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Four Practices

That will Change Your Life

Immediately and Forever

by

By Karin Ireland

I was brought up with a long list of rules my parents, teachers, friends and later, employers, co-workers, significant others, and society as a whole said I had to follow. I tried. I *wanted* to be, do, say, think and feel what everybody wanted me to be, do, say, think and feel.

The problem was that everybody told me something different. Speak up? Or go with the flow? Do what I “should” do? Or do what I longed to do?

Like Einstein, I wished there was one set of rules I could apply to every situation.

Eventually, I found them. But not until several crises forced me to rethink everything I believed. What those crises were doesn’t matter. What does matter is how well they worked and how well they continue to work every time I find myself struggling and remember to use them.

This, it turns out, is the guidebook I wish had come with my life; one set of rules I can use to guide me in every situation, and they will work just as well for you.

The first is to notice the stories you tell, and if they keep you stuck in unhelpful thinking and behaviors, change them to ones that support you in having the experiences you want.

The second is to let go of attachments to outcomes, and turn what you want into intentions (a strong knowing that you can and will succeed) instead.

The third is to choose your behavior patterns instead of simply slipping into them, and choose ones that help you be who you want to be.

Finally, the fourth, let your ego help, but don’t let it be in charge.

These four practices led me from being confused and overwhelmed to being peacefully in charge of my life, and they will do the same for you, too.

The four practices will make your relationships better, they will help you trust yourself when you and the experts don’t agree, and they’ll help you be happier, healthier and more successful. They’ll also help you make wise decisions and let go of unpleasant emotions like anger, fear, guilt, frustration, and regret quickly – about things in the past and in the present.

* * *

Practice One: Notice the Stories You Tell Yourself

We create the experiences in our lives with the stories we tell. Unfortunately, too often, we tell stories about what we don’t want instead of what we do.

The stories we tell ourselves are so familiar we barely realize we’re telling them. They drift through our minds as thoughts, and we’ve heard them for so long that we think they’re true. Some are. But a lot of them aren’t. A lot of our stories aren’t even our own.

We all started learning stories the moment we were born. Our parents told us who we were and who they thought we should be. Later our teachers, friends, employers, significant others, and even strangers told us their stories about how we should think and feel and behave.

Sometimes we learned stories as much by peoples' actions as by what they said. When I was almost five, my dad asked what I wanted for my birthday, and I told him I wanted a dog. I got one. A taffy-colored cocker spaniel I loved instantly. My dad suggested the name Taffy Firefly Vinson, which sounded okay to me, but I couldn't remember it. After asking the third or fourth time, my dad told me sternly that if I wasn't old enough to remember the dog's name, maybe I wasn't old enough to have him. One of the stories I got from that warning was that approval depended on my performing up to other peoples' expectations.

I was in the sixth grade when a classmate named Eddie threw darts at me as I walked past his house on my way home from school. His mother made him come to my house to apologize, and my mother criticized me for not accepting his apology more graciously. The story I got from this? It's more important to take care of other peoples' feelings than my own.

From seventh grade on, I was bored in school and had a hard time remembering the names and dates I'd read in history and geography books. My parents'- and teachers' stories were that if I tried, I'd understand the school work. Since I didn't understand, they said I wasn't trying. But I *was* trying, so my story was that I wasn't very smart.

Some people tell us stories because they love us, they want us to be happy and safe, and they think their advice will help. Some tell us stories because they have an attachment to our being the way they want us to be. Unless we question those stories, we tell them to ourselves over and over, and they shape our beliefs about who we are and who we're not, what we and everyone else in the world can and cannot, should and should not think, feel, do and be.

I spent a lot of my life doing things I didn't want to do because my stories said people wouldn't like me if I didn't. I was nice to people when I should have walked away because my stories said that leaving wouldn't be polite. I worked crazy hard at too many jobs because my stories said hard-workers were appreciated and respected.

I stayed in my first marriage way too long. The stories I told myself were that I was unhappy, but I couldn't get divorced; my then-husband was really a nice man, and I had no right to make him unhappy just so I could be happy; I had no right to separate our daughter from her dad; and I couldn't possibly support myself and my daughter on my own. I was attached to making that marriage work and keeping our family together. My then-husband wanted to

keep our family together, too, but he had different stories about how he and I should behave.

We were stuck in this loop for years. Finally, I told myself a different story: It was okay for me to take care of myself, and everything would work out for us all. That story freed me to ask for a divorce. And everything did work out for all of us.

Some stories help us be happy and successful, and those are the ones we want to tell more of.

You can *think* about a story, use all your logic to determine if it's true, but thinking relies on other stories, so it's hard to discover anything new. A way you can always catch an untrue story is to notice the way it makes you *feel*.

For example:

- * I'm not as good, smart, thin, pretty or young as she is, so I can't...;
- * A good parent, child, sibling, employee or employer would always/never (fill in the blank), so I have to, too;
- * I have to do, say, or think the way he wants me to or he'll be hurt, angry, or depressed;
- * She would do it for me, so I have to do it for her; or she should do it for me because I'd do it for her;
- * I can't do, say, feel, or think what I want to because he would feel I was unfair, unreasonable, unkind, unreliable, or irresponsible if I did.

How do those stories make you feel? They may *sound* true, and friends may reassure you that they are because those are your friend's stories, too.

But for each limiting story, there's another side you can tell *that is true if you let it be*.

Notice how these stories make you feel:

- * Look at all the successes I've had! I know I can figure out how to be as successful as I want or need to be this time, too;
- * I'm a good parent, child, sibling, partner or employee, and it's okay for me to take care of myself instead of always putting what other people want first;
- * I can say what I want and need to say. It's really not my job to make everybody else happy, and I can let him be upset if he needs to be;
- * I know she would do this for me, but I can choose not to let that story push me into doing something I don't want to do;
- * It's my job to take care of myself first. If he doesn't approve, I will be okay.

* * *

It's been said before, change your stories and you'll change your life. Did you notice how much more empowered you feel with the second set of stories?

* * *

Practice Two: Let Go of Your Attachments to Outcomes

I'd always wanted to use hypnosis to help people manage their pain, so one year, I took a class and was certified as a hypnotherapist. It turned out I was a pretty good one, but I had no idea how to turn my skill into a business. I called a local hypnotherapist, and he invited me to meet with him.

After we discussed the business possibilities, he offered to hypnotize me, and I drifted into the most relaxed state I'd ever been in *in my life*. I felt peaceful, happy, confident, powerful... not I-can-rule-the-world powerful, but balanced, secure and serene. It wasn't because of anything I was doing; rather, it was because of what I *wasn't* doing: I wasn't mentally trying to fix the past. I wasn't scrambling to control the future. I wasn't trying to change anything or do anything *right*. I was just there, in the present, noticing how I felt as he guided me to relax and let go of my busy thinking.

After I returned to my conscious state, he asked me how I'd felt. I told him I'd felt wonderful. He asked me what I'd have to change in my life to feel like that all the time, and I knew instantly: I'd have to stop trying to control the way things turned out. It sounded easy enough, and I could see how it would help me be happier and more successful, and certainly less stressed.

And I needed to be less stressed. While I was taking the hypnosis class, I'd started a job trying to sell wine to company presidents and CEOs... on the phone. I was supposed to sell at least two cases each time and get a credit card number on the first call.

I knew the wine was great, actually a subsidiary of a popular upscale winery, but I wasn't allowed to say that. Instead, my boss had given me a script to read that he promised would work. I tried. It didn't.

I'd never have chosen phone sales as a job for myself, but at the time, I didn't want to go back into corporate writing and it was the only one I could get. And the winery gave me health insurance, so I stayed. The job was a commission-only position, so if I didn't sell, I didn't get paid. I was a single mom with a daughter in college and a mortgage to pay, and when people didn't buy – which was most of the time – I'd hang up the phone feeling angry, frustrated, resentful, and afraid. I could hear other people making sales, so I'd force myself to make the next call.

I'd known there was a connection between what I thought and how I felt, but it wasn't until the hypnosis session that I realized I could change how I felt by changing what I thought. The morning after the hypnosis session I wrote *attached?* on a yellow Post-It note and stuck it on my cubicle wall. Every time I'd hang up the phone feeling frustrated, angry, afraid, or hopeless I'd ask myself, *what am I attached to?*

Of course, it was obvious: I'd wanted to make a sale. I'd take a deep breath and ask myself if I could let go of my attachment to that outcome, just that time. I'd remind myself that sales is a numbers game, and the more calls I made the closer I got to a sale. I'd exhale, and I could feel the attachment and those unpleasant feelings slip away; then I'd make the next call without dragging negative energy along from the previous one.

I expected that when I was able to let go of my attachments to making a sale on every call I'd feel more comfortable, but what I didn't expect was that I'd actually start selling lots more wine. As I relaxed, I stopped trying to sound like the high sellers, and started being *me* on the phone. I felt relaxed and confident, and I started winning sales competitions.

Letting go of attachments to the way things turn out is a behavior that has changed experiences in every area of my life. But it only works when I remember to do it.

* * *

We're taught to be attached to the way things turn out by our parents, our teachers, our friends, significant others, employers, coworkers, and just about everyone else in our lives.

As toddlers, we learn to be fiercely attached to having our parents' love and approval. If our parents aren't able or inclined to give us the love and approval we want, we can become more determined to have it, and we change our behavior, even who we are, to get it.

Teachers push us to be attached to outcomes by offering good grades and awards to students who perform well and indifference or punishment to those who don't.

The media and our peers tell us that we have to look a certain way, dress, and behave a certain way, so we try, and then blame ourselves if we're not happy.

But we can never be really happy as long as we're struggling to please everybody else, telling ourselves that they hold the key to the way *we* feel.

When I talk to people about letting go of attachments to outcomes, I see that some are confused. *Isn't it good to be attached, they ask? Isn't it good to have goals?*

Goals, yes. Attachments, no.

Here's how they're different: When we're attached to an outcome, we tell ourselves, *This person, this situation has to be the way I want it to, or I can't be happy.* We plot and we plan, we request, coerce, and demand that people and situations change to fit our vision. Sometimes, when we're attached to an outcome, we tell ourselves *we* have to change, we have to be and do what *they* want us to so we'll

get their approval. We work harder, we work longer hours, we change who we are to be who they want us to be.

While we're attached to an outcome, our bodies are uncomfortable and tense, and we feel emotions like doubt, regret, confusion, and fear; our minds are full of chatter about how unfair/unreasonable/unkind/unsupportive people, and life in general, are.

Being attached isn't a matter of how much we want something. We can want something passionately without being attached to having it. The way we know we're attached to an outcome is when we think about it and feel unpleasant emotions like anger, frustration, overwhelm, or stress. Those emotions are the result of us wanting someone or something to be different than it is.

When we hold what we want as a goal or, better yet, intention, we work to get it, sometimes we work very hard, but we're calmer, more focused; we feel relaxed, confident, and optimistic. With a goal or intention, we believe, *I want this and will have it, something like it, or something even better!* We can be comfortable working toward it, thinking about not getting it, and we're even okay when we don't.

Here are examples of our thinking as attachments and as goals:

* (attached) *I have* to win that promotion. (The attachment to this outcome causes us to feel angry, hurt, resentful, worthless or some other unpleasant emotion if we don't win the promotion and even when we think we might not);

(goal) I'd like to get the promotion, so I will take the time to figure out what skills/relationships/attitudes I can develop that will help me accomplish this goal. If I don't reach it, I'll consider the possibility that what I want might not be the right step at this particular time, and I will look for opportunities that might be even better;

* (attached) I need to convince him that my way is right/efficient/cost-effective/ethical/or something else, and I'm going to be angry and resentful if he doesn't agree. In fact, I feel angry right now just thinking about how stubborn he is. If he doesn't agree with me, I might not bother to help him figure anything out in the future;

(goal) I'd like to convince him that my way is right/efficient/cost-effective/ethical/or something else, so I will be sure I've got my facts right, and I'll ask questions and listen carefully so I understand what he is thinking. If we can't agree, I'll see if there are other steps I might take or other ideas I can develop that will help me convince him, or I'll ask myself if it would be okay for us to disagree;

* (attached) Sales clerks and food servers should take care of me quickly and pleasantly, and I'm sorry if I'm rude when they don't, but it's their fault;

(goal) I love it when sales clerks or food servers take care of me quickly and pleasantly, but I can never know what's happening in their lives, so I can never know why they aren't more helpful when they aren't;

* (attached) My friend is always late, but I don't say anything because I don't want to make her mad;

(goal) my friend is always late, and I can tell her it bothers me. If she gets angry, I will be okay.

Many motivational leaders feel setting an intent is stronger than having a goal.

* * *

Notice how stories and attachments support each other:

STORY → ATTACHMENT → STORY → ATTACHMENT and so on.

This loop will keep us stuck until we tell ourselves a different story.

* * *

Practice Three: Choose Behavior Patterns That Help You Have the Experiences You Want

We began building our behavior patterns the day we were born, and they helped us get what we wanted and needed. When we were uncomfortable we cried and we got fed, or changed, or held. When we fussed, our parents searched for the reason and did whatever they could to make us happy.

Somewhere early in our childhood, our parents probably turned some of their attention to other people and other interests. If we were comfortable with this shift, we turned some of our own attention to other people and other interests, too. If we felt abandoned by this shift, we may have looked for behaviors to bring our parents' attention back to us.

Crying and hiding, bullying, lying, acting out, putting up walls, over-pleasing, and dozens of other behavior patterns may have helped us get the attention we wanted and needed when we were helpless children. But we're not helpless now, and while some of these childhood behavior patterns may feel like reasonable responses to the people and events in our lives, many of them probably aren't: they're just habits we haven't changed.

Here are some unhelpful behavior patterns we slip into and the stories we tell to justify them:

* Denial (it's okay, it's not that bad, I don't have any options);

* Struggle (I have to struggle to succeed, people will only respect me if they see how hard I work);

* Blame (it's someone else's fault, and I have excuses to show why it is);

* Victim/martyr (people don't understand me, everything just happens to me,

- things aren't fair, there's nothing you I do about whatever the problem is);
- * Projector of doom and gloom (I'm certain the worst is always going to happen);
 - * Drama Queen/King (I'm always in crisis mode, caught up in conflicts or challenges);
 - * People pleaser (I behave a certain way so people will think I'm smart, hardworking, kind, successful, a good parent/daughter/ /sibling/employee/ friend);
 - * Controller/judge (I know how everyone and everything should be, and it's my job to make other people conform);
 - * Protector/enabler (I must help others when they ask, and even when they don't; it's my job to make sure others don't feel bad or get into trouble).

Our stories, our attachments, and our behavior patterns support each other to keep us stuck.

STORY → ATTACHMENT → BEHAVIOR PATTERN → STORY →
ATTACHMENT → BEHAVIOR PATTERN and so on.

The limiting stories we tell reinforce our attachments to outcomes, and both affect the behavior patterns we slip into. Our stories, attachments, and behavior patterns lead to the experiences we have in life; our experiences trigger our stories, attachments, and behavior patterns, and we begin the loop all over again.

Here's another saying you've probably heard: If we keep doing what we're doing, we'll keep getting what we're getting. In order to escape an unpleasant loop of story/attachment/behavior/experience/story, we have to say or do something different.

* * *

Practice Four: Let Your Ego Help You, But Don't Let It Be in Charge

My ego, bless its heart, can be a huge help when it nudges me to start working on a talk weeks before I'm to give it so I won't be embarrassed. It's helpful when it whispers I should put a little more thought into what I'm wearing before I leave the house; when it nudges me to defend myself against someone who wants to take advantage of me. But it's not helpful when it nudges me to be rude to someone who's being rude to me; to insist I'm right when it really doesn't matter; or to struggle to be perfect when there's no reason to be.

* * *

As children, we're encouraged to let our ego push us to be the first, the fastest, the best, the hardest worker, the one with the highest grades, the loudest applause, the most awards. Our ego pushes us to succeed, and that's good. But sometimes we let it push us too much.

When we're angry, frustrated, demanding, impatient, and unhappy because someone didn't treat us the way we think they should have... that's our ego reacting. It nudges us to judge, blame, and make excuses, and it wants us to believe that we're justified when we fuss.

Our ego pushes us into behavior patterns of being a victim (I was hurt), being angry (I didn't get what I wanted), struggle (I needed to work harder, faster, longer hours), and blame (whatever went wrong was somebody else's fault). Our ego whispers that if we want anything done "right," we have to do it ourself; we don't have time to rest or play; we have to be busy, busy, *busy*.

Our ego's stories say that we need to be right, and everyone needs to know we are; we need to be perfect, and everybody needs to appreciate that we are; we must struggle so everyone sees how responsible, hardworking, deserving, etcetera we are; we need to control ourself – our feelings, actions, and behaviors; we need to control others – their beliefs responses, and actions; we need to control our physical space and the people in it, and... well, our ego has a long list. When we let it, our ego can keep us stuck telling unhelpful stories, stuck with attachments to outcomes, stuck in behaviors that don't make us happy and don't help us experience life the way we want to.

Here's what that loop looks like:

STORY → ATTACHMENT → BEHAVIOR PATTERN → EGO → STORY →
ATTACHMENT → BEHAVIOR PATTERN and so on.

Our ego contributes to stories that reinforce our attachments and push us into behavior patterns that don't make us or anyone around us happy.

Here's what I believe: I need to remember that my ego helps me most when it's my coach, not my boss. It can whisper that I want to be right, or perfect, or be considered the best. It can whisper that I might enjoy having a nicer car and a nicer home. Those are okay goals, or, if I am determined to have something, intent.

But I'm the boss, and I mustn't let my ego push me to be attached to outcomes or tell stories that bring on one of those unpleasant emotions like anger, frustration, doubt, fear, etc.

I need to always notice: Is my ego in charge? Or am I?

I wish I'd figured these four practices out much sooner than I did; I could have saved myself and several partners and employers a lot of grief. But I'm grateful I understand them now, and after living with them for decades now, I can promise that once you live your life with these practices, consistently, and completely, decisions will be easier, relationships will be better, and you'll find you don't experience uncomfortable emotions like anger, fear, doubt, confusion,

overwhelm, jealousy and all their cousins as often or as deeply. When you do find yourself in one of those emotions, ask yourself what you're attached to being different than it is and what thinking or behaviors you can change to bring yourself back into balance.

I leave you with this and my heartfelt wish that these Practices bring you peace, clarity, happiness, ease, and confidence to be, do, say, think, and feel what *you* want to.