

Hopeful crumbs

In this blog piece I am reporting on our ASPIA partner support group meeting in April 2014 when one of our members Natalie, who'd recently completed a Psychology Degree with Honours, gave an amazingly meaningful presentation to us that helped us explore aspects of ourselves and how we relate to our partners.

Without hijacking Natalie's work or words, I just wanted to share a few things so that others can benefit from the education we're blessed to receive there.

A strong emphasis that came through is how extremely hard we all work in our relationships to get responses from our partners, often with little or no success. Natalie showed a short video to demonstrate how distressing it is when an infant cannot get her Mum's face to respond to her, even though the infant is trying everything she knows or that has worked before. (See "still face" experiment online)

Natalie then shared a powerful analogy with poker machine players. When an individual's effort to get a response works sometimes, ie, the response is intermittent, it then sets up the kind of repeated behaviour that's behind playing a poker machine. The person keeps playing because it might work, they might win, they might be rewarded, because they have before, whereas if they never won at all they would lose interest and stop playing. Some years ago one of our members likened this concept to being thrown "crumbs", sometimes.

Natalie shared many illustrations, and in all of them we could see ourselves. It was alarming to see the way we try so hard and get very little benefit in return. We looked at why we are ok with that, why we are prepared to work so hard for so little, and what this is doing to us emotionally. We all know how deeply drained and exhausted we are. We are certainly a special kind of people, we are compelled to be helpers and caretakers, and we expect little in return. It will be interesting to study us some more.

Over the years that Natalie attended ASPIA meetings she said she noted how intelligent our group members are and reassured us that our intelligence is a strong protective factor for us coping with our situations. She also reassured us that we are "cycle breakers" and have been a massive protective factor in the lives and development of our children, in spite of the difficulties we're so aware that many of our children have experienced with an ASD parent.

Natalie shared so much more, and we could have work-shopped it and asked questions and discussed it for a whole weekend.

Natalie emphasized over and over again that the motivation behind her presentation was to help us develop more awareness of ourselves which will in turn help empower us to make choices about how much of ourselves we continue to give.

Carol Grigg, April 2014

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