

Learning to work in a difficult relational context

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The nursing profession is one where professional relationships can be difficult at times. Whether it is with patients, colleagues, those in authority or with other members of the multidisciplinary team, relationships are not always harmonious. At times they are delicate, even problematic. And whatever our role in the health care system, whether we are administrators, team leaders or caregivers, human relationships, whether difficult or simply dissatisfying, end up by affecting us. It is thus important to better understand the phenomenon of human interactions and grasp its influence on our own behaviour, our happiness at work and on the productivity of individuals and groups.

Difficult human relations

- In addition to the difficulties we experience in the workplace, difficult interpersonal relationships are supplementary stress factors.
- We are all responsible for the climate in our work environment.
- If we cannot change others, we must change ourselves.
- We must learn to:
 - affirm ourselves without hurting others;
 - maintain our self-esteem.
- Under certain circumstances, it is important to protect oneself by keeping a certain distance.

In the context of a personnel shortage, the constant rise of absenteeism at work and the increasing number of cases of burnout among the nursing staff, it is normal to seek organisational solutions and even behavioural responses adapted to demotivating situations. It is well known that the nursing profession is one with a high level of stress especially in the units where the caregivers are confronted with very sick patients or where care depends on complex technology which requires rapidity of action and a high degree of responsibility. But these are not the only units where the work wears us down, everywhere, the proximity of suffering, death or powerlessness in the face of chronic illness creates a difficult work context.

Studies on burnout also mention several causal factors which are of an organisational nature such overloaded work schedules, rigid time-tables, obligatory overtime, under utilisation of nurses' competencies, difficulties reconciling work and family and the undervaluation of care giving. But tense human relationships are also often evoked concerning our interactions with colleagues, supervisors, or members of the

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multidisciplinary team. Thus, apprehensions of committing an error as well as the fear of negative comments or feedback from our supervisors are causes of constant tension². In stressful situations, the tension between people often becomes palpable: irritability, disagreeable remarks and even conflicts arise.

Unfortunately, organisational factors are not under an individual's control and should be envisaged at a higher level of decision-making, but human relationships can be modified in order to diminish the burden of anxiety, stress and nervous fatigue which they inflict and which are borne by the caregivers.

Instructive theories

In the face of these difficulties we must seek ways of helping ourselves. Coping strategies are practices which arm the nurse against the assaults of professional burnout. It is a mechanism of adaptation which applies to various life situations. *Dicopsy* defines coping as "the process by which an individual faced with a problematic situation seeks to adapt"³. The term signifies "to succeed in dealing with difficult situations or problems". *Lazarus and Folkman* describe it as the combined cognitive and behavioural efforts that an individual deploys in order to respond to demands which they consider as going beyond their adaptive resources⁴. They are strategies that the person interposes between themselves and the threatening situations, in order to master, tolerate or diminish the impact on their physical and psychological well-being.

The autotelic personality

However, there are people who are more resilient in difficult circumstances. Some are even stimulated by stress. They possess what *Csikszentmihalyi* (pronounced chick-saint-me-eye-ee), one of the founders of positive psychology (1990, 2006) calls the *autotelic personality*⁵. This term, derived from the Greek "*auto*" which means "*oneself*" and "*teli*" which means "*end or finality*", describes an activity which brings intrinsic gratification.

Thus, subjects who possess an *autotelic* personality live their life experiences to the full. Via an intense personal investment even in difficult situations which they envisage as challenges, they find themselves motivated to act despite the difficulties, which are thus transformed into gratifying experiences. It is what the author calls *optimal experiences*. In conclusion, for these persons stress is beneficial rather than destructive.

². FIIQ. *Soigner sans se crever*

http://www.fiqsante.qc.ca/documents_publications/documents/sst2001_f.pdf

³. Dicopsy, *Dictionnaire de psychologie* : <http://www.dicopsy.com/coping.htm>

⁴. Lazarus R, et R. Launier (1978). *Stress-related transactions between persons and environment*, in L.A. Pervin et M. Lewis (1982). Eds, *Perspectives in international psychology*, New York, Plenum, p. 287-327

⁵. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2006). *Mieux vivre*. Paris Pocket.

Csikszentmihalyi, the author of a psychology of happiness, explains that an intense investment, an innate motivation to ardently pursue a task, gives meaning to what we do. He calls “*flow*” these moments of grace when we give the best of ourselves. *Flow* implies a feeling of serenity, freedom, like the flow of a tranquil river. But this term may also become the allegory of a spontaneous surge from a source, a gush of creativity. It is a state of intense concentration, total absorption in a task which even enables us to modify our state of consciousness and helps us to transcend difficulties to the point that our perception of time is altered.

We forget the hours which pass and the efforts furnished. This state confers a feeling of fluidity, ease, self-confidence and competence in the face of the work to be accomplished or the situation which needs to be managed. And for Csikszentmihalyi, thus transforms routine to pleasure, enabling us to invest intensely in each moment and rendering our existence much more pleasant. An activity becomes *autotelic* when the pleasure one takes in doing the task becomes more important than its objective^{6, 7}. For example for us nurses, it might be the happiness of being with our patients, making them feel better becomes more important than the immediate goals of the treatment or the details of its organisation.

This theory which is the fruit of three decades of research demonstrates that total and dynamic engagement in what we do procures a feeling of plenitude and joy which diminishes difficulties and stimulates creativity.

This positive and energizing perception is produced when an activity requires deep concentration demanding all our attention. It makes us forget the frustrations and the efforts required and are perceived as a challenge which can be met. It is stimulated by a well-structured task whose sense we understand and when the attainment of a precise objective is probable. According to the author, the persons absorbed in an *autotelic* activity, who abandons themselves entirely to their work are less vulnerable to fatigue and professional disenchantment.

The locus of control

But it is also very important to conserve a sense of *control* over what we are doing. We all need to feel that we exercise certain mastery over our lives and over the situations which we experience, in summary, that

The locus of control: what is predominant in your life?

- Control can be :
 - *Internal*, when it depends on the person, their capacities, behaviours, and decisions. The person perceives a direct relationship between their degree of performance, their decisions and the results of their actions.
 - *External*, when it depends on the decisions of others or of external events such as chance, destiny, fate, or an all-powerful being.

Julian Rotter, 1966, in Susanne Kaiser (2006) Stress: analyse, intervention, maitrise. Université de Genève, 2006 : <http://www.asso-etud.unige.ch/adepsy/doc/cours4.pdf>

⁶. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Flow: *The psychology of optimal experience*. N-Y.: Harper and Row.

⁷. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2006). *Mieux vivre*. Paris, Pocket.

we are the masters of our professional activity. In order to do this, our decisions must come from within us, a *locus of internal control* and not be entirely controlled from the

The hardy personality

- According to Kobasa, the characteristics of a hardy personality are:
- **Engagement**, that is:
 - The capacity to involve oneself in one's work or activity;
 - Stability and mastery of our actions;
 - Self-actualization in human relationships;
 - Positive acceptance of the daily tasks of our work;
 - Heightened sense of our responsibilities;
 - Satisfactory level of autonomy;
- **Control** which reflects self-mastery and the capacity to personally intervene in the events and not to feel alienated;
- **Challenge** which is the capacity of the person to engage themselves with confidence in a situation, as if before a battle but without the notion of threat
- The challenge also includes a certain anticipation of success and self-fulfillment.

Source : S.C. Kobasa, S.R. Maddi et M.C. Pucetti (1982). Personality and exercise as buffers in the stress-illness relationship. *Journal of behavioral medicine*. 5 (4), 391, 404.

outside. These conditions clearly give us information on the context which is favourable for the equilibrium of caregivers as well as on the climate in our institutions which may be harmful. The *demand/control* approach of *Carasek and Theorell* provides evidence that in order to respond to the demands of work a certain amount of control is necessary⁸. An autonomous person is generally more efficient in their work.

The support of the milieu

Johnson, another researcher interested in stress in the workplace, added a third criterion to *Carasek and Theorell's scale* that is, *the support, both emotional and informational, of the milieu*.⁹ This last element

Demand and control: effects on stress

There are four possible situations:

- 1. High demand + maximal external control = high efficiency and a high level of stress.
- 2. High demand + a certain level of autonomy = good efficiency and less stress which is easier to cope with.
- 3. Low demand + important external control and a low level of autonomy = work which is un motivating, stress due to authoritarianism.
- 4. Low demand + an important level of autonomy and control = passive work, low stress level sometimes due to a lack of organization.

KARASEK, R., THEORELL, T. [1990], *Healthy Work : stress, productivity, and the reconstruction of the working life*, Philadelphia, Basic Books.

⁸. R. Karasek et T. Theorell (1990). *Healthy Work : stress, productivity, and the reconstruction of the working life*. Philadelphia, Basic Books.

⁹. J.V. Johnson, M. Hall E et T. Theorell (1989). *Combined effects of job strain and social isolation on cardiovascular disease morbidity and mortality in a random sample of the Swedish male working population*, *Scand J. Work Environ. Health*, 1989, 15 : 271 - 279

demonstrates the importance of well-understood team work where the caregiver can recharge their batteries and find stimulation, comfort, and help both in the face of emotional and professional difficulties, and by this means diminish stress and its consequences¹⁰.

Stress and personality in the workplace

■ **Caractéristiques :**

- Type A : impatient, sentiment of urgency, multiple projects, highly productive, competitive, demanding of self and others = difficult, at times conflictual, relationships at work. Risk of hypertension and cardiac problems.
- Type C : interiorizes chronic stress, outwardly calm but highly anxious with respect to their work, discouragement = at times difficult work relationships and tendency towards depression.
- Type B : A balance between A and C = harmonious work relationships, copes well with stress.

Previous studies, which are just as pertinent, broach the problem of disenchantment and professional burnout from the point of view of the personality of the subject. *Kobasa et al.* (1979) refer to **hardy** personalities for whom stress is an incitement to action. They define this personality by three attributes which transform stressful situations into “*eustress*” that is, into

an agreeable and beneficial stress. The characteristics of these personalities are:

- **Engagement**, that is the determination to invest oneself in the work which needs to be done, to become self-absorbed in an activity, to enhance the value of human relationships, to manifest a positive acceptance of the activities, the current routines of the work and autonomy of action;
- **Control** leads us back to self-mastery and the capacity to personally intervene on the events and the tasks;

Some useful strategies

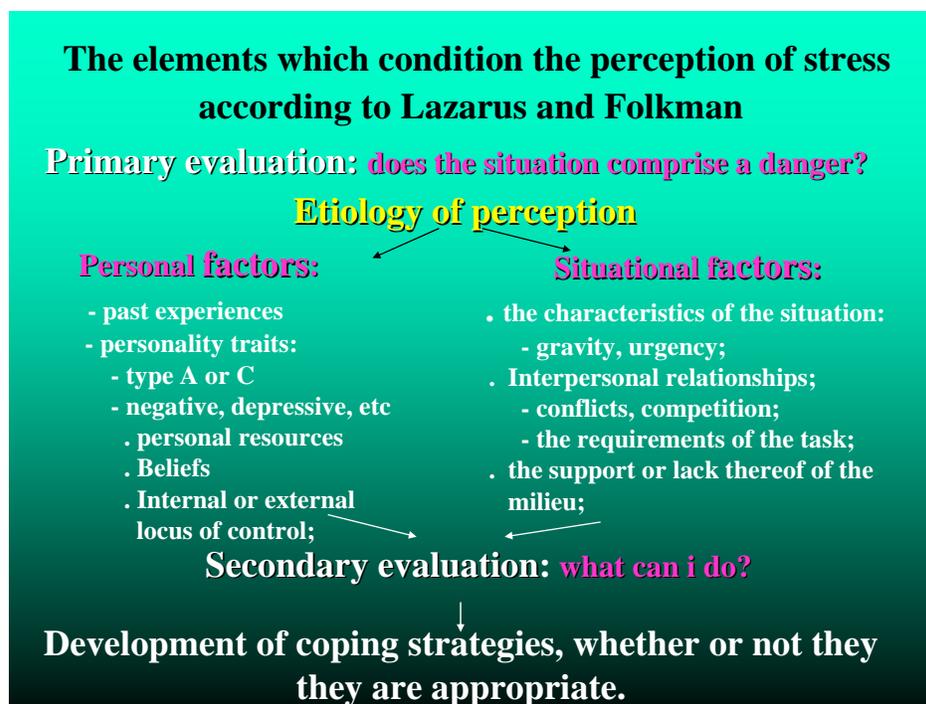
- In order to manage harmful stress at work we should:
- Adopt coping strategies;
- Pursue autotelic activities: the timeless “flow”;
- Conserve a locus of internal control;
- Develop a “hardy” personality;
- Manage the risks inherent to our personality if type A or C;
- Seek social solutions: emotional or informational.

¹⁰. Margot Phaneuf. *Teamwork with Patients: Resource or Sufferings?* : [Infiressources](http://www.infiressources.ca/fer/Depotdocument_anglais/Teamwork_with_Patients_Resource_or_Suffering.pdf). Professional Crossroad, section Care Management : http://www.infiressources.ca/fer/Depotdocument_anglais/Teamwork_with_Patients_Resource_or_Suffering.pdf

- **Challenge** means the capacity of the person to engage themselves with confidence in a situation as if before a challenge, an incitement to battle. It also harbours a certain anticipation of success and self-fulfillment^{11, 12}. Here we come close to the characteristics of the preceding approaches.

For several of these authors, whether it be *Csikszentmihalyi* or *Kobasa et al.*, the most important elements which bring a sense to our professional activities and consequently which reinforce our defences against professional burnout are: self-esteem which fuels our action, motivation which nourishes our sentiment of competency, and clear objectives.

Coping and the personality



The efficacy of the coping methods which we adopt depends mostly on becoming aware of the resources which we use to confront our difficulties. For example, to realize that our sense of humour relaxes us and enables us to face up to our

relational difficulties, that our professional competence enables us to find solutions to the various problems which crop up at work or that our capacity for self-assertion helps us in difficult relational situations, giving us self-confidence. All these constitute, in a way, a protective shield.

¹¹. S.C. Kobasa, S.R. Maddi et M.C. Pucetti (1982). *Personality and exercise as buffers in the stress-illness relationship*. Journal of behavioral medicine. 5 (4), 391, 404.

¹². S.C. Kobasa, S.R. Maddi et S.Khan (1982). *Hardiness and Health: a prospective study*. Journal of personality and social Psychology. 42 (1), 168-177.

But it is also important to be realistic with respect to ourselves and our personality. For example, if we are a type “A” personality thriving on stress and ambition, our enthusiasm, our strong sense of competitiveness and our feeling of urgency can fool us¹³. Here, it is the “*interactionnist*” theory developed by the cardiologists *Friedman and Rosenman* in the 70’s that we must evoke. It posits the interaction between the characteristics of the person, and the requirements of the work and its consequences on health¹⁴.

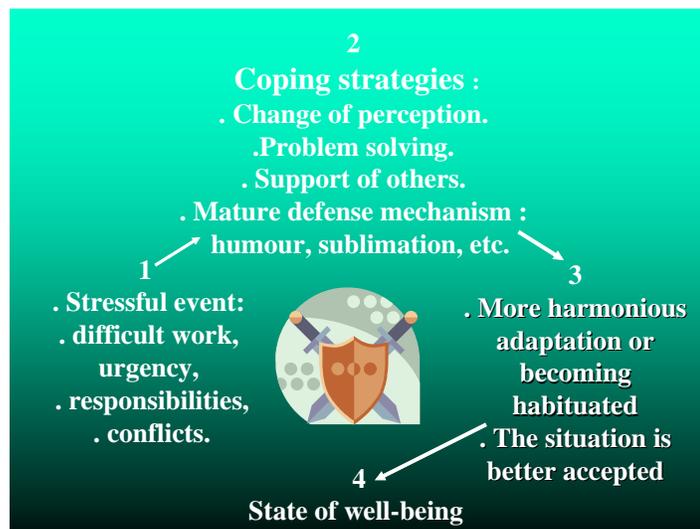
Developing appropriate strategies

Faced with adversity, we can react in different ways: for example, when things are going badly or when we feel overwhelmed, confiding in someone in whom we have confidence can relieve our tension and often, enables us to benefit from their counsel or their comfort. But it can also happen that faced with a difficult situation, when we are unable to cope, bombarded on all sides by the requirements of our job, we keep ruminating over our difficulties and our setbacks, for example replaying the recalcitrant illness of a patient or the disobliging comments of a colleague. These sad ruminations do not at all help the process of adapting; they only amplify our disappointment and further entrench us in our feeling of inadequacy.

It is possible to cultivate coping strategies which are more appropriate. Generally speaking, we succeed in adapting to a problematic situation if we can act upon it or get used to it. It is by finding a balance between these two extremes that we can find the means of avoiding a burnout¹⁵.

Does the pressure of stress originate from external sources or an interior individual perception?

We have all heard of the work of *Selye* on stress, but it is to *Richard Lazarus* (1984) that we owe a psychological explanation which demonstrates that stress is not entirely due to easily discernible external etiological agents but also includes the phenomenon of individual



¹³. Moyle, P. (1995). *The role of negative affectivity in the stress process: tests of alternative models*. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 16, 647-668.

¹⁴. Éliane Ferragut (2005). *Émotions et traumatismes. Le corps et la parole*. Paris, Masson, p. 14.

¹⁵. Margot Phaneuf. *L'épuisement professionnel : perdre son âme pour gagner sa vie*. Infiressources, Carrefour professionnel, Section Profession : http://www.infiressources.ca/fer/depotdocuments/L_epuisement_professionnel_perdre_son_ame_pour_gagner%20sa_vie.pdf

perception which may be even more important than the stress-causing agent itself. The reason is that human beings are not passive in any given situation. They seek to give it meaning according to the circumstances and according to the personality of the person or their physical or emotional state at that moment.

As a result the person selects certain information, often that which is negative and loses sight of the rest, often more constructive. It is the phenomenon of *the treatment of information* which refers us back to personal elements as stress factors. The definition of *Jacques Larue* is enlightening. He defines this as a psychological state arising from the perception of an imbalance between the perceived expectations and a self-evaluation of one's own capacity to meet the requirements of the task¹⁶.

Developing one's self-assurance

- Express your feelings: you also have rights. If someone annoys or hurts you, you should let them know. (communication using the first person singular: I feel such and such...)
- Be honest. State your opinion by giving it form: "I have some reservations about this idea..." "What you are telling me poses a problem for me..."
- Don't let yourself be intimidated. Even under pressure, stay steadfast but respond with diplomacy. E.g. "I'm sorry, but I can't..."



According to *Lazarus and Folkman* (1984), when we are faced with a professional requirement or an interpersonal problem, we unconsciously proceed with a cognitive evaluation of the situation (primary evaluation) and then move onto a subjective evaluation (secondary evaluation) where we appraise our capacity to do what is required of us. At that moment, we will opt for a strategy which will help us to deal with the situation. When we believe that we are able to cope

with or get used to a situation, it becomes less harmful. But, in the opposite event, stress overwhelms us. *Marcus Aurelius* wrote a long time ago, that it is not external events or circumstances which cause us pain but rather the idea that we make of them.

According to *Lazarus and Folkman*, the negative reaction to stress is a result of several factors such as the personality, the psychological state, especially depression, the physical condition, past experiences, the level of confidence that we have in our own capacities and our beliefs with respect to this situation and even our sense of humour. These factors vary from one person to the other and they

Learn to say no

- With difficult people who are always making demands or soliciting our services, we must learn to say no in an affirmative manner and without feeling guilty.
- An affirmative no and a short explanation are sufficient. You don't need to defend yourself.
- This attitude generates respect.
- People who are sure of themselves don't dominate others and don't let themselves be dominated.



¹⁶. Christine, Le Scanff et Jean Bertsch (1995). *Stress et performance*. Paris: PUF

nourish our manner of interpreting the difficulty which confronts us. This is what explains that under the same conditions of professional stress some caregivers suffer from professional burnout whereas others don't.

Coping strategies

According to *Lazarus and Folkman*, the strategies that we develop in these situations can:

- Center on the **problem** with actions aimed at the source of the stress. These include: confronting the difficulty; using **strategies of problem resolution**; seeking more information; applying known methods; or a better organisation of the action.
- Use **avoidance**, or fleeing from the difficulty which may be necessary when faced with situations which we cannot change;
- Aim for adaptive strategies centered on the **emotions**. Stress is thus diminished by a **change in perception, a reframing** of its cause. For example, our bad-natured colleague can be seen as a tired or eccentric person; a protesting patient as someone who is suffering; and a demanding supervisor as a worried boss. This modification of our perceptions bears a conscious cognitive component and a somewhat unconscious emotional component which acts on our reaction to stress. This reframing renders the situation more supportable.
- **Diminish our own reactivity** to difficult situations by recourse to techniques such as relaxation, yoga, and mediation etc.¹⁷.
- Seek to distance ourselves from our sad, depreciating emotions and dedramatize our difficulties through the use of **humour**¹⁸.

Our defense mechanisms

The anticipation of stress underlain by anxiety and fear also has a negative effect on the person in that it predisposes them to a reaction which is most often negative. In understanding this phenomenon, one must not neglect the importance of the **defense mechanisms** that one has developed in the face of difficult situations. The first is often **denial** of the difficulty. Rather than evaluating it for what it's worth, the person prefers to deny it or act as if it did not exist. **Intellectualisation** and **sublimation**

Keep one's composure

Develop your capacity to stay calm even when you feel irritated or disappointed and even if the situation justifies it. It is a powerful weapon.

Manifesting negative emotions doesn't help to solve problems, rather it risks provoking conflict or an increase in frustration.



¹⁷. Phaneuf, Margot. *Defense Mechanisms among Our Students* www.infiressources.ca, Clinical Crossroad, section Mental Health and Communication.

http://www.infiressources.ca/fer/Depotdocument_anglais/Defense_Mechanisms_among_Our_Students.pdf

¹⁸. **Stress** : <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stress>

are also means of dealing with the situation by controlling one's emotions via a rational explanation or a transfer to higher values.

Attributing the problem to someone else by *projection* is also an easy defence mechanism to fall into in these situations. And certain people develop a *passive-aggressive behaviour* which makes them difficult to deal with. However, these mechanisms are unconscious and do not favour the development of appropriate coping behaviour, for these strategies are effective only if they enable the person to diminish the impact of stress on their physical or psychological well-being¹⁹. And even if a state of serenity is obtained, it should not cloud their contact with reality, nor diminish their capacity to function.

Learning to cope with difficult people

As we have seen, relationships in the workplace can be an important source of harmful stress. In addition to the requirements of our jobs, demanding time-tables, the proximity of suffering and death, and friction within our work teams are the causes of dissatisfaction and even of tension, and this is on top of the other causes of nervousness and tiredness. Interpersonal

conflicts concerning the organisation of health care, inequality in the effort furnished by other members of the team, absenteeism or lateness of certain individuals, are not rare. We must thus learn to work with difficult, even daunting, people and develop strategies which favour better relationships and avoid relationships which are too hurtful. In order to do this some behaviours are more appropriate than others.

Behaviours and attitudes to develop

Ros Jay in his book, *Travailler avec des personnes difficiles*, provides some interesting possibilities²⁰. But one must first issue a few words of warning:

Don't be afraid to broach the subject

- When the problem persists, broaching the subject is necessary.
- Choose an appropriate moment (when you are feeling calm and there is sufficient time), a favourable location (privacy), plan your intervention: attitude, arguments.
- Avoid expressing value judgements and saying hurtful things.
- Broach the subject from the point of view of your own perception (communication using the first person singular) or from the point of view of your work. E.g. "I feel hurt when you answer like that..." or "I have trouble doing my work when..."

¹⁹. Gérard Ribes. *Coping et stratégies d'adaptation* :

<http://recherche.univ-lyon2.fr/lab-psd/IMG/pdf/coping-strategiesM1.pdf>

²⁰. Jay Ross (2004). *Travailler avec des personnes difficiles*. Paris, Village Mondial, Pearson Education.

- Respect for others is the basic rule to follow in all human relationships.
- Difficult people either cannot or do not wish to change their personality.
- But if they would like to, and if our attitude favours this, they can modify the behaviour which causes problems. Appropriate reactions on our part can help them to improve themselves.
- Acceptance of the other is the first step toward a change in difficult relationships.
- One must realise that trying to force the other to change only creates frustration and anger.
- Basically, since we cannot change others, we must change ourselves.
- It is often useful to reframe, trying to see the person in a different light. They may then simply appear as different and our level of tolerance increases.
- Develop self-criticism by looking at our own behaviour. Are we obsessed by order, stubborn in our opinions, rigid in our judgements?
- Understand that others do not see the need to change any more than we do.
- In our interventions, avoid value judgements such as “You’re always leaving things lying around”. Use formulations in the first person singular, such as: “I find it annoying when things are not in order since I cannot find what I am looking for”.
- Reduce our expectations of others because:
 - Expecting less enables us not to be disappointed;
 - The person is less frustrated and becomes more adaptable;
 - They have the impression that they are more competent, which reinforces their self-esteem and makes them easier to get along with;
 - They feel that they are accepted and are ready to make more effort;
 - A friendly discussion may then enable an exchange of viewpoints and subsequent change;
 - The two people are thus more apt to share their tasks equally.
- Manifest self-confidence.

But we must understand that in order to modify a situation, one must be able to affirm oneself and not to have too many illusions, for if the difficult person were dissatisfied with their behaviour, they would probably have changed by now. One must keep in mind that perhaps they are happier like that or that they may fear being otherwise? Manifesting assurance is not necessarily being authoritative; it is based on considering others as equals which includes recognizing our right, as a person, to be treated as equal.

Staying calm is also a powerful means of influencing others. Although this is not always easy, it is often more effective than argumentation or anger. Moreover, it enables us to keep our cool in the face of decisions which need to be taken.

Another behaviour which is recommended is *active listening*. This is a win-win technique which is useful to diminish aggressiveness or to face demands to which we cannot acquiesce. It consists of listening to the person and reflecting their words by repeating them. In this way they feel that they are being heard and respected and are thus better disposed to collaborate. After this process, when the person has calmed down, it is

possible to discuss the problem with confidence and firmness. Here is an example of active listening with a colleague.

The angry colleague: “I got a raw deal because you neglected to look after the problem of the time-table for the holidays”.

Response: “Did you find it unjust that the problem was not discussed?”

The angry colleague: “Yes, this is a big problem for me and you don’t seem to realize it”.

Response: “You say that this is a big problem for you and you think that I don’t realize it. On the contrary, I would like to discuss it with you.”

One must not forget that we may also be part of the problem and that we must look at ourselves and develop self-criticism. We may be surprised by what we see. The signs to watch for in our own behaviour are: an aggressive tone of voice, severe facial expression, interrupting the conversation of others, curt questions, bitter discussions, threats, value judgements, rejecting the opinions of others, awkward communications, the need to always be right, fear of change or being too competitive, perfectionism, lack of attention to the ideas of others, their difficulties, their suffering or simply their presence.

Difficult behaviours

In relationships at work, certain persons may present disturbing behaviours which may catch us off-guard. On the spur of the moment, we often react in an inappropriate manner because we do not know how to behave in order to avoid these problems. In the face of difficult situations, we must reflect on ways to respond which are more appropriate without creating conflicts and without diminishing ourselves, either. Moreover, certain behaviours can open the door to potential changes. This is what *Ros Jay* proposes.

Emotional blackmail

One of the most difficult behaviours to deal with in the workplace is *emotional blackmail*. This is a manoeuvre which aims to profit from the vulnerability or the sensitivity of others to gain our own ends. The major strategy consists of causing regret or guilt in the others or by making them feel responsible for certain unfortunate

Emotional blackmail

- This is a weapon often used to manipulate, to play on someone’s feelings in order to get them to do what we want.
- It doesn’t work well on those who are self-assured, they are not taken in by this behaviour.
- One must:
 - . Identify it when you feel guilty about saying no;
 - . Avoid justifying yourself for you are not guilty
 - . Even if you feel torn, pretend indifference;
 - . Manifest self-assurance;
 - . Use the broken record technique;
- If necessary say with humour: “Watch out, this is starting to look like emotional blackmail”.



consequences. For example, you may tell colleagues that they haven't done their job well and that an error was committed; they respond by telling you that if you had helped them when they asked you, then they would not have made the mistake. Another colleague asks for your help at a moment when you are not available and when you refuse, answers "I'm always there when you need me". You then feel badly and even feel guilty that you did not acquiesce to the demand. This emotional game is a way of manipulating you in order to have you do what they want.

Emotional blackmail arises from a desire to not take responsibility for one's acts, a desire to complain, to attract pity or to make the other do what otherwise they would not do. It is a devious power; it is manipulation. And it often requires a great deal of effort not to get caught up in the game of emotional blackmail. We must overcome our sentiment of being egotistical, heartless and repress the fear of losing the other's esteem. Certain people are experts in the matter; they know very well how to pull your strings in order to get what they want. This is what gives power to the blackmailer, especially as the requests are rarely explicit. They are most often hidden under evocative non-verbal behaviours such as sighs, a suffering face, or even generalisations such as: "If everyone would do their job, things would go better"; "You're always absent when there are problems".

Susan Forward who has written on the subject, states that manipulators know very well who they can lead "by the nose"²¹. They use your sensitivity to make you feel guilty or render you powerless: they make you understand that it is they who are the victims, abandoned and betrayed. They generally proceed by insinuation and never state a clear request.

The author uses the example of the sick mother who coughs loudly on the phone, speaks with a plaintiff tone and says in an offhand way that she hasn't eaten for the last three days because she is too weak to go shopping. But, she never asks for anything. It is up to her daughter to understand that she should go and do her shopping for her. In the face of emotional blackmail, we

must develop defensive behaviours of counter-manipulation in order not to get caught up. But we must first identify the behaviour. We can suspect its presence when we feel ill at

The hostile silence of sullenness

- **Sulking or sullenness is an immature reaction of those who wish to attract the attention of others and manipulate them.**
- **It is often manifested over small details and makes us feel guilty.**
- **Begin by trying to explain your point of view.**
- **Do not yield to the blackmail; act as if all was normal, by responding "OK, we'll talk about this later, when things are going better".**
- **It's better to demonstrate indifference.**



²¹. Susan Forward (2000). *Le chantage affectif : Quand ceux que nous aimons nous manipulent*. Paris, InterEdition.

ease, when we feel guilty for refusing to do something or when our actions or decisions go against what the blackmailer wants.

The weapon of silence

Hostile silence may be another form of manipulation. It is *sulking or sullenness*, a childish behaviour which is in fact psychological violence charged with unexpressed reproaches. *Dicopsy* defines this silence as an aggressive manifestation characterised by sullen behaviour and an obstinate refuge in silence. It is the confession of powerlessness of a weak adult. Sullenness recalls the frustrated child who sulks²². It is a paradoxical refusal to communicate which reveals a great deal about the intentions of its author. It is a non-verbal expression of discontent where aggressiveness becomes a weapon in order to guilt trip, punish and eventually hurt the other.

Certain more **aggressive sulkers** use silence to control others whereas the more **defensive** ones sulk as a rampart against narcissistic hurts, against the fear of being rejected or to hide their fear of a direct confrontation with someone else or their fear of expressing their anger.

Hostile silence has enormous repercussions on interpersonal relationships. It is first of all detrimental to the one who expresses it, for brooding silent anger is, like all forms of negativism, harmful and causes tension. It also makes the person who is the object of the silence feel very insecure and guilty, even when they don't know why they are faced with this distant and malevolent attitude. Sulking in its early stages may be no more than "a child on strike", as *Jules Renard* called it but it may also degenerate into real conflict²³.



Behind this behaviour is hidden a certain **anger**. As Marshall B. Rosenberg has written, *anger* is an alarm signal because at the heart of all anger, there is a need²⁴. In order not to create a gulf between ourselves and those who sulk, we must seek to understand their needs. Do they seek recognition through a desire to always be right, to be noticed? Is their pride hurt? One can then attempt a candid discussion by demonstrating in a straightforward manner our own point of view. But one should not forget to identify what this immature behaviour provokes in us and express it in the first person singular. Above all, we must not yield to this form of blackmail which creates enormous pressure and is not at all constructive²⁵.

²². Dicopsy. *Bouderie* : <http://www.dicopsy.com/bouderie.htm>

²³. Jules Renard (2002). *Journal*. Paris, Robert Laffont

²⁴. Marshall B. Rosenberg (1999). *Les mots sont des fenêtres ou des murs*. *Introduction à la communication non-violente*. Saint-Julien-en-Genevois, France, Jouvence Éditions, p. 147-151.

²⁵. Image. <http://www.musiks-eyes.com/>

Anger

Anger

- Always try to avoid responding to anger by anger. It only makes things worse.
 - Take a deep breathe to keep calm.
 - Try to identify the emotion that the other's anger elicits in us and express it calmly and firmly, using the first person singular.
 - Never let anyone yell at you when they are speaking to you. You might say: "I don't like being shouted at. I am going to leave if this continues."
 - If the shouting continues, leave by saying e.g. "Excuse me, but I must leave you now."
- You must behave like this every time the other starts.



Anger is an emotion which arises in response to a frustration, an injustice or a perceived or real wound. It serves to affirm oneself and to preserve one's physical, psychological or social integrity. It can be

expressed with various intensities from annoyance to fury and can take various forms. Revolt expresses a sentiment of injustice; rage manifests powerlessness, whereas contempt may be a form of vengeance.

In general, the feeling of anger is felt when we identify an dissatisfaction, a need, a lack, an aggression which mobilises the instinct of survival and solicits our physical response. In this instance we speak of blind anger or to be livid with anger. This intense emotion prepares us for one of our basic reactions of defence which is to fight (the other being flight) for which it furnishes the energy. It is accompanied by physiological changes: our cardiac rhythm and arterial pressure increase and the increased levels of adrenalin warn our brain of a menace which requires a reaction.

The evident changes in our facial features indicate its intensity: features become rigid in an expression of intense tension and our look becomes severe. This defence reaction may be healthy as long as it manifests itself in an appropriate manner, for in our modern world the occasions for combat are rather rare. Although there may exist physical danger, most often anger mounts as a result of a wound to our self-esteem. It is even possible to assist in an escalation which can rapidly degenerate into violence with deplorable consequences.

But what is most frequent is what *Edith Tartar-Goddet* calls **symbolic violence** which has to do with the small acts of violence suffered or acted out daily²⁶. They undermine the

²⁶. Édith Tartar-Goddet (2001). *Savoir gérer les violences du quotidien*. Paris, Retz, p. 14.

ties which exist between human beings living in a group and which have been forged by numerous meetings and exchanges. Symbolic violence may take the form of:

- Indifference to the efforts and difficulties of another;
- The obligation of one person to always adapt themselves to the tastes, desires, etc. of the other;
- Making others unjustly responsible for our problems;
- Ignoring the basic rules of civility (greeting others, excusing oneself, etc.).

The roles that certain people assume

The daily work of nursing, with its organisation in teams, is sometimes the source of difficulties which are linked to the involvement in their work, or lack thereof, of certain caregivers or in their conduct with their colleagues. This gives place to certain personality types that *Ros Jay* identifies²⁷. Those described here are evidently oversimplified

and may appear exaggerated but they help us to understand that certain difficulties in human relationships are “stressogenic” and that we should not let them destroy us. But



The loner

- They are happy to work alone.
- They are rather impenetrable and not very communicative.
- They are more comfortable on the phone or by email.
- They are very individualistic and don't work well in a team.
- They are generally very good workers, so don't make them work with others for very long.
- They can harm team spirit.
- Ask them to help others, coach others in certain techniques that they master or work with younger nurses. It may help them to better integrate the team.

THE DIVA



- The diva believe that they are stars and that they can do or get anything they want.
- They are always seeking the attention of others. At that moment, one must avoid giving them too much attention (make a phone call or get a cup of coffee).
- You should listen to them especially when they are not making a show.
- They tend to be late or flexible with their schedules. If you are the supervisor, don't hesitate to let them know each time.
- Always respond in a calm and factual manner,
- Avoid humiliating them before others, or you will have made an enemy for life.

we don't always stop to reflect on our way of reacting to these stressors and neither do we know how to encourage change.

Whether it is the *diva* who is seeking attention, the *loner* who isolates themselves or other personality types, we must compose with their way of behaving. We must also realise that our behaviour in the face of certain colleagues or persons in authority, may

²⁷. Jay Ross (2004). *Travailler avec des personnes difficiles*. Paris, Village Mondial, Pearson Education

establish a salutary balance in the heart of the team and favour good will and the optimal functioning of all.

The loner

Some nurses are *loners*. They are generally efficient and rapid and are annoyed when others are less efficient. They may also be irritated by the chatter which goes on between caregivers. It may be that they consider themselves above all of this. This may hide a sentiment of superiority. Without forcing them, we should not let them become too isolated. Showing them how much we appreciate their company may incite them to more easily forge closer ties with others. Working in a team should be more than just the juxtaposition of caregivers who work together in the same unit. We should try to create a situation where collaboration can be established.

The dreamers

The dreamer

- **The dreamer is generally less functional. Their lack of attention makes them forgetful and leads to errors.**
- **They are often bored. Make sure that they are always occupied and avoid giving them monotonous tasks.**
- **Giving them occasions for social interaction can help them avoid monotony.**
- **Working with others keeps them alert.**
- **Whenever possible, give them a choice.**
- **Clear objectives or precise indications may help them.**



The *dreamer* is another personality type somewhat less adapted to the precise and rigorous work which characterises the nursing profession. These people are generally pleasant and work well with others, have a need for change in order to be stimulated and supervision in order to better orient their efforts. They work well with colleagues who are

more organized. Dreamers are “star gazers” whose human qualities often compensate for their lack of realism. One must not forget to recognize their qualities.

In a team there may also be *Casanovas* who will do anything to please. The work place is their theatre of action; they are always seeking to seduce. One solution is to have them work with colleagues of the same sex, but that is not always possible. It is easier to be indifferent to their behaviour and to ignore them when they are exercising their seduction. Generally, when they realise that their behaviour has no effect, they stop it. At times an explicit and honest comment or a humorous remark may be useful.

The defeatist

In the workplace, there are also those for whom “*everything is impossible*”. They are the defeatists who often say that they cannot do such and such a thing. For them, everything is an obstacle or a difficulty, don’t ask them anything that is not routine. They always have a good excuse for refusing and “let’s not change anything” is their leitmotif. In the face of their stubbornness to maintain the status quo, pretend that there is nothing to it and try again; one usually wears them down in the long run. Humour may sometimes dissipate their objections.

The tyrant

The person who plays the *tyrant* is another type of problem personality in our workplaces. Whatever their role, be it caregiver, supervisor or a member of another profession, their behaviour disturbs all their colleagues. The situation is more delicate when they are our immediate supervisor as our recourse is much more limited. Luckily, in extreme cases there are legal means and one should not be afraid to

denounce certain abuses which may go as far as harassment. One must keep in mind that the tyrant is not necessarily a boss. There are also colleagues who play this role. Calmness and firmness on our part does not solve everything but gives less purchase for their harassment. Someone said with humour that “the best way to keep predators away is to taste bad”.

The tyrant

- This personality is domineering and chooses weaker or younger people in order to exercise their authority over them
- They can use intimidation, constant criticism and even harassment.
- You must never permit a person to dominate another; you must protect them.
- A good strategy is to stay calm and respond honestly without letting yourself be put down.
- The tyrant is often angry towards those who are weaker.
- Don’t pay them too much attention. They will perhaps realise that they are being ridiculous.
- In extreme cases, have recourse to mediation or lodge a formal complaint.



The disparager

- The disparager likes to put people down, criticise them behind their backs and makes insidious and hurtful remarks in the presence of others.
- Avoid giving them reasons to criticise and don’t confide in them.
- Neither should one appear to submit to them.
- It is best just to ignore their remarks.
- If they do it again, answer firmly, calmly and with dignity by reestablishing the facts.

The disparager

The disparager is also a type of tyrant and acts ruthlessly much more frequently than we might think. They are skilled in creating trouble in a team and even if we see them coming their insidious influence is none the less harmful. In the face of this type,

being affirmative is effective for they are generally not too brave and easily back down in the face of steadfastness. Firm clarification of the situation may often discourage them for a certain time.

The pessimist

The pessimist

- **The pessimist sees problems everywhere. They always say that things will not work out, that there will be difficulties. They are afraid of risks and failure.**
- **They are defeatists, for what is the point of making an effort when things will just fail.**
- **One must not forget that they are perhaps being realistic and that their fears may prevent errors.**
- **Ask them to explain their point of view rather than letting them just express their negative presumptions.**
- **There is a link between pessimism and individualism.**
- **Remember that negativism is contagious in a team**

The *pessimist* is also difficult to deal with in a team and we must confront them when they demotivate others for their influence can be very destructive. They are a pain to put up with on a daily basis and it sometimes helps to make them realize that they are being negative. Getting them to take something up, to plan a project, to get involved, congratulating them on their success, counterbalances their defeatist attitude in the

face of things. Using humour to point out their black ideas is also an effective means.

The martyr

Another disruptive personality in the workplace is the *martyr* who is always vaunting the work they do. They annoy and make everyone else feel guilty. They also allow themselves to complain about their fatigue and pain due to overwork and the lack of involvement of their colleagues in their work. While giving the impression that they are carrying their cross they are very competitive and are always seeking to do better than others. In serious cases, it is possible to make them realise that they should be more realistic as far as their behaviour and their effect on others is concerned by bringing up the problem in a calm and honest manner without hurting their feelings.

The martyr

- **They take on too much and are always complaining in order to guilt trip others. According to them, they always work more than others.**
- **They are stressed out and stress others out. They lack self-confidence and hope to prove their worth to themselves and to others.**
- **Encourage them to take breaks and holidays.**
- **Tell them privately that you are worried about them.**
- **One can also tell them that they have a negative influence on the others but one must do this delicately because they are very sensitive.**



The complainer

The martyr is often also a **complainer**, which is another personality type that it is difficult to put up with. They are always finding things to complain about and they often speak on behalf of other members of the group. They are conscientious and at times they effectively denounce real problems. Consulting them before making certain decisions, especially where they are concerned, is a good tactic. Thus they will “complain” less. It is often necessary to orient them towards solutions rather than towards problematic situations that they can criticise. Reflecting back their behaviour humorously is also sometimes effective.

The overly sensitive

The **overly sensitive** is another type of complainer who gets hurt and gets angry over nothing. They are hyper sensitive. With them one is always on one’s guard and one has to be careful of what one says. But we mustn’t let them take up all the space to the detriment of others. Their ill-timed whining is annoying and using humour as a mirror may be useful. At times, a calm and honest talk provides a more durable solution.

The overly sensitive

- They take everything seriously, as a criticism or an insult. It is difficult for them to be objective.
- Always be on your guard not to hurt their feelings, especially in the presence of others.
- If you must comment, make sure that it is clearly understood that you are commenting about their work and not about them. E.g. “I am concerned about your reports, they are ...”
- Underline their strong points, especially in front of others. You can also confront them and try to make them realise that they see criticism where there is none and that at times, a remark may be justified.

The know it all

The know it all is also difficult to put up with. They are forever giving instructions and driving everyone crazy and often succeed in undermining the confidence of others. Basically, they lack confidence in themselves and seek to prove their capacity to themselves. One should listen to them but neither more nor less than one would listen to anyone else. Recognizing their knowledge and expertise may facilitate relations with them but we should not forget to acknowledge at the same time the participation of all the others. One should not let them take all the credit for what is accomplished.

The aggressive or hostile personality

The **aggressive or hostile personality** is also a pest in a team. They “freak out” over nothing and create a climate of fear. They are often persons who have been hurt and are overly sensitive but we cannot let them constantly dominate others for fear of their next explosion. We must remember that people occupy the place that we let them.

Thus while avoiding provoking these vehement persons; we must not let them rule the roost. It is at times difficult to oppose someone who is aggressive but yielding is not the solution either. We always have the right to express what we think and feel. But we should chose the moment and the way to do it. The response in the “first person singular” is a method adapted for an honest and calm expression of our emotions.

The hostile personality

- **They think and act rapidly and get on their high horse easily, but essentially they lack self-assurance and need to receive recognition and power.**
- **They criticise others in order to feel superior.**
- **You should recognize their merits, remain calm and not be impressed by them.**
- **If need be, tell them delicately how you feel by communicating using the first person singular.**
- **Make them understand the necessity of good will between all the members of the team. A sense of humour is useful.**



Conclusion

Certain disruptive behaviours are almost inherent in our relations in society because of the many different personalities which make it up. But we should try to achieve harmonious relationships in order to make our work in a team as pleasant and as functional as possible. However, we must realise that interpersonal tensions are factors of stress which add to the other factors contributing to professional burnout.

Work is a means of self-fulfillment, but only when it is performed under good conditions. It is also pertinent to interest ourselves in the interactions that we must necessarily establish with the colleagues in our health team, the multidisciplinary team and even with the supervising authorities. We are all responsible for the relational climate which prevails in our work units. Thus, by being open to others, by benevolent listening, by being willing to help, we are contributing to make it more human and more functional. It is often up to us to take the first step, to reach out, to modify our perceptions, or to overcome our prejudices in order to better accept our colleagues and to find the appropriate responses to their way of being part of a group.

However, these relationships are not always easy and we must find solutions in order to make our human relationships less difficult. While avoiding provocation and an escalation, we must manifest behaviour which preserves our dignity and our self-esteem. The difficulty is to arrive at a balance between too much tolerance and immature intolerance. We can try to better the relational climate with an honest discussion but in extreme cases one must above all protect oneself. The limits of our well-being and our health should never be surpassed. It is better to consider a transfer than a burnout.

The attitudes and the disturbing behaviours examined in this text are accompanied by plausible and functional suggestions. May they inspire those who are undergoing undermining and anxiety-producing stress in their work relationships.

Things to learn

- Learn to :
 - Nourish peace of mind by pleasant thoughts and relax;
 - Quiet the small interior voice of our negative perceptions and prejudices;
 - Cultivate good humour and laughter in order to survive;
 - Reach out to others, be open and willing to help;
 - Know when to say no;
 - Make friends: we all need others.

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