

Just Between Us

When your anger is misdirected...

All of us are familiar with what is called "displacement of emotions." This means that we express feelings inappropriately, letting them go in a place that is inappropriate.

The familiar, classic picture is that of a man who is "chewed out" by his boss. Angry, but afraid to let his boss know how he feels, he goes home and kicks the dog or yells at his wife. Unable to deal with the emotions in the original, appropriate spot, he "displaces" them to another situation.

Much of the time it isn't quite that simple. Our displacements may not be so starkly inappropriate. There may be a bit more subtlety to our actions.

Many of us are not that likely to unload our stored up feelings on a totally innocent victim. We are more likely to wait until somebody commits a "one pound offense" and then let go with "10 pounds" of anger.

WITHOUT BEING aware of what is happening with us, we hit our partially "guilty" victim with a barrage that is out of proportion to what he has done.

Sure, the kids left their bikes in the driveway again. But does that merit a 6.5 Richter scale reaction? And threats to ground the kids for a month?

Displacements of anger generally are not satisfactory to anybody. Certainly, they are not to the victim. It hurts to be a recipient, whether we are totally innocent or partially deserving of some degree of anger from the other person.

Victims are frequently bewildered and resentful. "What's with Dad? I didn't put the bike away, but I didn't deserve that! What a jerk!"

Most of the time when we are displacing our feelings, we don't feel much more satisfied than the victims. Hammering on a substitute is never the same as dealing with the original. One partially satisfying displacement is likely to be followed by another.

We may feel not only unsatisfied but guilty as well. To the extent that we are able to observe ourselves and reflect on our actions, we are aware that something isn't right.

DEALING WITH OUR displacement tendencies is never easy. There are, however, some practical steps that we can take in attempting to understand our actions and modify our behaviors.

First, we need to recognize that our reactions are over-reactions, that we are displacing our anger—whatever inappropriate feelings—from true

source to substitutes. Others can sensitize us to the fact that we are overreacting, if we can hear them. We also can try to help ourselves become aware that our reactions are inappropriate to the present situation.

Second, we can make the best effort that we can to determine the real source of our anger. These may range from something that happened earlier in the day to a variety of long-held resentments. Some may be simple to ascertain. Others may require professional help.

Third, we can decide what can be realistically done about dealing with the appropriate sources of our anger. Is it possible to change the things that originally upset us? Can we return to the original sources and deal with them?

Fourth, we can take the most reasonable and practical steps possible to deal with the original sources of difficulty. This may range from direct confrontation of persons and issues to recognizing that nothing can be done. We may get some satisfaction and release from coming to grips with the fact that nothing can be done, except to vent our feelings safely at a neutral party.

Fifth, we can try to deal as appropriately as we

can with the present situation in which we are tempted to unload our anger. Apologizing and making whatever appropriate amends we can make may be in order, if we have already turned loose our anger inappropriately.

THERE IS A continuing need to try to become aware of our patterns of behavior. We need to sensitize ourselves to our tendencies to overreact and displace in many situations.

If we are going to deal constructively with such tendencies, we need to monitor our reactions periodically. We also need to be open to having others tell us when they feel that we are out of line.

If we find ourselves continuing to use displacements that they cause difficulties in living—for others as well as for ourselves—we probably need to seek professional help.

(The writer is a marriage counselor and consulting psychologist.)



By William C. Nichols Ed.D.

Ask the Educator

Loose talk in hall

QUESTION: The person who teaches across the hall from my room has a very informal relationship with some of her volunteer room mothers. She and the volunteers sometime stand at her door and discuss their students within earshot of passers-by.

I have seen students and others perk up their ears when walking by and this bothers me. How would you handle this situation?

Mrs. R. L., Fourth Grade

ANSWER: You are right to be bothered. What you describe is not very thoughtful behavior on your colleague's part.

Needless damage can be done by such hallway chatter. Our students deserve better protection of their privacy. The teacher behavior you describe is not very professional.

We have a responsibility to protect the privacy of our clientele in education. They count on us to do this.

Further, we set an example to students by our behavior in this regard. One thing you can be sure of is that loose talk somehow always gets passed around, especially if it is unfavorable.

WE SHOULD ALSO keep in mind that volunteers are members of our school community. They very likely know some of our families and students on a personal or social basis.

It's important that we not compromise their personal relationships by sharing with them information about students which they would not have access to if they were not volunteers.

Volunteers need to know just enough about their students to get their job done and maintain a cordial

relationship. They need not and should not be privy to all of the teacher's observations.

HOW DO YOU handle your justifiable annoyance with your colleague across the hall? It may be much easier than you think.

Tell her directly that you feel she ought to know that her doorway conversations with her aides can sometimes be heard by passersby. Then, tell her of your concern for sharing teacher observations with volunteers.

This may make you both momentarily uncomfortable, but it should bring this issue into focus for your colleague. We really owe it to our profession to do the uncomfortable once in a while in the service of supporting standards.

Good luck to you. I commend you for being sensitive and concerned about an issue which others might find easier to ignore.

(The writer is director of special education for a suburban school district.)



JOSEPH HADDAD

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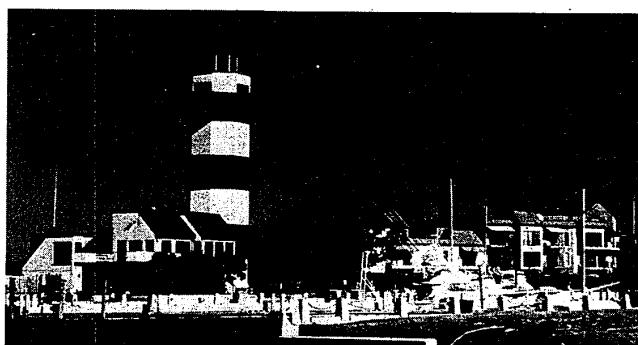
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