



Dr. med. Lilly Merz Raff, lic. phil. Diethelm Raff, Andrea Hugentobler  
from the Adlerian “Center for Psychology and Education”, Meilen, Switzerland. [www.tageszentrum-meilen.ch](http://www.tageszentrum-meilen.ch)

## **DEPRESSION WITH ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACK AS A RESULT OF AN AUTHORITARIAN UPBRINGING**

Peter has been studying his character for the past year, trying to understand what kind of feelings and attitudes he had developed in childhood. Originally, he had sought therapy because of a depression after years of being mobbed at work. When the therapist asked him about his childhood, he was at first surprised and answered that he had had quite a good childhood. In the course of the therapeutic sessions he then learned that he had – as all people – unconsciously constructed emotionally rooted convictions about the world out of his childhood experiences, and developed a certain style of life, which was nowadays guiding his thinking, feeling and his actions. For example, his constant nervousness was an expression of his fear of making a mistake and being criticized, which was the result of the authoritarian severity and violence he had experienced as a child. Peter has also developed a very precise and analytic style of thinking, which today helps him to understand the connection between the perception of his childhood experiences and his feelings today.

After going through a remarkable sequence of emotional events over the previous week, he went back to analyse, with the help of his therapist, his emotional grasp on life in general and on other people, of which he was not aware. He used a real life example, which his wife had become aware of because she had already learned a lot about his childhood patterns in psychological couple and group therapy sessions. In doing so, Peter could trace back his feelings and how they developed in his childhood.

Peter had volunteered for a nice project: Two of his friends had asked him if he would like to undertake something together with a discouraged 14-year-old teenager called Fabian. The idea was to let the teenager make the experience that cooperation with others is possible and enjoyable and to give him a feeling of achievement and encouragement. Since Peter was an experienced mechanic and Fabian was very interested in car mechanics, the friends suggested that the two of them could assemble and install a garage door opener together. Peter was happy to accept, and on a Monday they made plans for the following Saturday.

Two days later, Peter heard from Fabian that he would unexpectedly spend the weekend at his father's and would therefore not be able to come. Peter told him that it was okay. However, instead of postponing the project and informing his friends, Peter forgot that there was no hurry for the job to be done and that the main point of his involvement was the cooperation with the teenager. Instead, he racked his brains on how to be able to do the work on that Saturday anyway. He asked several people for help and when he could not find anyone, he decided to do the job on his own, despite the fact that he had just caught flu a few days before, and the fact that the weather forecast predicted snow for Saturday. Furthermore, he had found out that it was the wrong type of garage door opener that his friends had bought. In spite of all this, on Friday evening he was determined to do the job on the following day. Only after a long discussion with his wife could he be convinced of the futility of this undertaking.

Finally, on the following Monday, he contacted his friends and told them what had been going



through his mind. Retrospectively, he was as startled as his friends about the absurdity of his actions. So he brought up this experience in his next therapeutic session. The issue was:

The teenager had cancelled, Peter was sick, it snowed and the device did not fit. Why on earth had Peter nevertheless had the irrevocable urge to go and install the garage door opener at all costs? The original reason for the undertaking had disappeared and everything was against it.

Peter described his thoughts, which were an expression of his emotionally founded private logic, after much deliberation as follows:

There was no option for him to postpone the project because in his perception, it was absolutely clear that the job had to be done – with no ifs, ands or buts. When his father had decided to mow the lawn, Peter said, he would have done it even if it was snowing. The sternness at home, according to which ‚once something was planned, it had to be done‘, was omnipresent and overwhelming. Peter learned as a child: ‚If I do not achieve my tasks, then criticism, scolding, blame and beatings will follow – and there is no way of escaping.‘ As a child, he was beaten, pulled by his ears and thrashed with a carpet beater. His father had the unfortunate conviction that one must chastise a child in order to raise it well. Consequently, this was Peter’s impression of the world: ‚You only have one chance and if you do not do it correctly, you will get punished, and you are through.‘ Most of the time, there was something wrong with what he did despite his greatest endeavours, but when he showed his efforts he could expect a slightly milder treatment. He unconsciously resolved to prove that he had been willing, even when the probability that he would be able to fulfil all the demands put on him were low. This was the same way with the garage door opener project: He believed that everything which spoke against the project – the youth’s cancellation, the weather, his flu – would be seen as his responsibility and therefore his friends would heap reproaches on him. It was the same old anxiety he had experienced in his childhood: The fear of being blamed and of seeing the faces of his disappointed parents, the fear of being rejected and labelled as incapable. This fear drove him to prove that he meant well and had tried everything. He felt, thought and acted as if he were standing in front of his parents as a child.

How Peter came to have such feelings and thoughts today has its origin in his childhood, in the view on the world he constructed out of his experiences. The following childhood memory gives a good insight into his situation when he was little, and into the development of his inner disposition, which has unconsciously guided him ever since:

He quite often used to wet his bed at night. This was an expression of his constant anxiety. When his mother discovered his wet bed in the morning, it was not reprimand that expected him, but something far worse for Peter: His mother’s dismissive look full of disappointment. ‚Oh, not again‘, she would say. For him, this meant that he was not even worth a scolding, she already knew, he was no good, something was wrong with him, he never did anything right.

In order to avoid this horrible feeling, Peter wanted to make sure that his mother should never again notice his wet bed. He remembers very well that one night, when he woke up all wet, he got up and went to get a fresh sheet. When his mother discovered in the morning what he had done, it was wrong again: ‚Oh but not this sheet!‘, she exclaimed. Such experiences reinforced Peter’s deeply seated feeling: ‚One way or another, whatever I do, it is wrong. I mean well, I want to be good, and yet over and over again I get rejected. I certainly cannot come and bring a problem, because then I will only be reprimanded for telling lame excuses. Thus, I cannot go back



to someone who has given me a task and discuss the problem.' Therefore, Peter did not have the idea to contact his friends when the teenager cancelled and the circumstances changed, since based on his experiences it was clear for him: 'If I ask a question, it means that I am incapable. Then people will say: „Not even this you can do!“ And in the end, it will turn out: „One cannot count on Peter! He will always disappoint us!“'

These same misgivings had preoccupied Peter in his thoughts regarding the project and taken such possession of him, that he was no longer able to remember what had been its original goal. He was only thinking: 'What will it look like if I cannot fulfil what my friends want? They will think horrible things about me, they will be disappointed, they will say that I am a loser as well as a liar, who cannot be trusted. He says one thing and does another!' He understood his friends' request as an irrevocable command, unconsciously interpreting it on the basis of his childhood experiences. He was inwardly deeply convinced: 'If I cannot deliver what they want, I will go under. I want to and have to try to be perfect, in order to somehow get away safely, even if most of the time, I end up being a disappointment, rejected and looking stupid. Everything but that! I want to and have to prevent this by all means. Maybe this time, I can prove this is not true.'

Peter was not aware of this emotional pattern of reasoning, but it was his unconscious conviction and goal, which was in accordance with his childhood experiences and the interpretations he had constructed out of them about the world and other human beings. When a child is born, it is equipped to be in good terms and to co-operate with its fellow human beings. To this end, it learns quickly what should help it to find an orientation towards the world and other human beings. Depending on what kind of experiences a child goes through, it will come to different conclusions on how to move in life. This conviction then makes up the style of life that is later recognisable in every action of that individual.

Peter experienced in his childhood that other people had very precise expectations and would test him whether or not he fulfilled them. If he did not meet them, he was reprimanded or the relationship was broken off. Such a strict and violent upbringing induced constant anxiety and great insecurity together with cautiousness around other people because they would be most likely against him. One then always carries within oneself the expectation: 'Sooner or later, the next blow will follow.'

It seemed to Peter that there was always only one way of seeing things: 'You either do it right, or you are lost. The world is a dangerous place, and other people are mainly here to criticise me.'

In such a world, a human being nevertheless tries to get through and be heard. Out of helplessness, Peter began to fight back despite punishments and reprimands whenever he felt unfairly treated. He started to have so-called 'fits of rage', while his older sister and younger brother never dared to lodge a protest against their parents. In reaction to one of his tempers, Peter remembers his mother grabbing him and holding his head under the water-tap, saying: 'So, now you will finally be normal!' He had tried something, he meant well, he was sad and desperate, and this affliction was once again answered with rejection and violence. It confirmed his deeply-seated belief that people did not like him and despised him, and that something was wrong with him.

The child's terror that is generated when the parents scream at it, reject it, humiliate it, and show their disappointment, is deeply felt. It accompanied Peter throughout his whole life. It is for the child as if it had no more air to breathe when the parents break off the relationship. The child will



want to do everything to avoid this terrible feeling. It will develop a style of life and strike out in a direction in life believed to be the best in such a world.

The child becomes convinced that it really is bad and needs to prove to be not so terrible. At every task, the relationship to fellow human beings and one's own self worth are at stake. This is also what Peter read into the situation with his friends. Now that we know his background, we can very well understand why his whole life is full of nervousness.

The important step for Peter in his therapy is now to recognise his unconscious beliefs and feelings towards the world and other human beings, to understand that they have developed in his childhood, and to test them against reality and correct them accordingly. This also means to realize that fundamentally all human beings would like to get along with one another. The fact that anxiety and conflicts, severity and violence exist is due to a long series of mistakes in upbringing and misunderstandings that have misguided human beings' social nature.

Peter took an important step forward when he realized in his therapy sessions that his anxiety was without basis and no longer appropriate to the situation today.

He now continues to learn to understand his feelings according to his history. If he succeeds in confronting himself with the private logic he has developed out of his childhood experiences, and in working through them continuously and patiently, he will become more and more secure that he has nothing to fear, even if he makes one, two, or lots of mistakes, because then he can talk about them and find a solution together with other people. He is no longer at the mercy of criticism and rejection like as a child. On the contrary, he is highly appreciated by everyone who knows him for his friendly, active, helpful, steady and reliable way. And if problems arise, he knows that he can join forces with others and that he can work on his feelings to change them, and thus receive confirmation that he has nothing to fear anymore.