



e-quilibrium

- "electronic briefs on behavior and health"

Volume 5, Number 9
September 2009

Blue Dot

Many of the individuals who come to my office for consultation hear about the blue dot on my wall. Actually, there is no blue dot but here's how the conversation goes:

"If I had you stand by the door and look at my wall, what color would you say that wall is?"

"White."

"Now suppose I took a blue marker and drew a blue dot on the wall, one inch in diameter. Then what color would you say the wall is?"

"White, but I might also say there is a blue dot on the wall."

"Now imagine that I gave you a straw and asked you to look through the straw and focus on the blue dot. Now what color would you say the wall is?"

(Usually some pause). "If I had already seen the wall I would still know it is white, but if I hadn't seen the wall before, I would say that it was blue."

"And if your first look at the wall was through the straw and you told me the wall was blue, would you correct?"

"Well, if all I saw was the blue, then I wouldn't be wrong about what I saw. But when I wasn't looking through the straw, I would know the wall is white."

Negative emotions (anger, anxiety/fear, sadness/depression) narrow our attention. The narrowing of attention corresponds to the intensity of the emotion. Therefore, strong negative emotions essentially give us tunnel vision. It can be like looking through a straw. Our perception of what we see through the straw may indeed be accurate, but it is only a fraction of the whole picture.

If there is a purpose to negative emotions (and I think that there is), the narrowing of attention allows us to immediately focus on the specific problem at hand. However, once the problem has been identified, effective problem-solving typically involves taking a wider view of circumstances. Fortunately, strong emotional reactions usually are temporary states. For example, something that I'm very angry about today may well look somewhat different tomorrow when my anger isn't so intense (unless something continues to fuel my anger or if I maintain my tight focus on the narrow view). Limiting one's focus onto the blue dot, without looking at the bigger picture, can lead to erroneous conclusions, polarization of opinions, stereotyping, fewer perceived options, ineffective problem-solving, and an array of misunderstandings among people.

Most of us have had experiences when our intense emotion led us to conclude that "the wall is blue," but then discovered that the wall was actually white when the intense emotion passed. We may draw "blue dot" conclusions about other people when angry at them, about ourselves when depressed, or about political issues when fear is incited. There may be some small truth to the "blue," but the "blue" typically is less significant in the larger context.

At the peak of emotional intensity, we typically don't think about challenging "blue dot" conclusions. This is why it is wise to take some time for the intensity to subside before making consequential decisions or taking action. At that point there are some useful questions to ask, questions that can counteract "blue dotting." What's the bigger picture here? What evidence is there that the wall may not be blue? Do I know for sure what there is outside my narrow straw view? How will things look when I calm down or feel better?

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

To subscribe or unsubscribe to this e-newsletter, send an e-mail message with your request to paul.hershberger@wright.edu

If you wish to read previous newsletters, you may find them at:
www.med.wright.edu/fm/equilibrium/

To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu

phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021