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Childhood Offenses Instill Defensive Mind-Set

By Marilyn Murray

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In our classes for those who desire to be healthy, balanced people, participants are asked to identify their most powerful emotions. For the past 11 years, I have not been surprised that more than 2,000 students ranked fear as number one. But, I have been intrigued by the fact that the word obida, translated as resentment, consistently places in the second or third position while my students from other countries rarely rank resentment even in their top 10.

In addition, I was often confused as the word and its different forms are used in various contexts when it occurs with regularity in our classes. During a recent instructor training, we analyzed the complexity of obida and its profound impact upon Russian culture.

One of the instructors, an attorney, reported that while the word is widely used today to express the feeling of resentment, in ancient Russia it was not connected to emotions but only to negative events. It usually referred to a violation of someone's rights or a personal insult that was sometimes severe enough for a challenge to a duel. Its roots in Roman law referred to a deliberate disrespect to a person: a libelous act. An offender (obidchik) was

regarded as a lawbreaker.

However, in present day Russia, one of the phrases often heard between two people is, "You offended (obidel) me!" By using the word offended, the speaker then labels the other as an offender (obidchik). Confusion arises when the same root word, obida, is used to describe three different aspects: an action (to offend), a label (offender) and the resulting emotion (resentment). The following was a role-play our instructors used to illustrate this common problem with obida in its various forms:

Irina wanted to say to her husband Sergei, "Honey, last night my feelings were hurt when you said you had decided where we were going on our vacation and had already bought the tickets. I felt resentment because you didn't discuss this with me first."

But what Irina actually said was: "You offended me last night when you said you already made our vacation arrangements. I was insulted because you never discussed it with me first! I have lots of resentment about that!"

Sergei then responded: "What? Are you calling me an offender? I was planning a wonderful trip to a place where you have always wanted to go. You are so ungrateful — you offended me with your attitude!"

If Irina had used less intense words to describe feeling hurt and disrespected, and avoided the words obida and obidel, the conversation would have stayed with her original issue. On an intensity scale of 1 to 10, the exchange could have remained about a 2 or a 3.

But, when obida in its various forms is thrown into the ring, the ensuing fight usually results in a 10. The original issue gets lost as a battle rages on regarding who is the worst offender.

One of the main issues regarding "Someone/thing offended me!" is how the person perceives the offense. There are several options:

1) My perception is accurate, the offense was done deliberately to me.

2) It was done to me, but it was not intentional.

3) It affected me, but it was not personal (weather, traffic).

4) My perception is inaccurate, the offense was not about me.

5) I am overreacting.

Unfortunately, when obida storms in, the person usually is convinced it was perception number one.

When I asked my colleagues at what age they first became aware of obida, one shared that when he was young and accidentally tripped over the leg of a chair, his father picked him up and said, "Who offended you?" When he replied, "Papa, the chair tripped me!" his father banged the chair several times saying, "Bad chair, bad chair!"

Another instructor shared that the question, "Who offended you?" was a normal statement

that almost every child in the former Soviet Union heard on a regular basis. They also understood that whoever offended them always should be blamed and punished. As I listened, my face registered amazement, and one of the Russians asked me what I would say to my children or grandchildren if they tripped over a chair.

I answered that I would pick up the child and encourage them to be careful and walk around the chair next time. And as they grew older, I also would help them understand it was their responsibility to take care of their own safety and to be careful where and how they walked, because they were accountable for their own choices and their consequences of those choices.

One woman looked shocked and said:"That would never occur to me! Kill the chair for standing in my way! I would never have thought of walking around it. If the chair does not want to be killed, it should move! Or, everyone else should move it so it does not block my path!" Then she laughed at how ludicrous her words sounded but admitted she often felt that way. Others in the class agreed.

They realized the concept of "Who offended you?" set them up to view themselves as a victim who looks to blame some other person for their problems while denying their own responsibility. It encouraged them to be suspicious of others and constantly be on the look out for those who could offend them.

The instructors then made a lengthy list of people and entities that have offended them in the past and present. It included problems dealing with family, friends, work, living space, health care, transportation, shopping for basic necessities, the government, police, the military, weather, the Soviet Union and so forth. They were stunned to realize how deeply obida had unconsciously invaded their lives and saw the imperative of eliminating its destructive influence.

One said, "Obida is like my skin — how can I take it off?" Another stated, "Every day we inhale being offended by many, many events and exhale resentment!"

But, they also added that when they were children and someone hurt them, if they came to their parents stating they had been offended, often their parents did not try to protect them. Instead they said, "You must be to blame; you are the offender!" They became both the victim and the victimizer — a confusing status for children who deserved not condemnation but protection and healthy role models for personal responsibility.

An understanding of the extensive use of obida and its influence on Russian minds and emotions can illuminate numerous business and governmental policies that sometimes appear dark and irrational.

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