

Ouch! – when someone hits a nerve

You're in the middle of a conversation – at work, at home, at play or in relationship – pleasant, collegial, or perhaps serious, but respectful, when all of a sudden, it goes south. Someone hit a nerve.

Everyone has these experiences where, when a nerve is touched, a reaction is triggered. We become vulnerable.

While these places, for most of us, are not overly sensitive – that is, even though we do react when triggered, our reaction is but fleeting. However, we all have at least one or two places where the rawness is a 10 on a scale of 1-10. OUCH!

Why the ouch?

Psycho-emotionally, our reactivity is most often due to our feeling of being ignored (abandoned, unseen, unheard, dismissed and the like) in some way, shape or form. Our reactivity is based on some experience in our past with those significant folks who were around us and this earlier "wounding" now leaks out (the OUCH!) when someone in our present life – at work, at home, at play and in relationship – touches that nerve (e.g., your boss ignores you when you're speaking and want their attention and s/he chooses to check their iPhone in the midst of the conversation; your spouse/partner doesn't compliment you on the good job you did with (the kids, the landscaping, household budget, meal preparation, or a continuing education class you're taking...) Your reaction, while in the moment, is directly related to those times you were ignored or dismissed as a young child.

These sensitivities crop up whenever we feel "unseen," "unheard" and unsupported.

What's interesting, and important, here is many of us have become inured of the raw spots we have. Numb. What we are aware of more commonly is our reactivity – our shutting down, lashing out, moving away (emotionally, verbally or literally) sadness, or fear.

So we're all walking around with raw nerves and we engage in this dance of rubbing up against one other's raw spots – unintentionally and unaware, triggering one another over and over with these destructive interpersonal dynamics.

What's really happening?

When one hits another's raw nerve, or feels the sting of one's own nerve being rubbed against, there is a palpable change in "energy." One or both go "cold," or shut down in some way. And, one or the other's reaction is way out of proportion. One may know what just happened and the other hasn't a clue. "Where did that come from?!" "What just happened here?" we ask, openly or silently. What's happening is that needs are being ignored and anger and/or fear take over.

The process, which takes place in the blink of an eye, goes like this:

1. we're triggered by a word, glance, tone of voice, or a new/different emotional tone, etc., which takes over and says, "watch out!;"
2. we have a "somatic" response – feeling of nausea, dizziness, tenseness, tightness, heat or cold, increased heart rate, shallow breathing, increased blood pressure, etc.;

3. our "mind" tries to make sense of our physiological reactivity and we "move" – toward, away from or against the other – i.e., anger leads to "fight;" shame leads to "flight" (shut down, withdraw, leave); sadness leads us to "let go; etc."

The antidote to "ouch!"

The way to re-gain balance, harmony and self-control, and move towards equanimity is to take time, a lot of "conscious" time, to explore what throws us out of whack – when we, all of a sudden, feel unsafe, unheard or unseen, leading us to become reactive. Ask:

What was happening in that moment?

What was it (the specific cue-name it) that triggered me?

What was it I was feeling (name the feeling, not what you "think") in the exact moment I was triggered?

What did the other say or do that triggered my reaction?

What sensations did I experience in my body (not what do I think)?

Does this physiological sensation help me to name my experience (a metaphor, for example...I felt like...)?

What is my inner dialogue when my being triggered happens? What's the meaning I come up with?

Then, what did I do? What action did I take?

Then, think about your history. Did you experience this raw spot when you were young – with your parents, siblings, teachers, peers, or others, as you were growing up? Can you see this person from your past now "inside" the current person who is triggering you? Does the person who is currently triggering you see, i.e., know of, this raw spot of yours?

And, on the other hand, when the roles are reversed, do you know of the other's raw spots and what you do to irritate them? Have you ever shared this with the other? Or they with you?

The antidote to rubbing up against others' raw spots is to be aware of your own raw spots and those of others, share these with those others in a way that allows you to feel safe, yet honest and self-responsible, and then choose behaviors that keep you from behaving in negative ways.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- Have you recently experienced hitting another's raw nerve, or having another trigger yours? What was that like? How long did you remain triggered? How did you resolve the situation? Did you resolve it?
- Have you ever shared your triggers with another – at work, at home, at play in relationship? What was that like for you? For the other?
- What's it like for you to experience your vulnerability? Do you allow others, even yourself, to experience your vulnerability? Why, why not? Do you ever talk about your deepest fears? What is that like – if you do; if you don't?
- Do you ever trigger another willfully to upset them? What does this get you?
- How did you learn of your triggers? As you look back on your youth, do you see where those around you triggered you?
- Are you in any relationship where arguing is what keeps you connected (that is, if you weren't arguing you'd have no communication at all? What's that like for you?
- If you look back at your history in relationship, was triggering a common occurrence? Is it still? Is it OK?

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