

Podcast #22 REVISED - -WHEN WAITING MAKES US SICK

Too often we collide with or become enmeshed with institutions, with bureaucracies, that seem indifferent to our needs. During these moments, we're made to feel helpless. This experience is similar to a situation in which a child can't get her parent's attention, which becomes toxic when the child is in distress or has some important need, and the parent can't or won't understand and help. Similarly, in everyday life, when we need something as a consumer, a customer, a client, or a patient, and can't get or hold the attention of the entity that is supposed to provide it, a similar toxic situation results.

At the heart of this damage lie feelings of helplessness. When people feel helpless, they get angry. Or depressed. Or they make someone else feel helpless. The experience of helplessness can infiltrate our minds and spirits and make us feel that powerlessness is not only the way things are, but is the way things are supposed to be. Just as a child may grow up feeling that he or she isn't worth a parent's attention, empathy, or help, so too are adults in our society frequently made to feel weak, ineffectual, or worthless by the countless ways that the social world appears indifferent to their needs.

Studies have shown that a majority of people lack agency at work, and are forced to adapt to a work environment that they can't influence. The result is depression and chronic feelings of resentment. Or consider the world of politics: It's clear that to the extent that citizens feel that their elected representatives aren't responsive to their needs, these citizens will stop voting, stop participating, and cynically stop caring about their democracy.

These are major areas of social life in which experiences of relative helplessness cause psychological suffering. But there are a host of smaller ways that the world shows its indifference to us that added together creates similar emotional damage.

Most people, I believe, can relate to one or more of the following situations: Being put on hold in phone queues for long periods of time. Sometimes our concerns are addressed, but often they are not. Most people have horror stories about trying to get technical support when one of their devices is on the blink, or when they have to troubleshoot a problem with their phone or cable TV carrier, or when they have to deal with an airline reservation agent, or their town's planning department. And it's easy to imagine the frustrations and

inefficiencies and dehumanizing obstacles put in the way of people who are dependent on public services or welfare. Public agencies that are supposed to help us, entities upon which we're dependent, can easily throw up barriers whose sole purpose seems to be to tell us what we *can't* do and what we *can't* get. Customers and clients become frustrated and helpless petitioners hemmed in by bureaucracies that seem indifferent and rejecting.

Another arena in which we are often made to feel helpless is in our search for decent medical care. I had occasion recently to reflect on this as I tried, unsuccessfully, to fill a simple prescription for asthma medication. An array of bureaucracies defeated me, from an inefficient doctor's office to three understaffed pharmacies, to irrational Medicare regulations. My situation—the only one that mattered to me at the time, of course—fell through multiple cracks. Everyone I dealt with was too busy and everyone passed the buck. No one was in charge and no one took responsibility for any of the snafus that seemed to pop up by the hour. I'm not proud to say that I got so frustrated I took it out on clerks and functionaries who had no real power, ultimately, to help me. I felt helpless and victimized and so I was inclined to victimize others.

In terms of healthcare, we have to pay more attention to the quality of the care we receive, and not simply to how many people are covered. There is abundant research that shows that if patients have to wait a long time to see a doctor who then has only 10-15 minutes to see them, objective health outcomes (like compliance, return visits, rates of hospitalization, etc.) suffer.

It's tempting to chalk these experiences up to the inevitable complexities of modern life in an age filled with technological systems destined to break down. But I disagree. I think that all of us are overworked and our institutions are understaffed and, further, that we too often see each other as means to an end. I saw the pharmacist who was withholding my medication that way, and he saw me as a burdensome "problem" that he needed to get rid of. More and more companies in the private sector are studying their customer service scores because they are too low. Fixing the problem, however, requires a significant increase in spending on the technology and human resources necessary to increase customer satisfaction and such outlays can cut into profits.

The profit maximization and everyone-out-for-him/herself sensibility that marks our

capitalist system is, itself, one of the root causes of those practices that make us feel helpless. And each of us is left to deal with these chronic frustrations on our own, because in our society the ethic of individualism insists that each of us is responsible for our own suffering and our own welfare.

Our society is wearing us down, killing our spirits with a thousand paper cuts. There is nothing normal or inevitable about these practices that render us helpless. They originate in a society that dehumanizes us and makes us feel that our perfectly healthy needs for empathy and care are the problem, rather than the systems that fail to care for us.