

# SUPPRESSION AND REPRESSION - WAYS OF DEALING WITH STRESS

*by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.*

I have received a number of excellent questions as follow-up to the recent posting on adult-child/gender relationships. I'll try to respond to them all without overwhelming you with material.

Loren Ecker writes:

Would you discuss further the difference between when stress is overridden as compared to being negated?

Thank you and Good Shabbos,

With pleasure!

1. We often feel a sense of need or deficiency. For example, we may be like a child who wishes to play on the playground instead of sitting in class studying the Torah.
2. An adult has chosen to impose a stress upon the child (assuming that we are dealing with "adult" choice - putting long-term goals ahead of short-term needs) and keeps him/her in class for another few minutes studying Torah.
3. The child (in our example) fidgets or stares longingly out the window or otherwise manifests the difficulty which he/she is experiencing with the mandate being imposed.
4. The adult (in this case, the teacher) may respond with three possible messages which are generally communicated non-verbally, but sometimes take the form of specific comments:
  - a. To forgo the mandate (the application of the long-term goal) in favor of the short term need. In a word, to let the child out to play. This could be the result of either a) an adult rethinking of the mandate in light of the present stress and a decision that now is not the time/place to impose this stress; or b) an inability/unwillingness to absorb the stress of the child in favor of the long-term goal, thus compromising the long-term benefits to the child.
  - b. Upholding the mandate and sending the signal which implies that anyone who wants to play while we are learning Torah is a bad child. (Negating the need of the child.)
  - c. Upholding the mandate and sending the signal that, in spite of, and empathizing with the difficulty involved for the child, the child must remain seated while the lesson continues. (Overriding the need

of the child.)

5. Focusing on response b. (negating) we can see that the child will follow one of three possible routes (unconsciously).

a. To reject the "bad" label being implied and somehow absorb the stress of having been called "bad" by the teacher (the healthiest response in the situation but the least likely since it requires a backdrop of considerable support/love from home, etc., to do so).

b. To accept the "bad" label since I did, after all, (and still do) wish to run and play while we are learning Torah, and this is clearly a response which labels me as bad. Often such youngsters go on to confirm the label in "outstanding" ways.

c. To repress the thought of running and playing, in effect saying that I didn't (and don't) want to run and play, I want to study Torah, since the thought of accepting the label as bad is so horrible (as exhibited by the sheer disgust on the teacher's face when reprimanding me to look back in my text) that I cannot allow myself to acknowledge that I was thinking about recess. No recess, let's learn. Such repression comes with a heavy price down the road. This is the essence of negating a (child) need.

6. Response 4c. is the healthy process of education and discipline whereby the adult chooses on behalf of the child, thus choosing to override the short-term need, while accepting the existence of that need and recognizing that such choices involve stress for the child. The adult opens him/herself up to sharing that stress while maintaining allegiance to the mandate. This is how a child learns priorities in a healthy manner. All healthy growth and choice involves overriding short-term needs in favor of long-term goals and requires: a) allegiance to a well-reasoned mandate (which I have called maleness, in spite of the minor uproar that this term engendered [please excuse the pun] - I am willing to substitute any word that does the same job, or to simply say "allegiance to a well reasoned mandate", but I am not prepared to substitute Jungian or Freudian terms because, in spite of my willingness, I have yet to be convinced that they meant the same things that I am describing here) and; b) the empathic capacity and willingness to share the stress of the child (which I have sheepishly called femaleness, with apologies for the stress which this engenders for some readers).

7. This, in a word, is the difference between overriding and negating. Overriding is a healthy process which is indispensable to discipline and education (perhaps we can use the term suppression) while negating is an unhealthy process which is often a contributor to repression and increased stress.

8. The above model can be applied to intrapersonal choices as well as to when we encounter the short-term needs of others. Ultimately, this model is intended to inform our relationship with G-d, to the extent that we perceive G-d as overriding our short-term needs (choosing to favor long-term benefit for us over short-term, short-lived indulgence) while sharing the stress which we experience in regard to these choices (as opposed to negating our needs in

favor of an unempathic imposition of the mandate). The more we experience healthy overriding in our lives (either as the adult or as the child) the more likely we are to perceive our relationship with G-d in this light.

I do not believe that I have written any "news" here, just articulating some pieces of common sense. However, precisely because they are commonplace (as the author of Mesilas Yescharim writes) they tend to be overlooked and forgotten. There is much to be explained and expanded upon in the above analysis - but, once again, I turn to you to continue the learning process by your thoughts and your questions.

Best wishes,  
edb

Comments are welcome!

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Allow me a short comment on your Adult-child conflict in issue #11: The child wants to play and the Rebbe wants him to learn. You outline 3 approaches of the Rebbe.

But our holy sources give a 4th solution: The Rambam in his introduction to I believe Chelek or Avot suggests >>you give candy to the children to entice >them to learn (and I guess not go out to recess) because at this

Isn't this a 4th solution: Linking the adult long term goal (learning) with an alternative short term children's goal (having candy).

Dr Russell Jay Hendel; ASA Phd

Excellent point!

1. The Rambam is, indeed, instructing us to link the long-term good of the child (learning Torah) with the child's short-term interests (sweets). This will, in many instances, overcome the "conflict" felt by the child when being compelled to study Torah since the child has a positive association with Torah. The linkage referred to by the Rambam takes place initially, when the child begins to study Torah.
2. Linking the study of Torah with sweets will not solve the dilemma, since the child in our scenario is dissatisfied with the restriction and feels its stress. It may be possible (although I don't know how advisable it would be in this case) to sidestep the problem by offering the child something which the child likes. Over the long haul, however, caution must be employed when sidestepping the problem (as explained below).
- 3 If the sidestepping (distracting the child with a toy, candy, etc.) is being done because the adult has determined that the restrictive stress upon the child is beyond the child's threshold to absorb (at this

moment) then there is nothing wrong (and it is appropriate) to reduce that stress by the use of a distraction. This means that we avoid the problem, often a wiser strategy than confronting it.

4. If, however, the distraction is being employed because the adult is unwilling/unable to confront and share the stress which the adult is presently imposing on the child, then here a chinuch (instructional) opportunity was lost. Better to have let the child experience the stress, to have energized oneself to share that stress and to have the child learn an important set of priorities.

5. Of course, a parent/teacher is human and there may be occasions when we employ a bribe because we did not have the energy to deal effectively with the ensuing tantrum and, conversely, there may be times when a "power struggle" ensues and we impose our will, and the concomittant stress, inappropriately in a situation where a simple distraction was all that was called for. Being alert regarding the issue is a major step in the right direction.

Best wishes,  
Ephraim

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