

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## Humble Pie

By: Roger Ramsukh

This is the follow-up article to the November 2018 article [‘Staying buoyant while under attack: Dealing with racism and other personal attacks while supporting people with intellectual disabilities’](#) (volume 7 issue 11) on how to deal with racism from members.

I had been triggered again. I could cite the fact that what triggered me was an issue that I have had to deal with since childhood and that continues occasionally to creep up even now, or I could cite the other person (apparently) misunderstanding what I had said, and hence I thought I was being attacked, or I could cite the fact that, just that very day, I was dealing with the hair-trigger anger of someone I support and it, in turn, had affected my mindset. We can find all kinds of (good?) excuses when we want to excuse our own behaviour can't we? Well the truth was I *unleashed* – with a torrent of words at a volume that really was ... embarrassing.

When I look at the work we do in this field, and when I look at the personalities that I have to work with *while* I am doing my work, I sometimes have those moments that alcoholics call ‘a moment of clarity.’ This is that ‘parting of the curtains’ moment which revealed my inner me in some facet that perhaps hadn't been held up to the light of scrutiny for a while, or maybe that I had purposely held back from the light because it was too ... revealing? Illuminating? Painful. Well at some point, that part of you IS lit up, by circumstance, by chance, or by conscious will – whatever – and painful as it was in this case, I forced myself to look at it, feel the feelings, and embrace it – not with misguided pride as in ‘Yeah I'm one tough dude, that's just who I am’ – but more like, ‘If you want to change this part of you, then first embrace that this is a part of you – accept it – now go about deciding that this is NOT who you choose to be as the highest and best version of yourself.’

I know all kinds of ways to change behaviour. I can manipulate antecedents, alter consequences, positively reinforce, negatively reinforce, put on extinction, plan for the extinction burst, selectively reinforce one behaviour on a schedule of time or trial (ok now I'm just bragging) but, every so often, I have a moment like this day – when I looked at what I was doing with a particular person under my care and how I was coaching their staff – and I had a flash of insight into the

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person's world and their emotions from a place devoid of frequency charts and rewards programs. Here are my insights:

### **1. Am I trying to change the person or the behaviour?**

This might seem so simple that it borders on the ludicrous. “Of course, I’m changing the behaviour!” Yet wait ... is that truly what you are thinking? Are you thinking this is a valuable and God-imbued person who has *a behaviour* that needs correcting given their interactions and environment? “Of course, I do” you cry with righteous indignation! Well, are you thinking that this is how the person is (prone to violent outbursts, frequent name calling, strike or grab spontaneously, grow silent and retreat from the situation, become overwhelmed with their emotions and curse and leave), and that you have to ‘fix’ this? The truth is while these are learned behaviours they can also be so ingrained as part of this person that they have become ‘who they are.’ Now I am not going to engage in the age old debate of nature vs. nurture here (and I don’t want to have anyone writing me after reading this to argue the point either), but one of the hardest things I have to contend with as a behaviour analyst is that changing a behaviour that has gone on for so long, has had so much success achieving the effect the person wants, and is so firmly entrenched is like having to change a part of the person’s personality. Here is the stop and think moment. To teach a new behaviour, I must look at who this person really is. This behaviour can be seen as a thing apart from them – like a person who has the tendency to correct someone when they mispronounce a word – or this behaviour can be seen as a part of who they are – like a person that laughs at uncomfortable moments as a way to cope.

### **2. Do I make suggestions to change a behaviour that honours who that person is, or do what I think is the most expedient?**

“I want to make a change as quickly as possible Rog so that the person can have a better quality of life with those around them.” Well yes, but are you robbing Peter to pay Paul? I know, I know, this expression is usually used when discussing borrowing money and incurring debt from one source in order to pay money to another source but, before you accuse me of mixing my metaphors, see if you agree with this: Changing one behaviour which eventually creates another behaviour because you did not look at all the underlying factors is a little like borrowing money from one place, giving it to another, and now you owe the new place. All you have done is solved a behaviour – you have not solved a problem! See if I look at my own triggers (coming to terms with the fact that I have them is somewhat lessened by the knowledge that almost everyone has at least one), I can realize that, were someone to put me on a ‘program’ to manage my angry outbursts, it would be a disservice to me to not acknowledge that, in a very particular situation, I will be triggered to an angry response. While I may learn there are better ways to express that anger (this is often the goal of a behavioural program and, often, this is good enough for the person requesting the service to be honest), if I want to really eliminate the problem, then I would get to that place where I examine why I get angry in this one particular situation so fast and come up with ways to deal with that situation. So, is it that I have an anger problem? Depends on who you ask. But do I also have a situational or circumstance problem? Um – check that box too please.

### 3. Go SLoW

In the case of the person I work with who is struggling to manage their anger – do I even know what they were thinking when they spontaneously erupted with a volcano of words and name calling? What is the meaning they attributed to a certain set of events that led to that? If the person has the words, then encourage them to use them by creating a safe environment where they feel they can honestly speak without fear of repercussions. I used to work with a psychologist who worked with people with dementia who said, “I can teach anyone something if I make them feel safe, cared for, and comfortable (physically warm).” I often use this, and I created the acronym ‘SLoW’ to remember it: Safe, Loved, and Warm. In this type of environment, a person can be made to feel that you honestly are wanting to help them, and I will contend that, in this environment, you are more likely to gain insight into a person than most others. So, when you hear me advise someone to go SLoW, you know what I mean. My goal then is not to just find out what happened, it is to find out what they were thinking when it happened. See a staff can forget to take a person to the store to pick up pencil crayons and think what’s the big deal? I’m sorry I forgot, but we will just go tomorrow. In their mind, it is just an item to be retrieved and something to be checked off a list like getting dish soap or more peanut butter. It certainly did not warrant the name calling, the throwing of the tea kettle, or the running to the room and slamming the door that the person exhibited. Dig a little deeper, however, and you may find that this person has a history of people promising things and then not doing them. “Oh, we’ll go for a van ride in five minutes.” (It’s NEVER just in five minutes so don’t say that!) “I’ll help you with your laundry after dinner, I’m just in the middle of getting dinner ready” ... shift ends two hours later, and laundry is still in the middle of the bedroom floor. Dig a little deeper still, and you come to learn that this person had a parent that constantly said they would do something but then also constantly disappointed them, and the person felt unloved, unimportant, and shunned. So, this person learned painfully that being told to wait, or having someone forget to do something for them really meant that person did not care for them, and that they were unworthy of love. In some cases, for the people that are being supported, the staff that work with them just may be the most stable and longest relationship they have or maybe will EVER have in their life. Yes, the burden of that relationship is indeed something to pay attention to and to treat it with the respect for a life that this implies. Do not go getting all depressed now, thinking you have yet another relationship that you must manage on top of all the other relationship plates that you have spinning in the air! This primarily is a source of pride that people should trust you to such extents and, while you will certainly mess up interactions at times, you may find that the interactions you have with the individuals with whom you work are actually quite resilient.

### 4. Teach – don’t test!

I heard a great quote one time: Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterward. (Vernon Law) Too often, I see some version of this scenario ... the person is reprimanded for saying something inappropriate when they are angry, and then they are ‘tested’ again by staff saying, “Don’t ask for [privilege A or event B] until you learn to calm down.” Or I hear one staff joining in the escalated episode by saying some version of, “You won’t get a chance to do [event B] until you say ‘Sorry.’” I have to say – I am so NOT a fan of forcing kids, individuals you support, adults, anyone, to say sorry under a condition of duress (some type of punishment). It is not sincere even if they do it. You KNOW it is not sincere IF

they do it; and whether they do it or not, they will resent having to do it under those conditions. So really: What. Is. The. Point? Speaking to the main point, however, is the backward 'cart before the horse' way this is set up. One cannot do something they have not been taught to do yet. And even once they have been taught, they must be given a chance to do it poorly before they can do it well. I tell parents this all the time in my workshops – that it is so unfair to expect their child to do something without making a mess, or getting it all where it was supposed to go, or not missing a spot when it takes several attempts to attain competence not to mention mastery! Imagine if this same expectation were placed on the new driver trying to learn to parallel park! I digress. Oftentimes just saying, "Calm down" is not enough. *How* does one calm down? Do they go through a deep breathing process? A structured meditation? A visualization of a fun or peaceful scene? Do you teach them to practice feeling the feelings *as if* they were there (for individuals that are cognitively able to – you should!) Do you say go for a walk? Look at this thermometer picture and tell me how 'warm' your emotions are – now tell me what are things you can do to get 'cool' again? Do you tell them to think about something that makes them happy, or laminate a picture that puts a smile on their face? Do you show them the thoughts-lead-to-emotions-which-lead-to-behaviours triad that is used to explain how we turn our thoughts into reality? Or do you download the video game Tetris™ on their phone and tell them to play that until the calm down? (I read a while ago that the video game Tetris™ – and probably others too – keeps a person 'in the moment' which helps decrease both anxiety, depression, and anger). My point is that, when you are looking at ways to prevent name calling of staff, and anger that leads to physical aggression and property destruction, what you are addressing is a lack of skill in dealing with a powerful emotion. You must equip the person with a new skill to use when they are in a *skill-deficit* situation. Once you have taught the skill, you need to encourage practice when the person is calm – so that when they are not calm – they will have some idea of what to do. While you are creating the plan of *what* to teach and *how* to teach, take a moment to consider which strategy truly honours who the person is you are creating it for: not for 'a' person but for *that specific* person.

## 5. Engage the emotions

The final point about teaching an individual healthier ways to deal with their anger is to engage the emotions. There is nothing wrong with letting the person know your feelings have been hurt. Bottling up your anger without any means to release it only leads to more anger in other ways. It will ruin the therapeutic alliance – the relationship you have with the person that allows change to happen – and eventually will start to undermine the progress that was being made. Staff all too often confuse being 'professional' (whatever that means) with not being allowed to be human. You have emotions and, if you don't bring your heart into this work, then perhaps (respectfully) you are in the wrong field. I have often said that, when deciding between two people to train to work with individuals with an intellectual and/or physical disability, I'll take the person who has the heart but maybe not the knowledge over the person who has the knowledge but shows no evidence of bringing their heart into their work because, if someone has the heart, I can teach the head. But if they have the head only, I can't teach the heart. (Ideally of course I want both!) When your feelings have been hurt (and I have cringed at times when overhearing some of the truly devastating and racially hurtful things that people who are being supported say to the staff working with them) it is a strength – not a weakness of character – to be able to say to that person in a controlled way, "That was quite hurtful, and I need to take some space to deal with my feelings." It is a great way to model what you want to

see them do, but it also allows the person to understand what the emotion is and what it looks like. Many of the people I work with don't even understand what they are feeling and, sometimes, do not have the 'words' to express what they are feeling. Being able to say, "I am angry and hurt that you would say those words to me" is more powerful than merely saying, "Nothing is wrong, now give me some space." While addressing the problem, however, look at the person through the lens of 'what has been this person's experience' – what is the best way to get through to them? If you have good background information on them, that can be a gold mine of perspective if you read past the chronological information: "Joe spent two years at hospital X and five years in organization Y after parents decided they could no longer support them due to safety concerns at the age of 12." There is a whole world of emotion and experiences wrapped up in that one sentence. Do not just read with sight – read with INSIGHT.

As I sat there thinking about my own emotions and how ... 'emotional' I can get even with all the training and knowledge and good examples I have had around me, I was humbled by my own failings. It is so easy (in a manner of speaking) to create programs and fall into the trap of 'Why don't they get this?' when a supported person has a slip-up or regresses into previously dealt with behaviour. Yet when I turn the spotlight upon myself and look at how I can slip back into an old pattern under the right conditions, I am forced to eat a big bite of humble pie – and, as I sit here mentally 'chewing,' I wonder to myself: Are we so very different?

### **About the author**

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