

DEDICATED TO EXCELLENCE

A Series: Managing the Stress of Modern Living
Bumper Sticker Wisdom

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Years ago during a visit to Monterey and the coast of California I discovered the aromatic community of Gilroy. Passing through in the midst of festival season, I discovered what was already known to countless travelers and passersby – Gilroy is the Garlic Capital of the World.

In that corner of the agricultural universe, every snack, comfort food and dessert you can think of is available in a garlic-enhanced version – including ice cream and trail mix. Residents of surrounding cities and towns merely sniff the air to determine the direction of the wind.

When it comes to the art of garlic, all roads lead to Gilroy.

A few weeks later I was back at work as a mental health counselor and taking a break between client appointments. Driving to a sandwich shop I approached the stop-sign at a four-way intersection, pulling up behind a senior citizen in her 1962 Plymouth Fury. She was waiting her turn at the intersection and I noticed a sticker on the left-rear bumper inviting readers to **Honk If You Love Garlic!**

Amused by memories of the sights and scents of Gilroy, I responded playfully - honking just once (with enthusiasm) and giving the “thumbs up” signal of friendly appreciation. I was expecting a smile in the rear-view mirror or at least a half-hearted wave of agreement in return.

Instead, startled and unaware of my intentions, the little old lady from Pasadena went lickety-split from brakes to accelerator, rocketing into an already occupied intersection. Luckily, the result was nothing worse than a three-car fender bender. I sat hand-over-mouth in stunned silence before jumping out of the car to offer assistance (the voice in my head making it perfectly clear that my inner-honker had almost certainly been too helpful already).

Reflecting on this experience, it struck me that - just like the driver of the Plymouth Fury, and just like me - most of us have, at best, partial or inconsistent awareness about the information, invitations and messages we’re broadcasting to the people around us. The bumper sticker messages we’ve forgotten or overlook are the words we use, how we say things, the tones we use, our attitudes, our body language, the things we take personal responsibility for (or avoid), and the choices we make - our actions, inactions and behaviors.

We frequently assume that others understand where we’re coming from and why we’re doing what we do.

The surprising, sometimes unexpected actions and reactions of others – store clerks, teachers, friends, partners, spouses, kids, co-workers, supervisors, commuters and little old ladies – invite us to become less reliant upon the convenience of cruise-control and pay more attention to what and why and how we’re communicating. With practice we can become purposeful about the signals and messages we’re sending. Accomplishing this simple yet sophisticated change goes a long way toward minimizing the stress and discomfort we create in our own lives. What message is your bumper sticker sending?

With autumn in the air, a predictably busy holiday season around the corner and unforeseen challenges lurking at the next intersection, the EAP Customer Service Team encourages you to remember that change brings with it opportunity for personal growth and renewal. Whatever goals you’re planning to accomplish in the weeks, months and year ahead, success will largely be determined by your responses to circumstances and situations that rise up to meet you. Make sure the messages you’re sending are consistent with your goals,

intentions and desired outcomes.

When it comes to the art of increasing your effectiveness, minimizing misunderstanding and managing the conflicts and demands of modern life, being ready, willing and able to peel away and replace your faded or outdated bumper stickers is a healthy, wisdom-filled strategy, indeed.

Online Work/Life Resources:

Our new self-serve menu of learning tools, information and state-of-the-art resources on topics and stages from infancy to adolescence to adulthood to senior living – and everything that happens in between – is available 24/7 at: www.1stChoiceEap.com - click the Work/Life Resources button:

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This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. If specific health or medical advice or assistance is desired, the services of a licensed healthcare professional should be sought. The information in the First Choice Health EAP Quarterly Newsletter is not meant to replace the advice or expertise of your physician or healthcare provider. If you are experiencing health problems or contemplating lifestyle changes such as diet or exercise, consult your healthcare provider ahead of time to ensure your well being.

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Bringing Balance to Work, Home, and Life

A Primer on Change

Despite its inevitability people are reluctant about change. While change is a face familiar to everyone, each person responds in his or her own way. Change creates hesitation and resistance as well as curiosity and action. If some people have a knack for anticipating change, planning for it and building bridges to desired outcomes, the majority of us seem to prefer to wait and see.

At least initially, change creates waves of stress. Hesitation is an attempt to protect ourselves from the stress of change. Novelty, inexperience and lack of information often create anxiousness or fear. Change, not unlike *grief & loss* (see the EAP Summer 2005 Newsletter), is a process that involves stages (see *The Stages of Change* in this newsletter). Progress is influenced by our investment in making the change (what's in this for me?) and by our ability to embrace what is new (do I have the information and skills needed to do this?).

Whether we're naturally inclined to be passive or active in response to change, we benefit by learning as much as possible about the circumstances, studying our available options and resources, and using supportive, expert guidance when it's available.

You can learn to do change well. Time will tell if you can learn to enjoy it. With opportunities for practicing change always right around the corner, you'll soon be creating forward momentum. Start by being purposeful and taking time to do things differently (see *Bumper Sticker Wisdom* in this newsletter).

For ideas, resources and encouragement along the way, contact your EAP at (800) 777-4114 or by email at info@1stChoiceEap.com.

**“A cloudy day is no match
for a sunny disposition.”**
-William Arthur Ward

1-800-777-4114

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The Stages of Change

Change is a natural process that's usually gradual but often the result of crisis. Change means that a way of doing things no longer fits. Large or small, changes create consequences in our lives. Policies and procedures, styles and tastes, roles and relationships, attitudes and behaviors – everything changes. From life experience, most people recognize the stages of change based on the descriptions below.

Pre-Contemplation: This is status quo. Nothing in particular is on my radar screen. Even if I'm aware of a problem I have no plans to change. Others may recognize a conflict, opportunity or need

for change but I'm on cruise control. I'm unaware, unconcerned or in denial.

Contemplation: Through input from others or difficulties I've encountered, I'm aware of the problem, conflict, opportunity or need for change. It's come to my attention and I'm thinking about it. I may be uncomfortable but for now I'm uncommitted to change. Aware of the situation or effects of my behavior, I may or may not decide to do anything about it.

Preparation: Weighing the pros and cons, I recognize that change is necessary. I may not yet have a firm grasp on what

to change, how to change or when I will begin to change. Putting in the least possible effort may still be more important to me than mobilizing my resources and doing change purposefully.

Action: I see benefits and value in making change. I am taking forward steps. I am increasingly self-motivated on the path. I am taking ownership. Consistent with the notion of responsibility, I am using my ability to respond. I am willing. Change is beginning to feel comfortable.

Maintenance: I have crossed a bridge from the old to the new. What's new feels increasingly natural and efficient. Other

Responding to Change

Remember that change is a normal, healthy part of living: While discomforting and inconveniencing at times, change is one of the spices of life. Change is what keeps us growing personally and professionally.

Try to anticipate change: Practicing flexibility in response to change can lessen stress when the need for change arises. Having a flexible plan for an ever-changing world is practical, realistic and good self-care.

Participating in change lightens your load: Moving forward by exercising your options (rather than getting stuck in the mud by “digging in your heels”) may be a better use of your time and energy. If you decide the changes you've made really don't work for you, you can always change direction.

Use your support system and talk about it: Change invites you to involve the people and support systems in your life. Depending on the changes you're facing, talk to friends, family members, co-workers and supervisors. Be curious about what others have learned (from experience) about change. You'll discover that you're not alone.

Remember your EAP: For ideas, perspective, encouragement, resources and confidential consultation about change in any area of life – *at work, at home, at school, at rest or at play* - contact First Choice Health EAP. You can reach us 24/7 at (800) 777-4114 or online at www.1stChoiceEap.com.

people notice my changes and this helps to reinforce my decisions and efforts. I continue to refine and enhance my efforts, behaviors and attitudes.

Setbacks: Regressing to habits we're outgrowing or letting go of is common. In times of stress human beings tend to return to what is familiar and comfortable. Setbacks can happen anywhere along the path of change and invite us to realize that change is fundamentally a matter of choice, being consistent, access to resources, and recognizing the advantages of new behavior in our work, personal and family lives.

An Exercise in Change

Modifying our assumptions is an excellent way to practice change. According to Susan Lucia Annunzio in *Contagious Success* (2004), the labels we use are roadblocks or building blocks to effectiveness. Our stress level rises and our effectiveness falls when we rely on negative labels.

Consider the following examples of “reframing” and practice increasing your effectiveness by shifting to a positive focus when dealing with others (or instead of judging yourself too harshly).

Negative Label	Positive Label
Impatient	Solution Focused
Unprepared	Spontaneous
Demanding	Has Clear Vision
Overly Sensitive	Very Perceptive
Doubtful	Curious
Indecisive	Open Minded
Stubborn	Determined

Index of Articles on Stress and Self-Care

The EAP is pleased to remind you that all articles in the *Managing the Stress of Modern Living* series can be accessed in the *Newsletter* section of the EAP Internet site at www.1stChoiceEap.com.

The corrosive effects of stress often result from the way we think about what is happening to us and around us, rather than from the events themselves. Visualize an equipment belt on your waist and think of the information and strategies offered by the EAP as tools to use for building interpersonal, professional and parental effectiveness.

As a convenience, we offer this reference guide to finding specific articles in the series. Each article is listed along with the newsletter edition in which it appears:

- Bumper Sticker Wisdom** (Fall 2005)
- Responding to Grief & Loss** (Summer 2005)
- Stress in a Technology-Filled World** (Spring 2004)
- The Gifts That Keep on Giving** (Winter 2004)
- Communicating Effectively** (Fall 2004)
- The Mozart Effect: Music to Your Ears** (Summer 2004)
- The Building Blocks of Happiness** (Summer 2004)
- Effective Tools for Helping** (Spring 2004)
- Year Round Stress Reduction Strategies** (Winter 2003)
- The Healthy Advantages of Reaching Goals** (Fall 2003)
- Dealing With Difficult People** (Summer 2003)
- A Multitasking Survival Guide** (Spring 2003)
- Reducing Debt Stress** (Winter 2002)

Contact us at (800) 777-4114 or by email at info@1stChoiceEap.com for more information on any topic or for personalized copies of articles in the Newsletter archive.