

INNER CONSTRAINTS: SOURCE AND SOLUTION

I believe that every person is innately creative, resourceful, and whole. And that every person knows the experience of acting from this powerful core, even when it is not available all the time. This is not because of who they are, but because of what they have been taught to do or avoid. No matter how old or successful, people will have inner constraints that limit their life. In helping our clients overcome these constraints, we empower them to have healthier and happier lives, and become more effective and inspiring leaders.

People often wonder what these inner constraints actually are and how they can overcome them. To answer some of the questions, we need to take a closer look at the origin and structure of inner constraints. Now, while there are several types of constraints, the most common one is called a trigger. In the remainder of the text, I will purely look at the this type of constraint.

RESPONSE IS NOT RIGHT

We tend to speak of a trigger when an external stimulus generates disproportionate and/or inappropriate emotions that overwhelm a person's ability to make healthy, rational decisions. This limits their ability to act to an often childish, kneejerk response that, while designed to protect, harms himself or the people around him.

In the course of core work, we work with our clients to find their triggers and identify their underlying structure and source. What we notice, is that triggers originate in the outside world in other people's behaviours or specific circumstances. These send negative messages about who we are, which make us feel negative feelings to the point where we need to act to protect ourselves. Schematically, this sequence looks like this:

Event -> Message -> Emotion -> Response

Let's imagine, for example, that your partner is 15 minutes late for dinner. If this is a trigger, her absence could send you the message that 'you are not important' and 'you are unseen', which could generate feelings of, say, worthlessness and being small. To this you might respond by blaming your partner for not loving you enough or by giving him or her the silent treatment for the next few days.

Or imagine that your boss asks you why the report you were working on still isn't finished. If triggered, you could interpret her question as meaning 'you are a disappointment' and 'You are a burden', which in turn can make you feel stupid and unwanted. You might respond to this by calling in sick and not taking her calls, or getting drunk to suppress the crippling fear of getting fired.

In the case of a trigger, there is a mismatch between the triggering event and the emotional response. The emotion can be disproportionate, meaning that its intensity is either too high or too low in relationship to the stimulus, for example feeling bland when confronted with danger or experiencing panic when opening a letter from the tax authorities. The emotion can also be inappropriate, in that it does not reasonably fit with the stimulus, for example feeling shame when receiving a compliment, or feeling fear when a partner shows loving tenderness.

THE TRUTH ABOUT TRIGGERS

Throughout the process of core work we help every client uncover four things about his triggers: First, that the client is not the source of the trigger. Triggers originate within the environment in which the client is brought up, meaning the family system, the education system, the religious system and the cultural system. While growing up, there is a fundamental mismatch between our core self and the outside world. Who we really are, what we truly need and what we are really able to manifest, can conflict with the needs and limitations of the outside world.

For example, the needs of the family system dictate that for the system as a whole to function well, children need to fulfil one of four roles: the Hero (who allows the family to feel good about itself), the Scapegoat (who receives the family's shame so it doesn't need to deal with it), the Lost Child (who hovers around the fringes of the family so the system isn't burdened beyond ability), and finally the Mascot (who is beyond good and bad and brings love and light to the family). Children are gratuitously assigned a role and behave in accordance with it, whether it suits their needs or not (Hint: it doesn't).

The education system, meanwhile, tends to proceed as if all children have the same learning style and interests. Although schools are becoming more flexible and education systems like Montessori adapt to the needs of the child, children still emerge from formal education with feelings of inadequacy and stupidity. Also, the pressure to perform – for the parent's pride and to 'succeed' in life – lays an incredible burden on the child, who is judged for its grades rather than loved for who he is.

Religion, meanwhile, does its own share of sending children the message they are not okay. In some religions, people are born as evil sinners rather than as the innate good beings they are.

Other religions teach that sexuality outside of wedlock is bad, that women are lesser beings and that people with some sexual orientations are defective. In more extreme cases, religion becomes the breeding ground for intolerance and hate, which spills out into the world as verbal or physical violence.

Finally, the cultures in which we are born prevent us from being ourselves freely and fully. Every society has its own Scapegoat, which is a group that is marginalised and ridiculed. Society lays down social norms – for example gender roles - and rejects people who choose to live outside of them. More generally speaking, our cultures determine what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, for example with regards to our state of mind. Madness, for example, is culturally defined, meaning that some societies will embrace mental states that others reject. Cultures also have clear rules for how emotions are expressed, such as grief, lust and anger.

THREE LIMITATIONS

Now, these four systems are inherently neither good nor bad, and they can do a lot to help us transform from helpless child into empowered adult. However, these systems are naturally limited and those limits hamper us in three ways. First, these systems force us to tolerate behaviours that are not good for us, but which as children we are unable to change. We might have to tolerate a parent’s anger, mediocre teachers, and a society high expectations.

Second, these systems inevitably reject some aspects of ourselves because they are unable to see and bless it without judgement. At home, we might need to hide our sadness, in school we may need to censure our playfulness in order to perform, in church we may need to suppress our true sexuality, and most cultures reject body shapes that do not meet insane standards of beauty.

Finally, the systems in which we grow up place burdens on us, which we need to carry for fear of being rejected or unloved. At home, we may be burdened with the task of taking emotional care of a parent or the responsibility to be strong or invisible. In school, we may be burdened with the need to perform. Religions may burden women with the duty to produce offspring or serve men without question. And many cultures burden us with the demand of having a beautiful body or successful careers.

So instead of being protected, taught, guided, validated, seen, blessed, encouraged, and unconditionally loved and accepted, as children we were blamed, abandoned, abused or berated by the people and systems that were tasked with our protection. This sometimes huge difference between what we needed and what we got is the source of triggers and our clients

learn that they did not cause them. Triggers don't mean they are bad or defective, they mean they suffered the limitations of the people and systems they depended on.

In the process of core work, we cover all four systems but tend to focus on the family one in particular because it has the most impact. The role of our primary caregivers, whom we shall refer to as parents for the sake of simplicity, is crucial and, as most triggers will show, damaging to us in spite of their intentions to the contrary. For those clients who commit to core work believing they emerged from childhood unscathed, it can be hard to realise that their parents were, in fact, the source of some of their inner constraints.

Some clients resist this iconoclasm in the early stages of core work and it is our task to help the client face reality: my parents did not give me what I needed, I was hurt as a result and this still influences my life. It's probably not what the Bible meant when it said "and the truth will set you free" but it did have a point. The myth that our childhood was perfect protects us from the painful realisation that it wasn't, but also keeps us dumb and docile. If we are to wake up, we need to open our eyes and truly see.

IT'S NOT TRUE

The second thing the client needs to learn about his triggers, is that the messages they send are untrue. In the first few years of life, a child knows himself only in the way he is mirrored by his parents, so anything the parent rejects in the child, the child will reject in himself. The child also interprets what is done to him as the truth about himself. "If Mommy hits me, that can only mean I am bad."

Such conclusions become core beliefs that the child has about himself (e.g. I am worthless), relationships (e.g. I don't deserve to be loved) or the world in general (e.g. I don't belong). They occupy a central – and hidden - position in a person's hierarchy of beliefs, from which place they wield tremendous power. These core beliefs can have a crippling effect on the client's sense of self, motivation, relationships, decision-making, emotional wellbeing and ability to practice selfcare.

The third thing the client needs to learn about his triggers, is that they bypasses the rational, powerful, adult self and target the child part within. This is a symbol for the client's true self or soul, which in the course of core work we describe using the MBTI typing system. The messages target the child part and not the adult part and the emotions are the child's instead of the adult's. This makes triggers an echo of the past rather than the truth about the present, meaning it's not the client of today that is defective, but his inner most part that was damaged and hidden.

This distinction also opens the way for the adult client to come to the aid of the child part, and protect his boundaries, meet his needs, comfort him in times of stress and acknowledge his innate beauty and goodness. Not needing to invest so much energy and attention in his protection, the client becomes more grounded, peaceful, compassionate and self-confident and the core self is given space to show itself. This grants the client fuller access to his hidden potential and the gifts contained with his core self.

DEFENCE SYSTEM

These three realisations – triggers originate from outside the client, the messages and feelings are not a reflection of the core self and the client needs to take care of his inner Child – speed up the client's transformation. It shows him he is not defective, but the victim of a poisonous pedagogy, to borrow a phrase from Alice Miller, that deeply wounded him. It also shows him that, as an adult, he is able to heal himself and embark on a process of personal transformation.

Which is where the fourth realisation comes in, which is that the client has an in-built defence system that jumps into action when the emotional pain of a trigger becomes too big. In core work, we describe this defence system using the Enneagram typing system, of which there are nine types. For example, Enneagram Threes will project what the Parent wants to see and achieve success in order to be loved. Enneagram Nines will surrender their identity and will for the sake of maintaining harmony. Enneagram Eights will fight to avoid being helpless, Fives will dissociate so as not to feel their feelings and Sevens will escape from bleak reality into joyful experiences.

These strategies offer temporary relief, but do not fix the underlying problem. Instead, the child will be repeatedly exposed to the same negative messages and feelings, which strengthens the limiting beliefs they engender. As the client grows up, he diligently practices the patterns of thoughts, feeling and action associated with each specific Enneagram type. These patterns become the foundations of our inner and outer life, influencing how we parent, relate, work and deal with life's many curveballs. Over time, we end up deeply identifying with what essentially are coping strategies with limited effect and a high cost.

This leads to a narrow, negative and often false sense of self. For example, Threes may identify with their success, Eights may identify with their anger, and Fours may identify with their drama. This identification may not seem problematic, particularly when the Enneagram strategies provide us with a level of protection and offer residual benefits such as success, power,

admiration, fun, the moral high ground or peace of mind. Some clients may simply not see a problem in being defended, as it has served them relatively well in life.

LIMITED AND LIMITING

However, Enneagram strategies are limited and limiting: they rarely offer the best solution and prevent the adult from developing better alternatives. Living life only from your Enneagram is like renovating a house with only a hammer: the nails won't be a problem, but sawing the planks and painting the walls will be. Intimate relationships, conflict, parenting, loss, career progress and other people's demands require a broader range of responses than our Enneagram type provides.

Ultimately, Enneagram strategies bring about the very thing they are designed to avoid. A Nine can ignore an unpaid bill until he finds the debt collector towing his car. A Six who is afraid to leave a crappy job can become abrasive towards his boss out of frustration and get fired. A Three refusing to abandon a lost cause at work may persevere right into a burnout. A One teacher can demotivate her students by only emphasising what is wrong. And an Eight's need to control the environment can alienate him from the people he needs the most.

So at a more fundamental level, core work involves showing the client that some of his most cherished truths are illusory, that he is sleepwalking through life and that what he shows of himself is either untrue or a mere fragment of what he can be. We all emerge from childhood shackled by limiting beliefs, sabotaged by our Enneagram strategies and alienated from some of our most precious qualities, needs and desires, as described by our MBTI type.

SOURCE OF SUFFERING

This chasm between our essential nature and our personality, between our expressed reality and surpassed potential, is a source of human suffering. If we cannot live wholeheartedly and truthfully, meaning in line with the inner demands of our core, we will express this as depression, anger, frustration and other signs of inner distress. Some people tolerate this state for most of their life, not knowing it is possible to change what they believe.

Which is why few people actually commit to core work. Their lives may not be perfect and they may be repeating the same mistakes, but at the end of the day they make do and believe that their way is as good as it will ever get. Some people do not know what they miss, others are too scared to enter the dark forest of their core or tell themselves that they are beyond hope and help. And quite a few people go around life believing at an unconscious level they deserve the crap they get.

There are a few reasons why people do eventually pursue an inner journey. The most common one is that the pain is simply too big. These clients come to us when their life is falling apart, when their addictions have worn them out, when their most essential relationships have failed and when their defence strategies have taken their toll. When they have tried ignoring, blaming, trying harder and filling the hole with substances, they come to the conclusion that nothing has helped and they need to go inside and confront the truth.

The second reason is that something inside the client is waking up. It may be a small voice asking whether this is all there is or a loud calling to go on an inner journey of awakening. Some clients realise that, even though the status quo is bearable, more is possible for them in life and that it is worthwhile investing in a process of inner change. Committing to core work is often first step on a Hero's Journey.

WORTHWHILE INNER WORK

As a therapist, it is my responsibility to guide clients on this perilous, yet exciting journey. I show them how to release themselves from the burden of childhood, overcome the limits of their Enneagram type, and create space for the essential parts they had to suppress. I also teach them to protect their own integrity and take care of their own needs in a healthy and adult way.

The process of core work is worthwhile. By the end, clients feel more at peace, wiser, more confident, more accepting and more compassionate. They see themselves as fundamentally good, create space for their desires and needs, protect their integrity and increasingly realise their hidden parts. Many clients report feeling a growing sense of spirituality and the need to live life in the service of a higher goal.

When, after reading this, you are curious about the possibilities of deep inner work, contact me for an introduction or check the Life Foundation and Leadership Foundation programmes.