

Councelling: Overcoming the defences of your mind for peace, productivity

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Learning to recognise the impact past experiences have on present behaviour can unlock your true potential

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Most of us are caught in the iron grip of the past, caught in the illusion that we need to protect ourselves against what happened.

It does not mean that we were or are psychologically sick. What it however means is that in childhood, each of us, irrespective of our upbringing, was impacted emotionally because some or many of our needs were unmet.

As we mature into adulthood, the emotional impact of childhood deprivation manifests in our work life. We are caught under the spell of our emotional brain that starts up reactions in us. For functioning managers and those who want a meaningful existence, it is important to seek out coaching support to understand current realities, recognise the impact of past experiences, blend the two and live insightfully.

'Past Reality Integration' (PRI) technique, conceptualised and developed by Ingeborg Bosch, is a novel way to approach coaching both in terms of equipping persons to lead a functional and effective existence, and at the same time helping executives and managers work through blocks that prevent them from working at their 'optimum best.' PRI is aimed at helping clients reach a point at which they are able to do the work themselves and the coach is needed only to facilitate early enquiry. A PRI coach helps recognise the division between adult and child consciousness, to make one unafraid to battle past ghosts.

Bosch essentially says that each of us, as children, develop certain defences which travel with us throughout our life.

She cites five defences that operate in each of us. They build up most often in early childhood. These include:

'It is okay for my boss to shout at me as I did not do a good job.'

Such self-admission is actually a repression of our need to be heard, and the defence that plays up is 'Denial of Needs'.

This defence first manifests in us as a child when for instance a mother, who has just fed her child, refuses the child's demand for more. Unfortunately, the child does not comprehend that the mother does not want her to overeat and fall sick, but unconsciously construes the refusal as a denial of her need. When similar situations happen, the 'amygdala' stores these memories that triggered in adulthood.

'You cannot depend on your subordinates, for they mess up!'

A typical remark such as the one made by a boss, is done in anger, and this is an example of what Bosch calls 'False Power'.

A child who falls down and is in pain, invariably cries. The mother immediately beats the floor saying that the child will not be hurt by the floor again. Thus, the child assumes that it is the floor that caused the pain and not her falling down.

As the child grows she believes that it is 'they' who cause pain. This also takes the form of blame and judgment.

'False power' thus lulls us in adulthood to believe that we can get our way by displaying anger.

'I stay late at work as only then my boss will appreciate my sincerity.'

Such an admission is evidence of what Bosch calls 'False Hope'. In childhood, a mother often tells her child that she may only watch television if she has her food. The child therefore finishes her meal and believes this is the only way to get her need watching television met. Similarly, we believe that by pleasing another we can get our way.

'I try very hard but sometimes feel I am not good enough.'

Employees who react this way are demonstrating 'Primary Defence'. When a child scores low grades, inadvertently even an indulgent parent may remark, "This is not good enough and you must do better." The child assumes she is not good enough, devaluing herself, and this becomes apparent in the way one reacts in adulthood.

'I am afraid my boss may pull me up for late submission.'

While such a fear expressed may be true, often it is not rational and based on assumption. This is the defence of 'Fear'.

A child rushes across the road carelessly is chastised by her mother saying "a policeman will catch you if you dart across the road." Later in life, the child's internal mechanism reprimands it for indiscretion. Often, the reprimand instills fear that is not current but relates to a past occurrence.

Bosh says that though many of us have had a normal upbringing, much of our needs as children remain unmet in spite of our parents' best intentions. Thus we grow up repressing many of our needs, for we do not want the pain that comes with the need remaining unmet.

The PRI model helps the adult, through guided questioning, to re-examine the hurt or pain experienced in the past. The methodology adopted intends not to be psychoanalytical or psychotherapeutic, but to help the adult recognise that much of what is being felt now is misplaced.

No attempt is made to assuage the individual or alleviate past pain; just to make him aware that his current defences are a result of past occurrences and can be let go of through choice.

PRI encourages the individual to change behaviour (often ingrained and considered to be part of one's nature) that support denial of the past reality.

It aims to help the individual act opposite to what has become habitual, and realise that the behaviour is actually a defence mechanism no longer needed in the present, which also inhibits the individual from seeing the 'here and now' clearly.

Often, something which happens in the 'now' symbolises a past occurrence which then immediately causes pain. From there, the individual uses a defence to counter the pain. Bosch says it is important for the individual to recognise the symbol as erupting a past memory, become aware of the defence and then neutralise it.

The ultimate objective of PRI coaching is to integrate the divided consciousness of adult and child, thereby helping an individual function effectively.

(The writer is an organisational and behavioural consultant.)