

December 2008

Greetings:

Over the years, people have asked me to explain what I mean by the term “growth work. Wow! Where do I begin? I could define growth work with other terms or give an example. I’d like to give an example, but to have it make sense I need to “set the stage” so prepare to follow along. When we humans are presented with an immediate threat to our life -- real or imagined -- we can respond with the instinctive defense of flight, fight, or freeze. I would like to draw a parallel to another type of threat -- that to our personality/self-esteem/ sense of self. I think we can respond reflexively to emotional danger with the same innate defense mechanisms of flight, fight, or freeze. Protecting our physical or emotional existence takes a toll. The price we pay is supposed to be less than the harm we would incur by not responding at all. Sometimes we use fight, flight, or freeze in moments that are not in our best interest such as responding to an imagined threat or acting before thinking. In these cases instinctive self-protections costs more than it helps.

For the limited scope of this letter, let us examine how this might work by looking more closely at the defense of “freeze” used to protect us from emotional pain/stress. I conceptualize “freeze” as stopping the reality of what is happening here and now. We stop the discomfort we are feeling by “changing the channel” so to speak. To change our “emotional channel” we can do many things -- faint, eat, drink, smoke, sleep, spend, fantasize, “go blank” and so on. In most of these examples, we engage in symbolic “re-creation” to feel better. From the standpoint of our ego, success means we did not “notice” the unwanted feeling state and we are restored. To illustrate, I am at work. I am angry with my boss. I cannot leave. I munch on nuts and candy. I feel soothed. I continue working.

When do we think we have a problem? Usually when our quick “fix” doesn’t work (I am still mad, hurt, scared, and sad) or we have unwanted consequences (weight gain, poor health, debt, or a hangover). At this juncture, we could feel trapped or stupid. Our example, I am angry at work. If I don’t eat, I feel trapped. If I do eat, I gain weight. I eat anyway. I gain weight. I feel bad.

How do we break the cycle? Perhaps when you have emotional discomfort/stress rather than jumping to a “re-creation” that you judge to have unwanted consequences, you could intervene. To optimize your chances of success, I strongly advocate having a set of tools at your disposal. I would like to make a distinction between two types of tools -- a coping tool and a healing tool. A coping tool is one that you use to help you in a moment of emotional unrest (like boredom, hurt, emptiness, sadness, frustration, etc.) that doesn’t give you unwanted consequences. Let’s use the same example. I feel angry with my boss. I cannot leave work. I want candy. I don’t want to be fat. I chomp on a piece of xylitol gum. I feel soothed. Plus xylitol gum fights cavities. I now keep working. In essence, you substituted a similar symbolic tool to cope with feeling angry but one that doesn’t further hurt you (by making you fat).

A healing tool is one that helps you to feel your feelings, center, and ultimately heal. Examples include deep breathing, journaling, stretching, meditating, relaxation response, tapping (EFT), exercising, and self-reflecting. Our example again -- I am angry with my boss. I breathe deeply for a minute. I suddenly recall my boss has a headache and is a troubled soul. I remember, I have value and no one can make me feel little unless I allow it. I feel soothed. I keep working. It may seem harder in the moment of distress to reach for a wise substitute coping or healing tool than to reach for your usual quick “fix”. Again, the problem is the quick “fix” doesn’t fix the bigger problem or leaves you with a negative consequence. If you choose to work at breaking your cycle with wiser tools, you are growing. Growth work helps you generally feel better about yourself and your life.

To let go of unwise habits that evolved from your innate defense mechanisms, you need to take several steps. The most important is to identify the behavior/consequence as a problem for you. You must feel you want to stop the behavior. You need to have an understanding of when/why you use your habit. Finally, you must have a set of alternative coping and hopefully healing tools. You are not stupid or trapped. You developed your unwise habits to protect yourself. The deepest problem is not that the habit causes other difficulties, it is that it does not protect your self-esteem and most importantly your spirit. Working to change can require looking inside or in-sight. Insight is necessary to growing. The journey to Self – Actualization (or so called growth work) is an amazing and mysterious process.

Thank you in advance for filling out and returning the annual patient information form which allows me to keep my records up to date. Please fill it out and mail or fax it back to me.

With warmest regards,

Nina Pesante, MD