

Choosing Shoes

Contributed by Joan Eison

Do you remember being nine or ten and having a friend who had the absolute coolest shoes? I remember swapping my plain Mary Jane's for my friend's velvet flats in the girl's bathroom. Do you think that it even occurred to me that my feet would get blisters?

Just as wearing someone else's shoes can make your feet hurt, so can taking on someone else's worries. Has someone ever told you about their sore throat and immediately afterward you began to feel bad? Has a co-worker's dialogue about their dysfunctional family turned your entire day gloomy? Although your responses to these friends are certainly well-intentioned, are you aware of the damage they do to you? They are as potentially painful as dime-sized blisters on your big toes. Try to think of your good intentions in a concrete way. You have a heart-felt desire to be a good friend; but, can you really feel bad enough to make someone else's sinus infection clear up? And, even though your stomach churns on hearing that your neighbor is three months behind in his house payment, will your sadness make a sack of money suddenly appear on his doorstep?

One of the greatest gifts in the world is friendship. Yet, sometimes, friendship should be pulled back in order to serve all concerned. This would be an opportune time to distinguish between empathy and sympathy. The act of being sympathetic includes projecting or accepting someone else's emotional state onto yourself. In other words, you wear it. Empathy, on the other hand, involves recognizing it, but not taking responsibility for it.

Try this experiment. When you go out to lunch, observe other diners and just listen without commenting to people who are talking at length about an unhappy topic. For their entire lunch time they could be pounding on their unhappy subject; but, regardless of the words they use neither of them would be able to change something that had already happened. They could have been talking about poor Agnes whose roof has a hole in it from a fallen tree limb. Though they could not change the fact that Agnes's roof had a hole in it, both people may have begun to feel bad because of their negative collaboration.

You have the greatest impact on how you feel. So, let's say that you woke up feeling great this morning. Arriving at work the first thing your co-worker says to you is, "You won't believe what Reginald has done, now! I have already cried my mascara off three times this morning!"

What would happen if the two of you spent the next hour re-telling events and dragging up similar situations? The damage to you would be equal to having dumped your great-starting-day into the trash can. To collaborate rather than agitate, don't try on her shoes. Try expressing empathy, "I'm sorry that you feel bad. I would like to help you get your mind off of it; so, let's get started on our project that's due next month."

Adjust the heat of your co-worker's anger and turn down the temperature of the moment. Your friend may look a little crest-fallen for an instant; but, if you stick to your new plan everyone concerned will benefit from the positive change. Not only will you reject the idea of taking on her bad mood; but, you will also maintain the positive feelings that launched your day. And, if your co-worker can't handle your redirection, she will move on to someone else who prefers circling the wagons around negativity, rejection and criticism.

So, choose your environment and your companions wisely. They have a huge impact on your sense of self, your well-being and the tone of your day. Huge quantities of information pour over us each day, some of it painful and some of it positive. It is tremendously important to purposefully select and sift through this barrage. Recognize the personal benefits of limiting and filtering out dialogues that are potentially destructive. You can't choose for anyone else; but, you can make your own path clear. Maintain your own glow and move forward in the shoes that fit you best.