

The Etiology of Self-Punishment

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It has been widely accepted that the source of self-Punishment is the punishing activity of parents or important others. The belief has been that the child, in order to escape punishment internalizes punishing and does it preemptively. The internalized self-punisher continues to operate as long as the person lives, independent of reexamination and evaluation. The assumption tends to be 'It's natural like walking.'

As a result of recent insights, it is now revealed that the self-punishing function is developed by the child to assuage his or her fear of abandonment and forestall its imagined occurrence. Parents' punishment stimulates the fear of abandonment, and that terror governed the uncompromising forcefulness of the punisher the child installs.

Given the limited experience and judgment of the child, and the enormity of the fear, it is not surprising that the self-punisher he/she installs is what one might call 'heavy duty'. Further, there is little capacity for discrimination between mild impropriety and barbarism. Anything that strikes the untutored eye, ear, nose, or feel as untoward, merits heavy to devastating punishment and dire threat.

This blunt instrument of 'self-discipline' and 'conscience' continues operational without significant modification or updating relative to reality. At some point the owner absently wonders about its usefulness and come to believe that its secondary purpose is to improve performance.

An intelligent, careful adult observer cannot escape the conclusion that each of us has, to borrow a phrase, put an enormously destructive tiger in his or her tank. The effect of this largely indiscriminating devastator is to obstruct almost every constructive development of connecting, understanding, guessing, imaging, initiative, enterprise, vigor, wholeheartedness, ability to listen, venturesomeness, curiosity, improvisation skills, courage and daring. It sounds the death knell of reasonable self-esteem. It makes unlikely the construction of truly intimate relationship. Further, it invites lethargy, indecision, indolence, apathy, and unawareness. It leads to closed mindedness and unwillingness to risk change.

No one can experience the impact of his/her full creative potential unless he has deliberately refashioned and rededicated the energy that is bonded into the Self-Punisher and shape it to supportive and constructive uses.