The Tyranny of But

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I'd like you all to try this...replace the word "but" with the word "and" and see how your perspective changes.

Often when we are personally or professionally spread thin, we start using the word "but" with great frequency. It could be because we're taking care of the needs of others or trying to do our best when confronted with more tasks than time. We may employ "but" as a subtle linguistic aid in justifying the increasing demands that we put on ourselves and others. "I'm exhausted, but I need to get these reports done." "I need to grab lunch, but this is the only time I can fit in that consult." "Of course there is no time, but someone has to do it." The tricky thing is that "but" rolls off our tongues so slyly, we often don't even hear it. We're simply living our lives and making daily decisions. The problem is the use of "but" is an act of persuasion. When there are greater needs than capacity to address them, "but" may function to push us to overextend ourselves and neglect self care.

Another way "but" can work against us is self-handicapping. "I should try joining my friend for that exercise class, but I am not very coordinated." This form is taking something you would like to do or accomplish, or even something you've done, adding "but," and ending the sentence with some reason why you can't try or why your attempt was poor. "I think I should do this, but I'm not brave enough." "I put a lot of work into this project, but I'm not very good with presenting data." Self-handicapping is antithetical to self-care. Using our internal self-criticism to negate our efforts or goals is unhelpful in any one instance and can be destructive as a habit.

Using "but" prioritizes one idea at the expense of another. "I need to go home, but I have to finish this paperwork." In that case, you're going to do your paperwork or worry about having not done it. "I'd really like to get to the gym or walk, but I need to go take care of my loved one." The idea that follows "but" can soften the preceding idea or even negate it. Using "but" allows you to strategically hide one thing behind another. Next time you hear yourself say "but," try replacing it with "and" and see what happens. "I need to go home, and I have to finish this paperwork." "I'd really like to get to the gym or take a walk, and I need to go see my loved one." Substituting "and" for "but" will not make a decision for you. It will allow you to hear both needs or concerns without one superseding the other.

In the ideal situation, despite the level of challenge or hardship in our lives, we can experience what replenishes us emotionally, mentally, and spiritually and the challenges that tax these very same resources. Embracing life's delights amidst the hardships involves a willingness to be mindful and aware. Being mindful and accepting of moments in life when two competing needs or desires exist or where either option is equally challenging requires the willingness to slow down and reflect.

"But" doesn't allow for consideration of competing needs or ask us to take time to consider. "But" is the conjunction of automaticity. "But" asks you to ignore or postpone the former in favor of the later. It serves the short term without considering the long term. "And" is the conjunction that allows for consideration of multiple needs rather than the subordination of one to another. "And" has the potential to be the conjunction of mindfulness.

When you hear yourself say "but," consider that you're in the act of persuading yourself or others that one thing is more important in that moment than another. Be mindful of why and try out "and." See how "and" changes your life!

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