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## SLEEP DISTURBANCE AND EXAGGERATED CORRECTNESS

A man – we call him John – came to psychotherapy because he was suffering from sleep disturbance. About once a week he stayed awake the whole night, especially when he felt he had to face a difficult job the following day. Otherwise, he neither seemed tense nor nervous, was generally very successful, esteemed and popular at work, had a nice family and good friends.

Since no physical cause for his insomnia could be found, it was obvious that some kind of unconscious inner restlessness was preventing him from sleeping. As he was not aware of his unconscious beliefs and feelings at that time, the question at the beginning of his therapy was: Which experiences as a child had he interpreted in such a way that he felt it necessary to become nervous and restless in certain situations?

He was the oldest of three children with two younger sisters. All three of them tried to fulfil all tasks in great detail in order to meet their parents’ expectations. In general, they experienced a kind atmosphere around their mother and father. The father, however, had from time to time a sudden surge of emotion out of nowhere and would vehemently scream at his children.

John was very scared as a child by these unpredictable bursts of emotion. Although his father always apologized shortly afterwards, John during the first years of his life subtly and unconsciously developed a goal to prevent such violent flare-up. With all his might, he tried to find out how he should behave so that everything was ‚right‘ so that his father would not need to become angry or have any bursts of emotion against him. John believed that his father became enraged because of him and therefore tried to find a way to avoid these eruptions. So, he developed great empathy and a good ability to solve conflicts and to create a good atmosphere. But because his father’s affects were not foreseeable and had nothing to do with him, he could not succeed in preventing them completely. As he was again and again exposed to his father’s unpredictable outbursts – verbal abuse and criticism – a deeply seated belief was formed that they were just and deserved, and that he could never meet the demands put on him.

What he had experienced with his father, he later transferred to everyone: In the same way as he wished to behave ‚correctly‘ with his father, he strove to achieve this with all people. He wanted to prevent at any cost the assumed outburst and circumvent the possibility of being a problem. His unconscious goal was to foresee and prevent the constant danger of not being able to do things correctly, so that these frightening outbursts would some day seize completely.

During those nights before an important job, he lied awake planning meticulously every movement and thinking of an adequate reaction to every possibility. This is why he was always well prepared and therefore accomplished a lot. As a superior, he was very popular, competent, clearly structured and constructive. Nevertheless, he lived in an emotional state of fearing to be attacked at any moment. It sufficed for him to hear his boss’s steps in the corridor that he would quickly go through everything he could have done wrong. Thus, he tried to be prepared for any criticism or anger in order to be able to react accordingly.



His preventative efforts were especially strong when he was with lots of people, for example at a meeting. Then, it was obviously impossible to be prepared for all presumed ‚dangers‘. His feeling: ‚I cannot assess everything‘ kept him awake the night before without him knowing why he could not find sleep. He had the unconscious conviction that he could be faced with the most violent reactions despite all his efforts. Rationally he could say why it was not necessary to be prepared for each detail, but this did not help him to get rid of his tension as long as he was not aware of the connection to his childhood experiences. He could – as everyone – only slowly realize his deeply-rooted feelings towards the world and recognize and question them as a childhood pattern.

He carried this unconscious emotional attitude even into situations where he was in charge. This made it still more obvious that his fear of evoking any kind of rejection was a deeply felt inner logic which he had developed through his childhood experiences and which was no longer suitable in reality.

He spent several months in psychotherapy in order to understand this problem. Thus, he gained precise insight into his attitude towards life and how this had evolved from his childhood. He learned to see himself, his father as well as all human beings more realistically. For example, he started to accept his boss’s appraisal not only as „pshaw, once again survived“, but he began to take it seriously and, hence, to adjust his perception and his feelings to reality. This meant that he was able to internalise that he was doing a good job and no longer had to be scared each time anew. Furthermore, John gained insight into his father’s background and the feelings his father had developed in his own childhood, so that he could understand that his father’s outbursts were the result of his own erroneous beliefs and wrong attitude towards human beings, and not provoked by John’s inability. John’s image and perception of other people started to change. He could now experience that they were not here to criticise him but were also preoccupied with feelings of insecurity and inferiority resulting from their own wrong perceptions regarding human beings. Through this in-depth work, he discovered his unconscious goal, recognised it as arising from his childhood experiences and therefore had the choice of rejecting it. Thanks to this systematic way of approaching things, he succeeded in twenty therapeutic sessions over the course of one year to overcome his sleep disturbance.

Through the deep and precise engagement with his movement in life and the understanding of how he had developed his personality, he also learned to understand one of his sisters better, who had problems with alcohol. His sister had always been in the shadow of her older brother. She had the feeling that she always came second after him and would have to catch up with him in order to gain recognition in the family. She, however, felt that she had failed to achieve that and therefore, from a certain age, she believed that she could no longer be an active and contributing member of the family. This was the field of the older brother. It was new to him to consider that his sister’s alcohol problem was not a weakness of character but an expression of the same fear of failure he also had. He was surprised to realise that he had suffered from his father’s treatment just as much as her, but that he had dealt with it differently. By chance, he had tried longer to be correct than her and also by chance, he had succeeded to a certain degree, whereas she had given up. On the basis of this understanding, he no longer rejected his sister and for the first time, he could empathise with her and be reconciled with her.