

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I never seem to have enough time to do the things that are most important to me. For example, I always say that I'm going to keep in touch with my extended family that lives in another state and my old college friends – we were very close twenty years ago--but between work, kids, and responsibilities, I just don't. Then, there's exercise. I need to lose a little weight and make hundreds of resolutions to become active in my community and begin walking or jogging but I never seem to have time to do that either, even though I say I value good health and want to be a good neighbor. Do you have any suggestions about how I can get my life back in sync with the things that I say are important to me? -- Eddie

Dear Eddie,

You are certainly not alone in feeling overwhelmed by commitments and responsibilities in your daily life. But, rest assured, you can change your behavior to more accurately reflect what you value, and it's imperative that you do so.

Our lives are richer, more meaningful, and less stressful when we put our core values -- those that are closest to our hearts -- into action. So, if we say we value friendship and connection -- for example with our extended family or our old college buddies -- but make no effort to keep in contact, then we are not really living that value. We may claim to value our health, while spending every spare moment sprawled out in the Barcalounger, chomping down snacks, and watching reruns on television. We may want a strong and safe community, but if we can't ever find the time to contribute, we are just "talking the talk," and not "walking the walk."

If any of those are the case, then our actual lives are out of alignment with our values, and we'll suffer the consequences. Writer and feminist Gloria Steinem once offered a simple way to look at our values and the ways we do, or do not, live them. "We can tell what we value by looking at our checkbook register," she said. We might say that donating to charity is important, but if every check is made out to Nordstrom's then we are just blowing hot air about our values.

Eddie, start by looking at your own most deeply held values. Imagine what your life would be like if your core values were being supported by your behavior. What would your "dream life" look like? Take some time to reflect on these values and actually write them down. You've given me some good clues to some of your values in your letter. You say that connections with friends and family, health, and community involvement, are important to you. Are there other values that aren't getting your attention as well? If so, note them too.

Now, for each of those values, write down an action plan. What steps could you take to really live those values in your life? Make the steps specific. Don't say, "I'll keep in touch with my cousin Fred." That isn't specific enough. Write, instead, "I'll call my cousin Fred tonight after work and ask him to work with me to plan a family reunion in the spring." Don't say, "Get more exercise," say, instead, "Tomorrow morning I'll set my alarm a half-hour earlier than usual and walk around the block. Each day I'll add

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another block.” It should go without saying, but I’ll say it: the writing is not enough; you must also take the steps you set out for yourself. Make it a priority to call Fred after work tonight, and to get up and walk around your block.

I just returned from a great weekend with a bunch of my old college friends. Several years ago, we bemoaned the fact that we had fallen out of touch, even though we genuinely care about each other. Several of us took some initiative and planned a date to meet near our old alma mater in Washington, D.C., then called a hotel and arranged for a block of rooms at a good price. We then emailed and asked everyone to reserve that weekend to get together, which – at that time – was still almost a year away. But, this is the way people plan events when it’s important to gather the tribe, and when everyone’s lives overflow with obligations.

The weekend with my old friends was meaningful and fun. We interrupted our daily life to come from all over the country to live this value of friendship and connection that we’ve felt since we were eighteen years old. It was worth it. We’ve all committed to gathering together every other year. Now, here’s the interesting thing. The entire organization of this great weekend took no more than two hours of work. Those who say they can’t find two spare hours over the course of several months are kidding themselves, IMHO. It’s not a problem of time; it’s a failure to put one’s values into action.

You can change your life to include all the things that are important to you. It requires first of all knowing what matters most, developing a plan to realize your goals, and then putting that plan into action. Here’s what Henry David Thoreau said about all that, “If one advances in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life that he has imagined, he will meet with success unexpected in common hours.”

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.