

# THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF THE COPING BEHAVIORS

## REFLECTIONS ON MY TIME WITH YOU

ROMA, NOVEMBER 6, 2023

I want to thank all of you who came to the one-day workshop at the Salesian University. Some of you traveled a long distance to be there. I felt as if I had come home. I have so many memories connected to the campus. I conducted my first workshop in a classroom above the upper parking lot in 1977. I want to express my apologies that there was not time to take questions at the end of the day.

I especially want to thank the three participants who volunteered to be my patients on the stage. That took courage and trust. I hope I was of help to each of you. I admire you. Your courage helped all of us who were there.

As with any presentation I give, I often have thoughts about what I had not been able to teach because of the constraints of time. I am writing this letter to you to share some of those thoughts. I think they are important and will help you understand the material in more depth.

### THE PARADOX

There is an ancient witticism that goes like this: "What is insanity?" The answer: "Doing the same thing over and over hoping for a different outcome." This humorous definition captures the paradoxical nature of the Coping Behaviors.

Remember the Coping Behaviors emerge over time from the continual use of the Defiant Decisions. The Defiant Decisions came into being in response to the Despairing Decisions. The most difficult aspects of these decisions was feeling helpless and hopeless. They are significantly painful experiences. The Defiant Decisions provided a a welcome sense of potency and agency. This gave relief to the despair, replacing it with the "I'll show you" energy of the Defiant Decision. This was an empowering discovery. And this decision worked, at least in the short term.

Over time the Defiant Decision was employed whenever the person was stimulated to feel helpless or hopeless. This repetition led to the canonization of the Coping Behaviors. Through habitual use they became integrated into the one's sense of personal identity and seemed to be "natural" and "defensible" ways of responding to stress. The stress involved might be trivial and the energy and intensity of the Coping Behavior might be out of proportion, but that discrepancy became lost over time. "Why do you get so upset?" "That's just who I am."

Here is a review the six major characteristics of the Coping Behaviors:

1. They bring comfort to the person using them.
2. They are discomfoting to others in proximity.
3. Over time they will cause damage to the individual: physically, socially, spiritually and/or relationally.
4. Their use conflicts with the dictates of common sense.

5. They were created during a time of life before the person possessed a fully functioning prefrontal cortex.
6. Over time they become ego syntonic, that is they came to feel like a natural attribute of the person and not something adaptive, formed from repeated patterns of thinking and behaving.

The Coping Behaviors derived from the repeated use of the Defiant Decisions. The Defiant Decisions represented a form of victory over the Despairing Decisions. The Despairing Decisions arose from a logical response to the Injunctive Messages. They had power because they were present in the environment. They were falsehoods that were believable and there was no countervailing voice powerful enough to correct the falseness or the messages.

The Coping Behaviors provide a person with a means whereby he or she can cope with the pain of the Injunctive Message. The problem lies in that it doesn't relieve the person of the untruth present in that Injunctive Message. It provides a means to counter its pain: the despair, with the attendant helplessness and hopelessness. That's huge. The paradox involved is in two parts.

One, the Coping Behavior keeps the person in a perpetual state of struggle with the Injunctive Message, "winning" momentary victories but at great cost to themselves and those close to them. It maintains the enmeshment with the Injunctive Message.

Second, and most important, the Coping Behavior maintains the Defiant Decision as the optimal response to the Injunctive Message. Over time, the continued use of the Defiant Decision/Coping Behavior makes the Injunctive Message come true. It fulfills the very thing the person is in conflict with.

The Coping Behavior does not resolve the Injunctive Message. It maintains the struggle with it and over time is exhausting to the individual and to those in proximity. The Injunctive Messages are immensely powerful, "Worthy Opponents," as I like to say. It was no small task to come up with the Coping Behaviors. It is no small task to identify them and replace them with more potent responses to stress.

Here is an example of one Injunctive Message from each of the five categories.

**SURVIVAL: The DON'T BE WELL (or take care of yourself) Injunctive Message.**

The Despairing Decision: I am not worthy of attention.

The Defiant Decision: I will prove myself to be a strong person.

**The Coping behavior: Frequent exhaustion. \***

If I keep proving to myself, I am a strong person by exhausting myself, what will happen? I will eventually make myself sick or even die before my time. I might even become sick enough to be "worthy of attention."

**ATTACHMENT: The DON'T BE CLOSE Injunctive Message.**

The Despairing Decision: I feel distant and forgotten.

The Defiant Decision: I will become loveable & attract an imaginary love.

**The Coping Behavior: Looking for an ideal love that does not exist. \***

If I spend my life looking for a love relationship that does not exist, I may take that personally and work even harder to become more loveable, believing the problem is with me

and not understanding I received a message telling me not to be close to people. I will find fault with my loved ones because they do not compare sufficiently with the perfect images in my head. They will feel my rebuke and pull away eventually leaving me feeling distant and forgotten.

IDENTITY: The DON'T HAVE WANTS Injunctive Message.

The Despairing Decision: I have no sense of me.

The Defiant Decision: I'll know what others want before they do.

**The Coping Behavior: Adaptive to the unspoken "needs" of others. \***

If I have no sense of myself, of my own separate and unique ego, I seek to overcome this lack of knowing myself by paying such close attention to others that I become an expert in anticipating their needs. Over time being adaptive to the unspoken "needs" of others may make me acceptable to others as the ultimate codependent, but a lifetime of that practice will give me no sense of myself or of my own needs.

COMPETENCE: The DON'T (ever) MAKE IT Injunctive Message.

The Despairing Decision: I am never good enough.

The Defiant Decision: I will prove myself to be extraordinary.

**The Coping Behavior: Striving for achievement while preoccupied with feelings of failure. \***

If I believe I am never good enough, then the decision to be extraordinary, that is better than others, then I will feel relieved each time I redouble my efforts to prove myself. The insidious part of the Coping Behavior is that I might demonstrably become successful in Practical World terms, but I will never feel as if I have made it because I fall short of the expectation to be extraordinary (in all things). This leaves me feeling that I am never good enough.

SECURITY: The DON'T FEEL Injunctive Message.

The Despairing Decision: Feeling my emotions is too painful.

The Defiant Decision: I will do whatever is necessary to deaden my feelings.

**The Coping Behavior: "Emotional responses" lack warmth. \***

I may learn the language of being "nice" and know how to mimic the words of empathy, but I will be faking it. Or I might just allow myself to openly appear as someone who doesn't care and is a skeptic of showing emotion. Either way, I lack the internal warmth that is necessary to be at home in the Emotional World. When life penetrates my shield of non-feeling, I will have no tools to handle that moment and the experience will feel overwhelming and "too" painful.

- The Coping behaviors are printed in bold as they are on the charts. This is a reminder of their importance in accurately diagnosing the Injunctive Messages.

Lacking the Unsuspected Truth that is the key to resolving each Injunctive Message, the person approaches life blind in one eye, not realizing that he or she is responding to stress situations in a repetitive and eventually harmful manner. On the left side of the charts, we can

“cope” with our Injunctive Messages, but we lack the essential learning that makes it possible to free ourselves of the constant use of the Coping Behaviors.

### FREE BEER TOMORROW

This is my favorite sign from an English Pub. Think about it. I love it. Go in the next day and the sign is the same. This is akin to the beliefs created by the Injunctive Messages. The solution is in the future, if at all. It will be OK for me to be here, I will have love in my life, I will feel good about myself, I will feel as if I am making a mark on life, and I will feel secure in the future, but not this moment.

This awareness is crucial in the diagnostic process. People make good arguments for how their current state of not enjoying their lives or neglecting their most intimate relationships will ultimately have a happy and positive outcome. I often ask, a little sardonically, “How is that working for you?” This is an echo of how this article began: with the irreverent definition of insanity. “So, you are angry and driving yourself seventy hours a week hoping to someday feel relaxed, happy and close to your loved ones?” “Yes.” “How is that working for you?”

Watch for the promise of a future state that is not being realized or practiced in the current moment. I often use a metaphor. I tell some people they are like a person who practices the piccolo every day hoping someday to be a great tuba player. That summarizes some people’s view of the future. I will practice being tense every day in hopes of being deeply relaxed in the future. The left side of the charts is powered by an imagined future. The right side is an invitation into the current moment with all of its difficulties and satisfactions.

### THE BLIND SIDE

Many of you reading this have heard the story of my first meeting with Dr. Meyer Friedman at his office in San Francisco in 1989. Forgive me for returning to it once more. At the end of our interview, he asked me to describe the Type A Behavior I had demonstrated during our meeting. I felt bewildered, even saying I had tried not to show any signs of the behavior. He asked (very important) if I would be interested to know the Type A Behaviors I had manifested in our congenial interview. I agreed, feeling just a bit of dread.

He described to me between eight and ten behaviors. To my credit, I recognized the accuracy of his observations immediately. I didn’t argue. In fact, I couldn’t. He was spot on. I had to take his word about how rapidly I blinked my eyes or about the tightening of my mouth in a grimace, but the rest were as clear to me as a bell. He made me aware. He did not criticize me or belittle me. Indeed, we became close friends for the remaining decade of his life.

He educated me about my “Blind Side.” Most people using their Coping Behaviors do not see them as adaptive behavior or as something damaging to them. That interview was a high stress event for me, even though Dr. Friedman could not have been more congenial. In that stressful situation, I used my “best” tools. Remember the old saying, “If the only tool you possess is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Coping Behaviors proceed without interruption from the blind side. It is not possible to change something you are not aware of.

And because they have come to feel like an extension of our true selves, we instinctively defend them. I have had more than one person say to me, “Well, my wife has been trying to tell

me about that for years.” “My husband has just learned how to bear with me when I become so critical of him over the smallest issues.” We invite people to see what has been invisible to them.

Go through the charts and review each Coping Behavior for each Injunctive Message. Look at the Despairing Decision connected to it. If a person uses the Coping Behavior throughout their lives, can you imagine that resolving the Injunctive Message and relieving the person of their despair? Or will the use of that Coping Behavior make the Despairing Decision and therefore the Injunctive Message come true? That is an important question. The answer to it empowers us to identify and confront the Coping Behaviors.

### **ONE ADDITION AND ONE WORD CHANGE**

You may have noticed the absence of red ink throughout this article, a relief I imagine. In my most recent article, *Good Enough is Good Enough: Completion and Satisfaction*, I declared myself fundamentally satisfied with the current state of the charts following more than thirty-five years of adding and correcting. And I am. In that spirit, I also said I might tinker just a bit because it is the nature of my brain.

I have added the word **ENCOURAGEMENT** to the list of our “allies,” that is those strategies that help us help others cross the impasse and begin to experience life on the right side of the charts. Here is the list as it now appears:

AFFIRMATION  
GRATITUDE  
ACCEPTANCE  
**ENCOURAGEMENT**  
ADMIRATION  
EMPATHY  
CONFRONTATION  
HUMOR  
INVITATION  
RELIEF

This is a good list. These have been the tools I have used for decades. Part of the art of our work is knowing when to switch from one to the other. When in doubt: listen, be curious and be patient. It will come to you. In using these allies and using them in a flexible manner, we pass them on to our patients. Then they will carry these allies and be able to use them when they need them. This is a great gift.

For those of you who are familiar with the book, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy, you know this is a metaphorical book about these four creatures who find one another and help each other on a common journey. If you have not had the pleasure of reading and absorbing it, I highly recommend it. It is about my two favorite subjects, kindness, and love.

There is a moment in the book where the boy is looking at a distant point and he says, “We have so far to go.” The horse responds by looking back and says, “Look how far we have come.”

This is the function of encouragement. It is the primary purpose of the even numbered pages being included in the charts. The influence of the Injunctive Messages is to be forward focused on a world that can never be, so the journey always feels impossible, “We have so far to go.” Reality is different.

I didn’t alter my Type A behavior in any measurable way the day after my meeting with Dr. Friedman, but I had started on a new and long journey. Today I can look back and say, “I have come a long way.” I can look at the Injunctive Messages that have most impacted my life and say, “I have come a long way.”

The most crucial movement is the first movement. It begins to head us in a new direction. Remember, the people we work with will have expectations of themselves and of us that cannot be realized. A person cannot “jump” from the left side to the right side. But if that person moves just one tic on the even numbered pages, we can rightfully say to them, “Look how far you have come.” In this we apply an ancient piece of wisdom, “Life by the yard is hard but life by the inch is a cinch.”

The moment that someone realizes that their struggle in life is with something that is embedded within them and not with their spouse, boss, parents, friends, or children, they become empowered in a new way. One cannot change the character of life with its unfairness, indignity, and injustice. It is best not to have those but that does not keep them from existing.

We can change our response to the stimuli that trigger our Coping Behaviors. But we can’t change them if we don’t know them and can’t see them in real time when they are taking place. The moment someone can recognize the Coping Behavior in real time and have an alternative to it is a “Look how far you have come” moment.

As I often quote her, my late and beloved colleague, Virginia Price would say, “We cannot control what comes in. We can control our response to what comes in.” We can’t change our responses if we do not know that some of them are to a time, place and persons who no longer exist. I tell people that we all arrived at our eighteenth birthday with a toolbox. It was a perfect toolbox and it had everything we needed to deal with, even survive that environment. That ancient toolbox cannot satisfy our lives today. Tools other than our Coping Behaviors are required.

That is part of our task: to help people recognize the tools they ingeniously created while small and helpless and to understand they can have a different sort of power today. They are no longer small or helpless. All of us feel that way in moments. That is life. We don’t change life. We change how we respond to life. And we help others to do so if they sign on for the journey. They must sign on. Some will and some won’t. That is life, no matter how good a therapist you are.

## **I AM ABANDONED**

The other spot of red you will see in the charts is connected to the Injunctive Message: DON’T FEEL ANY ATTACHMENT (only rejection), I often say that after the DON’T EXIST Injunctive Message, this is the most difficult one to resolve. Whether that is true or not is up for debate. I

know it is powerful and tenacious and often ruins the relationships of people who have it. Without awareness, they become the destroyers of relationships.

The Despairing Decision for this DON'T FEEL ATTACHMENT (only rejection) has been listed previously as "Life is lonely & empty." Over time I have come to believe that those words do not capture the level of despair created by it. Besides the Despairing Decision for DON'T ENJOY is "Life is Empty." I dislike repetition. I believe the wording that more closely captures it is, "**I AM ABANDONED.**"

Using the formula from the first of this article, those words become prophetic.

The Despairing Decision: I am abandoned.

The Defiant Decision: I am entitled to all the objects of my desire.

The Coping Behavior: **Always being possessive, insistent, & manipulative.**

All of us are possessive, insistent, and manipulative at times in our intimate relationships. But if this is my Coping Behavior and comes from my defiance that I am entitled to whatever I desire in my relationships, it is not hard to imagine that people over time will peel away, even those with genuine affection.

I won't feel that affection. I will only feel my need for continual proof of it by my insistence on more. People will separate from these constant demands and sense of entitlement. I will feel genuinely abandoned, having no idea of my part in the drama.

Without knowing of this Coping Behavior, the person will be mystified, but will revert to the determination to conquer new relationships and drain them. He or she will never experience the right side of the charts:

The Unsuspected Truth: There are people who have genuine affection for me.

The Resolving Activity: Learn what brings pain to those who love you & refrain from those bitter behaviors.

The New Parental Voice: Treasure and protect the people who have given their hearts to you.

If we had had time, I would have gone through DON'T FEEL ANY ATTACHMENT (only rejection) with you. It is so important and so powerful. The person in its control does not see either their possessiveness, insistence, or manipulation. It is a lot to be confronted and learn about one's behavior. But people do. And then they can learn what I call one of my rules for being in a love relationship: "Come to know yourself well enough so you can protect your loved ones from yourself."

## HANDING IT ON

I was having a conversation with one of my closest friends this week not long after returning from Rome. During our talk, I told him about our workshop and how much I enjoyed the day. I recounted the deeply emotional ending of the day and how beautiful all of you were when I found myself unable to speak because of my tears. It was a tender moment. Then I told him that I felt as if I was giving my material to all of you. That I have taken the charts as far as I can. He said he thought a better phrase was, "Handing it on." I agree.

So, I am handing this on to all of you and to all who are interested from all over the world. And, just as I have done today, I will continue to write as I have ideas and I will tinker just a little bit with the charts.

The charts are an act of love.

Thank you for participating in a wonderful day. I hope it was as rich for you as it was for me.

John  
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San Jose, CA