

Chapter 8 Families Behaving Badly

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Chapter 8: Families Behaving Badly: Parents and spouses ensure unhappiness

The \$64,000 Question

At this juncture in the book I would like to take the opportunity to strongly urge the reader to realize how important education is. If this is difficult for you to understand, then please read the entire paragraph. Children are not being taught how to be parents. Since the beginning of time they have not been taught. It is time to begin the education on a wide scale. Millions of young people do not understand how to take care of their children. They do not understand how to take care of their relationships. They do not understand their own behavior. They need help. I have had countless patients say to me "I wish I had had this information when I was young" just after I have given a lesson on healthy relationships in the hospital where they landed after years of stress and conflict in their marriages.

Why? I ask again, why are we not rushing to provide the most important thing in a person's life after physical health: psychological health. Think about it. If you have no worry of your physical health what would you want next? Money? Possessions? Maybe an egopathy would say that. But most healthy people would say Happiness. Amen. That's right, happiness. Whence happiness? It comes from healthy loving relationships with parents, spouses, and children.

The parents will balk and complain and shift blame to someone else quite possibly because they have personality disorders such as Narcissistic P.D., Sadistic P.D., Borderline P.D., or Psychopathic P.D. All of these personalities, each one infused with egopathy, are notorious for being defensive and lacking

accountability. The younger generation will begin to connect this annoyance of personality testing with having children who murder. They will begin to ask, “How can I avoid having to take a personality test someday.” Hopefully, they will begin to realize that they must be better parents if they are to avoid the hassle and embarrassment of taking a personality test and being held responsible. In Jack Weston’s book, Licensing Parents, he says, “Parents ought to be held responsible.”

The news items that would come out of this mandated procedure would seep down into the public consciousness that adults who kill were once children who had problematic parents. The results would, by law, be put into a private storage where psychological researchers could access the information and use it to do research, draw statistical conclusions, and learn more about developmental personology. In the beginning, judging the parents and using the tests to criminally prosecute them would be consciously held to a minimum. We would not know enough about the connection between the personalities of the parents as revealed on the tests and the crimes of the children to hold them criminally liable. Not for about ten years. After that we would be in a better place to make judgments about appropriate laws linking children’s criminal behavior and the parenting skills of the parents.

This information would be used to teach high school students about why criminals become who they are. The students would then be inspired to attend parenting classes with a diligence not heretofore seen amongst high school students. They would begin to show interest in becoming the best parents they could be so they will have healthy children. Furthermore, this information will aid in teaching the students of all ages and persuasion how dysfunctional personality develops.

Black and White, the Dichotic Bent

In the course of two days I had two parents describes themselves as “black and white.” What did they mean and how can we understand it? Let’s make a note that both the fathers who said this had been divorced at least once and both had angry, unhappy, low performing sons and daughters. Although being “black and white,” as they described themselves, was something they seemed to be proud of, it certainly wasn’t working for the health of their families.

Let’s examine what being “black and white” means. Simply put, it means seeing things as a simple choice. Every mental function is expected to be a simple, two options such as “do it or don’t do it, “like it or don’t like it,” “want to come over or don’t want to come over.” It is as if their brains lack the ability to see feelings and desires in several shades of gray. For instance, things could be seen in terms of “sometimes, under certain conditions, with certain people, in certain places, in certain moods.” These mitigating factors don’t sit well with egopaths. In psychoanalytic literature having this mental style is called “splitting.” When a child is very young, they don’t understand shades of gray so they consider their mothers “good mothers” or “bad mothers.” When the mother is cooing and nursing she is a “good mother.” When the mother is impatient and not responding to the babies cries, she becomes a “bad mother.” As the child grows older and receives the love it needs, he or she begins to realize that the “good mother” and “bad mother” are one in the same and that everything is okay. * It is a part of living to have someone you love be hurtful or unavailable sometimes and it is not the end of the world. Egopaths have a hard time understanding this concept. For some reason they did not get their needs met as children which left them with a similar attitude in adulthood. They expect everyone to do exactly as they expect, and any deviation from their expectation constitutes, in their minds, a radical departure from the “right thing” and, to them, completely unacceptable. Gray areas are not egopaths’ forte. *(They grow into an “I’m okay, you’re okay” frame of mind. See the list of books on page XX in Chapter 18.)

Let’s apply this to the situations these fathers were dealing with. They both had children who were angry, rejective, and low-performing. Both fathers cared about their children very much. They were loving fathers. However, they did not know how to “be there” for their children. When the child showed any kind disgruntled attitude, didn’t perform well, or had inchoate ideas, the father would quickly move to shut that kind of behavior down with a shaming barrage of disparaging words. He thought he was being helpful. He thought he was firmly guiding his child in a more appropriate direction. But in both cases he was only hurting his child’s sense-of-self feelings. Both fathers did not know how to slow down, pull

back, ask questions, respond with interest and curiosity, and then make suggestions for new behaviors that would work better for the both of them. After describing this more “salutogenic” way of parenting, one father spontaneously threw up one hand and said, “Guilty.” (of not parenting in the healthy way.) He instinctively knew the description I gave was a more loving way to parent, and immediately admitted to his failure to parent his son in that more supportive way. I would say he stands a good chance of growing out of his egopathy.

Once, there was an egopathic psychologist. How did I know? I could tell by his egocentric behavior. I had failed to call him back after he had called me and that had sent him ‘round the bend.’ I had apologized genuinely but that did not mean anything to him. It seldom does to an egopath. They are inherently unable to say, “Oh, I see” much less to say “I forgive you.” To change attitudes or stances or positions or responses or threats in the middle of a discussion seems to them that they have “lost” and you have “won.” (see chapter XX about “win-win” solutions)

I have learned that a person who is mentally/emotionally healthy is able to say, “Oh, I see” when given an explanation. They are able to say words like, “Don’t worry about it. We’ll deal with it. I understand. It’s okay.” Egopaths are good at saying words like, ‘Don’t let it happen again,” “I didn’t like that,” and “It better not happen again.” They feel the power of control over others and it works to help them feel safe in their environment (see chapter 3).

There was a term on a test I once took. The trait was “comfortable with chaos.” Black and white parents and supervisors are not comfortable with the “chaos” of human behavior. They want things done this way, the right way, with no deviations from rules and routine. Any deviation creates discomfort or anxiety inside them. They are the “just do it” and “just do it my way” folks. (This is the trait that overlaps with Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder.) Furthermore, egopathic parents and bosses seem proud of this “dichotic” way of thinking. It may be that it has worked for them in the past to cut through the clutter and get the job done. That style may succeed with work groups but when it comes to relationships, a little willingness to care about the other guy’s needs and point of view is absolutely required. To desire the subordinate to do it “my way” is a clear indication that egocentric egopathy is present in the PS (psychodynamic structure.) (In the personality and self-system). (Or if you prefer, personlogical shape, psychological state)

Circle of Acceptance

Imagine a balloon drawn on a chalk board. It looks like a large ceramic pot drawn upside down. Now imagine every behavior you think is acceptable being drawn inside it. Now imagine everything you think is acceptable behavior is placed inside this circle. This is what I call the “circle of acceptance.” Everyone has this circle inside their head. You have one right now. Everything your boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, son, daughter, friend, boss, or employee is doing is inside or outside that circle. But everyone’s circle is not the same. Some people’s circle is large and some small. Everything that happens outside that circle is unacceptable. Parents have circles of acceptance inside their heads. They notice what their children do and decide in a flash “Is this inside my circle of acceptance?” If it outside the circle of acceptance they usually respond with a corrective action, a “redirection.”

Trauma and toxic shame

A child is a sensitive being. It doesn’t take much to cause the nervous system of the vulnerable child to be shocked. I recently saw a little video on a professor who walked over and took student’s phone she had answered in class and threw it on the floor and then kept talking. I could feel a moment of trauma flood over my body. Think what it would be like if a child experienced that kind of angry, violent response from his daddy or mama every day. It would be traumatic.

When a child experiences little traumas like that every day it changes the shape and style of the his or her brain.

Egopathic and non-Egopathic Parents

Parents whose behavior is approaching what might be called “egopathic,” have a hard time seeing their bullying behavior is inappropriate. There is a built-in mechanism inside many parents’ minds that excuse them from behaving kindly or wisely to their children. The voice in their ego says, “If I deem that my child is misbehaving or not performing his/her daily chores, homework, or activities of daily living (ADLs) up to my standards then it is only appropriate for me harangue and chide him/her until they do it or until they get it right. There are only two *other* things I can do. I can try the “nice” approach and ask in a pleasant tone of voice or, if that doesn’t work, I can withdraw from parenting my child and do it myself. All three approaches don’t seem to work very often. Millions of parents interact with their children with these three choices in their heads and every one of them think they have “tried everything.” It is utterly unbelievable that intelligent, good parents stumble so badly when it comes to parenting. There is some kind of genetic trait that is passed from generation to generation that prevents most parents from saying to themselves, “I NEED HELP FROM PARENTING EXPERTS.” Why is it that an intelligent mind who is able to say “I need help from a computer expert” can’t imagine saying, “I need help from a parenting expert?” “Is it really so difficult to imagine that there are parenting experts who are ready to help them? I once led a group with an attractive, intelligent 35 year-old woman who lamented, “Children don’t come with instructions.” This comment always irks me. So I asked her, “So where do you get the information?” She sat looking bewildered for a moment and then said, “From your intuition.” Is it so overwhelming to think that maybe a book full of wisdom and knowledge could be useful? It is easy to imagine the parent is so afraid of being found lacking by a book or an advice-giver that they default to the ego defense of self-satisfied denial of the need to seek help.

There was a young woman in a psychiatric unit who said she didn’t know why she had a “hole in her soul.” (a phrase the therapist had used in the teaching module.) In the course of the group process she described her parents as being “authoritarian, directive, controlling, and disempowering.” The shocker came when she said her father had told her, “You’ve been sick lately, you don’t know what you feel.” Amazingly, this father was, at the time, in a Ph.D. program in Marriage and Family Therapy! Unbelievable.

Extreme egopathic Parents

In some cases a parent will go almost psychotic in their mistreatment of their children. A mother who vented unwarranted retribution on her son was documented in the books by David Pelzer: [A Boy Called It](#) and [The Lost Boy](#). Pelzer was shamelessly abused for years by his mother by being ostracized, forced to eat out of garbage cans, and made to wear old clothes to school for maximum humiliation. What was she thinking?” the reader may ask. She was acting out her own childhood pain to a level that few parents feel compelled to do. In the actor’s mind the abuse has a two fold purpose. One is discipline. Secondly, it is to ensure the absence of future “bad behavior.” The two are mixed into a toxic amalgam that the abuser never processes rationally with anyone. They just do it and feel justified in the same way many parents will feel when they spank a child for actually misbehaving. “That’ll teach that child to *that* again” is the mantra that is heard around the world but seldom spoken in public. In the book [A Boy Called It](#) Dave Pelzer outlines his horrible abuse. You might wonder how someone who was so badly abused could have grown up and resisted becoming a criminal or an alcoholic. I wondered that myself. But as it turns out, Dave had what many children never have: a few years of healthy happiness as a small child. For some reason, Dave’s mother was able to provide a normal, nurturing, happy early childhood (five years) for Dave. This answers the question, “What would happen if the child had a normal childhood first and then began to be abused?” What would happen, as in the case with Dave, is that the child will hold on to a dream of finding happiness and goodness in the world. However, after so many years of abuse even little David lost hope that it would ever happen and he grew angry and bitter. But the early childhood positive experience won out in the end. Dave was able to join the armed forces and fight in the Gulf War and write his books in hopes that he could help others learn from his experiences. And so we have, Dave. Thank you.

Couples Therapy

“No blame” is a great way to do marital therapy but it is a lousy way to understand human behavior. Usually both partners are “to blame” for the conflict and unrest. With couples, in Imago Therapy, it is taught that individuals who marry are wounded from childhood. The individuals are often attracted to each other based on complementarity. One person’s deficits/strengths are the opposite of the other’s and so it seems like a perfect fit. However, when the couple has been married for a few years, the volume on the deficits start to become increased, and the strengths begin to seem old hat or even diminished. This is a natural process in couple hood. The old wounds which had been effectively submerged below consciousness and exposure to the outside world are triggered to rise up and become manifest. It’s as if they are coming up to be healed. That’s what Imago therapists think. I think there’s truth in it. Most couples are completely unprepared for this and see it as the partner “going bad” and “acting wrong.” For some it’s “proof” that they are no good or even the “wrong” for them.

When we first fall in love we have one of two attitudes. The first is most often seen in young people. Younger people truly do think their man or woman really is without faults. They are wonderful. Words such as, "My Johnny would never do something like that." Sometimes it's true. Mostly it's not.

The second attitude is, "I know he has faults but I just don't care. I love him (her) so much I just don't care. We'll work it out in the future somehow. We love each other so much right now we just want to be together." These are lovely sentiments and beautiful words. They represent our highest human experience: love. But, alas, they are doomed to falter. Almost every couple discovers that the other person is much more flawed than first they realized and sooner or later it has a tremendous impact on the relationship.

There are eight basic traits that will soon show up in your man or woman. It is the way life is. I'm sorry. I wish it weren't true but this is just what happens. The ten faults are consonant with the 10 personality disorders. The first is anger and control. These traits are the hallmark of anti-social personality disorder. The second is egocentrism, which means focusing mostly, maybe only, on what *I* want to do and have. This is the hallmark of narcissistic personality disorder.

The third is emotionless, disregard for your feelings and needs. This is the hallmark of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. The fourth is emotional upheaval and changeability according to fleeting moods. This is the hallmark of borderline personality disorder. The fifth is the whiner/complainer. Nothing is ever right or good enough and no one understands me. People treat me terribly all the time. This resonates with Paranoid Personality Disorder.

The sixth is acting submissive and obsequious. This is the heart of dependent personality disorder. Each of the common traits that we can put up with in the beginning of the relationship because we are so in love, become unbearable and threaten the very fabric of the relationship in time. The seventh is the tendency to become lost in the focus of one's own interests. A spouse can lose interest in the normal social events and fun times that helps a marriage stay strong. Instead, and it's usually the male, the husband will become bored with activities that the children and wife enjoy and opt to spend hours in pursuit of an arcane interest such as video games or electronic wizardry.

The eighth is the tendency or ability to say or do something hurtful or egocentric and then find amusement in the suffering of the partner. This is part and parcel of Sadistic Personality Disorder. Although this disorder is not in the DSM-IV, it is supported and advocated by the greatest personality theorist of all time: Theodore Millon. His wisdom is good enough for me.

How This Knowledge Can Help

If couples could avail themselves of training they would be helped to see themselves as they tend to really be. If each partner could become prepared through this education, they could learn what the other person is likely to become in times of stress or low "needmet." If the two could be prepared to communicate, negotiate, and articulate what each needs from the other then there would be more likely the continued loving feelings that were so strong at the beginning of the relationship, and the two would have much less

conflict and heartache.