

PAIN:

How much can you take?

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As a psychologist, my job is to try to make sense of this complex thing we call human behavior. As a college instructor I teach my students that one way to understand behavior is to think about our brain as having two major functions: (1) to reduce pain and (2) to make sense of the world around it. This article is about the former.

Of course we don't like—or rather our brain doesn't like—events in our life which are: painful, difficult, uncomfortable, boring, excruciating, agonizing, tedious and so on unless we can come up with a *reason* to put up with the pain.

Think about it: if you are working on a tedious task, it's likely that you are tolerating the discomfort because you have one or more motives to get it done. For example, what about something like lifting weights? Here you are lifting—one (ugh)—two (ugh)—three (ugh)—and your brain says, "You can stop any time." However, despite the pain, you continue. Why? Because you want what weightlifting will do for you. So, you put up with the discomfort.

However, pain is not just due to physical factors. It can also be psychological. Think of the last time someone rejected you. Did it hurt? You bet. Or what about the pain from any number of negative emotions: jealousy, envy, hatred, sadness, guilt—you get the idea. Our brain feels so much better when the effect of these emotions begins to subside.

Now imagine how you would handle each of these scenarios:

- ◆ A man you know is standing in front of you sobbing, telling you his wife just died.
- ◆ You have an eleven-year-old niece whose mother just died, asking you, "What am I going to do without my mom?"
- ◆ A 30-year-old woman at work is telling you that her son died from suicide.
- ◆ Your next-door neighbor tells you that her brother was murdered last night.

My question is: How much of their pain can you handle? To gain an understanding of how this works I want you to choose one of the scenarios just mentioned. Go ahead, pick one. Now I want you to see yourself standing there looking at the person's face: their eyes, their forehead, their lips as they tell you their story of sadness. As the story is told, what do you see yourself doing? What do you say? As you read these words, do you find yourself skimming over the scenario I'm asking you to imagine? Did you truly imagine it? Can you slow down for a few seconds and actually try to *feel* what these moments of pain would feel like? Not easy, is it? It never is. Pain is tough. Watching someone in pain is difficult as well.

What do people often do when they can't handle the pain of another person? They resort to pain-reducing procedures such as defense mechanisms, clichés, and other escape methods. We humans have an array of techniques for reducing discomfort. Let's look at some.

USING A DEFENSE MECHANISM

Rationalization. This defense mechanism involves justifying an action by coming up with an excuse. In responding to the murder example above, you may find yourself with self-talk that goes something like, "I wonder what her brother did that caused him to be murdered?" Or "Maybe he was in the wrong place at the wrong time." At the moment this thought emerges, the level of your discomfort may subside, if only a little.

Emotional insulation. When you insulate something, you keep it inside. In using this mechanism, you withhold true empathy because it is too painful to feel even a little of the other person's pain.

USE A CLICHÉ

Clichés are expedient ways to dismiss a person's pain. Each has at its base the belief. "See? Things are not so bad." You've heard them all. Here are a few:

- ◆ It was God's will
- ◆ Everything happens for a reason
- ◆ Life goes on
- ◆ You're so strong.

CUT AND RUN

The pain-reducing technique comes in many forms, but they all share one goal: To end the interaction as soon as possible and leave the scene.

JUST LIKE YOU

In this one the goal is to demonstrate, "I know just how you feel—a similar thing happened to me."

- ◆ "Your wife died? My aunt died last year and my uncle has never been the same."
- ◆ "Your son shot himself? Yes, my niece's boyfriend died the same way. It's a shame what young people go through today."

Of course there is nothing wrong with saying these things. So, what's the big deal? The problem comes when you launch into your story (or someone else's) and *attempt to show how you know how they feel*. What to do in this situation? If you experienced an identical tragedy, share it and then quickly turn it back to them. For example, "My son took his life two years ago and we've been devastated ever since. Tell me how you and your family are doing."

Why do people use these methods of avoidance even though they know better? Our brain plays a trick on us that goes something like this: At the *exact* moment we use these pain-reducing methods, we get relief. That is, we receive immediate reinforcement; and, we know that reinforced behaviors are likely to repeat. So, to truly support a person the question you need to answer is: Can I not resort to any pain-reducing method? Can I *stay with the pain* as long as it takes? This is hard work—very hard.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Look again at the four scenarios mentioned earlier. Let's practice on how you would respond to each.

A man is sobbing, telling you his wife just died.

- First, let the man cry. You let him cry for as long as he needs to. Follow the rule: Let him cry until he's dry. Never say, "There, there, don't cry." Instead say:
- "This must be hard."
- "Tell me more."
- "You must have loved your wife very much."
- Tell me about her."

Your ten-year-old niece is asking you what is she going to do without her mom.

- You say, "This is so sad."
- "Your mother was such a good person."
- "I know you miss her so much."
- "I am here for you."
- "What questions do you have?"
- "What can I do to help you?"
- "What are some good memories you have of your mom?"
- "Let me tell you some stories of your mom."

Whatever you do with your niece, be honest. Not telling a child the truth now can cause more problems later.

A woman is telling you of her son's suicide. You say, "

- "What is (not was) his name?"
- "Who is helping you with this?"
- "Suicide is so difficult. How are you dealing with this?"
- "Some people feel anger and guilt. Are you feeling either of these?"
- "What are you doing to take care of yourself right now?"

Your neighbor's brother was murdered last night. You can say any or all of the following:

- "Oh, my God."
- "Tell me what happened." (Then, shut your mouth.)
- "Have they caught the person?"
- "Are you safe?"
- "A brother is so precious."
- "I'm so sorry. How are you coping with this?"
- "How are your parents coping with this?"
- "What is going to happen now?"
- "Is there something I can do to help you?"

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

In between these sentences you say little. You bite your lip. You shut your mouth. You permit silence—I call it awkward silence because it often does not feel like the right thing to do at the time—yet it is. When people who want to help are told to permit silence, they often respond, "Here I am wanting to help this person in any way I can and I am supposedly helping by saying nothing? Nothing?"

The answer is a resounding **Yes**. When a tragedy erupts in someone's life, you do not need to fill the airwaves with sound.

CAN YOU? WILL YOU?

So, I ask you again: Do you have what it takes to be the kind of person described here? Or, because you can't handle the pain, will you take the easy way out? People need you. They need a strong person to withstand powerful pain-diminishing urges.

Remember, in these situations, there is nothing
you can do or say to fix it. Nothing.

The rule to follow is: Allow the person to be in pain.

When that moment arrives and you find yourself standing face-to-face with a fellow human in gut-wrenching, unremitting pain, will you run away? Or will you be the person who finds a way to dig deep, withstand your pain (and theirs), and do what is truly needed?