

PSYC SPOT PSYCHOLOGY CLINIC

Understand & Develop Your Inner-Workings

Maladaptive Attempts at Adaptation The Hallmark of Mental Health Problems

NEWSLETTER #6

Traditionally, one of the better ways to discern whether a client is likely to benefit more from supportive-counselling or treatment-centric therapy is to assess whether the person is *employing problematic “solutions” to one’s perceived problems*. The idea is that without counterproductive efforts to strive towards one’s goals or fend off one’s fears, most issues will naturally fade over time (e.g., people can gradually accept the unachievable goals, adapt to unresolvable issues, or the issues may be temporary in nature). In such cases, counselling may facilitate the “time heals” processes. However, if the person’s efforts are counterproductive, like fuelling the existing problems or creating new ones, then therapy may be needed to shed light on and help break this vicious cycle (instead of expecting “time heals” kind of spontaneous improvements). The key question is, why do people employ problematic “solutions”?

Sometimes, we may be too fixated on achieving a goal or fending off a threat that we ended up neglecting to weigh up the costs, or are willing to accept any costs. For example, someone who has an insatiable need for attention may dramatize or outright fabricate parts of their life. Likewise, someone who has an excessive need to feel superior may resort to undermining everyone nearby. In both cases, however, the immediate gains is always followed by costly mid-long term consequences.

Other times, we may not realize the “solution” being employed is actually a costly and otherwise problematic one. For example, someone who relies on being extremely generous to win relationships may only highlight the positive aspects of generosity, and overlooked how one has drawn in and failed to filter out people who see this as a chance for exploitation. Worse, some may have been exploited for as long as they could remember, and have desensitized or never learnt to see it as an unacceptable price to pay for maintaining human connections.

Still other times, we may not even realize we have actually employed some form of “solution” to experienced problems. An example would be the use of (the proverbial) Sour Grape rationalization, where the person develops the biased view that the challenging goal is not that desirable anyway (“those hard-to-reach grapes look sour anyway”). While unconsciously devaluing the target provides an easy way out, it can also prevent us from truly pursuing what may have been attainable and valuable outcomes. As another example, many people who are highly intolerant of uncertainties will, without realizing, make decisions that bring forth even the worst possible outcome, because subjectively that is less painful than prolonging the uncertainty-related sensations.

Countless other forms of maladaptive coping / defences exist (colourful examples related to PTSD, Panic Disorder, and Eating Disorder were included in Newsletter #2-4).

A fundamental goal of therapy is to help each client figure out how and why one has come to (over) value and/or fear certain things in life, and further *understand why the person (consciously or unconsciously) strives to attain what one values and/or defend against one’s perceived issues in counterproductive ways*. If the person simply did not realise the “solution” used is maladaptive, insight building could be most relevant. If the person realises but lacks the means to employ more adaptive solutions, then skills and capacity building could be most pertinent. If however the problem lies in the pursuit of “unhealthy” goals and/or seeing issues in areas when there is none, then that takes therapy into a different direction.

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