

From Star to Cynic

DAVID F. MACHELL

As an associate professor, I was feeling frustration and lack of appreciation on my job. I found myself relating to others with anger and dissatisfaction, and this began to worry me. For years, I had dreamed about teaching in a university. Now, eight years into the dream, I was deteriorating emotionally.

I had written numerous articles on how professional roles (police, physicians, clergy, and so on) contribute to addiction; now I turned my attention closer to home. Why would I and others in such an idyllic work life be experiencing such discontent? I knew colleagues, former professors and associates, who suffered from extreme bitterness and cynicism. I was determined to seek answers to this question.

Over a two-year period I interviewed about 300 professors throughout the eastern United States. Combining these interviews with countless discussions and observations, as well as with my experience counseling addicted professors, I defined a concept which I called "professorial melancholia" (PM). I found that sufferers of PM demonstrate intense internalization of the following irrational belief systems (Ellis 1975):

1. We must be thoroughly competent, adequate, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects.

2. We must be loved by everyone, and everyone must approve of everything we do.

In graduate school, the vehicle of academic achievement helps aspiring professors to accomplish both these unreasonable goals. The grading aspect of student life may acclimate the student to receiving immediate gratification and regular high-status feedback. But this process fosters an "out-of-self" focus,

where self-worth is created by the environment's input and regulated by its influence. Hence, maximal input creates high self-worth; minimal input creates low self-worth. As a practicing professor, this former golden-haired child becomes a "threatening" colleague who can make another professor's accomplishments look less luminary. Thus, the person conditioned this way may now receive "starvation-inducing" cues from the environment, instead of the "star-producing" cues he or she became accustomed to during the student years.

Subsequently, the emotional starvation may foster attitudinal changes such as these:

- the perception that "unresponsive" students are "desecrating the discipline";

- the creation of defense mechanisms of displacement and isolation (For example, "They cannot understand me; I'm too intelligent, and they're obviously not");

- perfectionism (often ignited by pressures to publish), which will remain rigid if untreated;

- diminished self-esteem, leading to feelings of self as fraudulent in the role;

- limited upward mobility, fostering frivolous power gestures or games of "one-up-manship" with peers, students, and administrators;

- association with other sufferers, with consequent increase in misery.

As time passes, if the hurt goes uncared for, disillusionment increases, as do isolation, fortification, and depression. The professor's original philosophical motivation diminishes, and resentment of students increases.

Finally, scholarly interest and activity diminish, making the work drudgery. Withdrawal may manifest itself in elitism and arrogance; these devices ensure distance. Cynicism, even "algalagnia" (an extreme form of cynicism), can become unmistakable.

The professor suffering from

advanced PM may be prone to alcohol abuse, drug abuse, interrelationship problems, sexual promiscuity with students and others, verbal or grade abuse toward students, rage reactions, and occasionally suicide. Fortunately, recovery is possible. My own treatment plan consisted of the following:

1. *Increase self-insight.* Realize and diminish irrational thinking (the crazy thinking!), and be ever vigilant to its return (Works by Burns 1980 and Ellis 1975 can be very helpful.)

2. *Reprioritize professional investments.* My students come first; my science and my teaching second. Also, networking with *healthy* colleagues, limiting my *unhealthy* associations, and dropping my purposeless activities. Last and most important, rest, have fun, and expand hobbies and avocations (I'm a bagpipe and flute player).

Instead of the "star-producing" cues they became accustomed to during the student years, professors now receive "starvation-inducing" cues.

Some suffering professors may require formal counseling, but many early-stage professors can follow my treatment plan (minus the bagpipe playing, of course!). □

References

- Burns, D. (1980). *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. New York: Signet Books.
Ellis, A. (1975). *A New Guide to Rational Living*. North Hollywood, Calif.: Wilshire Books.

Author's note: For a complete version of this discussion, write to the author at the address that follows.

David F. Machell is Professor, Department of Justice and Law Administration, Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, CT 06795.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.