

The Department Store Story

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I created this story to point out the different perspectives and ways of evaluating mother-child conflicts. This is a situation almost everybody knows or has experienced in some way or another. Apparently, this is part of life.

Let's assume that a mother and child went shopping at a relatively crowded department store. Just for a moment, the mother is distracted and the child has suddenly disappeared. Deeply worried, the mother starts looking for her child, but as usual in this kind of situation - which every mother knows all too well - she can't find her child. Well, at least not right away.

What happened from the point of view of the child? Something caught the interest of the child and it went after it. After the child's curiosity is satisfied, it suddenly realizes that "mom is gone." For the child, the apparent loss of the mother is existential. In general, children panic in situations like this; they feel lost, separated and suddenly the world without their mother is gloomy. During this kind of an emergency, children decide how to see the world, what to think about their mothers and also make up their mind about themselves. This emotional pain of loss, which the child experiences as existential, is also linked to feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, disorientation, confusion, forlornness, loneliness, anxiety and fear, are split off and "frozen" and then submerged into the subconscious. From the point of view of the child, this situation is about bare survival. This state of "deep freezing," in the sense of not wanting to feel these emotions, is stored in the cellular memory. If, in our later life, we even begin to come into contact with emotions that arise in us (feeling of helplessness, loneliness, of being left

alone, being confused ...), we experience the feeling of stress. Today, we react with the survival and response strategies that were activated as a survival reflex at the time.

How does the child experience the situation in the department store?

The child feels left alone by the mother and evaluates the situation as such. The child is convinced that it has been abandoned by its mother. The feeling of being separated from the mother ends in an existential crisis for the child; the child feels that its life is threatened. The child's decisions are made accordingly: "I can't trust my mother", "it's all my fault", "I'm lost", "I don't know what to do", "being separated is a nightmare" etc.. We, therefore, don't know why and we don't know which belief systems, hopes and longings are embedded in our unconscious or subconscious mind. The way we perceive and interpret experiences and events is our choice.

What do we see when we look at this situation from the outside?

Basically, what the child has completely forgotten and has split off is that the impulse to separate from the mother came from him/herself and is no longer aware of this fact. This fact is very important, because it means that all the decisions and concepts that child makes unconsciously are essentially an illusion.

Even after mother and child are reunited and both feel relieved, concepts defined by these decisions may remain active. Time and again, they keep coming through. Over the years, I have collected several negative affirmations that have shaped the life of most of my patients.

Here are some examples:

"I'm a failure;" "I'll show you;" "I'm not good enough;"
"I'm annoying;" "I always lose;" "I'm a strain on
everybody;" "It's never enough;" "I'm disgusting;"
"I'm difficult;" "I don't get it;" "I'm an outsider;"
"I'm a burden;" "I'm a nuisance;" "I'm embarrassing;"
"how I am is not right;" "I ruin everything;" "I
am irrelevant;" "I'm never going to make it;"
"I'm stupid;" "I'm not worthy;" "am I allowed to live?";
"I'll comply;" "yes, I'll do it;" "I have to make a huge
effort;" "the world is evil" and so on.

This is just a sample of the deep-lying belief system that the "glass is half empty." Affirmations of hopes and longing such as "I have to put in a lot of extra effort" or "if I am good then..." can also have a lasting impact on our lives.

Only in very rare cases are children aware that they were the cause of the separation. These children's decisions are more constructive and self-assertive. For them the "glass is half full."

Normally, children are not aware of their decision making processes and they go down the life path of the "glass is half empty." The child's reality could be as such: I am not secure, the affiliation and the place at my mother's side is not secure; I can't trust anybody and so on. From my many years of professional experience I have learned that the place and, thus, the sense of belonging are basic needs, which are non-negotiable. The child's existential crisis and the ensuing unconscious decisions have great impact on the child's later life.

In principle, people with negative existential experiences always view life through the lens of "the glass is half empty." Only the few who are at peace with themselves are capable of making constructive

decisions in traumatic situations. These people tend to see life through the "glass is half full" lens. We live in a polarized world, which means that both options are available to us. However, most people chose to see "the glass as half empty" in existential situations.

Example: Patient L.

Ms. L., 47, came to my practice with various health issues and climacteric symptoms. She herself has 2 children and lives in a stable marriage-like relationship. She also has a brother who is a year younger than her. In my conversation with her, she quickly brought up her endless conflict with her mother. In her opinion, her relationship with her mother was never as she would have liked it to be. Her mother's enormous expectations were impossible to fulfill. Ms. L always had the feeling that she could never please her mother. She never was able to trust her mother and she always felt her mother's pressure to try even harder. Despite all her efforts, she never was able to enjoy a good relationship with her mother. When I told her the department store story, it spilled out of her. In her childhood, she experienced a similar situation where her mother was not paying attention and she got lost; she panicked. Still today, these emotions are very present and can be easily called upon. Her greatest fear at the time was "to be left behind by her mother." She concluded that her mother did not want her anymore. Moreover, she believed her brother was her mother's favorite child and that he was everything she was not. For her, the situation was endlessly confusing and it felt like a never ending nightmare. Even after her mother found her she was not able to calm down again. She also believed that her mother loved her much less than her younger brother. This feeling accompanied her through her entire life, which meant that her

relationship with her mother continued to be difficult throughout her entire life.

I asked her if she herself had ever lost one of her children in a crowd. She said yes. Then I asked her if she had loved her child less while she was desperately looking for her child. She looked at me with an irritated facial expression. Now I knew that she was ready for a change in perspective. She was able to imagine that her mother had experienced the situation entirely differently than herself. In the following sessions she began to regain her health.

This shows how much we are influenced by our early experiences. Through crises or illnesses, we get the chance to initiate an "update" of our unconscious views that made us ill in the first place. The information stored in our cellular memory is stored in the moment of the actual event. At that time, the situations were experienced as existential; however, from today's point of view this is no longer the case. As children, the survival strategy was important and right for us. We survived, which was the purpose, and today we want to live. As adults our actions are still generally based on the concepts of our childhood.

There is nothing wrong with our survival strategies. It depends on the possibilities we choose, and thus the goal to survive has been achieved. For a better quality of life, it is better to choose the constructive path of "the glass is half full."