

Stress Bytes Newsletter

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"WHEN STRESS BITES, BITE BACK!"

THE NEWSLETTER OF ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.
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Are Parent's To Blame?

Our personalities and behaviors are shaped by multiple influences—biological, social, and cultural. I sometimes quip that I'd be out of business if it weren't for parents, sex, and religion. These are extremely powerful influences on the shape of our adult personalities, behavior, and the values we live by. As such, those influences can be positive, negative, or in direct conflict with each other.

A careful examination of past influences will help set a direction and agenda for therapy. That is why when an adult comes for treatment, I routinely take a family history to see how well the family functioned during that person's formative years. It's not surprising to me that most of the people seeking therapy were raised in families or encountered circumstances that were problematic to some degree. If those problems were extremely severe, the client may have few, if any, specific memories of their childhood. Otherwise, people can usually recall significant events from their lives,

sometimes as far back as age of three or younger. If the family system was healthy and functioning optimally, the child and adult will have learned how to handle life's inevitable upsets more gracefully.

One of the purposes of taking a family history is to gauge the context and the onset of a person's current problems and see if they are consciously or unconsciously replaying or continuing a role they assumed as a child—one which no longer serves them well. Another purpose is to ascertain what the person learned as a result of growing up in that particular family with all its attending circumstances.

Was there early experiences of loss due to death, illness, divorce? Abuse? Poverty? Anything to threaten a child's sense of stability, security, or safety? I'm also looking for the possibility of genetic factors that might be contributing to the client's current discomfort, such as a family history of alcoholism, depression, bipolar disorder, suicide,

obsessive compulsive disorder, schizophrenia, or eating disorders.

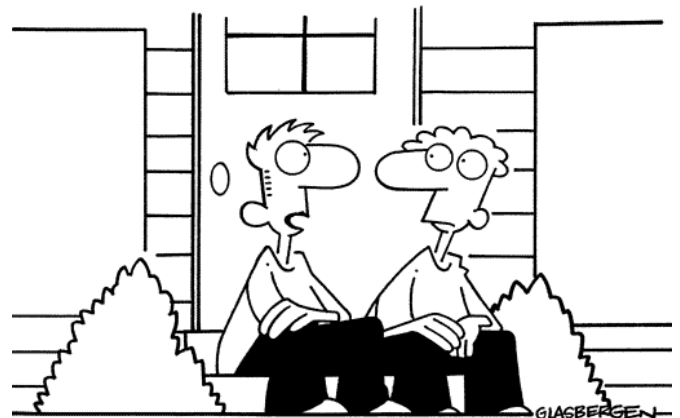
Once I have all this information, I form and test a hypothesis about the way that person learn to view others, themselves, the world, and their place and it.

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"We're at that awkward age...too old to blame our parents for everything and too young to blame it all on the government!"

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What I am NOT looking to do is to blame the parents or give the client an excuse for their current behavior or problem. As adults, to function optimally, we all are responsible for our own thoughts, words, and especially actions. Blaming others and making excuses for one's behavior is a sign of immaturity — not mental health.

We've probably also in the bumper sticker that says, " my children drove me crazy." Too often there's a misconception about therapists, that we blame parents for their offspring's mental illnesses or behavior problems. This is far from the truth. If your roof was leaking, you'd trace the problem back to the point of origin in order to fix it, wouldn't you?

Sometimes people are reluctant to come for counseling because they think, " there's no point dredging up past." That is true: therapy can't change the past, but it can help us not to repeat.

Successful treatment involves identifying past and present influences, conscious and unconscious attitudes, possible resistance to change (or payoffs for NOT changing), before developing a plan of action to deal with it.

FAMILY PROBLEMS THAT MAY AFFECT INDIVIDUAL FUNCTIONING

- ALCOHOLISM/SUBSTANCE ABUSE
- CHRONIC MENTAL ILLNESS
- ABUSE—SEXUAL, PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL
- OVERCONTROLLING OR UNDER-FUNCTIONING PARENTS
- SECRET AFFAIRS
- EMOTIONAL TRIANGULATION
- CHRONIC POVERTY
- NEGLECT

IF THESE PROBLEMS WERE/ARE PRESENT IN YOUR FAMILY, EVERYONE IN THE FAMILY IS VULNERABLE.

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**“Never mind what Susie’s mother said.
Two-parent families are *not* a cult!”**

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