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How Soviet System Left People in Survival Mode

By Marilyn Murray

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As I listened to clients and students over many years, I realized there are essential survival requirements for every human being:

• Safety

• Security

• Stability

• Consistency

• A sense of control of one's environment

These fundamental needs represent the most basic requisites that dictate all human decision and action. They are like bricks that form the foundation upon which everything else in life is built.

Parents are responsible for establishing a solid survival foundation for their children, and when they either neglect to provide these essentials or violate them in some manner, it is as though their sons and daughters are bequeathed a life structure built upon a faulty foundation of bricks filled with holes and cracks.

In addition to damage from family issues, people raised in the Soviet Union and living in Russia today often feel as if their life foundations are built upon an earthquake fault line with regular seismic activity. As a result, people often stay in a "survivalist mentality" and never move beyond this to build a structure containing healthy adult maturity and relationships.

Consider this: I have found that every conflict — in marriages, families, relationships, governments and so on — begins with a violation or a disregard of one of these basic needs. Think of the major conflicts in your life and note which of the following tenets were affected.

Safety: a physical assurance that you will not be harmed, that you are safe from abuse and trauma. Anyone in Russia today can relate a long list of times they did not feel safe. I consistently hear stories of domestic violence experienced by spouses and children, especially where alcohol is present. The owner of the first Moscow apartment in which I stayed was violently beaten and robbed there just days before I arrived. Crime boss Vyacheslav "Yaponchik" Ivankov was shot in a restaurant a block from my present apartment. Violence is normal here.

Security: an emotional assurance that you are valued and loved — by parents and others — that creates self-worth for a child. This is difficult for people who grew up in homes where parents were told their devotion to the state and the Party took priority over their families. The majority of Soviet children were raised by family members other than their parents, and many also spent long days and nights in a kindergarten for several years. Even though they knew their mother and father loved them, they often never heard "I love you" or were given physical affection.

Stability: a material reality that ensures you will have enough food, clothing and shelter to survive. During Soviet times, the government stated it would supply its citizens with a place to live and a job that would provide enough money to buy essential food and clothing when available. This stability was a major factor in ensuring loyalty to the system. However, this stability was shattered by the Soviet collapse, and two decades later, many people, especially the elderly, still struggle to find material stability in their lives. This has been exacerbated for multitudes of all ages by the world financial crisis starting in 2008.

Consistency: actions that are consistent help a child to feel safe, secure and stable. Children become confused and insecure when a mother and father are not parenting "out of the same handbook" and when the parents are not congruent with their own actions and teachings. The atmosphere of consistency is often violated in alcoholic homes. One student stated, "As a child, I was always fearful and confused. My mother was sometimes kind and loving, other times she just disappeared and I was left alone to care for myself even though I was very small. Then there were those terrifying days when she was raging drunk and beat me. I never knew what to expect." Also my students remark how they often received double messages from their teachers: "Be the best!" but also "Don't stand out," and from the government

when history text books were changed as the political system shifted. There were no consistent truths.

A sense of control over one's environment: the fight for control over one's environment begins at birth with parents, continues through school, jobs, marriage, child rearing, and so on, until death. It is important to understand that every other person on this planet has as great a need for control as you do. Ultimately, however, we must realize we live in a world in which we will never be in control as there are too many things outside the realm of our control. The only one truly in control is God.

As part of our survival process, we learn how to give up certain "bricks" if it helps enforce other survival imperatives. For example, I am willing to allow a stop-light to control my actions because if I do not do so, my brick of safety will be violated.

As long as a person's personal foundation is fragmented and shaking, building a structure containing a healthy adult life is impossible. Instead all efforts become diverted into trying to fill the holes and cracks in the fractured foundation by using other people, work, money, success, power or addictions. But no matter how much and how often these attempts are applied, the holes and cracks are not filled. It is like pouring water through a sieve; it is never, ever enough.

Remembering that these survival bricks represent our deepest primal needs, it is interesting to study one of the ways in which the Soviet system was able to manipulate and control millions of people for 70 years. Soviet citizens were told that they would be provided with permanent stability if they allowed the government to acquire a few considerations. Citizens had to allow the following: to feel uncertain about their safety, to compromise how they provided emotional support for their loved ones, to accept inconsistency and lies as normal and to give control of their lives over to the Soviet system. It was a very high price to pay for stability.

However, human beings are also created with a desire to be free, to think independently, to grow, to become who they were designed to be and to experience real intimacy — physically, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually. The Soviet system did not allow this, and it ultimately fell.

Today there are men and women in Russia who have realized that only they and their Higher Power are able to repair their fractured foundations, and they now are actively working on that major reconstruction. As they do so, they are able to build a structure of healthy adult lives and families.

Unfortunately, there also are many people who remain stuck and have never developed beyond a survivalist mentality. Once again, they are sacrificing freedom, growth and maturity for stability. Indeed, a high price to pay.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," was recently released in English and Russian.

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