

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION
FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of February 7, 2007

Dear Reader,

Fulfilling many of life's minor responsibilities may be experienced as uncomfortable. Cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, paying bills, and running routine errands take time that you might prefer spending doing things that are interesting and pleasurable. But these chores can also cause discomfort because their repetitive nature makes them understimulating. What happens in our minds when we are understimulated?

A stimulus is a change. A new activity is interesting because it constitutes a change but if it is repeated periodically its novelty wanes and its capacity to serve as a stimulus diminishes.

The mental apparatus strives to maintain an optimal stimulus level. When there are insufficient stimuli it seeks new ones so that comfort will be restored. When subjects are placed in extended sensory deprivation their usual thoughts and feelings, which are *partial solutions*, lose sufficient stimulatory capacity. They eventually resort to matching delusions and hallucinations, which are *false solutions*. Fortunately the degree of understimulation that we suffer from time to time is less extreme. For us, partial solutions suffice and offer varying degrees of relief. What sorts of partial solutions do we employ and to what extent do they maintain comfort?

As we perform our mundane tasks the thoughts and feelings that enter awareness are those that cause the greatest disequilibrium. They may be unpleasant ones. Perhaps something painful or embarrassing has happened recently. Maybe there are chronic problems that we worry about or unmet goals that we ruminate over. Although worry feels uncomfortable it is nevertheless a partial solution because it partially decreases the distress caused by the stimulus. A person who anticipates being late for a meeting will partially decrease that distress by worrying about it. Feelings of sadness will decrease the discomfort of a loss and revenge fantasies will diminish the distress of an injury. Anxiety, sadness, and anger, and their accompanying thoughts can become generalized and serve as partial solutions for many stimuli. And if they do they tend to dominate awareness especially when other stimuli are minimal. They provide unpleasant mental background noise during routine activities.

Fortunately the stimuli that cause the greatest disequilibrium may be positive ones. We may have had some good news, completed a task successfully, or recently enjoyed good company, excellent entertainment, or a wonderful book. In fact we may still be overstimulated by one or another of these events. If so we must replay them in our minds until their novelty wanes and we again attain an optimal stimulus level. The reverberations of these events will continue to occupy our minds for some time and will



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

Tel: (312) 733-3218
Fax: (312) 733-3215
www.davis-foundation.org
info@davis-foundation.org

provide enjoyment as we perform our routine tasks. And with repeated successes and pleasures these reverberations will become ongoing.

Many people have predominantly negative mental background noise and they try to drown it out by various means. They may keep the radio or TV on nonstop or do their chores wearing an iPod. They may talk nonstop to friends and acquaintances on their cell phones. We have all heard, often involuntarily, people who do this.

When a person is talking with another because of this need it is uncomfortable for both parties. For the talker it is a partial solution; it diminishes a disequilibrium but doesn't end it. The underlying problem continues to generate distress. And the talking creates a new disequilibrium because it does not originate from a genuine wish to communicate or because of valid information to impart. For the listener it is a noxious intrusion. Even if both parties feel compelled to talk in this way they are both suffering from the resulting disequilibria.

People with predominantly positive background noise have choices. They are not compelled to keep the radio on or talk to acquaintances. They can do what feels most enjoyable at any given time. While driving to the grocery store or the dry cleaner you might choose to turn on the radio or you might prefer to enjoy your own thoughts.

As your Inner Guide works to solve all problems and end all discomforts you will find yourself becoming increasingly comfortable with your own thoughts and feelings and your background noise will be very positive. And as this happens you will take great pleasure in your own company as well as that of others.

QUESTION:

I hear an inner voice that is very critical. Where does this come from? Can I get rid of it?

ANSWER:

All people have mental pathways that are identifications with the parents. If a parent has been predominantly loving an individual will have a good sense of himself. If a parent has been particularly harsh an individual may become very self-critical. This "voice" is one source of negative mental background noise.

Your Inner Guide knows the origin of this voice. It may have arisen as a partial solution in response to parental criticism (agreeing with the criticizer reduces the disequilibrium). Or, if the parental criticism was sufficiently traumatic, a dissociation may occur. A new entity will then come into being that will be separate from you (though within your mind).

In either case your Inner Guide will match true solutions to the disequilibria that generated the critical pathway and, with time, it will change. It will no longer need to be critical.

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,

Judith M. Davis

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