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JOB'S BATTLE WITH GOD

In my Tucson paper (1), I suggested that one cause of depression might be blocked higher level (voluntary, conscious, rational) de-escalation (see Table on page 11 of last October's ASCAP). Sometimes we have to back off and give way. This is particularly true if we are in conflict with the major secular or spiritual powers. This means we have to put up with not getting our own way, and also with unfairness. But sometimes we rebel, and our rebellion inevitably fails, and then in many of us (who are so pre-disposed) an episode of lower-level de-escalation is triggered (which we have called an "Involuntary Subordinate Strategy" (ISS)). If intense or prolonged, the ISS is recognised as depression.

I can think of two literary models for this situation. One is Satan, as portrayed by Milton in Paradise Lost. Satan rebelled against God, lost, took a lot of punishment, and then moved sideways (rather than directly against God) to get his own back by sabotaging God's plans for Man. There is no evidence that Satan underwent lower-level de-escalation (ISS leading to depression).

The other model is Job. Job did not submit to God and accept His unfairness. The cause of the unfairness is not important – in the Book of Job, the Devil is represented as tempting God to test Job out by giving him unfair and undeserved negative experiences. It is the lot of Man to accept the brickbats of life – the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune – and if he does not do so with philosophical resignation (or with religious ecstasy) he finds himself fighting an unwinnable battle – struggling to achieve an unachievable goal, kicking against the bricks, beating his head against a brick wall, wilfully escalating into failure and humiliation – and in this situation his ISS is likely to be triggered. Here is how Job expresses his sense of being in an agonistic encounter with God:

“The arrows of the Almighty find their mark in me,
And their poison soaks into my spirit;
God's onslaughts wear me away.” (Job 6:4)

“I was at ease, but he set on me and mauled me,
Seized me by the neck and worried me.
He set me up as his target;
His arrows rained on me from every side;
Pitiless, he cut deep into my vitals,
He spilt my gall on the ground.
He made breach after breach in my defences;
He fell upon me like a fighting man.” (Job 16: 12-14)

He feels trapped, his escape is blocked and he is virtually in a state of Arrested Flight... (2)

“He has walled in my path so that I cannot break away
And he has hedged in the road before me.” (Job 19:8)

In spite of his ISS, for a long time Job remained arrogant. He even wanted to take God to court!!! His friends were unable to comfort him. He remained depressed and trapped, but whining with self-justification.

“I will maintain the rightness of my cause
I will never give up.
So long as I live, I will not change.” (Job 27:6)

“Let me but call a witness in my defence!
Let the Almighty state his case against me!
If my accuser had written out his indictment,
I would not keep silent and remain indoors.
No! I would flaunt it on my shoulder
And wear it like a crown on my head;
I would plead the whole record of my life
And present that in court as my defence.” (Job 31:35-37)

Finally, Elihu the prophet got through to him, and persuaded him that he and God were not in the same league. God then spoke to him personally (which must have been a great face-saver). Job finally makes a voluntary submission:

“I know that thou canst do all things
And that no purpose is beyond thee.
But I have spoken of great things which
I have not understood,
Things too wonderful for me to know.
I knew of thee then only by report,
But now I see thee with mine own eye.
There fore I melt away;
I repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:2-6)

Then his ISS is no longer necessary, his depression remits and good times come his way.

Jack Kahn comments: (3)

“Job, being Job, realises that his discovery that the acknowledgement that he has not the key to wisdom is, in itself, the key to wisdom which had eluded him. He has reached a new level of humility which is going to make him greater than ever before.”

Job is an example of higher level de-escalation blocked by stubborn pride. His expectation (or goal) had been to be treated fairly. It was an unrealistic goal. Life is not fair. His goal was not achieved. He became depressed, but even the abatement of pride that comes with depression was not sufficient to induce him to yield to God.

Finally, Elihu manages to get him to achieve a cognitive restructuring in which he can accept God's unfairness at the highest brain level. Then he recovers. In our “shivering model”, he has finally been induced to turn on the central heating and so he stops shivering. I recommend Jack Kahn's book to anyone who is interested in pathography.

Comment:

What if one were Job's fourth friend, or if one were called in as a professional person for a consultation about his case? Some people would want to give him ECT or an antidepressant drug. Would that make him more or less arrogant? Could cognitive therapy improve on Elihu in helping him to accept Fate? Of course, submission is only one option, and although to fight God might seem an unwise course of action to advise, there is a clue from our evolutionary approach.

Convert individual conflict into group conflict:

We believe that the ISS and depression evolved as part of agonistic behaviour – a primitive (reptilian) component of the submissive component of agonistic behaviour. Agonistic behaviour is essentially a dyadic process, a locking of horns – an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Admittedly, in higher animals allies are important in deciding who wins, but the basic structure of agonistic behaviour is dyadic. Between-group conflict is an entirely different kind of behaviour. It is less ritualised, it has different rules and, in particular, there is no place for the individual ISS in inter-group conflict. There is, of course, the demoralisation of the defeated group, but this is a different thing from individual depression.

What the therapist might do in Job's case is to reframe the problem as inter-group conflict. To put it at its most banal, we might advise Job to join a victim support group. Job is not the only one to whom God has been unfair. But in the Book of Job, those who try to comfort him have not shared his sufferings – they are comforting from outside his situation. If he got together with others whom God had wronged, and made it a group problem: whether to take God on, or to go and find a better God, or in some other way to sink their own individual indignation into the common pool of resentment; then the rules governing dyadic agonistic behaviour would no longer apply, and the ISS would be irrelevant and might then remit.

We have learned this lesson bitterly in this country (UK) in the trade union movement. There is no hope for the individual employee who takes on an unfair management, but joined together in a union the working man can fight effectively for his rights, and if he loses the fight, he does not suffer individual defeat, but shares it with his comrades.

I have estimated that I must have treated about 6,000 cases of depression in my professional lifetime, but I cannot recall a single case in which the complaint was the unfairness of God. However, rebellion against the dispositions of God or Fate underlie many cases which do not on the surface have an agonistic component. Often there is just grief to be seen. Grief is usually associated with limbic de-escalation (the emotion of sadness). I suspect for a loss to trigger lower-level de-escalation (depressed mood), there must be escalation either at the middle, limbic level (anger) or at the higher, neocortical level; e.g., wanting to take God to court over it all. Life is unfair, and it is much unfairer in tyrannies and those countries which do not enjoy our democracy and welfare services.

Life is too short (or too long), there is too much pain, incapacity and disease. There is too much uncertainty and not enough point to it all. We deserve a better deal. But we do not know to whom to apply with our objections. There is no court with the requisite level of jurisdiction. These philosophical complaints do not seem to lead directly to depression, unless they are accompanied by specific insults such as death or other forms of loss. One is reminded of the fact that people do not have a natural fear of real dangers like cars and light sockets, but waste their time and energy being afraid of harmless spiders and snakes. Evolution has not yet caught up with modern man's search for meaning.

In this country we are accustomed to seeing on television groups of people who have suffered some appalling tragedy. There are parents whose children have been killed by drunken drivers, virtuous wives whose husbands have walked out after years of marriage, would-be university students whose careers have been ruined because of the School System's failure to diagnose their dyslexia, fathers who have been falsely accused by Social Services of seducing their daughters. These people are all escalating at the middle level (they are very angry) and de-escalating at the lower level (they are depressed). Many of them seem to get relief from joining with other people similarly afflicted, and hopefully television helps them to do this. If I were asked to advise the surviving victims of some natural disaster, I would suggest that they form a pressure group to prevent the arrival of counsellors on the scene, hoping that the group solidarity thus formed would convert their individual rage into group rage and they could take it out on the armies of know-it-all do-gooders who apparently nowadays descend on any scene of widespread tragedy and insist on sharing the grief.

The discerning ASCAPian will see in the above the shape of our Editor's concept of ATP (allies, thought and planning). Allies are

important both to assist thought and planning, and to form a group to rescue the victim from individual conflict: different allies may be needed for these two functions.

1. Price JS (1997) Goal setting: a contribution from evolutionary biology. The ASCAP Newsletter, 10 (10), 8-11 (October).
2. Gilbert, P. & Allan, S. (1998). The role of defeat and entrapment (arrested flight) in depression: an exploration of an evolutionary view. Psychological Medicine, 28, 584-597.
3. Kahn J (1986) Job's Illness: Loss, Grief and Integration: A Psychological Interpretation. London: Gaskell.

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