of self caring. It's also scary to trust that it's really true that he's free and now need only respond to his own wishes. There's also grief at being chained for so long that comes with the emerging awareness of the joy of freedom. The sweet joy of freedom emerges as we grieve our prisons past.

I feel very sad about how harsh I've been on myself as I have tried to get clear on my 'being' before I start my 'doing'. I really want to spend time each day, preferably each morning being with and really empathizing thoroughly with all my shoulds. I want to do this not for purposes of manipulation or motivation, but for clarification. Motivation and energy and life force is already there. I just need to clear a path for it's expression. That life force wants to serve me but I need to empathize to clear my eyes of the fear. I chose to clear the fear ringing in my ear so I can hear the call of my vocation, my need to contribute. Or I want to feel and enjoy the guilt-free hunger for vacation and recreation.

How sad that I will only call myself good,
If I do what a voice inside says that I should.
I choose now to stop calling myself bad,
Just because I don't do what I wish I had.

It's the same thing I fought against in college. I would tell myself, "I know I should be studying right now instead of watching Star Trek." But there I would sit trying to stay focused on my beloved show while annoying 'should' thoughts, like little 'guilt gnats,' kept buzzing in front of my mind's eyes. I can't really enjoy the show nor could I enjoy studying and missing the show. With the 'shoulds,' doing anything other than what you should is tainted with miserable guilt, and making yourself do what you should is like making yourself eat razor blades.

Wouldn't it be great if it was socially acceptable to have a case of the 'shoulds' once in a while? You could call into work and say, "Oh wow, I'm really sorry but I can't come in today because I woke up this morning with a terrible case of the 'shoulds.'" And your boss would say, "Oh I'm really sorry to hear that. I had them last week. There's been a lot of it going around lately. It must be 'Should Season.'" So you take as long as you need. Get lots of empathy and don't come back to work one minute before you really want to." I bet if the culture operated this way we could save millions of dollars in lost productivity due to sick leave and health care costs.

If I am having a 'should' go off in my head it means that a part of me is in fear. That fear needs empathy until the 'should' subsides and the true want emerges. Example: My sexual partner is out of town for several days and comes home. I start thinking I should have sex with her, after all it has been a long time. Now this is really sad because she has been my sexual fantasy for years, and I really don't need my mind's help with my sex life. My mind has only ever served to screw up my sex life, if you'll pardon the pun. Now something that has been a great joy in my life becomes a job, a chore, a duty. I also believe that it is 'should' thinking that contributes to sexual performance anxiety and dysfunction. Men sometimes start thinking things with their big head like "I really should be able to wait till she has an orgasm." Or "I should be able to go all night." Of course all this distracts from the natural flow of erotic energy.



A should suggests that there is separation between my will and the sweet flow of life, and therefore they are two separate things. I want to sit with my fear until it subsides enough for me to remember that my will and the flow of life are the same thing. A tributary and the main river coming down the mountain toward the sea. I need to use my will not to do what I should, but to get that tributary of should thinking reconnected to the main river — the source of life’s creativity.

The Schizophrenia of Should Thinking destroys my childlike spontaneity. A child never thinks “I should play.” When I am thinking ‘should’ I am up in my head, my ego, my adult, thinking that there is a need for my “wiser” adult to control my “foolish” child. I am also experiencing a sense of separation within myself that I label “my child versus my adult.” That perception of separation occurs in my head, and if I allow my awareness to enter my body I will notice an accompanying fear. (False ego appearing real) I am entertaining the illusion that I am two beings. There is the wise, good being that knows what I should do and the rebellious bad being that hates to be controlled. It reminds me of mornings I have woken up and said, “Alright now quit being lazy. We need to get out of bed now.” We? Who the hell is “we” and what are they doing in bed with me?

To shake shoulds into wants I need to get clear.
And to take my time to empathize with my fear.
If I think that there is a decision to make,
It’s just another should I need to shake
I don’t have to figure out what I should be.
If I listen with acceptance, clarity will find me.

I want to practice putting my relationship with myself first and getting other stuff done second. I would like to pay more attention to what energy, attitude and intention is motivating me to do something, and less energy to what I should do. I would like my only agenda to be to listen to and nurture me. I want to listen to myself until I can hear the wants that are temporarily obscured by the cloud of shoulds. How? **Try this:**

- Step 1:** Notice you are shoulding on yourself. Do you know how you can tell? Different parts of your body feel shouldy, i.e. tension in your shoulders, fear in your stomach, etc. All kinds of little things start to irritate you.
- Step 2:** Let it be OK that you are shoulding. (If you think you shouldn’t think “should,” notice that and let that be OK) By let it be OK, I mean relax your body and allow yourself to feel the fullness of your anger, disgust with yourself for not living up to your own expectations. Let yourself feel the fear that you are going to “miss out,” starve, beat up on yourself forever, etc., etc. Be careful not to try to fix your feelings by coming up with solutions right away. This process may take an hour a day for a while.
- Step 3:** Write down some of the needs that the shoulds are trying to motivate you to meet. Example:
The should: “Kelly you should get busy on that article.” **The needs:** Self expression, food, self-protection from anxiety by cutting it too close to the magazine deadline, attention, acknowledgement from others, etc.
- Step 4:** Picking and doing an action that would meet one of my needs. If you’re having trouble deciding which need to pick, you might chose one that is urgent, and one that addresses the important needs for long range planning, prevention, relationship building, real recreation or self development. Then feel into your body and let it tell you which one you want to do first.



Step 5: If you are having trouble deciding which to do first, go through the list and assign an A, B, or C to them according to level or urgency or interest in doing them. Then go back and number the A's by 1, 2, 3, etc. in order of which you'd enjoy seeing finished first, second and third. Do the same for the rest.

If I pick one of the things I don't enjoy like washing my laundry, I like to challenge myself to find a creative way to make it fun. I have used my stopwatch to try and set a new world indoor washing record, gotten someone else to do it, (I'm embarrassed to admit that I have brought my portable TV into the laundry room) or brought my favorite music or audio tapes along.)

If you want to get it done,
Do it with fun.
Find a way,
To make it play.

As I've slowed my doing down and started trying to get in touch with my being before acting again, my jackal mind has freaked out. "Your kidding yourself, your just being lazy. Really your depressed and your just painting this noble image of existential struggle to avoid facing reality. You're wasting your time. You're really missing out on a lot of creativity etc." Then I remember Rollo May's quote, "You learn to snow ski in the summer and swim in the winter." Do I let me go to recess or do I make me go to school? If I make me "go to school," by doing what I should, I feed the illusion that coercion is the only way I will ever get anything done. And each time I do that, it is less and less fun and I have less and less motivation in the future.

It's not what I get done, it's how I get me to do it. It's not how productive you are but how you are productive. Sure the Great Pyramid in Egypt is a great accomplishment and monument, but a monument to what? When I think of how many lashes of the whip on the backs of slaves it took, it becomes a very sad monument. I am glad that the wind is chewing it up and spitting it back into the desert. I want to protect my life from becoming a monument to my own inner slave driver. I want it to be a passionate pillar to my own longing to experience and express that most satisfying aspect of life: Love, first for self and then for others.

Did you know that you don't even have to feel love for yourself to nurture your self? And if you can shake your shoulds and give to what really counts, your own needs, that self love will grow. Our selves are a little like dogs. You don't have to love the dog to feed it and take care of it, but if you do these things the dog will start loving you. And once the dog starts loving you, you won't be able to resist loving it and nurturing it all the more.

You Don't Count

You don't count, deny yourself . . . that's how I was reared.
And I got so good at denying myself that myself just disappeared.

The programs in my head make me feel so dead and seldom bring a smile.
So I'd like to tune in to a different channel, but I can't seem to find the dial.

My head was filled with a million or more of those have to's, shoulds and oughts.
So I spend all my time & energy just unraveling the knots.

I was always taught when things get bad find someone to blame.
Philosophies like this can easily give living a bad name.



I'd like to dig my soul out of the mess I see cluttering my mind.
Because there's too much of life, too much of me I've been leaving too far behind.

- by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg

* A should is two or more wants mixed together *

If I keep listening to the two or more needs behind any should, either synergy or shift will happen. If I keep unwrapping the should it becomes one or more could's to meet the various needs.

Example: I am talking with a young man who had just hit another small man in the face several times and had strangled to a certain extent another man and torn his shirt off. This all happened at the YMCA where I go to play basketball. After I and several others tore him off the second person, I decided to engage him in a dialogue partly because I was fascinated to learn what was behind his uncontrollable anger and perhaps learn something more about myself.

I spent over two and a half hours talking with him as we uncovered layer after layer of the 'think' that was creating his rage. Of course I knew intellectually that all anger comes from should thinking. But I was interested in the way the anger seemed to take a life of its own and come through as though he was possessed. I asked with the empathic intention to connect, not correct or criticize, "What was that all about?" "He shouldn't have called me a liar!!" He went on to explain to me how we shouldn't judge each other, and that he shouldn't have beat up on the two young men, and he shouldn't have picked people smaller than himself and that we shouldn't lust after women or masturbate. Oh, now I was starting to get a clue where his rage was coming from. While he was ranting I entertained myself by wondering whether he knew that sex was a misdemeanor, -the more you miss, da meaner you get. He explained that he actually knew better and shouldn't have lost his temper or even gotten angry. He told me that he shouldn't have done what he did because he was Catholic, but that he would be sure and go to confession.

I suddenly felt a little priestly but resisted telling him to say three hail Mary's and not do it again. I really felt compassion for the guy and after I listened for a long, long time I tried to explain to him that should is like a big pressure cooker lid and what ever you put it on you begin to build up pressure in it. If you think you shouldn't be sad, you become uncontrollably depressed. If you think you shouldn't be scared, you'll become paranoid without being able to stop the fear thoughts. If you think you shouldn't get angry, you will occasionally explode with rage attacks. If you think you shouldn't feel lust, you will become obsessed with sex. Or you might do what I did, join a monastery (actually an Indian ashram), practice chastity until I developed a stricture in my Urethra. Only after I nearly had my bladder explode and had to have an emergency operation did I realize it's not nice to mess with Mother Nature. She will provide consequences.

He then switched subjects, so to speak, and began to tell me about a problem he was having with his studies. He explained "Any time anyone tells me what I should study I never end up doing it. Why do you think that is?"

I asked him, "Do you think you should study what they are saying you should?"

To which he replied, "Well yeah."

"Then that explains to me why you're not doing it." I said I was grateful for the chance to contribute to his self awareness. "Whenever I tell myself I should do something I feel so heavy and depressed that I will do anything to get away from that feeling. One way of avoiding the feeling is avoiding the thought and subject altogether. My father helped me understand this when he explained why he forgot to call me once for 25



years. He told me that he frequently thought he should call me but then he would start feeling so guilty about not doing it that many times he would just get drunk instead. And I remember many an hour spent in the student recreation center of the University of Florida guiltily playing pool in rebellion of my own inner should screaming at me to study.”

“Well how do I get out of that tug of war and get myself to do the right thing?” he asked with amazing sincerity.

“You can make being gentle with yourself as important as getting whatever it is done. Make sure what you are asking yourself to do is really what you want to do and not just something you are afraid not to do. Wait till you hear your heart singing before you try to dance. Take the time to really listen to yourself, to both the ‘should’ and the ‘I don’t want to’.

“Like right now a part of me is thinking I should be working on my book instead of talking to you. As I am thinking about this I’m teasing apart the different, apparently conflicting needs that are wrapped together in the ‘should.’ One of my needs is to contribute to myself and the planet by making progress on the book. Another need is for stimulating conversation which is being met by staying here and talking with you.”

I could tell he liked hearing that. As I am holding these two needs in clear focus within my awareness, ideas are starting to pop into my head like popcorn popping. Synergy-pop, synergy-pop, synergy-pop. I could remember and write about this conversation in my book. I now can see this conversation could be a sort of research for the book. Now I am seeing a way to get both needs met at the same time. I am no longer stuck on what I call the request or action or solution level. I am no longer thinking: a) Should I stay her with this conversation? or b) Should I leave and work on my book? Just thinking on the solution level keeps me stuck in a painful game of Ping-Pong power-struggle in my head as I go back and forth thinking first of one option and then of it’s mutually exclusive opposite.”

Should is a conflict indicating a need to negotiate with myself.

Most of us have been taught that if we do what we should we will be loved. In other words, if we do what Mom and Dad, teacher and preacher want you to, then they and God and society will love you. In Alice Miller’s book *For Your Own Good*, she describes how Nazi’s were made. She explains that in the German child rearing manuals parents were taught to teach their children to “Knock on the door of love through obedience.” In other words, if you deny yourself and do what you should you will receive love in return for the loss of your self. What happens is that this thinking, up in our head, about what one should do, about what others think is right and wrong, replaces the awareness of our own feelings and needs, down in our bodies. Again Jampolsky’s question comes to me, “Do you want to be right or be happy? You can’t have both.” Do you want to do the right thing, what you should do, or what you need to do for your soul’s fulfillment? Do you want to be up in your head being right or down in your body being alive? And of course I love thinking, but only when it is in the service of my needs. You can’t do what your heart’s desire is and still live up to your ‘shoulder’s’ expectations. We all choose one or the other.

Things I ‘should’ have included in the above:

Sometimes I start shoulding on myself about things that greatly affect my health, security or well being. This is particularly scary because the more scared I am about the health of my teeth or my financial security for instance the more intensely I tell myself I should floss or call the accountant. This of course triggers all the more rebellion till all my teeth fall out and I’ve mismanaged my money so I can’t afford dentures.

* * *



I am a recovering chronic 'shouldaholic' and really can't handle my shoulds. If I indulge in even one should I can't stop. So whenever I feel an urge 'to should' coming on, I like to stop dead in my tracks and wait for it to pass. If I start thinking, "It's O.K., one little should won't hurt you," I know I need help quick. I either call my 'should' sponsor, who doesn't tell me anything I should do, or I try to find some sort of meeting.

* * *

Procrastination is living under the tyranny of the should, then rebelling against it by avoiding the whole subject.

* * *

Maybe I have made the progress I have *in spite of* making myself do what I should, not *because of it*.

* * *

I'm scared of being punished if I don't "work." In other words I am thinking I should do something I don't like doing, just to get paid. This makes me a slave to my inner 'should' as in "you should do stuff you don't like or else you are immature." This prevents me from being able to just contribute or act out of sincere giving. I put myself in the paradoxical position of having to submit or rebel. How sad that I can't just contribute anymore.

I'm only going to call you good,
If you do what you think you should,
In the mean time you're called bad,
'Cause you haven't done what you should had.

* * *

I want a morality based on valuing and nurturing each other instead of a morality based on trying to avoid should, shame or guilt.

* * *

Thinking in terms of what one 'should' do can be an escape from taking responsibility for oneself.

* * *

I need to destroy the master/slave relationship I've created with my body as I forced it to do stuff I think it should do for me. I need to restore the lost trust so my body quits rebelling against me.

* * *

Should thinking is a form of denial. Whether I'm denying the reality of my level of knowledge or wisdom as in; I should have known better. Or I'm denying what is; this puzzle piece should easily slide in here. Example:



I had taken my copier apart a little, to see if I could fix it. As I was trying to put it back together, this very simple piece would not go back into place. I must have tried 200 times (I’m a slow learner). Each time I was thinking “this should just slide right back in here.” I was so irritated by my ‘should thinking’ that I didn’t seriously start looking for what might be preventing it from sliding into place for a very long time. Finally, I came out of denial and considered that maybe, just maybe, there was something in the way of the piece sliding back together. Maybe I needed to align myself with the laws of physics instead of insisting that those laws cooperate with my should thinking. It was much easier to get the piece in once I had done that. Once I started looking at what was instead of what should be happening, life got easier.

As I look back on my little struggle I wondered “What was so frustrating?” The first, second and even third times I tried to get it back in I wasn’t frustrated. Why not? Because I hadn’t started thinking ‘should’ yet.

* * *

Should obscures or hides deeper needs. Once these needs are uncovered it’s easier for decisions, even difficult decisions, to be made.

From Procrastination to Creation

Of course, if my focus becomes how to get myself to do what I should, I’ll run into the same dynamic I would in any relationship. If my focus is solely on getting what I want with no real empathy for the needs of the other, the other will sense the demand and immediately resist me.

I once managed a group home for “rebellious teens” and had an employee I thought ‘should’ be doing the dishes instead of reading magazines as much as she was. Whenever I would finally ‘should’ her into doing the dishes she would get even by putting on a long face and only doing the minimum basic requirements for the job. She would cut corners when I wasn’t looking, and was forever ‘forgetting’ many responsibilities. She had a depressed energy about her and when I wasn’t hounding her she laid on the couch and ate Cheetos a lot. As I look back on it I see how I had manifested externally the soap opera that was constantly playing in my head. My employee had the role of my inner rebellious teenage and I was playing the part of my inner ‘shoulding parent’. Her being depressed, laying on the couch eating Cheetos was exactly what I did when I was not at work trying to make her do her work.

* * *

I am so grateful now that my Aunt wouldn’t let me take any music classes in school. If I had I’m sure they would have taught me to think I ‘should’ practice my piano or guitar which would make me nauseous. It’s like that movie *A Clockwork Orange* when the government decides to try to cure this man of sexual misconduct by pairing his sexual feelings with aversive stimuli. I have forgotten the exact details but it was something like showing him sexy videos and giving him electric shocks at the same time. They were hoping that he would feel scared and bad every time he thought of sex and thereby control his sexual behavior.

* * *



No one can be generous from 'should' energy.

* * *

Three of the most common shoulds people bring me, as a psychotherapist, to fix:

1. How do I get myself to do what I should so I won't be angry at myself and depressed?
2. How do I get my partner to treat me the way I should be treated?
3. How do I get my child to listen (which really means act the way he/she should. Sometimes they frame it in terms of 'How do I get my child to quit being lazy, or start being motivated, or quit being irresponsible, etc. But of course it all means the same thing, 'How do I get him/her to do what I want, what I think he/she should do?')

I try to get them to change their agenda to:

1. How do I develop a gentle caring relationship with myself so I will act in caring ways toward me? (Which may involve doing things for myself I dislike, but still want to get done somehow.)
2. How do I clear whatever resentments, hurts or fears that are clogging the pipe of love so my partner will want to give to me?
3. How do I put the relationship with my child first and getting the toys put away second? Because any child loves to give to their parent until they are told they should. Every child loves to help their parent until they are told it is their duty. Every child feels great generosity of spirit toward their parent until they are told they owe it to their parents.

* * *

Should is also an indication of self hate. It is a rejection of the actual self and a demand for an unrealized ideal self. Sometimes I tell myself "I should be a best selling author and world famous Guru." I hate the fact that I am not, because I think I should be. This self hate does not inspire me to start making the plans or taking the steps it would take to move me toward these lofty goals. In fact it zaps me of any of the self caring and self confidence I would need to achieve such goals.

* * *

Many of our shoulds are insanely unreasonable:

The monk's should: I should never need anything.

The therapist's should: I should always be patient and empathetic.

The macho man's should: I should never be scared.

The mother's should: I should always put my children's needs ahead of my own.

The Zen student's should: I should never be upset about anything anyone says.

The medical intern's should: I should never experience time or energy limitations.

The mensa member's should: With my great intelligence I should have no relationship difficulties.

The eternally wounded workshop junkie: My parents should have been different.

The guilty church goer: I have forgiven my parents so I shouldn't have any unpleasant feelings towards them.



* * *

We have been so “should upon” that we don’t even know what’s fun anymore. Have you ever watched little kids deciding what to play? One kid will bring up an idea and the other kids will either say, “Yeah! That’s it, let’s do it.” Or “Nay. Let’s play hide and seek instead.” They know. They feel intuitively what would be fun. Have you ever heard a little kid say, “Yeah, hide and seek would be fun but we should get better at basketball instead.” No that’s not their focus until they have been influenced by their make-me-proud-of-you-parents.

I have clients who come into my office regularly, and list off 20 different things they THINK they would like to do. They plead, cajole and threaten to end the therapeutic relationship with me in an attempt to get me to tell them which one they should do. And I empathize and empathize with how scary it is to take responsibility for one’s choices with all it’s consequences. Some build enough connection with themselves to make the leap into the river of life, others sit on the bank cursing the river for not pulling them in.

Kelly Bryson MA, MFT, author of the best selling book, *Don’t be Nice, Be Real - Balancing Passion for Self with Compassion for Others (COVER TEXT: A Handbook to Nonviolent Communication™)*, has been featured in Elle and Shape magazines, appeared on many TV and radio shows, lived in an ashram many years, is a humorist, singer and licensed therapist in private practice. He keynotes conventions (national Montessori), is an inspirational speaker and has been an authorized trainer for the international Center for Nonviolent Communication for over 20 years, and has trained thousands in the U.S., Europe and the Middle East. He trains, presents and consults with groups, corporations (Tony Robbins, Paul Mitchell Salons), churches (all flavors), schools (U.Cal.L.B, Body/Mind College), clubs and all types of organizations. He also studied with E. Stanley Jones, Gandhi’s concierge and friend. Learn more about his work or information about his private or phone-based sessions, visit his website at www.LanguageOfCompassion.com or contact him directly at 831-462-EARS (3277) (most insurance accepted). To purchase Kelly's book *Don't be Nice, Be Real* or other related CD's, audio tapes & books, or to read chapters from his book click <http://www.languageofcompassion.com/Publications.htm>