



Beyond Blame

Experimenting
with Alternative
Strategies

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Experimenting with Alternative Strategies

It is time to put what you understand about others, and most importantly about yourself, into action. You recognize the ways that certain people get under your skin, the means by which they attempt to push your buttons. Your unresolved issues from the past are now clearly articulated, or at least not controlling you to the extent that you cannot think clearly or act decisively. Your discomfort has become a helpful ally that has only increased your resolve to act differently in the future. You are willing to accept responsibility for your conflicts, without blaming yourself or anyone else. You are ready to change patterns in your relationships that have become as enduring as any of your most stable characteristics.

There is no longer any sense questioning *whether* you will do something—the only question is exactly *what* will you do? What course of action might you take that is likely to produce outcomes different from those that you have yet experienced? What alternative strategies are at your disposal that will allow you to move beyond blame and into the realm of more constructive interpersonal functioning? How might you react differently, both internally and externally, to the conflicted situations that challenge you the most?

The Alternatives Available to You

“Alternative” means doing something other than what you are doing now. We have already covered a series of action strategies that are part of each previous stage in the process. At this point in the program the emphasis is on helping you break repetitive self-defeating patterns and put into action your resolve and commitment to act differently.

When you are confronted with conflict in relationships, you can choose either (or both) of two courses of action. In the first, you can decide to act differently. This means avoiding the tendency to become defensive or argumentative, to escalate conflicts through your own stubborn determination to “win” a dispute at all costs. The second set of alternatives available to you involves strategies that take place inside of you rather than things you say and do in relating to others. Of course, the course of action most likely to produce significant changes is one that combines the best of both worlds: you not only are able to respond differently on the outside when faced with conflicts, but you also are able to react more constructively internally.

A few words of warning about the suggestions that are to be presented: the use of the word *experimenting* in the title of this chapter was quite intentional. Any new skill or way of relating to yourself or others that you add to your personal repertoire is going to seem awkward at first. You may not feel very comfortable or competent applying the strategies that are discussed. This

is only natural. The first time you tried to ride a bike, drive a car, play tennis, ski down a slope, use a computer, or read an intellectually challenging book, it is likely that you struggled quite a bit. You felt frustrated and discouraged. You told yourself that you could not do it, or that it was not worth the effort. If you stuck with it, however, and continued to experiment with alternative strategies until you found the right combination that worked for you, you eventually did reach a point where you appeared fluid and comfortable with what you were doing. The same is true for the tasks that you are about to undertake.

In your efforts to experiment with alternative ways of dealing with conflict, you may not experience much success at first. You may even notice some slight deterioration in the beginning. I mention this not to discourage you but rather to help you be realistic about the magnitude of the task that is before you. You are attempting to do no less than change the lifelong patterns with which you relate to others and yourself; I am not certain there is anything in life that is more difficult. That is why so many people drop out of self-improvement programs and why so many self-help books gather dust on your shelves. When it comes right down to it, changing a significant part of you, especially behavior that is entrenched and enduring, takes tremendous resolve, commitment, and determination. It also takes a willingness to experiment until you can find a strategy, uniquely your own, that works for you.

Make a List and Check It Twice

You will find that the greatest problem is not that there is a scarcity of options available to you in your efforts to alter conflicted relationships; the problem is that there are too many. Imagine, for example, that you are confronted with a situation in which someone is accusing you of doing something that he or she believes was highly inappropriate. You immediately have flashbacks to other times in your life when you were unfairly charged with some transgression. You are thus reacting not only to the present accusation but to the sum total of all such unfair assessments. Fortunately, you realize this.

While ordinarily you might react in a defensive manner, both externally—arguing with the person, trying to convince him or her of the superiority of your position—and internally—desperately trying to place blame elsewhere—this time you decide to apply the process you have learned previously and to experiment with some alternatives.

The method described in this book stresses internal versus external focus of responsibility, integrating the past with the present, acknowledging rather than avoiding pain, and moving beyond blame by concentrating on what is within your power to control. Implicit in this plan is a systematic effort to review internally what you have been doing, noting the typical results and trying something a bit different, some action that is not part of your normal repertoire.

Since you have had a lifetime of practice doing the same things over and over, usually without success, you may have no idea what will work in this situation, but you should have a pretty good idea of what will not work. In your efforts to figure out your best course of action, you first decide to eliminate what you have already tried that has not proven helpful. That way you know what *not* to do anymore, even if you are unclear about what you can do instead.

For example, with regard to the most conflicted relationship in your life right now (or in the recent past), make a list in your head (or better yet, jot notes down on paper) of the characteristic ways that you respond in these situations. Such a catalogue of ineffective strategies for one woman, Elena, looks something like this:

1. *Agree with his assessment and hope this will get him off my case.* “This almost never works since then he interprets that I am a pushover who agrees that he is right and I am wrong. Next time he will just push me harder.”
2. *Fight back as hard as I can until he realizes that he can’t intimidate me.* “This just makes him even more determined to not back down. One of us may win this particular skirmish, but it will be at the expense of lingering resentments.”
3. *Ignore him. Just walk away from the situation.* “He will just bide his time and ambush me later. By then he will have prepared an even more forceful set of arguments to bolster his attacks.”

4. *Get somebody else to mediate the dispute between us.* “He would then feel betrayed that I ‘tattled’ on him by reporting the incident to someone else. He would put on a good show for the sake of the other person’s good opinion of him, but he would make me pay later.”
5. *Write off the relationship as unsalvageable.* “That has been my most frequent choice in the past when I have been confronted with similar situations. Yet I now realize that the problem is not so much him as it is an interpersonal problem between us. Whenever I have run away from these conflicts before, I have just ended up getting myself in the same mess with someone else.”

At this point, you still would not have much of an idea about how to handle such a situation more effectively than you have in the past. You do, however, know what doesn’t work. Experience tells you that what you have been doing has not been all that helpful. Rather than repeating those strategies, you might now consider experimenting with something else, *anything* other than what you have already been doing.

Some Experimental Alternatives

After working her way through the various steps that have been described in this book thus far—especially concentrating on discovering what specific provocations set her off, understanding how they are reenactments of unresolved issues, and realizing the senseless ways she had been repeating the

same mistakes over and over—Elena mobilized her commitment to act differently by resolving to be more experimental, innovative, unpredictable, and creative in her efforts.

Side by side with the unsuccessful strategies she had already tried, Elena created some alternative actions. As is so important in any creative endeavor, she resisted the impulse to censor or criticize herself. No matter how bizarre, radical, or apparently stupid the idea, Elena considered it anyway. She reasoned that she could hardly do any worse than she already was doing. That is the beauty of the freedom you can feel to be more experimental and creative in your responses to conflict. What do you have to lose? What can happen that hasn't occurred already? What do you imagine will happen? That you will fail? So? Better to mess up trying something new, something that conceivably might work, than to continue doing something you already know is fruitless.

Revisiting her list of things she had tried unsuccessfully, Elena jotted down on the next page a collection of alternative courses of action she might try. She was not altogether certain that any of her new ideas would work better than anything she had already tried, but she was fairly optimistic that a few of these options (or a combination thereof) would indeed turn the tables. Following is Elena's list of alternative strategies.

1. *When I look at him, see a clown.* "I've got to stop taking him so seriously. If I could just see the folly in this conflict, I would not

react so intensely to the struggle. I will imagine him in a clown suit and try not to laugh.”

2. *Imitate him.* “I will mirror everything he does. Whatever he says, I will repeat essentially the same things. If he argues with me, he will just be arguing with himself. That way I won’t have to take this so seriously.”
3. *Push my buttons before he does.* “Since what gets to me the most is when he starts to bring up stuff from the past (just like my parents used to do), I will introduce my previous mistakes before he can throw them in my face. We can have a contest to see who can remember the most instances.”
4. *Order him to do what he is already doing.* “If I tell him to do something that he is going to do anyway, he will either do it (but at least I had some say in the matter) or not do it (and then I will feel more in control).”
5. *Wallow in the pain.* “Maybe I need to feel humiliated, degraded, abused enough so that I just won’t take it anymore. Rather than cutting myself off from the discomfort, I can immerse myself in it. That should break something loose.”
6. *Ask myself, what are the secondary gains?* “We are *both* getting something out of this conflict. If not, we would stop. I can recite my list of payoffs like a chant to myself, repeating them over and over until they sink in.

- I like blaming him so I don’t have to be responsible.

- I enjoy the passion that comes when the sparks fly between us.
- I need to punish myself for things I have done that I am ashamed of.
- As long as I am focused on our conflict I don't have to deal with other aspects of my life that I am avoiding.
- I get a lot of mileage out of feeling like a victim."

7. *Pretend he's not there.* "I'll just do whatever I want and act like he is invisible. It will be a game I can play. On the outside, I will appear the same to him; on the inside, I will pretend I am alone."

8. *Live with it.* "I can tell myself this really isn't so bad. What is *really* bad is letting this continue and feeling helpless. But this is my choice for now. That's the way it is. I may not like it, but until I am willing to do something else, there is no sense in complaining."

The specifics of Elena's case are less important than the method employed. Once you have attained a degree of clarity and resolve, you will also be able to develop such a list. If the first three, seven, or forty-one things don't work, no problem. There is an endless list of options, limited only by your own imagination and patience.

The Strategy of Managing Conflict

The principles implicit in Elena's list of experimental alternatives are extensions of the method presented in this book. If you wish to extrapolate from this example to your own situation, you will want to consider some of the following guidelines.

1. Be Realistic

Develop a strategy that is within your capability to execute. Michelle, for example, had grandiose plans to teach her boss a lesson, perhaps even get him demoted for his arrogant disregard for employee welfare while pursuing his own goals. She was initially frustrated in her efforts, escalating the conflict to her own detriment, because it was not realistically within her power to make her objective happen. She adjusted her goal to a more modest wish to stop allowing her supervisor to abuse her. This narrower objective was well within her means to achieve.

2. Stay Focused on Your Objectives

Don't let yourself become distracted by things that are not important. Clearly define what it is that you want, and then go after it.

Dan has a competitor at work who has been trying to undermine him in hopes that he will be passed over for promotion. Every time Dan has allowed his attention to be drawn away from his ultimate goals and has engaged his

adversary in direct confrontation, they both have ended up looking foolish and unprofessional. By measuring each subsequent action in terms of its likelihood of increasing or decreasing his probability of promotion, Dan has been able to thoughtfully ignore, parry or retaliate against any initiative without losing sight of his objective.

3. Do the Unexpected

Never underestimate the value of surprise. When you are predictable, you may easily be defeated. This is true on any battlefield.

Marilyn felt stymied in her attempts to get her mother to stop meddling in her life. She tried pleading, to no avail. Threats, punitive responses, and ignoring her were equally ineffective. Like so many people locked into dysfunctional cycles of conflict, Marilyn kept trying the same things over and over.

Applying the strategy used by Elena in the example mentioned earlier in this chapter, Marilyn also decided to be unpredictable in her responses. Instead of resisting her mother's suggestions, she experimented with compliance. Instead of arguing, she decided to agree with everything her mother said.

Although this particular tactic did not work any better than others she had tried, Marilyn learned from this encounter that even when she tries something new that does not work, at least she is not repeating the same useless strategies

that she *knows* are ineffective. She now feels more free to try a number of creative ways to deal with her mother in the future. Even though her mother continues to meddle, Marilyn feels less perturbed by the circumstances since she *gave herself* more options for how to respond.

4. Take What You Can Get

Rather than lamenting about what you are not able to accomplish, concentrate instead on what is within the realm of possibility.

Patrick had been negotiating with his son for some time, trying to get him to agree to some equitable arrangement such that if he dropped out of college for a year, then he would have to support himself during the interim. Their relationship, which previously had been quite good, had deteriorated to the point where they could barely speak to one another in a civil manner.

It could well be conceived that this was a necessary conflict between them, one that would launch the young man into the world as a more independent and self-sufficient person. For the present, however, Patrick just wanted a way out of his predicament without compromising the important principle of accepting responsibility for one's decisions.

During one point in their heated discussions, the son altered his position. He seemed most adamant about controlling his own destiny but less concerned

with the specifics of any contract between his father and him.

“You mean as long as you can take next semester off with no interference from me, you are willing to abide by terms we would agree on?,” Patrick asked tentatively.

Once they reached that breakthrough, Patrick was able to build into their contract the resolution of a number of other disputed issues that his son was readily willing to settle. Although both of them ended up getting what they wanted, Patrick felt especially good about making progress on a number of fronts during that critical moment of opportunity.

5. Create as Many Options for Yourself as You Can

By choosing a strategy that permits you the flexibility of moving in several different directions, toward different objectives that are equally desirable, you ensure that you will get at least some of the concessions you want.

Kara felt taken advantage of by her sister Krystal after the death of their father. Still struggling with her own grief, she was also saddled with all of the responsibility for taking care of their invalid mother, making funeral arrangements, and settling the estate. The only thing that Krystal seemed to care about was the amount of her inheritance.

Kara discovered that by trying to do everything herself, she was falling behind in her own personal and professional responsibilities. It was clear she had to have some help, but she had yet to find a way to recruit Krystal's assistance in even the most minimal way.

Applying the tactic of multiple options, Kara was able to tether a number of tasks to monetary compensation by the estate. Whether Krystal helped as executrix, nurse, or financial manager now seemed less important since Kara would receive payment for her efforts. Once she began her new ploy, sure enough Krystal wanted to become involved in the chores as a way to usurp her sister. Kara hid her delight with the obligatory protest, eventually succumbing to pressure that she allow Krystal to help out.

6. Don't Argue with Someone Who Is Looking for a Fight

In other words, there is no sense in launching an initiative when another person is ready, willing, and able to repel it.

The fence that separates Myron from his neighbor is more psychological than an actual physical barrier. Unfortunately, Myron and his neighbor have been feuding for years, and Myron has been on the losing end of their exchanges. This is not only because the neighbor is the one with the dogs who bark all night but also because he does not appear to be the least bit perturbed by their conflict. On the contrary, he seems to savor the war.

The most serious mistake Myron made was to escalate their feud to the point where the neighbor engaged in deliberate acts of annoyance rather than just negligence. Myron became terribly predictable in his responses—yelling across the fence to show his displeasure or squirting the dogs with a hose. In both cases, the neighbor filed a police report for harassment.

Partly out of exasperation because he could think of nothing else to do, Myron allowed things to cool down. Even though his sleep continued to be disturbed by the barking dogs, he turned on a noise suppressor and ignored the disturbance as best he could.

Within this relatively calm climate, he visited other neighbors who were within earshot of the dogs and organized them into a posse to approach his adversary. With this coalition showing a firm alliance, the neighbor agreed to take steps to curb the problem.

Each of these principles applies to experimental *interpersonal* strategies that break the chains of your usual way of functioning in conflict situations. Although most conflicts involve parties who are sincerely interested in resolving their differences, these concepts will serve you well with opponents who may refuse to negotiate and are only interested in domination.

Some Things You Can Do Internally

In an earlier section I asked you to imagine a situation in which you have been unfairly accused of doing something that caused a major conflict. No matter how you have tried to rectify the situation, you feel impotent and misunderstood. You have created a list of things you have tried and are quite amazed at the sheer number and variety of strategies you have employed. You notice, however, that most of them have involved interpersonal methods in which you have tried to alter someone else's behavior. Such approaches generally don't work.

In reviewing his list and checking it twice, Arthur determined that it did not seem to matter very much what he said or did with his brother; they would still end up in a serious misunderstanding. He tried being compliant, being assertive, showing first more trust and then more power—whatever he tried ended in the same result. It was clear to Arthur that the solution to this problem would not come through any negotiation with his brother. The key for him was to give himself whatever comfort he could internally so that he would no longer be so disturbed by their interactions.

Since Arthur was unwilling to cut off all communication with his brother (in spite of their conflicts, he still loved him), he had to discover a way that he could spend time with him without suffering indignities. He experimented with a number of internal strategies until he found the right combination.

1. Redefine What You Are Experiencing

It was Arthur's interpretation of his brother's behavior that led him to conclude that he was being humiliated, taken advantage of, or ridiculed. Since he could not change the way his brother acted toward him, he decided to alter his perception of that experience. This task was made considerably easier by the insights he had developed into the source of their unremitting tension—their competition as children and what each represented to the other. These realizations made it easier for him to be more forgiving of what his brother was doing and why. This did not mean that he was excusing his brother's conduct—just that he now understood what was behind it. There was no longer any reason for him to assign blame.

Arthur decided to redefine what was taking place between them as a normal form of sibling rivalry. Whether that was an accurate interpretation of the situation was beside the point. Such a reconception allowed him to not take the conflict so personally, as if this were something being done to him. Instead, he found it much more helpful to think about what was happening as similar to their wrestling matches when they were young. Conflict was the way they related to one another, in much the same way that some people show affection by nagging or arguing with each other. Arthur certainly did not like the texture and tone of their relationship and the limited, hostile ways they dealt with each other, but before he could possibly do anything about that he first had to center

himself such that he was not unduly disturbed by their encounters.

Much to his surprise, redefining their struggles as a form of brotherly rivalry helped Arthur refrain from overreaching in subsequent interactions. Sure enough, this change in his attitude de-escalated the tension between the brothers to the point where they settled into a less emotionally charged style of communication. Of course, his brother attributed this change to Arthur being less stubborn. Rather than igniting a new argument about who was at fault, Arthur showed considerable restraint and graciousness by not taking up the challenge and instead expressing that whatever was the cause of the changes, he was grateful that they could now enjoy each other's company. The key to this change in external interpersonal response was lodged in the internal strategy to redefine the problem.

2. Purge It and Let It Go

Tell somebody—a friend, a partner, a therapist—what is bothering you and then drop the subject. When you cannot reason with someone, when you are not able to change the pattern of your conflicted interactions, then at least minimize the effects of the struggle.

Imagine yourself doing this right now. Picture yourself unloading all your pent-up feelings, your indignation and frustration, toward a particular person. I am certain this is not a new experience; you may have already spent a

considerable amount of time doing just that—telling select others about the ways you feel you have been mistreated by someone. This time, however, after you have expressed all the emotional intensity inside you, imagine these feelings draining away. Let them flow out of you so that you feel your load lightened. Resolve to stop torturing yourself by reliving the conflicts over and over.

There are two ways that you experience misery as an effect of conflict. The first involves the hurtful things people say and do. Second, and just as potentially lethal, is what you say and do to yourself before, during, and after the encounter. If you are unduly hard on yourself and self-critical, if you are obsessed with blame and guilt, if you replay over and over in your mind all the injustices you have suffered, then you are hurting yourself as surely as if you had cut yourself with a knife.

A conflict can occur once in your life, or you can live it over and over again a thousand times. You can drive yourself to distraction by nursing your resentments, rubbing salt in the wounds, savoring the victim role in which you have placed yourself. You can keep yourself up all night by playing back arguments, browbeating yourself for not saying all the things you wish you had said. You can distract yourself all day as well, reliving the worst scenarios you have experienced. This goes well beyond trying to learn from the encounter, trying to figure out what you could do differently next time. Through such self-

inflicted misery you punish yourself for what you believe was a less than stellar performance. You make yourself pay for losing your cool or acting spinelessly. Now that you have invited somebody to move into your head, you are allowing him or her to live there rent free.

You take this critical person into your bed at night. You invite him or her to join you on the ride to work. You take him or her into the shower. Wherever you go, whatever you are doing, the conflict remains alive in your indignation.

You cannot do a single thing about what has already happened, but you can decide how much you want to let the incident control you now. How long do you want to suffer? How much do you want to stew over the matter? When you have decided that you have had enough, what can you do to let the negative feelings go? Who can you talk to? What do you need to do in order to stop torturing yourself by reliving the conflict over and over?

Under the right circumstances, catharsis does work. Tell somebody what is bothering you. Dump your troubles out on the floor. Let go of whatever happened. Put the past behind you.

3. Rehearse Through Imagery

Much as you did in the previous chapter, in which you imagined the conflict situation you fear the most, try to visualize yourself in the predicament.

Note how you appear—your body language (placating or rigid or fierce). Hear how you sound—your voice tone, pitch, and modulation. See how you handle the situation.

Now, in your mind, alter this image of yourself in such a way that you appear calm, in control, no longer distracted by unresolved issues from the past. You are now utterly composed, fluent and convincing in your point of view, yet no longer threatened or made defensive by what the other person is saying or doing. Quietly, dispassionately, you attend to what is going on, noting what seems to be working and what is not. Without a vested interest in a particular strategy, you find you are able to change direction in midair just like a basketball player outmaneuvering an opponent with sleight of hand, a head fake, or a forceful dunk. (Create your own metaphor if you are not a basketball fan.)

When the exchange is over, even without a resolution and with continued animosity, observe how you are able to shrug it off readily. Get inside your head and listen to how this image of a more fully functioning you processes the experience. There is no blame directed toward you or the other person, no remorse or guilt, no second guessing about what you should have done. Instead there is a deliberate processing of the experience and then a resolve to try some different things next time. Finally, watch yourself put the whole incident aside and move on to something else, with few lingering side effects.

4. Become More Reflective

Writing in a journal is an ideal way in which to help yourself make sense of your behavior, analyze recurrent themes and patterns, experiment with new ways to process your experiences. When you spend structured time involved in self-analytical endeavors, you become more reflective about what you do, why you did it, and what you could do instead.

This book began as a journal writing activity for me, trying to figure out why I have had trouble with the same kinds of people in similar positions throughout my life. Perhaps, like you, I am sick of wasting my time and energy feeling consumed by the aftereffects of conflict. Writing down my thoughts and feelings and recording the dialogues that have taken place help me keep things in perspective. Since I have been keeping a journal since I was seventeen I have the added luxury of being able to review patterns throughout my life. I noticed the same issues cropping up again and again—my craving for approval from older men, my competitive drive to overcome core feelings of inadequacy, my vulnerability to being hurt because I am too trusting—these are but a few of the recurring themes. By writing about them and subsequently reviewing what I was experiencing, I am better positioned to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Writing in a journal affords you the opportunity to problem solve, to recollect ideas you want to access, and to rehearse what you want to say both to yourself and to others. Sometimes this helps you let the feelings go so you don't

have to tell the other person, who may not be receptive to hearing you; at other times you are able to prepare more carefully for what you want to do and how you want to do it.

5. Stop Taking This Stuff So Seriously

It may feel to you as if your conflicts are life-and-death struggles, but in the grand scheme of things, one hundred years from now who will remember or care about whatever you are struggling with in your life right now?

Humor serves us well by introducing some balanced perspective into the picture. For example, in a gathering of associates two colleagues continuously went for each other's throats, creating tension and morbidity among the whole group. It took the intervention of a third party to break this pattern: he parodied what was going on in such an accurate and hilarious way that even the combatants broke into grins. This diffusion of negative energy takes place when you are able to laugh at yourself and your tendency to greatly exaggerate the significance of minor skirmishes.

The methods suggested here involve internal strategies to help you cope with conflict situations. Yet there is only so much you can do within yourself, especially considering the interactive nature of conflict. The insights you have developed, the patterns you have attempted to understand and work through, have value when they can help you act differently in your style of

communication.

Experimenting with Ways to Counteract the Forceful Demands of Others

The process we have been working with is likely to be difficult to apply, concentrating as it does on what you do internally to counteract blame, in situations in which you must deal with forceful or manipulative individuals. Despite your attempts to identify your own buttons that are being pushed, work through conflicts from the past, commit yourself to act differently, follow through on a specific plan, you still may encounter some resistance from others. This section explores strategies for situations in which people are determined to get their way at your expense and you must resort to more creative efforts to counteract their attempts.

Dealing with Unreasonable Demands

There are times when people ask you to do things that they well know are beyond what you are willing to do. They ask anyway, as a test of your commitment or loyalty or to prove their potency in enlisting compliance to their demands.

“I don’t mean to intrude like this, but I was wondering if you could help me. You said that you would do most anything, and I know this is a lot to ask, but...”

Say no and you will face an escalating series of more forceful strategies to gain your cooperation. Say yes and you will temporarily appease this person's appetite, but at the expense of your own needs. You will feel resentful or abused—that is, if your self-esteem is high enough for you to realize you deserve to be treated differently. If this is not the case, you will swallow your indignation and do what is demanded, hoping you will not be bothered again for a while. But, of course, you will because you just taught this person that although you may not like it and you will make some noise about it, if a person works on you long enough you will accede to their demands. Your reluctance makes the victory even more enjoyable for people who manipulate others in this way. Not only do they get what they originally asked for, but they also have the satisfaction of knowing they got you to do something that you did not want to do. Imagine how powerful that must feel to such people.

In such instances, and in the presence of the other styles of manipulation discussed here, it is important to follow the dictum of professionals who work with these types of people for a living: *In response to unreasonable demands, set reasonable limits—and stick with them no matter what.*

Defusing the Threat of Self-destructive Acts

Some people are willing to go to almost any length to exert an illusion of control. Pain and suffering do not have the same meaning for them that they do

for others, or they may have a tolerance for misery that is beyond mortal thresholds.

“If you won’t let me go to the game, I will just end up staying at home doing nothing. I won’t get any work done under these circumstances, when you have aggravated me so much already.”

This is not an idle threat. We know that some people are willing to forgo things they really want in favor of the greater pleasure of manipulating someone else into getting upset. Children will flunk exams, quit jobs, stay home from the prom just to demonstrate that they will not be controlled. Spouses will walk away from marriages just to prove that they will not give in. Businesses suffer financial losses because workers deliberately lower their productivity in order to punish their employers.

Threatening to do something to hurt oneself is actually quite an effective manipulative strategy. Two friends agreed to pool their efforts in an attempt to obtain tickets to a playoff game. Because of their cooperation and division of labor they were successful in their goal, but there the goodwill ended. A conflict developed over who got tickets to which game. Rather than working through the stalemate to the satisfaction of both people, admittedly a time-consuming and frustrating struggle, one of the friends threatened that he would just sell the tickets, or better yet give them away, and neither of them would go. To prove he

was serious, he stopped the next passerby and asked her if she wanted some tickets to the playoffs—cheap.

Manipulative people continue to engage in manipulative behavior because it works for them. There is nothing more fearsome than an army that is prepared to fight without the possibility of survival just to keep others from reaching their goals. Most of us not only want to win, but we want to come out of the interaction better off than we were before we started. Since people who threaten to hurt themselves just to get to you do not operate by fair rules, there is no way to win in an exchange with them—they will shoot at you, and if that does not work they will shoot themselves in the foot and blame you for the wound.

The best way to get somebody to stop doing something is to make it less fun or profitable for them to continue. Since the manipulative ploy is based on eliciting a particular reaction in another, it is important that these people not be allowed to enjoy the benefits they think they have earned. Essentially this means not challenging threats directly, but defusing them dispassionately.

Applying this technique to the child who threatens to sabotage his schoolwork if he is not allowed to go to a game, the parents would respond as follows:

“Gee, that would be unfortunate if you allowed your aggravation and

disappointment to get the best of you. And we would certainly be sorry to see your schoolwork suffer as a result. We respect your decision to handle this matter the way you think is best. Of course, if your grades do suffer, we will assume you are telling us that you need help. Maybe a tutor could be scheduled every Saturday night until you feel you have things more under control.”

Saying No to Guilt

It is a hallmark of the seasoned manipulator to keep trying different strategies until one is found that really works. A little girl who first threatened to eat a caterpillar if her mother did not buy her a book she wanted tried another tack: “Oh, it’s all right, Mom. I know we need to spend our money on really important things like purses and stuff.” She got the book.

Guilt works best between children and parents—in either direction. This is because in both roles there is a lingering feeling that we could and should have done more for the other person. My son does not finish his chores in the yard. I casually but conspicuously head outside to complete the work. He is watching television and does not even notice. I come in for something I forgot, and finally he realizes what I am up to. “Oh, Dad, I’ll take care of that,” he says, and rises to help. “No, it’s okay,” I reply stoically. “I’ll take care of it since you are too busy.” He is a quick study and not at all shy about turning the tables. “Dad, would you like to play catch with me since you’re hardly ever home on the

weekends with all the traveling you have been doing lately?"

It is a funny thing about guilt that even when one is aware of what the other person is doing, there is enough truth embedded in the accusation to stoke up support for the request. All the while we feel resentful of the attempt to manipulate us, we still go along with the program, baffled as to how it all happened.

Somebody who is very good at influencing people to do things they are reluctant to do has a highly developed sensitivity to vulnerability in others. I know this because that is essentially what therapists do—guide (and sometimes cajole) people into doing things they believe are good for them. Guilt preys on all the unfinished business of your life, wherever you still feel the need to rectify past mistakes.

To immunize yourself against attempts by others to “guilt” you into doing things you do not want to do, you must first accept your own fallibility. Dinah knows she is not a perfect mother. Her chief struggle during the past decade of her life has been coming to terms with some of the misguided decisions she has made regarding her daughters. If she could do things over again, there are a hundred ways she would act differently— chiefly, she would be more consistent, and she would listen more to what her daughters have to say.

It is acknowledged between mother and daughters that serious mistakes

were made. Dinah apologized to her daughters as the first step in what she believed would lead to forgiveness and adult friendships. Instead, this admission provided the daughters with leverage to insert a dagger and twist whenever they wanted money or a favor.

The manipulation stopped only after Dinah was able to accept fully her own imperfections. So she made some mistakes. Had she known then what she knows now, she would have done things differently. But she did the best she could with what she knew at the time. She can accept that now. If her daughters cannot, that is their problem. She will no longer be emotionally blackmailed into buying their support.

A Few Reminders

There are many unscrupulous individuals in the world who are willing to resort to any measure of deceit in order to sell their wares, promote their ideas, or recruit followers. They rise to the top of their fields because they are willing to do more than anyone else to get what they want. Lying? Cheating? Stealing? Deceiving? No problem. The end justifies the means. The end they are looking for is one in which they are on top and everyone else is on the bottom.

What is one to do with someone who is obsessed with power and control? *Stay out of his or her way.* When that is not possible (as often it is not), when you are not in a position to extricate yourself from the relationship and avoid future

conflicts, follow these rules.

1. Remind yourself that it is not intelligent to trust that this person will do as he or she says.
2. Do not set yourself up for betrayal. Since the manipulative person is predictable in attempts to be manipulative (by definition), do not be surprised or indignant when it inevitably happens. Plan accordingly.
3. Refuse to be baited. Once you realize what is happening, take a step back so that you do not escalate the conflict.
4. Talk to yourself in such a way that you stop blaming the other person for doing what he or she does best. Stop blaming yourself for mistakes you have made in the past. You can't do anything about the choices you have already made or the actions you have already taken.

Some people do not operate under the same rules as you and are willing to resort to tactics that you find offensive. This does not necessarily make them bad or wrong or demented. Moving beyond blame means no longer focusing on the other person's behavior. It involves taking inventory of your options, letting go of things in the past that are no longer within your control, and teaching other people how to treat you differently. Perhaps, as discussed in Chapter Seven, in time you will even come to see conflict as potentially useful in teaching you things you could never learn any other way.

About the Author

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Teacher as Counselor (1993, with Ellen Kottler)

Advanced Group Leadership (1993)

On Being a Teacher (1993, with Stan Zehm)

[Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients](#) (1992)

Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

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Private Moments, Secret Selves:

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Ethical and Legal Issues in Counseling and Psychotherapy (1985, 2nd ed., with William Van Hoose)

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Mouthing Off: A Study of Oral Behavior, Its Causes and Treatments (1981)

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