

There I Go Again: Understanding Repetitive Behavior Patterns

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“There I go again! Why am I always doing things like that?”

We all have repetitive behavior patterns, our own little ways of doing things, special interests, ways of looking at the world, ways of making relationships and habits of daily life. Some of these provide comfort and pleasure, others are recognized as our ‘style,’ some are habits that annoy our friends and family, and others become extremely problematic in our work and in our relationships with others. She’s always late. He ignores his appearance. She’s a hopeless optimist. He’s got no business sense. She always does it at the last minute. He’s always got an excuse. She always dates losers. He can’t hold a job for more than three months.

We can describe such behaviors from different theoretical points of view. Speaking from the perspective of ‘behaviorism’ we can see how repetitive behavior patterns have been ‘conditioned’ or in some way have drawn a ‘reinforcing response’ from the environment. A misbehaving child often misbehaves not because he likes to be bad but because he gets some needed attention with each bit of mischief. The attention he receives reinforces the behavior. It motivates him to do it again.

Speaking from the perspective of ‘cognitive psychology’ some repetitive behavior patterns may be learned through imitation “My father had a short temper, so I have a short temper.” Or they may be based on false or twisted ideas about one’s self or the world. “I’m bad. I don’t deserve to be treated well.”

From the perspective of the ‘depth psychologies’ repetitive behavior patterns are driven by unconscious ‘complexes’ (Carl Gustav Jung), ‘guiding fictions’ (Alfred Adler) or the ‘repetition compulsion’ (Sigmund Freud). The repetition compulsion is the tendency people have to unconsciously place themselves in situations, that are often unpleasant and that, in a sense, are repetitions of traumatic or conflict-ridden experiences from early childhood, even though the person feels their contemporary problems are entirely determined by the current circumstances. This is how early childhood experiences and relationships to parents and siblings exert an influence on our personality and our adult relationships throughout the rest of our lives.

If a person feels like an outsider, is it because others pushed her out? Or is it that she sees to it that she is rejected and, in fact, finds comfort in veering toward the margin? How does she handle acceptance? And whom does she push out when she assumes power herself?

I once knew a man who meekly approached and asked me if I was mad at him. I said "No, not at all." He thanked me for the reassurance, explained that he was feeling a little

paranoid and went off into another room. A little later he approached again and asked if he had done something to get me angry. I reminded him of our earlier conversation and reassured him, once again, that I was in no way angry with him. Again he thanked me and went on with his business. A little later he came back and asked if I was feeling bothered by him because he certainly wouldn't want to bother me. Again I said "No." and reassured him that there was no problem whatsoever. He went off on his own and left me to continue with my tasks. A little later he came back and asked if I was feeling annoyed with him. This time, I had to admit that, yes, I was a little annoyed. Finally he'd received the confirmation he needed to account for his paranoid feeling. He had cast me into the role of the perpetrator but when I wouldn't play the role, he fed me my lines, so to speak. He set the stage until I complied with this piece of theater – his piece of theater.

Some children who have a history of repeated beatings find some sort of confirmation in the act and seek out opportunities to elicit such responses from others. They will assume the position of the beaten and insist on it until they can coerce it out of the potential beater. It is not that they 'want' to be beaten as much as they seek it out or create the conditions for it to happen in order to confirm a certain unconscious view of themselves.

A woman molested and beaten as a child may seduce men to repeat the scenario with her. She may find men with a corresponding script or feed them their lines until she reaches the unconsciously desired and consciously feared result - violation. She re-enacts the scenario in order to attempt mastery of the situation (by not being beaten) and also to reconfirm herself (by being beaten). If she masters the situation, she is not confirmed. If she is confirmed through the repetition, she has not mastered it. This view is not a way of blaming the victim or denying the very real social problem of domestic violence as much as it is a way of empowering people to recognize their own unconscious conflicts, which may drive them to do things they don't really want to do or cause them to use particularly bad judgment at particularly inopportune times.

A woman with a long history of sexual assaults beginning in childhood and continuing into adulthood came in to see her therapist and reported. "Enough is enough! I can't take it anymore. I want nothing to do with men. I am going to consciously resist getting involved with anyone and just try to focus on my work and my therapy." Two weeks later she came into her session and reported that she found a new boyfriend and was very happy to be with him, as he seemed very different from all the rest. "Where did you meet him?" the therapist asked. Innocently, she replied "In an adult bookstore. Why do you ask?"

A man may say he doesn't want to be mothered and smothered by women yet he insists on acting like a little boy. Charming in one moment, whiny in the next he seduces or pulls for a mothering response. If a person pulls for a certain kind of response and the other person resists this pull, the first person will often attempt to turn the tables – reverse roles. It is the job of a psychotherapist to recognize such repetitive behavior patterns, resist the pull to act in the role that the patient unconsciously demands, and demonstrate to the patient what is going on.

If the patient is afraid of the psychotherapist's criticism and the therapist refuses to critique the patient, the patient may reverse roles and critique the therapist as an inferior therapist. If a patient is afraid of abandonment and the therapist offers to see him in long-term treatment, we should not be surprised if the patient soon announces that he wants to leave treatment. He abandons the therapist not only to be sure that he doesn't get left again but also to see to it that his scenario contains the required abandonment scene.

So why is it that people persist in their efforts to set the stage for the familiar problem? The reason is that the familiar problem is 'familiar' - it's family. It provides the opportunity to master the conflict-ridden situation and arrive at a new solution. Yet if that is not possible, it will, in the end, be confirming, in a certain sense. It is confirming in that while it is unpleasant, at least it is familiar.

If you have a history of abandonment and are always being abandoned, it may be that you have developed defensive strategies to protect yourself from the experience of abandonment. These defenses may include seeking out relationships with people that are passing through town, finding ways to ward off intimacy, leaving a lover before being left behind, or clinging so tenaciously that the beloved recoils. In each case the strategy to ward off abandonment always ends in abandonment. Thus, we reap what we sow and the play is in accordance with the stage that we set. This is the nature of the repetition compulsion. The repetition compulsion is the tendency to repeat, in action, a scenario with unconscious motivations in an attempt to keep some experience from consciousness. If we inhibit the compulsion to repeat, we open ourselves to distress as well as the opportunity to become conscious of that which we have been repressing. And those that refuse to learn from history, including their own personal history, are compelled to repeat it.

A distressed mother came to me with a serious problem. Her eight-year old boy was getting in fights every day and the school was demanding that she get some help for this problem. She explained to me that she did not want her son getting in fights and to stop him from hitting children at school she took it upon herself to beat him every day after it happened. But "for some reason", he wasn't getting the idea and the fights continued. She said she felt out of control and wanted me to help. It was obvious that the boy was traumatized by his beatings at home and he was doing unto others as was being done unto him. He had also learned at home that violence is a way to manage frustration and anger.

I said to the mother "This is a terrible problem!"

She said, "Yes! It really is."

"Your son is completely out of control and he is not listening to you at all."

"That's right!" she said.

"A mother needs to be in control and your son isn't responding to you!"

"Yeah!"

"He gets in fights every day and you beat him everyday and still nothing happens. He isn't responding!"

"Yeah!"

"You need more power!"

"That's right!"

“Because hitting him doesn’t seem to be working at all.”

“Yeah.” She said a little less enthusiastically. She saw where I was going but she really couldn’t deny that her beatings were completely ineffective.

I said, “You need some other strategies for limit setting that will be more effective.” I then spent some time talking with her about time-outs, the withdrawal of privileges, natural consequences, logical consequences, making his world small enough to be successful in and large enough to be challenging, schedules, limiting the length of her lectures to him, and avoiding hurtful words and physical assaults. As her tool kit of strategies for limit setting increased, her chin began to quiver. Suddenly she began to cry and bitterly said, “Nobody ever stopped MY mother!” She was remembering and taking her first step toward not repeating. “Yes,” I replied, “That’s right, nobody ever stopped your mother and it must have been terrifying to you to be beaten by your own mother. And because you know what it felt like, I am sure you don’t want your son to experience what you went through.” She sobbed and nodded her head in agreement. It is in this way, that we can see how beneath the repetitive behavior, the beating in this case, there is always a story needing to be told. And this is why I say that therapy is a place to talk about what is difficult to talk about and a place to learn to keep as few secrets from oneself as possible. Whenever a significant secret is being kept, consciously or unconsciously, it is capped or covered with a symptom – an anxiety, a depression, a relationship problem or a repetitive behavior problem.

The patient in psychotherapy is often surprised to discover the memories, thoughts, feelings, fantasies, dreams, and other associations that come to mind when his/her demand for the therapist to play a familiar (family) role is not gratified. Not uncommonly the patient's demand is tied to the demand of ‘an internalized other’ – that is, to a memory of a relationship from long ago. If the therapist can demonstrate the patient’s demand for a particular repetitive behavior pattern – a particular scenario - the patient may begin to recognize it, retrieve memories, make new connections between his thoughts and feelings, have new experiences outside the familiar scenario and create a psychological space between his own desire and the desire of the ‘others’ in his memories.

We can say to the patient: "You are a relationship looking for an other to confirm your view of your self. So who is the other you need me to be? What demand do you demand that I impose on you?"

I once knew a severely disturbed boy who, when anxious, would begin to shake and nervously move about the room until he had trapped himself between a large piece of furniture and the wall. As soon as he'd wedged himself hopelessly in place behind the couch, he'd let loose a blood-curdling scream. He did this repeatedly. After a while, I could see when he was about to do it again, based on his nervous shaking and agitated movement about the room. Then it occurred to me that prior to his entrapment, he seemed to be feeling ‘trapped’ and seeking an external circumstance to confirm his experience. He was feeling emotionally caught between a rock and a hard place and looking for an event to confirm this experience.

Similarly, we could say that each of us, to a certain extent, is an experience looking for an event to confirm that experience. If we say that a person is an experience looking for an

event, the question remains, What is the experience? What is the scenario? If we formulate a person's experience by saying, for example, "He is a loaded gun looking for a target." we have to be mindful that while he may prefer to identify himself in the role of the loaded gun, so to speak, it is probably as a compensation to the complementary experience of feeling like a frightened target looking out for a loaded gun! Other formulae might include: I'm a helper looking for someone to need my help. I'm a rebel looking for a cause. I'm a lightening bolt looking for a lightening rod. I'm an outsider looking for an inside from which to remove myself. I'm a runner looking for someone from whom I will run. I'm a mother looking for a child to whom I can show care. I'm a child looking for a parent. I'm a masochist looking for a sadist. I'm a lover looking for a beloved. I'm a performer looking for an audience. I'm resentfully powerless looking for someone with more power so I can resent him or her. I'm a mourner looking for something to lose. I'm a healer looking for someone who is hurt. I'm guilty looking for a punishment. I'm a criminal looking for a policeman, hoping I don't find that which I am setting the stage to find. I'm an accident waiting to happen. I'm a searcher looking for an external conflict to confirm my internal conflict.

Psychotherapy helps us to become conscious of our repetition compulsions, obtain insight into the unconscious motivations residing beneath our repetitive behavior patterns, resolve old conflicts and make better decisions in our lives.

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