

TRAUMA-INDUCED NEOPHOBIA AND MASOCHISM  
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One of the most difficult things to understand in treating victims of childhood abuse is why people who were traumatized as children will choose to remain in abusive environments as adults. A traditional explanation has been masochism, that they somehow enjoy being in pain. Theodor Reik (1962) asks the question of why people unconsciously strive for physical and psychic pain, voluntarily submit to privation, and deliberately accept sacrifice, shame, humiliation and disgrace. He concludes there is pleasure in voluntary suffering. I would like to offer an alternative explanation.

The "law of effect" assumes that people will seek to minimize pain and maximize pleasure, yet countless numbers of abused people re-traumatize themselves by choosing to stay in situations that re-create their childhood experience of violence and abuse.

The convergent paradigm of optimal arousal and neophobia proposed by Mitchell, et al. (1984, 1985) is offered to explain the seemingly paradoxical perseveration of abused people in painful and self-destructive behavior and learned helplessness in general. Mitchell and his colleagues discovered that traumatized animals will continue their exposure to shock (trauma) by repeatedly making a familiar choice rather than exploring a novel alternative which could end their experience of pain.

In an intriguing series of experiments, these researchers found that mice which usually alternate choosing arms in a T-maze ~50% of the time will rapidly stop alternating and go in only one direction if they are consistently shocked at the point of choice. The animals perseverate in choosing the familiar arm even when they receive further shock after the choice. More provocative and significant still is the fact that they will perseverate even though they have experienced shock termination by choosing the alternate no-shock arm earlier in the learning trials.

Mitchell suggests that traumatized animals no longer make choices based on feeling pleasure and pain but revert instead to a more primitive form of nonassociative learning concerned with maintaining the familiar and avoiding the new (neophobia). This primitive form of learning operates along a novelty-familiarity continuum which is independent of the hedonic "law of effect" governed by pleasure and pain.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Mishkin believes that the nonassociative habituation of a response to a stimulus is mediated by an evolutionarily ancient brain structure, the striatum, which is far older than the cortex or limbic system (Mishkin and Appenzeller, 1987).

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Animals and people who are numbed by the effects of trauma and are struggling to stay psychologically present must search for non-feeling cues to direct their behavior until they regain the affective capacity necessary for causal effectiveness. Neophobic perseveration and a reversion to primitive learning are forms of "treading water" until the ability to feel returns. In terms of a survival hierarchy, the predictive need for sameness and a stable orientation in time and space in order to minimize confusion precedes the causal requirement for effectively manipulating the environment to maintain homeostatic equilibrium (Bettelheim, 1972). Tragically, the comforting predictability of a familiar choice leads to more pain and a further dissociation from internal direction which increases the need to hold onto the familiar pattern of trauma and shock. Traumatized people are thus "stuck" at presence and prediction and rarely reach the level of basic security needed to risk attempting any new behavior that could free them from their self-destructive pattern of pain.

Neophobic perseveration in humans is most clearly seen in all sado-masochistic relationships where pain is intertwined with pleasure and survival. A graphic experimental example of painful neophobic perseveration is seen in Milgram's work with obedience to authority. Milgram (1974) found that people would torment themselves by continuing to deliver what they thought were potentially lethal amounts of electric shock to helpless subjects rather than stop their habitual response of obeying external authority.

In working with clients who are caught in familiar numbing behaviors, it is important to reassure them that coming alive is not an act of suicide. They need to know they will not be overwhelmed with pain from their childhood so the process must be done very gently. It is important for them to discover they have control over their behavior in the present, unlike when they were children. They need to learn they can trust themselves to make choices that have pleasurable results without being accompanied by pain. Because the authority figures in their childhood were the source of confusion and pain, it is important that masochistic clients learn they can depend on authority to protect them from harm. So, it is particularly important that the therapist act in a kind and dependable way. Helping clients move from neophobia to a sense of excitement about the new requires that therapists more fully understand the dynamics of trauma.

The fact that abused people will re-traumatize themselves in order to maintain a familiar state of tenuous security emphasizes the need to distinguish between primitive habituation and consequence learning in treating trauma. A client who is engaged in habitual re-traumatization will not be psychologically present or available for therapy to take place.

It is suggested that we need to develop this anhedonic psychology of trauma and shock to better explain the behavior of clients who are numb and cannot fully feel. The role of pleasure and pain for those in such a state is simply to show themselves they are still alive. The extremes of pleasure and pain that do penetrate through the numbness let them know they still have the capacity to hedonically be in the world. When we realize the motivation and behavior of people in shock are different than those who are not, we can devise a method of treatment that meets their need for soothing and comfort and supports them in regaining the capacity to feel.

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