

Defensiveness Disorder

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[We believe that defensiveness with its many faces is *rooted in anxiety*. It is a major obstacle to everyday relating, learning and accomplishment. Because we are all so used to it, it goes unremarked and does critical damage to all who are subject to it. Herewith, some thinking about it]

A defense is created in anticipation of an attack. In our culture most of us, while open and trusting as children, become hair–trigger defensive as adults. Study of videotapes of hundreds of meetings that included people of different backgrounds and education, reveal a beginning watchfulness and apprehension. Is the interpersonal field friendly or not? This watchfulness persists. At the first put–down or discount, the field is established as “dangerous as usual”. This reactivity is not harmless. A person feeling demeaned will often act in obstructive ways, or drop out and stop contributing.

Fueling defensiveness is uncertainty about one’s meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness

The need to be “seen, to be recognized, however it changes in the complexity of its form, may never change in its intensity.(Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self* P.18). This need originates in our genes as a mechanism for survival. It begins in infancy when we feel overwhelming anxiety when we are “abandoned” by Mother or “endangered” by the presence of a stranger. It is a biological as well as an emotional phenomenon.

This compulsion to be and feel meaningful is not an option. “Meaning...is the primary human motion, irreducible...” “Well–fed, warm and free of disease, you may still perish if you cannot “mean”. ” (ibid. P. 19)

Responding to this compelling need we develop strategies for protecting ourselves from the devastating anxiety of feeling meaningless. The very first of these is the convulsive screaming an infant uses to attract attention when he senses the threat of abandonment.

Many of these early strategies evolve into useful practices to recruit others to friendship and cooperation with us. Two examples are civility and empathy. “The capacity to recruit another’s invested regard, so uniform at birth, becomes a various affair as people get older.” (Ibid. P. 19) and this seems to depend largely on how successful is the infant and child at getting the loving attention, *respect* and *regard* of his parents. Those who get it tend to become “recruiters”—people others like to be with. Less successful children, while recruitable and able to have rewarding relationships, have more trouble attracting others. Children who suffer indifference or other abuse are not only non–recruitable, they have great difficulty establishing nurturing relationships with

anyone. Their anxiety about their meaningfulness is so acute that they tend to resort to anti-social behavior for attention and reassurance.

Discount/Revenge

The fact that the fight/freeze/flight impulse is triggered by non-threatening discounts suggests that there is a much greater sensitivity to threat than was realized; that any transmission or action that is perceived to diminish or demean a person, even though not reasonably dangerous, can evoke defensive reactions and render a person less available for connecting to relate or learn.

Anxiety

"The tension called anxiety...is differentiated from all other reductions in euphoria by the absence of anything specific, and consequently there is in the infant no capacity for action toward the relief of anxiety..." (Harry Stack Sullivan, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, P.xiv)

"...Anxiety always interferes with any other tensions with which it coincides." (Ibid. p.43)

"...the role of anxiety in interpersonal relations (fields) is so profoundly important that its differentiation from all other tensions is vital." (Ibid. P 44)

It seems that the defensive reactions are an expression of anxiety brought on by any real or imagined threat to one's feelings of meaningfulness.

"...what a devastating complication of development frequent experiences of anxiety can be." (Ibid. P. 75)

"...the interpersonal situation is destroyed—it breaks up.... anxiety is a disjunctive or disintegrative tendency in interpersonal relations." (Ibid. P95)

"...so far as interpersonal relations are concerned, anxiety is almost always, but not quite always, an outstanding ingredient in breaking up interpersonal situations." (Ibid. P. 95)

"...severe anxiety probably contributes no information."

"The effect of severe anxiety reminds one in some ways of a blow on the head, in that it simply wipes out what is immediately proximal to its occurrence."

"Anxiety has a similar effect of producing useless confusion, and a useless disturbance of...sentience..."

[Learning by anxiety gradient] "...learning to discriminate increasing from diminishing anxiety and to alter activity in the direction of [diminishing it]". "Very early in life there begins to be discrimination as to when euphoria is diminishing—that is, when one is getting more anxious..."

"...an immense amount of what is human behavior in any society is learned on the basis of this gradient." (P. 153)

"...it is anxiety which is responsible for a great part of the inadequate, inefficient, unduly rigid, or otherwise unfortunate performance of people..." "Whether one is getting more or less anxious is in a large sense, the basic influence which determines interpersonal relations...it more or less directs the course of their development." (P. 160)

"...there comes into being in late infancy an organization of experience which will ultimately be of nothing less than stupendous importance in personality, and which comes entirely from the interpersonal relations..."

"...a dynamism directed at how to live with this significant other person. The self-system thus is an organization of educative experience called into being by the necessity to avoid or the minimize incidents of anxiety." (P. 165)

Lack of attention to child's perceptions (indifference)—the child tends to perceive less. (P. 181)

"The discrimination between fear and anxiety is a vital one."

"Very severe fear and very severe anxiety...feel the same—that is, the felt component is identical—but the discrimination between these two powerful disjunctive processes in life is at times vital."

"Anxiety is something which...is acquired by an empathic linkage with the significant older persons, whereas fear is that which appears when the satisfaction of general needs is deferred to the point where [they] become very powerful." [need to be free of pain/hurt] (P.204)

The extraordinary impact of anxiety comes from its reverberations with the infant's genetic apprehension of ceasing to exist developed in the first year and observed as fear of abandonment.

Anxiety, however aroused, always includes an unconscious component of *threat-to-existence*. Thus the reaction will be, to some extent, irrational, disconnected and disproportionate to the rational cause.

The Neurophysiology of Anxiety

Anxiety originates in an organ of the brain. The amygdala acts as the storehouse of emotional memory and thus of significance itself. The signals from eyes and ears are channeled through the thalamus, which routes them to the amygdala, which scans for emotional danger. The neocortex—the reasoning/thinking part of the brain—receives the information split seconds later. If the amygdala detects threat, it flashes an emergency signal to all parts of the brain to mobilize. This signal is sent *before* the neocortex has had a chance to analyze the situation to determine the reality of the danger. (Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, P. 15–17)

History

An infant first experiences anxiety at about six months when s/he senses that he has been abandoned by Mother, or that Mother is gripped by anxiety, or when the infant is confronted with a stranger. (Kagan P. 43) The emotion remembered by the amygdala is an unspecified fear of ceasing to exist—failing to survive—the feeling we call anxiety. “If a sight, sound or experience has proved painful before—Dad’s drunken arrival home was followed by a beating—then the amygdala floods the circuits with neurochemicals before the higher brain knows what is happening. *The more often this pathway is used, the easier it is to trigger.*”(Newsweek 2/19/96 P. 58) [Emphasis ours]

Because the amygdala is *approximate* rather than precise, this dread feeling will later be triggered whenever any event resonates with that emotional memory of abuse and threatened abandonment—any event that even remotely conveys, “you are unimportant”, or that demeans, discounts; suggests that one does not matter; that one is meaningless. *Any action of control, domination, demand, repression, or imposed restrictions tends to set in motion this powerful counterforce.* Very often the expression of this force is hidden because the recipient is subordinate.

Understanding the impact of abuse

PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) is the name given to a disorder that is the consequence of prolonged or intense abuse such as combat in war or rape or other terrifying event. The symptoms are attacks of almost unbearable physiological arousal: a hypersensitive emotional tripwire, an exaggerated startle response, and profound distortions of memory. Attacks can be triggered by any reminder of the terrifying event.

“It does not matter if it was the incessant terror of combat, torture or repeated abuse in childhood, or a one time experience, like trapped in a hurricane or almost dying in an auto accident...all uncontrollable stress can have the same biological impact.” (*The Biology of Fear*, Kay Butler—*Networker* July/August 1996).

PTSD is the pathological end of the spectrum of physical and emotional damage that is done by terrorizing a person in a situation where he is or *feels* powerless. The special situation of children—of helplessness, dependency and limited resources for resistance— makes them extremely vulnerable to a persistent dysregulation of body and brain chemistry.

We see the consequences of severe abuse in the violence and destructiveness in our culture, and in the abusive background of our prison populations, but we tend to be unaware of the price we pay in the high level of defensiveness in our everyday lives because we are all immersed in it like fish in water.

“Emotional reactivity is a hallmark of PTSD. Years after the trauma, its sufferers startle at the slightest surprise and remain easily frazzled. The fight or flight response is dysregulated.” (ibid.)

Consequences of Dysregulated Flight or Fight Response

One of the more visible symptoms of dysregulated fight or flight response is the Discount/Revenge syndrome observed in thousands of meetings and invention sessions. It is entirely predictable that when one person discounts another (points out flaws in his idea or reasoning, or otherwise demeans him), the injured party either gets revenge or drops out. In rational terms, the discount has done no real injury or posed no real threat, but the response is not rational. It is triggered by a flood of adrenaline along a pathway made hypersensitive by repeated demeaning actions in the past. The resultant anxiety impairs the mind.

The larger problem is that this defensiveness has a profound effect on one’s availability to relate with others and to learn from the events in his or her life.

Anxiety and Learning

Anxiety interferes with any activity that is going on. A child quickly learns to stop whatever she is doing that triggers anxiety. When a child is discounted—demeaned— she is emotionally “hijacked” and will have the impulse to stop making connections and fight, freeze, or flee. In most situations she must transform this impulse into compliance with the adult’s order, but it leaves a residue of anger and rebellion that interferes with connecting.

The relaxation of the tension of anxiety brings the experience of interpersonal *security*. In this state the child is free to make the connections of learning.

Relationship, Field and Learning

A relationship is formed of all the messages that pass between two people. These messages create a field that, like a magnetic field, exerts a force on the parties. Relationships persist over time and affect interpersonal security. When some of the messages sent by a parent or teacher are disrespectful and demeaning, they trigger anxiety in the child *and it has a continuing effect on the relationship*. A single discount has more force than five validating, appreciative actions. (Based on research reported in *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* by John Gottman with Nan Silver, Simon and Shuster 1994)

When there are discounts in the field, everyone tends to become defensive, antagonism increases, and trial connecting (thinking) slows. When the field is unfailingly respectful, the child feels safe and can self-soothe her "normal" anxiety about making trial connections.

[Expectations—*Pygmalion in the Classroom*, a researcher demonstrates the extreme sensitivity of children to teachers' expectations.]

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one's transmissions to another without demeaning or diminishing the other while maintaining one's integrity. An emotionally intelligent person knows how to create relationship fields that advance interpersonal security, reduce defensive perversity and invite collaboration and synergy. S/he also knows how to handle destructive inputs to damage-control.

To a large extent, how one manages relationships determines the quality of his or her life.

To determine whether a transmission is emotionally intelligent, answer the following two questions: does this help me to be and feel meaningful? Will this transmission help xxxxx be and feel meaningful? If the answer to either question is no, the transmission is EQ negative and it will damage the relationship.

Emotional Intelligence and Self

To operate at our best, each of us needs *inner* personal security—an internal field that unfailingly supports us. This requires that we learn *to deal with ourselves* with emotional intelligence to nurture learning and growth. Our internal field tends to break down when we make a mistake or fail to live up to expectations. A mistake is an event and when we convert it into information—tell its story—if we begin by discounting and demeaning ourselves, it triggers the inevitable anxiety and we greatly reduce the possibility of connection making and learning.

It is emotionally intelligent and a far better learning experience if we are mindful of the learning curve and tell the story of our mistake without punishment and with a beginning, middle, and conclusion—creating well-organized information to guide us to a new level on the curve. Only in such a positive field does our full potential come into being.

Learning from Events

There is a widespread belief in the saying, “We learn from experience” as though the experience is the teacher. When we analyze how we learn from what happens to us, it is clear that the teacher is “us”! What happens is an *event*. It is neutral and meaningless until we process it into a story. We connect it to other information; determine the significance of it and flesh it out with feelings and reflection so that it *becomes* an experience organized into information we can use in the future. Its information is most useful if our story has a beginning, middle and ends with a conclusion—a “therefore”.

It always begins with telling the story to one’s self. This is a monologue. It can be enriched by then telling it to another person.

Skill with language is important, for language is the way we transform events, and to capture meaning one needs words. “Language is the transformation of experience, and at the same time it transforms what we can experience.” (Goolishian) “We could not experience love as we do if we had not learned to talk of love.” (La Rochefoucauld, quoted by Goolishian).

Vocabulary and storytelling are critical assets in growth.

Interpersonal security

Once we are aware of the symptoms of Defensiveness Disorder we can see that it is epidemic in our culture. The violence and rebellion, more than matches the pervasive attempts to dominate and control. It is evident that something is wrong with our present ways of dealing with each other. It is most spectacular in the neighborhoods of the deprived, but it is the every-day field in nearly every school, home and business. Our assumptions about discipline and education are firmly based on using power-over and domination to coerce the behaviors we desire; we do not see that a great many of our actions demean those subordinate to us and set up a pattern of reactivity. Until we invent ways to be more respectful and protect interpersonal security from infancy to old age, we will be frustrated by the effects of Defensive Disorder.