

treatment

UNDERSTANDING NEGATIVITY



The Root of Suffering

How to fight the neurotic loop of negative reactions to negative feelings. **BY GREGG HENRIQUES, PH.D.**

I **T WAS OUR** sixth session. Hannah,* a junior in college, entered my office looking desperate. She had been dealing with depression and anxiety for several years, and the fall semester had been particularly difficult because of a breakup with her boyfriend. Things had somewhat improved by the winter break, and she was hopeful her despair was behind her. But her first week of the new semester had not been a good one.

She handed me a note she had written:

*“Coming back to campus was like slamming into a brick wall. I hate my life here. Nothing ever works. I am trapped. There is no one to talk to. My boyfriend is gone, and I am tired of talking with my mother. I hate being around my mother; all she does is pretend everything is f*cking fine. I can’t go to sleep, because tomorrow will come even sooner. And it will be more of the same hell. God listen to me. I am pathetic, desperate, lonely, and I act like a child. And the more I think about it, the worse and worse I feel. I would rather die than stay in this black hole. I need*

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to escape. I need to stop acting like a f*cking child, cut these feelings off, and just grow up.”

“I thought I was getting better,” she said. “But now I’m wondering.”

Change, of course, is not a straight line, but more like a series of gains and setbacks. Hannah had been feeling and doing better. But the negative moods had been with her for a long time. While I shared the observation that change is a developmental process, I was struck by her last comment: She hated feeling like a needy child.

I guided her to take a moment to locate the root of this feeling. “Take a deep breath. Close your eyes. Do you recall a time when you felt vulnerable or needy and then hated yourself for that?”

Tears welling up, she did remember a time: “I was about 10. I liked drawing horses and dogs and stuff like that. I always shared them with my dad. One day, I brought a new drawing to him, asking if he would put it with the other drawings I’d given him. He said, in his usual calm, matter-of-fact tone, that he had thrown them out because I could draw so much better now. I knew my dad loved me and he did not mean to hurt me, so I didn’t say anything. But I started to feel all those sensitive feelings I would always have. I ran to my room to cry. I remember thinking, What is wrong with me? I am such a freak! My dad loves me. Why can’t I have normal reactions like everyone else?”

I pointed out that she was punishing herself for her negative feelings so that she could stay close to her dad.


This process of turning against oneself is the root of much pain in life. Yet there are alternative ways of relating to negative feelings.

AT THE HEART OF MISERY


People often enter therapy because they are suffering—trying desperately to control both the world around them and their feelings about that world. But stress overwhelms them, and they find themselves trapped in cycles of negativity. One

reason that coping is difficult for many people is that they have a neurotic temperament. Such individuals have negative emotions that idle on high. They are quick to react to stress and require time to calm down.

Although the combination of real-world stress and a neurotic temperament sets the stage for trouble, the root of much long-term suffering takes hold when individuals battle with themselves by developing negative reactions to their negative feelings. In a manner that parallels the old saying “it’s not the crime, but the cover-up that harms you,” this secondary negative reaction to the original negative feelings often



Because we sometimes block our negative feelings, our emotions build up until we find ourselves completely flooded by negativity.



creates a vicious cycle that results in major depression and generalized anxiety disorder.

A hallmark of therapy—such as rational emotive therapy or cognitive behavioral therapy—is patients addressing how they feel and react to how they feel and react. Yes, my repetition is intentional: There are secondary reactions to primary reactions.

OF TWO MINDS

One of the wonderful things about being human is that we have the ability to reflect on our feelings and our place in the world; it is also one of our curses. We have this ability

because the human mind is really two streams of consciousness wrapped into one. In his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman explored the implications this has for the way humans solve problems. These two streams of consciousness also have major implications for mental health. By understanding them and seeing how they relate to one another, we can discover why we have secondary reactions to our primary emotional states.

The first stream, or the “primary process mind,” is the perceptual or experiencing mind. It consists of perceptions, drives, and goals and can be thought of as our “primate mind.” It is the part that looks out and sees the world, has motives and urges (ranging from food to sex), and is energized by our emotions to respond to events. The primary process mind works by taking perceptions about the current state of the world and referencing them against drives for what we do or do not want, and our emotions are activated to respond accordingly. For example, when we are waiting for someone we have not seen for a long time, we longingly look out the window and feel a jolt of joy when we see that person’s car pulling into the driveway.

The second stream of consciousness, the secondary, deliberate mind—the “person mind”—is the part of us that talks, deliberates, reflects, and rationalizes to others about why we do what we do. It comments, reacts, or responds not just to what is, but also to what one thinks ought to be. Shaped by culture and experience, the person mind has ideas about what is justifiable and what is not.

WHAT IS VS. WHAT OUGHT TO BE

Sigmund Freud likened these two streams of consciousness to a horse and rider. The secondary person mind, represented by the rider, is trying to guide the primary primate mind, represented by the horse,



THE PRIMARY WAY I teach people to alter their negative reactions to negative feelings is to guide them to develop a cognitive behavioral approach. I call this “CALM MO.” This is a mindful attitude that allows for the adaptive processing of negative feelings and events. MO stands for “meta-cognitive observer,” which means that one adopts a deliberate, reflective, observing position in one’s mind. It is this “participant-observer stance” that reaches outside consciousness and sees these processes from a distance. It allows people to be in contact with their feelings, but not be all the

feelings that are flowing through their streams of consciousness. Learning to take this meta-cognitive stance takes practice.

Let’s break down CALM. **C stands for Curious.** Curiosity is the desire to know more. It means to wonder and seek understanding. An individual adopts a questioning attitude, first and foremost. Thus, the curiosity of the meta-cognitive observer asks “what, where, how, when, and why” questions about the key domains of the psyche. Curiosity sets the stage for awareness and attunement to what is actually happening. Many people short-circuit this process by impulsively reacting negatively and attempting to control and escape from feelings prior to understanding them.

A stands for Acceptance, referring to the ability to be with the pain and the awkwardness without freaking out and without harsh judgment. This is hard, but with practice it can be done. It is connected to Buddhist insights regarding suffering. The first principle in Buddhism is that life is suffering. The Buddha realized that to run from suffering, to pretend it is not there, to try and jam it backstage, or to control it in other ways does not lead to escape. It instead leads to more suffering.

L stands for Loving Compassion toward oneself and others. It recognizes the basic wisdom that people have dignity and are worthy of respect and that this is a starting point for constructing a just world. It is the view of hoping that people flourish and have healthy well-being, of feeling compassion or sympathy for those who are genuinely suffering. The attitude is cultivated because most people at their core (with some exceptions) are doing the best they can.

This brings us to M for Motivated to learn and grow toward valued states of being. This refers to the deliberate, self-conscious values individuals have about who they want to be over the long term (honest, courageous, kind). The “M” guides individuals to separate their feelings from the impulsive actions they are often associated with and orients them toward future goals.

toward long-term goals. However, as suggested by this metaphor, the two minds are very different. The primate mind feels things based on what it perceives relative to its goals in the immediate situation. If it perceives the situation as being one in which the individual is isolated, it will feel lonely. If it perceives the situation as one in which its goals are being intruded upon by others, it will feel angry. If it sees that it has failed or is inferior to others, it will feel shame. In short, the primate mind is reactive to the situation in which it finds itself.

The secondary person mind is more complicated, and it can project much longer into the future. It thinks not only about what is but also about what ought to be. Just as a rider can have opinions about the horse she is riding, the secondary person mind will often have opinions about the primary primate mind if it is or is not feeling what it should. If the person mind makes critical and controlling judgments, the stage is set for a vicious intrapsychic cycle of negative thoughts.

Many cases of depression and anxiety have their root in negative reactions to negative feelings. It is hard to overstate the importance of this fact. Depression and anxiety disorders are the biggest drivers of mental illness, and they get continually worse in modern society. This increase may be occurring because people are taught that they should be afraid of their negative feelings, or that they should not have to feel them, or that they are “disease states.” We do not educate individuals about the nature of emotions or the relationship between these two minds. Instead, we too often seem to reinforce the idea that negative emotions are, well, negative. This is a mistake because all emotions are essential to human living.

Early on, Hannah developed the idea that she felt things she should not feel. She learned from her mother, who coped with her own distress through avoidance, that she should just put on a happy face. She learned from her father, who was kind but also analytical and not as attuned to her feelings as he could have been, that her sensitivity was a weakness. She learned as a young child that she ought not to have strong negative feelings, that such feelings were a problem and she should control herself by whatever means necessary to crush them. By doing this, Hannah could imagine maintaining a justifiable image of herself in the eyes of her parents. Unfortunately, she ended up turning against herself.

CLOSING THE NEUROTIC LOOP

Why do some people turn against themselves and their negative feelings? First, we can all agree that it is painful to have negative feelings, and thus, it is only natural to want to avoid them. Second, negative feelings can indeed cause problems if they orient us to act in impulsive and problematic ways. Third, because many of us block our negative feelings, these emotions build up until we find ourselves completely flooded by them. Fourth, people tend to react badly to anyone acting negatively. Thus, we try to protect our own image in the eyes of others.

Attempting to regulate our feelings does make good sense. However, the crucial point is how that regulation is achieved. If a person uses a critical, controlling voice, he can set in motion a downward spiral of feelings that get harder to control. As he grows increasingly frustrated with his own negative feelings, he can become conflicted and vulnerable. The criticism leads to more and more negative emotions, which leads to more and

more frustration and harsher and harsher attacks from the inner critic.

This vicious feedback loop is a reason anxiety and depressive disorders dramatically accelerate during adolescence. The adolescent is forming an identity that is narrating how the world should be and how she should be in the world. If the adolescent does not like her levels of sensitivity or neediness or vulnerability or any of the negative states of feeling, the stage is set for her to “close the loop” and engage in critical reactions about negative feelings. This leads to turning against the self in the way that Hannah has.

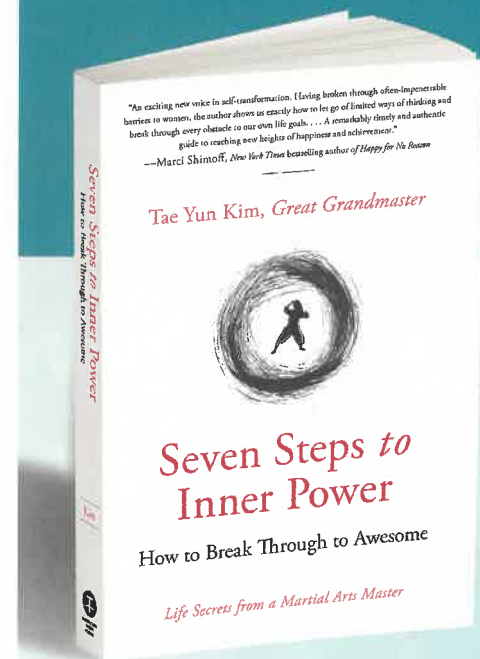
What we need to do, both intrapsychically and interpersonally, is create a different kind of attitude toward bad feelings. Rather than seeking to avoid them or control them or engage in self-attack, we should listen to what our feelings are telling us and to learn how to use them to guide us toward long-term valued states of being.

Over time, Hannah learned that hating herself for her feelings resulted only in greater suffering. With that insight, she was motivated to learn a different way of being. The approach I use to foster this growth is what I call “CALM MO” [see “Keep Calm and Carry On”]. Eventually she learned to become curious about what her feelings mean, to accept them for what they are, and to use them to inform herself about who she wants to be going forward. By breaking the loop created by her negative reactions to her negative feelings, she set herself on a path to a much freer and more fulfilling way of being.

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AS THIS ISSUE heads to press, psychologist **Gregg Henriques** will be convening a two-day interdisciplinary conference at James Madison University, where he will be joined by physicists, biologists, philosophers, and other psychologists, all in pursuit of a vision of integration of psychology. It's not just a case of physics envy. Henriques believes psychology is badly in need of a grand unified theory. **"The amount of language-game confusion is qualitatively different in the mind sciences than in physics and biology,"** says Henriques, director of the Combined Clinical and School Psychology doctoral program at JMU. "Does *psychology* refer to behavior or mind? If it's mind, is that equivalent to consciousness or to cognition? We don't know

what behavior is. We don't know what cognition is. We don't know what self is. For all the things we psychologists are interested in, we don't know what we're talking about. Everyone has his or her own schema." Henriques stumbled onto what he calls "the problem of psychology" when he attempted to integrate into one framework the core principles of the many psychotherapies currently in use. There were clinical practicalities to borrow from each, but deep coherence proved elusive. "Each is embedded in a distinct vision of humanity," he explains. A big-picture guy—"I'm drawn to holistic integrative positions," Henriques says—he embarked on a search for synthesis that has led him to develop a unified conceptual framework he calls the Tree of Knowledge; one small branch is visible in "The Root of Suffering" (page 48). Psychology's lack of coherence is rooted in the mind-body problem, he says. "No one has created a theory that's up to the task of dealing with mind. So we just research it. We have an ocean of findings but no understanding."



Wendy Patrick has litigated more than 160 trials as an attorney in San Diego. Her focus in the "The Stealthiest Predator" (page 80) is not on the criminal mind per se but on the sub rosa predator

who may never commit a crime but can forever change the life of someone who falls victim. **"I've seen so many smart, well-educated, savvy individuals compromise their judgment, morals, and standards under a predator's control,"** says Patrick, whose books include *Red Flags*, on the dynamics of reading people. Patrick decided to earn a Ph.D. in psychology while already practicing law. Her dissertation "explored the psychology of attraction and how malevolent manipulators attract and entrap their victims by preying on areas of vulnerability."



Jena Pincott has been a senior editor at Random House, worked on science documentaries for PBS, and written books on topics ranging from dating to technology. When she had to choose

between doing science or writing, she chose a middle way: to write about science and psychology. In "Lessons You Won't Learn in School" (page 52), she came to recognize that the very skills she was writing about "are going to keep us functioning, employable, and reasonably well-adjusted in a fast-changing world. There has not been a single day that I haven't drawn on one insight or another that I acquired while researching this piece. **Everyone has blind spots. Sometimes you have to get out of your own way.**" Her writing has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Scientific American*, and *Nautilus*.



As an ultra-stylish fashion photographer with a taste for the surreal, **Tim Petersen** brings a deeply artistic sensibility to "Lessons You Won't Learn in School" (page 52). In suggesting

how the skills are important navigational aids for living, he drew on references from film and other realms of the culture. **"Every movie you see, everything you do will appear in your subconscious,"** he finds. Born in Hamburg, Germany, and raised by a single mom, his interest in the camera was ignited when, at 17, he met his father, a photographer, and apprenticed with him for a year before he was eligible for university. A paternal bond didn't take, but a career did. Petersen fell in love with New York, now his base of operations, and travels the globe in pursuit of beauty.