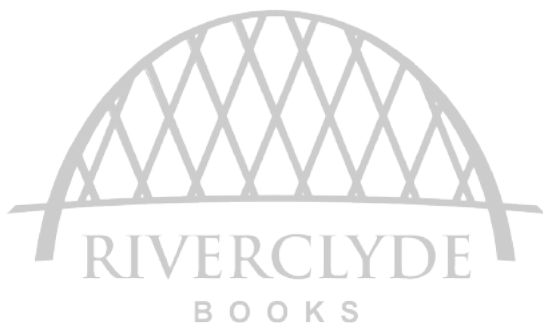


# Cracking The Teen Code

How to find calm in the chaos

BRIAN COSTELLO



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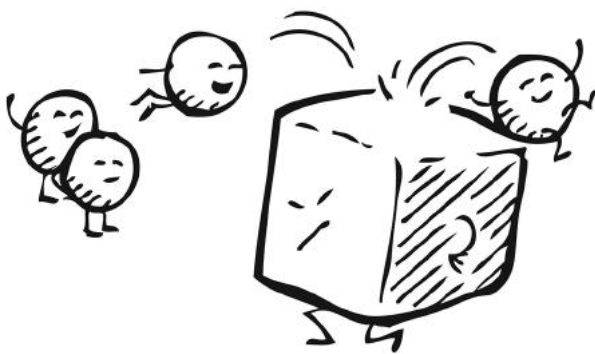
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# Pleasure and Pain



As a parent, every time money is offered to pass an exam, fast food for tidying a room, a material prize for doing/trying/winning, we are employing one of the oldest motivational tricks in the book.

As a teen, every time mum or dad are told that they are the best mum or dad in the world, or an offer is made to do/try/study/win something in return for a material prize or a promise that the dishes will be done if only they are allowed to do something or go somewhere it's exactly the same, age-old strategy in action.

These are all simple and familiar examples of the *pleasure* approach. However, most of us have learned from experience that *pain* can also be an effective path to motivation.

In most families, we find that both parents and teens use pain much more often than pleasure. We seem to have an inherent understanding that in many cases it is more effective than pleasure but, much more importantly, it also becomes our *pattern*.

Removal or refusal of access to something important, the threat of a bad mood, raised voice or other punishment, bad dancing in public causing widespread family embarrassment (one of my personal favourites that one) are all threats of potential pain. All of them can be used just as effectively as pleasure to motivate a family member to do something they are currently not doing or to stop doing something that they are.

Pain is also the motivational tactic we most often use on ourselves.

### **Pain is our 'normal'.**

For example, which of these statements do you think people use more often to motivate themselves to diet?

"I love myself dearly and I think I can look even more fabulous than I do right now. I deserve to do the best for myself."

*or*

"Oh no, look at the state of me. I am so disgusting, I can't believe I've let myself go this far and I've become such a big, fat, greasy slob."

It doesn't take much to figure out that there are far more people living in fear, anxiety and worry about failure and not living up to expectation than there are living in confidence, pride and contentment about the possibility of future success, love and fulfilment.

Now, on the face of it, both approaches, pleasure and pain, would seem to work.

They bring a sense of achievement to a parent because they generate an instant response and make stuff happen. For example, in my family, I know that *either* the threat of a public dad-dancing display *or* the offer of an evening out at the cinema are both effective ways of making things happen.

Sort of.

It depends on how we define 'effective'.

They are both based on some sound psychology, that's for sure. Pleasure and pain are powerful motivators but they only work for a brief period and, annoyingly, you can never fully control which direction the motivation is going to go!

How many times do you need to reward the doing of, or punish the avoiding of, washing the dishes before you realise that you aren't actually changing anything? It still won't be done if you don't ask. You are merely motivating a short term change in behaviour by offering the reward (pleasure) or administering the punishment (pain).

How often have you threatened to go nuts if their room isn't tidied? How's that going for you? Working well? I take it that after all these years your repeated bad moods and shouting have created long term behavioural change and your teen now displays a perfect room cleaning routine where even the curtain rail is wiped down at least once a month?

No?

Really?

And I bet most teenagers will recognise that the tactic of losing their temper, going off in a huff, slamming a door or making their parents' lives just a little more difficult, very rarely changes their parents' mind on something. In fact, on most occasions, trying to administer pain to a parent will actually have the opposite effect entirely.

I would suggest that none of us, parents nor teens, really *want* this to be the way things go.

It doesn't matter if it's pleasure or pain, whether it's shouting, slamming, grounding or whatever it is we do, all of these things only make us feel better for moments in time.

These short term tactics only give us a brief glimpse of change and too often, we think we have no alternative, we just do the same things over again and again.

Shouting, Praising, Rewarding, Punishing  
Rewarding, Punishing, Praising, Shouting  
Praising, Shouting, Punishing, Rewarding

And the process repeats . . .

Manipulating someone into changing will produce short term results but very quickly both teens and parents will get tired of the same tactics being used over and over again.

However, there is a way to motivate long term lasting change and it's easy to do. The only problem is that we are often just too *stuck* to go there.

## THE CLOAK OF INVISIBILITY

Any pattern, repeated often enough, will become diluted in importance and will eventually just be ignored.

It will become 'normal' and the effects of the pattern become invisible.

As an example, how often do you really pay attention to your regular daily commute? You do the same things, at the same time, in the same order every day and probably only really notice them when something affects your usual routine. Maybe you slept in, the train was late, the traffic lighter/heavier than usual or your regular coffee shop was closed when you got there.

On a normal day you don't really notice that you get up with your alarm, the train is on time, the traffic flow is about normal and the coffee shop open as usual. You *delete* these facts from your consciousness because anything that is repeated often enough is liable to become familiar to the extent that it is simply not noticed.

In the same way, the use of pleasure and pain is a concept that the mind finds all too familiar. And with this familiarity, comes deletion and therefore immunity to their effects.



Rewards are no longer big enough, shouting is no longer loud enough, door slamming and going off in a huff becomes 'just what you always do', familiar compliments lose their power in overuse and regular insults become just words that are easy to ignore.

If we try a *pain* tactic and don't see an action, our mind deduces that this approach has obviously not worked. We might consider a switch to a *pleasure* tactic or we just might turn up the pain. If nothing happens then we might turn it up some more . . . and more and more until we get that reaction we have been waiting for. In our minds, this is the only outcome that indicates our tactic has 'worked'.

And that means rewards are withdrawn, shouting becomes even louder, compliments are forgotten and insults become nastier.

How loud/painful/provocative do you need to be to provoke a response and get a reaction?

And can you be sure that you will get the response or reaction you are hoping for?

If we use a *pleasure* tactic, it often goes the opposite direction. We give the compliment or the reward and, if there is no action or response, we can't understand why there are not somersaults of gratitude and conclude that the target of all our generosity obviously doesn't care. Therefore, we end the *pleasure* hoping that this will be a way to cause *pain* and the cycle begins again.

We are stuck in a loop.

## BREAKING THE PATTERNS

On the face of it, it might seem impossible to break these patterns of behavior. I promise it's not impossible . . . but it might be difficult.

And only because it's new.

Think back to the first time you ever did anything new. Didn't it feel a bit weird?

We question new ways of behaving because they are simply not what we are used to. When someone proposes something that doesn't seem to make logical sense, we feel that it will be difficult and it's all too easy to dismiss it as 'impossible'.

It's not impossible, it just feels difficult because it's new. And that's OK.

I remember, just couple of years ago, standing at the top of a very large, snowy (indoor) hill with an artistically decorated plank of moulded wood strapped to my feet, my heart racing and my backside aching from some very frequent bumps!

I had spent the last hour 'enjoying' my first ever snowboard lesson during which I had been falling over, a lot, because my mind thought that it knew better than my instructor! I was finding it very hard to override my own patterns of thought and behaviour to try something new, something that didn't feel natural. The more I resisted it, the more I fell over and the more it hurt.

You see, to slow down while riding a snowboard, you lean forward, pushing onto your front foot. If you want to rattle down a hill really quickly then lean back, lifting the front of the snowboard off the ground and this will cause you to go a lot faster.

But my mind, with all its established patterns told me, 'If I'm going down a hill and I want to slow down, I lean back. That is logical and what I am used to. When I walk, or run down a hill, I lean back to slow down, and that's what I'm going to do on this snowboard, I'll lean baaaaa . . .'

This thought process was inevitably cut short by a painful thump and deep gratitude for my helmet.

And that's how I found myself stuck in the Dance of the Bruised Backside, leaning back to slow down and finding myself picking up speed! Then, to compensate for how fast I am hurtling down the hill, I lean back further, sticking to my old pattern, pushing weight onto my back foot, find myself going even faster and then falling over in a spectacular, painful snowy tumble.

I couldn't change my old established patterns in this new set of circumstances and they continued to cause me pain.

All too often our mind thinks it knows the right answer when it quite clearly doesn't. Even when the result causes us emotional or physical pain, we find it hard to trust ourselves or other people enough to try something new. We remain stuck in rigid patterns and continue hurting ourselves, and those we love, over and over again.

But when we trust enough to change . . . that's when magic can happen.

I love snowboarding and I rarely fall over now, largely because I learned to trust my instructor's advice that leaning forward will slow me down. The first time I did it, I will admit, my heart was pounding and my mind was telling me that it was all going to go wrong and I was going to hurt myself.

But that didn't happen.

I slowed down, controlled the ride, got to the bottom of the hill still standing upright and my brain began learning a new 'normal'. A normal that would not have worked if I had been running down the hill, was perfect for keeping me safe as I slid down it on my artistically decorated plank.

Now it's automatic and I don't even think about how to lean. It just happens. I see learners on the hill falling over and hurting themselves just like I did and I can understand what is happening – they are stuck in their old 'normal'.

Trusting yourself, or others, to change patterns of thought and behavior isn't easy especially when your mind wants to keep doing things that don't work. But it's not impossible. It's just not easy.

Once you begin to see things differently, you will begin to understand that your experiences have taught you many flawed lessons.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL JUDO

You may think that some of the dances you see your family perform are ridiculous. You may even think some of them are dangerous, awkward, infuriating and a little crazy. I guarantee, the rest of your family are thinking *exactly* the same about your dances!

As we discussed earlier, our natural reaction to behaviour we don't understand is to use the strategies of pleasure and pain, when actually the first steps to defeating negative behaviour should be to accept, understand and trust yourself to try something new.

I want to give you one invaluable insight into the workings of the mind that I believe makes the difference between someone who is 'reactive' to the world around them and someone who 'responds' to the world around them.

**Every pattern of behaviour exists for a positive reason.**

The mind operates with the sole aim of ensuring the safety, protection and happiness of its owner. Every single pattern of thought, behaviour and action created by your mind is there because, on some level, it helps you. There is a positive intention at the core of everything we do, even if and when it causes pain. And we can learn to understand this, absorb the force of the pain and use it to our advantage – just like in judo.

In judo, victory does not rely on strength but in skillfully using the energy and momentum of your opponent against them. Absorbing their physical attack by moving with it will often be a far more effective strategy than brute strength or head on attack. Understanding and predicting the direction of your opponent will allow you to turn their efforts to your advantage.

If someone is procrastinating, self harming, depressed, anxious, angry, withdrawn or indulging in any other negative emotional behavior, they are doing what they are doing because, on some level, their mind believes it is helpful.

Yes, it might sound weird, but trust me, it's absolutely true!

One of the first keys to cracking the teen code is to get as close as you can to understanding what that positive reason may be *before you respond*.

Let's use a common example.

Let's imagine you discover your teen has started smoking. You instantly and correctly decide that this has to stop and you also decide a *pain* approach is necessary to scare them into action. As your teenager walks in the door from school one day, you are ready to confront them.

In a voice approaching the volume of a jet engine, you inform your teenager how disappointed you are. You make sure to tell them in no uncertain terms just how it ruins their body and causes cancer, how bad it is for their health in other ways, how expensive it is, how it makes you stink and how you can't believe someone with all their intelligence could be so stupid. You ridicule their friends who are obviously a bad influence and you immediately withdraw all sources of money and confine your teen to the house for the next 4 weeks.

Pain has been administered.

Sound reasonable?

I believe many parents would agree with this approach. But if you look at it again and think about the psychology of change that we have discussed already in this chapter, how would you rate this pain-orientated approach in terms of its ability to create immediate and long lasting change?

I suspect you said very low. And you'd be absolutely right. Why? Well, that's easy . . .

**Every pattern of behaviour exists for a positive reason.**

No-one starts smoking (or any of the other myriad of bizarre teen behaviour that we mentioned earlier) by accident. There's no moment where a teen says 'oops I didn't *mean* to try that cigarette, it just kind of popped into my mouth already lit'. There is always a positive reason that is the motivation behind the behavior. So how do we find this reason?

As a parent, you can try shouting "you're being stupid and so are your friends, I expected more from you" or you can try crying "you've let me and this whole family down". You can even try the