

The Impact of Modern Neuroscience on Contemporary Teaching

Chapter 11

Acting to Protect Yourself

Children who have a sense of toxic shame about their sense of self will act to protect this feeling of disgrace from others. This essay outlines the motives and techniques of protecting a sense of shame and healthy ways of acting to learn to live with imperfection. This essay offers an alternative explanation of addiction.

Introduction

The constant need to integrate our sense of ourselves with the outer world creates stress. This stress is the driving force of behaviour. Whenever you find yourself in a stressful situation, if you step back and observe what is going on, you will soon see that it is the threat to your sense of yourself that creates negative stress.

Remember back when you started a new job or moved to a new school—the apprehension and fear came from being concerned about whether or not you would be accepted or whether you would be able to handle the work. In most cases, you soon learned the rules of the new environment. You learned how to act to get your relating needs met.

As children grow to the age of about three, they develop a lot of learned behaviours, accumulating a repertoire of actions that can be accessed when they are confronted by a new and worrying situation. As they master one form of stress with the appropriate response, they move on. The response can be called on in future situations. The resulting repertoire allows them to master their day-to-day life; they see the world as a place where they have some control. This makes them feel powerful and confident.

Adaptive behaviours allow us to go out and explore the world in comfort. When we are confronted with a new experience, we have the confidence to solve the problems it creates. The new solutions are then added to the existing behaviours.

Children, who have to develop behaviours in an environment that is life-threatening and abusive, develop behaviours designed to protect themselves. Therapists Chopich and Paul accurately describe this concept in their excellent book *Intent Therapy*. Whenever you face a stressful situation, you will either act to learn from that situation—to gain an old head, if you like—or you will act to protect yourself from the stress of that situation.

For the child with an abusive background, the ability to handle stress and threats against sense of self is impaired. One of the effects of trauma is that children focus their energy on avoiding any possible repeat of that experience. They become hyper-vigilant when they see a dangerous situation that a healthy person would ignore. They shut down to a lower level of thinking. The feelings they experience in the initial abuse are reflected in the

current situation. They really do think they are in a life-threatening predicament. This fear will push them into a behaviour they learned to survive. They will take a position of flight or fight or, if this approach fails, they will surrender.

The inability to choose an appropriate behaviour reveals the damage that is done in a child's brain. The injury to the limbic system and particularly the frontal lobes presents an even greater handicap for these people as they try to take control of their lives. When confronted with a situation, the feelings are initiated by the amygdala long before the cerebral cortex can be consulted. The damage to the frontal lobes dampens these individuals' ability to pause and think; they live with a grossly unfair handicap that has been placed on them by others. The impulsive tendency, so widespread amongst these damaged children, takes over.

Chopich and Paul described the act of self-protection as an addictive behaviour. It is this need to avoid stress and hide from the pain of the belief that they are bad and worthless, combined with the need to escape feelings of fear and hopelessness that is at the root of all addicts' problems. If you work with addicts, you soon find that they have in common a history of abuse.

Modern society with all its change and uncertainty exposes children to enormous levels of pressure. The effect of this pressure is to intensify feelings of inadequacy. Television and movies invariably portray stars that are perfect—they are thin, they are fit, they never fail, and they never lose. Abused children think everyone enjoys this perfection, and because they are nowhere near perfect, the images confirm their obvious shortfalls. Then, just to reinforce this faulty belief, every four minutes television bombards us with messages—design by the smartest minds, the advertising gurus—on how we can overcome our shortfalls. “Brittany buys product X and she is perfect, so you can be perfect if you buy product X. You can buy success.” This of course is a load of rubbish, but the projection of perfection through consumption of certain products allows those desperately in need of projecting their self with a perfect false hope.

If you described the insane mind control of advertising to visitors from another planet, they would be astounded that society allows this mindless and damaging manipulation to exist on such a large scale. Just imagine sitting in a classroom and being interrupted every twelve minutes by a message that you are not good enough, but that you can overcome this shortfall by purchasing success in a bottle. No wonder victims of this advice take to the bottle. Unfortunately, the substance in the bottle only makes the problem worse.

Substance Addiction

The most common form of addiction is that of substance addiction—drug addiction. In its classic form, we see the junkie lying in the gutter with a needle hanging out of his arm or an empty bottle wrapped in a brown paper. Too often, we really do see this sight. For

people who suffer constant nagging pain in their life, who have never had any success in developing behaviours that allow them to handle stress, the high experience from the drug of choice is heaven-sent. The most common observation by junkies or alcoholics is that the first time they got high or drunk was the first time they felt at peace. For the first time, they felt successful—and they had bought the success, just like the ad said they could.

The benefit of the drug is that it stops the pain and allows the child to feel real pleasure for the first time. This individual will eventually use the most powerful concoction. Politicians miss the point when they take up crusades against the drug trade. Their standard response is to stop the traffic of drugs, crack down on the dealers, and educate children about the danger of drugs. These activities do no harm; however, for the abused child, they will have no effect.

Recently a student at my school was discovered with an addiction to a volatile substance. He sprayed fly spray directly into his mouth. You don't have to be too intelligent to understand that fly spray is not good for your health, and this boy was certainly intelligent. Yet this student would act in ways that for a healthy person are beyond comprehension. To him, the smallest period of relief from the pain he felt was worth dying for.

Substance addiction is not limited to illegal substances. I remember an aunt who was addicted to headache powders. She would take these every day, regardless of her health. She knew that if she continued to take them, she would die. As a child, I could not believe this otherwise apparently healthy person could commit suicide for headache powder. I didn't understand the dynamics behind addiction. She died before I could find out.

The insidious thing about addictive drugs is that they eventually become the cause of the stress they originally eased. The habit of escaping from physical pain wreaks havoc on the physical body that houses the mind. Eventually, the body needs the drug just to take away the fear of dying from the withdrawal symptoms. The source of the original pain relief becomes the cause of the new pain. The cycle is devastating.

Activities Addiction

Another addiction is an addiction to activities. Focus on an engrossing activity will allow the victim to forget the pain. Workaholics are a classic case of this type of addiction. Whenever life creates a tense situation, these addicts throw themselves into their work, becoming too busy to think about anything else.

When I was coming to terms with this theory of addiction, I discussed it with a colleague. When I finished the description, he exclaimed, "That's me." I wasn't surprised. I knew he displayed all the characteristics of activities addiction. When I asked what he would do about it, his solution was easy: he was studying for his doctorate. I watched this person

focus on his studies while his marriage disintegrated. Whenever his wife wanted to discuss their relationship, he was too busy. He beat the pain by hitting the books.

A problem for the activities addict is that if their escape is their work, then the concentrated effort and the long hours put in will be rewarded by promotion. Often these addicts will be placed in charge and become responsible for others—become the boss. In the process, they are exposed to even more stress. Like a substance addict, their source of pain relief becomes the new cause of pain.

I watch colleagues in a head office working extraordinary hours—working until they fall exhausted into bed. Their success is short-term. As responsibilities increase, they become stressful in their own right. Now the stress of perceived inadequacies combine with work stress. Work addiction can't last. You eventually get old, a new young addict takes over, and you have to face yourself. For some, this facing up to the problem is the beginning of self-discovery. Others buy a Harley Davidson and head off down another busy road.

Watch some children when a new activity becomes fashionable. The ones who participate at a fanatical level, beyond what is reasonable, are most likely those who suffer from activities addiction. They spend all their time saving cards, riding skateboards, or being the most fanatical fans of the latest rock star. They become addicted to soaps on television or to some sporting team. There is nothing wrong with having an interest in day-to-day activities; however, when this interest takes the place of learning how to live and a way of escaping the stress of daily life, this is an “act to protect” to defend their sense of self.

People Addiction

The most subtle forms of acting with an intent to protect through addictive behaviour are what Chopich and Paul called *people addiction*. The most common cause of stress for a person who lives with toxic shame is the failure to integrate successfully with others in the world. They feel rejected, and many develop behaviours designed to deal with tension put on them by others. They will either try to control a source of stress—control the other person—or they will resist it and fight it off. Or they may just comply with the other person's wishes without any reference to their own needs. By doing this, they have surrendered to the stress.

Overt control is the most easily observed of this type of addictive behaviour; that is, behaviour that is overtly designed to change the other person's behaviour and stop that person from affecting you. This is a particular favourite response for someone who has a superior position in relationship to the other. Overt controllers take the initiative; they blame others, yell at them, or use criticism. If the other person does not have a strong sense of self-belief, he or she will be threatened by this attack and back off. By attacking the source of stress, controllers aim to make it go away.

Children become very accomplished at these behaviours. Watch them place an otherwise healthy adult under extreme stress. They will attack the adult's personality, history, and good nature. The adult is soon so stressed that he or she will give in and move on with life. As the adult moves on, the source of stress goes too. The crisis has been avoided for the time being.

Overt control is a very aggressive attempt to control the environment. It is generally used by individuals who have a position of being better than the other person in the stressful situation. If the person protecting himself or herself can establish this position, the need to be "better than"—so important if they have a shamed core—is fulfilled.

A particularly regrettable situation can occur if the shamed person is a wife who comes from an abusive family and whose husband attacks her. These women have their whole apparent happiness tied up in the fact that their husband loves them, and if he left them they would be exposed to the fact that everyone would then know that they are a failure. They would be back in that all-too-familiar territory—a child again. To avoid the risk of this happening, they will be nice so that the husband has no reason to abuse them.

Another type of stress control is more covert. People who use covert control over others in an attempt to avoid stress are the classic people-pleasers. They never rock the boat. They are the peacemakers. They are so nice no one would ever get angry at them. In a relationship, if a partner asked what they would like to do, the answer is always, "I don't know. What would you like to do?" The hyper-vigilant characteristic of these people ensures that they are ahead of the game. They can see things coming, and they act to avoid them, to keep the peace. They would make excellent spies, as they read the situation well ahead of time, and they always know the rules of the game.

The use of covert control is subtle and pleasing for the other person. However, by using this tactic, these people never get justice in relationships. They will take the blame for any problem in the family; they protect everyone from any responsibility for their actions. You see it with a wife who continually refuses to press charges against an abusive husband because she doesn't want to stress him, or a teacher who continually forgives students for not keeping their commitments. Covert controllers fail to make the other person take responsibility for his or her actions. If the covert controller is a teacher, students miss one of the important lessons children should learn at school: be responsible for your actions.

Another way to control a stressful situation is to resist it—deny it is there. The use of resistance is also destructive; it denies the person the opportunity to learn to deal with similar situations. In its raw form, it is the simple but persistent denial that there is a problem. In a strained relationship, the healthier partner may want to discuss what is wrong and to work out a solution to the problems they are facing. The resistive partner will just deny there is a problem. There is nothing wrong, and so nothing is learned. The problem remains unaddressed.

With children and with adults facing stressful change, perhaps in their work, resistance will more likely be seen as oppositional behaviour. The individual will refuse to take part in any activity. How often have I seen teachers grow frustrated because they can't seem to get through to a student? You must understand that the moment the student accepts there is a problem; he or she has to face up to it. The risk of others discovering the faulty core of their existence is too much. They resist the reality of the situation as an act of protection.

I have a clear memory of an incident I experienced at a railway station with probably the most defiant student I have ever dealt with. To avoid a potential problem at the railway station, I told the student, Chris, to get on the train and leave. Chris, of course, refused. Like all students at the school, he had been taught the concepts, and he understood them. So I said to Chris, "What would you have done if I told you to wait here?" Chris and I both knew the answer: he would have got on the train. Because we had a good relationship, we both had a laugh. However Chris continued to refuse to do as I asked. The risk of acknowledging the problem and a potential threat to him was too much, even when there was no real inconvenience involved in getting on the train. The consequence of not getting on the train was relatively severe, yet it was more acceptable to suffer than to accept that there was a problem.

People who refuse to acknowledge stressful problems will appear indifferent, uncaring, or rebellious. They annoy those trying to help them, so eventually the helpers go away, and the problem goes away with them. The protective behaviour works.

Conclusion

People who are addicted to control of others by behaviours described above are not locked into one style, even though they have a preference. They will use whichever works at the time. As with any addiction—to people, activities, or substances—every time it works successfully, it reinforces its value and pushes back the opportunity to learn from the stress.

If you are dealing with people who use behaviours to avoid facing a situation in which you are involved, it is crucial to see past the behaviour and make sure that at least you get your own needs met. You need to be selfish about this.

When you come across protective behaviours, don't be too hard on the person using them. These behaviours were learned when they were children and perhaps offered the only protection available. They have been very important to the individual's survival to this date.

When dealing with younger children who remain in abusive families, be careful not to take these behaviours away from them. Aim to teach the children that such behaviours

are only functional in certain places, and healthier behaviours are suitable in healthier environments.

However, understand that when one is stressed, there is an overwhelming instinctive propensity to go back to the behaviour learned earlier in an attempt to protect oneself. The difficulty in changing this response is enormous. To become a functional adult, these children must have the courage to face and survive the feelings that stress produces. They must overcome behaviours that are driven by the faulty beliefs associated with their toxic core.