

5

Traps

Certain kinds of thinking and acting result in a 'vicious circle' when, however hard we try, things seem to get worse instead of better. Traps are called traps exactly because they feel like behaviours we cannot escape from! In order to remove ourselves from a trap we need to revise what, in terms of our thinking, ideas or presumptions, keeps us there.

The 'doing what others want' trap

When we fear being judged harshly, or feel uncertain of ourselves and our self-worth, we tend not to express ourselves freely but move towards the ideas, beliefs or desires of other people. We do as others dictate. We may please people, doing what they want, thinking their ideas, even feeling their feelings. (One woman said to me once, 'I felt I ought to cry because everyone else was so upset, but I didn't feel anything.') The idea behind our way of proceeding is, 'If I do what they want things are bound to be OK. They will like me, want me, want to be with me.' What tends to happen over a period of time is that our eagerness to please is taken advantage of. Then we feel used and abused, angry, hurt and resentful that we should be treated in this way when we have tried so hard. I often hear people saying, 'I gave him everything he wanted, never argued, never disagreed ... I even changed my hair colour/way of dressing to be as he wanted,' or, 'I stopped seeing the friends he didn't like,' or, 'I gave up my car/hobby for her, and then she went and left me for someone else who doesn't listen to a word she says.' When what one really wants is affection, respect, care, love, it's bitterly disappointing to find it backfiring in this way.

What we need to challenge is the premise that we have to please others in order to be liked. The more we are taken for granted and abused for our attempts to please, the more our uncertainty about ourselves is confirmed. As long as our energy is taken up with pleasing others, moving into their worlds to try to make our own safe, we are not developing our real inner selves as we might; we develop only a coping, or survival self.

Getting off the symptom hook

When we feel let down or ignored because we are in the 'trying to please' trap our own actual needs *are* being ignored, which makes us feel resentful and needy. Sometimes these needs burst out in a childlike way when we don't want them to. We feel out of control, and because the pressure to please others, and our natural internal fury at this restriction, causes such tension, we may find that we put things off, actually let people down. Or we may hide away, increasing people's anger and displeasure with us, and thus compounding our uncertainty about ourselves.

PAT recognised being caught in the 'doing what others want' trap. She could not bear to say 'no', or to feel she had let anyone down by being different in opinion, view, dress, attitude, ideas or action. To her, failure to comply meant hostility and rejection, which she could not endure. In her self-monitoring diary she wrote:

'Bought new dress. Didn't buy the one I wanted but the one the sales girl insisted looked the best. It was more expensive than I wanted and not the right colour, but somehow I couldn't refuse her. When I got home I just cried, I felt so upset and cross and helpless.'

Pat also wrote about incidents with her children when she had given in to them over bedtimes. She swung from shouting at them and feeling bad to giving in to them, and getting arguments as they tried for more. 'I was giving them what they wanted and they threw it all back in my face.' She recalled similar incidents with her husband and friends, and one friend in particular to whom she had acted as 'agony aunt'. Pat had wanted to confide in her about her own problems, but the friend had cut her off sharply. When Pat seemed tearful and hurt, the friend suggested impatiently they meet the following week. Pat duly turned up on time, but the friend arrived one hour late. Pat was boiling up inside with a rage she could not express and which only made her more fearful of losing her friend. She had convinced herself that it was her fault the friend was late, that she must have written down the wrong time, even though she knew this wasn't true. Pat couldn't speak because she was so upset, and the friend became cross and impatient again. As a result Pat felt guilty, alone and cross, but these feelings were hidden in her headache and sore feet.

When later we looked at the pattern of Pat's need to please and at what compelled her to keep doing this, she selected one of the images she'd written down during her monitoring and got into the feel of it. The trigger point for giving in to, and pleasing others seemed to be linked to a compelling and demanding look from others that hooked her in.

In staying with this she was reminded of two important images. One was related to her English teacher for whom she had written some good essays, and the teacher, who had been very nervous as it was her first job, looked to Pat when things got difficult in class. Pat became her anchor and help. The look said 'don't let me down'. Then Pat told me she'd realised that the look went further back, to her own mother, who had experienced similar feelings of insecurity, and had looked to Pat for help in making her life more comfortable.

fear was that if she did not respond to the eye-call her mother would become cross, upset and withdrawn, and Pat's world would be in chaos. She dreaded her mother's disapproving cold silences, which made her feel isolated and abandoned, and which she interpreted as her own fault. It was precisely to cope with fear and pain that she developed the habit of pleasing. This had served her reasonably well during childhood and adolescence, because her mother responded and things were kept safe. But only on a superficial level, for underneath Pat wasn't developing her own voice or her own ways of being; she was bending and twisting to her mother's.

The habit of pleasing others went on into adult life and wasn't questioned until Pat came into therapy because of her depression. The depression was largely a result of living in the placation trap. She had married a man who benefited from her pleasing skills. He was resentful when she burst out angrily at the children, or when she tried work of her own that was different (she had recently given this up because she felt so guilty). Then everything was thrown into confusion by Pat's depression.

Pat chose to risk getting herself out of the trap. She risked saying no, doing something different from others, risking being disliked. She faced her worst fear. She saw that it was rooted in the world of her childhood and carried with it the force and pain of the child's fear. She recognised that if she wanted to grow and be free she had to take risks she couldn't have taken in childhood.

Although Pat's husband felt threatened at first by her change from placation to being more assertive, he came to recognise that his wife had many more 'real' qualities than he had seen before, and it was a relief when she was not so 'nice' all the time. She stopped being depressed. Pat had some surprises too: people she had previously feared would not like her actually took more notice, and the friend who had let her down said, 'It's good interacting with you now you're no longer a doormat!'

In my experience, people don't want doormats and placators, because they invite the 'bully' in us. To be 'too good' encourages others to behave badly – often in the hope of getting a real response. Also, if people are seen as 'too good', their underlying anger is more fearful because it is hidden.

Pleasing others is a useful and necessary skill in the making of relationships and in human interaction. But when our entire life is lived through it, it becomes a damaging and self-negating trap, perpetuating our worst fears.

Questionnaire: The 'doing what others want' trap

Do you act as if the following were true?

I fear not pleasing:

- ☐ those close to me
- ☐ people I work for
- ☐ anyone and everyone/men/women/authority figures

(Continued)

Getting off the symptom hook

If I don't please them:

- ☐ they won't like/love me
- ☐ I'll never get anywhere in life
- ☐ I'll be rejected/passed over/ignored/abandoned/criticised/hated/abused

Pleasing people means:

- ☐ doing what they want regardless of how I feel
- ☐ getting to know all about them and what makes them tick so I can feel confident of producing things they would like
- ☐ never getting cross or upsetting anyone, whatever they have done to me
- ☐ squashing what I *really* feel in case it slips out and I am rejected or criticised
- ☐ feeling dependent upon the goodwill of others to feel all right inside

If the feeling you have to please sometimes makes you feel out of control and increases your uncertainty about what to do to ensure the goodwill of others, do you find yourself:

- ☐ putting things off because I'm unsure I've got it right and I can't bear to be wrong
- ☐ being unable to say 'no', and so ending up taking on too many tasks, agreeing to certain things that are inappropriate, and ultimately letting people down

If you find that you have answered 'yes' to more than one question in each section of the questionnaire then you are in the placation trap. You may find that the reciprocal roles are *conditional/disapproving* in relation to *anxious/striving*. Stay with what you have marked and concentrate on the feelings you have identified. See if you can locate any images or memories that help you understand the origin of these feelings. Make a note of them in your notebook and we will return to them more fully in Chapter 10, 'Writing our life story'.

The 'depressed thinking' trap

We may expect that we will do things badly or fail in some way because we feel we have done so in the past. One or two disappointments may make us lose confidence, and this can grow until we believe that we are a failure. Thinking about oneself in a depressed way perpetuates the trap of feeling depressed. Although depression can be complex and have an actual physical basis that needs medication, research has shown that recognising and challenging depressed thinking alters depressed mood.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
7 a.m.	10						
8 a.m.	10						
9 a.m.	9						
10 a.m.	9						
11 a.m.	9						
12 noon	7						
1 p.m.	7						
2 p.m.	6						
3 p.m.							
4 p.m.	7						
5 p.m.							
6 p.m.	7						
7 p.m.	4						
8 p.m.	5						
9 p.m.							
10 p.m.	5						

10 = very depressed, down, sad, not coping

7 = depressed but coping

5 = mildly depressed

3 = low, but able to take in other things and look around

1 = not depressed but enjoying the moment

Figure 5.1 Chart for self-monitoring depressed mood

Using self-monitoring, over the next week write down how many times you find yourself thinking: 'Oh no, not another day,' or 'I'm not going to be able to do that.' 'I look awful so I won't go out today.' 'I'm too tearful to do anything.' 'Last time I went near that place I couldn't bear it.' Any time, in fact, that you feel 'I'm bound to do this badly.'

To self-monitor depressed mood, make a chart like the one shown in Figure 5.1. Rate each hour, from 1 to 10, to indicate the level of your depressed mood. Low scores start at 1 and 10 would signify a highly depressed state. Mark the chart for each hour for one week and see where your lowest and highest points come. (You might like to use certain colours instead of numbers.) This process asks us to be aware of our mood and what we are feeling; it also gives some loose structure to the shape of our day. So often when people feel depressed they curl up in a ball and do nothing, presuming that whatever they do will not work. These two simple exercises will help you. First, it will show you what times you feel most depressed (often in the mornings), and secondly, that you may not be at number 10 all the time. If you find that you are, then perhaps some professional help should be sought, unless – and this requires honesty and self-observation – it may be that you are angry underneath your depression and don't want this to be relieved until you have been allowed to be angry. We will come back to this in Chapter 7. By monitoring what it is you are thinking about at the times when you feel most low, you will get an indication of where your fears about yourself lie.

Getting off the symptom hook

There are several ways in which this trap operates, and for everyone who recognises it, it will have different origins.

MALCOLM had become very stuck in the 'depressed thinking' trap. He had got into an increasingly depressed way of looking at himself and life because of his disappointment with other people's failure to recognise the value of his work. On retirement he had hoped for greater acclaim and feared that he would be forgotten. Although on a deeper level his problems were largely to do with an early dilemma of 'having to be special or feeling empty and insignificant', which we will look at in Chapter 6, he was also caught in this particular trap. Every day he contributed to his depressed mood by thoughts such as, 'No one wants me any more.' 'There's no point writing to X because they probably won't reply.'

Malcolm began to see that he was approaching each day with the following attitude: 'I feel doomed before I start, so I jeopardise my own life by not valuing what I do, say or aim for.' One of the ways he got out of this trap was to work at valuing what he had done and did do with his life. As an English teacher, he had many extremely grateful students and many fine examples of his work, which he dismissed. His criterion for acceptance and value was a fixed external idea of fame and public recognition. He could not see how much he was already valued without this. Malcolm's depressed thinking about himself was accompanied by feelings of hopelessness and pointlessness, and by thoughts of death. Fortunately he was angry enough about this feeling of 'stuckness' to use his anger to get out of it and to re-evaluate his approach.

We may also be trapped by our negative and depressed thinking in a passive way, which makes us feel victimised.

CLARE felt very weak after a period in hospital for a knee operation. She had been feeling depressed before this because she was unable to carry on with her work at home or at the consultant engineering company where she'd been a valued member of staff for five years. She was depressed when she was 'out of role', when the ordered world she knew was removed during her hospitalisation, and afterwards when she felt she couldn't cope very well with everyday chores. She became more and more depressed, because she told herself, 'I'm useless,' 'I can't do anything,' 'No one will want to see me like this.' She feared that her husband would not understand her and that she would not be able to make him understand. Eventually, she got to the point where she was almost permanently in tears because of this trap.

She and her husband both attended a therapy session, where we drew up a self-monitoring chart to record her depressed mood (Figure 5.1). When she realised that she was not depressed all round the clock, but that there were some grey areas, she rallied enough to use the better hours to draw or paint what she was feeling and write down what she wanted to say. At first she dismissed all of what she wanted to say as: 'It's silly, he'll never listen to this ...', but with the help of her husband she was able to make use of the less black periods and free herself from the more depressed times.

When you have monitored your own negative thoughts for a week (the 'I'll only do things badly' ideas), spend some time with your findings and try to see if you can identify where these thoughts and ideas stem from, and how much they are in fact self-perpetuating.

Questionnaire: The 'I'll only do things badly' trap

How much do you exaggerate your fear of doing things badly? Use self-monitoring methods to get a really accurate picture together. Use the chart in Figure 5.1 or monitor the time and place when you expect a negative outcome to:

- (a) a thought/idea
- (b) what you say
- (c) what you do

If you feel you have done something badly, what were the ingredients of your involvement in that work? Were you:

- ☐ doing something you liked?
- ☐ doing something you wanted to do?
- ☐ doing something new?
- ☐ doing something you had admired others doing and presumed you would be unable to do yourself?

How much understanding did you have about what it entailed?

If you find that indeed your depression is made worse by constant depressed thinking that needs to be challenged and consciously adjusted, it will help to read on and perhaps find some clue to the source of your depressed feelings about yourself in further chapters.

The 'I'm better off on my own' trap

Sometimes we take the view that the trauma resulting from contact with other people just isn't worth it. We feel so anxious that people will find us boring and stupid and we get so hot and bothered when we have to talk to someone that we decide to avoid contact. It isn't that we would rather be on our own; it's that we believe that because things don't go well for us socially we have no choice. When we are forced to make contact with

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others, and because of our internal beliefs about our abilities, we don't look at others properly, we find it difficult to know what to say and we appear actually unfriendly and standoffish. For these reasons people tend to leave us alone. This is the very opposite to what we really want, and, rather as with the pleasing trap, we are not developing the skills for meeting and talking to people that we need to gain confidence and break the negative cycle of the trap. The other aspect that tends to increase is the fantasy level of our ideas about our own incompetence. We can become phobic about it, building it up to dramatic proportions. Our sensitivity to other people's reactions to us can also be heightened, as we imagine rejections and criticisms in an exaggerated form. Jeff recalled his own experience of this: 'When I began to speak to a group of people at the party, I felt as if my whole being was lit up in stage lights and everyone was watching my performance.'

PAUL decided very early on that being involved with people wasn't worth it. In his early life he had been in hospital for eighteen months. He had no conscious memory of that time, but it is not hard to imagine the powerful effect such a long separation would have on a small infant. As we saw in Part Two, in early life we cut off from feelings when they are unmanageable in order to survive. When Paul was six his mother became ill and died the following year. The rest of his childhood was particularly isolated: his father worked very hard and was absent for much of the time, leaving Paul with a grandmother whom he did not like. Paul withdrew into the world of study and encyclopaedias.

When we met, Paul had a successful career as a scientist, but tended to be very split inside himself. He felt he was either the powerful scientist at his word processor or the very lonely boy. One way in which he had ensured that this split would perpetuate itself was by falling into the 'I'm better off on my own' trap. Then he fell deeply in love and all his deeper feelings of longing, excitement, togetherness, came to the surface. At first things were wonderful, but when the initial wonder and magic was at all threatened he once again became the six-year-old boy who feared abandonment by the woman he loved (originally his mother). We will return to Paul's story in Chapter 6, but having identified the way in which he kept his split going by his isolation he was prepared to look more at his internal world, instead of the external, carefully controlled world of the scientist. He took risks in order deliberately not to isolate himself in situations at home, by going with the pain of his feelings and trying to find ways of expressing them.

In another case, Mary saw her problem in this way too. The chart shown in Figure 5.2 helped her to see how she was trapped into being 'better off on her own' as a way of coping

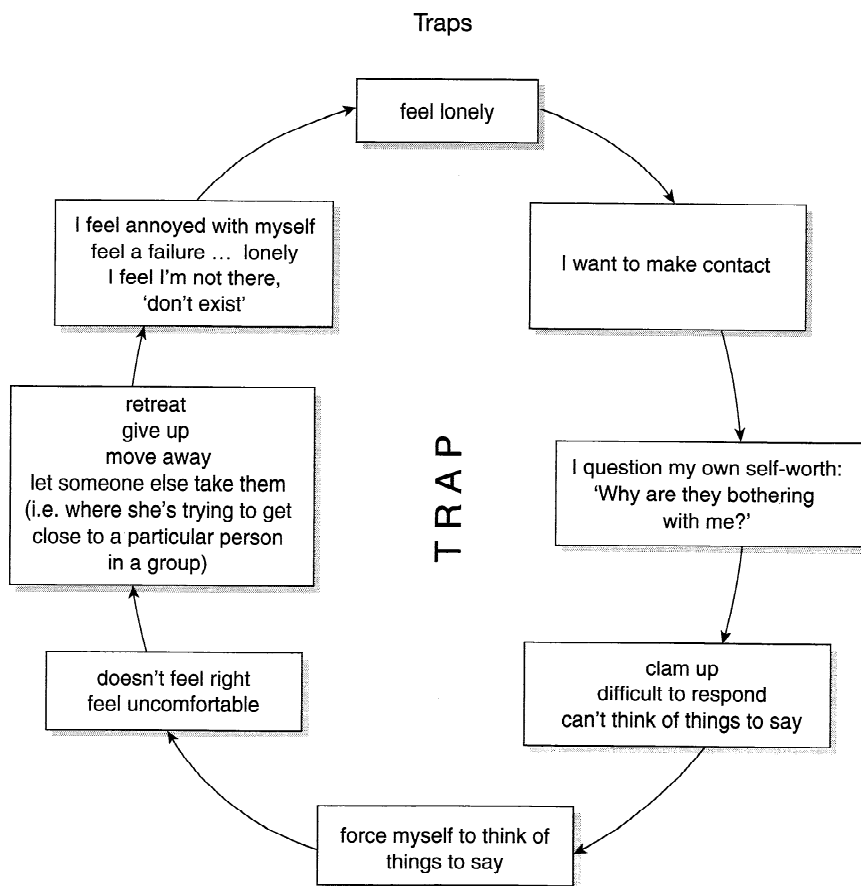


Figure 5.2 Mary saw her problem in this way. The chart helped her to see how she was trapped into being 'better off on her own' as a way of coping

Questionnaire: The 'I'm better off on my own' trap

Make a list of all the things you do on your own. Include activities like making breakfast, going to work, walking, shopping, holidays.

Make a chart showing the number of hours you are alone each day, for a week.

If you do work within an organisation where there might be opportunities to talk to others and form friendships, how often do you avoid contact?

Do you join clubs or associations, go to eat with others, stay on after work?

Do you seek the company of others at weekends or do you feel 'People have got to come to me', or 'It's not worth making an effort as others never appreciate it'?

(Continued)

Getting off the symptom hook

Do any of the following ring true:

- ☐ I'm not used to being with people and don't know what to say to them when they start talking to me.

I'm not used to being with people because:

- ☐ I don't have enough practice
- ☐ I don't meet people
- ☐ I don't join in at work
- ☐ I don't join outings
- ☐ I don't make sure that I set up meetings where I can practise being with people

I expect people to talk to me because:

- ☐ I don't feel I'm an outgoing person. (Where does this come from? Who said this? Is it really true? Check it out by asking someone)
- ☐ if people don't come to me then it's not worth it
- ☐ I don't feel I should have to make an effort. Nice things should just happen

I lack confidence with others. I presume I will be:

- ☐ rejected, that people won't like me
- ☐ criticised because I am not like others
- ☐ ignored – people will find me boring and stupid because I believe I'm not clever/attractive/rich/don't speak with the right accent

When I do meet people:

- ☐ I can't look at them, my hands sweat or I can't get my breath
- ☐ I feel as if my whole body is lit up and that everyone is looking at me waiting for me to make a mistake

I fear if I open my mouth I will:

- ☐ say the wrong thing, and people will laugh at me
- ☐ get in a muddle, panic, perhaps become cross or start swearing, that I will say something awful

What is your image of how you would like to be with others? Describe the qualities you would like to have.

Mark down in your notebook which statements in the questionnaire apply to you. Again, we are gathering important information, which we will use when we reconstruct our life story and make our plan for change.

The 'avoidance' trap

If we avoid things we find difficult, we will discover in the long run that our avoidance only increases our difficulties and our sense of ineffectiveness and lack of control in life. Perhaps the most powerful example of this is people who suffer from agoraphobia.

Every agoraphobic will have experienced something frightening outside, or when they were waiting in a bus queue or a shop, or just walking along a street. Sometimes it can happen in a cinema or other public place. Knees turn to jelly, the pulse increases and it feels as if the heart might jump right out of the body; breathing becomes difficult, there is a feeling of faintness or nausea, buildings and surrounding vistas may become distorted and the overwhelming terror can be momentarily incapacitating. People have said, 'I really thought I was going to die.'

The physical manifestations of anxiety have always startled people with their depth and insistency, and can often easily be confused with real organic illness. The symptoms are identical, but the cause is different. What tends to happen in these instances is that the person becomes frightened to go out again in case the same thing happens. The feelings are so fearful that we become involved in the fear of the fear itself and stay indoors, thus avoiding the situation of the fear. This may give temporary relief, although many sufferers from agoraphobia also feel very anxious about being alone inside a house and project their anxiety onto families or friends, so that they only feel safe when everyone is home safely tucked up in bed. Avoidance of anything fearful may relieve us from the anxiety, but it is at considerable cost to our freedom and may restrict our life severely. Many agoraphobic sufferers do not go out of their houses for years.

We may not feel that we go to the extreme lengths experienced in agoraphobia, but we may relate to all the feelings outlined in the next questionnaire in other situations in our lives. Some people avoid contact with others for fear of being rejected; others avoid making decisions in case they are the wrong ones; many people avoid telephoning in case they get a difficult response; others avoid their everyday tasks, leaving them for others to do or until they are forced to do them. All of which results in frustration and feeling bad – which can be worse than the fear the person is trying to avoid.

Most people get into the avoidance trap because they do not believe that they can cope with unforeseen or imagined circumstances. The sense of 'what if ...', followed by the dramatic scenario of rejection, anger, ridicule, or worse, can make us feel incapacitated, and so we avoid the situation.

TERRY lost both his parents before he was three and was brought up by his grandmother. She felt very protective towards him, and he was never encouraged to go out and experience the world for himself. During his early school life he was often absent due to long periods of hospitalisation to rectify a birth defect, and he missed out on a lot of schooling. When he was asked to give answers in class and found he couldn't reply, he felt embarrassed and 'stupid'. Later, when he wanted to ask a question about something he didn't understand, he avoided it lest he be called 'stupid' again.

Getting off the symptom hook

Unused to having to deal with confrontation and nastiness, and with no preparation for an outside world that was so very different from life with his grandmother, Terry developed avoidance tactics to cope with potential stress, mistakenly believing that he couldn't handle whatever might be asked of him. The 'avoidance' trap meant that he didn't stay in any one job for long in case he was asked to take on more advanced things that he believed he wouldn't be able to handle. He had avoided making any commitment in terms of his work or future, and was plagued with the idea that he shouldn't have to ask but should just know.

When he was able to face his imagined fears he took the risk of not avoiding things, and experienced all the physical symptoms described previously in relation to agoraphobia. But he did overcome his fears and entered into a training programme for a proper professional career.

Questionnaire: The 'avoidance' trap

Do you avoid things because of false beliefs: 'I'm no good at that so I won't try'?

Examine why you may have written something off. When did this attitude start? How far back does it go?

Who told you were no good?

Have you been discouraged by not coming up to certain standards? Were they your own standards or those of others? (Important early figures: for example, father, mother, teacher.)

Has there been a period in your life when you felt left behind, when you didn't understand something and were unable to ask or get someone to go over it with you?

'Fear of failure means that I don't want to start anything.' Have you put off starting a course, applying for jobs, making contact with people you know can help you?

What does failure mean to you?

When did you first come across it?

What are the examples of failure from your own life, or the lives of your family and friends?

If you feel you have failed to live up to your own or others' expectations, do you feel it is what you attempted that hasn't worked out, or do you see it as a reflection of your lack of ability?

When you fail at something do you identify your whole self with this failure or do you recognise it is only one aspect of what you do? (What I try for is not what I am.)

Which of these things do you cope with by avoidance:

- ☐ writing to friends
- ☐ inviting someone round
- ☐ applying for promotion
- ☐ starting a new course
- ☐ getting angry with someone
- ☐ reading something different because we envy others' knowledge about it
- ☐ trying something new
- ☐ sorting out sex problems
- ☐ confronting my partner
- ☐ being angry with someone who has hurt me
- ☐ mending something that's broken
- ☐ tidying up
- ☐ planning things to do with my toddler/children

What are your fantasies about what will happen if you don't avoid things:

- ☐ become ill
- ☐ rejection
- ☐ confrontation with things I don't like about myself
- ☐ fear of getting it wrong, not knowing what to say, how to assert myself
- ☐ get angry
- ☐ make a mess
- ☐ be judged

Can you recognise the personal price you are paying by your avoidance?

You will perhaps have recognised some of your deeper fears from this questionnaire. Give yourself time to allow an acceptance of these fears, because we do not go to the trouble of adopting avoidance behaviour unless our fears are profound. Write about it in your notebook. Knowing and naming what you fear is the first step to overcoming it. Working with your fear will be central to the development of your target problems and aims in Chapter 11.

The low self-esteem trap

Many people suffer from low self-esteem. This means they place little value on themselves or their contribution to life. And in feeling such worthlessness, they become self-effacing, automatically presuming they have nothing to offer. This might manifest itself in an obvious form, such as speaking negatively about themselves, putting themselves down or leaving themselves till last. Or it may take a more subtle form and remain hidden under a brittle, successful exterior or beneath the mask of a 'salt of the earth' copier who always

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manages. This subtle sense of uselessness may be so well hidden that friends and neighbours are shocked when the person they saw as marvellous and competent takes an overdose, revealing perhaps for the first time just how bad and worthless they feel.

People with low self-esteem find it hard to ask for anything for themselves, because they have very little sense of 'self' and therefore do not know what they might ask for, or they fear that in asking they will be blamed or punished. Feeling worthless tends to derive from having been criticised or judged as bad or wanting at some point in our development. We are left feeling that what we express, indeed often who we actually are and what we want, is in some way wrong or not up to scratch. How often have you heard someone say, 'I feel wrong' or 'I feel bad'? And this can be said even by people who have accomplished much, or who are actually well loved. It's as if the self they wake up with in the mornings feels that it has no right to any self-expression or desire, or sometimes even to existence.

What is frequently most difficult about feeling worthless is that the standards we assume we 'should' be achieving are unclear; we are just sure that whatever we do it will never be good enough. Such a negative sense of self-worth means that we feel we cannot get what we want because (a) we don't know what we want, (b) we fear being punished for even mentioning it and (c) anything good we do receive is bound to be taken back or turn sour because, actually, we don't deserve it anyway.

This becomes a trap when we feel so hopeless that we give up trying to express ourselves, at the same time as punishing ourselves for being weak. Such a circular movement in our thinking merely serves to confirm our sense of worthlessness.

SUSAN came into therapy because she felt unable to make any decisions in her life. As she described it: 'I don't know who to please for the best.' When, after the birth of her second child, a doctor told her that she was suffering from postnatal depression, she thought to herself, 'What does he mean, this is just how I always feel.' She identified feeling worthless, and had often been depressed, sometimes suicidal, claiming the only thing that had stopped her walking out in front of a car was her guilt about how the driver would feel.

She had very few early memories but many images of suffering, and some of these came forward more poignantly after her own children were born. She described her mother as 'hard-faced' and had experienced her as critical, demanding and conditional. Her mother boasted that she had 'never had a dirty nappy' from Susan, but that right from infancy she had been in the habit of 'holding her over a newspaper'. Later on Susan was left out in her pram in all weathers, even snow. Susan learned to survive this early start by expecting nothing from anyone and by fitting in with what other people wanted. She was terrified of feeling cold or hungry, and always wore too much clothing and carried food in her bag.

After the birth of her younger sister, the family's 'golden girl', she became 'mother's little helper' and rather than going to college left school early to contribute to the family.

Traps

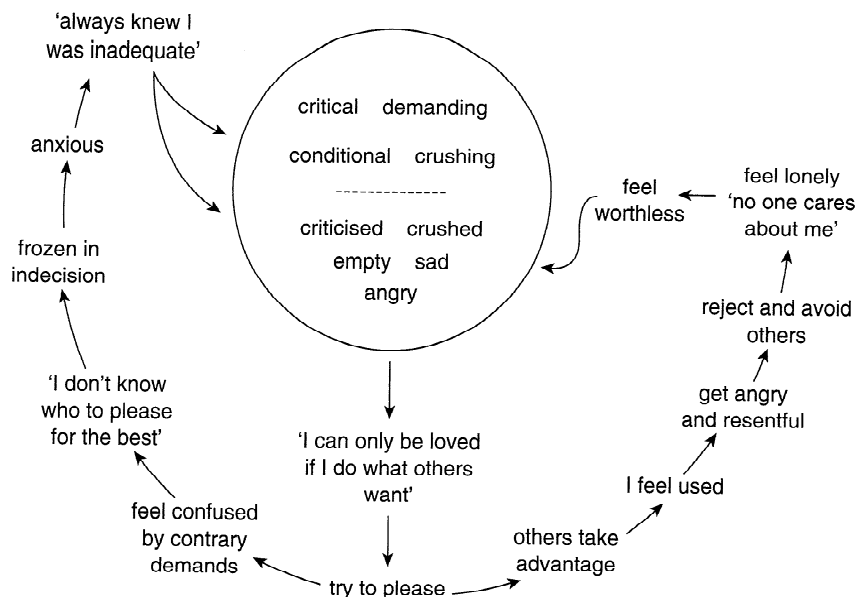


Figure 5.3 Susan's trap diagram showing her reciprocal roles maintained within the trap

Despite these beginnings, Susan had somehow held on to a belief that her life must have meaning. Towards this end she had joined several philosophical, political and religious societies, but still the feelings of worthlessness did not fade, as the groups could provide only outer rather than inner guides.

She expressed her understanding of her particular traps and dilemmas in the following way:

'Feeling unsure of my worth and afraid of rejection, I try to please others by doing what they want. This results either in my being taken for granted and abused, when I feel angry, guilty and start to avoid people, which leads to isolation and confirms my low self-esteem. Or in my feeling confused about whom to please, leading to being frozen in indecision which makes me feel stupid and worthless.'

Susan's dreams variously depicted her as a prisoner in a cage, a dead person underground who hears a voice bidding her to come out, and finally as someone who falls out of a tree but manages to somersault and land on her feet. As she worked with the dream themes and with the diagram of her trap (see Figure 5.3) she began to find a way out. She got in touch with her 'seed' self, and began to let this inform her of its value. This became a part of her which had its own sense of worth, meaning and direction, which was not dependent on the approval of others and which was able to make choices. She wrote:

Getting off the symptom hook

'I realise now that "yes" to everything is wrong and "no" to everything is wrong, and leads to a difficult existence. What I must brave is the disapproval of some people. It's hard, but no harder than the life I lead now.'

Susan eventually decided to go to college to study for her O and A levels. About two years after her therapy she wrote the following:

'I am going to do things on my own. Not carry food in my bag and eat it on the bus. I'll wait and buy something in a café. I'll sit at a table on my own and not feel I'm doing something wrong because there isn't anyone with me. When I was young I had an imaginary friend who travelled on buses with me and slept with me at night, who went everywhere I went. Here I felt on my own and obvious, so I'll bring that back to myself. I'll feel I've got myself with me and rely on that, not on what someone on the outside has to say.'

exercise

Monitor for one week the occasions when you think in a 'I'm worthless' way, and make a note of them in your diary. Try to isolate a tone of voice, attitude or look that accompanies you at these times. See if you can give a shape or image to this internal judge. Does it remind you of anything from an earlier time in your life? If your internal judge is a parent, teacher, priest, nun, sibling, friend, write down all the things that person has said to you, and all the messages you have received. Read it out loud. Then ask yourself: 'Is this really true? Do I have to go on living my life according to this judgement, as if there were no court of appeal?'

Spend some time discussing these things with a friend you trust, and begin to value yourself in a new way, concentrating on what you find you do and feel, rather than on what you do not. Every one of us is worth something. We each deserve the chance to find something of our own truth, and it is this search which can help to both create and maintain our feelings of goodwill towards ourselves.

exercise: the 'low self-esteem' trap

How do you rate your own value? What words do you use to describe yourself?

If you are struggling in the worthless trap you probably have little sense of yourself at all and are afraid of thinking about yourself. Sometimes it helps to give yourself permission to take time, and as an experiment just to look at your face in the mirror. Notice what happens when you read this idea.

Notice how you think about it. Do you think, 'I'm awful', 'I'm ugly', 'I'm nothing', 'I'm bad', 'I'm useless', 'I'll never amount to anything'? Or, 'I'm not going to do any of this, it's useless'? Just notice how much this thinking affects your mood and your sense of yourself.

If you notice that you think in this way, what part of yourself are you referring to? Is it your body, or mind, or feelings? Or does the voice that says 'I'm bad' mean the whole of you? Go back to the mirror again, and be an observer to that face. If it were the face of a friend, you would probably be objective and find something positive to say about it. Try this approach now, still as an experiment. You might come up with nice eyes, hair or smile (try smiling into the mirror). Try this exercise each day for a few minutes and see what comes out of it.

Do you compare yourself with others? If so, which others? Think how you judge yourself. Is it by comparison with those you presume are superior or better? Are your comparisons fair? For example, Sibyl was always comparing herself with someone heroic she thought might represent the boy that would have made her parents happy and saved their marriage. It was a point she could never win, and her efforts merely reinforced the feelings she had about her own worthlessness. The question we must ask is how helpful is it to compare ourselves with what we were never intended to be? However you judge yourself, do you always find yourself wanting?

Do you presume that you and what you want are always 'wrong'? If so, try to isolate what this part of you wants to do or say, and let it have an airing. Then be your own judge as to whether it is 'wrong'.

Can you get help to express the bad feelings you have inside, and recognise where and when they originated? Can you see how much guilt you have assumed for not being what you thought others wanted, or guilt for some failure for which you could not possibly be responsible? Read Chapter 7, 'Snags and self-sabotage', and see if this might throw any light on your experience of the worthless trap.

Have you got so used to feeling worthless that it has become a habit? Sometimes people are afraid to get out of the worthless trap because they feel that more will be demanded of them if they try. I've heard people say, 'If I did it well, people would expect it all the time. This way at least I can just be unhappy.'

exercise

Are you in touch with what you do well? It might be something straightforward like keeping a nice home, being kind to others, writing letters. Make a list of what you feel you do well. If this feels too difficult, ask someone to help you with the list. When you have done something well, how did you respond to this inside yourself?

The 'fear of hurting others' trap

In this trap we believe that if we say what we think or feel, or just express ourselves to others, we will hurt them in some way. So we either avoid self-expression altogether, allowing others to ignore or abuse us, or we find our real feelings bursting out in a display of childish anger that surprises, even alarms, others, thus confirming our original feeling that what we think or express is harmful. And because we believe we will be hurtful, we avoid standing up for ourselves in case we are seen as aggressive.

So where does this idea that we might hurt others come from? Sometimes our early feedback emphasised that 'children should be seen and not heard'. Sometimes we have the impression that the way we express ourselves is just too demanding, and we get judged harshly, as if there were some better way to be. Anger is often a problematic emotion in families. It can be forbidden or punished, or evoke even more furious responses. We learn that to be angry is bad and dangerous, so we bottle it up fearing the 'devil' inside. Sometimes people have felt so oppressed in their early life, either by strict parenting or schooling, that they find it impossible to trust what they feel or need. It's as if their way of being has never been respected.

Sometimes we are frightened by the kind of thoughts and feelings we have inside. We fear that if we let these feelings out they will hurt others as we have been hurt. It's as if we have no way of judging the nature of our responses that we have bottled up. This sometimes applies to people who have been abused, either physically or sexually, early in life. They come to mistrust their own instincts and impulses, believing wrongly that it was something in them that made the bad things happen and that they, and what they feel inside, are not to be trusted.

The consequence of being bound in the 'fear of hurting others' trap is that we fail to assert ourselves with others or to stand up for our rights. We carry around a poor sense of what is reasonable, and are so afraid of expressing what we think that we do not develop our own ideas. Sometimes we feel stuck in a kind of childish sulk, weighed down by the unfairness of it all. We cope with this in a number of ways. We may turn what we believe to be our hurtful ways upon ourselves, inflicting harm by cutting or bruising, drinking or drug-taking. In so doing, we avoid contact or blot out the reality of what we feel, making ourselves so isolated that we become depressed and despairing.

exercise: the 'fear of hurting others' trap

Monitor for one week the number of times you are aware that you fear hurting others when you are with them. Notice the way in which you think about yourself, or anticipate hurting others, and the words or images you use.

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.

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