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MAINTAINING MORALE IN THE
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Published August, 2004. Relational Child & Youth Care Practice, Volume 17 (2)

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Most readers will probably not be quite as “chronologically gifted” as myself, and therefore I should probably let those more chronologically challenged in on the fun of the article title. The title is a riff on an “old” country song by Johnny Paycheck, titled “Take This Job and Shove It!” You can probably guess that it was wildly popular for many years, and the subject of jokes, cartoons, and numerous improvisations. I address this musing, however, to those who wish to make a commitment to our children/youth and our work, despite many invitations from your child clients to “shove it”.

In the midst of the many challenges presented by funding agencies, government agencies, agency management, and the children themselves, how can we keep the fire in our bellies, the mission in our souls, and the love in our hearts, to continue serving those who are hurt, troubled, and generally shunned? I present for your consideration, “**The Ten A’s of Job Happiness**”.

Accept Responsibility for your Career Choice

How many of you readers have worked next to someone who acts as if they don’t know how they even got their job and act as if they are being punished?! It’s as if they were walking down the street one day and a hook came out and grabbed them by the neck and forced them into your building, where they found your clients. Imagine what it’s like to be a child/youth in a program surrounded by people who act as if they’re trapped in a cage with you! Just as importantly, imagine the impact on the morale of others on the work team. As hard as it is to believe some days, we actually did apply for our jobs. And the beauty of living in a free country is that we can change our minds at any moment.

Some people act in such a way to let others know that they will become happy with their jobs “as soon as things settle down”. Well, if that’s what you’re waiting for, it’s time to go. If you are working in any kind of treatment setting “things” will never settle down! As soon as one client settles, they will be discharged and another totally unsettled being will come to replace them. Every so often it is good to recommit. Any of you in a long-term relationship knows that every few years each person in the relationship does a “cost-benefit analysis”, reviewing the option to leave and the option to stay. Each re-decision to stay makes the relationship stronger. And so it is with our work. There are many reasons to go – many less stressful ways to earn money, many jobs with better hours, many jobs with better pay, and many services with more grateful recipients. But there are also many reasons to stay. I encourage each of you to sit down with your colleagues and have a session where you quit complaining about the kids for an entire meeting, and just talk about why it’s so great to know them and have the opportunity to share their lives, even briefly. If you find that all you want to do is complain, perhaps it’s time to move on. But maybe you can fall in love again with one of the most unique jobs in the world!

We owe it to our clients, our team members, and ourselves to choose our jobs every day, just as we choose where to live and who to live with every day. The stress will never go away, the pain we face each time we hear another story of abuse and torment will hurt every time, the opposition to our demands will be unrelenting because of their past experience of going along with tormenting requests – for sex, for secrets, for cover-ups. But, if you take a job as a nurse in a hospital there's no sense complaining that everyone is in bed! If you accept a job with troubled and troubling children and youth, relax into it. There's no sense getting angry that "there's something wrong with these kids!" Yes indeed. There is something wrong. That's why we're here. They are who they are because they've been hurt so terribly. And although they'd rather die than admit it, they need you desperately.

Acknowledge Individual Differences

How many times have you been told that you're "not getting the picture"! As if there is one way to "see things". How many times have you been told that something is "easy", when you just can't figure it out. As if what's easy for me should be easy for you. How often have you wondered why something that takes you ten minutes takes someone else an hour? How many times have you been puzzled why an issue that is so clear to you is so confusing to someone else? There's one thing we all have in common: we're all different! Unless you plan to live alone and work alone for the rest of your life, I suggest that you decide whether you want to make these differences between you and others frustrating, or interesting! In terms of keeping your morale up, I'd suggest the "interesting" choice.

I have art on my walls that you would never hang in your home, and visa versa. There is no "the picture"! We can't even agree on whether a movie is a good movie, a great movie, or a boring movie. It depends on who's watching it. I'm sure you've had the experience of giving someone an explanation that you knew was perfectly clear, only to have them go to someone else and tell them that you never explained it to them! We not only don't see the same thing, we don't hear the same thing. Subjects in school that are easy for you are hard for me. Kids that you like drive me crazy. And my "pets" are kids you can't stand to be around. This, of course, is the beauty of working in a team. **Together** we can get it done! Between us, all the kids will find someone who is crazy about them. What one of us can't do, probably another can. The diversity is wonderful for our clients, but presents interesting challenges in terms of developing an "appreciation" for each other.

And before we move from this topic, let's remember that we don't even move the same! On your work team you probably have a rich – or irritating – combination of "tortoises", "hares", and "thoroughbreds". **Tortoises** take forever to get anything done. They work on one thing at a time, no matter how many tasks need attending. The good news is that they take so much time they make very few errors. But you will have to wait, and wait, and wait to get the error-free work. Tortoises actually are known to "stall out" at times. You find them sitting and staring into space, or standing in the middle of the room doing nothing and going nowhere. Do not tell them to "hurry", because they think they are hurrying! And do not light a firecracker under them to get them going, because they will stop everything to see what the noise was! These slow-moving colleagues, also think slow! If you ask them for some help with problem solving, they

will be very glad to help. But they will ruminate! They will ponder. They will take their time thinking of a good solution. The solution they arrive at will be great – but late!

Hares, on the other hand, move like the wind, running around as if their hair is on fire! They race into work, swooping past the tortoises who are sauntering in, and when confronted with a myriad of tasks begin working on everything at once. While tortoises get a lot done on a little, hares get a little done on a lot. Nothing is ever quite finished, but everything is in process. If you want to talk to a hare you will often have to do so on the run, or while they are doing something else, like talking on the phone or writing. Hares are the ultimate multi-taskers, assured that they are giving all matters their attention, simultaneously. If you want advice from a hare, they will not only not ruminate, they will begin to answer your question before you have finished asking it. A staff meeting of hares consists of everyone talking at once convinced that everyone is also listening to everyone else. (Staff meetings of tortoises start late, and last long, with plenty of time for pondering). Hare meetings are finished quickly, with everyone racing off somewhere. The hares are off and running, the tortoises are sitting there absorbing what was discussed, and the Thoroughbreds are looking at the agenda to see if everything got discussed.

Thoroughbreds are the “control freaks”. They have their lists. They have their day-timers and planners. They have schedules, which must be adhered to. Want to meet with a tortoise? You’ll have to wait for them to finish what they’re working on. Want to meet with a hare? Sure, now is fine – follow them to the copy room. Want to meet with a thoroughbred? The meeting will be scheduled at a convenient time. In meetings the thoroughbreds will be keeping track of who has spoken and who has not, and will be taking notes and making assignments. If they have a really busy or late day, they will compensate for it tomorrow by scheduling a slower or earlier day. If you want their advice they will go to the whiteboard and make a pros and cons list and plot everything out. By the time they’re finished the hares are midway into implementing the “gist” of the decision, and the tortoises are trying to fathom the implications of what is being discussed.

If you recognize yourself and any of your teammates, take a minute to apply these “work styles” to your children, your own of those you work with. These patterns start early (Tortoise children, first up and last on the bus; Hare children, last up and first on the bus; Thoroughbred children looking at their watch and calculating exactly what time the bus will be there and giving you their schedule for the day). Do not expect people to change: Tortoise children become tortoise adults, Hare children.....you get the idea. Work on developing a tolerance. Enjoy the mix.

Maintain an Assertive Approach

Morale can sometimes be affected more by our colleagues than by our clients! I invite you to take a moment to analyze how the team you work with handles their stress, and to see if it’s any better than the way the clients handle theirs. Unfortunately, we’re just people too, and many of us grew up in homes that did not exactly model healthy coping styles. Without careful attention and downright discipline, we sometimes end up acting not much better than those we are getting paid to serve. I will present four “dysfunctional” styles (i.e. styles that don’t work!) and give you a moment to reflect on your current situation.

1. **Withdrawn styles.** This would include the ever-popular style of just making believe there is no stress to handle; denying conflicts and tensions on the team, or trying to ignore them. Or, the runner up, to act as if the only stress is being caused by the clients. How is your work group at confronting difficulties in interpersonal relationships on the work team? Do your staff meetings focus only on client problems, or are folks willing to confront problems between members of the team? Unfortunately, some of us were raised under the maxim that “if you don’t have something nice to say about someone, you shouldn’t say anything at all”. No problems are ever solved following that bit of advice, but many of us who constantly confront the clients with their problems are not very good at looking each other in the eye and speaking honestly about trouble with our working relationships. It simply isn’t true that if we ignore things they will go away, but many staff groups operate as if just leaving troubles unspoken will somehow make them not true. Or, if someone dares to show a little courage and brings up a problem, others leave them hanging out to dry, acting as if they don’t share the concern. It’s amazing how many staff members miss the meeting when a decision has been made to bring the “dirty laundry” out in the open. Some would actually rather have a root canal than engage in honest feedback and problem solving with their peers. This, of course, is not good modeling for our youth. But more importantly, it serves to undermine the morale of team members who have sufficient stress from dealing with troubled and troubled clients!

2. **Passive styles.** How much “whining” do you hear at your staff meetings and during shift changes? Are staff acting as if they are victims of the clients? Do you have 52 staff meetings a year, or one meeting 52 times? Are all problems blamed on clients, administration, other shifts or people with other positions within the agency? Complaining can be seductive because while it is going on people often feel that something is being done about situations. However, raising issues does not solve them. Nor does kicking responsibility to another person or group. How many of you have worked next to someone who acts similar to the clients in acting “trapped” in the job? Listening to them complain about the kids, their colleagues, the management, the pay, etc. would lead one to believe that they didn’t actually apply for their jobs. This attitude is not only unfortunate for the persons holding them, and for the clients listening (who in many cases actually did not get the chance to choose their participation in the program), but also drags down the morale of others working with and around them. Of course, if others on the team are operating in the “withdrawn” style, the whining is not confronted and the stress just builds up!

3. **Aggressive styles.** Sometimes colleagues on the work team decide that they will deal with their stress by punishing others around them for the fact that they are experiencing stress! Rather than passively whining, they rant and rave and blame and carry on, filling the atmosphere with heavy metal attacking and snits. Very often these folks are operating under the mistaken assumption that they will feel better if they “vent” their anger and frustration, and usually feel entitled to share their hostile feelings and reactions with all they encounter, since they are convinced that others are responsible for their misery. Of course, since they are chronically “mad”, we know this doesn’t work. It’s one noisy complaint after another, with no real relief; but they persist. The clients get punished by them, the passive staff members get together to complain about them

(whining and dining together at lunch), and the withdrawn just stay out of their way. As with the other dysfunctional styles, this style contributes to the negative environment, which often gets blamed on clients.

4. **Assaultive styles.** Although we don't often encounter this style, since they would be reprimanded, we do sometimes experience hints that these folks would be hitting people if they could. They slam things around, talk about wishing they could give the clients the kick in the pants they need, and sometimes actually provoke restraints and other acts that allow them to attempt to "control" the sources of their stress. These team members often cause stress for others who work alongside them, as they often provoke violent and aggressive clients. Again, the withdrawn steer clear and request other work assignments, the passive complain to supervisors and each other, but never directly to the hands-on staff members, and the aggressive just get angry at the clients and everyone else.\
5. **Passive-aggressive styles.** We've all seen this style at work, usually experiencing it as quietly infuriating. These are our colleagues who never complain, never yell, and never verbally "take on" those in charge. They just go about doing exactly as they please without regard to group decisions made or the effects of inconsistency with the clients, and just sit quietly when it would be appropriate to register an opinion. Since they don't register their opinion, they feel they can disregard what others decide and do as they want, with the "out" of saying they never agreed to anything. While they don't openly create conflict on the team, they refuse to participate as a member of the team, and prefer to "do their own thing", acting as if they were independent agents while on duty. The fallout is then left for others to deal with: Which they will a) refuse to do (withdrawn); b) complain about doing (passive); c. respond to angrily (aggressive); or d) take out on the clients by provoking acting out (assaultive).

So, you've done your analysis. Is it time to stop focusing on clients who use these styles – which is, of course, what makes them clients – and bite the bullet and clean up the team? A good, positive, healthy working relationship with other committed people can make all the difference in the world when working with difficult and challenging young people. How about asking your team to make a commitment to engaging with both each other and the clients **Assertively!** That means we speak for ourselves, and directly to those who need feedback about their behavior. Adopting an assertive stance means that we accept responsibility for our choice of career, for how we respond to both the clients and each other, that we ask for changes when needed to keep the work environment healthy and motivating, and for setting limits on the types of behavior we will accept from our colleagues. Making a commitment to behaving assertively may not make you the most popular member of the team initially, especially if your team is not functioning up to par, but it will certainly help you to feel better about yourself, and may be the impetus to change the way team operates so that the only real stress experienced is truly from the clients!

Attitude Control and Affect (mood) Management

How many times have we sat in a meeting only to hear a colleague say: "I can't help it, that's just what I think". How strange is this? Imagine that same staff member coming two hours late to the meeting, explaining that although they left in plenty of time, their legs took them to the

mall! Blaming body parts for independent action doesn't make much sense, but is sometimes tried in an effort to avoid responsibility. Our brain is a body part – and it does not do things independently. The truth of the matter is that we can think whatever we want to think. Most of those I encounter agree that the most important determinant of working environments has less to do with the clients than with the attitudes of those working with and around them! The dictionary defines an attitude as a “habit of thought”. Those we describe as having a positive attitude have a tendency to think positively, even though they may have an occasional “down” day. Those with negative attitudes have developed a **habit** of seeing the glass as half empty. This is the same glass that others who are habitually positive would describe as half full. (The “idealist”, of course, would be grateful to have a glass, no matter how much is in it!). Attitudes do not “happen”, they are chosen. This is crucial to keep in mind whenever we find ourselves in situations where we truly don't have control over events. In such situations, and they occur frequently in our work, the only real choice we have is to decide how we're going to think about the situation. If our house burns down, there is really nothing to be done, other than to decide whether we've “lost everything”, or whether we are fortunate that we “only lost stuff” and all got out safely. We can choose whether to see the clients as deliberately operating to make us miserable, or whether we can “see” that most of them are doing the best they can at the moment – even if their best isn't very good. We can see challenges as problems, or as opportunities to give, to grow, and to learn. We can decide whether to focus on what we can control, or what we can't. And although attitudes are only thoughts, they cause, and are reflected in our moods. Thus, our moods are not created by the clients, but rather by our own attitudes and how we choose to view those we have chosen to work with. We can actually choose to love them, to appreciate them, and to feel blessed by any opportunity we have to give them a chance to feel better and do better. It can actually be a huge relief to grasp that **we** are in charge of how we think, and how we feel, and not a bunch of “disturbed” individuals!

Before we leave this most important subject, let me suggest a practical practice that can contribute to keeping our attitudes more hopeful. Monitor the discussions you have in your staff meetings to see if folks are spending inordinate amounts of time talking about situations that cannot, or will, not change. Lingering here will keep everyone down in the dumps. “Venting” – without problem solving – does not contribute to morale. Strive to keep discussions about matters out of control to a minimum, spending the majority of time on issues where you may be able to have some influence, or on issues that you know you can control. Just a suggestion. If you can't change the wind.....adjust your sails!

One final suggestion in this regard, be careful about hiring those candidates who have a lot of experience, and overlooking those who might be less experienced but who might be far less jaded. To keep staff morale at its peak, remember that hiring is not about finding people with the right experience. Hire for attitude; train for skill!

Allow Empathy

The Native Americans passed on to us the tremendous benefit of “walking a mile in someone else's moccasins”. Carl Rogers, the Client-Centered Psychologist, also spent a life studying the benefits of this approach for those needing help. In my career, however, I must say that the benefit seems to be mutual. It has been my observation that developing “empathy” for the

clients, a real sense of what it's like to be them, allows us to value, appreciate, and even admire them. Isn't it amazing how some of them have managed to cope with, and survive, some of the horrendous situations we read about on their intake forms. Those colleagues I have had the privilege of working with over the years who have developed a habit of looking at issues from the client's point of view, of trying to understand how "things" are for them, continue to serve after many years with loving hearts, consistent devotion, and real joy. It has been proved that providing empathy has tremendous benefit for those youth who have felt alone in their misery, and how it enables clients of all ages to move on from on "stuck" place. The good news is that we do not have to have exactly the same experience as another person in order to feel empathy. Human life experiences and emotions are all that is required. We may not be able to relate to the exact issue another person is experiencing, but we will be able to relate to the issues involved in the experience. This sharing benefits them, and benefits us. A great gift for both sides of the helping relationship.

Assign Appropriate Responsibility

In making a commitment to keep our morale positive, it is important **not** to tie personal feelings of competence to client performance. Likewise, it is crucial that we not allow others to do so either. How many times have we been criticized by another professional for what a **client** has, or has not, done! Is the school yelling at child care workers because students are late, or unprepared, or difficult? Is the therapist yelling because the youth doesn't want to go to their counseling appointment, or arrives late, or leaves early? Does the AM shift ask the night shift why kids are still in bed and not up getting ready for school, as if it was the staff job to **get** kids up rather than to wake them up. Why do we ask each other to account for client behavior? Why do we "get down" on ourselves because clients are struggling? What tempts us to measure our own or each others performance by how well a client is doing, at the same time that we spend meeting after meeting spelling out the trauma, neglect, and general maltreatment that our clients have endured that bring them to us in the first place? Professional objectivity does not imply that we have no feelings for our clients, that we don't deeply care about them, and that we don't emotionally invest in their well being. I think that the way professional objectivity is necessary for good morale when it allows us to distinguish clearly the gap between our efforts and the clients ability to benefit from them. We are not, after all, responsible for the hurtful experiences that bring our wonderful young ones to us. We are not the cause of their struggles and their pain. And, we may also not be enough for their cure! At least maybe not yet. To stay with our earlier sailing analogy – Don't let the client's wind get into your sails!

It may be helpful to remind ourselves that people walked away from Jesus, Mohammed, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and many other great and powerful teachers and healers, every day. Why should we wonder or become angry when some of those we reach out to turn away? Can the "result" we seek be reframed as the effort we make to reach, and to teach, and to care – even if the damage done to our young ones before we met them renders some of those we reach for unable to reach back? The result thus becomes something we can guarantee: that we will be faithful in our attempts. Maybe the important act is to give the gift, even if it remains unopened.

Accentuate the Positive

Take it from one who knows: S/he who laughs, lasts! Nature has done a wonderful thing for us. Knowing that we can't break the law and keep our jobs, and knowing that we are broke, God has provided us with an affordable, totally legal, easy to obtain "high", built right into our bodies. Yes indeed, just when we need to break the tension, re-frame how we are looking at something, or when we need to make a dramatic change in our state of mind – ready to order chemicals can be released at will. There are three conditions under which these mighty mood-changers – called endorphins – can be released at will.....two of which we can do right at work. The easiest, of course, is just to engage in a good old belly laugh. And there is plenty to laugh about. The kids are always good for a chuckle. They are entirely unique, and come up with the most original phrases and behaviors under the sun. Why don't we just learn to enjoy them! And we are usually for a laugh as well. Just looking at ourselves, and listening to ourselves as we attempt to provide helpful "interventions" while stumbling all over ourselves is great comedy. Why get frustrated when we can just enjoy! Laughter has been proven to improve physical health, is a natural tension reducer, a natural pain reliever, and relieves stress. Hire some silly people. Play with the kids. Lighten up the staff meetings.

Secondly, exercise is known to release endorphins – hence the famous "runners high". We spend lots of time running around like our hair is on fire, attempting to cover all the ground covered by the kids, chasing down the ones who think they would be better off without us, seeking those who don't want to be found, and racing from one task to the other. I should also mention, although this is an away-from-work activity, that a satisfying love life is also quite good for morale, and will help us to release our pleasant substances that will enable us to return to work ready for another day of challenge. It is important that we build joy into our team meetings and our daily interactions. Some good cheer can go a long way toward building in the commitment we need to stay up for the all important task of providing interventions to build skills for satisfying living that so many of our youth, who have known only pain, lack.

Act – When Necessary

Here is a very important finding about "burnout". It is not caused by jobs! If jobs caused burnout, everyone doing that job would be burned out! Stress, pressure, challenge – none of these is related to burnout. Burnout is caused by not dealing with stress and pressure in an active way. So, decide now if you want to become cranky and negative and end your career with aches and pains and physical problems. Or, decide now if you want to stay "up" for the task for as long as you choose to do it.

If you would like to burn out, join me in taking the low road to dealing with workplace stress. Adopt a defensive posture, keeping in mind always that nothing bad that happens – nothing – is your fault. It is always someone else's fault – the kids, the other staff, management – funding sources, whoever. But not you. This defensive stance will allow you to deny your part in problems, and thus avoid having to do anything constructive to fix them. Keep it up for a while and before you know it, you will have more than your fair share of stress symptoms – both physical and emotional. You will then move into a reactive reflect, sometimes referred to as "crisis management", and you will become truly miserable.

If you would like to decide now that this is not the path you would like to take, join me on the high road to dealing with the inevitable stress of a challenging job. I would like to make four suggestions.

1. Remember first of all that there is no book, no manual, no policy, no procedure, no program that can tell you exactly what to do with any given child/youth that will be effective. Our clients are so unique, so different, so creative, that effectiveness requires creative responses and interventions to reach them. Use the guidelines you are given, and absorb what you learn in training. But learn to look within yourself as well. Don't be afraid to try something different, something maybe even a little bizarre. Creativity, and the willingness to move off something that isn't working and try something else will keep you fresh, interested, and effective.
2. Give yourself a wonderful gift that you will frequently not appreciate. Promise yourself that you will have a couple of people in your life who are willing to tell you the truth. Many people who burn out don't see it coming. They don't notice when they start becoming chronically negative. They fail to realize that they are losing hope. By the time they are actually over the edge and burned out, it's too late! It is not easy to have people tell us what we need to know. For one reason, most of us become pretty defensive when we hear negative information about ourselves. It's hard to tolerate defensive behavior in others, and we will need to have an agreement with one or two people that they will be willing to put up with us even when we become difficult. Most folks will not risk giving negative feedback unless we have specifically told them we want them to. Self-awareness is an important ingredient in burnout prevention. Make a promise to yourself that you will be watchful. Notice when you start to lose the joy, when you start to complain more than you rejoice. Put one or two others in your life who will notice for you if you stop paying attention. If you become aware of a slide into negativity, you can explore what is going on, and make a plan to get yourself back on track.
3. Arrange your life so that you have some friends who are not as needy as the clients! Find healthy people and hang out with them. Develop hobbies and interests away from work. Do not volunteer for every open shift or to fill in for everyone on vacation. Take time away from work and take care of yourself. Spend time in nature looking at the larger issues to keep daily frustrations in perspective. Pray, meditate, renew yourself and manage your stress before it gets the best of you. You can't take care of others if you forget to take care of yourself.
4. Working within ourselves is very useful in building in positive longevity for our work, but sometimes it is important to actually **do** something about a situation that is bothering us. Talk to someone who has the authority to make necessary changes. Confront a tense situation with one of your teammates. Make a plan and follow it through. Things don't change because we think about them. If you are dealing with a situation that can't be changed, change the way you think about it. But if you are dealing with a situation that can be changed, change it.

Affirm Your Effectiveness.

Finally, I suggest we take a lesson from some religious groups and take time out on a regular basis for “testimonies”! We have a bad habit of making our meetings problem focused, and spend the entire agenda addressing stressful situations and challenges we are having trouble meeting. I would like to suggest, for the sake of maintaining morale, that **every** staff meeting end with a “success story”. It doesn’t have to be a major victory, but there are hundreds of little victories that occur every day, for ourselves and the kids, that we tend to overlook because we are so focused on the problems. If a kid called you by your actual name – celebrate! If two kids were able to resolve a dispute, even without great charm – celebrate. If a kid made it through a whole day at school for the first time in a while – celebrate. If we had one our “buttons pushed”, but didn’t react in our usual less than graceful way – celebrate. Train yourself to notice the small successes – and to share them, with the clients, and with each other. Nominate someone in the group to take responsibility to see that this becomes a habit with the group, otherwise we risk falling into our “problem focused” ways. Sometimes we need specific examples from the week to remind us that often when we feel we have fallen into a well, we are usually just walking through a tunnel. Both are dark – but one has much more promise of getting out!

Summary

What a privilege we have been given – to not only make a living, but to make a difference! Let me share a few words of encouragement from the good book: The prophet Isaiah, many centuries ago, made an interesting observation about the benefits of helping, saying – “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then **your** light will rise in the darkness, and **your** night will become like the noonday (Isaiah 58:9-10). We struggle to do things right; but we take comfort in doing the right thing. And the benefits are ours.

Practice your “Ten A’s”, and call me in the morning!

