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JEALOUSY AND DESPAIR

Amy, a very active, open-minded and inquisitive young woman of 16 years old, had experienced strong mood-swings, which threw her from one extreme to the other and very quickly into distress. On the one hand, she could be almost exaggeratedly active and overly excited about everything and on the other hand, she could, shortly afterwards, become deeply dispirited. The tiniest things could suddenly unsettle her and lead her either to withdraw or feelings of great despair. Her whole life was full of emotional agitation. This went so far that she cut herself, had crying fits for hours and became quite frantic.

In single and group psychotherapy, she was nevertheless able to overcome her mood-swings and regular nervous breakdowns, which had even led her into a psychiatric clinic.

Within a trustful and equal relationship with a therapist, what was fundamentally necessary was to conduct an elaborate investigation of Amy’s history – how she had been raised and what kind of environment she had experienced in childhood.

All children learn about the world through their attachment figures, usually the parents, and develop their characters in such a way that will provide them with the most care, recognition and love in their first environment. Therefore one can ask: what are the effects that the parents’ behaviour had on the children? What are the convictions they, in turn, have unconsciously drawn out of these early emotional experiences?

In the first six years, a child unconsciously develops an emotional view of the world, of other human beings and of self within a unified pattern of behaviour towards challenges and tasks. Character is thus formed as an expression of an inner private logic resulting from a specific and unique response based on a child’s experience.

We have divided up the developmental factors of Amy’s character into four main components: pampering, jealousy, rejection and moodiness. These four factors ultimately converge to make up her personality.

Pampering

Amy grew up with her mother and a brother, who was three years younger than she.

From her own emotional background, Amy’s mother was determined that her children should never have to experience any negative feelings. In her own childhood, she had felt left alone and neglected. When one of her children showed just the slightest signal of unease, she would immediately become alarmed and talk to them about their feelings, sometimes for several hours. She would feel deeply with them and become just as upset as they were, in order to show them empathy.

The mother made these efforts to such an extent that Amy psychologically learned that her mother would immediately care for her intensively even for the slightest emotional distress. It became an Amy’s expectation that others should always be there for her and that her wishes should be fulfilled immediately, which she signalled through emotional agitation.



This kind of pampering attitude, in providing not only immediate help but also intense anxiety, brought about two things: firstly, Amy came to believe that the best way to a close relationship was to show distress; secondly, this over-attentiveness led to an unrealistic expectation from the world. If a mother is always so deeply concerned at every little commotion, the child, while exploring and discovering the world, is likely to expect that something really terrible has happened. This helps us to understand why later in life things often seemed to be exaggeratedly difficult and upsetting to her.

For example, at the age of seventeen she was at a winter camp and had been looking forward to going sledging the following day. When told that they would not be able to go because of bad weather, she felt a great feeling of distress and deep disappointment. She was so unsettled that she cried for a long time.

It must be said, however, that there was also a really positive influence in the fact that the mother took her children's feelings and difficulties so seriously and discussed them in detail. Thanks to this, Amy, today, feels free to express her thoughts and feelings, and is very open-minded and sensitive.

Jealousy

In addition to the distress she experienced, Amy also developed strong feelings of jealousy. Her mother was very determined to ensure that both children felt loved and cared for. She endeavoured to do justice to each one of them by focusing on only one child at any point in time. Amy remembers that she was fully there for one of them or for the other, but rarely for both together. For example, when her brother was having difficulties with his homework, Amy remembers that her mother told her to be quiet and stand aside while her brother was doing it. At other times, it was the other way around.

Amy's mother did not seem to realise that it was most reassuring for a child – and for every human being – to grow up feeling as part of a community and connected to other fellow human beings. Her intense attention and immediate care for one at a time, especially when they were in some kind of distress, resulted in the development of a strong jealousy between the siblings. They competed to establish this intense and deep connection to the mother because each child believed that the relationship was lost when she attended to the other sibling. Not surprisingly, both children developed different strategies to gain their mother's attention in the most effective way.

Amy was the firstborn and a very active child, very quick at walking, thinking and talking. In contrast, her brother, three years younger, came to believe that he had to be seen differently and chose to be extraordinarily slow. While Amy was running around, climbing on trees and talking endlessly to keep her mother on her toes, her brother was late in learning to walk, was rather sluggish and spoke little. Both patterns of behaviour retained the mother's full attention and worry. She was constantly torn between Amy, who was pulling her ("Come on, let's do this!") and her brother, who was slowing her down ("No, I don't want to!").

This jealousy came to be an essential part of Amy's nervousness later in life. She became immediately insecure or felt rejected when people did not relate to her with the same intensity and exclusiveness that she was used to with her mother. She was constantly driven by her childish



fear: “I could lose the relationship, people may not see me and leave me aside.” All the time, she needed reassurance from people’s attention to feel closely connected to them, and it sufficed that two others were getting along well to make her feel excluded and in great distress. In those situations, she would react by working herself into a panic, thus trying to establish an intense connection and regain the attention in the same way she had trained herself as a child.

or example, a group of schoolmates were talking and did not see Amy while they were walking by. Amy immediately interpreted this as a rejection and thought: “They are together and I do not belong with them.” For the next couple of days, she was very upset and desperate, which was her unconscious way of trying to come into a relationship with them again, although she was unaware of her motivation at the time.

The jealousy between Amy and her brother was also evident when she insisted on dictating what to do or what to play together. It was deemed a tragedy for her when her brother, and not her, was asked to choose the movie they would watch all together.

It was also because of jealousy that Amy could not stand it when things turned out in a different way than she had anticipated because it made her feel disadvantaged because she unconsciously expected that her ideas should always be right. The fact that her inner nervousness became as extreme as it was when she was a teenager had to do with a third important aspect in her upbringing. This factor had a strong impact on her image of self and of the world, i.e., her mother’s self-absorption and dismissiveness.

Rejection

Amy’s mother – herself having experienced an authoritarian upbringing – felt insecure, overburdened and in depressive moods from time to time. Furthermore, she could act impetuously or dismissively in the heat of the moment. In such negative moods she was no longer responsive to the children.

When the mother felt exasperated, helpless and lonely, she could become very loud and angry with the children and her partner. In such moments, Amy and her brother would feel frightened and were left alone. When she became emotionally dismissive, they had found a way of re-establishing the contact by demonstrating distress and despair themselves. When their distress was greater than the mother’s, she was able to leave her own worries aside and care for the children again. These childhood experiences reinforced Amy’s unconscious life style of developing very strong and demonstrative fits of desperation.

Amy had had great difficulties in building and keeping good relationships with other children because of her attitude in life, which, while suited to her childhood situation within her family, was impractical and not effective with other children. With these other children, she would try to be the centre of attention, using distress and despair if need be. The fact that she did not succeed in making friends made her mother protect and pamper her even more. This, in turn, confirmed Amy’s perception that she had been rejected by the other children and that she had to struggle for love and attention in life by developing stronger and stronger attacks of despair. This helps us understand the extreme events in Amy’s life.

At the age of thirteen, Amy reached an emotional impasse: as she did not have any friends in school and her mother was absorbed at the time by constant fights with her partner. In turn,



Amy began to have hysterical fits and even started to hallucinate, which led to her to be admitted to a psychiatric clinic for five months.

Through therapy, she now understands and recognises that these extreme psychic states and hallucinations were only meant to be so terrible – more terrible than her brother's problems – so that it would force her mother to be fully there for her again.

When an emotional attitude becomes as extreme as Amy's, it may be considered bipolar disorder. Amy's life history sets a good example to illustrate how such a disorder may develop, but it is also evident that it can be altered because, being based on an erroneous interpretation of life, it can be redressed.

In therapy, Amy began to comprehend how she developed her movement in life, i.e., she had to create problems for herself in order to establish closeness to her mother as well as to other people. She accurately illustrated her emotionally founded private logic with the following example: she was 17 years old and successfully completing her apprenticeship. The family had planned to go out to celebrate her brother's birthday. Amy was already feeling that her mother had been rather absent during the past few days. She was also jealous because her brother would be the centre of attention for an entire evening. Already at work, she had started to feel that everything was going wrong, to make mountains out of molehills and to dramatize tiny mishaps. On the way to the birthday dinner, she continued to process the events of the day in such a way that she was suddenly extremely upset and agitated, feeling sure she would have to quit her apprenticeship.

In other words, her beliefs and feelings were leading her into a direction that she unconsciously believed was necessary in order to receive care and attention from her mother. Because she felt isolated from her mother and pushed aside by her brother, the rejection she felt made her feel worse and worse. So, during the birthday dinner, she felt panicky and told her mother about the "dire" situation at work and her conviction that she would have to leave it. This had the hoped-for effect, namely that her mother became alarmed, was all ears for her and her brother's birthday became secondary. The competition and jealousy between the siblings was once more at play. When the mother became unavailable or dismissive, the children would try to be close to her by all possible means.



Moodiness

The fourth and last important aspect in Amy's emotional development was her mother's moodiness and unpredictability: sometimes she reacted well, sometimes badly; sometimes she was exaggeratedly attentive and caring, then once again absent or dismissive. This contributed to Amy's already existing feelings of insecurity and inner restlessness in response to her mother's pampering and dismissive moods, and her own competitive attitude towards her brother. This also led Amy later to call her friendships rapidly into question when she interpreted their behaviour, for example their tiredness or slight absorption, as pushing her away.

Psychotherapeutic Development

Amy learned in her psychotherapeutic sessions that she reacted with the same nervousness and distress in all situations of life where she felt neglected and insecure, or when she was thinking that she had lost connection to someone. Whenever she thought that people did not see her, that someone was being distant from her, or that she was being excluded – which happened very quickly, - she would immediately work herself into a panic.

Nowadays, she understands why she had – and sometimes still has, but in a much weaker form – such mood-swings. She “had” to feel desperate and abandoned so as to create a big brouhaha around her when the other person's attention was putatively missing. This was – to put it bluntly – the only way she had found to establish a relationship with someone. As a child, she had climbed on a windowsill to engage her mother's attention and as a teenager, she had started cutting herself for the same reasons.

In therapy, she began to realise and accept that such surges of emotion were no longer necessary or suitable. She has already made great improvements and found a new, calmer and steadier way of being in her relationships.

We would like to go through six aspects that were essential for correcting Amy's childhood patterns:

1. The foundation of every change in the client's emotionally founded beliefs is through the development of trust in the therapist, and the gradual widening of this relationship into a basic trust in all people. To this effect, clients must experience that the therapist understands them, their feelings and their attitudes towards life. Amy experienced that her therapist acceptance of her, including all the healthy and socially co-operative parts of her personality. Not only was she becoming aware of being perceived in a benevolent way, but also that there were parts that she could change because they were based on unconscious errors made early in life in her experiences at home.

Through trust and understanding, Amy gained the view that her therapist was able to show her a way out of her negative feelings. She felt that she was now seen differently from how she was used to being seen, and understood what was obstructing her in life.

The more she was able to rely on her therapist, the more she could examine her childhood convictions, and later on transfer her trust to a group. She was able to take steps into a new direction because of the security that she was beginning to enjoy, even though she was moving differently through life by endeavouring to put the agitation aside when receiving too



little attention. She was experiencing little by little that she would not be rejected and that a relationship could not suddenly turn bad or break off.

2. In group therapy, Amy experienced of a sense of belonging to a community of which she was part, even if sometimes she overreacted, or suddenly withdrew, or showed great distress. This was a community where those inappropriate attitudes would be benevolently pointed out to help her understand and change them.
3. Amy learned that even rather difficult topics, such as jealousy and rivalry, could be discussed calmly and in confidence with others, since everybody has also developed some socially unsuitable feelings.
4. Amy also experienced that she can move ahead in life without finding it necessary to talk over every trifling matter for hours. Her counterpart – the therapist – had to demonstrate how to do this without being disconcerted when at first Amy did not feel understood. She slowly discovered that her therapist and the other people in the group not only understood her, but that they were also happy to go over everything with her, except discussing the cause of her distress. They only deliberated on the emotional logic that evoked it and helped her correct her conviction that she was accepted and approved only when other people immersed themselves into her moods and feelings, the way her mother used to.
5. Amy learned a great deal about how human beings develop their feelings and behaviour during childhood. This means, amongst other things, that emotions are not sacrosanct and they have a history. Therefore, once formed, they are transformable if one is able to reconsider whether they are still adequate today.
6. In individual and group therapy, Amy was enabled to enjoy directly the fact that there was no need to create her own despair because people were happy to be in a good relationship with her, discussing things with her calmly. On the basis of her growing trust, she was, for the first time in her life, able to realise and experience that, in order to take on life's challenges, one need not be nervous. On the contrary, these are easier to confront when one stays even-tempered.

Today, she declares that she finds it wonderful to be calmer in life. The despair and distress had been exhausting for her. She really had not been faring well when, after being hysterical, she had talked in detail with her mother about these feelings, believing in those moments that something terrible had happened. Now she states that it is a relief to learn how to take an interest in other people's lives and to know that it is normal that they do not care for her in the same intense and exaggerated manner as her mother did.

Amy has become calmer and happier, feels freer in life, has more friendships and relationships, is advancing better in her apprenticeship and is very pleased about these achievements.