

The Danger in Your Head

Why negativity is dangerous for your health.

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All of us know Complaining Jane and Joyous Joyce. They go out to lunch together. Joyce loves the cozy ambiance; Jane complains about the poor service. Joyce loves that her salad is fresh and tasty; Jane complains that her soup is not hot enough. Joyce loves the restaurant's convenient location; Jane complains that it's over-priced.

Jane's complaints are justified. The soup *wasn't* hot enough and the restaurant *is* over-priced. What all the Complaining Janes and Critical Craigs don't realize is that negativity exacts a price that no healthy person can afford to pay.

Usually we think of negativity – the tendency to criticize, blame, hate, fear, or be depressed – as a psychological disposition. “Some people are just upbeat; I'm not.”

It sounds as neutral as saying, “Some people are blonde; some are brunette.”

But what if you viewed negativity as a spiritual disease? Just as you would never complacently say, “Some people don't have cancer; I do,” resigning yourself to the status quo rather than seeking treatment, so you would regard a negative state of mind as dangerous to your spiritual – and physical – health.

Faulty understanding of the cause of communicable diseases kept cholera raging for millennia until scientists discovered microorganisms and how they operate. The Jewish understanding of what negativity really is and how it operates is crucial to dealing with this plague.

The 20th century sage Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explained that there are two parallel worlds, and at any given moment we are in one or the other of these worlds. One world, called the World of Connection (*Olam HaYedidut* in Hebrew), is characterized by love, joy, tranquility, optimism, harmony, generosity, confidence, and faith. The other world,

called the World of Estrangement (*Olam HaZarut*) is characterized by animosity, anger, blame, resentment, criticism, anxiety, sadness, and fear.

1. Only once she exits her state of negativity can she feel happy, loving, and optimistic

Because these worlds are parallel, at any given moment a person can be in only one of these worlds. While Complaining Jane is finding fault with the restaurant's slow service, she cannot be happy that her best friend just got engaged. She cannot feel loving toward her baby niece. She cannot feel optimistic that she'll get the job she just applied for. Only once she exits the World of Estrangement with its negativity [see "The Spiritual GPS" to learn how], can she feel happy, loving, and optimistic. But while she is engaged in the act of criticizing, she is confined to the World of Estrangement like a prisoner in her cell.

This is because negativity is not a feeling or emotion that is *in us*. Rather, it is a world or spiritual dimension, and we are *in it*. Just as there are no palm trees in Antarctica, there is no love or joy in the World of Estrangement. Fault-finding, blame, resentment, hostility, and anger – no matter how justified – are the plane tickets that land us in the World of Estrangement. Some of us visit that world only periodically. Others of us have taken up permanent residence there.

2. Scientific ramifications

Judaism is a holistic religion. A principle of Judaism is that whatever is true is true on all levels. Thus if it's true spiritually, it's true also on the psychological, emotional, and physical levels. In fact, the teaching about the World of Connection and the World of Estrangement has interesting parallels in the latest scientific discoveries.

Scientists have long understood that the body has two distinct nervous systems: the sympathetic nervous system, which operates during the fight or flight states of elevated adrenalin and cortisol (the stress hormones), and the parasympathetic nervous system, which operates when a person is in a relaxed and content state.

Fight (antagonism) and flight (fear), of course, belong to the World of Estrangement. Relaxation (tranquility) and contentment (happi-

ness) belong to the World of Connection. That two distinct nervous systems are hard-wired into the human body is an interesting correlation to the teaching of the two worlds.

3. Recent studies show the correlation between harmonious relationships and good health.

Even more impressive are recent studies on the correlation between harmonious relationships and good health. For years, studies have shown that married people live longer. They are less likely to get pneumonia, have surgery, develop cancer, or have heart attacks. The *New York Times* (April 14, 2010) cited a group of Swedish researchers who found that being married is associated with a lower risk for dementia.

More recent studies, however, indicate that it is not the state of marriage itself but rather the level of love and harmony in the marriage that accounts for the increased health benefits:

One recent study suggests that a stressful marriage can be as bad for the heart as a regular smoking habit. And despite years of research suggesting that single people have poorer health than those who marry, a major study released last year concluded that single people who have never married have better health than those who married and then divorced. [“Is Marriage Good for Your Health?” *New York Times*]

Professors Ronald Glaser and Jan Kiecolt-Glaser, researchers at Ohio State University College of Medicine, have conducted the most fascinating studies on the correlation between harmonious relationships and good health. The Glasers recruited 76 women, half of whom were married; the other half were separated or had divorced. The Glasers then ran tests to identify which married women were in friction-filled relationships as well as which of the women who were separated or divorced from their husbands were most bitter or resentful.

Next, using blood tests, the Glasers measured the women’s immune-system responses. The results showed that the women in unhappy relationships and the women who remained emotionally hung up on their ex-husbands had decidedly weaker immune responses than the women who were in happier relationships (or were happily out of them). [*Ibid*]

The Glasers then set out to uncover what happens to the body minute by minute, hour by hour, when couples engage in hostile mar-

ital disputes. Working with 90 seemingly happy newlywed couples, they hooked up each couple to tubes so that blood samples could be drawn from the pair at regular intervals. The husband and wife were seated face to face, while the researchers, obscured by a curtain, watched the couples on video monitors. Nurses came in at regular intervals to take the blood samples. When prompted, the participants discussed their most volatile topics of marital conflict. The couples who exhibited the most negative and hostile behavior during the conflict discussion showed the largest declines in immune-system function.

Living in the World of Estrangement, the State of Negativity, is like living atop a nuclear-waste disposal site. So why does any intelligent person stay there? Why don't they just move out?

4. Clutching the valuables

After the start of the Iranian Revolution, Persian Jews were free to leave the lethally dangerous country, but only if they relinquished their property and their valuables. Similarly, people can't leave the World of Estrangement while clutching their valuables — their long-held resentments, their cherished grudges, their precious claim to be the innocent victim of someone else's wrongdoing. They proclaim that they are the rightful owners of those legitimate gripes, but in fact the gripes own them.

5. The World of Estrangement charges its inhabitants an exorbitantly high rent.

For two decades the Weiss Family lived in the World of Estrangement. It started with an argument over the inheritance, which led to a feud among the five siblings, which led to estrangement among the next generation of cousins¹. The warring factions did not invite each other to their family Bar Mitzvahs and weddings, and every mention of

1 The story, in all its details, was reported in *Mishpacha Magazine*.
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the “other side” produced a spouting of venom unabated by the years.

The World of Estrangement charges its inhabitants an exorbitantly high rent. Three of the siblings died of various illnesses while in their early sixties. Other family members, extending to their children and grandchildren, suffered premature deaths, divorces, and childlessness, while others suffered the pain of unmarried older children and at-risk teens. Then, Barry, the son of one of the principal combatants, contracted meningitis and lapsed into a coma. The doctors held out no hope.

At that point Yossi, one of the cousins, who understood the spiritual reality that hostility kills, undertook to end the family feud. He drew up an official document of forgiveness. He went around to all 32 cousins, pleading, “Barry’s going to die if you don’t sign.” After days of cajoling and convincing, Yossi got every one of his cousins to sign the document, granting forgiveness to every relative.

Barry’s daughter Etty brought the document with the signatures to her father’s room in the I.C.U., and read it out loud beside his comatose body. While she was reading it, a doctor ran into the room and demanded, “What’s going on here? The monitors outside show that your father’s brain activity just started to normalize.”

Barry experienced a complete recovery. Within the following year, several older single women in the family became engaged, and a couple who had been childless for 13 years had a baby.

Of course, complaining about the poor service in a restaurant is nowhere nearly as toxic as a family feud. But if you’re deciding where you want to live, would you choose even the remote outskirts of a nuclear waste disposal site? Anyone who really cares about his own well-being would be wise to drive hundreds of miles out of his way rather than cross the border into the State of Negativity.



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