

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A SHIRT'S COLOR

A need to control our environment is apparent from an early age. Where does it stem from?



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**T**he need for control is rooted in a desire for events to be predictable. It gives a person confidence that what he is doing will bring a positive effect. Loss of control triggers negative emotions, especially fear, and possibly even depression in the long run.

We all have a need for control, although in varying degrees. Someone with a very strong need for control strives to ensure he or she is in charge of every situation, even those that are seemingly uncontrollable. For example, if such a person wants to control traffic jams, the weather, or the political situation in the world, which obviously they can't influence, they become severely stressed. On the other hand, anxiety and depression arise from a situation when a person feels that they have no control over things that, at least theoretically, are in their power.

Those who are convinced that they have no control over their surroundings and cannot predict what's going to happen, function worse when it comes to mental processes. Studies conducted in the 1990s concluded that the feeling of having no control has a negative impact on the immune system. Among other findings, they proved that the sense of a lack of control impairs the functioning of the immune system (Kamen, Rodin, Seligman & Dwyer, 1991), while acute and chronic stress weakens the immune response (Kiecot-Glaser & Glaser, 1993).

A study involving nursing home residents, conducted by E. Rodin and J. Langer in the 1970s, showed that people who had the ability to control even the simplest things in their lives, such as what they ate or the time they watched television, lived longer than people who did not have such opportunities. The study was performed with two different groups. The control group lived according to constant rules, defined by authorities, while the experimental group was allowed to make decisions about simple matters for a period of time. It turned out that people in the second group on average lived 8-9 months longer than those in the control group.

## Hear me roar!

The desire to exert some control over our immediate environment is with us practically from birth, and through small steps, initially unaware and unspoken, it forms the building blocks of our identity. The first instrument used for this purpose is crying. As this results in the child usually getting its needs met, so the conclusion is that, since its actions are producing some sort of effect, the world must be predictable. This then facilitates the child's development. But if crying does not bring any positive changes, the child grows to believe that he lacks empowerment, and this has a negative impact on its development. In addition to psychological changes, prolonged crying, which produces high levels of cortisol in the blood, can lead to irreversible changes in the brain, including inhibiting the growth of the nerve tissue in the brain, and blocking the formation of new connections between neurons, as well as to decreased immunity levels.

In this early stage of development, it is usually the parents (or guardians) who have the most significant impact on how the child perceives its ability to effect change. The type of relationship they have will impact

CONTROL IN HUMAN RELATIONS



Giving a child space for independent action is important part of the socialization process

not only the child's immediate well-being, but also his future relations with others. Psychologist John Bowlby, the creator of the theory of attachment, wrote: "Attachment is an integral part of human nature from the cradle to the grave." The basis for secure attachment is a sense of predictability of the world and our own actions.

If a parent responds appropriately to a crying child, hugs and calms it, strives to understand and eliminate the cause, they are creating secure attachment. This leads in adulthood to an ability to freely express one's needs, because such a person is not afraid of rejection, and is able to easily form close relationships, including intimate ones. If the parent's attitude is inconsistent, on one hand he wants to help the child, and on the other he is afraid of binding with the child, they sometimes meet its needs, while other times ignoring it. This contributes to one of two insecure attachments: the anxious-ambivalent attachment. Adults who were treated in this way may be prone to emotional swings, inherited from their parents. They may also be pretentious and possessive. This type of attachment also causes trust issues when it comes to potential life partners, and entering into relationships in which one gets hurt.

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A parent might also completely distance themselves from the child's emotions and punish the child for displaying them, which results in creating an avoidant attachment. In adulthood such a person may be afraid of forming relationships, unsure that they will last. Moreover, they may feel insecure, and even if someone does form a closer bond with them they immediately begin to fear that they will be rejected in the end.

Insecure attachments bring with them convictions that are significant when it comes to the need for control: that there is no predictability of events, and the world we have no control over is not a safe place.

### Just love me

On the other side of the coin is excessive control on the part of the parents. Some are so focused on their

children in terms of their education, psychological well-being, and their needs, both real and imaginary, that they don't actually give them any freedom.

In part, this attitude is created by the reality we live in. There is no data by which to compare aspects like the level of security then and now, but these days people surely know more about the various types of threats out there, and that determines the level of control. One of the signs of the times, to which parents should definitely pay attention, is the Internet. You can understand a parent's desire to protect his child by restricting its access to information, which the child is developmentally unprepared to receive. What is different, however, and in some sense is imposed culturally, is requiring perfectionism from children in everything they do. Developmental psychologists emphasize that the only thing parents who have such expectations achieve is to cause their children, in trying to fulfill all these duties, to incur serious emotional costs.

Carl Rogers, the founder of the humanistic movement in psychology, said that the basis for high self-esteem and proper human development is unconditional love from one's parents. If love is conditional, "I love you only when you meet some criteria", evokes a very strong fear of failure and rejection. A parent who imposes perfectionism, setting the criteria which the child must fulfill, does not build good relations, and is not the way to a happy life.

Moreover, in today's world, driven by the media and corporate culture, success is determined by the number of titles and diplomas or material possessions one has, as well as having a beautiful and youthful appearance. All this puts us under a lot of pressure, and since it's difficult to be young, beautiful, experienced, successful, and always smiling, people feel exhausted, which often leads to low self-esteem. On the other end of the spectrum of these modern, western world worries is positive psychology, which encourages the pursuit of valuable (instead of ambitious) goals, recognizing everyday pleasures, and acting with full commitment. If a person develops in a balanced way, and is well perceived, distinguished and honored by others, then there is nothing wrong with that. Provided, however, that this itself is not the goal.

An important part of the socialization process is giving the child space for independent action. At each stage of development the child should be allowed a sense of control, which can be safely afforded to him. A four-year-old should probably not decide for himself when and where he will go on vacation with the family, but he can decide whether he will wear a blue or a red shirt. If the child sees that he has a say in certain matters, and is able to make decisions without relying too much on parents or guardians, it gives him a sense of competence, responsibility, and hope for achieving independence in the future.

## A long farewell

Psychologists and anthropologists emphasize that the focus in Western culture is on active control. If things are bad we must take action or change our surroundings in order to improve the situation. By contrast, Eastern cultures insist on self-control, reducing the level of anxiety and emotions through meditation or relaxation. But in Western culture we also have references to limiting control. The words of philosopher Marcus Aurelius, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”, show that sometimes it’s necessary to exercise control, and all it takes is courage. But sometimes you need to come to terms with the fact that something cannot be controlled, and the only thing you can do is control your emotions and accept the inevitable. When a person can regulate his emotions, he is able to cooperate with his surroundings.

It is important to be able to distinguish what can be controlled and what cannot. On one hand, researchers suggest that people who have a sense of control on a higher level, also have the cognitive basis to be more optimistic and hopeful. A person who sees more opportunities in his surroundings can do more. If he has control on a higher level, and looks at various situations and his role in them in a more optimistic way,

his body’s defense mechanism is stronger, his mental health is better, and he has more strength to fight, for example, when he falls ill. Research indicates that it is easier for those who believe everything will be fine to fight for themselves and their own health.

On the other hand, if the situation is very difficult, it’s best to accept that there are certain matters we cannot influence. This is particularly important when having to confront our own terminal illness, or when being around a loved one who is terminally ill. A useful tool in this case is the grief model developed by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. The first stage in this process is denial (“It can’t be true”), immediately followed by the anger stage (“How can this happen to me!”). What happens next is the bargaining process with either doctors, with God or another higher power (“If only I get better, I promise to always ...”). Then comes the stage of depression, when it is apparent that nothing can be done, and finally acceptance. Emotions that are initially very strong gradually slow down, are followed by feelings of calm and finally acceptance of the inevitability of events.

The need to control accompanies us throughout our lives, and it’s based on how often, and for how long we were left crying in our cradles.

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