“DEAR DICK” - COPING MECHANISMS

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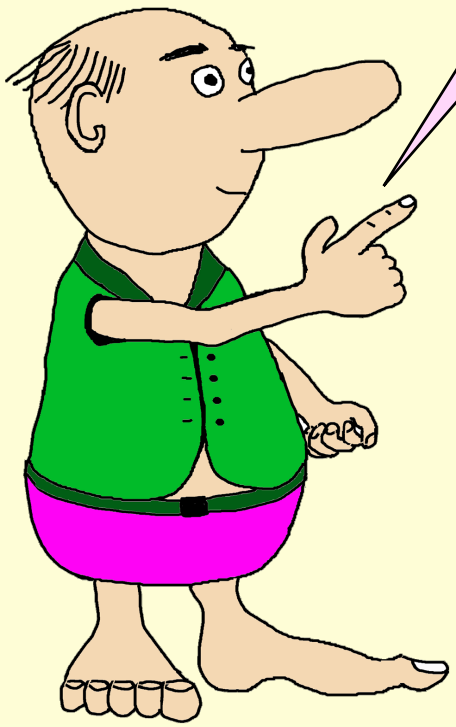
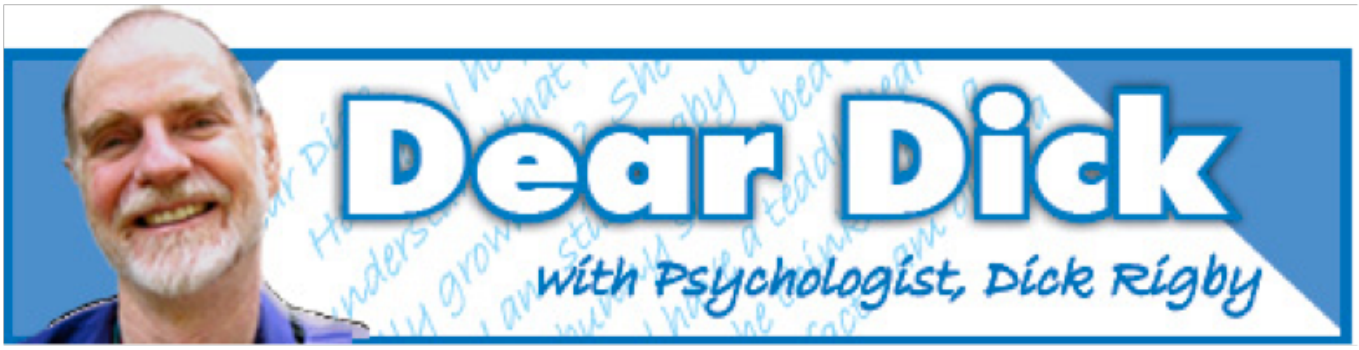
Chapter 1. Hysteria





"Hysterical person"
April 2003

Have you ever tried to talk to someone who is in a hysterical state and not making sense? Who hasn't? It's so frustrating.

Janet was trying to reason with her daughter Amy. "Please don't just drop your clothes where you take them off" said Janet in a calm voice. "If you could just put them in the dirty clothes basket, it makes it easier for all of us".

Amy was quick to react "You're always picking on me, you never have anything good to say about me". "Look" said Janet "this isn't about criticism, it's about consideration for other people". Amy raised her voice in anger, "You find fault with everything I do. Nobody else attacks me like you do". "My friends at school say that I am really easy to get on with."

"Your friends at school don't have to live with you and trip over your dirty clothes". "Right,that's it" screamed Amy "I'm never going to do anything for you ever again". Amy raced out of the room slamming doors and cursing as she left.

The hurricane had past and Janet reviewed the damage. She felt upset and shaken. "What did I say that was so wrong"? she asked herself.

Many of us who have had teenage children have faced this situation. But it's not just teenagers who do this. I know of some adults who behave this way. I really a form of cheating. Amy knows that she can't win the argument about the clothes using fair means, so she tries to manipulate using foul means. Amy is not doing this consciously, so she is not aware that she is behaving irrationally.

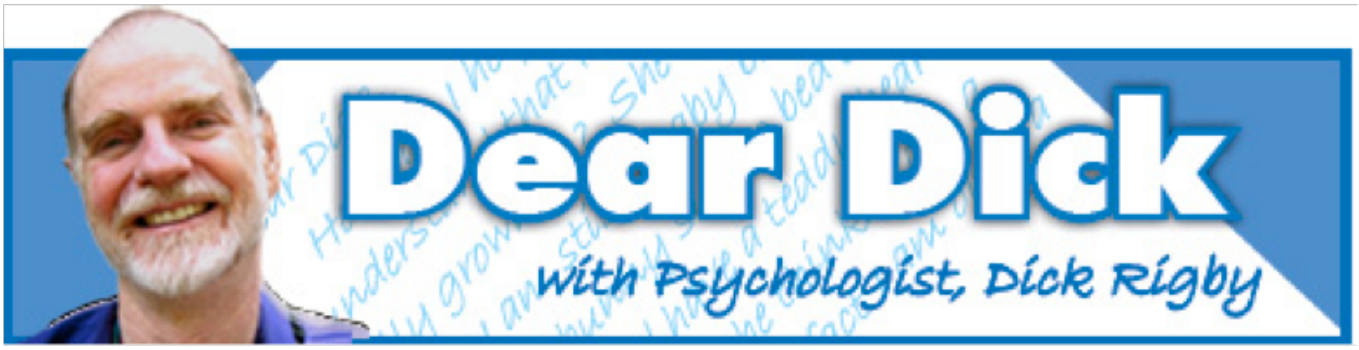
This denial of her self awareness makes Amy difficult to deal with. Even though an over-reactive person like Amy is difficult to deal with, there are some basic guidelines to follow.

The first is, don't get drawn into the fight. Stay calm while those around you fly off the handle. If Janet were to fight back, Amy would feel even more the victim of her so called "abusive mother".

The second rule is to not be sidetracked. Stick to the point no matter how many red herrings are thrown at you. This is called the broken record technique. Keep repeating your point.

The third rule is to try and introduce some negative consequence for the person who is being hysterical. This is not always easy to do. But sometimes it is the only way that the hysterical person will be forced to look at what they are doing.

Chapter 2. Disorganization



"Organized disorganization"
April 2002

I would like to tell you about a client that came to see me a year ago. I have changed some details so that he remains anonymous. Jack is a 29 year old single male whose problems started at university when he moved out of home. He was always late for lectures and late handing in assignments. As a result he only scraped through to become a qualified teacher.

Jack was disorganized. Not just a bit, but very disorganized. Everything in his life was in chaos. His home office was in a mess. He couldn't find anything. His relationships with women were always in crisis. Nothing was easy.

When it came to money, Jack was always in debt. Even though he earned good money as a teacher, he managed to spend or lend it so that he was always in debt. Jack is an intelligent man, so why did he do this?

Every time that the crisis of disorganization got too bad, his parents would come and rescue him. His mother would put his house in order and his father would give Jack money to cover his debts. Jack's father would go crook at Jack and show Jack how to organize his finances so that he didn't get into debt. But nothing changed.

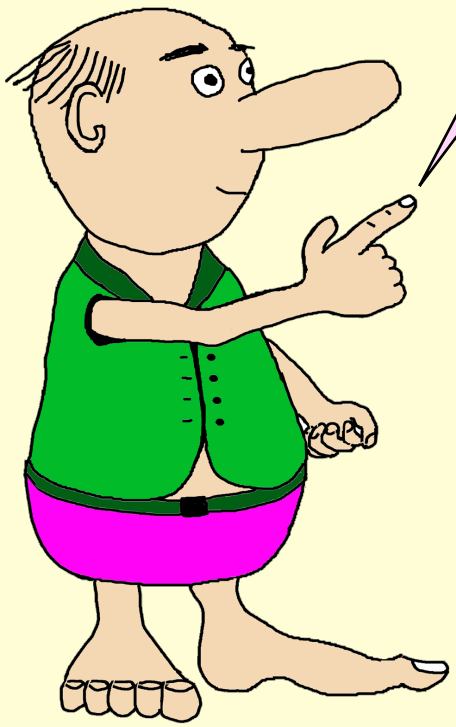
You would have guessed already. The pay off was that Jack was being rescued by his parents. Nobody in the family knew what was going on because it was all operating at a subconscious level. Jack's state of disorganization was run by a subconscious part. When things started to settle, this part would do something to sabotage in some way to return things to a state of chaos.

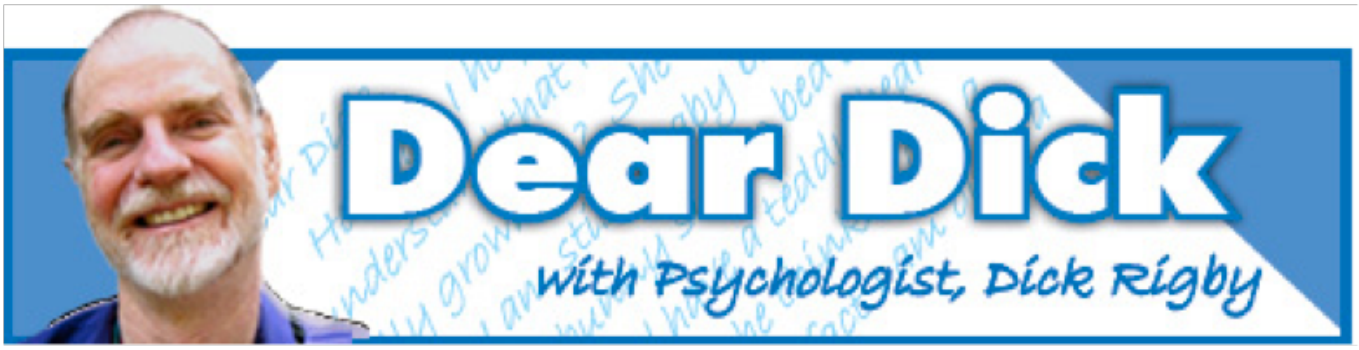
For example, his father noticed a small leak in the bathroom and pointed this out to Jack. It would have cost $80 to fix at the time. Jack did nothing. Three months later, the bill to fix the damage was $350.

Jack's disorganization was very neatly organized at a subconscious level. The pattern of being rescued by his parents was set up in his childhood. Once Jack started to work in therapy, he started to see his pattern at a conscious level.

He realized that he could get his need for support and affection met by other methods. This freed him up to understand that he no longer needed to be rescued by his parents.
Happy ending. Jack is now functioning with an appropriate level of organization.

Chapter 3. Self sabotage





“Success or failure”
November 2003

Isn’t it so frustrating when you have a friend or loved one who is capable of great things and always manages to shoot themselves in the foot.

Here’s a case in point. Alex was an inventor. He had talent oozing out of him. He came up with great ideas that could really help other people.

Alex could have easily been a millionaire several times over. His inventions were very good. But Alex would sabotage his success at a subconscious level. He was never aware that he was doing it. He always had a good explanation for why he was not successful.

Take the lawn clipping dispenser for example. Alex invented this devise for distributing lawn clippings over the surface of the lawn so the lawn looked neat after it had been mown. He built the prototype and started to look for a manufacturer. Whoops! He made a mistake in lodging the patent forms so the patent was not legally registered. You guessed it. Someone else patented his idea and made a mint.

Alex explained this situation away by blaming a clerk in the patents office for giving him the wrong information. We could believe his explanation if it was the only time it occurred. But this was a repeating pattern of self sabotage. Because Alex didn’t even acknowledge that he had a problem, nothing was done.

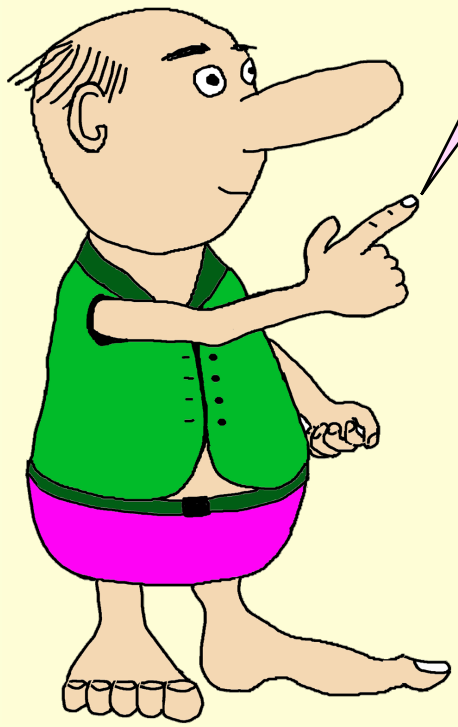
The reason that he sabotaged his success was that he had a deeply held fear of success that he learned in his childhood. The core belief system that ran this fear was that “If I am successful, people will begin to expect great things of me and I will not be able to meet their expectations. I will be a disappointment to them and I will be rejected.”

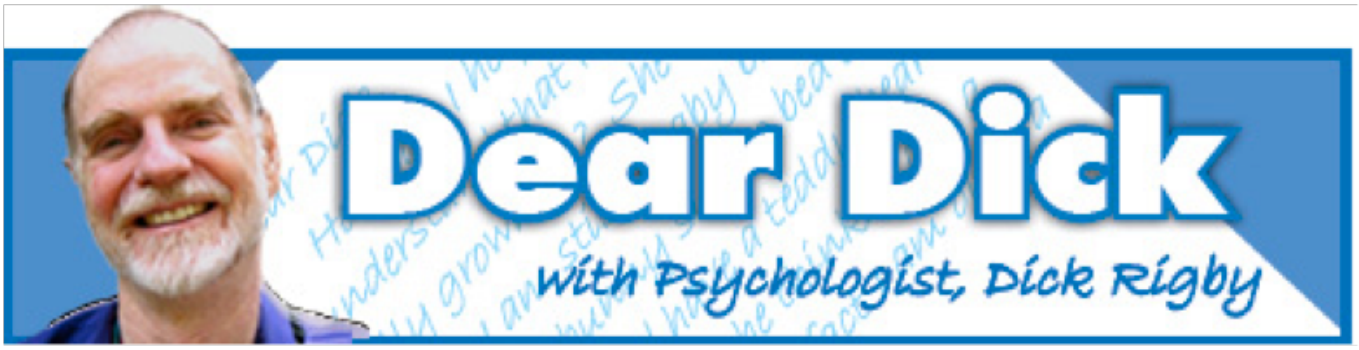
This belief system meant that when he was within a hairs breath of succeeding, his subconscious part would devise some ingenious way of sabotaging the project and making it look like and accident or someone else’s fault.

Alex’s story is still waiting for a happy ending. Alex is still sabotaging himself and blaming other people and things. His wife goes along with this and believes that Alex is either careless or unlucky. She doesn’t see the pattern of self sabotage.

If you know someone like Alex, gently point out to them that they have to take responsibility for their actions. Oh, and one more thing. Don’t tell them I told you to do it.

Chapter 4. Nervous breakdown





“Nervous breakdown”
February 2009

The term “Nervous Breakdown” is a popular term for the loss of normal coping mechanisms. A simple definition is that “the sufferer is severely and persistently emotionally distraught and engages in inappropriate behaviour as a result of sustained stress”. Let me explain by sharing a case study (anonymity preserved).

David was an IT specialist in his late 20s. He and his wife had been in conflict for ages, and she eventually left him. He was distraught. He coped by just surviving from day to day. One month later he was involved in a car accident in which he received minor injuries and severe psychological shock.

The traumas added together. He was finding it more difficult to concentrate at work. His social life wasn’t happening and he was drinking too much. Then his mother died unexpectedly. It was all too much for David. He started to “go off the rails”. He lost interest in keeping contact with his friends. He did not sleep well at night, and he became over-reactive and paranoid.

On one occasion David’s boss criticized his work. David flew off the handle in rage. He was convinced his boss was out to humiliate him. It was all in David’s mind.

He had been a very thorough and careful person before the breakdown. Now he would often go to work leaving his house unlocked and the lights on. He would forget to pick his kids up on an access visit. He was a mess but not suicidal.

David’s GP referred him to a psychologist, Melissa who helped David in three areas. She helped him:

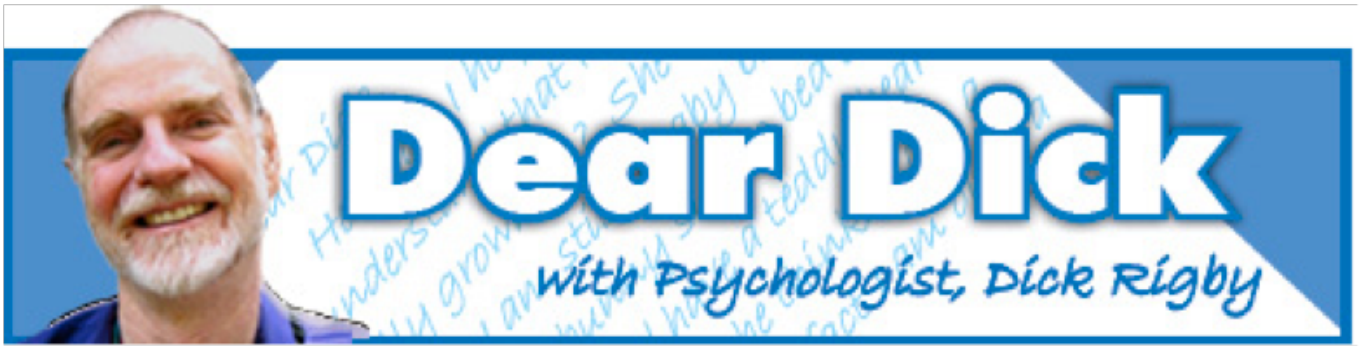
1. to lower his level of anxiety. David learnt about how to calm himself down using breathing and relaxation.
2. to make sense of what had happened by understanding how people react when they get hit by a series of traumas.
3. to react normally again. This took some time to learn that people were not out to get him. He learned how to manage conflict resolution even better than he had before the “breakdown”.

David was asked to mix more socially and drink less.

We jump forward six months. David made a full recovery. He now has a steady girlfriend and keeps regular contact with his children. David was able to process each trauma separately and come to terms with it. He learned to grieve the loss of his wife and his mother. He was able to cry and release.

He made this full recovery without the use of antidepressants.

Chapter 5. People pleasing



“The people pleaser”
February 2010

Ian hit the roof. Peter had no idea of what he had said that provoked such a strong reaction his friend. Ian reeled off all the things he hated about Peter. Ian had been sitting on his resentment for months. Ian was a people pleaser. He hated conflict and always wanted to reach agreement at all costs. On the other hand, Peter was a man with definite opinions and didn’t mind sharing them.

The conversation that led to the blow up went something like this. Ian complained to Peter about his boss. Ian had been passed over for promotion yet again. Peter did what he normally did, which was to offer Ian advice on how to manage his boss. Peter said, “the trouble with you, mate, is you never stand up for yourself”. Ian agreed with Peter. Peter went on in great detail telling Ian what he should do.

It was only after ten minutes of advice that Ian exploded. From Peter’s point of view, he was just trying to help a mate. From Ian’s point of view he was being told how to run his life and given no recognition for the social skills he already had.

This led to a rift in the relationship. Ian recognized that he had over reacted, but didn’t understand why. He went to a therapist and got some guidance over several sessions. He learned that he had been giving people misleading messages. He had been agreeing with Peter when he should have been disagreeing.

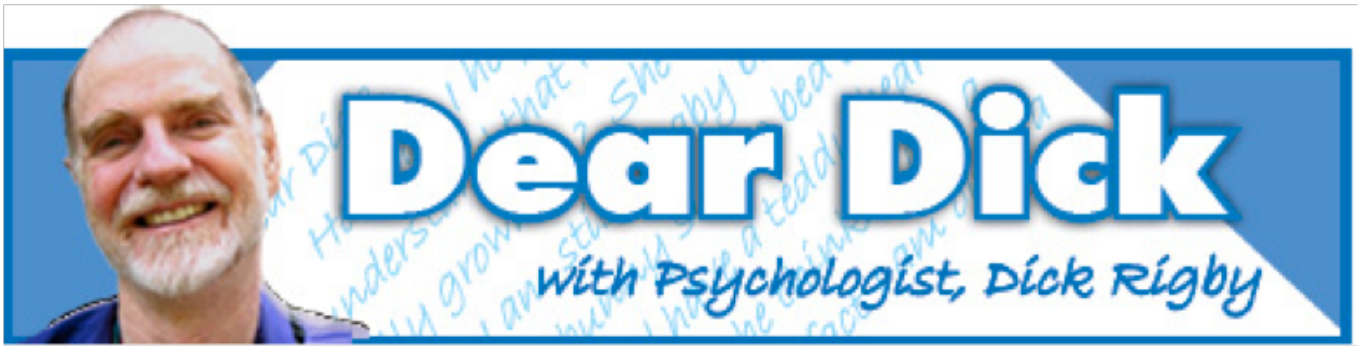
Ian worked on his self confidence and assertiveness. He started to communicate more clearly with people. There were upsides and downsides to this change. His relationship with his boss improved. His boss started to see that Ian had initiative and that he was better at handling staff. Ian got his promotion.

Ian and Peter were able to get their friendship back on track. Ian learned to me more direct with Peter, and Peter learned to be more sensitive and empathic in how he spoke to Ian.

The downside was with regard to Ian’s relationships with his mother. Ian’s mother was used to telling Ian what to do. No one stood up to her. When Ian stood up to his Mum, world war three broke out.

Ian had enough courage to stick to stand up to his Mum’s aggression and anger. It was very difficult, but over a long period of time things started to improve and a new pecking order was established.

Chapter 6. Grandiose entitlement



“Grandiose entitlement”
November 2010

Mary was 28 years old. She had one older sister, Julie who lived in dread of Mary phoning her. Mary only rang when she wanted something. Mary was very charming as long as she got what she wanted. If she didn’t get what she wanted there was a price for Julie to pay.

Mary had “Grandiose Entitlement” (GE). This meant that she expected more from life than she was entitled to. Mary had her parents well-trained. Mary lived rent-free in a modern unit owned by her parents. Mary didn’t see anything wrong with this. In her mind, her parents owed her this. By contrast, Julie worked hard for everything that she got. Julie resented Mary freeloading off their parents.

It was Julie that came to see me to get help in dealing with Mary. She had tried talking to her parents, but they were just blindly defensive of Mary. I began by helping Julie to understand the origins of this condition. Mary was indulged by her parents as a child. If she didn’t get what she wanted she would throw a tantrum, and eventually her parents would give in.

People with GE are basically very self oriented and they are not sensitive to other people’s needs. However, they can also be very clever in how they manipulate other people. Mary manipulated with a combination of charm and intimidation. If the charm didn’t work to get what she wanted then she would either get angry or withdraw affection.

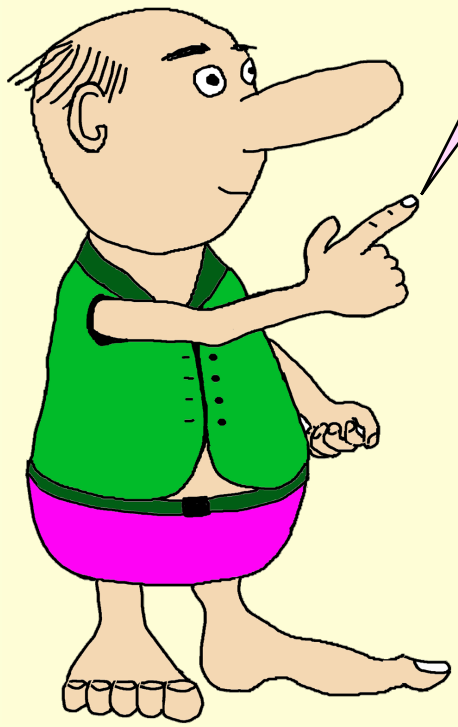
The people with GE are immature and have poor self-esteem. They do not have a healthy sense of where they fit into the world.

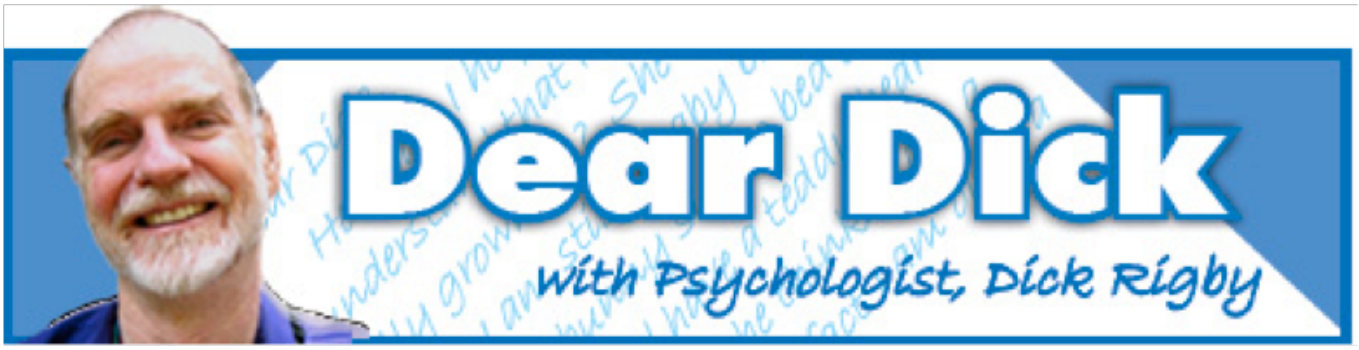
The work that I did with Julie was to help her to stand up for herself. In the past, if she said no to Mary’s demands, she would feel guilty and responsible. She would feel sorry for Mary. Usually Julie would give Mary what she wanted just to keep the peace.

Julie began to understand that Mary was coming from a damaged position, and when Julie gave into Mary, it didn’t help Mary. Julie was able to reduce her guilt. She was also able to understand that she was not responsible for Mary’s life. Mary could get help to sort her life out if she chose to.

This was incredibly liberating for Julie. She became clearer with her boundaries. There was an adjustment period of several months between the two sisters. But after that, things settled down and Julie felt much clearer when she had to say no to Mary.

Chapter 7. Self image





“Keeping up appearances”
October 2010

What a trap Bernice was in. Do you remember the show on ABC TV some years ago called “Keeping up appearances”? The main character was Hyacinth Bucket. Hyacinth had to impress people with her social status. Her identity and self worth was fully defined by her social status.

So it was with Bernice. She had a large house in Chapel Hill with beautiful original art works hanging in prominent places. Her large swimming pool blended into the landscape gardens. Everything was immaculate. Her appearance was immaculate. Her husband, Alan, was a company director and earned squillions. Their two boys went to Brisbane Grammar School.

They had many social friends and they entertained often. Only people of high social status were invited. At one of their events they hired a chamber orchestra. Everything was perfect – or so it seemed.

“I have everything I’ve ever wanted, but I’m not happy”, Bernice confided to her best friend Julie. Julie asked, “are you happy within yourself”? Bernice didn’t understand this. Julie went on to say; “You are always trying to impress people and upset when they don’t value you”.

This was very challenging for Bernice. She decided to visit her GP for some advice. Her GP told Bernice that she was depressed and suggested she see a psychologist. After 3 months she summoned up the courage to have just one session with me.

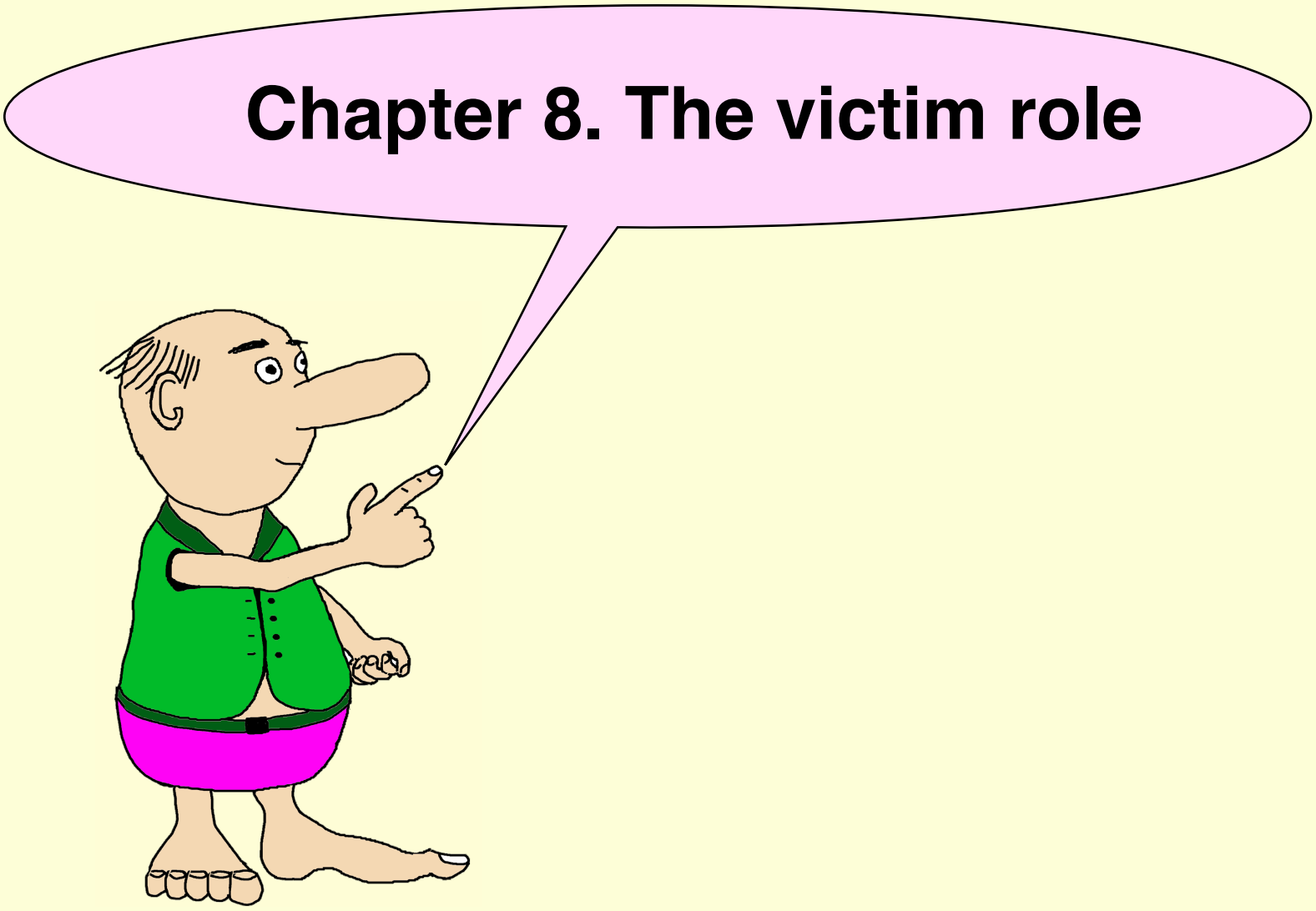
In our first session, I recognized her fragility and was very careful to take things slowly. We explored her childhood. This is the time when her life values were formed. She said that her childhood was perfect.

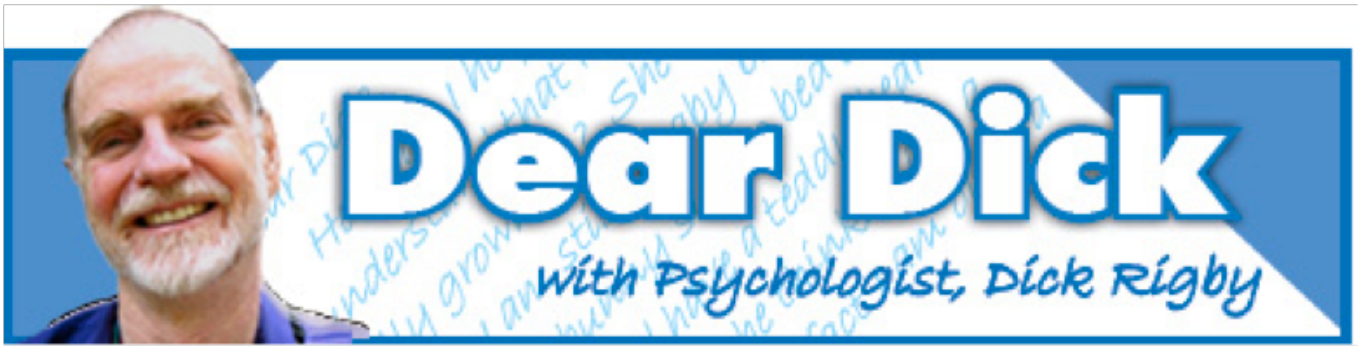
As we explored further, a different picture began to emerge. From a very young age, Bernice and her brother were pushed to achieve; from potty training to school results. Everything was measured by result, not effort. The approval they received was based on their achievements. They did not receive unconditional love.

As a consequence, Bernice didn’t learn to love herself, but rather to gain her sense of self worth from the approval of others. The problem with this system is that it doesn’t supply happiness. No wonder Bernice was depressed. One key to happiness is a strong internal sense of self worth.

That key defined the course of our therapy. There is a saying used in EFT therapy that goes; “I deeply and profoundly love and accept myself”. It took many sessions for Bernice to be comfortable saying that. She did get there, and surprise surprise, the depression disappeared.

Chapter 8. The victim role





"The victim trap"
December 2008

Lewis was a young man in his early twenty's. He couldn't get his life together. He had worked in various jobs in the hospitality industry. In each job he clashed with his boss. He either got fired or he left feeling disappointed and angry.

Lewis had a safety net. He would come home to his mother (Annette) and tell her what a terrible time he had been through. Mum would always take Lewis's side. This meant that Lewis was never challenged to look at his part in creating the problems.

On one occasion, Lewis's father (Bill) suggested that Lewis may have contributed to the problem with his boss by being rude. Annette rushed to Lewis's defense. That was the end of that. Lewis didn't have to look at his part.

At one level, Lewis wanted to be protected by his mother, but at another level, he was unhappy, angry and a bit depressed. His life kept going wrong. Then something happened that changed his life. He met and fell in love with Liz. She was a couple of years older than him.

Liz didn't want to play the rescuer role. If Lewis hadn't been in love with Liz, he would have dumped her. But he was madly in love so he had to listen to what Liz had to say.

She kept asking Lewis to look at his part in the conflicts. She asked him "Why was this a repeating pattern and what did he have to learn?" Gradually Lewis started to see himself less as a victim and more as a participant.

Annette developed an intense dislike for Liz. No prizes for guessing why. She was losing control over her one and only boy.

In Lewis's life, good things began to happen. He started to be more respectful of his current boss. He started to be more understanding when his boss was having a bad day. Lewis stopped taking everything personally.

Most of all Lewis learned to get out of victim mode and begin to negotiate with people. For example, his boss asked Lewis to work late on Friday evening because someone was off sick.

In victim mode, Lewis would have flown off the handle and stormed out in anger. With his new skills he sat down and talked with his boss. He said that he had an appointment at 7.00pm and would it be OK if he knocked of at 6.30pm. The boss said yes and was grateful that Lewis could stay back until 6.30pm.

Everybody won except Annette. Thank you Liz!