

Shifting The “Power Over” Pattern At Home

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A strange phenomenon can occur in intimate and family relationships. You can go along being a friendly, even tempered, person all day at work and with friends and then walk through the door at home and turn into an angry, demanding ogre. This can be confusing for all involved; and for you, it probably stimulates guilt and shame after the event, perhaps even hopelessness around being able to behave differently. You might have a judgment that you treat the very people you love the most with the least kindness and respect. Reflecting on your behavior, you are startled at the metamorphosis. Who is this other “you” that gets angry and tries to control your partner or kids with demands, stone-walling or criticism?

For example, you get home feeling exhausted and sit down in a comfy chair wanting to relax for a moment, and your partner yells a request for you to help with the laundry. In an instant you feel angry and resentful and perceive a demand. You begin defending against an attack that never happened.

In a deeper sense, all reactivity is a tragic attempt to avoid pain and protect specific needs like: love, safety, acceptance, ease, belonging, and autonomy. Connecting with and naming the specific feelings and needs underneath reactive behavior is key to gaining more understanding and choice around your responses. In the above example, we could imagine you were taken aback and irritated, needing rest, ease, consideration or autonomy. If you connect with the needs alive for you in the moment reactivity triggered, you can share them later with your partner and voice a request around what happens at home during the first half-hour of your arrival, or make a request of yourself around meeting these needs prior to or upon your arrival.

In intimate and family relationships, it's equally important to look at power dynamics. Power dynamics refers to a mix of habits, beliefs, and perceptions regarding who has power and how that power is used to care for our needs.

Personal power could be named as universal and refers to your need to interact in the world in a way that consistently meets your needs while living in harmony with others.

You might become more conscious of the need for personal power in intimate and family relationships because you might be more motivated to shift relationship dynamics than in other settings. In addition, relationships with a history usually have a greater frequency of small or big unprocessed hurts, that makes the triggering of pain or threat inevitable.

Right before you metamorphose into an angry ogre, some part of you perceives that you have lost power or that your power is threatened. In this moment, asking yourself to shift to the seemingly vulnerable position of communicating from a heart-based consciousness is like asking yourself to move a mountain. You might be able to override your inner resistance for a while, but you'll likely only delay the appearance of the ogre. In a moment of defending

against a perceived threat, your whole system is geared toward power— go ahead and follow it. You can do a sort of psychological aikido. Embrace the impulse toward power while adjusting the definition of power and the strategy for expressing it.

Real power means that you have the ability to choose how you behave moment by moment according to your values. Rather than being taken over by an angry ogre, you have the power to notice the anger arising. You have the power to see through it to what's actually happening in the moment: the arising of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and needs. You have the power to pause and breathe deeply for five minutes restoring equilibrium to your physiology. As the angry ogre part of yourself demands that you fight, you have the power to turn toward that ogre and say, "Thank you for trying to take care of me. I am powerful. I decide what's next. I get to choose."

Like a powerful martial artist, you reside in your center and decide where and how to direct your energy in accord with your values. From this place of power in yourself, you know that having power over your partner or kids is the last thing you really want. You want them to love and consider you because it comes from their heart and is given freely, not from some fear of what you will do if they don't behave as you like.

Practice

Take a moment to reflect on the last time you were caught in the reactive pattern of trying to control or have "power over" another person. As you replay the scene, this time see yourself doing the aikido move described above to cultivate your own sense of internal power. What would you do or say in that moment? How might you behave differently from this place of power in yourself?

In a broader sense, you might also find it useful to reflect on where, when and with whom you tend to enter this reactive "power over" pattern. Do you notice particular environmental conditions or context that reinforce that pattern? Perhaps there are recurrent stimuli in those situations? Take a look at these in some detail and explore the feelings and needs that are up for you in those contexts. Take the time to imagine other strategies that could meet your needs in or before those moments. In this way, it'll be easier to connect with your sense of choice the next time a similar situation comes up.