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INTRODUCTION TO THIS ISSUE

Self-Mothering Versus Self-Indulgence: Healthy Versus Pathologic Self-Care

Although common in daily usage, self-indulgence is rarely mentioned in the literature of psychotherapy, and the concept of self-mothering is generally still almost unknown. The basic meaning of both concepts can be easily deduced, but beyond that we intend now to examine their clinical value and their place in the psychotherapeutic treatment of patients.

Most clinicians agree theoretically that appropriate self-care is a healthy adult objective, while regressive gratification is a sign of emotional immaturity. Confusion abounds, however, when such theoretical agreement is translated into actual recommendations about the procedures and steps needed to help patients learn to care for themselves well. It is very difficult to wean growing children from being self-indulgent, and the task with patients is much harder yet. We intend here to lessen the lack of clarity on these issues and thus to help clinicians do this aspect of their work better.

In our permissive societies proper and desirable self-mothering is often confused with harmful self-indulgence. So much is given, promised and available to so many of us in our affluence that there is too little understanding of every person's need to still care for him- or herself. People now expect quick and easy solutions to every problem, and many have become accustomed to seeking comfort and solace in any form, as long as only little time and effort are required. This is why alcoholism and drugs are a serious national problem, and why shoplifting is so common among kids. Taking aspirin is a ubiquitous solution to a headache, even if the pain is due to fatigue, thirst, a missed meal, or anxious tension. The frustration tolerance of many youngsters is much too low for the same reason; they shoot and kill each other for minor slights, or for no reason at all. The gun is king when reason is not.

In the absence of sensible self-mothering young and old satisfy themselves with the help of pathologic self-indulgence. Few among us sleep, eat, read, relax, work and play enough, but not too much. What is behind the push to do things that we ourselves recognize as bad for us? Anxiety? Habit? A willful refusal to stop?

Much ignorance and confusion exist about the meaning of healthy self-care and self-concern. "Self-praise" and "self-satisfaction" often carry with them negative connotations, while being "self-less" is considered a good thing. Contradictions are common and they interfere with good child-rearing no less than they do with the work of the psychotherapist.

Discussions that follow thus are of the greatest importance in childrearing, but our emphasis is on clinical relevance. Learning to successfully battle self-indulgence requires that we become competent in self-mothering as therapists, friends and citizens. Our success or failure in these has a powerful impact, one way or the other, on virtually every aspect of our personal and professional lives. The topic of this issue would therefore be of interest to thoughtful parents and citizens also, but for psychotherapists it has an even greater significance. In a real sense it determines whether our efforts are crowned with success. Patients often improve in psychotherapy but they only get well if they win not only the narcissistic battles against self-indulgence but also become competent in mothering themselves lovingly without guilt or shame.

The Editors

SELF-MOTHERING VERSUS SELF-INDULGENCE: HEALTHY VERSUS PATHOLOGIC SELF-CARE

Reuven Bar-Levav, M.D.

Self-mothering and self-indulgence are opposites that have much in common: both concepts are of central importance in the raising of children and in psychotherapy, and yet neither is as yet well-known. Poorly understood and inadequately described, both are hardly ever even mentioned in the psychiatric literature. Self-mothering is a relatively new concept introduced by this author (Bar-Levav, 1988) and no other references to it were found, except for Blanck's discussion of "self-soothing" as an interim goal in the management of anxiety (Blanck, 1979). Wiggins (1990) discusses self-indulgence as a problem that society must recognize so that it would not become "the helpless victim of alcohol and narcotics." Walters and White (1988) see self-indulgence as one of four characteristics responsible for criminality, while Grieger (1986) relates it to dysfunctional relationships. This author has previously defined self-indulgence as consisting of acts "that provide regressive gratification in an area already freed from fear" (Bar-Levav, 1988). When moralists speak of self-indulgence they condemn it, while "progressive" educators sometimes come to its defense.

What is self-mothering? Simply, it is the same as good mothering, except that all the needed supplies and services are provided to the person by the self. The well-mothered baby has all its physical and emotional needs satisfied at about the right time and in the proper dosages by a loving, supportive, responsible and consistent outside caretaker. The result is an inner sense of safety and well-being which lasts throughout life, provided however that the same supplies continue to be available on a regular and steady basis as time goes on. But since maturation is impossible without separation from mother, someone else must become the reliable supplier of these essential needs. To become emotionally self-sufficient we ourselves must learn to be that supplier, and self-mothering is thus the basic ability which makes individuation possible.

Most people do not acquire enough of the skills of self-mothering, and they attach themselves instead to another person when they grow up. They hope and magically even expect a spouse or someone else to take mother's place as the source of solace and of other needs. Since both marriage partners often have these same expectations, many marriages fail. Normally, even very loving spouses tire sooner or later of one-sided giving.

Not only babies but adults too need for their physical well-being regular well-balanced meals, rest, recreation and emotional support. But many people clearly fail to take good care even of their basic needs, and stocking up on emotional supplies is much more difficult. To do so we need clear and flexible personal boundaries that demarcate our identity, emotional ties and roots to sustain our sense of belonging, and privacy as well as enough anxiety-free time to attend to ourselves thoughtfully.

But nowadays, both actually and metaphorically, too few people sit down at a table to dine in the company of others even once in awhile, and instead it is common to take meals on the run. Most people eat, sleep, work and play too much or too little. Our busy hustle and bustle lives, TV and the personal computer are constant distractions that make it too easy to forget our real needs. Generally, people take more time to exercise their bodies than they do to replenish needed emotional supplies.

In an effort to vanquish narcissism among the young, most civilizations have always emphasized the importance of humility. No one wants his children to become braggarts. Self-praise was thus condemned, even as children were taught to praise the desirable traits of others. The Judeo-Christian tradition has underscored the importance of respecting and loving others, but not the self. Yet the commandment to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" is meaningless before one learns to love oneself.

Even so, we still look upon self-love with suspicion and do not teach our youngsters to attend to themselves with appropriate self-concern, nor do we encourage them to take pride in their realistic achievements. Hence the enormous and widespread hunger to be seen, recognized and praised by others, and the almost universal wish to be caught in the spotlight for even a passing moment. This is why people wish to become VIP's, and why they do grossly bizarre things for a little attention. Anything to be lifted out of the gray anonymity that envelops those who have not learned to observe, to see and to love themselves.

Loneliness is especially oppressive for people who are poor in self-mothering. Disappointment commonly results when practically everything must be gotten from the outside, and people then typically protect themselves by allowing no one to come close, even as they also refuse to leave their isolated shells to make contact. They are hopelessly caught in this double trap from which there often is no escape.

Adults who have not been adequately mothered by others do not usually mother themselves well even later on because:

1. Resignation or hopelessness is often built into the core of such people's personality. Expecting nothing but disappointment, those who are resigned never reach out to supply their physical and emotional needs. The possibility of being well-satisfied and lovingly cared for is unknown to them. They fill themselves instead with self-destructive indulgences such as over-working, over-eating, alcohol or drugs. Hopeless people know at least that hope exists, though they lack it. Since they were not mothered well they expect even less from others, and they have neither a wish nor the strength to do so for themselves.
2. Such people also do not know how to mother themselves, since they have not experienced it enough. They commonly neglect their realistic needs for food, for rest, and for human companionship. The triggering mechanisms that cause others to be alerted to their unsatisfied real needs are stunted or underdeveloped. Thus, they provide for themselves poorly.

Sensible and appropriate self-care, self-recognition and self-praise, tempered by moderation and by good taste, are scarce and urgently needed in our society. To make up for this deficiency kids stare into TV cameras and scream that they and their team are number one. This is the closest our advertising culture comes to promoting self-mothering. Very few people dare to describe themselves seriously as a valuable human being.

Self-indulgence is common in the absence of self-mothering. Without balanced and regular meals people have no choice but to satisfy their hunger by eating popcorn and candy all day long. When this normal hunger for mothering is expressed pathologically it often involves orality. Alcoholism and over-eating, smoking and endless chewing of gum are all common. But such people typically live the life of "noshers" in a myriad of other ways also. To make up for what they really lack and need, many such people tend to always grab, demand and expect "more" from everyone. Not feeding themselves properly, they nonetheless remain emotionally always hungry.

Self-indulgence is ours by nature. Since we all slip into it after infancy. At the beginning of life there is no moderation or judgment, and everyone wants whatever they want when they want it, immediately and without delay. Without enough fathering these traits continue to govern at least some behavior throughout life. But with sufficient good fathering children eventually learn to tolerate the discomforts of not always getting their way, though not before many crises, struggles and disappointments have been overcome.

The threshold of tolerance for discomfort and for disappointments is raised to proper levels when success is achieved. This makes planning ahead and the pursuit of important but distant goals possible, and it enables the person to have stable human relationships. Such living provides the means and the conditions for rational and satisfying self-care. It also reduces the anxiety that springs from the constant search for someone outside ourselves to mother us.

Self-indulgence is related not only to the absence of good mothering and fathering, but it sometimes results from the presence of harsh fathering. Adults raised this way have no model to help them develop self-respect and self-love, even if obedience out of fear is achieved. Such people tend to be harsh with themselves and with others, and they often mortify their flesh and their soul by driving themselves mercilessly till they burn out. To compensate they go on binges of self-indulgent living which endangers the internal dam. Even self-starvation fits in with this scenario.

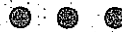
The development of self-mothering thus requires both good mothering and good fathering. Good mothering supplies the physical and emotional needs of the child, while good fathering directs the struggle against the natural tendency to seek instant gratification. Neither function is gender related. Most early mothering and fathering is done by mothers since they are the ones who are usually responsible for most of the baby's care. With good early mothering the baby:

1. Learns physiologically that it can count on a steady and consistent supply of its real needs, which protects it from the need to hoard piggishly. Enough is usually quite enough.
2. Such babies also "learn" that disappointment and frustration are compatible with life.

Both these lessons must be incorporated for the eventual process of separation-individuation to be completed. Children and adults with such inner "knowledge" are less dependent on approval from others, and they have less of a need to always please in order to get what they need from the outside.

Individuated people are self-contained, and they do not usually even wish to indulge themselves. Like a competent vessel, they too can hold their emotional supplies for relatively long periods of time, which lessens their need for frequent refueling. Besides, self-indulgence always exacts a price in dignity and in self-respect, qualities which such people are eager not to lose.

Self-mothering feeds the adult needs of the person while self-indulgence is an attempt to satisfy the inner infant's pre-verbal hunger, which is in fact unsatisfiable. This is why self-mothering fills, and no amount of self-indulgence is ever enough. Self-mothered individuals are typically satisfied with their lot and willing to share of their riches with others, while self-indulgent people tend to remain emotionally in turmoil no matter what their real achievements (Bar-Levav, 1994).



One goal of effective psychotherapy is to convert patients from the pathological mode of self-indulgence to the healthy way of self-care defined as self-mothering. In the process, chronic depression is lifted, hopelessness and helplessness are essentially eliminated and core anxiety is lowered at least to the point where it no longer produces symptoms.

The intensive work involved is based on eight principles described elsewhere (Bar-Levav, 1988) that aim to basically alter physiologic responses. Interpretations or explanations to the intellect are not relevant to this process. Since self-indulgence is a defense against anxiety, it is not given up without repeated struggles within the therapeutic setting in a process that in many ways replicates the healthy maturation of children. Emotional dependency and the Real-relationship keep the patient from bolting even when massive anxiety, hurt and anger are mobilized (Bar-Levav, 1988). These are expected and common by-products whenever self-indulgence is confronted and challenged.

Narcissistic "injuries" are unavoidable, and patients must physiologically come to realize that they are in fact not real injuries at all. Those who first coined the term could not have foreseen the current developments in psychotherapy that go beyond "character analysis." With the patient's self-observant capacity and a strict non acting-out contract well in place, powerful storms of intense affect are welcomed, encouraged and given open expression. This is the essence of work-

ing-through that alters physiologic pathways and habits. The increasingly powerful observing ego of the patient joins the therapist in repeatedly repulsing the push to inappropriately gratify the self with self-indulgences, even under the pressure of such forceful stimuli.

To survive, everyone needs satisfaction of their basic needs. When good nourishment is scarce, surviving organisms always find pathologic ways to feed themselves. This is true among plants as it also is in the animal kingdom, of which we are part. Most people marvel at the rich and amazing variety of adaptations found in nature, but they usually overlook the fact that many of these result in stunted growth. This is what we try to change in the lives of the patients who seek our help.

But plants, animals and people are alike in their stubborn refusal to give up that which helped them survive, even when better options become available. The worm that lives inside the horseradish will not switch over to make its home inside the sweeter carrot. The same for humans. The compulsion to repeat our pathologic ways is rooted in unconscious fear that the new alternatives may not be life-sustaining. This fear must be physiologically overcome before any real changes become possible. "The push away from fear and dread supersedes everything" (Bar-Levav, 1988).

Self-indulgence is thus defined as the insistence on following tested, pathologic adaptations even after enough of the relevant fear has been eliminated. It indeed requires much courage to venture for the first time into deep water over our head, which is why people normally claim the continued presence of fear to avoid taking such risks, even when it is no longer present. This is the self-indulgence that must be replaced by self-mothering. Otherwise we are condemned to never swim but to always wade at the edge of the pool.

To succeed in this task therapists must therefore be able and willing to not only serve in the mothering mode but also to "father" their patients (Bar-Levav, 1988). This need is not yet widely recognized. But self-indulgence is not given up without it. Upon close examination many failures of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis will prove to have occurred on this basis.

More specifically, appropriate self-praise which may have previously been defined as arrogance must become legitimate, and its use encouraged by patient mothering. But chronic lateness or self-medication to lessen anxiety must be confronted by firm fathering. The patient's needs for rest, recreation and human companionship, as well as the necessity to make a decent living, must all be stimulated if they have been stunted. But these same things must also be curbed and limited by fathering interventions if they are being pursued self-indulgently and in excess. This is an intrusive, active and on-going process since none of these changes occur spontaneously.

The inability to self-mother is a very common disability, as is evident wherever we look. Many millions of people have never learned to care for themselves in a

healthy way, and they experience guilt or even shame when they mother themselves lovingly. This is why self-indulgence and the lack of self-restraint are so widespread.

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Reuven Bar-Levav, M.D., is a psychotherapist, teacher and author of *Thinking in the Shadow of Feelings*, Simon and Schuster, 1988 and of over two hundred other articles. He is also the father of Crisis Mobilization Therapy, the founder of the Michigan Group Psychotherapy Society, and a contributing editor of *VOICES*.