

Podcast #26- WHAT TRUMP CAN TEACH US ABOUT
PSYCHOLOGY

I'm going to talk today about the workings of Donald Trump's mind. I'm not doing so as one of his critics, nor am I trying to persuade anyone to oppose him politically. This podcast isn't about politics. Now of course it's also important for all of us to understand what makes the most powerful man in the world tick, what lie behind behavior that is confusing, and what his "buttons" are that future events might trigger. But more than that, by understanding his psychology, we can better understand our own. It turns out that Trump's psychology reveals certain psychological dynamics in great relief, with a kind of exaggerated clarity that can help us understand universal psychological processes.

Let me start by making an important generalization: Most approaches to psychotherapy assume that people naturally avoid painful emotions; that is, we believe that our minds, our very brains, are inherently wired to try to reduce or avoid feelings that disturb or threaten us. One person

can't tolerate feeling dependent; for another, it's anger or sadness; and for still another it might be guilt. People do all sorts of things to avoid painful emotional states. They might simply deny them ("I never feel sad"). They might exaggerate the opposite ("I'm happy, not sad"). They might get high ("I'm numb, I don't feeling anything). Or they might project these feelings outward, making an internal problem into an external one ("I don't hate the world, the world hates me").

These are examples of psychological defenses. And here's one of the important insights from psychotherapy: More often than not, the difficulties people experience in their lives – or the problems they create for others – come from their attempts to defend themselves against emotional pain. Their solutions, in other words, become a problem.

So, for example, if someone fears that expressing feeling of anger will provoke punitive responses from others, he or she might attempt to lessen this threat by becoming meek and compliant – you know, the opposite of angry. But it's unfortunately true that such an attitude might make it more likely that that person will be taken

advantage of or be otherwise self-sabotaging. Or he or she might get rid of angry feelings by externalizing them – you know, everyone else is prone to get angry, not ME--resulting in then feeling paranoid and fearful of this imagined aggression in others. Such a person is chronically defensive and mistrustful of others. And a paranoid person is very hard to get along with.

In the last analysis, our psyches are wired to seek to eliminate or escape painful feelings. And it then follows that when the threat posed by a feeling is experienced is extreme, the efforts to eliminate or avoid that feeling will also be extreme, even to the point of distorting reality.

Donald Trump's psychology seems to be dominated by extreme defenses against what we now must understand as extremely threatening feelings. I would argue that the emotions he dreads the most are inferiority, helplessness and shame. Much of his more aberrant behavior has to be understood, then, as defensive against one or more of this triad of painful and threatening feelings.

It's not enough to diagnose Trump, as many have, as a narcissist or a sociopath or any such thing. Such diagnoses

fail to grasp how a person with these alleged afflictions is likely to *feel, the fears and desires that motivate him and the strategies he uses to escape painful emotions*. Instead, I think that understanding how Trump is constantly defending himself against feelings of inferiority, helplessness and shame brings us closer to the truth and illustrates something universal about the ways we all seek to avoid emotional pain and suffering, even when to do so creates even more suffering.

Take Trump's extreme grandiosity. He is always the biggest, the best and the greatest. You don't need to be Sigmund Freud to suspect that grandiosity is a defense. But a defense against what? Well, logic and intuition would tell us that it must be a defense against feelings of being small, helpless, insignificant, and/or inferior, right? And it must be that, considering how exaggerated his grandiosity appears to be, the underlying feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and inferiority must be quite extreme as well.

Similarly, it is reasonable to understand some of the external trappings of Trump's lifestyle in a similar way. He surrounds himself with a type of garish luxury (gold fixtures in the bathroom, and golden trophy wives) to counteract

feelings of worthlessness. In other words, *these surfaces are absurdly glorified* in order to counteract internal feelings of psychological poverty.

Sticking with this line of thought for a bit longer, one can now understand how given his dread of feeling small (remember his need to prove that his hands weren't small?), he projects smallness and weakness onto others. Small is threatening to Trump, and so he constantly has to refer to himself as big and powerful and his enemies as small and weak. And if someone like Trump is afraid of feeling defeated, of losing, then telling others that THEY are losers is a good defense, a good way of escaping and avoiding a painful feeling.

Now, I'm talking about Trump, but much milder forms of this dynamic can be seen in lots of us. Think about people you know who keep buying shiny new expensive things, folks who appear to be trying to compensate for feeling one-down or inadequate. What about people you know who need to win every argument, as if their self-esteem was on the line, *as if -IF they don't win, they've lost, or, worse, are losers?*

Now, let's consider the feeling of disgust. What is it? Why do we feel it? Disgust is an emotional response of rejection or revulsion to something considered offensive, distasteful, or unpleasant. It's a feeling that triggers avoidance, arousing a need to get away from something bad or ugly, in other words, something threatening. Disgust often goes along with shame. Think about it: Shame is a feeling that there is something bad, something disgusting about you. It is accompanied by feelings and fears of exposure, a sense that the world is looking down on you, repelled and disgusted with what they see. It's as if one were incontinent in public. Shame and disgust go together and they are feelings that our minds are highly motivated to minimize or get rid of. We most often do so by taking these internal feelings that we are bad or disgusting and make them into an external thing that we can then put down or avoid.

It seems to me that Trump's psychology exemplifies these psychological dynamics. Trump is constantly battling feelings of shame. I suspect this to be true of him because he frequently expresses disgust. During the 2016 campaign we saw this in regard to women—he was disgusted by Hillary's

use of the bathroom during their debate at Saint Anselm College, and he fulminated about Megyn Kelly's bloody secretions after she was tough on him in their first debate. In fact, in my clinical experience men who feel disgust toward women often objectify them as a way to maintain distance. He makes them – women--into things because too much intimacy opens the door for him to start feeling shame and disgust. Relationships with things are safer than actual intimacy and exposure.

When young boys mock and avoid girls for having “cooties,” they are doing this same thing. Many men in our culture are afraid of intimacy with women for just such reasons.

Think about how mutually reinforcing the feelings of shame, helplessness, and inferiority really are. So, helplessness and inferiority are shameful and being “exposed” as pathetic or inferior increases feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. In fact, something so simple as Trump's now famous inability to pay attention in meetings and his lack of interest in reading can easily be seen as stemming from the play of these three feelings.

Think of it this way: When he has to pay attention for too long, he likely starts to feel anxious, as if he is being cornered and made to feel one down. People with ADD often report feeling like this. Moreover, if he has to consider a difficult problem or focus on material about which he is ignorant, Trump has to face feelings of being flawed, helpless and embarrassed. In other words, he begins to feel like he's stupid, a loser, which he can't tolerate. So he has to interrupt and quickly change the subject to one with which he's comfortable or one that features his greatness. In this way, he relieves himself of dreadful – and shameful-- feelings of being defective, weak or insignificant.

Such responses are merely extreme manifestations of conflicts that many of us have. None of us likes to confront our limitations, our human frailty, or our ignorance. That's what leads us to play it safe, to avoid taking risks in our careers or our learning. I see these self-imposed limitations every day. Trump's are, if anything, simply exaggerated versions of a common pattern.

We have to keep this in mind when considering Trump's psychology. For someone plagued with feelings of

helplessness, shame and inferiority, the danger of exposure is ever-present. Such a danger is captured by the colloquial expression “being caught with one’s pants down.” It shows up in our dread of incontinence, of an involuntary disclosure of one’s private secrets, of being found out. But found out as what? In Trump’s case, it’s found out to be dirty and bad, and unworthy, instead of deserving and greatly valued. I think it’s fair to speculate that Trump is consumed by this conflict. His paranoia reflects his constant worry about the critical judgment of others, a worry that, in his heart, Trump secretly fears is justified. As a result, he is angrily fixated on being “found out” by investigative reporters or exposed from within by “leakers.”

Now, think about how, understanding this psychological dynamic helps explain a range of phenomena. In the context of such a formulation, it makes sense that, more than anything, Trump dreads revelations that make his electoral victory last November seem illegitimate. He simply cannot tolerate the fact that he lost the popular vote, nor even a hint that the Russians helped him defeat Hillary Clinton. In Trump’s mind, this makes sense because he is horrified by feelings of being a loser, horrified by evidence

of the dirty fraudulent underbelly that might lie at the foundation of his personality and his life. He has to stamp out this accusation – which is really a self-accusation – at all costs.

In his years as a real estate tycoon, Trump could exercise enormous control over his environment, sanitizing it of any evidence that contradicted his idealized version of himself. He could surround himself with flatterers and the trappings of wealth and power – the external cues that he is special. As president, however, he finds himself under constant hostile scrutiny, and this scrutiny threatens his defenses. He is constantly compelled to preemptively reassert his invulnerability, his power and greatness, even if this comes across as boorishness, as a braggart desperately trying to save face.

If reports are true, Trump frequently loses his temper, striking out and blaming others for perceived failures. These outbursts are a belated attempt to master and control an environment that is relentlessly whispering – at times, shouting – that he’s a bad, inferior, defective man. He can’t stand being the helpless victim of these whispers and

shouts. He'll do anything to shut them up – fire press secretaries, obstruct justice, bribe allies, anything to restore the moat defending him against criticism.

Trump's private conflicts emerge over and over again in his public life. Real losses – say, votes in Congress – are psychically equated with being a loser. Revelations that his campaign colluded with Russia are psychically equivalent to admitting his victories weren't real. Impeachment would be the ultimate realization of Trump's nightmare – proof that he is helpless, damaged goods, a public failure who deserves contempt.

Knowing what makes Trump tick doesn't allow us to make specific predictions about his likely political positions, but it should make his maneuvering around the Russia investigation seem quite understandable. I'm sure that intelligence agencies around the world already have a book on how to deal with Trump that is based on analyses of his personality similar to this one. Trump will always be propelled by his defensive need to prove he's good, not bad; powerful, not weak; a winner, not a loser. This need will be behind everything he does.

We all are motivated in ways similar to Donald Trump. We all seek to eliminate our pain and perceived threats to our favored view of ourselves. The differences are ones of degree, and, of course, that fact that Trump's defenses are backed by the power of his elected office.