

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality

Chased By Chihuahuas

One morning Trish got up before Chad. Not long afterward, Chad appeared in the kitchen doorway. Engaged in her favorite ritual of having that first cup of coffee, she barely noticed him. Trish savors that time to herself; it's her way of getting the day started off right.

Chad asked with a scowl: "Hey, what are you all ticked off about?"

Trish was instantly jolted out of the tranquil spell that enveloped her. Peace gave way to high distress. She spent the next several minutes frantically attempting to get him to perceive her in the right light.

Yes, Chad was guilty of jumping to conclusions, but Trish allowed his shortsightedness to knock her off balance. Trish's reaction wasn't all that uncommon. Being wrongly accused, or seen in a bad light is likely to get a rise out of most us—a typical human response.

At those times, we're challenged to stay strong, to resist getting sucked into the quicksand of another person's negative opinion of us. Maintaining our composure—internally as well as externally—is a worthy objective.

After Trish expressed her pain over the incident in our counseling session, I responded: "Why do that to yourself? Why let his perception carry so much weight? Letting him get to you is like letting a Chihuahua chase you around the block. Why make him so big? Why make his opinions so powerful?"

The astounded expression on Trish's face told me that she was digesting a fresh thought. Trish easily gets hurt under such circumstances because she endows others with too much stature, too much clarity and too much maturity. For the sake of relief, I suggested that she view Chad and others as being limited in their capacity to perceive her accurately.

"When Chad fires off an assumption, realize that it's not about you," I advised. "More than likely, it's about his flawed lens and clouded thinking." Actually, we're all guilty of carrying around an imperfect lens, the filter through which we view others. Let's face it, we're limited in our ability to be objective. Our perceptions are influenced by many factors, such as our life experiences, learned biases, body chemistry, fears and other emotions.

That holds true for Trish.

Her peace wasn't rattled by Chad per se, but by how she processed or interpreted the event. Sure, Chad was the stimulus, but he wasn't the cause. The cause was Trish's filter formed by early childhood experiences. Her father's condemning and scolding manner led her to conclude that "I'm not lovable because I'm basically bad, not good."

Trish can't change the past, but she can change the effect it has on her today. She possesses the maturity and wisdom to question her early conditioning.

Einstein put it powerfully when he said, "No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it."

So when someone points an accusatory finger or arrives at a wrong conclusion, instead of automatically reacting, Trish can opt for peace by changing her thinking.

Playwright Tennessee Williams said: "There are no 'good' or 'bad' people. Some are a little better or a little worse, but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice."

So what about those people coming from malice? What if Chad's intentions are based on a desire to be hurtful? What if he doesn't want to correct his negative assumptions after Trish explains her version of the truth? What if his predominant view of Trish is negative? If that's the case, Trish might want to re-examine how close she really wants to be with this guy. Is he essentially good for her well-being, or is he poison?

Regardless of Chad's intentions, Trish is ultimately responsible for the beliefs about herself that fuel her ineffectual reactions. She is the only one qualified to know herself fully—not her dad or anyone else. So, on that one particular morning, she should have remained unruffled while calmly pointing out to Chad that he was off base by saying, "You've got the wrong idea; I'm off on a mini vacation. That's all it is."

Such a response would have discouraged any further wrangling simply because it couldn't happen without her participation. Powered by the poise of her dignity, Trish can negate any wrong opinion in a mere instant.