

Touchstones for A Psychology of Distress-Anguish

Wesley Novak, Ph.D.
November 16, 2024

Its disguised and enduring power: looking
back, being present, and looking forward.

The Nature of Distress-Anguish

Cry (sound) , **arched eyebrows and lower corners of mouth** (facial expression); **weeping** (tears), and **rhythmic sobbing** (pace and breathing pattern).

Its evolution: Analog of pain, separation cry, toxicity relative to fear-terror?

The body also cries: the activation of the affect has correlated responses throughout the nervous system , the endocrine system, the respiratory system, the thermoregulatory system, the cardiovascular system and the motor system.

Activated when a steady state stimulation rises above its set point.

The Nature of Distress-Anguish (2)

Sensitive temperament impacts threshold and importance in life.

The delineation of the properties of distress are confounded by failure to distinguish its properties/qualities from its interactions with the positive affects.

If interest-excitement is dominant positive affect of infancy, then distress-anguish is its dominant negative affect.

Through socialization its expressions can get radically transformed (AIC, V1/2, p317-322).

What is a Limitation-Remediation Script?

What is meant by limiting scenes?

Those aspects of the human condition perceived to be imperfect (including aspects of self), to which some enduring long-term response *must* be made and which it is believed *can* be remedied.

The person focuses on working with or around the limitation to mitigate its effects.

The “enduring distressing scenes ” and the desired “positive scenes” can and do differ in their intensity as well as frequency (differential magnifications). These variations are crucial in the quality of the L-R script and its impact.

Remedial action: some enduring long-term response is (“must be”) made. One can accept with resignation *or attempt* with varying degrees of success to change, improve, or make better.

Distress Illuminates Anything That Can Go Wrong and Stay Wrong



Distress Illuminates Anything That Can Go Wrong and Stay Wrong

- Losses: tangible, symbolic, and developmental.
- Images: desires, dreams, longings, and ideals.
- Overload of everyday life trivialized as stress.
- Character issues: our individual and collective struggles.
- Body states: amplification of hunger, fatigue, and damages.

What Becomes of the Broken-hearted? (LOSS)

Loss: requires an event which brings significant change within our awareness: either of our self (functioning, status, power), of a cherished “other’s” presence, or a missed opportunity.

Grief: references the emotional responses to our loss. Travel through time looking back, looking forward, and being present.

Mourning: depicts the learning which takes place as we move through our emotional responses. Its a process in which we undo the ties to what has been lost, revise our inner and outer worlds in response to that loss, and learn to live on.

LOSS (2)

The **psychological function of mourning** is to internalize the new absence, move forward with enhanced value and knowledge, and often reconstruct new meaning in one's world.

“**Sadness**” can be viewed as an end state of grief in which the loss is accepted even though it retains importance.

Not one prescribed route. Specific clinical interventions based on whichever affect is dominant at any moment; script formation makes grief intrinsically complex.

While the presence of the distress cry is often depicted as the signature emotion of grief— individual variation is the rule.

LOSS (3)

- One's lack of investment or disconnection in addition to prior hidden character issues may come to the forefront.
- Relationships in which attachment is negative to hostile, mourning may be absent. May result in depression, delayed or pathological-complicated grief.
- A significant proportion of mourners are suddenly challenged by a density of distress-anguish they are initially ill prepared to handle.
- People who cannot allow themselves to miss or grieve others have great difficulty receiving and giving "love".

Images: Dreams, Longings, and Ideals

- Disappointment as failure to enact desired Image.
- Chronicity of disillusionment results in distress and then detachment
- Beneath any pool of backed-up distress and shame may lie rejuvenating ideals and kernels for new purposes.
- In the spotlight of curiosity and compassion one can walk into their “cavern” of sorrow in order to decode one’s tears and find “new dreams”.

Images: Buried Dreams, Longings, and Ideals (2)

- Can seem backward leaning, unproductive, to mire in longing. Yet longing is momentum in disguise.
- “Disparity distress”: The “ideal” scene is connected with and one cries for its now recognized prior lacking/missing and/or rigorous efforts to attempt to reach it. Tomkins theory of developing 10th affect (density affect)- “tears of great meaning”.
- Yearning desire for something wonderful that we can’t have. Paradise lost. Nuclear script. We all live two lives - the one we embody and the one we imagine. In therapy— we explore the possibility and origins of Image.

Overload of Everyday Life Trivialized as Stress

Definitions

Stress: a broad term (**Selye**) that encompasses the body's reaction to any demand or challenge, whether physical, emotional, or psychological. Most generally it is the body's way of responding to any demand made upon it. Stress is an affectively neutral term.

Fight-flight response is viewed as a subset of the overall stress response referencing the body's specifically tailored response(s) to handle **immediate physical danger**. The **fight-flight response** is an automatic, physiological reaction to a perceived threat. It is viewed as an evolutionary mechanism which prepares the organism to either confront or flee from danger.

Affect theory: overload favors the presence of distress-anguish or anger-rage. "Stress" and "fight-flight" are not emphasized.

W.G. Novak, Ph.D., 2024. This presentation and its content are for the personal use of members of SSTI. Unauthorized use, reproduction, or distribution are prohibited.

Overload of Everyday Life Trivialized as Stress (2)

- More dependence on rapidly changing technological infrastructure has increased overload in daily life.
- Availability of human connection more expansive and efficient. Yet quality often more truncated, briefer, and less personal as we zoom through life.

Character Issues: Existential Challenges for Maturation of Self

Any recurring, repetitive, and unresolved group of scenes must be magnified into script by distress-anguish.

Therefore, character issues are not capable of being worked with until the individual is able to cry.

The therapeutic work of describing is completely dependent on the willingness of both patient and therapist to express and experience distress more fully together.

What do Our Bodies Have to Say?

Tomkins' diligent delineation of the the drives and body as unlearned activators of distress: low-grade pain, "fatigue", and low energy states daily due to nutrition and sleep (blood chemistry and temperature); gut health (AIC, V1/2, p 297-303).

Proper self-care requires ability to use distress as a signal.

“Success” in our culture often equated with ability to raise threshold for distress.

Interrupted action and affect expression results in body constrictions and muscle contractions <—> higher than optimal stimulation <—> distress-anguish.

The Phenomenon of Backed-up Distress

Tomkins: *“Because trouble is ubiquitous and because anticipation is perennial, man is forever courting suffering DISTANCE BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND ACHIEVEMENT IS A PERENNIAL SOURCE OF DISTRESS.....distress is suffered daily by all human beings, as they become tired, as they encounter difficulties in solving problems, as they interact with other human beings in ways which are less than ideal “ (AIC, p313, Vol II).*

Probability is high that much of our distress will be submerged and/or camouflaged. WHY?

Backed-up Distress (2)

Interested, excited, driven by our responsibilities, commitments and obligations (**cultural motivated escape pole**).

Personality is a uniquely patterned set of solutions which manage earlier repetitive emotional experiences. A massive affect management system which will keep much information outside of consciousness. Affective impact unknown. Trauma work informs of neural imprints with dense and enduring negative affect are reactivated in analog form.

Development of homeostatic social mask with purpose to “save face”. Displays some parts of self while submerging others.

As density affect, distress may have multiple sources making it difficult to “shut off”.

W.G. Novak, Ph.D., 2024. This presentation and its content are for the personal use of members of SSTI. Unauthorized use, reproduction, or distribution are prohibited.

Backed-Up Distress (3)

A person is motivated to express his/her affect (full-throated)- yet life does not allow in most contexts. (Rule 3)

According to Tomkins it is highly likely that the human being/infant will develop an Image whose motivated purpose is to fully express all feelings. Yet, because affect vocalizations are quite contagious and high powered, the free and open expression of the innate affects is a phenomenon that most cultures do not fully permit. Each culture develops its own rules for the socialization and management of such expression. From birth the infant is greeted by the idiosyncratic rules of his/her family or primary caretakers (punitive to rewarding). So we begin life with the capacity to boldly “cry out” in distress. By age 3 or 4 this must be mitigated in order to be a part of most any culture.

Backed-Up Distress (4)

What is Backed-up Affect?

- Tomkins never fully defined backed-up affect. He accented the transformations of the innate affect's facial expressions and the inevitable suppression of its vocal expressions across culture.
- As affect theorist he was concerned about universal confusion between the experiences of backed up affect and innate affect. He thought that any suppression of affect resulted in a bleaching of the experience of affect and thus to some impoverishment of the quality of life.
- **When an affect is blocked or not expressed it intensifies. It may become more explosive or overwhelming and/or get diverted.**

Backed-Up Distress (5)

What is Backed-up Affect ? (con't)

- Suppressing affects can lead to a state of emotional congestion. This impacts the body with an array of **psychosomatic disorders**: high blood pressure (suppressed rage), asthma (suppressed distress), migraines, gastrointestinal problems, etc. It also impacts our mental acuity: memory is “clogged”, difficulty with concentration, decision-making is poorer, and less “zip” in the AODL. The impact of the “backed-up” are often described as stress problems.
- Backed-up affect can be thought of as *unresolved affect that accumulates through repeated cycles without resolution*.
- Backed up affect as defined here (the recursive process, not the transformative expressions of the innate) does not just bleach experience— it limits and defines experience when intensified. Nuance is lost. When the process biologically generates above optimal levels of stimulation to “too much”, distress-anguish and anger-rage are its primary affects.

Exploring Density and Intensity of Affect

Clinical Manifestations:

- Intensity is about the momentary strength of an emotion.
- Density is about the persistence and frequency of emotional experiences over time; high-density affects can shape ongoing behavior and attitudes, influencing a person's mood or outlook more broadly.
- Intensity is about the peak force of an emotion, while density is about how concentrated or frequent these emotional peaks are over time.
- Different underlying biological processes.

What Processes Generate Backed-up Distress?

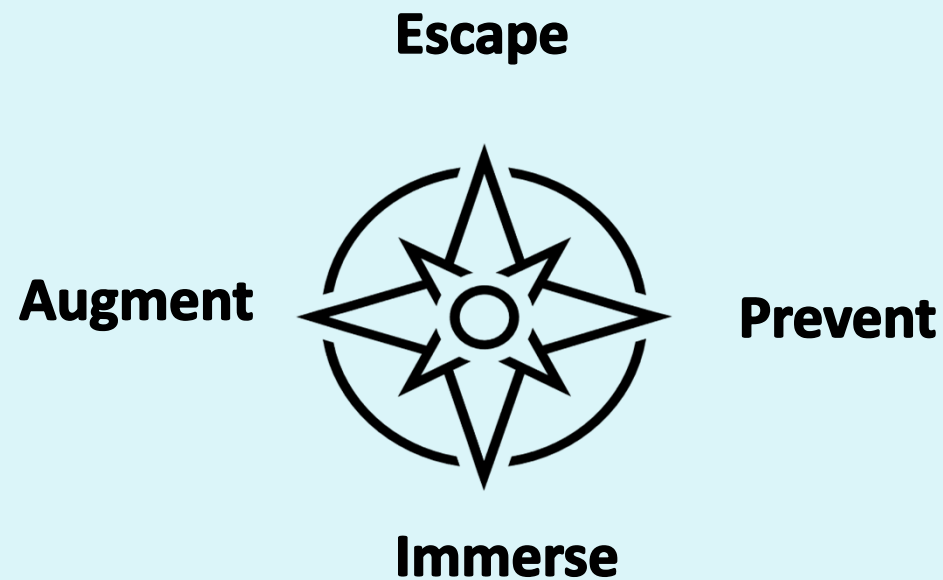
Suppression: An initial set of stimuli contained within a scene are perceived/evaluated, which automatically generates an emotional response (**Emotion= Stimulus-Affect-Thoughts**). We then reason, considering context and social norms. In this last step we often suppress rather than express. The brain-body keeps on going considering new responses generating more affect in a feedback loop within the problematic scene.

Automatic non-conscious process: scripts “governing” the scene, automatically from within generate repression of some responses over others. So what governs our responses within any scene often involves repressive processes particularized and directed by the rules of the script(s) activated.

What Processes Generate Backed-up Distress ? (2)

Rumination: Rumination is the act of **repetitively thinking** about a particular distressing situation. Rumination is an **involuntary engagement strategy** (script). Thus, not a coping style . It involves a tendency to overthink and dwell on the negative, rather than focusing on solutions or positive outcomes. It generates backed-up distress (**script driven**) . The distress level grows as the person focuses upon the **negative feel of distress-anguish, judges it, and tries to get rid of it**. On the road to depressive symptoms. No longer solving problems. Now just ineffectively managing the “feel “ of the affect’s presence.

The Compass of Distress



W.G. Novak, Ph.D., 2024. This presentation and its content are for the personal use of members of SSTI. Unauthorized use, reproduction, or distribution are prohibited.

Compass of Distress

Escape: ways we run from feeling

- Disavowal through expression of other affects.
- Dissociative strategies: paid sports entertainment, externalizing, search for distractions, excitement-based behaviors, cannabis.
- Shift to anger.

Compass of Distress (2)

Prevent: Methods which raise the threshold for the affect's activation

- Substance usage such as caffeine, amphetamine, cocaine.
- Attain power over the sources that activate distress.
- Build empathic wall to limit affect experience of another person.

Compass of Distress (3)

Immerse: Deep involvement in activity which expresses distress in culturally accepted (admired) manner

- Exercise, hard work, prolonged intense study.
- Jobs/roles which require “toughness”.
- Occupations that demand constant worry.

Compass of Distress (4)

Augment: Lower threshold for activation

- Use of media props (movies/plays/novels) both to add and enhance (romance-loss before reunion).
- “Sad” and distressing music.
- Alcohol.

“Stuck in the Middle of Compass”

- Focus on miserableness of “feel” of distress with rumination.
- Shame/fear about feedback of weariness and fatigue and anticipated capacity to function.
- Self-contempt and self-disgust for “diminished self”.
- “Collapsed” states and various “depressions”.