

The Problem of Offence and Judgment

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Hurts and offences that lead a person to judge the perpetrator are very common sources of inner and relational pain. Often they set in motion a cycle of pain that repeats itself in generation after generation. This paper will examine how offence, and the accompanying judgments, set in motion certain laws of the universe, which wreck havoc such as depression, addictions, and relational conflict in the lives of countless individuals and families.

Understanding offence and judgment

An offence happens when another person takes action, or says something, that we perceive to be contrary to our desires or expectations. Our interests, wants, or needs are not met. The potential for offence is greater with those we are close to, such as our parents or a spouse. The offender wrongs us, or hurts us, and is therefore indebted to us and therefore owes us an apology or some kind of recompense. And since we often presume to know the perpetrator's intention, we judge his or her character to be deficient.

When we judge someone, we measure or assess a person's character or worth by comparing it to a standard. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

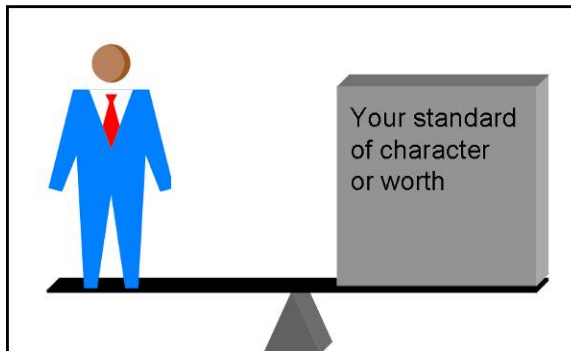


Figure 1

The standard we use on the right is our own standard, usually culturally determined, although affected by our own individual history and belief system. When the person whose

character we are assessing doesn't measure up to our standard, we see the balance tip to the right as in Figure 2, indicating a deficiency.

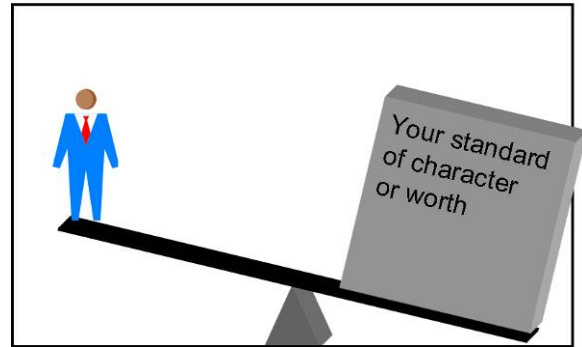


Figure 2

We can further quantify that deficiency by using the mathematical equation illustrated in Figure 3. The resulting deficit, illustrated by the red box, signifies the size of perpetrator's indebtedness toward the victim.

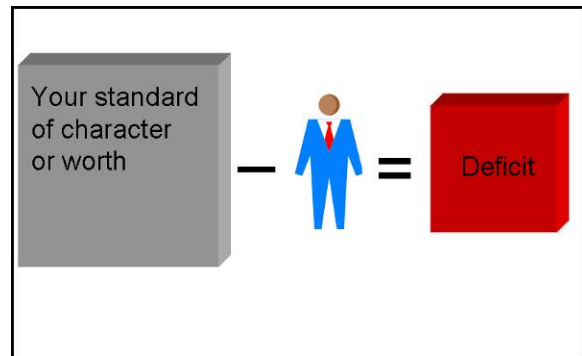


Figure 3

The question every person needs to answer when making a judgment is what to do with the deficit. It is what you do with it that determines the cycle of pain that you put in motion for yourself and your loved ones.

The results of unforgiveness and judgment

When faced with offence and the resulting deficit, you have two choices: hold the offender to account and demand payment, or excuse the debt by extending mercy and

forgiveness. The default within the human race seems to be the first option—demand justice and hold the offender responsible to pay. This makes sense logically, and when we look around, it appears to make sense experientially. When we do see someone’s debt paid off, they appear to feel better. But what if the perpetrator can’t or won’t pay? We could wait a lifetime. Maybe he or she is even dead. What then?

Here is where we are likely to reap pain in our own lives and the lives of those we love. We think that by holding the perpetrator accountable that we are forcing him to carry the red box as in Figure 4.

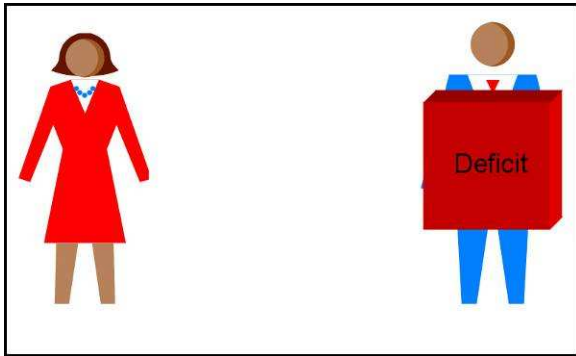


Figure 4

Reality is, however, that he¹ may be merrily on his way, often without realizing the hurt he has caused, and it is YOU that is carrying the red box, as in Figure 5.

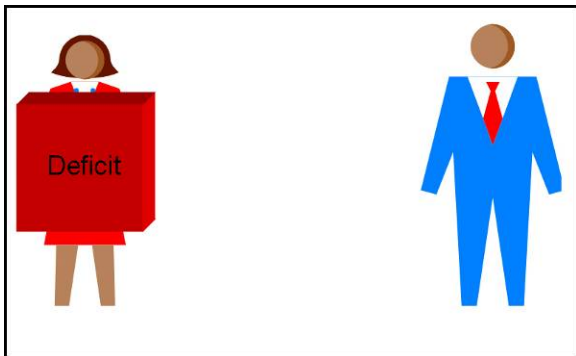


Figure 5

Now carrying the big red deficit box does not come without a price to your own mental and physical health. In fact, carrying it for any length of time is extremely toxic to your health. There are several ways it hurts you.

First of all, the red box causes you to internalize anger and to become bitter. And bitterness causes your emotional state to tip into an unresourceful, pain filled state, often leading to depression. This is illustrated in Figure 6.

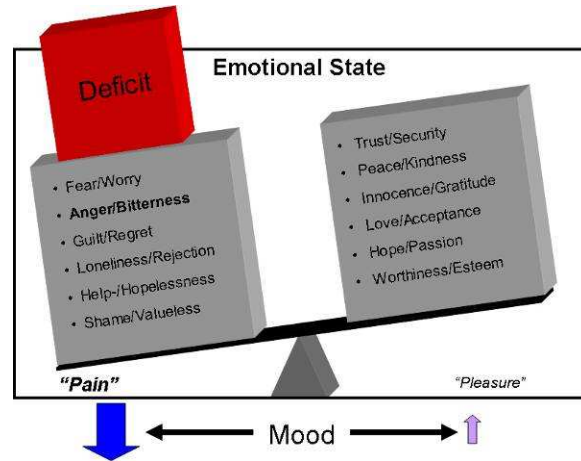


Figure 6

Notice that the emotional state is tipped to the left causing intensified pain and a blue, depressed mood. When unresolved, this leads to elevated levels of stress hormones which cause our immune system to malfunction, an exaggerated pain response, and upset in our hormone systems.

The second thing that happens when you carry the big red box is that you reflect the red colour to others, causing them to judge you. The very deficiency or deficit that you are holding the perpetrator to account for is showing up in your own life. And this is often despite a vow that this would never happen. So now people put you on their scale, using your own measure of character and worth (Figure 7).

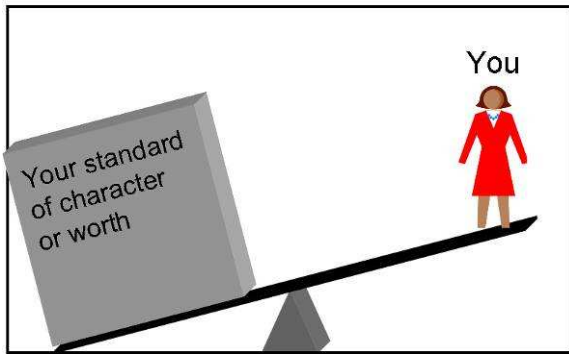


Figure 7

And they find you wanting as in Figure 8. Now you are really starting to own the big red deficit box and the cycle is well on its way to repeating itself with other people whom you are in relationship with.

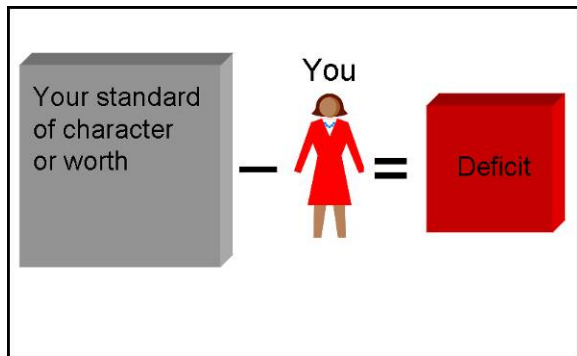


Figure 8

The third thing that happens when you carry the red box is that the red reflection seems to magically elicit the same or similar behaviour, which you judged in the perpetrator, in people you are in relationship with. Again, this is often associated with a vow that this would never happen. So for example, if you judged your father for his alcoholism and made a vow that you would never marry an alcoholic, chances are that the man you marry will be an alcoholic. Or if he doesn't drink when you marry him, you may drive him to drink or similar addictive behaviour before long. Statistics of the adult children of alcoholics continually bear this out.

Getting free

The necessity of removing the red deficit box from your life should now be

obvious. Again, let me reiterate the toxicity of continuing to carry it—sooner or later it will ruin your life. The further down life's road you go, the more junk gets added to the box, the heavier it gets, until you crash under its weight. So the key is to extend mercy and forgiveness to the perpetrator so that you can relinquish (give up) their indebtedness. Now this is not easy and it goes against our logic and reason. But you need to understand that it is YOU, whom you are releasing from prison, not the perpetrator. You can't hurt the perpetrator by not forgiving, but you can set yourself free by forgiving.

Figure 9 illustrates the principle of forgiveness.

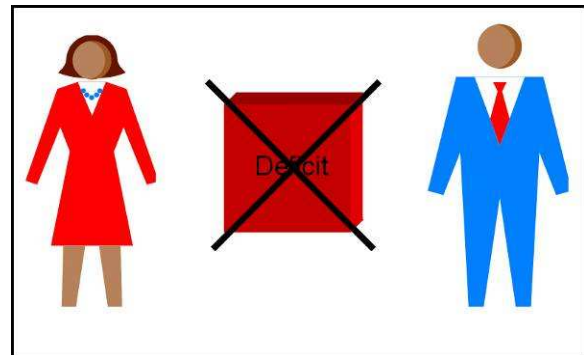


Figure 9

Forgiveness is excusing a debt someone owes you and relinquishing your right to be paid back for your loss. It excuses your entitlement to compensation by the perpetrator or his insurer. It does not justify his actions, excuse them, condone them, nor does it necessarily remove his requirement for legal justice. It just means that the debt he owes YOU is excused. Remember, by excusing it you are relinquishing your "right" to carry the red box on his behalf. Also, you are closing the door on other people's judgment of you, and you will also break the cycle that elicited the same dysfunctional behaviour in the people you are close to.

The second thing to realize about forgiveness is that it doesn't mean you will necessarily trust the perpetrator; that only comes with time as he shows new fruit in his life. Forgiveness simply says that you will give over your entitlement to compensation or revenge.

How to forgive

Forgiveness involves two steps: a conscious decision followed by an emotional release. In the decision, you choose to give up the fight to have your indebtedness paid. It is like a banker who tells a borrower who can't pay a loan that the bank will absorb his debt and that he no longer owes a penny. In this case, you are the banker, and the borrower is the perpetrator. Now he no longer owes you anything. The red deficit box is removed from being between you. For most people, this decision is extremely painful, and the resulting wound needs emotional healing, the next step.

The emotional release involves releasing the internalized anger and bitterness toward the perpetrator, healing the pain of forgiving the debt, and healing of the psychic scars of the original offence. This takes time and should not be rushed. Some people need the help of a counsellor to do this successfully, particularly if offence was huge, and there may be an initial worsening of one's mood. Writing a detailed letter (which you probably won't mail) to the perpetrator, telling him how much he hurt you, why he hurt you, and then telling him he's being forgiven, is both wonderfully venting and powerfully therapeutic. Another helpful technique is to talk out loud to a picture of the person, venting your anger and frustration. Do persevere in this process. As you lift the red box out of your life, you will notice your emotions tipping to the more resourceful, pleasurable state as in Figure 10.

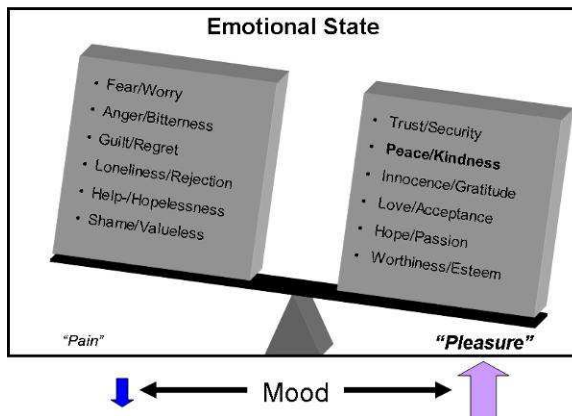


Figure 10

Unless the perpetrator asks for your forgiveness, it is not necessary to write or speak forgiveness to him. Whether you resume an active relationship with the perpetrator depends on how healthy your boundaries are so you don't get hurt again, the need to relate due to blood, employment or legal ties, or proximity. Reconciliation and the ability to truly wish the other person the best are good indicators of having truly forgiven him (Figure 11).

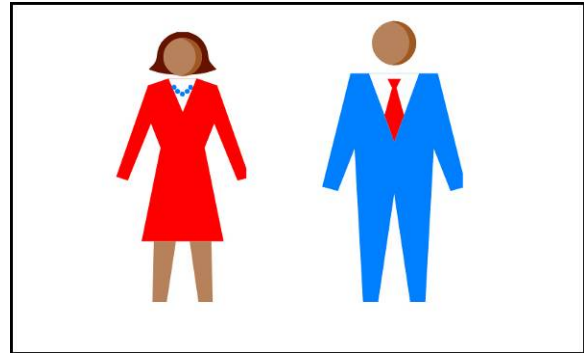


Figure 11

Conclusion

Offence, unforgiveness and judgment are one of the biggest causes of inner and physical pain in the human family. Bitterness causes a cycle of pain that repeats itself in generation to generation. Far better for us, and our children, is to forgive our offenders and release our judgments against them. This will yield a harvest of significantly improved health and happiness. Forgiveness is a gift worth giving yourself.

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¹ I will use the pronoun “he” to refer to the perpetrator for simplicity and to match the illustrations. I am well aware that some readers have been hurt by females.