

Depression: The Effect on Relationships

The February lecture in the Aware 2007 Monthly Lecture Series was delivered by Reverend Dr. Tony Byrne, CSSP and Sr. Kathleen Maguire, Co-Minister, Presentation Order. The topic was *Depression: The Effect on Relationships*. The following notes were taken at the lecture by Rena Harford.

Both Rev. Dr. Byrne and Sr. Kathleen have spent a lot of time working overseas with communities: Rev. Dr. Byrne spent 35 years in Africa, where he remarked 'they don't distinguish between spending time and wasting time'. Sr. Kathleen worked in Pakistan for 26 years.

Conflict

If conflict exists in a particular situation or relationship, and if it is handled badly there is potential for depression to arise. Rev. Dr. Byrne had his own personal experience of this when he experienced physical symptoms including sleeplessness some years ago, following a situation where he was exposed to bullying.

On the other hand, when conflict is handled properly, it can actually help us grow as people. It can lead to self discovery, which is a wonderful thing, allowing us as it does to repair our dignity and our self worth. To be alive is to experience some element of conflict: with so many individuals working together or living together it is normal that sometimes interests of both parties will be incompatible and this can lead to aggression and a hostile attitude. Conflict in itself is neither good or bad.

Handling Conflict: Therein Lies the Problem

Professor Paulo Freire was a renowned Brazilian education theorist who wrote the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1968. Freire believed that conflict can destroy you totally if you do not know how to handle it.

For some people when conflict arises, the reaction is to see the problem as much bigger or worse than it actually is – the problem is blown out of proportion. One unhappily married woman experiencing conflict in her marriage remarked, "I'm so unlucky, if they raffled this fellow, I'd win the prize". This stage involves a sense of panic, which in turn leads to a psychologically dangerous phase where the individual cannot express their feelings, and everything festers. It means the person feels unsafe, and this of course leads to a unique type of loneliness. Once this happens, it is all too easy for the ultimate outcome which is to run away. In cases of marriage, this means separation or divorce.

This problem is becoming very serious in Ireland. Sr. Kathleen said her research shows that one in four families suffer from serious bullying and the resulting distress. Over seven years, there has been a 343% increase in applications to Court for separation and divorce.

Reaction and Response

In conflict situations we often react defensively and this can involve shouting back. This does no good at all and in many cases can cause the situation to deteriorate further and the conflict to worsen. One of the key ways of dealing with conflict is to realise that there is a latent problem and a manifest problem. The latent problem is the underlying one,

while the manifest problem is the one that we see. For instance if conflict develops because one person in the house has left the top off the toothpaste, it is important to realise that any resulting tension will most often be a sign of something which has gone wrong on a much deeper level. So it is vital to try to discover what the latent problem is and to deal effectively with that.

It is vital to listen to the other person's point of view: to not do so, is to invalidate them and their opinion. If we put someone down and don't allow them their voice, this can destroy not only the relationship, but the individual as well. It is also important to acknowledge the other person's feelings e.g. "I know now that I hurt you".

Often the easiest responses to conflict can seem to be withdrawal or avoidance. However, this is never the right solution to a conflict situation. If you try to sweep the problem under the proverbial carpet, there can be serious psychological consequences.