

“Their Own Worst Enemies”

Understanding Self-Defeating Dynamics with People from Poverty

By Steve Parese, Ed.D, 2011

Summary: This article explores four self-defeating dynamics common among people from challenging poverty-stricken backgrounds. It then explains the cognitive-behavioral mechanism by which these individuals justify their inappropriate behaviors. Finally, it offers five principles of effective and respectful intervention.

For more detailed information, visit www.WorkinItOut.com, or contact Dr. Steve Parese at SBParese@aol.com.



The Hardest Hit

Recent changes in the U.S. economy have magnified problems which have existed for generations. While the events of the past 6-8 years have impacted the middle class in ways that previous economic downturns have not, the majority of Americans will muddle through this recession. Most of us will continue to heat our homes, feed and clothe our children, repair our cars, etc.

Those hardest hit by this recession are members of what has been called a “permanent underclass.” They struggle not only with poverty, but with issues of homelessness, alcohol and drug addiction, mental health problems, criminal histories, physical injuries or disabilities, limited literacy, and poor vocational skills.

Unlike the working poor of the Depression Era, who often scrimped and saved and worked menial jobs with hopes of a brighter life for their children, many of today’s neediest people seem to have little hope for a better future. They struggle in survival mode on a month to month basis, often without the resources or skills to rise above their circumstances.

Four Self Defeating Dynamics

Yet when opportunities do come their way, many troubled people seem to become their own worst enemies. They defensively sabotage relationships with the very people whose help they most need. Some threaten and bully, or try to manipulate and undermine authorities. Others withdraw into sullen silence, or become so needy and demanding that we find ourselves avoiding them at all costs.

Challenging adults and youth have often experienced a great deal of hardship and disappointment in their lives. As a result, they sometimes react to difficult situations in self-defeating ways, escalating problems rather than solving them. While every person is unique, four behavior patterns are among the most common:

- a. When triggered, Aggressive people often feel a great deal of anger. They have learned to see the world as a dangerous place in which only the strong survive. As a result, they express their angry feelings very directly with loud, intimidating, challenging, even destructive behaviors.

b. Under stressful conditions, Passive Aggressive individuals typically seethe with resentment. They have come to see the world as an unfair place, where it is unwise to show true feelings. As a result, they generally hide negative emotions behind fake smiles, expressing anger indirectly through sarcasm, manipulation, and sneakiness.

c. Avoidant people are frequently depressed, easily overwhelmed by challenging situations. They have learned that the world is an uncaring place, and that they are essentially worthless. As a result, they act out their emotions by withdrawing, making endless excuses, putting in minimal effort, sometimes even harming themselves.

d. When uncertain, Dependent individuals become quite needy. They see the world as an overwhelming place and themselves as too incompetent to survive alone. Therefore, they often become needy, clingy, whiny, and demanding when their needs are not immediately met.

While ultimately self-defeating, each of these patterns allows troubled people to have a sense of control in their lives. Aggressive and passive aggressive individuals influence others through intimidation and manipulation; avoidant and dependent people limit their disappointment by withdrawing or whining.

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In each case, the client unconsciously sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy of rejection and failure. S/he momentarily feels in charge of a difficult situation, though the eventual outcome may be negative. For individuals like these, predictable failure may seem better than uncertain acceptance or success.

Conflict Cycle

The Conflict Cycle is a cognitive-behavioral model created by Dr. Nicholas Long which describes how these self-defeating beliefs fuel negative thinking and behaviors, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of predictable failure.



Imagine the following:

Passive Aggressive Pete is a 45-year-old former felon who has been living for the past several months with his younger brother, who has been pressuring him to look for work. Being passive aggressive, Pete sees the world as an unfriendly place, but has learned that it is unwise to express negative feelings directly.

1. Stressful situation: Pete impatiently waits to interview with a potential employer, a young man barely half his age. He is fidgeting with the uncomfortable collar of his borrowed suit and tie.

2. Internal Thoughts & Feelings: Seething with resentment, Pete thinks:
‘I can’t believe I’m stuck here in my brother’s dumb suit. This kid will think I’m a total schmuck. I can’t get out of this, but I don’t have to like it!’

3. Impulsive Behavior: When asked to explain the gap in his employment history in the early 1990’s, Pete gets defensive and sarcastically responds: “Do I REALLY need to explain myself to a kid like you? What were you -- 7 or 8 years old back then? Please...”

4. Negative Consequences: The interviewer fumbles speechlessly for a few moments, then ends the interview, promising to call him back if they need more information.

Outcome: Despite his failure, Pete manages to turn it around in his head so that his failure is on his own terms. He tells himself: *'See? I knew it would turn out like this. Whatever... I didn't want to work for some punk-@\$ kid anyway!'*

Principles of Respectful Intervention

Even caring adults can become frustrated and overwhelmed by these "inappropriate" behaviors. We may find ourselves rejecting the person, rather than correcting the behavior. However, when we understand these self-defeating dynamics, we gain the insight needed to remain more professional in difficult moments.

Basic principles of effective intervention with this difficult population include:



#1: Build respectful relationships

No significant intervention occurs outside the context of a relationship, especially with people from poverty. Resist the temptation to be judgmental, and allow yourself some empathy for your most challenging customers. Remember that POVERTY IS PAINFUL, and build relationships based on respect for their ability to survive in harsh circumstances.

#2: Be a work-culture interpreter

Understand that people from poverty often view the middle class world of work as an unfriendly foreign land, and themselves as unwelcome tourists. Acknowledge the discomfort of your most defensive customers, and offer important insights into the workings of this new world, especially regarding the hidden or unspoken rules of conduct.

#3: Actively teach and model skills

Provide safe opportunities to learn and practice vital soft skills using a direct teaching approach, a charismatic instructor, and a well-organized curriculum. Learning new interpersonal skills is daunting for adults, especially those accustomed to their own way of doing things. Be open to questions and sensitive to learning anxiety.

#4: Resist authoritarian discipline

Prevent problems whenever possible by establishing mutual goals with customers, and by clearly explaining rules and consequences. If customers violate these rules, avoid acting like an angry or disappointed parent, as this only encourages customers to act like children. Instead, ask for and listen to a brief explanation. Summarize their reasoning, then re-explain the rules.

#5: Reframe work-related problems

Reframe work-related problems in terms of what customers value most, and help them separate home versus work situations. "I know that standing up for yourself is important... but I've also heard you say that you'd do ANYTHING to get your kids back. Before you make a decision, ask yourself this.... what is truly most important to you in the long run?"

For more information about training in this or related topics, visit www.WorkinItOut.com or contact Dr. Steve Parese at SBParese@aol.com.