

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION
FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of November 5, 2003

Dear Reader,

Why do people go to extremes? A mountain climber may choose ever more difficult peaks. A housewife may become increasingly finicky about the cleanliness of her home. A parent may seek progressively more competitive leagues for his child's soccer team. What do these people have in common?

We all share the need to maintain an optimal stimulus level. It is the most comfortable state. When we experience overstimulation, our minds work to decrease its intensity by repeatedly thinking about it. Even positive overstimulation is processed in this way. For example, a person who receives a high compliment from his boss, or a positive response from a woman he feels attracted to, will repeatedly think about it until its novelty wanes.

But we also need to cope with understimulation. This, too, is a deviation from an optimal stimulus level. Boredom occurs when too little is going on in one's surroundings, for example when waiting in a long line. It also occurs when there is too little change in one's activity, as when performing a very repetitive task. Our minds respond to understimulation by providing more. A person who is waiting in line may think about a variety of things, an internal response, or may fidget and continually look around, an external one. The bodily movement is an external stimulus because it provides proprioceptive stimuli to the mind, and looking provides visual stimuli. Those whose internal life is impoverished must seek external stimuli.

As an activity loses its novelty, it diminishes its contribution toward maintaining an optimal stimulus level, and the resulting understimulation creates a disequilibrium. One possible response to this discomfort is to increase the intensity of an activity. The mountaineer who depends on challenging climbs, the housewife who needs to keep busy, and the parent who requires excitement and perhaps maintenance of his own self-esteem, all solve their understimulation by increasing the intensity of an activity. Why do they choose these particular interests?

Initially, the mind selects the solution that best solves a disequilibrium. The mountaineer may, as a child, have read or been told about climbing while upset in some way, and found that the vision of climbing successfully distracted him from the disturbance. The housewife may have found the physical activity of cleaning a useful way of discharging tension during a time of stress. A parent with chronic disequilibrium due to disappointment in his own athletic ability may seize upon his child's activity as a solution.



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Once chosen, the solution gets locked in, and for future disequilibrations of the same type, the same solution will be chosen. But because over time its novelty wanes, it must be continually elaborated or intensified. The mountaineer intensifies his experience by choosing more strenuous climbs. The housewife elaborates her solution by finding more categories of dirt and disarray. The parent does both as he becomes more preoccupied with his child's performance and seeks new settings for the games.

Many people go to extremes in one way or another. These habit patterns may be unrecognized, though, because they are often seen as givens. The mountaineer, the housewife, and the parent don't realize that their activities have become extreme. What are some other examples? Perfectionism, obsequiousness, suspiciousness, relentlessness, even passivity. Any partial solution can become extreme, but of course this does not always occur. It is most likely to happen when the partial solution is a non-specific response to disturbances. If it successfully diminishes the original disequilibrium, it becomes associatively related to others, as with the mountaineer and the housewife. The parent, on the other hand, is responding to a very specific stimulus: his distress at the lack of his own athletic prowess. In this instance, the intensity and elaboration occur because this particular disequilibrium is, itself, intense.

An unhealthy locked in solution can be superseded by a more adaptive one if a complex stimulus is provided at the moment that the relevant stimulus occurs. This can happen either by chance or by the systematic intervention of an Inner Guide.

Intensification and elaboration are not always unhealthy. They serve to enhance the pleasures of life. Mountaineering, soccer, and even housecleaning can be enjoyable when their intensification and elaboration occur in order to increase pleasure rather than to manage discomfort.

QUESTION:

Does an Inner Guide communicate through dreams?

ANSWER:

No. Dreams are flashbacks, manifestations of disequilibrations from the day that have not been resolved during waking hours.

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

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