

TOXIC PEOPLE

Frequently people come to me seeking assistance in resolving interpersonal conflict. A mother unable to evict a daughter and her family to make room for her new husband. Siblings exhausted from futile efforts to appease a manipulative parent or a sibling totally lacking in caring or empathy. A spouse powerless to disentangle himself or herself from a seemingly helpless soon to be ex-spouse. Most of us know about cases like this or similar ones.

COMMON SENSE SOLUTIONS

Typical solutions revolve around some aspect of assertiveness. Speak up! Call a spade a spade! Be assertive! Just do it! (Nike commercial). Unfortunately, these common sense solutions have not worked for many years. It is easy to judge the powerless party as deficient or defective in some way. The truth is that they have been doing their very best, and if they could do better, they would do better.

While cognitive approaches such as outlined in Changing to Thrive: Using the Stages of Change to Overcome the Top Threats to Your Health and Happiness by James O. Prochaska and Janice M. Prochaska will be effective in some cases, a more in-depth process is usually required. What follows is a book condensed into one or two pages.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

These strategies need not be sequential but they do require considerable time and commitment. You may succeed on your own or you may need to enlist the facilitation of a therapist.

Begin with strengthening your self-awareness. This is done through prayer and meditation of your choice. Print out "The Healing Power of Awareness" handout at my website. Without a strong observing ego all your efforts will be futile (Visit "Who's in Charge – Healthy Bug Diagram" handout.)

As you strengthen your observing ego through daily meditation you will eventually notice negative or limiting thoughts. For example, "No matter what I try, nothing works!" This seems objectively true but it retains your powerless stance. Our brains believe our self-talk, whether positive or negative. Change to, "Every day I become more self-aware, more self-valuing and more self-assertive."

This might be the most intractable step. It is stopping the "Blame Game." All of us do it. We do it so smoothly, so effortlessly. (See Loving What Is by Byron Katie and Stephen Mitchell). Realize (wake up!) that regardless how formidable or unchanging your spouse, parent, sibling, boss, etc. may be, nothing really works until I become self-responsible. Change yourself, not the toxic other.

Becoming self-responsible requires connecting with the real issue, the underlying issue that has me so completely helpless. (Print AUDIO handout at my website). We must recognize that our truth, our answer is inside of us; and that our truth is the only valid truth. Your

therapist or friends may have opinions, guesses, or working hypotheses but their chances of hitting the bull's eye are very slim.

We may be able to connect with or identify the real issue by doing a brain search like a computer search with our conscious mind. If not successful, we must access our unconscious mind by relaxing deeply. People have varying ability to access their unconscious due to the level of permeability of the boundary or wall protecting their trauma from surfacing.

If a person has been traumatized by an angry father, that person may be totally frozen by an angry spouse. If a person grew up in a family with chronic marital infidelity, that person may choose an uncaring spouse and be too anxious and fearful to rectify the situation. Until the underlying trauma is identified and resolved, the helplessness will continue.

Another approach is Parts Theory. A part of me wants the toxic situation resolved but another part of me wants to keep it for some positive purpose. For example, no one has ever been divorced in our family so I remain virtuous by not getting divorced even though the marriage is irreconcilable. How can I accomplish this positive purpose, i.e. being virtuous in another way so I am free to divorce? The critical dimension is that we will not change until we have absolute clarity that this change is absolutely, positively what I want.

Related to this is goal setting with absolute adherence to timeliness. If we miss the timeline, are we really, truly committed? Again, what is the real issue?

As you deepen your understanding and acceptance of yourself, strive to deepen and strengthen your understanding and acceptance of the toxic other. "There but for the grace of God go I" (John Bradford, 1510-1555). The toxic other generally cannot help themselves because their childhood trauma erases their observing ego resulting in a diagnosable personality disorder such as Borderline or Narcissistic.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It takes time and practice to acquire and use the strategies stated herein. Be patient with yourself but be steadfast. Practice assertiveness (ABC message handout) with less scary people. Use my COSTS handout. If necessary see an Eye Movement, Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapist to heal your trauma that gets activated by the seemingly impossible other. (Visit www.emdria.org to locate a certified therapist.)

Remember, when you over-function, you enable the manipulative other to under-function. (Aren't we kind, generous, virtuous etc?! Groan!). Life is too short to be miserable for even one second. Let go of your anger, hate, resentment, etc. If not, your body keeps score. Your mind can deceive you, your body does not know how to lie. Print out my 4x4x4 Stress Management handout. Be at peace with yourself, with everyone and everything.

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