

# SCENE

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## Beggars Can Be Choosers

*by Christine Michaels and Lonne Sterling*

***Insanity: doing the same thing, expecting different results.***

Don't you often find yourself repeating the same behaviors over and over again, sure that this time the outcome will be different--the parent who spansks the child for lying but the child persists in lying most of the time anyway; the wife who nags the husband about his not being more attentive to her needs only to find her requests generally falling on deaf ears; the supervisor who constantly warns the employee about the consequences of being late for work and is continually frustrated by the employee's repeated tardiness? These are obviously not very successful methods of effectuating change in others, so why do we persist in doing them? Are we crazy? Not likely.

First, much of our behavior is learned through conditioning. Conditioning occurs through repetition and reinforcement and, the most permanent kind of learning occurs when the desired behavior is positively reinforced sporadically.

For example, why does a dog beg? If the dog *never* received a treat from the owner through this behavior, the dog would eventually stop begging. However, if the owner responds to the dog's begging by giving a treat, the dog has now learned that begging brings the desired reward. This is what is meant by positive reinforcement. From then on, the dog will continue to beg even if the owner only rarely gives a treat because the dog never knows which time he will meet with success. Constant reward is not necessary because occasional success reinforces behavior (sporadic positive reinforcement).

As humans, we respond much like our canine companions. Once we receive the result we want from a behavior, conditioning begins. If the result is then just occasionally or infrequently received, we will still continue the behavior, hoping that *this* time the desired result will again materialize. Being thwarted only seems to fortify our resolve to keep trying harder. Like the begging dog, all we need is that *first treat* and then possibly a treat now and then, and the behavior becomes entrenched.

This leads us to our second point. We continue exercising the same behavior patterns, even in the face of repeated failure, because it is so much easier to deal with change when we are asking **others** to do it rather than actually doing it ourselves, or so we think.

In the early years of Lonne's counseling career, one of her clients (who we will call Linda) was having difficulty getting her husband to partner with her in the household chores. Her husband (who we will call Steve)

was a schoolteacher who always arrived home no later than 3:30 p.m. His normal routine was to plop down on the living room sofa, in front of the television, remote in hand. He remained generally glued to this spot until bedtime. Linda would come home every evening after a full day's work, see Steve on the sofa, and begin *her* normal routine of hinting, asking, pleading, nagging, crying, and screaming. For the most part, Steve was unmoved. Hurt and defeated, Linda almost always ended up doing the chores. After a year of frustration and failure, with Steve still firmly planted on the sofa, Linda had an epiphany. She finally realized that nothing she was doing was working; she'd be the one who would have to change.

For three months, Linda came home from work, sat on the sofa with Steve and watched television. No chores were done—towels and sheets went unwashed, dishes accumulated in the sink, tumbleweeds began to form from the dust and dog hair, mildew was growing everywhere and the refrigerator remained bare. For two months and 29 days, Steve appeared to remain unfazed. On Day 30 of the third month, Linda arrived home to find the apartment vacuumed, the dishes cleaned and put away, the laundry washed and folded, food in the refrigerator and Steve on his hands and knees scrubbing the tile around the toilet with a toothbrush. Steve's first comments were: "I couldn't stand it any longer. I didn't realize it was such hard work." Today, Steve shares in household responsibilities, most times without even being asked to do so.

Unfortunately, Linda had to first spend a year in the painful exercise of insanity (remember our definition) before she realized she didn't have the power to change Steve; she only had the power to change herself. Then she had to risk initiating new behavior focusing exclusively on her, not Steve, without knowing if the outcome would be any different. That, too, was a painful three months especially because Linda was an extremely meticulous housekeeper. The results speak for themselves. When Linda relinquished responsibility, thereby changing her patterned behavior, Steve was forced to look at himself, accept some responsibility and change his ways.

For the rest of us it needn't be so painful or drastic. The task is relatively simple. Look deeply and honestly at yourself and commit to changing your own ineffective behaviors. By doing so, others will be forced to interact with you differently and in ways that better meet your needs. That's real control and power because it's all in your hands... **Beggars Can Be Choosers.**