

1 Stop Stinking Thinking

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Stories of Stinking Thinking

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What happens in the mind of man is always reflected in the disease of his body.

René Dubos

Why does it take so long to get better? Why does my mind return again and again to negative ideas? Many years ago I was struggling with anxiety and fears that had me debilitated and filled with self doubt. I already had two degrees in counseling but I had very little insight into how the mind works or how it was not other people or outside events but my own mind was sabotaging my peace. As Pogo the Possum was want to say in the funny papers, "We have met the enemy and he is us!"

I was studying the Bible but it did not seem to help me. I tried to change but stumbled and failed time after time. In scripture I was always drawn to the shoulds, oughts and don'ts. I tried my best to be a good, pious Christian, but I often failed. I rarely lived up to the God's standards of holiness, purity and peace. My self respect was low and I fought self-condemnation daily.

Belief Systems like mine are common. The minds of Christians are needlessly filled with ideas, perceptions and thoughts that destroy their self-respect rule many lives. They bring condemnation, sadness and despair to those whose stinking thinking dominates their lives. It is the problem of ANTS: **Automatic Negative Thoughts** that lead to the emotional destruction of a healthy self. This, in turn, unravels hopes of healthy relationships with others, including God.

Have you ever wondered why God told His people to choose life instead of death? It seems to me that all of us would naturally choose life instead of death, but they do not. Is it not strange that so many of us think destructive thoughts when it is possible to choose to look at life giving and pleasurable things? I see many people who allow ideas, perceptions and self talk that are destructive.

The Bible tells us in Genesis Three that Adam and Eve disobeyed the Heavenly Father and their thinking and the thinking of all their offspring became bent toward negativism as a result. It takes work, hard work to choose life rather than the death. The habits of stinking thinking and destructive self talk are deeply imbedded within our fallen minds. Even when we try to consciously try to think good, godly and gracious thoughts with the conscious mind, our deep hearts can allow those dreaded Automatic Negative Thoughts to rise up and disturb the peace.

Giving power to others

I had the privilege of studying with Rabbi Dr. Edwin Friedman, one of the premiere family therapists in the world, for an academic year. Ed carried on a very active private practice as well as an extremely influential seminar and workshop series. He was a superlative storyteller and creator of metaphors.

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One of Ed's most fervent beliefs had to do with personal responsibility. He urged, preached, taught and told stories about the need for all of us acknowledge that our feelings are ours. He laid out his theories about responsibility rather than blaming in dynamic, satirical and hilarious ways. Ed continually told fascinating and powerful stories illustrating why his ideas were true. The following is my favorite.

A married couple consisting of a female psychiatrist and a newspaperman came to an appointment with Ed. The husband's left eye was swollen shut and he winced as he sat across from his beaming wife. Dr Friedman looked him over carefully and said, "Why don't you tell me what happened to cause such swelling."

The man at once burst into angry accusations while pointing to his wife. "She did it! She did it! She is killing me with her attacks, nagging and complaining. It finally got so bad that she closed my eye! Tell her to stop."

The Rabbi looked at the female psychiatrist, who was grinning like a Cheshire cat with great satisfaction and said, "I will give you a hundred dollar bill if you come in next week with the other one closed."

At this remarkable comment, the man sputtered and said, "Why did you tell her that? Now she will kill me."

"Well," said the wise Rabbi "if you want to give her that much power over your body it is OK with me."

The next week both arrived at the appointment with all eyes open and minds ready to take personal responsibility for their own feelings and behavior. This wealthy, well-educated man had been quite dependent upon his wife for his thoughts, feelings and behavior. When people live with that much dependence on others they are doomed to a life of misery and pain.

Pain Enlivens But Misery Kills

Dependence is a symptom of immaturity and groupthink. It means that one has not really "left mother and father". The scripture is clear from Genesis to Revelation; leaving home is essential to adult health. This couple was stuck in an infantile stage of co-dependency and dependency. Baby-like behavior assigns omnipotence to others.

To allow others to control my thoughts and feelings like an infant is understandable. Parents and siblings have the physical, mental and spiritual power to intrude upon the mind of a child. The reason is simple. Even adults have not yet learned how to think on our own and be responsible for themselves.

Adults acting like infants mean one thing. We have not differentiated from our family. We are so emotionally enmeshed with the family that their ideas seem to come from within. When momma and daddy are miserable we catch their feelings like the flu. In

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one family Dad was consistently sad and unstable and Mom understandably used their eldest daughter to keep him served like a king and feeling loved.

Daddy's little girl was not willing to allow her to grow up and "leave home" at the appropriate times of transition. Mom was scared to death to encourage her daughter to grow up because that meant she would have to "meet all of dad's needs herself". So "Little Laurie" had to stay underdeveloped emotionally and play the little girls because Mom and Dad were stunted in their own development.

When "Little Laurie" was old enough to attend college her parents found numerous reasons why she should not leave home and attend Old State University that was 200 miles away. Instead, she was made to feel "guilty" (it is really anxiety not guilt) about even wanting to pursue her own dreams and career and finally made everyone happy when she attended West Chicago Junior College and received a degree in nursing to help her family cope with their many illnesses.

When love and marriage came along "Little Laurie" felt that she was somehow "abandoning" her family for Greg and his family. When they became engaged she kept it a secret for several months, causing Greg to wonder if she really loved him. Finally, Greg talked her into letting the family know they were planning to be married and move all the way from Chicago to Aurora. During dinner she held up her ring and said, "Greg and I are going to be married next year". The whole family was stunned. Mom left the room in tears and her sisters argued that she was not ready to marry her and their parents would fall apart. Dad immediately fell into an emotional funk.

Greg and Laurie did marry and had four children. However, Laurie continued to feel enormous anxiety any time she was around her parents and yet she was always anxious if she failed to talk with them every day. Greg was patient but after five years attempted to solve the dilemma by moving to Cincinnati, about 300 miles from Chicago. He began ministry as an Associate Pastor and thought Laurie would no longer be anxious if she had some distance from the family of origin. However, until we differentiate from the family of origin we will catch others' feelings all our lives.

Being in Ministry allows all us who are undifferentiated to become sponges for a multitude of emotionally dependent members. It was easy for the wounded Seekers in the First Church of the Vine to be drawn to Laurie's need to be needed. With every action Laurie said, "Please use me as a sponge to absorb all your anxieties and pain and to release all the love, grace and energy to refill your dry sponge with my good works". And, when Laurie was finally exhausted from all the vampire church members who were sucking her dry she would hear a sermon of "Laying down her life for her friends" and decide to "Take up her cross and follow Jesus" to do one more time the things for people they really needed to do for themselves.

The chronically and very wise church hopping co-dependents who took advantage of Laurie's compulsiveness were also quick to add to her sense of anxious guilt. If Laurie finally in desperation began to even think about doing something for herself one of the vampires would sense the loss of power in the force field and call or personally visit to

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manipulate her back into submission to their narcissistic demands by the very powerful duo of BS (BLAME and SHAME)

Once, after taking a class on Boundaries, Linda said, "I am sorry, Valerie, but I just can't set up the dining room in Fellowship Hall for the Women's Guild. I am already cooking all the chickens to make salad for 300 women and getting my four kids to soccer, baseball and violin after I do the home schooling lessons. I just don't have time."

Valerie responded with a perfect Blame/Shame statement, "Well if the Pastor's Wife is not committed to the Women's Ministry I can see why the whole thing is failing." Laurie immediately wilted in her resolve to "set a boundary" and asked Valerie if there was anything else she could do to support the Women in the church.

Setting boundaries will not work unless we are dealing with people who are also committed to our boundary. Nor will we stick to a set boundary unless we have already "left father and mother".

Did you hear about the woman who came to breakfast and said to her husband, "How do I feel this morning dear?" This is sometimes called, "co-dependence" but it is worse than that. This lady was stuck so closely together with her husband that she did not know what to think or feel on her own. Laurie was still stuck to her parent's apron strings. She had learned to feel her family's feelings so long that it was natural for her to also feel the pain of other persons.

Healthy life comes by differentiating ourselves from others and the process begins at home. When the Bible says to "Leave mother and father..." it is speaking about differentiating from them and the rest of the family. Staying undifferentiated from our parents, grandparents and siblings is not only contrary to scripture, it also leads to emotional dysfunctions in my own family relationships.

By not "leaving home" we leave an emotional circuit open that can be connected to others in life. That circuit is usually connected to a member of the opposite sex to whom we are attracted. When the connection or attraction is very strong we "fall in love". It is natural and normal for us to be attracted to another person but when we have failed to differentiate ourselves from past generations that good, normal attraction get loaded up with unnatural and unhealed emotional power. This leads people to say things like the woman who asked her husband how she felt.

God designed us to have healthy growth by the process of differentiation. All of life is designed like cells which grow by division. One cell grows into two cells and the two into four and four into eight until a life is formed. If no division occurs the single cell will die. All life depends upon cell division or "differentiation". When cells divide they stay in touch with each other but each is uniquely different and has its own functions. This is by definition what differentiation is in God's creation.

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So, each cell must be separated from other cells or both will die. However, on the other hand, neither can the cells separate too far from each other. Should they move apart so completely that they lose contact with each other both will die. Being close enough for mutual interaction and support is one side of the equation. On the other side is making sure we differentiate so we are not stuck together is also crucial. This is how God made us to operate functionally and healthily.

The newspaperman mentioned in Ed Friedman's story is a good example of being undifferentiated. He looked like an adult, spoke like an adult; could produce children and hold down a well-paying job. By all outward appearances he was a full grown man. However, when he allowed his wife to control his feelings and bodily functions he allowed himself to be a child. He was like a cell stuck in the process of dividing. He was at the mercy of an emotionally charged person who was looking to connect her emotions into some else's open circuit.

The Bible tells a similar story. A man let his wife's kindness killed him.

David moved down into the Desert of Maon. ² A certain man in Maon, who had property there at Carmel, was very wealthy. He had a thousand goats and three thousand sheep, which he was shearing in Carmel. ³ His name was Nabal and his wife's name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband, a Calebite, was surly and mean in his dealings.

⁴ While David was in the desert, he heard that Nabal was shearing sheep. ⁵ So he sent ten young men and said to them, "Go up to Nabal at Carmel and greet him in my name. ⁶ Say to him: 'Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours!'"

¹⁰ Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?"

¹⁴ One of the servants told Nabal's wife Abigail: "David sent messengers from the desert to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. ¹⁵ Yet these men were very good to us. ¹⁷ Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household."

¹⁸ Abigail took food and drink to David. "But she did not tell her husband Nabal. ²³ When Abigail saw David, she got off her donkey and bowed down with her face to the ground. ²⁴ She fell at his feet: "My lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you. Please forgive your servant's offense..."

³⁵ Then David accepted from her hand what she had brought him and said, "Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request."

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37 (W)hen Nabal's wife told him all these things, his heart failed him and he became like a stone. 38 About ten days later, the LORD struck Nabal and he died. (I Sam 25: Var)

Nabal was wealthy and surrounded by servants but he was insecure. He was a little child when it came to differentiating relationships. He could not accept an adult interaction from other men. Nabal was so reactive to others that he attacked David and insulted him. This was not only contrary to the common courtesies of the time but was very dangerous to insult a famous warrior. His swagger would be disastrous.

Nor could Nabal stand the fact that his wife saved the day for him. Upon learning that she had mollified David he had a heart attack and died. Many men are like this. They cannot bear a wife who behaves independently. The fact that his wife was smart was too much for him. The Shame was overwhelming.

America is producing new generations of Nabal's. In our nanny state we are seeing numerous children reared to be dependent and away from independence. We hear a lot of talk now about "helicopter parents" who hover over their kids in an over protective bubble lest they kids suffer from any type of rejection or distress. Rearing kids in a hot house will not develop them to thrive in the real world.

Education, politics and media are obsessed with trying to make sure that no one is offended by a speech or article. Politically Correct Speech is Thought Control. Had the PC Police been around in the day of Nabal they would have accused Abigail of shaming her husband and causing the heart attack. The PC Police imply that the worst thing we can do is **make** someone else "feel bad" or to "make them have low self esteem".

There are many examples of schools, government agencies and churches doing everything to create victims. One of their suggestions is to stop competition and differentiations among people lest it "damage their self esteem". A few years ago my Psychologist friend Will Carradine wrote an article in the Cincinnati Enquirer. I include my response to his views.

Reading my friend Will Carradine's insights while sipping coffee at Panara Bread I was struck with just how far off he is about the role of competition in developing healthy mental and emotional youth. Will begins by telling us how teachers did irreparable harm by using grades to distinguish between his performance and that of his classmates. Will wants us to believe that he was the helpless victim of callous teachers bent on separating the wheat from the chaff.

The rest is an attack on school honor rolls. He sees them as a primary cause of trauma, victimization and long-term neuroses for students. I could not disagree more strenuously. Competition and meritocracy are essential to teaching young people to deal with the realities of life in a competitive world. Let us discuss each of his objections.

1) *When you crown a winner, by implication you have a roomful of also-rans.*

This implies that teachers are responsible for winning and or losing. Students are responsible for the work they do. Admitting how well one did is simply a score-keeping task. My success has nothing whatsoever to do neither with another's failure nor of my teacher's grading practices. They are all separate events.

My 100 plus golf score compared to the 90 of Mike Johnson is a real comparison about how well I played compared to him. Neither Mike nor his score made me look bad. I made me look bad. We faced the same golf course, the same conditions and the same time frame. Until I learn how to deal effectively with both winning and losing I will not be able to compete in the game of golf or the game of life.

Dr. Carradine and I both learned a defective psychology at U.C. Our professors said having winners actually victimizes others into being losers. They saw grades as a "Zero Sum Game" that posits one can only win at the destruction of the other. The losers could not help it for the winners made them that way.

At one time I was taken in by this philosophy but I have been changed by experience and emotional healing. To think that we cannot influence our own lives makes us victims of others. I am glad to have responsibility for my successes and failures. Thank God I was saved from victimizing myself while demonizing winners.

2) *Honor rolls foster the false notion that verbal and technical ability are the only forms of intelligence worth cultivating.*

In America the opposite is true. Students with sports and artistic abilities are honored way beyond those with academic talents. We desperately need to honor kids who have verbal and math skills. I will be happy when schools have more academic competition.

3) *Many students are pressured to excel so parents can bask in their reflected glory. That way lays neurosis.*

To predict a neurotic result from parental pressure and egoism is not based upon facts but on an outmoded psychological model. Students can learn resilience, flexibility and survival skills from comparisons and pressure.

4) *For many, the sense of personal deficit associated with that a snapshot in time stays with them for life. Premature acclaim can warp that process, for those who are*

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honored and those who aren't. For many of the latter, the light goes out and never gets relit. Therein lies tragedy, for those young people and for the nation.

Will is right about developmental issues but he draws the wrong conclusion. The key to resiliency is in training kids to recover well from failures. Life is full of failure so we had better teach young people how to respond. Dr. Carradine is a prime example of those who succeeded despite the odds. He learned to "Take a licking and keep on ticking".

Will worked hard and got multiple honors including a Ph. D. He founded a private counseling practice and influenced thousands of persons. He is a poster boy for the opposite of his thesis. Perhaps we should do more to honor better students and make the laggards so jealous they want to beat them all. This is what happened to me as well as Will.

World Wide Depression

International research clearly shows a sharp rise in depression. This is puzzling since it is occurring alongside an equally dramatic rise in economic well-being. It is contrary to what we could call, "face validity" for people to sink further and further into gloom at the same time they are gaining economic health. Why would both these trends be true?

Some researchers believe it is because we have moved from basing self-respect on competition and personal achievement to self esteem based on affirmation and slogans. In the psychiatric hospital units I oversaw for seven years we discovered an interesting and surprising trend among the patients. Most of them had not played board games with their families.

Games like Monopoly, cards and dominoes were either forbidden or neglected in their homes. They had failed to interact with parents and siblings in competitive games and missed something important and special in the process.

What does this have to do with ending up in a psychiatric hospital because you were depressed, anxious, doing drugs or drinking? According to my theory, it has a lot to do with one's mental and emotional health. Games and competition teach us many things about real life. By failing to learn how to compete in a safe and positive atmosphere the patients had missed something very important.

They had not learned the basic social skills of listening, problem solving, conflict management or how to win and lose graciously. These are the most vital and basic skills of life and emotional differentiation. If one misses out on them as a child, adulthood can be very difficult. One is not ready for reality. So, when reality brings tough times and failures large or small enter our lives they were unprepared. This led to overwhelming feelings of shame, depression and anger.

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The American Idol TV Show is a modern example of how far the bogus self-esteem movement has progressed. When some of the worst performers in memory were confronted with their inability to sing and dance they responded with shock and horror. Many angrily blamed Simon Crowell, a plain speaking judge. Not a few of the worst performers said, "I am the best in the world and I deserve a shot at stardom. How can you not award me a prize place in the show?"

The most disturbing image occurred when the performer's supporters showed up. When told of the failure of their chosen performer some parents and friends cursed, shouted and hysterically accused the panel of victimizing their loved ones. They, like Dr. Carradine, refused to admit that comparisons are essential to improvement. The performers obviously had been told that they were very good musicians when in fact they were awful. They had not faced reality until they were on national TV.

What parent in his/her right mind would allow such unprepared kids to sing on national television without first discovering whether they could not sing or not? At the very least, that they needed voice lessons. The kind of person who allowed it have been reared on the faux "self-esteem movement". A movement that makes sure every contestant is honored and affirmed no matter how good or bad his playing and performance. I can imagine parents saying to their child, "You are the best singer ever. You should be on TV" even though the kid could not carry a tune.

Some schools and parent have been duped into thinking competition is bad and a false message of affirmation is good. We need to teach kids that failures are critical to a successful life and a successful career. The Bible says it this way in James I.

²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Let me finish with a story about how God helped Jon Hershberger and me with a Muslim group. I had been working with the Singapore Association of Muslim Professionals for several years prior to 911. I knew so little about their culture but wanted to witness to them with the love of Christ. How could I do that?

One day just before Easter, Hamidah, the lady who asked me to teach her team of lay counselors, asked Jon and me to come to a meeting at the Sheraton Hotel. We agreed and went down to see what was happening. As the only two Anglos among 300 or so Malay Muslims and a couple of Chinese men from the government we really stood out from the crowd. We were real minorities.

I saw a woman whom I had helped navigate through a terrible divorce and she came over and asked in a loud voice, "Dr. Gary, have you been praying for me?" Shocked, I replied, "Well, yes I have, Sharinai." A big smile came on her face and she said, "I knew you were because I can feel your prayers for me and my sons."

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Ruminating on how to interact with such a group made me so nervous that I went to the gent's room to pray. Prominently displayed in the gent's room of this Muslim hotel were pots of Easter lilies. This symbol of the resurrection was a reminder to me of God's presence. Peace immediately came into my heart. Not only Jon but Jesus was with me!

The meeting was mostly in Malay. After about thirty minutes they called our names. A man came over and escorted us to a special table in the front of the room while everyone stood and applauded. Neither Jon nor I knew why or what was happening. So, we just looked at each other and prayed that the pounding of our hearts wouldn't disturb them.

The President of the Singapore Mosque Association stood and gave a Power Point presentation in Malay. One time he switched to English and told the group how they were honoring us as special friends of Islam. (If my Christian friends could only see me now I would probably be booted off of a couple of Christian organizations.) However, while they talked in Malay, I talked to God and praised Him for this wonderful opportunity to be recognized by Muslims for showing them love.

All of a sudden, right at the table, in the middle of all those Muslims I had a vision. And whom do you think I saw? A real spiritual person might have seen Jesus, Moses, Elijah or Elisha. Not me! Nope it was Mrs. May Toney, my 70 year-old First Grade Sunday school teacher from the Ina Baptist Church. She had taught me about the love of Jesus and His call to missions. I saw her smiling down from heaven as if to say, "Gary Ray, you finally got the message." I sat transfixed and wept with thanks to God for a teacher whom I had forgotten for many, many years.

A fragile widow woman patiently taught a bunch of squirmy, hyperactive kids in a backward, redneck village in southern Illinois. She planted seeds in my heart that bloomed over 50 years later in a place she had never heard about. Now Mrs. Toney is part of that "Great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us with their love." God allowed me to have a small glimpse of her joy.

Hamidah did not come to faith in Christ that day but she came to hear me preach on Easter Sunday morning at Faith Community Baptist Church. There were over 3,000 in attendance. There she heard the gospel message in the resurrection. Another handful of gospel seeds had been planted in her heart now it is up to the Holy Spirit.

I did not need to worry about what to say or what to do because God had it all under His control. When we focus on the things that could go wrong or have gone wrong it robs us of the peace we need to make a good decision. Anxiety makes me stupid but peace gives me an edge in decision making.

Jesus taught His disciples not to worry about what to eat or drink but trust God. He said, famously, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added to you." As we seek the Kingdom by having our mind set on His will, it clears us up well enough to hear the still small voice of the Spirit so we can get the creative guidance we need. Do not react anxiously to any event and start to distrust God because it keeps us from listening for the answer.

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I took the research on couple conflict and adapted it to the Bible as a way to assist people stay calm in the face of stress. When we find ourselves feeling lousy about the ways we are being treated by a spouse, a child, an employer or a parent, it may be because we are allowing them to take control over our feelings because we don't control our thoughts. The following seven point scale lays out what happens when we give our power to others.

Level of Interpersonal Interaction	Resulting Personal State
1. Contented: At peace with others	1. Relaxed. Thinking and feeling calm Male heart rate: 72 Female: 80
<i>You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you</i>	<i>Jesus brings a new teaching about caring in addition to physical relationships. This is critically important in family life.</i>
2. Complaint: A specific behavioral statement. "I" statements (I want, I think, I don't like. Some anger	2. Slight anxiety & fear. Increased heart rate-BPM & breathing muscles tense. Minor Fight/Flight
<i>...anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Attack or Attend?)</i>	<i>Be careful about anger, bitterness and rage. It is not always a sin but it must be handled carefully. Judge ourselves or we shall be judged</i>
3. Criticism: A vague blaming. <u>You statements</u> . Focus on person not behavior. A flaw in person. Global statements. Somewhat attacking.	3. Raised anxiety, fear, blood pressure; increased BPM& breathing; muscles tighten, eyes dilate, reduced digestion, more blood sugar, increased Flight/ Fight
<i>Anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca', is answerable to the Sanhedrin.</i>	<i>Raca is calling a brother or sister "stupid" or a failure. (*Note Bitter Root below)</i>
4. Contempt: Personal insult, shame mocking attacks on the character sense of self, and identity. Opposite of admiration, no respect.	4. High anxiety and stress. Feel heart beat. Shallow breathing fight/flight response hyper vigilant, brain freezes Reactive
<i>One who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the hell fire. Mt 5:21-22</i>	<i>Character attacks cause severe emotional wounds.</i>
5. Consuming defenses: Immediately reject all communication. All-out Attack	5. Severe emotional & physical anxiety. <u>Can't think</u> . Feelings rule. Fight/Flight. Shake and Tremble
6. Crushing physical response. Acts out by withdrawal or aggressively pursuing the other. Cycle of Mis-communication/misunderstanding.	6. Emotional flooding - A chronic state of hyper vigilance and hypersensitive self-talk along with emotional pain, reactivity, bitterness, mental freezing, rage, etc.
7. Complete Isolation: withdrawal. a. Problems impossible to solve b. Talking is useless c. Hopeless d. Overwhelmed	7. Too painful to interact with rational discourse. Filled with constant thoughts of attack and condemnation. Must either stay away from the person or fight them with bitterness. Divorce, church splits, etc