

REMOVING RESENTMENTS

By Al Turtle © Al Turtle 2003

Introduction

This paper discusses the issue of Resentment that from time to time becomes an important issue in couples or between groups of people.

It includes suggestions on how to remove the resentment. Now, I believe this cannot be done, passively, by waiting. Resentment does not seem to go away by letting time pass. I believe resentment only goes away via the use of Validation, and Dialogue.

Background Story

Some time ago I worked with a couple for over two years. They were in their upper 60s. No matter what I did, they would not try to use dialogue at home. They were nice people, and for some time I believed I was failing them as a relationship therapist. As the months went, by I worried more and more. I recall consulting a several Imago Clinical Instructors, who told me just to keep at it.

I kept the couple in dialogical space while in my office using positive triangulation and eventually developing what I call the split board technique. I reduced them to one hour per session, and reduced my charges as long as they payed ahead. I simply maintained dialogue in the office. They were both validated continually by me.

Eventually I came across a theory that explained what was happening. They had been married so long, and had done many awful things to each other during that time. The resentment that they each carried was enormous. Both were terrified of dialogue (particularly alone, without me) because it might open up the flood gates that kept all that resentment held in check – and yet unrelieved. Every subject of dialogue touched on either one or the other or both person's resentment. I checked this theory out with them. They looked relieved and said that was exactly what they thought was going on.

Resentment, a definition

After years of working with this, I have settled on a definition of Resentment that seems comfortably dialogical:

Resentment is a memory of past in-validation.

Thus, I believe that what we call “resentment” is centered around a memory of an event, a time, where the person felt invalidated – where the person needed/expected validation and was unable to obtain it. I think resentments carry with them a specific memory (sometimes deeply buried) of a focus-person, the one from whom validation was needed or expected. In this way, I think a resentment can be seen as a simple frustration.

Since the human brain is not designed to forget, I believe that resentments don't go away. If anything, I think they may accumulate and grow larger as time passes -particularly if repetitions of similar invalidations occur.

Focus vs Fault

I believe resentments, just like frustrations, have triggers – some action by someone else that evoked the feeling of frustration, or the feeling of invalidation/resentment.

One of the primary gifts of the Imago Restructuring Frustration process, I believe, is to define boundaries, and to clarify that the “triggerer,” the one who did the trigger behavior, is not the cause of the frustration. This seems a crucial learning to me. To solve the frustration, it seems best for the frustrated person to look into themselves, perhaps with the help of the person whose behavior triggered their frustration. I am convinced that the frustrated person has to take primary responsibility for their own frustration.

I think this gift of clarity, of clear boundaries, leads to growth on the part of the frustrated person and on the part of the assisting person whose action happened to trigger the frustration. In a couple I see this as a Win-Win situation.

I believe this gift of clarity also shifts people away from the completely pointless fault-finding and blaming that is so prevalent in our society. This blaming produces what I think is a typical pattern.

Example: Partner A says X.

B feels invalidated and points to, and blames, A.

A now feels invalidated and points to, and blames B.

Both withdraw from connection, in Resentment.

Summary:

Thus, the way I see it, a resentment has a focus (a “triggering/invalidating” person), but is essentially an event within the person who carries the resentment. (You can write a few examples here – just look at who is the FOCUS of your spouse’s resentment. By whom did they feel invalidated.) Please, remember I am not at all interested in “blaming” but in identifying focuses.

The Fix for Resentment

My belief is that Resentment is healed by validation – actually two validations.

I learned this years ago from Robert Bly, who was teaching a class on “broken connections” and on shame. He pointed out that when a father rejects his child, it is as if a bridge of soul-connection between the two has been broken – and at the father’s end. The only one who could fix this breakage, Bly said, was the father (at least till after the kid reaches the age of 21). To repair the collapsed bridge, two things have to happen. 1) The father must acknowledge that he did the thing that broke the bridge. That he was there. He did the invalidating, trigger behavior. (“I told you to shut up and go away, son. I see that hurt you a lot and that makes lots of sense to me, now.” 2) Then the father must acknowledge what happened to his son in the time between the collapse of that connecting bridge and the present. (“I see that we haven’t talked about this for years and we’ve kind of been strangers over this. I sorry for how this must have hurt you over the years. I gather its been pretty bad for you.”

Work with the Original or a "reasonable facsimile".

In many cases, the actual father is not available or willing to acknowledge and validate. In this case an intimate partner, an Imago match, often becomes the focus of resentment for all un-validated, unacknowledged rejections or resentments which occurred during childhood.

Imago tools can help, and can resolve these otherwise unanswerable wounds. These tools, particularly the Restructuring Frustration process, give structure for the validation necessary to heal the old resentments, over time and with consistent repetition. It is vitally important that the partner expressing resentment in the present, seek within themselves and acknowledge the roots of resentments which are triggered in the present day but began with yet-to-be-healed invalidation experienced in childhood.

Summary of the Process of Removing Resentment

The person who is the focus of “my” resentment can get rid of “my” resentment by

- a) validating “my” original invalidating memory, and
- b) validating “my” experiences that resulted from that original experience.

The clue seems to be a lot of validation. I think this is very much like doing Restructuring Frustrations on past events.

Pro-active Suggestions to the Focus person

1. Lead the way by becoming an expert at validating.
2. Lead the way by validating any resentment anywhere in the relationship. Invite, invite, invite. Validated, validated, validate. Be successful.
3. Lead the way in learning and acting in congruence with Biological Dream. This stuff is pretty objective and I believe can be taught and measured pretty directly. In this instance, Resentment is a threat to Diversity, probably a threat to Reliable Membership and thus a threat to Safety. Validation is an act of assurance to Diversity, Membership and thus a move toward Safety.

4. Lead. I believe passivity is absolutely the wrong way to go.

A Challenge – Maintaining Self-Responsibility

One difficulty is, I believe, is in perceiving Validation as admission of responsibility. In working with Resentment, just as working with Frustration, the possibility of misplacing responsibility is very high. This is particularly true when people do not understand the difference between Dialogical and a Master/Slave relating.

In Dialogical Relationships both parties carry some responsibility for the situation and the two have to clarify what those responsibilities are. In a Master/Slave relationship there is always an attempt to hold one person responsible and hold the other un-responsible or blameless. Staying Dialogical leads to discussion over who is responsible for what.

In a frustration, clarity of boundaries divides along the line between the trigger behavior and the frustration reaction. One person is responsible for doing the trigger behavior, and the other is responsible for their reaction to their partner's trigger. Both are responsible to help in building a safe and loving relationship.

With a resentment, clarity divides along the line between the "invalidating behavior" and the resentment. One person is responsible for the "invalidating behavior," and the other is responsible for their resentment. Both are responsible for helping to rebuild and maintain a safe and loving relationship.

By contrast in a Master/Slave relationship, people tend to focus on the "the truth," forced agreement, and on "blaming". While very familiar to us all, and very useful on the battlefield of war, Master/Slave does not seem to be of value to me in an intimate relationship.

Pro-active Suggestions to the Resenting person

Make appointments to improve your relationship with your partner by working together to heal resentments. Bring your resentment to the meeting not to blame. Use your partner's help to discover more about why this issue bothered you so much, to discover why you have held back resolving it for so long, to give your partner practice at validation, and to improve the connection and quality of your relationship.

A Start at a Procedure for Restructuring Resentment (adapted from Restructuring Frustration process)

1. Make an appointment to work on a resentment.
2. State resentment in 1 or 2 sentences, mirror.
3. State what you remember of the original situation. Mirror.
4. State what you remember was the trigger. Mirror
5. State what you remember of your feelings at the time. Mirror
6. State what you remember of your reactive behavior at the time. Mirror.
7. State what you remember of your hurt at the time. Mirror.
8. State how you felt invalidated at the time. Mirror.
9. State what you remember of your fear at the time. Mirror.
10. State how this situation reminds you of past experiences, particularly in childhood. Mirror.
11. Now the listener should validate, and empathize thoroughly. "Did I get this? Is there more?"
12. State what you believe has happened to your life as a result of this situation. Mirror.
13. Now the listener should validate, and empathize.
14. (Optional.) Develop a Behavior Change Request.