

Preface

The purpose of this book is to increase the reader's understanding of the cause, or one class of causes, of behavioral, emotional, and thought disorders and of the treatment or process of therapy for these disorders with this class of causes.

What is the etiology of behavioral, emotional, and thought disorders? Early research as presented in my beginning psychology courses in college considered and rejected such possible causes as the effect of specific toilet training practices, birth order, and the trauma of divorce. Now, 30 years later, many clients come to me quoting their physician who prescribes medication, saying the cause is chemical changes in the brain. There is some truth to each of these causes, as we shall see.

Let's briefly consider the chemical changes in the brain. The human nervous system is composed of hundreds of billions of neurons. Each neuron sends electrochemical messages or impulses to thousands of other neurons. When an electrochemical impulse reaches the end of an axon of a neuron and jumps across the synapse or gap to the next neuron, this jump is made chemically with chemical neurotransmitters. Much of the neurological and neurochemical research on emotional disorders has focused on the limbic system or the emotional center of the brain. So far, more than 300 different neurotransmitters have been identified. Two of the better-known neurotransmitters are dopamine and serotonin. When you think of all the combinations and permutations of these neurons in combination with the many possible neurotransmitters, the possibilities are astronomical.

When an electrical impulse is repeatedly passed from one neuron to the receptor of the next, the sensitivity of the receptor to the neurotransmitter increases so that it takes less and less stimulation to the receptor for it to "fire" or respond to the neurotransmitter. Within the field of neurology this process of "learning" is referred to as kindling. Kindling "involves progressive increases in electrical (neural) excitability in response to less and less stimulation" (Dubovsky, 1997). With sufficient kindling the response becomes autonomous of the stimulus, i.e., the neuron learns the response so well that it takes no stimulus to trigger it.

The ramifications of the concept of kindling and an autonomous response are many. One logical consequence is that neurology, pharmacology, and psychiatry

have searched for chemical means to modify or rekindle the process of neurotransmission at the synapse as a means of decreasing the symptoms of such psychiatric disorders as depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorders, bipolar disorders, and schizophrenia. These sciences have paid little concern to the original stimulus that triggers the neural response. The physician who says the emotion is caused by a chemical change in the brain is ignoring the stimulus that initially triggers the reaction, as well as what is going on in the cognitive parts of the brain. Let's consider a simple example.

Whenever infant Jason spits out food while his father feeds him, his father sighs. Children, even verbal children, respond with feelings before they respond with words. Jason may not understand the meaning of his father's sigh but if he were able to express himself verbally, he might say, "Daddy is upset," "I'm a bad boy," "Daddy doesn't understand I'm full," or "Daddy doesn't understand I don't like the taste." But since Jason is preverbal and does not have the vocabulary to mediate these thoughts, he just feels anxious, scared, or trapped in the situation. He may have already learned from experience that daddy's sigh is going to turn to anger, escalated by Jason's anxiety and refusal to eat and father's frustration. The feeling of anxiety is kindled, i.e., it becomes a learned response to dad's sigh and soon the sighs of others—the stimulus. Each time Jason hears a sigh he becomes anxious. Eventually he may feel anxious even without hearing a sigh. The kindled anxiety then becomes autonomous of the stimulus.

More concerned with the resulting anxiety than the stimulus of a sigh or the meaning of the sigh to Jason, psychiatry's solution is to provide medication to change the chemistry at the synaptic level of the emotional center of the brain to diminish the feeling of anxiety. This solution ignores many aspects of what was learned. Jason may have learned that "people are unhappy with me" or "I can't do anything right." He may lack self-confidence and he may not have the cognitive and verbal ability to put such beliefs into words, but these beliefs can still be unconsciously part of him. In considering the neural process of kindling, therapy to uncover and help Jason change his way of thinking and his self-beliefs seems to be another logical conclusion. Simply prescribing medication ignores such internal language and beliefs that exist in other more cognitive structures of the brain left unaffected by the medication.

Uncovering and changing such internal language is the goal of cognitive behavioral therapy, but uncovering and replacing such ways of thinking are more easily said than done, especially when such self-beliefs are unconscious. The tools of dream work, mental imagery, and hypnosis are most effective in facilitating such uncovering and change. In considering the stimulus that triggers an emotional response, several factors need to be considered. First, the stimulus is the way an event is perceived and interpreted. Jason's father's sigh likely means something different to Jason than it does to his father. Some children may not even notice a sigh. To others it may have some other meaning. In therapy, what is important is what the sigh means to Jason. To Jason the sigh can be considered a

trauma, though to Jason's father it was a simple honest and gentle expression of his frustration.

Second, the stimulus that triggers an emotional response needs to be described in Jason's own words, images, or experience. Hypnotic time regression can help an individual identify the stimulus when the experience has been forgotten, repressed, or preverbal. When the learning or kindling of an emotional response was preverbal, the uncovered stimulus may be in the form of an image or other sensory experiences. Considering all of the senses can be of use. When a person is verbal the experience is generally verbal or auditory but experiences are often visual or imaginal in nature. Other times the stimulus may be tactile, olfactory, or even gustatory.

Third, Jason needs to find the right words to describe the emotional response to the stimulus. The hypnotic technique of instructing the client, "Let your adult self go back and be with your younger self and help your younger self find the right words to explain how you feel," is effective in identifying those feelings. Putting such experiences and feelings into words helps an individual gain some control over the experience.

Fourth, the repeated behaviors and attitudes of others that define the stimulus for the emotional response can be considered traumatic to the individual, and since such trauma is external to the individual, the individual does not or should not have to take responsibility for it. Such external stimuli are the class of causes of behavioral, emotional, and thought disorders to be considered by this book and will be referred to as the trauma. As you can imagine, the breadth of possible trauma is enormous, extending from the severe trauma of physical and sexual abuse and abandonment to such simple behaviors as a simple sigh, or such verbal comments as "after all I've done for you" or "where were you when the brains were passed out?"

Another class of causes, those decisions made by the individual to do something or be a certain way, behaviors and beliefs that are determined by the individual and for which the individual needs to take responsibility, will be the subject of a second book, *Loki's Children*.

Fifth, the traumatized individual needs to identify in affirmative terms what he or she needs to determine alternative behaviors and attitudes. I once heard a story from another psychologist: "A child comes into my office, touches something and I say 'no.' What does the child do but to run off to touch something else. Again I say 'no.' In no time at all, the child is racing around the office touching everything looking for a 'yes.'" This story was told to describe the etiology of hyperactivity, but it also is a good example of a problem in the process of learning or kindling, and relearning or rekindling. When we become aware of some dysfunctional or unwanted response to some stimulus or even an autonomous behavior, we may seek to refrain from the response, but we may have no idea what to replace it with. The "yes" can remain a mystery. Uncovering the history of the kindled behavior is important, but finding a healthy or functional alternative for rekindling is at least

as important. To help an individual find the “yes,” another hypnotic technique has been found to be very effective: “Let your adult self go back and be with your younger self and help your younger self find the right words to describe what you need.” Jason might say, “Dad, I need you to be patient” and “Dad, I need you to understand that I don’t like the taste, I need you to be more understanding.” For Jason to say, “I need dad not to sigh,” tells nothing about the alternative of what he does need.

Sixth, in stating what we need from dad, mom, or some other significant figure, we are not talking directly to our father or mother but to our inner father, mother, or other archetype. Talking to this inner part of ourselves helps us to integrate that archetype. As these internal images become better integrated in a healthy manner, we become the healthy father and mother to others in our lives. Becoming aware of these personal changes is an important part of the healing process.

If Jason as an adult is successful in changing the way he thinks or believes, thus “rekindling” the cognitive parts of the brain, and nothing changes in the emotional portions of the brain, he will continue to experience the anxiety response. On the other hand, if medication changes the anxiety response but Jason does not change the way he thinks or believes, when he stops taking the medication the anxiety will return. It takes changing both the thinking and the emotional responses to effect deeper change.

This book offers psychotherapeutic ways through hypnosis, guided imagery, and dream work to uncover our dysfunctional self-beliefs and internal language, and to learn functional and healthy alternatives for rekindling ourselves.

As mentioned above, there are at least two different classes of causes of behavioral, emotional, and thought disorders that for resolution determine different courses of therapy. The purpose of this book as described above addresses the first of these two “causes.” My second book, *Loki’s Children*, will address the second. Though it may be difficult or impossible to separate these two causes in the therapy room, the distinction does have implications for the course of and the techniques used in therapy.

In *Grendel and His Mother* something has happened external to the individual, outside of his or her control, that has caused the tormenting behavioral, emotional, or thought disorder. The ancient Old English myth of Beowulf offers us a map for our journey through the unconscious mind to overcome this torment, first to give us strength to overcome the more immediate torment of the behavioral, emotional, or thought disorder, our Grendel, and then to uncover and overcome the deeper cause of this torment, Grendel’s mother. Why use a myth as a map of this journey? Myths, the dreams of our ancient ancestors, like any dream, describe the process of the unconscious mind. Whereas an individual dream is specific to an individual, a myth of the culture describes the unconscious process on a more universal level applicable to all of us.

Jason, now as an adult, is suffering anxiety and panic attacks; he is dissociated from the cause of these panic attacks just as Hrothgar, the great king in the story of Beowulf, is dissociated from the cause of the emotional pain of his original abandonment. Hrothgar's immediate torment, i.e., Jason's panic attacks, is seen in the form of the monster Grendel who nightly attacks his great hall and kills the King's retainers. The fact that Jason has initiated therapy suggests that his inner warrior has been called upon and is preparing to face and destroy his tormenting anxiety, just as the great warrior Beowulf is summoned to save Hrothgar from Grendel. With this victory Beowulf is able to celebrate his authority over Grendel, just as Jason celebrates his victory over his anxiety, only to have another monster, Grendel's mother, arrive to cause further torment. After tracking Grendel's mother back to her den in the murky waters of a monster infested lake, Jason's unconscious mind, the warrior Beowulf, succeeds in killing this second monster. When Jason uncovers the original, unconscious source of his torment, the sighs of his father, he can truly free himself from this torment. Each line of this ancient poem has something to offer in explaining the course of therapy to overcome that which has tormented us since our early years, that something which is outside of our domain of responsibility and which we have forgotten.

Similarly, the ancient Greek myth of *Twelve Labors of Hercules* also describes a journey of overcoming such torment. As Hercules succeeds in completing twelve superhuman tasks, he is able to overcome the torment caused him by his stepmother, the Goddess Hera, and thus becomes a god in the Greek pantheon.

The second cause of behavioral, emotional, and thought disorders is well illustrated in the ancient Nordic myth of *Loki's Children*. In this second category of problems, rather than the cause arising from outside of ourselves, the problems are caused by the decisions we make in determining who we are and what we do that turns out not to be so wise. The trickster god within us, Loki, begins to torment us and finds ways to make us face the not-so-wise way we have become or the not-so-wise things we do. He torments us with three monsters, the three children of Loki: Jormungand, our fear; Hel, our guilt; and Fenrir, our obsessive worry. As we are forced to face these three monsters within us, we eventually die and are reborn in the new innocent Balder. The process of therapy to overcome our fear, guilt, and obsessive worry caused by our unwise decisions, whether conscious or unconscious, leads us to face the final battle of death, Ragnarok, and rebirth lifting us then to a new level of life.

In a similar Irish myth, the high king Fergus, when confronted by Esirt, the Leprechaun King's poet and our internal trickster, admits that he made a poor decision by being unfaithful to his Queen. Esirt's taunts eventually lead to Fergus's death, while facing a great lake monster, and his rebirth as the even greater and more famous King Fergus. This story is found in the ancient Irish myth of *The Death of Fergus Mac Leide*. Since these behavioral, emotional, or thought disorders are caused by our own unwise decision making, a part of us has to die before we are able to rise to new heights, whereas when we are not required to take

ownership of our problem when caused by something outside ourselves, such death is not necessary.

Why do we make such unwise decisions? Sometimes it is because of things that happened to us early in life. “I am not going to be angry like my father was,” or “I am not going to let people walk over me like my mother did,” are such decisions. Each of us make these decisions for which we need to take responsibility yet these decisions are based on experiences from outside of ourselves and for which we need not take responsibility. Thus, the distinction between these two causes of disorders is lost, yet facing problems with this distinction in mind opens doors in self-understanding and facilitates the journey of personal growth. The intersection between these two etiologies and the flow back and forth in the process of therapy will be considered in *Loki's Children*.

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