

"Sweet Revenge" Or is it?

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, ...it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, ... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."

—Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Many folks (not everyone) are experiencing their "worst of times" these days — at work, at home or in relationship. Their reactions to their "worst of times" are most often driven by fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, helplessness, despair and insecurity on many levels – physical, mental, emotional, psychological, financial, social, etc. As a result, many of these individuals have resorted to a single "solution" they hope and feel will bring them to their "best of times" — revenge.

What is revenge and what is "sweet revenge"?

Revenge is defined as harm done to someone as a punishment for harm that they have done to you. "Sweet revenge" is an emotion one experiences as very pleasant and satisfying. The saying, "revenge is sweet" is uttered when one feels satisfaction from harming someone who has harmed them, either in actuality or perceptibly.

The act of revenge can be either physical, or mental or both. Why is revenge, the act of harming someone, "sweet"? The research and findings of numerous neuroscientific and neurological studies provide some insights into the "sweetness" some ascribe to revenge.

Brain-imaging studies indicate the brain centers that "light up" when we experience pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction also light up when we act to commit, or even consider, revenge. These studies suggest we actually feel satisfaction when we punish others in some way – mentally, physically, emotionally or psychologically – for what we subjectively consider to be their "bad", "wrong" or otherwise harmful (whether directed towards us personally, or not) behavior. When engaging in revengeful activity, in thought or deed, one takes on the responsibility for punishing another or others who, one feels, deserves just punishment for "making me feel bad, or wrong or deficient" in some way, shape or form. Whether one actually acts out their revenge or simply considers engaging in revenge, the brain's pleasure center lights up.

Research says that a certain feeling, a complex emotional dynamic of *schadenfreude* — the pleasure felt over someone else's misfortune — comes into play when one is engaged in exacting revenge.

According to these studies, punishing others — even when it's irrational — is based on passion and emotion, not reason. And revenge breeds revenge, that is, the more the brain is activated by the anticipation of revenge, the more people are willing to engage in revenge in thought or deed.

When one is driven by their reptilian brain (the amygdala - our instinctual awareness of danger comes from this brain level and results in fear-based instinctual reactivity) and/or by their limbic brain (experiencing anger, fear, territoriality - protecting my turf, protecting "me", who I am; the emotional, non-rational center of the brain) without input from the cerebral cortex (the "thinking", rational center of the brain), revenge in the form of psychopathologies is common. That is, one's behavior is reactive (i.e. not "thinking" but acting out of fear), meting out punishment, and visiting revenge on another or others for no apparent "reason", i.e., acting irrationally — even though while caught up in the revengeful act, one "thinks" they are being "logical" and "rational" and justified in meting out their revenge.

Dr. Edward Hallowell, a psychiatrist and author of a book called "Dare to Forgive" says there's a reason for the rise of revenge, and it's because revenge satisfies. "It feels so good. It's a wonderfully triumphant feeling."

Victim consciousness and revenge

One of the downsides of living in the "worst of times" is many folks begin to feel helpless. In this helpless state, they feel like a "victim", that everything is being done "to me", that they are being harmed and threatened by forces "out there." When one is being sucked into the quicksand of "victim consciousness", one often feels the need to blame and "revenge" is the only strategy that will "set me free" and allow me to experience the "best of times."

Revenge on whom or what?

In the "blame-revenge" mind set, targets exist on many levels - individuals or groups one needs to "punish" because they are causing one's unhappiness, upset and helplessness. Some of these individuals and groups are, for example:

National: rich-poor; whites-blacks; gays-straight; fundamentalists-new agers; democrats-republicans; bankers-the credit-unworthy; liberals-conservatives; American flag lapel pin wearers, non-pin wearers; pro-abortion-anti-abortion; gay marriage-mixed marriage; the thin-the obese; Hollywood types-Wall Street types; liberal media-conservative talk radio; the educated-the uneducated; pro-immigration-anti-immigration...

Workplace: leaders-managers; CEOs-employees; Americans-foreigners; exempt-non-exempt; line-staff; 52nd -floor folks-basement folks; male-female; team leader-team member; degreed/certified-non-degreed/non-certified...

Home: wife-husband; partner-lover; parents-children; in-laws (his/her family)-my family; upstairs neighbors-folks across the street; folks with new cars and expensive homes-folks with older cars and less-expensive homes...

"If only...!"

Many who seek revenge (in mind or in deed) live in an "if only" world. That is, "If only I could punish, remove or even annihilate (fill in the blank with an individual or individuals, a group or groups), then I would experience some pleasure, happiness or satisfaction."

What's "real" here?

The truth is the question of what's real and one's perception of reality is so often skewed in favor of the one feeling "harmed" that one can often be disconnected from true reality in the sense that one often fail to see the "truth" of what actually exists, favoring the illusion. In this state of "illusion" one projects their fears on to the individual(s) or group(s) "out there" as being the cause of their unhappiness and fear when "in reality" their fear has been "inside" all along and if explored would not be directly connected to their "target". They've just never taken the time to explore their inner feelings and emotions to look for "root causes". For them, it's just easier to blame others and then dwell in the satisfaction of exacting, or fantasizing about, revenge.

James Baldwin explains it well, *"I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with (their own) pain."*

In "the worst of times" we often expect and want others to meet our needs, even when our expectations are inappropriate. It's a childhood fear-based reaction that leaks out when, as adults, we feel helpless, hopeless and abandoned - the way many people are feeling today. When they don't get the security they want, they may feel anger, resentment and even revengeful.

A solution

Charlotte Bronte wrote, "*Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity or registering wrong.*"

Rather than blaming others, and seeking revenge, we could choose to get in touch with our needs and then fill them ourselves. When we choose to take our life in our own hands, to be self-responsible, an interesting phenomena occurs: there's no one to blame, no one to punish, no one with whom to "get even".

The bottom line is that acting on feelings of revenge can become dangerous. For many, revenge is like a drug, an addiction, the more one experiences it, the more they want to, and need to, experience it. So, initially, one needs to exact revenge on this individual, then that one, then this group and then that group in order to maintain the sense of feeling safe, secure and satisfied – even though their safety, security and satisfaction is ephemeral, fleeting, short-lived. So, unable to experience a true and real feeling of peace and security from inside, their addiction continues to tug at them; it's never-ending; it's progressive - not unlike the drug, food, alcohol, or sex addict, who needs to score one more fix, and then another, and another to experience satisfaction or pleasure - while hiding and denying their deeper fears and insecurities that continue to live, fester and grow inside. For many, revenge becomes a way of life at work, at home, in relationship and even at play — a lifelong self-sabotaging, self-limiting obsession.

Vengeance is self-defeating. What can support one to reduce and eliminate their conscious or unconscious need for vengeance is entering into a conscious practice of self-reflection and living intentionally from a place of understanding, empathy, compassion and forgiveness. This is not to say that one condones true and "real" wrongdoing. It is to suggest, however, one take a deep conscious look at the hold that their addiction to revenge has on them and learn how to release that hold. The revenge-addicted are emotionally disabled - their denials notwithstanding. Moving past revenge is freeing on every level - mental, physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

Since no one was born seeking revenge, the critical questions are, "How did I come to scapegoating, to blaming and to being vengeful?" "Where and how did I learn to want to "punish" others for my upset, unhappiness and dissatisfaction with my life?" This healthy, conscious and deeper process of "inquiry" can support one to move from a place of vengeance to a place of well-being where one can take control of their life by taking back their power, and giving up wearing the cloak of "victim."

This process of inquiry supports one to move from the amygdala and limbic brain to the cortex, the level of the brain involved in thinking, problem-solving, goal-setting, and planning. The cortex provides one with *foresight*, an important ability that helps one to be less reactive and supports one to see the consequences of their (vengeful) decisions before acting on them.

The cortex also allows one consciously to name and sort out one's feelings and emotions and be less reactive, in this case, less vengeful - in thought or deed - allowing one to let go, to be more understanding and considerate. It's here that one acts from "having a conscience", not from emotional, unintelligent reactivity.

So, some self-reflective questions are:

- How do the actions of individuals and groups on whom you would like to exact revenge directly and measurably, not ideologically, adversely affect your life on a day-to-day basis?
- Do you feel personally attacked by individuals or groups who differ with how you see the world?
- What are your greatest fears and why?
- Do you deflect self-responsibility for your state in life by blaming others?

- Are you the type of person who doesn't just get mad...you get even? Are you sitting at work or at home plotting evil deeds on your "enemies", near or far?
- Do you like to "tell on" other people?
- Do you scheme to upset other folks in some way, to make their life miserable?
- Do you keep mental notes of all the people who have screwed you in life?
- Do you believe that two wrongs make a right?
- Are you one who lives by the mantra, "I can forgive but I can't forget"?
- Are you prone to verbally attacking others whenever and wherever you can? If so, what do these attacks get you?
- Have you ever spent a significant amount of time trying to hunt down someone from your past just so you could get back at them?
- Is your motto, 'an eye for an eye'?
- Have you gotten revenge on someone in the last six months? Have you thought about it?
- Have you sworn to get back at the person responsible for putting those cellophane wrappers on CDs, or the folks who deliver home town newspapers and throw them on your driveway, or leave sales leaflets or cards in your mailboxes? Do you feel angry with these folks, wish you could "punish" them or annihilate them in some way?
- Do you have a history of stereotyping individuals or groups? If so, how did that tendency develop?
- When you look at the cards (of life) you've been dealt, do you accuse someone of dealing from the bottom of the deck?
- What was your experience of revenge, punishing others and "getting even" like when you were growing up?

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