

A LINE ON LIFE

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Dealing with Frustration *

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In another article, we discussed various factors that affected feelings of **frustration** – emotional responses to having your goals blocked. The feelings of frustration are more extreme if:

- the obstacles are perceived to be caused by other people,
- the goal is very important,
- you are very close to the goal,
- you have had many frustrations recently,
- and your frustration is greater than others around you.

How do people respond to frustration? How can people respond?

Most of you have heard the saying, "*Frustration begets aggression.*" **Direct aggression** is expressed toward the object perceived as the cause of the frustration. If a machine doesn't work, you might hit it or kick it. If people get in your way, you could verbally threaten them or push them aside. If that is too threatening, you might verbally assault them under your breath. (Aggression is not the best way to respond to frustration.)

If the source of the frustration is too powerful or threatening for direct aggression, **displaced aggression** is often used. The aggression is redirected toward a less threatening and more available object. There can even be a whole "*chain*" of aggression. If the husband is bawled out at work by the boss, it is too risky to try direct aggression. Instead, he may severely criticize his wife for not having supper ready on time. If the wife doesn't want to deal with her husband's aggression, she may displace her feelings toward her daughter, who has not cleaned up her room. Rather than challenging Mom's authority, the daughter may yell at her younger sister, who comes in to "*borrow*" an article of clothing. Then the sister might kick the dog. (Maybe the dog could complete the chain by biting the boss!)

Prejudice is often an expression of displaced aggression. The original source of the frustration cannot be dealt with directly. Instead, another available target is found that is safer.

Aggression is not the only response to frustration. Techniques of **escape, withdrawal** and **apathy** can be used. When repeatedly frustrated, people can drop out of school, quit jobs,

or move away. The abuse of drugs or alcohol is a futile attempt at withdrawal. (Whenever the effects wear off, users find themselves back in the same frustrating situation – or worse.) Psychosis is another attempt to escape. Apathy is giving up all of your goals, so you cannot be frustrated by trying to reach them.

However, there are more constructive responses to frustration. One of these is **persistence** – continued trying and increased effort. "*If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.*" Look at the life stories of famous people. Whether in science, sports, entertainment, politics or other fields – essentially all were frustrated in their early attempts to succeed. With repeated efforts, accumulated experience and some luck, they finally made it. For example, Thomas Edison had repeated failures, before he found something that could serve as a filament for the first incandescent light bulb.

Alternate responses to achieve a goal can also be constructive. For example, on a walk, suppose you encounter a wall that blocks your route. What can you do? Is it low enough to jump over it? Can you climb over it? Does a tree branch overhang the wall to allow you passage? If these responses are frustrated, you could look for a gate. If there is no gate, you might be able to walk around the wall.

In trying to achieve a goal, you may be able to plan alternate responses in advance. Many people make only one plan to reach their goal. If that plan is frustrated, they are lost. However, beside "*plan A*," you can also develop a "*plan B*," and even "*plans C and D*." If "*plan A*" does not work, things would not seem hopeless. Because of available options, the feelings of frustration are not as intense.

Part of this planning could involve **consulting others** who are experienced in reaching the goal. If students miss a lecture, most of them are aware that they can get the notes from other students. However, they may not think of attending the same lecture taught by the same teacher in other sections of that course. They may not be aware that there are tape recordings available for that lecture material. (I have several sections of my introductory psychology class and audio tapes of my lectures. Of course, if students consult me, I will remind them of these options.)

Having **alternate goals** can minimize potential frustration. If one goal is frustrated, another is available. Although it might not be the first choice, a compromise can still offer many rewards.

Originally, I wanted to be a high school teacher. My parents discouraged me, because that is not a lucrative profession. They wanted me to become a physician. Since I was interested in psychiatry, I tried pre-med for two years. During that time, I found that my colorblindness was a definite handicap. I changed to clinical psychology, the psychological field that is closest to psychiatry.

While I was in graduate school, I found that I could not handle a constant diet of other people's problems. I suffered from "*burnout*." I changed majors from clinical to social psychology. I received a teaching assistantship, which brought me back to teaching again.

Now I teach full-time and occasionally help students who have problems. It wasn't the goal I originally planned, but it is very rewarding. (My parents were right about the pay though.)

**People envy those who are successful,
but they seldom understand
the frustrations encountered along the way.**

When viewing others who have succeeded, people often envy their fame and fortune. In contrast, they are rarely aware of the repeated frustrations and the hard work that led to their success – not to mention the continued effort that is still required.
