

The Four Agreements

Don Miguel Ruiz was born and raised in rural Mexico to a family of traditional healers. He trained as a medical doctor before eventually returning to his legacy of Toltec Knowledge. The Toltec were known as scientists and artists who explored spiritual power and knowledge. They combined the secular and the sacred, believing that science and spirit originated from the same source of energy.

After a near-death experience in the early 1970s, Don Miguel Ruiz focused his energies on introspection and self-analysis. His Toltec Wisdom Book titled 'The Four Agreements' is subtitled 'A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom.'

If one looks at the classic wisdom texts of any culture, it is not surprising to see many of the same lessons repeated. These universal truths find their way into most every doctrine or belief system, and therefore their fundamental significance is reinforced.

Don Miguel's Four Agreements resonate with just such a fundamental truth, and yet the practical application of something that seems so basic is a challenge for us all. The notes below expand on The Four Agreements with some tips around how to successfully apply the agreements in your day-to-day life.

Agreement #1: Be Impeccable with Your Word

Our mothers taught us a version of this agreement using the phrase 'If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.' Further, this message is an extension of the Golden Rule, modified slightly to read 'Say about others as you would have them say about you.' Don Miguel expands on these concepts to encourage readers to only say what they mean, to avoid gossip, and to refuse to engage in self-deprecation.

Unfortunately, gossip is so juicy and enjoyable. It's easy to feel better about oneself by noting the shortcomings and failures of others. And verbal self-deprecation is akin to self-pity, a pleasurable if unhealthy pastime. Committing to stop either of these acts is difficult. Here are some tips for trying:

1. **Bring in a partner.** Tell someone that you are trying to improve in this capacity. Ask them to call it to your attention whenever you are not impeccable with your word. Having someone to be accountable to is fundamental to achieving any goal successfully.
2. **Correct yourself out loud.** If you find yourself saying something disparaging, make a point of correcting yourself out loud, even if you're all alone and especially if you're in a crowd. That slight correction will sting at first, but eventually become second nature and then preempt the behavior.

Agreement #2: Don't Take Anything Personally

The lesson of the second agreement is as true today as it was when you were a teenager. But just like then it hurts to get picked last. You might not be standing in line waiting to play dodge ball today, but you are in line for promotions, reviews of your work and the happiness and success of your home life.

1. **Ask what you can do better.** In any situation where you're receiving the brunt of someone's ire or you feel slighted by their behavior, stand up and ask what you can do better in the future. The mere act of showing that you are willing to change and work harder will chastise anyone that is attacking you personally and cause them to retreat in the face of your willing collaboration.

2. **And do it.** Make a point of taking any advice given and doing it. Don't draw any attention to the effort. Just get it done. Your willingness to seek out and execute against advice will give people pause from choosing to direct their anger at you in the future.

Agreement #3: Don't Make Assumptions

There is an old saying that says 'Don't Assume. It makes an ass out of u and me.' Don Miguel encourages readers to find the courage to ask questions, to truly understand any situation before reacting.

1. **Apply the twenty-four hour rule.** In any situation that has you feeling overwhelmed and angry, learn to take twenty-four hours before responding. Even if you need to write down an angry e-mail to get out all of your bile, put it into your Drafts folder before sending and then sleep on it. The next morning, try and consider if your response will achieve your true end objective, and whether or not you could look at the situation in a different light and have a different response.
2. **Ask the same question twice.** If you are unclear of all of the facts of a situation, or even if you think you're clear but want to make sure, take a moment to re-ask the same questions in a different manner. Ask the same question of two different people to see if the answer changes. Comment that you want to be absolutely sure you understand and then ask again. Most people will admire your desire to get to the heart of an issue.
3. **Seek both opinions.** In any contentious situation, make a point of seeking both opinions, even if it appears the issue is completely one-sided. Situations and circumstance can appear markedly different when viewed through an opposing lens. In all cases, consider yourself a judge and jury, not a prosecutor. You have an obligation to collect all of the facts before taking action.

Agreement #4: Always Do Your Best

Once again, this agreement has a parallel in clichéd sayings. 'It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you played the game.' While Vince Lombardi might find that maxim fodder for the weak, the proverb is true in sports and in life. The sweetness of victory and the pain of defeat in any game, competition or challenge rapidly fade. The memories that persist are those of your individual contribution, effort and response in the face of adversity. Did you step up to the challenge and give it your all? Here are some ideas to ensure that you do:

1. **Grade yourself.** Regardless of the outcome of a challenge in the workplace or in your home life, give yourself an individual grade. Write it down in a journal to make the grade real and visual. You will often be your hardest critic, so the knowledge that a grade is forthcoming can propel you to drive that much harder.
2. **Tell a friend.** Share your grade with a partner, family member or friend. Show them how you did individually and how you could have done better. In first school, you had to have your parents sign your report card to be sure you were accountable to someone else for your performance. That same lesson applies in many of life's trials.

Click on the link to learn more about Don Miguel Ruiz and The Four Agreements
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