

## **When You See Ghosts**

A man saw a psychiatrist because he had serious problems in his relationships with women. He said that every time he allowed himself to be close, he was rejected. The man said that they all told him that they needed to move on and that it wasn't about him, but he knew that they were lying.

The man told the psychiatrist that he didn't understand what he had done to cause his relationships to fail. When asked if he had any ideas, the man said that he believed that women were just that way.

He then told the psychiatrist that even his mother had rejected him. She hadn't wanted him in the first place, and even tried to have an abortion. He had been nothing but trouble as far as she was concerned and could never do anything right. She often put him in his bedroom and left him alone for hours at a time just to be away from him.

When they were with other people, her attitude about him changed. She became affectionate and loving and all the things that he wished for when they were alone. Her false front hurt him deeply because it reminded him of what he did not have.

The psychiatrist could feel his patient's pain and decided that he would do his best to help him feel better. He empathized with his hurt and anger, provided emotional support, and reassured him that one day he would have a warm and loving relationship to enjoy. The patient didn't seem to respond.

After a few months of meeting every week, the patient had made no progress. He was still alone and unhappy. He was stuck. The psychiatrist pointed this out and encouraged him to take steps to develop a relationship that would satisfy his needs. The patient resisted. The patient's resistance frustrated the psychiatrist who offered stronger encouragement. The patient still resisted.

After this back-and-forth exchange had gone on for a few weeks, the psychiatrist sat back to re-examine the problem. The patient grew quiet and appeared withdrawn. This piqued the psychiatrist's curiosity, and he asked the patient what he was thinking.

The patient said that all along he had suspected that the psychiatrist would one day show his true colors and that that day had finally come. The psychiatrist asked him what he was talking about. The patient said that he knew that the psychiatrist would one day give up on him because the psychiatrist's caring had all been fake.

This startled the psychiatrist who reassured the patient that his concern for him was genuine. He pointed out that he had agreed to help him overcome his problems with women and had tried hard to help. The patient said that the psychiatrist had agreed to help because of the money. He knew that the psychiatrist didn't really care.

As time went on, the patient became less and less conversant. The psychiatrist decided to show the patient that he was reacting to the therapist as he was because of his experiences with his mother who didn't care about him. He explained that his mother had made him feel unloved when she put him in his room and left him there. The patient was now putting himself in his room just as his mother had, and that was why he felt the psychiatrist did not care. The patient would hear nothing of it.

The psychiatrist tried again. He explained to the patient that he was transferring feelings from his relationship with his mother onto his relationship with the psychiatrist which made it seem as though the psychiatrist did not care. He assured the patient that he cared about him and swore that he was telling him the truth. The patient would still hear nothing of it.

The man insisted that the psychiatrist was just like his mother and that the psychiatrist had pulled back a month ago because he did not really like the patient. Just like all of the other people in his life, the psychiatrist could not be honest about this.

The psychiatrist didn't know what to do. He knew that he didn't have much longer to get his point across. He knew that if he didn't act quickly, the patient would leave feeling just as bad as he had when he came in, if not worse.

The psychiatrist decided to take drastic action. Before their next session, the psychiatrist wrote on a piece of paper

### **I AM NOT YOUR MOTHER!!!**

and put the paper on his forehead. He met the patient in the waiting room, sat across from him in the therapy room, and waited for a response. The patient said nothing about the sign and started talking about his week.

About halfway through the session, the psychiatrist could stand it no longer and asked the patient, "Did you happen to notice the sign on my forehead?" The patient replied, "Yeah, that's just like something my mother would do!"

In my profession, we call this transference. It has to do with the transfer of feelings and attitudes about significant people in the past onto people in the present, particularly people who remind us of that other person. If it is pleasurable, we call it positive transference. If it is painful, we call it negative transference. It occurs in virtually all relationships.

Transference is almost always a factor when we over-react in ways that make no sense. We all carry certain sore spots that, when touched, elicit an intense reaction. Sore spots are usually the result of such things as childhood trauma, emotional neglect, repetitive patterns of interaction that stifle a person's development, and unhealed wounds that are covered over but still hurt when they are touched.

Touching sore spots causes ghosts from the past to live again. We look at the present, now enshrouded by feelings and perceptions from the past, and experience the unpleasant feelings of the past and present simultaneously. Emotional intensity builds, and we react to far more than the present would call for. Sometimes we treat people intensely based on our inaccurate perceptions of them, too often in a negative way.

Negative transference and over-reacting can damage your relationships as it did with the patient's who acted out his painful relationship with his mother in the psychiatrist's office. He pulled away from the person most likely to help him finally have his needs met in a healthy, loving relationship, depriving himself of what he needed emotionally just as his mother had done to him. How do you keep this from happening to you?

First, admit when you see ghosts and are over-reacting. Everybody does it. We all have sore spots that cause us to over-react when they are touched. It's a bit like having a boil under your skin. You probably don't notice it until someone bumps you in the wrong spot.

Second, open up to your feelings and the memories from the past to which they belong. Think about it, write about it, dream about it, and talk about it with people who truly care about you and are likely to empathize (not sympathize) with your pain. This will add greatly to your knowledge about what from the past has been touched upon and what you need to do to heal.

The healing of old wounds allows us to let go of the pain of the past which, in turn, keeps us rooted in the present. Life becomes easier and we end up in healthier relationships because we over-react less, no longer carry the dead weight of the past, and free ourselves from the ghosts that too often cause us pain and stifle our development.

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