

Being Imperfect Together – 02-19-15

When We Stress, We Regress

Art Maines, LCSW

Clients usually come to me in a high state of distress. Their lives are off track, and perhaps their mood and behaviors are limited by problems such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Other times the person seems completely mystified by their difficulties. They know their life isn't working in some essential way, but they lack insight into the source of the trouble. They wonder what's wrong with them.

Interestingly, people frequently fail to recognize the ways that stress has worn them down and caused them to fall back into old ways of thinking and behaving. Ways that don't contribute to reducing or eliminating the problems for which they sought help. In the psychotherapy lingo we often call this "maladaptive;" it doesn't help them adapt or change their responses and thinking to support a better outcome. I call this falling back into old patterns, "When we stress, we regress."

This dynamic shows itself in the life of our community at times. If someone with whom you're interacting is under a stressful burden that is wearing them out, they are much less likely to show up as their best self, the person who can listen patiently, offer support, or come up with a reasonable solution. You may not know it, because they may be very good at hiding, or because they don't know how to talk about what's on their mind. Perhaps they are too ashamed to say what's troubling them. Many times this stress-based regression will show up as your being surprised by the other person's reaction. It may feel like you've just stepped on a rake!

Sometimes, WE are that person.

And therein lies the beginning of how to be a helpful, supportive, and even healing presence when we encounter another member of our community who reacts unexpectedly to us. Ask yourself: What would I need if I were in a stressful situation? What do I perceive that this person might find helpful and supportive? In doing so you enact empathy, the ability to identify with and experience, to a greater or lesser degree, the experience of another. Frequently, expressing connection through simple words of support can be more helpful than we realize. Research has shown that, for most people, feeling connected to a caring other reduces signs of distress in the brain and body.

If someone surprises you with a sudden, harsh comment, it's also right to take care of yourself a bit. Accept that you feel a little hurt or even angry; these are normal and natural reactions to minor rips in your personal connections and reflect healthy self-esteem. The best action might be, after a brief expression of concern and support, for you step away to disengage. You could also soothe yourself in the face of a surprising reaction with self-talk like this: "_____ must be upset about something else in his/her life. I can let their comment go and not take it personally."

Just to clarify: I AM NOT suggesting that verbal abuse is acceptable. I'm referring here to mild to moderate distress from a tense interaction.

We've all been on both sides of the stressed-out coin. Being in a distressed state can cause us to react in ways that don't show our true nature as good people who strive to interact with kindness and courtesy, and sometimes we are on the receiving end of another's stress-based regression. Remembering that we're all imperfect humans trying to relate to others in ways that reflect God's authentic love returns us to the essence of true community: A place where we are safe, loved, and cherished for our uniqueness and abundant gifts.

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