This saying came to me like a mantra during Hurricane Harvey and repeated in my mind often. And it’s back now with Coronavirus, like a broken record. I’ve been trying to understand why it keeps coming up. I get protecting my family. I understand washing hands, keeping distanced, keeping the family and community safe and healthy. But I kept thinking that it was really coming up to remind me of something more. I have tried to be “curious” about this mantra to get clear on why, now in another difficult time, that this saying is coming back to me.

What I have discovered is that it has very little to do with the act of just protecting my family, social distancing or washing hands (all which are very important) and everything to do with honing in on what really matters, focusing only on what I can control and engaging in that with a whole lot of self-compassion and revised expectations during a time of uncertainty.

Putting words to why I’m circling the wagons and what I’m circling the wagons around is helping me find balance and a sense of calm during this crazy time and I hope that sharing will be helpful to others who may be struggling.

So, what exactly am I talking about? First, I began to notice that “Circle The Wagons” popped into my head when I was trying to be someone I’m not (like a Pinterest crafty Mom or master homeschooler) or when my expectations were unaligned with the reality of our life at the present time (clean house, order, time alone). It comes when I am irritable, cranky and demanding, when I don’t prioritize time for self care or when I am worried and focused about the unknowns in the future. I became clear that when I hear myself say “Circle The Wagons” when stressed, irritable, trying to be what I’m not or worrying about the future that I need to intentionally Circle the Wagons around 3 things: Focusing on what I can control, honing in on my values (or what really matters to help guide the way) and self compassion.
Focus on what you can control

When you Circle the Wagons you create a smaller space of control. We can’t control coronavirus, or the economy, how our government responds, what the school districts or employers decide or what others are doing or thinking. But you can control what you do. And what you do, in the here and now can make a huge difference to you, those living with you and the community around you. So, how do we do that? First, we have to remember that we have much more control over our behavior than we do our difficult thoughts and feelings. And learning a skill in grounding into the present moment can be very helpful.

I love the Drop Anchor Exercise from Russ Harris (Russ Harris, 2020 www.TheHappinessTrap.com.)

Basically, it goes like this: When a big storm comes, what do boats out in the ocean do? They drop anchor. If they don’t they will be swept up and out into sea. Dropping anchor doesn’t stop the storm, but it holds the boat steady until the storm passes. In a crisis, it can feel like an emotional and existential storm. Scary thoughts and upsetting feelings spin inside us and we can easily get swept away in them.

This metaphor asks us to DROP ANCHOR using the following ACE formula

A = Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings - notice what is coming up inside your body like difficult thoughts and feelings. Instead of trying to get rid of them, become curious about them and observe them like a curious scientist.

C= Come back into your body - Connect with your physical body. Connect with your senses by looking for something to feel, something to hear, something to smell or by noticing your breath, the muscles in your body through stretching, tensing and relaxing progressively, pushing your feet into the ground. Go outside, take a walk, pay attention to the chair you're sitting in or the sounds that you are hearing.

E = Engage in what you're doing - refocus on what you are doing. What is important right now, what small activity can you re engage in.
Brene Brown in The Daring Way discusses Values as one of the most important things to be clear on when things get tough. And Acceptance and Commitment Therapy has Values (knowing what matters to you) as one of the tenets of their psychological flexibility model. They speak of them as a lantern to light the way or as a compass to know which direction to move.

When we fall, or when we are in stress we have to be able to hone in on one or 2 values max that matter to us to be our guide. Our bodies and brains can’t do more in stress. Imagine for a minute facing a lion out in the open and having to deal with thoughts like “oh dear, how will I look running away from this lion” “everyone will think I’m such a loser running and not fighting” “I’m such a bad lion fighter, I need to prepare and practice to be a better lion fighter” or “what if I don’t beat the lion, what if, what if, what if...” I mean seriously! But this is what can happen when we don’t know what values light the way for us. We get swept up in shoulds, what if’s, what other people think, shame, self doubt. During times of stress like this, it is easy for our brains and bodies to spin into fear, worries about the future, thoughts of what if and shoulds leading us to become anxious, disconnected, irritable and really unpleasant to be around!

Instead, if we notice these feelings and thoughts, drop anchor and have a good sense of our Values (or what matters physically or psychologically for us) we can know how to move forward. It can be our lantern to light the way.

Here is a list of Values that come from The Daring Way.

Try it.

Pick 2 values, that in this time of uncertainty, are the values that you want to live by. Then write those 2 values all over the house on sticky notes. Put them in your purse, on your mirror, on the refrigerator. Ask everyone in the house to do it.

Be clear, put it in words and let this be your guide to know what you are circling the wagons around. When all else fails, come back to these 2 values and let them guide the way.
Find all the self-compassion that you can

None of this is easy.
Be kind to yourself.
Make speaking to yourself with kindness, patience and understanding an intentional practice.

Try these 2 things:

1. Speak to yourself like you would a best friend. Remind yourself that this is a storm that will pass and that you are a strong boat anchoring at sea. Remind yourself of the amazing values that light your way. Give yourself permission to not know all the answers.

2. Create a gratitude journal for what you have accomplished and what gratitude you have even while within your circled wagons. Were you able to share love with your family and community, to find patience in a difficult day, to take time when you needed it? Notice and honor that.

Circle The Wagons.
Clarify the values to guide you, focus on what you can control, and be kind to yourself. Oh, and stay healthy and wash your hands!

Nickie

For more information or to book an appointment, call 832-230-1167 or email info@westhoustononpsych.com.