

'Talking It Out' Is Not Always Helpful

If you're visibly dejected or upset, those around us will often ask, "Hey, what's wrong?" and then quickly suggest, "Let's talk about it."

The strategy of "talking it out" *can* be very helpful. There are times when we are bothered by something and discussing it with others helps dispel unnecessary darkness and puts things in proper perspective.

But there are also times when talking it out is unhelpful, or even harmful.

For instance, in some cases our moodiness may be triggered by an external event—a perceived slight, a cutting word, or a rejection—but our strong reaction is more due to our own personal faults. And we know it. In these cases, it's usually best to remain silent and to continue the hard work of overcoming our passions. Verbalizing what triggered our reaction may lead to us or others justifying it, which prevents us from maturing in virtue.

There are other times, too, when we don't fully understand the reason for our moodiness. Despite all of today's emphasis on self-awareness, we still somewhat remain mysteries to ourselves. If you're like me, you've found yourself spiraling downward in anxiety or despondency, but cannot for the life of you remember what triggered it. In an attempt to pacify others, who have a desire to discuss our mood and pinpoint the source of it, a brainstorming session begins that can very often cause you to assign blame to a myriad of things that have nothing to do with your mood at that moment. Sometimes, I've found, this brainstorming can add to your problems by causing you to reveal things that are unnecessarily critical

of others or your dialogue partner. As one of the early Christian desert monks said, "Why, words, did I let you get out? I have often been sorry that I have spoken, never that I have been silent."

When you're unclear about the true source of your discontent, again, it's best to either remain silent or say "I'm still working through it" and leave it at that.

I by no means here wish to criticize or discourage all of the efforts of significant others, friends, and acquaintances who encourage us toward this strategy. Many times it is recommended because of its experienced success rate and its association with genuine care.

But let's be honest, there can be self-serving motives in some of those who want to know what's bothering us—either because our mood is not particularly pleasing to them, or because they want to know that it's not about them. Our moodiness not only causes us to suffer; it can also cause those around us to suffer. And those in this latter category can sometimes be too hasty to alleviate their own suffering.

Also, too, I suspect the prevalence of the idea that it's always wise to talk things out is a child of our therapeutic culture which, as Christopher Lasch warned, has taken the place of a society in which shared principles "enabled people of unequal rank to conduct a civilized conversation... without feeling called upon to expose their innermost secrets." In the therapeutic culture, which has largely taken the place of religion, unhappiness and suffering is looked upon as a disease to be eradicated rather than part of our human condition. "Talking it out" is one of the favored prescriptions to be applied to this disease.

That said, man is a social animal meant for personal relations, and good communication is part of fostering these relations. When appropriate, we should let those close to us

know what's troubling us. And we should do our best to not let those times of moodiness be a significant drain on others.

But sometimes it's okay to repeat the words of Edith Stein to her prying friend: "*secretum meum mihi*"—"my secret is my own."