

Today's Empowered Woman

Claiming Your Voice

by Michelle Kelley

True empowerment for a woman comes from knowing how you feel and then being able to communicate your needs and feelings appropriately in your relationships. An empowered woman knows when to say 'no' and where to draw the line in her various relationships. She can recognize her own needs and ask for help when necessary.



Today's empowered woman knows what she deserves -- and knows how to command -- respect in all relationships. She does not define herself only by her accomplishments in the world (Olympic gold medalist, Secretary of State, Company President or Chairwoman, etc.), no matter how amazing her accomplishments.

Today's empowered woman:

- Listens to and honors her inner voice, and uses her outer voice to express herself positively in all of her relationships.
- Recognizes her strengths and embraces her weaknesses.
- Does not tolerate disrespectful or contemptuous behavior in her relationships because she values her time and energy.
- Avoids emotionally draining relationships and negativity.
- Understands that the choices she has made in the past have created her current situation and knows that she is able to create a different future for herself.
- Believes she deserves and is capable of achieving success in life, as she defines success for herself.

Very little has been written on the topics of empowered women and healthy relationships outside the world of business and the workforce.

The 1940s version of an empowered woman focused on her physical accomplishments more than her emotional well-being and or the health of her personal relationships. The iconic Rosie the Riveter poster spoke to women's changing role in the workplace, where they were rising to the challenges of performing traditional "men's work."

In the 1960s, Betty Friedan spearheaded the feminist movement, prompting more and more women to question their traditional roles as homemaker and mother, and seek more fulfilling educational and career opportunities. In the 1990s, Hillary Clinton introduced the possibility that a woman could, indeed, be elected President of the United States.

Today's empowered woman wants to express herself more fully and authentically in all her relationships -- with her husband, children, parents, siblings, romantic partners, friends, and colleagues in the workplace.

Many women I have counseled in my private practice have confided in me that they feel their situation or relationship is hopeless, or that their husband or another key person in their lives won't listen. Many of my clients have chosen to silence their voice, out of a feeling of hopelessness or despair. The client may feel overpowered, threatened or invalidated in her key relationships.

claiming your voice continued on page 10

A woman who has not learned how to communicate her wants and needs effectively in her relationships is likely to feel stuck, hopeless and despairing. Communication is oxygen in a relationship. Without it, the relationship will die.

Many girls and women struggle to break free of their “people pleaser” personality. Women who are “people pleasers” often choose not to voice their thoughts and opinions out of fear of not being liked or fear of confrontation.

I recall my own silence as an adolescent female and the pain it caused me. When girls lose their connection to their voice, and the ability to express their wants and needs, their feeling of personal empowerment suffers.

Perhaps you can remember an instance when your voice was not validated or heard. How did that make you feel? What effect did that have on your confidence?

When a girl’s or woman’s thoughts and opinions are not validated, she will eventually experience a disconnection between her inner voice and her inner truth, and the messages she communicates to others. She may begin to shut down emotionally. She may end up traveling down the road of self-medication, drugs, abusive relationships and emotional problems.

A girl or woman who has been silenced has suffered an assault on her spirit.

How to Honor and Claim Your Voice:

1. Create a list of your strengths. Own them. Be proud of them. Don’t wait for others to validate your strengths. Validate yourself.
2. Do you have a voice in decision making? You have a right to be a part of this process. You have to give yourself permission first.
3. Revisit (reflect upon) a hurtful statement that was made to you. How would you use your voice now? What would you say differently?
4. Take care of yourself (emotionally as well as physically). Too often women put themselves last in this area.

I can truly understand the phrase, “If I only knew then what I know now.” But there is no way that I could have known then what I know now. I had to live through my experiences and deal with the consequences. Only then was I able to move forward.

Through education, guidance and support I help women to create positive change in themselves first and their relationships second. I have traveled the road

of personal disempowerment, and I know the obstacles women encounter along that road. Women need to be conscious about the choices they are making in friendships, romance and life. “We are not flowers in a field. We are supposed to be active participants in all areas of our lives.”

It is necessary to start asking for change, for respect, to be heard and to be validated. I often share my experiences and lessons learned in hope that some may avoid the seemingly lengthy amount of time it can take to learn how to make good choices. A girl in one of my “Healthy Relationships” classes told me that she didn’t realize that she could play her part differently. In other words she didn’t have to put up with any type of mistreatment or bullying. I gave her permission and the tools she needed to stand up for herself. Women can and should do the same.

I recently read a quote by Meg Ryan which stated, “If you empower women, you can change the world.” Women are often the ones who have been assigned the role of emotional caretaker in families. The self-help industry is largely geared towards women and so women may be leading the way and that is okay. It really doesn’t matter who leads as long as we are heading in the right direction. Culturally, we have given men the message that their work and career should come first in their lives. This is slowly changing. Many women are beginning to initiate positive change in their relationships. Ultimately the positive effects will reach men, families and society.

Let the change begin 2012 is not the end of the world as we are in a time of great change in our personal relationships.



Michelle Kelley, LCSW, is a licensed counselor and the owner of Girls Stand Strong in Warrenton. Michelle helps pre-teen and teenage girls, as well as adult women, develop the self-confidence and self-esteem they need to achieve their goals and realize their dreams. Through her speaking engagements, classes and workshops, and counseling—Michelle provides girls and women with the essential tools to select and cultivate healthy friendships and relationships. Such positive relationships foster a strong emotional well-being and successful social lives. Please visit www.GirlsStandStrong.com or call 703.505.2413 for additional information.

