Feeling Bad

Feeling bad has two distinct meanings. The first meaning we will call "coercion" and the second "inner conflict". Coercion is bad, inner conflict is good. Coercion is when you are hurt, when everything goes wrong. Inner conflict is when you wrestle with moral dilemmas and hard problems. Having conflicting theories is the same as have problems, and problems are not bad. The growth of knowledge can be seen as progress from problems to new and better problems; that's just as accurate a description as progress from solutions to more solutions. Hard problems have two different meanings. Hard problems can be problems that hurt, or just problems that are not simple, take a while to solve, matter, you might never solve. Problems hurt when you are unable to think about them in a rational way that makes progress. This feels frustrating. Not solving a problem does not inherently cause frustration. Having good problems to think about is fun; life would be boring without them. What's bad is when it hurts. We shouldn't shy away from problems for fear of being hurt. Being scared of problems is one of the mechanisms that makes them hurt.

Normally we engage in an intricate process of scheduling our thoughts, and choices, and problems, and criticism, and creativity. We constantly find short term solutions and juggle a variety of pressing issues. This is a good and necessary part of life. Coercion is when we drop the juggling pins and they fall on our head and give us brain damage. Inner conflict is just when there are a lot of pins that stay in the air a long time. There's nothing virtuous or admirable about coercion. But there is no mechanical way to avoid it. Coercion is not predictable and only happens as a result of failures of creativity. It only seems predictable when someone actively tries to hurt us, and has evolved traditions aiding them in hurting us. But in our own intellectual life, as long as we have some sense of what areas we are extraordinarily irrational about, there is little to fear. That doesn't mean coercion won't happen, it just means there is no specific thing to avoid that will help. Coercion is not caused by struggling with the conflicting theories that TV is worthwhile and a waste of time. It's caused by being unable to decide, for no good reason, whether to, as a temporary measure, watch TV today, or not. Coercion is not caused by being told that you should not hit your sister. That's just a good idea. It's caused by your parent trying to stop you from doing something you think is important to do, and you being unable to see why, and your parent not being helpful or comforting, and you believing your parent won't explain to your satisfaction later, and you being unable to see how to not mind, and you being unable to decide to think about it later in 5 seconds or 30 seconds or 5 minutes or 30 minutes or a day or a week, and you not being able to distract yourself and the issue is painful. Coercion is disasters of scheduling where problem solving goes awry and you hurt yourself. Avoiding problems does not help avoid coercion at all. It helps avoid learning. Not learning causes coercion, because it's harder to be happy when you have a bad life.

Not knowing the answer, all by itself, is not scary. Wondering what is right to do, and feeling conflicted, should not be scary. Do your best, and do it in such a way that if you're wrong you'll learn better. What more could anyone ask of you? And do one thing at a time, if that helps. Delay delay delay deciding while you do other things. Few problems need to be solved at the first moment they are thought of. Do them when it's best to. Be optimistic. You can and will make progress. There's nothing to fear. Just keep trying and you will, at the least, learn about what doesn't work. There is no reason this should hurt.

To relate this a bit more to TCS, parents should not be particularly scared of accidentally coercing their children. Innocent mistakes are as likely to cause coercion as random bad luck. That is to say, they will never cause coercion if people are rational about the subject in question. What parents should avoid is intentionally doing things designed to thwart, hurt, or oppose their children. This especially means all forms of disciplining children. If children do bad things, take their side and help them learn better. Anything that is truly good they will want for themselves. True morality doesn't hurt us, it helps us. It is not criticism, or being contradicted, that hurts anyone, so don't fear to do those. Instead focus on solving chronic problems and avoiding acting irrationally without thinking.

[More writing by Elliot **here (http://www.curi.us/blog/)** .]

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Comments

The last paragraph is great
Submitted by Leo on 18 January, 2006 - 13:01

It's not an attitude that was evident in TCS a few years back.

"Not solving a problem does not inherently cause frustration."

One thing is a problem in a game, which is something you can always reload and try again when you commit mistakes, another thing is a problem in real life, where circunstances force you to act before you have the time or the ability to think rationally. That is always very frustrating.

to post comments

Inner conflict?
Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 23 February, 2006 - 02:32

So, "inner conflict" is one way to feel bad, but it's good? How can feeling bad be good?

to post comments

'coercion' ? Don't think so
Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 24 February, 2006 - 14:28

This writer has neatly redefined the act of coercion (or using the threat of a reprisal to make a person do something against his or her will) as the fictional state of 'brain damage' caused by dropping something called 'juggling pins'. This is an example of false logic, a manipulative psychological technique used to convince an audience of an outcome that does not logically follow the given cause. Coercion is not a state of mind, it is an act. Coercive behaviour is not an absolute, there are degrees. Informing your child of the negative consequences of an action she wants to pursue can be defined as coercive if you want but is actually the definition of parental responsibility and encourages the child to take responsibility for her own actions. Threatening to hit the child is

also coercive but a bad plan as does not address the reasons for not pursuing the behaviour. This piece by Elliot, however, is a ridiculous piece of psychobabble written by someone who at best has not understood the word coercion, at worst is using emotional manipulation to make others behave according to his own misguided values. That's pretty coercive.

to post comments

It's not psychobabble!

Submitted by mammal_mama on 11 January, 2007 - 18:36

I see this article not as psychobabble, but as a comparison of conflict inside our own minds and conflict with others outside ourselves. I'm not saying I've totally "got it" -- but just because an idea takes a little effort for me to process, that doesn't mean it's psychobabble.

What I'm hearing Eliot say is that when our personal theories conflict, we don't have to coerce ourselves by suppressing one theory in preference of the other. We can give ourselves time to rationally mull things over until we come to a satisfactory resolution of the conflict.

When our children's desires conflict with ours, I hear Eliot saying we should keep thinking creatively about ways to satisfy everyone.

If our children behave in harmful, coercive ways toward others, Eliot is saying it's not coercion to tell them this is wrong and why.

Really I believe harmful behaviors are a child's attempt to meet some underlying need that we can help him/her meet in ways that also respect the needs of others. I agree with Eliot that punishment is not the way to address the problem.

Susan

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