

Stop Behaving!

Rose is a 66-year-old woman who came into social therapy because she felt that she was “just going through the motions” of her life. According to her husband, Sam, Rose “has everything” — a beautiful home, a new car, expensive clothes. But Rose feels that her home is a “prison,” especially since she and Sam sold their prosperous business.

Sam has never physically harmed Rose, or even threatened to. But she’s afraid of him anyway. She’s afraid to ask a “stupid” question when they’re watching the news, or to “make a mistake” when she’s driving, or to express one of her “ridiculous” opinions. When their son and daughter-in-law visit, Rose says, it “kills” her to see Sam “push them away” with his bullying and sarcasm. Rose once told her social therapy group that she tries to remember “what it was like” to like her husband, but she can’t even imagine it.

When Rose said that, another woman in the group, Laura, got very upset. Laura is a social worker; her husband Richard teaches political science at a prestigious university. They’re both in their early thirties and successful in their careers. Laura decided to take a six-month leave of absence just before their child was born. She welcomed the chance to stay home for a while, especially because Richard works at home a lot. It didn’t turn out as

she expected. "I feel as if I'm invisible," she told us. "Richard's polite about the baby, the way a stranger might be. Sometimes I think he wishes we would both just go away."

It's miserable to be poor in the financial sense — to have to go without, and to see your family go without, what you all need in order to live comfortably. Whether or not we have the material necessities of life is very, very important. But that isn't all there is.

I have come to believe that to live without feeling wanted or welcome, without being looked at or attended to, without giving or receiving smiles, kisses, small kindnesses and encouragement, makes people just as deprived. To live without experiencing intensity and excitement in your everyday life — to live without joy, day after day, year after year — is as deadening to the human spirit as it is to live without having enough food to eat or a roof over your head.

I think that joy is one of life's necessities. I'm not advocating the "pleasure principle" here — living life for the purpose of having a good time, pursuing a psychological "pop" or a drug-induced "high" from every moment. I'm talking about the ongoing experience of choosing how you want to be living and liking the choices that you make.

Sadly, there are many, many people like Rose and Laura, who spend much of their lives doing what they don't want to be doing — "going through the motions" without seeing any reason to, but feeling that they're "obligated" to keep doing it. They believe that this is what "real" life is about — "mature," "responsible" people not only make their beds but lie in them (however lumpy they may be); fulfilling their obligations is the important thing, no matter what the emotional cost. And they feel trapped.

Most of the men and women who come into social therapy are, like Rose and Laura, ordinary people who are leading halfway decent lives. They aren't materially deprived. They're not "failures" by societal standards — they have good jobs, stable families, and friends.

And they feel trapped! They don't like what they're doing — not just at particular times or on particular days, but most of the time. What they're saying about their lives is this: I don't enjoy what I'm doing. This is not something I want to be doing. I don't know why I'm here.

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ation that's miserable in this way. But in my experience as a therapist, it's usually the case that people with a religious faith or a set of moral precepts that sustains them do feel that their lives are satisfying and worthwhile because of that. Their beliefs inform and shape everything they do. They don't need to use religion and morality "after the fact" to justify their misery because they aren't miserable. It's when people don't have anything in their lives to turn to that religious or ethical values are most likely to be "dragged in" to keep them "in their place." And that, in my opinion, is neither religious nor moral. It's abusive.

People like Rose and Laura feel their lives are empty because — as a result of circumstance, or choices they've made — they've wound up in non-developmental (which means anti-developmental) life situations. They're acting out bad roles in a bad play. They've given up — an easy thing to do when you don't know that as a human being you can choose to live your life differently, that is, that you have the capacity to develop.

Not knowing that you have the capacity for unlimited development is, in essence, not knowing that you're human. That's why the experience of it is so horrible.

When people allow their lives to be completely determined by societal rules and categories, they're engaging in "conditioned behavior" — the automatic acts in response to environmental "stimuli" that were made famous by Professor Pavlov's dog. As I've often pointed out in lectures and articles, the problem with behaviorism as a theory isn't that it's wrong but that it's right!

In a coercive societal environment, human beings do indeed give up our humanness — our unique capacity for creative activity. Instead, we behave as passive objects which can only be acted upon. This has nothing to do with "brainwashing," by the way, as some self-appointed experts insist. It's the product of societal coercion. Sadly, it is normal behavior. And the more coercive the societal environment, the more likely people are to behave rather than to create.

In human beings, behavior is both the producer and the product of abuse. I'm not just talking about the abuse that's making the headlines these days — child abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence — the kind that causes visible damage and can be reported as a crime. I'm talking here about abusive behavior that's less extreme — that is, it doesn't leave any marks — and for this very

reason is in some ways more pernicious. It's often imperceptible to the naked eye, or ear, so many people tend not to see or hear it for what it is. Thousands of small brutal acts are perpetrated day in and day out by people who "honestly" can't see that they're being abusive to people who "honestly" can't see that they're being abused. I call this Abusive Behavior Syndrome.

From the vantage point of the social therapeutic approach, the only way to stop Abusive Behavior Syndrome is to stop behavior. Social therapy does not try to help people to "modify" their behavior. Rather, we help people to break out of their socially overdetermined behavior patterns and to become the active creators of their lives.

You see, it is as much in our nature as human beings to perform creatively as to behave. Behavior is what **all** other living things do. As far as anyone has been able to tell, it's all they can do. Beavers, for example, do many interesting things. But they don't write, produce and direct theatrical pieces. What I am calling performance — the conscious activity of producing how we are in the world — is unique to our species. While behavior is dehumanizing, performance is developmental.

Remember the man in Chapter 1 who could, at the very moment he was about to hit his wife, do something "a little bit" different and take her hand instead?

His awareness that he could — not necessarily would — stop behaving raises the issue of how he's living his life. I'm not some authority figure who's saying to him, in the name of Morality (with a capital *M*) or Humanity (with a capital *H*), that "in theory" he could stop. I'm saying: "You can do another thing right now! You can be something other than a prefabricated, mass-produced product of the male role! These societal roles are not all that's available to us. Let's turn your life into a play that you direct! Don't just change this behavior — this line, or this scene — create a whole new life!"

From the social therapeutic point of view, in fact, the thing that's least likely to change is particular behavior. Behavior modification — a highly coercive technique to help people stop doing all kinds of things from drinking to smoking cigarettes to "overeating" — has been a conspicuous failure.

What's most possible in those moments of acute self-awareness is to transform your entire life. You can say to yourself — Wait a minute! Who am I?

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Practice performing your life:

The next time you find yourself in
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What am I doing with my life? I must be engaged in a profound denial of my humanness to behave in this way. It has nothing to do with any decision I ever made about the kind of human being I want to be. Where am I in deciding what my life is about? I don't have to live that way. I can transform my life!

This small moment, which can lead you to change everything, has to happen many times throughout the day, every day. It has to be your moment-to-moment life experience, your life performance.

EXERCISE:

Practice performing your life:

The next time you find yourself in a familiar situation (visiting your family, taking a coffee break with your co-workers, being at the movies with your Saturday night date), don't behave — perform!