

# OVERCOMING DESTRUCTIVE REACTIONS IN THE FAMILY

with Psychophonetics

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In these trying time of pandemic restrictions— all our human relationships are under extra pressures. We all spend much more time at home with our close family. Is it a problem or an opportunity? It can be both. In order to survive and even to grow from this crisis – extra consciousness and practical relationship skills are required.

The most destructive dynamic in intimate relationships, in parenthood and in family life are our defensive reactions. It is also the most difficult one to overcome. When an animal or a human being feels attack – our instinct is to fight back, to defend ourselves or to run away. That is how we survived for millions of years, and our instinct of survival is not going to change anytime soon. It is an essential life component of every species of living beings and we will always need it. But in the domain of human relationship this same instinct can become a destroyer. Becoming aware of it, observing it and overcoming it is fundamental for the development and to the very survival of close human relationship on all levels.

There are moments when the most beloved, trusted and intimate person in our life suddenly appears like a dangerous enemy, a threat and a target for a defensive attack. We shout, we condemn, we accuse, we disrespect, we push out and offend our loved ones. This is truly crazy at the same time completely widespread, a ‘normal’ pathology. Defensive reactions are a destructive social pathology that we all wish to overcome. The momentary inflammation of reactive, aggressive defensiveness comes and go, but the damage to the relationship last long past that moment, and its effects accumulate into a pattern of mistrust. On the other hand, developing the awareness and the strength of character required for overcoming defensive reactions can become renewal and a positive development for human relationships on all levels.

Many of our automatic reactions, especially in our physical life, are serving us well and we don't want to change them: the body's operation is a system of automatic, unconscious balancing reactions between various systems of our physiology; a lot of our management of food, dress, intimate life, housing, transport and well-being are largely automatic; our car-driving habits for instance and many other of our learnt strategies on a daily basis are extensions of our survival instinct and act as automatic reactions. And, of course, when real danger to ourselves or our family appear—we react in functional self-defence. All these reactions are necessary. What is the kind of reactions that is destructive to human relationship?

They are the projective reactions, the automatic, habitual, defensive/aggressive responses to *perceived danger*, not to a real danger. Our perceptions can deceive us. What threaten us is not always a real danger, but some signal which we automatically interpret as danger because it *reminds us of a real danger* which we have experienced in our past. In Psychophonetics we call these mistaken signals *the trigger*: what provokes the automatic defensive reaction is not what is *actually* taking place in the person or the situation in front of us, but what the person or the situation in front of us unconsciously *reminds us of*. Once our survival instinct has been provoked into defensive action—it has all the raw power and aggressiveness of the life of nature, much stronger, faster and more unstoppable than all our cognitive abilities. We react faster than our ability to reflect, to evaluate, to separate what is *actually happening* from what we automatically project into it from our past. Our intellect explains it away, but it is not telling the truth about it. The survival instinct and its automatic defensive reactions *have to be fast* to be effective. They are much faster than our consciousness. We tend to reflect on what we do in reaction *after* we react, when the inter-personal damage has already taken place.

The people on the receiving end of our defensive/aggressive reactions know that they do not deserve them, they know they had no intention to attack us and that there is no logical or moral justification for our aggression towards them. What we say about it while in reactive mode makes no sense to them. Therefore, they tend to counter-react defensively to our defensive reaction. That *IS* conflict. In the inevitable ensuing dynamic of conflict, no one is listening to no one and no constructive resolution is being created, as most of the time we are not even speaking about the same thing. But the damage to the relationship is happening anyway: children are being blamed and punished for what they did not do; adults are being accused for negative criticism they did not intend; words and acts are interpreted negatively even if meant positively; trust, warmth, closeness, friendliness, care and intimacy are being destroyed – all for mistaking an expression for what it is not. That is reaction.

How can we control it? With great difficulties, but a development in this direction is potentially possible for everyone. Once we realise that we have become the destroyers of what we love and cherish—we can stop it, think about it and develop practical strategies for self-control.

**First** of all, in order for *consciousness* to enter into the *unconscious* dynamics of defensive reactions, a *stop* has to be implemented. While the aggressive/defensive interaction is going on, no consciousness can enter into it. In military terms: a cease fire has to take place before peace negotiation can start. The moment you realise that a conversation has deteriorated into a defensive/reactive argument, regardless of who is to blame for it– just stop. It takes two to tango and two to fight, and it is enough for one to stop for the argument– for the argument to stop. In Psychophonetics couple counselling we created the ritual of ‘*The Stop Sign*’: an agreement in advance between the two partners that it is enough for one of them to raise the

Stop Sign—for the other one to stop. Very often we do not know that we are in reaction until afterward, so if we wait for both parties to realise *at the same time* that a reactive interaction is going on—the argument is not going to stop until it is too late. So just stop. Even if only one side of the interaction stops – the dynamic of reaction-to-reaction-to-reaction will stop.

In the break of hostilities created by the Stop, new consciousness can enter, if not immediately, then a bit later on. A real break in the interaction is necessary for a real change to take place.

**Secondly**, a moment of reactivity can be observed more clearly after the event. Consciousness that failed to enter the interaction on the spot— can still enter the memory of it when there is less tension. That will be too late to prevent the damage of the conflicted moment, but it is a preparation for next time. The extra consciousness that can enter *after* the last conflict—may be with you *before* the next one. That is a progressive development. In such a reflective moment you may catch yourself reacting more objectively, without the noise of intellectually justifying what is not intellectually justifiable.

For what is the real reason for automatic defensive reaction? It is a forgotten hurt, injury, a bitter memory, a moment of injustice from the past, an anger that was never expressed. These ‘frozen memories’ surface when they are being triggered many years later, provoking the reaction. Only an honest (with oneself) penetrating observation into the real causes of defensive reactions has a real chance of changing it.

**Thirdly**, a healing process is required, healing the pain and the injury from the past that is the real cause of the reaction. That is possible. All this can be made practicable with the help of body awareness, such as we offer in Psychophonetics personal training sessions. The body remember everything that we have forgotten, and it reflect the relevant memories for conscious observation and change, if we only listen to its messages.

Try any of these three processes of overcoming aggressive/defensive reaction and there will be a change in the habitual destructive ‘civil wars’ of domestic reactions, arguments and conflicts that toxify your life. In these crisis times of pandemic restrictions, it is less possible to avoid the ‘pressing of the buttons’ of each other as we all spend much more time together at home. In order to maintain and to develop the human quality of important relationships—we have to raise our consciousness and change our habits. This is the way to transform crisis into an opportunity for personal and social development.

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