

KEEPING YOUR SANITY THROUGH SELF-MASTERY

<https://www.2thepointnews.com/keeping-your-sanity-through-self-mastery/>

Washington and Franklin – Exemplars of Self-Mastery

A certain degree of struggle, inside or outside, is part of life.

When we're struggling with our own emotions or impulses, negative thoughts, or troubling symptoms, we can sometimes feel helpless, overwhelmed; like there's nothing that can be done about it. When this is the case, it can help if we can take some of the mystery out of the equation.

When we approach any problem, whether a vast human problem like slavery, or a very personal problem like anxiety or conflict in a relationship, how we approach it begins with an idea, a belief, a story about what that problem is, and what needs to be done about it.

To some extent, we can choose the fundamental belief or premise from which we approach any problem; and how we frame a problem can be the very key to success.

In the movie Apollo 13, when the astronauts were in grave peril, and people at Mission Control were freaking out, expecting disaster, Gene Krantz (played by Fred Harris) stopped them and said, "What do we got on the spacecraft that works?"

With that one powerful question, he reframed the situation from helpless disaster to solvable problem. Everyone immediately shifted from disaster mode to focusing on the strengths and resources available to bring the crew home safely – which they did. The story would probably have ended much differently – and tragically – had they stayed in disaster mode.

How we approach our psychological challenges also begins with an idea, a premise, a story. One of the most consistent pieces of truth that I've come to understand through my work over the years, and has become a solid

premise for me, is this:

Mental health is not perfection. Everybody has something that they struggle with, have struggled with, or will struggle with. Some challenges are severe and daunting, others are more manageable; but nobody goes through life trouble free – and this is not a cynical or depressing belief.

This shift in perspective can often move our troubles from overwhelming to... well, at least just plain whelming. The troubles, whatever they may be, begin to look more like moveable, changeable qualities than rigid, fixed problems that we're stuck with forever.

Acceptance of what's true can allow us to face our troubles, and find real solutions. Some of us have learned to integrate our struggles, even to the point of tremendous grace and joy; others are still working on it, with good days and not so good days. For others the troubles can be tragically overwhelming.

Much as we may wish it, we can't often just make our challenges go away; but we can learn what we need to do to cope with them, to pay attention to what helps us feel better and what makes us feel worse; to *master*, as well as we are able, our emotions and actions.

At least two of America's founders paid attention to their own struggles and wrote about them, in very different ways.

George Washington, from a psychological perspective today, would be said to have had "anger issues." He could have quite a temper, but that wasn't something most people saw. Why is that? Read his *Rules for Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, and you'll find out. He worked hard and mastered his temper, and his other emotions.

If a science fiction writer were to cast Washington for a part in *Star Trek*, he would be a Vulcan. Vulcans attain supreme control of their emotions, not because they don't *have* emotions, but because their emotions are *too intense* and out of control to allow their unbridled expression.

Washington was *not a victim* of his emotional challenge; he *used it to master himself* to the point that his strength of will and character became an archetype of determination, dignity, and self-control. Washington made himself who he became.

Benjamin Franklin also took a conscious approach to self-mastery. In his *Autobiography*, he mapped out a strategy to practice and achieve several areas of virtue. This practice did not make him somehow perfectly virtuous; what it did do was help him to become *more* virtuous, and in the process to become a stronger, better man – which was his aim.

What we see with these two giants of human history are small insights into what were certainly much more complex challenges. We only see a glimpse of what they decided to share with us. One of the great honors of working with people as a therapist and a life coach for so long is that I have personally been witness to many hundreds of individual examples of such struggle; and such mastery.

The first step is always *self-acceptance*. Accepting what's true right now, even though we don't want it to be true in the future, allows us to orient to our challenges. It gives us a place to stand where we can see the problems we face without being absorbed in them.

Self acceptance allows us to come to view our troubling emotions, impulses or thoughts, as observers – as we would view wild animals like raccoons or possums meandering through our backyard. We don't have to be afraid of them; we don't have to frantically chase them away; but *we do learn not to feed them*.

Watching our emotions, thoughts, and impulses, and bringing mindful awareness to our experience, can make it much more manageable.

If we can just watch whatever it is we are struggling with; accept that it exists, and that we have some work to do in order to master it; then we can get to that work. Noticing what helps and what doesn't, getting support if we need it, giving ourselves a break when we're tired, and accepting this challenge as a normal part of human existence.

We all have something that we work to master in ourselves, mild or daunting. As conscious, complex beings, our behavior isn't predetermined with instincts, our brains aren't limited to simple, rigid pathways. Even in the best of circumstances, there is still self-possession to earn, and that doesn't come easy.

If you feel that you're struggling with emotions, or thoughts, or challenges that you've yet to master, don't despair, or berate yourself, or resign yourself to suffering. The options are not perfection versus disaster. Like Washington, we can use our will to focus and direct our life; like Franklin we can consciously, deliberately move, not toward perfect virtue, but toward greater virtue.

We start by accepting what's true, and knowing that whatever we're struggling with, however troubling, has been struggled with by millions of others. Including two of history's most revered people.

~

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

Joel F. Wade, Ph.D., is the author of The Virtue of Happiness, Mastering Happiness, his new course, Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions, A Master's Course in Happiness, and The Mastering Happiness Podcast. He is a marriage and family therapist and life coach who works with people around

Copyright ©2024 **2 The Point News** unless otherwise noted.