The Emotion of Powerlessness

We are marinated in a sense of immense power when we are in the womb. The baby can effortlessly strip mother of nutrients so he is born robust, at the expense of her health. The baby can ignore clocks, schedules and cultural niceties, sucking his thumb with impunity. He can hit mom without being spanked in return.

That world of immense power gets splintered with the birthing process where a child experiences a wide variety of powerlessness. That powerlessness is reinforced through childhood, school, religion and the land-mine-loaded world of relationships.

Then comes adulthood and you face employment, interfacing with the government and that ultimate factory of powerlessness – marriage.

So by midlife, just about everyone except the most pampered primrose has a file in their brain of the emotion of powerlessness. Few have “resolved” the past issues. We just push through, breathe a sigh of relief when we have restored some sense of dominion, and we go on with life.

Meanwhile, there is one more episode of that debilitating emotion of powerlessness filed away in our emotional data base.

When we hit a new patch of powerlessness, someone races to the cage where all those little gremlins have been locked up for a while, throws open the door and they come tumbling out, bursting with energy and race around your brain reliving each past experience with powerlessness, thereby magnifying your current bad situation.

Brutal.

Dealing with powerlessness is a lot like dealing with a migraine. Most people learn to recognize the early warning signals, and they pounce on it with meds. If they don’t address the issue quickly, and just let it “run its course” it often reaches a point where they can no longer power through. It is overwhelming.

So what DO you do to contain the emotions of the current powerlessness, and avoid letting all the gremlins out of the cage?
Here are some tools that work for me, since I don’t have a cage – I have a whole “nature reserve” just slightly smaller than Kruger National Park with more varied life forms of powerlessness than Darwin could imagine.

First, I try to identify an end point or a pause in the current drama. If I am on the phone with a useless “Customer Support” person, I can realistically say that in five or ten minutes I will be off the phone and will deal with my problem a different way. If I am in a long term relationship, I know that as soon as I send this email, I have a pause in the action. I can avoid the problem until their next email back, and when it comes, I can reasonably ignore it until near the end of the day, before having to embrace the powerlessness again.

Second, I look for some way to engage different parts of my brain, other than the thoroughly inflamed powerlessness file. My first choice is physical activity just because it is available right now. I have a chin up bar and can quite swiftly generate enough physical pain that it overrides the emotional sector of my brain with sheer volume.

I can go into the warehouse and unpack the most recent order, then stock the shelves. Or assemble a few CD albums. Or wash the dishes in the sink. I would prefer more intense physical activity, but it is not easily available at work, nor is it my strong suit.

But for some, going for a jog, or playing a rousing number on your air guitar will serve the purpose if you have strong positive emotions attached to that activity.

A second area of the brain that can be quickly stimulated is taste. Hence, “comfort food.” Fortunately my mango juice is highly comforting and non-fattening. Often just the act of moving toward the refrigerator releases some anticipatory good feelings, before I actually chow down.

Sometimes I blend the two and chew my ice after the drink. I am so very gratefully that there is not a 12 step program for all the ice chewers in the world because it certainly helps keep the gremlins in the reserve, at times.

The third part of the brain that is useful for diversionary techniques is your whole reading apparatus. If there is an enjoyable book already underway – usually biography or history for me – a quick immersion into a chapter will pull me into a different place in my brain.

This is why hurting people get sucked into Facebook and web surfing – looking, looking, looking for SOMETHING that is interesting enough to pull them into a better part of their brain than where the negative emotions are.

Any of these areas can be addictive and damaging, but they can also be useful tools for damage control when life has mugged us and the gremlins are threatening to swarm.

Third, I check to see if I have emotional energy available to fight.
Anger and depression are closely related. Both can come from the perception of being trapped. Depression robs us of energy. Anger gives us a brief high energy jolt.

If I can find my anger in the place of powerlessness, I will move toward some activity where I KNOW I can perform well, with power. For example, I will scan my emails to see if someone asked me a question that is right absolutely in the center of my strike zone so I can blast a ball into the second deck in center field.

Some of you who have received a long email back from me answering some question in tremendous detail were actually just being used by me to get my emotional equilibrium back. That happened today. A lady asked a leadership question right after I had experienced a familiar powerless moment, so she got the long version of my answer – immediately – not the pungent two sentence kernel that she would have had to chew on for a while, and now I feel much better about life!

It doesn’t have to be sophisticated. I am VERY efficient with housecleaning. There is an ability to think out ahead and an economy of motion that is quite impressive. The search-and-destroy mode for errant dust puppies is something to behold.

So at times I will blast through cleaning a room, primarily to re-establish dominion over something, and tamp down the pending revolt at the reserve.

Fourth, and dead last on my list, if I don’t have the emotional energy to fight back, I will talk to someone who I have reason to believe is on their game today. I will hitchhike on their momentum. They don’t have to know I am having a shabby day. Many know intuitively, but we are not going to discuss my pain. I want to hear what they are doing, what God is doing in and through them, where they are weaving principles together in a new way, where they are reaping fruit, etc.

After five minutes of drafting on their emotionally upbeat day, I can get back into my game with some degree of equanimity restored.

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There are levels of powerlessness that this won’t work for. When you are in a long, long rut, like being a battered wife or abused employee, these tools won’t do much.

When there is a serious demonic component such as with SRA, it will take more than this.

And when there has been so little dominion in life that a person simply does not have many neurological pathways for dominion, you will need to do some serious repair.
work there, first, over time.

But for the mythical Average Joe who has a stare down with powerlessness every week, some of these might help you bounce back more quickly.

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