

Toxic Environments – 7 Steps to Change, November 5, 2008

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". . . a range of apparently simple situational factors can impact our behavior more compellingly than we would expect or predict." Zimbardo, p. 47 [Zimbardo, P.G. (2004). A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil: Understanding How Good People are Transformed Into Perpetrators. In A.G. Miller (Ed.), The Social Psychology of Good and Evil (pp21-50). New York: Guilford Press.]

I've been working with a professor who has been completely blocked and unable to write. In reviewing how this came about, he described the unfriendly environment in his department that had existed for the past several years. This toxic environment had led to some people leaving his university and several others being stalled out on their research. Through our discussions, he started to realize that the situation had also had a negative impact on him.

In retrospect, it seems obvious – a toxic work environment leads to demoralization and lack of productivity. But when you're immersed in such an environment, it's like living near a garbage dump. After a while, you don't notice the smell. And you certainly don't feel like it's affecting you.

This professor was chagrined to discover that the events in his environment had indeed affected him. His first response was to feel shame. After all, if you're a logical human being, you should be immune to such behavior in others. So I told him about the infamous prison experiment by Philip Zimbardo, in which undergraduates assigned to be either prison guards or prisoners in a mock setup, quickly fell into their roles and experienced the same emotions that true prisoners or guards would feel (e.g. shame and demoralization or a sense of entitlement and even enjoyment of bullying.)

Another issue that made his problem harder for him to recognize is that most of the negative messages were being given to others, not to him. As is often the case, he discounted the extent to which witnessing others being victimized is harmful to his own sense of safety.

And finally, his only "symptom" was his inability to write up his research and submit it. He was able to function well in all other aspects of his career. I was able to tell him that this is not unusual. Writing seems to be the "canary in the coal mine" that is the most sensitive to the mental mayhem that traumatic or toxic environments can cause in your brain.

Why is writing so sensitive to environmental disruption? It may be because the dissociation that your brain achieves in order to allow you to function works best when you're busy and responding to the demands of others. (Dissociation is the disconnection of your emotional self-awareness from your cognitive knowledge of what's going on. So, for example, you might be able to say to yourself, "That's a terrible way for that person to talk to me," without consciously experiencing the rage or hurt that should accompany the situation.) In order to write, especially to write something that will be read and judged by others, you must quiet your mind and tune into the more creative, open side of your brain – the right hemisphere. That side of your brain is also more in touch with your emotions.

Thus, people who feel perfectly fine may sit down to write and be instantly filled with intense dread, fear or even rage -- the flooding back of the emotions that had been held at bay by staying busy. The fact that scholarly writing is connected with the toxic environment that created the bad feelings makes the feeling much worse. Needless to say, if you're filled with such strong negative emotions – particularly when they don't make sense to you, you'll do what it takes to avoid those feelings. Hence, procrastination and paralysis when it comes to scholarly writing.

Writing is hard enough for people in sane environments, and writer's block is common enough, that you don't need to compound it by surrounding yourself with unhealthy, negative situations.

Can a toxic academic environment really have this powerful an impact on someone? Of course it can. And I know that my newsletter readers are aware of this fact – a recent teleclass that I held called "How Academia Messes With Your Mind (and what to do about it)" attracted 483 listeners. The articles that I've written on bullying have led to dozens of emails from academics recounting terrible situations and the impact on their subsequent careers.

So what should you do to protect yourself from the ravages of a potentially toxic environment? Here are 7 steps that you can take, along with comments and examples of questions you can consider in order to assess yourself.

- Identify what is unhealthy in the environment

- Do I dread departmental meetings because you cringe at the way people speak to each other?

- Do I avoid meeting with my advisor because of the unnecessarily negative things he says about me in addition to or instead of the

feedback I need?

- Is there one person who is allowed to "misbehave" egregiously, without any apparent intervention from people at the administrative level?
- Is the level of competitiveness so high that I feel worse when I'm around colleagues?
- Acknowledge the impact a toxic environment is having on you
- Do I daydream frequently about leaving academia?
- Have I gone an unusually long period of time without writing?
- Do I feel isolated?
- Do I like there's something wrong with me?
- If you've been having trouble writing, and you suspect it is at least partly due to a toxic environment, decide whether you need to leave the environment or whether there is anything you can do to change the environment (see Step 7.)
- If you decide to stay and try to increase your writing productivity (sometimes that's the only way to create the situation that will allow you to leave and find new work, as in my client's case), try writing a little bit every day (start with small steps – say 10 minutes a day).
- If you still avoid writing, spend 5-10 minutes a day writing about the feelings that come up for you when you think about writing. Note bodily sensations and negative self-statements.
- Make sure that you replace those negative self-statements with positive statements (you received samples of these when you signed up for my newsletter).
- Find a support group of other academics that provides a positive environment.
- Sign up for the Academic Writing Club. Many of the techniques we use in the Club are set up to help you overcome these kinds of writing blocks.
- Educate yourself about toxic academic environments by attending the teleclass, "Antioxidants for Toxic Academic Work Environments," taught by Meggin McIntosh, Ph.D. , which I am hosting on November 12. Find out more by going here: <http://www.meggin.com/academicladder.php>

You don't deserve to spend the rest of your life (or another day) in an environment that is not treating you and others around you with respect. Life's too short -- do what you must to protect yourself.

Warmly,
Gina