



# *Affective Center for Therapy*

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## **THE TYRANT WITHIN**

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***The tyrant always talks as if he's preserving the best interests of his people when he actually acts to undermine them.*** Ramman Kenoun

The world is full of tyrants. You think of most tyrants as living in foreign countries, oppressing and brutalizing their citizens. As you watch from a safe distance and wonder, what is it about these oppressed people that allow the tyrant to grind down his slaves and yet they do not turn against him. As you watch, you may become incensed and angry, "Why doesn't someone do something about the tyrant. Someone needs to stop him."

Yes, the world is full of tyrants and there is something you can do about the worst of these tyrants. This tyrant talks about working in your best interest. In fact, this tyrant has convinced you that terrible things would happen if he were not in control of your life.

You can identify this tyrant by listening to the words he uses to control, oppress and dominate you to the point that you are so depressed that you find it hard to get out of bed in the morning. Life has lost its joy and spark for you. At times, you feel like a zombie just existing.

Yes, that tyrant is you! Have you been listening to the words that you use to motivate yourself and to keep yourself doing what you **should** do? The famous therapist Albert Ellis called it "musterbation." Here are some examples that he would use:

1. "Other people **MUST** treat me fairly and kindly, or it is horrible and I can't stand it."
2. "Life **MUST** treat me well and fairly, or it is horrible and I can't stand it."
3. "Life **MUST** be easy and without problems or discomfort, or else I can't stand it and can't cope with it."

When your expectations become personal indictments of your victim status, then you will know that tyrant is now in charge of your life and destiny.

Another form of tyranny that you use against yourself, it is the "**I should's.**"

Just like the typical tyrant, you have convinced yourself that you need all your shoulds. Without your shoulds, you could not make it on your own; they are in your best interest. What would your life be like if you did not have all your shoulds? Do you believe that you would be out of control, running through town raping, burning, and pillaging? Would you not get up in the morning and not go to work? Would you never clean the house or get the kids off to school? Would sit around all day and watch TV,

becoming a total couch potato? Now, are you not glad that you have your own private tyrant with all those shoulds to keep you on the straight and narrow?

There are problems with your shoulds. The first problem is, not one of your “I shoulds” is yours!

The second problem is that each “I should” that you have is a source of depression. The more “I shoulds” you have, the more depressed you will be. I once had a client who brought me a list of her I shoulds. She had 94 “I Shoulds!” She was so depressed that the next day, she had to be hospitalized.

The third problem with “I shoulds” is that each one of them is a source of guilt. Paul, in the Bible, makes a personal confession about his own “I shoulds” when he talks about this problem:

“For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

Romans 7: 18 - 19

Can you hear the guilt and depression in what Paul is saying? A little later on in this same section he says, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” This is a man with so many “shoulds” that he now feels like he is dying.

I am sorry that I cannot find many good things to say about your “I shoulds” except to suggest that you do not need the shoulds and the guilt and the depression that are the symptoms of your shoulds.

In my office, I have a bumper sticker which reads: **HAVE I SHOULD ON MYSELF TODAY?** The choice is yours; you can live “I should” free!

To get started, here is your challenge: Make your own “I should” list. Be sure to include both “I should” and “I shouldn’t.” I should be on time is the same as, I shouldn’t be late. In making your list, you are not allowed to use the words: more, less, better or worse. These words will make your should impossible to achieve. “I should lose more weight.” Not good, you could lose down to 80 pounds and you would not have achieved your should. “I should be more patient.” You could have moss growing on you and you will not have arrived at your goal.

Make sure that your shoulds/shouldn’ts are written in concrete, behavioral terms. “I will lose 10 pounds by June 1<sup>st</sup>.” “I will love my mate by doing (name the behaviors that you will do and set time lines). “I will be a better parent.” This is not good because it does not say what you will do to, for or with them that will make you a better parent, nor does it set frequency and times.

Be careful not to use abstract term such as loving, patience, or responsible. By using abstract words in your “should” list, you confuse yourself and those around you. What does a responsible person do? Are you talking about showing up to work on time or are you talking about paying your bills? What does a patient person do? Are you talking about not yelling at the children or are you talking about not nagging? What does a loving person do? Are you talking about opening the door for your wife or are you talking about having more sex? The use of abstract words allows you not to be accountable and, as a result, not to feel successful that you are doing what you should do. As a result, you get to feel this vague uneasiness that there is something more you should be doing.

When making your “should” list, be sure that you do not include things from the past. “I should have gone to school.” “I shouldn’t have gotten married so early.” When

you include regrets as “shoulds,” you have set yourself up for failure because the past cannot be changed!

Now, make your list as long as you can. Listen to yourself for a week to make sure you get all your shoulds/shouldn’ts.

**STOP, do not read farther  
until you have made your  
I should/shouldn’t list.**

Once you have completed your “should” list, you are now ready to read the rest of this article.

Read your “should” list over carefully. Make sure there are none of the forbidden words (more, less, better, worse). Make sure you have not used abstract words such as respectful, responsible, loving, etc. Make sure that you do not have any “shoulds” from your past. If you have any of these problems, you will need to make changes so that these errors do not appear in your list.

Look at your “shoulds,” **not one of those “shoulds” are yours!!!** Every one of those “shoulds” is someone else’s should for you. If they were your “shoulds,” you would be doing them!

Check your list. Is there any should in your list that says, “I should brush my teeth.” Or, “I should comb my hair.” Or, “I should take a bath/shower at least once a week.” Don’t you believe in brushing your teeth? Combing your hair or taking a bath/shower?

You wrote only the things that you do not do. If you are doing a “should” it is no longer a “should” it is “I brush my teeth.” Brushing your teeth was not always your thing, it was your mother’s thing that she had for you. At some point in time, it went from your mother’s “should” for you to, I do it, “I brush my teeth.”

If all these shoulds are not yours, then what is the purpose of all the “shoulds?” My guess is that the purpose for you was the same as the purpose was for your mother --- to get you to do what you **should do**. All your shoulds are just your attempt to motivate/wheel/push/control yourself into doing something that someone has told you that you should do. Another problem with your “I shoulds” is that, **nobody likes to be controlled, not even by themselves**. So, the more you “should” on yourself, the more you will resist doing what you should do.

Having all these shoulds did not work for Paul. **How is that working for you?**

Not so good you say. Well, if a few shoulds do not work, maybe you should add more shoulds to your list. It probably will not work any better and you will end up feeling even more powerless, guilty and depressed! At least then, you can tell everyone how hard you are trying. If more shoulds do not work, you might consider doing something else.

Once you have made your shoulds list, there are only four things that you can do with an “I should:”

1. **Do it.** If you chose this option, then it is no longer an “I should.” Now it is, “I exercise 30 minutes a day, four times a week.” “I am losing 5 pounds a month.” By doing what you should do, it is no longer a “should.”
2. **Change your “I shoulds” so that you will do them.** Many times, you do not do your “shoulds” because they are poorly written, making them unobtainable. “I should have gotten better grades in high school.” You cannot change the past. Or, “I should exercise for an hour a day seven days a week.” Or, “I should never get angry.” That could be changed to, “I am learning how to express my anger in constructive ways by going to counseling and taking classes on anger management.”

If you do not do either number one or number two, you will automatically go to your third option.

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3. **Feel powerless, helpless, guilty, angry at yourself and/or depressed.** Notice, that you are choosing number 3 because you are choosing not to do either 1 or 2! Depression is a choice!
4. **Cut off your feelings.** There are a number of choices here. Some people will choose drugs or alcohol; others may become workaholics as a way of avoiding emotional intimacy. One very common way of doing this is to become depressed. Depression is not only a psychological way of shutting down your feelings, but in the process, you are shutting down your immune system.

Most people do not trust themselves; as a result they will choose their self-tyrant to be in control of their life. They believe that if I did not have all these ‘shoulds’ (which do not work) I would never get anything done. My life would fall apart and I would lose my job and my mate would leave me. My kids would hate me.

This belief that you cannot be trusted is very deep seated. ***So your self-tyrant tries to convince you that he is working to preserve your best interests when he actually acts to undermine them.***

You can be trusted because everything that you are doing, or not doing, is what you want to do! However, you have convinced yourself that you are lazy and irresponsible and are in need of your tyrant to make you do what you are supposed to do. If something is really important to you, you will do it. If you let it slip and not do it, it is because you did not want to do it and all the “shoulds” in the world will not get you to do it.

Once you accept responsibility for your irresponsibility (I did not want to do it) then you can change it (now I want to do it).

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