

Human Nature Abhors a Vacuum, Too

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Beware! the need for stimulation can impair your judgment

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If scientists ever come up with a physics of the psyche, one of its first axioms might be the above title. We humans crave stimulation, and on many different levels. To experience ourselves as fully alive, we all have various "arousal requirements"--whether physical, mental, emotional, social, or spiritual. And if we feel under-stimulated, we'll generally complain of being bored, antsy, anxious, irritable, lonely, or even depressed.

This post explores some of the less fortunate ramifications of our constant need for stimulation. Perhaps more than anything else, our arousal needs--and the negative emotions and states of mind we experience when these needs aren't being met--can interfere with our better judgment. People who suffer accidents and injuries, for example, frequently do so because their personal arousal requirements compel them to take risks ranging from the not-entirely-prudent to the foolhardy or downright reckless.

Others may join religious cults or fringe organizations because they're frantically searching for a more fulfilling, spiritual life--but don't really know where to turn. Their need to fit in *somewhere*, to fill the internal void of un-relatedness, drives them (at times, quite indiscriminately) to put their faith in an ideology, or charismatic leader, that can easily lead them astray.

Since as a therapist I typically focus more on mental/emotional problems than physical or spiritual ones, I've become acutely aware of how experiencing an inner vacuum can lead people to make poor life choices, especially in relationships. Many people I've worked with who've gotten into bad or inappropriate relationships did so because at the time they felt alone, abandoned, or rejected. Consequently, they experienced an overwhelming need to prove to themselves they were still lovable.

Perhaps they'd been having problems dating, or recently "loved and lost," or maybe gone through a painfully one-sided divorce, which they'd strenuously sought to avert. Anxious to escape intolerable feelings of emptiness--the emptiness of loneliness or desertion--they rushed to embrace (as it were) the first person that came along. Unable to simply allow themselves to fully *experience* their disappointment, or grieve their loss, they propelled themselves headlong into a new relationship--one which they weren't at all ready for. Additionally, they may have feared going within themselves (or, for that matter, eliciting

professional help) to learn just why their relationship had gone sour. Feeling hollow, desolate and forsaken--and without the ability to self-soothe--they hastily paired up with the first available person they could find.

It reminds me a little of the lyrics to B. J. Thomas' song, "No Love at All," in which he opines: "A little bit of love is better than no love/Even a bad love is better than no love/And even a sad love is better than no love at all." In fact, in the mind of an individual unable to tolerate the emotional vacuum of dis-connectedness, it must certainly feel that almost *anything* is better than the unnerving void of being alone. But I myself would argue that if you can develop a secure, nurturing relationship with *yourself*, you're in a much better position to "stabilize" your thoughts and feelings after a failed relationship and patiently wait for the right person. To me, such an alternative is far preferable to making *any* person the "right" person simply because he or she can immediately fill what is "abhorred" as an unbearable vacuum.

Finally, the vacuum that some people strive so assiduously to avoid is really a "vacuum of self." When we're not enough for ourselves (i.e., can't somehow fill our own vacuum), we can't help but focus our attention on what we can import *into* ourselves to feel more whole and complete. Another PT blogger, Robert W. Firestone, recently made a similar point in a post entitled Emotional Hunger Vs. Love. As he put it, emotional hunger is the "pain and longing which people often act out in a desperate attempt to fill a void or emptiness." When people precipitantly get into unhealthy relationships, it's almost always to keep at bay some inner void they only vaguely understand. But to try to get from without what we haven't yet learned to give ourselves from within is almost always an exercise in futility.

Of course, there's nothing wrong in striving to fulfill ourselves by pursuing people and things that might offer us what--personally--will afford us just the right degree of stimulation. As I stated earlier, although what is an *optimal* degree of stimulation varies with the individual, the basic need for such arousal is universal. And it's certainly worthy of respect. But we still need to carefully monitor our behavior to ensure that our requirement for stimulation doesn't ultimately end up jeopardizing our health or peace of mind.

In instances where our best judgment is not available, we ought at least to confide in someone who cares about us as to whether we might possibly be getting ourselves into something questionable. Are we perhaps on the verge of making a decision that hasn't really been thought out? that may be wrong-headed, or foolish? Many people I've worked with have told me that before they made what, ultimately, was a disastrous decision, friends and relatives had already warned them against it. So it's not simply a matter of informing others about what you may be planning to do, but listening *painstakingly* to their feedback--whether it's welcome or not. I'd caution anyone on the brink of acting impulsively to stop, reflect, and speak to people they trust before giving themselves final permission to embark on such a venture, or commit to such a relationship. Although it may be true that our need to fill a vacuum can productively direct our behaviors, it can also end up seriously

threatening our welfare.

To conclude, if you're harboring some ambivalence about making a decision, most of the time it will be in your best interest *not* to until you're able to resolve this ambivalence. At the very least, you might ask yourself the question, "Am I driven to do this because I'm desperate to fill a void inside me?" If the answer is "yes," or "probably," I'd suggest--before going any farther--that you talk to others. . . . Or, if at all possible, go within and consult your own wiser, more prudent self.