

Other people are not you

Other people are not you. Who would argue with the validity of this statement? The thought that “other people are not you” is intuitive, self-evident, and something that everyone seems to know. But *knowing* that other people are not you is insufficient to make much difference in your life. To really benefit from this potentially profound insight, you must come to *understand* that other people are not you. This understanding will help you to maintain better personal boundaries, avoid frustration, become more tolerant of others behavior, and better manage your life.

Other people are not you - this means that at times, others will wait when you would act. They will act when you would wait. They might remain in circumstances that you would abandon, and abandon circumstances in which you would remain. This is because, due to many factors, there is a wide range of variability among individuals. This is because other people are not you.

The variability among individuals is seen most clearly in the area of interpersonal relationships. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, it is sometimes easy to “know” what others should do.

For the most part, we think that others should do what we think we would do in similar circumstances. This is why it can be easy to think that a person should leave their unfaithful spouse. It is much more difficult to try to understand why they persist in an unfaithful relationship.

How is it possible for you to “know” what others should do in circumstances that cause them great ambivalence? Why do they not see their situation in the way you see it? Why do they not act as you would (or believe you would) act? The answers to these questions are psychologically and sociologically complex. However, for current purposes, suffice it to say that there are five primary factors that make it possible for you to “know” what other persons should do in circumstances that create indecision for them:

- 1) Different personal histories
- 2) Differences in actual or perceived abilities
- 3) Personal value and belief system differences
- 4) You do not have the emotional investment or attachments that exist for them
- 5) You will not experience the real-life consequences that they will experience upon making a decision to continue or a decision for change

Therefore, the personal process of making any significant life decision is fundamentally different for the involved person than it is for any outside observer.

Most persons will eventually decide things for themselves. Even when they plead “Tell me what to do” and you unwisely tell them what to do, they seldom act in accordance with any or all aspects of your advice. This is because it is likely that they have already considered what you are advising and your advice will not eradicate their ambivalence. In any event, your advice will likely be completely or at least partially ignored or rejected.

The reasons for ignoring or rejecting another’s advice usually include the less desirable consequences of the action you are advising - which are often the original causes of the

person's underlying ambivalence! Therefore, the verbal exchange, "tell me what to do" followed by "you should do X" can become a repetitive personal-interaction game that soon becomes frustrating for both the seeker and provider of advice. Alternatively, if you advise the person to do X and the person does X, and things do not go well, the failure will likely be assigned to you..."I listened to you and now look where I am."

But what about the times when a person asks you what they should do, you tell them what to do, and based on your advice all works out fine? Unless your advice consists of factual or procedural information that clarifies how to proceed with something already decided, telling others what to do seldom results in any long-term positive outcomes.

Deciding things for people who are capable of deciding for themselves is inherently dysfunctional. It encourages dependency, suppresses the development of self-responsibility, and reduces personal independence. This is not a desirable outcome. This is why the "tell me what to do" - "you should do X" pattern of interpersonal interaction is rarely seen in healthy functional relationships. Instead of telling a person what to do, it is better to listen to the person, help them explore options, and support them in their effort to address the issue.

Decision making

Sometimes people get stuck. They seem unable to make a decision. They remain indecisive regarding undesirable life circumstances. Meanwhile, days, months, years, even decades can pass. Some persons argue that remaining indecisive is a type of decision - a decision to endure the present circumstances. In these cases, it is only when (and if) the *undesirable* becomes the *intolerable* that persons will implement an effort for change. How do you know when the undesirable becomes the intolerable? When action is taken to bring about change. Up to that point, the person is tolerating the circumstances, no matter how undesirable.

While undesirable circumstances may worsen to make things intolerable, it is important to note that a change of circumstances is not necessary for this transition. Moving from undesirable to intolerable may be caused by an exhaustion of a person's ability to tolerate the circumstances as they are. In such cases, there is not a "straw that broke the camel's back." A person can become fed up with their circumstances and decide to do something about it. An example of this is a person who decides to confront a long-time abusive spouse or leave the relationship entirely.

Personal evaluation

Other people are not you is also a frequent factor in our personal evaluation of other's behavior. It is expressed in self-statements such as, "I would not have done that" or "I would have not done that to you." Such exclamations likely reflect the differences in what you and others value.

Conclusion and summary

In the end, it is wise to remember that others may not think what you think, may not feel what you feel, may not value what you value, and may not act how you might act or think you might act. This is because they live in a different, and in many ways unique, psychological and sociological world. This is because other people are not you.

From: Digliani, J.A. (2015). *Contemporary Issues in Police Psychology*. (Revised on website April, 2020)