

Anger Gave her Something

Punching bags eventually stop bouncing back.

Lindsay's boyfriend, Dexter, certainly reached that point. After months of being subjected to angry outbursts and degrading attacks he finally told her enough is enough.

On the phone, she informed me of her upsetting news: "Dexter just told me he wanted out!" she blurted.

The last straw for him occurred the night before, when they were at a party among friends. Enraged over some minor thing, she blasted him—ruthlessly—in front of everybody.

"I can't blame him for walking out," Lindsay said regretfully. "I need help with this. I'm losing friends. People just don't want to be around me!"

Lindsay realized her angry tirades were chasing people away. But two days later, when she arrived for a counseling session, her attitude had shifted dramatically. Instead of emanating humility, she was clearly displaying irritation. Arms folded and wearing a frown, she expressed doubts about Dexter's motive for breaking up. "I'm thinking he still has feelings for his ex-girlfriend," she said. Her eyes narrowed in speculation as she considered confronting him about her suspicions.

"And if I do confront him," she said. "I want him to be honest and up front with me."

"Lindsay," I said, "you make it impossible for people to tell you the truth. Your attack-dog manner isn't likely to allow that to happen. So if you want him to be totally up front with you, then don't discourage it.

"Suppose he does have feelings for his ex-girlfriend. Maybe she's more fun to be with. People just naturally avoid unpleasantness. After repeatedly touching a hot stove, they finally wise up and stop. Most likely that's what happened to Dexter. And if someone seems more appealing to him—a cooler stove—who can blame him?"

Tears ran down Lindsay's cheeks. She got it.

Nodding, she said, “For most of our relationship, I was always mad and I blamed him for it. That wasn’t fair, because it’s me who has the problem. I see how I want to find fault with him because I can’t bear seeing how I messed up.”

I asked: “What does anger do for you, Lindsay? What’s your payoff?”

After some exploring, Lindsay realized that she uses anger in order to get others to pay attention to her.

As the youngest child of four, Lindsay recalls feeling invisible. “I was never taken seriously until I got mad,” she said. “I couldn’t get heard any other way.” Her other emotions—sadness, fear, heartaches—met deaf ears.

The same was true when it came to expressing what she was thinking. Because she was *the baby* of the family, Lindsay’s point of view and ideas were trivialized. Her thoughts and her opinions were ignored, considered trite and shallow.

So, angry outbursts became Lindsay’s language and her outlet for expression. It was her only way of attaining a sense of significance—the only way to be seen. Angry displays served Lindsay in another way—she received nurturing.

“My mom would comfort me after a meltdown,” she said. “It was the only time she cared about my feelings.”

In our session, Lindsay realized that she expected a similar nurturing response from Dexter. That’s understandable since getting upset had previously resulted in the love and attention she craved.

Now, though, having her heart broken taught Lindsay a powerful lesson: The twisted behaviors we learn as children, when our needs aren’t being met in healthy ways, can work against us later in life. Behaviors that benefited us as children often have opposite results in our adult relationships.

Lindsay’s parents had it backward. They should have been less attentive when she threw fits and more attentive when she wasn’t. She needed to feel valued and noticed without having to employ drama. She’s not feeling sorry for herself, nor is she blaming her parents. She’s accepting full responsibility for what happened.

“I don’t like myself lately,” she said. “I’m not a very nice person. I’m rude and mean.”

Lindsay's shame and guilt are healthy. They show she's maturing. Her new awareness is the byproduct of honest soul-searching and moral illumination. Hopefully, it will result in her making major changes.

"I'm proud of you, Lindsay," I said. "It takes courage to look at oneself."

Lindsay's conditioning will be tough to unlearn—but not impossible. She has already taken the first major step: healthy self-appraisal and a sincere desire to change. Now she must learn that she's an interesting, appealing person without having to yell at people. Her next step will entail learning how not to drive away the people who are important to her.

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality.

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