



40-Minute Take Back Your Life MasterClass Transcript

The holiday season is upon us. Are you facing them with eager anticipation or dreaded stress and tension? Guilt, anger and resentment, sadness, disappointment, and loneliness seem to be in abundance especially when it comes to caregiving and the holiday—not the feelings that get promoted all around us at this time of year.

Some of you may want your parent or loved one to be able to participate in family gatherings and you may feel incredibly guilty that you can't make it happen. Some of you may feel guilty because you don't want your loved one to attend family gatherings. It's just too hard, too stressful, too overwhelming and then there's no joy in the gathering. And what happens when you feel one way and other family members have a different opinion. Did your stress levels just rise at the mere thought of these upcoming (or even current/ongoing) conversations? Is it just one more year of "more of the same?"

We are going to address these feelings and issues and provide strategies and tools you can use in ways that will be helpful, productive and even inspiring for other situations you face as loving, compassionate caregivers. There are always issues to be addressed around the holidays that can undermine and sabotage the joy and camaraderie of the holiday season, and that's what this program is about. Getting through the holidays with your sanity and emotional stability intact.

Before we can dive into the steps needed to make the changes for your greater good this holiday season, we have to start with the key to everything...

And We Breathe: Taking slow deep breaths is one thing that will always give you space so that you really can process what is going on, what your feelings are, and what your thoughts/reactions are to the situation.

Let's start with my favorite question, and one that will help you to get laser focused for this holiday season and beyond.

STEP 1. What's your desired outcome? Always the first question that needs to be asked and answered...remembering that it must fulfill 2 requirements:

1. It has to be what you want, not what you don't want. This is imperative because whatever we put our attention to gets bigger. If I tell you right now not to think about pink elephants, under no circumstance are you to think about pink elephants. What goes through your mind? PINK ELEPHANTS
2. It has to be something over which you, yourself, have control. Asking your mother to stop demanding you do things right away for her is something you cannot control, but you can control whether or not you will do her bidding in her time frame.



When you're a caregiver, any situation that involves family gatherings, there are always extra logistics that have to be addressed in addition to whatever emotional turmoil exists in each family. Very few of us have "Hallmark" families where everything goes smoothly and easily. There are always issues to be addressed around the holidays so that you can get through the holidays with your sanity and emotional stability intact.

In order to come up with a desired outcome, you have to be willing to get clear on what it is **you** want. If you could create the ideal situation, what would it be for YOU??

There are questions, of course, to consider...

What happens when it's too much, logistically or emotionally, to have your loved one attend a holiday celebration?

Is it too much for them, and you feel guilty that they cannot attend?

Is it too much for you, and you feel guilty that you do not want them to attend?

Do your siblings or other family members give you a hard time that your parent(s) or spouse aren't attending, but they're leaving it to you to bring your mom regardless?

Maybe they minimize the problems and say it will all work out... Maybe there are promises of help, but in the past that hasn't materialized...

In the past, maybe you just did what you thought your mom, dad, spouse or family would want and didn't even take your feelings into account.

So, you have all these messages coming at you, either from others, or in anticipation of what everyone will say and how they'll react with whatever decision you make regarding family get-togethers. It's important to remember that opinions are like belly-buttons, everybody has one.

The next important point to remember and hold on to as you contemplate your Desired Outcome is that **NOTHING is ever personal**. Each of us operates from our own perceptions and beliefs.

Remember the character from the Peanuts comic strip, PigPen? He always had a dust cloud around him. Well, that dust cloud is his dirt. It's his and not anyone else's, and it didn't get on anyone else, and it wasn't anyone else's responsibility to clean his dirt up.

We all have an emotional dust cloud and our thoughts and reactions come through that cloud. If you can picture the people in your life with their dust clouds, it will make it easier for you to let go of everyone's opinions and not take their thoughts and opinions personally. It is possible...it takes



practice, patience and perseverance...and courage to actually consider doing something that might ultimately be different than what everyone is used to, including you!

The holiday season offers us many opportunities to **practice** self-care, and we have to have patience with ourselves as we bring in new responses and perspectives to the holiday season (and beyond).

Focusing on your desired outcome means that before you take everyone else's needs and opinions into any consideration, you must first know deep down what it is you want and/or need. If no one else mattered in this moment, what would you want to do this holiday season?

Once you're clear on what you want, then and only then do you bring in other variables:

- What does your mom or dad or spouse expect?
- What do other family members expect?
- What other help do you have? What other help could you receive?

As you consider what it is you want and/or need, you might have to consider a multitude of issues:

1. Is the issue strictly logistical?
2. What are your options?
Can mom be picked up by a cab or Uber? Can an aide be hired for the day to attend to mom's needs and travel with her? Can another family member provide transportation to the gathering?
3. You may feel guilty that you are not personally picking mom up and taking care of her, and I understand. Change is difficult and challenging, but we go back to the desired outcome... If it's to have mom attend the event, then you will have achieved your goal. Think about it...and we breathe...
4. Is the issue that your spouse, mom, or dad are not able to handle the event?
It will be too exhausting, they are not fully cognizant of events or people, they are not physically able to travel without personal assistance. What are the specific issues you are facing with regard to your parent(s) or spouse?
5. What guilt do you experience that you cannot make things better?
6. Is it too hard on you to have mom or dad attend the event? Do you need time off from caregiving and enjoy a family event without the added responsibility?

Are you concerned about what others will think about you because you didn't bring your mother to the family event?

Yes, this is a different way of looking at all your holiday plans, so it does take some time, patience and a willingness to view yourself and this holiday season (and beyond) differently. Please be aware that while initially you may feel some discomfort in making changes, the end result is greater ease in your life, and you both need and deserve greater ease.



So, once you admit to what it is you want, you'll move to step 2:

STEP 2. You have to Acknowledge, Respect, and Accept your own feelings: This is imperative because there will be questions and challenges to your decision, especially if it's different than what you have done in the past. Give yourself time to work through your own feelings of discomfort at making a new decision...maybe insecurity and fears around how other family members will respond to your new decision(s)...maybe your fear of others' judgments with regard to a new plan for the holidays. Remember that your feelings matter, and you deserve to feel cared for—first and foremost by you, yourself.

- Maybe you feel guilty about your decision to attend a family gathering on your own.
- Maybe you feel resentful that no one offered to help so your parent or spouse could attend the event.
- Maybe you feel angry or resentful that you couldn't (or didn't) attend alone.
- Maybe you feel sad and lonely that holiday gatherings are just not the same any more.
- Maybe you feel guilty that you feel relieved that your parents or spouse are not in attendance.

Guilt implies that you have done or are doing something wrong...and sometimes we feel guilty because we're doing something that is different, and the initial thought to doing things differently is that it's wrong. Are you really doing something wrong, bad, or harmful? Holidays, unfortunately are fraught with guilt...

Whatever you feel, it's OK...no judgments or self-criticism. It's how you feel. Maybe you just never addressed these feelings before with yourself, never mind with anyone else. So, talking about these feelings and actually allowing yourself to admit to them is new and different.

Making a new decision isn't necessarily an all or nothing decision. It may be a new way of planning for the holidays.

We teach others how we're willing to be treated, and if, up until now, they've gotten the message that you'll handle everything, and you're okay, then doing something different is going to cause them some discomfort...and it's important at these moments to remember their reactions are NOT personal. We just need to prepare ourselves for others' reactions so you don't get caught off guard. This means that you have to remind yourself to **breathe** before you answer anyone, and that you practice coming from a place of self-respect and self-compassion. Remember that your needs and feelings really do matter...and this leads us to...

STEP 3. Set boundaries and limits: Boundaries and limits are what we need for ourselves. It is you as the caregiver who needs to set limits because takers rarely do.

Boundaries are NOT a punishment, they are a sign of self-respect and self-care. When we don't set boundaries, we end up feeling mistreated, used, and resentful of the people we care for. Boundaries are an essential part of self-care and even more so during the holiday season.



Setting boundaries takes courage...courage to love ourselves even when we risk disappointing others.

So, with that said, here we are faced with the holidays and all that they entail with family, friends, parties, events, emotional strain of what we want the holidays to be and they're not...

The first thing to remember is that you do not have to attend every gathering and your loved one doesn't either. OR you don't have to blow off every gathering because you're staying home with mom, dad, or your spouse because they are unable to attend. Remember, your needs and feelings matter.

Boundaries are not just about whether or not you attend an event, alone or with your parents or spouse; it's also about if and how you choose to answer questions. Often times, we seem to be more concerned about others' feelings than our own. It's important to remember that once you've made a decision regarding a holiday plan that you believe is for your greater good, it will be much easier to participate without guilt or stress.

A key message to remember when setting boundaries is that you do NOT explain, defend, or justify. A simple statement: "I made a decision that is for my greater good." (and then take a slow deep breath.)

When you are asking people for their input regarding your decision, then it is fair to explore all possibilities and options and discuss your needs and feelings. However, once you make a decision, give yourself time to get comfortable with it. I've created a Step-by-Step Guide that can be very helpful in going through this new decision-making process, especially when you are making a new decision and you're stepping out of old habits. You can access the Step-by-Step Guide by going to: (www.takebackyourlifeguide.com) or clicking on the link that is in the written transcript.

STEP 4. Be willing to see the inquisitor's loving intentions: Now that you've made your decision, that feels respectful of your needs and feelings, you know that you'll be faced with questions from family and friends. Even if family members express concern, you have come to realize that most of them really don't "get it". They are not part of your daily stress and pressure to keep your loved one (and yourself) going. But they always ask, and sometimes their questions or comments can trigger a myriad of feelings within you: anger, resentment, frustration, annoyance, even disappointment, etc.

What do you say when other family members ask about your mom, dad, or spouse, and question why they're not in attendance? Or when they make comments about how wonderful everything is and how happy they are that everyone could attend without acknowledging what went into getting your loved one to the event?

It's important to operate from the premise that people do care and have loving intentions. Having this perspective will help you react with less anger, hurt or upset toward their judgments, or lack of actual help and support. Over the years, I had to learn how to respond to the comments or questions of concern for my husband from family members who didn't really act like they understood our reality. I acknowledged that while they were interested, they were limited. I worked at not making excuses for



them. I simply had to admit that their care and concern was superficial, so I learned to provide superficial responses and modify my expectations of them. Accepting people for who they are, and not who we want or wish they were, is a big step in making our lives better...even though it is initially painful. This is also about forgiveness and letting go (and we spend a good deal of time on this topic in our Take Back Your Life Group Program).

Changing our perspectives and expectations of others can be challenging and at times painful and sad, but it opens us up to so much more because we can now operate in our lives in a much more realistic way. You are moving toward using the new-found skills of gaining clarity on your desired outcome, setting new boundaries and acknowledging that your needs and feelings really do matter, we can move forward to step 5...

STEP 5. Be prepared: Whether you attend a gathering on your own or with your parents or spouse, you know there will be questions...they're inevitable. You want to be prepared for questions and comments that feel burdensome, guilt-inducing, intrusive, or that trigger your own sadness and disappointment, frustration, and sometimes even abject disgust.

Here are some responses you could practice for questions that could come up during this holiday season. (I've also included some of these on your handout as a quick reference guide).

1. Thank you for asking. It's been difficult, and I'd welcome the opportunity to let you know what's going on, but now isn't the time. Can we talk (and give a time or day) and I'll fill you in?
2. Thank you for your care and concern. I'd appreciate some added support. Here's what's going on. (Fill them in IF and only IF you want to).
3. Thank you for asking. Now isn't the time to discuss this. I'd much rather we enjoy the party.
4. I hear that you're concerned. I could have used your help with _____ to make this event a little easier on me. Can I reach out to you next time?
5. I appreciate your concern and interest, but it's far too overwhelming for me to talk about this here. I'd much rather focus on the party and save this topic for another time. (Be prepared to change topics or say there are others you want to connect with and politely walk away).

If you feel guilty not answering any questions, remember that guilt implies that you have done or are doing something wrong, and you can feel guilty because you're doing something that is different, and the initial thought to doing things differently, is that it's wrong. We have to be prepared for the myriad of feelings that can pop up before, during, and after holiday parties.

Therefore, it can be helpful if you practice some of the above responses based on who is questioning you. Remember that not everyone needs details. You get to choose with whom you share your thoughts, feelings, concerns, and needs.

As caregivers, holidays do not feel the same for us as for everyone else...even if caregiving is your absolute norm. So, let me add a couple more steps in being prepared for the curious, intrusive, caring



and/or upsetting comments or questions you might hear over the course of the holiday season, and whether or not you show up with or without your loved one or even if you choose not to show up at all.

Do NOT explain, defend or justify: A simple statement that it didn't work for them to attend, and you will share their good thoughts and love when you see them next. If your parents are cognitively aware, you can lovingly suggest to whomever asks after your parents that they give them a call. Getting social calls is always appreciated.

You get to thank everyone who asks after your parent(s) for their thoughtfulness and consideration. You appreciate their concern.

If you've decided to attend an event alone, take a deep breath as you work through the feelings that arise as you enjoy the family gathering without added responsibility. Acknowledge that you deserve time off.

Feeling judged? Struggling to work through this decision-making process? Reach out for support and guidance, and if you haven't done so yet, download the step-by-step guide to help you through the ongoing stresses that come with care-giving, or go to takebackyourlifeguide.com

STEP 6. Remember, it's important to take care of your needs and feelings first: While we all want to operate as if the holidays are all fun, easy and breezy, we know that this is not the case...especially when you're a caregiver.

As I stated at the outset in Step 2, your needs and feelings count, and they have to count first. Just as they say during airplane safety instructions, that should oxygen be required, it will drop down and if you are traveling with a dependent, place the oxygen mask over your face first. Doing so is NOT selfishness, it's self-preservation, and if you're not first giving yourself oxygen, then you won't be able to give aid to anyone else. That is the simple reality.

So, family members may not understand or agree with your decisions regarding holiday plans, and they may feel uncomfortable and upset. Well, with many decisions and situations in life, someone is going to be upset, sad or frustrated. It just doesn't always have to be you.

There's a line from the poem *The Invitation* by Oriah Mountain Dreamer which is very apropos here:

"...I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul; if you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy..."

There will be discomfort in everything we do that is different than what we are used to. Today and going forward you get to decide whether you are going to continue to live with your own discomfort of doing the same thing again and again, or allow yourself to experience the discomfort of change and let others feel their own discomfort.



Changes always feel somewhat disquieting at the start, and that's why you'll have this class to come back to over and over throughout this holiday season, and beyond. Go through this program as often as you need to practice new strategies, and always remember:

STEP 7. And We Breathe: This whole program started with a breath, and it is something I implore you to remember and practice with great regularity. Taking that slow, deep breath before answering anyone's questions or comments will absolutely help you to move from auto reaction to thoughtful response, and it will give you time to process the request and think about your desired outcome, assess your feelings and needs, and determine how you want to respond to the request or demand being made. And we breathe, because we know as caregivers sometimes that's all we can do.

STEP 8. Walk Away: If and when the pressure feels too intense and you really feel bombarded or overwhelmed with either your own feelings of guilt, tension, anger, frustration, etc, take a break... walk away. Take a bathroom break, take a walk around the corner, go into a different room. If you're on the phone state, "I'll call you back in a moment," if you need to call a trusted friend to vent and get a new perspective. You might even opt to leave an event early. Remember, your needs and feelings matter!

STEP 9. Don't expect Miracles: While the holidays are the season of miracles, these strategies take courage, practice, patience and perseverance. You can enter into this holiday season with a more empowered perspective and that in and of itself can produce some positive outcomes for you, and ultimately those you love, but please remember that these changes take time. Be patient with yourself, so that whether things don't work out as you hope and plan, you are learning and growing and therefore changes will happen. Your needs and feelings do matter, even if initially others in your family give you resistance and pressure. This is normal! Remember to take those slow, deep breaths to keep you from falling back into old habits, and believe me, that can be miraculous enough. After all, these changes are for and about you. And we breathe...

STEP 10. Laugh, have fun and enjoy: At the end of the day, think about what your desired outcome is: to find enjoyment, peace, laughter, love. Make sure that whatever you decide to do, do it with an open and loving heart. Even if you feel guilted into attending a party that you really didn't want to go to, once you decide to go, honor your decision and choose to enjoy yourself. Yes, you can decide to have a good time for as long as you decide to stay. Practice smiling and laughing, and you'll see that your mood will lift.

Certain aspects of our lives are really not within our control, and acceptance of that reality is a necessity. Please remember...Acceptance doesn't mean like...when there is a situation that we cannot change, railing against it will not improve it. While taking time to vent is helpful, it is not helpful when all we're doing is venting and railing against reality. That only undermines any joy we might otherwise experience.



So, admit the trials and tribulations, acknowledge your frustrations, and determine what you need to add some joy, laughter and ease into your holiday season.

I wish you all the best possible outcome this holiday season.

And, yes, we breathe...