

Overcoming Chronic Resentment and the Abuse It Causes

Choose between resentment and healing; you can't do both.

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Recovery from relationships that have suffered chronic resentment is long, complex, and fraught with setbacks, whether the couple breaks up or tries to repair the damage done to the union.

Unlike anger, which is stimulated by discreet incidents or thoughts, chronic resentment is a general ego defense - the more fragile the ego, the more resentment required for defense. For those most in need, ego-defense is more important than learning, truth, and reason. Hence resentment greatly distorts thinking - through oversimplification, confirmation bias, inability to grasp other perspectives, and impaired reality-testing (inability to distinguish thoughts from reality). Over time, resentment becomes a world view or way of life. Because the resentful have to devalue others to protect their fragile egos, chronic resentment in intimate relationships inevitably leads to some form of verbal or emotional abuse and, eventually - if the couple hangs in there - to contempt and disgust.

Characteristics of Chronic Resentment in Relationships

- High emotional reactivity - a negative feeling in one triggers chaos or shut down in the other
- External regulation of emotions - unpleasant emotions are regulated by attempts to control or devalue the other
- Automatic defense systems
- Power struggles - try to "win" or exert power rather than reconcile and connect
- Criticism, stonewalling, defensiveness, contempt
- Walking on eggshells - both parties feel this, but typically one will internalize, second-guess, and reangle the self in vain attempts to avoid the other's resentment or abuse
- Narrow and rigid emotional range - the parties seesaw between resentment and depression, with little emotional experience in between.

Treatment Resistance

Although it is better understood as a collection of bad habits rather than addiction, as some have suggested, resentment shares with the latter the need to "hit bottom" before there is motivation to change. That's because resentment requires an attribution of blame: "It's someone's fault that I feel bad or powerless." Their negative emotions seem like punishments that require retaliation rather than motivations to heal and improve. Resentful people typically have to hit bottom - lose a relationship or get fired from a job or suffer yet another failure before there is sufficient motivation to reverse years of bad habits.

Successful Treatment of Chronic Resentment

Resentful people feel devalued and powerless without resentment. Before giving up a defense they have likely held since adolescence, their egos need a more effective way to feel valuable and powerful, i.e., able to act in their long term best interests, without violating their deepest values. Successful treatment must employ commitment to their deepest values so that the motivation to build value outweighs the motivation to devalue. It must:

- Increase core value - the ability to create value and meaning in life and stay true to their deepest values (The resentful consistently violate their deepest values by devaluing the people they most value.)
- Emotional reconditioning - forming healthier habits of internal regulation.

In successful treatment, the resentful learn to focus on what they most deeply appreciate, what they most want to build, and the value they most want to create in life. Once they experience the enduring power and vitality of acting on the motivation to create value, compared to the constricted emotional range of resentful living, they can begin to develop a powerful sense of self that is less in need of ego defense and capable of maintaining a compassionate, loving relationship over time.