

EMOTIONAL MASTERY

**Manage Your Moods and
Create What Matters Most –
With *Whatever* Life Gives You!**

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This publication is designed to be accurate to the best of the author's knowledge, but it is not designed to provide psychological advice, or substitute for professional counsel in that area. No guarantee of any specific outcome is provided for utilizing the ideas in this book. Your results will depend on your circumstances, application, effort, and ability. If in doubt or crisis, seek professional mental health care.

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INTRODUCTION

IS *THIS* ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?

Mental tensions, frustrations, insecurity, aimlessness are among the most damaging stressors, and psychosomatic studies have shown how often they cause migraine headache, peptic ulcers, heart attacks, hypertension, mental disease, suicide, or just hopeless unhappiness.

- Hans Selye, MD, *Stress Without Distress*

Do you ever feel stuck? Stalled? Unsure what to do next?

Do you often feel too tired to get it *all* done? As if a huge weight holds you down? Are you working *too* hard for *too* little? Does your body get the blues?

Perhaps life and work seem fragmented, disconnected.

Or maybe you're in transition and not sure of your purpose or direction.

Do you feel stressed, anxious, or depressed more often than you would like?

Do you ever worry that you suffer from what Hans Selye called "hopeless unhappiness"? Do you ever feel resigned that *this* is all there is to life?

If you do—and if thoughts like these frighten and depress you more—you are not alone. "The mass of men," said Henry David Thoreau in 1854, "live lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation."

More recently, in a *Guardian* review of Andrew Solomon's book *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Nicci Gerrard wrote, "More ... people die of depression than of AIDS, heart disease, pneumonia, cancer and strokes put together. One in 10 people in America is on drugs to help their moods. Five percent of its teenagers are clinically depressed. Fifteen percent of people who are depressed eventually kill themselves."

That's the bad news. If you feel bad, you are not alone.

But there *is* good news, too. You can change how you think and feel!

More than Half Your Happiness Is Up To You

Our genes incline some of us toward optimism and a rosy way of seeing our lives and world. Others tend toward pessimism and a gloomy outlook on things.

But recent research shows that genetics accounts for *only* 25 to 50 percent of pessimism or optimism. What you do with the rest is *up to you*.

The *really* good news is there is *much* you can do with your part.

Many, including me, have learned to deal with pessimism, anxiety, depression, and other emotional distress in real and lasting ways.

You can, too. And in doing so, you will change your life!

Even if you are more pessimist than optimist, by practicing and mastering the skills outlined in this book, you can increase your ability to manage your moods and create what matters to you—regardless of the circumstances, problems, or adversity you face.

Equipped with a high level of emotional mastery and a well-developed capacity to create what matters most, you will find it much easier to cope with, and even dissolve stress, depression, and anxiety.

With practice, you will become able to create results that *truly* matter to you—with *whatever* you have to work with, and *however* you currently feel!

Creating what truly matters leads to feeling good about yourself. It also leads to real self-esteem, authentic happiness, and deep contentment.

Developing emotional mastery will greatly increase your chances of avoiding the epidemic of emotional distress that is sweeping North America.

You will also see that life *can* get better. A lot better!

I know.

I've been through most of the negative stuff described above and come out the other side happy, creative, and successful.

Although I care a whole lot more for freedom, creativity, engagement, exuberance, and day-to-day joy than I do about accumulating large amounts of "stuff," I have what I need and I *love* what I have.

How about you?

Would you like to manage your moods? Would you like to master your thinking and emotions, and make them work *for* you?

Would you like to *create* results that truly matter to you in life, work, and relationships?

Would you like to do all this in spite of the problems, circumstances, and adversity you currently face?

Would you like to be happy, creative, and authentically confident—with *whatever* life gives you?

Yes? Then, read on.

A Brief Overview

Emotional Mastery lays out a practical, skill-based, self-education approach that can help you prevent and rise above stress, anxiety, and depression.

It is not meant to be the last word on stress, distress, or the problems that flow from them. It does not cover social, interpersonal, or group approaches to emotional health. Nor does it say much about medical or pharmaceutical treatments for distress.

This book is not meant to suggest a treatment approach for serious emotional distress, other than seeing a mental health professional.

Rather, *Emotional Mastery* is about developing the deep, habitual ability—the authentic competence *and* confidence—to manage your moods and create what *truly* matters to you—*independent* of the problems, circumstances, or adversity you face.

The reason a self-educating approach such as this can work so well is that most of the stress and distress we feel day-to-day is self-created.

Much of our distress comes from our own distorted, even adversarial views of current reality. Instead of simply describing reality as it is, accepting it, and going forward, many of us—especially the pessimistically inclined—tend to judge reality in self-defeating ways.

Doing so generates negative emotions that enervate us, suck our energy, and deplete our will to choose and act on our own behalf.

So we don't act. We don't create results. We get stuck, reacting or responding to our distorted—made up!—judgments about current reality. All of which makes us feel *worse*.

But here is the really good news. If we create our own distress by distorting reality, we can—with skill and practice—create its opposite: healthy positive emotions, effective actions, and successful, satisfying results.

Instead of fighting what life gives you, you can learn to make reality your ally. You can realize that *what* life gives you is the raw material out of which you can craft the results and life you long for.

Seeing reality this way can radically change your life.

Changing how you think and talk about reality in positive ways makes your *feelings* more positive. Positive feelings lead to more effective actions and to increasingly successful results.

Developing emotional mastery can help you interact better with friends, family, and co-workers. It will make relationships richer and more satisfying.

It can help you get fitter, stronger, and healthier, in all ways—and stay fit and healthy even in the face of difficult circumstances and challenging events.

It can help you produce outstanding results at work, in sports, in arts or crafts, in your family, or with the organizations you volunteer with and support—with less time, effort, and strain.

It can even help you deepen your spiritual connections.

Emotional mastery is just one part of an integral system of mental, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual development we can undertake.

But, for most of us, it is the most *strategic* place to intervene in that system.

It is the easiest place make real and lasting changes in our thoughts, feelings, and day-to-day behaviours. And such changes radiate out, affecting all aspects of our own lives, and beyond.

Developing emotional mastery not only interrupts what, for many, is a *downward* spiral of distress, anxiety, depression, and desperation. By practicing, mastering, and consistently applying the skills, principles, and practices you learn from this book, you can turn a negative spiral into a positive, *upward* spiral of learning, mastery, and authentic success.

Doing so will bring you authentic self-esteem and deep happiness.

Chapter Outline

Over the next 10 chapters, I will explain how much, if not *most* of our emotional stress and distress are caused by dysfunctional thoughts and distorted assessments of reality.

I will show you how to take charge of your thinking. I'll help you make it functional, so it leads to positive, useful emotions. I'll share with you a wide variety of ways—cognitive and physical—to manage moods and create results.

I will describe ways to increase your sense of *realistic optimism*, and show you how to bounce back quickly when adversity strikes, or setbacks occur.

Most important, I'll lay out the skills and framework with which to create almost anything that matters to you—with *whatever you have to work with*.

In **Chapter 1, "An Epidemic of Stress—And How You Can Avoid It,"** I argue that society is gripped by an epidemic of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Most of us do not know what to do about it—other than numb ourselves with nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs, shop and eat to excess, get addicted to TV, or turn our lives over to so-called experts who may or may not help us.

I'll begin to introduce ways you can avoid and rise above this epidemic.

In **Chapter 2, "How Changing My Thinking Saved My Life,"** I tell my own story. I share how, 30 years ago, I let myself get so wrapped up in "problems," issues, and self-created victim stories that I felt trapped, helpless, and hopeless.

I'll show you how pessimistic language and stories—and the negative feelings I created with them—led me to despair. I'll recount how taking my own life often seemed more appealing than continuing to live it.

I'll also describe how I dug myself out of that pit of despair. I'll explain how—by taking charge of my thinking, managing my moods, and practicing the skills I introduce in this book—I learned to create what mattered most to me, with whatever I had to work with.

In **Chapter 3, "Why Do I Feel So Miserable?"** I explain why it's not just what happens to you that causes distress and bad feelings.

I'll show you how you create much of your distress and bad feelings by what you do with what happens to you. I will also help you change your thinking so you more easily and naturally create emotional mastery, happiness, and an authentic relationship with your own life.

In **Chapter 4, "The ABCs of Emotional Mastery,"** I'll introduce you to the first of several simple yet powerful skill sets that helped me pull myself out of despair, rise above my "problems," and create a life I love.

I'll show you how to use the *ABCs of Emotional Mastery* to think about your thinking and manage your moods. I'll help you recognize *dysfunctional* thinking, and change it to useful, realistic, yet optimistic thinking. I'll show how optimism leads to results, success at what matters, and happiness and contentment.

In **Chapter 5, "From Insight to Action: The Awesome Power of Practice,"** I explain why *insight*, by itself, is not enough to change your thinking or your actions in a real and lasting way. If you want to use emotional mastery when you need it, you have to practice and master the skills I describe when you don't need them. But with practice, you also will see, you can learn to produce awesome results. And, over time, even practice can become fun.

In **Chapter 6, "Thriving On Adversity: From Quitter or Camper to Climber,"** I'll show you how to cope with adversity. And learn how to deal with problems, obstacles, or circumstances by accepting them and focusing on results that truly matter to you.

I'll help you determine whether, when facing life's challenges, you are quitter, a camper, or a climber. And, I'll show you how to keep going regardless of adversity, and to reap the rewards of resilience and perseverance.

In **Chapter 7, "Mental Paths to Mastery,"** and **Chapter 8, "Physical Paths to Mastery,"** I'll describe an easy yet effective mind and body exercises you can do to reduce stress, improve your moods, and shift from a pessimistic view of life to a realistically optimistic one—in the comfort of your own home or office.

In **Chapter 9, "Creating Positive Emotions,"** I'll explain why (and how) to *create* positive emotions because:

- 1) They help you to set up a solid platform for action, and
- 2) It just feels great to think and feel realistically positive.

I'll also explain how to take energy from negative emotions and use it to create positive emotions. I'll clarify why positive emotions are the foundation on which all health, wealth, success, happiness and well being rest.

In **Chapter 10, "Creating What Matters Most,"** I'll outline a set of skills and a framework for creating almost anything that matters.

I'll show how emotional mastery and creative mastery reinforce each other to create a positive feedback system, and an upward spiral of increasing effectiveness and happiness.

Finally, I'll show you how mastering the principles and skills of creating and emotional mastery can empower and enable you to create the kind and quality of life you *most* want—with *whatever* life gives you.

PART 1

AN EPIDEMIC OF STRESS

ONE

AN EPIDEMIC OF STRESS AND DEPRESSION

“Americans may be more depressed, and at a younger age, than they have ever been: unprecedented psychological misery in a nation with unprecedented prosperity and material well-being.”

— **Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism***

In spite of increasing affluence, and homes and offices overflowing with the “stuff” of material accumulation, emotional pain and distress are snowballing across the North American landscape, picking up speed.

In response to a report claiming four out of five North Americans suffered emotional distress, a past president of the American Mental Health Association responded, “No. Five out of five of us suffer from some sort of distress.”

Distress includes stress, anxiety, depression, chronic fatigue, and the many nagging worries and fears that plague us daily. It also includes an increasing array of physical aches, pains, diseases, and disorders.

“Evidence of stress surrounds us,” says Dr. David Posen. “According to *Psychology Today* (March/April 2000), ‘stress-related problems cost American businesses more than \$200 billion annually.... Fully 40% of employee turnover is stress-related.’”¹

Then there is depression. The US National Institute of Mental Health says 19 million Americans suffer from depression. Twenty-seven percent of the adult population—63 percent are women—have been in therapy or taken drugs to aid their mental health.²

Other studies show up to 10 percent of American children age 12 to 14 are depressed.

Moreover, these figures don’t count the milder forms of anxiety and depression that afflict “the worried well” across our society.

Most of the statistics were compiled before 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, or talk about “Peak Oil,” “The End of Suburbia,” global climate change, and the growing challenge of living and working in environmentally sustainable ways.

The escalating epidemic of stress, anxiety, and depression affects more of us every day. It not only makes us feel bad physically, mentally, and emotionally, it prevents us from creating the kind and quality of life—and world—we truly want.

How then can we avoid being swept up and carried along by this dangerous epidemic? How can we rise above stress and create the kind and quality of lives, work, and relationships we most want?

If we want to create what matters to us—with whatever life gives us—it helps to understand the origins of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Armed with such realization, we can better develop the skills and mastery we need to rise above distressful states and create results we most want to create.

Where Does Distress Come From?

Although a great deal of our distress is ultimately self-created (as I'll soon show you), a large number of external factors trigger the processes that lead to that distress.

Major life changes or challenges trigger stress, anxiety, and depression. Death. Divorce. Loss of a job. Moving to a new city. Financial worries. These are the obvious triggers. But stressors don't have to be negative to cause us distress.

Positive events such as getting married, having children, buying a house, or getting a promotion can also stress us and leave us feeling anxious and/or depressed.

Physical triggers include anything that causes us to fear for our safety or our lives. Increased traffic, loud noise, the front page of the newspaper, and the bloody lead stories on nightly TV news can cause us to feel afraid for our well being and that of our families.

Social triggers such as difficulties in personal and professional relationships also cause distress. Recent news reports show arguments in supermarket lines or on freeways can lead to violent forms of distress such as uncontrollable anger, fist fights, and “road rage.”

Institutional triggers include bureaucratic hoops we have to jump through. Senseless rules and regulations can trigger stress. Meetings with no apparent purpose, and in which nothing useful is accomplished, can leave us feeling irritated, deflated, and depressed.

Then there is a myriad of small *day-to-day stressors* or “*hassles*” (as psychologist Richard Lazarus calls them.) They don't seem like much in themselves, but added together and repeated over and over again, tiny tolerations and irritants trigger stress and depression *far* in excess of their size.

Any *loss*, for example, can trigger a sense of momentary helplessness. Think about the last time you couldn't find your wallet or car keys. Or when your computer crashed. Such incidents can temporarily panic and paralyze us.

Other examples of daily hassles are the commute to and from work, rising prices, crime in your neighborhood, maintenance on your car and house, reoccurring computer glitches, pollution, and nagging health concerns.

Some experts argue the accumulation of daily hassles accounts for more distress than major life changes. Put large and small stressors together, and you begin to see why so many of us feel so distressed so much of the time.

Adversity is On the Rise

Most emotional distress is triggered by an increase in *adversity*.

Things change more and faster all the time. The familiar gives way to the unfamiliar. Everyday life is getting more complex and hard to manage.

All of us are affected by increasing difficulties, hardships, and unfavorable events or experience.

Longer working hours, multi-tasking, two earner families, less spendable income per family now than most families had in the 50s, rapidly changing technology, terrorism, and fears about declining resources such as oil and fresh water all take a toll on our ability to manage change—and on our capacity to *create* the kind and quality of change we want.

Confronted by all this change, it gets harder to live authentic, stress-free, and happy lives. Many of us throw up our hands in frustration and despair.

Many more feel as if we have to work harder just to stay where we are.

One study found in 1991 most Canadians worked less than 40 hours a week.

But, by 2001, 36 per cent worked more than 45 hours, and another 25 per cent put in over 50 hours.

Add to this the reality that unpaid, work-related learning now gobbles up about five hours a week of most middle level employees' time and you can see that Canadians, at least, are running harder to stay where they are.

Other studies show the situation is worse in the US.

The growing discrepancy between rich and poor and the disappearance of the middle class frightens many.

While those at the top of corporations and organizations become super rich, those at the bottom struggle to keep their heads above the poverty line. Those in the middle live in constant fear of dropping into the bottom.

As getting by gets harder, the question of getting what we *most* want seems increasingly distant and unrealistic. Most of us are working more now and making less per hour than we did in previous decades.

Happiness follows the same downward trend as income.

Fewer people now report they are “very happy” than did in the 1950’s. And it is not just the poor who say so.

Studies show, beyond a certain basic level of necessity, making more money does not translate into significantly more happiness.

More well off individuals now report they are less happy than did in the 50s.

Old Methods Don’t Work Well

As life gets more complicated, old methods for dealing with change fail to keep up with what happens to us.

Old roles and routines no longer serve us. The authoritarian father, dutiful wife and children, life-long employee, and other stereotypical roles seem strangely out of touch with today’s shifting complexity.

Many of us still value these roles and cling to them, but it is getting harder and harder to make them fit with the realities of a postmodern world and life. With both parents working in more and more families, roles must shift to accommodate the new reality.

Downscaling, major layoffs, and a large-scale corporate move to part time employees mean few people stay with an employer for a lifetime.

Indeed, we’ve been told to expect to change careers every 3 to 5 years.

Not just jobs, but whole careers!

What we want is also changing.

Because we are exposed to so many options in the media, on the Net, and through global travel, our values, desires, choices, and actions can become so complicated that many of them compete or even conflict with each other.

To deal with this, psychologists and self-help experts often hold up a “balanced life” as the ultimate goal.

However, even in the best of times, balance is hard to achieve, and harder to sustain. Think about trying to balance a seesaw. Remember how difficult that was? Now imagine trying to balance a seesaw on the deck of a boat in heavy seas. That’s what searching for balance can be like in today’s turbulent world.

Moreover, balance may not be what we *really* want.

Balance is a mechanical concept. It fits machines but not living, changing, human beings. One of the main definitions of “balance” is “to cancel out.”

Sometimes in our search for “balance” in our lives, we cancel out important values such as “work” *and* “family” or “simplicity” *and* “success” by unconsciously pitting one against the other.

When I ask my clients to explain what they mean by “balance,” I discover they really want *harmony*, *coherence*, and flow.

To achieve such things, I suggest they *integrate* values so less important ones support more important ones, and both support the integral, fulfilling life they tell me they want.

By integrating, they can embrace a variety of values without canceling others.

Not only are desires changing. Our identity also shifts in response to the media onslaught most of us face every day.

Today we no longer measure ourselves against neighbors down the street. We are more likely to compare ourselves to media characters than to our peers.

Instead of keeping up with the *Jones's*, many now try to emulate the lifestyles of *Frasier*, the women on *Sex in the City*, and other examples of an upscale consumerist life.

Many are no longer content to live in a home that hasn't had a makeover. Or to drive a vehicle without the latest bells and whistles.

But even as our material and lifestyle aspirations have risen, costs have skyrocketed, and our real incomes have fallen.

Trying to live the lifestyles we see in the media takes us further into debt.

We have to work harder and longer to pay for the toys we think symbolize success. But that “work and spend” treadmill is trying, and tiring.

Stress and distress increase. It can get pretty depressing!

As a result of the changes and challenges we face, few of us craft truly authentic lives any more.

Many of us don't even know who we *really* are or what we *truly* want.

Too many feel adrift in an alien sea of change, desperate for ways to make sense of it all, and to make ourselves feel a little better.

Focusing on *Feeling Good*, Rather Than *Doing Well*

Focusing too narrowly on feeling better can actually make us feel worse.

During the last thirty years, our society has shifted from a *do well* focus to a *feel good* focus.

Rather than building the personal and emotional mastery that generates authentic self-esteem, we focus more on the superficial self-esteem we seem to think we can buy.

The result we create is often the opposite of the result we want.

Psychologist William James originally defined “self-esteem” as “feeling good about doing well.”

But in formal and informal self-esteem development, many dropped the “doing well” part. For nearly thirty years, for example, children have been taught to feel good about themselves, *regardless* of how well they do.

Such children are not prepared for teen and adult worlds in which doing well *is* important.

As well, because they are often guided around tough choices and protected from bad feelings that might decrease their self-esteem, they lack the ability to deal with adversity and bad feelings that accompany it.

Around age 12, when such kids have to confront the larger world with its challenges, failures and inevitable losses, they cannot cope with what psychologists call “dysphoric feelings” such as disappointment, frustration, anger, and sadness.

Many young teens become quickly overwhelmed by negative emotions over which, it seems to them, they have no control.

This goes a long way towards explaining the 10- to 20-fold rise in teenage depression and the escalation of teen suicide we have seen over the last 20 years—the same 20 years during which self esteem programs came into being.

But it’s not just teens that experience such things.

“Feel Good” Fads

Many adults get caught up in “feel good” fads.

We spend billions in North America each year trying to make ourselves feel good. The sad irony is, because we focus on our selves and our feelings, we *feel* those feelings more acutely. So, when we feel bad, we feel *really* bad.

Moreover, trying to feel good through consumption—“retail therapy” some call it—does not work in the long run.

The excitement of the new thing fades quickly, leaving us craving the next trend, the next fad, or the next hot object that promises to make us feel good.

Studies show that even when we’re watching television programs we like, we report a kind of low level depression, perhaps at least partly caused by dissatisfaction stirred up by commercials, or maybe because we think we are wasting precious time we’ll never get back.

In our feeling-focused lives, we can easily become narrowly narcissistic.

When we do, we demand other people and the world provide for our every need and desire. We insist the world be the way *we* think it *should* be, which, we’ll see, is a dangerous, self-defeating stance to take.

Meanwhile, as our focus on “self” and feelings becomes more important, things such as relationships, community, neighborhoods, the environment, and personal purpose and meaning deteriorate around us.

Most of us are aware of this deterioration, but just barely.

We see roads crumbling and neighborhoods falling into disrepair. We note increases in youth and violent crime, the growing stench of pollution, and the rising cost of gas, heating oil, and electricity.

But because our focus is on ourselves and our feelings, most of us don't do much about these things outside ourselves—unless they affect us directly.

Still, at some level, they bother us.

We feel anxious, depressed, not the least because we feel we have little or no control over this decline. We don't know what to do about it, or what will happen. Such uncertainty is often perceived as a threat.

It stresses us, and makes us anxious and depressed.

So, to compensate for such distress, we focus *more* on trying to feel good.

If we can afford it, we go shopping or head to the day spa.

If we can't, we might lose ourselves in addictive behaviours such as over-eating, watching TV, and numbing ourselves with alcohol and other drugs.

Or we go shopping anyway, loading more debt on to our already overloaded credit cards, and more stress on to our overloaded psyches.

To avoid the adversity we can't control or fix, more and more of us are shrinking into smaller versions of ourselves. We cocoon.

Bunkering up alone or with our families, like people under siege, further erodes personal and social bonds, leaving us even more focused on ourselves.

Author/philosopher Christopher Lasch calls this self-centered contemporary self "the minimal self."³ He says this self is obsessed with ego-gratification, social status, and the pursuit of hedonistic pleasures.

The minimal self, he claims, has contracted to a defensive core. It is primarily concerned with its own survival and making a good impression on significant people—bosses, clients, potential sexual partners.

If our egoistic self is not gratified or the people it wants to please are not pleased, we feel bad. We feel unhappy, sad, anxious, and depressed.

Not only do we feel worse than before, we also feel bad about feeling bad.

Second Order Feelings

It is not just fear, anxiety, and feeling depressed that make us feel bad.

These first order feelings are often merely moods that pass with time.

Most serious stress, anxiety, and depression are created by *second-order* feelings. Feeling bad about feeling bad, feeling afraid of fear, feeling depressed about feeling bad and fearful, and feeling hopeless about dealing with our depression and anxiety cause us the greatest grief.

Second order feelings are deeper and more dangerous than moods because they don't pass with time. They include the deep angst and soul sorrow that follow us into and out of the malls, spas, and bars.

Shopping or drinking or losing ourselves in television's fantasy world might relieve such feelings temporarily. But, because they are self-created, as we will see, and not actually caused by external events or circumstances, these deeply negative feelings quickly come back, making us feel worse than before.

Then we feel bad about feeling bad about feeling bad.

No wonder we feel overwhelmed

We'll examine how we create fear, anxiety, and depression—and the nastier second order feelings—in the next chapter.

For now, let's see where distress—and feeling bad about it—can lead us.

The Downward Spiral of Despair, Anxiety, and Depression

Because things change so much, so fast, and old methods for creating success and happiness don't work well anymore, it is harder for us to reach our goals and successfully create what matters.

Facing life's inevitable setbacks, we often find ourselves stuck, stalled, or drifting without purpose or direction.

When this happens, we experience a sense of loss.

With such loss comes a temporary sense of helplessness.

When things get *too* difficult—when we fail or face loss too often—what was temporary helplessness can turn into a general sense of personal failure, and despair.

Despair spreads through our thoughts, affecting all we think and do. It seems as if *nothing* works, as if we'll *never* succeed, and as if these awful feelings will *never* go away.

Down we spiral, feeling even more helpless, even hopeless.

If we are not careful, we find ourselves—as I did—spiraling down through helplessness and hopelessness into the deepest depths of despair, and entertaining thoughts of suicide.*

*** A Note of Caution:**

If you feel down, depressed, or anxious for any length of time—or if you have any thoughts of suicide—it is important you talk to someone, preferably a Doctor or a mental health professional. There is no shame in this and it is much better to be safe than sorry.

If you don't know a doctor or counselor, talk to your priest or pastor, a nurse, a teacher or even a friend. Talk to someone and tell them what is going on for you. Most communities have crisis hotlines listed in the front of the phone book. If in doubt, call them. They will give you immediate help or refer you to proper professionals.

Again, if you experience desperate unhappiness such as that, you are not alone. Thoreau's observation that most of us suffer from quiet desperation is truer now than when he made it. Many around you suffer the same distress.

But please *don't* despair!

You *can* stop the downward spiral toward unhappiness.

You *can* reverse it; you can turn it upward.

You can head toward optimism and happiness. You *can* restore hope!

Depression and anxiety *can* be treated. Better yet, they *can* be prevented.

Reversing the Spiral

In spite of the difficulties and adversity you face, you *can* learn to create the kind and quality of life you most want.

This changing, confusing time we live in can be, as Thoreau's friend Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "a very good time—if we but know what to do with it."

Difficulties, distress, anxiety, and depression are far from being all there is to life. Even if your life sometimes feels overly distressful, you can learn to make it positive, uplifting, and enjoyable.

You will soon learn that knowing what to do with what happens to you can help you avoid being swept up in the epidemic of stress and depression.

You will also learn how to lay down a solid foundation on which to create what matters to you.

Moreover, you will begin to understand that when you take greater control over your moods and feelings, and when you take greater ownership over the results you want to create, the problems and distress you experience begin to fade, even dissolve.

In place of distress, you will feel excitement, hope, and energy.

Instead of spiraling into despair, you will spiral up toward success, joy, contentment, and an authentic relationship with yourself and your life.

In the next chapter, you will learn that most distress is self-created.

That doesn't sound like good news, but it is. Knowing that we create most of our own distress—and *how*—will make it easier for you to stop creating anxiety and depression, and to start creating the kind and quality of life you truly want.

Knowing how you create distress, and how to replace it with positive, self-supporting emotions and actions will help you generate results that truly matter to you. It will increase your authentic competence, confidence, and self-esteem.

It will make your whole life and world look and feel much, much better.

Two

HOW CHANGING MY THINKING SAVED MY LIFE

“There is a vitality in us, a sparkle—a bonfire, actually—that cannot be extinguished by any tragedy. Something in us, an urge toward wholeness, a passion for evolving, makes us go on, start over, not give up, not give in.”

— David Richo, *The Five Things We Cannot Change*

I have worked with, studied, lectured, written about, and dealt with anxiety and depression—in myself and others—for over 30 years.

But, I didn’t choose this work. I didn’t set out consciously to make it a large part of my professional contribution. It chose me.

I was a young, enthusiastic, and somewhat idealistic professional educator. I was full of energy, ambition, and vitality. I wanted to do great things for the world. In my best moments, I had lots of sparkle; I experienced a bonfire of vitality that blazed through everything I did.

Then, one evening in 1972, my flame flickered and faded. I thought it had gone out for good. Fearing I’d never get it back, I slid into a desperately anxious state of helplessness, hopelessness, and deep despair.

I was teaching high school, *again*. I’d quit once because I could not abide the hypocritical actions of an old school, “break-them-before-they-break-you” administration—and the “system” those administrators put in place.

I loved kids. I loved helping them learn. I loved how well they did under my care and attention. I loved the learning I had to do to keep a step or two ahead of the brightest and best of my young charges.

But I hated the Kafkaesque system of meaningless rules, processes, and hoops I had to jump through to do what I loved. The only purpose I could see for such a senseless, self-defeating system was, as George Leonard described in *Education and Ecstasy*, “to turn a torrent into a trickle.”

Please forgive me if you're a dedicated teacher or educator.

Not all schools are set up like the one I first taught in. Not all teachers act as the ones I worked with did.

Teaching is an honorable and vital profession. It was the hardest job I ever had. I admire those who find ways to coexist with, circumvent, or transcend a system I could not abide. There are many of you out there, and I deeply appreciate the work you do, in and out of the classroom.

But, please remember, I started teaching in 1967.

Back then, girls could not wear slacks in school, even at minus 30 F.

While principals clouded their offices with cigar smoke, students caught smoking on school property were instantly suspended.

Most of the teachers on my staff disparaged teachers such as me, who used audio-visual aids, held student-centered discussions, or were friendly with students.

"Don't smile until Christmas," I was told over and over.

"We've got to beat them down or they'll beat us." "You'll learn," they'd tell me. "Give it a couple of years and you'll lose all those idealistic ideas of yours."

At the end of that year, fearing they were right, and in spite of pleas to stay from my Department head, the kids, and many parents, I quit.

The Right Niche for Me?

I went back to university to do graduate work in teacher education.

During the next few years, I studied and did field work with smart, resourceful, hippie dropouts. I helped them start and run their own "free school" in a house they rented in a neighborhood slated for demolition.

I helped another group of kids, parents, and teachers start an alternative high school that still exists.

When the free school group fell apart because developers demolished their house, I got a part time job at a small, country school just outside the city limits. I taught two periods of English a day to non-academic kids.

Because I was temporary—I'd taken over from a strict British woman who suffered a nervous breakdown—I was free to do as I liked.

After a bit of jostling to establish my "cred" and to show they could trust me, the kids loved me.

They did things they'd never done before, and that other teachers said was "impossible"—such as write, design, publish, and sell a literary magazine.

They worked hard *and* had fun.

Some learned to write for the first time in their life. All got better grades than they had in years. It was an exciting time. A successful time.

The principal liked what I'd done. He wanted to keep me in the fold after my temporary contract ended. The school district got me a short-term job developing an environmental education program for a new outdoor center.

That led to me doing leadership development training and counseling for aspiring YMCA camp counselors. This experience, and the opportunities it provided, would eventually change the direction and purpose of my life.

I worked for the Y for seven months before I returned to the country school to take up a full time job teaching English, Social Studies, and Geography.

My part time job there had been challenging and fun. I thought teaching full time would be the same, only with better pay. I hoped I'd found my niche.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Back to the Grind

Teaching full time, I had to prepare and teach five different classes. Instead of 40 students, I had 130, mostly academic students. That greatly increased the pressure on me to conform.

Other teachers now felt threatened by my student-directed teaching methods. They pressured me to fit in, subtly and not so subtly.

A janitor who didn't like my semi-circle arrangement of desks tossed my library of books and magazines out the window into the rain. *Really!*

Although the Principal supported me, the Vice-Principal was old school. He thought I was the devil incarnate. Our philosophies constantly clashed. He hovered outside my room, waiting to catch me in some—*any*—indiscretion.

I was determined, though, to make it work.

I put my head down, worked hard, avoided the staff room, and gave all my time to the kids. It went okay for the first month or two, but, slowly, a thick, dark cloud of fear and sadness settled over me.

I began to think I'd made a mistake teaching full-time. But I didn't know what else to do.

Although my first degree was in Criminology and Delinquency, I didn't want to work in that field. I also had a B.ED and most of an M.ED, but didn't feel qualified to do anything except teach school.

I thought about becoming a journalist, but, after seven years of post-secondary study, I couldn't imagine going back to university and training for another profession.

I felt stuck; trapped. I worried about my future, or *lack* of one.

The more I worried, the worse I felt.

Day and night my head spun with half-formed ideas, most of which were pessimistic and conflicted with each other.

I agonized about my "dead end" situation. Doing so was exhausting. I felt down and anxious. My muscles were rock hard tense. I couldn't sleep.

The Breaking Point

One night, I came home from school more tired and uptight than usual.

I lived with friends and, as dinner progressed, I couldn't make sense of their conversation. It sounded like meaningless babble. In the background, radio news announced the day's absurdities. Sounds jumbled together to create a chaotic aural blur.

My pulse started to race. My breathing grew shallow. My stomach knotted. I pushed peas around my plate, trying to calm myself.

Suddenly, like a mirror cracking into two jagged halves, my sense of reality fractured. I saw two images of everything shifting off centre, overlapping, and distorting each other.

Nothing made sense. Not the conversation. Not the people. Not the news. Not even *me*. My heart jumped into my throat and tried to beat its way out. I thought I might be having a heart attack.

I went to bed with my clothes on, pulled the quilt over my head, and cried.

I didn't know why I was crying but I stayed in bed for three days. I was frightened of everything. Loud music. TV. My wife. The other people in the house. Going back to school. Myself. Life.

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I had no idea what was happening to me. I felt totally *trapped* in my own severely limited life. I felt *desperate*. *Doomed!*

After three days in bed, I dragged myself back to school.

My principal took one look at me and sent me to see my doctor.

The doctor was a nice guy, not much older than I was, but he didn't seem to know if I was suffering from depression or anxiety. Finally, he just asked me, "Are you depressed? Or anxious?"

I didn't know! I didn't know *anything* at that point. However, I told him I was nervous, uptight, afraid, and had trouble sleeping and sitting still.

"OK," he said, "anxious." He wrote me a prescription for four 50-mg Valium tablets a day. "Refill as needed."

Much later, as my knowledge and understanding of emotional distress grew, I realized I'd suffered from "atypical depression," which includes *both* the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The Valium helped. It mellowed my symptoms and made it easier for me to make it through each day. But nothing made those symptoms—or the worry that caused them—go away. I was confused, conflicted, and scared to death.

Every day I thought about quitting my job.

I didn't, though, because I didn't know what to do, or even what I *could* do. I could *not* see any options, any way out.

Changing my career, I feared, was way *too* much for me, way *too* hard.

Besides, what if I quit, and it didn't work?

What if I was just crazy and would *a/ways* be like this?

Thinking these kinds of thoughts tied me up in anxiety. It paralyzed my thinking. I couldn't make decisions. More than ever, I felt *trapped!* Plus, I had debts to pay. I craved the security of the regular school board pay cheque.

So, in a compromise that came close to killing me, I stayed on.

Tormented By “The Terror”

Teaching became a dismal, passionless chore for me.

My depression deepened. I felt doomed, as if my life would *forever* be and feel *awful*. I experienced constant, barely manageable anxiety.

In my most vulnerable moments, an almost unbearable state of panic—a terrifying internal torment that I came to call *The Terror*—would descend upon me like a sharp-clawed raptor, ripping at my confidence and self-esteem.

There were times I was sure it would *never* end, when I thought I *could not stand* another minute of the pain I felt.

During those times, I seriously considered taking my own life.

Once, driving fast, late at night, on a twisting mountain road, and several times on vacation, leaning on the balcony railing of our eighth-floor Hawaiian hotel room, I came close to ending it all.

Wondering why the pain was so fierce, afraid it would *never* go away, and that I *could not stand it*, the solution seemed so simple, so quick, and so final.

Somehow, though, with the help of my principal, my fearful but caring wife, a part-time job I liked (teaching skiing at night), and my daily regimen of Diazepam and Dutch beer, I struggled through that bizarre, frightening year.

Then I quit teaching school again.

Developing Character; Learning to Cope

What I came to call my “perambulating nervous breakdown” stayed with me on and off for about five years. Although I gradually weaned myself from the Valium, I still carried a vial of pills in my pocket, just in case.

During that time, I enrolled in a Master’s program in Environmental Design, where I hoped to design “experiential learning environments.”

I also got a part-time job developing character-building programs for children and teens with the Action Studies Team, a personal and professional development think tank in Calgary.

As part of my character building work, in conjunction with the Rocky Mountain YMCA, I designed and developed *Earthways: Experiences in Personal and Environmental Exploration*.

Earthways was a 3-week long, wilderness-based program that helped teenagers develop character skills and personal mastery through challenging and environmentally sensitive outdoor experiences.

Creating *Earthways* gave me a sense of purpose and meaning.

Everything I did served that purpose. Decisions, choices, and actions aligned themselves in a coherent way. My life became both simpler *and* richer. And a lot more fun!

During the three years I ran *Earthways* and follow-up programs during the winter, I felt mostly happy and energetic. *The Terror* stayed away most nights. I thought I’d found the cure to depression and anxiety—purpose-driven, meaningful work. And, to some extent, I had.

However, as I was yet to discover, there was more to it than that.

Back to the Grind, Again

Just before the fourth summer of *Earthways*, I got an offer to join an exciting new program at a West Coast University. I accepted, turned *Earthways* over to my partner, and prepared for a new phase of life.

My wife and I moved to Vancouver, B.C. in August of 1978.

There, I discovered the professors behind the new program had fallen out with each other. There was *no* new program.

I was put to work supervising student teachers in the kind of conventional classrooms I detested. Again, I began to feel trapped.

The whole complex of depression, anxiety, and despair came perambulating back into my life. *The Terror* reappeared. Sleep disappeared. I worried constantly. Thoughts of suicide arose again. I needed Valium. I needed help.

More help than I'd have believed possible came from Dr. Joe Niedhart, an old college roommate of mine. I rediscovered Joe through a poster on a community notice board describing a "How to Sleep" workshop he taught.

Joe was a psychiatrist who practiced preventive medicine and wellness promotion. "I should be able to help," he said at the end of our initial session. "Make an appointment for an hour next week. In between, I'd like you to read as much of this book as you can."

He handed me a dog-eared copy of an early version of *A New Guide to Rational Living* by Albert Ellis and Robert A. Harper. Ellis was one of the founders of what is now called *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy*.

In the book, he stressed that the principles and practices of what he called *Rational, Emotive Thinking* were as important to *preventing* emotional distress as they were to treating it.

Changing My Thinking Changed My Life

Reading *A New Guide*, I quickly saw that Ellis's ideas and the skills he taught could help prevent emotional distress as well as treat it.

As I read, I realized how I made *myself* miserable—"unnecessarily unhappy" as Ellis put it.

I saw how I had given myself my perambulating nervous breakdown by thinking dysfunctional, *pessimistic* thoughts about the adversity I faced, and letting those distorted, irrational thoughts affect my whole life, my whole being.

I realized I'd scared myself sick by imagining "awful," worst-case scenarios, and telling myself made-up stories that terrified me.

I realized I'd said things to myself such as, "I *can't stand* this pain! What if it *never ends*? I *have to* get rid of it any way I can"—and *believed them!*

This in spite of the reality that I *had* stood that pain for years.

I recognized that for believing my victim story about being trapped and helpless to change had almost cost me my life.

My feelings, I began to understand, depended not just on what happened to me, but mostly on what I thought and said about what happened.

The Terror, I realized, was nothing more than my own self-created fear that I was powerless and doomed, and my escalating second order fears about not being able to control that fear, and maybe spinning out of control.

I was “stuck” only if I told myself I was stuck.

I was “doomed” only if I told myself I was doomed.

Life was “not worth living” only if I judged it to be not worth living.

I discovered a powerful principle of emotional mastery.

As we think, so we are.

Or, as Shakespeare said in *Hamlet*, “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

I called Joe and told him I didn’t think I needed another session.

My anxiety had all but disappeared. My spirits lifted. Sunshine broke through the black clouds of my despair. I felt better than I had in years. I slept!

Joe chuckled when I told him about my change in mood and energy.

“I thought you’d get a lot out of reading the book,” he said.

“Good for you. *But don’t get cocky*. This is not a one-time fix. This is the start of a lifetime practice of monitoring your self-talk and changing self-defeating thoughts and stories into supportive ones.

“Let me know if you need coaching support to help you practice.”

Rekindling My Spirit

I wish could tell you I “got it” perfectly merely by reading the book, and have effortlessly applied the skills ever since. But, no; I didn’t. I’m still working at it.

Ellis’s book was not a magic bullet.

Reading it did not instantly eliminate all of my depression and anxiety.

However, the skills I learned from Ellis and Joe and other cognitive behavioural and positive psychologists are the closest thing to mood-managing magic I’ve found.

I’ve had other milder bouts of depression and anxiety, especially after the loss of a love, or following major setbacks in life or work. I am affected by the darkening days of fall and winter.

Now, though, I recognize what is happening to me. I understand my part in creating distress. I recognize dysfunctional thoughts and stories and replace them with functional ones.

Ellis and Joe gave me a simple, but sophisticated set of thinking and doing skills. When I practice those skills consistently, like a pianist practices piano or a skier practices skiing, I think clearly, feel great, and produce results I want.

Emotional Mastery

Research backs me up. Studies done by the *US National Institute of Mental Health* show that *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy* is superior to all other therapies for dealing with depression and anxiety.

It is also superior to the best anti-depressants, largely but not only because you don't have to go off it. You can, as I did, make it part of your life. You can develop emotional mastery.

You can use the thinking tools that I outline in this book to help yourself if depression strikes and, more important, to prevent it from striking.

Practicing emotional mastery skills helps dissolve distress and keep anxiety and depression away. It helps you think and act in a realistically optimistic way.

Most important, practicing emotional mastery helps you establish a solid emotional platform on which to create what matters most.

Creating what matters makes you feel great about yourself. It helps you feel competent *and* confident, able to see challenges where once you could only see threats.

Instead of the downward spiral into depression, despair, and terror I'd felt I was locked into, I learned to create an optimistic upward spiral that integrates emotional mastery and creating skills.

Practicing both sets of skills has enabled and empowered me to create the kind and quality of results I most want in my life, work, and relationships.

I've practiced emotional mastery for more than 25 years now.

Usually, I'm good enough at this practice that I don't notice I'm doing it.

Some times, though, when adversity is great, or sudden, I slip into old habits. Other times, I get cocky, lazy, and let my practice slip.

When I do, bad feelings creep back in.

Now, instead of feeling bad about bad feelings, I take them as signals to refocus my emotional mastery practice.

When I do, I feel good again, and can create what matters to me.

Developing emotional mastery and learning to create brought sparkle back into my life. It revived my vitality. It relit my bonfire of enthusiasm and exuberance. When I practice those skills, my bonfire blazes brightly.

I can't tell you how much I appreciate Joe giving me Ellis's book, and how much I appreciate myself for all the time, effort, and practice I've put in to mastering the skills of emotional mastery.

It really has changed my life in amazing ways.

In the next chapter, I'll try to show you that what happens to you is not what makes you feel bad. It's what you do with what happens—how you explain it and act on it—that makes you feel bad.

Then, in Chapter 4, *The ABCs of Emotional Mastery*, I'll outline the basic thinking and mood-managing skills I learned from Ellis and others. I'll also show you way to practice those skills and develop your emotional mastery.

Part Two

Change *Your* Thinking; Change *Your* Life

THREE

WHY DO I FEEL *SO* MISERABLE?

*What disturbs (our) minds is not events
but (our) judgement of events.*

— Epictetus

Stress is not necessarily bad for us.

Stress is a natural response to change and adversity. In the face of perceived danger, our brain and bloodstream flood with chemicals that quickly provide us with energy and strength to fight the danger, or flee from it.

In manageable amounts, stress helps us make quick, useful decisions in difficult situations. Stress is, therefore, an important part of our survival and achievement systems. We need it to stay healthy, alert, and creative.

Stress is good for us—if *we know what to do with it*.

When, for example, a rock climber readying herself for a difficult ascent turns to her buddy and says, “I’m stoked!” she means she is excited and ready.

She has harnessed her stress reaction in a positive way. She is ready to channel the energy of stress into creating a successful, enjoyable climb.

So, too, when a team player tells his colleagues he’s “psyched” for a big presentation, his stress is useful.

The physical changes he experiences help him get “up” and energized for his presentation. They enable him to do his best job in a challenging situation.

By taking on their challenges, the climber and team player use the stress chemicals in their bloodstreams and replace them with “feel good” chemicals that leave them happy and satisfied.

If they do not take action—if the climb or presentation is cancelled, for example—the chemicals are not used. If they do not experience more stress right away, the chemicals slowly dissipate.

Stress becomes a problem when we become overloaded with too much of it, too fast, and by the wrong kind of it. Then, instead of dissipating, stress

hormones accumulate. They prevent feel-good chemicals from binding to our cells. When we can't cope with stress, it turns into "distress."

What most of us feel and label "stress," is usually distress.

It is critical we use stress hormones when they flood our body, or prevent such flooding from happening. Learning to avoid distress and harness the power of positive stress is a big step toward emotional mastery.

We also need to know how to turn distress into useful stress.

Challenge Harnesses Stress

Challenge is usually good for us.

Challenges are difficult and sometimes dangerous undertakings at which we are reasonably sure we can succeed. A challenge is a "call to respond." It is an opportunity to gather our wits and strength and stretch for the best in ourselves.

Challenges can be physical, such as rock climbing. Making a presentation and speaking in public are social challenges. Speaking our truth when we are unsure of the consequences of doing so is an emotional challenge. Writing this book has been both an intellectual and emotional challenge.

Every day, more people take on new spiritual challenges.

One of the largest, and perhaps most important challenges we can take, is the challenge of integrating all these different types of challenges, and creating *an integral life*—a life of flowing wholeness.

Challenges motivate us to push our limits, to stretch, to do our best.

In rising to them, we develop new skills and mastery.

If our skills are well suited for a challenge, we often experience a kind of total immersion in the experience. Action and awareness merge. We experience a kind of one-pointedness of mind. Our sense of time and emotional worries seem to disappear. We enter that elusive state positive psychologists call "flow."

Threat Leads to Distress

The opposite of a challenge is a threat.

Threats are difficult or potentially dangerous situations we fear we cannot succeed at.

Whether we are challenged or threatened by a situation depends on whether we think we can succeed in that situation, or not.

While challenge generates useful stress, threat generates fear and distress.

As well, we can make distress worse by how we talk to ourselves about the threat, and/or our lack of ability to deal with it.

When we are afraid, we often use phrases such as, "This is *awful*," or "I'm *terrified* of this," or "There's *no way* I could *ever* do that." When we are afraid, our language becomes the language of doubt and self-fulfilling failure. It can become victim language.

Although, sometimes we are victims, in real and present danger, most of the time we say something is “awful,” or we are “terrified,” it is an exaggeration. Such statements are subjective judgments, not accurate or objective descriptions of the actual situation or danger.

When, for example, my clients say something such as, “My life is *awful*”, I ask them, “Awful like life in WW2 concentration camps was awful?”

“No,” they reply, “not that awful.” Then they explain what they mean in more rational, objective, and appropriate terms.

Please do not think this is a trivial point, or “just semantics.”

If we don’t catch and change this kind of distorted, dysfunctional language, our mind/body processes it as if were true. It receives “awful,” translates it into “Danger!” and immediately floods with fight or flight chemicals.

Real or Imagined—the Reaction is the Same

A threat doesn’t have to be real to create a stress response.

The brain/body system reacts the same when we watch a scary movie. Although we know the “terrifying” action on the screen is not “real,” our mind/body processes it as if it were.

Our pulse shoots up, breathing gets shallow, our stomachs knot up, and blood is shunted from our extremities to our core and brain—all signs our system is flooding with stress chemicals such as adrenaline and corticosterone.

When the movie ends, we laugh at ourselves for screaming and clutching at our partner. The stress chemicals dissipate, replaced by pleasant, feel good chemicals such as endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin.

But what if the horror movie is *just* in our minds?

What if we create a “terrifying” scenario when we describe our own lives and the *problems* we face?

When we make up scary scenarios in our minds, it is like watching horror movies that do not end.

The mind constantly perceives “Danger! Threat!” It downshifts into fight or flight mode, and floods our system with chemicals that are difficult to dissipate.

The constant build-up of stress chemicals makes us feel miserable, and can quickly lead to burnout and breakdown.

Locked In: Prisoners of Our Neuro-Chemicals

Have you ever worked yourself into a stressed-out dither? Or even panic?

Did you find that you couldn’t think clearly, concentrate, or make decisions?

Instead, did your mind just spin around and around? Did negative thoughts chase each other around your brain, seemingly out of control? Did the whole situation—and what to do about it—seem impossible to make sense out of?

If so, don’t worry. You’re not crazy. It happens to a lot of us.

It is *fight* or *flight* chemicals that are mostly to blame.

Stress chemicals such as adrenaline and corticosterone are designed to lock us in to *only* two options—*fight* or *flight*?

When danger threatens, we can either take it on, or run away. In major distress, our options are only fight, or flee.

This may sound like bad design, but it worked well when we humans were regularly assailed by saber toothed tigers, or raiders from another tribe.

Under such real and present danger, our brain simplified things by locking us into the either/or choice. Fight the danger. Or run like heck!

But neither option really works when we make up a scary scenario in our mind, and don't realize we have done so. There is nothing to fight, except our thoughts. And nothing real to run away from.

Yet the brain/body system perceives "threat," and blasts out chemical messages locking us into the "fight" or "flee" options.

When stress chemicals flood our system, it's almost impossible to think clearly and make good decisions. The brain/body just wants us to *stop* thinking and react—now!

This instantaneous, automatic reaction to threat is why it is so important to understand that fear, anxiety, and depression do not result *just* from what happens to us.

Problems, circumstances, and adversity *by themselves* do not generate the bulk of bad feelings and our experience of distress.

"Experience," said Aldous Huxley, "is not what happens to us; experience is what we make of what happens to us."

In difficult situations, how we *interpret* what happens (mostly by *thinking* about it) determines whether we feel challenged or threatened.

The way we *explain* what happens (and what imagine about what will happen as a result) determines whether we experience useful stress we can act on, or debilitating *distress* that locks us in to a counter-productive fight or flight reaction.

EXPLANATORY STYLE: THE BASIS OF OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM

When *things* happen to us, we *interpret* them before we feel or act.

Consciously or unconsciously, we filter what happens through our belief systems and construct an *explanation*. That explanation greatly influences our responses—our feelings, actions, and results.

So, what often *seems* like an instantaneous reaction to circumstances and events, is actually a series of steps involving what happens to you, how you explain what happens, and the feelings and actions that flow from your explanation.

Over time, we develop an habitual way of explaining things. Psychologists call this our "explanatory style."

Well, where does our explanatory style come from? How do we develop it?

As we grow from toddlers to teenagers to adults, we accumulate ideas and beliefs from a variety of sources—mainly from our predominant caregiver.

We develop theories and draw conclusions about how the world works. We concoct explanations for why we succeed and why we fail. These all accumulate and solidify to form our belief systems and our explanatory style.

All of us constantly talk to ourselves about what happens, and what we think about it. As part of this process, we often make up stories and tell them to ourselves and others.

If our stories are objective and accurate in relation to reality, they are usually functional and support us in creating what matters to us.

But if our stories are not objective, not logical, or not rational, they can scare us nearly to death, and lock us in to that rigid flight or fight reaction.

Horror Movies in Our Minds

Sometimes the stories we tell ourselves become frightening mind-movies about how we were wronged, used, abused, ignored, left out, passed over, abandoned, or otherwise hard done by.

Telling ourselves “terrifying” horror stories about our lives and difficulties can scare us into distress, or worse.

As you read the next paragraph, for example, imagine telling yourself the story. See it play out in your mind as vividly as you can.

“I think my partner might leave me. Darn, that would be *awful!* I *couldn't stand it*. I *can't stand* being alone. Besides, it's happened *too* many times before. What if it *always* happens? What if I *never* find another love? What if I'm *not* really loveable? Oh, no! I'm *doomed*. I'll probably live alone *all* my life, and die lonely and miserable. How *horrible!* *What's the point of anything now?*”

How does that little story make you feel?

Not so good, I'll bet.

At 3AM on a dark night of the soul, this is very much like the stories many of us do tell ourselves. Often, the stories are worse than this, even more *terrifying*.

Unfortunately, telling ourselves such exaggerated, illogical stories can easily become a habit. When it does, we may automatically apply such overly negative stories to most (even all) situations.

People who *were* victimized (or even thought they were) as children, for example, often carry the story, “I *am* a victim,” into their adult life. Their story becomes generalized into a judgment about their *identity*, not just a description of what happened their past.

The statement, “I am a victim,” is dangerous because it implies, “I am always a victim,” “I will always be a victim,” and “I can do nothing about it.”

Such a story can make challenges look like threats and kick off a cascade of fight or flight chemicals that paralyze the individual into inaction.

It also prevents those who tell it from seeing other, more descriptive and objective stories, such as, “I may have been victimized as a child, but I'm grown

up now. I've transcended victimhood. I can act as a smart, confident, competent adult with multiple skills and talents that serve me and the results I want."

Which story would be most likely to serve you and your ends?

Here's another story that I hear from clients far too often.

"I *can't* practice things. If it does not come easy and naturally, I *can't* do it."

Even seemingly innocuous stories such as this can have debilitating effects on success and happiness. Such *pessimistic* explanations do not serve us, or the results we want to create. They prevent us from succeeding at what matters.

I'm *Just A Mother*

Here's another example of how an explanatory story can limit your thinking, feeling, and actions.

In my coaching and retreat work, I often encounter women who, when asked what they do and what skills they have, apologetically respond, "Oh, I don't have any skills; I'm just a mother."

"*Just* a mother?" I ask.

"Well, yes. I stay at home and care for my three kids."

I probe a little.

"Do you negotiate conflict between your kids? Do you counsel them when they're sad, or hurt, or afraid? Do you organize schedules for them? What about organizing yourself and your husband to get the kids where they need to go? Do you ever prepare family food and clothing budgets?"

Naturally, the women, usually grinning, answer, "yes," to all the questions.

I point out that the skills they acknowledge are *generic* skills. If they become conscious of these skills, and value them, they can transfer them to other challenging activities.

If you don't believe me, read the memoir *Body and Soul* by Anita Roddick, founder of *The Body Shop* worldwide empire.

Anita was "just" a mom when she started her first shop.

She had no business skills or experience. She couldn't even get a loan from the bank without her husband's signature. But she had generic skills.

She knew how to budget, negotiate, resolve conflict, schedule, nurture other people, and make complex decisions.

Now, her company is worth billions and spans the globe.

"Just a mom," indeed!

The "I Am Great" Story

People to whom school, sports, music, or other activities come easily often develop the story: "I am great; things come easy to me. I don't have to work hard at things to produce results."

However, when they carry this story into adulthood, they find themselves among others with talent similar to theirs. No longer a big fish in a small pond, their “I am great” story does not serve them.

In this new situation, they face a new reality. Everyone is talented.

Therefore, to excel, they *do* have to work hard for results.

Some realize this and change their “I am great” story.

Others hang on to their story, and to the identity they have built up around. Doing so often prevents them from excelling.

Research shows that often the most talented do not succeed in the big leagues of any field because they did not learn to practice and develop their skills, or express their talents fully, or to work hard to overcome difficulties.

So, although they might be good, they rarely become great.

Of course, if one has natural talent, desire, and the support to practice, learn, and improve their skills, they are likely to end up outstanding in their field such as “the Great One” Wayne Gretzky did in hockey.

Although he was judged a “phenom” at an early age, Gretzky is said to have grown up with an, “I’m good, and I can get better,” story.

Moreover, those close to him say that throughout his stellar career he was “first on the ice, and last to leave.”

Gretzky’s story, which included a dedication to practice and improvement, has served him well on the ice, and off.

Success in anything is largely a matter of our choice of story, supported by practice and learning. One of the most important things you can practice and develop is an explanatory style that serves your best self, and the results you *most* want to create.

Developing a realistically optimistic explanatory style is a critical part of emotional mastery.

PESSIMISM OR OPTIMISM?

Explanatory style takes two basic forms: pessimistic and optimistic.

No one of us is all one style or another.

Individual explanatory styles range from very pessimistic on one end of a continuum to overly optimistic on the other.

As you’ll see below, you don’t want to be on the either extreme of the continuum. The explanatory style that extensive research shows to be most successful is “realistic optimism.”

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Before we can create success and happiness by shifting from a pessimistic to a realistically optimistic explanatory style, we first have to understand the difference between the two basic explanatory styles.

Pessimism: *Permanent, Pervasive, and Personal*

Pessimism is the tendency to focus on the negative aspect of things, and to imagine the worst situations possible. Pessimists tend to emphasize the dark side of things in their explanations and interpretations of what happens.

Research by positive psychologists such as Martin Seligman shows that individuals with pessimistic explanatory styles explain problems, circumstances, and adversity as if they are:

- **Permanent:** “This will last for ever,”
- **Pervasive:** “This will affect *all* aspects of my life and work,” and
- **Personal:** “This is *all* my fault.”

As well, Dr. Paul Stoltz has shown that a lack of **Ownership**—the belief you cannot make things better or produce results you want because of an adversity—compounds negative affects of a pessimistic explanatory style

If we describe adversity in a pessimistic way—if we *imagine the worst and tell ourselves it will last forever, affect every aspect of our lives and work, and is all (or mostly) our fault, and there is nothing we can do about making it better*—is it any wonder we feel anxious, helpless, and depressed?

Although there are many influences on how explanatory style develops (including genetics, temperament, culture, school, friends, and the media), research suggests the most powerful influence appears to be our dominant caregiver, usually our mother.

As children, we learn to mimic Mom’s (or Dad’s or Aunt Jean’s) way of explaining things and the world. If our dominant caregiver sees them darkly, we’re likely to see them the same gloomy way. If they see the bright side of things, we are likely to pick up that positive approach ourselves.

We, in turn, influence our own children.

Changing the way *you* explain things will not only help you increase your emotional mastery, optimism, and real world success.

Doing so will also help your children develop a realistically optimistic approach towards what happens to them.

Optimism: *Temporary, Specific, External*

Optimism is the tendency to look for the best in things; to think that the world we have is the best of all possible worlds. Optimists tend to look on the bright side of things.

Optimists rarely suffer from depression, anxiety, or stress. When they do, it does not last long. They see problems, setbacks, and other adversity as:

- **Temporary:** “This *won’t* last,”
- **Specific:** “Just *part* of my life is affected”, and
- **External:** “It’s *not* all my fault.”

Moreover, optimists are more likely to take **Ownership** for results they want to create, regardless of the adversity, or its cause.

Positive psychology research shows optimists perform at higher levels than pessimists do in work, sports, art, music, and other areas. They also tend to make more money, live happier lives, and have more intimate, connected, and caring relationships.

Strangely, while research shows optimists are not as realistic as the more dark-minded, pessimists, it also shows that, to a point, “positive illusions” (about skills and abilities, for example, or the control we have in a situation) seem to make us more successful in dealing with challenges and adversity.

But only *slightly* positive illusions.

I am not talking about mindless, Pollyanna style optimism here. Nor rah-rah boosterism that flies in the face of reality.

I am talking about a flexible, realistic form of optimism that provides you an edge in dealing with life’s challenges, whether you inherit it or adopt it as an explanatory style.

A realistically optimistic explanatory style is well worth cultivating.

Explanatory Style and the Quality of Experience

Within limits, the more optimistic our explanatory style, the easier, and more successful our lives, work, and relationships become.

The more pessimistic our style, the more difficulties we are likely to experience (*and* create for ourselves), and the harder it is to produce the results we want in the face of those difficulties.

Indeed, an overly *pessimistic* explanatory style lies at the root of much (maybe most) emotional ineffectiveness and distress.

Overly pessimistic explanations give rise to fear, angst, anxiety, depression, and almost all the nagging, energy-sucking, self esteem-ravaging worry—and much of the *physical* distress—so many suffer from these days.

On the other hand, a realistically *optimistic* style gives rise to mental, physical, and emotional health. It elevates our sense of well being, increases our energy, and makes it easier to take action on what matters to us.

Realistic optimism also increases productivity, success, health, wealth, and well being in all areas of our lives, work, and relationships.

An optimistic explanatory style also makes us more authentically happy.

It helps us relax, and feel at ease in our lives, work, and relationships.

It helps us feel in harmony with our world—regardless of what happens to us or around us.

It helps us see difficult circumstances as challenges, obstacles as opportunity, and adversity as a chance to learn, grow, and develop skills and mastery.

It also produces more opportunity to enter what psychologists call the “flow state,” and to enjoy the deep sense of gratification, gratefulness, and satisfaction that accompanies it.

If you have a realistic optimistic way of explaining things, congratulations. You have a leg up on the rest of us in terms of creating success and happiness.

But the rest of us do not have to lament our lot. We can change it.

We can, with practice and persistence, develop a more optimistic explanatory style. As we do, our moods will improve, our energy will increase, and our actions will show greater flexibility and power.

Most important, we will be better able to create what truly matters to us.

Changing Your Explanatory Style

Your explanatory style is largely a deeply ingrained habit. Like any habit, you best change it by developing a new habit, one that generates more satisfying experience and gradually becomes your default, or “go to” habit.

When you change your explanatory style, you do not just change your thoughts, moods, and emotions. Because emotions are the basis of action, changing your explanatory style also affects the actions you take, and the outcomes you produce.

As well as helping you manage your moods, an optimistic explanatory style also increases your effectiveness at creating *whatever* is important to you.

Whereas a pessimistic style can lead to a depressing downward spiral of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair, a realistically optimistic style leads to the opposite results.

Optimistic explanations lead to an upward spiral of learning and mastery. That leads to increased emotional competence, confidence, and the self-esteem that comes from doing well in difficult situations. Success becomes simpler, and leads to more success—and to the kind of success we long for.

If you teach yourself a healthy, positive, creative, yet realistic way of explaining what happens to you—and practice it consistently—you can transform your experience and your life.

First, though, you have to determine where your habitual explanatory style lies on the optimism—pessimism continuum.

Assessing Your Explanatory Style

It helps to assess your explanatory style. Being aware of how you habitually respond to difficult and challenging situations is an important step in building emotional mastery.

You can start by assessing your current levels of optimism and pessimism. Martin Seligman includes simple instruments for doing so in his book *Learned Optimism* and on his website at www.authentichappiness.org

If you worry you might be depressed, or feel overly anxious, or have *any* thoughts of suicide, *do* call someone and tell them.

Local mental health associations will provide you with depression screening tools. You can also access the US National Mental Health's depression screening service at www.depression-screening.org/ for a private, on-line assessment.

Again, crisis lines are usually listed in the front of phone books, under "Emergency and Important Numbers."

You can also call information and ask them who to call.

Adversity Quotient (AQ[®]) and the Adversity Response Profile[®]

One of the best tools I have found for evaluating (and changing) explanatory style is Paul Stoltz's *Adversity Response Profile (ARP)*. I trained with Paul and used his approach myself, as well as with hundreds of clients.

Paul is the author of *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles Into Opportunity*. Building on Martin Seligman's research on explanatory style, Paul outlined four **CORE** skills for dealing with adversity that he calls **Control, Ownership, Reach, and Endurance**.

Three of the CORE skills—Control, Reach, and Endurance—correspond roughly to Martin Seligman's Persona/I External, Permanent/Temporary, and Pervasive/Specific attributes of explanatory style. And the fourth CORE skill, Ownership, I've described briefly above.

I describe Stoltz's approach and the CORE skills in greater detail in Chapter 6. I'll also explain why mastering the CORE skills can make a significant difference in how you explain what happens to you, what you do with it, and the kind of results you create—in spite of what happens to you.

At this point, though, I recommend you assess your habitual way of responding to adversity by using Stoltz's **Adversity Response Profile**. This short but insightful assessment measures your overall **Adversity Quotient**, or **AQ**. It also provides you with a profile of how you score on the four CORE skills.

I found with myself, and many clients, that the ARP assessment, just be itself, can be a catalyst for significant change in your explanatory style. Just the awareness of how you habitually respond to adversity can provoke you to change.

The *Adversity Response Profile* is usually taken in a workshop or a coaching session, because debriefing it and laying out strategies for increasing your capacity in each or any of the CORE skills often requires extra help.

I offer an ARP assessment coupled with a 50-minute debriefing session as a one-time coaching session. For details, contact me via www.BruceElkin.com.

Knowing how you habitually respond to difficulties and adversity will also make the rest of the book more interesting and useful to you.

Next, though, I'd like to take you on an in-depth examination of the powerful and practical thinking skills I learned from Dr. Joe Niedhart and Albert Ellis that underlie explanatory style and give it its power—the **ABC's of emotional mastery**.

FOUR

THE ABCs of EMOTIONAL MASTERY

*Happiness does not depend upon who you are or what you have;
it depends solely upon what you think.*

- Dale Carnegie

Dale Carnegie is partly right.

Research shows 25 to 50 percent of our happiness is genetically determined, but the other part *does* depend almost entirely upon what and how we think.

While I read Ellis's book, I also practiced the skills he described. Immediately, my thinking and emotions changed. Excited about the possibilities, I read more, practiced more, and made more changes in my thoughts, moods, and results.

You, too, can change your thinking, and change your life.

But *not* just by reading this or other explanations of the ABCs.

You don't have to be a great "book learner" to understand the *ABCs of emotional mastery* I introduce in this chapter. But, if you want to make changes in your life, you *do* have to practice them and learn from your own experience.

"Experience," said Albert Schweitzer, is not the best teacher; it's the only teacher.

Practicing helps you see how thoughts and beliefs lead *either* to stress, distress, and emotional disorder, or to emotional mastery, happiness, and success at what matters to you.

Although I teach and write about these skills, I *still* practice them every day.

Applying the skills to life and work—and learning from your experience—will greatly increase your chances of making the kind of major life change I made.

But, before you can practice, you have to understand the skills and how they relate to each other.

It's As Simple As ABC!

Changing your life is as simple as **ABC**.

To change how you *feel* and *act*, change the way you *think*.

Change how you explain what happens to you, and what you think will happen as a result of what happens.

Changing how you think changes your feelings and moods.

Changing your feelings changes your actions.

Changing your actions changes the results you create in all aspects of life.

It's that simple. But it does take practice to make it work consistently.

The ABCs of Emotional Mastery

ABC stands for three key elements in the thinking process that combine to produce emotions and actions.

A stands for **Adversity**: what happens to you.

Ellis calls **A** the **Activating Event** because often what happens is not adversity until you judge it as such.

B stands for **Beliefs**: what you believe and think about what happens at **A**.

C stands for **Consequences**: how you feel and act in response to **A** and **B**.

Something happens at **A**. We filter it through our thoughts and beliefs at **B**, which leads to feelings and actions at **C**.

Unfortunately, most people habitually think and act as if **A causes C**.

They think adverse events and circumstances create the negative feelings and dysfunctional behaviour they experience.

They blame their feelings and actions on outside events, other people, or parts of themselves over which they think they have no control.

But the **A-C** connection is incomplete. It leaves out **B**, *thoughts* and *beliefs*.

B is where you can have a huge effect on emotions and actions. **B** is where you can develop the power to change not only your thinking, but also emotions, actions, and results.

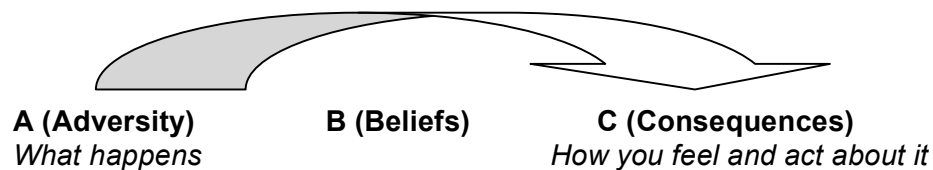
So, let's start our exploration of the **ABCs** by examining the incomplete **A-C** connection, and its dysfunctional outcomes.

The A—C Connection and Its Dysfunctional Consequences

Most people think (**A**) what happens to them—problems, circumstances, setbacks, and adversity—causes (**C**) their feelings of anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, and despair.

Ignoring **B** (their thoughts and beliefs about what happens at **A**) they make a quick **A—C** connection (as shown in the diagram below).

Emotional Mastery



Ignoring **B**, people who make this quick **A-C** connection fail to perceive their own part in creating negative consequences, **C**.

They feel bad, and act dysfunctionally, but blame it on the adversity or circumstances. So, as a result, they feel helpless, even powerless.

Such feelings put them in danger of feeling anxious or depressed.

An A-C Example

Say your computer breaks down, and you can't finish a report on time.

The breakdown is **A**, the *activating* event, the *adversity*.

A common way to react to such adversity is assume (usually unconsciously) that you have no control over the situation or the outcomes.

As a result, you blame the computer. Or blame others for your misfortune.

You tell yourself, "This *always* happens to me."

You assume the adversity will last for a long time, maybe forever.

You let your fears about possible negative outcomes escalate until they reach into and affect the rest of your life.

Then, you let such dysfunctional thoughts and feelings spin out of control until you feel just awful (**C**) and compelled to do something stupid, such as put a shoe through the computer screen.

But all you are aware of is the computer crashed, you felt terrible, got mad and put your foot through the screen. **A-C**: Adversity → Negative consequences.

But that is an incomplete explanation of what happened.

In between **A** and **C**, at **B**, you spun out negative, dysfunctional thoughts. You reacted to dysfunctional beliefs about what should and should not happen.

In your head, such thinking might sound something like this:

"*Stupid* machine! It's *totally* useless. It'll *never* work. The idiots who made it *wrecked* my chances of getting my report done on time.

What if I get *fired*! Jobs are *impossible* to find these days.

I could *lose* my house. If that happened, my partner would *leave* me. I couldn't stand that.

I'll end up alone, broke, and living on the street. I'm *doomed*!"

That's a pretty scary scenario, don't you think?

Although common, such thinking is irrational and self-defeating.

It exaggerates adversity. It distorts reality. It creates unnecessary misery and unhappiness. It leads to inappropriate and ineffective actions.

The computer is not *stupid*. It is not *totally* useless, and it is unlikely that it will *never* work. Imagining such a worst-case scenario is bad enough. But then thinking, "not only is it true, but it is the *only* possible explanation," is irrational.

That is the kind of thinking I did that brought on my perambulating nervous breakdown, *The Terror*, and thoughts of suicide.

Such dysfunctional thinking makes you feel far worse than you need to feel. It also leads to actions that are way out of proportion to the adversity.

Faulty "What If?" Logic Leads to Catastrophic Conclusions

In our computer example, the angry operator not only exaggerates the extent and intensity of the "problem" with the computer, they also indulge in an illogical, chain of speculation about what might happen.

"What if I get fired?

What if I lose my home and partner?

What if I end up broke, homeless, and living under a bridge?"

Then they wrongly conclude, "I am doomed."

Such illogical and catastrophic thinking makes them feel terrible.

Remember, statements that start with "I am..." also imply, "I will *always* be this way," and "I can do *nothing* about it."

Seen in black and white, such escalating but faulty "what if?" thinking might seem bizarre. But at 3 AM on a dark night of anxiety or depression, this is exactly the kind of thinking many people indulge in.

Such thinking has many serious problems.

One of the most debilitating is that, although it is exaggerated, illogical, and irrational, it *feels* true.

So it is difficult to recognize how irrational and dysfunctional it is.

Because your thinking is distorted, and you feel so bad, you do not see the faulty jumps in logic that lead to your irrational conclusions and exaggerated feelings of fear, anxiety, despair, and depression.

You just *feel* those feelings in all their raw and frightening fury.

Still, no matter how true it *feels*, such thinking is irrational. It does not reflect reality as it really is. Moreover, irrational thinking leads to irrational consequences.

Imagining such a chain of events can keep you awake all night, make you panic and pace the halls, and render you sick with worry.

It can lead to difficulties at work. Or with your partner, children, and friends.

As we will see below, such dysfunctional thinking can become what psychologists call a "self-fulfilling prophecy." It can lead to the very consequences you fear.

But the scenario is made up. It's not real. It exists only in your over-active imagination. But when you're locked into a faulty logic chain, it feels real—and you believe it.

Thus, we largely drive ourselves into anxiety and depression by believing the irrational statements and stories we make up, and then feeling unnecessarily, even desperately, unhappy about them!

Dysfunctional Thinking and Feelings Lead to Dysfunctional Actions

Irrational thinking not only makes us feel bad; those bad feelings lead us to take ineffective actions.

Irrational thinking strongly affects our moods and emotions.

“Emote,” means, “to move”.

So, our emotions give rise to our actions, and to our results.

By generating miserable, dysfunctional feelings, irrational thinking moves us to dysfunctional actions.

In fear, anger, or panic, we might lash out. Or break something.

Often, feeling powerless in the face of an “overwhelmingly” negative reality, we just give up.

Such irrational actions create more adversity, which leads to worse stories, worse feelings, and even worse consequences. It's a *viscous* circle. It can quickly lead to a downward spiral into helplessness, hopelessness, and despair.

Such irrational thinking can even lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the imagined “doom” becomes real.

After a frustrated colleague of mine went through the kind of faulty, pessimistic, illogical thinking described above, he felt so angry he did put his shoe through his computer screen.

As you can imagine, that didn't really help.

In fact, my colleague was demoted, which angered him more.

His constant anger and carping about “unfairness” irritated his colleagues, and his boss. Eventually, he was fired.

But such consequences do not *have to* happen.

Regardless of **A**—the adversity—there are more rational and self-supporting ways to think, feel, and act.

In Search of a Full ABC Connection

When something unpleasant happens to us at **A** (a computer fails), we don't *automatically* feel, act, or react negatively at **C**.

First, we filter what happens at **A** through thoughts and beliefs at **B**.

Depending on the nature and content of those beliefs, our explanation can lead to either positive or negative feelings, and to corresponding actions.

I've always liked birds, for example.

However, the first summer I lived on Saltspring Island, a great flock of crows gathered in the trees behind my house and set up a terrible racket.

I couldn't concentrate. I tried to write, but the "gang of thugs in black feather jackets" (as my friend Kim calls them) distracted me with their incessant cawing.

Afraid I was using valuable writing time, I told myself, "This *isn't* fair. I *can't* work in these conditions. It *has to* stop!"

As the cawing continued, I got so worked up, I blurted out, "I *can't stand* it."

Then I burst out into the back yard, grabbed up sticks and rocks, and flung them into the trees, trying to scare away the crows.

But that only excited them to louder, more frantic cawing.

After wasting ten or twenty minutes more of writing time, and nearly throwing my arm out, I finally persuaded the crows to move across the street. Then I went back to my office and tried to write.

Twenty minutes later, the crows were back in my trees. Out the door I went!

This happened several times a day. I fantasized about bear-scaring noisemakers and other crazy solutions to my situation. I hated those crows. They were driving me nuts!

Can you see the faulty **A** (Crows) —> **C** (Driving me nuts) connection?

Finally, I called a local birder and told her about my crow problem.

"Relax," she said. "It's fledging time. The little ones are just out of the nest. So the flock gathers round to protect them. As soon as the fledglings can fly on their own, the flock will disperse. It'll only be a week or so!"

Suddenly, I had a new story. A new set of beliefs at **B**.

My new set of beliefs explained more objectively what was happening. The brave crows were not trying to disturb my work; they were protecting their young.

Instantly, I relaxed and began to enjoy the crows' presence. I told myself I was providing sanctuary for them, and their fledges. (How noble a belief is that?)

That small change in my story made a huge change in my experience!

From AC to ABC

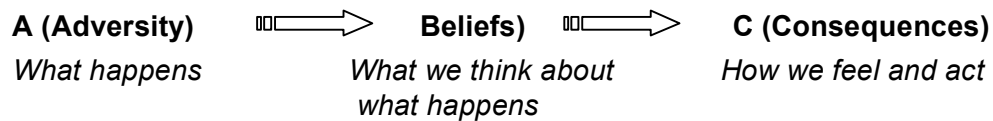
At first, I mistakenly assumed that **A**, the crows and their raucous cawing caused **C**, my anger and crazy reactions.

Later, by becoming aware of and changing **B**, my irrational belief—that the crows were out to get me—to the more rational belief that they were caring for fledglings, I changed **C**, the way I thought, felt, and acted about the crows.

I relaxed and enjoyed what I had previously hated. Never again did cawing crows upset me or get in the way of my work.

Now, I hear the raucous crow chorus as a welcome sign of a returning summer. I get excited and I'm happy to interrupt my writing to see if I can spot the fledges in the tree branches. When I do, I giggle with delight.

All this because I shifted from an **A-C** to a rational **ABC** connection.



Together, the **ABCs** create our feelings—positive and negative, and lead to supportive or self-defeating actions and results.

The key to whether our moods, feelings, actions, and results are positive and success supporting is how we deal with our **Bs**, our thoughts and beliefs.

Our power to manage our moods and create what matters most—with whatever life gives—lies in recognizing and changing our **Bs**.

Recognizing Our Bs (Thoughts and Beliefs)

Emotional difficulties and stress arise when our **Bs**—our beliefs, interpretations, and explanations—are not rational.

Distress occurs when those **Bs** are illogical, overly judgmental, exaggerated, or catastrophic—i.e., irrational.

When our **Bs** are logical, and grounded in an accurate and objective assessment of reality, we are more likely to generate good moods, supportive feelings, effective actions, and the results we most want to create.

So, recognizing our **Bs** leads to a more complete and useful description of what causes **C**, our feelings and the actions those emotions move us to take. It also makes it easier for us to make good choices and take effective action.

If we don't recognize irrational **Bs**, we cannot change them to rational, functional **Bs**, and generate more effective actions and results.

So an important first step towards changing your explanatory style is to recognize your own irrational beliefs.

Ten Irrational or “Nutty” Beliefs

People believe all kinds of irrational things, many of which are harmless.

But some irrational beliefs have a major negative effect on our emotions and actions. It's those beliefs we want to learn to recognize and change.

In their book *How To Keep People From Pushing Your Buttons*, Albert Ellis and Arthur Lange list what they call “the ten nutty beliefs” that cause most, if not all of our emotional distress.⁴

Paraphrased slightly those beliefs are:

1. I *must not* be rejected or disapproved of by key people in my life, because if I am it is *awful* and I *can't* stand it.

Excessively worrying about what relatives, friends, bosses, coworkers, and teachers, etc... think of you is a form of narcissistic egoism. Moreover, such worry sets up a strong fear of rejection.

Plagued by such a fear, you either try too hard to please other people, or you reject, disapprove of, or attack other people to hide your insecurity.

2. I *must not* fail in business, school, sports, sex, relationships, etc... and if I do, it's *awful* and I *can't stand it*.

Worrying too much about failing is a form of perfectionism. It prevents you from taking risks, even small ones. It also makes it difficult to accept criticism, which, in turn, makes it difficult to learn and change.

3. People and things *should* always turn out how I want them too—and if they don't it's *awful, terrible, horrible*, and I *can't stand it*.

People who hold this belief, or it's corollary, "I *should* always be treated fairly," suffer from Low Frustration Tolerance or Impulse Control.

They feel victimized by circumstances and other people. They blame both for their inability to produce the results they want.

Often, they experience helplessness, even hopelessness.

4. If any of the first three unwanted events happens, then I'll always blame someone for it! I will conclude that someone acted badly, they *should* not have acted that way, and they are rotten people for acting so terribly.

People with this nutty belief confuse blame with responsibility.

Because it's easier to blame others, they are unlikely to take ownership for results they want to create. They point fingers, rather than look at themselves.

Such dysfunctional beliefs also give rise to dysfunctional groups and relationships.

In fact, beliefs such as these cause the dysfunction. Blaming others leaves little time or energy to focus on actions that create desired results. Instead it creates conflict, and wastes time and energy.

Some people turn the blame inward, on themselves.

They "should" on themselves for their flaws and failings. Doing so leads to feelings of inadequacy and worse.

People who *should* on themselves often feel bitter and withdrawn.

These first four irrational beliefs account for most of the bad feelings we experience. Later, we'll see a simplified version and another take on these beliefs as described by David Richo.

For now, let's quickly look at other irrational beliefs that many of us hold.

5. If I worry obsessively about something or how someone feels about me, things will turn out better.

Yeah, right. Worry usually leads to second order fears and more distress.

In my first job as a probation officer, we had notepads on which was written, "Worry is the interest we pay on trouble before it is true."

I've tried to take that advice to heart.

6. Perfect solutions exist for every problem and I *must* find them—now!

This is another version of perfectionism. It gets in the way of effective action. As I often say to the social and environmental activists I work with, "You do not have to save the world by Friday!" The same advice applies to "fixing" yourself.

7. It is easier to avoid difficult situations and responsibilities than face them." While it might be easier in the moment, hiding out in what Robert Fritz calls "a zone of tolerable conflict" usually leads to more intense problems and worse feelings in the long run.

8. If I never get seriously involved in anything, and do not care about things, I will never be unhappy. This is a form of avoidance, a variation on hiding out in the zone of tolerable conflict. It might be safe for a while, but it does not lead to results or long-lasting good feelings.

9. It is my past and all the awful things that happened to me when I was a child, or in my last relationship, or in my last job, that causes me to feel badly.

This belief is true only if we let it be true. It's basically a victim story.

As Huxley said, experience is not what happens to us, it's what we do with it. By accepting past experience, learning from it, and changing it, you can shift yourself out your victim story into a *creating* story.

10. Bad people, things, and events should not exist, and when they do, they have to really disturb me

This belief contains a flawed **A-C** connection. It blames what happens to us for our negative feelings rather than our beliefs about what happens to us.

Taking ownership for your feelings and the beliefs that give rise to them can help you change both.

Together, these 10 nutty beliefs cover most, if not all, of the dysfunctional beliefs that cause emotional distress and failure to thrive and succeed in life, work, and relationships.

I recommend you take some time to re-read this list of irrational beliefs and see if any (or all) apply to you. Pay particular attention to the first four.

An easy and effective way to do this is to use the 10 Nutty Beliefs Checklist in the Appendix. Write down any of the beliefs you think you have. Also note how each belief makes you feel, and act.

Understanding your own nutty thinking is a big step forward in learning to change it. By changing your thoughts and beliefs, you can create the feelings, actions, and results you *really* want.

But be careful. And gentle.

Don't "should" on yourself if you discover you hold any of these beliefs.

Just acknowledge them as part of your reality, and start to change them.

I'll give you techniques for doing so below.

Next, because understanding how irrational beliefs can lead to negative moods and feelings, and to ineffective choices and actions, I'm going to take a more in-depth look at how irrational beliefs affect your moods and actions.

How Dysfunctional Thoughts and Beliefs Lead to Dysfunctional Emotions—and *Ineffective* Actions

To deepen our understanding of how the **ABCs** give rise to feelings and actions, let's revisit our computer example.

A: An adverse event occurs; a computer crashes and won't restart.

B: In a split second, *without realizing we are doing it*, we compare what happened to our beliefs and assumptions about what *should* happen, and how things *must* be.

We *judge*. We think, "This is a brand new computer, it *should* not fail. It *should* work perfectly."

We *exaggerate*. We say, "This thing *never* works."

We *blame* others. "The *idiots* who made the *@#\$%\$ machine have *wrecked* my chances of promotion. That's *awful*. They *should* be punished."

Or, we turn the *blame* on ourselves. "It's all my fault. I should never skip the maintenance checks."

We *speculate*: "What if I get fired? What if I *can't* find another job?"

We make illogical jumps in logic? "What if I *never* find another job? I would lose my house. My spouse will leave me."

Then after all this irrational, illogical, and dysfunctional thinking, we *conclude*, I'm *doomed*. I'll have to live under the bridge with the shopping cart people."

Such an irrational, illogical story involves great loss. It doesn't matter it is made up. Our mind processes it as if it was true, as if the loss was real.

This kind of loss is frightening.

Instantly, a "Danger!" warning flashes in our brain. Fight or flight chemicals flood our brain and bloodstream, impairing our cognitive (thinking) ability and making it difficult to think clearly.

That's why the faulty logic chain *seems* to make sense. Instead of thinking our way out of our situation and bad feelings, our thoughts seem to spin out control, alarming us even more.

C: Fear grips our throat; anxiety threatens to overwhelm us.

We don't know what to do. We can't fight and we can't flee.

We fear we will never be able to control our thinking or feelings, which terrifies us even more.

We feel trapped, helpless. A sense of hopelessness descends on us like a thick, black cloud. A desperate sadness threatens to overwhelm us. Despair is not far away. At this point, we are most vulnerable to those almost overwhelming negative feelings I called "The Terror"—and the unspeakable dysfunctional actions it can lead to.

The most important thing to understand about this kind of bizarre process is most (if not all) of the imagined, illogical, and pessimistic thinking and story-telling we did at **B** happens without us being aware that we are doing it.

It happens outside conscious thought, sometime in a split second.

All you are aware of is **A**, the computer crashed, and **C**, I *feel* awful.

How Rational Thoughts and Beliefs Lead to Functional Emotions and Effective Actions

Such pessimistic **A-C** thinking is quite different than realistically optimistic thinking such as, “Oh, well, computers crash. I’ll reboot and start again.”

This kind of thinking will produce dramatically different feelings and actions.

Try this experiment to experience the difference for yourself.

First, imagine yourself in the computer-crashing scenario.

Imagine saying the pessimistic things that were said in that scenario.

Imagine making the irrational jumps, the “what if...?” statements, and then drawing the catastrophic conclusions described.

Then, notice how you feel.

Next, imagine a more realistically optimistic analysis of the situation.

Imagine saying, “Oh, well, computers crash. I’ll reboot and start again. If that doesn’t work, I’ll call a tech person and see if I can get a replacement. If not, I’ll rent one.

“I do want to finish my report on time. I’ll probably miss my squash game, but that won’t be the end of the world. It’ll be good to get my report done and on to the new project. I better give the boss a ‘heads up’ that the report might be late, and then get working on this.”

Then, note how you feel.

Can you see the difference in feelings and energy produced by the different explanations and stories?

Can you see yourself taking different actions in the different scenarios?

Let me restate what I’m sure is now obvious to you: adverse events and circumstances (**A**) do not *cause* bad feelings (**C**).

Our *beliefs, interpretations, and explanations* (**B**) of what happens cause (**C**) our feelings—and the actions we take.

The more rational our thoughts and beliefs, the better we are at dealing with adversity in ways that produce desirable feelings, actions, and results.

Rational Beliefs: Keys to Creating Emotional Mastery

It is important to realize we hold both rational and irrational beliefs at **B**.

Irrational (self-defeating) beliefs do not accurately or objectively reflect reality. Thus, they lead to inappropriate feelings, irrational consequences, and dysfunctional actions.

Rational (self-supporting) beliefs reflect reality as it is. They are much more likely to lead to rational consequences, supportive feelings, and effective actions.

A more complete view of the **ABC** model looks like this:

A = Adversity/Activating Event: what happens to us.

B = Beliefs: what we believe about what happens to us, including:

- **Rational** beliefs, which lead to rational consequences, and
- **Irrational** beliefs, which lead to irrational consequence.

C = Consequences: our feelings, choices, and actions.

When we filter our **A**'s through *irrational B*'s, we produce irrational feelings and ineffective, self-defeating actions at **C**.

When we filter our **A**'s through *rational B*'s, we produce rational feelings and effective, self-supporting actions.

Successful actions produce positive feelings.

Positive feelings increase our energy, confidence, and motivation. They lead to a positive *upward* spiral of success, which leads to more success.

When we use the complete **ABC** form of thinking, distress dissolves. Negative stress fades away. Positive stress is harnessed in the service of creating the results we truly want to create.

Looking back at my crow example, you can see, when I unconsciously processed the situation through negative, pessimistic, and irrational beliefs—i.e., *the crows are thugs, out to get me, and I can't stand it*—my irrational explanation caused me to become irrationally upset, and act like a crazy man.

When I consciously processed the same event through rational beliefs—the crows are proud parents, protecting their babies—my explanation caused my emotions and actions to change. I felt sympathetic toward the crows. I let them be and watched them with interest and tenderness.

Same situation, two explanations, and two radically different outcomes.

Dispute Irrational Beliefs; Generate Energy to Create Results

Understanding your **ABCs** gives you insight into your thinking and actions. It helps you recognize irrational thinking at **B** and its irrational consequences at **C**.

Although recognizing distorted thinking and faulty **A—C** connections is a critical step toward emotional mastery, and can significantly change how you feel, awareness, alone, is usually not enough.

Recognizing negative thoughts and understanding how they affect your moods and actions can sometimes lead to changes without further effort. But, more often than not, you have to actively *dispute* and *change* the negative thoughts.

When I first read Ellis's book, for example, realizing I created most of my distress through distorted thinking gave me *temporary* relief from my negative feelings.

But, as Joe warned me, understanding my **ABC's** and how they affect my feelings and actions was not a one-time fix. It was just the start of a lifetime practice to create clear, effective thinking, and the positive, realistically optimistic feelings and actions to which it leads.

The real power in the **ABC** model, I would learn, comes when you can *dispute* (**D**) your irrational thoughts and beliefs, and replace them with rational, realistically optimistic, and self-supporting thoughts and explanations.

When you change your thoughts, you feel *energized* (**E**). Ready to act.

You feel hopeful, excited, and motivated to take self-supporting actions.

You feel *up* and optimistic about your future.

Disputing Irrational Beliefs: An Example

Here is an example of faulty **ABCs** to which we can apply **D** and **E**, and turn a situation—and the feelings and actions that stem from it—from negative to positive.

Say you are trying to eat a healthy diet, one that doesn't include saturated fat or sugar. You have been making good progress in sticking to your food choices and losing unwanted fat.

Then, one evening, a friend comes to watch a video with you, and brings a carton of your favorite extra creamy, double chocolate, coffee liqueur ice cream.

During the movie, you limit yourself to one small helping of ice cream.

But later, you think, "Darn! I *shouldn't* eat *any* ice cream. Eating a little makes me want a lot more. I *really* screwed up."

Such "all or nothing" thinking makes you feel guilty, even ashamed.

You conclude, "I am *such* a wimp. I have *no* willpower whatsoever. I'll *never* be able to live up to my food choices. It's *hopeless*."

Such a catastrophic conclusion leads to even worse "all or nothing" thinking. You think, "I might as well quit my program now, and eat the whole darn carton."

So you do, which "just proves," you tell yourself, "that I *am* a spineless wimp with *no* willpower heading straight toward a future as a beach ball!"

Have you ever thought things like that?

Most of us have. *But would we be right?*

Does eating one small dish of ice cream mean you *are* a wimp with *no* willpower? Does it have to create guilt and shame?

Does it have to tear away chunks of your hard-earned self-esteem, and result in a downward spiral of negative thoughts and action?

No!

Jumping to such negative conclusions is irrational and self-defeating.

So *what* can you do to change your thinking, feelings, and actions?

Dispute and Energize!

To change your thinking—and your feelings and actions—dispute assertions such as, "I *am* a wimp," "I *screwed up*," and "I'll *never* live up to my food choices."

Challenge such statements. Ask yourself are they true? Are they absolutely true? Are they rational? Do they support you, and what you want to create? Do they make you feel energized and motivated?

No! They are not true; they are generalizations and exaggerations.

They are not rational; eating one bowl of ice cream does not make you a wimp. Nor will it lead you to *never* living up to your food choices.

Such irrational assertions make you feel unnecessarily, even desperately, anxious and unhappy. They destroy your energy and enthusiasm. They lead to ineffective, self-defeating actions.

Ruthlessly dispute such irrational and pessimistic thinking.

Look for evidence that you have “*no* willpower whatsoever.”

Ask yourself if the conclusion, “It’s *hopeless*,” is justified by the evidence.

When you recognize irrational, self-defeating thoughts or beliefs, challenge and dispute them. Then substitute rational, self-supporting thoughts and beliefs, and enjoy the energy and hope they create.

Say something to yourself such as, “See, I *can* eat one bowl and stop. I don’t have to feel guilty. I want to support my food choices. And ninety-nine percent of the time, I do. That’s good enough. I don’t *have to* be perfect. Eating one small bowl and stopping is a success!”

Such thinking includes a conscious **ABC** connection and an optimistic explanation. It will greatly improve your feelings and lead to effective actions.

Practicing the **ABCs** improves your responses to specific situations. It can also improve your way of looking at and explaining your life in general.

By practicing the **ABCDE** process carefully and consistently, you can gradually shift a pessimistic explanatory style to a more realistically optimistic explanatory style.

When you do that, your whole life changes.

You produce positive feelings, effective actions, and an *upward* spiral of learning, skill building, and mastery.

You recognize when you do well, and feel good about doing so.

You feel proud and happy with yourself.

This kind of thinking, and the feelings it generates, increases your sense of control and ownership. It makes it easier for you to deal with the next challenging situation or setback you face.

Your competence and confidence increase. Your self-esteem soars.

To make it easier to practice the **ABCDE** process, I have included a practice sheet in the appendix that you can copy and use to analyze and change your thinking in the face of adversity. (Or afterwards, until you master the technique and can practice it in the heat of a difficult moment).

Practice Leads to Mastery, and Results

The **ABCs** of emotional mastery are simple, yet extremely powerful skills.

In theory.

As simple as the **ABCDE** process is to understand, most of us can't apply it when we need it, unless we practice it regularly and consistently.

The hardest thing for many of my coaching clients to do is practice skills such as these on a daily basis. They “get” the process intellectually, and think that means they can apply it when they need it, but it doesn't.

When faced with adversity, those who have not practiced and mastered the **ABCDEs** quickly revert to old intensity-driven, relief-seeking, problem-focused explanations that lead to negative feelings, and ineffective action.

That makes it very hard to manage your moods or create what matters.

So, in Chapter 5, ***From Insight to Action***, I will take you on a small diversion to emphasize *why practice* is so important in developing emotional mastery.

Hopefully, you will see the point of practicing these skills before you need them, so you will be able to respond automatically when you *do* need them.

Then, in Chapters 6 to 9 to, I will outline a number of powerful but easy-to-practice *paths to mastery*—tips, techniques, and new skills that will help you create more effective thinking, feelings, action, and results—with *whatever* happens to you.

FIVE

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION— *THE POWER OF PRACTICE*

Recent research... has shown that long-term focused practice, rather than talent, holds the master key to top performance in almost every field.

— George Leonard and Michael Murphy

Have you heard the story about a stranger in New York who wanted to visit Carnegie Hall?

Frustrated because no frantic New Yorker would stop to give him directions, the visitor approached a kind-looking, older man carrying a violin case.

“Sir,” he asked, “can you tell me the best way to get to Carnegie Hall?”

The kind-looking man was Jascha Heifetz, one of the world’s finest violinists.

Jascha leaned forward, tapped the visitor on the chest, and said, “My son, there is only one way to get to Carnegie Hall—*practice, practice, practice!*”

Directions to Mastery

Mr. Heifetz obviously misunderstood the visitor.

Instead of giving him directions to Carnegie Hall, he gave the visitor directions to *mastery*—that “*mysterious process during which what is at first difficult becomes progressively easier and more pleasurable through practice.*”⁶

The best way to get where you really want to be is practice, practice, practice.

During regular, consistent practice what, at first, you find difficult and frustrating, gradually becomes easier, more pleasant, and more useful to you.

Practice may not make you perfect, but it will make you *better* at doing—and creating—what matters to you. Plus, the road to mastery and success always runs through better.

The Importance of Practice

Author and philosopher James Keller tells an illuminating story about how one of golf’s greatest players turned her talent into outstanding success.

Emotional Mastery

“When Babe Didrickson Zaharias, often called the 'athletic phenomenon of all time,' won the British woman's gold tournament, people said of her what they had said many times before: “Oh, she's an automatic champion, a natural athlete.”

“But, when Babe started golfing in earnest thirteen years ago, she hit as many as 1,000 balls in one afternoon, playing until her hands were so sore they had to be taped.”⁶

To develop emotional mastery, you won't have to hit 1000 golf balls in an afternoon. But, if you want to dissolve stress and distress effortlessly and habitually, you will have to practice the **ABCs** and other skills over and over many times.

Remember those musicians and monks who rewired their brains by practicing over 10,000 hours?

Again, you may not have to put in 10,000 hours. But, if you want to develop emotional technique to burn—to be able to manage your moods and create what matters under any circumstance and in any situation—regular practice will be well worth the investment.

Besides, the more you practice, the easier it gets.

People on the master's journey even come to love practice for its own sake. And for those who practice because they love to practice, results that seem like miracles to others become common occurrences.

Besides, you have already done this.

Remember when you first learned to ice skate, ski, thread a needle, drive a standard shift, dance the tango, play an instrument, or do anything difficult?

You probably felt awkward at first, and frustrated. Even discouraged.

Perhaps you wondered if you'd ever get it. You might even have felt you would never develop the smooth proficiency your teachers showed.

But you did.

If you stuck with it, practiced, and learned your skills, you gradually developed at least some form of mastery in that difficult activity.

So it is with emotional mastery skills such as the **ABCs**, *explanatory style*, and emotional mastery in general.

The ability to apply such skills easily and effectively—especially when you *most* need them—requires mastery. To master them, you have to practice these skills when you *don't* need them.

Unfortunately, many of us *don't* practice, or we practice the *wrong* things.

Why is that?

I think we don't practice—or create—emotional mastery because we believe (or want to believe) the myth that insight, by itself, leads to change.

I call this mistaken belief “the academic fallacy.”

The Academic Fallacy

The academic fallacy is the erroneous assumption that *knowing* something automatically enables us to *do* it. *This ain't necessarily so!*

Assuming insight leads to action, we mistakenly conclude we do not have to practice or develop skills. But, insight, by itself, almost never leads to effective action or results.

The path to success and satisfaction in any endeavor almost always leads from insight to practice and learning, through mistakes and learning from our own experience, and, finally, to mastery.

However, in our post-modern, feel-good society, many refuse to practice. They think that is something does not come easy, naturally, and effortlessly, it's not worth having.

Many even forget *how* to practice! But it is more than that. We also forget "why" to practice. In our rush for quick-fix relief and feel-good solutions, we ignore practice and the pursuit of mastery.

"It takes too long," we say, "too much effort. We want results *now*."

So, we take action *only* when problems get *too* intense for us to stand.

Then, instead of practicing emotional mastery and creating, we practice relief-driven problem solving—usually on situations that are not really problems, and cannot really be solved. (See Chapter 5 of *Simplicity and Success*).

But problem-focused action merely provides us a pale illusion of the real and lasting change we are capable of producing.

Relief? Or Real and Lasting Results?

When we are driven by the intensity of negative feelings, we focus on (and try to fix, get rid of, or merely get relief from) those painful feelings.

Such a feeling-focused approach does not move us toward emotional mastery. Instead of a path that consistently moves toward successful action, such an approach locks us into a frustrating, repetitive pattern of *worse*, then *better*, then *worse*... and so on.

Say, for example, you are in a stressful job, and get a headache.

Taking aspirin to relieve a headache doesn't eliminate the stress that causes the pain. Nor does it result in an effective, stress-free way of organizing your work or life style so you are happy in your job, or motivated to find a job you like.

Instead, by merely relieving pain, the painkiller "solution" allows you to keep doing what causes you stress, and the headache that comes with it.

But when the relief wears off, you're still in a job you don't like, and maybe a little closer to ulcers, or burnout.

Creating expert Robert Fritz shows how such repeating patterns are common to all relief-driven problem-solving approaches.

Here's how they unfold:

A PROBLEM
leads to
ACTION
leads to
LESS INTENSITY
leads to
LESS ACTION
leads to
THE PROBLEM REMAINING!⁷

In this *oscillating* pattern, action is taken, time, energy, and money are spent, but lasting results are not created.

You merely cycle between intensity, relief, then intensity, then relief, then....

You lose sight of the big picture; you forget the results you wanted to create.

When you constantly react or respond to problems and seek relief from negative feelings, you forget not only how to practice emotional mastery, but *why*.

An old saying sums up the dilemma: "When you're up to your ass in alligators, it's hard to remember you set out to drain the swamp."

Fear-Based Change

Recently, in a national magazine dedicated to redefining spirituality, I read the following statement about the motivation needed to make change: "Unless somebody slaps you in the face and draws a little blood, most people don't think very much about changing. We're creatures of habit."

I was shocked, and temporarily disheartened.

On reflection, I realized I should not have been. Many people, even so-called experts writing in "enlightened" magazines still believe the Newtonian notion that crisis, fear, and negative facts are required to *force* us to change.

Newton, you may recall from high school physics, stated that, "Every body continues in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a right line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it."

Suggesting a slap in the face is needed to provoke people into changing is restating Newton's First Law of Motion.

But is he right? I don't think so. It works with billiard balls but not with people. A slap or a little blood *can* compel change. But is the change effective?

And can we sustain change forced on us by such compulsion? Again, I don't think so. This is another case of fear-based problem solving.

It will not focus people on creating what they truly want to create.

It will frighten them, and cause pain. They will focus on getting *relief* from the *intensity* of the fear and pain caused by the slap. They will try to get away from what caused the slap.

They will not create the change that matters most to them.

What Are the Odds of Sustaining Fear-Based Change?

Would you believe as low as one in nine? 1 in 9!

After angioplasties and open-heart surgery, almost all post-surgery cardiac patients change their unhealthy lifestyle behaviours that gave rise to their cardiac problems. They adopt healthy eating, exercise, and medication regimes.

But *only* one in nine *sustains* those changes beyond a year or so!

In spite of a real and present danger to their lives, intense fear, and insight into the differences between healthy and unhealthy lifestyle behaviours, 90% of patients do *not* sustain their lifestyle changes beyond one year after surgery.

Those are not very good odds on which to bet your life.

So what's going on?

The Dynamics of Relief-Driven Problem Solving

An angioplasty or bypass provides *relief* from chest pain and fear of imminent death. Following surgery, patients are highly motivated to make changes.

Fearing a reoccurrence of heart problems, and armed with advice on healthy vs. unhealthy lifestyles, most change their eating, exercise, work, and stress management habits.

For a while, they feel better. The intensity of their pain and fear is relieved.

But when patients no longer *feel* the effects of these changes, they quit doing them. They stop taking their cholesterol drugs. They drift back to old eating patterns, slack off on their exercise, and resume stressful work habits.

Gradually, their cholesterol levels rise, arteries clog up again, and they become prime candidates for another, perhaps fatal, heart attack. Most experience a reoccurrence requiring surgery within three to four years.

Again, intensity leads to action, which relieves the intensity (but not the problem or its causes), which leads to less action, which leads to the problem remaining, and perhaps getting worse.

Looking Out for #1

It's not just with cardiac patients that *fear* fails to produce lasting results.

Scientist David Ingvar is a neurobiologist who studies brain function with PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scans. Such scans show computer-generated pictures of the neo-cortex during different states of mind.

When individuals face real or imaginary threats to survival and cannot anticipate a positive future, Ingvar found, the higher parts of their brain *turn off*.⁸

Their brains downshift into a narrowly focused, "me first," survival mode.

When for example, fear-mongering politicians or activists tell us we must change, now, or we, our nation, or the Earth are doomed, they do so to *frighten* us into changing our thinking and doing.

Fear mongering is a mental slap to get us moving, to compel change.

However, when we are frightened, our bodies flood with *fight* or *flight* chemicals that first activate us, but eventually inhibit our ability to think and act effectively.

If the fear gets too intense, Ingvar argues, our brains shut down.

While survival fear *does* focus energy, it narrows our interest to “looking out for number one,” says Michael Macoby, commenting on Ingvar’s findings.

Personal security becomes our overwhelming need. Our focus becomes protecting ourselves at the expense of the group—even if *the fear is made up*.

So, rather than motivating or empowering us, fear can lead to a sense of helplessness, apathy, and self-defeating behaviour. Threats seem *so* large; individual efforts so puny, and futile. So, rather than join the fray, many retreat, and seek relief in counterproductive ways.

Faced with threats such as terrorism or environmental collapse, many throw their hands up in despair and flock to the mall—searching for relief products to lessen their pain and distract them from fear.

Others duck out for a beer or other mind-numbing drugs to lessen their stress.

Ironically such selfish, “me first,” behaviour is the opposite of what problem-focused politicians and activists wanted to bring about.

The tragic irony is *not* taking effective action also leaves us feeling helpless, even hopeless. Unable or unwilling to act, we feel trapped. Relief products wear off. Hope fades. Despair darkens our minds and our world.

Back to the mall, bar, or spa we go, looking for *more* relief.

It’s another vicious circle.

Everyday Relief Seeking

Revisiting earlier examples of dysfunctional thinking and action, we see the same relief-driven processes in play.

Angry at the raucous crows, I tried to “solve” my “crow problem” by crazily flinging rocks at them. At best, I got 20 minutes of quiet relief before the crows came cawing back.

Frustrated with a failed computer, and angry at the “idiots” who made it, my colleague stomped off in anger and went for a beer to salve his fevered soul.

He got temporary relief, but failed to get his report done on time. Blaming his boss for being unreasonable, he grew angrier. Over time, his anger and blaming lead to dismissal.

Mad at eating a dish of ice cream, we judge ourselves negatively. *Shoulding* on ourselves makes us feel worse. So, hoping to get relief from self-created negative feelings, we eat the rest of the carton.

But before the last spoonful gulped down, we feel guilty and angrier at ourselves than before. We worry, “How can I get *relief* from the shame I feel?”

Explaining reality this way is clearly dysfunctional. Rather than lead to real and lasting change. It leads only to ineffective actions and temporary relief.

Three Beliefs Cause *Most* of Our Misery

What are we to do with such insight?

Let's start by looking more closely at dysfunctional beliefs and their effects.

Albert Ellis summed up nearly seventy years of research into dysfunctional thinking by saying that **three main beliefs** account for most of the misery most of us suffer.⁹ They are:

- I *must* do well.
- You *must* treat me well.
- The world *must* be easy.

You can substitute the words “should,” “ought to,” “have to,” and “need to” for “must.” They all have the same dysfunctional effect.

Also, remember, the belief, “I *must* do well,” implies other underlying, self-imposed expectations, “I must *always* do well, at *everything* I. And if I don't, it must be awful, terrible, and horrible. And, “I can't stand it!”

These beliefs are absolutes. They lay out inflexible rules for behaviour. When we fail to live up to such rigid rules, we create negative feelings and actions.

These three beliefs are *irrational*. They do not square with reality. It is impossible to live up to the demands of such absolute rules.

Every time we *fail* to live up to them, we feel conflict between what we think we (or others, or the world) *must* do and how things really are.

Such irrational beliefs quickly lead to irrational feelings and ineffective actions.

Mastery Saves the Day!

You can recognize and rise above these beliefs. You can master more functional beliefs and greatly increase your chances of creating success.

Imagine, for example, you are giving a talk to a crowd of 1000 people in a large auditorium. Your income for several months depends on doing well. But, just as you start to speak, the PA and projection systems quit working.

This happened to me. It was, initially, a *terrifying* experience.

I feared the technicians would not get the systems working, and I would not get to do my talk. I worried I would lose my substantial fee, and any chance for follow-up work with the sponsoring organization.

I felt irrational anger toward the technicians building in my chest.

Imagine how the event might have unfolded had I filtered this adversity through the three key dysfunctional beliefs.

Thinking, “I *must* do well,” would have made me extremely uptight, and much less effective as a presenter, even if the systems started to work.

Had I thought, “You *must* treat me well,” I would have been much more angry at the technicians. The anger would show in my talk. I might even have refused to go on until they fixed things perfectly.

If I'd believed, “Life *should* be easy,” I would have been disheartened and dejected. I would have found it difficult (perhaps “too” difficult) to persevere and

to give a good talk. I might have quit in frustration and anger, shooting myself in the foot, and the pocketbook.

Thankfully, though, having worked with the **ABCs** for 20 years, I was forewarned and forearmed.

I recognized those dysfunctional beliefs and stopped myself from filtering the situation through them. I replaced the irrational beliefs with rational, supportive beliefs. That enabled me to think and act effectively.

I focused on what I could *control*. I accepted what I could not.

I took *ownership* for the result I most wanted: a successful talk, my fee, and future work with the organization.

I took a lesson from actors and told myself, “The show must go on.”

I reminded myself, that although the situation was difficult, it would *pass*.

In a difficult, challenging situation, I *persevered*. I did the best I could with what I had to work with.

I joked with the audience while the technicians tried to revive the systems. When they could not get them working, I moved off the stage, into the centre aisle of the auditorium, and shouted my talk so those in back could hear.

Although I could only describe the diagrams in the slides I’d prepared, the talk went well. I got excellent feedback. I got bonus points for being such a trouper. I was invited back to do more work for the sponsoring organization.

What could have been a disaster turned out to be wonderful experience—for me, and for those who invested time and money to hear my talk.

Needless to say, I was very grateful for all the **ABC** practice time I’d put in. I came away from the situation feeling good about doing well, and confident I had the skills to deal with challenging situations.

I felt great.

Working with What Life Gives Us

If we think dysfunctional beliefs are true, that they are inviolable laws of the universe, then, when those laws are broken, we will likely get very upset.

However, *no* law says you *should* do well.

It is not written that others *should* treat you well.

No statute says life, or any part of it, *should* be easy.

It is rational and useful to *desire* to do well, to *prefer* that people treat you well, and to *want* things to be easy. But, when you turn *preferences* into *demands*—musts, shoulds, oughts, etc...—you pit yourself against reality.

As a friend advised, “In the battle between you and Reality, always bet on Reality.”

Besides, when you “should” on yourself, other people, and the world, you end up “full of should.” Who wants that?

Demand-driven “shoulds” make you frustrated and disappointed. They create anger, anxiety, and depression.

Learn to work with reality *as it is*. Working with reality while you create what matters to you lessens your stress and dissolves distress.

Going With the Givens

Accept life’s givens, and work *with* them.

That’s what I did with my talk. I took what life gave me that day, and did the best I could with it. People appreciated that. I succeeded in spite of adversity.

If you accept and work with what life gives you, too, you can succeed.

You won’t *always* do well.

People will not *always* treat you as you think they should.

And life isn’t *always* easy.

These three givens are bedrock facts of your existence. You ignore or deny them at your peril.

But when you acknowledge these givens, and do your best in spite of them, you are more likely to succeed at what matters, and to reap the internal and external rewards of doing so.

Recognizing dysfunctional beliefs is the first step in creating a more functional way of thinking and acting. Changing your thoughts and beliefs changes how you feel and act. It changes the results you produce. It can change your life.

But as Doctor Joe warned me, “Don’t get cocky!”

Insight and understanding are important. But, by themselves, they do not lead to real and lasting change, or results.

To master the **ABCs**, realistic optimism, and other emotional mastery skills so you can use them when you need them, you need what jazz musicians call “technique to burn.”

Technique to Burn

By technique to burn, musicians mean having more skill than you would ever need for any given situation.

To achieve such mastery, and make it your habitual way of dealing with difficulties and adversity, you need to practice, practice, practice.

Repetition breeds habit formation.

Researchers, for example, found that rats can solve a puzzle flawlessly after practicing it (and being rewarded with food) 100 times. After 200 repetitions, they can do the puzzle habitually, automatically—without rewards.

Researchers found that such extensive practice actually changes the shape and structure of a rat’s brain. Other researchers found the same thing happens when any highly trained specialist practices enough. Their brains change.¹⁰

Musicians who practice five or more hours a day, and Buddhist monks who practice meditation for 10,000 plus hours, actually rewire their brains.

They increase their neural capacity. They develop technique to burn.

Love As A Motivator

Why do musicians and monks practice so much? What is it that sustains their pursuit of mastery? Is it just the rewards that come with technique to burn?

Partly. Financial and social rewards do flow from being very good at what you do. But that's not the main reason people practice to the point of mastery.

People practice because they *love* what they do, and what it lets them do.

Love is a far better motivator than fear because the more you practice, the more it grows in intensity. So, if you want to practice the skills of emotional mastery, be clear about *why* you are practicing.

Focus on how you *truly* want to feel, and how you would *love* to act.

Focus on what you *most* want to create—in life, work, and relationships—with the emotional mastery you are developing. Imagine creating those results and feeling fantastic about doing so well.

Practicing emotional mastery skills provides a solid platform on which to create what matters. Not only will you develop emotional mastery, you will also develop a more open, flexible, and successful perspective on life as a whole.

So instead of practicing getting rid of what you don't like and don't want, practice bringing into being what you love and truly want to see exist—and sustaining it.

Sustaining Results that Matter

Research on cardiac patients shows the one in nine patients who do sustain healthy changes beyond a year are motivated by a hopeful vision of a joyful, vitality-filled, active, and great-feeling life—a life they would *love* to lead.

Successful patients imagine themselves enjoying pleasures such as making love without pain, taking long walks with breath to spare, and being around long enough to create what truly matters to them.

“Joy,” says Dr. Dean Ornish, who pioneered successful ways to motivate cardiac patients, “is a more powerful motivator than fear.”

Ornish is just one of a growing number of positive change experts who believe joy-inspiring, vision-driven motivation works better than a “slap in the face and a little blood” to move people to create deep and positive change, and sustain it.

In my book *Simplicity and Success: Creating the Life You Long For* and in its companion eBook *Barriers to Success*, I outline simple but effective ways to shift from problem-focused, relief-driven action to more effective action driven by love and a deep, joyful desire to create results that truly matter to you.

Emotional Mastery

I'll introduce you to those skills and a framework for *creating* almost anything—with whatever life gives you—in Part 4.

Before that, though, in Part 3, I'll describe three more sets of skills—**AQ** (Adversity Quotient) skills, mental skills, and physical skills.

Together with the **ABCs** and realistic optimism, practicing these skills will give you the emotional mastery you need to create results that matter—in spite of any adversity you might have to face.

PART THREE

PATHS TO MASTERY

"The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made. And the activity of making them changes both the maker and their destination."

— **John Schaar**

SIX

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY, *CREATING* RESILIENCE

Suppose you have tried and failed again and again. You may have a fresh start any moment you choose, for this thing that we call failure is not the falling down, but the staying down.

— Mary Pickford

Actress Mary Pickford makes an important distinction. There is a critical difference between the *act* of failing and *conclusions* you draw about that act.

Instead of merely observing that an action did not work as intended, those who stay down judge that they—themselves—have failed. Moreover, they generalize and conclude, “I *am* a failure,” or “I will *always* fail.”

Therefore, they assume there is no point in getting up.

But there is always a point in getting up. Failures and mishaps do not define us. What we do with them defines us.

“Mishaps,” said author James Russell Lowell, “are like knives; they either serve us or cut us, as we grasp them by the blade or the handle.”

To turn mishaps, mistakes, and failures into success we must grasp them by their handles.

Old wisdom says the sooner we make our first 5000 mistakes, the sooner we learn anything.

New wisdom talks about “rapid prototyping”—fail fast, and often.

Make many small, instructive mistakes, and try, try again—that’s how you learn quickly, in art, business, and life.

Learning Begins With Questioning

To learn how to cope with adversity, develop emotional mastery, and become resilient, it is important to stifle the tendency to blame yourself, the circumstances you encounter, or other people.

Instead, ask yourself these kinds of questions.

- Do I want to change? Do I want a fresh start?
- Do I want to be optimistic and resilient?
- Do I want to be able to bounce back from setbacks quickly? To get up easily when I fall down?
- Am I willing to try new ways of explaining what happens to me? And new ways of dealing with what happens?

If you answered, “Yes” to these questions, then, as a powerful first step, I suggest you formally *choose* to create those qualities.

Try this now: say to yourself, “I choose ...” and then fill the blank with the results you want. Then notice how making such choices shifts how you feel.

If you just read the last paragraph and didn’t make the choice, I suggest you go back, re-read it, and do the exercise. It could make a significant difference in how you approach the rest of this book. Go on, try it. It won’t hurt.

Okay, once you *choose* to respond to adversity in a realistic, optimistic way, the next step is to assess how you currently respond to adversity.

What’s Your AQ?

AQ stands for **Adversity Quotient**.

Just as IQ measures your intelligence quotient, **AQ** measures the critical factor in emotional mastery—your capacity to deal with adversity.

Your AQ, however, is not fixed. Through awareness and practice, you can increase your AQ. The best way to start is by assessing your current AQ.

Developed by Paul Stoltz, researcher, consultant, and author of *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles Into Opportunities*, the *Adversity Response Profile (ARP®)* is a scientifically validated, easy-to-use instrument that measures your overall AQ, and your performance levels on four essential success factors.

An *ARP®* assessment helps you see:

- How well you withstand adversity;
- How capable you are of surmounting it,
- How well you do on factors leading to mastery and optimism,
- How likely you are to overcome adversity and prevail, or give in and quit,
- How likely you are to meet or exceed expectations, or to fall short.

Often, just the awareness provided by an AQ assessment can lead to life-changing insights into your current habits.

“When I took the *ARP*,” Jill, an energetic single mother of two, told me, “I scored quite low on ownership. But once I realized I didn’t take responsibility for the results I wanted, I also noticed I play a victim role in difficult situations. I saw

how I often blamed others for my misfortunes. I also saw that same ‘poor me’ behaviour in my kids.

“When I recognized my lack of ownership, I found it easier to stop blaming. I quit obsessing about how things got screwed up, and why. It was much easier then to focus on results I wanted to create—for me *and* my kids.”

Awareness *is* important, but there’s more to AQ than assessment.

As well as insight into your habitual way of responding to adversity, Paul Stoltz laid out four essential skills for improving the way you respond to adversity.

The **CORE** AQ Skills

Stoltz’s AQ approach draws on the work of positive and cognitive psychologists such as Martin Seligman, as well as recent findings in neurophysiology and psychoimmunology.

Such research shows when we fail at anything, we feel a sense of loss.

This loss causes us to feel temporarily helpless and depressed. We don’t act as quickly as we might otherwise. If we have a pessimistic explanatory style, we may not try again. We might just give up.

Optimists, Seligman showed, recover more quickly from momentary helplessness caused by loss than pessimists.

“(They) pick themselves up, shrug, and start trying again,” he says. “For them, defeat is a challenge, a mere setback on the road to inevitable victory.”¹¹

Paul Stoltz identified four **CORE** skills—**Control**, **Ownership**, **Reach**, and **Endurance**—that largely determine whether we *quit*, *camp*, or continue to *climb* life’s mountains when faced with adversity.

Control

The first factor, *Control*, relates to Seligman’s notion of *personal* (as in “personal, pervasive, and permanent”).

The *control* factor assesses how much power to act you perceive you have in the face of adversity and its consequences.

The higher your sense of control, the more likely you are to deal well with adversity. The less control you think you have, the less likely you are to act.

While a pessimist might say, “There’s nothing I can do about this,” an optimist with high control is likely to think, “There must be something I can do.”

At the very least, high AQ optimists realize that they can always control their attitude. Viktor Frankl describes a moving example of such control in Auschwitz inmates who “walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.”

“They may have been few in number,” wrote Frankl, “but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from (us) but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”¹²

A sense of control over adversity and its consequences enables high AQ individuals to take more inner and outer action, which results in more control. Thus, they are less likely to be stopped by adversity.

High AQ individuals are more likely to keep climbing, even if it means temporarily retreating, camping, or figuring out a way around the adversity.

Ownership

Stoltz's research shows that being willing to own the outcomes of adversity is critical. High AQ individuals hold themselves accountable for results they want, regardless of what happens, or who is at fault. Focusing on the outcomes they want to create helps them persevere and persist until they succeed.

High ownership reflects an ability to take responsibility, learn from adversity, and focus on results. Low scores reflect a lack of motivation that leads to blaming, decreased energy, low self-esteem, and, often, a victim story.

Jill's example above aside, research on ownership shows men tend to blame others for what happens to them. Women tend to take on too much ownership, and blame themselves.

Neither approach is effective. Asking, "What do I want in this situation?" not "Who's to blame?" is a sign of high ownership.

Before I assessed my own AQ, for example, I considered myself a doer, a creator. But, although I loved what I did and was usually successful at whatever I turned my head and hands to, much of the time, the *doing* was difficult.

It drained me. I'd feel as if I was climbing my life's mountains with fifty pounds of rocks in my pack, or slogging through thick, knee-deep mud. Sometimes both. I constantly had to force myself forward and up. I worried about burning out. Or worse.

I wanted to work with the forces in my life, not against them. I wanted to set up and follow the creators' path of least resistance as I turned visions into reality. But it didn't seem to work as well as I wanted it to.

When I assessed my AQ, I discovered the reason that *doing* drained me.

I scored much lower on ownership than on the other CORE skills.

I realized I often blamed others for my difficulties. I whined. I complained. In doing so, I made creating what matters much more difficult than it needed to be.

When I started taking ownership for what I wanted, this changed.

Doing got easier. I shifted from my own victim stance into the stance of a creator. Action and results started to flow for me like never before.

Buddhists have an approach that nicely sums up the action of ownership.

When facing adversity, they focus on what they want, accept reality as it is, and ask, "This being the case, how then shall I proceed?"

This simple ancient process integrates *intention*, *attention*, and *action*, which, we'll see in Chapter 10, is key to creating results that matter.

Control and Ownership are the two most important CORE skills. Indeed, a reinforcing relationship exists between the two skills.

Taking ownership leads you to focus on what matters. Doing so gives you a greater sense of control. Stronger control makes it easier to take ownership of the results you want to create.

Success grows upon success.

Reach

Reach describes the extent to which you let adversity bleed over into other areas of your life.

Scoring high on reach indicates you keep adversity in its place. Scoring low indicates the opposite. It shows you have difficulty preventing adversity from affecting other areas of your life and work.

Dale, a lawyer, found when he contained work-related adversity to the office and courtroom, he created a better relationship with his wife and kids at home.

Not surprising, those happier times at home helped him relax, recover, and re-charge his batteries each day. Doing so helped him reframe work “problems” as challenges, and made them easier and more enjoyable to deal with.

“Now, I get a lot *more* done with a lot *less* stress and strain,” he told me.

Limiting the reach of adversity into your life is a key factor in preventing, and even reversing, the downward spiral to helplessness.

Endurance

Finally, **Endurance** refers to how long you think adverse events and their consequences will last.

Optimistic, high AQ people see adversity as a short-term phenomenon. “This too,” they say, “will pass.”

Pessimistic, low scorers see adversity as long lasting or permanent. “This,” they moan, “will *never* end.”

Such a stance can lead to a lack of hope and a “what’s the point” attitude. Such an attitude prevents people from taking action.

Down they slide toward helplessness, depression, and despair.

Practice Is Key To Progress—and Results!

Your **CORE AQ** skills—**Control, Ownership, Reach, and Endurance**—underlie your habitual ways of reacting to adversity. By assessing them, you can see what works for you, and which habits need changing.

However, it is one thing to assess your **AQ** and see how your unique pattern of control, ownership, reach, and endurance plays out. It is another to change your habits through day-to-day practice. Insight not grounded in reality and focused on action is usually mere sentiment.

“I found the CORE skills easier to grasp once I practiced them,” my lawyer client told me. “AQ made intellectual sense when I took the assessment.”

However, only through regular practice did I grasp how these skills worked, and how they really applied to me, my life, and my work.

“They’ve turned out to be a very simple yet powerful way to guide myself and my kids toward a more optimistic stance. Now I’m teaching them to my law partners, and to the rest of my family.”

Improving Your CORE Skills

So, how do you teach yourself the **AQ** skills?

There are two key steps. Catch your low AQ responses. And replace them with high AQ responses.

Step One: Catch Your AQ Response

The first step in practicing the CORE skills is to catch yourself responding to difficult situations. It is most helpful to recognize adversity—and the negative feelings pessimistic explanations cause—when they arise.

Each time something adverse happens or you feel bad, stop for a second and see if you can head off the *flooding* process that prevents you from thinking and acting effectively.

Each time he encounters adversity, for example, Paul Stoltz throws his hands in the air and shouts, “AWOOGA! AWOOGA.” This can be a bit unnerving when he does it in the middle of a training workshop, but it works for him.

Others wear rubber bands on their wrist and snap them each time they notice themselves feeling bad or ruminating on adversity.

I prefer the more sedate, Zen like, “Ah, so!” my neighbor’s six year old daughter taught me after I dropped and shattered a jar of soya milk on her kitchen floor.

The idea is to catch yourself reacting to adversity and make your response a conscious, high-**AQ** response. Instead of reacting habitually, you want to stop and think about the best way to respond.

Step Two: Create a High AQ Response

When adversity strikes, ask, for starters, “What about this adversity can I control? Also ask, “What about my response to it can I control?” “What attitude do I want to take to this adversity?”

There may not be a lot you can control externally, but you may discover you have ample control over your own thoughts and feelings.

Using the *Serenity Prayer* is a useful way to sort out what you can and cannot control. Paraphrased slightly, it is, “Give me grace to serenely accept what I cannot change, courage to change what I can, and wisdom to tell one from the other.”

Focus on what you can control, and let go of what you can’t.

Let go of blaming others or yourself.

Instead, ask, “What outcomes do I want? What results do I want to create, regardless of this adversity?”

Later, you can reflect on causes if you think it is needed and/or useful.

Practice *containing* adversity. Prevent it from reaching into other areas of your life. One way to do this is be specific in *describing* the adversity.

Don’t say, “My tire blew. I’m gonna be late picking up the kids at the dentist. They’ll go nuts. Darn! My whole day is wrecked.”

Such a story generalizes from a specific adversity and lets bad feelings reach into and affect your “whole” day.

Say, instead, “My tire blew. I better call the kids and tell them I’ll be late. Maybe I’ll bring them a treat to reward them for waiting.”

By staying with specifics, you contain the adversity.

That makes it easier to take ownership for what you want, such as a good relationship with your kids who had to wait while you got your tire changed.

Finally, work at telling yourself the adversity is *temporary*.

“This too shall pass,” is a phrase common to most religions because it rightly describes any sort of adversity. All things change and end. So too will your adversity. Tell yourself so, instead of lamenting, “it’ll never end.”

That’s not true, and thinking or saying it just bums you out.

Practice Increases Your AQ

Practicing the **CORE** skills will improve your sense of control and ownership, and your ability to limit adversity’s reach and endurance.

With practice, your **AQ** can rise significantly, which can have major effects on your feelings and actions. High **AQ** people keep going where others camp or quit.

“Climbers,” Stoltz calls them. Climbers feel empowered whereas “campers” and “quitters” often feel helpless.

“Campers” find a comfy camping spot on life’s mountain, and, although it’s not the true end they want, decide to stay there. They camp.

Sometimes climbers use camping as a temporary rest and regroup strategy. When they feel refreshed, they continue the climb.

Low-AQ campers stay camped.

“Quitters” give up the climb all together, or fail to even start.

Are You A Quitter, A Camper, or A Climber?

When you think of life and the challenges it poses as a mountain, or any ascending journey, which would you prefer to be—climber, camper, or quitter?

Like explanatory style and your predisposition to optimism or pessimism, your adversity response is at least 50% up to you. And, there is *lots* you can do with your 50%.

Changing how you deal with adversity can help you become healthy in mind, body, and spirit—and stay that way even in the face of life's challenges.

Paul Stoltz's research shows climbers succeed where others fall short. They get more done with less effort. They experience almost no distress. And they greatly increase the happiness and contentment they feel.

However, some people fear that choosing to climb will be too arduous, too stressful, or too much for them. People often tell me they prefer to flow with life rather than climb its mountains.

If that is your preference, then so be it.

But please recognize that there is a big difference between flowing by *choice*, and flowing by *default*.

When you flow by default, you put yourself at the mercy of life's different forces, including adversity. You only go where life takes you. You do not steer in the direction of your dreams.

Most people who flow by default give up their dreams and take whatever comes their way. Often that is pain, unhappiness, and emotional suffering.

But those who *choose* to flow steer toward their dreams. You can climb life's mountains and still flow. In fact, flow is a big part of climbing mountains.

The best climbers seek to climb in a way that works with whatever forces they encounter, and moves them consistently toward their dreams.

Part of the challenge of climbing mountains is to climb them in a way that works for you, and creates the kind and quality of experience you want

Some will climb hard and fast. So be it.

Others will stroll more leisurely up the ridges.

Still others will make day trips, camping in a comfortable campground each evening. For each challenge, there is an appropriate process for you.

Don't be afraid that choosing to succeed at what matters to you means you become a success-crazed workaholic, always *forcing* yourself onward and up.

Emotional mastery means knowing when to push, and when to back off.

It means being able to choose to flow with whatever circumstances you encounter, and still steer in the direction of your dreams.

Climbing In Flow

When you add the basics of emotional mastery and creating what matters to your **AQ** skills, you can become like the climbers described by Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.¹³

Comparing life to mountains, Pirsig wrote,

"Mountains should be climbed with as little effort as possible and without desire. ...

To live only for some future goal is shallow. It's the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top. Here's where things grow."

However, just when it appears Pirsig thinks process is more important than goals, he adds,

“But of course, without the top you can’t have any sides. It’s the top that defines the sides.”

Then, having embraced journey *and* destination, process *and* end, Pirsig turns effortlessly to action.

“So on we go ... no hurry ... just one step after the next.”

That’s a great recipe for climbing life’s mountains in a state of flow.

Life’s True Basics

The stronger your **AQ** skills, the easier it will be to navigate and enjoy the mountains (and other challenges) of your life.

With an optimistic explanatory style and a high **AQ**, it will be easier to embrace process *and* results. It becomes possible to focus on your desires, accept reality, choose effective actions, and *flow*.

By mastering your **AQ** skills, you become resilient, able to successfully bounce back from setbacks of all kinds.

You become focused on what matters, and energized by challenges you choose.

You become patient, persistent, and determined.

You become creative in the face of challenging circumstances.

You become able to flow with whatever life gives you, and to consistently move toward your deepest longings and highest aspirations.

Emotional mastery, creating, AQ—these are the true basics, the critical life skills we need to thrive in these changing, challenging times.

To help you develop these skills, raise your AQ, and experience more flow in your life, the next two chapters will provide you with a series of both mental and physical skills for increasing your emotional mastery.

SEVEN

Mental Paths to Emotional Mastery

On the master's journey, you can learn to put things in perspective, to keep the flow of energy going during low moments as well as high. ... It might well be that much of the world's depression and discontent ... can be traced to our unused energy, our untapped potential. ... All of us can increase our energy, starting now.

— George Leonard

To be successful—to create the results that matter *most*—we each need to undertake our own journey toward emotional mastery.

In the following chapters, we will work with three more paths to that mastery—*mental skills, physical skills, and skills for creating positive emotions.*

These skills will help you create and sustain energy and results during both the high and the low moments in your life. They will help you create and sustain momentum, which acts as a force propelling you toward success and satisfaction.

In life, work, and relationships, mastery of your *thinking* processes is key.

The *mental* path to mastery involves recognizing, challenging, and disputing dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs, then substituting rational, supportive thoughts in their place. It also involves such skills as mental rehearsal, monitoring self-talk, and choosing appropriate language to describe what happens to you.

The mental path is critical but, by itself, is not enough to give you full mastery.

Sometimes, adversity occurs so quickly your automatic stress reaction instantly locks you into a flee or fight dichotomy. At such times, you need *physical* techniques to clear the neurochemicals that impair your cognitive ability and make clear thinking difficult, if not impossible.

Practicing on both the mental and physical paths will increase your ability to work with the **ABCs**. It will help you shift to a more realistically optimistic way of

explaining what happens to you. It will increase your **AQ** and fluency in the **CORE** skills. It will make you more resilient, able to embrace and rise above adversity, and create the results you most want, in spite of adversity.

Practicing all three paths leads to a decrease in negative emotions. It also leads to an increase in *positive emotions*. Moreover, it sets up a solid emotional platform on which to create what matters to you.

It is also very important to know how to *create positive emotions* in every day life. Not only do positive emotions drive out negative emotions, but positive emotions increase your energy and effectiveness, and add to a happy, successful, and fulfilling life. So learning to consciously create positive emotions can give you a great boost in spirit and in results.

In this chapter, we'll examine mental paths to mastery.

In Chapter 8, we will look at physical paths to mastery.

In Chapter 9, I'll describe how to create positive emotions.

MENTAL PATHS TO MASTERY

Many mental paths lead to rational, self-supporting thinking processes.

The most important techniques you need to master are the **ABCDEs**.

These skills underlie and give rise to many of the other skills you will use. I suggest you make good use of the Practice Sheets provided in the Appendix.

Because the **ABCDE** process can be difficult to apply in the heat of a distressful moment, there are other skills you can start with that will increase your ability to practice the **ABCDEs** more effectively when you need them.

The techniques that follow are those that have worked well for me for over the last 30 years, and for my coaching clients for the last 20 or so.

They are not listed in a linear order. Sometimes you might rehearse skills, practice them, and then review how you did. Other times, it will work better to review a response to adversity first, rehearse new approaches, and then put them into practice.

It all depends on the situation you find yourself in.

Mental Rehearsal

Reading about emotional mastery skills such as the **ABCs** and discussing their application to real life situations is a good start. But you want to do more.

Try doing thought experiments; practice applying such skills in your mind.

Imagine yourself performing them with grace and excellence, and producing the results you want.

Research in sports and other fields shows that *mental rehearsal*—imagining yourself practicing skills and techniques—can be almost as effective as actual practice. All elite athletes now practice mental rehearsal prior to events.

Mentally rehearsing the **ABCs** can help you build a base of skill and confidence over which you can layer increased levels of competence through actual practice and performance.

Back when I was beginning to master the **ABC** skills, for example, I helped develop a program to train wilderness leaders. To implement the program, my partner and I needed support from the board of an important organization.

We knew from previous experience that two people on the board were not sympathetic to us, or our approach. Both, I thought, were know-it-all, naysayers.

I tended to get defensive in the face of their predictable negativity, and often reacted badly. I knew such behaviour would not help us secure support.

So, on the day we were to present our formal request for support, I decided to practice my **ABC** skills during an hour-long drive into the city. While my partner drove, I imagined myself answering what I assumed would be difficult, adversarial questions from the negative board members.

As I practiced, I noticed I had a lot of *shoulds*, particularly of the “you *should* treat me well” kind. Even in my mind, whenever I thought I was not being treated as I thought I “should” be treated, I reacted negatively. I could feel myself tense up, and then snap out a defensive comeback.

So, as we drove through rolling foothills, I practiced letting go of my “shoulds.”

I worked on substituting *preferences* for my demands, and answering challenging questions as honestly, sincerely, and respectfully as I could.

At the meeting, just as we’d expected, we did get difficult questions from the two board members. But I surprised everyone, including myself, by responding without defensiveness.

I answered clearly and honestly, as I’d practiced. The board members responded in kind. What I assumed would be a difficult debate turned into a useful discussion.

Not only did we get the support we needed, the board member who I most disliked asked if he could participate in the program as an apprentice instructor.

We agreed, he came on board, and he and I became good friends and colleagues. Needless to say, he became one of our biggest supporters.

I learned a lot about myself that day. Since then, I rehearse my thinking skills before every important meeting or presentation. It helps me immensely.

But don’t *just* practice in your head.

Also try practicing in more real-life but safe situations.

Practice in Safe Environments

My practice in the car was critical, but it was my performance in the meeting that allowed me to really master the skills I’d practiced.

Another way to practice such skills is to find someone you trust and have them role-play a potential adversary with you. You can then put your thinking into practice, notice when it works and when it doesn’t, and practice it until you get fluent at it.

You also get useful feedback from your partner about things you did not notice yourself.

Also don't just talk about new skills with others. If you talk too much about what you want to do, without actually doing it, you can easily delude yourself about your competence level.

"'Rehearsal' can become your reality," says Dr. James Prochaska,¹⁴ a psychologist who helps people overcome difficult habits.

About 85% of people who want to change their behaviour, he says, never get to or beyond the rehearsal stage.

They substitute rehearsal for the real thing. They talk about the changes they want to make but do not actualize them through action.

Then when they need the skills, they're not there.

To move toward mastery, you must perform. You must put rehearsal into practice, learn from your mistakes, and make real changes.

However, making real changes, especially in the heat of difficult moments, can be difficult. So, as well as rehearsing skills, I suggest you borrow another technique from top athletes.

Review your game films.

Review Your Responses Using the ABCs

You can practice emotional mastery skills before the fact, as I described above. You can also practice them *after* the fact.

I highly recommend that, after an adverse experience you review and analyze your responses using the **ABCs**.

When you're overly anxious, stressed, or depressed, you flood with chemicals that paralyze your thinking and limit your options to "fight or flight."

Neither option is useful if, for example, you are in an important meeting, or discussing finances with your spouse, or about to give a speech to a group.

In many cases, you will not perform as you would prefer to perform.

But don't beat yourself up.

Don't indulge in shoulda, woulda, coulda thinking.

Instead, just as athletes review game films to assess their performances, you can review imperfect responses to adversity after the event, when things are less intense.

Using the **ABCDE** model as an analytical, self-teaching tool, you can review situations in which you think you acted dysfunctionally.

You can replay the movie in your mind to see how your dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs led to dysfunctional feelings and action.

First establish **A**, the activating event. What happened?

Tease out dysfunctional **A-C** connections such as "She hung up on me, so I got angry and kicked the wall."

Recognize such connections are incomplete, and almost always lead to dysfunctional behaviour.

Next, dig into your **Bs**. Review the thoughts and beliefs you used to explain **A**. Notice the consequences (feelings and actions) at **C** for each of those beliefs. Carefully sort out rational from the irrational beliefs.

Once you have the **ABC** connection clear, challenge, and dispute (**D**) your irrational beliefs and thoughts. See them for what they are, silly, dysfunctional, and self-defeating.

Then, substitute more rational, self-supporting beliefs and thoughts, and imagine (mentally rehearse) using those the next time you encounter such adversity.

Finally, enjoy the energization (**E**) that occurs as new thoughts lead to new possibilities and new energy.

Use that energy to initiate new actions.

Next Time, I Choose...

In post-adversity situations, I find it helps to use what I call the “Next time, I choose ...” exercise.

Instead of looking backward at what you said and did, and applying “shoulda, coulda, woulda” thinking to the adversity and to your less-than-perfect response, shift your focus to what you want to do the next time such a situation occurs.

Use mental rehearsal and imagine yourself successfully thinking and acting the way you would prefer to think and act. Imagine producing successful results. Enjoy the energy and satisfaction that comes from such rehearsal.

Then *choose* the kind of thinking and action you want to do, and commit to doing it by saying, “Next time, I choose to...” (and fill in the blank with the behaviour you chose).

Continue to mentally rehearse your desired response using rational beliefs and functional **ABC** combinations.

For simple situations, you can usually do this quickly, in your head. But for more complex situations, I recommend you do not try doing the whole process in your head, at least not until you have mastered it with simpler situations.

Instead, I suggest you practice by picking one activating event that led to negative feelings and actions in the last week or so. Then use the practice sheets provided in the Appendix to review what happened.

Write out what you said to yourself about the situation, other people, and yourself. Substitute rational thoughts and beliefs for irrational ones, and watch the energization emerge.

Using the practice sheets is an excellent way to practice the **ABCDEs**.

I find it helps to print out a dozen or so of them and keep them handy, by my bed, for example. And on my desk.

Another powerful technique for reviewing your adversity responses is *active journaling*.

Active Journaling

Active journaling combines a passionate, uncensored telling of your story about what happened with a dispassionate review and analysis of what you thought and did using the **ABCDE** framework.

When something bad happens, or whenever I am ruminating (chewing over) something that makes me feel overly sad, angry, or uptight (usually at 3 AM on a sleepless night), I get out my journal and write it all down.

I don't censor myself. I tell it like it was, or at least how I thought it was!

I allow myself to make judgments, assume all sorts of things, draw dire conclusions, indulge in faulty logic, "should" on myself and others, and generally just rail away about the situation that bothers me.

Once I have the whole "awful" story down in my journal, I go back over what I've written with a yellow highlighter.

I highlight all the **A—C** connections.

I highlight emotionally loaded *trigger words* such as "never," "always," "ever," "totally," "nothing," "nobody," "all," "every," "everything," etc....

I highlight *demand words* such as "should," "must," "ought to," and "have to," and "need to."

I look for examples of *mind reading*, in which I project intent on other people or things. "That stupid computer is out to get me." "Those idiots are laughing behind my back." Or, "she'll never notice me no matter what I do."

I look for *judgments* such as, "This relationship sucks," or "I'll *never* learn to use this accounting program."

I look for *all or nothing thinking* such as, "My diet is wrecked; I might as well eat *all* the ice cream."

I look for *exaggerations* such as, "She *wrecked* my life." (Clearly she didn't, if I can still practice the **ABCs** and take action on my own behalf).

I look for *catastrophic conclusions* such as, "My *whole* life is *totally devastated*, so there's *no* point in doing *anything*."

Usually, by the time I get done highlighting what I've written, I'm chuckling at myself for being so irrational and melodramatic. Getting the dysfunctional thinking about of my head and down on paper helps me see how silly it really is.

Sometimes just writing it all out and highlighting the silly stuff is enough to shift my thinking into a more realistically optimistic style. I feel better. I think clearly. And I make better decisions.

If writing it out and highlighting my nutty thinking isn't enough to shift my thinking from dysfunctional to functional, I move to the **DE** steps.

When I am sure I've caught all my dysfunctional language and logic, I dispute it. I challenge and change my faulty language and logic.

I substitute rational logic and accurate, objective language. I replace subjective stories with objective, descriptive stories.

Then I rewrite the journal entry as objectively and accurately as I can.

Inevitably, the following good things happen:

Emotional Mastery

1. The “problem” I was ruminating on dissolves. Or, at least, the *threat* I thought I was reacting to dissolves. Without my made-up fear, I realize I face a challenge for which I have the skills to cope.
2. I feel calmer. I’m able to think more clearly.
3. I feel that I have more control. I find it easier to take ownership for the results I want, regardless of the situation.
4. My sense of control increases, does my confidence in myself.
5. I experience a surge of energy and good feelings that excite me.
6. It is easier to lay out my next steps and move toward what I want.

At times when I can’t sleep because my worries are spinning around my mind, keeping me awake, active journaling helps calm me down, and relax me.

When I write down my worries, there are rarely as many as there seemed to be when I was ruminating about them.

What I thought was “overwhelming” often turns out to be just two or three things that, on paper, seem much simpler than when they were spinning around in my mind.

I make a note or two about what results I want to create and what action I want to take to support those results. Then the worries stop being worries and become merely aspects of my current reality, raw material for creating results I want.

Fear shifts to hope. Excitement replaces worry. I relax and fall asleep easily.

Third Person Journaling

If you have trouble writing objectively about what happens and how you react to it, I suggest you try what one of my coaching clients does to rise above that difficulty.

Unable to write objectively about herself in the first person, Francesca writes in the third person. She writes about “the woman” and what she did, what happened to her, and how she dealt with it.

Writing in the third person is easier for her. It also makes it easier for her to describe her dysfunctional thinking and acting, and a lot easier to change it.

Reviewing Your Journal

Sometimes, just flipping back through my journals to see how far I’ve come in developing emotional mastery can change a negative mood into a positive one. Doing so validates my developing skills, and my fluency in applying them.

Reviewing also helps me see patterns in my thinking.

It helps me recognize the unique ways in which I tend to regularly make myself unnecessarily upset or distressed. Knowing them makes it much easier to spot such patterns before they take over my thinking.

This kind of wisdom and the results it leads to makes all my practice worthwhile.

Practicing In the Heat of the Moment

As you get better at using the **ABCs** and other skills through review and mental rehearsal, you can start practicing them in the moment.

To do so, work on changing your thinking as you notice it, and changing your actions as you change your thinking.

Catch yourself about to make a negative judgment such as, “This situation is awful,” and quickly substitute a more objective description of the situation. “This part of this situation is more difficult than I thought it would be.”

Even better, with continued practice describing reality rather than judging it, you will develop the skill to anticipate dysfunctional thinking and dissolve it before it leads to dysfunctional thoughts and actions.

This is the ultimate state to which you want to aspire.

But, I’m getting ahead of myself.

Before you achieve such a high skill level, it is best to start where you are and work on the basics.

A good first step is learning to listen carefully to your own self-talk.

Monitoring Your Self-Talk

Monitoring your self-talk means becoming aware of the constant stream of chatter that goes on in your mind, often without you noticing it.

Psychologists call self-talk by different names: roof brain chatter, ticker tape talk, monkey mind, gremlin thoughts, the little reprobate that lives in the attic of your mind.

Whatever you call it, self-talk is made up of an almost constant stream of thoughts, beliefs, stories, judgments, and conclusions that run through your mind.

We usually don’t know we’re doing it, or realize that it affects our moods and behaviours big time, but we continually comment to ourselves on our lives, our actions, other people, and their actions. We chatter away about what happens to us, what we think about what happens, what we think we *shoulda*, *coulda*, and *woulda* done about what happened, and so on.

Unfortunately, this constant nattering at ourselves and the world mostly happens outside our conscious awareness. That’s why it is so difficult to monitor and change, unless we develop special techniques to do so.

It is important to monitor your self-talk, though, because it affects your moods and emotions—and your actions are motivated by your emotions.

“Emote,” remember, means, “to move.

Unmonitored, self-talk—and the emotions it generates—can move you in ways you don’t want to move.

Methods for monitoring and changing self-talk are sometimes quite simple. They can also be quite sophisticated.

Meditation

Meditation is a sophisticated way to monitor your self-talk.

Meditation techniques were designed, in part, to still mind chatter so practitioners could experience “the peace that passes all understanding,” and access the deeper insight and wisdom that arises out of such peace.

Here’s what meditation teacher Eknath Easwaran says about the detachment from “problems” meditation can bring us:

Some of the chronic problems that millions of people suffer from today might be solved by gaining a little detachment from their minds and emotions, so they can stand back a little when the mind is agitated and see the ways in which it makes mountains out of molehills. Many problems simply are not real; they start to seem real only when we dwell on them. The thorniest problems to solve are those that are not real; yet most of us go on giving them our best efforts.¹⁵

There are numerous forms of meditation. It is not my place to advise you on types or techniques of meditation, only to say I know from experience that practicing meditation can be an excellent way to quiet and calm your mind.

If you’re not familiar with meditation and/or are nervous about it, I suggest you check out Herbert Benson’s book *The Relaxation Response*. Benson is a Harvard Medical Doctor who studied meditators and developed a non-religious relaxation technique that appears to provide many of the benefits of meditation.

Another excellent resource is Matthew Ricard’s book *Happiness: A Guide To Developing Life’s Most Important Skill*.

Ricard was a cellular biologist before he moved to the Himalayas to study and practice Buddhism. Twenty-five years later, he is the Dalai Lama’s French translator, and a key figure in the attempt to bring together ancient wisdom and modern science.

As well as outlining an excellent case for the benefits of meditation, Ricard’s book also describes specific techniques for practicing it.

Here are the other self-talk monitoring techniques I use with my clients.

Notice Trigger Words

During coaching sessions, I point out how often some clients use words such as *should, must, have to, never, ever, but, can’t, every, always, everything, nothing, totally*, etc....

Such words can be negative “trigger words” that cause you to exaggerate, judge, and catastrophize reality, and then feel awful as a result.

A client might, for example, say something such as, “Oh, I *can’t* do that.”

I stop them, and ask them to notice the “can’t.”

I ask them to notice what saying “can’t” does for them.

They usually say it makes them feel bad, stops them from acting, and erodes their hope for success.

I ask them to repeat the sentence and add “yet” to the end of it.

Saying, “I can’t do that, *yet*,” makes a significant difference in their feelings and actions.

I recommend you try this yourself.

Here’s an exercise to help.

Think of something that you’d love to be able to do but cannot. Preferably it should be something you have tried and failed.

Think about it, and then say to yourself, “I can *not* do that.”

And note how you feel.

Then, imagine the same scenario, but this time say, “I can not do that, *yet*.”

Notice how your feeling shifts.

When they add “yet” to the sentence, most people say they feel “uplifted,” or “hopeful.” They feel inclined to act, to find a way to do what they can’t *yet* do.

You can do the a similar thing with the words “and” and “but.”

From “Yeah, but...” to “Yes, and...”

When they first start coaching with me, many clients tell me what they want to create using the form, “I want this *but*....”

Then they list the problems, obstacles, and circumstances that they imagine prevent them from producing the results.

In what I call a “*Yeah, but...*” *structure*, the “but” negates the “yeah,” the desire. Saying “but” negates what the client says she *wants*, and stops her from acting on it. Often, clients tell me they’ve been describing their desires using a “yeah, but...” form for years.

It’s no wonder they had not succeeded in achieving those desires.

Once they realize that the “yeah, but...” form is dysfunctional, I suggest my clients substitute “and” for but.”

I ask them to say, “I want this *and*...”, then fill in the relevant current reality, including the factors that are already in place, those working on their behalf, and any they perceive as problems.

In coaching work, which is informed by the creative process, it is critical to separate desired results and current reality. We do not want reality to influence vision. When you *create*, you want what you want, *regardless* of current reality.

To be effective, your vision of desired results must reflect what you *truly* want.

You do not want vision to be about what you think is possible or probable based on current reality.

In the creative process, you start with a clear, compelling vision of a result you truly want, *and* acknowledge current reality, as it is. Then you make changes to reality until it matches your vision.

So, in creating, because it is key to aim for what you truly *do* want, it is critical to separate your vision from what you have and what you think is possible or realistic.

If you say, “I want to create a house by water, *but* I don’t have the money,” the *but* (and the negative emotions it causes) *negates* the desire. Your *but* cancels out your desired result. You feel deflated, even defeated.

And all before you’ve even really started creating!

Shifting to a “yes and...” form changes things significantly.

When you say, “I want to create a house by water *and* I don’t have money,” the *and* links the two statements in a way that maintains your desire, honours your current reality, and leads you to take action to close the gap between vision and reality.

It works even better if you say, “I don’t have the money, *yet*.”

You might therefore conclude: “I better start saving each month, and think about ways to increase my income,”

Or you might think, “Maybe I can start by house-sitting a house by water and test if I really want to devote time and energy to making that dream a reality.”

Either way, you stop defeating yourself and move toward the result you want.

Describe Reality; Don’t Judge It

To be accurate and objective about reality, simply *describe* it.

Don’t *judge* it.

To describe something is to state its characteristics, its appearance. Descriptions are best based on facts.

To judge is to form an opinion. Opinions are more like editorials than facts.

Opinions get in the way of objectivity. They prevent us from accurately seeing the facts of what we’re looking at.

So, to assess current reality accurately and objective, look closely and carefully at what is, or what happens, and simply state what you see.

Describe reality without exaggeration or distortion, without making it better or worse, without adding opinion or interpretation.

Establishing an accurate and objective description of your current reality provides you with a solid platform on which to take action toward your desired result.

I’ll cover skills for assessing current reality in much greater detail in Chapter 10, as one of the seven skills for creating almost anything you want—with whatever life gives you.

Don’t “Should” On Yourself, Others, or the World

Another thing I do to help my clients monitor their self-talk is point out when they “should” on themselves, others, or the world.

Remember Ellis’s “three most dysfunctional beliefs?”

They all included “shoulds” in the form of “I must...,” “You must...” and “The world must...”

This kind of grandiose thinking can be very damaging to our emotional mastery.

Most of us *should* and *must* much more than we realize. But once you’re aware you do it, it becomes much easier to stop doing it.

Once my clients notice their “shoulds,” I help them change their grandiose *demands* into more reasonable *preferences*. “I want...,” “I prefer...,” “I would like to have...,” work far better than “I should...,” or “I must...”

Better yet, “I choose...” generates a deeper level of commitment and generates more energy to act on behalf of what you are committing to do.

Watch for Exaggerations

I help clients notice when they use words that exaggerate the difficulty of what they want to do. Try the following example to see how subtle changes in word usage can escalate or decrease the emotional charge of a sentence.

First, think of something you want to do, but have difficulty doing.

Then say about that task, “It’s hard.”

And notice what you think and feel.

Next, imagine the task and say, “It’s so hard.”

Notice how you think and feel.

Finally, say, “It’s *too* hard.”

And, again, notice your thoughts and feelings.

Can you see and feel the difference the words “so” and “too” add to the simple, rational statement, “It is hard”?

Can you see how such words add a larger emotional charge to the sentence, and make it harder to take action.

Most people agree adding judgmental words such as “so” and “too” make a task harder than it needs to be. And exaggerating the degree of difficulty by using the word “too” can make your task feel impossible to accomplish.

If it’s “too” hard, why do anything? Why not quit?

Look for Catastrophic Conclusions

When you use absolute words such as “totally,” “absolutely,” “everything,” and “all,” you seriously distort your explanations of what happens to you.

Using such emotionally loaded words can cause you to exaggerate the permanence and pervasiveness of what happens, even to “catastrophize” it through a series of seemingly reasonable, but illogical, jumps.

“It’s *too* hard. I *can’t* stand it. I’m *never* going to succeed. I’m *doomed!*”

Using such illogical forms of explanation can cause you to jump to catastrophic conclusions that de-energize you so much that you quit acting altogether.

So, seek out catastrophic thinking and replace it with objective descriptions.

Here's an example.

"My partner left me. My whole life is *devastated*."

Really? Like lives were *devastated* during 9/11, or the Asian Tsunami?

No? Then like what?

Perhaps there is a more accurate, objective descriptor you could use.

"Devastated" is an example of an action-stopping absolute. It is so negative it makes you feel helpless, even hopeless. It makes almost any action seem futile.

Other action-stopping absolutes include words such as *never*, *nothing*, *anything*, *all*, *totally*, *every*.

When we use these words (in our mind, or in conversation) they stop useful thinking and action, and generate negative results.

Consider these statements:

"You *never* tell me you love me."

"*Nothing* I do pleases you."

"I'm *no* good for *anything*."

"It's *all* ruined."

Such statements usually generalize from a specific case to a general rule. Moreover, the rule is absolute. It does not allow flexibility or shades of grey.

"This *always* happens to me," means that each and every time you do x, then y inevitably happens.

However, such statements are rarely true. They rarely describe the whole reality to which we refer.

Often, they don't even describe the parts accurately or objectively.

I've had clients tell me, "This always happens to me," when, in reality, it has only happened to them once or twice.

We use such absolute statements for dramatic impact, but that impact is too often self-defeating and counter-productive.

A statement such as, "This always happens to me," can lead to what some call NBC thinking—nagging, bitching and complaining.

NBC thinking is a kind of victim thinking that leads to victim behaviour. It gets in the way of useful thinking, creative behaviour, and effective results.

Soften the Absolutes

You can soften absolute words by putting "almost" in front of them. Adding softening words changes a sentence from an inflexible judgment to a description.

In the statement, "This *always* happens to me," adding "almost" changes the meaning of the sentence significantly. The statement, "This almost always happens to me," changes the emotional charge that accompanies the sentence.

The softened statement is still quite general, but because the emotional charge is less, it is easier to further clarify your thinking and come up with a much less emotionally charged statement.

You might come up with one that is more accurate and objective, such as, “This happened twice in the last 10 times I tried it. I guess that’s not so bad.”

Instead of leading to helplessness and inaction as absolute statements often do, adding “almost” softens the absolute, and is much more likely to lead to action.

The “all or nothing thinking” of catastrophic conclusions can make us desperately unhappy. It turns stress into distress. It turns normal sadness, apprehension, and the blahs into gut-wrenching grief, anxiety, and depression.

While softening such thinking will not take away all of your negative emotions, it will reduce the unnecessary and self-defeating aspects of those emotions.

Coaching Helps

Mental rehearsal and review can help you become familiar with your own patterns of self-talk.

However, because it is sometimes difficult to monitor your thinking when you are experiencing adversity, it can be helpful, at first, to have an outside observer coach you in noticing and changing what you habitually say to yourself.

Such an observer can be a counselor, a professional coach, a good friend, or even a journal you interact with as I interact with mine. Spouses can also help but be careful; coaching your spouse to monitor his or her self-talk can be as dangerous as coaching them to drive a car with a standard transmission.

At the risk of sounding blatantly self-promotional, I recommend you hire a professional coach with skill and experience in emotional mastery.

I find that after about six to sixteen weeks of coaching in creating what matters most, which includes practicing realistic, positive self-talk, and regular prompting from me, my clients begin to catch themselves and change their self talk on their own.

With continued practice, they become able to catch and shift their thoughts and feelings in the moment, even to anticipate and change both before they cause problems.

However, to do so, they sometimes have to also use some physical skills that make it easier to apply the thinking skills they have practiced and mastered.

EIGHT

Physical Paths to Emotional Mastery

"If there is any sure route to success and fulfillment in life,
it is to be found in the long-term, essentially goalless
practice of mastery."

-- George Leonard

Catching dysfunctional thinking can be challenging, especially at first, and almost always difficult in the moment.

When your body is flooded by a "fight or flight" reaction, you freeze. Stuck between two drastic options, it is hard to think clearly and wisely. You forget about the swamp you set out to drain before you encountered the alligators.

This is where *physical* techniques of emotional mastery come in to play.

By mastering key physical techniques, you can make mastering your emotions and moods much easier.

PHYSICAL PATHS TO MASTERY

A number of simple yet powerful physical practices can help you interrupt the fight or flight reaction, and prevent the mental paralysis that accompanies it. Such physical practices can restore your neurochemical state to one that promotes clear and functional thinking.

Deep Breathing

One of the easiest techniques is just taking long, slow, deep breaths.

This is why the advice, "count to 10" helps to prevent you from overreacting. As you focus on counting, your breathing slows and shifts deeper into your chest.

Most meditation techniques include deep, slow breathing. Research shows that doing so changes brain wave patterns. It also changes the neurochemical bath that carries messages to all the cells in your body.

When I climbed frozen waterfalls in the Rockies, I often faced fear, even panic. To calm myself, I would slowly chant (to myself) “Ree” on an in-breath, and “lax” on the out-breath. “Ree...lax, ree...lax..., ree...lax...”

It worked well for me, helping turn threats into challenges.

I use the same technique when I’m asked a difficult or aggressive question at a workshop or talk. If I feel defensive or reactive, I say, “That’s an interesting question.” Then I rub my chin, look skyward as if I’m thinking deeply, and slowly, silently, chant, “Reee.... laax...”

Doing so prevents a “fight or flight” reaction. It helps me calm down and think clearly. It enables me to focus on the outcome I want.

When I have a clear vision of that result, I choose it by saying, “I choose...” and stating the desired result to myself. Then, I act in a way that supports the outcome I want.

With years of practice, I can do this whole process in under 10 seconds.

Energy Breathing

Another breathing technique that I use several times a day is pause, close my eyes, and take six long, slow, deep breaths. I inhale for a count of four or five, hold for three or four seconds, and then exhale for a count of eight. When I’m done I feel relaxed and refreshed.

My friend Sam Graci, an expert on nutrition and health, and author of *The Path to Phenomenal Health*, tells me this breathing exercise not only relaxes me, but it also changes my body chemistry from acidic to alkaline.

When we’re stressed and distressed, we are also often too acidic. As well as more vulnerable to colds and flu’s when we’re acidic, we also lose energy, which affects our stamina, alertness, and moods.

But, by breathing deeply and slowly several times a day, we force fresh, alkalizing oxygen into our deep tissues and clear out the stale carbon dioxide.

The result? We feel relaxed, alert, and energized.

Quick Coherence

Researchers, scientists, and program developers at the *Institute of HeartMath*® have developed a number of simple, yet powerful techniques that enable you to interrupt negative thought and breathing patterns, calm yourself down, and regain coherence between your heart and brain rhythms.¹⁶

I’ve had great experience with one of the simplest of these techniques, which the HeartMath folks call *Quick Coherence*.

Because the heart has the strongest pulse in the body, other body pulses, including the brain, tend to entrain with the heart when it pulses coherently.

Such coherence, research shows, quickly changes your brain wave patterns. It also alters the chemical balance in your bloodstream, restores emotional harmony, and makes it much easier to think clearly and effectively.

To practice the quick coherence technique, you need to do three simple things: create a heart focus, do heart breathing, and feel a heart feeling.

To create *heart focus*, place your hand over your heart and focus your attention on the area of your heart. The heart is up high, in the middle of the chest (not on the left as many think).

Once awareness is centered on your heart, practice *heart breathing*.

Imagine breathing into your heart for a count of five or six, then breathing out, slow and easy, also for a count of five or six. Do this for several repetitions, until you can feel your breath slow to a comfortable, deep, and natural rhythm.

Then, invoke a *heart feeling* by bringing to mind a positive feeling or experience, a time when you felt very happy and relaxed.

Re-live and appreciate that experience, and bring the feeling into your heart. Sunsets and smiling children work wonders for me. When you feel a sincere feeling of appreciation, enjoy it as you breath in and out of your heart.

Do this for a minute or two, or as long as it takes to restore your mind/body to calm, clear-thinking coherence. You'll feel the coherence as a sense of calm yet energized relaxation in your mind and body.

Quick Coherence and other *HeartMath*® exercises help clear fight or flight chemicals from your cells and replace them with feel-good beta-endorphins and dopamine, which produce more positive, productive feelings, thinking, and action.

The increased coherence you create using these techniques also makes it easier to apply the **ABCs**, and other thought-changing tools.

The *HeartMath* folks say such exercises even help you tap into your intuitive *heart wisdom*.

Once you restore coherence, they suggest, gently ask your heart a question about what to do next, or where to go, and listen without expectation. The results might surprise you. They did me.

I highly recommend these exercises. For more, go to www.heartmath.org

A Quick, Brisk Walk

Another simple technique to calm yourself and alter your body chemistry is to simply go for a brisk 10-minute walk.

To clear fight of flight hormones from your cell surfaces, and replace them with feel-good "molecules of emotion," neurophysiologist Candace Pert has shown you only have to walk long and brisk enough to break a light sweat.¹⁷

The chemical shift that occurs helps you relax. It increases your energy and alertness. And it helps you see reality more clearly and objectively. As such, it makes rational decision making much easier and more effective.

I find this technique so effective, not just for calming myself, but also for restoring energy and focus after 60 to 90 minutes of writing (or any work), that I try to go for three to five short, brisk walks a day.

This technique is particularly useful if you're too emotionally distraught to do the other mental or breathing techniques.

When you're very angry, anxious, or depressed, you are often unable to think clearly enough to use the **ABCDEs** or other techniques to change your thinking.

That's the time to take a brisk 10-minute walk. Or walk up and down the stairs in your home or office. If you prefer, do as I sometimes do and turn the music up on your radio or CD player and dance around your kitchen.

Ten minutes of aerobic exercise will help you relax, recover from the distress you felt, and restore your equanimity.

Got little kids? No way you can take a 10-minute walk by yourself? Too much hassle to get the kids dressed, organized, and out the door—and then they move so slow the only sweat you work up is an emotional one?

No worries. Darla, one of my coaching clients figured out that she could just grab a skipping rope and quickly work up a light sweat in the living room, while her kids played or napped or just sat and watched their wild woman mom whirl her magic rope. "It really works," Darla told me.

When you feel calm and can think clearly again, take another 10 minutes to apply the **ABCDEs** to your thinking, feeling, and doing. Use the Practice Sheets in Appendix 1, or active journaling, or one of the other exercises above.

This combination of physical and mental practices can make a large difference, especially those who are prone to emotional excess and drama.

Get Into *Flow*

Another way to interrupt distressful thinking and feelings, and restore calm, clear thinking is do something that puts you in *flow*.

Flow is that almost effortless, emotionless, timeless state we enter when we engage a challenging activity with well-developed skills that are equal to that challenge.

When I feel blocked in my writing and irritated or angry, for example, I often juggle for ten minutes.

Juggling is a flow activity for me. It brings both my hands and both sides of my brain into play. It takes my full attention. It's easy to immerse myself in the flow of juggling without much effort.

When I return to writing, I feel energized, motivated, and can usually see a way to transcend the block I faced, or write around it. Sometimes the block isn't even there any more. It was all in my distorted thinking.

Other physical techniques I have found that interrupt the fight or flight response and make it easier to think clearly are stretching or doing yoga, meditating, even cleaning house or whacking weeds with my golf club-shaped, manual weed-whacker.

Don't over do it, though, or it merely becomes a distraction. You'll lose the momentum of whatever you were working on. Ten minutes is all you need.

Then apply the **ABCDEs** to the adversity that brought on your distress.

Whatever you choose to do in the face of adversity, the point is to interrupt your reactive thinking/feeling pattern, and notice the adversity *and* your response to it.

Then, in the calm, clear space created by the interruption, decide what you want, and what do to create it—in spite of the situation you face. Then do it.

We will look deeper into the flow state as a way to create positive emotions in Chapter 9.

Sports and Physical Activities

Almost any sport or physical activity, if pursued without excessive desire or comparison, can help you produce the same physical and mental changes as the practices described above.

Regularly working out, or going dancing, or skiing, or hiking, or riding your bike or working in your garden can help you relax. It changes your body chemistry. It energizes you (if you don't overdo it). It makes you more alert, and calm.

Other leisure activities such as knitting, carving, weaving, and woodworking can have many of the same benefits to your mental emotional health.

In any activity, if your skills match a challenge, you can find yourself in flow, and will reap the benefits of temporarily stepping outside of time and normal consciousness. You'll feel gratified and satisfied when the activity is over.

Regular participation in sports and other activities is preventive. It can also be therapeutic. Many studies show that physical activities are as effective for relieving depression, for example, as antidepressants.

So take up a hobby. Find a sport you love. Go dancing. Sing.

It doesn't matter what you do as long as you enjoy it enough to do it regularly.

Thinking Clearly in the Moment

The capacity to think effectively in the moment emerges from technique to burn, which results from regularly and consistently practicing emotional mastery skills. A number of things you can do will help that emergence along.

To think about your thinking—in the moment—you must first notice and pay attention to any feelings of stress or distress. Ask, are these good feelings that come with useful stress? Or are they the unnecessarily bad feelings of distress?

Good feelings are exciting, engaging, and maybe tinged with a touch of nervousness. You feel relaxed, yet energetic, *up*, and eager to get on with things.

Bad feelings include fear, anxiety, and depression.

Sometimes you feel irritated, annoyed, frustrated, angry, panicky, or just *uptight*. At other times, you feel down, stuck, lethargic, and have difficulty knowing where to go or what to do. At worst, you feel helpless, hopeless, even despair. "What's the point?" you ask.

If you feel negative, do one of the physical practices for calming your mind and body, then ask yourself the following questions.

- **What situation** gives rise to these feelings?
- **What am I saying** about the situation, my self, and others involved?
- **Is what I say true? Really true?** Is my story or explanation as accurate and objective as I can make it? If you're not sure, dig deeper.

- **Ask, What assumptions am I making?** What do I *believe* about what happened? What *judgments* am I making? Am I jumping to illogical *conclusions*? Am I indulging in “what if?” thinking? “All or nothing” thinking?
- **Ask, Does my story support what I want?** Will it help me create the outcomes that matter to me? How do I *feel* when I think this way? Is this how I want to feel?
- **Ask, How would I feel if I let go of this story** and focused on what I want in this situation, for myself, and others?
- **Ask, What results do I want**—in spite of the adversity and how I feel?
- **Finally, formally choose the result you want**, and then move on. Take whatever next step occurs to you, or do something else until a next step occurs.

At first, it can feel cumbersome and awkward to ask these questions. That’s why I suggest you use the practice sheets and active journaling until they become second nature. This exercise is described in greater detail in Chapter 10, and there is a “Creative Moments” practice sheet for it in the Appendix.

When you can quickly ask and answer the questions above, you can better recognize irrational beliefs and feelings, and replace them with functional ones.

You shift focus from problems to results.

Taking ownership for results, regardless of a situation, helps you further shift your thoughts and feelings, and leads to effective actions and much improved feelings.

Don’t worry about being *too* objective, or *too* rational.

Not only does developing emotional mastery allow you to feel normal emotions, it helps you feel them fully, deeply, and free of over-reaction.

Such mastery provides a solid foundation for creating simple, elegant, and fulfilling success in all areas of our lives.

The Importance Of Practice, Revisited

Shifting from a pessimistic stance to an optimistic stance is, as I’ve said before, simple to read about. It’s even fairly simple to *imagine* yourself doing it. However, it is not simple to do in the face of adversity.

At the risk of belaboring the point, if you want to be able to apply these skills when you need them, you have to practice them when you don’t need them!

Many people don’t practice regularly. They practice *only* when things go wrong. Such folks use skills such as the **ABCs** merely to get relief from intense feelings generated by their distorted thinking about the adversity they face.

When they get relief, they do what eight out of nine cardiac patients do.

They stop practicing, slide back into their old ways—the very ways that brought about the intensity in the first place.

Such *reactive* practice helps them through difficult times, but it does not build mastery, or change the focus of their life and work from coping with problems to creating real and lasting results that matter.

Later, when intensity returns, they again reach for the **ABCs** to produce relief.

But because they haven't developed mastery in these skills, they have to start from scratch. They never get far enough along the learning curve to build momentum, or to develop true mastery with technique to burn.

This is a key reason why so many people fail to reap the full benefits of so many self-help approaches. They get it intellectually, but they do not deeply understand nor *embody* the skills because they don't use them regularly.

"Use it or lose it," asserts an old saying.

Such folk wisdom is backed up by recent research cited by Fritjof Capra in *Resurgence* magazine.

Capra describes a study that shows after two weeks we remember only 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, 50 percent of what we discuss, and 90 percent of what we experience.¹⁸

Use it or lose it! And Capra is *just* talking about recalling information, not dealing with complex and challenging life/work situations, or adversity.

The falloff from skill learning is more rapid.

Researcher Bruce Joyce showed only 15 percent of training workshop participants are able to apply their learning on the job. But, when coached to practice what they learn after the workshop, and to persevere in the face of adversity, over 90 percent of participants successfully apply their learning.

Therefore, to be able to embody and habitually apply emotional mastery to your life, work, and relationships, you not only have to understand it; you have to practice it regularly. Moreover, a little coaching is probably a good investment. We all need help mastering these skills.

Even many people who teach these skills sometimes can't apply them easily when the bad stuff hits the fan. Sometimes, I'm one of those.

I am usually good at this stuff, but there are times, when I face new and different adversities, or when several adversities stack up on me, when my skills are stretched to their limits. That's why I try to practice *daily*. I want to overlearn these skills. I want technique to burn.

Practicing daily, not just when you need it, helps you embody and master these skills. They become your natural, habitual response to adversity.

So, if you truly want to develop emotional mastery, and easily and effortlessly apply it to all aspects of your life, work, and relationships, I suggest you practice, practice, practice.

In Chapter 9, I'll outline a set of skills for *creating positive emotions* that will complement the skills you have learned so far, increase your day-to-day emotional mastery, and add a large dollop of delight to your life.

Then, in Chapter 10, I'll describe the skills to *create* almost anything that matters to you—in spite of what life gives you.

NINE

POSITIVE EMOTIONS, POSTIVE RESULTS

(R)ecent discoveries suggest that positive emotions are an essential daily requirement for survival. Not only do they improve your physical and mental health but they can also provide a buffer against depression and illness.”

— Tom Rath & Donald O. Clifton

We have all heard about mental illness. Entire university departments study it. Some hospitals deal with nothing else. Across the nation, programs exist to help mentally ill people. I am grateful they do. But what about mental health? Mental wellness? Mental and emotional well being. Who promotes these?

Europe’s arm of the *World Health Organization* defines *health* as, “the extent to which an individual or group is able, on one hand, to satisfy needs and realize aspirations: and, on the other hand, to change or cope with the environment.”

Health is thus not a problem to solve, but rather, a *capacity* to develop.

Emotional mastery develops your capacity for mental health, wellness, and well being. It increases your ability to deal with what happens to you, satisfy needs, and realize your deepest longing and highest aspirations.

Developing emotional mastery can provide you with basic skills not only to feel good, but also to *do* well. Doing well is the best way to build self esteem and positive feelings about yourself. Emotional mastery helps you manage your moods and create what matters most to you—*with whatever life gives you*.

Positive Platforms for Success

Explanatory style, **AQ**, and the **ABCDEs** provide solid foundations on which to satisfy your needs and realize your aspirations, especially non-material needs such as emotional well being, creativity, and resilience in the face of adversity.

These skills enable us to “change or cope with” our mental, social, spiritual, and physical environment—in ways that are healthy for us, and healthy for the systems of life on which all health, wealth, and well being depend.

While most conventional psychiatrists and therapists still focus on problems and disease, a leading edge of psychology is moving toward emotional mastery.

Researchers, psychologists, and consultants have recently founded a new field of *Positive Psychology*. Positive psychology practitioners make excellence, mental wellness, flow, joy, and authentic happiness the focus of their research and practice.

In the business and organizational world, David Cooperrider, Sue Hammond, and others gave birth to a new approach to bringing life, energy, and mutually desired results into organizations. *Appreciative Inquiry (AI)* helps people focus on what works, what’s going well, what they do best, and then design ways to maximize organizational strengths to support results they most want to create.

You might call *AI* a powerful approach to organizational wellness. In organizations that practice this and other vision-driven approaches such as those developed by Robert Fritz and Peter Senge, positive emotions flourish and reinforce each other.

Leading edge private and public schools and increasing numbers of educational researchers find students (and teachers!) do and feel better when praised for good work rather than put down for poor work. Although praise and criticism are both needed, rewards work better than remediation.

Rather than seeing themselves as mere information dispensers, and order-focused disciplinarians, forward-thinking educators are starting to see themselves as designers of learning environment, and coaches. Good coaches focus on students’ values and strengths, and help them develop, expand, and take advantage of both.

True, we all have weaknesses. But, this is not a “problem.” It’s the way life is. Overfocusing on “fixing” flaws takes time and energy away from expanding strengths, where the most leverage, success, and happiness are found. New research in businesses and organizations shows successful leaders capitalize on strengths and compensate for weaknesses by, for example, hiring people who excel in areas they are weak in. Success breeds success.

Virtuous Circle and Upward Spirals of Mastery

When we are successful at things that matter, positive emotions flourish. Where positive emotions flourish so do good work and outstanding results. It’s a virtuous circle, one that spirals up toward mastery, more success, and higher levels of mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness—in individuals and groups.

Throughout this book, we have seen that practicing emotional mastery skills not only dissolves negative emotions, it also creates positive emotions. What may not be as clear, yet, is that we can also create positive emotions for their own sake, because they just feel good, and improve all aspects of our lives.

Moreover, our days are full of simple, easy actions opportunities to create positive emotions. Doing so complements and makes the practice and development of emotional mastery easier and more enjoyable. It is another self-reinforcing *virtuous spiral*!

Consciously creating positive emotions significantly benefits your life. It also benefits relationships, families, organizations, and businesses in a dramatic way. There is no reason why creating positive emotions cannot also contribute to making the world you live in a little—or a lot—better.

The Benefits of Positive Emotions

A founder of positive psychology, Donald Clifton wrote extensively about the benefits of positive emotions on daily life, work, and relationships. Positive emotions, he and his grandson Tom Rath (an ex-Gallup Corporation researcher) point out in *How Full Is Your Bucket*, help us live longer.

They provide a buffer against negative health effects, anxiety, and depression. They enable us to recover faster from pain, trauma, and illness. They might even add more years to life expectancy than does quitting smoking (5.5 years for men and 7 for women).¹⁹

Other studies suggest positive emotions can even ward off the worst of the common cold. Researcher Barbara Fredrickson, director of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology lab at the University of Michigan says, “Positive emotions are not trivial luxuries, but instead might be critical necessities for optimal functioning.”²⁰

As well as physical health benefits, positive emotions can produce a myriad of benefits that add to our mental well being, and increase our ability to function well in relationships. Positive emotions, Rath and Clifton, conclude:

- Protect us from, and undo the effects of, negative emotions;
- Fuel resilience and transform people;
- Broaden our thinking, encouraging us to discover new lines of thought or action;
- Break down racial barriers;
- Build durable physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources that provide “reserves” during trying times;
- Produce optimal functioning in organizations and individuals; and
- Improve the overall performance of a group (when group leaders express more positive emotions).

There is more. Positive emotions generated by praise and accurate feedback increase performance in sports, learning, and on the job. They improve marriages and relationships. They help us raise healthier, more self-reliant and authentic thinking children. Learning to create positive emotions is a critical life skill we would all do well to master. Luckily, it's not hard to do so.

Creating Positive Emotions

Most of the ways to create positive emotions may seem like common sense to you. Some are very simple and easy to do. Others, though are more complex

and require a bit of uncommon sense, the ability to perceive and change your own thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Do Well and Feel Good

Positive emotions are a pleasant by-product of creating results that matter to you. William James defined *self esteem* as “feeling good about doing well.”

Therefore, creating results that matter is an excellent way to create positive emotions. Creating—both the process and results—leads to flow, and to the deeply positive emotions of gratitude, joy, and contentment.

Learning to consciously create what you most want in life, work, relationships, and your world can be one of the most powerful ways to produce positive emotions.

I will provide you an overview of the process for creating almost anything in Chapter 10. You can read a more detailed approach in my book *Simplicity and Success: Creating the Life You Long For*.

Other resources I recommend are Martin Seligman’s books *Learned Optimism* and *Authentic Happiness*. If you have children, you’ll want to get a copy of his book *The Optimistic Child*. I highly recommend it.

Close the Gap Between *Espoused Values* and *Values-in-Action*

To create positive emotions, it is critical we *objectively* assess our actions—*what we do*—in relation to vision and values—*what we say we want to do*.

Too often, though, we see our own actions through the lens of our “espoused values,” the values we aspire to, our intentions. Research shows, however, there is often a dramatic difference between *espoused values* and *values-in-action*.

This is not necessarily bad. As the poet Walt Whitman said, we are large; we can contain multitudes. But, if we are not aware of the gap between our espoused values and our values-in-action, we are not likely to do anything to close that gap.

I, for example, value compassion, gentleness, and grace. I aspire to act that way, without having to think about it. However, in reality, I can be a bit defensive when I think I’m being attacked. Therefore, in spite of my *espoused values* of compassion and grace, I sometimes act in ways my friends describe as “prickly.”

You could see this as hypocrisy. Or you could see it as me recognizing a gap between the values I aspire to and the values I habitually act on. Recognizing the gap is critical. If I espouse compassion but deny my edgy temper, I get in the way of my intentions. I don’t choose actions that support compassion and grace.

Recognizing the gap helps me to act in ways that are closer to the values I espouse. When I recognize my reality, I’m better able dampen my temper, and practice what I espouse. Doing so produces positive emotions: deep, authentic feeling of pleasure and gratitude as I master my behaviour.

You can take Martin Seligman’s *Values In Action: Signature Strengths Survey* at www.authentic happiness.org. It’s free, fun, and illuminating. Check it out!

Clarify Meaning and Purpose

Another way of acting on deeply espoused values is to commit to something with purpose and meaning. Committing to what truly matters, as I did when I developed *Earthways*, produces a wealth of positive emotions.

Back then, I didn't see myself merely helping teens have a fun summer at camp, though that was part of it. I also didn't just think I was inventing a job for myself and a few friends, or trying to change the Y's focus toward an ecologically sensitive way of being in wilderness, although they *were* part of my purpose.

Mostly, I was trying to help my teen charges, my staff, and myself develop a new way of seeing and being in the natural world. A way that would help us live lightly yet richly and authentically on the planet. I wanted to contribute to a larger shift in environmental responsibility I hoped was happening. In doing so, I tapped into one of life's great joys.

"The true joy in life," said George Bernard Shaw, is "being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one ... the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

At *Earthways*, I felt used by a mighty purpose. Focused on what I wanted to create, I didn't have time to complain the world wasn't making me happy. Besides, I was making myself—and a bunch of other people—happy.

Meaning and purpose add depth and richness to our lives and work. They also add engaging challenges that develop skill and mastery, positive feelings, and that elusive sense of flow for which so many of us long.

Creating Flow

Being fully involved with a challenge—an activity in which your skills match (or almost match) the difficulty of the activity—can give rise to that deep and satisfying sense of "flow" that positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes so eloquently about in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.²¹

When goals are clear, feedback relevant, and challenges and skills are in balance, attention becomes ordered and fully invested. Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings. Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes. When a person's entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind, whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake; living becomes its own justification. In the harmonious focusing of physical and psychic energy, life finally comes into its own.

In the flow state, we no longer seek comfort or pleasure. We no longer compare ourselves to others. We no longer measure success by the feelings or emotions it generates. Indeed, flow is free of emotional content.

Only after we have finished our climb, created our painting, or completed the dance do we become aware of the results we produced. Then, as well as pleasure, we feel a deep sense of gratification and gratefulness.

Anything from stamp collecting to writing to tango dancing to gourmet cooking to bird watching to skiing, rock climbing, and other sports can put you into the flow state. Anything that fully engages you can put you in flow. The more meaningful the challenge, the greater the chances of creating flow.

When you master the skills outlined in this book, you will find daily challenges provide opportunities for flow. And while flow is free of emotions, when you finish a flow activity, you feel a surge of positive emotions that enhance your day.

Caring and Compassion

Caring and compassion are primary paths to positive emotions. As the Dalai Lama says, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If *you* want to be happy, practice compassion."

Giving your best in terms of listening, understanding, and empathizing can produce wonderful effects. So can performing random and not so random acts of kindness. When you are kind to another, Donald Clifton says, you "fill their bucket." You add to their stock of kindness and caring.

All of us have invisible buckets. With words and actions, we add to others' buckets or dip from them. We do and feel our best when our bucket is full of positive emotions. We do poorly and feel badly when it is empty.

Even brief positive interactions can add to another's bucket. And adding to another's bucket also adds positive emotions to your own bucket.

A thank you note, for example, to a bureaucrat who expedited backhoe help when a ditch overflowed and water cut a path right to my back door led to positive emotions for both him and me.

Being nice to people you meet during the day can produce a ripple of positive emotions. Thank sales people. Be understanding with a person pushing two carts and three kids through a check out; let her (or him) go ahead of you. Give a sincere compliment to someone in your office who did something worth commenting on that day.

The best way to compliment someone is be specific about how what they did made *you* feel. It's best not to say things such as, "You're a super person," but rather to say, "When you helped me during that presentation, I felt so grateful. Thank you so much." That kind of compliment adds a lot to both buckets.

Caution: You do not have to perfect at any of this. Don't convert these suggestions to "shoulds" or "musts" and then beat yourself up if you can't always live up to them. As Oliver Wendell Holmes so wisely advised, "The great thing in this world is not so much where we are as in what direction we are going."

If you practice these suggestions and move in the direction of increasing your ratio of positive to negative emotions, that's good enough. That's what's important, not being perfect. If you're doing that, give yourself a hug.

Hug A Lot

Hugging and being hugged (respectfully) produce positive emotions. The respected family therapist Virginia Satir said her research showed we each need fourteen hugs a day for optimum mental health.

Another social researcher Ashley Montague pointed out the importance of touch to health. Our skin is our largest organ and perhaps the most sensitive. Montague showed that much caring and concern are transmitted through touch.

Research on *Healing Touch* techniques is beginning to confirm the importance of touch to health and well being. Even hugging your cat or dog can have significant, positive effects on such things as your heart rate and blood pressure.

Being A Force for Mental Health

Not only do the small, mostly easy-to-do actions described above create positive emotions for people on the receiving end, and for you, too. Those positive emotions ripple out into the world. Not just metaphorically but actually. Eventually, they will ripple back to you. And sooner, more likely, than later.

As we saw above, scientists at the *Institute of HeartMath*[®] showed heartfelt emotions affect the rhythmic pattern and pulsing of your heartbeat. The more positive you feel, the more your heart pulses with a coherent rhythm.

The heart has the largest and most powerful pulse in your body, about sixty times that of the brain. “So your emotional state is being broadcast to your environment,” say Doc Childre and Deborah Rozman in *Transforming Stress*, “and to the people around you.”²²

I once heard a nationally known psychologist say, “We can go around each day being a force for diminished mental health. Or we can go around being a force for positive mental health. The choice is up to us.”

Making that choice not only has a significant effect on your positive emotions and your life; you broadcast that effect to those close to you. The coherent pulse of your positive emotions ripples out into the world, where they interfere with other’s positive emotions in a constructive way.

Amplifying each other, growing more powerful, these small waves produce larger waves of positive energy that create effects far beyond you and I.

Why not give a try for a couple of weeks?

Gratitude, Appreciation, and Positive Emotions

A few years ago, I read about the “power of gratitude” in a magazine. The author suggested each evening before going to bed, we write down a half dozen things for which we were grateful. Doing so, she said, would make us feel and sleep better. Being a more than an occasional insomniac, I thought I’d give a try.

I bought a notebook, titled it “Gratitude Journal,” and began recording the things that I appreciated about each day. It worked! I felt better about my day. I felt relaxed, content, and fell asleep easier and slept longer. I was amazed such a simple technique could produce such powerful results.

Loving What You Have; Creating What Matters

About the same time as I was starting my gratitude journal, I re-read a book called *How To Want What You Have* by Timothy Miller. In it, Miller, a Buddhist- and Ellis-influenced cognitive therapist outlines ways to be happy with what you

have, even as you create what you want. One of Miller's primary suggestions is to practice *Compassion, Attention, and Gratitude (CAG)* throughout each day.

Compassion, means seeing others as you see yourself.

Attention means noticing, being mindful of each moment, experiencing it fully.

Gratitude means giving thanks for the many blessings you have.

When I first read Miller's book I tried his approach enough to realize CAG created positive effects. But, I didn't practice long or consistently enough for the skills to become habitual. I slid back into my old ways.

Back then, I still had a tendency to grind through each day complaining and griping. I was too critical to be compassionate. I complained too much about what was wrong to notice what was right in the world. I "should" on myself, others, and the world for not being as I thought they ought to be. When you're full of "should," it's hard to be grateful.

My understanding and practice of gratitude increased when I took Martin Seligman's *Values-In-Action (VIA) Signature Strengths Survey*. My VIA assessment showed "gratitude and appreciation" was one of my key strengths.

The theory behind the VIA approach is the more we apply our Signature Strengths on a daily basis, the more authentically happy and optimistic we are likely to be. The printout I received suggested I practice noticing things I appreciated throughout the day and feel grateful for them. This reinforced the CAG practice I'd started to learn from Timothy Miller.

I redoubled my efforts to practice appreciation and gratitude. I made it a regular part of my day. Now, I routinely practice appreciating and being grateful for my health, for work I love to do, for the freedom to live in such a beautiful place. I'm grateful for friends who care about me. I'm grateful for the people who appreciate my writing, coaching, and teaching.

Daily, I'm delighted by and grateful for the smiles and laughter of children. When I recall the saying, "a child is God's way of saying that the world should go on," I'm filled with warmth, joy, hope, and a deep connection to a positive future.

Practicing these simple acts of appreciation and gratitude has not only made it easier for me to love what I have. The positive energy generated by doing so makes it easier for me to create what I truly want.

Embracing the 10,000 Delights

As part of my daily routine, I also like to pay attention to what eastern philosophers call "the 10,000 delights" of nature.

I appreciate the songs of birds. I appreciate blue sky and misty fog. I'm grateful for rain and for the sun that shines through the clouds at the end of rain. All around me, I find things to appreciate and to be grateful for.

I am lucky. I have a good base on which to practice awareness and appreciation of nature. For five years, I was senior trainer with the *Institute for Earth Education*. I taught workshops in *Acclimatization*²³, a sensory and conceptual approach to ecological understanding and practice. Many of the practices I shared with children and adults were sensory awareness exercises that helped them become keenly attuned to and in love with the natural world.

The simple act of holding, rubbing, smelling, slowly peeling, and consciously eating a fresh orange on a crisp summer morning while you wiggle your toes in the cool sand of a mountain lake could become an act of love. Doing such exercises in nature reminded me of William Blake's famous lines, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And Heaven in a Wild Flower." That's appreciation!

I still use many of the practices I developed and taught during those years. Of course, these practices take time. To do them I had to learn to stop and take time to practice.

Stopping

Another daily practice I developed after I moved to the island is "stopping."

On my way to town each day at noon, I stop at a little bridge over a brook and let myself relax. I do the HeartMath® *Quick Coherence* exercise to open and soften my heart, and put myself in an appreciative state.

Then I lean on the railing of the bridge and watch and listen appreciatively as flowing water trills a harmony with thrushes perched in willows that draw sustenance from the stream. I let myself feel grateful for the intricate beauty and peacefulness of that little corner of the world, and for my place in it.

This small practice almost always has a huge impact on my day.

No matter what happens before, or how crabby or negative I let myself get (usually because my writing is not going as I think it "should"), *stopping* on the bridge for a minute or two to appreciate and be grateful for what matters to me almost always shifts me from negative into positive emotions. The whole day, including my writing, goes better from then on out.

I also practice *stopping* in other special places such as along the seashore, and at special times, such as before I eat, or start to write, or whenever else it occurs to me. It almost never fails to relax, refresh, and recharge me.

Gratitude and Success

One benefit of practicing gratitude you might not think about is it can make you more successful at what matters to you. When you are grateful and appreciative, you tend to get more of what you want in life and work. Why?

Because, largely, you get what you focus on. And when you pay attention to and give thanks for what you are grateful for, you focus on what you care about. Energy-robbing negativity fades away. In its place, you feel the highly energized sense of being focused on what truly matters to you.

"Gratitude is so important," says Wes Hopper, author of *The Astonishing Power of Gratitude*,* because it is powerfully attractive. Quoting Wallace Wattles, he says, "It connects us with the Source."

"You cannot exercise much power without gratitude because it is gratitude that keeps you connected with power. The creative power within us makes us into the image of that to which we give our attention. The grateful mind is constantly fixed upon the best, therefore it will receive the best."

* For a free copy of Wes's *The Astonishing Power of Gratitude* contact me through my website.

Gratitude for what is and what happens is a wonderful way to generate positive emotions. It helps you define life—the Universe—as friendly, a place in which to feel at home, and to thrive and succeed.

The Universe wants us to succeed.

It wants us to learn, change, and evolve. It wants us to free ourselves from habits that don't work, and transform ourselves, and our species. It wants us to enlighten ourselves and stretch our consciousness to embrace ever more of Life and the Universe. I think the Universe wants us to say "Yes!" to life.

I'm also pretty sure the Universe wants us to say "yes" to ways of living that harmonize with (rather than dominate and exploit) the natural systems of life on which all of our health, wealth and well being depend.

As we stretch, develop, and learn to live well on a healthy planet, we create ripples of positive emotions. And not just the pleasant, fleeting, surface emotions, but also deeper, meaningful, and life changing and world changing emotions such as love, compassion, contentment, and connection to meaning and Spirit.

From such a deep, solid foundation, creating what matters *most* becomes easier. And although it becomes more challenging, life also gets more engaging, exciting, and fulfilling. The ability to consistently say, "Yes!" to life is the most all-encompassing way to produce positive emotions and successful results.

Saying "Yes!" to Life

Although, as I mentioned before, I used to gripe and complain much more than I do now, I have always been a doer. As a teacher, when I did not like the public school, I left and set myself up as a free-lance teacher and coach.

When university jobs didn't work out, I created experience-based learning programs for environmental education, wilderness leadership, executive team development, and personal and professional mastery. When I realized that the corporate path did not have enough heart for me, I reinvented myself as a writer and a high performance, full potential coach.

But, as I said above, although I have always been good at what I do, the doing often drained me. I often felt as if I was slogging uphill through mud.

Getting to Yes

One day, I met an old friend who had created what I thought was a truly successful life. We chatted at length about how he'd got where he was in life.

John had been an architect; one of the best in his field. However, he'd had rough times. He'd felt he was swimming upstream against a growing trend to bland, corporate architecture and "money-driven design." In spite of winning awards for his designs, John left his profession, its politics, and an ugly, sprawling city. He set out to rebuild his life as a homesteader, artist, and family man in a beautiful rural valley.

There, he was happy. He and his wife built a house, cleared land for a farm, and grew their own food. John painted and taught. He enjoyed a wonderful

long-lasting relationship and helped raise inspiring, self-sufficient children. He sang in a barbershop quartet and a choir, played softball in town, and took on numerous challenges in the community. His paintings changed from pretty, but commonplace nature scenes to vibrant, character-filled paintings of people.

I asked him why he thought things worked out so well.

“Because I started saying ‘Yes!’ to whatever came along,” he said. “If an opportunity appeared, I took a look; I tried it out. In spite of fear or doubt, I said ‘yes,’ and went for it. That made a huge difference. I felt I was living my life without regrets.

“There was a downside,” he continued. “Saying ‘yes’ to everything that comes along can be a hectic way to live. I often had a lot going on. Sometimes more than I could handle.

“However, significance emerged out of all that doing. I learned I had to say ‘yes’ to the most important things to give them space to grow. To make that space, I learned to let go of less important things. Letting go is a way of saying ‘yes’ to change and endings. When I said ‘yes’ in that way, things evolved organically. I didn’t force decisions; they seemed to happen naturally. I became at ease with change, welcomed it. Results came easier for me.”

I came away from my chat with John inspired, but also a bit confused.

Although I made progress, things rarely flowed for me. I often had to force myself to make decisions and act. I frequently found myself trying to wrestle into being the things I wanted. My way worked, but that extra fifty pounds of rocks in my pack took its toll on me. It drained my energy and depleted my spirit.

The Word in Our Heart

After talking to John, I realized the wisdom of something I’d read but not fully understood. “Each of us carries a word in our heart,” wrote Martin Seligman in *Learned Optimism*, “a ‘no’ or a ‘yes.’” What, I wondered, was *my* word?

Through my *creating* work with Robert Fritz, I had started saying “yes” to what mattered to me. However, the dominant word in my heart was still “no.”

I still complained. In my attempts to better myself, and my world, I focused primarily on environmental problems, social problems, and personal and interpersonal problems. Most of my energy was sucked up worrying about things I *didn’t* like and *didn’t* want, and trying to get rid of them. Or relief.

Trying to force creations into being, I used willpower manipulation. I tried to overpower the forces in play using my will. That worked sometimes, but it was energy intensive; draining! Worse, the results rarely lasted.

I also used conflict manipulation as a strategy. Feeling sorry for myself because creating did not come easy for me (as I thought it “should”), I slipped into NBC thinking—nagging, bitching and complaining. (A friend once suggested that the perfect Halloween costume for someone wanting to go as me would be to wrap their head in a roll of toilet paper and carry a stack of self-help books.) Such thinking only depleted my energy, irritated others, and led to more problems and conflict.

Don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t like that all the time, or even most of the time. I created things. For example, I took the lead role in creating the mountaineering

school in which my witty friend made his living. I developed training programs, wrote published articles, and gave inspiring speeches. But, after my chat with John, I knew a strong, committed ‘Yes!’ was not yet the primary word in my heart.

When I made it so, things changed for me as they had changed for him.

When I learned about AQ and *ownership*, I let go of my *need* to solve problems—the world’s and my own. I focused on creating what I truly *did* want in my life and world. I stopped imposing my will on myself and on others. I stopped imposing it on my creations and the world in general. I began to do as the poet Rumi suggests in “An Empty Garlic,” when he says, “Let yourself be silently drawn/by the stronger pull of what you really love.”

It was a great day when I realized that success and happiness did not just come from doing well at whatever I turned my head and hands to. True success came only when I involved my heart, when I took ownership for what I wanted *most*, and said “Yes!” to my heart’s desires.

Suddenly, life got easier. The rocks disappeared from my pack. My legs felt stronger, my step lighter. The ground was solid underfoot. I felt as if I was striding easily up the mountains of my life.

Yes, I still faced obstacles and adversity, but I accepted rather than fight them. I embraced them as “givens,” raw material out of which to create what truly mattered to me. I learned from them, and rose above them.

It was truly a great day when I finally realized I could create success and happiness with *whatever* life gave me.

Embracing and Learning from Life’s Givens

I think the way we make ourselves happy is unique to each of us. The ways we make ourselves unhappy, though, are remarkably common to all of us.

Earlier, we examined Ellis’s “three most dysfunctional beliefs we use to make ourselves miserable.” Here’s another take on the same territory.

In *The Five Things We Cannot Change ... and the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*, “David Richo reminds us of these five immutable facts of life.”²⁴

1. Everything changes and ends.
2. Things do not always go according to plan.
3. Life is not always fair.
4. Pain is part of life.
5. People are not loving and loyal all the time.

Learning to live with these five truths can help you accept reality as it is and things as they are. These are life’s givens. If you fight these truths, you will lose. You will become frustrated, angry, and unhappy. But, accepting them as reality, and working with them, helps you think, feel, and act much more effectively.

Let’s say, for example, that a love affair you are committed to suddenly ends.

A certain amount of grief and unhappiness is natural, perhaps necessary as a way to help us learn from the experience. However, fighting the “five givens” can make us more than miserable. It can make us desperately unhappy, overly anxious, and hopelessly depressed. Here’s how it happens.

We start by arguing the relationship “should not have ended.”

But it *did* end. That’s our reality.

Arguing with ourselves, with the other, or with the Universe that the relationship should *not* have ended puts us in a position of arguing *against* reality. What does that bring us? Frustration. Grief. *More* unhappiness.

Worse, when we argue with reality, we lose touch with it. It becomes hard to orient ourselves, make decisions, and take useful actions. Action devolves into seeking relief from suffering—most of which we self-create by fighting the givens. Such relief-driven actions can be dangerous, addictive, and soul-destroying.

However, accepting Richo’s first given—*everything changes and ends*—allows us to accept reality with greater equanimity. We accept the end of the love affair with grace, which gives us increased personal power with which to move on.

Likely, we’ll still feel disappointed and saddened by this ending but we will not feel *desperately* unhappy. We will feel pain but we won’t suffer as we would if we did *not* accept the ending.

Accepting the second given—*things don’t always go according to our plans*—means we do not have to complain, “this is not the way it *should* be.” Who says things should always go our way? No one but us. And saying so pits us against reality.

Life isn’t always fair. That’s true; that’s the third given. Again, it does not help to whine and complain that the ending is unfair. It’s best to accept unfairness, learn from it, and move on. Try, try again.

And yes, pain arises out of endings, failed plans, and life’s unfairness. That’s the fourth given. *Pain is part of life*. But pain does not have to be desperate, overwhelming, heartrending pain. We do not have to *suffer* unnecessarily.

We suffer more from an ankle broken when we get hit by a rude skateboarder than one broken sliding into home to score the winning run for our slo-pitch team.

Judging pain as “unfair” increases its intensity. We create *suffering* (which pain specialists say is worse than pain) by fighting the given that pain is part of life, when we say, “it’s not fair,” or “there shouldn’t be any pain.”

Instead, we can say something such as, “This ending is painful, but I don’t have to make it more so by fighting it. I’ll get through it. This, too, shall pass.”

Taking this stance avoids suffering; the pain passes more quickly, and easily.

Finally, as we get on better terms with reality, we realize, sadly but not desperately so, that “*people are not loving and loyal all the time*.” Love fades. Loyalties shift. Bad things happen. This too is part of life, the fifth given.

Accepting this given can make an ending less personal, less about you and your flaws, weaknesses, and failings. Stepping back to the perspective of the fifth given, you can see that other people change and, sometimes, those changes cause them to shift their paths. Our paths diverge from theirs. Connections become strained, and then break.

Again, some of the sadness and disappointment of a failed relationship is natural, even necessary, but much of it is self-created and unnecessary. The unnecessary part comes from fighting against the reality—the given—that people are not always loving and loyal.

So, like a sailor on the sea of life, when change storms blow you off course, acknowledge but don't fight them. Focus on what you want, accept reality, and change course. That way you can go with the flow *and* move toward what you truly want to create.

It won't always be easy or effective. Difficulties and adversity will get in your way. So be it. Accept them. Give yourself time for appropriate sadness and disappointment. Then, by accepting and embracing the five givens, you will be better able to embrace and transcend negative feelings and keep moving in the direction of your heart's desires.

The Heart Wants What the Heart Wants

An old saying asserts, "The heart wants what the heart wants."

We do best to honour our heart's desires rather than deny or ignore them.

Saying "Yes!" to what matters to you is about embracing and focusing on your heart's desires. It's about keeping focused on what you want to create—even when you are unsure how to bring those desires into being.

Saying "yes" is also about embracing reality. It is about accepting the givens of life as challenges. It's learning, as John did, you sometimes have to let go of lesser things to focus on what matters. Letting go can be a way of saying 'yes' to what you most care about and want to create.

That things change and end, plans don't work out, life can be unfair and painful, and people don't act as loving and loyal as we think they should are not reasons to quit or give up hope. These givens are just aspects of current reality. If we want to create what matters most to us, we do well to accept, embrace, and transcend these realities.

Saying 'Yes!' to life, to your heart's desires, and to life's givens creates positive emotions. It generates energy you can use to practice emotional mastery and build a solid foundation of mental wellness and well being.

* * * * *

Emotional mastery is both an end and a process.

It can be learned, practiced, and mastered in such a way it becomes your primary way of being in the world. It also becomes your foundation for creating what truly matters. The ability to create what matters, grounded in realistically optimistic emotional mastery will help you rise above what Shakespeare called "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

Emotional mastery increases your resilience, your capacity to bring into being what you truly long for with *whatever* life gives you.

Emotional mastery can also become the platform upon which you create not only what matters to you, but also what matters to your children, their children, and the world you pass on to them.

Asking yourself, "What kind of world do I want to create for myself?" is a powerful and important question. But asking, "What kind of world do I want to create for my children, grandchildren, and their children?" makes it a much more meaningful task.

Emotional Mastery

If you accept and act on that task, it will challenge you, stretch you, and help you grow into your best possible self. If we say, “yes” to that challenge, life will open to us. We will become, as David Richo says, “the courageous, compassionate and wise beings we were meant to be.”

In Chapter 10, I will lay out a powerful, organizing framework and a dynamic set of skills for creating almost anything that matters.

I’ll show you how to integrate vision and reality, combine intention with attention and action, and focus best efforts on creating real and lasting results.

And I’ll show you how to do all that *simply, successfully, and sustainably*.

PART FOUR

CREATING WHAT MATTERS *MOST*

*"Those who do not create the future they want
must endure the future they get."*

— Draper L. Kaufman, Jr.

TEN

CREATING WHAT MATTERS *MOST*

"The best way to predict the future is to create it."

— Alan Kay

Success: *Simple, Integral, Rich, and Sustainable*

Why, you might ask, do I single out these four criteria for success?

Because they are the four elements my clients tell me they seek in success.

Although they are not always (or even usually) on the surface of clients' minds when I begin to work with them, as they clarify what they want and why, these four success criteria inevitably surface.

So what do they mean?

Simple, for most, has much the same meaning given by the Oxford dictionary: "easily understood or done; not compound; consisting of only one element or operation."

To simplify means to make things easier to understand or do, primarily by organizing them into an integrated, meaningful unity.

The simplicity my clients seek is not a problem-focused simplicity. It does not avoid the messy complexity of life, work, and relationships. It is a kind of simplicity that embraces life's messiness, and transcends it. It is the simplicity Oliver Wendell Holmes called "the simplicity on the other side of complexity."

This kind of simplicity is not achieved by merely getting rid of things you don't like and don't want. You create it by focusing on what you do like and do want, and bringing it to being.

Creating this kind of simplicity means you can do more (often much more) with less effort, energy, and complication. It means you are able to integrate diverse desires, choices, and actions around a small number of results that truly matter to you.

Integral means “of a whole” and “made up of component parts which together constitute a unity.”

An integral life is an undivided life, a life in which all the parts are integrated around a simple, coherent focus.

Although it is made up of a multitude of parts, an integral life has a unity—a oneness—to it. And in that unity, that oneness, it becomes simple and whole.

Rich isn't primarily about money. By *rich* my clients mean full, engaging, satisfying, and fulfilling lives. Rich, to them, means having an abundance of what *truly* matters.

Although everyone I work with wants sufficient money on which to build the life they long for, rich is more about *mastery* and *meaning* than it is about money.

My clients long to be good at things that are important to them, and that bring meaning and purpose to their lives. Today, clients also want the results they create to be environmentally *sustainable*.

Sustainable means they want to create results in ways that harmonize with the natural systems on which all life—and our own health, wealth, and well-being—depend.

Sustainable means being able to work within the natural limits of the Earth's basic ecological systems. It means giving back to life in equal measure to what we take.

Simple. Integral. Rich. Sustainable.

Although they don't always use the same words, and some have difficulty articulating these desires, nearly every client I work with ultimately wants the results—and the lives—they create to embody these four criteria for success.

Here are some examples of folks who made significant strides toward creating the simple, rich, and sustainable lives they long for, and continue to do so.

Dawna and Richard

Five years ago, Richard and Dawna were a young, well-off urban couple. She managed a branch of a regional bank. He trained teachers. Together they made \$170,000 a year and spent it all.

They lived well in a gated hillside townhouse complex, and owned a cabin on a rustic island. Dawna drove an expensive European sports car. Richard prized the rugged Japanese SUV he claimed was for "off-road trekking," but rarely saw mud or dust. The couple both traveled for business, and took frequent vacations to the Caribbean, Europe, and South-East Asia.

On the surface, all seemed to be going well.

To family, friends, and colleagues, Dawna and Richard seemed successful and happy. But beneath their surface contentment lurked deep resentments, unfulfilled longings, and a growing sense of desperation.

“We can’t keep up this pace,” Richard said when he first contacted me.

In an early coaching session, he and Dawna said they both worked too much, were apart too often, and no longer felt connected. They wanted kids, but couldn’t see how to fit them into such busy lives. They liked urban life, but longed to slow down, simplify a little, and maybe live in the country. Both wanted to work less and enjoy life, and each other, more.

“We’d also like to be more environmentally responsible,” Dawna said. We’d like to live a more local life, one that’s less dependent on oil and imported resources that have to be transported to us over long distances.”

But, their problem was, they told me, they didn’t act on such desires because they felt stuck.

“We’re mired down by our mortgages,” Dawna said. “We’re trapped by jobs and obligations. We feel held back by our own and others’ expectations. We know we shouldn’t be, but we are. We try to do too much, and end up scattered, unfocused, and frustrated. We’re afraid to stay the same, and we’re afraid to change. We’re not really sure *what* to do.”

As I worked with this couple, I noticed Richard tended to blame others for his and Dawna’s fear and anxiety. Dawna took it all on her own shoulders. She said she felt guilty they had not reached their “deeper, realer dreams.”

Both were astute enough to realize simplifying their outer life without simplifying and stabilizing their inner life would not produce the real and lasting results they *most* wanted. They knew merely clearing out clutter, selling off excess, and moving to the island would not produce the results they longed for.

But what would? What, they pondered, truly mattered to them? What did the future they wanted to create together look like?

And how could they bring it into being?

Dawna and Richard examined those questions in a *Creating What Matters Most* workshop and a follow-up coaching program. Working with me provided a safe space in which they could open up, and share their deepest longings and highest aspirations with each other.

Coaching helped them refine fuzzy concepts into clear compelling visions of results they wanted to create. It also helped them see where they were, and what they had in relationship to the results they wanted to create.

Both programs helped them increase emotional mastery. Their language shifted and their stories changed. Problems, obligations, and obstacles became challenges instead of threats. Pessimism about the future, and fear about their inability to create it, gave way to realistic optimism and a growing sense of adventure and experimentation.

As they developed their capacity to create and co-create results — independent of current circumstances, problems, and external events—Richard and Dawna’s confidence in their own creative process and each other grew.

Most important, a strong commitment to practice helped them apply what they learned. They capitalized on mistakes and successes. They built momentum. They created small results, alone and together. Then they

stretched and created larger results. They learned much from their own experience.

Gradually, they clarified what they each truly wanted. Then they shaped a mutually shared vision of the life they wanted together. With that as a guide, they began to bring their new life into being, piece by piece, creation by creation.

Today, Dawna, Richard, and daughter Ashlee live on a small acreage in a rural valley outside a small but cosmopolitan city. They sold their condo and cabin, traded sports car and SUV for a Japanese Hybrid, and bought a cottage they could fix up. Together, they retrofitted it with beefed-up insulation, solar panels, a wind generator, composting toilets, roof top water collection, and grey water systems.

Now, each works 50 to 100 days a year, mostly telecommuting with former employers and similar organizations. They earn less, but their simpler lifestyle lowered their costs. They have time and energy left for each other and for Ashlee. Their new life is simpler, they say, yet richer.

Dawna summed up their success, saying, "We feel free now. We are able to be true to ourselves and to what really matters to us. We no longer feel scattered; our lives feel unified and flowing. We are creating rich, happy, healthy, and successful lives that are (mostly) in harmony with our environment. We feel blessed."

Pat's Story

Pat's story is different in many ways from Dawna and Richards, yet similar in the kind and quality of its outcome.

When I met her, Pat was a single mom on welfare. Her husband left her without a cent. Her one pre-teen and two teenage children dabbled in gangs and drugs. She struggled to provide on the meager welfare cheque she received each month. But it was never enough. She felt overwhelmed and scared.

"Cornered by a shitty life," was how she put it, "with nowhere good to go."

Pat came with a friend to a free *Creating What Matters Most* intro session I offered. "It was just for something to do," she told me later. "I knew couldn't afford a workshop or coaching, but my friend wanted to go, so I said, 'Why not?'"

Pat learned fast. She used what she learned at the intro to get clearer about what she really wanted. She wanted to get off welfare, get a job, get her house back, and get her little family on a solid, stable path. Her heart told her she should take the workshop and learn how to create what matters with whatever life threw at her.

To test her newfound knowledge and turn it into skill, she called me and negotiated deferred payments to cover the workshop and coaching fees. I was happy to accommodate her, and agreed to take 10 post-dated cheques for \$50 each. She turned down my offer to let her attend the workshop for free.

During the workshop and follow-up coaching, Pat jumped joyfully into learning to create results, in spite of the "shitty" hand she'd been dealt.

Within six months, she took her husband to court and secured sole ownership of the family house in lieu of on-going support. As soon as title was in her name, she sold the house and bought a more affordable one. She used money from the sale to let her kids decorate a rec room and their own rooms.

When her middle son came back excited after a school-sponsored program at a YMCA environmental education center, he convinced the whole family they could live better, save energy and money, and help the environment by taking part in a 1-Tonne Challenge program to reduce consumption, waste, and emissions.

Working on this challenge, Pat's family came together like never before. The kids took on responsibilities they had previously shunned. Pat got off welfare, worked full time, and took classes at night to upgrade her skills. As part of their environmental program, they gradually shifted their diet to more natural, local, and organic foods.

"I've had my ups and downs," she told me a year later. "But since I shifted my focus from solving problems to creating results I want, the trend has been steadily up.

We don't make a lot and don't spend a lot. But what we spend goes toward what we *really* want. We're pretty happy and content. Much healthier. All the parts feel like they are connected to what matters. That makes me feel good."

Daniel

Daniel, a conflicted doctor, did an extended coaching program with me.

For his first practice *creating* project he chose (in spite of my reservations) to create a Porsche convertible. However, when this result didn't seem to work for him, I asked why he wanted it. After all, a car wasn't something he was really going to create; he was just going to save money and buy it.

After blustering about performance criteria and superior acceleration, Dan finally confessed the Porsche was really a fancy success symbol to park outside his house and show his friends and mother-in-law, "Dr. D. is doing okay!"

When I asked him if he was doing okay, he shook his head slowly and said, "No, I'm a mess."

He told me his marriage was failing and he hated his work. He'd wanted to be a biologist or a naturalist, and work outside, but his mother pressured him to become a doctor like his father, uncles, and grandfather. He acquiesced, did well in medical school, but said he now felt trapped by his profession. He felt sick, tired, out of spirit, and worried he had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

During a year of coaching with me, Dan made progress. He ended his marriage by mutual agreement. He shifted his practice to preventive medicine and wellness counseling, and began to build a new client list—and a new life. As he did, he started to feel alive again—healthy and full of energy.

He bought a low mileage, second-hand VW Golf with a sporty handling package. He spent his Porsche money on a mountain cabin where he retreated on weekends to hike, ski, and explore the natural world he'd loved since boyhood. When I last saw him, Dan said, "I'm finally creating the kind of success

I've longed for. It's real. It's meaningful. And it's integrated. Most of what I do is aligned with what I most deeply care about and want to create."

Dawna, Richard, Pat, and Daniel each harboured longings and aspirations that went far beyond conventional material success. However, for various reasons, they had not felt free to pursue those dreams. They all felt trapped by circumstances, and limited by the results of earlier decisions and actions.

Another client, a 20-year professional who said she was "terminally bored" in her work, summed up this common dilemma succinctly. "I feel trapped," she confessed, "in a job chosen for me by a naïve 18-year-old."

Still another, a youngish corporate executive, told me his life, which revolved around a fast-track career he stumbled into by accident, felt like an out-of-control freight train.

"I'm hurtling toward I-don't-know-where," he said, "and scared that when I get there, I won't like it. Sure, I'm making money, and some of that is okay. But it's not what matters most to me. I'm pretty sure there's more to success than salary increase and promotions in a job you don't like."

What Most Clients *Really* Want

Although they are already successful in many ways, most of my clients share common feelings of being stuck, trapped, or drifting in their current reality. Although good at what they do, they long to rise above their current situations and create what truly and deeply matters to them.

But, all too often, they don't know or can't articulate *what* truly and deeply matters. And, even if they did, they tell me, they feel stuck because they don't know—or don't think they know—how to bring what matters into being.

As they get clearer and more concrete about what matters, clients tell me they want to create mastery and meaning in their life.

They want to do work they are good at and that returns enough income on which to live a simple yet comfortable and fulfilling life. They also want to work in ways that leave them time and energy to enjoy the whole of their life.

They want time to pursue leisure activities that engage, challenge, and stretch them. They want to learn and grow. They want to immerse themselves in that elusive sense of flow that positive psychologists tell us comes from taking on meaningful challenges that match our skills.

They want purpose and direction, a connection to things and causes bigger than themselves. Many recognize, as G.B. Shaw did, that the true joy in life is serving a mighty purpose, not sitting, stuck, wondering why the world won't make you happy.

They dream of safe, healthy, happy, and fulfilling family lives. They want to spend more time with their partners and children, do more things together, and interact more with their extended families.

Single clients dream of connecting with friends and colleagues in meaningful and engaging ways. Many talk about becoming part of a "tribe" of folks with similar interests and desires.

Almost everyone wants to be fit, healthy, and active *throughout* their life. Many are entering or about to enter the second half of their life, and see it as a great opportunity, a second chance, to truly live freely and fully. Some want to be "younger next year," to be able to ski better at 75 than they did at 40. As one client put it, "I want death to catch me *ALIVE!*"

Each year, I work with more clients who feel drawn to help create healthy, harmonious, and sustainable neighborhoods, communities, and cities. Most want to create their own experiences rather than consume packaged experience.

But, for many, such success remains illusive, merely dreams without substance. That's why they come to me for help.

Over and over again, people tell me, because of limited circumstances and a lack of resources, they fear their true desires are beyond them.

Current reality, they lament, is just too difficult to overcome.

Reality Is *Not* Your Enemy

When clients tell me they fear their dreams are beyond them, I politely ask, "So, what?"

Most of our dreams are beyond our *current* capacity. That's what makes them dreams. Not being able to create what you want with your current capacity does not mean you cannot make your dreams a reality over time. It just means you can't create them *yet*.

To bring dreams into being, you have to stretch. You have to learn, develop, and deploy new skills. You have to practice those skills and learn from your own experience. Doing so builds your capacity to create what matters.

Besides, it's not so much reality that prevents people from creating what truly matters to them. It's more how they deal with reality.

Dreamers, for example, often get stuck in problem solving.

They mistakenly judge their inability to create their dreams as a problem to solve. So, instead of focusing on the results they *do* want, many focus on getting rid of what they *don't* like and *don't* want—i.e., the negative feelings of frustration, anger, anxiety, and sadness over "failed" dreams.

Why? Because that's what they know how to do. That's what they've been taught. It's what society reinforces. So they focus on problems.

But problem solving, as we saw earlier, too often brings only temporary relief from negative feelings. It doesn't lead to real and lasting results. And, because they don't know yet how to transcend problems by consciously creating what they most want, non-creating dreamers feel trapped by circumstances and events.

They become cranky, uptight, frustrated prisoners of their own current reality. "Scratch a cynic," says my colleague Peter Senge, "and you'll likely find a frustrated idealist."

But reality does *not* have to be your enemy. It can be your *ally*!

The inability to create what matters is not a problem to solve. It is just the way things are, right now. It is an opportunity to learn, grow, and develop your creating capacity.

Moreover, you don't have to fix or get rid of your current reality to bring into being what you want. By developing your capacity to *create* what matters—with whatever life gives you—you can start where you are, with whatever you have, and *learn* to create the success you most want.

When you start to consistently create the results you want, you realize you're not trapped. You're free, and have always been free.

One of the most important keys to creating what matters is understanding the difference between *freedom from* and *freedom to*—and how they relate to problem solving and *creating*.

Freedom *From* and Freedom *To*

When people think of freedom, they often think about what they want to be *free from*: mortgages, dead end jobs, bossy superiors, bad habits, failing relationships, and other obligations and restrictions they think limit them.

When you focus on *freedom from*, you focus on things you want to get away from—things you don't like and don't want. Your choices and actions are designed to get rid of those things, or to get relief from them.

Sometimes, this is appropriate, but focusing only on *freedom from* puts you smack in the middle of problem solving, viewing reality as an enemy rather than an ally.

But *freedom from* is only a part of true and complete freedom. Being *free from* constraints, restrictions, and obligations may sometimes be a condition for true freedom, but it is not nearly as important as *freedom to*....

Freedom to is a different kind of freedom than *freedom from*. It is the version of freedom the Oxford dictionary defines as, "the power of self-determination; independence of fate or necessity."

Say, for example, you are standing at the top of a high cliff. No fences, regulations, guards, or other constraints restrict you from jumping off. Standing there, you are *free from* such restrictions and constraints. But, unless you're equipped with hang-gliding skill, experience, and equipment—i.e., *capacity*—you're not really *free to* jump off (at least not without killing or maiming yourself).

Freedom to create comes from having the capacity—the tools, skills, and experience—to successfully do what matters to you. True freedom comes from being able to create what you want in all aspects of your life, work, and relationships—*independent of fate or necessity*.

Developing the emotional mastery to see that reality is not your enemy enhances your overall *freedom to*. Emotional mastery allows you to embrace reality as the given you have to work with. Seen that way, current reality becomes the raw material out of which you create results that matter to you.

By mastering your own creative process, and developing emotional mastery, you will be able, as true creators have always been able, to create

results you want, regardless of the circumstances you face, or the feelings you feel.

Rather than focus just on *freedom from*, on what you don't like and taking action to get away from it, you greatly expand your sense of freedom and power by shifting your focus to what you truly *do* want.

That way, you can accept current reality as just the way things are, for now. You can begin to take small actions that teach you what you need to know and do to move consistently in the direction of your dreams.

Skills and Structure for Creating What Truly Matters

Creators use seven essential skills to create what they really want. I'll describe those skills shortly, after I outline the structure of the creative process

The seven creating skills do not comprise a *formula* for success, but rather a *form*—a dynamic organizing framework common to all acts of creating.

A *formula* is rigid and prescriptive. It is often overly restrictive.

A *form* provides a guiding structure, skills, and principles, but the process—the actual doing—is left up to you. You make it up as you go, much like musicians improvise within the jazz or blues forms.

The *creating* form includes a set of creating skills *and* an organizing framework that ensure your choices and actions support your vision and values, and lead to the results you most want to create.

Just as creators have long created works of art, literature, music, architecture and other creations, you can use the skills and form of creating to bring into being the results you most want to create in your life, work, relationships, and just about anything that matters to you.

The Form—and Framework—of Creating

The form of creating is driven by vision, grounded firmly in current reality, and focused on actions that lead to learning, feedback, and desired results.

As you work your way through the skills and structure of this framework, you will see that the creative process is a powerful system for organizing and taking actions that support desired results — independent of current reality.

The framework for creating almost anything has seven main components integrated within a dynamic system. The components are:

Vision: *a clear picture of a desired result, clear enough that you would recognize it if you created it.*

Current Reality: *a clear, objective, and accurate description of the current state of the result.*

Creative Tension: *the energy arising out of the gap between vision and reality, which creators use to power and guide their actions*

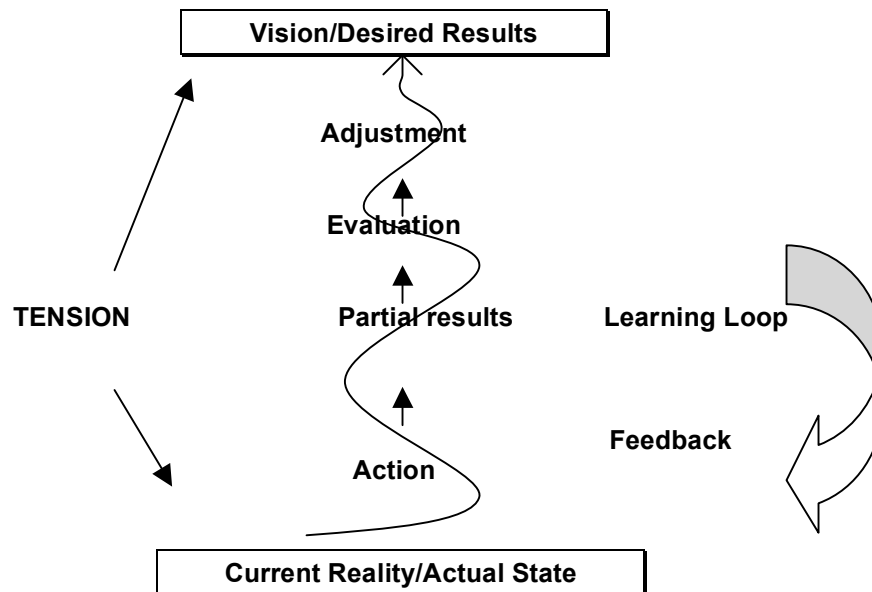
Action/Learning: Choices and action that supports the completed result in accord with the specifications of Vision.

Evaluation and Feedback: Ways to determine the effects of your actions and measuring their effectiveness—and updating current reality.

Create and Adjust: Creators craft results, slowly shaping reality into the form specified in the vision. The wiggly line in the diagram below indicates the process of making up the path as you go.

Completion: Strategies for finishing fully and moving on to produce other results using the momentum and energy of completion.

The Creative Framework:



By embracing the *whole* process — vision, reality, and action — you are able to simplify, clarify, and harmonize the process of producing results.

Because the creative process *embraces and transcends* problems as part of current reality, it is a far better framework for creating the simplicity on the other side of complexity than is problem solving.

Working within this *creating* form enabled Richard and Dawna, Pat, Daniel, and thousands of others to create their versions of success. Mastering both the form and skills of creating can enable you to do the same.

Seven Skills for Creating Almost Anything

The following seven skills or practices, when integrated within the form of creating, allow creators to create results that matter to them—with whatever they have to work with.

1. Create A Clear and Compelling Vision of What You *Most* Want.

Creators focus on what they love and want to see exist.

Then they get clear about where they are and what they have to work with.

When vision and reality—and the gap between them—are clear, they take action to close that gap, and bring their desired results into being.

So can you.

When you shift your focus from solving problems to *creating* results that matter, a problem-driven process such as, "lose all this extra weight," becomes, a *vision*-driven result such as, "a healthy, fit, well-toned body that is strong, energetic and attractive, and fits into size "x" jeans."

"Quit smoking," becomes *"Create, clean, strong, fit, healthy lungs."*

"Solving pollution," becomes *"Creating, clean, healthy watersheds and clean air in my community and region."*

It's fine to start with concepts such as "health," "simplicity," "success," or "sustainability." To be effective, though, fuzzy, general concepts are best focused into clear, compelling *visions* of completed results that motivate and guide you to action.

So, step one in crafting an effective vision of a desired result is *specify* the result you want as clearly and compellingly as you can. Here are a few examples of desired results taken from clients I work with:

"Full-time children's book writer and story-teller, making a comfortable living doing what I love."

"A 2000 square foot retail store in Manhattan, selling high quality ecologically and organically sourced clothes, accessories, and home products."

"An organic fruit and vegetable market gardener, providing food for 500 local families and earning \$50K a year, after taxes."

"A values-driven coaching business that enables me to help make my community healthy, livable, and ecologically sustainable."

"A fit, healthy, flexible, and energetic body. Able to ski all day and dance all night—even when I'm 80. Mentally, emotionally, and spiritually fit, too. Deep connections to my family, my community, and the natural world from which I draw so much energy and inspiration."

You'll notice some of these visions are clearer and more specific than others. A vision of a desired result does not have to be perfectly clear, but it does have to be *clear enough* that you would recognize it if you created it.

Besides, visions get clearer when you ground them in current reality, and act on them. Vision tends to grow in the doing. As you learn from your actions, your visions get clearer and more compelling.

A clear, compelling vision gives you focus. Focus generates energy and power. You use that energy to take actions to bring your vision into being.

With focus, for example, the concept, "A *better car*," becomes a vision of, "A *2-door, candy-apple red, Honda Jazz Hybrid, which gets 70 mpg, has a navy blue, natural fiber interior, and a 4 speaker Alpine CD system.*"

You generate more *creating* power if you envision your desired result as if you already created it. *"My body is fit and strong. I can hike all day without*

stiffness the next morning. I'm full of energy and enthusiasm. I feel terrific and people tell me how healthy and vital and attractive I look."

It is important to understand this is *not* positive thinking, or affirmation.

You are not telling yourself you *will* get what you want, only that you truly *do* want it. You still have to *commit* to your vision of what you want—by *choosing* to bring it into being —and *take action* to support your choice.

Also, throughout the creative process you ground both visions and actions in accurate, objective assessments of current reality. But, for now, don't worry whether your vision of a result you want to create is realistic. Don't worry whether you have what it takes (time, money, talent, resources, etc...) to make it happen.

A vision does *not* have to be realistic; it only has to be what you *truly* want.

The heart wants what the heart wants. "Your vision will become clear," said psychologist Carl Jung, "only when you can look into your own heart." When you craft visions of desired results, it is most important to honor your heart's desires.

You, like the Wright Brothers or Sharon Wood (the first North American woman to summit Mt. Everest, and my first coaching client) won't know if your heart's desire is realistic or even possible until you bring it into being.

And when you do bring it into being, other visions, other summits will beckon to you, often with deeper meaning and more compelling purpose for you.

A vision, as Rosa Beth Moss Kantar says, is not just a picture of what could be; it is an appeal to your better self, a call to become something more.

So look into your heart. Let your aspirations soar. Be visionary. Go for what truly matters to you. Grounding your visions in reality is the next step.

2. Assess Current Reality Accurately and Objectively

Vision not carefully grounded in reality is merely wishful thinking.

To create anything, you have to start where you are, with whatever you have. To get where you want to go, you need to know *both* your destination (vision) *and* your starting point (current reality).

If, for example, you want to go to Boulder, Colorado and think you're in Boston, but are *really* in Seattle, you will head in exactly the wrong direction. You and your spirit will also get a bit damped in the process.

To ensure they work from a stable and solid platform, creators carefully assess and objectively *describe* where they are and what they have in relationship to their visions of desired results.

Unfortunately many non-creators tend to misrepresent current reality to themselves. Instead of describing reality clearly, they *judge* it. They say things such as, "*Everything* is wrong", when a small part of their life might not work.

Or, just as inaccurate, some say, "*Everything* is great", when it really isn't.

They distort, exaggerate, and leave out what they don't like. They exaggerate and add to what they do like. Then they try to act on those

distortions. They try to act on a made-up version of reality. Doing so is like thinking you're in Seattle when you're really in Boston. It greatly decreases the likelihood of creating the success you want.

As my mentor Robert Fritz drilled into me, the key to accurately and objectively assessing current reality is, "Describe it; don't judge it!"

Describing reality objectively takes the emotional charge off it. Without an emotional charge, it is easier to see reality as it *really* is. It is easier to change reality, and to move toward the results you want to create.

Remember this example from the section on "mental paths to mastery?"

Think of something that's difficult for you to do or create. Something you care about and would love to bring into being but can't do, yet.

Then say, "It's hard," and notice how you feel.

Next say, "It's *so* hard," and notice how your feelings change.

Finally, say, "It's *too* hard," and notice your feelings.

All three statements are judgments about reality, not objective descriptions of the task. They are opinions about the difficulty of the task in front of you.

The first judgment distorts because it judges the task as hard, rather than describing your *feeling* that it is hard. Imagine doing the task with someone you are deeply attracted to. Does the focus on difficulty shift? Do you feel different?

When you add "so" and "too" to "It's hard," you increase the level of judgment and up the intensity of negative feelings associated with the statements. The statement, "It's *too* hard," has a strong emotional charge, which quite possibly would prevent you from taking any action.

Take it one step further. After judging the task to be *too* hard, conclude, "It's *impossible*; I could *never* do that." Is such a statement going to move you closer to or farther away from the result you want to create? Not likely!

The stronger your judgment, the more intense the emotional charge, and the harder it becomes for you to create what you want to create.

The more you develop emotional mastery, the easier it will be for you to accurately and objectively assess current reality relative to your visions of desired results. When you learn to manage your language, stories, and moods, the easier you will find it to create results that matter to you.

All the mood-managing skills I outlined in earlier chapters can help you ground your visions of desired results in accurate, objective assessments of current reality. When you do, you set up a solid, stable foundation on which to make choices and take action in favor of your vision.

You also set up a useful *creative tension* between your vision and your current reality. Such tension is a powerful source of energy and guidance.

3. "Creative Tension"—The Engine *and* Container for Creating

To successfully create results you care about, hold vision and reality in dynamic tension. Tension sets up a tendency towards movement. You can learn to direct that movement in the direction of your vision.

But only if it is *creative* tension.

The tension I'm talking about is not emotional or psychological tension. It is an engaging tension that feels more like excitement, or attraction. It feels good, motivating, and empowering.

When you set up creative tension, you want to move toward your vision.

To set up creative tension, hold a clear picture of a vision you want to create in your mind.

Then add a clear picture of your current reality.

Finally, hold both vision and reality in mind at the same time, as if you were viewing them on a split screen. I put vision at the top and current reality below, and a space between them. You can play with it to find what works for you.

Holding a clear, compelling vision in mind *together with* an accurate, objective picture of current reality sets up a *discrepancy*—a gap—out of which the engaging, useful, and creative tension arises.

Creative tension generates *energy* you can use to close the gap—to take action and move from where you are to where you want to be.

To get a sense of how creative tension works, imagine a rubber band stretched between *Vision* and *Current Reality*. The tension in the rubber band wants to resolve. It wants to move, to go somewhere. There are *only* three ways it can do so.

1) Let go of your vision, and give up your goals.

Quit. Give up. Let go of your vision. When you do, the tension resolves toward current reality, towards the status quo. You're back reacting or responding to circumstances, solving problems and trying to avoid negative emotions.

2) Move part way toward vision, but stop if it gets uncomfortable.

Compromise. Camp. Take some action but settle for less than you truly want. Because such compromise is not satisfying, here too, the tension will eventually resolve to current reality. You'll be back reacting to what happens to you, not creating what you want.

3) Commit to your vision, honour current reality, and take action.

Keep climbing. Use the energy of creative tension to take actions. Learn from experience, adjust your actions, and gradually change reality until it matches your vision.

Only this third approach consistently produces real and lasting results.

As well as generating energy, creative tension also provides you with the guiding framework—the container for creating—in which your actions are more likely to support the results you want to create.

The relationship between vision and reality sets up the creative framework. It also sets up a container for creating—an *organizing framework*—in which you explore, experiment, innovate, try out new things, and tap into your deep intuitive powers without getting sidetracked from the result you set out to create.

Energy in such a framework always seeks the path of least resistance.

By setting up, holding, and resolving creative tension in the direction of your dreams, you set up a path of least resistance along which your energy flows more naturally toward the creation of the results you want to create.

Although the framework is usually *tight*—constrained by vision, reality, and creative tension—the process is usually *loose*. It is open, playful, exploratory, intuitive, inventive, and innovative.

“In the house of the creator,” says Robert Fritz, “invention takes precedence over convention.”

So, as a creator, you will often make up your process, or path, as you go.

Doing so within the framework and container of creative tension is key to consistently making choices that support your vision and honour current reality.

4. Choice Is Essential In The Creative Process.

As part of their creative process, creators make several important kinds of interrelated choices.

Foundation Choices: First, creators make *the foundation choice* to operate in the creative process—to be a creator.

Formally or informally, they choose to be the predominant creative force in their own life. They take ownership for results—creations—they want to bring into being. If you want to create your own life, you want to make this same foundation choice, and others.

Personally, I make the foundation choices to be *healthy*, to be *free*, to be *true to my whole self/Self*, to *create what matters to me in a way that matters to other people, my community, and the world*, and to *live simply and in harmony with the systems of life on which my life, and all health, wealth, and well being, depend*.

Others make foundation choices such as *to live in peace*, *to practice compassion*, *to work for the enlightenment of all beings*, and *to live by the values and tenets of their faith*. You can make up your own choices based on your deepest and truest values.

Although you don’t act directly on foundational choices, they create a context for other choices. They establish a kind of internal compass that ensures your choices about results and actions are aligned with what matters most to you.

When coaching clients report they have stalled or begun to backslide, the first question I ask is, “Are you making your foundation choices? Do you have them printed out and tacked up above your desk, or on your fridge?”

The answer is usually “no.”

So I suggest they start conscientiously making those choices again. That’s usually all it takes to get them unstuck.

I make my own foundation choices every morning in a ritual that includes a walk along the cliffs above the ocean, followed by stretching and other wake-up-

the-body/mind exercises. After a stop to get my go-cup filled with dark coffee, I feel focused and ready to approach my day as a creator.

Primary (Results) Choices: Within the context of foundation choices, creators also make *primary choices*. They choose—and *commit* to creating—the specific *results* they want to create.

Out of all the possible visions you could work on, you make a specific result (or several at a time, but not too many) primary by *choosing* to create it. To make such a *primary choice*, say, “I choose to create “x” by (a specific time).

I have files full of ideas I’d like to write about. It’s impossible to work on them all at one time, so I elevate some of those ideas to primary choices. I choose to create a specific article or a book or a newsletter piece.

Great power is generated when you shift from merely thinking about results you want to create to actually choosing to create them.

The Power of Commitment: W.H. Murray, a Scottish mountaineer captured the essence of this power when he described a critical point in the 1950 Scottish Himalayan Expedition.

The expedition had encountered many difficulties and setbacks. Doubt and uncertainties surrounded it. Team members were unsure whether to go or stay. Yet, in the face of that uncertainty, they decided to make the trip to Everest a primary choice. They committed to it. “We put down our passage money,” Murray said, describing the moment of choice, “booked a passage to Bombay”.

“This may sound too simple,” he added (in a paragraph you may have seen mistakenly attributed to Goethe), “but it is great in consequence. Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one’s favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamt would come his way. I have learned a deep respect for one of Goethe’s couplets:

*“Whatever you can do, or dream you can begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.”¹*

Secondary (Action) Choices

Having committed to their primary choice, the expedition members then made a series of *secondary choices*.

They ordered supplies, developed climbing strategies based on maps and reports from previous expeditions, arranged for overland transportation, and began to train to get themselves fit for the challenge ahead.

¹ Murray, W. H., *The Story of Everest*, J.M. Dent & Sons London

Later, on the mountain, they had to make many more secondary choices, all of which flowed from their original decision to commit to Everest as a primary choice.

Secondary choices are action steps you take to bring your primary choice — your creation — into being.

A painter experiments with colour tones so she can capture the subtlety of her vision. Athletes get up at 5:00 AM to train because it supports their vision of a gold medal. Participants in a *Simplicity and Success* program track their daily expenditures so they can know where to cut expenses and increase fulfillment. Supporters of environmental sustainability buy unbleached paper and organic cotton clothes, grow organic vegetables, and recycle as steps toward a sustainable life and community.

The primary-secondary hierarchy makes organizing daily choices and actions much simpler and easier to manage than randomly reacting or responding to external forces and circumstances.

When you are clear about and committed to your primary choices, it is simpler to make strategically supportive action choices. You make them not because you have to, but because they support what you truly want.

*In the creative process, secondary (action) choices are **always** made to support primary (result) choices.*

You put 10% of each month's cheque into savings bonds because doing so supports your vision of a modest, regular income from interest on those bonds.

You jog five times a week because you're focused on your vision of a fit, healthy, athletic body.

You make an extra trip to the local food co-op for bulk granola instead of going to the big box supermarket because doing so supports the kind of life and community you most want to live in.

When I am clear about the results I want to create, I make a series of *secondary choices* about actions that support my primary choices.

Viewing a task such as, "Write for three hours each morning," as a secondary *choice* that supports my primary choice, "An internationally successful book"—enables me to see it as a creative challenge, rather than a chore I have to do. Making it a secondary choice makes doing it easier and more enjoyable. Although the task may be arduous, I choose to do it *because* it supports my primary choice.

Understanding primary and secondary choices helps you manage your time by managing your priorities. At any time during the day, for example, I can ask, "Why am I doing this? What primary choice does this task serve?"

If my action does not serve one of my primary choices, I can choose to do something that does serve such a choice.

I don't *have to* do that. I don't *force* myself to do it. I just clarify the connection between primary and secondary choices and, nine times out of ten, the choice to act in support of the primary choice makes itself.

The other time? I slack off a little, give myself a break, and hope it leads to some serendipitous discovery.

Choice Points: Throughout each day, we face moments when we have to choose between competing, even conflicting, courses of action. These *choice points* are strategic moments. They are critical in the creative process.

Choice points are the decisive moments in which the envisioned becomes actual, the moments in which we actually shape the lives, families, relationships, work, and world we most want.

Choice points are those moments of decision in which, Paul Tillich says, we become most fully human.

They often result in pivotal decisions that can make or break your creative process. However, they often happen so fast, there is no time to invoke the formal choice making processes; you have to make them on the fly, in the moment.

By aligning *foundation*, *primary*, and *secondary* choices, we ensure that we always work from a place of choice. Being motivated by choice is far more empowering and effective than being motivated by problems or obligations.

From a place of choice, we (almost) always take actions we *want* to take.

Rarely, if ever, do we feel forced to do things we don't want to do. And if we do, we are usually very clear what primary choice such action supports.

Thus, we are *free from* the limits of circumstances, and *free to* follow our own star. We are free to let our energy flow along a path of least resistance arising out of the creative tension we consciously set up and work within.

Making choices and taking action within the framework of creative tension enables us to consistently create the results we most want—simply, easily, and effectively—regardless of the circumstance, adversity, and problems we encounter.

4. Action: Take Small Steps. Create and Adjust...

"Fail fast," advise innovative business experts, "and learn lots."

The practice of *rapid prototyping* in business is much like the practice of writing drafts or making sketches. Do lots of them. Do them quickly. Create partial results and learn from each what works and what doesn't. Then keep what works and scrap what does not. Create and adjust, create and adjust.... Gradually, finished results begin to emerge.

Too many of us, though, have perfectionist tendencies.

We are afraid to fail even once, let alone lots. A common mistake that prevents those with such tendencies from getting started in creating is insisting their first steps be perfect.

Such perfectionists desire high levels of success but are afraid to fail. Their fear cancels their desire. Because they don't want to make mistakes, they don't try. But, mistakes are a necessary part of learning. To paraphrase an old saying, the sooner you make your first 5000 mistakes, the sooner you will learn anything.

So, a key to getting started is taking small, easy steps.

Take steps that are so easy there is almost no chance of failing. Moreover, if you do make mistakes, they are almost inconsequential. Doing so removes a great deal of the pressure of perfectionism and makes it easier to create.

In my coaching process, clients learn to break large creations down into smaller, sub-creations, each with small, easy-to-do action steps. They also learn to see each action step as an *experiment* that can teach them what to do next.

The word “experiment” comes from the same Latin root as “experience,” and “experiment,” *prier*, “to try.” In the creative process, if you don’t like your results, adjust your action and try again. If you make a wrong decision, make another.

When you’re *creating*, failure is simply feedback, useful experience. And remember what Schweitzer said about experience being the *only* teacher.

Small experiments teach you what you need to create small creations. Small creations add up to larger creations. Eventually, a completed result emerges out of the many linked small and medium sized creations you bring into being.

Taking easy first steps gets you started. It also builds confidence. Several small successes form a pattern of success. In practice, “I *did* it,” becomes, “I *can* do.” You feel good about doing well. You feel competent and confident to stretch for larger creations and larger successes.

Backward Planning

To get to easy first steps, try this technique I learned from Barbara Sher, author of *WishCraft*.

To work backward from a vision of a result you want to an easy, non-threatening “first steps,” ask, “*Can I do this today?*”

If you can’t do it today, ask, “*What must I do first?*”

If your vision of success, for example, is to be fit, healthy, and energetic and you can’t walk upstairs without getting winded, you surely can’t do it today.

So what must you do first?

Using the question, work back to small steps you *can* do.

You’ll probably find the steps you uncover are beautifully simple, such as, “Call the rec center and see if they offer a fitness program for people like me.”

And, before you do that one, “get the phone number for the rec center.”

Hey! That’s simple. I can do that! Great! You’re on your way.

Identifying first steps overcomes inertia and fear. Taking several steps creates patterns of success, enhances confidence, and builds momentum toward larger steps and results.

As Barbara Sher says, “*great deeds are made up of small, steady actions*”.

Good Enough Works Better than Perfect

Finally, in the creative process and in life, it helps to strive for *good enough* results, not perfect ones.

Research into sprinters' performance, for example, shows when they try too hard—"give 100 percent"—they tense up. They run against their own muscle resistance, and produce slower times.

When told to give it 85 or 90 percent, they run faster.

Psychologists have developed a "good enough" approach to parenting that helps harried parents lower the demands they put on themselves, and increase their effectiveness. It's counter-intuitive, but it works.

Zen Buddhists have a saying; "Perfection is 85 percent."

I use this saying like a mantra, repeating it to myself when I'm pushing too hard and creating resistance for myself.

When I back off a little, choose in favor of what I want, I usually regain the flow and sense of momentum that comes from working *with* the path of least resistance as I create what matters.

5. Build Momentum—Turn Problems into Opportunities

Momentum, along with creative tension, is another major force you can use to generate energy and bring your creations into being.

Momentum is as important or *more* important than motivation.

Momentum—"the impetus gained my movement"—can get you through times of no motivation better than motivation can get you through times of no momentum.

Creating patterns of small successes generates momentum. So do mistakes and wrong turnings. It is easier to change direction when you are moving than when you are at a dead stop.

Think about pushing a stuck car out of mud or snow. To get it to move forward, you first rock it backwards, building the energy of momentum, which helps you push it forward.

Watch professional athletes such as tennis players waiting to receive an opponent's serve. Their feet are in constant motion, building momentum, ready to respond as quickly as they can.

You may also be aware the Chinese use the same ideogram for both "crisis" and "opportunity." Any time things go wrong during the creative process can be a choicepoint, a "creative moment," an opportunity to clarify vision and reality and reform creative tension.

I use the following "Creative Moments Technique" to help clients learn to use mistakes and unwanted circumstances as occasions to re-create tension, take new action, and build momentum toward the results they want.

The "**Creative Moment**" technique includes six simple steps. When things go awry:

1. **Notice what happens** *and* what you say about it. Also notice what you say about yourself and any others involved.
2. **Ask yourself, Is what I say true?** *Really* true? Don't *judge* what happens, or yourself, or others. Just *describe* reality as accurately and objectively as you can. Just facts; no opinions, no emotions. Make your thoughts rational, and make reality a neutral force.
3. **Also ask**, Is what I am saying consistent with what I *truly* want?
4. **Then ask, "What do I want?"** Envision the result you want, fully completed.
5. **Formally choose that result** by saying, "I choose..." and fill in the result.
6. **Move on. Take whatever next step occurs to you**, or do something else, such as go for a walk, garden, or juggle. Come back to your creation when an appropriate next step does occur to you.

With practice, this *creative moments* technique becomes a simple yet powerful technique for quickly increasing your perception of control in difficult and adverse situations. It helps you take greater ownership for the result you want. It helps you contain the reach of adversity, and realize it too will pass.

Most of all, it gets you unstuck, and moving again. It builds momentum in the direction of your desired result.

Use the *Creative Moments* technique whenever you are angry, frustrated, depressed, anxious, or any time things don't go the way you'd like them to. It can quickly shift your focus from problem solving to creating, and your mood from pessimistic to energetic and realistically optimistic.

As well as building momentum, applying this technique builds competence and increases the confidence that comes from a growing sense that, "I *can* create the results I want—even *when* things don't go the way I'd like them to."

If you are too upset to do this exercise in the moment, remember neurophysiologist Candace Pert's advice to go for a brisk ten minute walk—just enough to break a sweat.

Just that small amount of exercise will clear your brain/body of thought-paralyzing hormones and replace them with feel good neurochemical such as endorphins and dopamine. You will be able to think clearly and act effectively.

Also, if you find steps 1 and 2 difficult—if you find it hard to get clear, honest, and objective about what you say—practice the **ABCDEs** using the practice sheets in the Appendix or by doing Active Journaling.

Again, emotional mastery skills help you ground visions and actions in accurate, objective, and emotionally neutral assessments of current reality. Doing so greatly improves your ability to create what matters.

So try the Creative Moments technique. It works wonders for me.

6. “Oh, no! Not the ‘P’ word *again!*”

That’s what a client said that to me as she rightly anticipated my answer to her question, “I read your book. I read Fritz’s book. I think about this stuff all the time. Why can’t I do it when I need it?”

That’s a succinct summation of *the academic fallacy*, the notion that with insight and understanding alone, you can create desired results.

Most of us suffer from this mistaken notion to some degree. Few of us have the skills and talent to achieve our visions without practice.

But, we *are* all natural learners.

We can try things, correct mistakes, and practice until the new becomes natural. Practice, as I’ve said before, might not make you perfect, but it does make you better. And the road to *good* always runs through *better*.

In any area of life, we can increase our capacity to create what matters through regular, consistent practice.

Alisha, for example, wanted to be a guitar player, but had perfectionist tendencies. She tried to play jazz guitar, but was put off when she discovered it was harder than she thought it would be. She wasn’t “good,” which she defined as able to play in a jazz band with friends. She didn’t like not being good, so she didn’t play at all. Obviously, she didn’t get better.

One day, in spite of her reservations, a friend showed Alisha how to play a simple, three-chord country song. After a little practice, Alisha could play a passable version of the tune. She wasn’t good, but she was *better*. This simple success excited her so much, she got her friend to show her more 3-chord country tunes *and* practiced them.

As she picked up the basic techniques of fingering, chording, and keys by practicing country tunes, she kept her vision of playing in a jazz band. She focused on getting better at the guitar, instead of “being good.” The creative tension and momentum she created allowed her to have occasional “bad” practice sessions and still keep moving toward the result she desired.

In no time, she was playing well enough to play duets with her friend.

Doing so further increased her enjoyment and her technique. Eventually, the friend eased her into more complex jazz arrangements.

Alisha still has a way to go, but she’s keeping her eyes on her vision, accepting where she is, and looks forward to improvising jazz riffs in a trio in a year or two.

Creating, Alisha discovered, is a step-by-step process of patience, practice, and perseverance. Trying to make success an all-or-nothing leap usually leaves you with nothing.

7. Know When You Reach Your Goal, Then Stop.

Without clear, recognizable criteria for recognizing results and judging them as successful, you are like a dog chasing its tail. You don’t know when to stop creating. You don’t enjoy your completed creation, or move on to your next.

Emotional Mastery

To access the full power of *creating*, you must invent your own standards of measurement. You must lay out success criteria with which to measure progress, and recognize your creations as complete.

As well as visionary goals such as, “a best-selling book and appearances on the Oprah show,” or “a Gold medal in the 10K at the Masters Running Championships,” creators also set realistic goals as part of their action steps.

Writers, for example, set standards such as 1000 words a day, or three hours each morning. Runners strive for 50 miles a week. One coach I know says he’d recognize success if he earned \$50,000 a year working three days a week, ten months of the year, i.e., \$5000 per month.

Being able to match your results against your standards helps you know where you are relative to your vision. It also helps you know when your creation is complete. Without some way of recognizing completion, you can waste time trying to improve or change something that might already be good enough.

Completing a creation and living with it generates new energy, which you can use to take on new creations. When Picasso, for example, was asked what his favorite painting was, he answered, “My next one!”.

So, finish fully, acknowledge your results, celebrate success, and use the energy of completion to begin your next creation. Success builds on success.

Manage Your Moods; Create What Matters *Most*

When applied within the framework of creative tension, these seven practices will enable you to create almost any result you want—regardless of the reality you face.

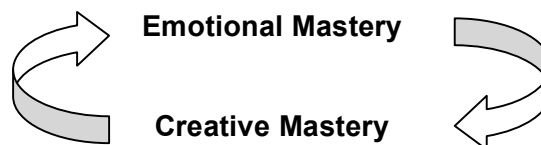
While almost all my clients produce significant results, not all of them produce such great results as Richard and Dawna, Pat, and Daniel did. These folks stand out among many coaching and workshop participants who increased their capacity to create results that truly mattered to them.

What set these standouts aside from others who had more difficulty creating and sustaining results? I imagine you know the answer by now.

Yes, practice. Practice, practice, practice!

The clients who produce the most outstanding results are those who diligently practice both their creating and emotional mastery skills daily.

Those who do the very best understand that emotional mastery is a subset of creative mastery, and see how the two interact in a positive feedback loop. They realize that success in one increases success in the other.



They recognize that emotional mastery arises out of the ability to create what matters—with whatever life gives you to work with. That insight spurs them to practice as a master practices yoga, or a professional practices piano.

Emotional Mastery

Those who adopt *creating* as a daily discipline and invest time and energy into mastering the seven creating skills for creating almost anything are able to produce and sustain real and lasting success in all areas of their lives and work—independent of circumstances, problems, and adversity.

Mastering the principles and practices of *creating* can help you invent your own ways to realize your highest aspirations, and express your deepest longings.

It can help you create—and live—the life and work you most want to live.

It can help you become the person you glimpse, as Abraham Maslow says, “in your most perfect moments.”

So, to begin creating the life and work you most want, let go of your focus on what limits you, or getting rid of what you don’t like and don’t want.

Focus instead on what you *truly do* want.

The key to success is getting started. Even if you can’t do all of what you want, *yet*, you *can* start to develop your capacity to create, and apply it daily.

As Goethe urged, “*What ever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.*”

If you are leery of starting on your own, or have questions along the way, don’t hesitate to contact me to explore whether my coaching approach could help you. I’d be happy to help you clarify what you want to create, and to see if there is a fit between your desires and my way of coaching.

Because both emotional mastery and creating are skill based, it often speeds up the learning process to have someone teach you those skills, coach you in their application to your life, work, and relationships, and then give you feedback on your progress and success. Feel free to contact me if you’d like such help.

I wish you great success in whatever you choose to create.

Bruce Elkin is a personal and professional life coach and success coach. He helps individuals, couples, and organizations master and apply *emotional mastery* to *creating* the life, work, and world they *most* want. Bruce is author of ***Simplicity and Success: Creating the Life You Long For*** and the e-Books ***Emotional Mastery***, and ***Sustainable Success***. **Contact him**, get info, or sign up for his free e-Newsletter “Simply Success” at **www.BruceElkin.com**. Or call 250.388.7210. Or **Skype!** He’d love to help.

APPENDICES

and

FOOTNOTES

Bruce Elkin

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THE ABCs OF Emotional Mastery

"Experience is not what happens to you; it's what do with what happens."

It is usually best to use 2 sheets for each adversity response you want to reflect on. First, just fill in the A, B, and C portions with your unfiltered, uncensored thinking. Then, when you have disputed and replaced irrational thinking with rational thoughts, rewrite the ABCs on the second sheet, using more rational, objective, and accurate language.

A - ADVERSITY (What happened to you? Events? Circumstances? Problems?)

B - BELIEFS (What do you think and say about the adversity, yourself, and others?).

C - Consequences (How do you feel and what you do about what happens).

D - Disputing (Challenge dysfunctional thoughts and replace with functional ones).

E - Energizing (Note any changes in your feelings and actions)

When things go awry, and you feel you might stall, drift, or quit:

2. Ask, Is it *true*? Really true? Don't *judge* what happens. Don't judge yourself, or others. Don't assume that negative consequences will occur. Just *describe* reality accurately and objectively. Facts: no opinions, no emotions. Making thoughts rational removes the emotional charge from current reality.

3. Also ask, is what I am saying consistent with what I *truly* want?

4. Then ask, "What *do* I want?" Envision the result(s) you want. See it as if it was fully completed.

5. Formally choose your result. Say, “I choose...” and add the result.

6. Move on. Take whatever next step occurs to you, or do something else, such as go for a walk, garden, or juggle. Come back to your creation when an appropriate next step does occur to you.

Note: If you're too upset to do this exercise well, try the **ABC** practice sheet, and/or go for a brisk 10-minute walk, and then try the exercise again.

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- ¹ David Posen, *The Little Book of Stress Relief*, Key Porter Books, Toronto, 2003
- ² See "Take A Hike! Therapy on the Open Trail," by Kelle Walsh, In *IMAGINE*, Spring, 2005
- ³ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, W.W. Norton, 1985
- ⁴ Albert Ellis and Arthur Lange, *How To Keep People From Pushing Your Buttons*, Birch Lane Press, New York, 1994
- ⁵ George Leonard, *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment*, Plume/Penguin, 1992
- ⁶ James Keller, *Three Minutes by James Keller, M. M., 1950*
- ⁷ Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life*, Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1989
- ⁸ For a description of Ingvar's work, see *Why Work: Leading the New Generation* by Michael Macoby, New York, 1998
- ⁹ See the proceedings of the American Psychological Association, August 4-8, 2000 for a discussion between the two giants of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Thinking, go to <http://www.fenichel.com/Beck-Ellis.shtml>
- ¹⁰ See "Change or Die," by Alan Deutschman in the May 2005 edition of *Fast Company* magazine.
- ¹¹ Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Life and Your Mind*, Pocket Books, New York, 190, 1998
- ¹² Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Pocket Books, 1984
- ¹³ Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, William Morrow New York (1974)
- ¹⁴ See the sidebar, "Which Stage of Change Are You In?" by James Prochaska that accompanies "Change or Die" in *Fast Company*, May 2005
- ¹⁵ Eknath Easwaran, "Words to Live By" (Nilgiri Press, 1997)
- ¹⁶ See www.heartmath.com
- ¹⁷ See Candace Pert's *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine*, Touchstone, New York, 1997
- ¹⁸ See *Resurgence*, No. 226, September/October 2004
- ¹⁹ Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton, *How Full Is Your Bucket: Positive Strategies for Work and Life*, Gallup Press, New York, 2004
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- ²¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper and Row, New York, 1990
- ²² Doc Childre and Deborah Rozman, *Transforming Stress: The HeartMath Solution for Relieving Worry, Fatigue, and Tension*, New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA, 2005
- ²³ See Steve Van Matre, *Acclimatization: A Sensory and Conceptual Approach to Ecological Involvement*, American Camping Association, 1972; and *Earth Education: A New Beginning*, The Institute for Earth Education, 1990
- ²⁴ David Richo, *The Five Things We Cannot Change . . . and the Happiness We Find by Embracing Them*, Shambala, Boston, 2005