

## IN MEMORY OF CHARLIE, DUNCAN AND DONUT



### If a Dog Were Your Teacher

When loved ones come home, always run to greet them.  
 Allow the experience of fresh air and the wind in your face to be pure ecstasy.  
 When it's in your best interest, practice obedience.  
 Let others know when they've invaded your territory.  
 Take naps and stretch before rising.  
 Run, romp, and play daily.  
 Thrive on attention and let people touch you.  
 Avoid biting when a simple growl will do.  
 On warm days, stop and lie on your back in the grass.  
 On hot days, drink lots of water and lie under a shady tree  
 When you're happy, dance around and wag your entire body.  
 No matter how often you're scolded, don't buy into the guilt thing and pout....run right back and make friends.  
 Delight in the simple joy of a long walk.  
 Eat with gusto and enthusiasm. Stop when you have had enough.  
 Be loyal.  
 Never pretend to be something you're not.  
 If what you want lies buried, dig until you find it.  
 And MOST of all,  
 When someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by and nuzzle them gently.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DISSENT: A MEDITATION ON THE DANGERS OF DANGER

*Sandra L. Bloom, M.D.*

Liberty and the right to protest. Civil rights and freedom of speech. The right to dissent is a fundamental requirement of democracy. Our willingness to express a differing opinion appears to be inextricably bound up with our most cherished values. But why is this so? When dissent is suppressed we focus on this suppression as a violation of rights as it certainly is. But why is dissent so important to the functioning of any group, from one as small as a family to one as large as a nation? And why do we willingly silence dissent, even when we so cherish the right to free expression?

The key to understanding the conflict between freedom of expression and the silencing of dissent can be found in an analysis of the role of stress – particularly extreme stress – in individual and group life. For groups, as for individuals, a little stress is good for us. Stress stimulates growth, development and innovation. But too much stress – including stress that lasts too long – is toxic. Overwhelming stress in individuals leads to physical, emotional, and social adjustment problems that have become well documented. Although there is an extensive body of information about the effects of stress on individuals, less study has been devoted to the impact of stress on groups. Families, workplaces, organizations, and even countries are more than the sum of the individuals involved, and systems such as these respond to severe stress in certain characteristic ways that may serve short term survival of the group but which can have long-term negative consequences for the well-being and healthy functioning of the organization and of all the individuals that comprise the group.

What causes organizational stress? Anything that compromises safety and security for the system. Organizational safety has at least four components: physical safety – which extends to include financial security; psychological safety – the safety of individual expression within the organization and organizational “self-esteem; social safety – the safety of group functioning; and moral safety – the organizational ethics and integrity in pursuing its mission. Like individuals, organizations must manage emotional expression since too much emotion in any environment can create confusion and an interference with function while too little emotion can become demoralizing and can stifle creativity. Within organizations it is the decision-making, problem solving and conflict resolution

methods that help a system routinely manage emotions that can become destructive if not properly channeled but which can greatly assist organizational functioning when they are directed to constructive purpose and the achievement of organizational goals. Organizations experience losses – of leaders, of funding, of work partners, of members – and must grieve for those losses. And if they are to be successful, all organizations must develop a vision that propels them into an imagined future. This vision is usually embodied within the organizational mission and goals. Groups may also experience conditions of extreme stress. The events of September 11, 2001 produced extreme stress in the United States captured in the frequently spoken expression, “America will never be the same again”. Families experience the death of members, domestic violence, divorce, job loss, house fires and other traumatic events. All of these are examples of situations of extreme stress that may have large and often unrecognized impacts on organizational as well as individual function.

When confronted with extreme stress, individual function changes rapidly in order to accommodate to the situation with responses that are more likely to promote survival. The fight-flight characteristics of the human stress response prepare us to survive under emergency conditions that are the exception to the rules of normal functioning. We enter a state of high arousal and hypervigilance with attention directed at whatever is the source of the danger. Complex – but time consuming thought patterns are replaced by a more rapid form of information processing characterized by the reduction of multiple options to only dichotomized either-or choices. Emotional expression may be sealed off, a condition commonly called “shock” which is the acute form of dissociation, because emotional arousal can so easily interfere with cognitive functioning and an action response. Attention is directed at the source of the threat and other environmental information is ignored as extraneous and irrelevant to the immediate danger. An urgent need to take action compels us to fight or to flee. Aggression increases dramatically and therefore violent action is far more likely while impulse control plummets since it interferes with rapid response.

But the human stress response is not a totally individual response. Human beings are social animals and responding to danger

# LOOKING AHEAD

JUNE 25-26, 2004

PHILADELPHIA

"Finding New Directions for Responding to Intimate Violence" Sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, the Mayor's Task Force on Family Violence and ISF.

OCTOBER 8, 2004

PHILADELPHIA

"Men and Domestic Violence" Sponsored by The Philadelphia VA Medical Center Department of Medical Center Education

OCTOBER 13, 2004

PHILADELPHIA

ISF's 5th Annual "Health Cares About Domestic Violence Day"

OCTOBER 21-23, 2004

BOSTON

"National Conference on Health Care and Domestic Violence: Health Consequences Over the Lifespan" Sponsored by the Family Violence Prevention Fund

DEC. 8, 2004

PHILADELPHIA

"Family Safety and Child Abuse Prevention: A Pediatric Health Care Response to Intimate Partner Violence" - The Anne E. Dyson Symposium Sponsored by CPAP and ISF's Pediatric RADAR Clinical Network at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

with a unified group response accounts for much of our ability to survive as a species. When we are under threat, we experience an increased attachment behavior directed at those individuals and groups to which we have already formed an attachment. Threatened families tend to pull together under stress as do threatened workgroups and threatened nations. Group cohesion and unified action is achieved through a series of steps that is part of the human stress response. In stressed groups, a leader is likely to arise and in an emergency we are likely to follow the leader who most convincingly asserts superior knowledge about how to survive the emergency. Human beings love to engage in conflict – a movie, a book, a television show, or a play without conflict are recognized as boring – but under stress, group conflict is dangerous because it interferes with the rapid mobilization of a coherent group response. As a result human groups tend to strongly silence dissent and externalize the conflict by projecting the conflict onto an external enemy and the more strongly the convincing leader urges a group to resolve its conflicts by these methods, the more strongly the group becomes bonded to the leader. Since the increased group aggression must be projected outward, overt violence against the perceived enemy is more likely to occur.

As long as the danger to the individuals and the group can be removed through these methods, the results can enhance group survival. However, two conditions interfere and may even sabotage these efforts so that they become ineffectual and even disastrous: when the complexity of the threat requires a more complex response than the individual or group can summon under the impact of stress; or when the threat itself become chronic and repetitive.

When danger becomes chronic or repetitive, the biology of individual changes and the effects of these individual changes, compounded by escalating group responses turns an evolutionary survival mechanism into an evolutionary time bomb. Chronic exposure to danger creates chronic hyperarousal in overly stressed individuals. In this state, people respond to even minor threats as if they were major threats and are likely to react accordingly. Extremist thinking becomes chronic leading to further difficulties with problem-solving and flawed decision-making. The tendency to act – and act violently – escalates dramatically. The numbing of emotions simultaneously reduces concerns about one's own well-being and reduces the capacity for empathy with others. Other vital, but apparently less immediately stressful concerns, are ignored as attention to threat becomes chronic. The employment of aggressive responses becomes chronic leading to a state of chronic conflict and the need to seek out perpetual enemies. As the need to justify previous actions and defend faulty judgments expands, explanations become increasingly bizarre. The leaders who have made these faulty judgments become both bullying and deceptive, needing to lie not only to their constituents but to themselves. Dissent must be suppressed using ever more coercive and forceful means because surfacing the previous and present conflicts now is seen by flawed leaders as more dangerous and destabilizing than ever before. In this way, individuals and groups under stress can become incapable of comprehending or dealing with situations of great complexity.

Complex problems require complex solutions and complex solutions are never the product of a single mind. Complex solutions require the participants in any problem-solving venture to start from some basic shared assumptions about where they need to go

and the means by which they are going to get there. For complex solutions to emerge in any situation, there must be sufficient safety for the individuals within a group to voice divergent opinions and challenge the existing status quo. Individuals and groups must grieve for whatever has been lost in the struggle for survival and be willing to recognize their present resistance to change. There must be sufficient calm and mutual respect for human cognitive function to work at peak efficiency and sophistication – conditions impossible under the impact of chronic stress. To reduce the externalization of aggression, group conflicts must be withdrawn from the enemy and reabsorbed by the group. To counteract the effects of stress a leader must seek out and welcome dissent and guide a group toward the integration of multiple points of view. The dissenting voice in any group contains the necessary seeds for the solutions of complex problems because the dissenters contain in embryonic form, ideas that are new or previously discarded by the group faced with a problem that will not budge. Without recognizing the dissenting voice, a group is quite likely to follow a leader, like lemmings, over a cliff.

For all these reasons, democracy is a necessity, not a luxury. Democracy is the best method yet that human beings have evolved for managing complex problems with a minimum of violence. The more democratic principles are compromised, the greater the likelihood of poor decisions, faulty judgments, escalating levels of conflict, and ultimately violence. Dissent – and the engagement in creative conflict – is the cornerstone of democratic processes and in an ever more complex world, silencing the dissenting voice imperils human survival.