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Published by Dr. Simon Sheh, Ph. D

And Simon Sheh & Associates

Registered Psychologists

154 Meadowlark Health Center 156 St. & 87 Ave., Edmonton, AB. T5R 5W9 Telephone: (780) 429-4761, Ext. 237
Fax: (780) 425-4274 Email: simon@drsimonsheh.com

HOW TO STOP PAIN IN THE PAST FROM DESTROYING YOUR LIFE

A CASE STUDY

A young man recently came to see me wanting to work on his depression and anger. He was using pornography to medicate his emotional pain. A couple of years ago, he came to my Pure at Heart Seminar in Edmonton to deal with his sexual addiction. And now he wanted to stop depression and anger from destroying his marriage, his family, and his life. During the course of the therapy, this young man disclosed the pain growing up with his father. He literally hated his father and blamed everything on his dad. He was quick to anger and derived no joy and fun from living, at home and at work. This young man built a play structure for his son on the family home's back yard, He described his project as pieces of lumber that anyone can put together, and perceived the play structure as nothing special to him, his son, and his son's friends.

EXTERNALIZING THE PAIN

Pain in the past can rob the joy of living in the present, and immobilize a person looking forward to the future. Hatred and anger toward a family member, such as the father in this young man's case, can turn into depression and anxiety problems.

The first step to bring healing from pain in the past is to name the pain. Naming the pain involves labeling the pain, identifying the pain, and describing the pain in a safe and trusting environment.

I gave my young man client a piece of home work, and it was to write a letter to his father, and in the letter tell his father everything he hates about him, with no reservation. The letter was part of the therapy to help externalize pain and was not meant to send to his dad. The following is an excerpt of the letter:

"You never wanted me. You never wanted to play with me. You never wanted to spend time with me. You never tried to teach me anything, but you expected me to know how to do everything. You're a stranger to me. I don't know anything about you. I never know what to say to you. I don't even hate you because I don't feel anything for you. I feel like I never had a father. I don't know my brother. I don't know any of my uncles. I have no family. Now I have to spend hour after hour in therapy and hundreds of dollars trying to figure out why I am the way I am and all I keep getting told is it's because of you. I'm sick of living like this every minute. I hate myself and I should hate you. You deserved to be hated because you don't deserve anything else. You're the most miserable person ever and so am I. Why do I have to spend the rest of my life trying to fix myself and miss out on a good life? I never feel happy or satisfied or peaceful. I think about killing myself every day because I never feel better no matter how hard I try. I'm so ashamed of myself that my son has to have a father like me. I wish you had died before I was born."

LETTING GO OF THE PAIN

The essence of letting go of pain is to make a conscious decision not to bring along with you, psychologically speaking, the person and his/her voices that caused the pain into your everyday living. In the letter, my client was naming the lack of blessing from his father, the loss of a healthy childhood, the loss of extended family, and basically the loss of who he is, his own identity.

In order to let go of the pain, my client has to learn to accept the losses and the fact that his father was not equipped at all to be a healthy man and a healthy dad for him. His father was a lousy dad, period. I asked my client, if a miracle had happened to his father and his father has changed and matured to be a healthier man, what his dad would say to him after he has read the letter. To help his son letting go of the pain, I believe the father would say the followings,

"Son, let me go. I screwed up. I have damaged you. I cannot go back to undo my wrong doings. Let me go. Release me. Don't take me and my voices with you into your home or your work place. Do not let what I have done in the past destroy the rest of your life. I am very sorry. Release me from your life. It is O.K., I can handle it. I give you permission to do so. Let me go, and you can begin to pick up the pieces, for your self and your own family."

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A HOME IS SIMPLY BEAUTIFUL NOT SO MUCH FOR HOW IT FIRST APPEARS, BUT FOR WHAT THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE CAN BECOME.

Sarah Nettleton, Architect and Author of the Simple Home

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Picking up the pieces is equivalent to a rebuilding project after suffering a major loss. In my client's case, it entails a personal responsibility to reclaim who he is, and to recapture his own identity outside of the realm of marriage, parenthood, and his father's voices.

I gave my client a second piece of homework, an esteem-building activity. I asked my client, as well as his wife, to write down on a piece of paper his own strengths, gifts, abilities, talents, things he loves to do, his temperament, dreams, weaknesses, liability, and limitations. The followings describe the upsides and downsides of my client's recaptured identity:

Client's Identity

- Strengths – conscientious, reliable
- Gifts – craftsmanship
- Abilities – handy, technical knowledge
- Talents – use tools, good driver
- Love to do – workshop, build things, movies
- Temperament – sensitive, easy to anger
- Dreams – wants to have peace, work in workshop
- Weakness – not a people person
- Liability – no confidence, unable to make decisions, no self esteem
- Limitations – can't handle stress, doesn't like to be challenged

Spouse on Client's Identity

- Strengths – organized (a great list-maker), detail-oriented, perfectionist, sensitive, a great dad
- Gifts – craftsmanship
- Abilities – able to plan and create things
- Talents – creative, handyman, self-taught woodworker
- Love to do – woodworking
- Temperament – melancholy, easily sink into depression, feels things very deeply
- Dreams – to have a workshop to create and build things
- Weaknesses – angers easily, does not handle stress well, often takes life's nuisances/stresses very personally
- Liability – low self-esteem
- Limitations – no male role models

We all have upsides and downsides in our self identity. The key to healthy living and healthy relationships is to pursue our upsides with passion and learn to better manage our downsides so as to minimize relationship injuries and negative impacts on our mental health.

I gave my client a third piece of homework, and that was to bring me pictures of his wife, his son, and the backyard play structure. I strongly believe a big part of my work as a therapist is to give

my clients voices of blessing on who they are, the same voices that many of my clients had never heard of while growing up in their homes. This belief of mine has led me to attend a client's horseback riding lesson on a Saturday afternoon, sit in a Sunday service listening to a client preach in his church, and drinking tea in an Irish pub listening to a client playing his music in front of friends.

My young man client brought the photos, and the play structure is sure not just a bunch of lumbers that anyone can put together. In the pictures, I saw his son and his friends having so much fun playing and swinging, a very much different childhood, partly because my client was willing to use his talent in craftsmanship to build a strong foundation of healthy living for his family.

BENEFITS OF A HEALTHY SELF IDENTITY

A healthy identity is the cornerstone of healthy psychological health. In an April 2006 issue of Glamour magazine, Kristin Armstrong, the ex-wife of cyclist Lance Armstrong, wrote about the pain of losing her own identity after her marriage to Lance. She said if she were to do things over again, she would have guarded the things that made her feel like her. Her advice to her daughters is as followed:

"I know that one day my daughters will face these same challenges. At age four they are already starting to form their own dreams of a handsome prince on a white horse. Without destroying the beautiful elements of their innocence, I long to prevent them from a disappointment like mine – so with each step between now and then, I vow to myself and to them to be real. I hope that as they watch me painstakingly reclaim my hard-earned authenticity, they will manage to guard their own. And when they do decide to wed, they will bring to their marriage the greatest gift of all: a unique and unshakeable sense of self."

In our last session, my client told me that he has become more assertive, less reactive to stressful moments, and wants to do life with less of his father's voices. His wife has noticed less "blues" in her husband. A good beginning in rebuilding a life once lost.

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