

Why Overcoming Passivity Is So Important

By John Lee

The Half-Lived Life workshop tackles the ever-increasing problems passivity presents to individuals, groups, and families and does so without shaming those whose lives may be less than what they'd hoped. As you recognize your passivity and begin to understand and address it, you are building the foundation necessary to become creators of your world instead of feeling like the world controls you. These first steps allow you to become compassionately assertive and in so doing regain valuable insights into how to become the person you thought you would be, longed to be, and ultimately can be. The result can be a fully-lived life.

Passivity has been one of the least studied, discussed, and explained aspects of human behavior. The fields of psychology, personal growth, and recovery have completely ignored it. Understanding passivity is an essential and important key to creating healthy relationships, increasing self-esteem and healing the bodies, minds, and spirits of individuals who are hurting.

Passivity is a learned tendency to live at half-speed which ultimately leaves people feeling their glass is half-empty and thus half-heartedly committing to projects, plans, and goals. Passive people are half in and half out of relationships. The passive person who suffers the effects of a glass half empty life is more attached to not having what they think they want or desire, even though they protest loudly this is not so.

A client, James, is 40 and a very successful real estate agent who earns a high six figure income. During a session he said, "I work all the time on my marriage. I'm in therapy, I read books, and I regularly attend self-help workshops. No one can say I'm passive." When asked about his marriage he quickly replied, "I want more physical contact, more touching, and yes, more sex, but I don't get hardly any at all."

James wants his wife, Brenda, to be more affectionate and yet he indulges in a whole host of behaviors that guarantees he will get just the opposite of what he thinks and says he really wants.

I asked him to give me an example of his efforts to get affection from his wife, so I could see and show him his passivity and addiction to not having what he says he wants.

"I go into the living room all the time and Brenda is on the couch watching television for hours on end. I say something like, 'Can't you turn that thing off for a little while? There's nothing intelligent or worth watching on TV. I don't know why you watch these silly shows.' But she never agrees and I end up storming out of the room frustrated."

I jokingly said, "How's that working for you?" Then I offered a suggestion. "Try sitting on the living room couch next to her; gently lifting her legs and placing them on your lap while you massage her feet, instead of shaming, criticizing, demeaning, and judging her. Then simply ask her what's on that you two can watch together."

He looked at me like I was speaking in a foreign tongue; it was an unfamiliar language, the language of compassion and assertiveness. James looked a little dumbfounded before saying, "No, I have never even thought of it. It sounds so simple. I can see me doing that but I never would have

thought to do so. I wonder why?"

It was because of his passivity and his fears of rejection, abandonment, and intimacy.

He tried my suggestion the very next week. "We got up off the couch ten minutes after doing what you suggested. She looked at me and said 'Who are you?' Before I could answer she laughed and said, 'Never mind, I like this,' and we got up and got in bed and made love for the first time in a year."

This same man devoted an exorbitant amount of time to reading about relationships and marital counseling. He said he worked all the time on his marriage. But in reality, he thought his wife had the problem, not him.

them rather than being actors and movers.

It is important to note that passivity causes you to react rather than act, control rather than respond, manipulate rather than make, or self-destruct instead of create. The half-lived life is NOT to be confused with passive/aggressive behaviors, timidity, shyness, apathy, or laziness. It is also not to be misconstrued as "surrendering" or "letting go," "turning it over," or "passive resistance." All of these are very active processes that actually energize the ones doing so. The passivity that is being discussed here is more closely akin to "giving up," "feeling defeated," "settling for," or "feeling unsatisfied."



As one highly successful surgeon said to me after a day-long Half-Lived Life workshop, "I always felt I was half the husband, half the father, half the friend I knew I could be, even though I'm very successful in my field. It was like I was living half the life I could be living. Now I feel I have the tools to be the person I have always wanted and knew deep down inside I could be."

Passivity is difficult to identify because one of the greatest tricks a passive person plays on themselves goes something like this, "Look how hard I work. I work eighty hours a week and I'm the CEO of a large company. How can anyone label me as passive?" or "Look how much I work on myself. I go to five twelve step meetings a week and see my therapist regularly. How can I be passive?" or "Can't you see I'm suffering? Isn't that proof that I'm not attached to passivity?"

One of the main symptoms of passivity is being out of balance in our personal and professional lives. The passive person's creed is, "I'm bored," or "I'm feeling overwhelmed." They think the world acts on them and moves

Passivity Defined

By working with your tendencies to be passive you are taking the first critical steps to take your life to the next level; a level which is more rewarding and satisfying. Unfortunately many people have developed a greater connection to loss and feeling less than; they settle for unfulfilling relationships or careers that never quite achieve their creative potentials. Surviving rather than thriving has become the state that many of us are not only used to but are compelled to pursue. This leads to secretly evaluating our glasses to be half-empty. It is the non-engaging that lets life pass you by because you did not have the information and tools to take action to change things for the better. You do now. Passivity is a learned behavior; a reaction to life that can be unlearned.

Passivity is an offense of omission—not doing or saying what you need to, not responding, not accepting challenges and refusing to take risks—rather than commission and that is one reason why it has been overlooked by clinicians and writers.

Passivity compels people to wait in a state of suspended animation until something or someone outside themselves "rescues" them from their current circumstances which would then allow them to have a Full Glass Life. This knight in shining armor (whether a person, the world, society or a supernatural being) is supposed to bring the passive person something they feel they have lost or had taken from them. That something could be hope, energy, love, faith, the perfect job, an unconditional lover, winning the lottery, or the good parent they never had, once had or wished they had. It is a psychological, physical, emotional, and spiritual condition that plagues even the most educated and self-directed people. Therefore the whole person must be addressed and once it is you can move from passivity to pursuing your passions in life and relationships.

I, Not You

When we become ready to address our passivity one of the first active steps we take is to see the absolute necessity in dropping one of the most button-pushing, regressive words in the English language: "You." The differences between "I need" and "You need to _____," "I hurt" and "You hurt me," "I feel" and "You made me feel," "I love you" and "Do you love me?" are enormous and only perpetuate passivity.

"If only you would..." "Why don't you..." "You should..." "You ought to..." Even the word "You" by itself triggers many. There is something about this three letter word that puts almost everyone in a defensive posture, and causes them to duck and run for cover. It instigates "I'm out of here" or distancer behavior.

Intimacy ends with "You" and begins with "I" The word "I" is active, compassionate, responsible, remorseful, mature, and non-threatening. It enhances communication and reduces needless confrontations and conflicts. "I" becomes the actor, instigator and mover. "You" act upon me. You must be the initiator and move me from one place to another. It is the "I" who must fill my own glass.

The Compassionately Assertive Person

The fully lived life is achieved not by aggressive acts but by becoming a compassionately assertive person who can genuinely give apologies and make amends. This leaves not only the injured party feeling better, but it transforms the one saying it as well. The authentic apology makes no excuses, assigns no blame, and carries no guilt or shame. Followed by changing behavior and stopping the offense, it repairs and mends the tear in the relationship fence. Everyone wins.

The compassionately assertive person will actively give and receive love in a mature adult way, something the passive person cannot do. As a compassionate man or woman you will send those you love the kind of love they need. Instead of passively following the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you*, you follow the Platinum Rule of compassion: *Do unto others the way they need to be done to*. Those you love have probably been yearning to be loved in that way their whole lives.

John Lee will be leading a workshop on September 18-20. Please see page 12.