

# 6

## Dilemmas

Part of adaptation to environment involves developing a 'persona' – the safe-enough mask we present to the world. Sometimes our choices about how to 'be' become polarised. Our ways of being and thinking are reduced to 'either/or' or 'if ... then'. When we become lopsided and live at one end of the pole of the dilemma, it is usually because what we see as the alternative is much worse. If we have recognised being in the 'doing as others want' trap, we might also recognise the dilemma about feelings – either I keep them bottled up, or I risk making a mess. In dilemmas there is no middle way, no grown-up greys!

We choose the pole of the dilemma which is most comfortable for our 'survival' self, thus creating part of our persona, or 'mask'.

The following are widely held dilemmas in being. Read through and see if any of these apply to you.

### The 'perfect or guilty' dilemma

This dilemma is dominated by the need for perfection. In striving to be perfect we are trying to live up to an image of what we feel is expected of us, originating in our early environment. Being perfect might mean getting everything right all the time and each one of us will have a different model of what is 'perfect' for us. It might involve standards of excellence in work, behaviour, morals, lifestyle, accomplishments. Perfection might mean having to climb one mountain after another; it can mean trying never to have a cross thought about anyone.

In this dilemma, if we are not striving to follow the learned pattern of perfection we feel guilty, and the gap left by not striving makes us angry and dissatisfied. Because the dilemma is based on a false choice about how to be, it carries with it the weight of feeling we have to be a slave to a system that is not fully our own, and we become angry at the imposed restriction. Even the external 'success' that our perfect standards bring about does not relieve us.

Many people live with this dilemma for years, striving for often impossible standards and unaware that this is based on a false presumption. However

## Traps

When you find yourself alone in a sulk or feeling badly because this fear you have has forced you to withdraw, notice the feelings you have and their nature. Keep a diary of them.

How angry do you feel? What are your ways of coping with anger or expressing it? Have you buried old anger?

How long have you felt like this? Was there a time when you felt that you had hurt someone? Who was this person? What did you either do or say that you feel was harmful to them? How old were you then? What were you feeling at this time? See if you can put words to the feeling. Did you feel angry, shamed, upset, abandoned? What has happened to those feelings now?

Ponder on how you carry your own hurt. What is its nature? How do you express it?

Take a piece of paper and crayons or paints, and draw or paint what you fear coming out of you. Don't censor it as you do with people. Just let the images form. Share them with someone you trust if you can, and see what they might be telling you about the fear involved in hurt.

## Aggression and assertion

Many of us are helped out of the 'fear of hurting others' trap by a reappraisal of aggression and assertion. We may have been taught that to speak our own mind or stand up for ourselves is aggressive, and are put down for appearing this way. But aggression is part of our survival and we need to acknowledge its force and power. We can then claim our right to a relationship with it, as well as the right to choose how to express it. Mindless aggression leads to violence and the loss of power that often triggers it. Natural aggression becomes *assertion* when we use it to name or speak out about something important to us, and to stand up for our rights. It becomes our way of 'singing on the boundary', as the birds do in claiming their territory.

high the external achievement, it brings neither joy nor satisfaction; in fact there is often a sense of irritation and feeling trapped, and a nagging sense of meaninglessness, and something missing. When you are caught up in this dilemma you have to go right on trying to be perfect, regardless of any success, until the dilemma is revised.

Perfectionists caught up in this dilemma tend to live on their nerves. If they try to be perfect they feel depressed and angry; if they don't try to be perfect they feel guilty, depressed and angry. Sometimes it is an admired and strict authoritarian role model in early life that stimulates the creation of this dilemma. The old saying: 'If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing properly' can be useful, but if it becomes too rigid and carries an unconscious message, 'You're nothing if you're not trying to be perfect', then we can become lopsided. (See Part Five, 'Making the Change'.)

Another way in which this dilemma can develop is in an environment where the person only feels safe if self-enforced models of perfection are brought about.

MARY was the youngest daughter of a factory worker. She was beaten and abused by her brother (eight years older) and teased at school for being clever and different. There were no books in her house, but she craved the life she escaped to in the safety of their pages. So she allowed her brother, who found ways to get books, to barter with her for them. She survived this deprived background by holding her feelings inside and never showing them or asking for anything, and by learning to despise the environment which she called 'in the grime'. Her way out of the grime was to work obsessively hard in order to get above those who persecuted her.

Her coping mechanism worked and she is now a successful doctor, but for years she has had to struggle with the depression caused by this dilemma. Her fear was that if she did not try to be perfect she would slide back into the grime, and she had been unable to develop a place that did not involve this slavery to perfection. Slowly she is separating herself from the rigidity of this dilemma – which also cuts her off from other people – and is starting to express not only what she really feels but also how to be content with 'good enough'. She has surprised herself with how philosophical she can be.

### Questionnaire: The 'perfect or guilty' dilemma

In which of the following ways do you try to be perfect:

In my home:

- ☐ I have to be always cleaning and decorating
- ☐ everything has to be in its place

*(Continued)*

### Getting off the symptom hook

*persecuting control* in relation to *persecuted/terror* dominated by the terrorist in both political and street life.

The outward expression of control may also tell us something about the nature of our struggle with internal invasions of feared violence. Any early influence which restricted our natural growth, which was against us rather than for us, will be internalised and as such will carry on restricting us from inside in later life. We will continue to believe there is something frightening that must be controlled at all costs. We may have experienced these restrictions as frightening episodes of anger or temper, as an overemphatic concentration upon morals, or in the dogmatic insistence on 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour that is characteristic of religious fervour. We may also experience it via the obsessional or repetitive behaviour of those around us.

THEA was adopted by a couple who had already adopted a boy two years older. She spent her first few months with her biological mother, then time with her adoptive parents, and then her first Christmas with her biological mother. She was officially adopted when she was nearly two. Her adoptive family emphasised being in control, especially of anger and 'tantrums'. When she was three she remembers her grandmother saying, 'Put your anger in the wardrobe'. Her life was very contained, both by her tight family unit and by a strict school where little self-expression was encouraged and any kind of risk-taking severely restricted. At sixteen, on moving to a different school, Thea discovered an aspect of the world that felt 'wicked, naughty, dirty, sexy and very out of control' and which she was ill-equipped to handle.

Since this time, when she broke down under the strain, she has been bravely learning to cope with this different and difficult aspect of outside life triggering inside feelings, which threatens her safety. One of the ways she copes with strong feelings, especially negative feelings, and with her fear of sex and physical closeness, is to make sure that everything in her house is kept very clean. She may wipe over her doorknobs three or four times when she comes in from work, even though she knows that no one has been there during her absence. She explains:

'If everything is in its place and tidy then I feel I can let myself off the hook and relinquish my obligations. I get cross if people mess up my order. If my bag isn't tidy and I haven't tidied up before I leave the house, then I'm all at sea and things will go wrong.'

Thea sees her 'perfect control or perfect mess' dilemma as rooted in her early life's anxieties about being sent away or orphaned if she were not very good, which meant in her family being neat and controlled, especially with her feelings. This also kept her in a dependent position: 'If people feel I need them they'll stay around more than if they had a free choice.' She feels that if she gave up being dependent people might make decisions over which she would have no control.

Thea is an attractive, very intelligent woman who has done a great deal to separate herself from the early survival modes that helped her get through very difficult beginnings then, but which can sometimes get in the way of her



current relationships now. She bravely monitors how she feels when the need to clean is at its most pressing, and these occasions are usually connected with a time of transition or change which threatens her security. She has recently taken the huge step of committing herself to a relationship, where her fears of closeness, of sex and of being out of control of what she most needs are challenged, and she is managing well. She has been able to express many of her hidden feelings about being adopted, and her sense that 'anyone could have picked me up', and the helplessness this puts her in touch with. She is working towards the possibility of freeing herself from the tyranny of 'perfect control' in the future by feeling more loved and 'allowed' as a person.

If you recognise yourself in this dilemma, make a list of all the ways in which you keep in 'perfect control'. You may not be aware of some of the ways immediately, but let your awareness of this problem stay with you and inform you as you go about your everyday activities.

Two of the most frequent ways of keeping in perfect control involve continuous cleaning and checking external situations. A young man came to see me because he had to get up three or four times in the night in order to re-clean his bathroom. When I asked him to describe exactly how he did the cleaning, he began to recite his ritual in great detail. Suddenly, as he was describing how he pulled on 'his pink rubber gloves', he exclaimed, 'I know ... it's all the dirt inside myself I want to clean out, isn't it?' This sudden piece of insight allowed him to work back to the core issue of what he considered the 'dirt inside himself' to be. In unravelling how this idea had originated, he was able to release himself from the powerful internal terror of dirt which was manifest by his external, ritualistic cleanings, and which was threatening his everyday life and work.

Use the questionnaire to identify any issues that apply to you in any way. Write them down in your notebook.

### **Questionnaire: The 'perfect control' or 'perfect mess' dilemma**

Cleaning obsessively (more than is appropriate):

- ☐ going over the same area more than twice after it is already clean
- ☐ cleaning something before you sit down, eat, go to bed or relax in any way
- ☐ cleaning at inappropriate times

Checking obsessively (more than is appropriate):

- ☐ gas
- ☐ taps
- ☐ electricity

*(Continued)*

### Getting off the symptom hook

- ☐ windows
- ☐ valuables (jewellery, money, books, etc.)
- ☐ things needed for work outside the home or journeys
- ☐ children
- ☐ telephone

Record in your notebook how many times you have to check your 'perfect control' rituals. The next time you feel compelled to move into a 'perfect control' mode, spend a few moments allowing your feelings to surface. Do not worry how vague they may seem to be. Do this on as many occasions as you can. When you have a sense of the feelings underneath the 'perfect control' mode, feel into what it is you are trying to achieve through the method of control. Are you:

- ☐ keeping things safe (later on ask yourself, what things or feelings)?
- ☐ keeping something out?
- ☐ saving something?
- ☐ bestowing a blessing?
- ☐ other?

What do you most fear will happen if you do not check, clean or control in any other way?

- ☐ flooding
- ☐ invasion
- ☐ dirt
- ☐ contamination
- ☐ ruin
- ☐ disaster
- ☐ chaos
- ☐ annihilation
- ☐ death
- ☐ unbearable stress

What is it in you that tells you whether you would or wouldn't be able to cope, or eventually ask for help in some way, if any of the above were to happen?

### *exercise*

Try to imagine how you would cope. What would you do? What could you do? Have you got an image of how others cope with such situations? If you have difficulty in imagining any coping strategies, it may be that it is difficult for you to imagine anything other than the 'distaste' itself. Is there a voice

in you which tells you that you would be unable to cope? Or a voice which informs you that you would be helpless or unable to enlist help? One of the most useful positive thoughts to develop is the idea that, whatever happens, you will either find a way of coping, or you will ask for help. This is all you can expect to ask of yourself.

### The 'greedy or self-punishing' dilemma

This dilemma is related to our basic needs and desires, which have, in some way, been thwarted from an early age. Left with a sense that we are not fully entitled to anything freely for ourselves, when we approach something we need or desire we inevitably feel as if we are being greedy. To cope with this we deny our needs because the pressure of the guilt about feeling greedy is unbearable, and we end up being miserable and punishing ourselves. This dilemma is very painful, and at its core lies our struggle to cope with early deprivation. Whichever end of the dilemma we inhabit, the experience is equally painful, and so often ritualistic to-ing and fro-ing from one end to the other seem a way to cope.

One of the most symbolic ways in which this dilemma finds expression is in people who have problems with eating, sex, gambling, spending money, or any other ritual attached to something important which symbolises having our needs met. The person suffering from bulimia, for example, will allow themselves a certain amount of food. If he or she goes beyond this limit, the solution is to vomit up the residue or take laxatives. Sometimes the self-imposed limit is very small, and the sufferer will feel in danger of becoming fat and being seen as out of control and greedy. Such is the terror that she or he enacts the self-punishing end of the dilemma by getting rid of the food. Equally, someone with a gambling compulsion will be able to have money for only a short time before he or she risks losing it. Some people will allow themselves to spend money on buying things, feel immediately greedy and have to store them away, never to be worn or used. Others may have decided that their needs are simply never going to be met, so they will deny all need or desire or pleasure and 'give themselves away' to anyone, being sexually profligate or exchanging body and sex for money and power.

Sometimes we may feel that the sense of deprivation inside is becoming unbearable and we desperately have to grab what we can in an attempt to fill the place that feels so empty and hurt. We may go on a binge of some sort – for example, eating or spending – or we may assume a compulsive pattern, grabbing at something or someone whom we hope will fill the emptiness. We may get into debt, try to resist paying for things. (When you feel deprived inside it's hard to give out without resenting it somewhere in your being. This frequently expresses itself unconsciously, perhaps as hoarding, appearing 'mean', or by attaching an exaggerated anticipation to what other people may or may not give, which always disappoints.) But being torn in this way makes

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us feel miserable, and the misery may be turned against oneself. When someone in the grip of anorexia nervosa feels longing and hunger of an emotional as well as a physical kind, they feel such terror that punishment through strenuous exercise, or starving for days, soon follows. Other people are compelled to harm themselves by cutting, stabbing or damaging their bodies in some way.

This dilemma carries with it both a social stigma and a religious one, and thus the internal dilemma becomes more absolute as it is judged harshly by the moral tone of society or the Church. Greed is seen as a sin that deserves punishment. Perfectionism and high achievement are admired and encouraged. It may be that the truer source of greed comes, in fact, from the compulsive perfectionist's desire for bigger and better without reflection on need or appropriateness, rather than from the obviously equally compulsive strivings of someone labelled greedy by the exposure of their needs inside. Once basic needs are met – by each of us recognising them for what they are, by having another recognise and name them, by a relationship with another, or by putting energy into something where our needs are satisfied and we are nourished – then the heat is taken out. Greed becomes recognised as need.

ROSE started to look at her life closely when she realised that her spending of money had got out of hand. She would see something very beautiful, usually an antique, and couldn't resist buying it. She was very afraid of her husband's anger when he found out, because he said things she didn't want to hear: about her being out of control, greedy, irresponsible, wanting things 'above her status and income'. She knew there was some truth in all of this, but she felt 'carried away by my tastes'.

Rose had been sexually abused, first by her father between the ages of ten and fifteen and then by her uncle from fifteen to eighteen, when she managed to get away to university. She came to see that, largely because of her secret and forbidden relationship with her father (which her mother refused to believe, and indeed made Rose feel dirty and guilty for revealing), she had linked all of her self-expression, her appetites and her desires and excitement, with guilt, shame and a sense that they were forbidden. She had married a man who helped her 'control' her appetites because he was 'strong, determined, disciplined' and very good at controlling money, which was his specialist field.

For a while she felt safe, that her appetites and tastes were under lock and key. But because she needed her instinctual nature and her appetites to allow her to express herself fully, they had to emerge somehow. (Seeds want to grow.) They tended to emerge guiltily, as in some of her compulsive eating bouts, and in her need to keep lovely 'delicacies' waiting in the fridge. And they started emerging through her compulsion to spend money on lovely things. The way in which her feelings and instincts surfaced frightened her, and at first served to refuel her old learned and mistaken belief that her appetites and tastes were dangerous and out of control and would lead to disaster.

Rose was a wise professional woman who soon talked things over with her husband. got her own separate bank account, and began working on how her

life had been controlled by the 'greedy or self-punishing' dilemma. One of her problems listed on the chart we made was: 'Pleasure, excitement, appetite, forbidden'. The aim was 'To free myself from the effect of past abuses and their grip. To allow a fuller range of feeling.' In the letter she wrote at the end of her therapy she says: 'The short therapy has been a wonderful vehicle for my release, and it showed me some of the ways I can manage the chaos that results from that release.' In allowing herself to get in touch with her instinctual nature she was able to revalue her creative self, which had originally expressed itself through music until it had been put away, like all other instincts, when she became the scientific professional. She was also able to have a much fuller relationship with her husband, no longer assigning him the 'controller' role, and she has recently experienced the 'healing' joy of a second child.

Concentrate on the next questionnaire and become more aware of your needs during your daily experience. As we build a picture of what you would most like to change we will also be building a picture of what you most need and desire in your life – something you may not have thought about. As well as actively changing old attitudes that are now redundant, we are also rebuilding a sense of who we are and the ingredients of what our 'seed' self most needs for its growth and development.

### Questionnaire: The 'greedy or self-punishing' dilemma

In what ways do you experience yourself as greedy:

- ☐ with food?
- ☐ with money?
- ☐ with possessions?
- ☐ with wanting more contact with others?
- ☐ with sex?
- ☐ do I take on more than I need or can finish?
- ☐ do I 'hoover up' experiences, books, others, time, events?

What kinds of feelings are behind your experience of greediness?

- ☐ hunger
- ☐ exasperation
- ☐ need
- ☐ desperation
- ☐ hope
- ☐ hate
- ☐ love
- ☐ longing
- ☐ waiting

*(Continued)*

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- ☐ anticipation
- ☐ fretfulness
- ☐ shame
- ☐ anxiety
- ☐ emptiness

How do you cope with your experience of greed?

- ☐ Swinging from one end of the dilemma to the other?
- ☐ Living permanently at one end?

Have you ever talked about it to anyone?

What do you most hope will be resolved by this dilemma?

How much is your body involved in this dilemma?

What is your image of your body? Draw, look in the mirror, show a friend.

Get in touch with the body that contains these feelings, carrying them out for you in a literal way. (See Chapter 13, 'Techniques for working through the process of change'.)

Draw a picture of the hunger. What is it like, what does it need?

What do you consider are the basic needs of a human body?

Make a list of your basic needs as they come along. Include warmth, care, holding, rest, sleep, safety.

## The 'busy carer or empty loner' dilemma

Most of us are familiar with the person who faithfully and selflessly devotes all of his or her life to others, either to a parent or family, or in serving a household or company way beyond the accepted call of duty. They may end up, either in retirement or after the death of the parent or relative they have devoted their lives to, feeling lonely, anxious, unsure what to do with the rest of their lives and fearful of feeling out of control. Many people do serve others and find deep fulfilment without being caught in this dilemma, but here we are looking at those who, unless they are involved in looking after others and keeping up with their expected role of carer and server, suffer anxiety. It's as if our identity is built upon the premise that we are lost without our job of serving the expectations of others.

This dilemma often originates from an early environment where we are encouraged to look after others, be involved in decisions of the adult world and receive a lot of self-worth and praise for doing so. Many people are relieved to find they fit in, and can play a role that is useful. And if there is uncertainty about going out into the world alone, making a career or leaving a comfortable job to do something more risky or courageous, they will be glad to settle for a role where they become indispensable and their worth is

Out of this comes the need to be needed. It is gratifying to be needed, especially if the need is something we can supply. In being needed we often don't have to attend to our own needs, which may feel terrifying. We may assume a 'holier than thou' pose, adopting a self-righteous and superior demeanour to save our inferior sense of self. If we are doing something worthwhile and selfless, many ways of life encourage this 'service not self' attitude. In communities where this is practised by everyone and there is more of a chance of everyone getting some of their needs met, this may work. But it is when our identities are caught up in believing we are nothing if not in the service of others that this dilemma becomes a tyranny.

When we are engaged in looking after another and their needs, and have devoted much of our energy to this (the person may not be ill or needy) we feel OK, and the reason for the dilemma is borne out. It is only when something happens (we are bereaved or told we are not needed any more), that we come face to face with our fears of coping with our *own* lives, and in particular with our own emotional and inner lives.

SALLY was the sort of person who could be guaranteed to look after everyone and their problems. She was a jolly, large, cheerful person, for whom nothing was ever too much trouble. She had four children, an unemployed husband, and worked as a nurse. In addition, she reported that she ran the Girl Guides and Sunday School, and took in animals and babies when people went away. She filled every moment of her life with other people's needs.

During her forties Sally began to get irritated with people, to snap at them and then feel remorseful and guilty. She began to get depressed, and put everything down to the 'change', until one Saturday, when her husband and all the children were away and she wandered around a shopping centre wondering what to do with herself.

'I sat down on one of the benches and looked at all the people milling around me. They all seemed to have somewhere to go, be doing something important. I saw my life as being one mad rush to get things done, and what for? I felt suddenly very frightened, horribly lonely, and I just started to cry, I couldn't stop'.

This crisis brought Sally into counselling, where she needed to address her dilemma, be able to express some of her needs and understand that her irritation and bursts of anger towards others was not a 'madness' but the result of denying her own individual life and reality for so long.

Many people live with this dilemma in their relationships. Many women, particularly, have learned to be the carer, the one who thinks all around another, anticipates, who knows what the other – husband, partner, family, group – needs and wants, and who knows how to provide it. Many such women receive an early training from their mothers in the role of serving and giving, and in

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how to respond to another's needs without ever thinking of their own. From this way of being we absorb a lot of good feeling and security, and find a useful place in the community. But if our responding to another's needs is not based on a solid sense of ourselves – who we are, what our needs are – our own desires will surface in some uncontrollable way, making us feel guilty and angry. In *Understanding Women*, Louise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1985) write:

A woman must learn to anticipate others' needs. Part of her social role as caregiver and nurturer of others involves putting her own needs second. Yet her needs do not remain merely secondary but often become hidden ... for if she herself does not have an emotional caregiver to turn to there is an imbalance in the giving. A woman then carries deep feelings of neediness.

Over the years I have met several men who became carers in a different way from their women counterparts. The men expressed their caring through being good providers and by making sure their partners never needed for anything materially. They tended to choose partners who they secretly viewed as 'weak' and in need of looking after. Although this initially had the benefit of caring for the man's lonely 'inner female' self through its projection onto the partner, ultimately these relationships would become very stuck. The female partner would become infantilised into being the weak needy one who couldn't grow; the men remained in their loneliness, no nearer to claiming their neglected, lonely female selves or child selves.

Many people who have been busy carers for a long time have admitted that secretly they hoped that if they gave out enough to others, those others would turn round and recognise their own needs and desires and return in full the affection, attention and caring they had received. Many busy carers are well defended. If giving out is based on a denial of need and the underlying message is 'I don't need anything', or, 'I don't matter', it is very hard to receive. Others are often rebuffed because carers cannot bear to think of themselves as having needs. It's hard to reach them, because they feel invaded and vulnerable if their own needs are discussed. Perhaps the ultimate fear for carers is that if they really show how they feel inside the outpouring would be unstoppable because the depth of feeling and need is so great.

### **Questionnaire: The 'busy carer or empty loner' dilemma**

How much does the 'busy carer or empty loner' dilemma operate in your life?

How much of your daily energy is tied up with caring for others?  
100%, 75%, 50%, 25%, 10%

How much of your caring for others is caught up in the 'having to please' trap?

100%, 75%, 50%, 25%, 10%



When people question your role as someone who gives out to others all the time, do you answer:

- ☐ 'I've no choice.'
- ☐ 'No one else would do it.'
- ☐ 'I can't let anyone down.'
- ☐ 'People need me. I can't help that.'
- ☐ 'I like to feel I'm doing something useful.'

How much of your living is postponed until tomorrow? Do you put off things by saying 'I'll do this when ...'?

List any things that you really want to do but daren't while you are in the role of main carer?

How often do you feel you can call upon the help of others to share your burdens, or do you feel you have to do it all yourself all of the time?

How do you spend any time off? Doing things for others or doing something you really like?

How much can you recognise feeling anxious and lonely if people aren't expecting you to do things?

Do you feel guilty when you think about not being a busy carer?

Do you label wanting to do things for yourself as selfish? Do you want to be a selfless person?

What are your dreams of the kind of lifestyle you would like to have?

### *exercise*

Feel into your loneliness or emptiness the next time you are about to fill it by caring for others. How does it feel? Can you paint or draw what you feel? Does it remind you of anything? How might you develop this image?

If you recognise that you are caught in this dilemma and fear feeling out of control if your life and identity are not shaped by caring for others, spend some time thinking about how it came about in your life. What is really at stake now in terms of claiming the right to your own life? You still have gifts for caring and giving. These will not go away. If you can develop a firmer sense of yourself, so that you can use your free time creatively, your skills at caring will be all the more nourished. You will be freer to give, and your giving will be enriched. You will not feel so out of control, but will have a greater sense of appropriate boundaries. Others will respect you more and demand less, because you are in firmer control of who you are and just how much you have to give out.

Many people realise that although they have given out all their lives they have actually received very little thanks or regard for it. This may cause bitterness and

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anger. Depression and a sense that it really wasn't worth it soon follow. Some people may feel their lives have been wasted when they look back on years spent in the service of others at the expense of their own development.

I do not encourage individual development at all costs, but I do discourage lopsidedness. People who are centred, comfortable with themselves, who know how to say 'no' without the accompanying guilt, and have a quiet sense of themselves, are free to give with a joy that is beyond price. If we tie ourselves to the dilemma that if we are not expected to do things for others then we become lonely, guilty and out of control, we are tying ourselves to a life of slavery. There will be a build up of underlying anger and resentment at the frittering away of our own precious life. Many murders are committed by wonderful carers who have suffered and been abused by their tyrannical charges, until the one time when they are pushed too far and boil over.

If as you are reading this you are getting in touch with your own anger, use it. Don't be afraid of it or consider it bad. Write down all the angry things you can think of; hit something (not someone), throw sticks, logs or cushions, go into a tunnel and scream. Get it out. Find out what your anger is like before it turns in on you and swamps you with depression and self-destruction. (See Chapter 13, 'Techniques for working through the process of change'.)

### The 'bottled-up or burst-open' dilemma

This dilemma is related to how we cope with our feelings and emotions. We either keep our feelings bottled up inside, or fear hurting others and being rejected ourselves if we express what we feel. For us the world of feelings is dangerous and unknown, full of frightening unstable volcanoes about to erupt. For many people feelings carry a quality which they do not understand. Unlike the cool, clear rational world of thinking and reasoning, the world of feelings can resemble a raging fire, a stormy sea, a sweltering underground pool, a heavy earthen cave, damp and dark. Often we don't like this about ourselves and are afraid. We get used to bottling up feelings, because we don't know what else to do with them. It may be that feelings were not welcome currency early on in our lives and we were told to 'pull ourselves together' when we expressed something emotionally. We may have witnessed occasions where feelings got out of hand and the extremes of feeling were expressed, making us decide secretly never to get that way ourselves.

If we have known the extremes of the emotional and rational in our early lives we may feel we have to make a choice between them, and many of us choose the rational because it feels safer, calmer and logical. We live in a society where words are the main currency. As we saw in Part Two, feelings and emotions tend to come without words and are thus often misunderstood.

Sometimes we are humiliated for expressing our feelings; or laughed at, or made to feel weak, at the mercy of anyone with a command of words.

We usually bottle up our feelings because we don't know what to do with them, and because we have learned and still presume that if they are let out they will be the cause of misery, mess, hurt and rejection. Most of us are unaware that we do this because it's what we know. Again from Part Two, sometimes we presume we don't have feelings, but find ourselves weeping at something on the news or in a film, or find ourselves depressed and lonely for no 'good' reason. We may be aware of odd things happening in our bodies: feelings of apprehension or tension, constant stiff necks, backache, migraine headaches, skin trouble, pain in the chest, difficulty breathing. Although all these symptoms may well have other causes needing medical attention many people who bottle up their feelings do store them in their bodies. Bodies express themselves via symptoms. This may be the only clue we have to the fact that we bottle up feelings.

PAUL, who was referred to in the 'I'm better off on my own' trap (Part Three), would be overwhelmed by a surge of tears and sadness whenever he felt that someone was excluding him. He had a lump in his throat and wanted to cry. His frustration came out in anger against others for excluding him, which he was unable to express except by withdrawing into aloneness, and which others saw as a sulk. He experienced himself in a place where no one could reach him and all he had for comfort were the logic and facts of his encyclopaedias. He had learned no way to express his emotions, for in his early life there was no one to pick up the signals of what he was feeling or to interpret them. Thus, he had kept most of his feelings bottled up reasonably successfully for many years, through one marriage and its subsequent ending, and through the birth of his only child. It was when he really fell in love for the first time at forty that his bottled-up feelings welled up, which he found extremely difficult. His anxiety over making a 'mess' and suffering rejection of his new-found love overwhelmed him.

So most of us bottle-up feelings, because to express them is worse, and feelings become our 'no-go area', the area we are least familiar with and fear most. If you feel you recognise yourself in this dilemma, spend some time pondering over the next questionnaire.

Feelings that get bottled up or displaced tend to be behind many emotions. Understanding the world of feelings plays a very important part in our growth process. Beginning to unravel the different feelings that affect you at different times and finding ways of using your feeling life creatively will be tremendously helpful. As you read on you will see how others have made this journey, and in Chapter 12 there are ideas to help you to anchor what you are feeling and learn how to cope with the feelings of others.

Getting off the symptom hook

**Questionnaire: The 'bottled-up or burst-open' dilemma**

In what ways are you aware that you bottle up your feelings?

- ☐ I keep everything inside me, no one ever sees what I truly feel.
- ☐ When something emotional is going on I feel:

- ☐ tense
- ☐ upset
- ☐ afraid
- ☐ apprehensive
- ☐ lost
- ☐ unsure
- ☐ eager to leave
- ☐ hopeless

- ☐ Most of the time I am unaware of what I feel.
- ☐ I presume I don't feel anything.
- ☐ I experience physical symptoms:

- ☐ stomach cramps
- ☐ tightness in the chest
- ☐ difficulty with breathing
- ☐ 'lump in the throat'
- ☐ difficulty swallowing
- ☐ neck aches and headaches
- ☐ clenched jaw
- ☐ grinding teeth
- ☐ back pain
- ☐ wobbly legs
- ☐ racing heart
- ☐ thumping heartbeats
- ☐ dizziness
- ☐ pins and needles in hands and feet
- ☐ problems with eating, digestion, stomach

- ☐ I do express some feelings but not others. I find the following feelings very difficult:

- ☐ anger
- ☐ frustration
- ☐ disappointment
- ☐ sadness
- ☐ happiness
- ☐ success
- ☐ winning
- ☐ envy
- ☐ when hurt by others
- ☐ praise
- ☐ when shown affection

## Dilemmas

- ☐ love
  - ☐ admiration
  - ☐ joy
  - ☐ jealousy
  - ☐ mistrust
  - ☐ hate
  - ☐ loathing
  - ☐ disapproval
  - ☐ embarrassment
- ☐ I think feelings are messy and you should never wash your dirty linen in public.

If you don't bottle up your feelings what do you think will happen?

- ☐ I will get hurt by others who will take advantage of my weakness.
  - ☐ It will come out all wrong and I will be embarrassed and want to disappear into a hole.
  - ☐ I will be rejected. No one really wants to know what I feel.
  - ☐ Everyone will see what a mess I am inside.
  - ☐ My whole world will be totally out of control.
- ☐ Someone would get hurt. What I feel inside is violent, furious, out of control, intense, huge. If I really let out what I feel the rage and tears would be unstoppable. I would be:
- ☐ like a little baby almost choking myself on my screams
  - ☐ screaming into a void
  - ☐ swamped
  - ☐ drowned
  - ☐ People would laugh at me and try to put me down. They would call me names: cissy, mother's boy, wet, wimp, softie, cry-baby.
  - ☐ whatever I feel it always comes out as tears, and I can't stand it.
  - ☐ whatever I feel it always comes out as anger, and people don't understand.

On what sort of occasions are you aware of your feelings most strongly?

- ☐ when alone
- ☐ when with others
- ☐ when with older people or those in authority
- ☐ after a row
- ☐ when watching a film or news item or reading a book
- ☐ days after something important has happened
- ☐ when others are expressing strong feelings

Think about how feelings were handled in your family early on. Go to Part Four ('Gathering Information') and consider the different kinds of feelings. Ponder on how they were or weren't expressed in your early life, and with whom each feeling was associated. How were feelings discussed, and if not experienced within the family, how were feelings discussed in association with others outside? What kind of family sayings or myths did you grow up with?

## The 'if I must ... then I won't' dilemma

Initially, this dilemma appears quite difficult to understand, but take a moment to examine the number of times when you have felt totally overcome by instructions or orders or 'having to'. They may come from inside you or from other people. Sometimes we feel so restricted by these requests and demands that the only freedom is not to do them. The thought pattern is: 'I've got no option.' The feeling is one of tremendous restriction, which can be claustrophobic. The reaction then is to get out by not complying as if this is our only freedom. This can operate in quite subtle ways: we may receive a letter from somebody which we ought to answer but don't, perhaps there is a telephone call we need to make and we keep putting it off. A more extreme and damaging example might be that we fail to turn up for an important job interview.

The seeds of this dilemma go back to restrictive former years, in family or school, where rules, regulations and obligations felt binding. We can feel so rule-bound that there is no room for self-expression. Our only self-expression is in saying 'no'. A graphic illustration of this dilemma comes in the story of Oblomov, who lay in bed all the time because he couldn't bear any kind of obligations to get up and get dressed or go out. His dilemma consolidated itself to the point where he slowly dwindled away and died (a rather extreme form of this dilemma!).

Aspects of this dilemma operate in most of us because most of us have experienced restrictions of one kind or another during our early life. But when the dilemma is severe it affects everything we do, and we are keeping up our sense of control in life mainly by default. It's not what we do but what we don't do that gives us a sense of control or power. But in time this backfires. Our inability to get anything done means that we are never able to develop a decent sense of self-worth or skill.

In the 'avoidance trap' we looked at TERRY's story (Part Three) and how the restrictions placed upon him in early life led him to duck out of challenges to do with work. On a deeper level he experienced his early restrictions as coming from the demand of others that he be both grateful for being cared for by people who were not his parents, and for his (later) inheritance. Because he felt he owed it to his grandmother, and the family who later on adopted him, to 'be good' and do well, and because an overprotective environment meant that he hadn't developed the skills to deal with the challenges of outside life, he believed that the only way for him to cope was not to do anything at all. This was not a conscious decision, but an unconscious drive based upon the mistaken belief that his only option was to say 'no' to a demanding environment.

When Terry came into money at twenty-one, for which he was also unprepared, he took flight into heroin addiction. He could not cope with the demands the money made upon him, and he could not ask for help from those

whom he presumed he had to please and be grateful to. He did not believe he was entitled to his powerful and mixed feelings of grief over losing both of his parents, and he felt disloyal for talking about them.

Since this time, several years ago, he has been courageous and brave enough to get himself off heroin and to look at his life more fully. He has begun the painful process of grieving and mourning for his lost parents for the first time, and is releasing himself from his restrictions in thinking about his life and what he was entitled to. As he began to have more choices about how to respond, and as he allowed himself more freedom to take up choices about what to do, he has been able to release energy to put into tasks and training, has become professionally qualified and married. The energy that was tied up in the silent protest of 'if I must ... then I won't' has been well used.

If this dilemma is severely restricting your energy and your life, look carefully at where it originated and what your fears are about embracing something instigated by other people. If this dilemma is allowed to dominate it can take over and immobilise us, to the point illustrated by Terry's heroin addiction. If you find yourself saying 'I won't' when you feel obliged by someone or something, feel into what your own inner restrictions are. See how many ways you can find to respond to the perceived restrictions, other than saying 'no' or 'I won't'. You may find you need to be angry, to hit out, to be sad and grieve, to find a way of thinking about things that stimulate you and which you allow. You will need to go through the 'pain barrier' felt by restriction and to find yourself on the other side – your own freedom.

### **Questionnaire: The 'if I must ... then I won't' dilemma**

How much does the 'if I must ... then I won't' dilemma operate in your life?  
I respond to an obligation with 'I won't':

- ☐ all of the time
- ☐ some of the time
- ☐ in certain situations:
  - ☐ at work, college, school
  - ☐ with friends
  - ☐ with family
  - ☐ in relationships with men/women
  - ☐ other

If I feel obliged, I feel:

- ☐ restricted
- ☐ caged
- ☐ controlled by others

*(Continued)*

### Getting off the symptom hook

This then makes me feel:

- ☐ furious
- ☐ frightened
- ☐ belittled
- ☐ threatened
- ☐ defiant

When I feel this way I want to:

- ☐ hit out
- ☐ run away
- ☐ curl up
- ☐ get the world to make me disappear

I see saying 'I will' as conforming to others' ways and ideas:

- ☐ all of the time
- ☐ most of the time
- ☐ in certain situations (name them)

Saying 'I won't' gives me freedom from restrictions imposed by others. I have put this to use by:

- ☐ creating my own life
- ☐ using my defiance to start something new

I am frustrated and feel I can only act 'against':

- ☐ I have been unable to create anything of my own
- ☐ I feel the restrictions I feared from others have now turned against myself

### The 'if I must not ... then I will' dilemma

Take a moment to explore this dilemma, even if you don't relate to it immediately. Again, as in the 'if I must ... then I won't' dilemma, this dilemma is concerned with our response to pressures, whether they come from inside ourselves or are imposed by others, especially those in some form of authority. In this case, it's as if the only proof of our existence is our resistance. In our fight against, in our protest, we are struggling to be seen for our real selves. But all too often this dilemma results in harm to ourselves, and in punishment rather than acceptance. We begin to break rules – even our own rules begin to feel too restricting – and so our frustration and fury with life escalate. Sometimes our attitude becomes so entrenched that we feel we will lose face even more if we give in or change our pattern, so we carry on piling up negative responses to command, thus tempting fate.

Many of us will perhaps relate to this dilemma during adolescence, when we need to lock horns or try out our strength against those in authority. The 'cult' of protest is active, and usually appropriate, during this growing time. And many of us forge our sense of ourselves against such testing of authority, especially parents or leaders, for our views on religion, politics, social welfare



occupy those positions of authority we once had to kick against, developing rules or structures we once found so frustrating.

But this dilemma can become a way of life, piling up our anger and resentment without a space to breathe or take stock. If it becomes entrenched, it may move us into circles of friends whose lives, behaviour and choices are all limited by this dilemma, creating a much greater force of 'must not'. Then the life itself can become like a brick wall which feels impossible to break down. Until properly revised and refreshingly challenged, this dilemma only serves to block our path and prevent us from having a life.

Sometimes we learn to resist as our *only* way of survival in a restricting environment, where our resistance ensures our actual body and soul survival. We learn to become guerrilla fighters in our own families or environment, living on our nerves, hiding, being always on the attack against the enemy. And while all communities need this fighting *for* aspect, to challenge authority when it becomes limiting and oppressive, when we fight *against* simply because it has become a habit we court destruction rather than creation.

Many people do experience their lives as being oppressive in this way, as if they were the hunted minority. But if we persist with this behaviour after the war is over, we are not claiming our true freedom. The skills and determination we have learned during our resistance are actually needed much more for the creation of our own rules and standards, where we are forging a life for ourselves rather than having to defend against an imposed position.

### Questionnaire: The 'if I must not ... then I will' dilemma

If you can see this dilemma operating in your life now, ask yourself:

In what areas of my life am I fighting the rule 'I must not ...'?

- ☐ at home
- ☐ at work, college, school
- ☐ in religious belief
- ☐ in my social life and sexual or moral conduct
- ☐ over money

Which rule exactly do you experience as 'I must not ...'. Spend time examining this. Write the rule down in your notebook. Try different responses to it in your imagination.

How many times in a week do you say 'I will' in response to another's 'You will not'. Note the time, place, feeling, people or aspects involved. See how these tie in with the first question.

How much of your life is taken up living in a 'must not' cult? List the areas (friends, interests etc.).

Does this serve your needs now?

Ask yourself what would happen if you examined your resistance more thoroughly? Try to communicate with your resistance now, and find out more about it. What are its qualities?

## **The 'satisfied, selfish and guilty or unsatisfied, angry and depressed' dilemma**

This dilemma is to do with getting what we want. If we get what we want and therefore attain some measure of satisfaction, we find that it is inevitably accompanied by feelings of selfishness and guilt. We feel like a spoiled child. At the other extreme, if we don't get what we want, we feel angry and depressed. This dilemma is related to our ability to receive something and possess it freely. At some point we have decided unconsciously that we are not allowed to have what we want. We may even have been told, 'Don't think you can get what you want,' or, 'You can't always have your own way.' These kinds of statements, which are common currency during childhood and at school, can be interpreted internally as 'if we get what we want it's actually at some cost'. So, like a spoiled child we feel rather guilty, because we are not really entitled to it.

At the opposite pole, if we don't get what we want we feel angry and depressed and obviously deprived. This can lead to a kind of spoiling mechanism. Because we feel so guilty and childish when we get what we want, we actually don't allow ourselves anything – we don't even allow ourselves to receive things from other people. But at the same time, we feel permanently angry and depressed precisely *because* we are refusing to receive anything, either from ourselves or from others.

Sometimes it's as if we get permission to get what we want only through being impaired in some way. This might be through chronic illness – for example, migraine, stomach upset, back pain, colds and flu, or in minor repeated accidents where we need attention. This isn't to say that we make a conscious decision to become ill. It may be the only way we can receive something without feeling childish and guilty. But even when we have 'paid' the price, the dilemma dictates that deep down we feel we are not really allowed anything and guilt is just below the surface.

### **Questionnaire: The 'satisfied, selfish and guilty or unsatisfied, angry and depressed' dilemma**

Do you feel that you get what you want?

- ☐ at home
- ☐ at work
- ☐ in relationships
- ☐ with children
- ☐ in sports
- ☐ sexually

If you feel you have never addressed this issue, take a few minutes to consider what you want in your life. Write it down, and then ponder on which areas in your life are satisfactory and which are not.

How do you know when you do get what you want? I feel:

- ☐ bad afterwards
- ☐ selfish
- ☐ guilty
- ☐ greedy
- ☐ too big
- ☐ secretive
- ☐ joyous
- ☐ triumphant
- ☐ satisfied and happy

If you get what you want, do you feel:

- ☐ I will have to pay something back
- ☐ life or someone will get even with me sooner or later

What myths, sayings or 'old wives' tales' about being satisfied and getting what you want can you remember from your early life?

Where do they come from? Whose voice do you hear when you remember them?

If you don't get what you want, perhaps because of any of the above injunctions against it, do you feel:

- ☐ angry
- ☐ sad
- ☐ depressed
- ☐ punished
- ☐ despised
- ☐ vindicated (i.e. the old messages that say 'you can't' are right)
- ☐ spiteful
- ☐ envious of others who seem to get what they want
- ☐ childish and want to cry
- ☐ murderous
- ☐ ill

Do you recognise a pattern of illness after disappointment? Look to see if any of the above feelings could be hidden within the illness.

Identify as clearly as you can the areas in which you believe you should deny yourself satisfaction. Notice the feelings you experience when you go along with something that you actually don't want, but have not yet developed a way of saying 'no' to. Note in your diary or notebook the times when this occurs and the feelings involved. Experiment with asking exactly for what you want in a direct, clear way and see what happens. When you have isolated the mistaken belief behind this dilemma, challenge it as best you can in your everyday approach to life.

# 7

## Snags and self-sabotage

### **'Yes, but ...' and 'if only'**

Snags seem to operate when part of us is saying 'I'd really like things to be better, but ...' Or when we say, 'Oh well, I could never have a life like that,' or gaze very enviously at others and say, 'It's all very well for them.' We may also start to reminisce, 'If only I'd been allowed to do, be, have ...' Part of us has the desire to lead a fuller life, to have better relationships, to feel freer about ourselves, be more successful, to be more imaginative, but it's as if we have been found guilty and sentenced to a life of snag.

Part of us is saying 'if only ...' while the other part of us counters with 'but I couldn't ...' or 'I'm not allowed' or 'something bad would happen if I were to be happy'. It's as if we carry an eternal rebuke for being alive and well, as if we were responsible for bad things that happened early in our childhood. This is called 'magical guilt', for it is guilt for something we wouldn't possibly have taken responsibility for or feel guilty about, hence the word 'magical'. The 'magical guilt' we carry may be for things that happened in the past. It becomes fixed as if 'true' and seamlessly woven into our everyday repertoire without our questioning it. The things for which we have taken on magical guilt may be external, such as having a handicapped sister, or a depressed mother to whom we may, or may not, be able to express our frustration or be cross with. If not able, we turn our more aggressive feelings into ourselves, as if it is we who are responsible for the difficult painful or lost lives of those in our early family.

As you read through this section, remember that I am sitting opposite you in the therapist chair as a third person in your inner exploration and dialogue. I am the mitigating 'judge' you didn't have when you were small, standing in for the new reciprocal role relationship you are trying to develop in yourself that does not blame or envy but understands the forces that formed you and forgives the past where it has become embedded.

### **Family myths**

Sometimes this sense of 'yes, but' comes from powerful people in our early