

Ms. D, an articulate woman of 28, sought analysis because of various complaints that seemed to focus on her inability to act independently. She described herself as “clingy,” by which she meant that she tended to take her clues about what she should do from other people, because she found it difficult to think and act on her own. As a consequence, she was prone to going along with what others decided “we” wanted to do, with the result that very often what “we” wanted to do was not what she wanted to do. Nevertheless, she couldn't make herself do what she wanted without first being assured that it was what others wanted her to do, too, which meant that she couldn't muster the courage to do what she wanted, if it conflicted with what others wanted. (Taken from Weiss et al., 1993, “Unconscious Guilt,” pp. 57–59 in: *The Psychoanalytic Process*, Guilford Press, New York.)

### **General Diagnosis**

We all need the support of others in varying degrees, and clingy people can have wonderful lives, so clinginess in itself does not necessarily indicate that anything pathogenic is involved. Pathogenic beliefs are indicated in this case by the fact that Ms. D was emotionally clingy even though she didn't want to be that way. Her emotions also stood in the way of her life taking the course she wanted for it. This conflict between her emotions and the person she wanted to be suggests that one or more pathogenic beliefs were responsible for the obstructive emotions and that the most important pathogenic belief probably involved the unconscious notion that it was somehow dangerous to be independent.

### **Ms. D's Therapy**

Ms. D's therapy involved four steps, which were accomplished together in a piecemeal fashion as part and parcel of her attachment relationship with her therapist:

1. Helping Ms. D to understand the origins of her pathogenic belief that it was psychologically dangerous to be independent.
2. Encouraging Ms. D to learn through experience that the perception of danger was incorrect, that most people were not hurt by her independence and that many people would welcome it, and that, in any case, she had the right to live her life as independently as she wished, irrespective of what other people wanted or thought.
3. Helping Ms. D to understand that pathogenic beliefs stunt psychological development, and that this stunting often spawns other pathogenic beliefs that need to be dealt with.
4. Encouraging Ms. D to learn through experience that these secondary pathogenic beliefs were also false.

Let's now consider each of these steps in turn:

*Helping Ms. D to understand the origins of her pathogenic belief that it was psychologically dangerous to be independent.* Not surprisingly, Ms. D described herself

as having been highly dependent on her mother as a child. She, however, initially resisted the notion that her mother possibly said and did things to indicate that it was dangerous to be independent, dangerous either to Ms. D herself or to others, including her mother. Ms. D pointed out that she was clingy even though her mother did not want her to be that way. Her mother often complained about her clinginess and had tried to force her to become independent by sending her off to camp.

Her therapist knew, however, that children are extremely perceptive, so he questioned her closely about her mother's "disapproval." This examination brought out the following facts:

Her mother never encouraged her daughter to be independent by praising her when she did things on her own. Parental praise is a type of reward for a child; her mother never rewarded her for being independent.

Her mother never even took notice of how capable Ms. D was of taking care of herself. Parental attention tells a child that something is important; parental inattention likewise communicates that something is not important. Her mother never communicated to her daughter that taking care of herself was important.

Although her mother had encouraged Ms. D to go to camp, she seemed unhappy about her actually going. She wept at the railroad station and embarrassed Ms. D by calling her every other day on the camp's only phone.

Her mother often seemed draggy and listless, which caused Ms. D to continually worry about her mother. She would examine her mother carefully when she returned from school to see whether she was depressed, and, if she was, she would try to cheer her up.

All of these factors led Ms. D to infer correctly as a child that her mother, while berating her to be independent, was secretly pleased by her dependence and wished it to continue. Ms. D readily agreed with the therapist that her mother probably had urged Ms. D to be independent to assure herself that Ms. D remained unable to separate herself from her.

A child strives to have the best possible relationship with both parents. In Ms. D's case, that meant having a close, dependent relationship with her mother and not much of a relationship with her father. Little is known about her relationship with her father, but, given her mother's possessiveness regarding her daughter, it seems likely that she would make the father's life miserable whenever he tried to get close to his daughter, with the result that he eventually learned to stay away. The mother probably also showed her displeasure with Ms. D whenever she attempted to get close to her father, possibly by becoming more depressed or ill.

Parents see their children as beings who need to be taken care of, and are invariably surprised to first learn that their children think of their parents in exactly the same way. A small child will do whatever is necessary to ensure that its parents have the best relationship possible among themselves and that each parent is happy, both with the child

and with life in general. In Ms. D's case, her mother set all of the requirements to be met. Her mother's possessiveness led Ms. D to learn that her mother objected to her having an independent judgment about what to do in life, that any self-directed impulses needed to be ruthlessly suppressed in favor remaining sensitive to what her mother wanted and needed at the moment. The mother's strategy of enforcing compliance by becoming depressed or ill whenever she felt that Ms. D was not sufficiently attentive to her needs led Ms. D to learn that independence generally was dangerous to her mother's health and that it was somehow Ms. D's fault whenever her mother became sick. Ms. D also learned that independence was dangerous from the standpoint of her with her parents' relationship with one another, as that relationship would become upset whenever she showed any self-will, particularly if she attempted to be close to her father.

None of this would have affected Ms. D's later life if it were not for the fact that it is in the nature of childhood learning that children use what they learn about getting along with their parents in developing models of how they should behave in general. So Ms. D's early experiences with her mother caused her to find it difficult to come up with independent ideas when playing with other children, leading her to become a follower rather than a leader in most game situations. As she grew older, these behavioral patterns persisted in new contexts and were accepted by her as inborn personality traits. The notion of danger also persisted as a tagalong component of this belief system, as a generalized presumption that she would be the blame for any negative consequences of an attempt by her to be independent.

Other tagalong sources of inhibition were influences called separation guilt and survival guilt. By acting more independently, Ms. D would create psychological distance between herself and her mother. This sensing created separation guilt, which operates unconsciously, giving rise to a host of obstructive feelings and thoughts that inhibit a person in taking any steps that would separate a person from a parent emotionally. Separation guilt would be triggered whether or not Ms. D's initiatives hurt her mother. Ms. D also sensed that her mother would be hurt by the separation and that her mother would be left alone to live in misery while she went on to have a wonderful life. This recognition that her life would become much better than her mother's triggered survival guilt, which is different from separation guilt only in that the person recognizes that he or she is going to have a much better life than a parent. Like separation guilt, it is an inhibiting factor, sapping a person's will to succeed.

*Encouraging Ms. D to learn through experience that the perception of danger was incorrect, that most people were not hurt by her independence and that many people would welcome it, and that, in any case, she had the right to live her life as independently as she wished, irrespective of what other people wanted or thought.* Her therapist helped Ms. D in the context of their relationship by showing her that he was not hurt by independent initiatives on her part, that he in fact welcomed them and encouraged her to be even more independent. He also helped her by encouraging her to be more independent in her own everyday life. Ms. D's therapist helped her with separation and survival guilt by continually reminding her that she had a right to live as independently as

she wished and that her mother's situation, while unfortunate, would not be made any better by Ms. D living as she had in the past.

Helping Ms. D to apply what she learned in therapy to her everyday life probably was a little tricky for the therapist. The reason is that Ms. D's pathogenic beliefs probably led her to seek relationships with people who were similar to her mother, in that they were needy and dominating. Such people would neither welcome nor understand bids for independence on Ms. D's part. This meant that as Ms. D asserted her independence, the people around her would be hurt just as her pathogenic beliefs predicted. The therapist would need to continually remind Ms. D that the problem lay with her choice of friends, that she had every right to act independently and that the world was full of people who would applaud her initiatives and value and love her for her independence.

Another factor slowing her progress was her continuing relationship with her mother. Visiting mother will bring home the reality of her prior programming because she would find herself reverting to her girlish ways during and for a time after a visit. In the long term, however, these visits were helpful, in that they brought home the reality of her programming and gave Ms. D the opportunity to be more independent with her mother while recognizing that her other coped with the change just fine.

*Helping Ms. D to understand that pathogenic beliefs stunt psychological development, and that this stunting often spawns other pathogenic beliefs that need to be dealt with.* Encouraging Ms. D to learn through experience that these secondary pathogenic beliefs were also false. When Ms. D was a little girl, she probably looked to her mother for help in doing various things and later on sought help from others as part of her dependency on other people. This habit gave rise to the pathogenic belief that she needed to do this, that she was incapable of figuring out how to deal with many situations on her own. Ms. D's dependency also solidly enmeshed her in relationships with other people. The lack of experience with a more independent basis for a relationship additionally created the pathogenic belief that being more independent meant being alone.

Her secondary pathogenic beliefs were based simply on a lack of experience. Undermining them, therefore, merely involved getting experience in solving problems on her own and establishing relationships with people who valued her independence. The therapist's role in this was to encourage her to solve problems on her own and to seek out new people.

As a result of the therapy, Ms. D began to free herself from the hold of her pathogenic beliefs. She began to do more things on her own and feel less draggy. She also did more things with her friends, went out more with men, and became considerably more capable of running her own life.

### **Elements of Ms. D's Therapy that Could Help You**

If you see similarities between your situation and that of Ms. D, here's some advice about what you will need to think about and do to change. First off, recognize that the relationship between Ms. D and her therapist in itself was extremely important to her

progress, because it gave Ms. D real-life supportive experiences. To have the best chance of succeeding, you should search around for one or more friends who will support your efforts to become independent as strongly as a therapist would.

You have a concept of yourself as a needy, insecure, clingy person. That concept lives inside you because of indoctrination during childhood and because that indoctrination subsequently led you to not live independently in various ways. So you see yourself as a needy, insecure, clinging person because of past experiences as that type of person and because you have little or no experience as the self-confident, independent person you wish to be. To become that new person, you need to establish a new reality about yourself through experience. That is the only way. That means you need to begin to start taking chances with yourself in order to test the validity of the old reality; you need to prove that old reality false. Watch closely how others react to you while in your independent mode and you will find that most people will accept and support the new you.

Initially you are going to make mistakes, which will lead you to fail in proving the old reality false. You need to not let those failures discourage you. You need pick yourself up and try again. To help you do this, celebrate every small victory. Make a big thing of the victories because they are big things. You need also to not let yourself fall to your old habits. The old programming will reassert itself again and again, and again and again you need to beat it back. This is extremely difficult, but it is also essential. Persist and you cannot fail to change. Give in to the urge to give up and you will join the masses of people for whom a real life change is only a distant dream.

Recognize also that you need to do things that will be extremely uncomfortable for you, because you're going to need to start acting independently. Not only will you have no emotional support for these training ventures, you are going to be quite awkward at them, simply because you have never done them before. So be kind to yourself. Don't beat yourself up because of every stupid thing you do. You're going to do a lot of stupid things. Accept that fact right from the start and move on. You will also seem phony to yourself initially as you act independently. Don't give in to that feeling. It is merely the voice of your negative programming.

Separation guilt and survival guilt probably operate in your case. These are spooky sources of inhibition, because they don't make you feel guilty. Under their influence, you merely lack the energy and resolve to try to change. Spend some time trying to see how separation guilt and survivor guilt participated in your past relationships and then look for ways these influences operate today. Do this on a continuing basis to bring home the reality of these influences. Don't expect, however, that this alone will make these sources of inhibition go away. You need to continue to force yourself to take positive steps even though these influences rob you of emotional support. That is a very tough thing to do alone, which is why I advise you to find friends who will support you in your efforts at being more independent.