

## **“I Shouldn’t Have So Many Shoulds”**

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February 9, 2017

When I was a kid, my father purchased a small motorboat having had no nautical experience. And just a few days later, he – being the most under-qualified captain – took us out to sea for the first time. After dropping anchor for lunch about a mile or so offshore, my father goes to restart the engine, but finds, much to his surprise, that it doesn’t work. So to review: we’re in the ocean, on a boat, about a mile from shore, and the engine won’t work. So my father, being the man that he is, decides to do the logical thing: explode. Metaphorically speaking. He starts desperately screaming for help to the beach. He’s spinning the wheel as if that will do anything. He’s running back and forth, fear in his eyes, screaming “HELP! HELP!” frantically waving his arms like he’s simultaneously doing jumping jacks and hailing a cab in NYC. In this moment, he comforts us in the right way: “All right, we’re going to have to swim to shore otherwise we might drift out into the ocean and be lost forever.” Although swimming to shore wouldn’t have been that bad, he was basically just short of screaming, “we’re going to die!” at his two young daughters. You know? The logical reaction. After what seemed like decades of panicking, the coastguard calmly arrives and simply switches the boat’s gear: “it was in neutral.”

This story is exhibit A of our tendency to jump to conclusions, expect the worst, and blow our fears out of proportion, which not only causes loads of undue stress, but

also, apparently, in its worst form, can induce unnecessary near-death experiences. Like my father, I am extremely anxious and expect the worst. My hands sweat profusely and my heart races at the thought of speaking and sounding stupid in class. I used to stay inside all summer because I feared bee stings. These fears take us out of reality and transport us to a terrifying place of what-if. And these what-ifs can stress us out and prevent us from fully living. Although I've never been stung by a bee. So. Take that as you will.

But what if these what-ifs were positive? What if I win the lottery? What if I marry Jim from *The Office*? Problem solved. But here's the kicker: expecting the best is also kind of bad, right? Embracing a sort of romanticism in life is often associated with naiveté – we suckers have way too high expectations for life that we're bound to be let down. Not only do I have a lot of *scary* what-ifs, but my *positive* what-ifs take on a harmful imperative form. They must happen. They should happen. Simply put: I have a lot of *shoulds*. I should be happier. I should be in a relationship. I should be going outside more. I should be healthier. And all this pressure on living the ideal life can make you sick. Literally. This break, after a long period of couch-potatoing, I tried a boxing class, thinking, as a former competitive athlete, I should be able to handle this. But instead I pushed myself so hard to live up to this expectation that mid-class I walked outside into the pouring rain and threw up on the curb – still rocking my oversized pink boxing gloves. Expectation: Rocky, Sylvester Stallone, hands up with

victory; reality: me, Brooke, hands up holding my hair, blowing chunks. In many ways, these *shoulds* are good, except maybe when they result in unplanned vomiting. They help me strive for a better life. The one I should be living. But why *should* I be living a life that is different from the one I *am* living? I feel like I'm just setting myself up for a loss.

For example: About eight months ago, I was lying on the grass under the Eiffel Tower. It was unbelievable. It was surreal... Too surreal... It didn't feel real. And with that thought came anxiety. I *should* be feeling something more – something magical and physiological and life-changing. Butterflies? Like I'm Lizzie McGuire in Rome on Paulo's moped? So to help, I tried putting on Louis Armstrong's "La Vie en Rose" and my mind repeated, "Feel present! Feel present! Feel present! Feel present!"

I realize now that my insistence on feeling a certain way or being a certain way – my *shoulds* – wind up overshadowing and constraining my reality. And as a person with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, this ends up meaning that I *obsess* about how my reality is not living up to my expectations. For instance, every day I obsess on how my eyesight shouldn't be so unfocused or how this interpersonal interaction should feel more "real" – whatever that means. Instead of enjoying the present, the real, the now, the reality – I fixate on how my reality isn't how it *should* be. And constantly asking myself, "Is this real?" just makes it possible for me to think that it's not!

Now I'm not saying we shouldn't have any shoulds. I'm not advocating for complacency. Having goals and desires and aspirations are often what make life worth living. They excite us about the future and give us something to work toward. They make us better and the world a better place to live. I just think, before you get to the place, where I've been, of resenting your physical or mental reality, you can take some time to appreciate, or merely even accept, your reality. And even if everything does feel horrible, like you and your entire family might drift out to sea and be lost forever, focusing on that and wishing it were different makes it feel even worse. So maybe if we take a second, breath deep, and chuck the expectations, we might actually have a chance to realize that the engine was just in neutral all along.