

The Role of Pain in Driving Behaviour

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Just the other day I lived through what, on the surface of it, would appear to be a traumatic event. Someone whom I care about deeply and whose friendship is dearly important to me announced that he was so unhappy with me that he was no longer willing to consider himself my friend. Worse, he also made it clear that he expected his other friends to do the same. Yet as much as I cared about this person and wanted to continue associating with him, I wasn't at all distressed by this turn of events.

The reason? The person subjecting me to this treatment was my three-year-old son. He was determined to get his way, and he resorted to every weapon in his limited arsenal in an attempt to do so. There were no long-term intentions behind his actions. Seeing his efforts in this light, it was easy to face them without feeling personally attacked.

This stands in stark contrast to numerous cases of violent crime that take place around the world on daily basis. The frequency and viciousness of such crimes have increased in South Africa in recent years. Reporting on them has completely saturated the media.

The most poignant of these events that I can recall was an armed robbery that had gone horribly wrong. A group of criminals ended up killing a middle-aged woman, her mother and her daughter. When her husband learned of what had happened, he expressed his desire to have the people who committed the murders die painfully.

One needn't examine the incident too deeply to appreciate the reasons for the man's reaction. Losing a loved one is a painful experience. Simultaneously losing three generations of close family members is a devastating blow. Such is the intensity of the experience that one loses all sense of perspective and simply wants to strike back. It is not a reasoned response, but one driven by blind emotion.

An interesting thing happens if we visualise a scale of abuse in order of increasing severity. Severing of ties by a three-year-old resides at one end of the scale, and murder of close loved ones at the other. If we accept the above responses as appropriate, then we are left with the conclusion that, in the least abusive cases, we should respond in constructive ways, whereas in the most abusive ones, we should seek retribution.

This presents us with a dilemma. As we traverse the scale from less to more abusive actions, at some point the purpose of our response will switch from understanding, healing and support to retribution. What is the nature of the dividing line between the two kinds of responses? I believe that it can be accurately characterised as *experiencing pain*.

If we perceive ourselves to be injured, we will be motivated to protect ourselves from the injury. This will cause us to react defensively, perhaps even retaliate. Such a reaction is likely to be unconscious, especially if the hurt is severe. As in the case of the man who suddenly lost his wife, mother and daughter, it will not be a carefully crafted response aimed at a particular desirable outcome, but thoughtless lashing out brought on by pain. It is about inflicting pain for the pain that has been caused, regardless of other consequences.

This is quite unlike a situation in which no injury is perceived. There, we feel free to consciously choose the most beneficial course of action. Having no need to protect ourselves from the intended abuse, we can examine the situation deeply to empathise with the other person, uncover her motivation for engaging in such destructive behaviour, and help her heal.

Another way to look at the boundary between constructive and retributive responses is in terms of availability or freedom of choice. When no injury is sustained, we find ourselves at liberty to pursue any course of action we wish. Experiencing pain restricts our choices. The hurt compels us to react in certain ways, taking the matter beyond our control.

What happens if we are able to conquer pain? Not eliminate it – I doubt that such a thing is possible – but prevent it from limiting our choices, and thereby driving our actions? How do we act when we are able to retain control over our choices in the midst of calamity?

While he was dying on the cross, Jesus didn't call for retribution against those who crucified him; he prayed for them instead. Such was the power of his example that some of his followers were able to emulate it at their own martyrdom.

As much as he criticised their actions, Gandhi didn't cry out for revenge against the British soldiers who physically assaulted Indian demonstrators on a peaceful march. He understood that, like his own followers, they were only doing what they believed to be right.

Even though his country remains under military occupation by the Chinese, Dalai Lama has shown no inclination to resort to military tactics in an effort to drive them out. Furthermore, he has pledged that, as long as he is the leader of the Tibetan people, the efforts at freeing his country will remain peaceful.

And lest we think that such behaviour is the exclusive province of renowned spiritual masters, in 2007, a New York woman expressed her sorrow for the behaviour of two young men who sodomised her son with a plumbing tool. Addressing them in the criminal court, she said that "The only thing I can think of that is worse than what you

did to my son is how your parents must have felt when they found out the truth, that their child had done something so horrible to another human being. Our hearts go out to them as they deal with the aftermath of your actions."

These examples present us with a tough act to follow. If we are to succeed at following it, we need to find an answer to the question that naturally arises from these considerations, namely how to conquer pain. How do we ensure that we are not overwhelmed by hurt in what are normally painful circumstances without shutting emotions out altogether?

Various answers can be given. The one that I would like to focus on here was hinted at in the words of the New York mother whose son was sodomised. Empathising with the parents of her son's attackers has enabled her to look beyond her own pain.

Another example was given by Bud Welch, whose daughter Julie-Marie died in the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. When reflecting on his sentiments towards the perpetrators – McVeigh and Nichols – in the weeks immediately following the incident, he says: "I would have killed them with my bare hands if I could have reached them."

As time went on, however, he realised that their death wouldn't have taken away his pain. His perspective gradually expanded beyond the initial demand for retribution. It helped to meet Timothy McVeigh's father Bill, and his sister Jennifer. Talking to them gave him better understanding of the background to the crime and greater appreciation of the feelings of other people whom he may otherwise have perceived as belonging to 'the other side'. They did not lose anyone in the bombing, but were adversely impacted by it just as much as he was, if not more.

The Bud Welch example is instructive in another important way – it shows that healing can be a lengthy process. If we react immediately, we may do something destructive that we will regret later. We would be better off focusing on the grieving process and allowing it to run its course. Then, when the choice of response is ours again and not dictated to us by the pain, we will be in a far better position to make use of it for everyone's greatest good, including our own.

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