

THE FIGHTER

By Joe Alexander, LCSW

Sammy was a lawyer in her late 30's who was referred by another therapist who was seeing her and her husband for marital work. She reluctantly agreed to come in and see me. She saw most of her problems as stemming from her partner.

She had always been focused on success and achievement. She went to a prestigious school and graduated near the top of her class. She was employed by a law firm that was tops in its field. She was proud of her ability to get results regardless of the emotional cost to herself or others around her. She could also be charming and engaging mostly as a story teller in the limelight. What she didn't say and came as information from the couples therapist was that she would at times go through periods of vituperative self-attack that she normally reserved for others. She was resistant to the idea of a group and only agreed to try it as it had been helpful to her boss whom she admired.

Early on in group she was contemptuous of others problems and quickly came up with advice and solutions on how she would handle the situation. She took other questions and reactions as criticism and would become defensive. She was peeved by my continual focus on her and how she felt versus what she thought. After a time she became more trusting and was able to talk about how she would get self-critical. However, most of her input had the tone of: "you're stupid" or "I'm stupid". Genuine compassion for herself or others was difficult.

She had grown up with an alcoholic, emotionally cold and critical mother. Her father was warmer and publicly charismatic but was often at work. She competed with and was taunted by an older brother.

Like many people who grew up with critical, unpredictable or emotionally absent parents she was ruled by shame. At a core level she believed there was something wrong or bad that she had to hide. Over time vulnerabilities and perceived weakness were covered and protected by sarcasm and contempt. Many individuals who grow up ruled by shame deal with this by attempting to please others and win their approval. She wasn't interested in being pleasing but she desperately wanted respect and admiration. Success and achievement were Sammy's only way to feel OK about herself and quiet her loud internal critic.

Group was a difficult experience for Sammy. She had spent her formative years emotionally alone and had learned that to open up about doubts and vulnerabilities was to invite criticism or worse yet be ignored. As group continued she learned to trust that she also could share her vulnerabilities. She had to grieve for the young girl who felt so lost when she was criticized and left alone. Of course she hardened and developed an "I'll show you" attitude. The group reinforced her softening and she was surprised that they enjoyed her while she wasn't busy accomplishing. This was novel for her; she was a human doing not a human being. Doing meant accomplishing and feeling OK, being

meant feeling she was shameful or somehow bad. Her ability to soften and show a different side of herself didn't affect her ability to aggressively pursue her work. She did however; take more inner pleasure at her achievements. She had found a still place inside and could be happy without having to be on the next task. Her relationship with her husband also improved as she became comfortable with interdependence.

Sammy's story is only one example of how our childhood can shape and continue to affect us many years later. Useful coping mechanisms, once in place and reinforced with hundreds hours of practice do not change without awareness. It often takes a crisis to get us to the point that we start to look inward and realize we are overprotecting ourselves. This protection was once necessary and a creative way to manage our dysfunctional environment. When we have that realization it becomes possible to change, to let go, grieve and look forward to what comes next.

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