

Men Boggled Down in Old Patterns



“Why do people act the way they do?” is a commonly asked question when trying to understand behaviour. A much more useful and helpful question to ask is ‘What stops me acting differently—what is blocking my ability to change?’ It can be very difficult giving up a behaviour that you may have been doing for a long time. It raises questions about the values or beliefs that underpin and maintain your behaviour. Besides, there may be definite short-term payoffs for continuing some behaviours. These of course need to be balanced with the costs. The pattern of abusive behaviour that Frank is expressing in the following story had others feeling afraid of him. His relationship was about to end and he was doubting his ability to change.

Frank (aged 35) tells his story

Frank came one day, distraught that his wife Jenny (aged 34) had walked out on him and gone to her mother. He was tearful, upset and desperate to be back with her.

‘It all began when we were driving home from a family barbecue. Jenny was sitting in the back seat of the car with my sister, Mary. Jenny began to gossip to Mary about what had happened to one of our neighbours. I said “Here we go again”, or something like that. It was meant to be a joke.

Things went quiet in the car. When we got home a couple of hours later Jenny told me she was upset by my comments. I told her it was only a joke but she didn’t believe me. Things were pretty strained for the rest of the night. The next morning I had to go away for work for three days. I hate going away because I don’t get on with the rest of the crew.

I was looking forward to coming home. On arriving home Jenny told me her cousin was in town [this couple lived in the country] and that she would really like to see her. I had just gotten home and here she was deciding her cousin was more important to be with than me.

I told her she’d have to hitchhike because there was not enough petrol in the car. Jenny became upset. At that moment I knew I had blown it. I said it was only a joke. Jenny brought up the situation of my previous joke in the car.

I felt cornered. The more I tried to convince Jenny that it was only a joke, the more heated the argument became. She just wouldn’t accept my point of view. I got really furious and ended up hitting her, pushing her on to the floor, telling her she was stupid. I kicked her when she was on the floor. I told her to stop hassling me and to forget what I had said.

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I walked down to the shop. When I got back she and the kids had gone. [At this point in the interview Frank became tearful.]

Two days later, meeting with Jenny and Frank to hear more of the story, Jenny said she kept things from Frank not to upset him, tried to be pleasant to him when he was 'in a mood'. She described becoming increasingly anxious when Frank was due to return home and how relief came when Frank went away with his work. Jenny described her life with Frank as 'like walking on eggshells'. Much of this was new information to Frank; he had little understanding of what was happening to others within his family.

Frank grew up in a family where abuse was common. He related a situation in which he saw his enraged stepfather break down the toilet door to get at Frank's mother, who was hiding within. As a young boy this had a profound impact on Frank. He tried to protect his mother, the result being that he often became the target of his stepfather's violence. Frank vowed and declared he would never be like his stepfather, but twenty years later he was aware that he was heading down a similar pathway. Frank feared that his own children were learning from him, and would carry on what seemed like becoming a family tradition of abuse. It became apparent that he carried around with him very firm ideas on how he should behave in relationships, and how men and women should be in relationships.

In other words Frank had a blueprint in place about how relationships and the people in them should act. Unfortunately for Frank, Jenny had a different blueprint. Frank's blueprint was based on issues of entitlement, expectation and the control over others. This certainly didn't help his relationship with Jenny and their children. Separation was fast becoming the only viable option. Frank's story was not an isolated incident in his relationship. Jenny had experienced Frank's abuse and violence many times before. Frank was not a bad man and like most men he was confused about hurting the people he cared about most in the world.

If you recognise something of your own difficulties in Frank's story, go to the page about "Developing a new rule book for men."



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