Getting Worse Before It Gets Better
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"We've done this trip together for 15 years. How has this not bothered me before?!"

My client had just returned from her family's annual get-away with some friends, and she found herself more stressed out after her trip than she was before.

How was this possible?

In our work together, my client had started to notice how she accommodates or makes excuses for other people. If people were drinking too much and getting belligerent, leaving messes for others to clean up, or generally not pulling their share of the load, she barely noticed. She just handled things that needed handling, and tried to focus on making things go well. No problem!

But, of course, there was a problem. Two of them, really.

First of all, taking care of everything and everybody is stressful. It is a never-ending, thankless job, and the more people get used to being taken care of, the less they take care of themselves!

Secondly, my client had no time or space in her life for herself. The first time I asked her what she wanted for herself, she looked at me as if I had just spoken to her in a different language. She had no idea what she wanted. She couldn't even think about how she could find out what she wanted.

After some time looking at why and when she started putting herself last, I asked her, "If you didn't owe anybody anything, what would you want?" This seemed to open up some space for her to start imagining taking her wants and needs seriously.

So there she was on vacation, able to consider what she wanted, and noticing how much was not the way she wished it was. I reassured her that this was a sign of progress. The fact that she was able to notice things that annoyed her meant good things – first, that she had some idea of what she wanted, and second that she wasn't automatically fixing or smoothing over things that weren't going well.

Also, I was confident that, the more she practiced noticing what she wanted (and didn't want), the more relaxed she would be. With the ability to let things go, she could set up something else for herself that worked better. In the meantime, the situation might feel worse before it felt better.

What changes would you like to make in the unrealistic expectations others have of you?