

THE  
DAVIS FOUNDATION

FOR PROVIDING  
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of September 7, 2005

Dear Reader,

The recent hurricane on the Gulf Coast has caused many changes. Thousands of people have lost loved ones, homes, and most of their possessions. As they have evacuated, either before or after the hurricane, they have found themselves in new situations in which they must perform even the most basic functions differently. In addition, their attitudes toward government and authority may change. The results of this catastrophe are predicted to cause changes for all of us as the bill for reconstruction becomes known and as shortages and higher prices for all products made of oil occur.

Many of these changes provide *complex stimuli*: those that signify two contradictory meanings simultaneously. When you are in a new location, many of the objects you use are in different positions. The toothbrush may be positioned on the opposite side of the sink. As you begin to reach for it in its accustomed place, and discover that it isn't there, a complex stimulus has occurred. You can brush your teeth/you can't. You must pick it up from its new position before you can proceed.

As you acquire replacements for lost items, complex stimuli occur. You can wear your brown coat /you can't, the new coat is black. And as you cope with the loss of a loved one, you may turn to ask him something only to realize that you can't. A government agency may project an image of reliability yet be wanting: you can/cannot depend on it.

Another source of complex stimuli is the experience of uncertainty about the future. Where are your loved ones? They must be alive/or did they perish? You can return to your home in a few weeks/or has it been destroyed? Did you escape with enough money to tide you over/or will you run out?

Some complex stimuli can be solved immediately. You can reach the toothbrush in its new position. You realize that you now have a black coat rather than a brown one. You may decide that you won't expect as much of government agencies in the future. But complex stimuli that cause ongoing uncertainty are very uncomfortable because they produce a continuing oscillation between two alternatives that takes energy and precludes rest.

Awareness of minor uncertainties can be temporarily blocked when more powerful stimuli occur. Worries about whether a treasured possession is safe will diminish when hunger, thirst, or fatigue become strong. But the oscillation continues, out of awareness, and its contribution to the stimulus level is undiminished.

Major uncertainties are extremely uncomfortable because their stimulatory power is very strong and there is no respite from them. Perhaps you have had an experience of uncertainty about a major event. If so, you may remember the painful oscillations



The Davis Foundation for  
Providing Emotional Comfort  
30 North Michigan Avenue  
Suite 1125  
Chicago, IL 60602

Tel: (312) 230-0114  
Fax: (312) 230-0168  
[www.davis-foundation.org](http://www.davis-foundation.org)  
[info@davis-foundation.org](mailto:info@davis-foundation.org)

between alternative answers. Even if the event you anticipate is a positive one, the oscillations are uncomfortable. "I ought to get the promotion/What if I don't?"

In these situations, there is no *true solution*. It will come only with resolution of the uncertainty. You may attempt *partial solutions* such as distracting yourself with other thoughts or activities. But when the stimulus is major, such as the possible loss of a loved one, it will remain in awareness. You may fantasy a scenario with the outcome you desire, a partial solution, but presently you will find yourself switching to anticipating the worst. Some view anticipating the worst as a superstitious act, a protection against having it happen. But the protection that it provides is to prevent the extreme disequilibrium that would occur with a shift from fantasizing good news to hearing the worst. This change would be so extreme that it would be more disequilibrating than the discomfort of fearing bad news. After a time, imagining the worst becomes sufficiently disequilibrating that it is less uncomfortable to shift back to the positive expectation. Thus the oscillation continues until the uncertainty is resolved.

Though uncertainty feels uncomfortable, it can be less so if you understand the reason for the oscillating expectations. Your Inner Guide may cause moments of minor uncertainty in order to create complex stimuli that will enable you to make the positive changes that you want. But when major uncertainty strikes, your Inner Guide will help you tolerate it. You will become aware of the reason for the oscillations, which will help lessen the uncertainty.

\*\*\*

*QUESTION:*

Isn't every change a complex stimulus?

*ANSWER:*

No. Every change is a stimulus, but a complex stimulus is one that signifies two contradictory meanings simultaneously. When you notice that you are hungry, that is a change. But it is a simple stimulus because it has only one meaning. However if, when sitting down to eat you discover that you forgot a fork, that is a complex stimulus because it simultaneously conveys the meaning that you can/can't eat. The mind completes the partial pattern of the place setting leading you to believe that you can eat, but at the same time it perceives that the fork is missing. This double perception takes place in a fraction of a second, but that allows a sufficient pause for a habit pattern to be unlocked so that a new one can replace it.

\*\*\*

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](mailto:info@davis-foundation.org). If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

*Judith M. Davis*

Volume 3 Number 18

© 2005 The Davis Foundation for Providing Emotional Comfort. All rights reserved