

Cultivating Forbearance and Forgiveness

Excerpt from [*THE NURTURE EFFECT*](#) by Anthony Biglan

The world has struggled with how to deal with other's aversive behavior for centuries. The fundamental problem is to get people to NOT respond to others' aversive behavior with their own aversive behavior, because more likely than not, doing so will simply perpetuate the coercive process. Instead, we need to cultivate forbearance and forgiveness as cardinal features of our culture.

We still look with wonder at examples of such behavior.

- Charles C. Roberts stormed an Amish school house and killed five young school girls before he killed himself. The Amish community expressed its forgiveness by attending his funeral and raising money for Roberts' widow and three small children. Those three small children must live out their lives knowing that their father committed a horrendous act. They will face difficulties in any case. But which will be better for them, knowing that the families of their father's victims hate them, or knowing that those families have forgiven their father and care for them?
- Mohandas Gandhi had vowed to fast until all violence between Hindus and Muslims ended. A Hindu man came to him and confessed that he had killed a Muslim boy as revenge for the killing of his son. He implored Gandhi to end his fast because he did not want to have

Gandhi's death on his soul. Gandhi told him that he could atone for his sin by finding a Muslim child whose parents had been killed in the riots and raise that child as a Muslim (A. Gandhi 1998).

- In South Africa, under Nelson Mandela's leadership, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created to address the many wrongs that had been done during Apartheid. The Commission invited victims of Apartheid to give statements about their experiences. Perpetrators of violence were also invited to give testimony and could request amnesty from both civil and criminal prosecution. The process is generally credited with having prevented much retaliatory violence.
- A mother patiently changes the diaper of a crying child.

I hope you see how this last example resembles the other ones. In every instance, the key is that people choose not to retaliate or otherwise respond with their own aversive behavior. In doing so they make it a little more likely that peaceful behavior will replace aggressive or unpleasant behavior. When they succeed, they build the capacity of others to react to stressful situations with calm and even warm behavior.

You might be inclined to respond to this line of thinking by saying, "Yes, we know all this. It is all in the teachings of people like Gandhi, Jesus, Martin Luther King, and many others." That is quite true. It is no accident that each of these leaders had an impact on millions of people. What I am saying that is new and I hope helpful is that the behavioral sciences have developed systematic ways to help people control threatening or antisocial behavior without acting in ways that simply provoke further aggression.

Only when we spread these practices throughout society and reduce the

number of people who arrive at adulthood with coercive repertoires will we achieve the kind of peaceful society that Christ, Gandhi, and King envisioned. Spreading warm, supportive, caring interpersonal relations requires that all those warm supportive caring people have the skills for dealing with others' aversive behavior without further escalating it.

My admittedly behavioristic shorthand label for the skill that we need is "Stepping over the aversives of others." It might also be called forbearance. The Oxford English Dictionary defines forbearance as "Patient self-control; restraint and tolerance." Every one of the effective parenting programs developed over the past forty years helps parents get better at stepping over the aversive things that children naturally do. An infant cries and an abusive or neglectful mother receives encouragement from a skilled nurse to step over this aversive behavior. The nurse teaches her to hold the infant and rock him, talking soothingly. The nurse makes it clear that the mother's frustration and distress are natural and understandable (which is an example of the nurse stepping over the distressed behavior of the mother). The nurse commiserates with the mother at the same time that she models more patient—and more effective—ways of soothing the child.

In numerous family interventions, parents learn many ways to help children develop the self-care skills and routines they need to get through the day. These may include praising and rewarding what the child does. It may also include simply doing things together. In essence, parents get a lot better at not responding with anger or impatience, but rather with calm, patient guidance, interest, teaching, and support that helps children develop an ever-expanding set of skills, interests, and -- most importantly -- the ability to regulate their own emotions and restrain angry or impulsive behavior. In

short, parents learn to ignore the milder forms of children's aversive behavior and simply do what it takes to comfort and soothe children and guide their development of new skills and interests.

The same is true for couples who are not getting along. Psychologists like Bob Weiss and John Gottman have carefully observed the interactions of couples in conflict. For distressed couples, it often works to escalate aversive behavior because it may make their spouse stop doing something aversive. Effective marital therapy helps couples replace cycles of criticism, blaming, anger, and cold silence with forbearance, patience, and positive activities. It does not work in every case. But it saves many marriages.

Stepping over aversives is also involved in helping people who are depressed. The research that Hy Hops, Linda Sherman, and I did showed that depressed mothers were getting some respite from the aversive behavior of their family members by being sad and self-critical (Biglan 1991). When mothers acted this way, their husbands and children were just a little bit less likely to be angry or critical. No one was having fun, but Mom occasionally avoided others' negativity. Based on our research, Frank Beach tested whether reducing conflict between depressed women and their spouses would reduce their depression. It did (Beach, Fincham, and Katz 1998).

So we need to build people's repertoires of forbearance, forgiveness, empathy, and compassion. It will undoubtedly be a bootstrap affair. Every time we influence someone to replace coercive reactions with behavior that calms and supports others, we have one more person who is cultivating these same nurturing reactions in those around them. A good place to start this quest is with children.