

INSIGHTS THAT MY CLIENTS HAVE TAUGHT ME

WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING ABOUT ANYWAY?

M. K. Doc Downing Ph.D., LMFT

Have you ever been in one of those fights and, all the time that you are fighting you are thinking this is a really dumb fight, but you keep fighting? Writers used to say that all fights were about sex, religion, and politics. I would like to suggest that they are not about any of the above.

All fights, whether between individuals or nations, are about one or a combination of three things. There are three things underlying your fights that are more basic than sex, religion and politics! Since the basic underlying issues are hardly ever expressed, solutions are not found, and as a result, most fights never get resolved and are doomed to be repeated over and over.

There are only three things that you fight about:

- 1) Significance (attention);
- 2) Need to be connected (fear of abandonment);
- 3) Control (anatomy).

Every fight that you have is coming from one or a combination of these three needs. For example: "You never spend time with me; you are always working," is about significance. Fights about significance can be anything from not telling someone the meal was wonderful to the fact that you did not pull the chair out or open the door. It can be over infidelity (I'm not special any more) to "You did not kiss me when you left for work."

Think of the fights that you have had because you did not feel important or significant. Did you let the other person know that it was about not feeling significant?

Part One

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING SIGNIFICANT

Abraham Maslow in his **hierarchy of needs** (a theory proposed in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*) put forth that the basic human needs were breathing, water, sleep, food and a thing he called homeostasis. Others have summarized this as having a roof over your head and food on the table. The American government has accepted this as fact and sees these as the right of all Americans. So, now we have food stamps, welfare, and medical health care.

I would not argue that these things are unimportant, but I am suggesting that there is something that is even more important. Maslow missed the bottom rung of his **hierarchy of needs**.

Significance is a basic human need, without it you will die. It will not matter if you have all the food in the world and live in a beautiful home, if you don't feel important and significant, you will die. When you are born, they can give you all the milk, water and warm blankets that you need; they can change your diapers and keep you clean, but that won't be enough to keep you alive. The basic human need in all of us, is the need to feel significant, or important. As a baby, unless there are people around you to pick you up, soothe you, and make faces at you, you will fail to grow, fail to gain weight and you can die. Medically, it is called marasmus or failure to thrive.

There is nothing that a tiny baby can do to make you pay attention to him. The baby can cry and cry, but you may still choose not to pick him up. Once the baby becomes a toddler, he can start doing things to get attention. The problem is, there are very few things a small child can do to make you pay attention to him. However, being bad will do it every time. Unfortunately, it is often easier to reinforce negative behaviors than to reward good behaviors.

The need to feel significant and get attention will never leave you. Have you ever heard someone say, "The doctor says that old Uncle Joe has lost his will to live"? What the doctor is saying, is that Uncle Joe doesn't feel significant, he has no purpose, nothing to live for and he is going to die. [See Victor Frankel's book, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*.]

If you cannot get significance in positive ways then you will find ways of getting significance by doing negative behaviors. Young people who are not getting the significance they need at home will sometimes join gangs as a way to get significance. Some preteens and teenage girls get significance by having sex with the boys (often getting more than significance; pregnant, STD's, etc.).

Very early on, boys and girls are programmed to get their significance from very different places. What are the toys you were given as a child? If you are a boy you were probably given toy cars, dump trucks, fire engines, toy guns, knives, GI Joe figures, and baseballs, basketballs, soccer balls, the toys of work, war and big time sports. The message is that you are to get your significance from working hard, playing hard and fighting hard.

If you are a girl how many toy guns, GI Joe figures, and fire engines did you get? If not these things, what did you get to play with? Tea sets, baby dolls' and Ken and Barbie? The message here is that as a woman, you get your significance from cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids and "Ken."

This same programming continues into adulthood. What is the subject matter of teenage boys and men's magazines? Business, cars, motorcycles, computers, sports, guns, hunting and sex. And what are the focuses of teenage girls and women's magazines? How to look beautiful, how to get a man, dating, home, garden, cooking, and how to please a man and your family.

As adults, where do these big boys get their significance? From working hard, playing hard and fighting hard, while their wives are trying to get their significance from their children and from their husbands (who are busy working hard, fighting hard and playing hard). As a result, many of these wives become frustrated and angry, "I didn't marry you to see you work all the time. We never spend time together." (Ken and Barbie always had time for each other.) His response is usually, "But I'm working as hard as I can to take care of you and the children." And the fight goes on.

The next time you are in one of those stupid fights, stop the fight and ask yourself and your partner, "Is this fight about not feeling important or significant?" If the answer is yes, then start working on sharing your feelings of being alone and feeling unimportant. You will often discover that you are both feeling the same lack of recognition and significance. Do not stop there. Next, work on how to make each other feel significant and important. "What would make you feel important and loved?"

Don't expect others to know what makes you feel loved and significant. You are not a mind reader and neither is the other person. Since significance is the basic human need, more important than a roof over your head and food on the table, therefore, it is OK to ask for what you need.

You can ask for what you want by using statements like:

- ❑ "When you come home and hug and kiss me, I feel loved and important. Can you spare a hug tonight?"
- ❑ "I feel important when you brag about me to our friends. I will probably fight less with you when I feel significant."
- ❑ "I feel loved when you want sex from me."

- ❑ “Whenever you bring me flowers, I feel loved and important. The next time you want me to feel loved, you know what to do.”
- ❑ “I feel importance when you initiate sex. It makes me feel wanted.”

The sense of importance and significance comes from only two areas: first, from our support people, such as parents, mate, children, friends and co-workers. One of the problems with dysfunctional families is that they do not provide the sense of significance to each other or to their children. When the children grow up, they do not know how to provide this basic need to their children and so the cycle continues.

The second area from which significance comes is having a job, skill or ability for which you get recognition. People who have never learned how to get significance from their mates and their children may end up getting all their significance from their work and become workaholics. “At least at work they recognize my importance. I know I’m important, my paycheck tells me that.”

A problem can develop when you “put all your eggs in one basket,” such as in a relationship and you lose that “basket,” through death, divorce, or Alzheimer’s. Or, your children grow up, leave home and create their own lives and families and just don’t have the time to spend with you.

At work, you were recognized for your skill and ability. As a result, you got most of your sense of significance and importance there, but then either through age or disability, you will lose your importance. Younger men and women will replace you with new energy and new ideas. The result is that you are left feeling very depressed and despondent with no source of significance and no reason to live.

All relationships end, all skills and ability diminish and are lost. Nothing is forever. My father said that rocking chairs will kill you. He lived to 99 and died just three months after they took his car from him and he could no longer take the “old ladies” to the store or drive people to church. Where do you get your significance and are you able to keep remaking your sources of significance if you should lose one?

I have noticed that from birth to forty years of age, people are busy making new friends, creating new experience and skills. From forty to sixty people are starting to stop reaching out and making new friends and having new experiences. From sixty on, I often see people reading the obituary pages and watching their circle of friends get smaller and smaller. It the law of diminishing returns.

I have a life plan for me. Whenever someone dies in my circle of friends; I go out and create two new friends. It is the law of increasing returns.

The importance of maintaining a balance in your life is essential to your quality of life. Positive attention and the significance that comes with it are the basic human need. And since it is the basic human need, I have a right for you to make me feel significant, BUT then I also have a responsibility to make you feel significant, too.

You are in charge of your life. Make sure you have people around you who have the same values and goals. If you have people who believe in putting others down so they can feel significant, it is not your job to change them, but to gently and firmly remove yourself from this environment.

Since significance is the basic need of humans, it is no wonder that it is the root of so many fights. Next month I will look at the second thing that is the basis of so many fights.

M. K. Doc Downing Ph.D.
Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist
Doc@MKDocDowning.net
<http://www.mkdocdowning.net>

M. K. Doc Downing Ph.D., Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist is an author of books and articles on relationships and parenting. You can find him at the 2GetHelp Therapy Center located in Fresno, California. If you would like to be on his mailing list, he may be reached at Doc@MKDocDowning.net.

2009 Copyright notice

The contents of this newsletter may not be reproduced, copied, reprinted, uploaded, posted, transmitted, or distributed, in whole or in part, for any purpose other than personal, non-commercial use, without the express prior written consent of M.K. Doc Downing, Ph.D., LMFT. However, under certain conditions, reproduction of these contents may be permitted. No part or parts of the contents should be edited as the whole part which includes the copyright acknowledgments for M.K. Doc Downing, Ph.D., LMFT, must be kept intact. Reproducing or displaying any part of this newsletter's contents on your personal website is strictly prohibited. Instead we invite you to be linked to our website www.MKDocDowning.net or write to us for express permission.