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For more than 20 years, Nicole has held executive and leadership positions in the human services arena. She is also a certified mediator and a member of the International Association of Coaches.

Those who coach with Nicole come away with clarity of purpose, well-established goals and a renewed mindset toward their personal and professional priorities.

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A Newsletter of Personal  
& Professional Results  
from Nicole Kirksey  
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## Self-Care: Being Your Own Best Friend

**N**eed someone to work extra days? Ask me. Someone who'll clean up the place because you've scheduled an open house? Sure. I'll even bring the cleaning supplies. Need someone to baby-sit your kids? Stay late? Run an errand? Give up my bed, my book, my best outfit? You bet.

"This was my life," said Sharon. "I thought I had to do anything and everything people asked. Even if they didn't ask, I'd find ways to accommodate them. And if I couldn't, I felt guilty."

Sharon was an "accommodator." Somewhere along the line she learned that her needs weren't important. In fact, she had been accommodating others for so long and doing it so well, she didn't even know what her needs were.

She did know that she was unhappy, that she sometimes felt angry and almost always felt guilty. She realized she allowed people to use her, but she didn't know how to say no.

"To me, self-care had something to do with giving myself breast exams," she said. "If someone mentioned boundaries, I thought they meant property lines."

"Self-care is an attitude toward ourselves and our lives that says, I am responsible for myself," wrote Melody Beattie, in her classic book *Codependent No More*. It doesn't mean you become selfish, cold, and dispassionate. But you first become compassionate with yourself.

To practice self-care you must continually ask the question, "What do I need to do to take care of myself?" To be sure, self-care can take the form of gifts to yourself and pleasurable activities, but it can also mean

work. For example, you may need to change some behavior or take care of some responsibility. And you'll have to start saying "no" when you want to.

Self-care also means asking others for what you need and want, everything from returning an iron that doesn't work to requesting certain sexual pleasures from your partner.

Practicing self-care means you become your own best friend, confidante, personal counselor and spiritual advisor. One thing is true: practicing self-care will always improve any situation you are in.

Following are some self-care qualities:

**Being financially responsible.** Be aware of your financial situation and live within it.

**Taking care of yourself physically.** Eat healthfully and exercise; practice preventive health care. Be in touch with your body.

**Having fun, playing, and laughing.** You'll feel better physically if you include laughter and fun in your life.

**Setting and maintaining boundaries.** This is what you will or won't do. How far you will or won't go and what you will or won't tolerate.

**Maintaining nurturing relationships.** Spend your time with people who are kind, loving, honest and appreciative. Give and accept compliments, hugs, love.

**Affirming and nurturing yourself.**

**Seeking professional help when you need it.**

As Beattie says, "Self-care isn't narcissistic or indulgent. Self-care is the one thing I can do that most helps me and others too." ●

## Top 10 Signs of Strength

*Flash the Morse Code signal SOS and help is sure to come your way. Master these 10 signs of strength (SOS) and the help may be in the form of improved relationships, greater joy and connection with yourself, better self-care and enhanced communication. All in all, quite a life raft!*

**1. Respond instead of react.** When we react, we give away our personal power.

**2. Identify and learn from your judgments.** Judgments are often a reflection of our own inner needs and values.

**3. Reach out when you need it.** Asking for help is *not* a weakness.

**4. Keep your word—especially to yourself.** Beautiful palaces are built on this foundation of integrity.

**5. Speak what is true for you.** Authenticity begins here, now.

**6. Take time for yourself.** This isn't narcissistic or indulgent. Caring for yourself helps you care for others better.

**7. Know what you want.** Take the time to figure out this one. It's worth it.

**8. Don't take things personally.** Even if it sounds personal, it usually isn't.

**9. Honor your limits.** Setting boundaries is an act of caring.

**10. Recognize fear as a guide, not a barrier.** Your dark side is a friend when seen in the right light. ●

# Self-Quiz

## How Well Do You Manage Stress?

Beyond the ongoing, regular stress of everyday life, specific events can pack a wallop. Even happy changes can cause bumps in the road, which we register both physically and emotionally. While we can't eliminate stress from our lives, we can learn where our hot spots are and how to best reduce and manage the stress we do experience. Take this self quiz to see how well you manage stress.

True False

- 1. Throughout the day I live in the moment. I don't brood about a past event or fret about the future.
- 2. Each day I do something physical.
- 3. I eat healthfully and take the time to enjoy my meals.
- 4. I look for the good in any given situation.
- 5. I can say no when I need and want to.
- 6. I leave open time in my day for doing something spontaneous. Or doing nothing.
- 7. When I sense tension in my body, I practice progressive muscle relaxation, beginning with my face and moving down to my feet. I remember to breathe.
- 8. My daily "to-do" list contains only that which can be accomplished in a day.

- 9. I am willing to settle for "good enough."
- 10. Throughout the day, I create peaceful images in my mind where I can retreat for a moment to rest and refill.
- 11. I make changes where I can and accept the things I cannot change.
- 12. When I am able, I plan events that I know will cause stress (moving, giving a party, buying a new car) around times when less is going on (a quiet time at work, no pressing deadlines).
- 13. I use a journal not just to write about stressful events and problems, but to express my thoughts and feelings.
- 14. I plan time off regularly. A weekend away. A long vacation. One day a month, just for me.
- 15. I talk to my friends and family about what's going on with me, and when I need to, I seek guidance and counseling from professionals.

If you answered false to many of these, you may want to ask for help with handling stress. Please don't hesitate to call. ●



Is all your rushing getting you where you really want to be?

## Recommended Reading

*What About The Big Stuff?: Finding Strength And Moving Forward When The Stakes Are High*, by Richard Carlson

*Money, and the Law of Attraction: Learning to Attract Wealth, Health, and Happiness*, by Esther and Jerry Hicks

*Excuses Begone!: How to Change Lifelong, Self-Defeating Thinking Habits*, by Wayne W. Dyer

*Self-Nurture: Learning to Care for Yourself as Effectively as You Care for Everyone Else*, by Alice D. Domar, Ph.D., and Henry Dreher

*Life is But a Dream: Wise Techniques for an Inspirational Journey*, by Marcia Wieder

**"You must do the thing you think you cannot do."**

—Eleanor Roosevelt (1884 - 1962)

# Taking the “War” Out of Our Words with Nondefensive Communication

**Y**ou’re sitting down to dinner with friends, when one looks over and asks, “Do you always butter your bread that way?”

Ha, ha, you laugh. But inside, your story is going like this: Who does he think he is, Mr. Manners? What’s wrong with the way I butter my bread? Jerk. He’s always so critical.

Freeze frame.

If something as minor as buttering bread can provoke such feelings of defensiveness, imagine what can happen with emotional issues at home, boundary issues at work or ethical issues in our larger community.

What happens, says Sharon Ellison, M.S., is essentially war.

Ellison, founder of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication, teaches that the way we communicate with each other uses the same principles and tactics we would use in physical combat, based on the belief that we must protect ourselves by being defensive. As soon as we feel any threat, either of not getting what we want or of being harmed or put down in some way, we choose from among the three basic defensive war maneuvers: surrender, withdrawal or counterattack.

“It’s a sad commentary on our use of human imagination,” Ellison says, “to realize that for centuries we have essentially used a war model as the foundation upon which we have built our entire system for spoken and written communication.”

O.J. Harvey studied this connection between language and violence when he was a psychology professor at the University of Colorado. Using random samples of pieces of literature from countries around the world, he tabulated the frequency of words that classify and judge people—the types of words that often provoke defensive reactions. Not surprisingly, he found a high correlation between the frequent use of such words and the incidence of violence.

The myth, says Ellison, is that defensiveness will protect us, that to be open is to be vulnerable and weak. On the contrary, it is being defensive that weakens us. Consider this: When you are defensive, do you feel safe? Competent? Confident? Do you learn well? Power struggles and unnecessary, destructive conflicts are the more likely outcome.

Ellison, who estimates that we use 95% of our communications energy being defensive, describes the six most common defensive reactions as follows:

**Surrender-Betray.** We give in but defend the person’s mistreatment of us, taking the blame ourselves.

**Surrender-Sabotage.** We cooperate outwardly but undermine the person in some way. Passive-aggressive behavior falls into this category.

**Withdrawal-Escape.** We avoid talking to someone by not answering, leaving the room or changing the subject.

**Withdrawal-Entrap.** We refuse to give information as a way to trap the other person into doing something inappropriate or making a mistake.

**Counterattack-Justify.** We let someone know she is wrong to be upset with us, explaining our own behavior and making excuses.

**Counterattack-Blame.** We attack or judge the other to defend ourselves.

To curb your own defensive reactions, consider some of the following alternatives.

- If you feel criticized, rather than reacting or retreating, take a deep breath, tell yourself that it’s only feedback and just listen. You can correct the record later, if necessary.
- Consider if there is a kernel of truth in the criticism. If there is, acknowledge it and work to improve in that area. Your will-

ingness to acknowledge when you’re wrong inspires others to feel confident in you.

- Realize that sometimes people’s criticisms are all about the “story” they have made up around a situation. Try not to take it personally or as your responsibility.
- When someone uses the words “always” and “never,” ignore those words and focus instead on the rest of the message.
- Listen for the (usually) hidden need expressed in a person’s complaint or anger, acknowledge the need, and then see whether there is something you can do to meet it.

Changing how we communicate as individuals—learning that we can protect ourselves and have greater influence without using a war-based language—will not only shift our own personal and professional lives, but can ultimately lead toward a more peaceful world. ●



## BEYOND the Box

*The following questions are designed to broaden perspectives, to open vistas, to widen the lens. There is no one right way to approach them. You can journal about them, talk to friends, create art, ponder them while driving, talk to your dog, dance them—whatever helps you explore “outside the box.”*

1. Think of one long-unmet need. What could you do today to start moving toward it?
2. How does “accommodating” serve you? How does it not?
3. Which signs of strength are well developed in you? Which would you like to develop?
4. Choose an item in the quiz to which you answered false. What change would you have to make in your life in order to answer true. Are you willing to do that?
5. What would be available to you if you never felt you had to defend your desires, beliefs or actions?
6. What’s available when you come from an open-hearted, curious place?
7. What are you protecting when you respond defensively?
8. When was the last time you *really* had fun?
9. What fears are associated with working so much that you have no time for play?
10. What form of fun could you include in your life this week?

# The *Serious* Importance of Play in Our Lives

If it feels as though you have less leisure time and fewer unstructured “play” hours in your life, you’re not alone. Consider these statistics:

- The average married couple works 26 percent longer each year than similar working couples did thirty years ago.
- Leisure time among children ages 12 and under has declined from 40 percent of a child’s day in 1981 to 25 percent of a child’s day in 1997, and about one in four American adults reports no leisure-time physical activity.
- A landmark Surgeon General’s Report identified lack of physical activity, including during leisure, as a serious health threat in the U.S.

Our high-tech life has fostered a culture that seems to be always working, always rushed, always connected. With cell phones interrupting the theater, laptop computers at the beach, Internet connections at every café, and home offices that beckon us all hours of the night and day, it’s hard to separate “play” from “work.”

Yet to maintain balance in our lives, and for our ultimate well-being, play is important. Lenore Terr, author of *Beyond Love and Work: Why Adults Need to Play*, argues that play is crucial at every stage of life. In play, we discover pleasure, cultivate feelings of accomplishment, and acquire a sense of belonging. “Play is a lost key,” Terr writes. “It unlocks the door to ourselves.”

When we are completely involved in play our cares and worries

disappear. There is nothing like play that allows us to be present in the moment.

If you feel that you don’t have enough play time in your life (and who doesn’t), try these suggestions:

**Turn-off.** Turn off the television, computer and cell phone for at least two hours a day.

**Let your mind wander.** Recall what you used to enjoy doing or what you always wanted to do before we became so technology-oriented.

**Include others.** Invite someone over to play, just like you used to when you were a kid. Nothing planned, nothing structured. Let your play evolve naturally.

**Think physical.** Go for a walk, ride your bike, rent some skates, break out the croquet set from the basement, go for a swim or a run.

**Pretend.** Pretend you don’t have any cares or worries. Pretend you have all the time in the world to laugh and play and enjoy. Pretend there is no moment other than this.

Any time you have the choice of whether to work “just one more hour” or give yourself over to play, consider what Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.” ●



—Warren Beatty (1937 - )

*“You’ve achieved success in your field when you don’t know whether what you’re doing is work or play.”*

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