

## Reframing (i) - Perceiving a weakness as an overstretched strength

Getting stuck is frustrating. Especially if we are stuck with someone close to us who refuses to mend his or her ways, as we perceive it to be the case. Or living with something within ourselves, a weakness we are stuck with, that we cannot shake out of.

Try 'Reframing'. It is a powerful tool. It is used in counselling to move people from being stuck by getting them to create new ways of looking at situations they find no way out of. Someone describes reframing as 'removing the frames from the same picture we are tired of seeing and putting in a different frame'. And in so doing, the same picture may look different; we may see things we did not use to see when it was in the old frame.

What forms the basis for reframing? We now understand that it is not situations we encounter that themselves affect us. Our thoughts, associated beliefs and accompanying emotions arising from these situations influence the way we interpret them. Those are responsible for the way we are affected. 'Frames' represent the underlying hidden beliefs, assumptions, thoughts and perceptions surrounding the situation. Very often, we cannot change the situation we are in although we hope we can. But if we can move away from our set beliefs and assumptions about it, embrace different ways of looking at it, if we can change the frame, or reframe our perception, the picture or the situation may then look different as it takes on a



different meaning. Reframing is therefore looking at a situation from a new perspective.

Let's look at the case of Jane and see how reframing helped move her situation from getting stuck.

\*Jane's parents and teachers were frustrated with her wilfulness. She was always getting into trouble. She would get into fights and quarrels. If we asked her parents about Jane then, they would tell you that her strengths were; she was *diligent*, *tidy*, and *intelligent* but that she was *aggressive*, *wilful* and *brash*.

Jane's parents and teachers, like us, perceive her strengths and weaknesses as opposites. The way light is seen as the opposite of darkness, top the opposite of bottom. They see strengths and weaknesses as contraries, of opposing ends that will never meet. They cannot occur simultaneously. The way that it is impossible to roll a five and a three on a single dice at the same time.

They also, like us, perceive strengths

and weaknesses as positive vs negative, desirable vs undesirable qualities. Implicit in this is that her parents and teachers were proud of and approve of her being hardworking, neat and clever. They disapprove of her wilfulness and brashness. They perceive these as something to be gotten rid of. So they would complain about and scold Jane for her brash and stubborn behaviour. The trouble was, the more Jane's parents and teachers scolded her for her brashness and wilfulness, the more defiant Jane became. Vicious cycles in the relationships started to set in. Things came to an impasse.

The situation brought as much frustration to Jane as it did her parents. For Jane, her parents' and teachers' disapproval of her brash and wilful behaviour would have created in her a belief that they had wished for her to be more docile, mild and agreeable (the opposites of aggressive, wilful and brash?) Whether she was conscious of it or not, this would have caused her to feel invalidated. Since being mild, docile and agreeable was not her, and did not agree with her personality, Jane would have felt that she was not accepted for who she was. Try as she would, she would not be able to meet their expectations.

Something new needed to be introduced into the vicious cycles between Jane and her parents/teachers to break the impasse. Reframing came into the picture.

\* *Fictitious name*

## Connect-Point

During a session with her counsellor, Jane (a Primary Six student) related matter-of-factly her fight with a male schoolmate. She recounted in great detail and with pride how she attacked him, out of retaliation, for making lewd remarks about her and her friend. She had kicked, punched and given him back more insults than she had received.

Jane was obviously not the passive, doormat type of girl. Being the gung-ho, aggressive type, she was not going to be victimised. Here she was, giving a triumphant account of her adventure. A triumph she had clearly enjoyed often. And which she was confident of repeating in the future.

It was not difficult to imagine Jane as the brash, wilful and rude girl described by her parents and teachers. She would be quick to defend and as quick to attack. Yet, Jane clearly possessed a strong ability to stand up for herself and her friend. She could take-charge of situations. She had traits in her personality that her counsellor could affirm. With the trouble that she often got herself into, it was easy for Jane's strengths to be overlooked and be accepted as such. Hence it did not come as a surprise that being affirmed under such circumstances was like a breath of fresh air to Jane. Jane became more receptive as the discussion ensued.

While processing with Jane, the counsellor suggested that her frequent 'triumphs' would tempt her to use her 'tactics' indiscriminately. Jane was quick to admit to using these 'tactics' both for 'offensive and defensive' purposes, to intimidate as well as to retaliate. She was equally quick to recognise how 'disproportionate' and 'inappropriate' her behaviour could be at most times. With that, the platform was set for guiding Jane towards appropriate assertiveness.

'Reframing' saved the day. On seeing Jane's strengths in the fight episode, the counsellor began to move away from her own usual perception of weakness as being opposite of *strength*. She was suddenly awakened to seeing that Jane's weaknesses (her brashness, wilfulness and rudeness) started from her strengths. What people around her perceive as her weaknesses are actually overstretched, overextended and 'misguided'



strengths. Instead of condemning these weaknesses, which tantamount to negating her personality, affirming the strengths, and shifting her towards using her strengths in the right measure, for the best effect was something that worked for Jane. Jane did change her behaviour in time to come.

This approach may not apply in all situations. It is, nevertheless, worth an attempt before it is dismissed. In some cases, applying it is clear-cut. A miserly person clearly has an overstretched strength of *frugality*. In others, looking for the strength may take some effort. A complaining or critical person would be exhibiting an overextended, misguided *passion* for something. Perhaps justice? Or a sense of right and wrong? An often disapproved nagger may have an overextended strength of being alert to what people around her dismiss as insignificant, but misguided by her anxiety of not being heard.

Applying this new perspective of looking at weaknesses in others and ourselves as overextended and misguided strengths can open up fresh options to otherwise stuck situations. We begin to approach the situation more positively. We relate with those involved differently as we experience them from a fresh perspective, out of our new beliefs and changed assumptions. Try reframing. It is a powerful tool.

### Contact Us

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