

The Negative Impact of Survivor Guilt on Marriage

Richard Vogel

SUMMARY. Individuals who grow up with self-denying and/or unhappy parents or siblings often develop pathogenic beliefs that prevent them from enjoying themselves or their relationships. Unconscious beliefs emanating from survivor guilt in relation to individuals who are not faring as well as oneself occasion maladaptive behaviors, i.e., undoing, unprovoked antagonism, withdrawal, that are harmful to a marriage. By behaving in this manner, individuals susceptible to the effects of survivor guilt are unwittingly maintaining loyalty to their unhappy parent(s) or sibling(s), at the price of their own happiness. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]

Marriages with the potential for growth and continued enrichment are often undermined when partners chronically re-enact with one another maladaptive behaviors acquired in childhood in their relations with unhappy and/or self-denying parents or siblings. The likelihood for such reenactment to occur is magnified to the extent that either or both partners are burdened with unconscious guilt associated with a potential for success in their relationship that was either imperceptible or nonexistent in their parents' relationship and/or unobtainable by their siblings. Such individuals often harbor the unconscious belief that to be successful in their rela-

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tionship is to demonstrate disloyalty and possibly harm their less fortunate parents or siblings.

The concept of survivor guilt was introduced by Niederland (1981) who described a persevering guilt complex affecting survivors of the Holocaust. Survivors developed symptoms that included depression, anhedonia, psychosomatic conditions and anxiety. Niederland viewed these symptoms as identifications with family members who had not survived and ascribed them a pervasive and intense sense of guilt that he referred to as survivor guilt. Modell (1971) states that survivor guilt is based upon the belief that taking is at someone else's expense. According to Modell, survivor guilt stems from a biologically-based concern for and sensitivity to the pain of significant others, making it difficult to be happy if others are not.

Weiss and Sampson (1986) use the term "survivor guilt" to connote the guilt of persons who assume they have fared better than their parents or siblings. A person experiencing the debilitating effects of survivor guilt believes, according to Weiss and Sampson, that "by acquiring more of the good things of life than parents or siblings, he has betrayed them. . . . His acquisitions have been obtained at the expense of parents or siblings" (p. 52).

In a similar vein, Firestone (1987), in his book, *The Fantasy Bond*, comments:

Guilt in relation to other people who are self-denying takes the joy out of achievement . . . most people unconsciously deprive themselves of much of what they value in life because they fear going beyond a significant person in their background. (p. 229)

Engel and Ferguson (1990) elaborate on the implication of "outdoing," i.e., surpassing, a family member. According to Engel and Ferguson (1990) "the crime of outdoing" stems from two irrational beliefs: (1) ". . . by having the good things in life (happiness, success, love and affection) you are using them up, not leaving any for your less fortunate parents or siblings." (2) ". . . by achieving your occupational and personal goals, you are showing up those family members who were unable to achieve their own" (p. 42).

In the novel *The Prince of Tides* (Conroy, 1991), Tom's moodiness and rejection of his wife's affection are manifestations of survivor guilt associated with his brother's violent death and his sister's incarceration in a mental hospital. In response to her husband's despondency, self-deprecation and the effect his moods are having on her, Tom's wife, Sally, implores him to give up his sorrowful ways and be more demonstratively

affectionate. She remarks "You've been so self-pitying, so analytical and so bitter, since what happened to Luke. You've got to forget what happened and go on from here, from this moment. Your life isn't over, Tom. . . . Why do you want to throw even the good things away?" (p. 26). Tom's hopelessness is evident in his response "Because they aren't so good to me anymore, because I don't believe in my life anymore" (p. 27). This is the voice of his survivor guilt speaking and echoes his refusal to acquiesce to his wife's invitation to a happier life. He simply cannot allow himself pleasure in the wake of his siblings' tragic lives.

With regards to the detrimental effects of survivor guilt, Firestone (1988) comments:

The person who is alive to his experience may unconsciously hold back his enthusiasm, sensing that his vitality might threaten a person who is more self-denying . . . we have observed that people are very susceptible to negative social pressure from unhappy or self-sacrificing family members. (p. 266)

CLINICAL CASE EXAMPLES

A dramatic example whereby a marriage with the potential for success was placed at risk as a result of one of the partners feeling obligated to his unhappy and visibly distraught mother occurred as follows: Ben, his wife and widowed mother were viewing a film in which a couple were passionately embracing. Ben's mother, peering intently at her son with the glint of an all-too-familiar carefully contrived tear in her eye, lamented "I wish I had some of that."

In couples therapy, Ben's therapist inquired whether his mother's despairing comment had affected him. He replied that it had not, but admitted that he had become embroiled in a bitter fight with his wife, jealous that she had spent the evening with her girlfriends.

Ben learned to be possessive in relation to his mother, who had been extremely needy and demanding of her son's attention throughout his childhood. This tendency was exacerbated after the death of her husband, when Ben became her sole source of affection.

Ben harbored the pathogenic belief (Weiss, 1993), fueled by his mother's neediness and poverty of relationships, that it was his responsibility to make her happy. The impossibility of doing so, combined with his mother's obvious despair, engendered intense guilt for Ben. According to Weiss (1993):

A person develops pathogenic beliefs in childhood by inferring them from traumatic experiences with parents and siblings. These are experiences in which he finds that by attempting to attain a normal, desirable goal, he brings about a disruption in his ties to his parents. For example, he may infer that he burdens his parents by being dependent on them, or that he causes them to feel hurt and rejected by being independent of them. (p. 6)

Ben assuaged his guilt by providing the appearance of not being any more happy in his life than his mother was in hers. He accomplished this grim result by adopting the worst of his mother's traits, her possessiveness which he inflicted upon his well-meaning spouse.

It is often the case that instead of rejecting parental attitudes and behaviors detrimental to their happiness, individuals like Ben adopt and reenact these very same attributes. By maintaining their allegiance with their parents' shortcomings, they are in some obscure fashion magically protecting and providing redemption for their parents' flawed personalities. Fishel (1991), in her book *Family Mirrors*, elaborates upon this phenomenon as follows:

... From childhood forward we will make a huge effort to prove our parents right, even if it means making ourselves wrong. . . . we may maintain our childhood loyalty to our parents by continuing the . . . abuse, ensuring that we will not outdo our parents as parents. (p. 84)

According to Weiss and Sampson (1986), individuals like Ben who are susceptible to survivor guilt inflict punishment on themselves to atone for their attainment of a more prosperous existence than their despondent parent.

He may by identifying with the parent towards whom he feels guilty acquire certain of the parents most self-destructive behaviors or traits . . . for example ruin his marriage by raging at his wife as his father ruined his marriage by such raging. (p. 51)

Ben experienced his wife's anger in response to his possessiveness, as punishment for being in a relationship with her that afforded him happiness, and that contrasted so dramatically with his mother's despair.

When this dynamic was discussed in therapy, Ben was able to gain insight into the disruptive effects to his marriage of his possessiveness. This awareness enabled him to resist the temptation to compensate for his mother's unhappiness through the enactment of undermining behaviors that placed his marriage in jeopardy.

Another instance where the presence of survivor guilt was injurious to a marriage occurred for Jack, a writer, at the time of the publication of his first novel. Simultaneously, with its publication, Jack visited his younger brother who was in the throes of coping with two crises—a divorce and the loss of his job. Though Jack was consciously aware of the sadness he felt for his brother's hardship, he was ill-prepared for what would eventually manifest as a self-denying symptomatic expression of his concern. This took the form of his experiencing erection dysfunction after the visit.

Apparently, Jack's achievement juxtaposed with his brother's recent business failure and divorce engendered guilt that negatively affected his relationship with his wife, depriving him of what had been an exciting and spirited sexual relationship.

Firestone (1988) comments on this dynamic as follows:

... achievement, an unusual success, or personal fulfillment in a relationship often lead to anxiety states that precipitate withholding responses. . . . Patterns of withholding practiced by one partner can effectively change the other's positive feelings of love to those of hostility and anger. For example, men and women often hold back qualities that originally attracted their mates, such as their . . . sexual involvement. (p. 169)

Jack's erection dysfunction and the conflict it created between him and his wife evened the score for outdoing his brother in the domains of work and love. Though he had received accolades for his novel, he nevertheless found himself in the less-than-enviable position of a discordant relationship with his wife that mirrored his brother's inharmonious marriage.

Though Jack consciously desired to enjoy the fruits of his literary endeavors along with an intimate relationship with his wife, his unconscious guilt and the belief that he was unentitled to success while his brother's life was in such turmoil prevented him from doing so.

One aim of the couples therapy was to enhance Jack's awareness of the origins of his grim belief while receiving encouragement from both his wife and myself to overcome its implications. Such an awareness would enable Jack to challenge this belief, regain his sexual vigor and attain a level of satisfaction in his marriage that had been available to him prior to visiting his brother. Upon his return I asked Jack how he felt about his brother's divorce and loss of his job. Jack said that he was "saddened" by these events. He lamented how his mood had changed from one of elation associated with the publication of his novel, to despair in relation to his brother's dilemma. Jack shared a dream indicative of his guilt and fear of surpassing his brother. In his dream, Jack portrayed his brother as a presi-

gious CEO of a large corporation, a far cry from his current unemployed status. Jack interpreted his dream as a wish to elevate his brother in stature to compensate for his recent losses. I observed that Jack might be feeling guilty regarding his brother's difficult straits at a time when Jack was experiencing success as a novelist. In response to my interpretation, Jack recalled having similar feelings upon graduating from college with honors while concurrently his brother was graduating from high school with no plans to continue his education. After that event, Jack "never felt right" discussing his achievements with his brother for fear of "showing him up" and/or "hurting his feelings," an earlier manifestation of Jack's survivor guilt. His wife concurred that on numerous occasions she observed Jack minimize his accomplishments in conversations with his brother. Jack utilized his wife's and his therapist's observations to refute his pathogenic belief that his achievements were potentially harmful to his brother.

In an attempt to remedy his erection dysfunction, a symptomatic manifestation of his survivor guilt, Jack requested that he and his wife go on a date and that upon their return, his wife wear a negligee that he had given her to celebrate their anniversary. Jack was confident that with his newly-acquired insights, regarding the role of survivor guilt in his life, combined with a more novel approach to their sexuality, that his sexual difficulties would subside. Jack's wife was delighted with her husband's change in attitude and in subsequent sessions reported having achieved intercourse devoid of any complications.

Altruistic attempts like Jack's to compensate for the despair and unhappiness of loved ones by suffering in kind are doomed to fail. Yet such behaviors occur frequently in the lives of men and women.

A married couple on their honeymoon received a frantic call from the bride's mother who was experiencing an attack of vertigo. Each day of the honeymoon, and much to her husband's chagrin, Rachel, the bride, though desirous of distancing herself from her mother, was motivated by guilt to call her. To atone for the guilt induced by her mother's insinuation that she was neglecting her, she deprived herself of her husband's affection and good will. Rachel's guilt for daring to enjoy her life with her husband, while her mother manifested such intense though contrived suffering, required that she subvert her good intentions towards him.

Rheingold (1964) counsels women in Rachel's situation as follows:

A woman may bring any number of assets to marriage—compassion, wisdom, intelligence, skills, an imaginative spirit, delight-giving femininity, good humor, friendliness, pride in a job well done—but if she does not bring emancipation from her mother, the assets may

wither or may be overbalanced by the liability of the fear of being a woman. (p. 451)

In couples therapy, I asked Rachel how she felt about her mother's interference at a time when Rachel should have been accorded the opportunity to celebrate her marriage. Rachel replied that for as long as she remembered, her mother had behaved selfishly towards her, placing her voracious need for attention above her daughter's right to a life independent of such manipulation. Rachel recalled depriving herself of friends, hobbies and a close relationship with her father in response to her mother's incessant plea for her daughter's undivided attention. She described her mother as a needy, unhappy woman who rather than create a life for herself, was living vicariously through her daughter.

Rachel's husband reported numerous incidents where his mother-in-law attempted to subvert their marriage. He believed that Rachel's mother would be happy with him out of the picture. Rachel understood that by succumbing to her mother's selfish and unreasonable demands, she would be placing her marriage in jeopardy.

On one occasion Rachel posed an unconscious test (Weiss and Sampson, 1986) for her therapist. The purpose of this test was to disconfirm her pathogenic belief acquired in relation to her mother that her autonomous strivings were injurious to others. According to Weiss and Sampson unconscious testing of the therapist is a means by which patients attempt to solve their problems. By provoking the therapist and monitoring his response, the patient is able to determine whether certain of his unconscious beliefs are really true.

Engel and Ferguson (1990) describe the "transference test" as one in which:

the client invites or provokes the therapist to treat him in the same negative way that he was treated by his parents. If the parent was critical, the client invites the therapist to be critical. If the parent was controlling, the client invites the therapist to be controlling . . . to pass these tests, the therapist must refuse these invitations. (p. 202)

According to Engel and Ferguson (1990), what the patient unconsciously desires "is for the therapist to demonstrate that he will not criticize her, or control her-even if given the opportunity" thus allowing her to "overcome her unconscious beliefs that she deserves these inequities" (p. 203).

Rachel's test took the form of her announcing her intention to enter a week-long couples' retreat as an adjunct to her couples therapy. Unlike her

mother who denied and denigrated her daughter's attempts at individualizing. I encouraged Rachel to proceed with her plan agreeing that it would be useful to her marriage. According to Weiss and Sampson (1986), when a test is passed:

the patient may become unconsciously less anxious and more relaxed than he had been. He may, moreover, while relaxed, become more insightful. He may, for example, bring forth a previously repressed memory. . . . He may, in addition, keep the memory in consciousness without coming into conflict with it and use the insight he gained from it to attain a better understanding of his problems. (p. 106)

In a subsequent session, Rachel vividly recalled the childhood experience of being denied access to a ballet class by her mother, who chided Rachel for being "too chubby" to succeed in such an endeavor. Rachel felt relieved that I, unlike her mother, responded to her attempts at individualization non-punitively and with encouragement. Rachel's husband added that by supporting Rachel's independent strivings, I had provided him with role modeling that he intended to replicate on those occasions when he, like Rachel's mother, tended to be critical of his wife.

Rachel's awareness of the dynamics underlying her relationship with her mother, combined with her therapist's passing of her transference test, provided Rachel with the motivation to challenge and overcome her belief that her autonomous strivings were harmful to others. This enabled her to affiliate more comfortably with her husband and resist the temptation to experience intimacy in their relationship as a disloyalty to her mother.

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995), in their book *The Good Marriage*, cautions that for a marriage to flourish, partners are required to separate psychologically from their families' "emotional ties." They write:

Psychological separation means gradually detaching from your family's emotional ties . . . you must shift your primary love and loyalty to the marital partner . . . (p. 53). Separation is particularly tricky for women because the ties between mother and daughter, made up of strands of compassion, love, and sometimes guilt, are so powerful . . . Marriage may be particularly hard for the daughter whose mother is lonely and unhappy or is caring for an ill sibling or spouse. (p. 55)

Janet and Lewis entered couples therapy feuding about Janet's perception of her husband's parenting their newborn. On one occasion Lew, upset by their child's continuous crying, cursed out loud and, in Janet's

perception, held their infant too tightly while changing diapers. Janet accused her husband of being insensitive. She implied that his outburst and manner of handling their child bordered on being abusive. During our first couples session, Janet intimated that she was considering divorcing her husband. Lew acknowledged that his behavior was out of line, apologized and promised to refrain from reenacting such behavior in the future.

Janet disregarded her husband's apology. She continued to berate him throughout the days that followed. In the interest of defusing their feud, their therapist interpreted Janet's reaction as exemplary of her maternal instinct to protect their infant. Lew responded positively to this interpretation. He viewed Janet as a compassionate, caring woman, character traits that were influential in his decision to marry her. At the same time he remarked how difficult it had been for him to be repeatedly accused of abusing their child, and that no matter what he did to rectify his error, Janet's rancor did not diminish.

Lew contended that this one occasion where he appeared to be losing control was an anomaly. He prided himself on being impeccably attuned to his child's needs. Janet acknowledged Lew's overall sensitivity to their child. Janet surmised that perhaps there might be other factors contributing to her exaggerated response.

Interactions with family members, friends and acquaintances affect one's relationship. Janet's sister, who could not have children, had been visiting at the time this episode took place.

In his book *Voice Therapy*, Firestone (1988) refers to the deleterious effect of guilt activated in proximity to or induced by one's less fortunate and/or envious family members.

Many patients . . . regress when they have contact with original family members particularly if members of their family either actually manipulate them to activate their guilt feelings or indirectly foster guilt in the patient because of the negative quality of the family members' lives. (p. 229)

Janet felt guilty for being able to conceive a child while her sister could not. Her sister's complaint that Janet had "all the luck" made it even more difficult for Janet to talk about the pleasure she received from her infant. Janet was aware of subduing her feelings and expressions of enthusiasm in relation to her child while in her sister's presence. She remained unaware, however, of the insidious affect to her marriage that her sister's forlorn attitude was creating. Juxtaposed with her good fortune, her sister's unhappiness became the seeds of an inner discontent that would eventually

manifest as an overreaction to her husband's relatively benign and remediable error.

The presence of unconscious guilt for surpassing a loved one or attaining in life what they were unable to often manifests as self-sabotaging behavior on the part of the more fortunate individual. Janet's bickering with her husband was meant to convey to her less fortunate sibling that though she appeared to be happier and the recipient of more good fortune, this was not really the case as evidenced in her marital conflict.

Janet's cognizance of her guilt enabled her to communicate her feelings in a more even tempered manner. She viewed her husband as an ally in possession of parenting skills conducive to their child's well being. Rather than divorce, she was determined to react more reasonably to disagreements that invariably arise in the course of child-rearing.

Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig (1981), in his book *Marriage Dead or Alive*, alludes to the value of persevering and remaining in one's relationship while resisting the temptation to flee when the going gets rough.

The life-long dialectical encounter between two partners, the bond of man and woman until death, can be understood as a special path for discovering the soul, as a special form of individuation. One of the essential features of this soteriological pathway is the absence of avenues for escape. Just as the saintly hermits cannot evade themselves, so the married persons cannot avoid their partners. In this partially uplifting, partially tormenting evasionlessness lies the specific character of this path. (p. 41)

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