

Video 9 - Pathogenic Beliefs - Transcript

So at the risk of seeming maybe just a tad pretentious I'm going to talk today about and reveal the secret cause of almost all mental suffering at least the suffering that I see and have treated in my office for over 40 years And the secret cause of suffering can be found in the concept of pathogenic beliefs See look people come to see me as a psychotherapist because they've somehow managed to get in their own way in their life or spoil their experience of life So you know I mean it could be some people stay in a bad relationship too long or they underperform at work or maybe they find that they put themselves down somehow publicly or privately or somehow snatch defeat from the jaws of victory over and over again And so there's some version of a psychological conflict that causes us to live lives that are less than optimal And you could define optimal not scientifically probably but close enough by thinking of a life where you feel fulfilled and you can freely love and feel loved by others where you can feel independent but also comfortable relying on others and where you can freely pursue ambitions and aspirations in the world And if I put it that way you can see that many if not most of us experience some kind of interference some static or inhibition in one or more of these areas of life Now You could be more or less aware I think some patients are more some are less of the psychological sources of their dysfunctional patterns and can link them to the dysfunctional patterns of their family life growing up But I think the key to understand all forms of psychopathology lies in this concept of pathogenic beliefs which has guided my own thinking and work for over 40 years and it was a concept first developed by the psychoanalyst Joseph Weiss in San Francisco and the team of people that worked with him So what are they What are pathogenic beliefs These are beliefs and I'm going to call them maladaptive beliefs that are often unconscious They interfere with our functioning they adversely affect our self-esteem and they prevent or get in the way of our pursuing highly desirable life goals and developmental goals like I was mentioning earlier in the pursuit of happiness or fulfillment or a good relationship And the goal of therapy in my view is to help someone disconfirm or disprove these beliefs and therefore to free them up to pursue the goals that are well first off quite normal but that have been stymied over the course of their life Now in order to understand how these pathogenic beliefs arise you have to put yourself in the shoes of a child because the story has to begin in childhood and we have to think about the world through a child's eyes See the developing child has one overarching goal or aim and that is to adapt to his or her environment including most importantly the environment of his or her family interpersonal environment And the child's dependence survival is dependent on figuring out how to get along with his or her caretakers upon whom the child's completely dependent and in the course of adapting to the family system whatever it is the child has to learn certain of the rules that govern social life certain expectations or rules about right or wrong about what's good and bad about what's what's forbidden And the punchline here is that if pursuing some developmental goal or expressing some feeling or acting out some behavior if any of these things threaten the ties in the family well they have to be repressed altered distorted inhibited or otherwise just gotten rid of So while the child has to learn how to get the parent's attention you know and earn his or her love the child also has to learn that there are limits to his or her own will so that the kid has to learn that his or her own wishes don't control the world around them And most important that the child has to learn that you know what he or she has to do to get the parent to love them or protect them

And that means they have to learn about what their families our families teach them about morality And when I say morality really I'm just talking about what the child is supposed to feel what the child's supposed to do and what the child is supposed to need or not need See these are actually if you think about it These are kind of moral beliefs aren't they And the child acquires them in the course of growing up in a particular family context in which the child has to learn really how he or she affects others and how others are likely to react to the child But you know if a family is dysfunctional then the child acquires beliefs that are also dysfunctional I'll call them pathogenic And if you understand development this way you can see that these dysfunctional beliefs which I'm going to illustrate at some length may appear very reasonable at the time the child develops them in the family but they appear and reveal themselves as very dysfunctional when the child grows up and brings that belief or those beliefs into the world outside the family when they're adults So these beliefs that work so well to help the child fit in to the family are revealed to be very dysfunctional in the real world outside In that outside world the world of love and work and ambition and caretaking and child rearing such beliefs cause distress and And that's why we call them pathogenic and they give rise to pathology in some way So thinking about the types of beliefs that I think are common that I see also in my consulting room every day I'm thinking of a woman who grew up with a depressed mother and assumed that she the child had the power to make mother happy and desperately tried to do so She felt and believed herself to be almost omnipotently responsible for her mother and took that belief out into the world see where she was a great caretaker but couldn't take good care of herself Another woman had parents who were withdrawn and appeared self-centered and she grew up developing the pathogenic belief that if she were only more interesting her parents' interest would be aroused The belief she wasn't interesting plagued her in relationships you can imagine for her entire life teenage and adult life A man I treated grew up with parents who seemed to display always an exaggerated worry about him as if he was a spun glass And as a result he assumed it was because he was in fact fragile and broken You see his pathogenic belief arose from you might say his compliance with his parents' view of him So many people I've treated you know hold the pathogenic belief that they're not supposed to be confidently assertive and strong And if they are they'll somehow in their minds risk hurting their caretakers in some way or damaging those attachments As a result they find themselves expecting that somehow they'll get punished by the world One of my patients felt this a lot at work He that if he exercised his capacity which was considerable to think strategically in a bigger visionary way in his company that his boss would feel threatened and his peers would be envious and resentful and the consequences would be bad for him And see even if it was a little bit true there's a grain of truth in that the heart and soul of his belief was pathogenic because he had grown up believing that he was supposed to defer to others if he wanted their approval And he wasn't ever supposed to act too full of himself See here we go He imagined he'd threatened somehow his parents if he was too cocky and therefore jeopardized their attachment to them And so this was something he had to suppress or sometimes do the opposite So another patient experienced another similar pathogenic belief in his marriage He felt secretly that his wife in fact all women when it came to it would be easily hurt if he was too self-assertive at home for example or if he wanted to occasionally go out with the guys or socialize in ways that excluded his wife His pathogenic belief is that he would hurt her And as a result he rarely said no at home even though it led to him acting very

self-effacing self-sacrificial which was painful and caused him a lot of distress So you can see that pathogenic beliefs are getting in the way and they cause distress because as in this case they kind of sap the light joy and success out of the person's experience And finally in a similar light I treated a woman whose mother was very depressed and bitter for lots of reasons all her life I grieved especially about her lousy husbands and men in general The daughter my patient grew up believing that she just wasn't supposed to have pleasure with and be intimate with a man because she was identifying with her mother out of a sense of guilt and a worry a guilty worry about having a better life than her mother So you can think about pathogenic beliefs I think as being formed to protect us from some danger perceived danger either external or internal And I guess the external danger if you think about it developmentally might involve losing someone's love or hurting them or provoking their anger And I guess in a way we could say that the external threat and danger comes down to jeopardizing the attachments and the security of the attachments we feel that we have with our parents and then later with important people So it starts maybe in the family but the child in us is there all the time But there are also internal dangers You see there are certain painful feelings that our minds are just committed to avoiding like fear anxiety and guilt and shame and remorse And so pathogenic beliefs tell us that we better not pursue certain aims that better not express certain feelings or else we're going to incur trigger one of these dangers Feelings are really bad or threatening something interpersonally And that's why people inhibit themselves or hold themselves back It's in order to feel safe from either internal or external dangers See the dangers are almost like an imaginary punishment for the crime of what Well of pursuing these feelings or desires or hopes and dreams and longings and needs that otherwise I think we would consider quite normal So you know a child may infer that he or she burdens a parent by being dependent on them or that he or she causes them to feel hurt by being too independent of them But notice here you know the need to be dependent or independent is perfectly normal and healthy but such desires in childhood can and do become the targets of pathogenic beliefs And the power comes from the developmental origin of it where parents have an awesome authority to define what's real and what's moral The way things are and the way they're supposed to be And you have to also consider a child's mind is a little different than an adult's because in a child's mind a child tends to be omnipotent a little bit and confuse cause and effect if you will like the child's angry And let's say a parent were to suddenly get sick or God forbid die because of things unrelated to the child The child would to feel guilty and responsible anyway because of this tendency in childhood thinking to feel omnipotent So just to review here at the end there are all sorts of ways someone can develop a pathogenic belief One way it could be as simple as assuming that the way your parents are treating you is the way you should be treated A woman I saw was ignored by her parents in favor of a very vivacious and successful older sister And she inferred that she deserved to be treated as if she was unimportant And she developed this pathogenic belief around that She's not supposed to be important to somebody And there are lots of things you can use this concept to explain I mean even something seemingly unrelated like I guess they call it FOMO fear of missing out The pathogenic belief is that one is not supposed to be welcomed into a group and feel part of a community It's a punishment fantasy I think Or You think about all narcissistic and arrogant politicians the pathogenic belief is this if I lose I'm a loser or I'm never supposed to fail I mean look at the actions of our current president consumed by pathogenic beliefs that tell him he's shit

if he doesn't win or if he doesn't make other people feel like shit And I can tell you you know on the progressive side of the spectrum I worked for years with large progressive political organizations And often the people that were running them as they acquired more success and power some way sabotaged themselves There's a great history of self-sabotage on the left because of a discomfort with power and a commitment to being the underdog always Now people can unlearn and overcome their pathogenic beliefs by either finding themselves in situations or creating circumstances that disconfirm or disprove those beliefs So people who grew up feeling unlovable may find love or people fearful of success might find situations where they're encouraged to safely succeed Someone who feels inadequate and insecure might find him or herself with children that they think and see walk on water affording them a great feeling of pride And I think psychotherapists like me help our patients every day by offering healthy experiences that correct the pathogenic beliefs of our patients' childhoods So I believe that the world we find ourselves in the world we create for ourselves can go a long way to correcting what ails us