

## How to Cope with Disappointment

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How do you deal with profound disappointment? With things not going the way you wanted—or expected?

How do you deal with disruption/change/shock/disorientation/feeling like the bottom just fell out and you don't know which end is up? Several clients have spoken lately of feeling confounded: "...Like being in the middle of deep water, so I can't touch down anywhere, and I don't know which way land is. There's nothing to hold onto. I'm disoriented and don't know what to do—but I can't stay where I am and have to do *something*."

We are living in interesting times. Recently we had an election that is likely to be affecting all of us in a big way. Some people are hopeful. Some are feeling profoundly shocked or disappointed. Some are struggling with friends and family who don't share their perspective; they feel angry and are wondering how to deal with it.

One client speaks about her family members as dancing on the edge of a progressive pin, trying to figure out who to blame when there is no right action. Some teens and adults are marching to protest and stand up for dignity, showing their feelings, opinions. How could that go against family values? But sometimes it does. How can we have a deeper discussion beyond politics and into real issues? On several therapy listservs there are therapists asking each other how to support their clients who are suddenly dealing with an increase in hate, oppression, violence in their school or community—somehow it is in fashion to put down people who are different. Even in California, bullying has increased in some schools. I read in the paper that Gavin Newsom declared Bay Area schools to be bully-free zones with zero tolerance for bullying, whatever the reason.

I tell my clients about the paradox: If we see the others as haters, and we "hate the haters," don't we become haters too? In this paradox there may be no familiar or right answer. But if we hate the others we all become enemies.

After the election, clients came in in different stages of frozenness or shock. And my work with them was to help them find their way forward or find their way to acknowledging the shame of feeling less than and thinking that something was going to happen that didn't happen.

When we don't get what we want, there can be grief. Familiar stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

We may also respond with any or all of the four responses to shame:

1. Attack Self

For example: Shaming yourself for not making sure your friends went to vote or not knowing how to take helpful action yet.

2. Attack Others

Find the bad guy. When we blame or shame others, there is such a possibility of derision and a breaking down of family or community. This is where bullying and aggressiveness comes from.

3. Denial

"It doesn't matter anyway."

4. Withdraw

Some people just want to withdraw and not be political, not be part of the conversation, not be part of what's going on. That is a common reaction to shame.

How do you hold yourself when you're going through emotional turmoil? How do you not just survive but make it a meaningful experience?

There is the possibility of honoring grief, honoring what is lost, by finding a way, through creative expression, to build something to remember what has been lost. Rather than using anger to harm ourselves or try to destroy the other person or idea, we find a way to deal with our grief or shame that can go into a poem or song or work of art. Then there's the possibility of hope.

The Jungian archetype of the shadow is being unleashed in these times of turmoil. This is the part of the psyche that is usually hidden or repressed, or denied. It's like the tarot card of The Tower, where everything is turned upside down.

This is a time of shadow when maybe we don't know darkness from light, right from wrong. Our careful job is to find our way through. Shame and the shadow? Shame *is* the shadow, the parts of ourselves we want no one to see. Shadow often gets projected onto others in order to try to ignore it or not deal with it.

My students and clients reminded me that the election results fell on the anniversary of *Krystallnacht*, “Crystal Night”—also referred to as “Night of Broken Glass”—on November 9 & 10 in 1938, when the Nazis started going after the Jews, torching homes, burning synagogues and killing close to 100 people. Before anyone in the world could even imagine what would happen. It was the beginning of something profoundly dark. Some of my clients, whose ancestors went through that, are reliving the terror of that time as they fear for their families now. After I listen with great care, I’m reminding them that there is a difference this time. The difference is that our eyes are open now. And we can make a difference.

What can we do? We can put love first, put family first.

And we can use the idea of healthy shame to help us get through, take us to a place of seeing the big picture. What can we do differently to express our views more clearly? Maybe, at some point, have more humor about the situation. (But maybe not yet!) If we see someone being bullied or attacked, can we say something and not turn away? When we see someone hurting can we show up? Can we have compassion? Compassion is counter-shaming, it is connecting. Compassion is love in action. The best part of compassion is being able to love ourselves and talk kindly to ourselves and others whom we maybe don’t understand. If we can do that, can we extend that compassion to a relative who is different? Can we still love them? I hope so!

One way to move beyond these reactions to shame is to work with what is coming up with through creativity—which could take the form of a poem, a creative gesture... Ultimately it’s about choosing a creative action rather than a destructive action.

On the day after the election, when many of us were in shock, my neighbor asked me how I was doing and if I wanted to hear something hopeful. Then he played me something his granddaughter had posted on YouTube. She was saying, “Well, if you’re down, you just pick yourself up, and then you try it again and you get stronger.” It was inspiring to hear the strength in her young voice!

Wishing all of us some light to see in the darkness!

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