

What is the Emotional Plague? A Brief Introduction

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A plague implies a highly contagious disease that can become epidemic (rapidly widespread) or pandemic (an epidemic throughout many countries). The Black Death, a fourteenth century plague, connotes an epidemic characterized by the person's skin turning black; Bubonic Plague by the sufferer developing buboes or swellings. So the emotional plague is characterized by infectious, destructive emotional reactions, and like other plagues may be crippling and deadly.

The emotional plague is driven by an intolerance of spontaneous life, emotions, and pleasure (Reich 1949, pages 248-280). Wilhelm Reich's colleague, Dr. Elsworth Baker, stated, "We can say that to the degree that an individual tries to tear down other people or control their lives, he is functioning as a plague character" (Baker 1967, page 154). Someone afflicted with the emotional plague just cannot leave someone else alone. Where does the energy for this reaction come from?

This destructive behavior starts with just one person who is a catalyst. That afflicted individual is compelled to stifle or destroy those people or things in the environment that stir up unbearable feelings. These feelings include unfulfilled longings and desires that in turn result in intolerable anxiety, frustration and eventually murderous rage toward those who stir them up. This compulsion to destroy, serving as an emotional defense for that individual, is the essence of the emotional plague.

When one person's irrational intolerance and destructiveness incite others to act destructively, we know for certain we are dealing with the emotional plague. Unfortunately, the potential for that

destructive tendency is almost universal among humans because almost all people have armor that prevents them from fully discharging their energy in a satisfying way. It may seem so obvious that it does not need to be restated, but the basis of health is genuine satisfaction. Genuine satisfaction is the basis of healthy social interactions as well. This observation is the basis of one of Reich's early discoveries which he formulated as part of the concept of the function of the orgasm. It is not merely sexual activity that determines health but whether it is *satisfactory* and *satisfying* sexual activity.

If someone is genuinely satisfied, does he or she care about what someone else is doing? If they are happy and satisfied themselves, they will feel pleasure to see another person happy to the extent that person matters to them. They certainly would not be disturbed by their happiness. On the other hand, the unsatisfied person feels something different when in contact with a happy, satisfied person. They may feel emotions such as longing to have the same happiness, sadness at their own inability to have the same, envy, jealousy, frustration at not having it, anger, resentment, and anxiety from the excitation stirred up in them.

There are three basic ways (Reich 1949, pages 254-266) that someone can handle feelings in the presence of another who is happy and satisfied when they do not have these feelings themselves. In any particular situation we can see a mix of them (*ibid.*, page 262):

1. Healthy reaction: Strive for satisfaction oneself and overcome whatever is preventing one from having that satisfaction.
2. Neurotic reaction: Stifle or prevent one's own anxiety by clamping down on oneself to prevent that intolerable anxiety; i.e., armor to block the intolerable feelings.
3. Emotional plague reaction: Attempt to destroy and kill anything outside oneself that stirs up intolerable feelings; i.e., to destroy the source of the intolerable excitation.

The distinction between a neurotic reaction and an emotional plague reaction is not absolute. Any situation can have a mixture of healthy, neurotic and emotional plague reactions. The fear of and

intolerance of healthy emotions can be handled in one of two ways: The neurotic reaction is to turn against oneself, stifling and deadening anxiety and with it deeper emotions and longings. In effect, the person kills the life within themselves and suffers with an inhibited, constricted existence. This is seen, for example, when someone tolerates unhappy or superficial relationships or settles for empty, joyless work.

In contrast, the emotional plague reaction is when the person is compelled to stifle, kill, or destroy anyone or anything outside themselves that stirs up intolerable, spontaneous feelings. Thus, any free and spontaneous ideas, emotions, work, and expansive feelings most epitomized by genuine love and sweet, healthy sexuality cause anxiety and become the object of hatred.

This kind of reaction was shown quite simply and vividly in the movie *A Little Romance* (1979) in a scene in which a young teenage boy and girl quite innocently delight in each other's company and incur intensely disapproving looks from an old woman waiting for the train.

It is important to understand that emotional plague reactions are *common* and they can happen to *anyone*. They can range from minor to severe reactions. For example, when you are having a particularly bad day, haven't you ever just wanted to stifle the person who comes into your office whistling, happy and cheerful? When in a contracted state anyone may be irritated by and want to put a stop to the expansiveness they see in others. If kept to oneself, this is a Little Man reaction. If acted out interpersonally, socially, this then is an emotional plague reaction. Though this is a seemingly minor example, it illustrates on a small scale the very same emotional motivation that is behind the more extreme, destructive reactions.

Cases of the emotional plague can range from such common, minor incidents as petty jealousy, gossip and slander which are self-limited, to lethal outbreaks that may be local such as the genocide in Bosnia or Rwanda, or widespread such as Nazism and Communism, as well as the serious, acute and large-scale outbreak among Islamic fundamentalist fanatics in the Middle East. It is important to

remember that the emotional plague can and has occurred throughout the world and throughout history.

Most individuals handle their anxiety with typical neurotic defensive reactions such as various inhibitions, compulsions, phobias, and depression, with only occasional or rare emotional plague reactions. Some, on the other hand, handle their anxiety consistently and predominately with the emotional plague defense and can rightfully be called “emotional plague characters.” Fortunately, emotional plague characters are rare. But unfortunately, they have had a disproportionate and tragic influence in human history.

It only takes one such highly energetic, clever person to tap into, bring out and organize the repressed rage and destructiveness in the masses of neurotic people, to infect a larger group. Hitler did it in Germany; Stalin in Russia; Mao Tse-Tung in China; Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran; Khadafy in Libya; Saddam Hussein in Iraq; Milosevic in Serbia; Yasser Arafat in Palestine; and Osama bin Laden along with Taliban leaders in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and we can go on and on with many examples. Also, it is important to remember that a dictator cannot take power without the support of the masses of people, either through their active assent or their passivity, dependency and silent helplessness.

A key feature of the emotional plague, whether in an individual or as a group phenomenon, is that it rationalizes its destructive motives and actions. Explanations range from saying that the actions are good for the morals of the people, for the glory of God, for the fatherland, for the benefit of the common man, etc., etc. One striking example: Osama bin Laden justified the attack on the World Trade Center by saying that those who died were not civilians because they were working for the American system and this was war.

These rationalizations are genuinely believed by the person afflicted with the emotional plague because their true motives of pure destructiveness driven by an intolerance of life and genuine natural pleasure are unconscious and unknown to them. One of the most difficult things for people to grasp is that those with an emotional

plague reaction believe they are doing the right thing. The intention to attack may be conscious but the true motives are not. The behavior and thinking are irrational and driven, therefore the individual is not open to discussion or reasoning at the time they are afflicted. This is true for everyday examples as well as the extreme ones.

Certain conditions make a particular social group or organization more susceptible to emotional plague activity. In general, social organizations with a clearly defined and practical work function that allows a rational, constructive, satisfying outlet for discharge of the individual's energy are much less likely to become infected than those that are more political and with less clearly defined practical work functions.

For example, a bricklaying company with its organization of managers, foremen and laborers is less likely to become afflicted with and function in an emotional plague way than a bricklayers' union which is far more political in character. In today's modern world the rational function of a union is often not really clear.

Also, organizations with positions of public influence such as political parties, religious organizations, educational institutions, and news media are more likely than other organizations to become infected and to attract people with emotional plague tendencies and outright emotional plague characters. These individuals are instinctively drawn to positions of influence out of their strong drive and compulsion to control others and the social environment. They also inherently have a high energy charge and are drawn to areas where there is intense emotional excitement. They just cannot leave others alone. Therefore, political parties and religious organizations where there is intense emotional excitement are particularly susceptible.

Also, social structures that allow a significant concentration of power and influence with one individual or small group of individuals are more at risk for emotional plague reactions taking hold. Throughout history dictatorships, monarchies and theocracies have had a greater likelihood of functioning in an emotional plague manner than republican or democratic forms of government where a

separation or balance of political powers and separation of church and state reduce the likelihood of political power concentrated in one or a few people.

Beyond the identification of the emotional plague as a social disease and some of the general features we have mentioned, we can identify two basic “strains” of the emotional plague that relate to each individual’s sociopolitical character. It is not possible in this context to go into detail about the sociopolitical character types but we can mention here that each individual has a tendency to react in the social realm in one of two basic ways: either with a muscular defense or with an intellectual defense. This characterological predisposition of the person is deeper than the person’s political ideology (Konia 2001). And these tendencies, even though they are not political, are associated with either side of the political spectrum (Harman 2001). On the Right, the tendency is to be physically aggressive in the attack and mystical in thinking with an openly moralistic attitude. On the Left, the attack tends to be intellectual and the thinking mechanistic with disguised or hidden moralism (Baker 1967, page 155).

The attitude of the woman on the train platform in the scene described from *A Little Romance* shows the authoritarian, conservative, right-wing form. An example of the left-wing form is illustrated in an episode of the television series *The Office* (2004). In that situation, the human resources person, Toby, observed and was apparently disturbed by an innocent, sweet, affectionate interchange in the semiprivate vending machine area when Pam, the receptionist, shyly kissed Jim, her colleague, on the neck. Toby then sent out a memo indicating the company policy against “PDA” (public display of affection). Instead of a direct, openly disapproving attitude, he hid behind a memo, which is a very intellectual way to attack the young love he witnessed. This is an example of the left-wing form of the emotional plague reaction that is intellectual and mechanical.

We cannot discuss the emotional plague without at least a mention of what has to be done to prevent it. The basic solution as described by Reich (1949, page 280), Baker (1967, page 165) and Konia (2008) is

that we must raise children to be able to grow up with the capacity to have satisfying love, emotional and work lives from the very beginning of their lives. This will eliminate the source of undischarged energy that can turn destructive.

We must educate many more people about the essential role of natural, healthy satisfaction in their emotional, love/sexual, and work lives. We must educate parents about how to support the healthy development of their children right from the start.

Public education about these matters is the specific purpose of the American College of Orgonomy series of presentations on social orgonomy and more broadly a vital function of the ACO in general.

The emotional plague, although simple in description, is complex requiring extensive study to fully grasp. It cannot possibly be covered in a brief introductory article. It should also be recognized as a potentially emotionally explosive topic to which people seem to be drawn. One only has to look at literature and the movies to see how great is people's fascination with "the dark side."

It is important to emphasize that Reich's concept of the emotional plague brings the discipline of scientific thinking and medical science to the sociopolitical realm. With this objective scientific and medical approach the great problem of human destructiveness can be brought out of the murky realms of moralism and politics.

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