

Conditioned Emotional Response

By Shon Pernice

Have you ever done something foolish and asked yourself, "Why did I do that?" It is usually something small or just a minor lapse in character. But how about something so repulsive, that you are too ashamed to admit it? You say to yourself, "What the heck is wrong with me?" It makes you so disgusted with yourself and it gets buried deep down as you try to hide it. That event silently reemerges; it affects your life adversely until you play the role of detective, psychologist, and social worker until you can attempt to identify your error in thinking. I am that person. I did something horrible.

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When I went back down the stairs, to see what I had done, my wife's body lay motionless on the floor. I had previously pushed, hit, or shoved her in an explosive rage. As a combat medic, I check for signs of life: absent. The common reaction would be to call 911. That is what our society is conditioned to do. I did not. My next course of action has haunted me for the past ten years. Not because I write this from a prison cell, but because my response to the situation repulses me. I hurt a lot of people.

After confirming my wife's death, a light goes out. I am detached without any feelings. She is no longer my wife of ten years, mother of our three children, but an object. I place her body into a big, black duffle bag. Later that night, I placed her body into a garbage dumpster and drive away. No emotions. How could a person, a father, or a husband do this to someone they are supposed to love?

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As a combat medic, emotional detachment is paramount to your sanity, and the survival of others. With traumatic injuries, you have to maintain your composure in the worst situations. If a severely injured casualty sees you scared, alarmed, or grossed out by their wounds, they will lose hope and die. Sometimes you need their will to fight in order to get them to the next level of care alive. You adapt to being emotionally numb all of the time. That same tourniquet that I

placed on the soldier's leg to stop the blood loss is the same one I place on my emotions. If I release the tourniquet, on the injured or myself, lives will be lost. If you do not conform to the unwritten rules in the combat zone, especially as a medic, you will get emotional, then complacent, and then dead. When a soldier gets killed in action, you bag them up in a black human remains pouch (body bag), and get them out of sight. The dead bodies of your friends deplete morale, and they start to stink. A smell that goes into your sensory bank forever and does not come out regardless of how many showers you take. "Out of sight, out of mind." It becomes reflexive in nature, to bag a body, or the pieces, call in a 9-line medevac, and get them out. You continue your mission and the command will provide replacements. That routine, and repetitive contact, becomes "normal".

Death, dead bodies, violence, and atrocities will make you go crazy, especially with repeated exposure. You do not look at life the same as part of your coping mechanism. Seeing dead bodies piled in the back of a flatbed truck like cordwood, is exactly that—cordwood. The dead foreign fighters left to rot on the roadside, being chewed by the hungry, stray dogs are just a food source. Those are not people. The dogs go for the meaty areas on a body: cheeks, thighs, buttocks, and the heels. The trash dumps are well known as a place where bodies are left. It is usually the opposing religious sect of the area, that came to fight and got killed. It is a waste of their energy to bury a body that is not part of their tribe. What would you do in these situations? I not only absorbed the mental horrors, stored it in my memory banks, but also took pictures. I was so shocked that I knew nobody would believe this stuff, or even comprehend it.

Back Home

After coming home from the war, I did not know how to express what I experienced, or how to process the pain, sadness, and grief. I could not form the words so I would show my pictures. I posted several on my Myspace page, Myspace quickly censored and removed them from the site. Most people I associated with were repulsed by the photos and did not want to see them again. How else can you explain these buried images that sneak up on you every night when you close your eyes?

Crime victims, survivors, families, and the community ask, "Why?" when horrible things happen. I did not care for a long time but the last several years I began to ask myself the same

question. I needed an answer because I want to prevent this from happening to another family. Sometimes, there will never be a plausible answer to a tragedy. However, I am not content with that in my case. As I removed layer, after layer of denial, buried memories, and detached emotions, I started to remember things. The events were real, and documented, from the war. A memory—a snap shot in time—now my words record the process and try to make sense of a horrible act. My motive: to educate others, understand, and face my demons.

While this situation is unique to my life, my crime, and the event that I am responsible for, we are creatures of habit. We react by what we know. My out of context response may be related to the procedural memorial of re-experiencing the event. A Conditioned Emotional Response ⁽¹⁾. This does not excuse my actions, or anyone else's. It only answers the question of why. A conditioned emotional response can be reflective of a childhood trauma, rape, assault, natural disaster, combat, or any other significant traumatic event that was detached and buried. It is still inside of you. Like the tourniquets I put on wounded soldiers, I kept the tourniquet on my memories, and emotions. Until you can identify, single it out, remove the layers, and start to process the event, the ripple effect will continue to destroy your life, and others.

References:

1. Lecture by Gary Sibcy Ph.D. Associate Professor of Counseling, Liberty University
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