

Five of My Favorite Tips for Thriving

 **EXTRA BONUS** Relationship Tips

 **EXTRA BONUS** Enabling or Scaffolding?



Donal MacCoon, Ph.D.

Introduction

These are some of my favorite tips for thriving and connecting with others. Some of them might surprise you. I know they surprised me.

Tip #1 – Criticism vs. Complaints

Tip #2 – Made a mistake? G.R.L.

Tip #3 – Neither invade nor abandon

Tip #4 – Take a break

Tip #5 – Skillful Disagreement: Skillful words need the music of kindness

Bonus #1 – Relationship mini-review: 4 Must-Avoids and 3 Must-Haves for a relationship (include friendly autonomy and mutual influence; 4 areas of compatibility)

Bonus #2 – What’s the difference between enabling and scaffolding.

At the end of this book, I describe the full training for sustainable well-being with access to free material and discounts.

Tip #1 – Criticism vs. Complaint

Before I clocked much time as a therapist, I wouldn’t have thought this distinction is as important as I now do. In our avoidance culture, many of us are taught that complaints are whining and to be avoided whereas as pathological focus on personal responsibility often encourages criticism in general, and self-criticism in particular.

I have a bold claim for you. Criticism is almost always inaccurate and counterproductive. It is inaccurate often because it is too general. For example, if I fail a calculus test and conclude that I’m a worthless human being, that is manifestly not true but would certainly require a great deal more evidence than simply failing a calculus test. It is perhaps a bummer of a truth that I’m bad at calculus or maybe even math, but that’s an entirely different issue. In that case, I’m – perhaps – correctly recognizing that I have a weakness. We all have both weaknesses and strengths. That’s just a fact of life.

Our strengths don't make us the best people on the planet and our weaknesses do not make us worthless.

It's no wonder that criticism is related to the emotion of shame, an emotion that can carry a sense of debilitating worthlessness along with it. Contempt is another closely related idea. What all these have in common is that whether applied to ourselves or others, we are making attributions about character and traits instead of behaviors and states. We want to eradicate the former and enhance the latter. One area of research that emphasizes this point is the research conducted by Lyn Abramson and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin – Madison on hopelessness depression. They find that unpleasant stable (over time), global (across domains), internal attributions lead to depression. Criticism is the act of making unpleasant stable, global, and internal attributions about others or ourselves.

Criticism is counterproductive not only because it causes depression and ruins relationships (see Bonus below), but also because we have limited prefrontal brain capacity. That means that whatever we are currently focusing on and processing takes up the neural resources available for processing something else. So, if I make a mistake and I'm using my limited processing capacity on processing self-criticism, I will not have the capacity available for doing the only three things I need to do when I've made a mistake (see tip #2). Instead, I'm rehearsing and increasing the strength of a neural network that represents a bad habit and an inaccurate view of myself.

Now, I hope it's obvious that I'm not advocating for ignoring mistakes we make. On the contrary, noticing mistakes is critical for our own survival and thriving. And that brings us to complaints. I have another bold claim for you to consider: we should be complaining early, often, and skillfully. Complaining is the way we identify a problem, and the best way to solve a problem is to know what it is. What tone of voice you use while you're identifying a problem and how skillfully you communicate the problem are also important. For now let's just notice the goal: eradicate criticism and skillfully complain.

Tip #2 – Made a mistake? G.R.L.

For many of us, making a mistake will result in an internal tyrade of violent self-criticism which we've already established as inaccurate and counterproductive, right? There are only three things to do when you realize you've made a mistake: Grace. Repair. Learn.

Grace: Give yourself grace. Everyone makes mistakes. It's a natural way of learning in the world. Some argue that the only way to avoid mistakes is really to avoid life by staying in highly scripted or safe zones of that life. You can be an excellent skier, for example, but if you're never falling, it's probably because you're not pushing yourself. Life is so complex that we're never going to be perfect. But if we run experiments and pay attention to the feedback from those experiments, we can iterate into a better life. So, when we make mistakes, it's important to give ourselves some grace, space, kindness. It's ok that we made the mistake.

Repair. Repair the damage caused by your mistake whether it's an apology, fixing a broken window, or a combination of the two. You can't always fix the damage done, but you can try to repair and use skillful listening in the process.

Learn to avoid the mistake in the future. If you combine the extra capacity you have from giving yourself grace and the knowledge gained from repair conversations with a close look at the causes of the mistake, you can decide to avoid the cause in the future. Sometimes there's a long chain of decisions that needs to shift. For example, I yelled at my child because I arrived late to a work meeting which threw off my day, was flipped off driving home, opened the door and was greeted by chaos and a partner who was on their last nerve, forgot to pick up dinner, and then my child complained that they wanted anything but what I ended up cooking. In this example, I arrived late to my meeting because I didn't have a reminder in my phone. Do have reminders in my phone now for future meetings? The meeting threw off my day because I felt stressed, guilty, and self-critical for being late and was so focused on that I could take a breath and reset. Have I internalized the lesson about complaints vs. criticism? Can I learn to recognize the unpleasant emotions of stress and guilt so they trigger the idea of taking a brief break and

resetting? I was flipped off on my way home because (I must admit) I was driving too fast because I was running late to get home because I did one too many things before leaving work. Have I solved the problem of doing one too many things? And so on...

It's perhaps not surprising that we don't do these three simple things when we make a mistake. Typically, I see people getting taken over by their unpleasant emotion and then spinning into a black hole of self-criticism so that they are doomed to keep repeating the same mistakes, in part because they don't ever get around to making the small – and sometimes numerous – changes in their lives necessary to prevent them. Do yourself a favor, make G.R.L. your new habit.

And when you do, be ready for the implications of this this observation: There are no heroes in prevention. If someone cures cancer, they're a hero. If they prevent it, it's very unlikely we'd ever know. So, as you change your life and prevent mistakes from happening, try to be aware of how things would have gone before.

Tip #3 – Neither invade nor abandon

In his teaching, Jim Finley, clinical psychologist, student of Thomas Merton, and core faculty at [The Center for Action and Contemplation](#), will often suggest: “Neither invade nor abandon.” Do not invade other people. Do not abandon them. Do not abandon yourself or allow yourself to be invaded. You cannot be kind to yourself or others if you are invading them.

Believe me, as a psychologist, I have done way more than my share of invading others, a mistake that has caused a lot of suffering. For example, if you ask someone how they're doing, and they give a scripted, “I'm fine,” and you can tell they're not fine, do you pause and ask them, “Are you really ok?” Do you do it with a patronizing frown, sneering, judging, or with kindness? Even if you do it with sincere kindness (meaning you're not just fooling yourself that your being kind when you're actually being passive aggressive, or...), this may feel invasive to the other person who is setting a boundary to protect themselves – not letting themselves be invaded, not abandoning themselves – by saying, “I'm fine.”

Many of us are raised in our culture to be people pleasers. Everyone likes people who are nice and polite so we are rewarded for abandoning ourselves in order to please others, letting ourselves be invaded by various requests for our time or energy. Sure, we notice the resentment, but since we've also been taught that unpleasant emotion is negative, we try to suppress resentment and miss the clear message that we're violating ourselves.

It's easy for parents to invade kids in the name of helping them. It's sometimes difficult to know the balance between supporting someone and insisting on a change in their behavior in an invasive way.

It's easy to abandon people who cause us unpleasant emotion especially because our avoidance culture trains us to use silence and violence against others to make ourselves feel better.

This is just the tip of a very large iceberg of a topic, but it's a very useful reminder: Neither invade nor abandon.

Tip #4 – Take a break

This one is deceptively simple, but so important, especially in personal interactions. The simple version of this one is this: when you are feeling like things are too much, take a break. Notice, however, that this requires you to (1) have the self-awareness to know when things are getting to be too much, (2) do something counter-cultural like pausing or interrupting or closing down a conversation, and (3) either taking a counter-cultural internal pause or leave the situation. None of these things are particularly well-trained in our culture. As an example, if you have a guest who is staying too late and is not picking up on any of your decreasingly subtle and polite cues that it's time for them to go home, what do you do? If someone is talking to you on the phone and you're getting tired of the conversation, what do you do? The simple answer is "take a break." That break can be as simple as breathing slowly or closing your eyes, but you might need something more dramatic. In the latter case, taking a break means saying to your guest something like, "I'm sorry. I'd like to continue the conversation, but I think I just need to go to sleep. I'm really tired." On the phone call: "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to go."

The difficulty with these very straightforward options derives from two primary aspects of our culture. First, many of us are defensive – we feel criticized when we haven’t been criticized. So, we can feel criticized when someone interrupts our conversation and says they need to go. “I’m boring.” “What a jerk.” “How rude!” Second, there’s an emphasis on being polite which often translates to doing anything to make someone else feel any whiff of unpleasant emotion. The reason for this is that most of us are fragile and incompetent at handling any unpleasant emotion and are likely to respond with silence and violence when unpleasant emotions are triggered for us. We can note here that taking a break is a form of silence, but it’s a healthy form. Often taking a break early enough will prevent worse suffering that can happen when we suppress our unpleasant emotions until they explode. That’s often much less ideal than a more skillful and diplomatic boundary setting done earlier.

Tip #5 – Skillful Disagreement: Skillful words need the music of kindness

There are a host of skills that combine to represent skillful disagreement. They include, for example, using “I statements”, expressing your emotion, and keeping your statements short and simple. They include listening well which means being able to summarize someone, validate them, and empathize with what they’ve said. It includes principles of non-violent communication, testing when someone is capable of connection strategies or will resort, instead, to silence and violence. It involves accepting reality, not being passive aggressive, not being self-critical, and a host of other skills.

However. Trust me when I tell you that you can do ALL of those things and still mess things up royally if you are not also able to be sincerely kind while saying them. Kindness is the music for the words of skillful disagreement. And kindness in a conversation with someone who is causing unpleasant emotion is very difficult. It is easy to PRETEND to be kind. It is difficult to actually be kind. And, let’s recognize in passing that there’s an important difference between being diplomatic, nice, or polite, on the one hand, and being kind, on the other.

Bonus #1 – Relationship Tips

There are a few simple things that everyone should know about a relationship. Much of these insights come from John and Julie Gottman's research and work on romantic couples. I believe they are important for all relationships.

Four things you must avoid. There are four things that are so poisonous and destructive to relationships that the Gottman's call these the Four Horsemen. I sometimes just underline that by going all the way: The Four Horsemen of a Relationship Apocalypse. They are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stone walling. Stone walling is the only one we haven't covered so far. When someone refuses to talk, that's stone walling. It's a very effective and popular technique in our culture, but it is poison for relationships.

Four areas of compatibility. In his book, *Will Our Love Last?* Sam Hamburg makes a good case that all couple's should have large degrees of compatibility in three areas because teaching communication skills is often unsuccessful as a strategy to create a good relationship. These three areas are:

- Practical/logistical day-to-day life: Pace, when to get up, TV dinner or at the table, tailgate or picnic, hiking or beach, same standard for clean dishes
- Sexual: Similar importance, frequency, attraction, similar sexual activities
- Worldview: Partners get and affirm each other; spiritual, worldview, religion, politics, movies, public school or private, breast feeding or bottle

You can see that the boundary between some of these areas may be a bit arbitrary. A preference for hiking over the beach might represent a more day-to-day logistical concern or could be more of a worldview preference. But, the point is that high degrees of compatibility are good for relationships.

The more compatible people are, the fewer disagreements there will be. That is largely a good thing! However, no one is going to be 100% compatible which is why my claim is that skillful communication generally – and skillful disagreement in particular – is a fourth area of compatibility that is crucial for

a successful relationship involving any real depth and intimacy, a closeness that Sue Johnson might call a bond as characterized by being emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged.

Four Other Must-Haves for a relationship. Fondness and admiration, curiosity, turning toward, and mutual influence. Each of these are emphasized by John and Julie Gottman in their recommended books. “Turning toward” needs a bit of explanation. If I marvel out loud about a cardinal in the garden, my partner would be turning toward me if they came to the window to see it and exclaim along with me. If my partner ignores me, that’s not turning toward. Mutual influence is another interesting addition. In a health relationship, we both give and receive influence.

Bonus #2 – What’s the difference between enabling and scaffolding?

Our violent culture focuses on codependency rather than interdependency. One aspect of this is to focus on pathologizing help for someone else by calling it, “enabling.” Enabling occurs when our “help” reinforces someone’s bad habits. In this way, enabling is damaging, not helpful.

However, we sometimes go overboard, labeling things “enabling” that are actually a form of scaffolding. Scaffolding is a term from developmental psychology used to describe how we help children learn. When a child is learning to walk, we first help them crawl, then we help support their weight as they try to stand, we hold their hands as they start to walk. Gradually we help less which encourages them to grow strong and balanced enough to walk on their own. There is a fine balance between preventing negative consequences and allowing them. We do try to minimize the pain the child experiences while allowing them to learn by doing...and falling. The key issue from a behavioral learning perspective can be expressed in three statements:

1. Anything that allows someone to learn and practice a better habit is helpful
2. Anything that prevents someone from learning and practicing a better habit is unhelpful but may be the best possible outcome in certain

circumstances. This is related to harm reduction – rather than a cure – as a goal under certain circumstances.

3. Anything that encourages someone to increase their bad habits is damaging.

“Enabling” is often applied to parents whose adult children have a drug problem. “Stop enabling your kids; you’ve got to let them hit rock bottom.” That advice certainly fits our violent culture and promises parents some relief from an awful situation. But, if we return to the three statements above, there are only one real question: How do I help without causing harm?

Though this insight into scaffolding has implications for substance abuse, it also has implications for how we treat ourselves and each other. For example, if I’m trying to lose weight, can I be honest about the difference between enabling and scaffolding? Is what I’m doing unrealistic given my current skills? Instead, I can choose a small step and learn to walk before I run.



Kindness for a Change Training

If you think this material is worthwhile, take my free training which will give you many more skills as well as a great introduction to Kindness for a Change (KFAC), my 10-week training program for healing ourselves and our planet. KFAC is designed to transform your individual well-being and your relationships. The skills and knowledge from those areas also happen to be a critical foundation for healing our politics and planet.

Our current culture is destructive, disconnecting, fragile, and unsustainable on every level: individual mental health, relationships, politics, and planet. We need to quickly evolve from that industrial culture to an ecosystem culture that is healing, connecting, resilient, and permanent. This is the only training designed to do that!



Don't take my word for it, KFAC alumni consistently rate the training with 5 stars, saying it's one of the best trainings they've ever participated in. Here's just a few of their other comments:

This KFAC training is worth the time and energy and can lead to transformations in many aspects of your life in ways you won't know until you take the class!

Learn how to be Ninja Warriors, not Widgets!

This is one course that you do not want to miss. It is packed full of information that can help you personally thrive. You'll also learn skillful ways of interacting with others and ways you can impact the planet.

These strategies have made me bolder to speak out against the things that keep us going into shame and blame.

It is so comprehensive it has permeated into lots of areas of my life, personal, social, well-being practices, mindfulness practices, dealing with family dynamics, considering alternative political, social and societal ways of being.

This really augments and supports the mindful self-compassion and mindfulness practices that I facilitate in groups...the "missing" piece in mindfulness and self-compassion trainings.

The heart of Kindness for a Change is my Thriving Strategies Framework. If you want to know more about the Thriving Strategies, take the free Quiz and get a video from me explaining your results. The training uses these thriving strategies to integrate six areas of skills and knowledge to achieve your transformation (see illustration).



Kindness for a Change

6 Areas of Skills and Knowledge

1. Individual well-being 
2. Relationships 
3. Brain & Nervous System 
4. Lessons of Big History 
5. New Life Design: Physical Technology 
6. New Life Design: Social Technology 

And all that training occurs with as much opportunity as you want to connect with others like you. For some people, finding people with the same aspirations and language to have real conversations about real topics is the best part of the experience.

The training came alive with like-minded people opening their hearts, taking risks and sharing their lives and hearts with ways the material influenced their lives as well as simply sharing where they were at in that moment of class.

I was hesitant due to my shyness in participating in groups with people I don't know well but the group was very inviting, and we had the freedom to be who we are and to get what we needed depending on how we were at the time of the class. Everyone was encouraged by one another to be authentic and real.

And perhaps the best news is that if you sign up for early interest in the course, you will qualify for a discount AND get access to the first training for free! See for yourself how valuable it is. To be first in line to hear about the next training and access discounts,

[>>> click this link <<<](#)

About Dr. Donal MacCoon



- Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the best national program in his field
- 20+ years as a therapist helping hundreds of individuals, couples, and groups learn to thrive
- Worked with Dr. Richard Davidson, a Time Magazine 100 Most Influential People
- Co-invented the Health Enhancement Program, proven in several large NIH clinical trials to enhance sustainable well-being and thriving for hundreds
- Published 20+ scientific articles related to sustainable well-being, anxiety, depression, and dysregulated behavior.
- Survived 13 years of personal suffering (3 years of child's cancer, family implosion, and 7 years of wife's disabling pain)
- Member of a cohousing community for 16 years
- Studied with world experts in ecology, sustainable agriculture, and permaculture
- Ran several political campaigns (back in the day)

