

Moving past your anger

A study in vengeance & forgiveness

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How do we know what we are feeling

There is an interesting article in the latest edition of the "Australian Psychologist" (November 2006). It addresses a point that I have often considered. It questioned the assumption that people use the same words to describe the same levels of pain.

The results of the research did not support the assumption. It found that people use different words to describe the same intensity of pain. If you extend this to other feelings like anger, sadness and fear then you have a problem for the psychotherapist, indeed anyone in a relationship really.

Regarding the reporting of pain this has consequences for medical practitioners. When they are deciding what to prescribe for a patient's pain relief what one patient reports as severe pain another will report as mildly painful for the same level of pain. In clinical judgements of the psychotherapist what two different people report as "being very angry" can actually mean two quite different things.



Some people say they are like this when they are in agony. Others say they are like this when they just have a sore throat.

In fact I have always taken it a little bit further and wondered how do we know that what one person reports as anger is actually anger. It may be what another may report as fear. The answer is, we simply do not know. The problem is of course that a feeling is an intangible thing. You cannot see or touch a feeling.

But researchers have tried as we humans want to be able quantify just about everything. Indeed this is how lie detectors work. If someone tells a lie it is assumed that their anxiety level will go up. When that happens there will be physical changes in the body. So you place electrical receptors on the body to pick up those changes, then you know when the person is feeling anxious and thus when they have lied. However such machines have proven too unreliable. Peoples' physical reactions are too inconsistent or difficult to accurately measure. Telling a lie for one person may generate 5 units of anxiety and for another it may generate 10 units and still for another there may be none.

Then scientists have tried other ways. They have done experiments where they observe kids in a play group situation after watching a violent movie. These experiments assume that if a child hits out 6 times in an hour then they are twice as angry as a child who hits out 3 times in an hour. Obviously this assumption is very flimsy and thus why these experiments are dubious themselves. Some people will hit out at others if they are even slightly provoked whereas others you have constantly frustrate and taunt for hours before they will actually hit out physically.

This leaves psychotherapists in a difficult situation as it is often important for us to know when a person is feeling angry, how angry that person is feeling and how much expression of that feeling they are doing. As an example I was working with a man the other day who walked in to my office and stated that this talking shit was a waste of time as talking doesn't change anything. He then proceeded to talk constantly for the next 30 minutes with little or no prompting from me. It was in essence a catharsis for him.

There are various ways people can express anger with varying degrees of catharsis.

1. At the lower end they can draw pictures or write angry things or even fantasise angry situations.
2. In the next level of intensity up, they can verbally express anger and this of course can range from very quiet and controlled to an outright loud angry tirade or a shouting match between a married couple.
3. Then the next level of catharsis is the physical expression of anger. This involves some sort of physical movement or hitting. One can run or cycle their anger out, hit a pillow on a bed or punch a punching bag. Then of course people can physically hit other people such as in contact sports, the most obvious being

boxing or in physically assaulting another person.



Contact sports can be a cathartic release of anger.

Generally it is seen that the lower the level of catharsis then the less anger is being expressed. However that is not always so. The man I mentioned before spoke about his life and the things he was angry about. He verbalised for 30 minutes. At times his voice was slightly raised but he never got anywhere near shouting. However I think that this was a highly cathartic experience for him, similar to the level that physically hitting out would be for others. At the end he reported almost physical exhaustion and all he had done was remain seated and spoke for 30 minutes. So for him the 'lower' level of anger expression was in fact a very high level. It would be very easy to 'misdiagnose' what he had done and thus the treatment gets confused.

Over the years I have run various workshops on anger and its expression. There have been two interesting observations that I have made. In some workshops people do exercises where they experience the different levels of anger expression. As I mentioned before at the lowest level of catharsis people can draw or write or fantasise about their anger expressions. Some people find this very confronting, which I didn't expect to be the case.

I might ask workshop participants to draw a picture of yourself expressing anger at someone whom you are angry at. The good part about this 'make believe' anger expression is that it is precisely that - make believe. So you are completely unrestrained in how you can express your anger. So if you are very angry at this person then you can shoot them, stab them, chop them up with an axe, do the Chinese water torture and so forth. Some find this most difficult and

refuse to do it.

The common faulty belief is, "If I think it then I will do it". This is quite frightening to some as they find it hard to distinguish between thinking something and then behaving on that thought. Obviously, in reality there is a very big difference between the two.

Also there are some who don't like to realise that they can have feelings and thoughts of violent anger. They see that as a failing in themselves or as a bad part of them self. It certainly goes against the idea of love thy neighbour and forgive thy enemy. I think forgiving thy enemy is a great thing to do and do it myself.

There is one problem with such forgiveness, in that you need to do one other thing first or at least concurrently. Vengeance and revenge is a normal human emotion that is felt by the Free Child in all of us. If some one hits you the FC part of yourself will have a natural reaction of wanting to hit back in some way. But revenge is often seen as a 'bad' human feeling and thought. So in the community where I live people will say that they don't want revenge they want justice. Which is a lie to self as they are the same thing. However the word "Justice" makes it sound nicer and more acceptable.

There is nothing wrong with the emotion of revenge as it is a normal human emotion. One does however need to be careful with the expression of that emotion. But there is nothing unusual about that either. For instance people have sexual feelings to all sorts of other people who society would consider as very inappropriate and even illegal. There is nothing wrong with having those sexual thoughts and feelings, it is how those feelings do or do not get expressed that is the key. But there are some who believe that they must not even have those thoughts and feelings in the first place. That they are 'bad' in some way if they do. Which of course is not true.

Before you can truly or more completely forgive thy enemy you have to deal with the FC feelings of revenge and anger. Fortunately if someone hits you, you don't actually have to physically hit them back in order to resolve the feelings of vengeance in oneself. Humans can also express and release the revenge by 'hitting' back verbally to either the person directly or some other sympathetic listener. Alternatively one can also physically hit an inanimate object such as a punching bag or pillow on a bed.



Life Goes On

Sometimes life is not fair, but it always goes on regardless.
If one gets stuck in the anger at the unfairness then they
get stuck in life and stop going on.

So we have in the process of forgiving:

You get 'hit'

FC has feelings of revenge

Release the vengeance with anger expression in a socially appropriate way.

Drop the anger and move on = forgive the other person for the 'hit'.

However getting back onto the topic. There are people who don't want to accept that they can have angry and violent thoughts. Whether that be for religious reasons or just because it plain frightens them. Everyone has angry thoughts and feelings which is normal. There is a very big difference between a thought and acting on that thought. The vast majority in our society can keep the two separate. Those who don't, end up in trouble with the law sooner or later.



The second observation at workshops on anger over the years happens when one gets to the topic of expressing anger. My position is that one seeks to express feelings including anger in socially acceptable ways and then one gets over the feeling. There are others who disagree with this and sometimes very strongly. I have had people walk out of a workshop because of what I am saying. One can be sure that there will be active debate for the other solution.

The other solution is in essence to think away your feelings. That is, one does not express them in a cathartic way. If one feels angry they think about why they are angry and what can they do to end the anger. Such as logically talking to the person who may have offended you and a whole other array of things that can be done. The anger gets intellectualised and that does reduce the emotion. But I would say it only does that in the short term. Of course for the person who is frightened by their own or others anger this is a very good solution. But one thing is for sure people seem to get quite angry about whether it is OK to express one's anger.

Sweet, sweet revenge

I was speaking with someone the other day. Her ex of two years had recently gotten married and she was just furious about how he now had a life and she didn't, none of which was actually true by the way. She was very clear in that her hurt Child wanted him to suffer and for him to hurt. She was emphatic about how she wanted him to suffer. Why? Because she perceived him to have 'abandoned' her, again none of which was true. I had not come across such a blatant example of pure undiluted revenge in a long time. I always find it a delight to see such pure expressions of such primal human emotions.



What is revenge

I have looked through various references and so forth and find there is not much agreement on what is revenge and vengeance so I will have to just state how I am going to use the terms.

From Collins Cobuild dictionary

Revenge = is something that you do to hurt or punish someone who has hurt or harmed you, that gives you a great deal of satisfaction. So revenge is an action or a behaviour

Vengeance = If you are vengeful, you feel a great desire for revenge. So

vengeance is a feeling and a feeling that sometimes can lead to you acting with revenge

Children and the Child ego state can operate as follows - "When you hurt me I hurt you". This seems a natural part of human nature or a normal human reaction. So what is the feeling called. From the above vengeance is the feeling that goes along with this. So the child in the playground at school who gets taunted by another student feels vengeance - "you hurt me, so I feel like I want to hurt you." This is very much an 'eye for an eye' type of thinking and action.

One could say that fundamentalist type of thinking comes from this primal urge of human nature. Using the law (in western societies) as a means to deal with someone who has assaulted another is much less of this type of thinking. It does not allow for the victim of the assault to get the expression of the revenge in its pure form.



Mud wrestling. Not all conflict is because of revenge.

Human nature

As I mentioned before vengeful feelings are it would seem a normal human feeling. The desire for revenge is a natural human thing. One could even say that it has an evolutionary or survival of the species basis.

If someone attacks your group and kills some of its members then the first reaction is to defend self to stop the killing. The attackers then retreat. If one then feels vengeance and has a desire for revenge then that provides the motivation to go and attack those who attacked you. If done then that will weaken the opposition and thus make them less able to attack in the future. Without feelings of vengeance your group would be much less likely to attack the other group and thus you would be more likely to be attacked in the future. If Charles Darwin was right then all those people who do not have vengeful feelings would eventually have been killed and those with vengeful feelings would tend to survive more.



Lebanon. In some places revenge just seems to go on for ever.

Justice

Listening to talk back radio one hears statements like, "I don't want revenge I want justice". That of course makes the statements sound much more 'nice' and acceptable. So what is the difference between justice and revenge.

From Collins Cobuild dictionary

Justice = punishment that someone gets for doing something bad, especially when this is regarded as being fully deserved.

So in my mind, it seems that justice is a more reasoned response to an act, than is revenge. Revenge is high Child ego state and is based more on emotion. Justice takes into account the emotions but allows more Adult ego state to be involved. Hence we end up with the law which is a much more reasoned Adult way of getting revenge or an eye for an eye.

So what now

Some time ago I saw a documentary about a man in the USA. He had been sentenced to death for killing a girl. He was endeavouring to get his sentence commuted to life imprisonment. In doing so he was allowed to talk with the surviving relatives of this girl to try and get them to make a request that the prison officials let him live. The show was about him talking with these relatives.

One of the things he said was, "Seeing me die by lethal injection is not going to make you feel better". This was completely the wrong thing to say as it only got them more angry. The problem is that he is right or at least partly right and perhaps this is why the relatives responded so angrily in that at one level they also knew he was right.

This man hurt the girls relatives. They then feel anger and vengeance. They 'get him executed' by requesting it in court and then some of them are there to witness the execution. So once one has seen the execution what then? There may be a feeling of satisfaction at the time of seeing him die because revenge or justice has been achieved. The problem is, what happens with the anger and hatred that is also in the girls relatives. The act of revenge will not make those go away. And this is where the man was right, in that it wont make them feel better in the longer term.



Suffering the pain of trying to turn back the clock. Some things are really hard to do. Letting go of your anger can be one of those. Sometimes life is just a

bitch. Very unfair things happen to us from time to time. But life just rolls on relentlessly and if it is not accepted it can cause us a lot of pain and send us to an early grave.

To stop feeling the anger and hatred one has to do other things than just witness the act of revenge/justice. Those feelings have to be dropped for one to get on with life. If not done then the person will take those feelings to their grave and of course that will be an early grave.

To drop the anger some people see as letting him off. They can sometimes think,

"My feeling of anger, means I have not forgotten her and means I won't give up seeking justice for her death".

To drop the anger one has to just accept that sometimes, "Life isn't fair". Sometimes unfair things happen to people and the girl's death was one of those things. Some people have trouble accepting this because it can be seen to trivialise her murder, as just something that was unfair.

Also if you do manage to drop the anger then you start to forget about her murder and it slowly fades away in the memory. Some people hang onto the anger because it gives them some sort of a feeling of connection with the girl.

"I must not forget as it is a disservice to her. The least I can do is remember her and keep my feelings (anger)".

IN SUMMARY

1. Some one hurts you
2. You feel vengeance (and anger)
3. You hit back with revenge
4. There is a feeling of satisfaction with that act of revenge
5. The anger remains
6. The anger is expressed
7. If you don't drop the anger, let it go, forget about it, think 'life is not fair', etc then the anger remains in you. If this happens then you end up hurting yourself.
8. If you forget about (let go of) the injustice or hurt that was done to you then the anger subsides and you don't carry it around, having it slowly killing you. To do this you must forgive and forget at least in part, the injustice that was done to you. The more those relatives of the girl forgive and forget the murderer the better they will be in the longer term. Not an easy thing to do I think I can safely say.