

Self-Defeating Behavior

This is about defeating one's self to protect one's integrity. Some time ago, just like that, it came to me that I have a Self-Defeating Attitude. I then had to ask myself the question, "Why would I defeat myself?" The best answer that I could come up with at the time was because I didn't know that I was. "What? Self-defeating. Am I crazy?" Always a possibility but no, I didn't view myself as nuts, just messed up. Ever since that moment I have been grappling with this insight. I have been exploring this phenomenon for years, a little bit at a time. Eventually I kind of got a hold of the concept of my Self-Defeating Attitude and the subconscious confusion that initializes that outcome. Making some progress it just all started to make sense why I always seemed to mess up in the end. Still, being aware of how this was affecting me did not immediately result in change. Especially in the beginning I just experienced more apprehension, anxiety and stress for I was no longer blind to where it was headed regardless of my intent to do well. Damn, no matter what I do it's just going to crash at some point. That's really demoralizing.

So, because I'm just a nice guy with a less than admirable history, it didn't mean that I was completely hopeless or helpless. OK. Another journey and one of my strengths is being good at the journey. I mean I persevere regardless until I get it. Given the depths from which I started I've come a long way. It may take even more years or even decades, but I'm always still on the trail to my becoming ever more aware of the mechanism that keeps me away from the experience of success. I've learned enough to feel encouraged to keep on walking the path that will allow me to acquire a better attitude and the behavioral skills to live in a more healthy manner.

I've come to know and know of many people who self-destruct on the way to success, or at the moment of success, or soon after achieving success and even after a good while after having experienced success. Mostly people believe that such people like me have serious mental problems. "Mental Problems" is such a catch-all phrase that we dump people into when we cannot understand their behavior.

I have a feeling that it isn't necessarily so much as a "mental problem," rather it could be a result of any combination of the inadvertent variable such as the following:

1. My inability to carry, monitor and manage the higher energy that success requires.
2. My having a fundamental conflict of values.
3. My experiencing or having experienced an intense episode or series of traumas.
4. My accepting unreasonable expectations.

Because imagery helps me at times to understand abstractions such as Self-Defeating Attitude I will explore my dilemma and the variables listed above in this way.

The First Variable as to why I inadvertently defeat myself emerged from one of my insights. This illumination revealed that my act of self-defeating can also be the outcome of my having insufficient energy to engage in achieving a set goal and/or having sufficient energy to sustain the achievement if it is attained. To me this means that getting to the goal is only arriving at a stop on the journey to sustained success. Not only this, it also means that I have to consider the energy that I have available in general before setting another goal. Setting another goal while maintaining the success of attainment of the prior goal may overwhelm me thus not only will I be unable to achieve the second goal, I very likely will jeopardize sustaining the first goal. In short I will have spread myself too thin, thus the appearance of Self-Defeating behavior even after achieving the goal.

Let's look at energy by using the imagery of weightlifting. When I first started to lift weights it was my goal to lose weight and get into shape. However, at a certain point lifting weights somehow became attached with my drive for ego satisfaction. I remember in the beginning being challenged by relatively light weights and being embarrassed by my weakness. In response I over did it with the result of quickly injuring myself and having to stop and recover. Like I said, "I don't quit." That's my ego speaking in case you hadn't noticed.

In the next phase of "jumping" back into weightlifting I was smarter, or so I thought. I set up a schedule of working out three times a week and disciplining myself to the goal of gradually increasing my strength. What I did not consider and it wasn't made clear to me by any of the more experienced weightlifters who kept chanting, "No pain, no gain," is that by utilizing the strategy of gradual progress, a tipping point will still be reached that is beyond my body's ability. Not being sensitive to the concept of the Tipping Point, I again suffered injuries such as muscle pulls and other soft tissue strains as well as a hernia and nerve compressions. After repeatedly recuperating I finally was forced to add the skill of listening to the pain messages at the first signal, which means that I was either moving too quickly or that I was coming up to or just starting to pass my body's limit. This worked for a good while, however it must be like childbirth after which a woman swears she'll never have another child, but eventually she forgets the pain of birthing and gets pregnant again. So I too eventually "forgot" the pain and started to increase the weights once more. This final bout with weightlifting led to the injuries becoming chronic, thus the emergence of the Self-Defeating Outcome. Damn, I ruined another good thing.

The function of a light bulb has been another image that has assisted me in the fuller grasp of the how a poor understanding of energy contributes to my inadvertent self-destructive behavior that either prevents me from achieving success and if success is achieved it can undermine my ability to maintain that achievement.

From my limited understanding, an incandescent light bulb functions because of a regulated flow of electricity which travels across a thin wire called a filament causing it to heat up and in doing so gives off light. However, the flow of electricity is not necessarily a constant, and at times greater electricity can flow into the wires leading to the light bulb and should that increased flow of electricity reach the light bulb, the filament will burn out and break causing the light bulb to fail. What prevents this surge of electricity from reaching the light bulb is a circuit breaker, which is located inside every home. The function of the circuit breaker is to prevent electrical surges from entering the home's wiring and doing damage to light bulbs and appliances.

The circuit breaker is like one of those bridges over water that split with each side rising up to allow a boat to progress under it span. When the bridge is closed vehicular traffic can travel across it to the other side. When the bridge rises up the vehicular traffic can't progress across the bridge. That is how the circuit breaker works, as if this type of bridge. Too much electrical energy causes the circuit breaker to open its "bridge" preventing the continued flow of energy.

Self-destructive behavior remains a deep focus for me. Why did I eventually refuse to listen to my body's pain messages that it was becoming too much? I concluded that my ego was conspiring with my subconscious. Obviously my conscious effort was struggling to "rewire" my pattern that was deeply ingrained in me and which caused poor decision-making. So in all that effort to get into shape all I was really doing was to reinforce this dysfunctional pattern. So, I brightly concluded that I didn't have the skill of retooling my mind and so I began a study of neuropsychology, which eventually did have a positive effect. It seems that making changes in behavior also requires a higher level of energy. I came to suspect that unless I strengthened my

nervous system's ability to carry more energy and probably also learn how to use my energy wisely before attempting change, I would only fail.

In my new understanding of the concept of success, greater and greater energy is needed to climb the increasingly difficult steps to that success. In my experience with self-destructive behavior the failure comes again when I exceed my capacity to conduct the energy required to move into the next step. Like the light bulb, when I exceed my limits my neurological circuit breaker opens and I can't continue on my pathway to what I feel defines success. In me, my self-destructive behavior is magnified if in my drive to persevere I try to force myself to function even when my circuit breaker starts to open. In these episodes not only do I stumble I effectively burn out.

The Second Variable as to why people like me defeat our selves came from another one of my insights and this time I saw that self-defeating behavior can also be the outcome of a deep conflict of values.

I need to emphasize that having an insight is not a shortcut to change. At least for me, understanding how to integrate an insight into my life is usually very challenging. To make it easier for me to grasp this insight, I decided to list my values into groups of three sets with each set residing in one of three rings. These rings are organized as inner, middle or outer. For me, my inner set of values are formed early in my life. These values I hold most dear. They are the core of who I am. Who am I? My values and how well I live them. This set of inner values encompass: nurturing, compassion, sharing, truthfulness, kindness, respect, listening, loyalty, courage, strength, sacrifice, creativity, fairness, justice, empathy, cooperation, friendships and family. My middle set of values is a balance between my inner and outer set of values. They are of a second degree of importance. These values are: community identity, learning, hard work, teamwork, play, social networking, teaching, mentoring, and being a support person. My outer set of values is mostly cultural and are of a third level of importance. These values are the most ego gratifying and include: national identity, competitiveness, winning, domination, individualism, freedom, control, power, and material possessions. When I look at these three sets of values I can see that there is a degree of conflict between the inner and the outer set of values such as the value of sharing from the inner set of values and possessiveness from the outer set of values. It is my experience that when I undergo such a conflict of values that my inner set of values will eventually assert itself and effect or even undermine the outcome deriving from my outer set of values. However, I have also learned from experience that when my inner ring of values dominates over the outer ring there are often consequences that can hurt.

Let me share an example. When I was just a little boy learning values, the set of inner values were the ones I first picked up, especially that of sharing. Being one of five siblings I was always hearing my mother's chant, "Share, share, share." The most intensive lesson came when upon learning that it was my third birthday our milkman gave me a bottle of lemonade. It was my present so when my mother informed me that I would have to share it with my brother and sisters I complained. The consequence of that complaint was that my mother tried to force me to drink the whole bottle at once. Of course I couldn't but the lesson of sharing dove deep into my psyche and I must share that it also was forevermore associated with a sense of discomfort. So sharing became big in my young life. However this is how it turned out a few years later.

I remember learning how to ride my first two-wheeler without the training wheels. I was so excited. We lived in a lower middle class community, hard working fathers with mother's caring for the children. It was in 1950. I was about five and had started kindergarten at 4 ½. Most of what I wore and the toys I played with were all hand-me-downs from my older brother. One

day I rode my bike to a friend's home to play. He lived not too far away. I liked spending time at his house. It was less crowded. The only thing was that he didn't have many toys and mainly when I was at his home we played with things we found and made. I really liked that kind of play. Anyway in spending time with my friend I observed that he didn't have a bike and well, each of us siblings in my family had bikes so on this day, before I went home, I gave him my bike. "Share, share, share." I felt really good about doing this and was smiling as I walked home from Billy's. When my brother and sister ran inside to tell my dad what I did, well.

"Jonathan, where's your bike?"

"Billy's family is poorer than we are and Billy doesn't have a bike so I let him have mine."

"What? You gave your bike away. You can't just do that. You didn't buy that bike. It belongs to our family. We work hard for our money. Go back there tomorrow and get our bike back, you understand?"

Wow, a difficult situation to resolve as a young boy. Get the bike back and what about fairness, and sharing, and compassion?

"But dad, what about fairness, sharing and compassion?"

"You got to be kidding. You got to learn about the realities of life. I can't believe you are my son and can be so naïve."

Later, I guess I had to look up that word "naïve." I had learned to use the dictionary at a very early age and so when I finally figured out how to spell "naïve" I found it to be very disturbing. How could I be naïve? I knew what I was doing. I was living what I felt were my family's values. They should have been proud of me, but nope. That's not how it was. So values aren't real? Anyway, I guess I just continued to live naively and to this day I still do. I can't say it has made many people, even people who I care about very happy. Even after I got married I remember hearing my father's diatribe,

"You can't live life as an ideal. You got to deal with the realities."

"I do. I make a living as a mental health worker. I have a family I love. I worked for and voted for progressive agenda's like civil rights, equal rights for all people regardless, health coverage for all Americans, stand up for LBGT folks, stand up for Muslims right to worship in America, etc. I pick up trash as I take my morning walk in the local nature park. No, I'm not a theoretical idealistic, I live it."

"You're just kidding yourself. You got to be out there for yourself. Don't Tread On Me. You could have earned so much more if you really cared for your family. You were so foolish to not believe in private ownership like you're some Indian. Just look at them now with all their Reservation Gambling Businesses thriving so well."

But what happens if someone succumbs to the call of the individualistic outer egocentric values of our American culture. For many, with strong inner values, this can lead to a disturbing outcome. Let's take a look on how this can develop.

I feel that a good amount of resentment toward the dominant culture could be a result of a minority and or impoverished youth seeing their parents being constantly abused. Abuse comes in many forms including being prevented from having economic opportunity, or witnessing the hurt and the pain of one's parents feeling like failures, not being able to provide enough for the well-being of the family. The parents could also have been abused physically by the dominant culture through police action where any effort to seek redress from the oppression could result in beatings, torture, and long periods of incarceration. Any child would hate the dominant culture for such abuse of their parents. The conflict that arises is that while hating the dominant culture it

would be completely understandable should the youth also want what the dominant culture has to offer if one could only get into it.

Of course seeing the advantages such as adequate housing, nice clothes, healthy food, transportation, available higher education, open recreational avenues to fill leisure time and spending money would be so attractive and how could one not be envious of the dominant culture's hold and control. What does the dominant culture say to the impoverished? "You can have it too if you work hard enough."

I remember working at Teacher's College, Columbia University during the early 70's and getting to know the janitorial staff through initially being attracted to them due to an art exhibit of their work that was set up in the basement. Being an artist I couldn't help but to want to get to know them as their work felt so connected and socially relevant. What I came to know was that all of them had degrees from Southern Black Colleges and these janitorial jobs were the best that they could find. This blew my mind. So what about all that, "You too can have it if you work hard." Hmmm.

When I look back at this, was it really true that this was the only level of job "Up North" that they could get or was it something to do with the conflict between their inner values and those of the Outer ring, which is that of the mistreating dominant culture. I don't really know. Could they not have obtained jobs as teachers and social workers? Maybe even with their B.A. they couldn't qualify for the required M.A. programs.

What about the folks who make it in sports and in gaining such lucrative contracts move out of their neighborhood which for some is a community of poverty and into neighborhoods of wealth where everyone has a security system in their home, live in gated communities and have regular police patrols to keep "the people" out. Fancy cars, jewelry, live-in nannies, etc. and yet not being able to hang out with their childhood friends who live too far away to get together. It works for many, however for those for whom it doesn't work does not the conflict between values trigger a break with a successful manner in which to live life. How many of them prematurely lose their careers as a result of risky behavior doing drugs or getting caught up with the police when they choose to go hang out with their friends in the old neighborhood? Some for sure. This would look like a classic case of self-defeating behavior, but is it really? Or is it a way of reconnecting with the inner ring of values that promotes friendships and sharing and in their situation with their hommies from the hood? Certainly there are better ways of reconnecting, but like everything else it's tough to move from subconscious reactive behavior to conscious thought-out behavior especially when one doesn't have a life mentor who knows this stuff.

This Third Variable as to why people like me defeat our selves came from another one of my insights and this time I saw that self-defeating behavior can also be the outcome of a trauma or a series of traumas.

Is this what is happening to Tiger Woods? Was his collapse not due to a conflict of values and in addition also personally traumatic? How traumatic to lose his family! Was his collapse a means to prevent himself from further moral deterioration and does not the effect of the trauma contribute to his difficulty of "regaining his form;" the result of his fear of falling back into the same painful and humiliating pattern that success brought on?

In my life, given that the older females in my family, my mother and sister, delivered most of the emotional and physical abuse, it would make sense that the female presence as a childhood cause of this repeated trauma would interfere with my forming healthy relationships with women as I became an adult. I experienced the drive for companionship become coupled with the emergence of PTSD, anxiety and fear, and greater the impact the more intimate the

relationship became. Being caught up in the healthy need for companionship too often resulted in a desperate but unconscious need to escape the increasing irrational threat that the relationship represented. To me, numerous avenues for Self-Defeating Behavior manifested as a result of these unresolved traumas. Actually the outcome of these behaviors resulted in traumas of their own such as being divorced twice and losing the closeness of family that I had initially experienced with my wives and children. Eventually it became too overwhelming to reenter a permanent relationship and to willingly render myself vulnerable to possibly re-experiencing the depth of such pain. To protect myself I began to engage in long-term relationships with women who I professed to love, but because of the nature of the relationships were eventually time limited. Self-defeating choices, yes, but choices that simultaneously “protected” me from the commitment that would result in having and potentially losing even more children.

The Fourth Variable as to why people like me defeat our selves came from yet another one of my insights and this time I saw that self-defeating behavior can also be the outcome of accepting the definition of success, whether set by one’s self or by others that is not only unreasonable but actually unattainable? In the case of accepting an unattainable definition of success this variable can be imposed by family, school, and society at large. So many people are misdirected to their detriment to life paths that are unsuitable for them.

At least for me it seems that certain definitions of success are unhealthy because not only are the necessary skills not in place I also have to overuse my energy just to make the effort and of course burn out quickly. It’s demoralizing especially when guilt is part of this formula. The immature conclusion is that there is something wrong with me because I had accepted the devastating Cultural Dictate that cleverly shifts the responsibility for success to the individual, “There’s nothing you can’t achieve if you put your heart into it.” Modern educators know that this is terribly inaccurate for it completely denies the barriers that society sets up to limit the number of people access to the riches that are hoarded by the wealthy.

In the imagery of weightlifting presented above, the lesson became to reframe the definition of success in a reasonable manner that sets the goal I wish to attain and which is within the scope of my actual capability. What I learned? Reasonable Limits and this became my motto.

I’ve come to view success as a sort of life force that requires ever-greater energy, with its own wiring and circuit breakers. For a long time I didn’t understand that success takes at least an upgrading of one’s nervous system. In my case I only started to achieve success safely when I learned how to safely lift “Neurological weights” which gradually increased my nervous system’s ability to carry greater loads of energy. However, having the personality that limits most of my understanding to experiential learning as exists in the concreteness of weightlifting, I initially failed to generalize my weightlifting experience in regards to exceeding my body’s limits to that of my mind.

It just blew my mind that I could at times actually establish a reasonable goal, but once I achieved it and without fully enjoying that plateau of success, I would blow by it and seek for a higher level of satisfaction thus falling back into the Self-Destructive Syndrome. However eventually I picked up that even with a dedicated effort to strengthen my mind, I like all people have some outer limit. Accepting this has been a blessing. I’m learning to anticipate this cycle and have increasingly stepped out of this path before passing the point of no return.

In my life I now have chosen to live within a system of life that my energy can handle, which is closest to my inner values, which permits me to walk around the landmines of my traumas and which is defined by a reasonable definition of success. I came to the conclusion that

I would follow and live my inner most set of values and which incorporate the values of people who live close to nature. In this culture, we take as little of possible, utilizes all that we take, keep things repaired to extend their use, and share with those who have the least before taking our share.

I know what I write is not always clear and yet it somehow helps me as a human being to share my concerns, insights and vision at least with myself if not the reader. Well, hopefully also the reader.

As always, Peace, Love and Harmony