How Not To Cope With a Personal Insult

September 15, 2011

Humans have always had to cope with threats, both big and small. The physical and life-threatening threats that our ancestors faced have largely been replaced by social threats, but they are nonetheless an emotional menace: Insults, rejections and criticism can undermine our integrity and self-esteem, even our sense that the world is a meaningful place. Sometimes we cope with these threats smoothly, and other times awkwardly—sometimes disastrously.

Is there a single, most effective strategy for dealing with life's constant battering? One way to approach this question is to look at an example of sheer social ineptness, and where better to find this than in the old sitcom *Seinfeld*, specifically in the character of George Costanza. Jerry's best friend is the embodiment of insecurity. He's constantly threatened by pretty much everyone, at least in his own mind, so he is always trying to deflect or defuse or escape one unsettling event or another. How does George cope with the insults he detects everywhere?

George is especially insecure around women, and fans will recall the episode where he has fallen for Paula, a friend of Elaine's. He wants to know if she returns the feeling, so in his juvenile way he asks Elaine to find out for him, without giving away his hand. Here's his conversation with Elaine and Jerry a while later:

George: Hey, did you see Paula?
Elaine: Yeah.
George: So what did she say?
Elaine: She . . . likes you.
George: She said she liked me? No kidding, she said that?
Elaine: Yeah!
George: Those were her exact words, I like George?
Elaine: Yep!
George: Ha! Jerry, how do you like that? You see, I get myself in a tizzy. I'm all worked up and for what?
Elaine: For nothing.
George: Ha, ha.
Elaine: In fact, she said that looks aren't even that important to her . . .
George: You see . . . WHAT?!

Okay, so stop the action here a minute, while I introduce some new research on what's called "threat reduction." University of Toronto psychological scientist Alexa Tullett and her colleagues* have been exploring the idea that social threats can be interpreted in different ways—depending on the person and context—and that different strategies might be better for coping with different situations. Paula's comment to Elaine about looks, while not intended to hurt George, is a direct and personal attack in George's mind, which is why he reacts so strenuously. He's sensitive about the fact that he's a short,

overweight, bald man, and this remark simply underscores his inadequacies. So how does he defuse this direct threat to his manhood? Read on:

George: She said looks aren't important to her?
Elaine: Well, uh, let me rephrase that? She said . . .
George: She thinks I'm ugly. I knew it!

For George, there's no way around the meaning of this threatening remark. Elaine would like to rephrase it to make it less threatening, or take it back completely—and George would probably prefer that, too. That's what Tullett calls a direct coping strategy; it specifically targets the threatening event. But direct strategies are often impossible, as it is here: Even unintentional threats can't be wished away or taken back. So what's to be done? This is where Jerry finally chimes in:

Jerry: You see, the thing is, there are a lot of ugly people out there walking around, but they don't know they're ugly, because nobody actually tells them.

Huh? Okay, this is really lame, but it fits with Tullett's theory. Jerry is trying to help his pal, who he knows is feeling really bad right now, but he fundamentally misunderstands how George is being threatened. Jerry, in his clumsy way, is trying to say: It's okay, looks really aren't that important and you're a good and normal person—just like a lot of people who aren't Hollywood handsome. But that is not what George wants to hear. He is not interested in a general defense of his value as a human being, and he doesn't care that others share his situation—all he cares about is that his looks are under attack. It's no wonder he's confused by Jerry:

George: So what's your point?
Jerry: I dunno . . .
Elaine: The point, George, is that she likes you.

Most of us would agree with Elaine here, I think. But again, she is missing the point as George sees it. She is responding, on George's behalf, to an abstract threat—on George's general likability—and sidestepping what truly matters to George, as his final remark illustrates:

George: Oh! So what! I'd rather she hate me and thought I was good looking. At least I can get someone else.

So here it is in a nutshell. Elaine and Jerry's strategies are completely understandable. They are trying to bolster their friend's self-esteem by telling him one, his predicament is common and, two, he's popular in spite of his looks. But they don't get that they only thing that matters to George at this moment is that a woman has denigrated his looks. Nothing short of a diet, toupee, and perhaps plastic surgery will deflect this direct, concrete threat in a direct and concrete way—that or "someone else" who might actually see him as handsome.

Tullett and her colleagues describe their ideas about social threats and coping strategies in the on-line version of the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. The gist is that when we construe a threat as concrete, we tend to respond in relatively direct and concrete ways. By contrast, if we see a threat as more general and abstract, we have more options for making things okay, including affirming values and

beliefs that seem entirely unrelated. That's what both Elaine and Jerry are trying to do, but they fail because they can't get inside George's head and feel the personal attack he feels.

So how does George finally deal with Paula and her unintended slight? Here they are later on:

Paula: What's the matter?
George: Well I spoke to Elaine . . .
Paula: Hey, look! No shave!
George: No. Why should that make any difference to you?
Paula: It doesn't.
George: Of course not. You don't care what I look like.
Paula: That's right, I don't.
George: I suppose I could just pull this [his tucked shirt] out and walk around like this and you wouldn't care?
Paula: Not a wit.
George: Hmmm. I suppose we could go to Lincoln Center and I'd be wearing sneakers and jeans and that would be fine, too?
Paula: You can wear sweatpants.
George: I could . . .
Paula: You could drape yourself in velvet, for all I care.
George: Velvet . . .

This scene is open to interpretation, I think. But when George does reappear, ecstatic and draped in velvet shortly afterward, it's clear that he has defused the threat in some way. He's a shallow man, so it's unlikely that he has embraced the higher belief that looks are superficial. More likely, he has affirmed a new belief about himself, one that trumps his homeliness, and one having something to do with velvet.

*Rimma Teper and Michael Inzlicht

Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought*, has just been released in paperback. Excerpts from his two blogs—"We're Only Human" and "Full Frontal Psychology"—appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and in *Scientific American Mind*.