

# ***Fer-de-lance Fiasco***

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*The Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself.*  
—Benjamin Franklin



Perched on the stool, her body language screaming dejection, disappointment, and disbelief, she wailed, “I can’t believe I did it again! I keep jumping to conclusions, overreacting, and taking things personally.” She covered her face with her hands.

*JOT behaviors*, I thought to myself. Off and on over the past ten years, Angie had dropped by to chat. It was usually to rehearse *another* installment in the on-going saga of her life. Typically, the same chapter, same verse—with just a twist in the details.

“Are you here to tell me about the latest fiasco?” I asked. Angie nodded. Soon it all came tumbling out.

*Chad called me late afternoon yesterday and suggested we meet for dinner at a new restaurant in town. As soon as we’d placed our order, we started talking about our upcoming trip to Thailand. I told him how excited I was and said, “After our trip to Cambodia, I think I’ll be a bit more adventurous in trying new foods.”*

*Chad smiled and said, “I bet we can find you some filet of fer-de-lance.”*

*I didn’t find that funny, so I clammed up the rest of the evening. It really was very uncomfortable.*

Angie stopped her rehearsal and looked at the floor.

“And?” I prompted.

“And I did a similar thing last week when he took me out for lunch. And again the week before that. And a week before that. I tell you: it’s no fun! I’m 47 years old, for heaven’s sake! When am I going to stop?”

“I have no idea,” I said, calmly.

Ignoring my comment, Angie continued. “If I were Chad, I’d probably stop taking me out.”

“Many men would,” I replied. “It can’t be much fun for him either.”

Again Angie ignored my comment. “When I think about it now,” she continued, “it was a really clever comment. I mean, I know what a *fer-de-lance* is. I read about it in one of the Nero Wolf books. You know, the series by Rex Stout.”

I nodded.

“I think the venom only comes out through the hollow fangs,” said Angie. “It isn’t in muscle tissue, which is the reason *snake* is on the menu in many Asian countries...”

I nodded again.

“What would *you* have done in my place?” asked Angie.

“If I were you, probably exactly what you did,” I said, smiling. “Most people do about the best they can at the time with what they know.”

“But what would you have done in a similar situation if you were *you*?” Angie asked.

“I would have implemented AAA replacement behaviors. Likely have laughed and replied, ‘Very clever! *Fer-de-lance!* But I said a *‘bit* more adventurous’—not off the charts *dramatically exotic!*□And, anyway, to me *adventurous* never includes eating something that ever had a mother—or a face.”

“Well, that’s not what I did,” said Angie. “I pouted, clamed up, and pouted some more.”

“An adult pout is really a quiet, emotional tantrum,” I said.

“Remind me of the AAA replacement behaviors.”

I did:

- First, ASK questions to clarify the situation instead of jumping to conclusions and making assumptions that may be off base and way out in left field.
- Next, ACT calmly as you assess the situation to prevent a reactive emotional tsunami from blowing up a relationship bridge.
- Third, ALTER your perception or reframe the event, looking at it from a different perspective to avoid taking things personally.

“I must be getting something out of this, or I would not be repeating the behaviors.”

“And that would be?”

“I *get* letting him know I didn’t like what he said. Then I feel sorry for myself because I’m unhappy. And then I *get* mad at myself for ruining the event. Then I don’t sleep well and

wake up with another migraine. And, sadly, I repeat it a few days later...” Angie paused and then said abruptly, “You know, I’m *getting* really tired of this!”

“Not tired enough,” I said, laughing. “At least not tired enough to put in the work to raise your level of emotional intelligence—your EQ—and choose to exhibit different behaviors.”

“Help me analyze this,” she said. I agreed to do my best.

“Chad’s comment likely reflected male humor, and you completely missed it.” Angie nodded. “Women who fail to understand male humor miss a ton of opportunities for laughter. Males are actually very funny. In some studies they came across five times funnier than females. Knowing that, I always choose to think *humor* first. They tend to use humor to connect with others and can be great teasers, especially with people they care about.”

“But what if it wasn’t meant to be humorous?” said Angie.

“Then it was just that other brain’s opinion, and I can choose whether or *not* to pick it up. Personally, I am at a loss to think of even one reason to pick up another brain’s unkind or negative opinion.”

Angie smiled, and we went on to talk about other things to address.

When you choose to take something personally, your brain goes into a “*poor me*” stance. Feeling anxious and uncomfortable might trigger your brain to downshift into the emotionally reactive mammalian layer and to leap to a very erroneous conclusion. In Angie’s case she might have thought, *Well, you nerd! A fer-de-lance is a poisonous snake. You want me to eat a poisonous snake? The nerve!*

Or your brain might slide down into the basic reptilian layer where stress responses are housed: fight-flight, tend-befriend, conserve-withdraw. Metaphorically, Angie chose *conserve-withdraw* and disconnected from communicating with Chad, ruining the evening for them both quite unnecessarily. And, in the process, interfering with a good night’s sleep, suppressing her immune system, and contributing to a migraine.

But that’s not all. Because the brain seeks congruence, it begins to recall other “*poor me*” incidents from the past. Soon, you feel tired and sad as accumulated injustices come to mind. Enters: an overreaction—which is *never* just about the present and *always* about the past to the tune of something like 70 percent. Something about the present reminds your brain of something from the past, bringing back all the unresolved emotional pain and dumping it into the present moment. This often emotionally beats up the other person, who really doesn’t even know about all the unresolved issues in your past.

An overreaction is a behavioral way of saying that what happened to you in the past was unfair. (It probably *was* and typically requires going through a recovery process to forgive, heal, and move on to high-level-healthiness.) When you over-react, you usually begin to

feel indignant about all the accumulated injustices your brain has recalled. As indignation rises, so does the emotion of anger, triggering the release of adrenalin, which gives you a boost of needed energy.

As adrenalin rises, so does dopamine (the “feel better” chemical), which may make *you* feel better momentarily. Soon, however, you realize that—oh no!—you *did it again* and start beating yourself up for taking things personally or jumping to conclusions or overreacting, which triggers the release of adrenalin. And so on.

It becomes a vicious circle because—in effect—you have become *addicted* to your own adrenalin and dopamine. No, you’re not ingesting anything from the outside. You just trigger their release from your own internal pharmacy through the thoughts you think, the feelings you hang on to, and the behaviors you exhibit.

There are consequences, however. Disruption of sleep, nightmares, headaches, and suppressed immune function come to mind, all leading to an increased susceptibility to colds, flu, and other illnesses, and possible adrenal insufficiency as those critical glands become exhausted from the never-ending demand for more adrenalin.

During our discussion of this ugly cycle, some of the color drained from Angie’s face. “I was miserable as a child,” she said, quietly. “I’ve never been happy. I don’t think I know *how* to be happy. I do know how to take things personally and create a state of chaos—sometimes inside my own head—maybe to get adrenalin.”

“That’s very honest,” I said, “and I’m proud of you. You can only deal with what you can label and describe. And you just labeled and described a bottom line from your childhood: *unhappiness*. □ Unfortunately, unhappiness can become a way of life. Over time, it can turn into a habit.

Happiness is a choice—at least in adulthood. Many people have everything they need (not necessarily everything they want) and *could* be happy. Yet, they choose to be unhappy. That was demonstrated in a study of lottery winners who reportedly were much less happy *after* winning than *before*.

People whine and complain, pout and overreact, jump to conclusions and take things personally. This not only impacts *them* negatively but also every person with whom they come into contact, even poisoning the environment.

“So, where do I begin?” asked Angie.

“You begin by choosing to be happy—ongoing. Part of raising your Emotional Intelligence level involves managing your moods. A mood is simply a feeling you choose to hang onto for a long time. You can *choose* to hang onto happiness. Write down some affirmations and read them aloud several times a day. Reading aloud is more effective than just rehearsal of rote memorization. Remember to use your first name and the pronoun ‘you.’ Try these . . .

*Angie, you have everything you need. You are happy.*

*Angie, you like being happy. Everything goes better that way.*

*Angie, choosing happiness help you stay upshifted.*

“My brain’s opinion is that Emotional Intelligence should be a required course in the School of Life. High EQ skills are essential for anyone wanting to be happy, healthy, and successful.

“The course requires digging into family-of-origin work and a commitment to honesty. The homework is challenging. The exams, often tough to pass. That’s why many people drop out and fail to keep learning and practicing. In my own life, however, the work has been exponentially worth the effort.”

Grabbing pen and paper, Angie begin writing furiously. At last she sat up straighter and *smiled*. Not into the camera: into life!

“And Chad?” I asked.

Little humble, Angie responded. “Some of my behaviors have been most unattractive and down-right dysfunctional. As soon as I get home, I shall thank Chad for his patience and apologize for my episodes of pouting. My *quiet emotional tantrums*, as you put it. I shall also ask him to call my attention to any future behaviors that appear to involve pouting.”

As the song says, “This is how we do it!” Avoiding another fixable fiasco is all about *choice!*