

Rash optimism a poisoned pill

By Ruth Ostrow

NO one coins psychological phrases quite like the Americans. Weened on decades of pop therapy, self-help books and daytime-TV doctors, the US has given us titles such as *Women Who Love Too Much* and *Love Your Disease*. Or those wonderful, two-word psycho-concepts: co-dependency, commitment phobia, toxic relationships, sexual addiction.

I heard a real double-barrel gem the other day which has prompted me to rethink my entire philosophy -- "malignant optimism", coined by Sam Vaknin PhD.

Vaknin seems to have put together two utterly discordant ideas to form one very well-conceived syndrome: "malignant" -- as in it will kill you, cancerous, poisonous -- and "optimism" -- as in a positive outlook.

So can too much happiness and positive thinking kill you, metaphorically and/or literally? Is there such a thing as being too positive, too forgiving?

In this world of New Age thinking, it is a brave man who answers yes to these loaded questions. But Vaknin has done just that. In his recently revised book *Malignant Self Love* he examines narcissism and related personality dysfunctions, and talks about the malignant optimism of the abused.

He argues that victims of abuse will often use optimism to justify and rationalise the inexcusable actions of others.

"He/she won't do it again," they argue. Or they launch into a plethora of "if only" statements: "if only he/she really wanted to heal", "if only we found the right therapy", "if only his defences were down", then all would be better. "There must be something good and worthy under the facade", "no one can be that destructive", "he/she must have meant it differently". Often victims of abuse will blame themselves: "I need to be more (or less) then things will improve." Vaknin calls these statements "the Pollyanna defences of the abused".

"This is magical thinking," he explains, on a website devoted to mental health called www.healthypplace.com. In the Personality Disorder section he writes that the narcissistic, self-absorbed abuser "uses and abuses this human need for order, good, and meaning, as he uses and abuses all other human needs.

Gullibility, selective blindness, malignant optimism -- these are the weapons of the beast. And the abused are hard at work to provide it with its arsenal." Over the years I've had many conversations with people who claim to be in hurtful relationships. It's hard to know who is to blame. Perhaps the disgruntled party is just expecting and needing too much, being overly demanding or goading. How do we know when a relationship is truly abusive or inappropriate?

Vaknin says there are a million ways to define abuse. To love too much is to abuse. It is tantamount to treating someone as one's extension, an object or an instrument of gratification. To be over-protective, not to respect privacy, to be brutally honest with a morbid sense of humour, or consistently tactless is to abuse. To expect too much, to denigrate, to ignore, are all modes of abuse. There is physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse. The list is long.

He talks about overt abuse which is the open and explicit abuse of another person: threatening, coercing, beating, lying, berating, demeaning, chastising, insulting, humiliating, exploiting. But says that there are more subtle forms.

There are also stealth abusers. You have to actually live with one in order to witness the abuse, which he says includes ignoring ("silent treatment"), devaluing, unceremoniously discarding, manipulating, depriving, philandering or withholding of sex (money/love), controlling the environment.

Chronic unpredictability can be abusive, with the abuser bouncing between sadism and altruism, neglecting and caring, abandoning and clinging, viciousness and remorse, the harsh and the tender, which Vaknin says can lead to insecurity, an eroded sense of self-worth, fear, stress and anxiety in the victim, who feels as if they are forever walking on eggshells.

Malignant optimists will keep forgiving and forgetting, rationalising and justifying -- possibly because they have a personality dysfunction stemming from childhood that compels them to remain in self-defeating situations. But as one reader wrote to Vaknin: "The way to stop the abuse is to use the 3Cs: 'I don't Cause it, I can't Control it, and I can't Cure it'." Since the reader's partner would not seek help with her, she walked away.

For me the term malignant optimism poses an important philosophical argument. I have always been a big believer in forgiveness, in sending out light and love in the face of nastiness, in the Buddhist philosophy of compassion: Breathe in pain, breathe out love.

I've believed that "to err is human, to forgive divine". But since reading Vaknin's work and thinking a lot about terrorism recently -- both emotional and literal -- I have changed my tune. One of Vaknin's readers wrote: "I believe it is possible to forgive, genuinely forgive in one's heart and soul, and yet not put oneself in danger, or refuse to hold someone accountable for their actions."

I go further. Some things are not forgivable. Some actions not condonable. Sometimes optimism is just masochism in disguise. You can let go, move on, send positive light and love, without having to forgive or forget.

www.ruthostrow.com

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