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## LONELINESS, DEFENSIVENESS AND HOSTILITY

Feeling completely exhausted two years ago Marita, aged 38, began individual and group psychotherapy. She had withdrawn ever more deeply and had the feeling that she had to deal with everything on her own. Her exhaustion led to a point where everything felt too difficult and made her believe that she could not go on and her problems could not be solved. At the same time, she felt totally alone and abandoned, could not imagine that anyone would help because she was too difficult and even unbearable.

Over the past year, Marita has learned a great deal about herself and about the melody of her life, the root of her feelings and her sense of loneliness. Since then her life has become much easier. Many of the earlier feelings are still there but definitely weaker, and she has skills in place to deal with them.

Marita is the elder of two daughters. Her parents knew each other when quite young and, when she was born, they had already been together for 15 years. Her father had risen socially upwards from a working-class background through work and study. He built a career for himself in the hotel trade and had a responsible post. Her mother, too, came from humble origins and was a trained salesperson. Her parents filled their life with social events and both took pleasure in being seen and respected in so-called important circles.

When she was born, Marita's mother gave up the shop she had been running. Although she was a wanted child, her parents could not adjust to life with a child. Her father was determined to pursue a successful career and devoted himself more to public life than home. Her mother had difficulty in accepting that her life was fully transformed by her new duty as a mother, which cut her off from high society life and allowed less time with her husband. This brought about increasing dissatisfaction to her. So both parents were absorbed by their own concerns. They were not able to devote much attention to Marita and could not form a bond that promoted emotional security in her.

When Marita was 3 years old, they moved from Germany, via France to settle in Switzerland. Her father was often away on business and she spent her time mostly with her mother. They lived in one of the smallest villages in the country. It would have been easily possible to make friends amongst other families there but her mother's attitude stood in the way. Above all, she had to observe proprieties and conform to expectations in a new country. Her strong prejudices prevented her from making more than a few social connections. The parents hardly ever had visitors and when they invited someone home, panic took over since everything had to look perfect, as if they belonged to the top layer of society. The view of the world modelled to Marita lacked a sense of solidarity and of equality. She did not learn that life could be shared with many people and thus, missed out on experiencing easy-going relationships and on being sustained by a supportive network.

Under the influence of her own childhood, Marita's mother was always dissatisfied and frequently criticised the children. Marita was not conscious of this until she started to reflect on her history. It struck her, for example, that when her mother visits her and her grandchildren today, the first thing she says after the greeting is that some stain has not been properly cleaned up.



Only then did she begin to remember that as a child she only had to notice her mother's raised eyebrow to sense that something was wrong and to feel anxiety. Her mother always found something in her appearance that was not right, a stain, a bit of fluff on her clothes, a badly done hairstyle, or being fat. As far as she can remember, her mother never appreciated what she did. For example, she loved to paint, but was told that her pictures were bad, or that she wanted to pursue gymnastics, but this was seen as too "wearisome" for her mother to take her there.

Marita indeed remembers that the atmosphere at home was full of rejection, criticisms and melancholy. These dynamics were combined with an authoritarian upbringing, one that led her, from the earliest days, to believe that there was consistently something wrong with her and, as a result, her self-esteem and self-image were always low. In reaction, she developed a way of countering this belief by striving towards the goal of being right despite everything. She was a well-behaved child who endeavoured to be recognised for doing everything well. She believed that there should be nothing that she could not do or not know. At every moment, she tried to satisfy her mother as much as possible and hoped to get a modicum of recognition. This striving contained above all the paramount wish not to be a burden to her mother, not to cause any problems and to be able to discover how to solve any problem on her own.

This became her style of life and henceforth how she approached everything in life. Since her mother found life so difficult, she wanted to take some of the burden from her. For this, she earned some praise and recognition. Her mother would indeed frequently declare: "Marita is so independent, thankfully I never have to worry about her!" Her mother would also say that her first words were: "I want to do it myself." These words revealed Marita's determination not to lumber her mother with her own worries, needs and queries.

Apart from being critical, her mother was also very much concerned with herself and her own problems. She was hardly accessible to Marita and was insensitive to her feelings, worries and thoughts. Marita could only connect to her mother when she showed concern for her and orientated everything towards her. When she tried to speak to her about her own concerns, her mother would tell her the following day: "You really made me worry; you gave me a few grey hairs!" Her mother was not truly able to devote herself to another human being. Instead, when she was supposed to be helping someone, she would always twist the situation around so that she could then reproach the other person or complain about it, thus, once again being the centre of attention and be the one who had to be soothed.

As a consequence of her mother's lack of responsiveness, Marita developed a strong feeling that she could not expect a response from others as well. Even today, she believes keenly that however much she tries she will not receive an empathetic reaction from others.

As a child, she always tried, with her mother as well as with her father, to be seen and recognised, but they were ignorant of a child's needs and unable to respond to them with adequate attention and, in particular, guidance. Marita was totally bereft of help since her mother was either strict or silent. For example, when as a 14-year old she came home drunk, her mother remarked that she trusted Marita to know what the right thing to do was. This was her way of being progressive as a parent by sometimes dropping her authoritarian stance and usual severity. However, this left Marita completely alone, feeling on the one hand, that strict ideals were *de rigueur* but on the other hand, that, on a whim, she was consigned to her own devices, but still dissatisfied if she



had acted inappropriately, with a feeling of abandonment underlined by definite expectations of what she should have done.

The following example, one out of many others, makes it abundantly clear from where Marita's current feeling of loneliness developed. When she was in primary school, she felt that she did not belong and was disliked, which explained her cautiousness and remoteness, and, hence, inability to make friends. From the second year onwards, other pupils often tormented her. This was at its worst when gymnastics was scheduled at the start of the school day, because then the children had to wait outside until the teacher came. She felt particularly vulnerable then, fearing being at the mercy of the other children. One morning, she had such anxiety about going to school that she confided in her mother and begged her either to let her stay at home or to help her. Since her mother did not know how to help her or to stand by her when she was in great distress, she insisted on her going to school and finally chased her out of the house. Marita still remembers how she threatened her like a fury, running after her with a broom until she was out of sight and certain that she was on her way to school.

This is just one example out of many occasions demonstrating that her mother was incapable of standing by her when she was in great distress, or helping her to connect with other children. This instance is reflective of Marita's feelings of emotional abandon.

Marita's father sought to be significant by being extraordinary and standing out from others. He wanted to appear grand and be in the circle of so-called important people. He devoted himself wholly to public life and had little interest in the family. When he was at home, he would often freely express his frustration with his office colleagues and complained about "all those losers", especially his secretary. He also shouted at the children when they did something wrong, and was easily offended. Marita remembers, for example, that on one occasion, when she was eleven years old, her father was combing his hair in front of the mirror, and it was standing up in such a funny way that she just had to laugh and said to him: "Don't you look funny?" Her father flew into a rage and shouted at her at the top of his voice.

For him, everything always had to be perfect, and his ideas were unchallengeable. He had a very clear sense of right or wrong. His relationship with his wife was based on inequality. He felt himself to be above her, looked down upon her – and upon all in the family – and had to dictate what was valid and how things should be. She, for her part, subordinated herself strongly to him and tried to fulfil all his wishes. When he was at home, she was permanently stressed, worrying that the children behaved themselves properly.

Those moments when he lost it, shouting at Marita, her sister and her mother, shocked and frightened her. She was unable to understand from where his emotional outbursts came. For her, as a child, these outbursts provoked anxiety and a fear of rejection for every little infringement. He maintained a great distance from her despite her trying, with all her power, to comply with and please him, but she was almost never able to succeed. She felt throughout her life, time and again, the same feeling of trying and trying to oblige but never succeeding.

On a few brief occasions though, she did manage to reach her father when he showed appreciation of her in public, or on a stage reciting a poem and dancing. He was also proud to take her, all dressed up, to social events, as long as she presented well and contributed to his own prestige.



The above situations helped us to understand why she felt as a youth, and sometimes even today, that she could only win recognition and bond to others if she delivered special offerings or achieved impressive acts and earned applause. On such occasions, she would have for a short time a good feeling about herself and believed that she was meaningful to, and accepted by, others.

Under these tightly limited conditions, Marita had developed a propensity for envy. From her experience, she indeed drew the conclusion that if she did not receive her share of recognition, she would always be missing out. She was convinced of this and wove this trait into her personality.

Marita's sister was born when she was five years old. This increased her tendency to be envious and fuelled subsequent competitiveness towards her sister who seemed to siphon from her the little attention that there was to be had.

Like her, her sister developed a nervous attitude towards life and kept the attention of the family by being agitated, prone to fainting and by becoming the problem child. Marita, in contrast, intensified her wanting to be the strong one and made it her goal to be the one who best understood her sister, and the only one capable of helping her. In this way, she could find the deep and heartfelt connectedness with her that she lacked with her parents. This is how she managed to feel meaningful and important to others; almost exclusively when she was in the role of the one who knew how to help. She observed that she usually sought out situations in life where she could be strong and of assistance to others. Relating to other people involved deciding what had to be done and what was good for others.

Marita's longing was to be close to others and to be recognised. Among the primary emotional components that made up her attitude towards life, the most significant entailed that she should always be good and well adjusted. Of course, such goals are not realistic and paradoxically produced difficulties. She was unable to form relationships with others in everyday life while nevertheless pursuing them. With such exaggerated expectations of how she should be and how others should see her, these led her inevitably and rapidly to feeling misunderstood and attacked.

So she constantly went through and repeated the same unsatisfactory experiences within the confines of her private logic. She kept on encountering defeats and rejections. Again and again, she despaired that she could never attain the goal of being accepted and to feel worthy, thus leading her often to believe in a sense of intractability and inevitability in her life.

After feeling that she had struggled long enough, a second component of her character took shape when she decided to counter her felt subjugation with defensiveness and hostility. From developing a belief that she must at long last stand up for herself accompanied by a strong feeling that "the world was against her", she took a defensive stance in opposing everything and everyone. She was able to work up intense surges of negative emotion and even to exercise coercion on others, erroneously believing that this was necessary in order to be heard and appreciated.

One side of her wanted to belong completely and could not bear being out of step with other people; the other side impelled her to give up and move into total hostility. She experienced this antithetical tendency in an extreme way without any rationality, wanting simply to be against everything. The switch between these two sides of her view of the world was at the root of her



mood swings, evident from puberty onwards. She followed the same course of action time and time again whereby she would pull herself together and try to do everything well, in fact, super-humanly well, and then, on feeling the burden as unjust would get into a rage at other people. And after a while, she would recompose herself and start all over again.

What made it even worse was a third side of her character that ensued when she formed a clear idea of the kind of approach, care or reaction others would have to display to assuage her. This meant that she would distance herself from others by using various means to make them relate to her in the way that she thought appropriate.

This third element was a strong compulsion, consisting of pushing others away and affronting them before being rejected by them.

All three sides merged into her becoming highly sensitive, often interpreting the reactions of others as attacks. She continuously fought, regardless of whether the others were for or against her, and remained hostile and remote. She had to find out later that she was, in fact, repeating the experience of her early childhood, i.e., feeling alone and misunderstood.

Through the course of treatment, the trust that she gained in her psychotherapist and in other people, as well as understanding the development of her unconscious feelings and attitudes, she became more and more aware of what troubles her. She has now found some relief, living in free and equal exchange with other people and feels sure that she is capable of making a contribution. She has indeed already taken great strides forward and experienced many moments in which she dares question her beliefs and feelings and is able to correct them when needed.

A recent episode on her birthday demonstrated her positive move forward movement, even though interrupted by some steps backward. Weeks before her birthday, she had already manoeuvred herself more and more into a familiar childhood mood, feeling unrecognised because a friend was, as she saw it, devoting too little time to her. She constantly asked herself whether she had done something amiss, but was at the same time angry at feeling neglected. In this explosive mood, she took it badly that most of her guests arrived a half an hour late to for her birthday celebration. None of their explanations calmed her down. She felt put out all evening and no one was able to win her over with demonstration of friendship. Her old childish conviction re-surfaced that she was being unjustly treated and that no one could meet her expectations. This mood lasted for two weeks and she almost broke off with all her friends, so deeply was she in this frame of mind. Eventually, she was able to reflect on it and recognise the pattern of emotional processing that had taken place within her and to talk it over with her psychotherapist. She came to see that her feelings did not correspond with reality and were not related to her friends of today. They were totally devoted to her. She apologised to all for her hyper-sensitivity and dismissive behaviour, and was able to preserve her friendships, which are so important to her.

Today, Marita considers herself lucky enough to have had the strength to be honest and open with people, even after such difficult missteps while, at the same time, making a big move forward in changing her childhood beliefs. Because she is building more and more trust in others, she indeed now feels that she belongs and that her relationships can remain stable and good, even when difficult feelings arise.