

The First Cardinal Sin of Thinking: Gotta

by

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“I gotta go to work,” I gotta take care of the kids,” I gotta go to the market”, “I gotta get a job.” There are so many things we “gotta” do. Gotta, of course, is a somewhat slang expression for “got to” or “have to.” There may be no more insidious phrase in the English language than “have to.” No one likes to be forced or coerced into doing anything and “have to” is a coercive phrase. It not only suggests force, but that we have no choice in the matter. With no choice, there is no freedom, and that can make a person very angry.

Many people respond to “have to” statements with resistance, sometimes active resistance such as verbal outpourings of abusive language, and sometimes passive resistance by simply not doing what they have to do, getting ill so it can’t be done or forgetting. Some people become passively aggressive and lash out in very subtle ways when put into the apparently choiceless corner of “have to.”

What we often don’t recognize is that we use this kind of coercive language on ourselves, in our own self talk, and then respond with resistance, anger or aggression. We might tell ourselves that we “have to paint the kitchen walls this weekend” and then find that we couldn’t sleep on Friday night so we’re too tired on Saturday to start painting. Or, we might tell ourselves that we have to go to work, which is an extremely common phrase, and find ourselves going to work, but in a bad attitude, thinking we’d rather be sailing or fishing or.....You’ve certainly seen some bumper stickers which state that I’d rather be doing just about anything than what I “have to” be doing.

The use of the “have to” or “gotta” phrase within our own mind through our own internal dialogue, our own self talk, can cause us to feel lethargic, a-motivated, apathetic and even angry simply because we feel, subconsciously, as though we are being coerced and that we have no choice in the matter. The truth is, we do have a choice in the matter. Certainly, there are consequences to every choice we make. However, it is critically important to recognize that we do have choice, and in that choice, we have freedom. You can choose to go to work, or choose not to go to work. “But,” you say, “if I don’t go to work, I’ll be fired.” That could likely be the outcome, the consequence, of that choice, yes; but, at least there is a choice! There is freedom to make that choice!! Every morning upon awakening, we start making choices. We make choices all throughout the day. We are not coerced or forced into any decision or action that we do not choose. We are even free to choose how to respond to the consequences of previous choices we have made.

Because we have been intensely conditioned by our culture and our language, changing common linguistic phrases, such as “have to” can be very odd and feel quite strange. Nevertheless, it is an excellent exercise to replace “have to” with “choose to.” It is much more truthful and it empowers a person to make such self affirming statements. For example, “I gotta go to work” is transformed to “I choose to go to work.” “I have to go to the meeting tonight” is changed to “I choose to go to the meeting tonight.” Any person who makes this simple linguistic change will feel differently. They will feel more confident and more self assured. They will feel less resistance, more energy and greater sense of meaning and purpose in their life. They will feel more liberated, and more responsible. Everyone has freedom to make choices. No matter how restrained, how confined and how limited our circumstances may appear, everyone has the freedom to make a choice if even to have a negative or positive outlook on their current situation.