

## Frustration

The term frustration is often used to describe a state characterized by baffled impulses giving rise to irritating dissatisfaction. The blocking of an impulse leads to frustration, and individuals are subjected to such blockings at all stages of development: the grown-up at work, the schoolchild at his homework, and the baby when its needs remain unsatisfied.

If an individual is continually exposed to serious frustration, it is clear that harmful disturbances may appear in his personality. There has been, ever since Freud, much lively discussion about how this condition affects the development of personality. There has been, ever since Freud, much lively discussion about how this condition affects the development of personality. What at least seems clear is that a child's physical or mental development can hardly be fostered if the child is neglected in such important respects as security and protection, with all the affection, consideration and material care that they involve.

Illustrative experimental work in this important field of developmental psychology has been performed by, among others, Norman Maier, an American psychologist. He considers that his results are applicable to both human beings and animals. Maier used Lashley's experimental set-up (fig. 10.1). The rat has to jump from a platform towards one of two cards each carrying a different design. The « correct » card gives way and the rat is rewarded (with food), while the other card is fixed and the rat is punished (falls into a net).

In Maier's experiment the rat was set an insoluble problem. Reward and punishment were meted out arbitrarily. There was no definite arrangement or pattern of the cards which would allow a predictable result. In such a situation the animal refuses to make any choice, even though it may be very hungry. A new form of persuasion must be introduced before the animal will jump: Maier directed a puff of air at the rat. Compelling a choice in this way often leads to behavioural fixation of a highly stereotyped kind; the animal jumps again and again at the same card or at the space between the cards. Fixation may become so permanent that no changes occur in the behaviour pattern if a card is removed and food is placed, clearly visible, in the opening.

### Main types of frustration behaviour

Maier distinguishes between three main types of frustration behaviour: fixation, aggression and regression.

In fixation the behaviour pattern cannot be modified, and may seem unintelligent, it does not allow adjustment to a specific situation. Such behaviour can sometimes be observed in children with strictly formed habits, and at school futile efforts to keep up in a certain subject may lead to a pupil's being unable to grasp something really quite simple. Difficulties with mathematics at school sometimes provide examples of such fixation. At times fixation takes the form of resigned disinclination.

Aggression implies that the individual makes blind attacks as a reaction to frustration. Aggression is not always directed against the immediate cause of the frustration. A schoolchild who has been subjected to criticism or ironic comments by the teacher, or an adult who has been reprimanded by his superior at work, often works off his irritation on those he can command, but who are quite innocent in this connection, or he bangs doors and kicks the furniture. The need for a scapegoat is a general phenomenon, besides being a fascinating theme in the history of religion.

Aggressive behaviour may also be directed against the individual himself as a consequence of an exaggerated sense of guilt.

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**Regression** means a return to earlier and more primitive forms of behaviour. A grown-up who cannot have his own way may scream and act like a child, while a child may revert to the baby stage to gain its ends. Bed-wetting and thumb-sucking, or marked dependency on the mother at a stage when this dependency has usually been overcome, are examples of what may be signs of regression due to frustration.

**Other defence mechanisms** : Among the defence measures adopted against frustrating internal tensions are certain other mechanisms intended to bring the organism into mental equilibrium. The whole of this discussion is based on parts of Freud's theory of personality dynamics.

**Rationalization** is the justification of an act after it has been performed, to avoid feelings of guilt from blameworthy behaviour. It also appears in eager assurances of, for example, enjoyment of a situation which is actually experienced as disturbing and unpleasant. A pupil who has failed in his work at school may make excuses to himself by claiming that the teacher was unfair, or that he had a cold –which he makes seem more serious than it was.

**Compensation** means that failure in one field of endeavour leads to greater efforts to succeed in another and there gain longed-for approval. A boy who finds it difficult to shine in intellectual subjects at school may instead devote himself eagerly to gymnastics in order to be all the better there.

**Projection** is a method of avoiding guilty feelings by attributing one's own mistakes and bad features to others. A lazy person accuses others of laziness.

**Repression** – regarded in Freud's psychoanalysis as a central defence mechanism – is a process by which a person endeavours to defend himself against painful impulses, not accepted by society, by banishing them to the unconscious. Still another way of avoiding frustrating conflict situations is to retire within oneself, a method that seems to require less energy than the other measures mentioned here. Different forms of withdrawal are daydreaming or wool-patching, general lack of interest and the abuse of drugs, such as alcohol.

## Course 2

On frustration,

Very often, you witnessed violent exchanges in class from students towards their teacher or the other way around. The same scenes are often present in public places, mainly markets etc...

Among the possible explanations behind this behavior is frustration.

Main sources :

Frustration is at its top whenever contradictions within the environment are multiple and frequent.

Frustration can be caused by economic reasons, injustice, political ideals versus reality and so on.

In your handout, you will find "aggression" as a defence mechanism. To illustrate the three main forms of defence : fixation, aggression, and regression, consider this situation : you need urgently to leave your room. Your door was locked and you need to unlock it to leave the place. The key turns properly in the lock but without opening it.

Despite repeating the same movement of the key correctly, the result remains the same. Your gesture becomes mechanical, and without any intelligence (fixation).

You are furious... you start hitting the door (aggression) yet the door is still closed. The lock is responsible but the wood (scapegoat) gets the kicking.

Then, you remember supernatural powers... you either blame God or call him to settle the problem (regression).

In class, you seldom know what the source of frustration was... all you see is the aggressive or regressive behavior (crying in most cases).

However, anticipation or attempt to understand cause of frustration can help. It can, at least, buy time to try to understand, be more patient in your reaction and possibly remain in control.

Give it a thought and stay safe.