

Finding the Lighthouse

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“I feel like a hamster on a wheel! All I do is go to work, come home, take care of everybody else all day, and I’m exhausted! I can’t keep going on like this!”

Tracey was right! Taking care of everyone else every day for years had taken a toll on her physical and mental health. She was a health care provider with a husband and 3 teenagers at home, and an elderly aunt nearby. She was so busy that she sometimes joked about the luxury of getting to eat a meal while sitting down at a table (instead of the car!).

The first time I asked Tracey what she wanted for herself, she looked at me blankly. As I persisted, she admitted she wanted to not be so tired. To not be so busy. To not feel like a hamster on a wheel. That was a good start, but I asked what she wanted *instead* of those things. When we can only think about the things we *don’t* want, our attention is mostly on the things we want to get away from. It is usually more helpful for us to focus on that which we *do* want instead I shared some research in which a group of people was hypnotized to not be able to see the chair in the middle of a hallway. They were asked to walk down the middle of the hall to the end, which they did, except that they veered slightly to walk around the chair (which they could not ‘see’). Even when researchers put painter’s tape on the floor along the middle of the hallway as a guide (even under the chair), subjects still moved slightly to avoid running into the chair, despite still being hypnotized.

These hypnotized people put their attention on where they were headed (in this case, the end of the hall) and went there, effortlessly moving around the obstacle in their way.

In a similar way, it is easier for us to move around the obstacles in our own lives if we have a clear idea about where we want to be headed – who we want to be, where or how we want to live, who we want in our lives, etc. Otherwise, we can get bogged down or preoccupied by the things in our way.

Also, if we know where we want to end up, we can use that in our minds like a lighthouse at a harbor’s entrance to help us make decisions and hold a direction. We won’t just sail along wherever the wind takes us. We can think about which actions keep us pointed more solidly toward the lighthouse and choose that option. It takes some of the anxiety and guesswork out of decision making and keeps us moving where we want to go.

It took a lot of practice for Tracey to start noticing what she *did* want, but once she got used to it, she started excitedly imagining her own lighthouse. As she got clearer about what she wanted for herself, it became easier to make changes in her life in the present. She loved being a health care provider but realized that she was burnt out from being in the same setting for 20 years. She started a training program that would allow her to move to another setting. Tracey was also better able to think about taking care of herself. She started by organizing her family to pitch in at home, so she wasn’t the only one doing all the work. And she got some help from family and members of her aunt’s church so her aunt could continue to live at home without Tracey carrying such a large load. This freed up some time and attention for Tracey to start taking better care of herself.

So, what direction does your lighthouse point you toward?

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