

Reactivity

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Abstract

Considers reactivity to include such behaviors and actions as awareness of feelings, thinking about feelings, and responding to feelings, and emphasizes that reactivity avoids passivity, symbiosis, games and rackets, and enhances closeness in relationships. Includes descriptions of, and suggestions for employing reactivity in therapeutic relationships and for incorporating it in family counseling. An example of a reactivity contract for couples is included.

Reactivity is a communication process used to clarify feelings, fantasies and intuitions, as well as for asking directly for wants and confronting others. Reactivity also includes responding to another person's fantasies, wants and confrontations, as well as stroking others spontaneously. It is an essential aspect of communication in avoiding unhealthy symbiosis and passivity (Schiff, 1971, p. 71), games and rackets (Berne, 1964). "Reactivity is essentially the natural state of all healthy organisms in relation to their environment" (Schiff 1981). In this paper, we will concern ourselves with the human process of reactivity in which feelings or urges can be interrupted by thought before action is taken. The process of reactivity involves 1) being aware of feeling reactions to internal as well as external stimulus; 2) thinking about the feeling and identifying the want; and 3) acting on the want in order to 4) experience relief.

In order for reactivity to work effectively the following beliefs are important: 1) all people are OK and are to be taken into account and treated with dignity; 2) a person's OKness is stroked by acknowledging his or

her feelings, opinions and wants; 3) a person's negative or not OK behaviors do not take away a person's OKness; 4) transactional stimulus deserves a response, therefore, changing the subject, redefinitions (Schiff, 1975, p. 57) are inappropriate in reactivity until the original stimulus is responded to; 5) everyone can win in cooperative relationships (Steiner, 1974, p. 295) and 5) competitive relationships (Schiff, 1975, p. 60) are to be avoided; 6) problems in relationships can be solved when persons in the relationship are being reactive; 7) relationship conflicts often are indicative of a developmental stuck point for individuals involved in the conflict.

The following is an example of a completed cooperative reactive exchange:

Tom: "I don't like it when you interrupt me."

Bill: "I hear that you don't like to be interrupted, I wasn't aware I was doing it. I apologize."

What often happens, however, is that the recipient of a confrontation becomes competitive and a game will follow.

In a competitive relationship the person receiving the reaction believes that 1) only one of us can win; 2) if I accept what you are saying, you are OK and I am not, or you are better than me; and 3) I will not get my needs met (Schiff, 1975, p. 60).

The following is an example of a redefining, competitive response:

Tom: "I don't like it when you interrupt me."

Bill: "Well, you are always interrupting me!"

In the competitive exchange above if Tom continues to be reactive and stay out of the game invitation by Bill, he will stay with the original subject: "I'm willing to

talk about your feelings toward my interrupting you later, will you hear that I don't like it when you interrupt me?"

Closeness and intimacy are only possible when the Child feels safe and acknowledged. Closeness is not possible if the child is feeling threatened with scary fantasies, feels controlled rather than acknowledged or is holding on to resentments. Reactivity will "clear the boards" (Steiner, 1974) so that intimacy or working relations are possible.

Reactivity is useful in a variety of relationships such as therapeutic relationships, parenting, primary romantic relationships, teaching or business relationships. In all these relationships, if people are being honest, reactivity will help to know oneself and others better and will uncover Parent misinformation, contaminations and negative early decisions in Child (Gouldings, 1979).

For example, having fantasies that another is threatened because one is succeeding in life, or enjoying oneself may represent a negative decision in Child, "I can't be successful without threatening others." If the fantasy is checked out and the other is in fact threatened by the success, then one has discovered a reality about the other person and not a truth about all people. As grownups, people having made such decisions in childhood, will benefit from hearing new permission messages such as "It's OK with me that you succeed. You can succeed and I'll still love you." People checking out such a fantasy may be presenting their child need for an affirmation (Levin-Landheer, 1980), or simply checking out reality. If a person checks out such a fantasy and the response is affirmative, protection for the Internal Child is often in order, with one's own Internal Adult by asking someone to tell them that it is OK for them to succeed.

The extent to which one is reactive in a relationship will vary depending on the relationship contract. In a therapeutic relationship, for example, contracts may be made to react by confronting passive behaviors and expecting the client to not be passive. This is appropriate since therapeutic contracts are by nature contracts for change. In a marriage, verbalizing resent-

ments about the other's passivity would be part of reactivity. Expecting the other to change, however, could be experienced as controlling. One cannot expect or demand that another change unless the other has requested support around the change; otherwise, one can only adjust one's behavior according to the reality of how another behaves.

The wording of reactive comments is important in order to maintain caring and productive relationships. Asking for wants is effective by saying, "I want you to ____ . Are you willing to do it?" or simply, "Will you __ _?" What the person speaking wants for themselves must be clear in such a request. For example, "I want you to rub my back, will you?" is clear. "I want you to stay home more, pay more attention to me, stop drinking, etc." is not clear because what the speaker is receiving if the other stays home or stops drinking is not stated.

I have noticed that persons who operate out of the top part of symbiosis (Parent and contaminated Adult) are uncomfortable asking for what they want and sharing feelings. Therefore, these people don't ask what they want for themselves (what they do instead is "take care of the other for the other's well-being" by trying to control or rescuing the other with Parent).

Resentments (held feelings) are effectively verbalized by stating, "I resent that you have been late to our last three appointments." The response to such a statement under a reactivity contract need only be, "I hear your resentment." It is the "being heard" that is important to a reactor's Child, not necessarily that the other changes. Held resentments can be avoided by spontaneously reacting when anger is felt. "I'm getting angry because I'm not experiencing you listening to me."

When a person is checking out a scary fantasy, "I have a fantasy that you don't like me" or "I have a fantasy that you are angry at me for verbalizing resentments toward you," it is important to remember that it is the three to seven-year-old Child who is projecting the fantasy (Levin, 1974) (Schiff, 1975, p. 42) (Falzett and Maxwell, 1974). An appropriate response to such a

fantasy needs to include "the grain of truth" (Steiner, 1974). For example, "It's not true that I don't like you. I was mad 'cause you didn't say hello when I walked in." In a therapeutic situation an appropriate affirmation is useful, such as "It's OK with me that you experience anger and let me know about it."

The following are two examples of reactivity contracts I use. The first one I ask participants in individual or group therapy to make with me and the group. The second is an example of a relationship contract I share with couples. I invite couples to design their own contract based on their values and wants for the relationship.

Reactivity Contract

I will:

1. React with feelings: Happy, excited, sad, scared, angry. Example, "I feel _____ about _____."

2. Check out scary fantasies. Example, "I have a fantasy that you _____" (Something to do with person speaking, like, "You don't like me or will go away if I tell you how I feel or what I want.")

3. Verbalize resentments. Example, "I resent it when you _____." (... are late for appointments; don't look at me when I speak to you; haven't paid me the money you owe me.)

4. Ask for wants. Example, "I want you to _____." (... listen to me for five minutes, stroke me verbally, hold me, give me a rub-down, tell me three things you like about me, etc.)

"Are you willing to do that for me?" or "Will you _____?"

5. Responses to reactions: To scary fantasies with grain of truth. Example, "It's not true that I don't like you. You may be picking up on the fact that I don't like you ignoring me when you walked in this morning."

To resentments: Example, "I hear that you resent that I interrupt you when you speak."

To wants: Example, "Yes, I will." or "No, I don't want to now." (No is always conditional and temporary.)

7. Complete transactions. Check to see

that a transaction is completed before a new one is begun.

8. Confront Victim Rescuer and Persecutor Roles (Karp, 1968), passivity behaviors and discounts.

9. Be open to confrontation of Victim Rescuer and Persecutor Roles (Karpman, 1968), passive behaviors and discounts.

10. Stroke others spontaneously.

The questions before the merit contract are for the purpose of allowing couples to examine their expectations about relationships. If they have difficulty answering any of the questions with a "yes" answer, discussion is usually necessary before making a reactivity contract. The wording of the contract itself should also be changed depending on the nature of the relationship.

The questions can apply to any relationship by deleting the word "primary." For example, "I believe having relationships is desirable." "I believe relationships which maintain their closeness and mutual respect are possible." etc.

Relationship Contract

I believe that having a primary relationship is desirable. Yes No

I believe that primary relationships which maintain their closeness, excitement and intimacy are possible. Yes No

I believe that such a relationship is possible for me. Yes No

I believe that such a relationship is possible for me with you. Yes No

I believe that it is possible for both of us to get what we want in this relationship. Yes No

I believe that both you and I are equal in ability to solve problems, think, be close, feel and be creative. Yes No

I believe that conflicts do have resolutions and that you and I will be closer each time we resolve a conflict. Yes No

I COMMIT MYSELF

_____ to make this relationship my primary relationship.

_____ not to look for another primary relationship either in or out of awareness.

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- not to give up on this relationship either in or out of awareness.
- to trust that you care about me and about this relationship.
- to confront behaviors which are destructive to this relationship.
- to be reactive to you by asking for what I want, and by checking out negative fantasies and feelings.
- to relate to you as an equal rather than taking a one-up or one-down position and over-adapting to your wants by complying or rebelling.
- to energize positive fantasies concerning our relationship.
- to be responsible for my own mental and physical health, strokes, rest, space and financial support, unless specific contracts are made concerning these issues.

Reactivity has its limitations, particularly when there isn't a firm commitment to work through conflicts in relationships or when one does not continue to respect one's own and the other person's OKness. Reactivity can be very threatening to people, so its use requires careful consideration and clear contracting. Reactivity is

most effective when people are committed to the belief that relationships do work and people are Ok, and that conflicts in relationships can be used for personal growth and learning.

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"The object of group treatment is to fight the past in the present in order to assure the future."

—Eric Berne, "Principles of Group Treatment," p. 250