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**Unraveling the Mysteries of Relationships:
Why Do We Hurt Those We Love Most? Part II—Old Coping Techniques
By Kenneth A. Sprang**

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.
--Kahlil Gibran

In growing up, we each learn coping mechanisms in order to address the challenges of our lives. In reasonably stable, secure and functional families, a coping mechanism might be as simple as learning whether to ask Mom or to ask Dad for things we want—like permission to stay out late or to use the family car--or when and how to ask. In a family where a child longs for more attention than she gets from her parents, she may decide to turn inward for support rather than outward. In severely dysfunctional or abusive families, a child may need to learn ways of avoiding or reducing emotional or physical abuse. These old coping techniques often cause our partners pain.

For example, last week I wrote that I experienced my first wife as yelling and being angry a lot. For most of our marriage I had no idea why she tended to get so upset about what often seemed to me to be little things. Later, I discovered the sad reality that as young as the age of six my former wife had learned that in her family the only way to be really heard was to explode and be angry. It was perfectly normal and natural for her to bring that style of coping and communication to our relationship.

Last week I responded to a letter to a coach's column for which I write occasionally. The letter was written by a young man who had just gotten engaged. "I'm overwhelmed with the people who want to know all the details of the proposal and our plans and they all want to be the first to be informed," he wrote. He then explained that his fiancée's mother was "laying a guilt trip on her" because the mother was not the first to be informed about the engagement.

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Although frustrated with his future mother-in-law's behavior, the young man's primary concern was the way his fiancée's family communicates with one another. He expressed the fear that when they are married his fiancée would "lay guilt trips on him" and they would have problems. "I'm scared about how to handle this," he concluded.

This story is a classic example of how coping techniques learned as children get in the way of healthful and sound relationships when we are adults. Somewhere in her past, the fiancée's mother had learned that the way to get what she wanted was to manipulate others by making them feel guilty. Perhaps she was unable to ask in a straightforward manner for what she wanted in her household growing up because such requests were unsuccessful, or maybe she simply never learned how to ask for what she wanted. Whatever the cause, being resourceful, she discovered that by making others feel guilty she could get what she wanted.

In responding to the young man I acknowledged that his fears made sense. Certainly if his fiancée has grown up watching her mother make others feel guilty, it is quite possible that the fiancée unconsciously uses the same tactic.

I invited the writer to share his fears with his fiancée. "Be clear that this is your fear and own it as yours--you are not criticizing her, just voicing a concern," I advised. The challenge for this young couple is to learn to communicate *directly* about issues that they face. If he can stretch to make it safe and comfortable for his fiancée to consciously say how she feels and what she wants, eliminating the need to *unconsciously* "lay guilt trips" on the young man, they can grow together. People manipulate through guilt and other means because they have not learned to be direct and candid and to take responsibility for their own wants and their own feelings, or because it has never been

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emotionally safe to do so. By being aware of that challenge the young couple can address it from the beginning.

This matter of coping techniques is important in parenting as well. It is important that we not manipulate children to get them to do what we ask, and equally important that we not let them manipulate us. We need to teach children to speak candidly with “I” messages about what they want, need, and feel. And we need to listen and respect what they say, even when we disagree and even when the answer to their request must be “no.” If we teach them by example to engage in honest communication now, we will take a huge step in helping them be mature, supportive, and caring partners to someone else tomorrow.

Please write with questions you have or with topic suggestions. The best sources of material for columns are your real life experiences. Email to ken@bccounseling.com.

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