Neurosis

Many parents make the mistake of not picking up their child sufficiently out of fear of "spoiling" him. By ignoring him, this is precisely what they do, and later they will be swamped by the child's insatiable demands for symbolic substitutes — until the day they crack down on him. The consequences of that are both inevitable and dreadful.

by Dr. Arthur Janov

We all are creatures of need. We are born needing, and the vast majority of us die after a lifetime of struggle with many of our needs unfulfilled. These needs are not excessive — to be fed, kept warm and dry, to grow and develop at our own pace, to be held and caressed, and to be stimulated. These Primal needs are the central reality of the infant. The neurotic process begins when these needs go unmet for any length of time. A newborn does not know that he should be picked up when he cries or that he should not be weaned too early, but when his needs go unattended, he hurts.

At first the infant will do everything in his power to fulfill his needs. He will reach up to be held, cry when he is hungry, kick his legs, and thrash about to have his needs recognized. If his needs go unfulfilled for a length of time, if he is not held, changed or fed, he will suffer continuous pain either until he can do something to get his parents to satisfy him or until he shuts off the pain by shutting off his need. If his pain is drastic enough, death may intervene, as shown in studies of some institutional babies.

Since the infant cannot himself overcome the sensation of hunger (that is, he cannot go to the refrigerator) or find substitute affection, he must separate his sensations (hunger; wanting to be held) from consciousness. This separation of oneself from one's needs and feelings is an instinctive maneuver in order to shut off excessive pain. We call it the split. The organism splits in order to protect its continuity. This does not mean that unfulfilled needs disappear, however. On the contrary, they continue throughout life exerting a force, channeling interests, and producing motivation toward the satisfaction of those needs. But because of their pain, the needs have been suppressed in the consciousness, and so the individual must pursue substitute gratifications. He must, in short, pursue the satisfaction of his needs symbolically. Because he was not allowed to express himself, he may be compelled to try to get others to listen and understand later in life.

Not only are unattended needs that persist to the point of intolerability separated from consciousness, but their sensations become relocated to areas where greater control or relief can be provided. Thus, feelings can be relieved by urination (later by sex) or controlled by the suppression of deep breathing. The unfulfilled infant is learning how to disguise and change his needs into symbolic ones. As an adult he may not feel the need to suck his mother's breast owing to abrupt early weaning but will be an incessant smoker. His need to smoke is a symbolic need, and the essence of neurosis is the pursuit of symbolic satisfactions.

Neurosis is symbolic behavior in defense against excessive psychobiologic pain. Neurosis is self-perpetuating because symbolic satisfactions cannot fulfill real needs. In order for real needs to be satisfied, they must be felt and experienced. Unfortunately, pain has caused those needs to be buried. When they are buried, the organism goes into a continuous state of emergency alert. That alert state is tension. It propels the infant, and later the adult, toward the satisfaction of need in any way possible. This emergency alert is
necessary to ensure the infant's survival; if he were to give up hope of ever having his needs fulfilled, he might die. The organism continues to live at any cost, and that cost is usually neurosis — shutting down unmet bodily needs and feelings because the pain is too great to withstand.

Whatever is natural is a real need — to grow and develop at one's own pace, for example. This means, as a child, not being weaned too soon; not being forced to walk or talk too early; not being forced to catch a ball before one's neurological apparatus can do so comfortably. Neurotic needs are unnatural ones — they develop from the nonsatisfaction of real needs. We are not born in this world needing to hear praise, but when a child's real efforts are denigrated virtually from birth, when he is made to feel that nothing he can do will be good enough for him to be loved by his parents, he may develop a craving for praise. Similarly, the need to express oneself as a child can be suppressed, even by the lack of anyone listening. Such denial may turn into a need to talk incessantly.

A loved child is one whose natural needs are fulfilled. Love takes his pain away. An unloved child is the one who hurts because he is unfulfilled. A loved child has no need for praise because he has not been denigrated. He is valued for what he is, not for what he can do to satisfy his parents' needs. A loved child does not grow up into an adult with an insatiable craving for sex. He has been held and caressed by his parents and does not need to use sex to satisfy that early need. Real needs flow from inside out, not the reverse. The need to be held and caressed is part of the need to be stimulated. The skin is our largest sense organ and requires at least as much stimulation as other sense organs. Disastrous consequences can occur when there is insufficient stimulation early in life. Organ systems may begin to atrophy without stimulation; conversely, as Krech has shown, with proper stimulation they may develop and grow. There must be constant mental and physical stimulation.

Unfulfilled needs supersede any other activity in the human until they are met. When needs are met, the child can feel. He can experience his body and his environment. When needs are not met, the child experiences only tension, which is feeling disconnected from consciousness. Without that necessary connection, the neurotic does not feel. Neurosis is the pathology of feeling.

Neurosis does not begin at the instant a child suppresses his first feeling, but we might say that the neurotic process does. The child shuts down in stages. Each suppression and denial of need turn the child off a bit more. But one day there occurs a critical shift in which the child is primarily turned off, in which he is more unreal than real, and at that critical point we may judge him to be neurotic. From that time on, he will operate on a system of dual selves; the unreal and real selves. The real self is the real needs and feelings of the organism. The unreal self is the cover of those feelings and becomes the facade required by neurotic parents in order to fulfill needs of their own. A parent who needs to feel respected because he has been humiliated constantly by his parents, may demand obsequious and respecting children who do not sass him or say anything negative. A babyish parent may demand that his child grow up too fast, do all the chores, and in reality become adult long before he is ready — so that the parent may continue to be the cared-for baby.

Demands for the child to be unreal are not often explicit. Nevertheless, parental need becomes the child's implicit command. The child is born into his parents' needs and begins struggling to fulfill them almost from the moment he is alive. He may be pushed to smile (to appear happy), to coo, to wave bye-bye, later to sit up and walk, still later to push himself so that his parents can have an advanced child. As the child develops, the requirements upon him become more complex. He will have to get A's, to be helpful and do his chores, to be quiet and undemanding, not to talk too much, to say bright things, to be athletic. What he will not do is be himself. The thousands of operations that go on between parents and children which deny the natural Primal needs of the child mean that the child will hurt. They mean that he cannot be what he is and be loved. Those deep hurts I call Primal Pains (or Pains). Primal Pains are the needs and feelings which are repressed or denied by consciousness. They hurt because they have not been allowed expression or fulfillment. These Pains all add up to: I am not loved and have no hope of love when I am really myself.

Each time a child is not held when he needs to be, each time he is shushed, ridiculed, ignored, or pushed
beyond his limits, more weight will be added to his pool of hurts. This pool I call the Primal Pool. Each addition to his pool makes the child more unreal and neurotic.

As the assaults on the real system mount, they begin to crush the real person. One day an event will take place which, though not necessarily traumatic in itself — giving the child to a baby sitter for the hundredth time — will shift the balance between real and unreal and render the child neurotic. That event I call the major Primal Scene. It is a time in the young child's life when all the past humiliations, negations, and deprivations accumulate into an inchoate realization: "There is no hope of being loved for what I am." It is then that the child defends himself against that catastrophic realization by becoming split from his feelings, and slips quietly into neurosis. The realization is not a conscious one. Rather, the child begins acting around his parents, and then elsewhere, in the manner expected by them. He says their words and does their thing. He acts unreal — i.e., not in accord with the reality of his own needs and desires. In a short time the neurotic behavior becomes automatic.

Neurosis involves being split, disconnected from one's feelings. The more assaults on the child by the parents, the deeper the chasm between real and unreal. He begins to speak and move in prescribed ways, not to touch his body in proscribed areas (not to feel himself literally), not to be exuberant or sad, and so on. The split, however, is necessary in a fragile child. It is the reflexive (i.e., automatic) way the organism maintains its sanity. Neurosis, then, is the defense against catastrophic reality in order to protect the development and psychophysical integrity of the organism.

Neurosis involves being what one is not in order to get what doesn't exist. If love existed, the child would be what he is, for that is love — letting someone be what he or she is. Thus, nothing wildly traumatic need happen in order to produce neurosis. It can stem from forcing a child to punctuate every sentence with "please" and "thank you," to prove how refined the parents are. It can also come from not allowing the child to complain when he is unhappy or to cry. Parents may rush in to quell sobs because of their anxiety. They may not permit anger — "nice girls don't throw tantrums; nice boys don't talk back" — to prove how respected the parents are; neurosis may also arise from making a child perform, such as asking him to recite poems at a party or solve abstract problems. Whatever form it takes, the child gets the idea of what is required of him quite soon. Perform, or else. Be what they want, or else — no love, or what passes for love: approval, a smile, a wink. Eventually the act comes to dominate the child's life, which is passed in performing rituals and mouthing incantations in the service of his parents' requirements.

It is the terrible hopelessness of never being loved that causes the split. The child must deny the realization that his needs will never be filled no matter what he does. He cannot live knowing that he is despised or that no one is really interested in him. It is intolerable for him to know that there is no way to make his father less critical or his mother kind. The only way he has of defending himself is by developing substitute needs, which are neurotic.

Let us take the example of a child who is being continually denigrated by his parents. In the schoolroom he may chatter incessantly (and have the teacher come down hard on him); in the schoolyard he may brag nonstop (and alienate the other children). Later in life he may have an uncontrollable craving for and loudly demand something as patently symbolic (to the onlooker) as the "best table in the house" in an expensive restaurant.

Getting the table cannot undo the "need" he has to feel important. Otherwise, why repeat his performance every time he eats out? Split off from an authentic unconscious need (to be recognized as a worthwhile human being), he derives the "meaning" of his existence from being greeted by name by various maitre d'hôtel in fancy restaurants.

Children are born, then, with real biological needs which, for one reason or another, their parents do not fulfill. It may be that some mothers and fathers simply do not recognize the needs of their child or that those parents, out of a desire not to make any mistakes, follow the advice of some august authority in child rearing and pick up their child by the clock, feed him by a timetable an airline would envy, wean him according to a flow chart, and toilet train him as soon as possible.
Nevertheless, I do not believe that either ignorance or methodological zeal accounts for the bumper crops of neurosis our species has been producing since history began. The major reason I have found that children become neurotic is that their parents are too busy struggling with unmet infantile needs of their own.

Thus a woman may become pregnant in order to be babied — which is what she has actually needed to be all her life. As long as she is the center of attention, she is relatively happy. Once delivered of her child, she may become acutely depressed. Being pregnant would serve her need and have nothing to do with producing a new human being on this earth. The child may even suffer for being born and depriving his mother of the one time in her life when she could make others care. Since she is not ready for motherhood, her milk may dry up, leaving her newborn with the same raft of early deprivations which she herself may have suffered. In this way the sins of the parents are visited on the children in a seemingly never-ending cycle.

The attempt of the child to please his parents I call the struggle. The struggle begins first with parents and later generalizes to the world. It spreads beyond the family because the person carries his deprived needs with him wherever he goes, and those needs must be acted out. He will seek out parent substitutes with whom he will play out his neurotic drama, or he will make almost anyone (including his children) into parental figures who will fill his needs. If a father was suppressed verbally and was never allowed to say much, his children are going to be listeners. They, in turn, having to listen so much, will have suppressed needs for someone to hear them; it may well be their own children.

The locus of struggle shifts from real need to neurotic need, from body to mind, because mental needs occur when basic needs are denied. But mental needs are not real needs. Indeed, there are no purely psychological needs. Psychological needs are neurotic needs because they do not serve the real requirements of the organism. The man in the restaurant, for example, who must have the best table in order to feel important is acting on a need which developed because he was unloved, because his real efforts in life were either ignored or suppressed. He may have a need to be recognized by name by the maitre d' because early in life he was referred only to by category — "son." This means he was dehumanized by his parents and is trying to get a human response symbolically through others. Being treated as a unique human being by his parents would obviate this so-called need to feel important. What the neurotic does is put new labels (the need to feel important) on old unconscious needs (to be loved and valued). In time he may come to believe that these labels are real feelings and that their pursuit is necessary.

The fascination of seeing our names in lights or on the printed page is but one indication of the deep deprivation in many of us of individual recognition. Those achievements, no matter how real, serve as a symbolic quest for parental love. Pleasing an audience becomes the struggle.

Struggle is what keeps a child from feeling his hopelessness. It lies in overwork, in slaving for high grades, in being the performer. Struggle is the neurotic's hope of being loved. Instead of being himself, he struggles to become another version of himself. Sooner or later the child comes to believe that this version is the real him. The "act" is no longer voluntary and conscious; it is automatic and unconscious. It is neurotic.

Notes

This article was originally published online at The Primal Therapy website as part two of the series, Why Is Primal Therapy? (http://www.primaltherapy.com/pages/04whatis2.htm). It is also part of Dr. Arthur Janov's book, Why You Get Sick, How You Get Well, which can be obtained directly from Dr. Janov's Primal Center.

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