

## **PODCAST #10 REVISED TEXT-**

### **Pathogenic beliefs**

Every day, I work with people who somehow manage to get in their own way or needlessly spoil their own experience of life. This isn't surprising, of course, given that that's why most people enter psychotherapy to begin with.

But the problems of my patients also aren't unlike those of the rest of us. So, for instance, these are people who might stay too long in a bad relationship, or they underperform at work, or maybe they find ways to put themselves down both privately and publicly. One patient I saw told me that he "snatched defeat from the jaws of victory" all the time -- meaning, he said, that he always seemed to spoil good relationships.

One woman that I treated confessed that although she had always been determined to have a better marriage than her own mother, she found herself repeating her mother's lot in life by getting involved with men who were abusive to her—much as her mother had done. She had no idea why she kept repeating this dysfunctional pattern.

Psychologists see these patterns as examples of "psychopathology," a disorder of the psyche. And all of us suffer from some degree of psychopathology, in the sense that we all seem to have some elements of psychological conflict that cause us to live lives that are less than

optimal. And maybe—for the sake of this discussion—we can define an optimal life as one in which one can feel—oh, you know, generally happy, a life in which one feels loved and can love others, one in which one can feel independent but also comfortable relying on others, and a life in which one can freely pursue one’s ambitions in the world. And so I’m suggesting that most if not all of us experience some inhibition, some interference in one or more of these areas.

The key to understanding almost all forms of psychopathology lies in the concept of “pathogenic beliefs.” This concept has guided my thinking and my work for over 40 years.

So what do I mean by "pathogenic beliefs?" Well, these are beliefs, maladaptive beliefs, usually unconscious, that interfere with our functioning, adversely affect our self-esteem, and that prevent the pursuit of highly desirable life goals, for example, happiness, success, or a good relationship. We all suffer from pathogenic beliefs to some degree, and, in fact, the goal of therapy is to help the patient disprove these beliefs and to pursue the goals that have--- up to then--- been stymied.

So—let’s try to explore what pathogenic beliefs are, how they develop, and how they affect our lives.

And the story has to begin in childhood. Now, you have to think of the world from the point of view of an infant and/or young child. The developing child has one primary overarching goal, which is to adapt to his or her interpersonal world---most importantly, the interpersonal world of his or her family. The child's survival is dependent on figuring out how to get along with his or her caretakers upon whom the child is completely dependent. In the course of such adaptation, the child has to learn certain rules that govern social life, including rules about right and wrong, good and bad.

The child has to learn how to get a parent's attention and how to win his or her love. Further, as children, we all have to learn the limits of our own will -- namely, that our desires do not and cannot control the world around us. Most important, we have to learn what we have to do to get our parents to love and protect us. This means that we have to learn what our families teach us about morality -- what were *supposed* to feel, how are *supposed* to act, what were *supposed* to need. These are moral beliefs and we acquire them in the course of growing up in our particular families. We learn—we have to learn, really—how we affect others and how they are likely to react to us.

*When families are in any way dysfunctional, then the child acquires beliefs that are also dysfunctional.* Now, if you understand the context, these dysfunctional beliefs may appear quite rational, even though they don't serve the child well later on. These are the beliefs that we are calling "pathogenic."

An example of a pathogenic belief is the belief that many people have that they're not supposed to be confidently assertive and strong, that ---and if they are, that the world will somehow punish them. One of my patients felt this at work; he felt that if he exercised his capacity to think strategically, that his boss would feel threatened and his peers would be envious and resentful. Even if there was a grain of truth in his expectations, the heart of his belief was pathogenic. See--he had grown up believing that he was supposed to defer to others if he wanted their approval and wasn't ever supposed to act too sure or too full of himself, or he'd threaten his parents. Another patient experienced a similar pathogenic belief in his marriage. He secretly believed that his wife—in fact, that all women—would be easily hurt if he was too self-assertive at home--for example, if he wanted to occasionally socialize with other men, without including her. As a result, he rarely said “No” at home even if it meant that he ended up acting extremely self-effacing and self-sacrificial.

Thus, the belief that one isn't supposed to be strong was pathogenic in these cases because it interfered with normal and healthy aims and desires.

Pathogenic beliefs get in our way. They rob our lives of pleasure and make us suffer.

Here's another way to look at them. Pathogenic beliefs are formed to protect us from danger—either an external danger or an internal one. The external one might involve losing someone's love, hurting them, or provoking their anger at us. We might generalize and say that external dangers involve somehow disrupting or threatening important relationships.

These are life and death consequences for a child---**AND for the child that's still around inside each and every one of us.**

And then there are internal dangers, by which we mean certain painful feelings that our minds are usually very committed to avoiding...feelings like fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, or remorse.

So, pathogenic beliefs tell us that we better not pursue certain aims, or we better not express certain feelings or else we will incur or trigger one of these dangers.

This is why people inhibit themselves or otherwise hold themselves back—it's in order to feel safe from either external or internal dangers.

A child forms pathogenic beliefs by inferring them from traumatic experiences with his or her caretakers. Traumas can be mild or severe. Doesn't matter. They are experiences in which the child infers that pursuing some perfectly normal developmental aim or feeling will disrupt the tie that that child has with parents. For example a child may infer that he or she burdens his parents by being dependent on them, or that he or she causes them to feel hurt and rejected by being

independent of them. But notice—the need to be dependent and independent are perfectly normal and healthy desires in childhood and yet they can become the target of pathogenic beliefs if they cause trouble in the relationship with parents.

The power of pathogenic beliefs stems from the fact that one's parents have an awesome power in the mind and life of a child. The child has no other model of reality or morality and thus endows the parents with absolute authority. Furthermore, a child's mind is different than the mind of an adult in that it is unformed and egocentric. By egocentric I mean that the child takes responsibility for whatever he or she experiences—the child doesn't yet have a mature sense of cause and effect. And so, as a result, a child may take responsibility for the depression, illness, or death of a parent, or for the painful and unpleasant ways that parents treat each other. It's well known, for example, that children of divorce often develop the pathogenic belief that the parental strife was his or her fault, or that a parent abandoned the family because of something the child did (or didn't do).

Consider these further examples taken from my own clinical practice: One woman grew up with a depressed mother and assumed that she, the child, had the power to make her happy and desperately tried to cheer her up.

A pathogenic belief....

Another woman had parents who were withdrawn and self-centered, and she grew up assuming that if she were only more interesting, her parents' interest would be aroused.

Again, this was a pathogenic belief.

And a man I treated grew up with parents who constantly displayed an exaggerated worry about him and, as a result, he assumed that it was because he was, in fact, so screwed up. His pathogenic belief arose from his compliance with what his parents thought of him.

There are all sorts of ways that someone can develop a pathogenic belief. Sometimes it's as simple as assuming that the way that your parent is treating you is the way you should be treated. One woman I saw was ignored by her parents in favor of a very vivacious and successful older sister. She inferred that she deserved to be treated as if she was unimportant. She developed a pathogenic belief around it.

Sometimes the pathogenic belief comes from some accidental shocking event, for example, the death of a parent, or a severe illness. One guy I suffered from the painful belief that he was too needy—a belief he formed growing up with a seriously ill mother. He developed the notion that people would be easily drained or burdened by him if he were too dependent. This interfered in his love life as an adult. He tended to choose women who were intolerant of dependency and when he found

one who liked to take care of him, he couldn't let himself surrender and let her. His pathogenic belief made real adult intimacy difficult.

Most of the psychological difficulties that people face reflect the workings of one or more pathogenic beliefs. We form them in order to make sense of a childhood world that is too often shot through with problems. People can and do unlearn their pathogenic beliefs by finding themselves in circumstances—or by creating circumstances—that dis-confirm, that disprove, these beliefs. People who grow up feeling unloveable may find love. People fearful of success may find situations in which they can safely succeed. And people who feel insecure or inadequate may find themselves with children who think they walk on water. And psychotherapists help their patients every day by offering healthy experiences that correct the pathogenic ones of their childhoods. The world we find ourselves in—and the world we create for ourselves – can go a long way to correcting what ails us.