



TIRED OF THE DRAMA

HANDLING PEOPLE WHO WON'T BE REASONABLE

DR. ALAN GODWIN

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Preface

Patti was pleasant when we first met but also seemed apprehensive, this being her first ever visit with a mental health professional. She made several nervous jokes about being “crazy” and asked kiddingly if she was supposed to lie down on the couch for analysis. Hoping to ease her fears, I joked around with her and tried to be reassuring. I told her that the real crazies of the world don’t usually come into offices like mine. Though she was ill at ease, I could tell she was really hoping to get some help.

I asked her to explain her reasons for coming. She then elaborated on how she felt overwhelmed all the time, mostly by the demands of being a wife and mom. Patti had been married for eight years to her husband, Bill, and they had a five-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl. She felt she was doing a bad job of being a wife and an even worse job of being a mother. The more she talked about her day-to-day life, the clearer it became just how much she was hurting. Her friends had commented on it, Bill had noticed it, and she had even found herself identifying with one of those TV ads on depression because it sounded so much like her.

After giving me the synopsis, she smiled and inquired, “So, can you fix me?” Contained in this question was a not-so-subtle demand for psychological twinkle dust which would make her pain instantly disappear. I told her that, while I couldn’t promise a quick fix, she would eventually feel better if we could do a good job of finding and addressing the causes of her depression. It would likely be hard but doable and definitely worth the effort. Not exactly the twinkle dust answer she hoped for but she agreed to hear more about the process.

I asked Patti if there were other things causing stress besides the daily demands of wifehood and motherdom. She responded dismissively, “Oh, well, my mother is driving me nuts but what else is new, right? Other than that, I can’t think of anything.” She told me that her parents had divorced shortly after she and Bill married and that her mother had moved to the same city just to be closer to them. I asked her to explain the phrase, “my mother is driving me nuts.”

She then gave me quite a list: she calls several times a day, she expects to see them several times a week, she frequently asks for favors, she drops in unexpectedly, and she gets upset if they ever let anyone else baby sit. Patti then said, “I don’t really understand this, but she almost seems jealous of my relationship with Bill and the kids. She gets upset if I ever do something with just my family, almost like she’s competing with them for my attention.”

Then, as if hit by a sudden wave of remorse, Patti said, “I don’t mean to sit here and criticize my mom, though. She’s really sweet and will do anything for you. We’re really lucky to have her so close by.” She then smiled, folded her arms, and said, “Hey, I’ve always heard that shrinks try to get you to blame everything on your parents. Are you wanting me to become a mom basher?” I laughed because I was so tickled by her directness but assured her that parent bashing would not be our therapeutic objective. Relieved, she said, “Good, just checking.” I really meant what I said—this would not become a blame-the-parents quest. And yet, it was my clear impression that Patti was exceptionally sensitive about the mom subject, which I decided to drop for the moment. We spent the next session or two discussing her history and background.

Patti grew up in one of those small towns where the streetlights dim when someone plugs in a hair dryer. She was the oldest of two children, her brother being two years younger. Her dad was a local businessman, sort of a big fish in a small pond. Her mom worked part-time in one of dad’s businesses but had mostly stayed home to raise the kids. She described her early years as idyllic. She and her friends rode bikes, played in the fields nearby, waded in the creek that ran through their property, caught fireflies in the summer, and had snowball fights in the winter.

But troubles lurked beneath this façade of All-Americanism. Dad was an alcoholic, not like Otis Campbell, the humorous town drunk on the old *Andy Griffith Show*. He was a mean drunk, saying and doing abusive things to his wife and

children during his drunken episodes. No one outside the family ever saw this side of Patti's dad. If he was late to work, that was his prerogative as the business-owner. He served on several local boards and was an elder in their church. So, there was a huge discrepancy between how he was perceived by the public and who he actually was in private.

Patti's mom had her own discrepancies. Sometimes, she was like Betty Crocker, the domestic and cheerful homemaker. At other times, she was dark and brooding like Betty Davis, the evil movie vixen. This drove Patti crazy because she never knew which Betty she'd find when she got home which is probably why she spent so much time outside playing with her friends.

And then there was her brother, Phil, who was the proverbial "black sheep" of the family. He didn't have discrepancies; he was consistently a jerk. She didn't go into a lot of detail about Phil but I got the picture. He was a problem at home and a problem at school. He prided himself on his alternative appearance and did all he could to resist the family expectations. Consequently, much of the family energy was channeled in Phil's direction.

It was clear all along that two systems governed the household. There was the "Dad system" that kicked in when Dad was present and the "Mom system" that ruled most of the time because Dad was seldom there. Patti often found herself navigating the difficult terrain of maintaining allegiance to one without offending the other. Home, therefore, felt like a minefield where the smallest of missteps could blow off a leg.

As Patti grew older, Mom increasingly confided in her about the struggles she experienced both with Dad and Phil. An oft-repeated phrase was, "Us girls have to stick together." Usually, it was unclear who was parenting whom. Mom would ask Patti's advice about how to handle Phil and get mad if her suggestions failed. She unburdened herself by disclosing her most personal struggles with Patti's dad, including details about their sex life. Even then, Patti understood how terribly inappropriate this was but couldn't figure out how to sidestep the information dump.

While Phil was the black sheep, Patti was the responsible child who seldom caused any trouble, made good grades, and represented the family well in the community. She graduated in the top 10% of her class and went onto college where she made lots of friends and continued to excel. During her college years, Mom and Dad separated.

Phil dropped out of school and moved into a ratty rental house with some guys who drank a lot and barely supported themselves with low paying part-time jobs. The once idyllic picture had morphed into an ugly portrait of gloom and tragedy. For Patti, being away at college was like a perch on which she could sit to catch a bird's eye view of the family dysfunction. She was sad about it and, at the same time, very glad to be away from it.

The last two years of college, Patti met and steadily dated Bill, a good guy. During their courtship, Patti was struck with an unpleasant realization. That is, she became conscious of just how much Mom was still “inside her head.” Mom had a terribly negative view of men, which was understandable given that she was the daughter of an alcoholic, she married an abusive alcoholic, and her son was rapidly becoming a shiftless bum. Patti discovered that she had unwittingly internalized this negative image through dozens, if not hundreds, of “girl talks,” in which Mom portrayed men as cavemen-like figures whose knuckles dragged the ground. Consequently, her starting point assumptions about Bill were colored by these deeply imbedded conceptions. Over time, however, the picture that emerged of Bill simply didn't line up with the internalized image. Sure, he had foibles just like anyone else, but he was not the ghastly troll that Mom had coached her to expect. This made Patti realize the importance of distinguishing between her thoughts and Mom's thoughts and the necessity of forming her own opinions even if they differed from Mom's.

When she and Bill graduated, married, and started their new lives together, Patti assumed that she had left behind the negatives of the past. They were forming a good marriage, had great jobs, and after a while, began a family. Jason was born three years into the marriage and Megan came along three years later. Just after Jason was born, Mom and Dad's separation culminated in a divorce. Not wanting to remain in that small town, Mom picked up and moved to where Patti and Bill lived “to be close to family and to help with baby sitting.”

Patti was flooded with mixed feelings about Mom's geographical relocation. On the one hand, Mom had some wonderful positives and Patti relished the idea of her kids growing up with their grandmother close by. On the other hand, living in such close proximity to Mom's negatives left her feeling very apprehensive.

As it turned out, her fears had validity. Even though Mom lived several miles away, she occupied a place at the very center of their lives with most things revolving

around her needs, her preferences, and her schedule. Patti often referred to her mom as their “third child” because the amount of attention she demanded rivaled that required by her own children. It was always all about Mom. Patti spewed like an unplugged fire hydrant when I asked her to give me some examples. She went into some detail describing the excessive demands for help and the guilt-trips that followed if demands were refused. “Every conversation with Mom” Patti explained, “has this theme: something has gone wrong or someone has done me wrong.”

I asked Patti to describe the typical way she and Bill end up in the helping role. She said, “OK, here’s a typical scenario. Bill, the kids, and I had been out for a while last week and our message light was blinking when we came in. There were six messages from Mom, each one sounding more frantic than the one before. She needed this particular prescription from the pharmacy and was panicked about what would happen if she didn’t get it. Mom drives and the drug store is right down the road from her house. She could’ve easily gotten it herself. Yet, if we didn’t drive the thirteen miles to her neighborhood and pick up the prescription, her health would suffer and it would somehow be our fault. That’s the sort of thing that happens all the time.”

Even though I already knew the answer, I asked if she’d ever tried talking to her mom about the things that bothered her. She said, “Are you kidding. Like a gazillion times. But trying to work things out with her is like slamming my head over and over into a wall. Nothing makes the slightest difference, no matter what I say or how I say it.” Hoping to get a better feel for what happens when conflict occurs, I asked her to tell me more about that “slamming my head over and over into a wall” remark. Here are some things she said:

- “The more we argue, the worse she gets and the more frustrated I become. I can’t imagine her ever backing down about anything. I’d rather lie down in an ant bed than have an argument with her.”
- “Mom never admits to being wrong about anything, even when she’s clearly in the wrong. She’s irritatingly oblivious to the faults that others so clearly see. She never apologizes for anything because, to hear her tell it, she never does anything wrong.”
- “Arguments with Mom confuse me and mess with my brain. On the one hand, I see what she does and know it’s legitimate to feel angry at her. On the other

hand, I usually end up feeling guilty for my anger, figuring that the difficulties we experience are somehow my fault.”

After hearing the abridged version of a very long tale, it seemed evident to me that Patti was experiencing momma drama trauma. Yes, she was depressed but her depression had resulted from drama participation and her ongoing involvement was continuing to feed it. I explained that she would probably stay depressed unless Mom moved to New Guinea or unless she could develop ways of avoiding participation in the dramas that were continuously being staged by her mother.

Patti had that look on her face that a person has when a dentist explains root canals. She told me I had merely confirmed what she'd known all along but she still wasn't looking forward to it. In fact, a root canal seemed more appealing than doing what was necessary to alter the mom relationship. But momma drama was now occupying the center stage of her life while other commitments like marriage and motherhood were being neglected. She wasn't looking forward to it but knew it was necessary to step out of the dramas being staged by her mom.

CHAPTER ONE

Drama Relating

We're all mixtures of positives and negatives. We're attracted to each other's positives but encounter the negatives when we get in close. In fact, the closer the contact the more evident the negatives become. At that point, we need something we don't naturally possess: the abilities needed to solve the inevitable problems occurring in close connections. Some people develop those abilities along the way while some don't. Those who don't we'll refer to in this chapter as "unreasonable" people. We'll use that descriptor because they are un-reason-able, having neither the ability nor willingness to be reasonable. We'll call these abilities "reason muscles", the thought being that muscles get stronger when used but atrophy from disuse

The Humility Muscle

The first muscle needed is the *humility* muscle, which gives a person the ability to acknowledge potential personal wrongness. When reasonable people use this muscle, the stance is, "I could be wrong, you could be right, let's talk". Reasonable people, who have healthy humility muscles, can handle being wrong if being right requires sacrificing the truth. They believe, though perhaps reluctantly, in the maxim, "Truth is your best ally." It may be painful to acknowledge wrongness, but they'll do so because being truthful has a higher value to them than being right.

Unwilling to allow for the possibility of wrongness, unreasonable people will sacrifice truth if being truthful means being wrong. They'll even lie to avoid being wrong. In fact, some unreasonable people revise truth so routinely that they delude

themselves and come to believe their own revisions. The stance taken is, “I’m right, you’re wrong, end of discussion.” They can be arrogant, inflexible, and never wrong about anything. That’s why “you can’t reason with an unreasonable person.” Your attempts at reasonableness won’t work because they’re not interested in reason; they’re only interested in winning or in being right.

The Awareness Muscle

The second muscle needed is the *awareness* muscle, which enables us to observe areas of actual personal wrongness. Having this muscle, the reasonable person’s stance is, “I see where I’m wrong.” They see their strengths but also understand their weaknesses. Unreasonable people have ruled out the possibility of wrongness, so the stance taken is, “I only see where I’m right.” Unreasonable people are notoriously lacking in self-awareness, not seeing the flaws in themselves that others so clearly see. Therefore, when problems occur, they automatically assume that others caused them. About these people, we say things like:

- She has no idea how she comes across
- He’s a bull in a china shop
- He’s clueless about the part he played in that argument
- Her husband sees it, her kids see it, her boss sees it. Everybody sees it but her.
- She’s just oblivious

The Responsibility Muscle

Sometimes referred to as a conscience, the responsibility muscle enables us to be bothered by personal wrongness. Unreasonable people seem weak in the conscience department. While the reasonable person observes personal faults and cringes, the unreasonable person shrugs when flaws are pointed out. His stance is, “If I’m wrong, so what?”

One Sunday afternoon, I sat riveted to a documentary about a well-known American who was great in public but not so great in private. With the passage of time, his once concealed infidelities have become part of the historical record. A

family friend was interviewed who recounted a conversation in which she asked him why he would take such chances and jeopardize his legacy. In response, he calmly replied, “I guess I just can’t help it.” She then made this astute observation:

He always lived his life in compartments. There was the public compartment in which he accomplished these great things, all of which were true. But he also had an unseen compartment in which he was repeatedly unfaithful to his wife and children. I think he knew there were discrepancies between the compartments, but they just didn’t bother him that much.

In effect, the unreasonable person looks in the mirror, sees the glob of spinach on his teeth, doesn’t like what he sees, and determines, therefore, to quit looking in mirrors. The reasonable person seeks out truth to change for the better. The unreasonable person runs from truth to avoid discomfort.

The Empathy Muscle

The fourth muscle needed is the *empathy* muscle. Empathy is the ability to be bothered if our personal wrongness hurts others. It enables us to understand the effect we have on the other person and to use that understanding to govern our words and actions.

When a reasonable person uses this muscle, the resulting stance is, “It bothers me when my wrongness hurts you.” He allows that understanding to shape how he behaves toward others. The unreasonable person is empathy deficient. His stance is, “I’m only bothered when your wrongness hurts me.” Consequently, the unreasonable person is often described as “cruel” or “insensitive” in his dealings with others. That’s why we say, “It’s all about him” or “I can’t believe he could say (or do) that” or “Watch out, he’ll stab you in the back.” He gives little consideration to the impact of his words and actions on others. Reciprocal empathy is a realistic expectation in conflict with reasonable people. With unreasonable people, however, we should anticipate only self-serving motivations and behaviors.

The Reliability Muscle

The *reliability* muscle is the ability to correct personal wrongness. A reasonable person is bothered by his flaws and determines, “When I’m wrong, I’ll change.” Since the unreasonable person fails to see his flaws, he is neither bothered by them nor sees the need to correct them. Consequently, his stance is, “I’ll not change because I’m not wrong.”

People have two types of needs: *real needs* and *felt needs*. A real need must be felt before we’ll do anything about it. For instance, you could have cancer but not know it, an undetected but very real need. If your doctor diagnosed it, you’d become aware of the illness, feel the need, and seek treatment. Evaluation and diagnosis would transform your real need into a felt need. Unreasonable people have flaws but don’t see them and, therefore, do nothing to correct them. Change presupposes awareness.

So, here’s what we’re up against when we have conflict with unreasonable people. They automatically assume that we’re the ones in the wrong, they fail to see their contributions to the conflict, they claim no responsibility for any part of the problem, they’re not bothered by the impact of their words and actions on us, and they change nothing because nothing about them needs changing. Is it any wonder that unreasonable people are so difficult to handle?

Patti’s Assessment of Mom’s Muscles

All five of the reason muscles were weak in Patti’s mom. *Humility* muscle weakness was evidenced in her starting point assumption: “There’s nothing wrong with me but there’s definitely something wrong with you.” She lied to herself so routinely that she came to believe her own fabrications and, worse yet, she could snooker others into believing the spin. Some of her friends and neighbors thought, “It’s such a shame that this poor nice woman is treated so badly by her neglectful daughter.” Her *awareness* muscle didn’t work. She could clearly see her positives—the same ones Patti appreciated—but was clueless about her negatives. No matter what Patti did or said, her mom couldn’t or wouldn’t see the problems with herself that

Patti was trying to point out. Her *responsibility* muscle was atrophied from disuse. If her mom was ever caught red-handed in a lie, she'd say something like, "Oh, so I suppose you've never made a mistake, Little Miss Perfect." Patti was usually stumped by such a remark, being all too familiar with her own imperfections. Her mom was *empathy* deficient. She demonstrated little, if any, awareness of the impact she was having on Patti's family life. And if she was aware of it, she didn't care. No wonder Patti would often say, "It's all about mom. She thinks the world is supposed to revolve around her." Nor did her *reliability* muscle work. On occasion, Mom would seemingly catch a glimpse of herself and voice what sounded like a change commitment. For instance, she might say, "I'm sure I drive you guys crazy sometimes. I need to do a better job of taking care of my own things." Patti learned to place no stock whatsoever in such statements because they were never followed up with actual changes. That wasn't being pessimistic, just realistic.

The chart on the next page summarizes the different outcomes when the reason muscles are used by reasonable people and not used by unreasonable people.

MUSCLE	Reasonable People	Unreasonable People
HUMILITY	I could be wrong, you could be right, let's talk	I'm right, you're wrong, end of discussion
AWARENESS	I see where I'm wrong	I only see where I'm right
RESPONSIBILITY	It bothers me when I'm wrong	If I'm wrong, so what?
EMPATHY	It bothers me when my wrongness hurts you	I'm only bothered when your wrongness hurts me
RELIABILITY	When I'm wrong, I'll change	I'll not change because I'm not wrong

Unreasonable people lack what reasonable people possess: reason muscles. And yet, they are driven toward relationships the same as all of us. So, how do they make

close relationships—which involve problems—work if they lack problem-solving capabilities? An alternative is needed and that alternative is called *drama*. Drama becomes a means of relating and, for relationships to “work”, others are obligated to play their designated roles.

These certainly aren’t the only ones, but we’ll examine here three common types of dramas that unreasonable people stage.

The Master Drama

Here, the stance is: “I’ll be in charge because somebody’s got to do it.” This type of individual may be a bully on the playground or a bully in the workplace. The master has to be in control. Consequently, we describe this person using terms and phrases like:

- He’s a control freak
- He’s got to be in charge
- Everything has to be her way
- It’s his way or the highway
- He micromanages everything
- She has control issues.

The master type of unreasonable person says in effect, “My role in this drama is to be in charge; your role in this drama is to be what I need you to be and to do what I need you to do. As long as we both stay inside of our drama obligations, we’ll get along just fine. Any questions?” Relational “success”, therefore, is contingent upon drama participation.

The Martyr Drama

Webster defines *martyr*, as “great or constant sufferer.” The stance taken by the martyr is: “I’ve been hurt and you should do something about that. By the way, it will be your fault if I don’t make it.” We describe these individuals using terms like:

- guilt tripper
- victim
- help-rejecting complainer
- dependent

We’re using the word “martyr” to describe an individual who adopts a victim stance. The theme of their discussions is, “something has gone wrong or someone has done me wrong.” But here’s the thing. If we participate in the drama by rescuing, he or she becomes the rescued victim. If we refuse the rescuing obligation, he or she becomes the persecuted victim. Either way, the martyr remains firmly entrenched inside the role of victim.

Patti’s Determination of Her Mom’s Martyr Role

This was the very dilemma experienced by Patti in her relationship with her mom. The “success” of that relationship was contingent upon both of them staying slavishly chained to their drama obligations. Patti had always called her mom a drama queen, never realizing just how appropriate it was to use that term. Without question, her mom’s good guy role was that of a martyr, one who struggles in life due to the victimization of others. A victim needs a rescuer and, when the casting call went out, Patti won the part. The non-spoken yet very real message from Mom to Patti was, “I can’t make it without you and it’ll be your fault if I don’t. Just try living with that.” The other subliminal communication was, “We’ll have a good, loving relationship as long as you perform your role. If you don’t, there will be hell to pay.” Again, these words were never directly uttered, but the message was as clear as if screamed through a bullhorn. Mom’s preference for the martyr role was understandable considering that

she had been victimized by abusive alcoholics. Presumably, at various points along the developmental path, she had made choices that solidified her victim stance. As long as Patti could remember, Mom had leaned on her—a role reversal in which the daughter was required to mother the mother. So, the current situation was merely a continuation of what had always been. Little wonder, therefore, that Patti felt like she had three children. She did. The momma dramas unfolded in predictable ways. Sometimes, Mom set up situations in which Patti was required to rescue. For instance, Patti would receive a call from Mom late at night that she needed medicine from the drug store. She was “too sick” to drive and, if she didn’t have it, she’d get even sicker, which would be Patti’s fault. If Patti bit the bait and made the drugstore run, the drama worked—Mom was the rescued victim. At other times, the audacious intrusion would agitate Patti so much that she’d angrily tell Mom to drive herself to the drugstore. Again, the drama worked—Mom was now the persecuted victim. Either way, when the curtain fell, Mom could take a bow for her brilliant martyr performance. Patti always wondered if Mom knew what she was doing, if she staged dramas on purpose. I told her it was unlikely that Mom got up every morning and scripted out her performances on a yellow legal pad. It was more likely that drama had become such a deeply entrenched way of relating that she did it without thinking about it. Patti tried occasionally to “call Mom’s bluff,” explaining to her how she was a victim expecting people to rescue her. It didn’t work. If Mom was unaware of it, she would deny the accusation. And if she was aware of it, she certainly wasn’t going to admit it. Consequently, direct confrontations did no good.

The Messiah Drama

“I sacrifice to help people” is the stance taken by messiahs. We describe them using terms like:

- rescuer
- caretaker
- knight-in-shining-armor
- God’s gift to the world
- needs to be needed

Eddie Haskell from the old TV show, *Leave it to Beaver*, was this type of manipulator. Eddie was a nasty jerk. But around Mr. or Mrs. Cleaver, he quickly slipped into the messiah role, saying things like, “My, that’s a beautiful dress, Mrs. Cleaver” or “Don’t worry, Mr. Cleaver. I’ll make sure little Theodore stays out of trouble when Wally and I take him to the malt shop this afternoon.”

The messiah says in effect, “My job in this relationship is to take care of you. Your job in this relationship is to be grateful for the help I provide. Any questions?” Again, relational “success” is contingent upon drama participation. By the way, lack of gratitude is experienced by the messiah as injury or rejection at which point he or she slips into the role of persecuted victim. This guilt-tripping manipulation is designed to coerce the other back into the role of gratefulness. And it often works!

Here’s a summary of the role obligations inside the different types of drama:

TYPE	The Unreasonable Person’s Role	The Reasonable Person’s Role
MASTER	To Control	To Submit
MARTYR	To be Victimized	To Rescue (or Persecute)
MESSIAH	To Rescue	To be Grateful

But here's the things about drama participation—it takes a toll on its participants. In short, it makes us sick, drives us crazy, and wears us out. Let's look in more detail at each of these:

It Makes Us Sick

Drama participation can make us. It's revolting. It's why we'll sometimes say, "I just want to throw up" after the violating experience of getting sucked into an unreasonable person's drama. Drama participation not only makes us feel sick but can also make us be sick.

All close relationships—even those that don't involve manipulation—can be stressful. But drama-filled relationships can be particularly distressing. With reasonable people, there is a reality-based expectation that relationship problems can be reasonably worked out when the normal problem-solving rules are employed. But unreasonable people don't operate according to those rules but rely instead on drama to make relationships "work." The stress of drama participation and its effect on the immune system can lead to actual physical illnesses. Consequently, the phrase, "You make me sick" can be literally true. When drama participation makes us sick, they'll say things like,

- This makes me want to throw up
- That guy makes my skin crawl
- I need to go take a shower, or
- She gives me the creeps

It Drives Us Crazy

Drama participation drives us crazy. Dealing with unreasonable people leaves us confused, baffled, and discombobulated. The purpose of the drama is to obscure the truth by promoting a lie. And lies confuse. A person who had grown up in an abusive family dominated by an alcoholic father described the craziness she felt this way:

I never understood just how crazy my family was until I went off to college and would come back for family gatherings. They were all masters of denial and would act as though things were normal when they clearly were not. Here's an analogy to illustrate my confusion: It would be as though I was at the gathering looking at a red couch. A cousin would come up and I'd say something to him about the couch's pretty red color. He'd snicker and then say, "That couch isn't red, you idiot. It's green. Hey everybody, she thinks that couch is red," and then everyone would laugh at how stupid I was. I'd leave the gathering thinking, "Is it red or is it green? I don't know, maybe it's green like they say. Maybe I'm crazy." Being home always felt like an episode of the Twilight Zone to me.

If drama participation drives us crazy, we'll say:

- Things about him just don't add up
- I feel like I'm in the Twilight Zone
- Is it me or is it him? I don't know, maybe it's me
- I often wonder, "Who are you, anyway?"

It Wears Us Out

Finally, drama participation wears us out. Dealing with unreasonable people can be absolutely exhausting. They can suck the life out of us. They can keep us awake at night. Remember, they are fighting to safeguard a survival level need—rightness—and they accomplish this through staging dramas. It takes a lot of energy to avoid being enticed into drama participation and to handle it well when it happens. If it feels like a battle, it is. One client put it this way: "When I'm with him, I experience what happens to Superman when he's around Kryptonite. I just lose all my strength."

Another client described a phone conversation with a controlling unreasonable person. Predictably, every attempt to reason with this unreasonable person failed. After several minutes of being trapped on this exhausting treadmill, the manipulator

hung up—angrily. Two weeks later, the client was driving to work and had this realization:

I was gripping the steering wheel so hard, I was about to pull it off the shaft. Then it dawned on me. For the last 15 miles, I'd been having a conversation with that person over and over inside my head. It was the same conversation we had on the phone two weeks earlier. Only this time, I thought, "If only I'd said that" or "If he ever says that to me again, I'll say this to him", etc. I was exhausted and got no further with him in the virtual conversation that I did in the real one.

Unreasonable people can rent space in our brains and they can be very difficult to evict. They don't leave without a fight. When drama participation wears us out, we'll say things like:

- I can't ever just relax and be myself around him
- I relax so much more when she's not around
- It takes all my energy to deal with him
- I keep playing my conversations with him over and over in my head
- I often think, "Maybe she'll move."

How the Momma Drama Affected Patti

Patti always felt manipulated into becoming a rescuer for poor victimized Mom. This manipulation was a violation of her most basic boundary—her sense of self—and the violation set off alarm signals, feelings that occur when a boundary gets crossed. She felt used, confused, violated, incensed, presumed upon, taken for granted, hopeless, worn out, and guilty for feeling everything on this list. She felt angry that there was no freedom to just be herself around Mom. Patti even wondered at times just how long Mom would live and then felt terrible for thinking such awful thoughts about her own mother.

"But what happens when a person decides to stop participating in an unreasonable person's drama? There are three levels of response to drama non-participation."

Level 1: Some Get Better

Level 1 unreasonable people are weak in the five muscle areas and, left to themselves, the muscles remain unused. But an interesting thing occurs when the person being enticed refuses to participate. If the resulting tension is high enough, the Level 1 unreasonable person displays a surprising capacity to grow. The conflict resulting from drama refusal, it seems, may have a growth producing effect. For Level 1's, conflict is like a relational defibrillator, which shocks the five muscles out of dormancy and into life. He may, for instance, demonstrate surprising remorse for hurting your feelings (empathy). Or, he may later explain what a jerk he's been, promise to change, and make actual changes (awareness, responsibility, and reliability). In response to this conflict, he uses muscles which had previously seemed non-existent. The Level 1 is a jerk who possesses the underlying capability to grow past his jerkhood. When he "hits bottom," he experiences a wake-up call, which serves as a catalyst for change.

Some have concluded erroneously, "Once an unreasonable person, always an unreasonable person." Though often case, this maxim doesn't describe the Level 1. If he is unable to elicit drama participation, his frustration will elevate into the red zone and it is that discomfort that provides the intrinsic motivation to change. When drama elicitation fails, the Level 1 manipulator may grow and become a better version of himself.

Level 2: Some Get Worse

While the Level 1 unreasonable person may grow in response to drama refusal, the Level 2 becomes more determined to entice participation or will distance himself from you to avoid frustration. He digs in his heels and stiffens his resolve to win. He can't be wrong and clings to rightness as if his very survival depends upon it. He'll claim to be right regardless of all evidence to the contrary. The Level 2 unreasonable

person is a jerk who's convinced himself that you're the jerk. Sadly, conflicts have no growth producing effect on this person. If he hits bottom, he bounces and appears to learn nothing from the experience. When drama elicitation fails, the Level 2 fails to grow and becomes a worse version of himself.

Level 3: Some Get Dangerous

Everything that's true of the Level 2 is true of the Level 3 with an important addition—danger. Physical safety as well as emotional safety is at risk. The prospect of wrongness is so intolerable that he physically injures or even kills his opponent, whom he sees as the enemy. He uses any means necessary to win and feels quite justified in doing so. Examples include domestic abusers, killers who “go postal”, terrorists, gang members, mob bosses, or despotic rulers who eliminate, torture, or imprison those with opposing viewpoints. The Level 3 unreasonable person is a jerk who will hurt or kill you. If he hits bottom, he bounces, learns nothing, and comes back up to take you with him to the bottom.

It's important to note that the danger need not be only physical. Sometimes, a person may be threatened with the loss of a job or the ability to make a living—a dangerous situation indeed. Or the danger may lie in the besmirching of one's reputation. And in some situations, self-harm is the dangerous threat. Figuratively, this person points a gun at his head and says in effect, “Do what I need or I'll pull the trigger.” When drama elicitation fails, the Level 3 doesn't grow and becomes a dangerous version of himself.

Patti's Assessment of the Drama Level

Patti knew her mom wasn't a Level 3 unreasonable person, someone who would hire a hit man to knock her off if she didn't take her to the doctor's office. But she did vacillate between Level 1 and Level 2, wondering which descriptor best fit her mom. At times, there were twitches in her seemingly paralyzed reason muscles, suggesting that she was perhaps a Level 1. But more often than not, she demonstrated no ability whatsoever to tolerate personal wrongness, leading Patti time and again to the Level 2

conclusion. She really wanted her mom to be a Level 1 who had the capacity to grow in response to conflict pressure. But Mom repeatedly acted like a Level 2. That is, she reacted to conflict by clinging ever more tenaciously to her need to be right.

* * * * *

Unreasonable people are grown-ups who have underdeveloped abilities to handle relationships in mature ways. They lack the reason muscles needed to solve the inevitable problems that occur in all close relationships. Needing an alternative to problem-solving, they resort to drama in order to make relationships “work”. Drama participation affects us in three ways: it makes us sick, drives us crazy, or wears us out. In response to drama non-participation, some unreasonable people get better, some get worse, and some get dangerous.

CHAPTER TWO

Drama Avoidance

Unreasonable people relate by enticing others into the dramas they stage. That's the only way they know how to make relationships "work". The trouble is, drama participation makes us sick, drives us crazy, and wears us out. To avoid dramas, we must be sure to do several things:

Understand Your Vulnerabilities

Naïve Relational Expectations

Normally functioning people like to think that most people function normally—and many do. But unreasonable people don't. Lacking the necessary reasoning abilities to problem-solve, they relate by enticing others into their obligatory drama roles. One form of enticement is to exploit the target's naïve relational expectations. Some of these stem from culturally-imbedded maxims that work just fine with normal people but not with unreasonable people. When we fail make the distinction, we become vulnerable to the exploitation.

- "Give people the benefit of the doubt." Giving someone the benefit of the doubt is a good thing—as long as that person deserves such benefit. But a manipulator doesn't deserve it due to his proven track record of exploitation. In fact, he deserves the opposite: Don't give him the benefit of the doubt unless he's establishes a new and different track record. Giving it to him when he

doesn't deserve it opens a door through which he'll step to perform his exploitive activities.

- “Don't think badly of people.” We've all heard this statement or its positive variation: “You should think the best of people.” It's often the case that unreasonable people have stellar positives alongside glaring negatives and it's that mix of conflicting traits that makes them so difficult to understand. Staying aware of people's negatives is not synonymous with thinking badly of them and failure to keep those negatives in view can increase a person's vulnerability.
- “Treat people like you want to be treated.” The danger here is a one-size-fit-all application of the biblical Golden Rule concept. But even the Bible warns against manipulators, sometimes referred to as “fools” or “wolves in sheep's clothing”.
- “Try to find the good in everyone.” Again, unreasonable people aren't usually devoid of good qualities and if we're looking for positive aspects, they may not be that hard to find. But we must remember not to allow the positives to cancel out their important-to-stay-aware-of negatives.

Attempting to Reason With the Unreasonable

Unreasonable people can't be reasoned with because they are un-reason-able. Lacking reasoning abilities, they have neither the ability nor willingness to work through relational problems. Consequently, they resort to manipulation (drama) to make relationships “work”.

But here's the thing. Despite what we know about them, most normal people are prone to engage on the level of reason in hopes that they will—at long last—see the error of their ways and change. But this won't and can't work because they lack the very equipment needed for reasoning to succeed. Here are some common reason-based appeals often made to unreasonable people:

- “Let's sit down together and talk this out.” This fails because it requires *humility*: I could be wrong, you could be right, let's talk.

- “I’ll let him know that I see what he’s up to.” This fails because it requires *awareness*: I see where I’m wrong.
- “If I treat him well, he’ll treat me well.” This fails because it requires *responsibility*: It bothers me when I’m wrong.
- “I’ll set him straight and tell him I won’t take it anymore.” This fails because it requires *empathy*: It bothers me when I hurt you.
- “I’ll confront him and let him know he’s got to get help.” This fails because it requires *reliability*: When I’m wrong, I’ll change.

You can see why trying to reason with an unreasonable person is an exercise in futility.

Confusion

Unreasonable people operate in a cloud of confusion. We can feel confused for one of several reasons:

- There is often a disturbing discrepancy between the public image the unreasonable person portrays and who he actually is in private. Attributes, which may be positives in public, are the same ones that have such a negative effect privately. For instance, a master who has to be in charge may excel in commanding a military campaign but be a controlling jerk at home. Frustratingly, he’s lavished with praise for his accomplishments by people who think he’s wonderful. And those same people may think something’s wrong with us for not agreeing with them. How can someone be such a winner in one realm and simultaneously be such a loser in another? That’s confusing.
- We may feel confused because unreasonable people stage dramas on some occasions and not on others. And when they’re not staging dramas, they can be very pleasant to be around. For instance, a messiah may be happy and normal as long as she is receiving sufficient amounts of gratitude for her caretaking activities. So, who is she? The happy normal person or the shrew who makes us feel guilty for failing to appreciate her? That Jeckyl and Hyde split is confusing.

- He creates a smokescreen by highlighting our flaws and calling us hypocrites for criticizing him. “How dare you judge me when you’ve got your own shortcomings” is the thought. If successful, we’ll think, “Maybe I am being too hard on him. He’s right, after all, I do have problems.”
- He has mastered the art of *projection*. Unable or unwilling to tolerate personal wrongness, he projects his negatives onto us so that we become the possessor of them. He accuses us of the very things that are true of him. When we look at what’s being projected, believe that the negatives are true of us and have emotions about them, we’ll think, “Is it me or is it him? It must be me.” At that point, the lies have accomplished their confusing purpose.

Understand Your Antagonist

Coaches study game films to understand the opposing team’s strengths and weaknesses. Wise generals study the enemy’s assets and liabilities before sending troops into battle. For conflict with unreasonable person to have a good outcome, we must accurately assess what we’re up against.

But a word of caution is in order. We should form conclusions tentatively and hold conclusions loosely. I knew a lady once who read a book suggesting that all people belong to one of four personality groups. She routinely referred to individuals by category as when she would say, “Oh, well, what do you expect from Joe. He’s a _____. Brenda, on the other hand, is a _____. No wonder they clash.” Her discomfort with complexity led to errors of oversimplification, and her dogmatic pegging and labeling of people caused her to often misunderstand them. Labels can be helpful but woefully inadequate when it comes to explaining the intricacies of human behavior. That danger exists here as well.

Remember, people in react mode are at their worst. Since all of us look and sound unreasonable when reacting, we should avoid rushing to judgment. Just as we can’t legitimately critique a movie after watching one scene, we should avoid quickly categorizing someone as unreasonable unless we’ve observed a pervasive pattern of behavior over time. “Are we observing transitory manipulative behavior or is this a persistent pattern of manipulation?” is the question we should ask ourselves. Once

conclusions are formed, we should be willing to alter them should subsequent evidence suggest otherwise. Additional pattern observation in different settings can result in pleasant surprises or disappointments. Sometimes, an unreasonable turns out to be reasonable after all or the other way around. It can go either way.

When Patti Understood Her Antagonist

Most often, Patti's mom was unreasonable like Betty Davis. At other times, she was the essence of sweetness, normality, and even reasonableness, like Betty Crocker. This good/bad discrepancy was confounding to Patti and made it all the more difficult to place her mom neatly into a category. Furthermore, Patti didn't like the whole idea of sticking her mom into the unreasonable box. She desperately wished for a mom who was normal and resisted the idea that she wasn't. It was painful, therefore, to admit that her mom's unreasonableness was more than just occasional quirky behavior; it was a persistent pattern that was having a consistently destructive effect. She had tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to relate to Mom using reasonable person rules but conceded that a rule shift was now in order.

Avoid Button Pushes

Unreasonable people push our buttons hoping for a reaction. We must expect attacks and learn from our mistakes.

Expect Attacks

The unreasonable person may push our buttons in predictably obvious ways or ambush us in unpredictably subtle ways, such as:

- Exploitation of Weaknesses. Sniffing them out and attacking us there. _
- Projections. Taking his negatives and projecting them on to us.
- Presumptions. Presuming upon our good graces.
- Role Shifts. If the unreasonable person can't entice us into playing the required part, he may shift roles in hopes that, when the drama ends, he'll be back in his preferred role. Here are some different forms of role shifting:

- *If the master role is preferred.* A master needs us to submit. If we don't, he may shift into the messiah role, one rescuing a person in need. He gives us something, but the gift has "strings attached." At that point, the giver is no longer a helper but a controller, the assistance being accompanied by an obligation to submit.
- *If the martyr role is preferred.* Martyrs are either saved by messiahs or persecuted by masters, the roles we must play for the martyr role to succeed. If we don't, she may become a master and strike at us, hoping that we will strike back. If we do strike back, she can once again assume the role of a martyr who suffers at the hands of others—"I can't believe you would treat me that way."
- *If the messiah role is preferred.* A messiah is a sacrificial giver and needs us to be grateful recipients. If we aren't, she may slip into the martyr role, saying things like, "After all I've done for you, this is the kind of treatment I get. Thanks a lot." If it works, we'll allow her to resume the messiah role just to escape the guilt trip discomfort.

Learn From Your Mistakes

Pickpockets can pick our pockets because we're not expecting our pockets to get picked. Remember, unreasonable people are good at enticements, but reasonable people are not naturally good at resisting enticements and get easily caught off guard. We will make mistakes and slip-ups are probably inevitable. But it's important to learn from our mistakes and avoid repeating them. As the saying goes, "Burn me once, shame on you. Burn me twice, shame on me." Beating ourselves up about it doesn't help but safeguarding ourselves against further enticements does.

When Patti Avoided Button Pushes

Long before she came to see me, Patti had used the term "subtly manipulative" to describe her mom. To casual observers, she was always Betty Crocker, but to Patti and Bill she was frequently Betty Davis. Patti learned that she had to keep up her guard in this game of "emotional chess" between her family and Betty Davis. Mom

was quite adept at utilizing her arsenal of subtle weapons. Her daughter had a tender spot for people or even animals in need and would go out of her way to provide assistance whenever she could. Understanding this, Mom would make her own needs apparent, taking on the demeanor of a wounded pet. These attempts to capitalize on Patti's bigheartedness usually worked and, when they did, Patti felt angry and presumed upon yet one more time. Yes, her mom was manipulative, but Patti came to see that it was her responsibility to avoid manipulation. When she studied her own buttons, it became much harder for Mom to push them. Having to think this way about her mom left Patti with a bad taste in her mouth reflected in statements like, "I can't believe I have to be so guarded with my own mother. Isn't that terrible?" Actually, Patti wasn't being terrible, she was being wise and the guilt she felt for having negative feelings about her mom was unwarranted. Again, her bad feelings served a good purpose—to make her aware of boundary violations. She couldn't feel good about what her mother was doing, but she could make use of what she felt to protect her boundaries.

Respond vs. React

Unreasonable people want us to react, they take "snapshots" of our reactions, and then they use those pictures to indict us. We can help clients minimize the likelihood of reacting in two ways:

Plan Your Response

Reactions are impulsive; responses are intentional. To plan responses, we need to know what role is being required of us. If our manipulator is a master, we'll need to plan ways to avoid subservience. If the person is a messiah, we'll need to avoid the obligatory role of gratitude. If he is a martyr, we'll need to find ways to avoid being guilted into rescuing behaviors. It's usually best to refuse our roles quietly rather than confrontationally. If we say, "I know what you're up to and I'm not going to allow you to dominate me," that statement alone makes us drama participants. Better to refuse quietly, disallowing him the gratification of observing a reaction. If we don't

react, the manipulator will likely think his emotional remote control is broken and try to fix it by pushing the buttons harder. In the short term, he may become a worse version of himself if he thinks his strategy is failing. If we don't remember this, we'll find ourselves thinking, "This isn't helping; it's hurting." Actually, more vigorous button pushing on his part shows that the plan is succeeding.

Display No Reaction

This is what we need to do with unreasonable people who push our buttons, hoping desperately for a reaction that can be used against us. It's not that we won't have reactions but that we choose not to display them. We need to restrain externally what we feel internally. This idea has been expressed through phrases like, "Never let 'em see you sweat" or "The best response is no response" or "Don't feed into it." Poker players learn to wear "poker faces" for this very reason. The phrase, "Kill em with kindness" applies here because displaying kindness versus agitation disallows the drama enticement. Displaying no reaction keeps us out of the drama. And that's not being passive; it's being powerful.

When Patti Replaced Her Reactions With Responses

No one could get under Patti's skin like her mother. Whenever she did, Patti was most prone to react, either by fulfilling her rescuing role or by getting angry. Either way, the drama worked to re-establish her mom in the starring role of martyr. So, Patti had to work on both types of reactions. First, Patti had to preplan ways to resist her mom's rescuing enticements so she didn't get caught off guard in the moment.

- She rehearsed several ways to verbalize the *polite decline*. That is, she would respectfully say no whenever unreasonable requests were made.
- She stopped explaining her reasons. Previously, she felt obligated to explain why a request was being declined. The problem was that her mom always found ways to invalidate her reasons, leaving her with no excuse. Patti's explanations became more generic like, "It's not going to work for us to do that

tonight.” If Mom asked why not, Patti would say something else generic like, “Oh, a bunch of different things. I better run. We’ll talk to you later in the week.”

- She reminded herself that declining requests would make things seem worse in the short run, understanding that Mom would locate her guilt button and push it vigorously.

Patti also had to fight against unwarranted guilt. With her head, she saw the necessity of staying out of the momma drama, understanding the toll it was taking on herself, her marriage, and her kids. With her feelings, however, she felt guilty as if she was being heartlessly cruel to a person in need. She had to remind herself that rescuing Mom wasn’t helping her but only enabling her to perpetuate some long-standing dysfunctional patterns.

Second, Patti had to keep herself from the displaying externally the emotions she felt internally, the chief of which was anger. The pattern of Patti’s reactions to Mom’s rescuing enticements was this: give in, give in, give in, blow up, give in, give in, give in, blow up. But when the blowups occurred, Mom would always say something like, “I’ve never understood why you get so mad. But then, you’ve always had a really short fuse. I just wish you wouldn’t take it out on me. Is everything OK with you and Bill?” In this way, Mom had mastered the art using Patti’s anger to reinforce her victim stance—“I’m an innocent person being raged at by an angry person.” Since open displays of anger were used against her, Patti learned instead to:

- Say nothing in response to Mom’s provocations. Most often, she found that the best response was no response. When Mom attempted long and wordy guilt trips, Patti learned to say things like, “Huh huh.”
- Use a matter-of-fact delivery rather than an angry tone. Every impulse was to “let her have it” but she knew that if she did, Mom would make Patti’s anger the focus rather than addressing the issue at hand.
- Politely excuse herself from conversations. Patti often found that the longer they talked, the more likely she was to cave, to give into the enticement. Leaving the conversation wasn’t being avoidant; it was being wise.

Don't Push Buttons

Another way to resist the drama is to avoid pushing the unreasonable person's buttons. If we follow our natural inclinations and react by pushing those buttons, we stay in the drama. The idea of not pushing buttons is expressed through statements like:

- Leave well enough alone
- Let sleeping dogs lie
- Don't stir the pot
- Don't poke a hornet's nest

There are two common thoughts that occur to reasonable people arguing with unreasonable people. One is, "How can he possibly believe that nonsense? If I could just get him to understand the sensibleness of my position, we could resolve this problem." There, we're attempting to establish reason, but remember, he's not interested in reason, only in rightness. The other common thought is, "I'll teach him a lesson and make him see the error of his ways." There, we're attempting to establish justice. But he won't see those errors because he admits no wrongness. Expecting either reason or justice "pokes the hornet's nest" and keeps us caught up in the drama.

Don't Expect Reasonableness

The common temptation when arguing with an unreasonable person is to make our case more vigorously, hoping that he'll eventually get it. What we discover, however, is that no matter what we say or how well we say it, he won't get it. He'll not listen to, understand, or validate our position. If we react by arguing harder, we're right back in the drama. We lose, simply by becoming engaged in the conversational tug of war. So, remember this rule of thumb: To solve conflict problems with reasonable people, we should talk more. To solve conflict problems with unreasonable people, we should talk less and act more. They "win" by keeping us frustratingly embroiled in the verbal battle

Don't Expect Justice

Attempting to establish justice puts us into the thick of the drama. It's very tempting to say, "I'll teach him a lesson and he won't do that anymore." The problem is that unreasonable people learn no lessons because learning lessons requires the use of muscles they've allowed to atrophy. Trying to get them to admit wrongness won't work and, if we display frustration, we've become drama participants. Trying to establish justice, to force an unreasonable person to acknowledge personal wrongness against his will, has a button pushing effect and provides a way for him to keep us wrapped up in the drama.

When Patti Stopped Pushing Buttons

For a long time, Patti indulged the notion that if she could only get Mom to see what she was doing, she'd stop. Both she and Bill spent a lot of time and energy trying to get her to understand that she could, in fact, do more for herself than she was doing. "We just want you to be more independent and self-sufficient," they reasoned. But everything they said fell on deaf ears. The problem was that Mom preferred victimhood over independence so none of their logical arguments ever registered. Getting Mom to see their point about self-sufficiency was like "trying to chisel through a stainless steel wall with a plastic spoon," as Patti put it. The more they talked, the more entrenched she became, and the more frustrated Patti got. Mom would then make note of Patti's frustration, wondering aloud why her daughter was always so angry. The martyr drama was fulfilling its purpose beautifully.

Patti came to see that she and Bill were attempting the impossible—reasoning with an unreasonable person. If Mom had no reason muscles, no logical argument would ever penetrate her tightly-constructed defensive barrier. Attempts to reason resulted not in solutions but in frustration, which Mom then used against them. So, instead of relying on words, Patti and Bill devoted more energy to the setting of boundaries. Boundaries accomplished what reasoning never could.

Patti was angry at her mother for all of this and, to be honest, sometimes entertained fantasies of revenge. She felt urges to strike back, hoping Mom would feel some of the pain they felt. But were she to do so, Mom would be more gratified than

hurt, grateful for the new opportunity to play the wounded martyr. Consequently, she and Bill had to let go of the need to exact justice, knowing that Mom was unwilling or unable to learn the lessons one is supposed to learn from negative consequences.

Set Your Boundaries

With reasonable people, we solve problems by working together to reach mutually satisfying solutions. Reasoning with reasonable people works, which makes for good conflict outcomes. But that doesn't work with unreasonable because they don't have the necessary abilities. And if we attempt it, the frustration we experience puts us right back into the drama. Reasoning doesn't work but a limited substitute does—setting boundaries. Boundaries accomplish what reasoning can't. They restrain the problems in such a way that they no longer dominate the landscape of our lives.

For instance, Mr. Jones had an obnoxious neighbor with an obnoxious dog, who regularly dug up his flowers and made unwelcome deposits in his yard. All efforts to persuade the neighbor to leash his dog failed and it became clear to Mr. Jones that he was attempting the impossible—trying to reason with an unreasonable person. Finally, Mr. Jones put up a fence, which kept the canine terrorist from terrorizing his existence. In this example, no mutually agreeable resolution was reached because the neighbor's unwillingness to reason made that impossible. But Mr. Jones did find a way to keep the dog out of his yard. The problem was not actually solved but his boundary enabled it to be restrained. He improved the dog situation by putting up a fence. In this case, the solution that couldn't be achieved through reasoning was achieved through boundaries. Yes, it cost him something but it worked. With reasonable people, problems are fixed when both sides participate in the reasoning process. With unreasonable people, problems are restrained, not when both sides participate, but when the reasonable person does a good job of setting boundaries.

- Boundary Goal for Level 1 Unreasonable People:
(Growth)
- Boundary Goal for Level 2 Unreasonable People:
(Containment)

- Boundary Goal for Level 3 Unreasonable People:
(Protection)

When Patti Set Boundaries With Her Mom

As unfamiliar as it was, she started saying no, declining unreasonable requests and refusing to take the guilt trips. For instance, Patti would calmly answer appeals for late night emergency drug store runs with statements like, “Mom, it’s late and we’re not going out for that. You’ll either have to pick it up yourself tonight or in the morning.” Predictably, Mom would get upset and say something like, “Well, I’d go if I was young like you and had a body that worked. If only you had any idea of what this is like for me. But I know you need your sleep so I’ll just have to figure it out myself.” Note the projection attempt: “You’re being selfish.” In response, Patti learned to say, “OK, I better run. Talk to you later,” and then hang up the phone. Patti also learned not to give reasons for declining because Mom would always explain why those reasons weren’t valid. This wasn’t easy for Patti because she felt mean—like she was disobeying one of the Ten Commandments, “Honor your father and mother.” In fact, she wasn’t being mean, just clear. And it honored her mom more to stop enabling her bad behavior and to contain the effects of that behavior on innocent bystanders, her husband and her children.

When Patti realized just how much time and energy had been spent on the mom subject, she started limiting the length and frequency of their visits. She dealt with her anger at Alexander Graham Bell by limiting their phone calls and allowing her voice mail to take messages more often. And to handle the multiple frantic messages that Mom would often leave, Patti also became more comfortable with deleting messages. She felt bad about this at first but got used to it. She also agreed with Bill to limit the amount of time devoted to drama analysis. Lengthy rehearsals of mom’s latest audacious intrusions did no good and deprived them of energy that should have been devoted to the raising their two actual children.

Lean on Your Connections

All aspects of dealing with the unreasonable are challenging. So challenging, in fact, that we won't succeed without the support of others. They can be so confounding, so determined, and so frustrating that we'll most likely fail if we try to go it alone. The understanding and reinforcement of other reasonable people is not a luxury but a necessity. Slaves in the pre-Civil War South understood this all too well. For all practical purposes, their masters operated under this unreasonable set of assumptions: "We're good, you're bad, and you exist for us. If you submit to our control, we'll all get along just fine." Lack of submission could—and often did—lead to physical harm. Their sufferings under that system of chattel slavery were eased somewhat by singing songs which came to be known as "Spirituals." Through the lyrics, they could express thoughts and feelings to each other about their trials, their tribulations, and their hopes. Thus, the ability to endure was enhanced through mutual encouragement.

We may not be literally enslaved by unreasonable people, but the need for support is just as essential. Remember, his survival depends upon getting us to believe, "There's nothing wrong with me but there's definitely something wrong with you." Without reference points for our sanity that others provide, it's very easy to get swept up into that distortion and to become discouraged. Handling manipulators is achievable only with the support of reasonable people relationships.

- Encouragement with Level 1 Unreasonable People:
(To stay with it)
- Encouragement with Level 2 Unreasonable People:
(To stay sane)
- Encouragement with Level 3 Unreasonable People:
(To stay safe)

When Patti Leaned On Her Connections

It helped Patti to compare notes with a few trusted friends who were in similar situations. It encouraged her and made her feel less crazy to hear that others were

going through some of the same things. She also noticed just how many movies and sitcoms had story lines about people who were being driven crazy by crazy people. It was funnier on TV than it was in real life but it did help to laugh at it whenever possible.

Accept Relational Limitations

A relationship with a manipulator may require coming to terms with certain limitations:

A Relationship with Limited Depth

Our relationships with some unreasonable people may be workable only if the level of relationship is limited. It may be more superficial than we'd prefer, but superficial and civil is better than close and contentious. If drama enticements are resisted, the relationship changes. In some cases, refusing a role in the drama ends the relationship but more often, it changes the level of closeness. Relating in this way may feel disingenuous to some of us, like we're pretending to get along when we're really not. Actually, it's more honest to be superficial if relating more deeply requires drama participation.

A Relationship with Limited Value

It's not unusual to have relationships with unreasonable people with whom we experience a dilemma. On the one hand, we greatly value their gifts, talents, and abilities. On the other hand, they drive us nuts. We treasure their talents but deplore the drama. It's like having a brilliant physician with a horrible bedside manner. We can't stand him personally but wouldn't want anyone else to perform the surgery. And we may have unreasonable people relationships that are valuable to us in some ways but detrimental in others. When this is the case, we need to re-structure the relationship in order to make use of its limited value. We can't "make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," as the saying goes, but we may be able to "make a pretty good tote bag" as a friend of mine says. The relationship may not be all that we desire, but it has value to us nonetheless.

A Relationship with Limited Growth

One of the outcomes of handling unreasonable people well is that we grow whether they do or not. We become better versions of ourselves while they remain unchanged or become worse versions. The growth is limited to us. When a reasonable person has good conflict with an unreasonable person, the reasonable person grows even though the person fails to do so—unless he's a Level 1. Handling a manipulator well contributes to the growth of character and identity. It brings out our best and we become better versions of ourselves.

When Patti Accepted the Limitations of Her Mom Relationship

Patti lamented the fact that her relationship with her mother could never be deep. The price she paid for closeness was too expensive, too costly for the ones who legitimately required Patti's time and energy. It couldn't be deep but it could be doable as long as it was more superficial, that is. She couldn't make it work on all the levels because some of those levels required drama participation. But a limited relationship, she felt, was better than no relationship and her mom was willing to accept whatever level of closeness Patti was willing to allow—though that couldn't be defined openly. Patti was fortunate here because the stance of some unreasonable people is: "Relate my way or no way."

Patti hated having to limit the relationship because her mom had some truly admirable traits. She was a wonderful grandmother and the kids loved being around her. She was well read, she had a great sense of history, she could tell interesting stories, she was a talented artist, she was well-liked by others, and she could make a mean pot of chili. The ongoing challenge for Patti, therefore, was how to enjoy the good while screening out the bad. She got to where she could do this pretty well.

When Patti did all that was required to handle her mom well, she hadn't changed a bit and was exactly the same as before. But learning to deal with her mom in a

healthier way had made Patti healthier. She had grown a lot despite the fact that her mother was still a child inhabiting the body of an adult.

* * * * *

Drama participation takes a toll on its participants so the challenge for reasonable people is to find ways to avoid participation. We must plan ahead to resist drama enticements and come to terms with the limitations of our relationships with unreasonable people.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, drama participation makes us sick, drives us crazy, and wears us out. But drama non-participation has the opposite effects:

Improved Mood

When steps are taken to back out of the drama obligations, it will likely feel worse for a while but then start to feel better. If you knew there was a rattlesnake in your yard, walking into it barefooted would cause your anxiety to skyrocket. But your anxiety could go down (perhaps eventually) if you only ever walked into the yard wearing a tall pair of leather boots. The principle: healthy boundaries improve mood. The more proficient we become at using our boundaries with boundary-violating unreasonable people, the better we'll feel. Boundaries can have an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety effect.

Restored Sanity

Crazy-making unreasonable people can make us feel crazy. As we've established, manipulators distort reality in order to make relationships "work" and cajole others into participating in their distortions. Mom was Patti's crazy-maker because she was always left feeling a little crazy from the exposure. But when she learned ways to exit the dramas her mother staged, she got her sanity back.

Increased Energy

Drama participation wears us out but drama non-participation allows that lost strength to be restored. Many people don't realize just how much energy is being devoted to drama-participation until they see what's happening and decide to stop.

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Patti's story is not unusual and perhaps yours sounds like hers. Maybe your unreasonable person is a parent, a child, a neighbor, a co-worker, a boss, or a spouse. And the resulting drama trauma has left you feeling sick, crazy, and exhausted. It's my hope this brief book can give you some hope and provide you with practical ways to handle more effectively that unreasonable person in your life.