

Anxiety and Realizing Potential

By George M. Prince

In infancy I begin the process of becoming a person. My early and most important guides, trainers and conditioners are my parents, particularly my mother, my siblings, and my own programming.

The influence of my genetic make-up, and my instincts form an enormously important part of the mix. My assimilation of information—that is, the way I interpret an event to make it useful to me, depends upon how I organize myself to make meaning. My self-organization—my self-system— determines how I interact with or accommodate to any situation to elicit more information to assimilate. My motive is to grow, to be better able to make meaning and to understand my world, and to be meaningful. The need to be meaningful is the bedrock, fundamental need of human beings—even more basic than the need to belong

In my first year I establish 'competence files' and begin to accumulate relevant information in appropriate files—for example, all learning –to– speak information goes into that file, while learning–to–walk goes in *its* file.

There is one type of information/event that takes precedence over everything else: information that has to do with my survival. There are the well known instinctual reactions of eating, crying when hungry, or in pain, etc. And there is one kind of survival information that is different from all others in its impact on me—it is the experience of anxiety.

Sullivan (1953) characterizes the experience of anxiety as an *uncanny* feeling, akin to awe, dread, loathing, and horror. Unlike hunger, it has no source on which I can focus to alleviate it, and a most significant early learning is the development of strategies to reduce or avoid anxiety. These defensive operations nearly always restrict and weaken my capacity for thinking and growing.

The experience of anxiety begins in my first year as early as the third month. It is triggered by two very different classes of event. When my mother is anxious, I *catch* it from her. If she is anxious when she begins to feed me, even though hungry, I am often too agitated to eat. The other type of event is *separation*.. When separated from my mother, I do not have the capacity to understand 'temporary', nor to imagine her still existing somewhere out of my sight, so when she disappears, my instincts tell me that I am in extreme danger. I am assailed by a powerful, irrational, dreadful apprehension of...I don't know what. But my instincts 'believe' that if abandoned, *I will cease to be*. The signals they send me are as urgent and compelling as Mother Nature can design. So fundamental and gripping are these signals that they command my highest priority. Everything else that is going on, is instantly subordinate. To a very large extent, any

circumstance that I can even *remotely connect* to this threat of ceasing to be—of being meaningless—will set in motion disproportionate reaction strategies.

Anxiety Establishes a Direct Route to Reaction

A child, from first days, relates a new experience to other relevant knowledge, not to the immediately preceding event. (Jerome Kagan, 1984) This tells us that most events are processed or sorted. If the sorting arouses anxiety—threat of ceasing to be—I do no further analysis. I feel the urgent need for action. This direct pathway is firmly established in my first year and as a result, an event that stirs anxiety is not subject to analysis, reason or learning. It cries out for urgent and immediate action to prevent annihilation. This direct, solid connection between anxiety and reaction remains a significant influence on behavior far beyond infancy.

Defending My Self

It is widely assumed that as I mature and become more and more capable of reason and analysis, I can discriminate between actions that actually threaten me and those that are not dangerous to me. This appears to be true about physical threat. I learn to go into my adrenaline-rich flight or fight mode only when confronted with a more or less real threat to my person. This does not seem to be true of perceived threats to my meaningfulness.

For the rest of my life, the phenomenon of anxiety will continue to exert a disruptive influence. It creates an almost irresistible impulse to go into defensive maneuvers to survive, to *preserve my being and my validity* from whatever I perceive to be *de-meaning* me. A great many, if not all of my strategies for interacting with others are designed to protect my *interpersonal security*.

Foresight Function and Anxiety Gradient

Sullivan describes the mechanisms that lead to defensive strategies. In infancy I develop what he terms *foresight function*: the ability to anticipate anxiety in emerging situations. I become sensitive to increasing/decreasing anxiety—my *anxiety gradient*. The combination my foresight function and my anxiety gradient alert me to impending 'danger' and I learn maneuvers or strategies to defend my feelings of meaningfulness. I develop the capacity to *substitute* other, more bearable feelings to mask my anxiety. For example, the flash of anger when someone is rude to me is a substitution. It is my defensive strategy to avoid the unmanageable grip of anxiety. Such substitutions become part of many of my strategies to disguise uncertainty about my meaningfulness. Anxiety is always grounded in some form of self-doubt.

Concealing Anxiety Through Substitution

I am *allergic* to actions that diminish my self-image. I could control my reactions if I could recognize that these 'threats' engage an infantile, vestigial need that is no longer valid. But my adult self-system is organized to *avoid that recognition*, as it would defeat my primitive purpose of concealing my anxiety from myself. The substitutions of anger, rejection, impatience, righteous indignation, adversarial response, stonewalling, withdrawal, prejudice, disgust—are designed to reduce the impact of my anxiety, and to protect my self-respect. As a result, there is considerable incentive to be *unaware* of the true motives that underlie my adversarial reactions. I am in a double bind: I need to conceal awareness of anxiety for my security, and I need to be aware of its true source of power so I have no need to react, since there is no actual danger.

How do I know that this unlikely and irrational dynamic exists in mature adults? In thousands of videotaped sessions in which small groups of individuals were attempting to collaborate to solve a problem or invent a new product, I began to see a strange sequence: when one member rejected the idea of another, or discounted another, no matter how subtle or indirect the slight, the target would often react with the emotional equivalent of fight or flight. He or she seemed instantly to change his relationship with his 'attacker'. This might take the form of an immediate counterattack; other times he would bide his time until the attacker was vulnerable and then undermine him. In other instances he would seem to drop out. This reaction persists even when participants are given evidence that it sabotages the purpose of the meeting. The behavior appears to hold true regardless of the seeming maturity of the parties involved.

This cycle was so predictable that I began to call it the *discount/revenge syndrome*. (Prince, 1982)

The Disintegrating Effect of Discounting

The discount/revenge syndrome is observed in the relationship of couples. Psychologist John Gottman (1994) has done extensive research of the transmissions between spouses, measuring physical signals such as blood pressure while videotaping the pair as they deal with each other in various situations. He identified predictors that reliably determine whether a couple will stay together or not. The predictors are actions that either discount or validate. When there is more than *one* discount to every *five* validations, there is a 95% certainty that the relationship will disintegrate and the couple will part. Gottman identifies four types of discount affecting couple relationships: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Any of these discounting actions tend to produce retaliation in kind.

Sullivan points out that in *any* relationship when anxiety rises, the harmony disintegrates and is replaced by reactivity.

Some Developmental Consequences of Anxiety

Robert Kegan (1994) maps the developmental stages in my growth from infancy and total enmeshment—inability to distinguish between feeling and thinking, between me and my surroundings in early life—to maturity when I clearly differentiate my thinking from my feeling; I become principle-oriented, capable of hearing and evaluating (entertaining) the views of others without getting 'hooked' by them. I can listen empathically to understand without reacting, communicate without antagonizing. My regard of myself is firmly respectful and realistically appreciative.

I have moved from a stage of "First Order Way of organizing experience" (enmeshed in it) to a "Third or Fourth Order Way" (able to understand and evaluate, and manage my response to an event without getting enmeshed).

The keys to my growing up are, first, my increasing ability to *empathize* with the viewpoints, thoughts and feelings of another *without* being taken over by them; and second, my increasing confidence that I am a capable and reliable person, not susceptible to threat. These capacities allow me to organize meaning at a mature level.

The greatest hindrance to my movement to maturity and the higher levels of organizing meaning is my enslavement to anxiety. The paradoxical result of my unremitting struggle to protect myself from it, produces a self that is under constant siege—highly susceptible to self-doubt; impelled at the slightest hint of anxiety to regress from rational, Third or Fourth level of availability—to-connect, to First level of unthinking reactivity.

The Learning Process

To understand this grave handicap in my ability to learn and grow from experience, we need to understand the specific way I organize information to create meaning. Here are the steps:

1. Perceiving/becoming aware
2. More or less confusion
3. *Trial connecting* the new perception to something known, to create meaning
4. Testing to see if that meaning conforms to reality
5. Adopting that meaning as the 'truth' until contrary evidence prove otherwise
6. Locating it in the proper competence file

The socializing process in our culture is goal-oriented. We want correct answers and proper behavior and we tend to pay little attention to process. For example, we believe in 'constructive criticism'. When my answers and actions do not meet

standards, my parents and teachers label them wrong and reject them. In my young mind I am identified with my meanings. They are 'me'. When they are rejected, I experience it as rejection and threat. My anxiety rises and I need to act. I have limited options. I can transform the anxiety into anger and rebellion, or I can change my process of creating meaning and make it safer. I try all my options. One that forestalls anxiety is avoiding commitment. If I feel confusion, I stop thinking in that direction. If it is risky to make a connection to figure something out, I don't make that connection—I ask someone. Whenever my foresight function tells me that I am moving into uncertainty, I avoid it if I can. I stop thinking for myself and seek help from an authority or I simply stop pursuing understanding. I limit my thinking.

The Divorce of My Self

In growing up I make a great many errors that are criticized or rejected. Considering Gottman's five to one ratio of validations to discount, it is almost inevitable that I 'divorce' myself, because my mental model of an ideal person is one who does not make mistakes.

I come to believe that my true self is flawed and inferior, and I develop an internal field of unforgiving censure, shame and guilt because of my many failures. When I compare this mistake-prone self whose flaws I know only too well, to the public, impression-managed selves of my fellows, I am confirmed in my belief that I am below standard.

Every stab of anxiety reinforces the disintegration of my self-regard and presses me away from being a learner and toward defensiveness and reactivity.

The Need for a Paradigm Shift

The first step in reclaiming myself is to recognize the pervasive forces that shape the way I deal with myself and comprehend how I collaborate with them to limit my access to my potential. The paradigm that guides parents, teachers and trainers, holds that the optimum field for learning is created with a goal-oriented, reward and punishment model. Two of the difficulties in understanding the drawbacks of this model are, first, it seems to work—most of us *seem* to learn and grow up; second, there is no clear alternative model for comparison.

As for 'it seems to work', Alfie Kohn (1993) says, "Scores of studies over the last quarter century have shown that when people of any age are offered a reward for doing something, they are likely to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward...another well-replicated finding: Rewards usually reduce the quality of performance..."

Even more disturbing is the fact that many psychologists and brain researchers are convinced that the vast majority of us never develop more than a fraction

(1/20th, for example) of our potential for thinking. The violence in our cities and towns and the world-wide tragedy of man pitted against man in irrational struggles, is persuasive evidence that mature, fourth and fifth level thinking is rare.

Anxiety—Toxic to Thinking, Learning and Accomplishment

Our interaction practices have created an anxiety-driven culture, which is to say, our traditional way of dealing with each other tends to arouse anxiety and reduce the use of my potential. It is accepted that early abuse results in later destructive behavior—more than 80% of prison inmates were abused as children. Analyzing the goal-oriented, reward and punishment model we can see how it may stunt growth rather than encourage it. It now seems probable that even well-intentioned criticism is far more damaging than we thought

Accomplishment always involves a vision, an idea or goal, *plus* a process for implementation—for making it happen. When I am focused on the end result, the reward, I tend to think of the process of getting there as something to be gotten through.

The self-limiting consequence of this can be more easily seen if we look at non-competitive activities such as skiing, or reading for pleasure. In skiing, or reading a novel, I still have the goals of getting to the bottom of the mountain and finishing the book, but the focus of my attention is very much on my process of getting to those goals. I might even say that when I consider either of those examples, I have multiple goals—my vision is to not only complete the run and the book, it is to fully experience every minute of getting there. This dual focus of *attention* radically changes the experience of accomplishment, and clarifies the limitations of the traditional reward/punishment model in which mistakes are criticized.

Csikszentmihalyi, the student of human development, (1990, 1993) says that how I focus my attention determines whether or not I will find rewards and meaning in the events of each moment. Attention and appreciation are my most important tools in getting the most out of experience.

Goal *and* Process

Kegan speaks of the ideal learning field: "...people grow best where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge."(1994, P. 42) If there is too much challenge I get defensive; too much support, I get bored. "Both kids of imbalance lead to withdrawal or dissociation from the context. In contrast, the balance of support and challenge leads to vital engagement."(Ibid)

Kegan's use of the word challenge is rooted in the competitive, win/lose , reward/punishment paradigm of learning and I believe it is useful to move toward a different model. This is a subtle yet critical point. The issue is not support balanced with challenge. I would substitute opportunity for challenge, and focus on the quality of support. Support does not imply that I make connections *for* the learner, but that I appreciate *his* operations *toward* making connections to create meaning. There cannot, realistically, *be* too much support. Support for my connection-making is not going to be boring; what generates anxiety and my self-defensive substitution of boredom is approval only for the connecting that is 'correct', and disapproval for 'mistaken' connecting.

Kagan sees this critical learning field in much the same way: "The infant's emotional state is affected by his ability or inability to assimilate discrepant events. [One] that can be assimilated after some effort produces excitement, but one that cannot be assimilated produces *uncertainty...*"(1984.P. 38) which is only a short step away from anxiety.

If it were possible to convey to the infant appreciation and approval of his *attempts* to assimilate—that is, connecting to make meaning, it could make an enormous difference in the infant's and later the child's and adult's ability to learn.

Mistakes and Self-Regard

There is such a powerful prejudice against mistakes because, in the grip of our goal-oriented, reward and punishment teaching/learning model, a mistake is *wrong*—I am taught that I should strive never to make a mistake. When I make one, I am criticized/corrected, and I build this loathing of mistakes into my model for dealing with myself: I not only punish my mistakes, *I hold against myself* the fact that I continue to make them. I systematically undermine my self-regard. This is a vicious circle that creates an internal field that not only handicaps my learning, it leads to critical and self-destructive actions, and also to unrewarding relationships.

I Am Like a Compass

A compass locates magnetic north by an activity called seeking. If the needle is held at west and released, it swings toward north and goes beyond north a little to the east. It senses the 'mistake' and swings back, going a bit to the west. It feels that mistake and swings back going a bit to the east. If we magnify its movements, we see that it *never* settles on north. It seeks back and forth, tiny movements to the left and then to the right, keeping north in between.

My eyes use the same seeking method when I focus on a target. When I begin the connection-making operations of thinking, I do something analogous: I

connect with anything that might give me a start on meaning. I trial connect, test, then make a closer, more precise connection. That initial connect, that commitment toward meaning-making, is crucial to purposeful thinking. Good thinkers/learners have conditioned themselves to tolerate the anxiety that accompanies this 'guessing'.

Learning to Love My Learning Curve

Learning curve is a term used to describe the increase in competence that I achieve as I repeat an operation. For example, as I learn to read. The task seems agonizingly slow and labored at first, and as I gradually work up the learning curve I get more and more expert. The early uncertain effortful steps are often seen by the teacher as something to be gotten through as quickly as possible. To me as the learner it is a mixed sensation: on the one hand is the excitement and satisfaction of each new connection to my 'how to read file'; on the other is the awareness of my slow and uncertain steps compared to the impossible perfection of my teacher. Because teacher rewards only correct progress, I may get the idea that my stumbling is a form of mistakenness and come to resent the very 'seeking' steps that will move me up the learning curve.

If teacher were consciously to shift from the goal-oriented, reward and punishment model to the 'double goal, love the learning curve' model, he would specifically appreciate the seeking steps. Prejudice (foresight function and increasing anxiety) alarms me about reinforcing 'mistakes' and I reject this idea, but I tolerate the anxiety and wonder if there is a way to appreciate without misleading. Of course there is. Simple acknowledgment is experienced as appreciation.

Reassurance can be found in the experiments of Georgi Lozanov who developed a language learning/teaching process called Suggestopedia. He changed the relationship between teacher and student. He systematically removed the criticism aspects of teaching. He moved the learning environment from classroom, with its dominant/subordinate connotations, to a comfortable living-room atmosphere. He asked participants to role-play. Each assumed a temporary identity of a powerful person—a king or warrior or goddess. The purpose of this role was to insulate the real person from feeling anxiety about mispronunciations and other mistakes. He played background music. He introduced vocabulary words using varying tones and emphasis and then 'passed them around', each learner pronouncing the word and the teacher modeling ideal pronunciation when her turn came.

These and many other devices that focused on removing anxiety from the *perception, confusion, and trial connecting* steps of the learning process produced spectacular results in speeding students up the learning curve. In two months Lozanov's students learned the equivalent of one full year course. (The

International Alliance for Learning, 1725 South Hill Street, Oceanside, CA 92054–5319 carries on the work of Dr. Lazonov in this country).

Systematic Limitation of Growth

The present system of child rearing and teaching seem uninformed about the child's brilliant sensitivity, capability, and *willingness* to perceive and make meaning. This combination of dependence and love creates an *availability* we do not seem to comprehend. With our devotion to punishment and reward to reach our goals for their behavior, we train our children to smother and reject their natural talents for connecting. Being gifted learners, they obediently create an internal field that shackles their thinking processes. They construct a relationship with themselves, modeled on that of their parents, that treats their selves like the enemy. Little wonder that most of us use only 1/20th of our potential.

The Golden Opportunity for Schools

If the current fever to redesign education were to be informed by an appreciation for the role of anxiety in the child's development, it would be possible to multiply the thinking skills developed in school. What is needed is not new curricula and new buildings and equipment, but a new relationship between teacher and student in which the adult focuses on nurturing, *above all*, a realistic self-appreciation. Treated properly, those selves have all the talent required to become outstanding thinkers. If we adults in the teaching system can become clear, within ourselves about how to create, first internally and then for our charges, a discount-free process *and* goal-oriented way of relating and learning, we may be able to provide parents with a new more humane way of dealing with their children.

References

- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow*, Harper & Row, New York, 1990
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *The Evolving Self*, Harper Collins, New York, 1994
Dewey, John, *How We Think*, D.C. Heath, Boston, 1933
Gottman, John, with Silver, Nan, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, Simon and Shuster, New York, 1994
Kagan, Jerome, *The Nature of the Child*, Basic Books, New York, 1984
Kegan, Robert, *In Over Our Heads, The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994
Kohn, Alfie, *Punished by Rewards*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1993
Prince, George M., "Creative meetings through power sharing", *Harvard Business Review*, (pp. 47–54) July–August, 1972