

Guidelines for Dealing with Patterned Behavior

When we are hurt or oppressed (especially as small children), we may internalize the emotional injury. Then, when placed in a similar situation in the future, we act in a rigid, mechanical, “patterned” way. This mindless, compulsive behavior is seldom useful, and it can be quite destructive. Sometimes we re-enact the role we played as victim of the hurt, sometimes we switch into the role of the perpetrator. Either way, we are usually thinking poorly — unable to evaluate what is really happening and unable to come up with rational and appropriate responses to the current situation.

All of us suffer from these internalized emotional injuries. The more traumatic the original injury and the less opportunity for healing ourselves at the time or afterwards, the more rigid are our patterns. Usually we are unaware (or just barely aware) of our conditioned behavior or the events that trigger it. Even if we are aware, it may be difficult for us to break free. Often we act badly when we are interacting with someone else who is also acting out some patterned behavior that meshes with ours. Once patterned behaviors get locked together, the interaction may get more intense, more rigid, and more destructive.

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind when trying to deal with people (including ourselves) when they/we are distraught and caught in rigid patterns. Here are also some suggestions to help keep from getting caught in the first place.

Notice Patterned Behavior

- Be clear about the basic nature of human beings and assume that behavior that is inconsistent with that basic nature must be due to recent hurts or emotional baggage from the past. Humans are by nature intelligent, capable, courageous, powerful, energetic, gentle, curious, loving, kind, honest, cooperative, confident, self-assured, joyful, humorous, sociable, attractive, affectionate, sensual, rational, responsible, trustworthy, self-reliant, honest, principled, tender, tolerant, generous, passionate, affectionate, and creative.

- This view of humans is not endorsed by our culture, and it is easy to forget. So review this list of attributes frequently so you don't slip back into traditional assumptions. Also, spend time with people who share this perspective so they can help remind you.

- Don't believe descriptions of yourself or others that come from emotional injuries. It is easy to recognize crazy nonsense when someone says “Martians control my brain” but it is much more difficult when someone says “I am stupid and ugly” and “You are a jerk.” This is especially true if either of you have ever acted badly. Try to remember the basic nature of humans and look beneath the patterns to see the real person hiding inside.

- Practice the art of identifying emotional garbage. The companion paper, “Emotionally Healthy Behavior,” lists many attributes of healthy and unhealthy emotional behavior. Closely monitor your own and others' behavior,

noticing which category it falls into so that you can spot unhealthy behavior right away.

Avoid and Resist Patterned Behavior

- Try to avoid situations in which you (or others) act out patterned behavior.

- If you can't act well, leave the situation. Learn to walk away when you begin to act strangely.

- Treat other people's emotional garbage as garbage. Don't take it personally — it probably has very little to do with you. Do not take it at face value — it's an emotional response without much substance and if handled well will soon dissipate. In fact, don't assume patterns are permanent or will even last for more than a few seconds. Even if you are severely attacked, do your best not to react with a patterned response of fury, defensiveness, terror, surliness, submission, or counterattack. Especially, don't let your fear or timidity allow others to behave in a way that is destructive — insist they stop immediately.

Undermine or Interrupt Patterned Behavior

- Do your best to love, support, care for, and encourage others to their best selves while you refuse to tolerate their destructive or dysfunctional actions. Be empathetic, compassionate, and nurturing. Remind them of their worth and merit. If you can't muster anything better, try saying “I know human beings are basically intelligent, loving, and so on, and since you are a human being, I know you are too.”

- Try various approaches to interrupt patterned behavior. Patterns are established in particular contexts and demand particular responses. Almost anything other than those preset responses will jiggle the pattern and force a new reaction. Sometimes you must risk physical harm or unpleasant intimacy to cut through a pattern — be courageous! Humor, silliness, or acting outrageously may help (though you must be very careful that you are not reacting with one of your own weird humor patterns).

- Don't expect people who are stuck in their emotional garbage to be able to get out by themselves — many patterns have a strong component of hopelessness and self-destructiveness. Usually only those people whose emotional injuries mesh well with societal norms concerning money and power can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Actively go after patterns.

- Be easy on people, tough on their patterns. Forgive people for whatever they do while acting out a pattern. Remember that everyone is always doing the best they can — and so are you.

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