

Barbara's "Stupidity," "Laziness" and "Craziness":
Why People Fail At School
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Martin Covington, a psychologist at UC Berkeley, is often referred to as the world's leading authority on why kids fail at school.¹ He believes that they are caught on the horns of an insidious dilemma. If they try hard and fail, they will conclude that they are stupid and are doomed to a life of, at best, mediocrity. Put differently, shame and catastrophic thoughts will overcome them. On the other hand, if they don't try hard, they will be overcome by shame for being lazy and otherwise irresponsible. The first threat is more onerous than the second. If kids don't try hard, they can always imagine that they are plenty smart enough and that, someday, they'll assert themselves and have a satisfying life.

To illustrate these basic ideas and another one, consider the case of Barbara, with whom I had ten one hour sessions. Her story illustrates both problems outlined by Covington and the added problem perhaps first noticed by Bernard Apfelbaum, a certified psychoanalyst practicing in Berkeley, CA. Apfelbaum and I have helped develop the problem of self-negation for being self-negating, or shame for feeling ashamed. Apfelbaum explains this problem, saying,

If the CT's [Cognitive Therapist's] attempts at refutation fail, the patient is left feeling "I must really be inadequate to still feel inadequate now that I see how irrational that belief is." Of course, CTs are well aware of that problem and have their relapse prevention strategies, largely inoculating the patient against that negative thought. CT, of course, seems to be aiming at self-acceptance, but efforts to promote self-acceptance frequently run into difficulty because such programs miss the necessity to develop self-acceptance about not being self-accepting, meaning to accept negative thoughts.²

My case illustrates how this problem underlies the self-negating thoughts Covington explores.

Barbara was a senior at one of the top two universities in the US. She was on the verge of flunking out during the second semester. Anyone who thinks that problems are simple would not like talking with Barbara. Her ability to raise a wide-variety of objections and variations on them in response to my empathic comments was amazing.

Barbara began our sessions, saying, "I can never sit down and make myself study." I asked why. She explained herself length. I italicize the many self-put downs for feeling bad and acting it out-for acting as if she is demoralized by humiliation-that pepper this explanation. She said,

One thing is that things to do pop up. For example, *I spent time with my sister who was in town last week rather than study.* ["I'm just escaping, looking for any opportunity to avoid work; I'm lazy and irresponsible."] Another thing is that I'm scared, because I really tried hard to think of an idea for a paper that's due and came up with nothing. And, lately, I realize that *I'm wasting my time here in school. I'm not getting anything out of it because I'm not putting anything into it.* ["All of the papers, tests, and courses I've passed, mean nothing; I'm completely irresponsible."]

I'm always rushing through my reading because I know *I should've done it long ago*. ["There's no excuse, nothing influencing me but my laziness and irresponsibility."] Moreover, as I'm rushing, I think, "*I should know this already; it should click after the first time I read it; I shouldn't have to read it over again.*" ["I'm stupid."] Then these feelings build up.

It is as if there is a crowd of people psychologically harassing her minute-by-minute. Imagine trying to think at all, much less study, when this kind of harassment is happening.

We were able to agree quickly that she was suffering from the comparison to others and that she did in fact often feel that she was "stupid," not able to learn because of an inferior intelligence.

We explored the idea that she had been brainwashed by many indirect kinds of hostile comments into believing that she was stupid. For instance, her older sister had been cruel to her about her presumed lack of wit when Barbara was still in high school and her sister was at a university I'll call Zenith U. She said, "We had a huge fight after she said that; I said, 'I'm sorry I didn't go to Zenith, *creep*.' I was so mad I wanted to hit her and hurt her really bad."

I suggested that this incident meant that the worry about being stupid was powerful, and that, therefore, it could have a significant influence on her. She deflected my argument, saying, "I get your point, but look, the simple fact that I have not accomplished anything or that whatever I have accomplished is insignificant sticks in my mind. I haven't gotten smarter in four years. I'm not willing to really push myself."

None of my standard arguments worked. The idea that she was avoiding studying because, as she said, she was scared of something linked with studying but didn't know what it was didn't impress her. "Whatever it is," she often said, "it shouldn't stop me from studying. I'm just lazy."

I suggested that we meticulously analyze the experience of reading a textbook to help her grasp how frequently and intensely she was being trashed for being stupid. I wrote her a letter summarizing what we discovered. This was one of my early therapeutic biography experiences. I wrote,

You always start reading slowly, and your idea about why you're reading at that pace is that you believe that you're reading for enjoyment. You enjoy all the details and the background information. We discovered, however, that in this first phase of the problem, which might be called the Contented Barbara state of reading, you're suffering subliminally from the idea that your comprehension is poor.

After reading at this slow pace for about ten minutes, your harsh critic starts to surface, to become more obvious. You notice how slowly you're reading and then worry about not being able to learn efficiently enough to do well on a test or a paper.

Phase two begins. Your worry drives you to read faster, not only for practical reasons but also to prove to yourself that you can comprehend enough at the faster pace, to prove that you're not stupid. This phase we can call Fast Barbara. Within ten minutes, as you often have said, you feel worn out by this faster pace, but you've proven you can read at this pace without feeling tired when the self-criticism is not present, as is the case the night before an exam. That set of circumstances makes the point that it is the pressure of self-criticism and

worry that is so tiring. The self-critical pressure is intense in this Fast Barbara phase.

As is typical for someone who's forced to listen to a harsh lecture, you begin to retreat into a distracting daydream. We don't know how long you're in the daydream, but we know that Fast Barbara is on duty for about ten minutes.

Then, you are jolted by the text and by your surroundings back into the situation with which you are faced, and you are hit hard by a very mild panic attack and catastrophic thought. Because you've been in a trance and don't recognize what is on the page before you, you worry that you haven't retained enough material to do well on a test, and you feel stupid, as in, "My comprehension at the fast pace is poor, so I really am dumb."

Then you begin phase three, which we can call, Backtrack Barbara. You skip back quickly to a point that you can easily recognize and begin reading again, frantically trying to get your bearings. You then discover that you actually did remember enough of what you had read before you panicked and skipped back. You remember a satisfying amount of material, except for the one page during which you were completely distracted by a fantasy.

Before this realization has time to settle in, you castigate yourself for having been such a neurotic, a worrier, one who is weak and insecure about her ability. You reason, "God, it is so obvious that I was comprehending this now that I look back on it; what a jerk I was for worrying about it." This is self-hate for being a weakling, a ridiculous, insecure worrier. As we have discovered in other contexts, you feel insecure about your insecurity. Or, *you're embarrassed about how much you doubt your intelligence, so much so that you haven't told anyone about it except me and, on occasion, your parents.*

This final attack against you is the last straw. It makes you feel especially lonely, lost, and confused.

After you are trashed for being weak/neurotic, the final phase occurs, which might be called, "Demoralized Barbara." You may either skip ahead to where you were before you skipped back and begin reading for a brief just a few minutes, or you may quit immediately. At this point, you're in all out retreat from your inner critic and seek an effective distraction.

Barbara said that this summary did accurately represent her experience. But she did not seem particularly helped by it. She complained, "I get your point. I'm being hounded while I read, but "why can't I just get down to business."

I suggested that perhaps she didn't believe that these inner influences were intense enough to derail her from working harder. She agreed, saying, "It shouldn't be that big of a deal." I referred back to her story about her experience with her older sister. It did seem, I argued, that "her put down about your lack of wit was infuriating, so much so that you wanted to hit her and really hurt her badly." She quickly changed the subject saying, "But why is it so upsetting to me."

This sudden turn in the path of self-understanding betrayed that she was worried that she was crazy. In her harsh critical state of mind, she could reason, "Okay, I'm hating myself and reacting desperately to it, but I have no reason to be self-hating. I must be crazy." She in fact did say that there was no way to account for her sensitivity to that criticism. She thought that she simply was "hypersensitive," which is a particularly

classic way of shaming herself for feeling bad, of implying that there was no reason for her to be tormented and demoralized by her feelings.

With her parents' help, we discovered that, from infancy, she had seemed to everyone to be developing slowly. She didn't talk until she was past the average age that children began to form words. And her older sister was highly verbal. Her earliest memories were of sitting around the dinner table listening to her parents converse animatedly with her charming older sister.

Her mother and father reported that, when Barbara did try to say something, it was often confusing to them. They tried to draw her out, but, when faced with their confusion, she withdrew, whereupon, they would resume having a conversation with her sister.

She began to feel inadequate by comparison to her sister and like an outsider. Her parents, who are well known by their families and friends to be unusually sensitive and understanding, did not notice that Barbara was beginning to suffer. What distracted them was that they were trying to avoid mentioning the problem, partly because they believed that calling attention to the problem would cause Barbara unnecessarily humiliation. They felt that merely to bring up the problem would make it seem like they thought Barbara was stupid.

Their fear is very common. People think that judgments per se are damaging, so you should avoid asking questions about the details of problems in favor of a more superficially encouraging approach. The jawbreaker idea that judgments for feeling bad are the problem was not in their minds; had they known that they were subtly judging and abandoning Barbara to her torment, they wouldn't have done so. But they only knew that judgments hurt and sensed that they were impossible to talk about without injuring their child.

Barbara's parents also did not pick up on this problem, because they sincerely and correctly believed that Barbara was very intelligent. They had touching and believable ideas with which to account for her early slowness, and they felt that her occasional cryptic sentences sometimes were fascinating. They believed that her drawings and play displayed an unusually creative and strong intelligence. So they were misled into assuming that Barbara could not possibly have a problem with self-esteem about her intelligence. Commonsense also argues, "If she's intelligent, there's no reason for her to feel stupid." "There's no reason to feel bad" is another classic put down for feeling bad.

I argued that she was abandoned to this torment by every important person in her life, however unwittingly. And this abandonment and the consequent feeling of not being worthy of attention was intense. She resonated to this summary of her experience, realizing again that she was very upset whenever anyone questioned her ability, and she now believed that she had a reason to be sensitive to criticism. She no longer was so convinced that she deserved to feel bad about feeling bad about herself.

Another piece of self-criticism she discovered in her subsequent therapy proved especially important. In the normal course of being encouraging to Barbara, both of her parents, who were very impressed by her ability, told her that she could "do and be anything she wanted to." Moreover, her parents and some of their brilliant friends seemed to exemplify this principle. Because of her pre-existing sensitivity to being called stupid, Barbara experienced this encouragement as pressure. Her unexpressed idea was, "If you

don't get A's in post-graduate level physics and chemistry with a minimum of effort, you're stupid" and, therefore, unworthy of respect and caring.

When she received this insight, it along with the accumulated empathic ideas we had developed did wonders for her. As she entered the world of work, she sought out opportunities based on her interest, not on driven attempts to prove herself. She now has work that she enjoys, work that although not at a genius level, is appropriate for someone who has her talent and intelligence.

¹ Covington, Martin and Karen Manheim Teel. Overcoming Student Failure: Changing Motives and Incentives for Learning. Amer Psychological Assn, 04/01/1996

² Apfelbaum, Bernard. Ego Analysis as a Deeper Cognitive Therapy, listed under, A Look at Other Therapies, bapfelbaumphd.com. p. 7