



Are You A Cynic Or A Skeptic?

Break old habits and open yourself to change

By Dennis Coyne

A few months ago, I was at a conference and overheard a conversation between two men who had recently met. In that exchange, Tom told Peter that his first impression of Peter was that he was a cynic. Without hesitation, Peter denied this; he described himself as a skeptic. Not only did he draw a sharp distinction between the two terms, but he also made it very clear which one described him.

Before that exchange, I never thought about distinguishing between cynics and skeptics. Now I realize that the two are very different. As lawyers, we like to define our terms by referring to an authority. According to The American Heritage Dictionary, a cynic is (1) “a person who believes all people are motivated by selfishness,” and (2) “a person whose outlook is scornfully and often habitually negative.” A skeptic is “one who instinctively or habitually doubts, questions, or disagrees with assertions or generally accepted conclusions.”

Which one are you? As you seek to understand your life and accomplish what you want, it's best to know if you approach life as a cynic or as a skeptic and to appreciate the difference.

Cynics And Skeptics Have Different Beliefs About Change

Most of my clients are lawyers. They are talented and generally high achieving, and often come to me when they're either in the midst of a transition, or desiring a transition. They claim to want something more in their lives, or a different life altogether. Many refer to life-work balance.

These clients complain that they aren't enjoying themselves. In their view, their lives lack people or activities that would make them happy, that would make them feel as if they're living a good life.

Other clients focus on their work. They want to manage their work differently, or to practice law differently. Some are consumed by work, and see themselves as living billable lives. For them, the only time they can call their own is the time that hasn't been billed to their clients.

Many of these clients are skeptical. They doubt, question, challenge and probe. They engage in the coaching conversations and wrestle with big questions. While they acknowledge that they may be stuck now, they believe in the possibility that they might learn something and get to a new place. Their past is not necessarily prologue for the rest of their lives. They entertain possibility.

I've seen many a skeptic in my coaching practice—but I can't recall a single cynic. Scornful, habitually negative people are not likely to engage coaches; in fact, they see us and other helping professionals as

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untrustworthy. Unlike the skeptic, the cynic sees his past as bitter prologue, and clings stubbornly to that belief. Cynics seem to champion being stuck. For so many, spinning their wheels is all they know. They resist change. They don't entertain possibility.

How can our reflection on skepticism and cynicism teach us something useful as we attempt to better understand our lives and fashion our future? Three points come to mind.

Cynicism And Skepticism Are Habits

First, skepticism and cynicism, like other habits, are learned. So the question for each of us is how and where did we learn to be the way we are? How, at that time, did that behavior serve us? A recent conversation of mine illustrates this point.

Mary is a bright and accomplished lawyer, earning a good income, with loving children and good friends. Yet she complains that she never gets what she really wants. On its face, the assertion makes no sense. By any measure (but her own) Mary has a great deal of what most people prize.

I asked Mary when it was that she did not get what she really wanted. She gave the question some thought. Slowly, an image came into her mind—of herself as a three-year old. At that time, Mary's father had meant everything to her. Happily, she thought she was the apple of his eye. But one day Mary's father walked out on the family—she never saw him again.

At that time in her life, Mary learned that she could not get (or at least keep) what (or who) she really wanted in her life. Her belief was reasonable then, as it mirrored her experience. Over the early years of her life, her belief saved her from being disappointed again. But today, whenever life disappoints her, Mary continues to say to herself, "I never can have what I really want." But that proposition is no longer true for her. Mary places a high value on having a loving family and success in her career, and she has both. Moreover, the old proposition saps her strength and undermines her confidence in being able to fashion a satisfying life. The old proposition no longer serves her.

Learn To Recognize Destructive Patterns

Second, observing our habits and becoming aware of how destructive they may be is a first step to freeing ourselves of them. Bruce, for example, had an abusive father who berated him at every turn: if something went wrong, it was Bruce's fault. His father was a powerful figure and Bruce did not question him. Over time, Bruce came to blame himself for all of life's disappointments.

Today Bruce is a prominent lawyer with a loving family and many friends. Yet Bruce lives each day with his father's words ringing in his ears. From time to time, life disrupts and disappoints all of us. Yet when life disrupts Bruce, he sees himself as stupid and inept. With each mishap for which he assumes the blame, he fulfills his father's words.

Bruce's first task is to observe his pattern—life disrupts him and he berates himself. If he can see the pattern and interrupt it, Bruce has a chance to free himself of this vestigial reaction that saps his strength and undermines his confidence.

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Even Cynics Can Learn New Ways Of Reacting

Third, over time, new habits can be introduced that better serve us. Take Bruce again. The next time that life disappoints or frustrates him, Bruce can take a moment to calm himself, perhaps by simply taking a few deep breaths. His goal is to stop, look and listen, rather than crossing through a too-familiar intersection where he will hear his father's voice. If he is able to interrupt this old pattern, Bruce is capable of behaving differently. For example, Bruce can remind himself that life challenges everyone, and it's his response to these challenges that matter most.

Recognize a well-established pattern and realize how it no longer serves us; confront the pattern and interrupt it; and introduce a new pattern that serves us better. It's not easy, and I'm not underestimating its difficulty. But, on a daily basis, I observe clients who do just that. I've done it for myself. I know it can be done. Even cynics can do it.



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