

Radical honesty isn't always easy, but it pays off

Interview by: *Milada Kadeřábková for Flowee.cz*

“When we don't tell our loved ones the truth about what we feel and experience, we keep ourselves locked up in a mental prison, our life turns gray and loses freshness and ease,” explains Czech psychologist Sebastian James. He also adds: “Open communication is the best way towards healthy interpersonal relationships and a peaceful sleep. ”

I came across Sebastian by chance when I found an interesting report from his workshop of Radical honesty in one magazine. I was intrigued by how openly the participants had to express themselves from the start, and the author of the text himself admitted that he had great trouble with it. Indeed, he is not alone; our entire society is not used to openly speak about the unpleasant, not even with our family and friends. That is why I wanted to get to know a man who promotes authenticity so much, even if it's radical.

As I quickly discovered, Sebastian James is definitely not one of those who preach water and drink wine. Immediately after welcoming me, he honestly told me that he didn't particularly look forward to do the interview today. He had a tough day, and also, as he had already warned me, he doesn't consider himself as good in talking as he is in listening. This is more suitable for the work of a psychologist. Fortunately, it wasn't so bad. Sebastian colorfully described his courses, advised on how to properly convey criticism, and explained why it is actually good to be radically honest.



Sebastian, do you still remember what made you decide to study psychology?

When I was nineteen, I was seeing a girl who had experienced a lot of domestic violence from her father. Then when her mother died prematurely, I learned that she once studied psychology. It was so bizarre and I just couldn't understand how a psychologist isn't able to protect herself and her daughter from physical abuse at home. I thought to myself that I wouldn't let this happen and that I would probably be a better psychologist than her.

Did you learn a lot from studying psychology?

Formal university education gave me a good foundation. However I learned the most from older fellow psychotherapists. I was very lucky to have good teachers, especially the American ones. I learned from Brad Blanton, Susan Campbell and John Scherer, who were all direct students of Fritz Pearls, the founder of Gestalt therapy. Also home in the Czech Republic I met great professionals from whom I learned a lot.

You say that honesty is one of the most important things in life, why?

Because what carries us people through life are quality interpersonal relationships. And indeed, there is a huge difference whether our relationships are based on sincerity or not. People are subconsciously aware of this, and therefore they are hungry for authenticity. However, they are sometimes confused, hold themselves back, are scared of the consequences and simply don't know how to begin an honest conversation.

Many people may be scared of the word radical.

I think the word "radical" provides honesty with both good and bad advertising. Some people think that "radical" means ruthless, but it doesn't.

The "radicality" of Radical honesty is in the view, that lying, pretending and withholding in the long run will almost always do more harm than good, and that it is beneficial to speak openly about even the most taboo topics, such as anger, sadness, shame, money or sex.

I often encourage people to express their emotions directly. I understand that sometimes it is difficult, but if we do not speak openly about our emotions, they will manifest themselves in other ways. For example, if I am angry with someone, but I do not tell him, I will probably start avoiding him, slandering him behind his back, criticizing him excessively, or acting spitefully towards him. We call this passive aggression. In the very worst case, we will even turn the anger against ourselves.

But if we just talk to each other about what makes us angry, then it probably won't be enough either?

Exactly, that would be the basis for drama. As in soap operas - someone tells the other person something hurtful or shameful and slams the door. But that is not Radical honesty. If I want to be honest, I also have to be able to stay in the room and listen to the opinions and feelings of others. Yes, sometimes someone raises his voice, sometimes we hurt someone's feelings, but that's human. At other times, we say it completely calmly and then even thank the person that he had the courage to openly discuss the subject.

It is also very important to say what we appreciate about the other person and what we like about him. I often reassure my clients that between two people who have known each other for a long time and care for each other, occasional conflict is inevitable. That would be against nature. However, if both people find the willingness to talk sincerely about their feelings and avoid communication fouls, such conversations are usually much better than what we expected. Not always, but mostly.





Is it good to be honest all the time in every case? How about delicate areas like sex and infidelity?

I'm certainly not saying that people must be honest under all circumstances. I am neither a judge nor a preacher. My job is not to persuade someone to be honest.

Rather, I help create an experience for people to show that honest and open communication is not only possible but can also be pleasant, because it brings freedom, freshness and genuine connection to our lives. On the other hand, lying, pretending and withholding takes a lot of effort, is a major source of stress and alienates us.

Regarding sex, when we are in a long-term relationship with someone, we always find something we're not happy with. So why not talk about it? It is not easy, but many times it proves being helpful. Of course we don't have to talk about it, but that rarely makes the sex problems go away and usually makes things worse.

Honesty towards others also requires us to be honest with ourselves. But we quite often mislead ourselves.

That's why it's important to distinguish between what we think and what we feel. Body sensations and our emotions provide us with much more reliable feedback about our own needs than our mind. It is also good to share our observations and feelings with a few close people.

How are you doing with honesty?

I'm okay. Not perfect but pretty good. Sometimes I am sad or angry and pretend not to be. But my loved ones figure out something is wrong anyway, so I'm not doing too much. This is true for both sides, I also sense when something is wrong with them. We humans have a built-in subconscious radar for insincerity and dishonesty.

You organize group meetings and several-day workshops. Can you describe what goes on at them?

At the beginning of each workshop we make an agreement that we will be honest to each other. Then when people introduce themselves to the group, in addition to their name, age and job, they also say a few things they wouldn't normally reveal. Usually it's something about money, unpleasant emotions, sex or health, which are the most taboo topics in our society. Each of us also speaks about our actions and behaviors by which we sabotage ourselves but we don't normally admit it.

During the workshop we practice a lot of straightforward communication without committing "communication fouls". We learn to speak clearly, comprehensibly and in alignment with our feelings, and in the beginning it takes a lot of courage. We also do a fair amount of hot seat work. This is an opportunity to practice difficult conversations and deal with unfinished business in our real lives.





Hot seat work, as well as the whole Radical honesty workshop, is based on Gestalt work, which is a humanistic, experiential and psychosomatic approach in psychotherapy, and is itself quite radical.

How difficult is it to open up this way for the participants of the course?

People are usually surprised that it is not that difficult. I had many people attend my workshops who had secrets they never told anyone. They were afraid of how people around them would react. But believe me, hiding, pretending, withholding and lying about something for thirty years really costs a lot of energy and sucks the aliveness out of life.

When people experiment with speaking the truth about their lives at my workshops, they usually realize their fears were either totally unnecessary or significantly exaggerated. Yes, a few people sometimes react a little negatively, but it's not the end of the world. Speaking the truth can make other people initially sad or mad, but it also creates a space for empathy, understanding and forgiveness. Many times we discover we are all more alike than we are different.

The good news is that when one person becomes honest, others around them also gain the courage to speak sincerely. This is the great power of honesty, as it expands very quickly across our interpersonal relationships. As a result, people begin to trust and care for each other much more. In addition, when people learn to talk openly and compassionately about their own emotions, they stop being so anxious of feeling them. And that is a huge boost to their quality of life.

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Finally, would you have a specific example of how to communicate our dissatisfaction in the "right" way and what to avoid? For example, when I get mad that my boyfriend doesn't wash the dishes...

Actually, the answer is already in your question. The best way is to simply say "I am angry at you for not washing the dishes yesterday."

It is a much better way than saying, for example, "Can you explain why you didn't wash the dishes?" "You'll never help me with anything." "You're careless like your dad." "Next time, I also won't wash the dishes."

There is a big difference between simply describing the facts and expressing our associated feelings, and between blaming, accusing, moralizing, lecturing or being passively aggressive. Neither is easy, but with a little practice the first situation allows us to have a mutual conversation and hear the other person out. Yes, we get sad, hurt and mad, sometimes we shout or cry, but eventually we work through it. The second situation just leads to blaming, guilt tripping and arguing about who is right. When communication becomes about who is right rather than understanding each other's needs and feelings, nobody wins.

Sebastian James * 1985, Czech Republic

Sebastian James is a psychologist and facilitator working both for the private and corporate sector. He studied in Europe and the United States and worked for companies such as Novartis, ExxonMobil and PwC. In his work he focuses on authenticity, direct communication, understanding human emotions and needs, expanding body awareness, relaxation and play. Sebastian facilitated personal development workshops in the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, France and Greece and worked with people from over 25 countries.

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