Quieting Unwanted Opinions - Responding to Moralizers

Air Play: August 25, 2024

Guest: David Lowry, Don Drew

Resources: Peacemaking101.com

Introduction to Peaceful Life Radio

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm David Lowry, along with my good friend, Don Drew. How are you today, Don?

Doing great, David. Today we'll be exploring practical strategies for cultivating understanding, resolving conflicts, as it relates to how we should handle a moralizer.

But before we get started, let's remind our listeners to download, like, or even subscribe to our Peaceful Life Radio podcasts. It only takes a minute, and it helps a lot.

It sure does, Don, and I hope people will do that.

Understanding Moralizers

Don, I don't know about you, but every now and then, I meet somebody who's very quick to share their opinion and wisdom with me, and the problem is I haven't even asked for it. Does that ever happen to you?

Oh, all the time.

This brings up an old thing with me. I was never very good at sports, but there was always something about me that brought out the coach in the other person--to correct, give me advice, and things like that. Moralizers are a bit like that, right?

So, when we talk about moralizing, we're talking about people who come up and offer you advice, many times unsolicited; maybe it's about how you ought to raise your kids, or how you ought to do your job or *you would be so much better if you just do things my way,* of course,

Right. David, I think it'll help our listeners a lot if we'd start giving an illustration of

somebody who's acting as a moralizer.

All right.

Illustration: Sarah and Jane

I'm going to pick on Sarah, okay, and her mother-in-law Jane. So, imagine this, Sarah's hanging up the phone after talking to her mother-in-law. And Jane has spent no small amount of time belittling her choices and the way that Sarah's raising the kids, saying, *you really ought to be stricter on the kids.* And she says in a condescending tone *children need structure and discipline and you're coddling them too much. You're going to turn them into brats!*

You can imagine how this is making Sarah feel. She's getting frustrated. And it seems like all of her conversations with her mother-in-law have this little turn. A nice visit, then suddenly it goes into unsolicited lectures about how we're not doing things the way mom thinks it ought to be done. Sometimes, you wish that people would respect and let you do what you need to do without always trying to tell you how to do it.

Every day, it seems that people are pushing their unsolicited opinions and preferences on others and ourselves. And we call that moralizing.

Defining Moralizing

So, let's take a deeper examination into what moralizing is. David.

Moralizing, as we're talking about it, is the act of giving unsolicited advice or expressing a strong opinion about what's right or wrong and doing it in such a way that other people think you're being self-righteous or condescending. It's when someone imposes their moral standard on us, implying that if we don't do it the way they do it, that somehow we're less moral or not as good as they are.

Moralizers feel entitled to make their judgements with little or no consideration for the feelings of others. They just put it out there. But, if you were to turn the tables on them and talk back to them, suddenly they would be all offended in everything.

Moralizers alienate others with their preachy, judgmental tone and unsolicited advice. They foster negative emotions like resentment and guilt instead of meaningful dialogue or change. Their self-righteous attitude dismisses individual perspectives. They create an air of disrespect for other's autonomy. And rather than influencing positive growth, moralizing generates defensiveness, resistance to advice, and unproductive conflict. So, that's pretty tough, isn't it?

Yes, it is.

That's what moralizing is and what it creates in other people.

Opinions vs. Moralizing

I oftentimes hear people giving their opinions. What is the difference between somebody giving opinions and moralizing?

That's a great question because you can imagine that someone say, *I'm not moralizing. I'm not trying to force my views on anybody. I'm just, stating my opinion.* But moralizing and sharing an opinion differ in a lot of key ways. Basically it's the tone that you use, the intention, the way you express yourself and whether or not it comes across as being disrespectful. So, let's look at this notion of tone or attitude.

When somebody's sharing an opinion, they use a neutral or respectful tone that does not assume superiority but contributes their perspective to the conversation. What is being a moralizer is coming across with a condescending tone as though their views are morally superior and leave others feeling as though they have been implicitly or explicitly criticized. A lot of this comes down to the intent of what they're trying to do.

So, the intention is, *why did that person say what they said to me? Or why did they speak to me in that way?* If it's a moralizing point of view, their intention is to correct or judge, or impose their values on others.

When somebody is moralizing, they tend to deliver in a way that can feel preachy or authoritative or accusatory. It often involves unsolicited advice or criticisms that may not invite open discussion. In other words, you need to do this, you need to fix that, and so on. That can be problematic.

When I was younger, I had a family member who didn't like the church I was attending. I can understand people feeling strongly about religious views and values and things like this. They would say snippy snipey things about my church, about people at my church. They would start talking about what they thought I should be doing and how I was doing the wrong thing and how I needed to find another place and things like this. That went from expressing an opinion to being preachy, judgmental, moralizing, telling me that I didn't know what I was doing and that, I needed to change my ways or else.

So, part of it is delivery, but another part is actually the content. What's being said? Again, sharing an opinion focuses on personal beliefs, experiences, or interpretations. It acknowledges the subjective nature of the opinion and respects that others may see things differently. However, moralizing often focuses on what's right or wrong according to the moralizer's standards.

It often involves black and white thinking and leaves little room for differing perspectives. These two different approaches to content can make a huge difference in how that message is being received and how the person on the receiving end of the moralizing is going to accept or feel about what's being said.

Emotional and Psychological Effects

When somebody is giving unsolicited, directive advice, and I hate to even call it advice, when they're moralizing, right? and I perceive that, I have a emotional response to that. And it usually is to shut down.

You know people are moralizing when you begin to feel resentful. You resent people pushing a viewpoint or demanding things of you that ought to be within your purview to decide for yourself.

The effect on others is to shut down or resist somebody who's being preachy and moralizing to them. I want again to emphasize the importance of sharing opinions. That's really important. Okay. That encourages open dialogue and mutual respect and allows for the exchange of ideas and foster understanding and empathy. But when we start becoming directive, when we start forcing our opinions, our beliefs on other people, and, it puts them in a place where they will resist. And it's not always obvious, but there is a relationship price that's being paid there.

When people moralize, it's a negation of a person's right to make decisions for themselves. It's The idea that *I know more than you, and you're so incompetent with your life that you need to listen to what I have to say.* They think, *you need to hear what I have to say. I'm telling you this because you don't know what I know. And if you did, you would believe like I believe.*

We sometimes want to tell our kids more than we should tell them, we think we know them so well that they won't mind if we say this or that thing to them, but we really need to be careful about that.

So, let's take a change here in direction. We've talked about defensiveness. But then there's also things like resentment. The condescending tone of moralizers can, breed resentment in those on the receiving end, and it also can create unwarranted guilt because they don't necessarily agree with the moralizer's stance. This can quite often turn into anger. All of these things are corrosive to relationships.

And there's some behavioral responses. One of them is that you just want to get away from people like that. You want to withdraw. *It's like, get me away from you.* All it does is create an internal resistance. Just because a person listens to you and goes, *Mm, you may have a point there* or something like that doesn't mean

that you're getting through. It creates resistance and more conflict.

We've talked many times about, fight or flight. Some people withdraw, that's the flight, get away from it. Other people become, *you wanna fight, you gotta fight.!*

Yeah, it's that anger coming out as part of an emotional response I mentioned earlier, yeah.

There's psychological effects as well.

There are. One of those things that can occur is constant exposure to moralizing can erode somebody's self confidence, frankly. Obviously, it can increase stress, which is a pressure to conform to others moral standards, and that can be really stressful.

I think one of the most hideous things that occurs, though, is something that, scientists call cognitive dissonance. In other words, cognitive dissonance is the difficulty we have holding two competing ideas or thoughts or ways of being in our head at the same time. And psychologists say that we tend to try to find a way to deal with that. We need to counter that somehow. People may struggle to reconcile their own beliefs with a moralizer imposed standards. And so we are forced by the moralizer into a position to make choices that perhaps we otherwise would not feel obligated to make.

Let me give you an example. I know a family that had a child we might call incorrigible. And if you've never had a super difficult child to raise before, you might think, *why don't you, really show that kid who's boss? You've got to let them know that they don't be disrespectful! They don't talk back to you and you use whatever means is necessary, corporal punishment or whatever.* It may not work with that kid. And when you hear a person moralizing about how to raise your kid, it creates this internal state of dissonance that you're talking about. *It's like, I know that you think you're telling me the right thing, but you just don't know.* And yet you have this guilty feeling because, it's been ingrained in you, or maybe that person is someone you really respect and you hate to create a scene with that person. But honestly, they're giving you bad advice.

Yeah, there's a number of other impacts that occur when somebody is moralizing. For instance, there's interpersonal consequences, as we can imagine. I mentioned strained relationships before, but also reduced trust and perhaps a social isolation within the family.

Then there's communication issues, inhabited dialogue, polarization, reduced self reflection, and missed learning opportunities or actually, one of the problems with moralizing is the person who's doing the moralizing is pushing out what they think and it's a one-way street.

That is a very good way of describing it.

Handling Moralizers with Peaceful Assertiveness

Don Let's move to the part now where we talk about how do we handle a moralizer? There's all kinds of ways and we're going to start off by making the assertion that peaceful assertiveness is the way to go.

In other words when people start pushing their opinions on you, instead of going to anger, we go to assertiveness. That means you, say what needs to be said without being reactive or showing anger. You don't run away from it and say, *they can say whatever they want.* But go ahead and speak your truth. Do it in a kind, but firm way. Don't be hostile and reactive and aggressive and just say, *I've had enough of your advice and I didn't ask for it.* It's a middle ground where you're standing your ground, but you're speaking up, and this is very important for us to do.

Peacemaking is not about shutting your mouth and letting somebody run all over you. It is peaceful assertiveness, bringing it to a dialogue instead of a one-way monologue that this person has been having.

Let's look at things we should do when we find ourselves in this situation.

Remaining calm can be one of the most useful things that you can do. Okay. It helps deescalate the situation, prevent further conflict.

Then of course there's not internalizing their judgments or letting them affect your self worth. And that's sometimes difficult to do and sometimes not.

One of the problems that people who are, experiencing a difficulty in which the moralizer is asserting themself. Okay. So you've got an individual, let's say me. Okay. I've got a situation that I'm trying to resolve and I'm already conflicted about it. I don't have a clear, idea or direction about what I think or how I should act or how I should behave. Along comes a moralizer and tells me that, this is the way to respond. And quite often if it's a parent or someone, I may feel a certain amount of obligation to listen to that. But if I can remain calm, accept what they're saying, and not in the sense that I agree with what they're saying, but just listen to it, and remain calm, and then part of your peaceful assertiveness is to speak back in a conversational tone without escalating into anger and letting that frustration come out. It's easy to say it's difficult to do, isn't it?

It is. One of the things that can be helpful, though, is to remember that in your head, be very clear that you will make the best decision you can, despite what a person may be trying to get you to do. In other words, you're driving your bus.

Sometimes we ask people for their opinion and advice and it's doesn't mean I'm

going to take it. I'm going to listen to it, and I'm going to maybe give it some consideration or maybe very little consideration. But as long as you realize that you are a sovereign person who can make your own decisions, that does a lot to take away the sting of unsolicited advice.

So, set solid boundaries for yourself-- what you're willing to accept and not.

Yes, exactly. Just remain truthful and authentic. Here's the thing that trips us up. The person offering the advice, feels so entitled to give this advice, but we know that they're not necessarily open to your point of view. And I've got a couple of ideas about that, and the first one is, be authentic and say the truth.

If you say, Okay. *I don't think that's going to work with my kid. Or, I'm sorry. I know that you believe that I should do this, but that's just not me. I don't see myself doing that.* Just be honest and truthful and put it out there if you really disagree. Or if you think, *I think I could use some of this, I don't know that all of this would work for me, but some of it I could see working for me.* Just be authentic and truthful. But I have a caveat.

Sometimes, people are not invested in understanding you. You can tell when you begin to talk about what you think about something that they don't want to hear it. They don't agree with it. They don't want to see your point of view. They're not going to enter to a dialogue. And at that point, you should just basically say, *I don't think we have any more to talk about.* And the reason I say that is, is that sometimes we can just waste our breath with people who are invested in not understanding us. You don't need to explain yourself to everybody. You just don't. Sometimes people demand explanations of us, but when they're invested in not understanding, we don't have to give it. Does that make sense to you?

Yes, it absolutely does. The reason why we're talking about this is because a lot of people, express themselves in ways that seem forceful and highly opinionated to the point of being moralizing. The moralizer assumes that they have the higher vision, the higher moral ground, so to speak, on which they can see all of your problems and tell you how to solve your problem and tell you what you're doing wrong, I think a big part of the moralizing problem is oftentimes not telling you *keep doing what you're doing*, that's encouragement. It's, *you're not doing this well, or, you need to do something differently, or you're doing this poorly, even.* and that's just not helpful.

Many times, people who moralize are coming from a good place, they're doing what they think is the right thing in the absolute worst way. They think they're doing the right thing. Maybe They believe, their faith, as they understand it, requires them to set you straight. Or they don't want to see you make the same mistakes they've made. So, if we can, we need to learn how to, put a good spin on the moralizer. That doesn't mean we agree with them in the least or that we're going to do anything they tell us, but it maybe keeps us from being so angry and

incensed about the moralizer.

Yeah, you're really making a great point here because both of us have been pretty tough on moralizers, right? And I think that's with good cause, but it is critical really to not necessarily assume bad intentions on the part of the person who is moralizing. Avoiding unnecessary demonization or reactivity, anger, judgmental responses, avoiding these kinds of things can help mitigate the trauma.

Perhaps we also need to practice some compassion because what they are saying, or the advice that they're giving, it's only these things, as you just mentioned, come out of a place in their life, their experience, their faith. There's something that's important to them. Otherwise, they wouldn't feel strongly about it.

Final Thoughts and Encouragement

There is one thing I'd like to leave our listeners with, as we head towards the close of our program, and that is, don't be afraid to say what you think and how you feel. Many times the reason we don't do this is, *what if they get mad because we don't agree with them?* And my reply to that is, *it's better to be, true to yourself, and for you to say it in a gentle but respectful tone about what you think and feel without the intention of making them mad.* And if they get mad, they get mad. The thing to remember is, they'll get over being mad at some point unless you escalate it into a situation where you're accusing them of all kinds of things. But if you say, *I'm sorry, I don't think I can follow that advice, or I don't think this works for me, or I have a different point of view about how I want to raise my children or what I think is important,* it's good to let people know what you think and feel.

It'd be more disingenuous if you were to say, *Oh, you really make some really great points here. I'll think about that or I'll consider all of this.* When you know in your mind, you're not going to do it. Honesty requires you to say the truthful thing and it will have an effect. as long as you're saying it gently and respectfully. peacefully assertive, then what a person does after that is really up to them because we don't control them. But we're not going to be controlled by them either, Don.

Thank you, David. In today's episode, we've explored the concept of moralizing, that preachy, judgmental behavior that can strain relationships and shut down meaningful dialogue. We've learned to recognize moralizing, understand its negative impacts, and most importantly, how to handle moralizers effectively.

Remember, the key is to remain calm, search your boundaries peacefully, and respond with empathy and understanding, even when you are faced with unsolicited advice or criticism. Because if you do so, you'll maintain your sense of

self esteem, preserve your relationships as best you can maybe you can potentially turn these challenging interactions into opportunities for growth and mutual understanding.

So, as you go about your week, we encourage you to be mindful of moralizing both in others and yourself. Try implementing some of the strategies we've discussed today, perhaps start by practicing peaceful assertiveness or looking for common ground in your next difficult conversation.