

Are You Trapped in The “Tyranny of the Shoulds” (and Missing Out on Your Peace of Mind)?

by
Carole Milan Danis, MSW, LICSW

“We’ve all been there...you’re preparing a meal for your mother’s visit but your thoughts are elsewhere.

You’re focused on the litany of “shoulds” your mother will inevitably chant...

You should chop the vegetables bigger, my grandchildren ought to be drinking milk, you should have closed the oven....

You feel yourself bridle against these judgments and immediately feel guilt and resentment.

The truth is you’re a nervous wreck, even though you’ve outdone yourself with preparations you hope will please your mother. Just this once you pray your mother will keep her opinions to herself.

Instead, the same old ritual gets played out, while you fume. Once again, you’re miserable,”

Can Expectations and Words Hurt?

What you and countless other women are struggling with are relationship expectations, the “shoulds” that strangle us and keep us from getting what we really want or need in our lives.

All relationships have expectations, spoken or unspoken and not all are troublesome, yet some create a sort of tyranny in our lives and are often represented in our language.

Such language as “Shoulds” and related words, “ought to, must, have to”, are what I call the “Language of Bondage” because the use of these words deprives us of our own choices and requires us to follow someone else’s dictates...if we allow it.

Is this Familiar?

One of the most common and frustrating expectations that mothers have is that their daughters do things the “right way”. The “right way” often means “her way” or what she didn’t do herself at another time and thinks she should have.

Often, the “right way” or “doing what you should” is a generational practice passed on from mother to daughter (or father to daughter/son). It’s not that mothers intend being judgmental. They, like most of us, are subjected to the judgmental attitudes of our society, which was founded on the Puritan ethic of “good” and “bad”.

This ethic is so closely woven into our lives that we aren’t even aware we are practicing it until we are stuck in it. In addition, women are especially conditioned to fulfill others’ expectations.



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Change Your Language, Change Your Life

You are not a victim of the “Tyranny of the Shoulds”. The pathway out is Choice. Here are three tips to help you on your journey to freedom:

1. **Clean up your language.** Instead of using the Language of Bondage and giving away your power, choose the language of freedom and choice. Rather than “I can’t”, choose “I choose not to”, “I choose to speak up for myself” rather than “I ought to, should, have to, must”.

Feel the difference when you replace one word with the other.

2. **What are your “shoulds”?** Do you believe that you should be the perfect mother and wife? The best daughter? Becoming more aware of how we limit ourselves by using “shoulds” in our self-talk and in conversation can be empowering.

You will then be able to make a choice as to whether you continue “shoulding” or replace it. You will also become more aware of when others are imposing their judgments on you

3. **Set limits on those who impose ‘shoulds’ on you.** For example, instead of fuming or feeling victimized, let your mother know you appreciate her way that has worked for her but that you are finding your own way now. Don’t be surprised if she respects you more.

Maddy’s story later in this article shows just how setting boundaries can work in a mother-daughter or other relationship.

How Can Changing a Few Words Make Such a Difference?

It’s not unusual for you to be skeptical. Some of my clients felt just like you and found during our work together, that there is amazing power in language.

If you doubt this, consider the power of the spoken words of Martin Luther King or John F. Kennedy. Or, how you felt when someone insulted you with just a few words.

But I’ll Feel Guilty If I Don’t Do What My Mother Wants

This is a common reaction when people, especially women, assert themselves. Women have been socialized to put others’ wants and needs before their own, and often get trapped in the guilt/resentment cycle. Yet, neither emotional reaction is inevitable, if you choose to act on your own behalf and let go of the guilt.

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Maddy’s Story

Here is how Maddy changed her relationship with her mother and claimed victory over her powerlessness by addressing her mother’s unrealistic expectations, using empowering language and limit-setting.

“Maddy, married and the mother of two teens, had always had a contentious relationship with her mother. They just never saw eye to eye. The teenage years were the worst when her mother expected her to be older than her years and “know better” when it came to doing things “the right way”.

Now, she was doing it with her grandchildren, complaining to Maddy that Alicia should be taking piano lessons, even though she preferred the clarinet or that Paul shouldn’t be getting his driver’s license.

Maddy resented this intrusion and had tried talking to her mother about it but the situation always deteriorated into a fight. Then, Maddy was miserable.

After, seeing me for awhile and realizing how she got “hooked”, Maddy vowed to do something differently.

The next time her mother told her what she should do, Maddy was ready. Instead of being defensive and blaming her mother, she focused on her own behavior and carefully chose words that empowered her, yet left her mother’s pride intact.

Maddy told her mother she chose to allow Alicia to choose her own instrument and she and her husband would decide about the driver’s license. She immediately felt stronger but waited for her mother’s reaction.

Surprisingly, Maddy’s mother brightened and told her daughter she never knew that Maddy felt that way. Maddy was shocked.

This led to many more talks, some old patterns resurfacing now and then, but Maddy knew she had the power of choice, language, and effective boundary-setting behind her. Her life and her relationship were never quite the same again.”

Summary

- Expectations expressed as “shoulds” can stifle your relationships, cause unnecessary stress, and keep you from getting what you desire in life.
- You have choices to overcome intrusive expectations of yourself or that others have of you. Becoming self-aware and changing your language to the language of choice and freedom can empower you and change your relationships.

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- Choosing to assert yourself and set boundaries add to your empowerment.
- Self-respect and respect from others can be your just reward.

Never again will you feel victimized and powerless from intrusive expectations imposed by your mother or anyone else. Misery is only one option. You have a choice.

What’s Next?

For one entire day, write down each time you tell yourself “should” (or some version of it). Also, write down each time someone else tells you “should”. If you take the time to begin replacing your disempowering language, you may discover more freedom and a new sense of peace in your relationship with your mother as well as with other people.

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