

November 3, 2013

Agility in Unlikely Places

Apparently, the word “agility” originates in Latin: “to do or act.” Its implies a certain kind of action: nimble, or quick to change direction.

For a week, the psych listserv that I follow was buzzing with reactions to an article in the Harvard Business Review on "emotional agility." A very fine piece of writing, easy to follow, stressing the need to accept emotions as reasonable -- even if negative -- and the need to get "unhooked" from habitual thoughts. Well done, Susan David!

The same week, I found myself attempting to shake off confusion, following a session when I was working on behavior planning with a father of a spunky three-year old. Because, once again, I found myself riding a similar wave of enthusiasm. And, the headache came from feeling unable to reconcile the two perspectives.

I have witnessed the power of a well written and well executed behavior modification program. Once, I was given an opportunity to design such a plan for a psychiatric program with a staff of over 240. That was a six months challenge, which brought about a dramatic reduction in crisis incidents. Concretely, my pager stopped burning through batteries, and I eventually disconnected it from the number that activated their crisis team.

More recently, I challenged young professional adults in my stress management group to write their own, simplified plans. As a reinforcement, people drew daily stars and visibly displayed them on their fridges, or on the walls in their bedrooms. Group members exercised more, ate better and arrived places on time.

So, where is emotional agility in behavioral planning?

A recent clever article in New York Times, on the “Accumulated Wisdom of Bribing your Children,” implied that reward-based parenting is unwieldy, ineffective or authoritarian. Definitely, the opposite of “agile.”

I believe, it all depends on a plan.

Describing her focus on emotional agility, Susan David talks about helping people get “unhooked” from habitual thoughts by re-focusing on the governing principles of their lives, their basic values. Similarly, behavioral plans are effective when reinforcement explicitly targets shared family values.

When I work on behavioral plans with families, I spend a great deal of time helping them identify “categories” that represent their values. For people of all ages, it is essential to feel as an accepted community member, to be acknowledged and to feel supported. So, the categories in a behavioral plan may be: “acting as a friend – using calm voice – making full effort.” Then, a star at the end of the day

becomes a badge of family union, and a reinforcement of pro-social behavior. Also, I suggest setting the expectation of 70% completion. Because, no one is perfect.

Steve Hayes, one of the founders of Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), uses the word “vitality” to describe lifestyle that follows conscious definition of personal values and intentional action according to such principles. I believe that a well-designed behavioral plan is a powerful tool that results in clarification of values for the family. Thus, it establishes communication style where both parents and their kids are able to grow emotionally agile.