

UNDERLYING THOUGHT PATTERNS IN SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR

Why do certain teenagers inflict pain in themselves or indulge in other self-destructive behaviour? The thought processes underlying this kind of behaviour are very complex but are often characterized by low self-esteem and feelings of desperation and frustration to an unanswered cry for help. Perhaps this account of a 17-year-old teenager will give us greater insight into the phenomenon.

Lana is an example of an older adolescent who developed a very different identity from that of her conservative, middle-class, upwardly mobile parents and her academically successful sisters and brothers. This 17-year-old Chinese-American girl had been getting into trouble ever since high school – repeatedly running away, using drugs excessively, and associating with a pimp and his friends. She was not yet sexually involved with any of them, although she intended to become an expensive prostitute when she turned 18.

Lana had recently been kidnapped and raped by a man whom she had met at a shopping centre. She was referred for psychotherapy by a probation officer who felt that she had self-destructive tendencies. Her therapist wondered why a streetwise girl would not have been suspicious of the man from the start. She pointed out that this and several other incidents in which she had exposed herself to danger had followed episodes in which she was berated by her parents:

Lana doubted that there were any connections between her parents berating her and her putting herself into positions of danger, but she did say that there were times she wished she were dead – usually after one of her parents told her how awful she was.

Lana remembered that when she was a child her mother frequently beat her. Her mother apparently had attacks of uncontrollable rage, and Lana seemed to be the most frequent victim of those rages. Sometimes she was even beaten for her brother's or sisters' wrongdoings because she interceded to rescue them. These beatings, which had her father's tacit approval (he did not stop his wife), were the foundations for Lana's low self-esteem. If her mother did not like her, who could? The verbal beratings she was still receiving from both of her parents reinforced her negative self-image. Because Lana, as a child, put herself in a position to take punishment for her siblings, it might appear that she really liked to suffer. Actually she was giving her mother one more chance to show if she really cared for her daughter. If she did not beat her, the mother did love her after all. Unfortunately, Lana never got the communication she wanted; she just received more beatings. There was a strong possibility that Lana, as a 17-year-old, put herself into potentially dangerous situations as a sort of test: Would she be harmed or wouldn't she? If she were not harmed, 'mother nature' or 'God' would be telling her that she was a worthwhile person. Lana's lack of suspiciousness, which facilitated her being kidnapped and raped, was a test of this sort. Even though she never seemed to get the answer she wanted, Lana tried time and time again to somehow feel she was worthwhile; these attempts were the basis for her self-destructive tendencies.