



DOUSING LIFE WITH NEGATIVITY:
A NEW ADDICTION?

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“Worry is not thought. Complaining is not action.”
Mason Cooley

The following stories embody the theme of this article. The first story occurred recently across the street from my office. In a matter of days a gargantuan machine, which looked like a dinosaur, decimated a large hotel. The mechanical monster grabbed parts of the building in its jaws and with amazing ease tore the building apart bit by bit. The destructive action was riveting. After the building was demolished, it occurred to me how easy it is to destroy something and yet how time and energy consuming it is to rebuild.

During the same week, there was an unsettling story reported by CBS news, about five year old Alex Barton, a kindergarten boy from Florida, who has Aspergers disorder, (a mild form of autism). His teacher Wendy Portillo stood Alex in front of his class and asked the other students to identify what they didn't like about him. The children, having been instructed to vote whether or not Alex could stay in the class, responded with two "yes" votes and fourteen "no's". As a result little Alex was voted out of the class. Why did Ms. Portillo teach the class that publically humiliating and shaming someone was acceptable? Was her behavior any better than whatever Alex may have done in class? In this one destructive, judgmental, and highly negative moment, a part of this little boy was destroyed. We can rebuild a building, but how does one rebuild a child's self-esteem?

These two previous scenes brought a memory to mind. A while back I was visiting my mother's retirement community, eating dinner with six elderly ladies, and listening to their conversation. Their verbal exchange was a eye-opener. First, their discussion was about their recent surgeries or illnesses, and then shifted to family issues and all of the struggles embedded in those relationships. After thoroughly exploring those topics, the tragedies in the local and national news were described in detail. "Did you read about that horrible accident?" I came away from these dinners feeling de-energized by all of the negativity. We know how to reconstruct buildings, but how do we recoup lost energy?

After a number of these visits, I noticed this pattern of negativity in many people – even myself, at times. Trying to be a bit more self-aware, I realized I would sometimes ruminate about the "bad" things that had happened in that day, week, year, or in my adult lifetime. These thoughts might be about old traumatic events, but they could just as easily be about the petty, meaningless things that went wrong that day, i.e. the garage door was stuck, or my e-mail wasn't working. I finally realized that the scope of

my negative thinking might not be triggered by an actual event, but by other things, such as my current level of fatigue.

Because of these incidents and plus many others, I thought a lot about the pervasiveness of negativity in our culture, and how destructive it can be. Has anyone else noticed how people often relate to each other through their problems and complaints? Have you ever been aware of someone's urgent need to discuss everything from his/her newest worry to his/her trivial annoyance? I doubt that I am the only one who has noticed that this pattern of negative thinking has become so pervasive. Negative thinking is destructive, and as my stories illustrate once something is destroyed it is hard (and often impossible) to rebuild -- an object like a building may be easier, but a relationship, one's energy, or self-esteem is much, much harder.

When we are functioning out of negativity, we are forgetting that reality consists of a positive/negative balance. "Bad" things do happen. But, so do good things. When we focus on only one perspective, one side of a seemingly black/white issue, we are not in a state of awareness. In addition, when we engage in negative thinking and behaviors it keeps us from creative problem solving. We remain stuck.

Negativity and the destructive outcome are rampant in our culture. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines negativity as, "... marked by features of hostility, withdrawal, or pessimism that hinder or oppose constructive treatment or development (as in negative outlook), or promoting a person or cause by criticizing or attacking the competition...." Compulsive, impulsive, and constant rumination over all that is wrong creates a lot of *internal* negative energy. Then when we act out our negative feelings and thoughts, they turn into negative behaviors. These destructive actions transmit more harmful negative energy, which emanates from one individual to another. It is as though negative thoughts, emotions, and actions contaminate the energy field around us.

Why is it that we indulge ourselves in negative thinking and behavior when we know the results will be destructive? Just as feeding on sugar and fats is causing a national epidemic of obesity – which is both physically and emotionally damaging – I believe that many people are feeding on negativity, which is also potentially emotionally and physically damaging. The "mind-body" connection is powerful, and I believe that when we feed

on negativity (just like junk food) the results are unhealthy at best, and psychologically destructive at worse.

I am now wondering if negativity is a new form of addiction? If negativity can be an addiction, it is important to understand what an addiction is. According to Wikipedia, "...the term addiction is used to describe a recurring compulsion by an individual to engage in some specific activity, despite harmful consequences to the individual's health, mental state or social life." As Eckhart Tolle says in his book *A New Earth: Awakening To Your Life's Purpose*, "...and addiction lives inside you as a quasi-entity or subpersonality, an energy field that periodically takes you over completely."

Any obsessive/compulsive behavior, used to alter a mood and help cope with reality, can be an addiction. Originally "addiction" referred to the habitual use of a substance (i.e. alcohol, drugs or even sugar and caffeine). When an addict abstains from using the substance, they go through a physiological and often a psychological withdrawal. This form of addiction is considered to be a biological/neurological disease. Negativity would not fall into this category.

However, there is another form of addiction – a psychosocial dependency, consisting of dysfunctional behaviors helping an individual avoid their current emotional or physical realities. Behaviors such as gambling, religion, shopping, love and use of the internet, all have the potential of falling into the category of psychological dependencies. With psychosocial addictions, there are also symptoms of withdrawal, such as anxiety, depression, and shame. These symptoms come to the surface once the addictive behavior is stopped, because the behavior is no longer being used to cover over these uncomfortable emotions.

Impulsive and compulsive negativity (in thoughts and behaviors), used to avoid reality, fits the criteria for a psychosocial addiction.

Negative thinking and actions apply to both thoughts about ourselves (as in self-shaming), and actions toward others (as in judgmentalness). Both contain negative and narrow focuses. With negative thinking, there is always a bias and a lack of awareness of the whole – that life contains the good, the bad and the indifferent.

Some of the behavioral patterns associated with any form of addictive behavior, including negativity, consist of the inability to focus on daily routines, low energy, plus difficulty with friendships and intimate relationships. These people are often depressed or anxious. Underneath this negativity exists feelings such as loneliness, envy, jealousy, low self-esteem, and fear.

People addicted to negative thinking have very little self-awareness, and/or concept of how to achieve a connection, let alone an intimacy with others. When someone is addicted to something, their interest in other areas of their lives – such as their spouses, families, friends, and work and even recreation – fades by comparison. This is unless their addictive behavior is linked to and/or enabled by that relationship -- for example, when one partner insists that the other join them in a shopping or gambling spree. Typically, both physically and psychologically addicted individuals *insist* that their partners and/or friends connect with them around their addictive behavior, and if the other person refuses, the relationship suffers. Withdrawing from this behavior results in loneliness, depression and anxiety, because the individual knows no other way to connect.

Negative thinkers and complainers tend to hang together, just as smokers, drinkers and food addicts do. We tend to keep company with those that will encourage, accept and enable our behaviors. I wonder if this is why negative thinking appears to be more and more rampant in our culture? Negative energy is highly contagious. When we are with someone who constantly ventilates negative, fear-filled views, it is easy to become emotionally sucked in.

I want to be very clear here, when I describe people who engage in negative talk and behaviors, I am not talking about people who need and want help in processing their problems or traumas. These people are not in denial about their issues. Instead, they are hoping to solve their problems with insight, self-awareness, and creativity. They desire to move forward with their lives. I see many such people each week who are eager to truly deal with their issues. This is not true for those who are addicted to negative thinking. For them it is easier to engage in negativity rather than creativity.

Joe is a good example of someone who was addicted to negativity. Joe came from a lower middle class family that suffered many hardships,

including accidents and poor health. Joe's father was often out of work and his mother frequently ill. As a result, his parents became pessimistic about life. They continually complained, and were judgmental and jealous of others. In addition Joe, being an only child, received the brunt of his parent's negative thinking. Not only did he witness their negative attitude on a daily basis, but nothing he did was good enough – his looks, grades, and lack of athletic ability.

As an adult, Joe embodied the family trait of negative thinking. He complained about his wife, kids, neighbors, work, and of course the government. He was judgmental of others. Joe's wife Sarah was also negative, but her negativity manifested in whining and taking on the martyr/victim role. She complained incessantly – mostly about Joe. Their only friends also complained and continually discussed the negative state of their lives and the world. Their social gatherings would become “bitching sessions”. This negative attitude allowed Joe to feel superior to others, (when in reality he felt a lot of shame).

Joe was the first to be jolted out of denial about his negativity and prejudicial attitudes when he lost his job. His wife reacted by complaining even more and questioning their relationship. Understandably, Joe sank into a profound depression, which had been underlying his habitual negativity. Perhaps Joe is an extreme example, but I think that many people have some Joe in them.

Negativity is often not noticed because it can masquerade as something else, i.e. constant complaining, judgmental thinking, whining, worrying, resenting, catastrophizing, hostility and distrust. Negative people can also appear opinionated, powerful, “better than”, and in control. According to these individuals, no one else sees what he/she sees. The problem with seeing these traits as being negative is that they are very socially acceptable – especially in the corporate culture.

Because negativity appears in so many forms, for the purpose of this article I will use **complaining** as a way to explore this issue in more depth. The Encarta Dictionary defines “complain” as a way to, “express discontent or unhappiness about a situation or to describe symptoms that are being experienced.” I would add to this definition that it doesn't matter if the complaint is just a thought and never verbalized – it still has a negative

emotional/physical effect. Mason Cooley said, “Complainers change their complaints, but they never reduce the amount of time spent complaining.”

Complaining (as in most forms of negative thinking) is an attention-getting device, used as an excuse to connect. Complainers move from one person to the next and will bend anyone’s ear with their negative tales of woe. They talk and/or think negatively about their kids, neighbors, spouses and jobs. If the weather is dry, they complain because their flowers and yard are not being watered, but if it rains they complain about the gloomy day and that it is hard to get their errands done. Are they hoping that by airing their negative thoughts the issue will be solved? I doubt it, because chronic complainers love to repeatedly vent about the same subjects, and yet take no action to remedy the situation. According to Eckhart Tolle, “Complaining is one of the ego’s favorite strategies for strengthening itself.”

Complaining is very different from constructive problem solving. Chronic complainers remain stuck. If presented with a creative solution, they will counter with myriad reasons why it won’t work. In addition, complaining and the resultant “stuckness”, causes tremendous stress by keeping our minds and bodies in a “flight or flight” mode. An article in *brainbasedbusiness.com*, by Dr. Ellen Weber, says that new studies showed that negativity is a cortisol trigger, which adds stress and can shut us down.

Complaining gets us nowhere. Mason Cooley also said, “Worry is not thought. Complaining is not action.” This is so true. Compulsive complaining deepens our suffering and sabotages any positive effort. It zaps our energy and hinders our ability to think creatively. Unfortunately, the more we engage in any addictive behavior, the more it deepens the neuropathways in our brains. The more habitual complaining becomes the more in denial the complainer.

The question that arises is, where does this all begin? Why do we, at any time, use complaining or negative thinking as a primary way to both interpret, and then relate and react to our world? Instead, why don’t we use new insights, positive happenings, or even use our interpersonal connections as opportunities to discuss our dreams, hopes and creative visions?

Childhood modeling is the first and most powerful determinant of negativity. As we saw with the case of Joe, if our parents were complainers – about the neighbors, the school system, the extended family, their work

situation, the government, or even about us, then we will have learned the art of habitual complaining.

I also believe that obsessive/compulsive negative thinking can begin as a “secondary gain”. A secondary gain occurs when someone has been ill, or experienced a trauma, and as a result they have received a lot of attention and support. Once they are emotionally or physically healed they still crave the same amount of attention. Hence, they will continue their negative behavior as long as they receive the emotional rewards.

As I have described in several articles, I also believe that the media is responsible for a lot of the negative thinking. Have you noticed how the media focuses almost entirely on negative news, and almost on nothing that is inspiring? I know of one exception, and that is the 7:00 news with Brian Williams who ends his shows with an inspiring story. What a pleasure that is. Sometimes I tune in for just that part. (See my previous article in “Pathways”, “It Is As It Is – or Is It?” where I discuss negativity in the media and our culture at large.)

So, what can we do as individuals? The first step is to become aware of our negative thinking and actions. Now some of you might be saying to yourselves, “But I need support. What will I do with my problems if I don’t complain?” People who have serious issues such as discovering their partner is having an affair, or that they need surgery, or have lost their job have a right to complain. There is nothing wrong in getting support when we need it. We all have a right to have a friend, an ally, who will hear our story, then help us move through the difficult times. In fact, that is the emotionally healthy thing to do, and I wish more people would reach out for support.

The people who complain, but can immediately use support in a constructive way are not the people who compulsively and chronically complain. The difference lies in their ability to use conversations and connections as a way to problem solve, and then move forward.

In order to practice what I preach, I want to conclude this article with things we can do to transform negative thinking into positive thinking and actions. Here are a few suggestions. The first step is to come out of denial and into self-awareness. We need to check ourselves – do we frequently engage in negative thoughts and behavior? Do we often have a gloomy view

of ourselves and/or the world? Do we regularly experience jealousy or feel judgmental of others. Are we aware that we complain too much? Do we seek out other complainers?

If the answer is yes, we might consciously try to develop new behavior patterns. How about waking up in the morning and trying to go a whole day without saying or doing one negative thing? Or, what about doing one unexpected positive thing each day, like complimenting a store cashier, or thanking the mail carrier for his/her great service? Afterwards, observe how this action made you feel.

We can also begin to counter our negative thoughts by being more aware of the positive things in our lives. One way to do this is by writing a nightly gratitude list. What did we appreciate about our day? What did we feel proud of, grateful for, or what made us smile? What are the things, small and large, significant or seemingly insignificant that we feel good about, i.e. my flowers are blooming, a robin has built her nest in the tree outside my window and is sitting on her eggs, I saw my daughter today, and I was able to spend time in my studio? As we list these items, our attention will immediately turn away from the negative. We will feel an opening in the heart and a softening of our whole being.

We can also make a conscious choice about where to put our energy. What issues are important to talk about? Where do we truly need support? Then, when we do discuss our concerns with a family member or friend, it is helpful to do so in two steps. The first step is stating the issue such as, "I am upset because my neighbors are making too much noise". The second step is to ask for help in problem-solving, such as "I need help in finding a creative, pleasant way to approach my neighbors". This approach moves us out of reactivity and toward proactive action. It is positive and more self-empowering.

As we become aware of our complaining, we can try to move away from negative, complaining and judgmental thinking, and toward positive thoughts and actions. We may not like something someone did, but that does not mean we don't like everything about them. We can always start a conversation with something positive such as, "I value our friendship and connection, but when you criticized me I felt hurt, and would like to discuss this with you." Addressing an issue in this way keeps things constructive. It may also help to review our relationships to see if any of them feed our negativity. Which of your friends have a more positive outlook?

Consciously make choices to spend time around those who tend to think in a more constructive way.

One more thought – if we are engaged in conversation with someone and it becomes negative, be aware. Try to turn the discussion toward creative problem solving or something positive. Refuse to engage in negativity. Even when the dialogue is about something personally removed from us, such as the government’s handling of something, we can state our complaint, but then follow it with what we would like to see happen.

Do not become sucked into the negative thinking trap. Going back to my earlier story about the retirement community – over time I noticed that several people were creative and curious about the world at large. They read, traveled and had a hobby. As a result, they had interesting things to share. These people inevitably were healthier, looked happier and appeared more spirited.

A study carried out by Leicester University of England, found that Denmark was again rated the happiest country. (The U.S. was 16th but at least we are above Iraq and Afghanistan!) The Danish students interviewed in Denmark by “60 Minutes”, felt that they have lower expectations, feel more easily satisfied, and even like the challenge of coming up from behind. They also have fewer financial worries hanging over their heads. For example, college students have their tuition all paid for and can take as long as they want to complete their studies. Young parents, fathers and mothers, are paid by the government to take maternity/paternity leave, and all medical care is free. However, they also pay 50% in taxes. It seems the Danish are content with the trade-off. Here in the U.S., the bigger the better, the more we have, the more we want. Perhaps we need to take some lessons from the Danish.

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I began this article with three stories and I will end with three more. The success of the mission to Mars is a wonderful example of our ability as a culture to move past negativity and failure, and engage in creative problem solving. After many failed attempts to successfully land on Mars, this current mission finally succeeded. The June 6th of *The Week* magazine, quoted the Arizona Daily Star as saying, “The spirit that drives us to explore space is the same spirit that compels people to extend their hearts to others

in need, to solve problems in our own world. If we can get to Mars, we can do anything.”

The next story is played out in a four-and-a-half-minute video called “Dancing”, which more than four million people viewed in two weeks on *YouTube* (as of this writing). The video shows 31-year-old Matt Harding, in shorts and hiking boots performing an arm-swinging, knee-pumping dance, surrounded by people in 69 different locations around the world. The video is uplifting and very touching, as we watch Matt dance with people of almost every age and color, and from multiple cultures. According to the article written by Kevin Casey for *The New York Times*, “It’s the online equivalent of a platinum hit, sweeping from one computer to the next like a virus.” It is absolutely joyously contagious. To see a bright, optimistic side of the world, go to: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=zlfKdbWwruY&feature=user> . How powerful and infectious positive the actions of one individual can be!

For the last story, do you remember Elizabeth Smart, the girl who at the age of 14 was kidnapped, held hostage, and sexually abused for nine harrowing months? Now, (as reported in the July 4th issue of *The Week*) she is a 20 year old college student, and her response to her horrific experience is, “Nine months of my life have been taken from me, and I wasn’t going to give them anymore of my time.”

Negativity is an emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual abductor. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could all have the same attitude as Elizabeth Smart and decide that we aren’t going to give negativity any more of our time and/or energy?

As I say in my new book, ***Break Through: Coping Skills for Chaotic Times***, “... we are living in tumultuous, chaotic, and stressful times. However, I am not pessimistic. As an eternal optimist, I believe that within this evolving chaos we are being given an opportunity to develop a stronger, more cohesive whole, both within ourselves, and within our larger, worldwide community.” In order to do that, it is my hope that we can stop putting energy into negative thinking but put our energy toward positive and creative problem solving.

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