

Module-8

Task oriented Reaction Pattern

We shall now look at the different possibilities of human reaction in a given situation and shall once again trifurcate the human reaction. The first situation when you have a task at hand and there is an expectation that you will come up with a solution to it. So, in a task oriented pattern what is the possibility? The second situation when you have performed a task and then you realize that the outcome was not desirable; the feedback you received was not positive; hence you comprehend some damage to your ego. The third situation when you are apprehensive of a possible threat to your ego and hence unconsciously try to defend yourself.

Task oriented reaction patterns

We begin with the task oriented reaction pattern. There are several possibilities before an individual. Attack could be one mode of reaction. Frustration and the resultant directed action could be the second mode of reaction. You experience conflict and then make a choice; this could be the third possibility. You experience pressure and try your best to resist it; this could be the fourth possibility. You can withdraw or compromise; this could be the fifth possibility. Withdrawal and compromise as adjustment techniques will be discussed at length later as these are the two dominant techniques used by human beings.

Attack is a direct type of a reaction to a situation where you experience an obstacle on the way of achieving the goal and you try to overcome it. There are two possibilities. First, you attempt to overcome and surmount the obstacle. You can draw a parallel. Say, you put up a barrier in front of flowing water and hence water accumulates and after some time water

starts pouring from the top of the barrier. The second possibility is that you hit the problem so hard that the obstacle fragments. It seems to others that this is unstoppable kind of approach and hence achieving a goal becomes easier for you. Practically speaking, a substantial portion of the problems we face are the kind that demands attack kind of a reaction. Say, you have to give your exam and you go into attack mode; you study very hard. This is an example of direct attack. Later in your life you realize that there are intelligent types of exercises that we perform which are not “attack”, but intelligently planned attacks. Say, when a quiz is announced for the course and everybody, including those who rarely go to the lectures, starts attending the lectures anticipating the quiz. This is an intelligently decided attack for those who were not coming regularly because you know that presence in this week could fetch you marks. This is a planned and calculated attack. You know at best you will get 100 and at worst you will get zero. The possibility to getting a score lies between these two extremes. Fortunately, most of the humans do not anticipate the base line. Even though you do not anticipate the top, you know you will be stand somewhere in between and hence will be able to clear the required course work for graduating.

More refined type of attack strategy would be that you discuss the topics with your friends who have attended the lecture and look at their notes or books and then come to the class. Now you target the maximum possible score in the quiz. Another type of attack, in case of realization that you are not prepared, could be that instead of participating in the quiz you withdraw and file a formal application stating that you were sick, knowing that you will be asked to either go for make-up quiz or your marks will somehow be adjusted. In life we try all these options. These are attack options. Psychologically speaking, these are considered to be task oriented reaction pattern and there is no harm in coming forward with such reactions.

The second situation we talked about could be that you first experience certain degree of frustration and then go ahead with an action which is directed towards overcoming it. This

is based on the tendency towards increased activity and variation in the mode of response when responses are encountered. Let us take the same example with little modification. After so much of vigour and enthusiasm to get the best possible score, you come to the class and the professor asks if you have registered for this course as he sees you for the first time. You feel frustrated that you are registered but were not coming to the lectures and this fact is revealed to the whole. You decide to get proactive and increase your activity. Now you come for the lecture every day after due revision of the topic that is likely to be discussed; you go for variation in the mode of response and make your presence felt. The other possibility could be that instead of coming to the class you get ready and you ask your friend to SMS in case the quiz is held. This is variation in response. In real life many a times frustrations arises not out of the end result but out of anticipation.

Let us now talk about conflict and choices. If you read the literature on motivation, you will find description of three kinds of conflicts— approach-approach conflict, approach-avoidance conflict, and avoidance-avoidance conflict. Say, you want to attend the birthday party of your friend in the canteen but also want to participate in the quiz. This is approach-approach conflict. You have two equally attractive goals and you have to make a choice out of it. There could be approach-avoidance conflict where the goal has attractive as well as repulsive aspects. Say, you want to pass the course with flying colours but want to skip exams. In avoidance-avoidance conflict you have to choose between two unattractive aspects. In conflicting situations one can attack the problem by analyzing the problems in terms of advantages and disadvantages of multiple options that you are capable of envisaging. So, you try to evaluate the options, gather information and then evaluate the advantages and disadvantages linked with each of these options. In conflicting situations you usually go for evaluation of various strategies wherein you always make a choice based on the maximum advantage you can derive out of the option.

There could be conflicting situations in life where you realize that your options do not lead to the anticipated goal. Say, you have applied for two different examinations, AIEEE and JEE. Unfortunately, the dates of the two exams coincide. Now your calculations for choosing one of them will be based on multiple options— how well prepared you are, the number of seats available, and other such conditions. Still it might be difficult to choose one of them. In reality it is extremely difficult to take a decision in conflicting situations. Therefore, support and advice seeking increase in such situations.

As discussed earlier, predictability is one of the prominent maintenance needs of human beings. When you are in a conflicting situation you want to foresee that if you go for a given option what would be the outcome. In our society, there are multiple ways of predicting such outcomes. You can approach a counsellor, but in our society majority does not seek professional help, rather group resources are utilized during crisis. Besides this you find different types of practices such as consulting a local occultist (*tantric*), tarot card reader, experts in horoscopes reading and palmists. This market is worth few crores in India. Each morning across channels you find forecast of horoscopes and similar programmes. Some channels even declare in the afternoon how the rest of the day is going to be. Economically, such programmes would be aired only when there is a market for it. Irrespective of the lack of scientific temper and absurdity you still find the prosperous existence of those claiming expertise in *Kala Jadu* and *tantric* acts. Psychologically speaking, the more you face conflicting situations with low predictability higher is the vulnerability to move towards such practices. This shift is also culturally governed.

When you realize you are in a conflicting situation, from a psychological point of view, the best possibility is you weigh the options, calculate the risks involved, evaluate the positive outcome of it and accordingly evolve a buffer program. Buffer program might be helpful when you go for an option knowing the pitfalls. As you have evaluated all the pitfalls,

you know if you fall in the first pit what you will do and if you fall in second one then what will be your course of action. If you have information and have decided the course of action like this, handling conflicts become easier. But such types of calculations are easy to make when you have certain degree of objectivity involved in the process.

Once, one of the lieutenants of Napoleon woke him up in the night informing him that they have been attacked from one side of their territory. He asked the lieutenant to take out certain map from the cupboard and follow the strategy. The plan was executed and victory was achieved. Later, the lieutenant asked Napoleon that if he knew about the attack why he did not tell them before hand and Napoleon replied that he had not been anticipating war from this or that end; he anticipated war from all ends and he had maps prepared for all contingencies. Are such calculations possible in the life of human beings?

In reality there could be situations where calculations are not possible and whenever you land up in such situation one of the suggested strategies is to adopt a wait and watch policy. There could be situation wherein you experience a great degree of pressure and try to resist. You only resist the pressure that you consider to be of undue nature. Pressures which are inevitable or warranted are accepted; you are by and large ready to encounter them. Say, you are gearing up for your mid semester exams. That is the pressure that is built up on you and as it was declared long before, you are ready for that. There is certain degree of pressure and you also have strategies to encounter them.

Another example could be when you participate in sports activities. No team anticipates that they will lose the match. You prepare well for it and give your best; you enjoy the pressure of the game and of course the game itself. There are situations when you can be in neck to neck kind of a situation with the highest degree of unpredictability. Say, 6 runs in 6 balls in cricket, penalty shootout in football when both the teams have equal scores, etc. You

also enjoy pressure in adventure sports. You know how demanding the situation is. Say you go for skiing or scuba diving where you know the stake is very high, the calculated risk is also very high but there are people who happily participate in such events. The pressure in such types of situations is happily accepted. But if the pressure is of undue nature, there is a tendency to resist. Say, the professor declares that this course will have surprise quizzes only. This is declared on the first day of the semester and you realize that two months have passed without the quiz. This is undue pressure. You feel you do not deserve this kind of pressure. As discussed earlier during dimensions of subjective adjustment, resistance to such kind of pressure is considered perfectly all right.

All these are interesting dynamics of real life situations wherein we face certain situations and respond in our own ways. Although they are all task oriented reactions, they vary in nature. Two more types of reactions could be where you calculate the risks and you realize that the outcome that you predicted was not very positive and hence you decide to withdraw or when you decide that there is no point in running the conflict longer and hence you decide to compromise. These two are also very important patterns of reaction. However, withdrawal and compromise shall be discussed little later in the course.

Damage repair mechanisms

We now come to another type of situation where you had a task at hand, you responded to it and the feedback you get for your response hurts you. It causes certain degree of damage to your ego. What are the mechanisms that human beings adopt when damage is caused to the ego? There are five kinds of damage repair techniques— crying, talking it out, laughing it off, seeking support, and dreaming and nightmares.

Crying is common in kids and is mostly used as a means of communicating needs. As an adult, this is seldom used and largely seen when one feels the pain unbearable. When you receive adverse feedback from the environment and causes damage to your ego, you might find the pain so generated to cross the boundary. Crying allows you to regain the equilibrium. However, the existing social protocol does not allow men to cry, at least in public. Children can cry whenever they want unlike adults. If the situation demands women have the liberty of crying where ever they are while men do not have that liberty. The best part in crying is that no one can cry for beyond a certain limit. So, you can burst into tears but however pathetic the condition be you will not have tears after sometime; you may still feel the pain but tears will dry out. There could be a situation where the ache that you experience in your heart is much deeper and it can make you periodically cry for little longer. Actually it is not a single but multiple episodes of bursting into tears. Crying is considered to be one of the damage repair mechanisms. It, by default, helps you attain certain degree of psychological equilibrium.

Although, anybody can cry whenever one wants but one has to make certain judgements. Say, you come for your exam, read the question paper and burst into tears. You go to the playground wait for the ball to reach you but have to wait for it and hence you burst into tears. In such situations crying will be considered inappropriate. There are interesting

dynamics in crying as well. When a loss hurts, you cry. There could be cases where your appreciation turns into tears. Say, while you watch a movie you get lost in the moving scene on the screen and you clap and wipe your tears. These are conditions when you have tears but this is not what we are considering crying to be. This is identification. You have identified with the silver screen character and the happenings make you show affective reactions the way the character feels on the screen. We are primarily referring to such crying behaviour that is used to console oneself in the event of damage to the ego.

Talking it out is another reaction that most of us adopt in a given type of situation. Here one repeatedly talks about the experience. Say, I tell you that I am seeing you for the first time in the class and I ask you to go out of the class as you are not attentive and regular. You feel bad as you are a registered student and you cannot be debarred from coming to the class. You feel offended; your ego is hurt; and then the technique that can be adopted is that you talk it out with your friends. You go to people and talk about me. You narrate the story to those close to you. This narration will be slightly modified so that it is more favourable to you. Every time you replay your experience you alleviate the tension you experienced in the class. You experienced a degree of tension when this incident happened and now every time you re-narrate the experience, physiologically your body experiences arousal. You are re-experiencing it. Psychologically what happens is that the more you repeat you achieve the state of desensitization. The time comes, when you stop feeling the arousal. This is the time you gradually start accepting that this phase is over. Practically you narrate it multiple times and you achieve a state of psychological equilibrium. Inwardly, every time you replay it, you might add more and more spice to the story to make it inclined towards yourself. The more you do so, the more you desensitize yourself.

Another interesting damage repair mechanism is laughing it off. As you can make out from the nomenclature itself, it is exhibition of a tendency to dismiss the valence of the event

that has hurt you. You experience damage to your ego but you laugh at it. This is how you release the tension elevated by the actual damage that was caused to you. Outwardly you might reflect that you are amused to see how people react to petty events. As this requires a great deal of balance in reactions very few people employ this mechanism. Technically, what happens here is that when you laugh the emotional tension gets alleviated. You experience emotional tension every time you laugh. The only difference between laughing it off and talking it out is that when you are employing laughing it off, you are gradually capable of achieving stage of desensitization as well as you can look at things from a much broader perspective, a perspective that many people are not able to adopt. Usually people can see things till an intermediate distance and not till the ultimate end and hence not many people adopt this mechanism to repair the damage to their ego. The problem with this mechanism is that in case you employ it but fail to contain the arousal level then your laughter can make you burst into tears.

Then comes the other mechanism of repairing the damage, i.e., seeking support. This is a means where you want to derive affection and hence hang to someone who is near to you. You cling to someone who likes you; you know that you can confide in that person and whatever the situation might be you will be accepted by him/ her. You seek his/ her support. Most of us have selected few in whom we can confide. For majority of people those people are their parents or friends. You can easily go and confide to them, no matter how absurd your reaction was. You can also seek support from your siblings or good friends. One possibility in support seeking is that you go to a clergy or the God and surrender. Christianity for example has an option where you can go and share yourself in a confession box. This is a great catharsis. You can go and speak something which otherwise you do not dare to speak in front of others. Other religions do not provide you confession box but gives you the option of talking to the clergy. In our culture you may find individuals who, instead of seeking support

from physical entities, seek solace in metaphysical entity. A large number of research findings have been reported in psychology proving the significance of religion in maintaining mental health.

Now we come to dreams and nightmares. In case you have confronted a situation in life which has caused a bruised ego, you might re-visit it in your dreams. One possibility is that you see things happening the same way in the dream. You see the whole situation and you re-experience what you had felt. This might help you in desensitize. There is another possibility. You might add or subtract the content of the event to make it incline towards you. The modification is satisfying and hence helps you attain certain degree of equilibrium.

Let us look at the other possibility. If you realize that you were at fault or if you have a strong super ego that would blame you of thinking bad about someone then what happens? You cannot add bad content as your super ego does not allow that. These are the cases when the dreams might have more symbolic representations. So, you do not see yourself or the other person(s) directly, rather you see a donkey which met an accident with a truck and then a sparrow sat on the cadaver and started dancing. The next morning you realize the absurdity of the dream. You do not realize that the donkey was the person responsible for causing damage to your ego and the sparrow represented you. This is a safe outlet where you did not reveal the symbols but realize that the unrest you were feeling after that experience had reduced and now you feel certain degree of equilibrium.

That is all about the damage repair mechanisms. Till now we have talked about the task oriented reaction patterns and the damage oriented reactions, both being conscious processes. We shall now focus on defense mechanisms which are unconsciously used to defend the ego.