

Title: The Problem With Yelling

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“The problem with verbal abuse is there is no evidence,” Marta shared. She came for help with a long-standing depression.

“What do you mean lack of evidence?” I asked her.

“When people are physically or sexually abused it’s concrete and real. But verbal abuse is amorphous. I feel like if I told someone I was verbally abused, they’d think I was just complaining about being yelled at.” Marta explained.

“It’s much more than that.” I validated.

“Much more.” She said.

“The problem is no one can see my scars.” She knew intuitively that her depression, anxiety and deep-seated insecurity were wounds that stemmed from the verbal abuse she endured.

“I wish I was beaten,” Marta shared on more than one occasion. “I’d feel more legitimate.”

Her statement was haunting and brought tears to my eyes.

Verbal abuse is so much more than getting scolded. Marta told me that there were many reasons her mother’s tirades were traumatizing:

- The loud volume of her voice
- The shrill tone of her voice
- The dead look in her eyes
- The critical, disdainful and contemptuous facial expression that made Marta feel hated.
- The long duration—sometimes her mother yelled for hours.
- The names and insults, you’re spoiled, disgusting, and wretched.
- The unpredictability of that “flip of the switch” that turned her mother into someone else.
- And, perhaps worst of all, the abandonment.

“It is not just that I felt assaulted. It’s that when I did something that flipped her switch, my mother was gone and replaced by a monster. That’s exactly what it felt like. I was totally alone.” Tears welled up in Marta’s eyes.

Being frequently yelled at changes the mind, brain and body in a multitude of ways including increasing the activity of the amygdala (the emotional brain), increasing stress hormones in the blood stream, increasing muscular tension, and more. Being frequently yelled at changes how we think and feel about our Self even after we become adults and leave home. That’s because the brain wires according to our experiences—we literally hear our parents’ voices yelling at us in our heads even when they are not there. Marta had to work hard every day to push away the onslaught coming from inside her mind.

Attachment and infant-mother research confirms what we all intuitively know: that humans do better when they feel safe and consistently loved, which means among other things, being treated

with respect. What is news to many of us is that we are born with fully matured, hard-wired, core emotions like sadness, fear, and anger. When fear, for example, is repeatedly triggered by a harsh environment, like one where there is lots of yelling, automatic physical and emotional reactions occur that cause traumatic stress to a child. The stress in their little brains and bodies increases from anything that feels attacking including loud voices, angry voices, angry eyes, dismissive gestures and more.

Children do better when they are calm. The calmer and more connected the caregiver, the calmer and more secure is their child. And the healthier it is for the child's brain and body.

The following are some things we can remember to help young brains develop well and help our children feel safe and secure.

- Know that children have very real emotional needs that need proper tending. In general, the more these needs are met, the easier it will be for the child to be resilient in the face of life's challenges.
- Learning about core emotions will help you to help your child successfully manage emotions.
- You can affect your child's self-esteem by being kind, compassionate and curious about their mind and world.
- When a break in the relationship occurs, as often happens during conflicts, try to repair the emotional connection with your child as soon as possible.
- You can help your child feel safe and secure by allowing them to separate from you and become their own person, welcoming them back with love and connection, even when you are angry or disappointed in their behaviors. You can calmly discuss your concerns and use opportunities as teachable moments.

Yelling at children is counter to all of the above, as is hitting and crossing physical/sexual boundaries of any kind.

The last time I saw Marta, she told me she had received upsetting news over the weekend.

Marta said, "I told myself, my distress will soon pass and I'll be ok. And, then I worked the Change Triangle. I named, validated and felt the sadness in my body as I gave myself compassion. After I spent time with my feelings, I took a walk through the park and looked at nature. I felt better."

So proud of the way she could now self-soothe, I said, "What a wonderful mother you were to yourself."

She smiled and said, "Yeah. It really does feel better when I don't beat myself up."

The mother who lived inside her mind used to condemn her with such mean and unhelpful comments as: Serves you right! Don't make a mountain out of a molehill! or Who cares about you?

The harsh mother inside Marta had indeed mellowed.

As a parent or teacher it is not easy to control one's temper or realize if we've crossed the line into verbal abuse. There is a slippery slope between being a strict disciplinarian and what will traumatize a young brain. A little awareness goes a long way in this case. Being aware of one's behavior, listening to our tone of voice and choice of words, and watching our body language, all help keep us in check. Children, who can act tough, defiant, or even indifferent to our actions, are still vulnerable to trauma. Our own childhood experiences, wonderful, horrible, and everything in between, need to

be remembered and honored. And we can all strive to help children and families evolve: to pay forward more of the best, gentle experiences we received as children than the painful ones.