

## MODULE 3

### SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

#### **Careful, we might learn something**

The comic strip *Calvin and Hobbs* was in the paper a few years ago, and now has been preserved in books. For the uninitiated; Calvin was a little boy with a big imagination, and Hobbs was his stuffed tiger—at least to everyone else saw Hobbs as a stuffed tiger. Calvin, however, saw Hobbs as a real tiger, who could talk.

In one cartoon, Calvin and Hobbs were starting down a hill in a wagon. Calvin was saying that life experiences didn't have to always teach anything—that sometimes you just go along in life and you go through different situations, but you don't have to learn anything from them. Before long they went off of a cliff, and crashed in a heap. Hobbs said, "I never want to do that again." Calvin said, "Careful, we might learn something."

As we approach this subject we should beware, we might learn something about ourselves, and what has led us to this place in our lives that we find ourselves.

We will begin with a story, and then go back to this story at the beginning of each section as it illustrates each point in regards to self-destructive behavior.

After years of hard work, a successful businessman finally took an ocean cruise he had been dreaming of his entire life. He spent his days walking the deck of the huge ocean liner, smelling the fresh sea air and lifting his eyes to contemplate the vast and clear horizon. One day, however, a violent storm blew up suddenly. Before the man could take shelter, a blast of wind blew him against the deck railing. A second gale caught him before he could gain his balance, and he tumbled over the top of the railing. As he fell overboard, though, he reached out to grab something—anything—he could hang onto. And luckily, he caught the tine of a heavy anchor suspended from a link chain on the side of the ship. He grasped at the anchor with both hands and squeezed its lines until his knuckles turned white. As the storm winds buffeted him from side to side, the man clung to the anchor, holding on for dear life...

At last the storm abated, and the man who had been thrown overboard, though he still clung to the anchor that had saved his life, was able to relax a bit. Soon enough, he thought, someone on the cruise ship would notice his absence and would send a crew out to rescue him. He did not know, however, that the chain from which the anchor hung had

been damaged in the storm. One of its links was badly eroded, and the battering force of the wind had caused it to crack.

The sun had just reappeared when, finally, the damaged link gave way. Both the anchor and the terrified man who clung to it fell into the ocean and began to sink. As he plunged underwater, the sinking man had only one thought. "This anchor saved my life," he told himself. "If I let go of it, I'm sure to die..."

As the anchor sank deeper and deeper into the ocean, the man who had been thrown overboard still continued to cling to it. He knew that he was sinking fast, but he also knew that hanging onto the anchor had saved his life. So he held his breath and allowed the weight of the anchor to carry him toward the ocean floor. He was aware that he was in danger, but the anchor, which had saved him once, might miraculously save him again.

"This really isn't so bad," the man thought to himself. "It's pleasant down here, once you get used to it. The water is warm, and there's a real sense of peace and quiet. It's not like being on a ship, where a storm can come upon you in a flash and throw you overboard."

Finally, the anchor came to rest on the ocean floor. The man, who still clung to it, was having difficulty holding his breath. His lungs burned, and his head filled with pressure. "What am I going to do to get out of this mess?" he asked himself, believing all the while that sooner or later a member of the ship's crew would appear to rescue him....

The man who had been thrown overboard sat in a bed of rocks on the bottom of the ocean, his arms wrapped tightly around the anchor that he believed had saved his life. He knew he could not hold his breath much longer: his chest ached, and his head felt as if it would explode. Finally, he gave in. He let out his breath in a great burst, and when he did, his mouth filled with sea water. He tried to swallow but the salty fluid seeped down his throat and into his lungs. He coughed violently. He knew he was drowning.

He looked to the anchor that had been his salvation. Somewhat tentatively he loosened his hold on the iron shaft and felt his body float away. "Maybe if I let go completely..." he thought. "It might not help, but I am going to die anyway."

Nearing Unconsciousness the man saw that his only hope was to let go of the anchor. He relaxed his arms and let them float free. At that moment, his body began to rise up from the floor of the ocean. He felt himself being carried upward by the weight and flow of the water. Above him he saw a light, which grew brighter as he continued to float up. He used his arms to push himself toward the brightness; he knew now that he might survive. With a burst of energy, he thrust his arms downward and, as he did, his face broke the surface of the water. He drew in a great breath of brisk sea air. As his vision cleared, he saw the cruise ship from which he had fallen, and, on its deck, a party of anxious rescuers. And all around him, he saw the light of the sun: directly overhead, in all its brightness, shone the sun.

## Slide 2

### I. HOW SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS ARE BORN

Let's look at the first part of our story:

After years of hard work, a successful businessman finally took an ocean cruise he had been dreaming of his entire life. He spent his days walking the deck of the huge ocean liner, smelling the fresh sea air and lifting his eyes to contemplate the vast and clear horizon. One day, however, a violent storm blew up suddenly. Before the man could take shelter, a blast of wind blew him against the deck railing. A second gale caught him before he could gain his balance, and he tumbled over the top of the railing. As he fell overboard, though, he reached out to grab something—anything—he could hang onto. And luckily, he caught the tine of a heavy anchor suspended from a link chain on the side of the ship. He grasped at the anchor with both hands and squeezed its tines until his knuckles turned white. As the storm winds buffeted him from side to side, the man clung to the anchor, holding on for dear life...

## Slide 3

### What Is A Self-Destructive Behavior?

This is a story that illustrates how destructive behaviors come into our lives and how they are harmful.

A lady was visibly distraught. Only a few months past her thirty-second birthday when she first sought counseling, she looked at least ten years older, mostly because of the frown lines that seemed cut into her forehead and the tight set of her mouth. A slightly overweight woman, she wore an expensive-looking and conservatively tailored business suit. She told her counselor that she was an office manager at a regional insurance firm, adding somewhat huffily that the company considered her a “top performer.”

Why, she was asked, had she come for counseling? “Because I have no life” she said grimly.

“Are you saying that your energy level is low?” she was asked.

“That, too:” she replied. “But what I really mean is what I said: I have no life. I get up in the morning and I go to work. Then I come home, watch television for a few hours, and go to bed. That's what I do every day, week after week, month after month, year after year: work, eat, sleep. And if I didn't have to support myself, I probably wouldn't work, so that would leave food and sleep. And, of course, the TV.”

She was asked if she had friends or family. “No family:” she replied. “I was an only child, and my parents are dead.” Here she paused to light a cigarette, which she smoked (in a well ventilated office) while formulating the rest of her answer to the question. “And as for

friends,” she said after a few moments, “well, I don’t have many of them, either. None, really. There are a few women at work I go to lunch with, but they’re married and have kids, which doesn’t give them time to socialize outside the office. There’s one girl, I suppose’ Lynn continued. “She’s single, but she claims she’s allergic to cigarette smoke. Going out with her is more trouble than it’s worth.”

It’s difficult to deal with a complaint as general as this lady’s seemed to be, so the counselor moved on to ask her to describe in detail a typical day in her life. “They’re all pretty much the same,” she replied, “but, well, there was last Friday.... “On that day, as she explained, her supervisor had complimented her on a project that her department had recently completed. But the elation she experienced upon hearing this praise dissipated soon enough. Driving home from her office, she felt a sadness creep over her, a mood she linked with the realization that she faced another Friday evening—and, worse yet, an entire weekend—alone and with nothing to do. To combat her despondency, she sought out a familiar remedy: she stopped at a convenience store, where she bought enough candy, snacks, and cigarettes to sustain her through another evening in front of the television.

At this point the counselors sensed that the lack of life that she had justifiably been complaining about was nothing more and nothing less than an ongoing sequence of self-destructive behaviors. Her life had become an arduous and repetitive ordeal—so much so that she felt best when she felt nothing at all. And like any bright and sensitive person in a similar circumstance, she had felt uncomfortable with this situation—enough so that she had sought help in an attempt to find out what she was doing wrong.

## **The Big Question**

Many people make statements and display attitudes similar to this woman’s. The refrain that is heard most often from the people who seek counseling goes something like this: “I keep hurting myself, but I don’t understand why.” Despite differences in age, sex, and financial circumstances they simply are locked into the habit of making choices that do not work for them. Acting on these misguided choices, they say or do things that virtually guarantee dissatisfaction and unhappiness. These people (and millions like them) are caught in a cycle of self-destructive behavior and feel that they are doomed to lives of failure, misery and disappointment.

What, exactly, is self-destructive behavior? On the surface, it would seem that we could categorize as self-destructive any attitude or gesture that thwarts a person’s healthy desire for love, acceptance, fulfillment, or tranquility. And while it is true that self-destructive behaviors effectively distort the individual’s best and healthiest response to a new moment of life, they have another key characteristic that distinguishes them from other behaviors:

True self-destructive behavior is an action or attitude that once worked to help an individual cope with a hurtful experience, but that now works against the individual to keep him or her from responding to new phases of life in a healthy way.

When attempting to identify and eliminate your own self-destructive behaviors, it's extremely important to keep this definition in mind: to be truly self-destructive, a behavior must have worked for you at one point or another in your life—or, at least, you believed it worked for you. Why is this so? Because, we believe, human beings are profoundly rational creatures. Uncontaminated by false conclusions (which, as you'll see, are the toxic by-products of our culture), they will respond in a healthy and rational way to any situation or circumstance. This innate coping mechanism will work until, one day, an unfamiliar and threatening situation arises. At this point, people will instinctively do whatever is required to eliminate the threat and maintain equilibrium.

When an individual manages to cope successfully with a threat, the behavior that he or she has used to deal with it will become imprinted within that person's memory. Because the behavior has worked to eliminate a threat, it is stored within the individual's memory as an effective means of dealing with other threatening situations. Each time the individual encounters a situation that is unfamiliar or ominous; he or she will react with the behavior that tamed the original threat. But because the new situations often bear only faint or superficial resemblances to the original hurtful experience, the behavior that the individual chooses will almost always be inappropriate. The individual's logic is still working flawlessly—which, paradoxically, leads him or her to repeat time and again a behavior that simply doesn't work.

### **Some Common Self-Destructive Behaviors**

The negative and counterproductive thoughts and actions that we refer to as self-destructive behaviors appear in many forms. Some of these forms do not seem to define a particular type of behavior at all but seem instead to point to character traits, moods, or attitudes. Do not be misled, however: all self-destructive behaviors, including those listed below, are chosen and practiced responses to new moments of life. Below are listed some of the more common behaviors that fall into this category:

#### *Slide 4*

- Procrastination
- Defensiveness
- Abuse of alcohol and other substances
- Depression
- Worrying
- Compulsive/ritualistic actions
- Alienating
- Shyness

- Overeating
- Smoking
- Anger and Hostility
- Suspiciousness
- Perfectionism

Although this list is far from complete, I would venture to guess that the great majority of people practice at least one of the behaviors we've mentioned. If you see on the list any behavior that is self-destructive in your life, you need to look into how you acquired the behavior and what you can do to replace it or, at the very least, to reduce its control over your life.

### **From Momentary Solace to Enduring Malady**

How are self-destructive behaviors acquired and nourished? The conversation that occurred near the end of the first meeting with the lonely lady who smoked and watched TV sheds considerable light on these insidious processes. Once it became clear that her primary complaint had to do with the oppressive loneliness she experienced, her counselor chose to focus on this particular aspect of the existence she so wanted to escape.

She was asked, "Why are you alone?"

Before responding, she began to laugh: a low, hesitant chuckle undercut by a deepening of the frown lines that crossed her forehead.

"That's easy," she said. "It's because I'm...you know...fat."

The counselor quickly pointed out that while she was somewhat overweight, her categorization of herself as "fat" was, in truth, a demeaning exaggeration. The counselor added that in light of the fact that many heavy people enjoy happy and active lives, her physical size was probably not the sole source of her discomfort. The counselor repeated the question. Why was she so alone in the world?

Now she became defensive. "Look, I don't see where this is going," she complained. "Why am I alone? Who knows? I've never been much of a socialite, if you want to know the truth. I'm not one for small talk. I like to take care of business, then move on. It's just the way I am."

"Were you always that way?" she was asked.

"For as long as I can remember," she replied a little sadly. "You know, people have these ideas of how a woman should act. And I guess I've never been able to act that way...to live up to stereotypes and expectations."

It was explained to her that she could not do much to change people's expectations. She should focus on the steps that she could take to learn to feel comfortable with her place in the world. She was given an assignment. She was asked her to think of a time in her life when she felt relatively happy and productive, and to try to remember what happened to change her view of herself and the world.

When she next met with her counselor, this matter was brought up immediately. Initially, she seemed unwilling to talk about her past, claiming she had been too busy at work to brood over what she termed "ancient history." But then, almost as an afterthought, she mentioned that she hadn't always been alone and aloof. "Back in my junior high days, I was outgoing almost to a fault;" she said. "I joined clubs, had all sorts of friends, even got involved in student government. I was busy all the time, it seemed."

"When did things change for you?" she was asked.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "But by the time I got to high school, everything was different. We all grew up, I guess. The kids I hung around with, I mean. All of a sudden we were in this school with a bunch of strangers...it was a nightmare. All that mattered was how you looked, who you knew, how much money you had. Ambition and brains didn't seem to count for much."

"How about the clubs you belonged to, and your participation in student government? Did you stay with that through your high school years?"

"No," she said. "I sort of burned out on all that, I guess."

There was this election for student council treasurer when I was in the ninth grade...I ran, and I lost."

She was asked to talk more about this episode. And talk she did: for the first time, she seemed to speak spontaneously and with feeling. She said that she'd felt confident that she'd win the election, even after learning that her opponent would be the daughter of a prominent school board official. She'd had reason to feel confident; all of her numerous friends had told her she was by far the better qualified of the two candidates. Still, she campaigned vigorously; she asked classmates for their support, and they assured her they'd vote for her. So on the Friday afternoon when the election results were announced, she felt the weight of the world crash down on her. She'd lost by nearly a two-to-one margin. She fled her sixth-period class in tears and left the school immediately, wanting never to return.

For the next two hours she wandered alone on the streets of her neighborhood, ducking behind cars and buildings to avoid contact with anyone who might have heard of her humiliation. She didn't want to go home and admit to her parents that she'd failed to win

the election, and because she no longer trusted her friends—most of whom, she believed, had double-crossed her and voted for her opponent—she found herself with no place to go and no one to talk with. Eventually she ended up two miles from her home, standing in front of a drugstore. By then it was almost dark, so she went into the store and took a seat at the soda fountain—just to kill time, she told herself. Then she ordered a double chocolate malted, and, as she drank it, she felt its sweetness flow into her, filling the desolate void that losing the election had created. By the time she was finished, she felt better, calmer, and once again able to deal with the world. She went to a pay phone and called her mother for a ride home.

“That’s quite a story,” she was told when she had finished.

“Did it give you any sense of how you developed your fondness for sweets and snacks?”

“Oh, you mean that I eat to fill the emptiness I feel?” she replied derisively. “I mean, really! That’s such a cliché.”

“It’s not that simple,” it was explained. “Yes, it is possible that you use junk food—and maybe cigarettes, too—as a substitute for friends and family, and for the emotional and intellectual stimulation that others can provide. But what seems more significant is that you seem to mistrust the world and all that it offers. You relate to it only on your own terms, then retreat from it before it can do you harm.

“Besides; it’s not written anywhere that self-destructive behaviors have to be complex, clever, or original. All they really have to be is temporarily effective.”

#### *Slide 5*

### **The Nature of Self-Destructive Behaviors**

Those of us who practice self-destructive behaviors (and rest assured, most of us do) can learn much from this woman’s experiences. From the counselor’s initial meetings with her, he was able to discern that she practiced on a regular basis at least six self-destructive behaviors: depression, overeating, smoking, defensiveness, hostility, and suspiciousness. Although at first this might seem like an extraordinary degree of counterproductive thought and action, experience has shown behavior patterns like hers to be fairly typical. Whether we’re aware of it or not, the majority of us—and here we are talking about allegedly “normal” people, not only those who have been labeled as “losers,” “malcontents,” “chronic failures,” or, most unfortunately, “mentally ill”—act and think destructively several times a day. Repeatedly we react inappropriately to new phases of life, then wonder why happiness and success elude us.

This woman’s story reveals a good deal about what a self-destructive behavior is and why this sort of behavior is destructive. Like the mutable creatures in science-fiction and horror movies, self-destructive behaviors are deceptive. We find them in one form, and they

appear to our friends. Only later do they reveal themselves as harmful and devious intruders. And when this time comes—when, if you will, a self-destructive behavior finally shows its teeth—we want to flee or cry out for help. If we understand the true nature of self-destructive behaviors, however, we can learn to spot and get rid of them before they can do us harm. But to do this, we need to be aware of the general characteristics that all self-destructive behaviors share.

We've already mentioned the first of these characteristics: at one point or another, a self-destructive behavior works to help an individual deal with a hurtful or threatening situation. Looking at this woman's situation, we can see that this is true. When her loss in the student election violated and threatened her healthy inner self, she sought solace in any form available to her. She found it by withdrawing from others and indulging in sweet, temporarily satisfying snacks—and, later in life, in the cigarettes she began to smoke in an attempt to control her weight. Withdrawal, overeating, and smoking became her means of dealing with psychic discomfort. Each of these techniques helped her to maintain a tenuous emotional equilibrium; they did nothing, however, to help her achieve any sort of stable peace of mind. None of Lynn's techniques constituted a life-enhancing behavior that she could have used to cope during uncomfortable moments of life.

This last point leads us to the second characteristic that is common to all self-destructive behaviors: although a self-destructive behavior at one point or another works to help the individual cope with a threat, it is never the best behavior that could be used in a particular situation. Let's face it: when she fled her school in tears on that Friday afternoon, that woman did not make the wisest behavioral choice available to her. When she learned that she'd lost the election, she could, for example, have sought out and congratulated the winner, a gesture that might have bolstered her damaged self-esteem. To deal with the pain she was feeling, she could have talked to her friends, her parents, or a school counselor, thereby avoiding the danger that arises whenever strong and legitimate emotions are masked or buried. In addition to these measures, she might also have used her experience to test some of the faulty beliefs she apparently harbored: that life is always "fair;" that others invariably behave honorably, and that as a "good" person she had a right to expect never to be hurt or disappointed. As we'll discuss later, these beliefs—we call them the sweet poisons inadvertently exuded by an essentially toxic culture—were at the core of her subsequent self-defeating actions. Her loss in the election was merely a triggering event.

The third (and perhaps the most insidious) characteristic of a self-destructive behavior is that, eventually, it guarantees the consequences that the individual is trying to avoid in practicing it. Again, this woman's example is instructive. Having given of her healthy inner self, she ended up hurt and apparently betrayed. At that point she formulated a faulty behavioral conclusion, deciding, in effect, that if she withheld her healthy responses and acted instead in a destructive way, she'd be able to avoid the pain of rejection. When we asked her why she ran from the school that afternoon, she told us that she feared that no

one would want to talk to her following her defeat. She went on to reveal that during her adolescent years, her single greatest fear was that she'd be ostracized, exiled from the world of happy and healthy people. Yet over the years that followed her defeat in the election, this is the very consequence that her behavior guaranteed. By her own admission, her popularity waned in high school: she put on weight, became increasingly suspicious and withdrawn, and developed a hostile personal style to keep others from getting close enough to betray or otherwise harm her. These behaviors persisted during her college years, when the demands of higher education exacerbated her sense of her own brittleness, inferiority, and isolation from others. And finally, she continued to practice her self-defeating behaviors in the workplace, thereby earning the reputation of a brusque, efficient, and hard-shelled administrator: a person who achieved results but who was something less than likable. As a result, she ended up in a counselor's office, complaining of loneliness, emptiness, and virtual isolation from the bustling sort of life she believed that other people enjoyed. She did not realize, however, that the self-destructive thoughts and actions she began to nurture as a means of warding off rejection virtually guaranteed that her worst fears would be realized.

As you study this material and attempt to identify the ways in which you are hurting yourself, keep this notion in mind. Look for the ways in which the people you'll meet eventually found themselves faced with precisely the consequences they tried to circumvent by way of self-destructive thoughts and actions. Above all, never lose sight of the fact that self-destructive behaviors are both dangerous and deceptive. They come into your life as apparent friends who offer comfort and protection in moments of distress. They help you through these threatening moments, and for this you are grateful—so grateful that you come to believe that you cannot live without their devious company. Sooner or later, though, these behaviors reveal their true nature. At that point, you must face the realization that your self-destructive behaviors have been unworthy companions and untrustworthy guides. The comfort that these behaviors offer is false. If you rely upon them too long, they will lead you away from the road of health, growth, and life. Self-destructive behaviors will, in the end, take you precisely where you didn't want to go.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### *Slide 6*

- 1. How are self-destructive behaviors born?**
- 2. What is a self-destructive behavior?**
- 3. What are some common self-destructive behaviors?**