

THE FOUR MISTAKEN GOALS OF THE DEPENDENT ELDERLY

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Do you love and want to help your mother and/or father who depend on you for their survival?

If you work in a nursing home, do you truly care for the residents?

If you are a doctor and work with the aged, are you genuinely concerned for their welfare?

If you are any of the above, or anyone else who is concerned about those elderly who are survivally dependent, this information is for you.

Why?

...because at some time, it is likely you have felt or will have felt:

ANNOYED with them, **ANGRY** at them,
PROVOKED by them, **CHALLENGED** by them,
FRUSTRATED by them, **HURT** by them, or
feel like throwing your hands up in despair
and saying, “*I GIVE UP!*”

Witness Emma (age 91), sitting at her usual place in the dining room of the nursing home. It is lunch time, As usual, Emma is staring into space. Nurse Cromby (as usual) walks over to Emma. “Mrs. Hones, it is time to eat now.” The only response is a blank stare straight through Nurse Cromby. The nurse picks up the fork and places it in Emma’s hand. “The cook has prepared your favourite dish today. How about at least giving it a try?” Emma begins to eat by herself. Nurse Cromby walks away to see to another resident’s needs. When she turns around, Emma is staring again. “Come now, Mrs. Jones, we know you like this food. Eat up.” Emma picks up the fork and begins to eat. Nurse Cromby, becoming annoyed, stays and watches for a few minutes while Emma continues to finish her food. Nurse Cromby walks away, keeping an eye on Emma. A few minutes later, she looks to Emma. Dessert has arrived but Emma is staring.

In the above case, we note a dutiful nurse seemingly attending to the needs of this resident. Or is she? A close look at the situation exposes an elderly lady who requires the services of the nursing home. But does Emma *need* Nurse Cromby in order to lift a fork? No. Nurse Cromby is allowing herself to become a victim of Mrs. Jones’ mistaken idea that “Emma only counts in this world when she is constantly being served or noticed by others.” We call this first mistaken goal;¹ **the striving for UNDUE ATTENTION**. What Mrs. Hones really wants is a sense of belonging and hence a feeling of self respect. This

goal of undue attention is called “mistaken” because it does *not* lead to belonging and self respect. On the contrary, Emma has reinforced her own low self esteem by once again requiring someone else to unnecessarily be in her service.

This is the first of **four mistaken goals of irrational behaviour**. The others are: the **striving for POWER**, the **seeking of REVENGE**, and the **demonstration of INADEQUACY** (see chart below)².

People who seek these goals are discouraged. They do not believe that there is a place in this world for them unless they pursue these useless and sometimes self-destructive goals. They have not as yet learned that, though their survival may depend on others, they can still lead productive, useful lives.

This phenomenon does not apply to independent elderly people nor does it apply only to the elderly who are dependent. It is observed in any human being whose physical survival depends on direct service from others. (In fact, Rudolf Dreikurs first observed these specific four goals in children.¹) Simply stated, these survivally dependent individuals mistakenly believe that because they rely on others for certain basic needs, they therefore become somehow less of a person, unworthy of having a place in the world, unworthy of the respect of others or of self respect.

We have seen many dependent elderly people who *have* maintained their self respect, who do feel they belong. We therefore know it is possible for any survivally-dependent person to contribute to their own welfare and even to the welfare of others. We must learn how to diagnose their mistaken goal, learn new immediate responses and then apply remediating measures so as to prevent future mistakes while enhancing the dependent elderly’s self esteem.

The first step is to become unpredictable. If we continue to respond the same way to the same behaviour, the pattern continually repeats itself. Eventually Nurse Cromby becomes annoyed that she must spend so much time with Mrs. Jones when others require her time and attention for genuine needs. Knowing she feels annoyed could tip off Nurse Cromby to the possibility that Mrs. Jones is seeking **UNDUE ATTENTION**. Nurse Cromby could then ignore Mrs. Jones, but she could pay attention when Mrs. Jones does lift her fork. She could do so by perhaps discussing the food with Mrs. Jones. Eventually, Nurse Cromby could avoid giving any attention to Mrs. Jones about eating. Instead, she could find other things to discuss during the meal or spend time and expend energy with Mrs. Jones when she is acting in a self-respected and contributing manner and is *not* demanding Nurse Cromby’s **UNDUE ATTENTION**.

Sometimes we find that undue attention is either not what the dependent elderly are seeking or is not enough. In that case, they may be seeking **POWER** (Goal 2). **POWER**-seeking is demonstrated in both active and passive forms. In its active form, the person’s behaviour is saying, “I only count when you do what I want you to do”. In its passive form the person’s behaviour is saying “I only count in this world when I show

you that you can't make me _____." (Fill in the blank with "take my medicine" or "come down to dinner" or "bathe" etc.)

Those who are trying to help the person who chooses **POWER** as a goal may come to feel provoked or challenged. They may feel their own sense of personal power threatened. (For example, a doctor whose patient refuses medicine or treatment may feel their position threatened.) Often our mistaken response to a show of power is to respond in like ("I'll show him/her who is in charge here!"). Thus, the power struggle is often intensified by the response. This leads to a lose-lose situation. If we win the power contest, then the other person has their "might is right" notion reinforced. Next time they'll just try harder to win. Should we lose the power contest, then the other person believes that dominating others works and will try it again and possibly more often! We must learn to "take our sail out of their wind."¹ We must extricate ourselves from the situation until both parties are in a more cooperative frame of mind. Then we need to negotiate with the dependent elderly in a friendly, calm manner with a demonstrated respect for them. (Remember, to be in a power struggle requires complete agreement. One person must agree to issue the invitation to battle, and then the other must agree to pick up the invitation.) If we spend as much time and energy encouraging the other person as we do arguing with them, the results might be different. (Encouragement means, among other things, catching the other person doing something right.)

The elderly person may begin to feel even more powerless such that they believe that the only way to gain significance is to have **REVENGE** (Goal 3) and *hurt* as he or she feels hurt. They will seek (and usually find) those methods that will hurt others most. (For example, make false allegations against particular staff members such that their jobs are threatened, thus making it difficult for those staff members to respond to their "avengers" with any sort of positive attitude.)

Once this cycle of discouragement is in progress and the elderly is involved in Goal 3 (or Goal 4) behaviour, professional help is usually required to break the pattern. Rather than punitive measures or retaliation, they need a controlled environment where each action, where possible, is responded to with appropriate encouragement or consequences.

It takes true understanding and genuine care for a person to encourage another when, by their behaviour, the other has succeeded in making themselves most disagreeable. This is, however, when they need encouragement most.

When completely discouraged, the elderly person can give up entirely. No longer feeling that he or she can succeed in either useful or useless ways, they aim to demonstrate their complete **INADEQUACY** (Goal 4). He or she becomes seemingly helpless, using their helplessness as a means to avoid any effort. They fear success because they are afraid that they may be expected to produce even more and will then possibly fail. These people may sit huddled in a bundle on their bed for hours, days or weeks or may escape into reliving yesteryear. Much patience is required because they hope we will give up. We must attend to their behaviour with selective doses of

encouragement. We must demonstrate that we appreciate each small success. At the same time, we must avoid overdoing the encouragement (as they might come to believe we are expecting even more next time, thus leading to their further withdrawal from life.)

For those of us who are truly concerned with the mental, emotional (and physical) health of the dependent elderly, the diagnosis and remediation of mistaken goals is tantamount. We won't reach perfection but at the very least we will be able to help them make their own lives more productive, more useful and more worth living!

GOAL	EXAMPLES OF BEHAVIOUR	WHAT BEHAVIOUR IS SAYING	HELPERS' EMOTIONAL RESPONSE	REACTION TO MISTAKEN RESPONSES AND MEASURES	EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE	REMIATING MEASURES
1. SEEKING UNDUE ATTENTION	Constant interruptions at the nurses' desks for pain pills, cigarettes, asking same questions repeatedly, requiring help to eat or walk	I only count when I have your attention	ANNOYED	Increased frequency of seeking undue attention	IGNORE	GIVE DUE ATTENTION when they're not demanding it.
2. SEEKING POWER	<u>Passive</u> – refusal to take medication, meals, baths. <u>Active</u> – make you help feed them, or make you help them walk, or temper tantrums.	I only count when: I MAKE YOU do what I want of YOU CAN'T MAKE ME do what you want.	ANGER FRUSTRATED CHALLENGED THREATENED	Increased intensity of power struggle (either resistance or attack).	TAKE YOUR SAILS OUT OF THEIR WIND i.e. WITHDRAW (extricate yourself from the power struggle.)	NEGOTIATE A NEW AGREEMENT AND ALLOW OPPORTUNITIES for them to use power in a responsible manner (e.g. leadership); offer them choice in decision making whenever possible.

FOR GOALS BELOW THIS LINE PROFESSIONAL HELP IS OFTEN REQUIRED

3. SEEKING REVENGE	Exaggerate staff's misdeeds, thereby endangering their jobs. Attempt suicide Damaging property	TWO EYES FOR AN EYE	HURT	BIGGER AND BETTER PAIN	DON'T SHOW HURT	CONSISTENT AND CONTINGENT RESPONSE to almost all their actions whenever possible – encouragement for socially – interested behaviour; no amount of encouragement is too much.
4. INADEQUACY	Will not resume walking after an illness although capable (with effort). Catatonia.* Hebephrenic.* *more research required	LEAVE ME ALONE because if I do anything at all you might discover how worthless I am afraid I might be.	HELPLESS Feel like giving up.	NO CHANGE "Turtling"	DON'T GIVE UP!	Selective encouragement; successive approximations towards a goal. Stay well within their perceived capacity to achieve (which will expand with progress).

REFERENCES

1. Dreikurs, Rudolf. Children the Challenge. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1994: (with Vicki Soltz).
2. Dreikurs, R., and P. Cassel. Discipline Without Tears. New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc.; 2nd ed., 1974

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