

## Ambiguity and Mental Health

Dr. Ron Kaiser January 28, 2014 No Comments

### Ambiguity and Mental Health (Transcription)

Hi, this is Dr' Ron Kaiser with your April podcast from The Mental Health Gym. Today's podcast will be devoted to the topic of ambiguity and its role in mental health. Now ambiguity is defined as a condition or bit of information or situation that's rather inexact, unstructured, incomplete, perhaps vague and uncertain, and all of us face these types of situations at various times, where the answer is not obvious. There may be multiple answers, there may not be enough information but we nonetheless have to act in a particular way.

Now let's introduce some science to this topic. One of the classic writings of the field of psychology dates back to 1950, when Theodor Adorno and his coworkers did a study that resulted in the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* and a major thing that Adorno and his coworkers found was that the authoritarian personality is someone who cannot tolerate ambiguity. Totalitarian regimes are also known as the Authoritarian Regimes usually lead by either a strong individual or collection of individuals who cannot tolerate giving power to the masses.

What we're seeing nowadays and what we've seen in the past few decades since the fall of communism in Russia is the fact that people cannot be stifled indefinitely and ultimately the authoritarian personality does not get what he or she wants indefinitely. At a more close to home level, we think not necessarily in terms of governments but in terms of the type of person who is a control freak. Someone who must control the options that are available to other people because they can't tolerate the fact that say, their child or their student or their friend or a coworker or employee might make a choice that is different from theirs.

So they try and control all of the things that go into making that choice, so that it becomes say, more difficult, more unpleasant to rebel against the authoritarian personality's choice it is to just kind of operate on your own and make your own decisions. The control freak or authoritarian personality counts on the fact that they create situations where they don't have to deal with challenges. One of the things that's obvious though is that if someone is a control freak, they're really out of control because they really depend upon artificial situations or artificial controls to permit things to happen the way that they might. And they're losers for it as well as people who work for them or work with them or their friends or family members because if you don't have the opportunity to express yourself, to make choices for yourself because somebody who is a control freak is telling you that you have to pursue a particular course of study or date a particular type of person or not experience certain growth enhancing experiences, then you know, you wind up not having these experiences in your repertoire and very often when you get a chance to you will rebel.

The control freak really loses in the process many of them wind up ultimately not being able to control indefinitely. When kids grow up and know that they don't have to do things a particular way, when employees recognize that there are places that they can take talents other than this particular job, the control freak in fact loses just the way that some of these governmental officials have lost as people have rebelled. But what I'd really like to talk about a minute or two today is the fact that many of us have a real problem in living with and tolerating ambiguity when it comes to our lives. Nobody may be imposing controls when you make the decision that you're not likely to get this job so you better not apply.

When you make a decision that I'm not sure that my remarks are gonna be well taken in a social gathering so I better shut up. When you make the decision that I'm gonna embarrass myself if I try this

new activity or a sport or whatever it may be and so I'm not going to try. In essence you're becoming a control freak over yourself by being intolerant of ambiguity, and there is a definite loss that occurs as basis to that and it's not really good mental health. An index of mental health involves person's ability to tolerate ambiguity.

To be able to access uncertain situations and make a determination of is this a real appropriate risk? Investing money or moving to new area or joining a new group, all those things have risks associated with them and they may or may not be appropriate. If you're able to tolerate ambiguity however you do not eliminate the possibilities until you've considered so that the mentally healthy who's able to tolerate ambiguity thus is able to assess situations and make decisions recognizing that there may not be an absolute certain outcome.

But if you can assess it and accept the possibility that some things are just ambiguous, some of them may be bad, some of them may be appropriate for you, but if you can evaluate it appropriately without thinking in terms of; is it uncertain? Is it ambiguous and therefore it's bad, then it enables you to make decisions in an appropriate way. And the tolerance of ambiguity is certainly one of the indexes of mental health. Think about it next time that you're faced with an ambiguous situation. If you notice that you yourself have problems tolerating ambiguity, I would encourage you to try a few examples of testing it out.

Perhaps if you're uncomfortable about certain kinds of ethnic foods but haven't tried them, give it a try. If you're not sure about certain kinds of music, attend a concert of that type of music. If you're invited some place and have preconceived notion that it's gonna be uncomfortable for you, give it a try. See what may happen. These are just few examples of testing out the whole concept of tolerating

ambiguity and if it works, you may find that you can generalize it to more important things.

Enclosing I obviously have to point it out that not all situations are ambiguous. Probably most of aren't and in some cases there are good reasons for rules in the family and the workplace in the greater society. So, not everything is imposed on you because somebody is a control freak. But being able to distinguish, ambiguity from non-ambiguous situations and be able to be comfortable with tolerating ambiguity is something that can be very beneficial and again things can be practiced to put this whole topic in a little more comfortable perspective for you.

This has been Dr. Ron Kaiser with your April podcast from The Mental Health Gym. As always I'll be glad to hear from you if you have comments or suggestions and we'll talk again next month.