"Making positive change within ourselves, our relationships, and within the community"

WORKING ON OURSELVES TOGETHER

By *Earl "Sook" Holdridge*

Learn how to start and sustain a personal growth support group that is safe and effective.

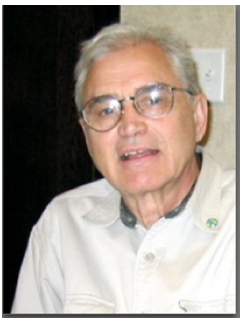
In Memory of

Earnie Larsen

our hometown hero, whose love and compassion brought people together to support one another in their physical, mental, and spiritual growth.

Earnie, author, speaker and counselor, is best known for his work in Stage 2 Recovery. His many books, dynamite talks, and one-on-one counseling have helped thousands across this country.

PREFACE



Earl “Sook” Holdridge

My gratitude goes out to my good friend Earnie Larsen, who in 1981 called a few of us together to work on positive change within ourselves and our relationships. And, to this day, I can testify that Earnie is still very much alive in everything we do here.

I’m also grateful for the hundreds of men showing up week after week to courageously share and interact around this work.

In the beginning, we were six men meeting in a quiet area of a restaurant. A year later, after we designed this self-organizing approach, we began to grow quickly—to over a hundred. Pressed for space, a few of us started a second group across town. Women have also formed a similar support group.

I wrote this booklet for three reasons; 1) to introduce our group to you, 2) as a help for any man, whether in a support group or not, and 3) for anyone wanting to start a new group (page 26).

It begins with some personal considerations about personal change and showing up at our men’s support group (page 3).

Then I go into detail about what we do, how we do it, and what we’re learning (page 7).

To give you an idea about the things we talk about, I’ve included a few random excerpts by men talking about some aspect of their personal growth (page 21).

Finally, I’m including some tips for creating your own personal program for making positive change (page 27).

Note that all names are omitted to preserve privacy. And most photos are of anonymous men downloaded from the internet.

You have my permission to download and print (but not sell) this booklet at **southsidemensgroup.org**. It’s easy to do. Or, you can just read it right there on line. Personally, I like to keep a hard copy handy, so I can quickly access it anytime.

Table of Contents

page

In Memory of Earnie Larsen
Preface
Introduction 1

CONSIDERATIONS

Q & A on Who We Are 3
Risking Change 4
Potential Benefits 5
The Bigger Picture 6

WHAT WE DO

Working On Ourselves 8
Our Shared Purpose 9
Our Shared Principles 10
Convener and Speaker 11
The Convener's Guide 12
Small Groups Format 14
Small Groups Sharing 15
Feedback Rule 16
Reality Checking 17
Obstacles To Change 18
Processing A Challenge 20

SAMPLING MEN SHARING

1. Self-Assertion 22
2. Self-Confidence 22
3. The Driver of My Bus 23
4. Power of Imagination 23
5 Intimacy Issue 24
6 Time To Heal 24
7 Feelings 25
8 Letting Go 25

A Personal Change Program 26
Starting A Group 27
Serenity Prayer 28

© Earl "Sook" Holdridge

first printing.....1988
second printing.....2014

All rights reserved

Published by
Topic, Inc.
4132 W. 62nd St.
Edina, MN 55424

INTRODUCTION

The need for the mutual support of our physical, mental and spiritual health has never been more keen. We live in a culture that is repressive of being who we really are.

For example, a top executive at Revlon once said, *"My job is to make women not happy with how they look."* Image is everything.

For men, the culture values individualism; being strong, tough, unfeeling, sexual, always positive and being *"right."* The promised payoffs are *"success"* - *"happiness"* - *"power"* - *"wealth", and yes, "maleness."*

These cultural traits are so pervasive they're called *"normal"* – "*the American way,"* and very few question them.

Pressure? It's extreme. To fit in, men generally unconsciously repress who they are. From early on the door is closed on their deepest aspirations, honest feelings and vulnerabilities. Anything seen as "bad", not acceptable or a sign of weakness is avoided. And, some men just fold under the pressure.

End of story? Absolutely not. Many men are aware of their dilemma and want to change, and some **have** changed.

Making change alone is always possible, but many are learning that working together with others in the midst of change is more effective. Men from all walks of life show up at our group, and their issues cover the waterfront. No personal experience shared honestly has ever surprised us.

Our purpose together is to make positive change within ourselves and our relationships—to rediscover and live who we really are. And, we value this protected space and time as sacred. Consistency is very important to us.

So, we are inviting you to show up at any weekly meeting to see what we're about. And, if you're comfortable with what you see, we welcome you to keep coming back for more.

At the bottom of a page you may find a question to stimulate **your** thinking. like---->

Question: What change in **your** life would you like to see happen?

CONSIDERATIONS

Q & A ON OUR GROUP.....3
RISKING CHANGE.....4
THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS 5
THE BIGGER PICTURE.....6

Q & A ON OUR GROUP

"ME?—going to a men's support group?" The mind hesitates. Change isn't something the mind treasures. There are questions.

Q: Who are these men? They're strangers to me, and how can strangers possibly care about my personal issues?

A: We may seem like strangers at first, but it doesn't take long to discover we are all more alike than we are different. Our stories are different, but our basic issues all spring from the same inner drives, needs and deep aspirations that somehow get sabotaged, repressed and in many cases, aborted completely.

Q: What kinds of problems do you guys talk about?

A: We talk honestly about our experiences mainly; what's going on inside that's related to our failing relationships, our dysfunctional behaviors, erroneous thinking, self-destructive goals, unrealistic expectations, misinterpretations, hidden anger, our "*crazy rules"* for living, and a zillion other mind synapses leading to frustration, disappointment, and unmet needs.

We talk about our personal breakthroughs, positive changes, and new "rules" for living we've created and are putting into practice.

Q: What are your goals?

A: Our goals are the same— physical, mental and spiritual health. We all strive to connect with who we really are at the deepest level in order to live happier, more productive lives.

Q: Is this a religious quest?

A: We don't ask for or judge anyone's religious position. Yet, there is a spiritual dimension, in that we all seek a deeper meaning and connection with ourselves and others.

We encourage you to seek out any support group to see what it's about. If you can't find one that's comfortable for you, think about joining us or starting one like ours (page 27).

Question: What fears do **you** have about going to a support group?

RISKING CHANGE

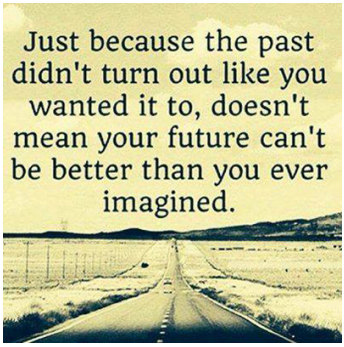
Change within ourselves is a risk. And the mind never seems to want to go there. The mind tends to resist giving up its deeply ingrained patterns of thinking. It prefers the known over the unknown.

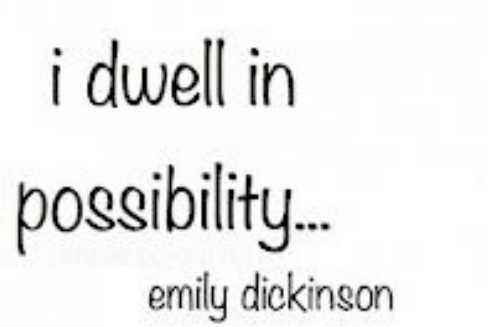
To the mind, no matter how bad or painful the way things are, the status quo is easier and less threatening than risking change.

But think again about risk. Helen Keller had this to say about it:

"Life is a risk. Always crisis is a part of life. Living 'safely' is no less risk than outright danger. Life is either a daring adventure, or it's nothing. There is so little time and so much of it is spent looking for security—when in fact, security is only an illusion—mostly superstition."

Isn't risk-taking an inherent part of growing? Accepting risk opens the door to **possibility**. Doing nothing closes that door.





Staying open to possibility can be the difference between stagnation and growing, dissatisfaction and fulfillment, and even life and death.

Even if you think life is good, possibility thinking can make it even better.

Is it ***possible*** a support group could help **you** make a positive difference in your life?

Question: What fears are holding **you** back from risking change in your life?

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Surprisingly, what usually happens to men visiting our group for the first time is just the opposite of what is feared. They quickly learn no one is pressuring them to do anything. No one is judging them, and no one is out to "fix" them.

The atmosphere is welcoming and friendly for everyone present, including visitors. It's easy to tell every man is totally accepted just as he is, and that's a good feeling.

Regarding benefits, personal growth is every man's responsibility—no one else's. And, when one benefits, it's because he is and has been working on himself.

What are some of the benefits you can expect?

- Sharing honestly is a way to self-knowledge.
- Self-disclosure in a supportive atmosphere is cathartic and confirms acceptance.
- Interacting honestly with another increases the capacity for intimacy, empathy and authenticity.
- Getting healthier leads to better choices, and for more effective problem solving.
- By working on yourself, you get better at sorting out what **is** and what's **not** important.
- What keeps us all coming back is just being with people pursuing the same thing—positive change. Ask us and you'll hear, *"Here I can just be myself."* - *"I don't have to keep up my facade."* - *"I see a little more of me in every person sharing honestly."*

Question: What benefits would **you** hope to get from a support group?

THE BIGGER PICTURE

"Saving society" isn't one of our stated purposes—yet, our experience has been, as we get healthier we contribute more to others and to society at large.

This is the way social psychologist, Anne Wilson Schaef said it way back in 1958 in her book, When Society Becomes An Addict.

"Society isn't bad. It's sick and trying to get well; and, as individuals get well, society gets better."

She goes on to say, *"The system reflects the individual and the individual reflects the system. Both have all the symptoms of addiction; including a reliance on denial, a need to control everyone and everything, and the tendency to lie frequently and habitually."* Her plea is, *"If we love this society, we must be willing to confront the reality that it has a disease."*

Trapped in our tradition of rugged individualism, we are an extraordinarily lonely people. So lonely, many cannot even acknowledge it to themselves, much less to others.

So, the work we do in our mens group is one important antidote for society's sickness.

Whether aware of it or not, positive change within ourselves ***ripples*** out and contributes to others and the world. That's the bigger picture. That's the automatic, built-in greater good of what we do.

Question: How do you see yourself in relation to societal trends?

WHAT WE DO

OUR OPEN SPACE PROCESS

WORKING ON OURSELVES..... 8
A SHARED PURPOSE 9
SHARED PRINCIPLES 10
CONVENER / SPEAKER.....11
THE CONVENER'S GUIDE.....12
SMALL GROUP WORK 14
POSITIVE FEEDBACK.....16
REALITY CHECKING.....17
OBSTACLES TO CHANGE.....18
PROCESSING A CHALLENGE.....20

WORKING ON OURSELVES

"Working on ourselves together" sounds like an oxymoron. How can we possibly do that when our individual issues differ so much?

As I said earlier, our separate challenges are all connected to the same deeper underlying issues. And there we discover our common humanity. We are more the same than we are different.

We all have the same inherent drive to survive and thrive—the same deep aspirations that we yearn to fulfill. At the very deepest level, our true natures are the same regardless of our complex individual idiosyncrasies. That goes right to the core of the compassion we have toward one another.

Question: How do you see working on yourself with others?

As a community working on ourselves, we:

1. acknowledge and accept where we are right now.
2. really experience our experiences to work through them.
3. have compassion for ourselves and others.
4. keep a sense of humor, because we all have dysfunctions.
5. stay committed and determined to grow healthier.
6. stay assertive—not afraid to ask for what we want.
7. stay honest to prevent self-deception from kicking in.
8. let go of many things that are not important.
9. trust that we have everything we need to be happy.
10. create new rules [of behavior] we want to live by.

The first thing we do when we get together is to remind ourselves of our purpose—why we're here (page 9).

OUR SHARED PURPOSE

We begin each meeting by reading aloud this shared purpose. It reminds us why we're here, and frames what we're about to do. To revise our purpose everyone must have the opportunity to participate in it. We've done that only once in our 33 year history.

> ***"Our purpose here is personal growth, defined as positive change within ourselves, within our relationships and within the community.***

Purpose instructs the mind, heart and soul **what** to pursue. It focuses the mind, shuts out distractions, and creates intention, commitment and determination.

Without a clear purpose, conversations tend to deteriorate and branch into all kinds of topics unrelated to personal growth. And, when we do that, it's every man's responsibility to remind the group to stay on task.

SHARED PRINCIPLES

We also read aloud some key principles of behaviors we agree to practice in the pursuit of purpose. Purpose and principles are the ground for everything else that follows.

> ***"We value sharing our feelings openly and honestly with one another; listening without judging or giving unsolicited advice, supporting those who risk change, and celebrating with those who do change."***

> ***"We agree to express our feelings, ideas, differences and concerns in a constructive and respectful way."***

Other unspoken principles include:

Good Will: We all have good will toward one another. If good will is missing, even between two people, the whole group suffers.

Acceptance: Unconditional acceptance is non-judgmental, avoids comparisons, and supports and nurtures where it can.

Encouragement: We encourage one another to go for real and meaningful change.

Appreciation: Who doesn't like to feel appreciated? That's why giving and receiving appreciation is the rule, not the exception.

The Facilitator's Guide

Start the meeting on time. (8:30)

A GOOD MORNING! THIS IS THE SOUTHSIDE MENS GROUP.

(Welcome everyone in your own way.)

B MY NAME IS _____ I'M THE FACILITATOR TODAY,

and my job is to keep us on task.

C OUR PURPOSE HERE IS PERSONAL GROWTH

defined as positive change within ourselves, within our relationships and within the community.

- *We value sharing our feelings openly and honestly with one another, listening without judging or giving unsolicited advice, supporting those who risk change, and celebrating with those who do change."*
- *To keep this an enriching and safe experience, members are expected to express their feelings, ideas, differences and concerns in a constructive and respectful way; and to keep everything shared here confined to this room.*

D WHAT WE DO HERE

We begin with a volunteer speaker who shares some aspect of his personal growth. We then divide into small groups where each person is encouraged to go deeper into the growth work he needs to do. At about 10:00 o'clock, each group closes with something agreed upon, like "The Serenity Prayer."

E THE VOLUNTEER SPEAKER CALENDAR

(Look at the sign-up calendar listing future speakers. Announce the date of the next open Saturday and pass the calendar around for signing up.)

F DO WE HAVE ANY NEW PEOPLE?

Would you tell us your name and how you learned about our group... If you haven't been here for awhile, tell us what's happened since you were last here.

G ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Are there any reports, personal "breakthroughs", birthdays, tragedies or upcoming events you want to share?

H REGARDING OUR EXPENSES. . . .

"We all share in the cost for using this room which is $5, and that includes the coffee and goodies. If this is your first time here put nothing in the basket.

I 8:45 (Approx.) TIME FOR THE SPEAKER

Normally the speaker finishes about 9:00 o'clock followed by a few comments and questions from the group. At the end, the speaker has the option of posing a question for any small group to discuss. So here's (speaker's name) .

J 9:10 (Approx.) TIME FOR SMALL GROUPS

Many men have said the small group work is the most valuable part of their mornings here. A couple of reminders before we count off. . .

<u>First</u>, each man is responsible for holding the group to its task and making sure each person is given time to speak.

<u>Second,</u> After we count off we'd like you to join your group quickly so we don't waste valuable time. Are there any passes today?

(Based on the number of men present less the passes, decide how many groups we'll have. Start with the speaker as # 1)

CONVENER AND SPEAKER

In the early days, the volunteer speaker also opened the meeting. Now, a volunteer convener opens it by reading the "Facilitator's Guide" (see next page).

The speaker, who had volunteered weeks before, probably benefits more than anyone. [That's what they often say.]

This is how it works. The speaker talks about 10 -15 minutes on something meaningful to his personal growth. At the end he usually poses a question for others to think about.

When he finishes, the speaker can also take questions and comments from the group **if** he chooses.

Having a speaker is important, because the speaker is:

1. demonstrating the tone for why we're here.
2. establishing an atmosphere for honest sharing.
3. reinforcing that every issue is part of being human.
4. making it okay for us to share what's important to us.
5. giving grist-for-the-mill for small group discussion.

If you happen to be the volunteer speaker, you may be surprised how freely you can share things that, until now, were very private or stuffed away in your subconscious.

I often hear men saying, *"I love this group. I can share anything and it doesn't shock anyone."*

Or, *"I don't know what took me so long to sign up as the speaker. Just preparing for it was a great exercise."*

SMALL GROUPS FORMAT

It's easier to share in a small group, and more people can share

After the speaker is done, we count off to create small groups of 4-6 men. Usually we have about an hour for small group sharing.

Our small groups are informal. We have no assigned discussion leader and no prescribed format. If you sense the group is moving off course, speak out, *"I think we've strayed from talking about personal growth. Can we get back on task?"* This keeps the space open for each person to go deeper into the growth work he needs to do [if he chooses]. Time is too valuable to waste.

Any format is okay. Here are some suggestions:

a) Begin with enough silence to allow someone with a strong need to ask for time to share. That request should take precedence over other formats.

b) If no one has a pressing issue, ask for each man to rank his week 1 to 10 with 10 being a good week and 1 being a lousy one. The lowest number begins.

c) Or, sometimes a small group will begin by clarifying the speaker's question, so those who want to can share their personal experiences relating to it.

FEEDBACK RULE

We refrain from giving feedback unless we're invited to do so. And if we're invited, we need to know what kind of feedback? Is it our opinion, advice or observation wanted?

"Observation" feedback is called **"spotting**"—a method used regularly in the "Recovery, Inc." approach to healing.

Spotting acts like a mirror. And the mirror is the group giving its perception of what they hear you saying, feeling and being.

Spotting requires paying close attention to the speaker's words, body language and tone. Some examples are:

- **…Spotting feelings:** "When you flinch like that, I see you are in some kind of pain. Are you feeling sad about something?"
- **…Spotting attachments:** "You said you were over your [breakup, addiction, anger, etc.]. Yet, when you keep talking about it with so much emotion, what I'm hearing is you're **not** over it. Do you find it difficult letting it go?"
- **…Spotting avoidance:** "I hear you avoiding the issue. Are you feeling guilty or insecure about it?"
- **…Spotting incongruence:** "You said you had forgiven her. Yet, your tone is still one of blame and anger."

Even when a person has **not** asked for feedback, if you feel strongly you have something to say that might help the speaker, go ahead and ask if he would like your feedback. If you're told "no", **don't** give it.

Spotting helps you see your obstacles to change. **You can check out twelve of them on page 18-19.**

Question: What kind of feedback would **you** like to get from the group, if any?

SMALL GROUPS SHARING
Sharing, Listening and Interacting

Effective sharing is...

- disclosing feelings, thoughts, and intuitions
- being honest
- facing what's really so
- avoiding "*story-telling*" (see below)

The person sharing can...

- ask for feedback or advice,
- share just to be heard and understood,
- share to release old secrets never shared.

Avoid what we call ***"story-telling"***—a litany of facts unrelated to personal growth. What's important is getting past our stories and into positive change.

Effective listening is...

- giving your undivided attention
- getting into the shoes of the speaker
- not judging what's said
- checking what you're hearing. "I heard you say..."
- being present with the speaker
- observing words, body language, and tone

Avoid "listening" just to find an opening to say what **you** want to say.

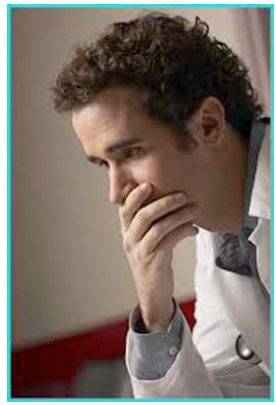
Avoid interrupting, giving unsolicited advice, your opinions, or your interpretations.

At 10 o'clock each small group ends with something agreed upon, like the Serenity Prayer (last page).

REALITY CHECKING

We can check our **perception** of reality with the truth. For example, ask yourself...is my motivation to change genuine?

Pay attention to your body sensations that signal some reality about you. For example, check how you are driving a car. Are you defiant, aggressive, angry, or are you calm and relaxed—going with the flow? And what is that revealing about you?



Check the thinking behind specific behaviors. Are you following some rules of behavior learned or created out of your early childhood experiences?

Examine the gap between expectations and roles; between what is and what you think is so; between your perceptions and the truth; between the rules you learned that still "drive your bus," and the power you have to create your life.

For example, I expected and needed approval from my father, but the reality was, he was incapable of giving it. So, my experience of that was disappointment, failure and suffering. It wasn't until he was on his deathbed that he was able to express his love for me. By then I was 40 when we reconciled. Very sad.

I had a fantasy that I was in a happy marriage, but I was living in total denial for ten long years. Being in a marriage without love has no chance of succeeding. After our divorce, it took nine more years to recover before I was even capable of re-marrying

One helpful exercise is to check the twelve obstacles to change on pages 18-19. Can you see yourself in any of those obstacles?

Questions: In what area of your life is a reality check needed?

OBSTACLES TO CHANGE

Some obstacles to change are subtle and unconscious. Perhaps most of them are outside our awareness. The mind has its own way of perpetuating its thoughts and here are some of them.

1. **Substitution:** Many times what appears to be change is only a new form of the same old thing. One habit gets substituted for another. The obstacle is the illusion of change. The mind gets to postpone any real change.
2. **Power Obsession:** This is illusory power. It's an addictive striving to inflate the ego. Position, status, possessions, control, money, etc. all build up the ego's cultural image. Beneath it lies a deep sense of insecurity (which TV commercials play on heavily). Personal growth suffers.
3. **Positive Thinking:** Granted, positive thought can be a constructive force. But, it can also be used as a cover-up as well. Hiding the pain behind a perpetual smile, or ruling out thoughts that aren't positive is a kind of self-delusion diminishing the chances for real growth.
4. **Affirmations:** Affirmations also can support the growth process. But, they can also backfire. Affirming something the mind doesn't really believe can end up strengthening the mind's position. And guess who usually wins out. The mind will figure out a way to sabotage affirmations every time—unless, what you affirm is really true. Affirming what you **know** is true at a deeper level will prevent that from happening.
5. **Acting As If:** The "fake it til you make it" mind game works the same way. So be wary. The "act" often inhibits open, honest encounters and blocks self-knowledge. Also, coming down from fakery can throw one into a severe depression.
6. **Perfectionism:** Having to be the best, always right and sure throws the growth process in the freezer. We freeze because we fear to go ahead lest we might not be perfect.

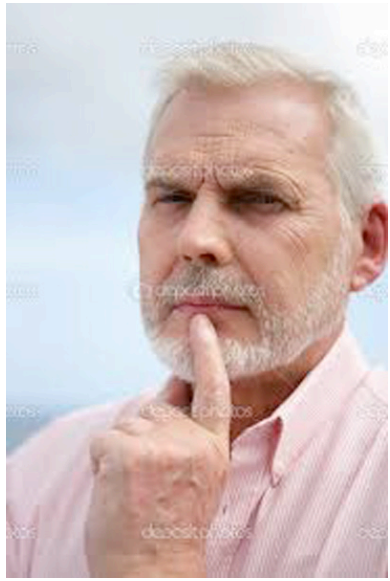
PROCESSING A CHALLENGE

Working through a challenge is called ***"processing"***. The aim is not to deny it, but to move **through** it, however long it takes.

Here is an example of processing a challenge called the ***"Holiday Blues"***. You're probably familiar with it.

Step 1: **Name it.** Is it depression? Is it the extreme pressure? Is it fear of falling short of expectations? Identifying it accurately is a big step in dealing with it.

Step 2: **Own it**. Take responsibility for it. No matter what anyone else has done or not done, this is yours to deal with. Blaming others for it will only lock it in tighter. By owning it you acknowledge the power to solve it.



Step 3: **Experience it**. Take each element and experience it fully. Notice which experience produces the strongest emotion. That may point to a source of the problem.

Step 4: **Accept it.** You can never change what's already happened. So, accepting it will release it, and thereby diminish its power over you.

Step 5: **Create something new**: When you accept it, you gain the power and ability to change—to be and plan something different. You can plan for and have a different kind of holiday in the future.

Of course, to process a problem or challenge, we all know we have to be honest about it from beginning to end.

Question: What challenge are you facing that needs processing?

7. **Resistance:** Muscles grow stronger by working against resistance. In the same way, what we resist, persists even stronger. Resistance takes a lot of energy and occupies the mind so completely that we lose the freedom to think and choose other options.

8. **Denial:** The mind loves this trick. Denial protects the mind against unpleasant thoughts, painful experiences, and the truth. Deny the truth and it will pop up again and again anyway. The truth never goes away. By accepting the truth, we can do something about it.

9. **Making Comparisons**: Comparisons can exaggerate our own shortcomings. We wish we were different, better, stronger and more capable. And when we aren't we can get down on ourselves. Or to compensate we'll get into a one-upmanship game against others. Growth stops.

10. **Analyzing:** We often think we are rational human beings, but the mind has a logic of its own. When we try to "reason" our way to change, it may sound good, but if the mind has other ideas, we might be better off resorting to our intuition.

11. **The "Should" Syndrome:** We say we should do something and when we don't we whip and punish ourselves. The emotional consequence is guilt. The cycle repeats itself.

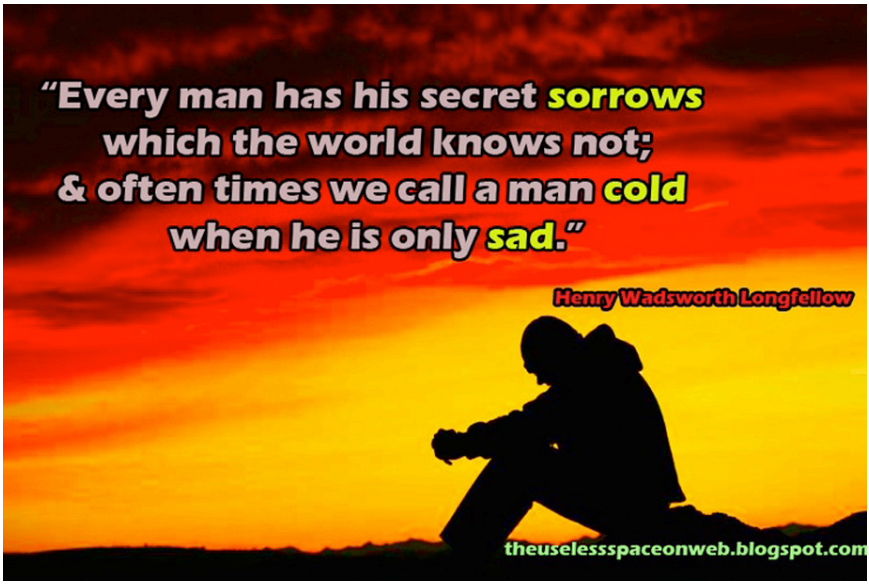
12. **Intellectualizing:** Words and ideas are very powerful. But if we rely on them exclusively for our personal growth, we will be sadly disappointed. Sometimes we just have to get out of our heads to make progress.

A SAMPLING OF MEN'S TALKS

Since 1981, there have been over 1,700 talks given by the men in our support group. These eight excerpts give you a glimpse into just a few of the topics we talk about.

Excerpts from men's talks

SELF-ASSERTION 22
SELF-CONFIDENCE.....22
WHO DRIVES OUR BUS?.....23
POWER OF IMAGINATION 23
INTIMACY 24
TIME AND HEALING.....24
FEELINGS.....25
LETTING GO.....25



A Sampling of Speaker Inputs

Here are eight summaries from over 1,700 talks offered by men sharing their personal growth issues.

1. SELF-ASSERTION (summary)

I am a worry wart. I'm always into something, looking for answers. Now I'm into the Serenity Prayer.

I've had many what I've called "failed relationships." Two weeks ago, I was facing another split-up, when my girl friend asked for a full commitment from me. I shook inside, got in touch with myself, and said "no". The relationship ended.

It was one of those times I followed my gut level and made a decision like that under pressure. It was painful.

This week at the men's group, I processed my feelings, and was supported in being okay about saying "no" to a relationship. I felt relief and better about myself.

Question: Has following your heart (gut feelings) ever let you down?

2. SELF CONFIDENCE (summary)

I want to talk to you about self-confidence. Several years ago I was fired from my executive position on an important government council. I had been doing well; won national acclaim, and after a painful divorce, doubted myself.

One of the things that has helped me greatly is being here with you men each Saturday, sharing where I am and openly asking about what I'm feeling. I appreciate not being judged or criticized, although I admit that I'm still a little afraid.

We executives especially feel we "must" be strong-willed, unfeeling, confident and impervious to human frailties. But this men's group has helped me in my progress. My self-image is rising. My confidence is coming back. And for that I thank you very much.

Question: Who are you if you're **not** your work?

3. "WHO'S DRIVING YOUR BUS?" (summary)

One of Ernie Larsen's favorite questions was, *"who's driving your bus?"* It was his way of leading us to find the answer to who/what is running our lives. And, the answer invariably was all the crazy ideas and "rules" we created in our distant past. Many of them can be traced to our "family of origin" (our parental upbringing).

I traced my tendency to procrastinate to a rule I created as a child. When I finished a job my dad asked me to do, he always had another job waiting. So my operative rule was, put off finishing the current job, so the next job will also be put off." Pretty smart, except—it doesn't serve me very well today. My wife agrees.

I traced my avoidance of conflict to the rule I created observing my parents when they got into conflict. It wasn't pretty. So, the rule applying to my first marriage was, "avoid all conflict by pretending to be happy." That rule didn't work well either, so I dropped it.

Question: What behavioral "rules" did **you** create or learn growing up?

4. THE POWER OF IMAGINATION (summary)

Einstein said, ***"Imagination is more powerful than knowledge."*** To imagine the unimaginable, the rational mind has to give way to its intuitive side. Ask the right question, quiet the rational chatter, and let the imagination soar into the creative sphere for answers.

My question was, what's the source of my self-worth? I already knew the rational mind would draw a blank.

I lived in that question for a long time and then one day—shazam! When I least expected it, out of nowhere, a light breeze slapped against my check and right there was the answer. The breeze was "Love"—Love telling me I was accepted and loved unconditionally; that I didn't have to prove my self worth to anyone. It was my nature to be worthy, just by being who I really am.

Question: How much credence do you give to your imagination?

5. INTIMACY (summary)

Intimacy in my life has been a real problem. I've noticed when someone gets too close, I get tired, stressed out or too busy. I'm afraid to take chances—risk. I'm afraid what might happen if I'm not being nice, "a perfect gentleman".

But I have made progress. I understand better what's going on since I've been coming here (to this support group).

I used to think intimacy had to do with the physical; being intimate sexually, touching and hugging. I did not consider the emotional aspects of intimacy; being aware of having a relationship with myself, feeling, being open and honest.

I learned "niceness" is dishonest. I also learned I couldn't be intimate when I was always trying to control. And that control was related to self esteem. I have to trust myself.

Question: What is intimacy for you, and do you have enough?

6. TIME (summary)

Once when I was going through a difficult time, to comfort me someone said, *"It's tough, I know. But give it time. Time heals all."*

I didn't say anything, but the truth is, time does **not** necessarily heal, and personal growth is **not** automatic given more time. Like Earnie Larsen often said, *"If nothing changes, nothing changes."*

In my case, *"Time"* didn't heal because I did **not want** to be healed. And nothing anyone said could make a difference.

For time to begin its healing work, I had to over-ride the mind "driving my bus". I had to get in touch with **why** I wasn't interested in healing. And this was my thinking. If I let go of blaming [my ex-wife] she would be "off the hook". I also realized hanging on to it was only hurting me—no one else. After taking those steps, a conversion experience just happened. Blame and anger began rolling off my arms and back. And, to my surprise, Love was flowing through me replacing all that hate I had inside. I became a different person. My life was changed forever.

Question: How is ***"time"*** working or **not** working for you?

7. **FEELINGS** (summary)

Very often the sole criteria of what we do or don't do is feelings. That is, we give feelings the top priority (power) of dictating the quality of our lives.

Especially the feelings of guilt and fear.

Fact is we "send our feelings to school." We teach ourselves what makes us feel "good" or "bad."

Feelings are always tied to behavior. Therefore, if we want to change how we feel we must change how we act—and keep at it.

Question: How much do you let feelings dictate your behavior?

8. **LETTING GO** (summary)

A year ago, I gave a talk on "The Greatest Love of All."

Putting that into practice, I found how important it is that I love myself. For one thing, I'm much better at accepting myself as I am. And my relationships with my family have improved. "Let go and let God," has helped me a lot.

When I let go, I am better at forgiving. [Or **is** "letting go" also forgiveness?]

When I let go I find more important things showing up in my life; things like, love, peace, safety and new adventures. Also, I think I am making a greater difference to those around me.

Strangely, over the last 10 years absolutely nothing has worked out the way I wanted it to. But since I started following my gut instead of my head, everything has worked out better than I could have imagined. It has been extremely humbling to say the least.

Question: What is **your** experience of "letting go"?

YOUR *"PROGRAM"* FOR CHANGE

Spending an hour and a half once a week in a personal growth session can be helpful. And there's a lot more one can do. Ernie Larsen called it *"working **your** program of change."*

A ***"program for change"*** includes the things you do on a regular schedule that help bring about the change you want.

For example, I keep a journal relating to my personal challenges —especially the things I want to change. It contains more than just ideas. It includes my feelings, my fantasies, hopes and dreams. It also includes the roadblocks I run into; those things preventing me from moving forward. I also write down any progress I make.

I set time aside for reflection. That means getting quiet, releasing the thoughts that keep whirling around in my mind. It tends to give me the space for experiencing who I really am at the deepest level. Part of that is acknowledging my deepest aspirations, and the presence of love that surrounds me always.

In the shower I ask myself, what's really important and then let the answers emerge. Almost always love, family and relationships are most important. A mantra I repeat often is, ***"Being loving is more important than this...[unloving behavior]***." When I acknowledge that, everything else becomes ***"small stuff."***

If you think talking one-on-one with someone you trust might be helpful, ask that person to be your *"sponsor"* for a time. Make it clear what you want from him. If you want feedback, ask for it.

It's easy to slip away from following your program. But don't beat yourself up. If I thought I had to be perfect in working my program, I'd never start it. And if I ever become obsessed with achieving expected results, I'd never be happy nor would I stay with the program." So, as they say in Hawaii, *"hang loose"*. And remember, ***"change is inevitable; growth is optional."***

Question: What would be a good growth program by you/for **you**?

JOIN OR START A GROUP

Usually, anything good begins with one person having a vision and sharing it with one other person. In the case of this support group, it was Earnie Larsen who enlisted me and four others.

If you like what you've read here, maybe it could be **you** with the vision to start the next support group in **your** community.

The first step is getting together with one or two others you know and trust to discuss the idea. Give them this booklet to take home and read. Then get together again soon after to plan a course of action.

Check out alternative locations that have the feel of a "sacred, time and space" for which you could comfortably commit.

You only need a few others to join you and you're all set to start. We started with 4-6 men who met for a year before deciding to expand. We met every Saturday morning from 8:30 to 10:00 a.m. in a quiet booth at a motel restaurant.

Now, 33 years later, we meet in a community room that has a coffee maker and comfortable chairs. Someone brings the donuts, and all costs are covered by a set amount tossed into a basket we pass around. If a person can't afford it, they just pay what they can. No visitor is ever expected to pay on his first visit. We are fortunate to have one person acting as the bookkeeper, who gets teased about how he and his wife can finance all their vacations.

It's important to avoid one person always being in charge of convening the meeting. Pass that task around so the group functions well, no matter who does or doesn't show up. To facilitate that, we pass a calendar around for people to volunteer as the input "speaker" for anytime in the future. And, we keep a 3-ring notebook for the summaries of speaker inputs by those who submit them. Men are welcome to take it home to catch up on the talks they missed.

Question: Do **you** have a vision for a support group in your community?

God,
grant me the

serenity

to accept the things
I cannot change, the

courage

to change
the things I can,
and the

wisdom

to know the
difference

contact: sook51@gmail.com