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Deconstructing Relationships

Cracking the Code of the 5 Core Fears

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The Deconstructing Anxiety Model

There are two basic drives in the human experience: Fear and Fulfillment.

Our first impulse is for fulfillment (wholeness, self-expression, realization of our high ideals, etc.). Fear immediately warns us about the dangers of pursuing fulfillment.

Fear and fulfillment are inversely proportional: The more fear we harbor, the more it limits our fulfillment and vice-versa.

This creates a fundamental conflict: we are both afraid to reach for fulfillment and at the same time will not be satisfied until we do. It is this conflict that is at the root of every struggle or problem. It is the fundamental source of suffering.

Fear's Survival Strategies

Fear convinces us it is the wisest strategy for securing fulfillment. It does this by distorting our experience while fooling us into believing its assessment is accurate.* Using various deceptions and manipulations, it prevents us from considering alternative approaches to fulfillment. These are fear's “survival strategies”.

*By definition, fear requires a distortion of the truth: We are too afraid to consider the objective truth of things and insist on seeing what makes us feel safe. This is a vital insight for clients to begin accepting that their fear is not a valid way of perceiving.

The Five Deceptions of Fear

1. Fear keeps us from seeing that it is ubiquitous, a constant way of thinking and feeling when we are not wholly fulfilled.
2. Fear keeps us from realizing it is the true source of any problem.
3. Fear keeps us from looking directly at it to see it for what it is.
4. Fear keeps us from facing and moving through it when necessary.
5. Fear keeps us from looking at or facing the correct fear.

The Eight Manipulations of Fear

1. The hypnotizing effect of fear
2. The lie of fear
3. The demand of fear
4. The ruminative quality of fear
5. The impatience of fear
6. The future orientation of fear
7. The time distortion of fear
8. The self-generating quality of fear

The Mechanism of Anxiety

Fear incites us to employ defenses to protect ourselves from that which we fear (what we will call “the fear-defense dynamic”).

It is, more precisely, our defenses that create the conflict between fear and fulfillment. They put us at “war” with reality, defending against the way things are, constantly striving to manipulate the environment (or ourselves!) to conform to our wishes.

Unfortunately, reality often has a different agenda and conflict ensues. This, again, is the original cause of suffering.

The Mechanism of Anxiety

Our defenses are designed to help us ***avoid*** the truth of a situation, as we buy into fear's assessment and try to protect ourselves from it.

By avoiding that which we are afraid of, we never test out whether it is truly a source of fear or not.

The anxious person is always, in some way, a person who has been enabled to avoid a full confrontation with the challenges of life, has not had a “complete experience” (Shinzen Young) of the feared situation.

Defenses Exacerbate Anxiety

All defenses backfire, exacerbating the anxiety they were meant to protect us from. They do this in two ways:

1) In exercising our defenses and avoiding reality, we reinforce the idea that there is something awful to defend against. By protecting ourselves, we tell ourselves “there must be something threatening causing me to respond this way”.

2) Defenses require that we fixate on the threat, thereby filling our minds with anticipatory anxiety. Reviewing all possible scenarios of danger, our anxiety is heightened since we can never **guarantee** that our defenses will provide the security we seek.

The Key to Resolving Anxiety

If avoiding fear by defending against it creates our problems, then ***facing fear*** is the inevitable solution.

Doing so gives the direct experience that nothing terrible happens – it is at least manageable and survivable. Often we find the whole notion of something threatening was made up as we move through it and discover there were no negative consequences.

The Key to Resolving Anxiety

This is the essence of any exposure therapy. But again, without a thorough deconstruction of the mechanics of anxiety, we will not have the insight into which fear needs to be faced and what specific actions need to be taken.

“My life was filled with terrible misfortunes...most of which never happened.”--De Montaigne

The Birth of Fear

Each of us is born (unless there is a medical or other problem) relatively whole and complete, an approximation of the intra-uterine state, where we feel fused with the mother in an experience of undifferentiated “bliss” (Rank, Grof). All needs are met and nothing threatens our well-being (i.e. there is no cause for fear).

The Birth of Fear

We then meet fear for the first time (as, for example, when mother leaves the room). Being so thoroughly vulnerable, the impact of this moment is profound, life-changing. Having known only relative peace and fulfillment, our entire being orients toward the threat. The “tabula rasa” of our mind is powerfully imprinted upon, with no contrasting experience to mitigate the effect.

The Core Fear

We land, as a result, on a particular ***core fear***—our fundamental interpretation of danger in the world, given by this first exposure to fear.

The core fear becomes the foundation for our basic understanding of life and how to perceive it, as we look through the lens of this interpretation, seeing the signs of it everywhere.

The core fear understanding of life becomes the lens through which we learn to view *any* problem.

The Core Fear

Any problem met later in life, therefore, has the core fear at its root.

The core fear is always formed in childhood (can be reinforced with additional interpretations during times of trauma later in life). This pivotal interpretation can happen at a single moment or as a gradual development in the midst of more generalized, non-specific threats in the environment.

The Five Core Fears

The five core fears (universal themes of loss):

- 1) Abandonment (loss of love).
- 2) Loss of Identity (the original, authentic self).
- 3) Loss of Meaning (the inherent value of things).
- 4) Loss of Purpose (a goal for a better future).
- 5) Fear of Death (loss of opportunity for the other four).

The Five Core Fears

This is why relationships are so important in the human experience, a critical aspect of both fear and fulfillment. Identity is based on who we are in relation to others. Purpose is about how we make a difference with others, etc. Each of the core fears can be directly linked to a faulty perception about relationships.

The Chief Defense

This first contact with fear is intolerable: we begin a frantic search to restore our original innocence.

We land on a ***chief defense*** as the primary tool to protect ourselves from the core fear. We have discovered our power to make ourselves safe, return to our previous peaceful state, and exercise the control to make things the way we want.

The relief this brings is so extraordinary that it makes a powerful imprint upon us: we have learned both that the world can threaten our existence and that we have the ability as an autonomous being to overcome that threat.

The Chief Defense

Examples of chief defenses:

- Perfectionism
- People-pleasing
- Specialness
- Anger
- Depression

The Chief Defense

But we have not truly restored our previous state of innocence because we realize the threat can come back. No longer do we live in a world where we can fully rest as before, oblivious to the potential for danger.

We conclude we must stand guard, ready to use our chief defense should the threat arise again. We vow to be prepared to use this defense at a moment's notice, never to be taken by surprise as we were before.

The chief defense strategy does work to alleviate the fear of the moment, but it comes at too great a cost. The potential threat is always looming, and we are conscripted to be prepared for battle.

How to Build a Personality

Each of us builds our personality on the foundation of this fear-defense dynamic: we are ready to interpret every situation according to what we imagine is threatening about people and life (our core fear), and to protect ourselves from that threat with the chief defense.

A “healthy” personality checks these tendencies against reality, rather than avoiding such exposure. This shows the problem to be either manageable or non-existent. As a result, we learn to adjust to the uncertainty and changing nature of life.

Secondary Defenses

As we go through life, we develop secondary defenses, adaptations of the chief defense to the various circumstances we encounter in life.

These account for the complexity of what it is to be human, the multifaceted ways we interpret and respond to life, according to the blueprints of the core fear and chief defense.

Three Phases in the Development of Personality

- 1) Even though we cannot remember it, the birth experience may evoke our first sense of a core fear, to which we respond with a limited repertoire of available defenses.
- 2) In early childhood, we encounter the danger in the world and respond with primitive cognitions about what the threat is (our core fear) and how to handle it (our chief defense).
- 3) In adolescence, we make additional interpretations about the potential threats of the adult world. We make a “vow” to rely on one primary interpretation (core fear) and one primary chief defense. This locks in our personality for a lifetime.

Finding the Core Fear: “Digging for Gold”

Write a problem at the top left of a page. Ask one of these three questions on the right side of the same line:

1. Why is that upsetting to you?
2. What are you afraid will happen next?
3. What are you afraid you will miss or lose?

Answer the question with a new problem, a new fear, one level closer to the core, written on the second line on the left of the page. Ask one of the three questions on the right and continue this process until you reach the core.

Finding the Core Fear: “Digging for Gold”

Technique tips:

- It doesn't matter what problem you start with, big or small, since all are manifestations of the core fear.
- Watch out for the “repetitive loop” where you have actually just restated the same level of the problem in a different form. The task is to get to one level deeper, one level closer to the core fear.
- One's core fear is one of the five major universal themes of loss mentioned earlier: Abandonment (loss of love); Loss of Identity; Loss of Meaning; Loss of Purpose (the chance to express oneself); Fear of Death (including fear of sickness and pain)
- You'll recognize the core fear when you can't go any further, and you have an “aha” moment... understanding that you have found a secret at the root of things, often accompanied by powerful memories and emotions.
- (Note: Credit is given to David Burns for the phrasing of the question “Why is that upsetting to you?”. However, please note this process is distinct, with a very different purpose, than his Vertical Arrow technique and should not be confused with it).

Finding the Core Fear: “Digging for Gold”

The three questions:

- 1) Why is that upsetting to you?
- 2) What are you afraid will happen next?
- 3) What are you afraid you will miss or lose?

Problem: _____

Answer (new problem): _____

Answer (new problem): _____

Answer (new problem): _____

Answer (new problem): _____

Answer (new problem): _____

Answer (new problem): _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Question: _____

Core fear: _____

Finding the Chief Defense: “Who Are You Really?”

Five questions

- 1) How did you respond to the original core fear?
- 2) How do you respond to fears today (“the past lives on in the present”).
- 3) How would others describe your personality?
- 4) How do you pursue goals?
- 5) What is it that you refuse to do that others can do comfortably?

The Key to Resolving Anxiety

The key to resolving anxiety is to “do the opposite” of what the chief defense would have us do.

This means either:

1. Moving in the opposite direction of how the defense would have us move – i.e. facing the fear and moving into it;
2. Standing still and refusing to respond to the fear at all;
3. Doing something completely unrelated to the fear, telling ourselves thereby that it has no power to force us to respond or even hold our attention.

Doing the Opposite

By “doing the opposite”, we remove the defensive barrier to the fear, exposing ourselves to it, and discovering it doesn’t have the power to carry out its threat. Either we find a manageable problem with readily available solutions, or realize the problem doesn’t exist at all – that it was built on a leftover belief from earlier times, the result of distorted perceptions and confused learnings.

Doing the Opposite in Relationships

Doing the opposite of the chief defense (or its secondary derivatives) in our relationships breaks the habitual pattern of “attack and defend”, offering an entirely new repertoire of possible responses.

In order to do the opposite, we must first catch ourselves in the process of using the defense, and see how our fear has been triggered. Then, in one of the three ways for doing the opposite, we resist the use of the defense and tolerate the fear, knowing it is a perceptual distortion.

Example: The Warrior's Stance

The Warrior's Stance employs the second way of doing the opposite: Refusing to respond to the fear in any way. When in the middle of a relational struggle (even if only in your mind), freeze, letting the rest of your sentence or action go unfinished.* Remain frozen as long as it takes, allowing your core fear to wash over you. Stand on your mark, with the courage of a warrior, until the fear completely passes.

*Of course, you will want to set this up appropriately; for instance, you can explain to the other what you are about to do and why, before engaging the exercise).

Example: The Warrior's Stance

When the fear has fully dispersed, your perception will shift dramatically, and you will see the other person in an surprisingly new, more objective way. The projections you placed upon them will spontaneously disappear, and a new set of behavioral responses to the situation will reveal itself. That response which will best help you achieve your goals for the relationship becomes obvious.

Example: The Deconstructing Relationships Communication Technique

This exercise requires both people in the relationship to agree to the structure, and to adhere to it strictly.

Person A states their grievance in terms of their fear, using the phrase: “I’m afraid that...”. This phrase should be short and specific. For example, “I’m afraid that you’ll try to stop me from socializing with my friend”, rather than “I’m afraid I’ll be a prisoner in this relationship”.

If having difficulty translating the upset into a fear, employ the “Digging for Gold” exercise.

Example: The Deconstructing Relationships Communication Technique

Person A follows this phrase by making a request of the other, something which would quell the stated fear. This phrase should take the form of “I request that...”. Again, the phrase should be short and specific (e.g. “I request that you tell me when I’ve said x, y or z that triggered your core fear”, rather than “I request that you not make me read your mind”).

Example: The Deconstructing Relationships Communication Technique

Person B then reflects back in their own words what they believe Person A said, trying to convey the feeling with which person A expressed it.

If Person A does not believe Person B fully and accurately received the communication, they offer feedback about what specifically needs to be corrected.

Person B offers a revised reflection based on the feedback Person A offered.

This process is continued until Person A feels fully and accurately understood.

Example: The Deconstructing Relationships Communication Technique

Person B then takes their turn, translating their response to Person A in the form of “I’m afraid that...” (regarding what Person A said), followed by “And I request that...”.

Person A then reflects what they heard Person B say, with corrective feedback from Person B, until Person B feels completely and accurately understood.

Example: The Deconstructing Relationships Communication Technique

Person A and Person B continue taking turns this way until there is an agreement to meet each others' requests.

This agreement may involve a mutually satisfying compromise. It is often the case, however, that the request for one or both people becomes irrelevant, because the true need—to be deeply seen and heard by the other--has been met.

When this agreement is reached, there will be a shift in perception or new understanding about each other, with a resulting empathy and restoration of original closeness.

The Deconstructing Relationships Program

There are many other exercises for “doing the opposite” in the Deconstructing Relationships approach, all of which involve a meaningful contact with the core fear, such that it is exposed as an “illusion” (distorted perception).

If one person in a relationship is not willing to engage these processes, the person who is willing can resolve the relational struggle for themselves with the Deconstructing Anxiety exercises.

Contact Information

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