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MARRIAGE, PARENTHOOD AND STRESS

There seem to be two specific situations that can trigger irrational behavior as a result of intense prolonged stress. One is marriage. The other is parenthood. Intense prolonged stress tends to lead to irrational behavior. Since the state of marriage can persist for a very long time and the state of parenthood persists for the rest of your life, it is not surprising that these conditions can produce both stress and irrational behavior. Let's take a quick overview of this situation.

The task of parenting is incredibly complicated. It seems like from one moment to the next your child sees you like a God to be worshiped, a hero to be emulated, a servant to be berated, and then a jailor to be resented. And through all this you are supposed to remain constantly composed and understanding.

The newborn infant arrives with a temperament, a body and the ability to grasp and suck. Their conscious understanding of who they are and where they are is a blank slate. During the first few months of life the child begins to determine who and where they are. I am not talking about the child finding out that their name is Robert and they live in Los Angeles. They are discovering what kind of world they have dropped into and whether they are valued and treasured or resented and unwanted. Is the world welcoming or hostile? Is it comforting and nurturing or is it harsh and unkind? Long before they are four years old they are no longer wondering about these things. They know.

Each of you went through this same process. You arrived on this planet with no tools and no understanding. You had specific basic needs and you had a problem any time one of those needs wasn't being met. Those needs included hunger, thirst and comfort. (If you can imagine suddenly finding yourself in a foreign place where nothing you saw made sense and you couldn't speak or understand the language or the customs, you have a vague idea of the enormity of the difficulties facing a newborn infant.) Any time you felt hungry or thirsty or uncomfortable, you had a problem. And crying, kicking and screaming were your only problem solving tools.

Inevitably, shortly after arrival, you were faced with such a problem. You expressed your distress in the only way you knew how. Hopefully, a caring sensitive adult showed up and, by the process of elimination, managed to remedy your distress. Ideally, that process was repeated every time you faced a distressing situation. As time went on, you learned and matured and mastered increasingly difficult tasks like buttoning your shirts and tying your shoes and walking and talking, etc. You also learned how to act in

different situations. You learned how to act like you care and you learned how to act like you don't care, depending on the situation. About the time you reached ten or eleven years old you had the basics down pretty well.

It is important to understand that all human behavior is governed by the "Pleasure Principle". Basically, everything we do is designed to bring more pleasure and less pain. As we get older and more informed we develop a more sophisticated understanding of what brings pleasure and what brings pain. For a two-year old, pleasure and pain pretty much only exist in the immediate moment and the idea of tolerating a little pain now to avoid greater pain later is completely beyond their grasp. For a two year old, the idea of passing up a treat now so that they will have an appetite later just doesn't make sense. If it were up to them, no two year old would ever get an inoculation. All they know is the next moment is going to be painful.

Similarly, when confronted by an adult about misbehavior their first instinct is to avoid any painful consequence. So they may lie. The ability to tell the truth about a misdeed or, better yet, to resist the impulse for misbehavior develops at an older age. By the time we reach adulthood we have learned that it can be far better to face mildly unpleasant situations now to avoid more unpleasant situations later. This is why we pay our income taxes, go to the dentist and go to work when we may not feel like it. We have learned that not paying our income taxes and avoiding the dentist and avoiding work has more serious consequences down the road. Most adults don't go to work because they find it pleasurable. They go to work because they find the paycheck pleasurable.

Now let's return to our preteen. Most children can run and talk and catch a ball and hold a conversation by that time. Then, they get blindsided by puberty. All of a sudden, they can't walk right or talk right and their whole world seems to have changed. The stress they feel often gets passed along to their parents in the form of sullen and/or defiant behaviors.

Actually, we all live in two worlds simultaneously. One is the world inside our skin and the other is the world outside our skin. We experience stress if either of these two worlds contains unresolved conflict. For the adolescent, both of those worlds are in disarray. Hormonal changes in the inner world cause temporary turbulence. Their bodies are not the same as they were just a year ago and that can be genuinely unsettling. Additionally, their peer group social interactions have shifted significantly. The social pecking order for both boys and girls changes in a number of ways. Girls begin to focus on the impossible feminine ideals represented in the media and they look at boys in a new way. Whereas they used to see boys as noisy rambunctious intruders, boys begin to seem interesting and somehow even exciting. Boys that used to see girls as hopelessly inept at sports and over focused on the intricacies of relationships now experience strange stirrings and they take a new interest in developing relationships with them. Both boys and girls experience confusing body alterations. Taken as a whole, these things add up to a general social upheaval. This understanding can help explain the pain, unhappiness, moodiness and occasional churlishness of many teenagers.

Add the increased adolescent willingness to take risks and push limits and we can see why teens become more likely to experiment with things like alcohol and recreational drugs. At puberty there is a shift from seeking identity within the family to seeking identity outside the family and within their peer group. I used to think that peer pressure meant a group of peers would try to persuade a friend to do something that they didn't want to do. Now I realize that peer pressure is simply a reference to the powerful need to belong. If an adolescent's friends use drugs and alcohol, the chances go up that the adolescent will indulge also.

It has become increasingly evident to the psychotherapeutic community that the principle attraction of alcohol may be in its ability to provide relief from pain and unhappiness. The same holds true of recreational drugs. Remember that these are teens we are talking about. They may be considerably more sophisticated than the infant they once were, but the pleasure principle still motivates their choices and they still focus pretty much on the here and now. A great many teens think that when you talk about the future, you're talking about next weekend. Anything beyond that just isn't terribly relevant for them right now.

There are many things that a parent can do to increase or decrease the likelihood of a teen getting into drugs or alcohol. If we want to increase the likelihood, we can make it clear that we see the teen as a major source of disappointment. We can address them with anger and scorn and tell them they are stupid and hopeless. We can refuse to listen to them and ridicule their ideas. We can criticize their friends and give them severe punishment for any infraction of the rules without taking the time to listen to them or understand why they did what they did. Looking for an explanation for their behavior we may simply conclude that the child is "an idiot" or "no good". This behavior increases the pain level of the child and, therefore, their susceptibility to drugs and alcohol.

If you want to decrease the likelihood of your child getting into drugs or alcohol you may want to acknowledge their strengths and express appreciation for their positive attempts and their accomplishments. You could make it clear that you love them and that you will be there for them in times of difficulty. Being there for them doesn't mean that you'll automatically defend them when they've been involved in wrong doing. It means that you'll always love them and want the best for them and support them when they try to improve themselves. It means that you'll never attack them by word or deed no matter how upset or angry you may get. Since you are human and you make mistakes, it means that when you do behave badly and say something mean to them, you will regret it and offer them a sincere apology. By acknowledging our mistakes and taking responsibility for them and apologizing for them, we model that behavior for our children and we teach them how to take responsibility and apologize for their mistakes. I have visited with parents who have never offered their child an apology. Perhaps they are amazingly competent parents. Unfortunately they have not modeled how to deal with the inevitable mistakes that most of us make.

All adults have negotiated these developmental stages I've been talking about and you

all did the best you could. As you withdrew your primary source of identity from your parents to your peer group, you were working on developing your ability to relate to the opposite sex and exploring the complexities of increasingly adult relationships. Mistakes were made. Hopefully you were able to learn from those mistakes. For most of us, adult relationships are very exciting and can be extremely rewarding. As we aged and matured, our relationships aged and matured and became more committed. Eventually, a child was produced. And that child was born helpless and unaware; the same as you were. And it's guided by the pleasure principle too. Now we have two adults and one infant under the same roof and they're all guided by the pleasure principle. They're all pain avoidant.

It has become very clear that identical twins cannot live under the same roof without conflict. Two adults of opposite genders from different families and with different temperaments stand absolutely no chance of a conflict free life. Now add a frightened pleasure driven infant to the mix and it seems very likely that God must have a sense of humor. It helps a lot if you have one too.

While conflict is stressful and inevitable, a clearer understanding of conflict dynamics can help manage stress. Every person on this planet is a unique individual with a unique history and unique preferences and styles. When the other person has a different perspective or problem solving style, it doesn't mean that anyone is wrong. It just means that they're different. There are three general responses to conflict. They are attack, defend or seek understanding. If we say to the other, "That's a stupid idea!" we are attacking. The other person then has three options. That person can attack back, "No, you're stupid", defend, "I am not stupid", or seek understanding, "Why do you say that? What did I do or say that caused you to attack me?" The first two approaches generally invite conflict escalation while the third response can lead to peaceful resolution. People generally experience attack as painful, which leads to anger. While the impulse to counter attack is understandable, it is generally unproductive.

Unfortunately, sometimes we feel threatened when we are confronted with someone or something different. Some of us might remember when a singing group called the Beatles showed up. The public reaction to male long hair was truly astounding. The public outrage was palpable. Today we see male corporate officials and schoolteachers with long hair and even ponytails. Sometimes we still act with outrage when confronted by someone or something different. But our children all want to grow up and become individuals. It is their mandate to grow up and individuate. Part of how they do that is to become pointedly different from their parents in some way. Doesn't it seem like each generation has a tendency to find music that their parents don't like? And to dress in a way that defines them as different? Notice their hairstyles and the way they wear hats and the clothes they choose. Part of that behavior is to prove that they're different. Much of adolescent behavior is simply trying out various role behaviors to see how they feel and if they fit. If we criticize, the child is more likely to defend, hold on to and prolong the behavior. Of course, if the behavior is truly dangerous, then we have a conflict. The child's safety is the only true bottom line. Genuinely dangerous behavior requires the parents to set firm limits. But if the behavior isn't dangerous or morally reprehensible, sometimes we do ourselves a favor by not getting drawn into an

unnecessary conflict. The chances are good that by the time they enter the work force they will have adopted a more acceptable style of dress. And when they get their own place, they can listen to whatever kind of music they want.

Now I'd like to talk a little more about parenting. Each of us actually has two parts. We can operate out of either of these two parts. These are called the conscious and the unconscious or the *learning* part and the *storage* part. The conscious part of us is what we use when we are learning a new task. Once we've learned that task, the learning is transferred to our unconscious (storage) part. Then we are able to do that task automatically, even without being conscious that we're doing it.

A good example is our driving. When we were learning how to drive, we had to pay close attention to what we were doing. Paying attention is a conscious activity and we paid very conscious attention to our driving. After we'd been driving long enough, we began to relax and trust that we knew how to drive. Years later we are able to drive in heavy traffic while we contemplate other things like what bills must be paid right away and which can be postponed. Or we may be thinking about what may have prompted our child's behavior lately. By that point, we are driving unconsciously. We automatically put on our brakes when we see a light turn yellow or red and we notice someone riding a bike and the pedestrian stepping off the curb.

As it turns out, the vast majority of our behavior is automatic. All reactive behavior is automatic. The ability to react automatically is nature's way of helping us survive. Our ability to respond automatically allows us to perform very complicated tasks that would be too complex to perform otherwise. Playing a concert piano is an example of automatic behavior. The artist has practiced that piece so often that they could perform it in their sleep.

Marital behavior and parenting behavior are other examples of automatic behavior. Have you had the experience of saying something to your spouse or child that you may have wished you hadn't said? If you are human, then you've probably had that happen to you. That is an example of automatic behavior. Changing automatic behavior is difficult but possible. Such behavior is unconsciously generated and operates much like a computer program. The unconscious can be reprogrammed. This reprogramming needs to originate from the conscious part of our minds. Such reprogramming is initiated by intent. In other words, we must want to change our behavior. Once the decision to change has been made, we need to build in a support system for that change. The support system can include telling others about our intended changes and asking for support and encouragement. We might also print out reminders or post 'sticky notes' where we can see them often. The goal is to keep this intended change in our conscious mind where we can exercise choices about our responses to the behavior of others.

It is important to remember that any new behavior is uncomfortable in the beginning, and we have an automatic tendency to avoid discomfort. Unfortunately, some of us were raised in families that punished mistakes and ridiculed anyone who made a mistake.

These people may grow up into an adult that *can't* look at their own behavior to see if a

mistake was made. They may automatically experience self-criticism and humiliation if they think they made a mistake. This aversion to seeing a possible mistake hinders their ability to learn and profit from their errors.

Bringing our behavior patterns to conscious awareness and working out new responses to every day scenarios is initially stressful. As new behavior becomes second nature, however, stress is greatly reduced. The benefits for parents and children in consciously developing workable behavior strategies can ultimately reduce stress levels for generations to come. Consciously developed interactions between family members can enhance comfort and reduce stress.