

PROJECTION

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Projection is one of the common challenges in relationships. Projection is the tendency to attribute thoughts, emotions and even actions to other people that are in fact true about us. When we have uncomfortable thoughts or emotions or when we are uncomfortable with our own actions, we often project these onto other people, unconsciously assigning the thoughts, emotions and actions to a convenient alternative target.

Here are some examples of projection:

- I do not like another person. But I have a value that says I should like everyone. So I project onto them that they do not like me. This allows me to avoid them and also to handle my own feelings of dislike.
- I don't like myself. I project onto others that they don't like me.
- An unfaithful husband suspects his wife of infidelity.
- A woman who is attracted to a fellow worker accuses the person of sexual advances.
- I blame others for my own failings.

Projecting thoughts or emotions onto others allows us to avoid the discomfort of knowing that these thoughts and emotions are our own. We criticize the other person, distancing ourselves from our own dysfunction.

The Taoist teacher, Lao-Tzu, tells the following story. "Once upon a time a man whose ax was missing suspected his neighbor's son. The boy walked like a thief, looked like a thief, and spoke like a thief. But the man found his ax while digging in the valley, and next time he saw his neighbor's son, he walked, looked, and spoke like any other child."

How do you know if you're seeing something in the other person that's genuinely theirs? Or something about yourself that you're simply projecting onto the other?

The answer requires a leap in thinking, because the truth of the matter is this: the only way to know what's theirs and what's yours is to assume everything is yours! If you are willing to consider that you're projecting it all onto the other person, you will become better able to see the difference between your "stuff" and theirs. We call this leap in thinking "taking radical responsibility."

The worst thing you can do is to deny absolutely that you've got anything to do with it. That's almost a guarantee that you're the main projector in the situation. The quote "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." comes from Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act III, scene II. The phrase has come to mean that one can "insist so passionately about something not being true that people suspect the opposite of what one is saying."

Next time you find yourself criticizing or pointing the finger of blame, take a moment to wonder: Am I making this whole drama up out of my own inner needs and feelings? Just considering that possibility gives you enormous freedom.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. For more information call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com.