

Invalidation

Invalidating a sensitive child is a crime against humanity. - S. Hein

Definition

Invalidation is to reject, ignore, mock, tease, judge, or diminish someone's feelings. It is an attempt to control how they feel and how long they feel it.

A Short Course On Invalidation

Have you ever been crying and someone said "Don't cry"?

- Yes.

Did it help?

- No.

Have you ever been sad and someone said "Don't be sad"?

- Yes.

Did it help?

- No.

Have you ever been worried and someone said "Don't worry"?

- Yes.

Did it help?

- No

Have you ever been angry and someone said "Don't get angry"?

- Yes

Did it help?

- No

When someone tells us not to feel how we are feeling, it is a form of invalidation. This is still true even if they have good intentions and they are sincerely trying to help us.

Effects of Invalidation

Constant invalidation may be one of the most significant reasons a person with high innate emotional intelligence suffers from unmet emotional needs later in life. A sensitive child who is repeatedly invalidated becomes confused and begins to distrust his own emotions. He fails to develop confidence in, and healthy use of, his emotional brain -- one of nature's most basic survival tools. To adapt to this unhealthy and dysfunctional environment, the working relationship between his thoughts and feelings becomes twisted. His emotional responses, emotional management, and emotional development will likely be seriously, and perhaps permanently, impaired. The emotional processes which worked for him as a child may begin to work against him as an adult. In fact, one description of what is often called "borderline personality disorder" is "the normal response of a sensitive person to an invalidating environment."

Psychiatrist R.D. Laing said that when we invalidate people or deny their perceptions and personal experiences, we make mental invalids of them. He found that when one's feelings are denied, a person can be made to feel crazy even when they are perfectly mentally healthy.

Recent research by Thomas R. Lynch, Ph.D. of Duke University supports the idea that invalidation leads to mental health problems. He writes

...a history of emotion invalidation (i.e., a history of childhood psychological abuse and parental punishment, minimization, and distress in response to negative emotion) was significantly associated with emotion inhibition (i.e., ambivalence over emotional expression, thought suppression, and avoidant stress responses). Further, emotion inhibition significantly predicted psychological distress, including depression and anxiety symptoms

The Role of Emotion Inhibition in Psychological Distress

Invalidation goes beyond mere rejection by implying not only that our feelings are disapproved of, but that we are fundamentally abnormal. This implies that there is something wrong with us because we aren't like everyone else; we are strange; we are different; we are weird.

None of this feels good, and all of it damages us. The more different from the mass norm a person is, for example, more intelligent or more sensitive, the more he is likely to be invalidated. When we are invalidated by having our feelings repudiated, we are attacked at the deepest level possible, since our feelings are the innermost expression of our individual identities.

Psychological invalidation is one of the most lethal forms of emotional abuse. It kills confidence, creativity and individuality.

Telling a person she shouldn't feel the way she does feel is like to telling water it shouldn't be wet, grass it shouldn't be green, or rocks they shouldn't be hard. Each person's feelings are real. Whether we like or understand someone's feelings, they are still real. Rejecting feelings is rejecting reality; it is to fight nature and may be called a crime against nature, "psychological murder", or "soul murder." Considering that trying to fight feelings, rather than accept them, is trying to fight all of nature, you can see why it is so frustrating, draining and futile. A good guideline is:

First accept the feelings, then address the behavior.

One the great leaders in education, Haim Ginott, said this:

Primum non nocere- First do no harm. Do not deny your teenager's perception. Do not argue with his experience. Do not disown his feelings.

We regularly invalidate others because we ourselves were, and are often invalidated, so it has become habitual. Below are a few of the many ways we are invalidated:

We are told we shouldn't feel the way we feel

We are dictated not to feel the way we feel

We are told we are too sensitive, too "dramatic"

We are ignored

We are judged

We are led to believe there is something wrong with us for feeling how we feel

You Can't Heal an Emotional Wound with Logic

People with high IQ and low EQ tend to use logic to address emotional issues. They may say, "You are not being rational. There is no reason for you to feel the way you do. Let's look at the facts." Businesses, for example, and "professionals" are traditionally out of balance towards logic at the expense of emotions. This tends to alienate people and diminish their potential.

Actually, all emotions do have a basis in reality, and feelings are facts, fleeting though they may be. But trying to dress an emotional wound, with logic tends to either confuse,

sadden or infuriate a person. Or it may eventually isolate them from their feelings, with a resulting loss of major part of their natural intelligence.

Remember:

You can't solve an emotional problem, or heal an emotional wound, with logic alone.

There are many forms of invalidation. Most of them are so insidious that we don't even know what is happening. We know that something doesn't feel good, but we sometimes can't put our finger on it. We have been conditioned to think that invalidation is "normal." Indeed, it is extremely common, but it is certainly not healthy.

I have heard parents and teachers call children:

dramatic, crybabies, whiners, whingers, too sensitive, worry warts, drama queens

I have also heard them say things like: "He cries at the drop of a hat." One teacher said "When she starts to cry, I just ignore her and eventually she stops." Another said, "When one kid's crying is disrupting the lesson, I tell them to go cry in the hall till they can pull themselves back together again."

All these labels and statements are invalidating and do emotional harm to children and sensitive teens and adults.

Our world will be a safer place when we learn to stop invalidating one another.

Hearing "Don't worry" Worries Me

When I am worried about something and I tell someone who is involved in the situation and they say "Don't worry," I actually feel more worried. This is because I can tell they don't take me and my feelings very seriously. I see that they are not going to do anything to help prevent what it is that I am worried about.

For example, let's say I am traveling with someone and I say I am afraid someone could come into our room and steal my laptop computer if they keep leaving the door unlocked. If they tell me "don't worry", then I am more worried, because they are not taking my fear seriously and they may just keep leaving the door unlocked. Besides worrying about my laptop getting stolen, I am now also worried about traveling with someone who invalidates me.

Defensiveness and Invalidation

All invalidation is a form of psychological attack. When we are attacked, our survival instinct tells us to defend ourselves either through withdrawal or counter-attack. Repeated withdrawal, though, tends to decrease our self-confidence and lead to a sense of powerlessness and depression. On the other hand, going on the offensive often escalates the conflict or puts us in the position of trying to change another person.

One sign of both high self-esteem and high EQ is the absence of either of these defensive responses. A healthier response, one which is both informative and assertive, without being aggressive, is to simply express your feelings clearly and concisely. For example, you might respond, "I feel invalidated," "I feel mocked," or "I feel judged."

How the other person responds to your emotional honesty will depend upon, and be indicative of:

- (a) how much they respect you
- (b) how much they care about you and your feelings
- (c) how insecure and defensive they are
- (d) how much they are trying to change or control you

All of this is information which will help you make decisions which are in your best interest.

Self-Injury and Invalidation

Invalidation has been suggested as one of the primary reasons people cut, burn and injure themselves.

For example this quote is from D. Martinson
(www.crystal.palace.net/~llama/selfinjury/guide.html)

One factor common to most people who self-injure, whether they were abused or not, is invalidation. They were taught at an early age that their interpretations of and feelings about the things around them were bad and wrong. They learned that certain feelings weren't allowed. In abusive homes, they may have been severely punished for expressing certain thoughts and feelings.

Martinson also writes:

Self-injury is probably the result of many different factors. Among them: Lack of role models and invalidation - most people who self-injure were chronically invalidated in some way as children (many self-injurers report abuse, but almost all report chronic invalidation).

Examples of Invalidating Expressions

Each of these is an attempt to talk you out of your feelings.

"Ordering" You to Feel Differently

Smile. Be happy. Cheer up Lighten up. Get over it. Grow up Get a life Don't cry. Don't worry. Don't be sad. Stop whining Stop laughing..	Don't get angry Deal with it. Give it a rest. Forget about it. Stop complaining. Don't be so dramatic. Don't be so sensitive. Stop being so emotional. Stop feeling sorry for yourself Stop taking everything so personally
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Ordering You to "Look" Differently

Don't look so sad.
Don't look so smug.
Don't look so down.
Don't look like that.
Don't make that face.
Don't look so serious.
Don't look so proud of yourself.
Don't look so pleased with yourself.

Denying Your Perception, Defending

You've got it all wrong.
But of course I respect you.

But I *do* listen to you.
That is ridiculous (nonsense, totally absurd, etc.)
I was only kidding.
That's not the way things are.
That's not how things are.
I honestly don't judge you as much as you think.
Don't worry about that. It's not going to happen

Trying to Make You Feel Guilty While Invalidating You

I tried to help you..
At least I

At least you....
You are making everyone else miserable.

Trying to Isolate You

You are the only one who feels that way.
It doesn't bother anyone else, why should it bother you?
You are weird. You are strange.

Minimizing Your Feelings

You must be kidding.
You must be joking.
You can't be serious.
It can't be that bad.
Your life can't be that bad.
It's nothing to get upset over.
It's not worth getting that upset over.
There's nothing wrong with you, so stop complaining.

You are just ...

- being difficult
- being dramatic
- in a bad mood
- tired
- going through a phase
- acting out
- seeking attention

- feeling sorry for yourself
- making things up
- weaving a story

Using Reason

There is no reason to get upset.
You are not being rational.
But it doesn't make any sense to feel that way.
Let's look at the facts.
Let's stick to the facts.
But if you really think about it...
To be fair...

Debating

I don't *always* do that.
It's not *that* bad. (that far, that heavy, that hot, that serious, etc.)

Judging & Labeling You

You are a cry baby.
You have a problem.
You are too sensitive.
You are over-reacting. You are too thin-skinned.
You are way too emotional.
You are an insensitive jerk. .
You need to get your head examined!
You are impossible to talk to.
You are impossible.
You are hopeless.

Turning Things Around

You are making a big deal out of nothing.
You are blowing this way out of proportion.
You are making a mountain out of a molehill.

Trying to Get You to Question Yourself

What is your problem?
What's wrong with you?
What's the matter with you?
Why can't you just get over it?
Why do you always have to?
Is that all you can do, complain?
Why are you making such a big deal over it?
What's wrong with you, can't you take a joke?
How can you let a little thing like that bother you?
Don't you think you are being a little dramatic?
Do you really think that crying about it is going to help anything?

Telling You How You "Should" Feel or Act

You should be excited.
You should be thrilled.
You should feel guilty.
You should feel thankful that...
You should be happy that
You should be glad that ...
You should just drop it.
You shouldn't worry so much.
You shouldn't let it bother you.
You should just forget about it.
You should feel ashamed of yourself.
You shouldn't wear your heart out on your sleeve.
You shouldn't say that about your father.

Defending The Other Person

Maybe they were just having a bad day.
I am sure she didn't mean it like that.
You just took it wrong.
I am sure she means well.

Negating, Denial & Confusion

Now you know that isn't true.
You don't mean that. You know you *love* your baby brother.
You don't really mean that. You are just ... (in a bad mood today, tired, cranky)
Oh, that's not what I meant. What I was trying to say (or do) was...

Sarcasm and Mocking

Oh, you poor thing. Did I hurt your little feelings?
What did you think? The world was created to serve you?
What happened to you? Did you get out of the wrong side of bed again?

Laying Guilt Trips

Don't you ever think of anyone but yourself?
What about *my* feelings?!
Have you ever stopped to consider my feelings?

Philosophizing Or Clichés

Time heals all wounds.
Every cloud has a silver lining.
Life is full of pain and pleasure.
In time you will understand this.
When you are older you will understand
You are just going through a phase.
Everything has its reasons.
Everything is just the way it is supposed to be.

Talking About You When You Can Hear

She is impossible to talk to.
You can't say anything to her.

Showing Intolerance

This is getting really old.
This is getting really pathetic.
I am sick of hearing about it.

Trying to Control How Long You Feel Something, or Judging You for How Long You Feel It

Are you still upset over that? It happened a long time ago.
You should be over that by now.

Explanations

Maybe it is because...
That is because...
Of course, because you....

(This one hurts four ways. First, the "of course" minimizes what you feel, second the "because" explains what you feel, as if explaining it nullifies the feeling, third the "you" blames you and fourth, blaming you is a form of attack which is likely to make you feel either defensive or guilt-tripped or both.)

Even when we are happy, unhappy people want to ruin it for us by saying diminishing things like: What are you so happy about? That's it? That's all you are so excited about?

There was an expression I heard when I was growing up. It was "Who put a quarter in you?" A quarter is a 25 cent coin in the USA. It was a coin which was once enough to start music in a juke box. So the implication was the person was acting abnormally happy, excited, lively etc.

Stories About Invalidation

The Invalidating Couple

I met someone once who said her boyfriend was jealous. I asked if he was able to say directly that he is jealous. She said yes. I asked him what she said in reply. She said she tells him he has no reason to be jealous.

Later this same person said she felt disrespected when he walks in front of her. I asked what she thought he might say if she said, "I feel a little disrespected when you walk in front of me." She said he would probably say, "That is totally absurd!"

These are two highly intelligent people, and both university graduates. They are highly skilled in debating facts, but untrained, uneducated and unskilled in listening and showing understanding.

Heaps of Fun!

One day in Australia I decided to try hang gliding. I went up with an instructor, floated and flew above the waves and coastline for about 20 minutes, then landed on the sand. His wife was there to meet us so she could drive us back up to the top of the hill. Their son, about 8 years old, was with her. As the four of us were standing there a woman named Sue came up with a big smile on her face. She gave a warm hello to the couple, then asked the boy, "How's school, mate?" With a troubled look on his young face, the boy quietly said, "Not good." In response Sue exclaimed, sounding surprised and incredulous, "Not good!? I bet it is heaps of fun."

Then she turned her attention back to the boy's parents. They started talking about some of their friends, smiling and laughing. Meanwhile all three of them completely ignored the boy. But I watched him. I watched his head drop. I watched his face change. I watched him turn away from the group. I watched him take a few steps, then just stand there, alone.

I still find it hard to believe that anyone could miss a child's reaction that completely. I wondered how the three adults could stand there and laugh while that boy stood there alone, troubled now not only about school but also because no one was interested in his troubles. They wanted everything to be positive. They want it all to be good. But it wasn't all good for that boy. No one showed him any understanding whatsoever. What's worse is that when he gave them a golden opportunity to understand him and his world, he was completely invalidated, then completely ignored.

Maybe his father was the type who would try to distract his son with thrilling and risky sports such as hang gliding, soccer, surfing, and race car driving. This is probably how

he was taught to deal with feelings by his father and by the Australian culture. As long as you are active, you can't feel your emotional pain. But what if his son is not interested in sports? Then what? What will his father do then? What will his mother do? She seemed as athletic as the father, which makes sense of course. Otherwise they would not have been compatible.

Again I feel guilty because I did not say anything. I just stood there, stunned, while I watched and made mental notes. I probably will never forget the dejected way he turned and walked away. And I never want to forget it. I want it to inspire me to keep working for the needs of children and teenagers.

These were parents which most people would say are "good parents." I doubt anyone will ever accuse them of child abuse. But I say that what they did *was* child abuse. It was total emotional neglect at that moment. Now you might think this one incident is a small thing. Yes, it is. Maybe they are good listeners when it really counts. Maybe. But then again, maybe not. I say this one incident says a lot about their parenting style and about how children are psychologically invalidated every day. Either way, they all could have handled that situation much better. And that is why I am writing this story. To remind everyone that it is these little interactions with children that make a difference in their lives and in society.

If one were to ask that child how much he felt understood, between 0 and 10, at that moment, what might he have said? I would guess he would say zero. Is that what we want? Is that acceptable to you? It is not acceptable to me.

One day I expect there will be research which proves that children who did not feel understood by their parents, teachers, parents' friends, etc. are among the most self-destructive or socially destructive adults.

We all need to feel understood. It is a basic, natural human need. It is not a right, it is not something nice to have. It is a need. When our needs go unmet one incident at a time, for years and years, we and society all suffer.

Don't Think So Much. Don't Look So Serious

Last night I went to visit someone while she was at work. When I got there, she didn't seem very happy to see me. I felt uncomfortable being there. I had to wait for her to finish with a customer. The longer I waited the more uncomfortable I felt. I felt out of place, unwelcome. I started thinking maybe there was something wrong and wondered if she had second thoughts about the plans we had made to go travelling together. I wondered if her boss told her that if she left, she couldn't come back. Many things were going through my mind. As I waited, small signals from her caused me to feel even more discouraged. Then she seemed to notice my mood and asked me what I was

thinking. I tried to explain to her what I was afraid of and she said, "Don't think so much."

I didn't know what to say after this. I knew there was no point in telling her that I felt invalidated.

(Actually, looking back, maybe it would have helped. Maybe she would have said, "What does that mean?" Then maybe I could have explained it to her and she would have learned something useful and it would have started us on a path of better communication and understanding. It is unlikely considering what happened next, but maybe with someone else it could have helped.)

I just sat there, stunned. I didn't know what to say for a moment. Then I said, "Why don't you want me to think so much?" She said, "Because I don't want you to think so much." Then I was quiet for a moment. This made her very uncomfortable and she said, "Don't look so serious." I said, "Why not?" Then she said, "Because I don't like it when you look so serious."

I understand a little about why she didn't want me to think so much or look so serious. Previously she told me she was raised in a dysfunctional family. Her father was an alcoholic and her parents divorced when she was 17. Throughout the family problems her mother might have tried to comfort her children by saying things like "Don't think so much" and "Don't look so sad." It is very possible that the mother also felt responsible and guilty when the children were unhappy, so she wanted them to feel better, or at least appear to, for her own sake. Maybe there were also times she felt powerless to help them in any other way. Sometimes, then, she might have just tried to tell them not to feel how they were feeling. Parents, like many others in our society, because of their positions, get in the habit of telling other people what to do and then seeing them do it..So they may start to believe they can also tell someone how to feel, and then, almost like magic, that will work, too.

Now I am wondering, when someone who thinks a lot is told, "Don't think so much," how does one do that? To me, that is like telling a fish not to swim so much or an artist not to draw so much. Or a writer not to write so much.

There are, of course, many ways people actually do try not to think so much. They distract themselves, for example. Or they temporarily numb themselves. But those options have never worked very well for me because it doesn't take long before I start thinking again, and trying to find answers to my questions. So I guess I will continue thinking and looking serious. And I will keep looking for people to spend time with who don't invalidate me.

You're Making Everyone Miserable

One day I was talking about depression with a self-harming teen in the UK named Loz. Here is part of that conversation.

SPH says:

do u ever get so depressed that u cant even get up?

Loz says:

yes but i get told its feeling sorry for myself, and there is nothing wrong with me

SPH says:

who tells u that?

Loz says:

my mum, my sister. they just say im making everyone else miserable and to stop feeling sorry for myself....

when i feel so low i cant get up for school i just pretend i was really tired and didnt wake up in time

SPH says:

ah. ok... how do u feel when they tell u to stop feeling sorry for urself?

Loz says:

hurt

After reflecting on that conversation with Loz these words came to mind:

Invalidation hurts. It causes pain.

People kill themselves to stop their pain.

Conclusion:

Invalidation can be deadly to sensitive people.

It's Not Going to Happen

Once I was telling someone that I was afraid about something. The other person quickly said "It's not going to happen." This didn't help me feel any better. In fact, I felt worse.

Conclusion

When your awareness rises, you'll begin to notice invalidating comments on a regular basis. Over time, they take their toll on us who are very sensitive. We may wonder if there is something wrong with us for feeling how we do. It seems fair to say that with enough invalidation, people around us can figuratively, if not literally, drive us crazy.

This is especially possible when one person has long-term power over another. Examples of such relationships are parent/child, teacher/child, "spiritual" leader/follower, boss/employee, spouse A/spouse B.

Such a sad scenario appears to be even more likely when the person being invalidated is not only highly sensitive, but also relatively intelligent and has previously suffered self-esteem damage or any kind of abuse. An intelligent, but abused person will try to figure things out and will usually come up with wrong, but logical conclusions about themselves being "wrong" and abnormal or sick for feeling how they do. The more sensitive the person, and the less emotional support they got when they were young, the more serious the damage of invalidation.

Invalidation undermines self-confidence because it causes self-doubt. This in turn further diminishes self-esteem. Invalidation is serious violation of one's "true self." It is one of the worst crimes one person can commit against another without ever lifting a finger against them. Yet it is neither illegal nor "immoral." And it is not even widely recognized as a problem.

Thank you for reading this document and freely sharing it with others.

SPH – August 2012

An emotionally skilled person will never invalidate another person's feelings, especially not the feelings of a sensitive child.

Source: www.core.eqi.org/invalid.htm

