

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  September / October 2003

Little Things Make a Big Difference

It is common folklore that “It’s the little things that matter most in life.” While such folklore is built upon centuries of accumulated human wisdom, it is human nature to be drawn to the bigger and flashier things of life. Often it is only when something occurs in our lives to slow us down that we take the time to pay attention to the little things that matter most — to the small and almost imperceptible interactions within and among us that spawn the more attention-grabbing events of life.

At one time or another, each of us has experienced the tremendous power contained in the little things. It is often the little things that separate the work environments that break morale from those that build enthusiasm and cooperation. There is the torturous day-in and day-out erosion of the self that occurs in interpersonally brutal work environments that are caustic and non-nurturing, and then there are the sensitive managers that labor interaction by interaction to provide the all-important buffers and contexts of safety that employees need to be creative and effective. It is the small things that shape the repetitive patterns that either destroy relationships one interaction at a time or build ever-stronger bonds of commitment. A regular series of broken promises, words of reassurance, renewed hope, and promises-shattered-once-more, eats away at the emotional bonds between two people, while the faithful expression of little acts of affection, respect, and civility builds self-esteem, mutuality, and love.

Life is built upon the minuscule, whether it is the atomic particles that form the foundation of matter, the double-helix DNA molecules that provide the recipes for the multitude of cells that comprise the human body, or the subtle glances between a mother and her infant that form the foundation of the developing self of a child. It is the easily overlooked that holds the greatest power for good or ill.

Most of our work at the Center occurs on the thresholds of life. These are the thresholds that separate life from death, health from illness, wholeness from brokenness, hope from despair, a higher calling from the status quo, and vitality from the blasé. Thresholds are generally not very wide. When one is on a threshold, it becomes abundantly clear that it is the little things that have the power to tilt the balance in one direction or the other.

Life lived on the threshold creates a sensitivity attuned to the little things. This sensitivity underlies much of the behavioral and emotional reactivity that characterizes many hurting people. For the most sensitive people among us are also the most vulnerable to being pushed off balance by the little things. When we slow down and pay attention to the reactions people have to seemingly small, but very destabilizing events in their lives, when we patiently listen in a non-reactive and respectful manner to their disappointments and disillusionments, we learn a great deal about the simple, yet critical, building blocks of civil human community.

We learn, for example, that administrative policies and structures designed to protect people from harassment and intimidation are not sufficient, and that persons in authority who are willing to take courageous steps to enforce those policies and to insure institutional commitment to their enforcement are also necessary. We learn that unchecked shaming and humiliating taunts by teachers and fellow students create scars that last a lifetime, and that a timely look of understanding and a reassuring hug by a friendly neighbor can quell a good deal of the damage. We learn that a parent’s unresponsive face creates unbearable turmoil in the inner world of a pre-verbal infant reaching out for connection, and that a simple smile and a gentle touch can bring a wave of calm and tranquility over that same troubled soul. We learn that institutional policies that create obstacles to easy access to services rob persons of their sense of efficacy and invalidate what they know about their own internal resources to cope. And we learn that policies that demonstrate respect for the felt needs of people and encourage an environment of welcoming hospitality produce a calming and soothing effect on people in need, build self-control, and foster a sense of hope that “help” is more than just a word.

Learning about the “little things that make a big difference” is both a blessing and a curse. Once we begin to pay attention to the subtleties of human interactions and the relative fragility of human dignity and self-respect, we can’t go back to a blissful lack of awareness. We see infractions everywhere. The tremendous havoc and ugliness these seemingly little infractions create are seen regularly on the evening news and in the morning paper. They are ever-present reminders of how much work there is to be done in

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developing deeper levels of compassion and understanding for one another.

This heightened sensitivity to the subtleties of human interaction can also alert us to simple pleasures of life that cost so little and return so much. We can become more mindful of the life-giving exchanges that permeate daily life: the pride on a father's face for a son he loves dearly, the simple "Good morning" returned by the homeless man in a park who a moment before had his eyes turned downward, and the warm, engaging, and protective embrace provided by a self-assured young woman calmly holding her child.

Each of us has our own threshold experiences. Times in our lives when we teeter and totter; times when we could easily tilt one way or the other; times when we could make it or lose it. Paying attention to what those times are like for us will help open our hearts in compassion to others and create within us a respectful mixture of awe and gratitude for the little things that make a big difference.

J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D.

Director of Clinical Services and Professional Education

For More Information on this Topic

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center counselors are available to engage your group or class in exploring a number of topics that relate to the little things in life that can make a big difference. Suggestions include: "How to Enrich, Nurture and Sustain Your Marriage," "The Nature and Practice of Helping Others," and "Building Self-Esteem in Children." Please call Eileen Burtle, M.A., at the Center (274-4006) to explore these or other options for your group.

Consider an Annual Gift to the Center

People come to the Center seeking counseling for depression, anxiety, grief, anger, marital or family conflict, past or current abuse, chronic/terminal illness, and parenting issues. They come to the Center to explore career issues or to understand their mind-spirit-body connections.

Parents bring their children to the Center to cope with divorce or the death of a loved one, to overcome difficulties with teachers or peers at school, to deal with behavioral or developmental disorders like ADHD or autism, to deal with past trauma, and many other issues.

We are able to offer our counseling on an ability-to-pay basis thanks to contributions from individuals, corporations, foundations, and congregations. If you would like to make a contribution to help us serve clients who are unable to afford the full cost of counseling, please call Kathleen Murrin at (515) 274-4006 or send your tax-deductible contribution to DMPCC, 550 39th Street, Suite 100, Des Moines, IA 50312.

Group Counseling for Sexual Abuse Survivors

Debbie Reed and Susan Ackelson of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center will co-lead a group counseling experience for women who are survivors of childhood/adolescent sexual abuse. The primary purpose of the group is to provide a safe and therapeutic environment in which women are helped to move toward a sense of personal empowerment. Other goals of the group are to increase ability to trust oneself and others and to provide an opportunity to begin working through and resolving feelings and relational patterns associated with the trauma.

The group will meet weekly for 90 minutes on Mondays from 6:00 – 7:30 p.m. over a 16-week period. Meetings will begin in September and will be held in our West Des Moines office. The cost per session is \$20 (\$320 total). Each prospective group member will be screened prior to acceptance into the group. Women enrolling in the group must be currently involved in on-going individual counseling. For enrollment and/or further information, please call (515) 274-4006.

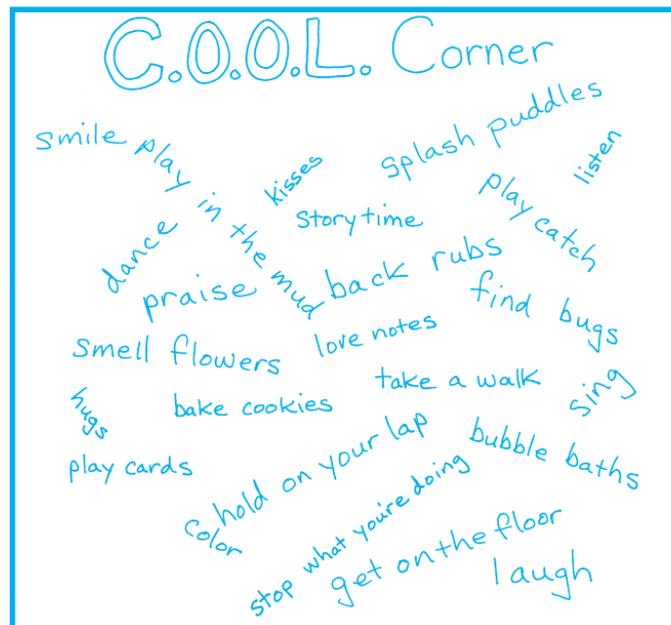
Facilitators:

Debbie Reed, Ed.D., L.M.H.C.

Debbie earned her doctoral degree in counseling from Drake University. She is a licensed mental health counselor and has experience in individual, marital, and small group counseling. Her past group experience includes work with cancer survivors and survivors of incest/sexual abuse.

Susan Ackelson, M.S.W.

Susan earned her master's degree in social work from the University of Iowa. She is a licensed independent social worker and has experience in individual, marital, and small group counseling, with a special interest in trauma-related disorders.



Working with Dissociative Processes in Psychotherapy – A Ten Week Course

Dates: December 5, 2003 - February 27, 2004
Time: Fridays, 8:15-9:45 a.m.
Location: Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center
Cost: \$200 plus optional text
Registration Deadline: November 21, 2003
Instructor: J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D.

This seminar will begin with a brief overview of the spectrum of dissociation. The focus will be on issues commonly encountered in the psychotherapy process with persons suffering from dissociative disorders including:

- how dissociation functions as an effective defense for the preservation of the self;
- signs and symptoms of dissociative disorders;
- switching as a process of compartmentalization and affect regulation;
- the use of art work and writing in therapy;
- grounding;
- management of transference and countertransference dynamics;
- working with parts;
- issues of self-harm and re-enactment.

Multimedia resources will be used in addition to a broad range of clinical material. Participants will be encouraged to bring examples from their own clinical settings for class discussion.

The Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center is an Iowa Board of Social Work Examiners approved provider #0087 and Iowa Board of Behavioral Science Examiners approved provider #AS98-13. This course is approved for 15 hours of continuing education credit. This course is also approved for 1.5 hours of nursing continuing education credit. For more information or to register call (515) 274-4006 or e-mail info@dmpcc.org.

Proactive Parenting Class

Are you tired of saying “no” to your children? Proactive parenting strives to anticipate and prevent potential battles. Learn how to create an environment more conducive to positive interactions with your child.

Kelli Hill Hunt, Ph.D., a child and adolescent psychologist in C.O.O.L., the children’s department of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, is offering a **Proactive Parenting Class** through West Des Moines Community Education. The class is scheduled for **Tuesday, September 30, 2003, 6:30-8:30 p.m.** at Stilwell Junior High School in West Des Moines. Call (515) 633-5001 to register.

MANifest Events

MANifest is a program for men facilitated by male counselors at the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. MANifest is built around weekend retreats and Saturday workshops. MANifest is for men of all ages and from every walk of life. Men of any faith background or no faith background are welcome. MANifest is where men can turn when they begin to sense that something is missing from their relationships, their jobs, and/or their social lives.

Manifest Weekend

The Fall 2003 MANifest Weekend is scheduled for Friday-Sunday, **October 17-19, 2003**. The MANifest weekend seeks to create a sense of community that supports men in addressing life’s issues. Men gather Friday evening and depart Sunday noon. The event will be held at a retreat center in a rustic setting southeast of Winterset (2412 St. Charles Road). Lowell Houts, D.Min., and Mike Sears, Ed.D., will facilitate the workshop. The cost for the entire weekend is \$175 (includes lodging and 5 meals). Call the Center to pre-register (274-4006) or e-mail info@dmpcc.org.

Manifest Workshop

The Fall 2003 MANifest workshop will focus on the topic of **anger**. This is a significant topic in men’s lives and yet it is rarely talked about. The richness of the workshop comes from the shared experience of participants themselves. The MANifest workshop will take place on **Saturday, November 8, 2003, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.**, at Queen’s Point, 2793 St. Charles Road (stone house six miles west of St. Charles). Lowell Houts, D.Min., and Mike Sears, Ed.D., will facilitate the workshop. The fee is \$50 (includes lunch). Call the Center to pre-register (274-4006) or e-mail info@dmpcc.org. Registration is limited to 20 participants.

Male and Female Communication Styles: What She Said, What He Heard

We have all experienced, male and female alike, the feeling of “not being heard” by a member of the opposite sex. No doubt about it, men and women think and communicate differently. Researchers now believe that the differences in communication styles are inherent in the basic makeup of each sex.

J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D., pastoral psychotherapist and licensed clinical psychologist at DMPCC, will explore these differences and why we interpret what we hear the way we do. The class is offered through Des Moines Community/Adult & Continuing Education on **Tuesday, November 18, 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.** Watch November’s newsletter for location. Call (515) 237-1690 for more information.

Educational Events for the Community

October 7, 2003, 5:30 – 6:30 p.m.

Charlie Day, Ph.D., Meditation

Charlie Day, Ph.D., is a retired psychotherapist who has meditated for 35 years. While working in Asia, he participated in several Buddhist retreats, which led him to conclude that Buddha anticipated modern psychological and psychotherapeutic techniques by more than 2500 years. Dr. Day teaches meditation as both a psychological self-help technique and a spiritual growth practice.

The Center is sponsoring three free community education events this fall to explore various complementary therapies that are available in the Des Moines community. All events will take place at Plymouth Congregational Church, Ingersoll at 42nd Street, in the Burling Room, from 5:30 – 6:30 p.m.

Call or e-mail the Center to pre-register for this free event or for further information. Watch the upcoming newsletters for more information on the other community education events.

- Tuesday, November 4, Carol Throckmorton on nutrition
- Tuesday, December 2, Michelle Martz on yoga

www.dmpcc.org

Visit the Center's website for more information on the Center counseling services and staff, special events and classes.

Connecting Available Through E-mail

Please let us know if you would like to receive this newsletter by e-mail rather than having a paper copy sent to you. To be added to our newsletter e-mail list, contact info@dmpcc.org and indicate in your message that you would like to receive *Connecting* by e-mail. Make sure to include the name and street address to which we have been mailing the newsletter so that we can remove your name from our newsletter postal list. You will need Adobe Acrobat Reader (free software) to access the newsletter by e-mail.

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation

One of the simplest and most popular ways to make a gift to charity is to give through your will. In many cases, a simple change to your will can add a meaningful gift to an organization and does not require rewriting your entire will. Please consider a gift to the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation when writing or reviewing your will. Help us secure the Center's future capacity to serve the needs of generations to come.

(From the Leave a Legacy Iowa website: www.leavealegacyiowa.org)

CONNECTING

is a publication of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center, an independent, interfaith, not-for-profit organization. For over 30 years, the Center has been providing counseling and educational services to individuals, couples, and families for the purpose of enhancing emotional, spiritual, and relationship health. The Center has satellite offices in West Des Moines, Altoona, Ankeny, and Urbandale.

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