

Strategies for Managing the Pain of Inadequacy

We do whatever we can to avoid the raw pain of feeling unworthy. Each time our deficiencies are exposed – to ourselves or others—we react, anxiously trying to cover our nakedness, as after that infamous fall. Over the years we each develop a particular blend of strategies designed to hide our flaws and compensate for what we believe is wrong with us.

We embark on one self-improvement project after another. We strive to meet the media standards for the perfect body and looks by coloring out the gray, lifting our face, being on a perpetual diet. We push ourselves to get a better position at work. We exercise, take enriching courses of study, meditate, make lists, volunteer, attend workshops. Certainly any of these activities can be undertaken in a wholesome way, but so often they are driven by anxious undercurrents of “not good enough.” Rather than relaxing and enjoying who we are and what we’re doing, we are comparing ourselves with an ideal and trying to make up for the difference.

We hold back and play it safe rather than risking failure. Playing it safe requires that we avoid risky situations – which covers pretty much all of life. We might not take on leadership or responsibilities at work, we might not risk being really intimate with others, we might hold back from expressing our creativity, from saying what we really mean, from being playful or affectionate.

We withdraw from our experience of the present moment. We pull away from the raw feelings of fear and shame by incessantly telling ourselves stories about what is happening in our life. We keep certain key themes going; what we have to do; what has not worked out, what trouble might lie ahead, how others are viewing us, how others are (or are not) meeting our needs, how others are interfering or letting us down. Maybe you have heard the old joke about the Jewish mother who sends a telegram to her son: “start worrying; details to follow.” Because we live in a free-floating state of anxiety, we don’t even need a problem to set off a stream of disaster scenarios. Living in the future creates the cortisol infused illusion that we are managing our life and steels us against personal failure.

We keep busy. Staying occupied is a socially sanctioned way of remaining distant from our pain. How often do we hear that someone who has just lost a dear one is “doing a good job of keeping busy”? If we stop we run the risk of plunging into the unbearable feeling that we are alone and utterly worthless. So we scramble to fill ourselves – our time, our body, our mind. We might buy something new or lose ourselves in mindless small talk. As soon as we have a gap, we go on-line to check our e-mail, we turn on music, we get a snack, watch TV – anything to help us bury the feelings of vulnerability and deficiency lurking in our psyche.

We become our own worst critics. The running commentary in our mind reminds us over and over that we always screw up, that others are managing their lives so much more efficiently and successfully. Often we take over where our parents left off, pointedly reminding ourselves of our flaws. As cartoonist

Jules Feiffer puts it: “I grew up to have my father’s looks, my father’s speech patterns, my father’s posture, my father’s walk, my father’s opinions and my mother’s contempt for my father.” Staying on top of what is wrong with us gives us the sense that we are controlling our impulses, disguising our weaknesses and possibly improving our character.

We focus on other people’s faults. There is a saying that the world is divided into people who think they are right. The more inadequate we feel, the more uncomfortable it is to admit our faults. Blaming others temporarily relieves us from the weight of failure.

The painful truth is that all of these strategies simply reinforce the very insecurities that sustain the trance of unworthiness. The more we anxiously tell ourselves stories about how we might fail or what is wrong with us or with others, the more we deepen the grooves – the neural pathways – that generate feelings of deficiency. Every time we hide a defeat we reinforce the fear that we are insufficient. When we strive to impress or outdo others, we strengthen the underlying belief that we are not good enough as we are. This doesn’t mean that we can’t compete in a healthy way, put wholehearted effort into work or acknowledge and take pleasure in our own competence. But when our efforts are driven by the fear that we are flawed, we deepen the trance of unworthiness.

Out of fear, we turn on ourselves and make ourselves the enemy, the source of the problem. We also project these feelings outward and make others the enemy. The greater the fear, the more intense is our hostility. Our enemy becomes the parent who never really respected us, the boss who is preventing us from being successful, a political group that is taking away our power or a nation that threatens our lives. In this “us versus them” world, the unworthiness, the evil, is “out there.”

This is not to say that real threats don’t exist. We can be a danger to ourselves; others can harm us. Yet if we lash out with hatred and violence, if we make war on ourselves or each other, as author Tara Brach writes, we generate more fear, reactivity and suffering. Freeing ourselves from this trance of fear and alienation becomes possible only as we respond to our vulnerability with a wise heart.

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