

Stepping Out of the Should Trap

by Joanna Holsten

□ “I should make more money.”

□ “I should lose weight.”

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□ “I should volunteer more often.”

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□ In saying “should” so often, I found myself feeling trapped by a sense of obligation and expectation. I felt this vague pressure to conform to external standards, to be someone or do something. It felt like just being me wasn’t okay. I felt pushed to follow a particular path, behave in specific ways, and believe certain things. In observing my mind and growing towards a more compassionate life, I realized that I had internalized both the messages and the method of the “shoulds.”

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□ Messages

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□ “Should” messages are familiar to all of us. Our lives are saturated with societal norms of success, beauty, intellect, strength, femininity, masculinity, ad infinitum. If you need a refresher, watch an hour of television or walk around a mall. Unfortunately many of these messages didn’t align with my values.

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□ Living in a sea of “shoulds”, I found myself in an impossible situation. I ended up being disappointed with myself or fearful of disappointing others. When I would obey the “should” in my mind, I felt far away from the ideas, needs, and values that I authentically desired. When I would choose to do something not on the “should” list, I felt guilt, shame, or fear that other people would disapprove and judge me negatively. Under the tyranny of the “shoulds,” I couldn’t find genuine fulfillment. I frequently felt lacking.

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□These persistent and powerful messages around us make it very difficult to listen to an inner voice. In some situations, I internalized the “shoulds” so deeply that I didn’t have the chance to discover my own independent beliefs. The “shoulds” lead one to adopt externalized values and never question the commands. By obeying “shoulds,” our belief systems could be coopted by external forces.

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□Method

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□In addition to absorbing the messages, I also started adopting the “should” method of using one-way force to gain compliance with others and myself. “Shoulds” are rarely conveyed as a dialogue about values or a cooperative process to understand differing perspectives. Instead, they are pressed in one direction. The priorities are set and deposited on the passive receiver. The “should” method represents a way of thinking and making decisions in which you are told what to do and be rather than searching for your own authentic needs. By internalizing this method of compliance, I not only felt the external “shoulds,” but began placing “shoulds” on myself as a way to direct my own behavior. I was my own personal tyrant.

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□While many people may have identified the harm in the “should” messages, I think it is even more important to identify the danger in the forceful method of compliance underlying the “shoulds.” In some cases, I identified messages that I didn’t believe in and found groups that circulated alternative “shoulds” that were more in agreement with my values: “I should drive a used, biodiesel car.” vs. “I should drive a luxury SUV.” Maybe one of these statements resonates more with you than the other, but they both use a violent means of communicating. The “should” method can be used to communicate positive messages too: “You should volunteer in the community” or “You should eat fruits and vegetables.” While these may be evaluated as healthy behaviors, if they are coming from a place of obligation and external expectation, they are still doing damage. It wasn’t until I figured out that the problem was in both the messages and the method that I was able to liberate myself from the “should” trap and live a more authentic life.

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□Stepping Out of the Trap

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□Inspirational idioms such as “March to the beat of your own drum” or “Forge your own

path" were so alluring and seemingly simple, but I really struggled. Breaking free of the "should" trap included five big steps for me:

- 1. understanding the trap,
- 2. choosing to change,
- 3. recognizing the "should" in my thoughts and emotions,
- 4. releasing the "should," and
- 5. looking inward to find my authentic self.

□Step 1: Understanding

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□The first step involved intellectually understanding the problem by labeling both the messages and methods of the "should" trap. In my adolescence, I saw people's anger at the mold that society pressed them into lead them to embrace the opposite of the norm as a means of rebellion. For example, smoking as a way to challenge the "don't smoke" command. What I didn't realize was that adopting oppositional positions still gives the "should" definitional power - instead of obeying the "should," people adopted the opposite, either way the "should" still set the standard. In my early adulthood, I tried shifting the should message, but not questioning the method of directing my actions with force. Recently, I recognized that both the message and the method of the trap was an important first step in freeing myself.

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□Step 2: Choosing to Change

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□The second step was to acknowledge the pain of the impossible situation that the "should" trap placed my mind and decide to change. By understanding the trap and linking the pain with the situation, I could see the damage this pattern was doing in my life. I had to choose to step out of the "should" trap. Choosing to make your own decisions and not blindly accept the norm takes courage. Removing yourself from the pattern does not stop people from judging or rejecting you. In fact, moving toward your authentic desires may even cause some to react more strongly. I found that choosing to change helped me fill my life with people who encouraged and loved my growing authentic self, and helped me gain strength in facing other's negative reactions. Talking with patients in the process of dying, a caretaker identified their number one regret - "I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me." It would take

courage and patience, but I was determined to live authentically.

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□Step 3: Recognizing the Pattern

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□The third step involves the daily process of observing my thoughts and recognizing the pattern. Meditation provided me with the skills to observe my mind and identify the "should" trap that ran carelessly through my thoughts. Deconditioning the "shoulds" requires practice with each thought. I had to be aware of these sneaky "shoulds" and catch myself when I started with a "should" story. Language was very useful in this process. The actual word "should" served as an instant red flag. Other phrases like "have to," "need to," or "gotta" can also be substituted for "should," but they still do the same damage. Of course there are other uses of the word that do not apply to this context, but I found that the trapping pattern was behind most of my "should" statements. Until I learn this new pattern, I've stopped using the word "should." (Note: If you change the way you speak but don't change the underlying intention, I don't think it will work. The important thing for me was living from an empowered position and not blindly internalizing or pushing beliefs.)

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□Checking in on how I was feeling was very helpful too. After observing the "should" trap, I found that certain emotions and physical responses came along with the thought pattern. When I start emotionally feeling worthless, sad, or confined, I would look to see if I was in the trap. My body would even respond. When I start physically feeling compressed, dark, and heavy, I look around for the snare that I may have stepped in.

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□Step 4: Releasing the "Should"

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□Once I understood the trap, chose to change, and recognized the pattern, the fourth step is to release the "should" story. I like to think of it as letting the thought dissolve. It is important to me that I don't harbor anger at the "should," rebel against the "should," or feed it any more energy than it has already taken from me. I had to do more than not obey the "shoulds," I had to take their power away. Others can tell me "should" stories, but I had to choose what to believe and how to live. Sometimes I have been able to recognize it quickly and let a "should" dissolve right away. When the "should" is about something important, or something that I receive a lot of external pressure about, it takes a lot more patience and conscious work to release myself from the "should" and find what

I authentically think. Through meditation, I practice noticing where my mind is, redirecting it away from thoughts, and focusing it on breath or sensations. This valuable introspection helped me realize that I am not a captive of my thoughts and gave me regular practice in releasing those sticky "shoulds."

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□Step 5: Listening Inside

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□Since I no longer look for direction from the "shoulds," I needed to find my own path. What would I do? I had to find out what I needed and wanted in my life. After spending a lifetime in the "should" trap, I felt a bit insecure without having instructions. When I first tried to listen to my inner voice, I found lots of silence and only a few faint whispers. Compared to obeying "shoulds," finding your own direction might feel less absolute and evolves over time.

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□Feeling a bit scared, I was tempted to relinquish my power to someone or something else, adopt a new philosophy, a new boss, a new structure. I thought, "Wouldn't it be easier to be told what to do!" As tempting as that may sound at times, I know that I would just re-enter this violent relation and the pain would return. For me, the real solution was self-empowerment - growing a trust in myself to think and feel for myself, taking responsibility for my actions and beliefs, and then enjoying the true freedom that this delivers.

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□I established a safe environment for exploration and listened to what I felt even if it sounded strange to my "should" conditioned self, "Maybe I want to become a farmer!" I explored my mind and tried on lots of different ideas. I could do anything, be anyone! I combined my hopes and aspirations with my practical needs, and slowly starting living an embodied life. This isn't about rejecting the mainstream or railing against conformity. It's about authenticity. I am slowly learning to weave together my intellect, emotions, and intuitions. I believe this process encompasses a lifetime of work.

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□This process is not necessarily linear. Sometimes circumstances around me and in my own mind send me from step 4 back to step 1. Sometimes step 5 is co-occurring with step 2. Sometimes step 2 and 3 seem to merge together, but you get the idea.

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□Living Authentically

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□By stepping out of the "should" trap, I shifted the locus of power in my life from others to myself. I didn't have to change anything around me, only how I responded to it. Going through this process has been liberating. I feel fulfilled much more often, and when I feel down I know it is in my hands to change. I am no longer a victim, but an engaged actor. I have more fully realized and embraced my life goals. After graduate school, I felt a lot of pressure to climb the next rung of the academic ladder, even though I knew that I could help the world and be happier working in a different capacity. The decision to move in an unexpected direction has been difficult, but with an authentic approach I see the whole picture of my decision, and can craft fulfilling work without feeling like a disappointment. Almost equally important, my approach to small tasks changed too. Since our life is filled with mundane chores, feeling trapped by them can have a big impact. My outlook shifted from "I have to do laundry today" to "I want to have clean clothes for the rest of the week, so I choose to do laundry today." Laundry is not being thrust upon me, but I am choosing it with eyes open.

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□Embracing Responsibility and Generosity

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□Some might say that without these external obligations, people wouldn't take responsibility or wouldn't do things that need to be done, like follow rules or go to work. I think the opposite is true. Working within the "should" trap robs us of our personal responsibility. In the trap, you do what you are told, and not what you assess to be right. So, you could easily be swayed to do things that are not best for you or your community. Stepping out of the trap does not excuse you of responsibility. It doesn't mean that you no longer have to do unpleasant things. Instead, it requires that you see the whole picture, the options you have, and you choose for yourself. Living authentically, you own your decisions.

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□Stepping out of the "should" trap and living authentically is not about being selfish, but about self-actualizing. The most compassionate people I know are the ones who live authentically. While undergoing this shift in perspective, I found that serving others felt different. When I now give, I am giving out of honest desire not obligation. Service to others now feels real and uplifting because I own the decision, rather than burdensome because it is the end product of some "should."

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□Stop Trapping Others

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□Within the "should" trap, I filled the roles of the oppressed and the oppressor. While being oppressed by the "shoulds" around me, I also perpetuated the cycle by applying "shoulds" to others. I forcefully placed expectations on my family, my friends, and my partner. In doing so, I didn't reach out for their understanding and experience. I spoke as though it had to be one way. In stepping out of the trap myself, I am also trying not to set it for others. I am working to request things and have a dialogue without applying obligation or limiting others' responsibility and authenticity. Identifying the "shoulds" has been part of a larger shift in how I treat others and myself. I am working hard to remove at least one tyrant from the world.

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□References

□Bronnie Ware, "Regrets of the Dying," Inspiration and Chai, accessed on December 9, 2011

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□Many thanks to Leah Pearlman for coaching and encouraging me to make authentic little stick people.

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