

Do You Have a Fully Functional Danger Filter?

Over the last 30 years, as I have engaged with individuals who have addictions, codependence, mental health issues or come from dysfunctional families; I have noticed that not only do they have difficulty assessing the level of danger in certain situations, they sometimes are shocked when the level of danger is explained to them and they realize how distorted their thinking has been.

Recently, I spoke to an acquaintance who was in distress. She had been in a fight with her daughter who is an athlete, very tall and strong. During the fight, her daughter pinned her against the wall in her home, pressed her forearm so hard against her neck that she passed out. When she recovered, she was very shocked that this happened and grounded her daughter. The daughter laughed and said, "I will do what I want to do and you cannot make me stay home or in my room!" The daughter did not apologize or show remorse after the incident. The acquaintance asked me, "What should I do?" I told her there were many options: she could file assault charges, call the police and have the daughter removed temporarily, or at least leave the house, herself, to get to safety immediately. After getting herself to safety, she could explore treatment options for her daughter. "This is an extremely dangerous situation!" I said to her. She replied, "I could never do that! And besides, my daughter would never hurt me."

This scenario and other similar situations have been told to me by friends, acquaintances, fellow 12 Steppers and clients over the last 30 years. It probably seems obvious to most of you how dangerous this situation has become; however, for many people, the denial that a loved one can truly be dangerous overrides good judgement. This is one of the reasons there are more homicides by relatives and friends than there are by strangers. There are multiple causes for this distorted thinking.

Anecdotally, there seems to be a correlation between increased dysfunction in the adult's childhood family system and an elevated level of distorted thinking about dangerous situations in adulthood. Patrick Carnes in his book, "Betrayal Bonds¹," notes that there are many researchers and therapists who have found this phenomenon to be accurate and validated with studies about childhood trauma. I call this phenomenon, "lack of a danger filter," or "a malfunctioning danger filter."

Personally, I can validate that phenomenon with clear instances from my own life before recovery. Much of the time, my family was loving, kind, supportive and sane. There were times however, that the environment was anything but safe and sane. Both parents were from families where severe neglect happened often, and they each had lost a parent before elementary school, leaving them with less than adequate or nurturing models of parenting. As an adult, when I look back over the clearly dangerous situations that I put myself in during the first 34 years of adult life, I am horrified. How could an intelligent, educated woman such as I, place myself in these obviously dangerous situations?

It is clear now, that intelligence and education do not prevent this phenomenon. The research shows that children whose parents or caregivers create a less than safe environment (and the child must remain attached to survive) learn to distort reality¹. The cognitive distortions that result are necessary in childhood; but remain in place for the remainder of the individual's life due to the creation of a "working model."¹ Our working model of the world—how safe it is, how capable we are to survive & be successful in it, etc.—becomes solid in early childhood, (i.e., 5-8 years old). Changing our 'working model' is exceedingly difficult once it is in place and set. In other words, our belief system from how the world appeared to be in childhood (including & especially our

parental role models) is THE way that we evaluate all the situations we encounter as adults including how dangerous they may be.

Our 'working model,' therefore, is how we decide what is safe and not safe, good or not good, helpful or harmful, healthy or not healthy, etc., as adults. That means children who grow up in war torn countries, will feel less concerned about dangerous situations, that most of us would be terrified of. Children who grow up in families where yelling is the norm will yell at their children and their spouse and/or allow their spouse to do it and believe this is not dangerous to either. The same applies to beating a child with implements while the parent is in a rage and out of control and other similar examples. Children in these families will put themselves in dangerous situations and become very confused about why the parents are upset about their decision. In adulthood, they are often in dangerous situations with no sense of how dangerous the situation truly is for them. Danger feels normal to those adults.

When a client comes into my office and tells comparable stories that do not seem dangerous to them, I inevitably hear about a childhood that was not safe, either all or part of the time. The worst part of the story is that the client cannot see the danger, not only in the present situation, but also, in their own childhood. When they tell the same story about the neighbor's or a friend's family, the individual recognizes the danger. Often, the reason is that the child dissociated during dangerous situations in childhood to feel safe in an unsafe environment. Children dissociate when the frightening situation overwhelms their appropriately immature ability to tolerate the intensity of feelings they experience in the moment. Dissociation allows them to maintain functionality and stay connected to caregivers in the face of mild to extreme terror. In addition, in childhood, our brain's "mirror neurons" 'ping' when people around us that are primary caregivers for us, behave in interesting ways. The mirror neurons store the memory of these behaviors; then, as adults we automatically repeat the behaviors when an event reminds us of the memory.

What is safety? What is danger? The most obvious is physical danger. If a child is hit, thrown, shoved, assaulted in any way physically and/or sexually, the danger should be clear—it could result in serious injury and possibly death. Many children who experience physical beating from a primary caregiver believe they deserve the beating, and, as adults may believe that it was normal. And what about emotional danger? If there is shaming or attacks to a child's intelligence, weight, body image, beliefs, emotions, behavior, academic or physical ability or disability, this is also dangerous—emotional danger. Children cannot tell the difference. Both types of less than nurturing parental behavior feel equally frightening & therefore traumatizing to a child. A parent who tries to mold a child to fit their own belief system or requires the child to emotionally care for them is implying that the child has no right or ability to individuate and have their own reality. As most of us know from experts in child development, children must individuate to launch from the primary family. Failure to do so creates a very immature and dysfunctional adult who has great difficulty taking care of themselves. They have distorted views of how to operate in the world that frequently get them into debt, trouble with jobs, creditors, spouses, the law and often the IRS. How to earn a living, pay bills, get to work on time, protect themselves or drive safely in traffic eludes them. Seeing clear and present danger whether physical or emotional also eludes them.

One of my clients* several years ago told a story in group that he felt shame about. He said that his girlfriend only knew how to make money prostituting herself. He did not like the situation, but in an effort to 'save her' he would drive her to a very shady side of town at her request and let her off at a street corner. The group confronted the dangerous behavior. He was shocked that his peers were so concerned. After his response, I said to him, "You have no danger filter." He asked me to explain. I told him to notice how seven of his peers and I could clearly see that he was in both physical and emotional danger on that street corner, himself; he still

did not think it was dangerous to him, and that the eight of us had functional danger filters but his seemed to be either missing or turned off. Many years later, I heard him tell his recovery story at an Aftercare function. He talked about his missing danger filter and that even after his peers and his therapist clearly told him it was dangerous; it still made no sense to him. It was many years later when he saw his son put himself in a comparable situation, that it hit him how dangerous this was for his son. He had great difficulty not sobbing as he told the story. He sponsors a lot of men in recovery today and he tells them all his story to plant the seed of learning to have a functional danger filter.

What constitutes safety in families and relationships in childhood or adulthood? Emotional and physical safety are present when all adults in the situation are capable of containing bigger than usual emotions and enforcing discipline calmly without anger, shaming or sarcasm. Children must be able to experience, experiment with and express their own reality—this is a natural and required part of development. Children also need discipline, limits, and structure. Without these things in place children are unable to explore their own reality and sense of self with ‘training wheels’ on first. Adolescents ‘test the boundaries.’ When they are allowed flexibility with firm structure, they feel safe. When the rules are too rigid, they feel smothered, trapped and oppressed. History has taught us that oppressed people rebel with anger and rage. It has also taught us that freedom with rules and regulations create a peaceful society.

If my danger filter or those of my loved ones seem to be failing, how do I regain a functional one or help others understand their own distorted thinking about danger? Professionals trained and experienced in treating childhood relational trauma such as Pia Mellody and Patrick Carnes can be very helpful. Those therapists who are trained by one or both wise & insightful authors, therapists and trainers are usually able to detect and treat this phenomenon. Books by both therapists that discuss it are listed below. Happy reading!

**Descriptions, situations, and references to specific people have been changed to preserve confidentiality.*

References and helpful reading:

- 1 Carnes, Patrick (1978) *Betrayal Bonds*.
- 2 Mellody, Pia (2003) *Facing Codependence*.

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