

Letting Go of the Grudge

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The following process was developed during a series with Jane, a woman who considered herself entangled in an addictive relationship. Her experience of the relationship was that her partner demonstrated a pronounced lack of reciprocity and willingness to communicate. Her sense of being repeatedly used and discarded by him led to intense feelings of sadness and despair. She described herself as addicted because, though she had tried for 8 years to break her attachment to him and move on, she felt completely powerless to leave him or to refuse any of his requests to see her, even though he repeatedly discarded her. Indeed, she believed she could not live without him.

Jane reported that she was plagued by feelings of wanting/not getting. Not only did she experience this in her relationship with this man, but she had experienced it in other contexts as well, at various times throughout her life. She claimed that she often felt that she was “banging her head against the wall;” the more she tried, the less she got what she was after, and the less she was appreciated and acknowledged for her efforts, which then drove her all the more to try again even harder. This pattern has been described by Stanton Peele, a prominent figure in the addiction field, who stated, “The process whereby people desperately pursue some feeling that becomes more elusive the harder they pursue it is a common one ... it is this cycle of desperate search, temporary or inadequate satisfaction, and renewed desperation that most characterizes addiction.”¹

While the process described below certainly has important implications for those people who exhibit dependent and abusive or otherwise addictive behaviors, it also has wider and more general applications. Many people struggle with repetitive behavior patterns which are largely self-defeating and ultimately painful, but continue to repeat themselves despite diligent and sometimes expensive efforts to change.

The entrenched nature of repetitive behaviors has mystified people for many years. Freud observed what he referred to as a repetition compulsion, and the psychiatric field has struggled to understand it ever since. The following formulation offers a way of explaining these behavioral patterns, as well as the power they appear to have over people. More importantly, it provides a method for clearing the pattern at its origin, resulting in measurable behavioral change.

The focus of the work with Jane was to identify what kept her “hooked” -- what kept her tied to a relationship that caused her such misery – what was it that stopped her from pursuing a better relationship in which her needs would be addressed and satisfied? The work that ensued has been developed and refined and is presented here as a process which Jane herself named, **Letting Go of the Grudge**.

The grudge. The grudge is operationally defined as: a) the feeling of resentment which is defined in Webster’s Dictionary as “a feeling of indignant displeasure at something regarded as a wrong, insult, or “injury,” plus b) retaliatory behavior.

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1. Identifying the Grudge

A grudge is usually triggered in situations in which a person is attempting to assert himself, get his needs met or ask for something – any situation in which he is trying to change his environment. It is generally an unconscious communication which is most often carried in the tone of voice and in the physiology. The tone of voice can be variously described in nonsensory-specific language as whining, complaining, entreating, pleading, plaintive, pathetic, self-righteous, entitled, defensive, accusatory, argumentative, spiteful or vengeful. It is manifested in the physiology in facial expressions, gestures and posture, and can be described in nonsensory-specific terms as dejected, helpless, Satir's placating position, pathetic, pouting, sullen or morose. Gross behavioral demonstrations of how a person may be playing out the grudge include depression, procrastination, smoking, over-eating, not eating, over-spending, drinking and drugging, among others.

When a grudge is operating, the person is communicating incongruently. His conscious communication is in the form of a request or a statement geared to have an impact on his world. The hidden unconscious message looks and/or sounds like: "I deserve this and you should already know that and should therefore automatically give it to me." It is sometimes experienced by others as "passive aggressiveness," a "chip on the shoulder," a "fuck-you," a "rescue me," a "you owe me," "stubbornness" or "getting even." Every request is flavored with the unconsciously communicated threat that, "I'll get back at you" for the perceived wrong or injury of not giving him what he needs. This simultaneously incongruent communication has the effect of alienating others.

When Jane was asked what feeling accompanied her pattern of trying, not getting, and then trying harder, she immediately became aware of an internal image of a photograph taken of her as a young girl. She described herself as sitting with feet and legs outstretched, hands hanging limply between her legs, shoulders slumped, head hanging and lower lip and jaw extended. She said that her mother had forced her to have her picture taken and she had not wanted her picture taken. It was remarked that she looked like she had a grievance. She agreed and replied that she had felt angry and resentful and that she had wanted to make her mother regret that she forced her to have her picture taken.

At this point in the process of identifying the grudge, the person may or may not be conscious of the feeling of resentment. He may first be aware of the internal image, as Jane was, or he may have an awareness of words or in some cases, a lack of words. Sometimes, a person has no awareness of a grudge, but you may see the grudge manifested in his physiology. You can anchor that physiology and ask for the feelings that accompany it. Although there is resentment at the root of every grudge, that may not be the predominant feeling of which the person is aware, nor how he originally labeled the feeling that accompanies the grudge. Whatever he first identifies, it is important to make sure that at some point during the process the person does become conscious of a feeling of resentment. It is also important to ascertain that the feeling is resentment rather than powerlessness, which is a feeling that is frequently a consequence of grudge behavior.

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2. Finding the Reference Experience

Ask the person when it was that he first experienced the feeling(s) of the grudge. Quite often, he will identify several experiences. In general, you will choose the earliest experience with which to work, or you may choose to work with the one that you calibrate to have affected him most intensely. It may seem appropriate to allow him to use two or three experiences and to go back and forth between them as he sees fit.

Jane immediately found the reference experience. Although she described other experiences of a similar nature, she was certain that this was the experience from which the grudge originated.

3. The Structure of the Reference Experience

During this step in the process, you will be communicating with the person as he was when he originally lived through the reference experience. Usually, this is a young child. You will need to adjust your language accordingly, remembering that a child has a very limited vocabulary as well as a limited capacity for abstract thinking.

a.) Criterion

Elicit which criterion was being violated in this experience. A simple “Which of your values was being violated?” is often all that is needed to begin this step. When eliciting criteria, the person may respond with the criterion word, a feeling or a behavior. If the response is a feeling or a behavior, you will need to assist him in translating it into the specific criterion word. Keep in mind that you are communicating with a child, and he may require special help with criteria words. You may also want to seek assistance from his adult.” Once the criterion is identified, ask for its flip side or opposite. This is not necessarily a linguistic opposite as in “adequacy/inadequacy,” but may be something more idiosyncratic as in “adequacy/failure.” Sometimes the flip side is elicited with the question “If you don’t have X (criterion) what do you have (get)?”

b.) Complex Equivalence of Criterion

Ask the person what it was, specifically, that he needed in this experience from the other person (s) involved. (The child at the typical age that the grudge is formed usually has an external frame of reference.) This is to determine how he would know if his criterion was being met. The child’s lack of sophistication in language skills may make this step difficult and may require your assistance.

c.) The Grudge Response

Ask the person what he did in response to the violation of his criterion. It is important that you elicit the behavior(s) with which the person responded. Keep in mind that a “non-behavior,” for example silence, is a behavioral response. Identify all of the behaviors involved.

With Jane, the reference experience was structured as follows.

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1. She felt she was not being understood (criterion: understanding) in this experience. For her, the opposite of understanding was dismissal (flip side of criterion). In her experience of the situation, no one was taking the time to understand her thoughts and feelings, and therefore she was dismissed.
2. The way she would have known that she was being understood (complex equivalent of the criterion) was that someone would have explained why it was so important to take the photograph and would have listened to her objections and explanation of how it was so important to her not to have the photograph taken.
3. What she did to make her mother regret this violation (grudge response) was to remain silent and to demonstrate through her withdrawal and in her physiology how miserable she felt.

4. Separating the Grudge Response from the Reference Experience

The information elicited thus far in the process can be used as leverage in this step. The object of this step is to help the child “see” and experience the grudge response as not only ineffective, but actually self-defeating and leading him in the opposite direction of what he needed. In effect, the grudge response guarantees that he will not satisfy the criterion that was being violated in the reference experience.

a.) Picture the criterion Violation in the Reference Experience

Ask the person to make a picture of the reference experience which includes the violation to his criterion. Have him place the picture outside of himself and have him dissociate from it. If he has difficulty making a dissociate picture, assist him in doing so (e.g., manipulate sub modalities).

b.) Picture the Grudge Response

Ask the person to make a picture of the behavioral response he had to the violation he experienced. This is a second picture of the reference experience, but one which occurs in time just shortly after the first picture he generated. Again, have the person dissociate in the same way to this picture as he did to the first picture.

c.) Go Meta to Both Pictures

Ask the person to have the child step out of each picture and look at himself in the picture. Make sure that each child is dissociated.

d.) Observe That the Grudge Response Does Not Get the Criterion Met, but, in fact, Gets Its Opposite

At this point, you can begin to assist the child in seeing and realizing that the grudge response was counter-productive to getting what he needed in the reference experience. You will be directing your

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communication to the child who generated the grudge response (i.e., the child who is standing outside of and watching himself in the second picture).

What is required in this step is that he “see” that the grudge response did not further his efforts to have his criterion met; ensured that he could not, in fact, have the criterion met and led him in the opposite direction of the criterion, that is, in the direction of the flip side of the criterion.

This last point is a critical aspect of the entire process, and one that is important for the child to see. The child’s grudge behaviors elicited the very opposite response of what he needed in order to have the criterion that was violated in the reference experience met. And it set in motion a life-long pattern of getting the opposite of what he wanted at the same time that he was going for what he needed and what was important to him. The grudge essentially takes on a life of its own, separate and unrelated to the reference experience, endlessly repeating itself. It gets to be about “getting back at” rather than getting the originally desired criterion met.

Back to Jane

Jane could see that her grudge behaviors (withdrawal and a physiological demonstration to the world of how miserable she felt) did not, and could not have furthered her efforts to be understood (criterion: understanding). On the contrary, they contributed to her eliciting a response which she experienced as dismissal (opposite of criterion understanding). She saw that she had developed a pattern that continued throughout her life which recreated in her the experience of being dismissed at the very moment she wanted and was attempting to be understood. Her grudge behaviors changed as she grew older, becoming more subtle and sophisticated. But they still contained the elements of withdrawal, ever more icy with age, and a demonstration of her disappointment, disapproval and displeasure.

The grudge appears to operate on an intrapersonal as well as an interpersonal level. Not only does the person manage to continue to set up situations where he experiences the opposite of the desired criterion from other people in his life, he also essentially violates this same criterion himself and experiences the opposite of that criterion at his own hands. Jane spent years recreating the experience of being dismissed by others (opposite of the criterion understanding). She also dismissed her own needs and feelings in the process and continued to remain with and surround herself by people who dismissed her.

What is essential in this step is that the child is able to observe that the grudge response got the opposite of what he wanted. He may feel he got what he wanted in terms of getting back at (or even with) the other person(s) involved. Point out that he did not, however, get what he needed with respect to having his original criterion met or satisfied. Reassure him that he made the best choice available to him at the time, given his age, and that he had no way of knowing that such a self-defeating pattern would develop out of it. Nothing more is required of him up to this point other than noticing the ultimate effects of the grudge. You can move on from this step once you get a congruent acknowledgment of this observation from the child operating the grudge behavior.

One she went meta to her pictures; Jane was quickly able to see how counter-productive as well as self-destructive her grudge response was. Not only did she realize it in regard to the reference

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experience, but also with respect to the grudge as a pattern in her life. It became apparent to her how she dismissed her own feelings when other people violated her criterion (understanding), and she realized how this contributed to having the pattern repeat itself.

5. Letting Go of the Grudge

Once the child sees that the grudge makes it impossible for him to get his originally designed criterion met and actually leads him in the opposite of that criterion, ask him if he is willing to let go of the grudge.

a.) Elicit and Handle Objections

Typically, the child will have objections. It is important to flush out any and all objections and to handle each in turn.

Jane's "child" had several objections to letting go of the grudge. She had no idea what else she could do to communicate how violated she felt. In addition, she found this particular way of being and feeling very familiar and wondered if she would know how to operate in the world without it. ("If I let go of this, who would I be then?") She also felt that letting go would mean that she had been wrong and had failed in her relationships over the past 40 years and that she had been fully responsible for each of the failures.

b.) Access and Install Resources

Objections are usually variations on the theme of not knowing what to do instead of being grudgeful. It is most likely that the adult, just in the process of living his life and accumulating sufficient life history, has already developed the resources and skills that the child would have needed at the time of the creation of the grudge. An awareness of this is usually enough to handle any objections the child might have. If the child had had access to those resources in the reference experience, the outcome would have undoubtedly been very different. Once the appropriate resources are elicited and in place, you are ready to complete the process.

Jane's first objection was handled by pointing out that she had developed some highly refined communication skills over the years (she was a teacher and a psychotherapist) and had experiences in other contexts of successfully handling violations. She knew that with further change work (a change in belief was required) she would be able to communicate directly and appropriately whenever she felt violated. Jane's "child" handled the second objection on her own, realizing that she would rapidly be able to make the adjustment to being in the world without the grudge and that the objection was merely a panic response to the thought of sudden change. She had difficulty handling the third objection, but she was finally able to see that relationships are cybernetic and no one person has control of the whole. She also needed to understand that there are some people who are very dismissive of others and who are unwilling or unable to give equally in a relationship, and that she has a choice about whether or not to spend time with them.

c.) Relive the Reference Experience

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Have the child step back into the first picture he generated of the reference experience. Ensure that the resources are available to the child, and have him relive the experience utilizing those resources. It may be necessary to interrupt the process in order to elicit further resources if he is having difficulty getting through the experience. It is important that he relive the experience in a more satisfying way since he now has resources available to him that enable him to attain the original criterion.

Having come this far through the process, Jane was overcome with feelings of sadness and remorse. She felt very sorry for her “child” who had been in so much pain, with no way to dissipate it. In her mind’s eye, she very gently comforted the child in the photograph. She spent time visiting and listening to her “child,” making sure that she felt understood by her adult self.

d.) Reorganize the Reference Experience

Have the child come back up through his life to the present, reorganizing from this experience as he does so. It is important that this reference experience become generalized in its new version throughout the person’s life. Undoubtedly, different responses, sets of beliefs, perspectives, etc., will evolve if the “new” version of the reference experience succeeds in attaining the original criterion.

Jane was able to quickly return to the present, reorganizing as she did so. She came away with a much greater understanding and a better appreciation for herself as a human being, realizing that she was not “crazy” or “masochistic” as she had often feared. She was able, in a fairly short time, to terminate the relationship that had been such a torment for her.

The structure of the grudge and the manner in which it operates brings up several points that are noteworthy. The grudge appears to keep the person repeating the form of the reference experience with other people he encounters throughout his life. It is kept alive as an in-time experience by the continually perceived violations which are being endlessly created as a consequence of the grudge behaviors. And so it becomes a vicious cycle of wanting, not getting, then trying again more desperately.

It seems that the tremendous force and power of this compulsion to repeat derives from the particular configuration of the criteria involved. Both the violation of the originally desired criterion, as well as the creation of situations where the opposite or flip side of that criterion is experienced, provide a paradoxical and an ironic groundwork for repeatedly getting exactly what you most do not want to get. In many ways, the grudge can be thought of as an organizing principle for a person’s entire life. And in a similar manner, the process of letting go of the grudge can be considered an organizing principle for doing therapy. In addition to freeing a person of a repetitive behavior pattern and providing him with a choice, it also serves as an entry point to a person’s most highly valued criteria, his beliefs, assumptions and perceptual filters – the patterns underlying the weave in the fabric of his reality.

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Summary

1. Identify the grudge.
2. Find the reference experience.
3. Identify the structure of the reference experience.
 - a. Elicit criterion and its flip.
 - b. Determine complex equivalence of criterion.
 - c. Identify grudge response.
4. Separate grudge response from reference experience.
 - a. Picture criterion violation.
 - b. Picture grudge response.
 - c. Go meta to both pictures.
 - d. Observe that grudge response does not get criterion met but, in fact, gets its opposite.
5. Let go of the grudge.
 - a. Handle objections.
 - b. Access and install resources.
 - c. Relive reference experience.
 - d. Reorganize reference experience.

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