100 Books to Think About

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100 BOOKS TO THINK ABOUT

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DEDICATION

With love and gratitude to my parents who taught me to be responsible for myself and provided an atmosphere where common sense ruled. They obviously mellowed with the years though because my younger siblings seemed to get away with a lot more than I did. I also dedicate this work to family, friends, and readers who may recognize these thoughts, subliminal suggestions, or mantras.

You're the oldest, you should know better.  
Did you do your homework?  
Come help me clean the garage.  
Put that back where you got it from.  
Is your bed made?  
Be nice to your little sister.  
Mind your own business.  
Eat your vegetables.  
If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.  
No, you can't go play until you clean your plate.  
Make sure you say your prayers.  
Don't make me stop this car.  

And best of all:  

Where'd you get that idea?
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A Book Can Change Your Life

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Re-Programming Is Hard Work


Where Thoughts Come From

How the Mind Works


Dangers of Believing What You Read, Hear, See, Think


100 Books to Think About


**Is It Possible to Think for Yourself?**


**Distortions and Solutions**


**Chapter 2 - Take Care of Your Gift**

**Figure Out Who You Are**


**Figure Out What You’re Good At**


Decide and Act on What You Want


**Chapter 3 - Take Care of Your Body**

Use Your Mind/Body Connection

*Fit or Fat?* Covert Bailey, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.


Learn to Cope


Chapter 4 - Take Care of Your People

What Your Parents Were Trying to Teach You


Watch What You Say


Chapter 5 - Take Care of Your World
Get Organized


Take Action


INTRODUCTION

What is this book about and where did it come from?

Do you ever find yourself wondering, "What the heck were they thinking?" Consider the mystery of a person who wins millions in the lotto and is bankrupt a few years later. Or a remodeling contractor who installed the new shower head just below shoulder height. Think about the craziest news or incident you've recently experienced. I'm talking about adult dysfunction, not the antics of a three-year-old treating the cat to a shampoo. Perhaps you were the person in the meeting who bluntly informed the new boss that he obviously didn’t understand this aspect of the business. In my case it was a very predictable interview question that turned me mute first, then into a babbling idiot. What happens?

For years I have been fascinated by what I call my theory of “smart and dumb.” Sometimes we’re thinking, and sometimes clearly, we are not. There is no shortage of stories about intelligent people, at the top of their game, who hurtle into public humiliation. My quest to understand these quirks of human nature shaped a lifetime of research, and it turns out I am not alone in my curiosity. People seek answers to their own compelling life issues. As a librarian, I have helped unearth solutions to many intriguing problems. Interpersonal, health, and financial topics, at work and home, dominate the list of dilemmas we explore. Self-care books, such as those summarized here, remain popular because people always appreciate advice on how to succeed, get rich, or attain their unique version of happiness.

We want to solve our own problems, but we also need confidence that we are making decisions based on unbiased information. We care about what is true, but research shows that we prefer the comfort of a quick explanation, even if it’s wrong. We seek to understand others and the world around us, but we have a hard time being objective. We want to be right, but we could be wrong. How can we figure out what is true? In schools, as in life, we attempt to address all those “buts” by investigating and practicing critical thinking.

Fake news was not invented during the 2016 presidential campaign. It merely gained the spotlight. We seem to be experiencing an intensifying crisis of credibility even though yellow journalism was decried back in the 19th Century. Today, data, discoveries, and theories are not only updated, they are challenged and discredited. Scholarly scandals include falsified data and plagiarism. Hostile and adversarial rhetoric minimize discussion, learning, and compromise. A constant challenge is to recognize and evaluate misinformation, both accidental and intentional.

As I sorted sources for this book, both classic and current, it became obvious that theories and scientific findings naturally evolve. The most recent example is salt. Doctors have warned us repeatedly to limit our salt consumption. Now, new headlines suggest that we may not be getting enough salt! Keeping up can be exhausting. While we need to stay current, we benefit from caution in assimilating the latest trends. We do not get to decide something once and make that our fact for life. Things change, so we must constantly reevaluate our beliefs. Hopefully this book will inspire you to do your own sleuthing as it models one way of collecting clues, weighing conflicting information, and living contentedly with our conclusions.
Contrary to a popular stereotype, librarians do not generally get to read for a living. We likely do read a lot, on our own time, but we spend work hours evaluating, organizing, managing, and providing information services. In my case, administrative and staff development duties required research on management tools and techniques, motivation, communication, interpersonal and team skills, which all double as valuable life skills. Knowing that I do not have a photographic memory, I always take detailed notes. Now, my file cabinet full of comprehensive book summaries morphs into this review. Some of these books conveyed other people’s thoughts, scholarship, and hard work so impressively as to stay with me long enough to appear before you today. If a book written in the 1970’s made such a lasting impression, it is that person’s thoughts that are recognized here. This book serves as a tribute to their contributions. If new research on your topic of interest is not updated in this book, it will be up to you and your local librarian to find the latest wisdom.

You may have guessed from the title that I do not present this as a scholarly research analysis. It’s part memoir, part opinion based on experience, but mostly a heavily annotated bibliography. The inspiration was my desire to offer advice without seeming like a know-it-all, and besides, I could be wrong. Imagine what you would suggest to your child, parent, or friend struggling with one of life’s curve balls. This book started that way, prompted by one festering financial problem. But how could I suggest the root issue, which is most frequently not about money but about how we think?

Thinking is everything. So, each chapter recommends books about thinking for that specific life skill. Five chapters encompass expert advice from doctors, psychologists, and other scientists on our most important priorities: who we are, why we’re here, how to be happy. Chapter one is about smart and dumb thinking: rational, irrational, thinking on both sides of an issue, and changes in thinking over time. Titles in the second chapter propose ideas to help us figure out why we’re here, what motivates us, and what might make us happy. Although chapter three invites us to take care of our body, again the focus is how we use our thinking to do that. There are fascinating explanations of the chemical interchange between the brain and body. Taking care of our body includes suggestions for pain management, coping, resiliency, and stress reduction. Since one of our most common body challenges is diet, readings related to willpower shed new light on the effectiveness of our efforts at self-control.

Most of the research on happiness suggests a strong correlation with positive interpersonal relationships. Our own experiences likely confirm that life is a lot less annoying if we can manage a little understanding and compassion. Authors in chapter four discuss our ability to take care of our people in terms of communication, morals, virtues, and spirituality.

Chapter five appears to be about the outer world more than the world inside our head, but thinking is still very much involved. We may not consciously realize it, but the space around us strongly influences how we feel. The ancient Chinese study of living in harmony with the environment is Feng Shui, and Marie Kondo demonstrates a Japanese interpretation of some of those principles for our 21st Century. This chapter offers tips on time management and getting organized physically and financially. Authors in the section “Take Action” offer various methods for pulling it all together, seeing an overall plan, and identifying strategies for change. The final chapter is not so much a list of
conclusions and recommendations, rather it offers perspective on the most common recurring themes.

Although I believe I have accumulated some of the best titles about what we need to know to take care of ourselves, there are always gaps we need to mind. My goal is to at least start an outline of the variety of skills we must balance so that one single desire doesn’t take over and lead us down a narrow and unfulfilling path. A theme of the books included is that, allowing for both our genes and our environment, we are still to some extent products of our own making. We do get to control who we are by what thoughts we put or keep in our head. Thoughts come to us from out of the blue, intuition, or survival instinct. They are also embedded, sometimes subliminally, by parents, teachers, sermons, TV, headlines, lyrics, movies, friends, enemies, and of course, books. If we pay attention, we get to choose what we think and believe.

As I’ve said many times when handing someone a book or article, “I hope this helps.”
CHAPTER 1 - TAKE CARE OF YOUR MIND

You Are What You Think

A Book Can Change Your Life

It’s sad that I didn’t really start watching my thinking until confronted with my own nasty personal crisis. Layers of deception started coming unglued one steamy Florida afternoon during a neighborly chat in our tree-lined driveway. Bill, the guy next-door, was also our insurance man, or so I thought. Our conversation meandered from the heartless people who moved and left their cat behind to reveal that my husband had not renewed our car policy with his company. Bill was not our insurance rep after all? There must be some mistake. Before we parted, I assured Bill we’d be his valued customers again in no time.

The extent of our true drama began to unfold when my husband tried to explain what was going on with the insurance. At first, he pretended it was just something he forgot, but it was months past due. There had to have been several reminders. How would I know? At work every day I never saw the mail. My husband was working from home running our eight or nine rental units. Always something to fix, tenants to screen, rent to collect, and bills to pay. Well, the bills were not being paid. The $80,000 that we came to Florida with in 1979 had been reduced to rubble through various get-rich-quick investment schemes that I did not know about. My home was soon to be offered on the courthouse steps for non-payment of back taxes.

The more I unearthed, the more despair settled in. Or was it a sharp pain, like a punch in the stomach? Frustrated, disappointed, and scared, there was nothing to do but cry and scream. Even writing this, almost forty years later, my stomach flips. Of course, it was not all his fault. Where was I? Not paying attention, that’s for sure. I had lost interest in his projects, lost confidence in his ability to make our life work the way I thought it should, lost respect, and boom, fell out of love. Talk about everything crashing at once. I found myself in a huge financial hole, left emotionally alone to solve it.

Fortunately, my minimum wage job offered the benefit of having many smart people around me. In those dysfunctional days, sitting at my desk feeling numb, I would try to complete just one work task without a worry hijacking my brain and taking me off on some apocalyptic tangent. A close friend knew the wretched details of my situation and listened like a good therapist. She was a retired schoolteacher used to families with problems, no doubt. Seeing that I was not capable of digging myself out of the morass, she recommended the book that saved my life. It was The New Guide to Rational Living by Albert Ellis that taught me how to look at my thoughts as something to be questioned and examined. That is one of the books that guided my life path and prompted me to write this saga of advice we get from books.

Rational or Irrational Thinking

When we are in the middle of a bad situation such as divorce or bankruptcy, both of which I have experienced firsthand as mentioned above, it’s probably normal to be upset by those bad events. Some of us excel at making ourselves even more upset, anxious, distraught, irrational, and downright dysfunctional by interpreting bad events as catastrophic, awful, and intolerable. We add to our own problems by what we say to ourselves about them. Some of those statements might blame either ourselves or someone else, like the good-for-nothing ex. Events may be bad, but we can make them better or worse depending on how we interpret them.

The primary message of Ellis’s book is that we feel the way we think. If we feel bad, there’s probably something wrong with our thinking. When it was written in 1975, the authors did acknowledge that there were three ways to help messed-up feelings such as depression or anxiety: drugs, exercise, and re-thinking. They admit that many patients resist taking drugs, prescription drugs that is, because there are side effects. Today strong research demonstrates the effects of physical activity on the brain, and we will explore those updates in the chapter “Take Care of Your Body.” So, given that the authors are psychologists, it follows that their naturally preferred therapy would be monitoring the conversations we have in our head.

When therapists help us think through problems, they call it cognitive behavioral therapy. Cognitive meaning examining our thinking and changing our thinking to obtain better behavior. The authors help clarify the re-thinking process by using an ABC formula. A is when something happens (A = activating event), B is what we believe or think about what happened and C are the consequences of feeling or behaving in a certain way as a result. A + B = C, activating event plus beliefs equals consequences.

The New Guide to Rational Living offers many different examples of thoughts that cause us to feel bad. If a mental process makes us feel worse, it could be considered irrational thinking because if we are being rational, we would not do something to harm ourselves, right? One of our most common thought problems involves the word “should”. It appears in phrases like “I should have handled that better, she never should have said such a thing, that shouldn’t have happened.” Should represents us wanting things to be different from the way they really are. Just because I think something should be a certain way doesn’t mean that is correct, helpful, or real.

There are ten irrational ideas explained fully throughout the New Guide to Rational Living with many very helpful examples and strategies for how to dispute the wrong thinking. If any of these seem familiar to you, please read the whole book.

1. I must have love and approval from everyone, well almost everyone.
2. I must be competent or nearly perfect.
3. When others misbehave, I should demonize, blame, and punish them.
4. When something bad happens, it’s really, really horrible and I can’t stand it.
5. Misery is caused by outside events not by my interpretation.
6. If I imagine that something is dangerous or scary, I can get really worked up over it.
7. It’s easier to avoid problems than deal with them.
8. I can’t get over what happened.
9. Things must turn out the way I want them to.
10. I will be happiest if I don’t get involved.
Rather than focus on the irrational ideas it’s better to turn those ten statements around and try to remember what one rational reinterpretation might look like.

1. It would be nice if everyone liked me but it’s more important that I know and accept myself.
2. I will not die of embarrassment over one mistake.
3. I can let people be stupid and wrong without being their judge and jury.
4. Bad stuff happens all the time. I can handle it without getting extremely upset and angry.
5. It’s not what happens that causes the pain, it’s my reaction.
6. I can learn the difference between a real threat and a problem blown out of proportion.
7. I’ll feel better if I do something, anything.
8. The past is over and can’t be redone. Today is where I have control.
9. I deal with what is and forget about the fact that I wanted something else.
10. I will get more satisfaction out of life if I get involved outside myself.

~*~

Re-Programming Is Hard Work

Being able to turn those ten negative statements into positives does not happen easily. We usually don’t pay attention to what we’re thinking until there’s a problem and even then, we might not recognize that our thinking could be contributing to the problem. We usually look at the outside forces as the cause of the trouble. It can be very helpful to learn to look at, examine, dispute, and substitute thinking or self-talk that is more helpful. Recognizing that there is a problem is only the first step. Reprogramming ourselves is hard work that takes regular repetition and practice.

Even after studying A New Guide to Rational Living, I knew I needed to do a lot more mental work to fix myself up. My confidence was shaky and now I questioned my ability to judge people. Being alone, as in not married, was not interesting. I wasn’t particularly afraid of the dark, but for want of companionship I might have started wandering the shopping malls of the 1980s. I didn’t know what else to do with myself and it offered a break from reading too many books. One book always led me to the next one which explains how I got interested in self-esteem. Did I have any? I might even be, to this day, a self-improvement junkie, but I don’t think I’m alone in that.

The next bit of information to share with you came from a cassette program. I listened to the six tapes, twelve sides, over and over again for months, even years. I sat under a headset (no ear buds in those days) and took notes and made outlines. I fell asleep listening to the special subliminal-suggestions tape. This is where I really learned about self-talk. I vividly remember Jack Canfield describing a presentation he gave and joking about the guy in the back row saying to himself, “Do I talk to myself? I don’t think I talk to myself.”


Before you dismiss anything having to do with self-esteem, let me observe how theories change over time. Since we can't generally know the future, there was no way to see how building self-esteem, which seemed like a good idea at the time, could have unintended consequences. High self-esteem is not the only factor that may have caused our society to shift away from caring about what is good for the community to caring more about our individual special selves. If we think of self-esteem as creating confidence to contribute positively for ourselves and the community, then let's go on with the appreciation of Jack Canfield's programs.

Canfield became a leading self-help and motivational speaker through the popularity of his works including the Chicken Soup for the Soul series and a 473-page book The Success Principles. It was Jack Canfield's earlier work, a 1989 self-esteem program that I found most important. It provides tremendously helpful advice on how to accept ourselves and change our thinking. He teaches us how to strengthen our self-confidence and how to take action. We learn about visualization, making pictures in our minds, and affirmations, things we say to ourselves, such as, “Oh what the heck, go for it anyway.” The cassette program is fully developed, well-organized, cohesive, logical, and easy to follow. It includes a list of cassette titles but no real table of contents, so the outline below is taken from my notes.

PART 1 - How to unconditionally love and accept yourself as you are

- How to be self-nurturing.
- How to change responses in five areas: mind, imagination, emotions, body, intuition.
- How your unique qualities or high-self reveal purpose of life and raise self-esteem.

PART 2 - How to become more capable by using tools, structure, or universal laws.

- Acknowledge and complete the past.
- Acknowledge and affirm your strengths.
- Clarify your mission and values.
- Set goals and make a plan.
- Affirm and visualize success.
- Take action.
- Respond to feedback.
- Persevere.
- Reap the rewards.
- Attitude of gratitude.

One of the most important messages that Canfield shares is that we have to tell ourselves we can do whatever it is we want to do; we have to believe in ourselves. These cassettes help us develop the confidence to do whatever it is that we need to do. If we absorb song lyrics, or a parental slip of the tongue, such as “You’re no good” and
allow this to become a life-long mantra, it’s easy to see how a bad outcome could be the result. Canfield’s advice on completing the past includes strategies for recovery and forgiveness. Other authors with similar messages are Dr. Phil McGraw and the megamotivator Tony Robbins.

An example of how self-talk works occurred to me at about this point in writing my own book. I had the idea, I felt there was a need and I started putting it all on paper. I even told a few people that I was working on a book project. Then it got overwhelming. Bad self-talk: “This is too much work. I’ll never get it all organized. People will say my sources are too old or not scholarly enough.” I started imagining a violent negative reaction. I imagined all kinds of scathing reviews saying, “Who does she think she is, she’s not a psychologist and she has no credentials.” I could easily have convinced myself that there would be death threats. This is an example of why we benefit from learning to stop, look at, listen to, and examine what we’re thinking. I followed Canfield’s advice and decided to “go for it anyway.”


Although I spent my every driving moment listening to Tony Robbins tapes of any and all varieties, it was not without some stealth and embarrassment. It is most unfortunate that there is an academic stigma associated with self-help and pop psychology. My impression, when listening many years ago, was that Robbins was extremely well read and that he prospered based on his own conclusions. He offers suggestions that are clearly upheld by scholarly research, the most obvious being that we learn and change through action and repetition. I’m glad I eventually got over my fear of being found out for the self-help nerd that I am because there is an inordinate amount of good that comes from people sharing their enthusiasm as motivational speakers or life coaches. All of Robbins’ books, workshops and programs are important for teaching us, almost forcing us via exercises and journals, to think bigger than our own self-imposed limits.

Canfield emphasizes the importance of using visualization and affirmation, but Robbins’ label of neurolinguistics programming (NLP) adds scientific mystique to identifying the interaction between mind and body. The vivid stories on Robbins’ tapes create strong, lasting images of how we can use our physiology to weaken or strengthen ourselves. He suggests that if you want to feel bad, slump over, hang your head down, use shallow breathing, and speak in your worst whiney voice. Next time you’re feeling punk try reversing those instructions and you will feel better. Without intentionally practicing this psychology, Mom always encouraged us to stand up straight and quit whining.

To reinforce how important our thoughts are Robbins quotes Shakespeare from *Hamlet* Act 2, Scene 2, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Is this not one of those profound bits of ancient wisdom, endorsed in modern psychology? Many of us have read Hamlet in school, but I have Tony Robbins to thank for imprinting this
quote indelibly in my head. I don’t know why I didn’t get the point in my high school English class, but it sure made an impression in the context of my adult life.

Robbins offers so much content that it is impossible to summarize. In the 1986 version of *Unlimited Power* he shared the following character traits of champions that serve as an outline for success.

- Have passion. Love what you do.
- Develop positive beliefs. You are what you believe.
- Map a course, path, strategy. Set goals.
- Clarify values and priorities and be congruent.
- Develop energy to take action.
- Practice bonding power – rapport.
- Master communication with self and others.

That last bullet reminds me of another quote of his that is still with me today. It was something along the lines of “the quality of your life IS the quality of your communication.” Taking care of our mind is all about full awareness of what we are communicating to ourselves in our heads. He shows us how to reframe a thought, how to ask for what we want, how to create goals, and how to create a personal “why,” the key to our motivation. He guarantees success based on this time-tested teaching method: find a successful person and model their behavior.

These programs and books can be more valuable than a winning lotto ticket. Their worth became obvious to me as I managed to get on with my life. Unfortunately, they don’t work for everyone according to Dr. Bob Moore, the therapist who wrote the section on the ABC formula in *The New Guide to Rational Living*. His concern about all the self-help media, even though he himself was a contributing author, was that the people who need help the most can’t seem to do the work required on their own. I don’t remember any other details about the conversation but I’m sure he was right. From my reading and teaching experience, I know the work of learning or relearning requires constant repetition and practice. So maybe if people watched the Dr. Phil show every day for a while, they would begin to recognize irrational thinking?

~*~

**Where Thoughts Come From**

**How the Mind Works**

We probably would like to think that we are in charge of our thoughts and that we can consciously control our thinking. Sadly, research on how the brain works puts forth a theory of the exact opposite. To learn how to recognize thoughts that might cause problems, it could be helpful to understand a little about our brain. Ellis counseled that to some extent we create our feelings with our thoughts. Self-talk remains extremely important. However, given what we now know about instinctual responses bypassing the cognitive part of the brain, there are times when we feel first and think later. Instinct first, sets emotions or brain chemistry into action, then according to the following authors, we generate thoughts to justify our reactions and gut feelings.
Books like *Emotional Intelligence*, *Focus*, *Blink*, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, *The Hidden Brain*, and *The Righteous Mind* all explain in different ways that we have two brains, or really two systems within one brain. One brain is quick, intuitive, or instinctual and the other is slower, deliberate, and more analytical. These authors have a variety of names for the quick brain such as subcortical, prehistoric, old brain, unconscious, hidden, or system 1. The analytic brain is referred to as the neocortex, conscious, new brain, or system 2. *The New Guide to Rational Living* referred to our quick thinking as conditioning. The theory now is that our physiology, or our body and brain chemistry, has evolved to ensure survival. Our brain sometimes functions by instinct to protect us first and foremost, even if the old pre-programmed fight-or-flight responses are not always appropriate today.


This well-known, popular best seller, *Emotional Intelligence* was the first place I remember reading about the concept of our old, primitive, biological brain as being reactive, impulsive, and intuitive. Daniel Goleman’s work might be especially appealing because he has a Ph. D. in Psychology, he taught at Harvard, worked at *Psychology Today*, and then the *New York Times*. That implies that he has not only the scientific background but also the writer’s ability to explain science for the rest of the world to benefit from. Furthermore, because he is on the Board of the Mind and Life Institute with Martin Seligman and the Dali Lama, I believe he deserves extra points for credibility.

The content of Goleman’s 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence* (EI) continues the themes of rational living written about by Ellis in the 1970s by offering more strategies to improve our quality of life. Before describing EI itself, Goleman explains how the brain evolved over millions of years from a primitive brainstem that automatically regulates basic functions and reactions. Emotional centers developed later, originating with the sense of smell. Then more years later, for the lucky human species came learning, memory, and the thinking brain. He does point out that there was an emotional brain function before there was a thinking one.

Goleman goes on to describe how scientists previously believed that the thinking brain was involved in all human responses until research by Joseph LeDoux showed a shortcut that bypassed the thinking part of the brain. One part of the brain, the amygdala, can start an emotional or instinctual response before the information is processed through the thinking part, the neocortex of the brain. The alarm response triggered by the amygdala includes significant physiological changes to our heart rate, breathing, blood flow, and hormones. This explains how we can sometimes have an emotional reaction and response that we would not have if our brain hadn’t used a shortcut. This very abridged explanation of the topic begs for you to read the whole book or newer research on the same topic.

Goleman elaborates on five competencies or skills that comprise emotional intelligence. The first is the importance of self-awareness and recognizing our moods. The second very important take away is that the ability to soothe ourselves is a fundamental life skill. Put that way this book is highly likely to deserve our attention. Who wouldn’t want to improve a fundamental life skill? No wonder this book made the bestseller lists. The third aspect of emotional intelligence is the benefit of hope and optimism for self-motivation. Fourth skill of emotional intelligence is reading the feelings of others and expressing
empathy. Next, Goleman explains how social arts and relationships are based on managing our own emotions.

Part three of the book goes on to give examples of how to apply emotional intelligence in our daily lives in marriage, families, school, and work. Goleman describes research and strategies on how to calm down, detoxify our self-talk, and listen without focusing on defending ourselves. Chapter nine offers advice for marriages, talks about character assassination, and examines the difference between personal criticism and a complaint. A complaint is about the action and how it made me feel. Goleman refers to situations where a person is taken over by emotional distress. He explains the problem of being swamped by bad feelings, called emotional flooding or hijacking, that is derived from John Gottman’s work with couples. More on Gottman in chapter four of this book.

Chapter ten of *Emotional Intelligence* has some helpful advice on how to give constructive criticism at work. Helpful criticism is specific, offers hope in the form of solutions or alternatives, and is sensitive and empathetic so as not create flooding or defensiveness.

In chapter eleven Goleman mentions that in 1995 the medical community for the most part dismissed the idea that the mind could influence the body. Happily, by 2013 in his book *Focus* he reports on research with clear evidence of the impact of mindfulness or non-judgmental observation on physical symptom reduction. Parts four and five offer suggestions and hope for the future based on this understanding of how emotions work. More ideas worth reading about are that relearning can help after trauma and that our temperament at birth does not have to be our life’s destiny.


In this book, Goleman updates his reporting about how we think, the two brains, and specifically about focusing our attention where it matters. Thanks to advances in technical imaging of brain activity, researchers confirm that more activity in the new brain shows that is where slower, more analytical thinking happens. The book is organized into seven parts moving from personal issues to global topics: attention, self-awareness, reading others, big systems, practice aimed at improvement, leadership, and the future. You would want to read this book to learn how your ability to pay attention can be strengthened like a muscle.

There is also a great explanation of how different parts of our brain process information and how routines or habits form without our awareness. Chapter eight is an update on emotional intelligence and using our attention to regulate emotions. Chapter ten covers empathy and relating to others. Chapter fifteen challenges the myth that there is a magic number of hours of practice that turns a person into an expert. Goleman emphasizes that the practice must be aimed at improvement and that practice is what helps hold attention and focus. Chapter seventeen talks about the mind and body connection, for example, practicing deep breathing as a method of emotional impulse control. Goleman reports that mindfulness is a way to boost attention, reduce self-talk and negative thoughts, and a way to see the bigger picture. For more on mindfulness see chapter three “Take Care of Your Body” in the book you have in your hand now.

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky published many scholarly articles in the 1970s on how thinking works in judgment and decision-making. Kahneman even won a Nobel Prize for Behavioral Economics in 2002. Later in 2011 he published what seems to be an encyclopedia of all his work in Thinking, Fast and Slow. This book was a challenge for me given that he did seem to try to include every possible piece of research related to the topic. If someone wants to know which research was behind any given conclusion or theory, this would be a good place to find that.

I want to include this book as a starting point for identifying what might be called errors or distortions in our thinking. For example, how our intuition, the split-second perception and memory thinking, could be wrong because it is based on short cuts or rules of thumb. The short cuts, also known as heuristics, are conclusions we have accepted based on previous experience or possibly because the brain does not want to take the time to re-evaluate the current situation.

Kahneman begins by describing the two brain systems. System 1 is the fast, automatic, unconscious system that reacts based on instinct, associations, and memory. System 2 requires attention, self-control, effort and is easily distracted. He describes the brain as preferring to do less work, so we humans will go with whatever plausible solutions System 1 produces. In the chapter about how the brain makes associations, he refers to the mind-body connection when he reports that we do indeed think with our body, not only the brain. And, as if we didn't already know, he also confirms that alcohol disrupts System 2. System 2’s laziness explains why we are duped into accepting frequent repetition as truth. Chapter seven explains how we jump to conclusions via the well-known confirmation bias. But did you know that we also prefer to answer an easier question rather than the difficult but more pertinent one? We let our likes and dislikes determine our beliefs because of something called the affect heuristic.

Part two explores how mental short cuts lead to biases and errors of judgement. For example, the brain likes to know why something happens, so System 1 assigns a cause even if it’s wrong. That should make you think! The availability shortcut means that we judge the frequency or probability of something by the ease with which examples come to mind. News that is dramatic, relevant, and personal easily leads us to believe that it is more prevalent than a statistical count would confirm. The more available a thought is, the more believable it becomes.

As the book gets into statistics and economics, my own System 2 wears down. I’m looking for examples of cognitive distortions from my notes that support the points I’m writing about. For instance, Kahneman’s research shows that we have excessive confidence in what we believe we know. We accept conclusions based on small sample sizes. He demonstrates that the accuracy of predictions, even those made by experts, is disappointing when examined closely. As you might expect by now, there is ample evidence that economics and decision-making are not free from emotional interference.

Finally, in the last three chapters I am back in territory that is somewhat understandable because Kahneman examines happiness and well-being. Here he presents the idea of not just two brains but two selves, an experiencing-self versus a remembering-self. To me this is just more evidence of how complex we are. Imagine that we can experience
something one way, painful, for example, and depending on how it ends up, pleasant, our memory of the ending determines how we interpret and feel about the whole experience. Shakespeare was right then - all’s well that ends well.

My conclusion is that we can’t trust ourselves. What we believe or reject can be somewhat automatic based on what is already programmed in. We look for and believe information that agrees with what we already know. We discard what doesn’t fit.


*Blink* was written in a popular style, not at all like Kahneman’s heavily cited research. In fact, I did not read *Blink*, I listened to it as a book on tape. It was entertaining, easy to follow, thought provoking, and fairly convincing. The stories Gladwell tells about how we respond under stress when the stakes are high were quite a revelation to me. This author refers to two strategies instead of two brains: one is conscious, logical, and slow while the second is below our conscious observation and is instant. He describes one example where police officers under pressure sensed something, reacted instinctually, and didn’t consciously know why. As I recall, in that case trusting intuition did not yield a good outcome.

Gladwell delves into the fact that we are suspicious of rapid decisions and instinct. They can be good, or they can betray us. Instincts can compete with emotions. He advises that we need to consider when to trust and when be to be wary of our quick thinking. He says that snap judgments can be controlled. He says this is an ability we can cultivate although my notes are completely inadequate here and I didn’t write down the solutions. I did follow-up on some of the research Gladwell quoted, such as John Gottman’s work on thin slicing, which is rapid judgment based on little information. Gottman’s work with married couples has lots of practical examples and is presented later in the chapter “Take Care of Your People.”


Shankar Vedantam is a science writer who regularly contributes to National Public Radio and also shares his information on a podcast of the same name, *The Hidden Brain*. His book interprets scholarly research for a popular audience and provides meaningful scientific interpretations to aspects of daily life. Although this book starts out describing the same two brain systems and the use of unconscious short cuts, the content focuses on biased thinking. Chapter four on “The Life Cycle of Bias” discusses how prejudice is learned unconsciously through over-exposure, repetition, and association. He claims that society only recognizes our conscious learning system. The chapter on “Gender, Privilege and the Hidden Brain” argues that having privilege is like swimming with the current. We give ourselves credit for being stronger than we are and do not recognize what it is like to swim against the flow. Chapter eight on “Justice, Unconscious Bias and the Death Penalty” reveal more examples of our biased thinking.
Chapters six and seven explore how much the unconscious mind values group conformity and repeats the author’s claim that our society remains in denial about the influence of the Hidden Brain. The explanation of how suicide bombers are recruited as members of an exclusive club is disturbing and enlightening. This work, like the others, interprets academic research to heighten our awareness about our ability or inability to deal with statistics, probability, and morality. The author’s plea is that we act based on conscious reasoning even though the arguments are convincing as to why we don’t.

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The Dangers of Believing What You Read, Hear, See, Think

Even though my neighborhood playground and park were a half a block from my house, my parents never allowed us to go there without an adult. On the other hand, The Christopher House, which had a one-room library, was a block past the park and that was OK to visit. Go figure? Since the public library was the only place my parents allowed me to go without supervision, it’s no surprise that I turned out to be a librarian. However, my mother never warned me that I should not believe everything I read. For a very long time, I thought if something appeared in a book, it had to be true.

Now, as a more mature reader, authenticating information sometimes might start with a popular title on a bestseller list. If I find the subject interesting, I want to know where the author got his information and normally the authors tell us who did the research that is the source of their reports. Occasionally the original research by the doctor, psychologist, or other scientist can be too complicated to follow so they do also write versions of their own research in a less academic style for a popular audience. This book, 100 Books to Think About, also simplifies these topics to help explain them, but more importantly to entice you to further reading for your own deeper understanding.

Today, no matter who puts forth a theory, someone is going to disagree and debunk it. In my experience, some scholars can be very contemptuous of popular interpretations of science, maybe justifiably so, because trying to simplify a complex topic can lead to misinformation. Not only is oversimplifying a problem, but also theories evolve as new information comes into play. One section in the introduction to the book Think Tank edited by David J. Linden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018) is called “Science is an ongoing process, not a belief system.” It warns that the research process includes guessing, testing, and interpreting. Sometimes a good guess can win popular attention and is then repeated so frequently that we assimilate it into our culture. This would be an example of Kahneman’s research showing that frequent repetition causes familiarity which then becomes a shortcut to truth. Marketing takes advantage of this concept by saturating us with endless messages about the superiority of any given product. The books in this section explore the challenges of validating or contradicting information.

Tom Fenton was a foreign correspondent with CBS for 34 years. After retiring, he speaks out about his frustration with the profession of journalism and he attempts to put pressure on the news industry to correct itself. Note this book, published in 2005, documents problems much earlier than that. The C Span interview of Fenton talking about this book refers to the 1976 movie *Network* where concern for ratings over content drove an unstable news anchor to utter one of the most famous movie quotes ever, “I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore.”

Fenton starts the book with an examination of why the September 11, 2001 attack on the twin towers was a surprise. He claims there was no forewarning due to a breach of the journalistic code, to keep the public informed. I didn't realize that journalists expected themselves to subscribe to such an honorable and important ethic. According to Fenton, journalists commit to the responsibility for the public safety by providing citizens with truth. That's another surprise because, even at the time of writing, Fenton admits that Americans had no confidence in mainstream media.

The most significant problem that Fenton identifies is boring and unprofitable news. Especially foreign news became the target of network executives whose primary concerns are ratings and the bottom line. Truth is not part of the equation when entertainment is what sells. Another problem Fenton points out was deregulation by the Federal Communication Commission which allowed networks to own many more stations while removing the requirement for public service broadcasting. That fueled the race for ratings. With radio, internet, and cable providing news all day long, the nightly news was no longer news. In Fenton's assessment, news became more about entertainment and big-personality anchors than providing context in the form of history and geography.

With the end of the cold war, foreign news bureaus no longer seemed necessary to budget-conscious executives. Investigative reporters with eyes and ears on the ground were too expensive to maintain. News gathering diminished. At the same time, the art of political spin made its way into the media. News stories in the foreign press would frequently tell a completely different story than the supposed facts reported to Americans. Fake news was not invented in the 2016 presidential campaign. It was referred to by Fenton as “ersatz news” with the *Daily Show* serving as his example.

Fenton’s proposed solutions obviously have not worked given the state of news today. He said then that “everyone agrees that Americans are woefully uninformed” and we can't just do nothing. He begged his profession to make a dedicated attempt to get back on track. One idea was to expand news to more than eighteen minutes of what he called “thin soup.” Today we have continuous news but are ever more misinformed. He suggested a council or pressure group to name and shame bad actors guilty of news shortfalls, omissions, bias, and laziness. The group would lobby the media to correct itself. He says we should spend money on investigating and reporting, not on expensive anchors. He argues for reconsideration of paid political advertising as a public service to allow equal time for all candidates.

Since we now know that we can’t believe anything we read or hear on the news, it’s a good practice to be open to look at contradictory information about what we think we believe. I have personally benefitted from self-help authors Jack Canfield, Tony Robbins, Phil McGraw, and others, but I also know that pop psychology is not respected in many circles. To keep my own thoughts balanced, I found a book that examines the downside of the Self-Help and Actualization Movement (SHAM). Salerno’s book was so depressing and negative to me that I thought about giving up this work. It almost derailed this entire book project. Why did I keep going? Because this is a perfect example of the see-saw, teeter-totter evaluation that is required before we can decide what we believe.

In chapter one, Mr. Salerno reviews the early history of self-help including works by Benjamin Franklin, Napoleon Hill, Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, and M. Scott Peck. He cites Thomas A. Harris’s work *I’m OK, You’re OK* (New York, NY: Avon, 1973) as a cultural turning point towards a victimization perspective. Because the implied message was that we’re really not OK, other self-help gurus took that message to an extreme over time. The victimization model follows the Alcoholics Anonymous dogma that we are powerless victims hoping to recover. Salerno argues that this is an enormously popular belief because whatever the problem is, it’s not our fault.

I always thought of self-help as the opposite of promoting a victim mindset, rather it is advocating for empowerment. Canfield, Robbins, and McGraw seem to propose that we are totally empowered and fully responsible for our own destiny. Salerno does argue that victimization and empowerment are two schools of self-help. After defining the evolution of self-help, Salerno begins his attack on its validity by asking why, if it works, has the self-help and actualization movement (SHAM) grown into a multibillion-dollar business. He expects that if the advice worked over a period of years, there should be less and less need for more of it. Going a step further, he proposes that SHAM has actually contributed to the cultural change to a self-centered, woe-is-me American society.

The title of chapter two “False Prophets, False Profits” reveals what appears to be Salerno’s primary problem with the industry. He seems very bothered by the fact that preaching self-help can make people rich. He assumes the reason for writing new editions or making workbooks and supplementary learning tools, is solely for the profit of the author. I didn’t see much consideration given to the possibility that people follow this career path because they want to help others.

I read four chapters about the culprits, the self-help prophets, and then skipped to part two, The Consequences. Chapters eight through eleven examine the problems that result from accepting the self-help philosophies and beliefs related to codependency, relationships, education, and medicine. Salerno points out a recurring theme of SHAM is that we are all wrong, broken, or failing in some way, and that is why we need more and more help. Salerno argues that twisted ideas have reversed what was once considered good and turned virtues into something bad that needs to be fixed. For example, caring more about others than oneself was once admired, but is now considered codependence. Self-sacrifice has become masochism and raising an obedient child with discipline is now portrayed as child abuse. He claims that social pressure makes it hard to hold students accountable and allowing them to believe that everything they do is great, is not helpful.

The concluding chapter summarizes Salerno’s impressions of the impact of the self-help movement as it expanded from the individual to collective, from personal to political.
Salerno considers political correctness a derivative of both the victimization and empowerment movements. He claims we identify with factions that tend to “unite under a common banner of victimhood.” We then hire a lawyer and operate as a BADASSE, that is, one who will “Blame All Disappointments and Setbacks on Someone Else.” Salerno blames self-help gurus for other societal issues such as our undue faith in the psychobabble of expert witnesses, the feminization of society, and the fact that we are a nation of lemmings allowing the rise of demagogues. As a reminder, a demagogue is a person who appeals to emotions and prejudices especially to advance his own political ends. Salerno claims there is no real evidence that self-help works and because of it we are single-mindedly focused on a relentless and selfish but futile pursuit of our own personal fulfillment.

Some of his observations made in 2005 are amplified in 2019, yet I have a hard time accepting his argument that a cadre of motivational speakers are responsible for the beliefs of an entire society. I am not a sociologist, so I can only guess that some scholars might observe that schools, families, and churches, not to mention politicians, entertainers, and journalists also impact the thoughts we live by.

After reading SHAM, I took a little time off before going back to review the Dr. Phil books. It was crystal clear to me that the “self” part of self-help requires us to do the work ourselves. If we are too lazy to do the exercises, that is not the fault of the person offering the advice. I am also reminded, as a certified educator, that learning takes many repetitions, that we have many different learning styles, such as see, hear, do, and that there are always new audiences eager for this information. One more reason for this endless market is that it may not be about self-help or self-improvement so much as about the pursuit of happiness. As we will see in some upcoming summaries, Buddhism teaches that our “wanting” is endless unless we learn to accept and be grateful for what is.

Keep Salerno’s book in mind when you read Why We Work coming up in a review below. Schwartz offers another example of how unproven ideas influence cultures. Salerno, Schwartz, and other authors’ journeys of truth-seeking reinforce the purpose of this whole book. How do we think, where do thoughts come from? When, where, and how do we learn to think critically?


This material appears slightly out of order in that we haven’t yet covered all the positive thinking authors critiqued in _Bright-Sided_. It does fit here since we are examining the need to balance our thinking, and this is another example of examining other people’s thoughts.

Ehrenreich came to this topic via a very personal path. Being diagnosed with breast cancer introduced her to the concept of positive thinking as a cure. That backfired in her case. She rebelled against feeling responsible or guilty because she wasn’t “up” enough. She reviews the preaching of magical thinking on everything from being laid-off, to losing weight, to accumulating wealth. She wonders about getting rid of negative people in our
lives and particularly rejects the “law of attraction” and its claim of a scientific relation to vibrations, magnetism, and quantum physics.

In chapter three Ehrenreich considers the dark roots of positive psychology dating as far back as 1860. She considers Mary Baker Eddy as an anti-Calvinist founder of positive thinking along with William James. James is acknowledged as a pre-eminent thinker and philosopher of his day and is referenced in most of the psychology works in this book. Ehrenreich also attributes blame to Napoleon Hill, W. Clement Stone, and Norman Vincent Peale. Her complaint is that Soviet communism used positive thinking as social control. On balance she warns that we need to heed our fears and negative thoughts.

Ehrenreich covers the business of motivation in chapter four, and in chapter five, “God Wants You to be Rich” she covers the role of positive thinking in religion and churches. Martin Seligman, one of my heroes of psychology, comes under fire next. Ehrenreich claims that his science does not keep up with the promises because his science shows only correlation which is definitely not the same as causation. She goes on to claim that positive thinking destroyed the U. S. economy because of group think. She says that negative views were not tolerated on Wall Street and therefore contrary thinkers were fired. If those naysayers had not been driven from the temple, we may have avoided the 2008 mortgage-crisis meltdown.

Her book is included here, once again, as a reminder that we need to do our own critical thinking. In her final chapter, Ehrenreich concludes that caution, skepticism, and negative thinking all have a place in evaluating our reality. She claims defensive pessimism is a fundamental instinct.


This book could also reside nicely in the next chapter because it deals with motivation, but Schwartz’s discussion about theories versus data explains a cognitive distortion worth pointing out here. He provides a convincing example of how theories change over time and how we are so inclined to follow the thinking of our day. He shows that if we all believe a theory our whole culture can take a turn based on what we all come to believe and accept as fact.

The example he uses begins with the famous work *Wealth of Nations* written by Adam Smith in 1776, which Schwartz argues is based on the false rationale that people only work for pay. In 1911 Frederick Winslow Taylor expanded on Smith’s belief in his book *Principles of Strategic Management* (New York, NY: Harper, 1911) where he proposed piece work as a means to increase efficiency. Piece work separates the worker from the whole and although it may be efficient, it can also be de-motivating. The point is that Smith had no actual data to serve as a foundation for his theory that people work for pay.

There is a big difference between a theory and hard data. Schwartz points out that sometimes theories drive behavior. He says theories about human nature are often neither fact nor discovery. For example, Adam Smith’s false belief that people only work for reward is an invention as opposed to a discovery. Our ideas about human nature come from social science, which like other sciences creates concepts, thoughts, and
ideas as ways of understanding. Schwartz warns that these ideas can have profound
effects before they are even noticed and that ideas can have profound effects even if
they are false.

Schwartz shows that a false theory can become true if people believe it. A false theory
changes how people think about their own actions. Falsehood can become a self-
fulfilling prophecy if institutional structures change to be consistent with the ideology. He
argues that ideology in a social structure can affect multitudes and can be pervasive. He
argues that Adam Smith’s belief that people only work for wages and no other reason
created a culture of self-interest, encouraged by an incentive-based structure for the
workplace. Schwartz says that this ideology and self-fulfilling prophecy led to workplaces
dominated by excessive supervision, routinized work, and incentives that undermine
motivation to do the right thing.

This book is an argument to redesign work around a better understanding of human
needs. Schwartz reports characteristics of satisfied workers as engaged, challenged,
autonomous, and believing in the purpose of what they do. To foster that he
recommends that employers look at the purpose of the task, explain why the work is
important, and give workers discretion in how they accomplish the goals.

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Is It Possible to Think for Yourself?

It would be interesting to me to know how many of us think about what we’re thinking. I
get the impression that many of us just accept our ideas or beliefs as part of who we are,
as facts of our lives. Some people, academics, psychologists, neuroscientists, might
examine a thought and look around it, and even at the opposite of it, to see which angle
would be most helpful. Are we trained to do that? Do we learn the lesson? It would
probably be beneficial to a lot of us and to the civilized world if we were trained to stop
and examine our thoughts.

The whole point of this section and all the books recommended above is to create
awareness that just because some thoughts, words, or pictures appear in our head that
does not mean they are true or helpful. All the previous authors do offer
recommendations and solutions on different ways we can learn to stop and think
critically.

Critical thinking has been a focus and a trendy phrase in higher education for years. I
don’t remember any class discussions on how to think when I was in school, however, I
may not have been paying attention. Today the academic term “critical thinking” is
seriously overused. Yes, an education has always been about learning how to think for
ourselves, but maybe not everyone figures that out. Maybe some people just go to
school, memorize what they are given, spit it back out on a test, and get a credential on
a piece of paper.

This little article of six pages says as much about finding the truth as many big, fat books. Hence, my deviation from the book reports to include an important article that ties together pieces to be discussed in future chapters. According to this professor of sociology, the reasoning skills, how the brain works, that we have been exploring are only part of what constitutes critical thinking. His definition is, “Critical thinking is the use of rational skills, worldviews, and values to get as close as possible to the truth.” From the previous summaries we probably already recognize that understanding how the mind works is a quest for truth. Which brain is right, the instinctive or the analytical?

We do learn some thinking skills, such as analyzing, explaining, applying, etc., in school. It’s Dr. Gabennesch’s references to worldview and values that is sorely neglected and needs more attention and practice. Worldview is that automatic, unconscious bias that causes us to put our own spin on what we see. Worldview is the filter that causes us to see things as black or white because it’s easier. The truth-seeker has to accept a new belief, “things are not always entirely what they seem” (original emphasis by Gabennesch.)

Values are an important part of the definition of critical thinking because what we value is our preference. We have seen that our thinking tends to confirm what we like. The value that Gabennesch singles out as part of the equation is honesty in the form of “intellectual due process,” his italics. If we don’t hold honesty as a valued characteristic, our thinking is not going to reveal objective truths. Gabennesch is another scholar saying we have to be willing to recognize our filters or our worldview and subject them to honest scrutiny in order to arrive at the truth. The only way we can think for ourselves is if we honestly examine what we accept automatically.


Whether or not this work derives from Toltec wisdom is not for me to say. After all, I am a person who read the whole *Life of Pi* (Yann Martel, New York, NY: Harcourt, 2001) believing it was a true story. If you like mythology and mystery, you will enjoy that perspective in *Four Agreements*. This book uses a different style and approach to explain familiar concepts of this chapter.

I created a little synopsis of this book which I review periodically the way other people might recite a prayer. As things go in our heads, it became embellished or tarnished based on new information that I connected to it. Specifically, Ruiz’s first recommended agreement that we might make with ourselves is to “be impeccable with your words.” After reading *A Complaint Free World* by Bowen I linked Ruiz’s first agreement to a litany of word-sins that I attempt to avoid, such as criticizing, contempt, controlling, defensiveness, judging, name-calling, and the list goes on. In my memory this book was a natural fit for the communication section of chapter four, “Take Care of Your People.” However, when I reviewed my notes, I was surprised to see that this book is really about thinking for ourselves.

Don Ruiz offers the perspective that we are living in a thick fog and see ourselves as if through a smoky mirror because of what he calls “domestication.” That is the process of accepting beliefs of society, whether true or not, so that we will feel safe from the fear of rejection. He claims that the result is that we live with an inner judge and victim who
prevent us from being our true selves. The three things we must master to remedy the situation are self-awareness, transformation, and intention.

According to Don Ruiz’s first agreement, being impeccable means being without sin and it’s not just with our words, but also with our thoughts and energy. Sin is anything that goes against ourselves, such as self-criticism or rejection. The lesson is to accept ourselves as we are. The second agreement, “don’t take anything personally,” means we should not interpret ourselves as either the cause or the target. We should not be easily offended. We are not responsible for the thoughts of others, right or wrong, but we are responsible for our own thoughts.

The third agreement is “don’t make assumptions.” If those are not words to live by, I don’t know what are! Being afraid to ask questions leads to assumptions. Communicate for clarification. We assume, for example that we know what others want, because it makes us feel safe. We need to examine our habits and routines. Finally, we must agree with ourselves to “always do your best” which means we must act on the first three agreements. Ruiz says we should replace old habits with better ones and take risks to express our dreams.

After explaining the four agreements, Don Ruiz offers suggestions on how to replace old beliefs. He says the first step toward personal freedom is mastery of awareness. We should be careful of what we do to please others rather than to fulfill our own dreams. He recommends that we see death as a teacher to instruct us how to use our limited time. He advises that we should enjoy the present more than we review the past or worry about the future. He teaches that we must think of consequences as we control our own choices. Once we are aware, we must master transformation which is basically making choices and taking action. Focus attention on your dream, then devote practice and repetition. Don Ruiz says that we run on mental, emotional, and physical energy. Did I mention that he was a medical doctor? He claims that negative emotions drain our energy and make humans suffer. One cure that he proposes is forgiveness and letting go of resentment. The third mastery is to live with intention, and the intent should be love.

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Distortions and Solutions

I have, on occasion, tried to teach critical thinking skills. In the table below, I attempted to summarize some of these concepts for a presentation for students. This chart does not precisely depict the conscious versus unconscious mind’s characteristics because sometimes the automatic brain is helpful and does solve problems. In the chart below, I begin to move this discussion away from of the physiological functioning of the brain to make the point that different types of thoughts can be helpful or not.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uncritical Thinking</th>
<th>Critical Thinking</th>
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<tr>
<td>Quick</td>
<td>Slow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrational</td>
<td>Evaluative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unverified</td>
<td>Factual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thwarts progress</td>
<td>Helps progress</td>
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</table>
Next, I will share ideas of other authors who have made it their life's work to identify thinking distortions and solutions. Most of the sources presented here consider our personal thoughts and feelings as opposed to the thought processes of argument, logic, and debate, which sadly I remain ignorant of to this day.


Medical doctor David Burns provides a list of errors of thinking called cognitive distortions and a complete book of information on how to deal with them. I am a little disturbed at the sight of my copy of this book bought in 1980 when it was published. The pages are brown around the outside edges fading to a lighter, worrisome shade of aged paper toward the center. Good news, no pages are loose or falling out. If I traded it for a new copy, I would lose all my notes, markings, and flags.

Burns’ Cognitive Distortions

1. All-or-nothing thinking.
2. Overgeneralization.
3. Mental Filter – dwell on the negative and filter out anything positive.
4. Disqualifying the positive.
5. Jumping to conclusions.
   a. Mind reading.
   b. Fortune telling.
6. Magnification (catastrophizing) and minimization.
7. Emotional reasoning.
8. Should statements.
9. Labeling and mislabeling.

I will share a little about three of these distortions in hopes that you will want to read all the graphic details.

**Shoulds** are unrealistic expectations, also known as complaints. We are probably familiar with the feeling that we should have done something other than what we did or said. We also expect others to behave in a certain way, they should do this or that. When they don’t comply, we can become frustrated, angry, or even OUTRAGED. Burns offers ten things we should know about our anger. This may be where I learned about unrealistic expectations although I also remember seeing a magazine article that guaranteed happiness if we just lower our expectations. It has certainly been good advice in the workplace.

**Labels** are a form of overgeneralizing. Once we label a person an idiot, a jerk, a flaming liberal, or a backwoods conservative we have applied a negative filter. There is a tendency to then associate more characteristics that are negative, or overuse the mental filter, and eventually see nothing good. We disqualify anything positive.

**Jumping to conclusions** means we write a whole story to explain either the situation or the other person. We assign motives, we engage in mind reading, we make
assumptions, we predict the future all usually without any facts. This can also mean that we assume something is true because we agree with or trust the source.

You may recognize your quick, intuitive brain at work in these examples. The solution is raising our own awareness. We have to learn to recognize bad thinking habits and ask ourselves for facts and evidence. We can challenge the thought that others should conform to our reality.


Martin Seligman is a psychologist who started studying and treating depression more than 50 years ago. After understanding the depressed and hopeless thinking style, he became a proponent of the benefits of optimism. In fact, he was instrumental in shifting the focus of psychology from studying abnormal thinking and mental illness to what is now called the school of positive psychology.

Seligman argues that there are basically two habits or styles of thinking – optimism and pessimism. Pessimism and depression are linked to hopelessness and helplessness. Resilience and hope are linked to an optimistic way of explaining or interpreting life events. Hope is having positive expectations or believing in a good future. The good news is that he also found that many depressed patients could be taught to think differently because automatic negative thinking as a habit is a learned behavior. What is learned can be unlearned.

The difference between the two thinking styles looks great in a chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hopeless</th>
<th>Hopeful</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pessimism explains causes as:</td>
<td>Optimism explains causes as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pervasive</td>
<td>Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
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The negative cloud of pessimism comes from thoughts we tell ourselves about causes of events. Permanent means that this will never end, it’s always going to be this way, or it’s just who I am. Pervasive makes the situation universal. Everything is dark, there is no compartmentalizing of one bad event. This leads to globalizing or catastrophizing as when a minor setback goes from adversity to disaster to full-blown catastrophe. Personal is any variation of internal interpretations; “Why is this happening to ME? It’s all my fault, I caused this, I can’t deal with it, I’m stupid.”

The optimist, on the other hand, has a different perspective. Rather than permanent, the event is viewed as temporary, as taught in ancient wisdom, “this too shall pass.” The opposite of pervasive is seeing this one specific problem, not everything is black. Rather than seeing an issue as all about me, optimists interpret it as impersonal or external. If it’s a bad event, optimists think, “it just is what it is” or *c’est la vie*. However, if it’s a good event, optimists give themselves credit. Seligman offers a significant warning about this aspect of our thinking. There is danger in blaming all bad events on impersonal or external causes. We still have to take responsibility for our own mistakes.
Now that we are aware of the dangers of the three Ps of pessimism, what do we do about it? We can learn to recognize those thoughts swirling around in our heads. Of course, in order to do that we do have to slow down and be aware of what we’re thinking. Basically, we need to practice mindfulness, that is, we need to stop and examine our assumptions and self-talk. I’m sure many of you have tried meditation to quiet your mind or focus your thinking, right? What’s another good way? Writing letters, diaries, and journals are very helpful because they help us see what we are thinking.

Seligman’s research offers two specific methods of dealing with negative thoughts once we know they’re there: distraction and disputation. Let’s use an example to work through this and see what bad things I’m saying to myself. I’m thinking that I hate my job because of work overload due to short staffing. The more I do, the more they want, etc.

First, we can distract ourselves. We can postpone dealing with something until our emotions have subsided and we’ve had time to think clearly. As distractions I could take a break, change the scenery, go for coffee, or call in sick. One good distraction is to read uplifting stories or watch hilarious pet videos to counterbalance all the bad news. This will definitely remove the immediate stress. But what happens? It’s only temporary, we haven’t solved the problem, and when we go back, there will be more work than there was in the first place. However, distraction might temporarily lift our mood.

Another way of dealing with negative thoughts is to argue with ourselves, that is dispute our own statements. We know how to argue with others, right? Just challenge ourselves like we would challenge our teenager. Here are four specific things to look for in a negative thought. These arguments especially apply to negative things we believe about ourselves.

- Evidence: is it true? Look at each negative statement for facts that confirm or disprove it. For example: It’s never going to get any better. Change to: Even though it looks black now, this is just a cycle.

- Alternatives: is there a different way to look at the situation? Is there ever a time when this is ok? For example: Why does this always happen to me? Change to: It’s not happening to me, it just is.

- Implications: ok, so what if my negative statements were true, where would that lead, what’s the worst that could happen, and how bad is it? Be sure to put a realistic likelihood on your guesses of outcomes. The reason we check the implications, is that we are trying to show ourselves that the impact is less catastrophic than we are imagining. For example: I’m the only one who cares if this gets done right. Alternate thinking: So what? How bad is it if no one checks in the books? Or if the statistics are inconsistent?

- Usefulness: is it helping me to think what I am thinking about the situation? Is it making me happy, is it making me a better person, am I a good person to be around? Is it getting me more of what I want? Or, as Dr. Phil used to say or maybe still does, “How’s that working for you?” Example: I can’t handle this work pace for one more day or I’ll self-destruct. That self-talk is not going to help me at all.
Summary - Take Care of Your Mind

- Not everything that occurs to us is true or helpful.
- Some thoughts are rational, others are irrational and emotional.
- Slow down, breathe deeply, listen for distortions.
- Think (if possible) before you speak.
- Open your mind to contradictory thoughts.
- Choose the most helpful interpretation.
- Believe in yourself.
- Create your own reality with your thoughts.
CHAPTER 2 - TAKE CARE OF YOUR GIFT

Figure Out Who You Are

While listening to Canfield tapes and getting my post-divorce life back together, I was still working at the same job, which fortunately was not so much minimum wage anymore. Very happily remarried, we were now looking at money in the bank as opposed to bankruptcy. Then, given the opportunity to make whatever life change I wanted, and inspired by the “you can do anything” Canfield philosophy, I landed a new job in a new town. It was not an easy feat as I sent out at least a hundred resumes. It’s clear in hindsight, given that I became a personnel officer who reviewed hundreds of job applications, that I had no idea what I was doing or how to look for a new job. Persistence is a virtue and life skill that comes highly recommended by many of these authors.

Over the last few years with my previous employer, that organization became heavily involved in Deming’s Total Quality Management philosophy. We all learned many process-improvement tools and techniques. Fortunately, because of that background, the director of my new position immediately tagged me as my department’s representative for further institution-wide quality initiatives. Besides learning to use more management tools, I trained to serve as a quality improvement meeting facilitator. This lucky turn of events was like turning on a faucet of possibilities for me. I was asked to coordinate staff training for my department, which lead to all kinds of information gathering and sharing. I researched and created programs to share lessons about team building, running productive meetings, effective goal setting, improving interpersonal communications, getting organized, managing time and stress. Researching content for these programs meant endless reading about organization development, change management, and employee motivation. Scores of employee training videos etched their way into my memory as I watched many times over while facilitating the related group discussions.

As the person charged with providing staff development opportunities for my unit of more than 100 full-time and about 100 part-time employees, I have observed the value of books and programs. Supervisors and technical experts usually provided job training. Soft skills like interpersonal communication, meeting management, and team processes were my area. We started to notice that the same employees came to all the programs while other people we would like to have targeted for development would never show up. As Dr. Moore predicted, these self-help endeavors didn’t seem to work for everyone. At that time, I was young and naïve and thought I could change people. My hope was that studying personality and motivation would explain why employees did what they did.

We know we are all unique and all have different needs and wants. We were trying to figure out how managers were supposed to be able to inspire their employees if they were all different. Personality traits are important from the perspective on an employer because they impact both motivation and communication. We explored personality traits so that we would learn how to be more productive and work better together. Among the programs offered by the university’s staff development unit were the Myers-Briggs personality test and another variation on that theme called the DISC Behavioral Style
Survey (Carlson Learning Co., 1987). DISC stands for personality types that are Directing, Influencing, Steady, and Cautious. As an institution of higher education, we also had access to plenty of information and assessment based on learning styles. It doesn’t matter what tool we use as long as we start somewhere to think about who we are and who we want to be.


There is no way any one book, let alone these few paragraphs, can do justice to explaining the formal Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) process. The biggest caution I remember is that the test had to be administered by a trained professional who would counsel people that all assessments are somewhat flawed and that there is a long spectrum between the two extremes of any of these characteristics. For example, I took the test several times over the years at different institutions and wavered back and forth across the center line between being an extravert and an introvert. In general, giving people labels is not a good idea. Here, we are exploring them as a tool for understanding ourselves, not others.

The four initials that we are assigned based on this test refer to four life situations. The first factor is how we get energized, with others or alone, Extravert or Introvert. Second factor is whether we take in information by Sensing or iNtuiting. Third initial comes from making decisions based on Thoughts or Feelings. Finally, if we operate in our daily lives with a preference for making decisions, we get a J for Judging. If we prefer to continue gathering information rather than deciding, we earn a P for Perceiving. Skeptics might say P is for procrastinating.

The preference for how and where we gather information and make decisions is referred to as the source of energy. If we are energized by operating out in the public with more people around, we are considered an extravert. If we prefer to take in information and make decisions alone, in this Myers-Briggs evaluation we would be classified as an introvert.

We take in information about the world via the information-gathering function. Some prefer to use their five senses, see, hear, taste, smell, touch, so they get the designation Sensing. People who prefer to gather information via intuition, possibilities, and relationships rather than cold, hard facts get an N for intuition because the letter I already belongs to introverts. After receiving input, we make decisions about what it means. The decision-making function according to Myers-Briggs is based on either thinking or feeling.

Life-style orientation explains which of these two functions, information gathering or decision making, we prefer to use to relate to the world around us. If we like a lot of structure, planning, and control, we likely make decisions easily and use that decision-making function as a frame of reference. For people who prefer flexibility and spontaneity and would prefer to not commit prematurely, the information-gathering function is our life orientation preference.

If you find this intriguing, you can take the MBTI and find out the four letters that describe your personality type. This might explain things that you’ve always wondered about.

It’s never an easy thing to speak against the commonly accepted norms, but when someone does, there is a silent cheer from those who agree. The approval in this case was not silent since it rang true for so many introverts and easily became a best-seller. Cain’s book offers a historical, cultural, and biological review of factors impacting introverts and extroverts. She explains educational and social perceptions that impacted the American shift from a culture of character to one of personality. She reports on research describing characteristics of both personality types, what works in which situations, and how far we can adapt to preferences of opposite types. This is a fascinating read no matter where you fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum.


As you can see from this title, investigating personalities rapidly leads to motivation, or is it the other way around? When pursuing these topics, I started with what I learned in Psychology 101, Abraham Maslow and his famous pyramid, a hierarchy of needs. Maslow’s theory was that we generally satisfy foundational needs for safety and security before we can move on to something loftier such as self-actualization. I compared that explanation to what Frederick Herzberg called hygiene factors. I also read whatever was in The Harvard Business Review or Psychology Today in the 1980s and ‘90s because that was what was handy, you know, before the internet.

I am including Reiss’s book because it was so enlightening to take this survey and compare my own motivators to someone else’s. Upon seeing the line-up of what was important to me compared to say, my younger sister who is completely different, I knew there was some serious benefit to this book. As a hypothetical example, imagine one person takes the survey and the very topmost important of the sixteen desires are power, status, and vengeance. The person next door takes the same survey and the top three preferences are tranquility, family, and idealism. It seems so easy to understand differences based on these more common descriptions rather than chalking things up to being either an introvert or an extrovert. Reiss’s work is not as famous as the Big Five Personality Factors, but that came on my radar later, after I had more or less figured out who I was. For the purposes of this little book, it doesn’t matter what assessment we use as long as we all take the time to think about what is important to us.

Two wonderful aspects to this book are an unambiguous statement that pleasure motivates behavior, and a history of the psychology of motivation going all the way back to Plato. Reiss points out that other researchers, James and McDougall, had previously identified thirteen basic inherited desires. Behaviorists argue these are learned. Notice the controversy over inherited versus learned. Is it nature or is it nurture? No psychology book is complete without that question. Reiss describes his research methods and says that knowledge of these desires can help us find value-based happiness. There is a discussion about the difference between pleasure and happiness derived from a values-based or meaningful life. Seligman’s Authentic Happiness is a whole book on that topic, so stay tuned for more.
Part one introduces the sixteen basic desires grouped into chapters of similar characteristics. I am reluctant to use just one word for each desire because they are so much more robust and encompassing than one word. For example, power as one of the sixteen basic human desires includes influence, mastery, achievement, competence, leadership, willfulness, and determination. Competence is one of the three fundamental psychological needs identified by Deci and Flaste in the next book in this section. These books confirm and support information in other titles recommended here and taken together they help paint a clearer picture of how we think and why we act.

You really should read about all the sixteen desires. It’s fascinating. The description of each desire shows a spectrum and includes balancing behaviors and values that can help keep our extremes in check. Chapter six describes miscommunication that occurs when people hold values at opposite ends of a spectrum. Reiss describes how holding opposite opinions can progress from a misunderstanding, to touting one’s values as superior, to an extreme position of tyranny using pressure tactics to force others to comply. He says tyranny, the word today might be fascism, will never work because people cannot change their basic desires.

Part two goes into detail about how we satisfy our basic desires. Discussion about the difference between pleasure and value-based happiness reveals that working towards our most important values gives life meaning and purpose. I appreciated the investigation of our dual biological and psychological or spiritual natures. The author makes a philosophical appeal for balance in meeting desires rather than succumbing to either excess or deficiency. For example, I learned that there are not nearly enough frivolous activities in my life that would help balance my intellectual intensity. :>) Reiss confirms that willpower and incentives work in the short term to change behavior but meeting our basic desires are the long-term automatic motivators.


It was clear to me by the time I read this book in 2012 that we cannot force other people to do what we want and expect a good outcome. Managers at the time were all talking about intrinsic motivation and this is a good book to explain the difference between internal or intrinsic and external motivators. The authors describe many examples of how external control and authority can generate either compliance or defiance. Money is an example of an external motivator that can backfire and lead to employee alienation if it causes the recipient to lose touch with what is personally and internally important. The authors emphasize that people must want to do whatever the task is in order to be true to themselves, that is, authentic.

Part one of this book describes the importance of autonomy for our well-being. Being in control over our own choices, that is autonomy, increases our willingness to participate. Behaviors that reduce autonomy include threats, deadlines, imposed goals, surveillance, and evaluations. Strategies for controlling and pressuring other people undermine their intrinsic motivation. The authors also state that competition can reduce intrinsic motivation, but this is not a statement that should be taken out of context. A good reason to read the whole book.
Chapter five explores our fundamental human need to feel competent. People are more motivated when they see a connection between what they do and the desirable results they get. If we have the abilities or competence to do what needs to be done, we get a sense of accomplishment and feelings of enjoyment. This book provides examples of how these internal motivators work.

Part two is about the role that society, relationships with others, and feelings of connectedness play in motivating our behavior. The summary is that people are intrinsically motivated to act to meet these three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Usually when sharing information about motivation theories, I translate this as Deci’s three C’s: control, competence, and connectedness because three C’s are easier to remember. The authors recommend that we can inspire others to become intrinsically motivated by providing reasons why, acknowledging feelings, and inviting participation.

Part three summarizes how the theory works. Chapter ten discusses how to promote autonomy with choices, limits, goals, and rewards. Chapter eleven is about promoting healthy behavior and reasons for change. Chapter twelve covers autonomy and individuality and reiterates Jack Canfield’s message about self-parenting in a section called “Promoting One’s Own Development.” The environment, parents, schools, and TV obviously impact our learning and growth, but we can change, take control of our thinking and emotions, and do what meets more of our own needs.

The authors review the role of emotions as motivators and repeat the message that people do assign different interpretations to the same stimulus. They discuss how our image of ourselves gets tangled up with various feelings, and this ego-involvement is the source of a lot of our problems. I thought it was particularly helpful that the authors compare a basic human emotion such as sadness to feelings that have a “cognitive overlay” like depression. That means that too much cognition, thinking, has taken a core emotion and distorted it. Final thoughts from this book are that motivation must come from within and the starting place for change is examining our inner world of thoughts by asking questions, mostly starting with why. Why do I do this or that? Why do I feel this way?


Before Martin Seligman’s influence, psychology was much more focused on mental illness than on healthy, rational thinking. His interesting personal story is explained in chapter two, “How psychology lost its way and I found mine” and now, another sixteen years later, he is considered the father of positive psychology. He writes that positive psychology has three pillars: 1) positive emotions 2) positive personality traits such as strengths, virtues, and abilities and 3) positive institutions including democracy and families.

Part one of the book covers positive emotions. Seligman explains the difference between fleeting pleasure and a deeper, more lasting gratification that comes from using our strengths and virtues. He says positive feelings that come from using our strengths and virtues can lead to authentic happiness. Chapter three reviews all the benefits of
being happy including longer life, health, productivity, and resilience. Seligman introduces the concept of a baseline or set range for our happiness and what makes it go up or down. He explains research about a “hedonic treadmill” which means that we easily get used to good things. Pleasures are hedonic, and we soon take them for granted. The downside of simple pleasures is that they fade fast, and we are on a treadmill to increase pleasure. The interesting thing about money making us happy is that it’s not how much money we have, but what is more important is how much significance we assign to money. The book includes a great deal of information on marriage, social life, health, and religion as external circumstances that have a small impact on happiness. On the other hand, internal circumstances, our thinking, has a lot to do with happiness.

I bet you didn’t know there are three kinds of positive emotions! Based on the past, present or future, each time period offers an opportunity to use our interpretations and personal strengths to change how we feel and increase those positive emotions. If you have an unpleasant memory of the past that makes you bitter or angry, there is an explanation and exercise to help convert negative feelings into those more positive such as gratitude and forgiveness. Chapter six on positive emotions in the future is a brief summary of Learned Optimism. If you remember the ABC formula from Ellis, Seligman now adds a D so we have an Activating even, a Belief, a Consequence and if you don’t like that outcome you can Dispute how you think about it. Chapter seven, “Happiness in the Present” covers pleasures and gratifications, how to enhance them and includes a review of Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1990.)

Part two is advice on how to increase our state of gratification through exercise of our strengths and virtues. Seligman argues that we are at a point in history where social problems and bad behavior are explained by inequalities in our environments rather than our own individual character. He makes an argument for why it is time to revisit that logic. I’m not sure when “character education” became part of some school curricula but I do remember helping graduate students in education with research on that topic in the late 1990s.

Seligman describes the process where a group of scholars reviewed philosophical and religious classics such as Aristotle, Plato, Bible, Koran, Talmud, and many more in order to arrive at a classification scheme of commonly accepted virtues. The six “core virtues that are consistently valued across cultures and across time” are wisdom, courage, love, justice, temperance and transcendence.

Chapter nine offers an opportunity to do a self-assessment and figure out what your own strengths are. The Values in Action project has an online survey at www.viasurvey.org Since the intent is to help people act on these virtues, the group also identified twenty-four related strengths that are less abstract than virtues and more measurable. Seligman states that strengths are moral traits that can be acquired through choice. He points out that talents, which are different, are not moral. Once you know what your strengths are, you can use them to achieve authentic happiness.

Summary of six virtues and twenty-four strengths:

Wisdom and knowledge
Curiosity, interest in the world
Love of learning
Judgement, critical thinking, open-mindedness
Ingenuity, originality, practical intelligence, street smarts
Social intelligence, personal intelligence, emotional intelligence
Perspective
Courage
Bravery, valor
Perseverance, industry, diligence
Integrity, honesty, genuineness
Humanity and love
Kindness, generosity
Loving and allowing oneself to be loved
Justice
Citizenship, duty, teamwork, loyalty
Fairness, equity
Leadership
Temperance
Self-control
Prudence, caution, discretion
Humility, modesty
Transcendence
Appreciation of beauty and excellence
Gratitude
Hope, optimism, future-mindedness
Sense of purpose, spirituality, faith, religion
Forgiveness, mercy
Playfulness, humor
Zest, enthusiasm, passion

Part three goes into detail about how the strengths can be used in different areas of our lives: work, love, and child rearing. In the work section Seligman mentions research showing that we can move from just having a job to having a calling based on using our strengths. Besides using our strengths, a calling requires a commitment to some greater good. If you are a lawyer, don’t miss this chapter’s section on why lawyers are unhappy. Marriage advice is to focus on your partner’s strengths and downplay their faults. Try to use your own strengths every day in some way to support your marriage and your partner.

The book ends with discussion of the importance of meaning and purpose in the type of life we live. Variations range from a pleasant life to a good life to a meaningful life. Religion provides meaning for many people, but what about non-believers? Seligman’s conclusion is that within most religions the higher power symbolizes knowledge, power, and goodness. He suggests that for some people an alternative to religion would be to practice their own personal strengths in order to help spread those higher-power virtues throughout our world. This sounds very much like advice from the Dali Lama in *The Art of Happiness.*

As a teenager I remember being particularly tormented about what exactly was the purpose of life. Ten years of Catholic education and catechism lessons had not convinced me that “God made me to know, love, and serve Him in this world, so as to be happy with Him forever in the next.” What was anyone supposed to do with that? I don’t remember how or when I got over the quest. Did I reconcile to some “just-serve-the-greater-good” answer? Maybe I just got practical and got a job. Maybe I am still seeking the definitive answer since many of these books deal with that exact question. Regardless, imagine my delight when I read the Dali Lama’s opinion that the purpose of life is to seek happiness.

Before you assume that is all there is too it, let me say that the book is more than 300 pages of explanations and qualifiers as to what happiness is and is not. The big picture presented here is that happiness is determined by our state of mind more than external events. Our level of happiness is related to how we perceive our situation and how satisfied we are with what we have. The chapter on training the mind explains that just as external events can be good, bad, or neutral, so can our thoughts. Learning, conditioning, and training can help us avoid negative thoughts and cultivate the positive.

Part two explains how to foster relationships, intimacy, and compassion as ingredients of happiness. All we have to do is try to be kind. Simple is not always easy. Part three is about dealing with suffering which ties directly to Buddhist teachings and the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that there is suffering in life and the more resistant and unprepared for it we are, the more likely we are to react as victims and increase our own suffering. Acceptance of what is, might be the most well-known aspect of Buddhism. The explanation of Buddhist beliefs in this book are very helpful because they are described in a modern Western context that we can identify with. According to Buddhism, the three causes of suffering are ignorance, greed, and hatred. These simple one-word categories are worth reading about because there is much more depth than one word conveys. For example, greed also means cravings, desires, and just generally wanting to have our own way. The ability to accept someone else’s wishes and let go of our own need to be right goes a long way towards making us happier people. Dr. Phil used to ask on his TV show, “Would you rather be right or happy?”

Part four is rich with helpful strategies on overcoming obstacles such as a lack of motivation to bring about change, dealing with anger, and anxiety. The Dalai Lama acknowledges that many people look to religion as a source of happiness, but he demonstrates that his approach, the Buddhist approach, relies more on reasoning and training, not faith. In the final chapter he describes how the purpose of religion is to benefit people. One way is that religions provide an ethical framework that governs behavior for positive effects. He believes that religion should be a remedy to reduce conflict and suffering, not a source of conflict. The book states that of the five billion people on earth, four billion claim no religion! The Dalai Lama observes that religion is only one level of spirituality. Much more important is what he refers to as basic spirituality – human qualities of goodness, kindness, caring, and compassion. Hope for the other four billion?

I learned about a concept called circular journalism when fake news became a hot topic. Circular refers to someone publishing an idea and others write a story based on that as a source without verifying or gathering new information. I know that many of the books I am highlighting here are interrelated because many of them quote each other. That does not necessarily make them either fake or circular. If they each make their own conclusions or add a new perspective, I’m not opposed to getting more ideas out there for us to examine.

*Drive* was going to be my nod to more recent information, so I am sad to see that it is already ten years old. Regardless, the interesting point is that author Daniel Pink, like Schwartz, also discusses the negative impact of Frederick W. Taylor’s emphasis on extrinsic rewards like money. Pink starts with a short history of motivation identifying biological, extrinsic, and intrinsic motivators. He also cites Deci’s theory that we have an inherent, intrinsic, tendency to seek autonomy, mastery, and purpose also known to me as control, competence, connectedness.

The surprising truth that Pink is emphasizing is the significance of internal motivators. One of his problems with external rewards is that they cause us to organize either a business or society in favor of profits over purpose. Chapter two outlines seven reasons why reward and punishment don’t work. The reasons are all captivating but two relate to the 2007-08 financial crisis still on everyone’s mind in 2009. Pink argues that external rewards can encourage cheating and unethical behavior, and also can encourage short-term thinking. Worst of all those rewards can become addictive so that we can’t get good behavior for the fun of it. We will have to pay forever after we set up that reward expectation. Pink describes the situation when the carrot and stick really do work and how to apply that information. He introduces the idea of a surprise “now that” reward to offer after the task is done.

The next three chapters are amplification of Deci’s autonomy, mastery and purpose. Based on research by Amy Wrzeniewski and Carole Dweck, Pink describes three laws of mastery or ways of developing our competence. First, we must have the mindset to believe that we can learn more, that our brain is capable of change, and we are not stuck with a limited mental capacity. Next, he warns that mastery is painful, requires grit and perseverance. Finally, mastery can never be achieved so making progress continues to be a great motivator.

When discussing purpose, Pink has high hopes that the huge demographic of the baby-boomer generation will cause our cultural focus to shift away from profits and more towards purpose. I don’t have the book here to re-read this section, but today in 2019 it seems unlikely to me. Just because we were anti-establishment hippies in the 1960s does not mean we hold the same views after spending a lifetime in the real world. I do believe that purpose, idealism, or social justice, is the work of each new generation. Pink’s final warning is that business policies can reduce intrinsic motives. He offers suggestions and research about what might work to increase employees’ subjective wellbeing and reduce burnout.

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**Figure Out What You’re Good At**
After giving up my fascination with organizational change management, I started focusing on what makes employees happy and consequently, productive. We just covered some suggested readings on how to figure out who we are, what our values are, what motivates us, and what might make us happy. Now, here are a few recommended titles that will help us identify our own personal values and skills in the work environment.


The first career book I remember being aware of was *What Color Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Bolles and it is still going strong. The first editions had to have come out in the 1970s because I remember studying it when I was still trying to decide what I wanted to be. It seems that now there are annual updates, so you should be able to find the latest edition for your own self-evaluation.

Much later, while preparing presentations on how to be happy at work I revisited the 2005 edition. One revealing exercise presents 246 skills listed as verbs which we examine and mark according to Bolles’ instructions. P if we possess the skill, E if we enjoy doing it, and W if we do it well. We then highlight all the words that have all three letters because these would be skills relevant to our most rewarding potential jobs. At that time, I was looking for a new challenge and it must have helped because in 2007 I accepted a new assignment with more responsibility. Turns out my three checks landed on skills like having responsibility, implementing projects, and communicating, but zero marks for promoting, acting, or diverting (whatever that is). This is one example of a fun way to learn about ourselves. These books, even the older editions, are overflowing with helpful ideas.


On more than one occasion of discussing this topic, my boss has praised his favorite title in this category, *Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow.* By the time he mentioned it, I thought I had no personal interest in devoting more time to discovering my own best work. However, I finally decided that his book could be an honorable mention title without a full summary, since I had no plans to read it. In preparation for this recommendation I started reading reviews on goodreads.com. Many reviewers suggest that they have read it many times over, and one person pointed out the value of this title for people considering their second, later-life, or post-retirement career. Since the title mentions “right livelihood” that is a clue to a Buddhist perspective. The book suggests a more philosophical than practical approach even though the title promises the money. I did read it after all.

It is a wonderful book for finding out who you are and what pursuits you will find fulfilling, but “the money won’t matter” would be more accurate in the title. This book covers Buddhist concepts of mindfulness, full awareness, living in the moment, commitment, and self-expression. The importance of self-esteem and the route to achieving or demonstrating it runs throughout the book, not confined to chapter two. Sinetar, as well as many other experts, suggests that we must know and accept ourselves, flaws and all.
Chapter four reminds us to treat ourselves as if we count, another tenet of good mental health. We examine how we manifest resistance and overcome other people's "shoulds." We learn that it is best to develop courage in safe, manageable steps. In chapter seven Sinetar describes three aspects of how the money follows. The concepts of letting go, doing something meaningful during the waiting period, and recognizing inner wealth are tremendously significant. They do not guarantee financial success.

The last three chapters further explain how self-esteem, resourcefulness, and cultural expectations impact a fully integrated self. Sinetar presents an excellent argument for work as a way to care for ourselves and others. Of course, the work has to be congruent with our true self. She reflects that "new research" about a state of flow including deep concentration and full attention reported in 1986 were already part of the Buddhist practice and previously identified in other Western research in the 1960s and '70s.

This author's timeless conclusions explain why readers continue to revisit her book. She says that "all major cultures...grasped this central truth: that work, done rightly, affords an individual the key principles of life..." She assures us that persons fully integrated in their work will experience love, happiness, and a sense of satisfaction, otherwise known as abundance.


Since I do not have this book in front of me, I must rely on my notes which yield a less comprehensive summary than some of the other titles. Regardless, it is obvious that this book brings a very definite Eastern, spiritual, and philosophical focus to the topic of work. It starts with an examination of what the authors mean by true work. A recurring discussion compares what we do for money so as to have things versus what we do that seems most meaningful to us. The authors remind us that ancient wisdom observes that "unhappiness comes from seeking to have not be." One theme of Toms' advice is to just be who we are. By honoring what gives our life meaning, we clarify our own purpose. He claims that we need to express our gifts and contribute to the world around us.

In the next chapter on discovering our own passions, Toms suggests that serving people and our planet are hallmarks of true work. He advises that we look for gaps; find what needs to be done. This is the same advice found in Constructive Living. Effective work comes from living in the present and being fully present in the moment. This also echoes research reported in Flow and The How of Happiness. Toms says that to manifest your best work, "Know your purpose. Be present. Act decisively and don't be attached to the results of action." The chapter about working through the wilderness covers negative attitudes, mistakes, expectations, and toxic work environments.

Toms must have been an early adapter in 1998 because he was covering mindfulness, deep breathing, and intention before it became trendy. He advises that we do every task, even those seemingly insignificant or meaningless, with attention and awareness. It's about the journey, not the destination. Some of us may remember a scenic motivational poster to this effect. In explaining "what you see is what you get," Toms says, "the worldview you hold determines what happens in your life." What we think we see, what spin or interpretation we put on events, that is our self-created reality. The term "worldview" was previously discussed by Gabennesch in the critical-thinking article.
For some reason, I copied the whole chapter on money and wealth. As a librarian, making a lot of money was never an option so maybe keeping this chapter was my way of rationalizing low pay. The authors contend that we assign money with all kinds of hidden values like security, power, prestige, acceptance, and success. Toms is quoting a 1992 edition of *Your Money or Your Life* by Dominguez and Robin, discussed later in chapter five of this book, when he states that money is something we choose to trade our life energy for. These authors say that our financial life does not exist separately from the rest of our quality of life. They explain the economics of money as being based on deferred satisfaction. In other words, we do something we don’t like now in order to later buy the opportunity to do something we do like. Both sets of authors argue that life is too short to spend years viewing our work as a burden.

Toms’ reports that capitalism is based on creating wants, not satisfying them. The capital market is partially fueled by our basic human characteristic of always wanting more, as in an unquenchable appetite. Our deepest human desire is actually for a connection to others and the world around us. Instead of just connecting, we buy things that make us feel connected, valued, important, or intelligent. We confuse being a joyous, productive, contributing person with having and accumulating a lot of possessions. Remember that Deci’s research on *Why We Do What We Do* showed a sense of belonging or connectedness as one our three fundamental psychological needs. Understanding this discussion is especially important for service-oriented people who want to follow a path that will not get them a fancy car and a big house. Toms also offers a reminder of what true wealth is and how important it is to appreciate what we already have.


As an almost-wise elder myself, I no longer find my life’s purpose quite as mysterious as I did at age nineteen. Maybe organizing this book helped me calm down and figure it out. According to Leider, to discover our purpose we must learn how to live from the inside out, discover our gifts, what we’re good at, what moves us, what we enjoy, and we must discover solitude. Our purpose is a built-in reason to contribute to and connect with the world around us. Since this author has a master’s degree in counseling and is a nationally respected life-coach, the book is filled with guidance in the form of exercises and questionnaires. There is no need to summarize in more detail because this is just a book you work through for your own benefit.


This book expands on Leider’s previous work in *The Power of Purpose* by describing the potential for our work-satisfaction to progress from being a job to a career to a calling. A job pays the bills and provides some security, a career allows for our professional development and increased competence, and a calling allows us to share our unique gifts in a way that provides us with meaning and purpose.

One idea from this book that I loved and has stayed with me is the title of the introduction, “If you can’t get out of it, get into it!?” In my 48 years of working I have been
with one employer for 17 years and another for 23. I have been able to stay happily in one place for long periods because I am always able to find new ways to get interested in what I’m doing. I likely learned some of those tricks from this book. The “calling card” exercise is just one example of a helpful activity that, by forcing us to identify and choose between options, makes our personal strengths and preferences clearer to us.

Shapiro and Leider explore the idea of our calling being our destiny. Our calling is not just what we do, but more about what kind of person our work allows us to be. They also develop the idea of using our gift in service to others and to make a difference in the world. The “whistle” in the title of this book refers to the joyous feeling we have when we are using our gifts for others. Thinking about our destiny and our legacy may seem too lofty for most of us, but if we think about it merely in terms of how we want to be remembered it is a little more manageable. For example, how great would it be to be thought of as the kind of person who “always leaves a little bit of heaven behind” wherever you go? Not impossible to aspire to.


This is another book that can help us appreciate the work or life we have. It’s interesting to me how one sentence can have a lasting impact. Early in this book, as best I remember, Izzo is telling a story about work advice from his grandfather. The message is that most of life is rowing so learn to be good at it and enjoy it. Once again, the lesson is to enjoy the journey.

Izzo’s research is presented in five sections covering daily life, work, relationships, faith, and the journey. His theme is that there can be two views of life, innocence or cynicism, Seligman would say optimism or pessimism, and we each choose our view hundreds of times a day. Izzo encourages us to hold onto our ideals and act on our beliefs. He has specific advice on how to deal with burnout when we have fallen out of love with work. He recommends random acts of kindness for nasty situations. He advises us to give up childish hopes that everyone will like us.

Izzo does have a way with words. He reminds us “you must be present to win” as an attention-getting introduction to a discussion of mindfulness and focused attention. He argues that boredom or depression can be cured by joining something larger than ourselves, and as proof he advises us to read Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, summary coming up in chapter three. I have to admit that Frankl’s work is referred to as a source in many, many of the other works summarized here but, in this context, it is both real and practical. Izzo is trying to emphasize the point that giving is better than receiving. Frankl survived the Holocaust by asking “what does life expect from me?” Or as other authors have phrased it, what needs to be done now? What can I contribute?

Another memorable phrase that I attribute to Izzo comes from his final comments on our journey, destiny, or legacy. He says that we have influence just by being who we are. The question I ask myself, learned from this book is, “What is my way of being in the world?” Some days I am a real pain, but I try to keep those to a minimum. Also, I am sorry to admit that I am a cynic, but I try to be a lighthearted and humorous cynic always looking for solutions.
Decide and Act on What You Want

After exploring countless personality and management strategies for better communication, persuasion, negotiation, planning, and goal setting, I gave up on trying to manage any of it. Yes, instead I abandoned myself totally to empowering others. The advice to empower, not to abandon, came from a very early Total Quality Management book called *Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment* (William C. Byham, Pittsburgh, PA: DDI Press, 1989). This inspired me to quit trying to establish goals for the group. Instead I worked with my people to establish their own goals that would give them what they want and at the same time meet the needs of the institution. That lightbulb might also have come from the book *Finding Flow*.

Having clear goals is a recurring theme in all the self-help and motivation works discussed here. Each author has a unique way of describing good goals. Canfield almost made a song out of the characteristics of good goals as conceivable, believable, achievable, desirable, measurable, and controllable. At work we learned about SMART goals being Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time-bound. What we learn from Deci and Flaste is that the best goals meet our three fundamental psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy (or the easy-to-remember three C’s, competence, connectedness and control).

I studied change management rigorously through 2007 when a colleague and I were invited to present a half-day workshop at our national professional association meeting in Washington, D.C. We had done deep research and preparation, then attempted to share everything we knew in a very short time. We received positive feedback, felt good about our accomplishment, and were even invited to consult at one of our attendee’s home institutions. It was pretty much a high point for that career to date. Ironically, a new position as a regional librarian manager quickly shifted my focus from theoretical and instructional staff development to actually managing employees.

There is an impressive amount of research, literature, time, and effort dedicated to change management which makes sense because change is usually the work of leaders. If there is no change, there is not much leadership. However, I began to see change as much more personal than organizational. People, not only procedures and processes, make up the organization. My focus shifted from changing the environment or managing process improvements to attempting to motivate my employees, in other words making them happy. Making employees happy was always part of change management anyway but the shift from an organizational to a personal focus lead to a lot more study of motivation.

We have my brother to thank for this next fabulous resource. In the old days he and I would periodically take turns talking each other away from the ledge, the jumping off the cliff ledge, the “I quit my job” ledge. We did that as a form of therapeutic complaining and self-assessment, but also sibling bonding. He might have been inspired by a work consultant at the time and that’s how this book got on our radar. All we had to do was figure out what we’re good at and what we like to get in the flow.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a Hungarian psychologist who has studied peak performance in Olympic athletes, world class musicians, and ordinary everyday people. He argues that the flow experience is the ultimate desirable state of accomplishment and productivity. People feel fulfilled and happy when experiencing flow. The person is so absorbed in what they’re doing that they lose all sense of time. With complete absorption and focus we are able to achieve higher levels of accomplishment. As an aside, he calls multitasking a fashionable myth. This research concludes that involvement in the work itself can motivate us to do more of the same.

In my interpretation, some characteristics of being in a state of flow are more a result of the focused attention than a cause. These results of flow include deep concentration, awareness of only the present moment, losing track of time, and losing track of a sense of self. I am most interested in the next four characteristics of flow because they seem to be factors that we can control to some extent to create a state of flow. These descriptions come from my notes about flow at work, but we can apply the same concepts to our personal lives.

- **Clear Goals**: People who are top performers have no doubt about where they are going. In sports the object is always clear, and it usually involves doing something with a ball. Get the ball in the hoop, get the ball across the goal line, hit the ball out of the park. No doubt at all about the object of the game. Whether we are thinking of this in terms of our personal life, or as a supervisor, clear goals are as important as air. There is no way we can get where we want to be if we don’t decide where that is.

- **Instant Feedback**: The author studied gamers and found that the instant feedback at each step of the way helped motivate players because they always know how they’re doing even if it means they are obliterated and out of that game.

- **Skill to Challenge Balance**: This means that our abilities and skill level are up to the task, job, or challenge. This is one of the most important factors in my opinion. Think about what happens if we’re not trained to do the job? If it’s way beyond our abilities, we can easily become frustrated. On the other hand, if we’re seriously overqualified, what happens? Feels like “been there, done that” and we are bored. This explains why learning new skills helps us stay engaged. We can always get better at what we do and prepare ourselves for the next level.

- **Control**: My number one rule of management is, don’t tell employees how to do their job. Tell the outcome, be specific, give training but let the person have the challenge of figuring out their own method. This also applies to allowing as much control as possible over the environment, the schedule, whatever makes employees comfortable, but note that giving control comes after the teaching and training.

When I read this book, I sensed that I had found the definitive reference tool and summary on how to be happy. No thought or comment is without a note about who did the research. For all the scholarly documentation it is still an easy and most enlightening read. There are tons of books out there telling us how to be happy, and I’ve read a lot of them, but this one is firmly grounded in science. If you’re going to read one, please start with this.

The cover image of a lemon chiffon pie, not an abstract pie chart, depicts the 40% of happiness that we can control with specific activities. Research shows that we all have a sort of baseline called a set point for happiness. That baseline measurement claims that 50% of our happiness comes from our genes. Fussy baby 50% likely to grow up to be cranky husband. The other 10% of our happiness set point comes from life circumstances or external events. Earlier I reported that in the 1970s Ellis wrote about how unhelpful it is to blame others or our environment for our problems. The external situation only accounts for 10% of why we are not happy. The point of this book is to help us identify and use the happiness-inducing activities that will work for the 40% we can influence.

In chapter two we can take a test to get our own happiness score. The author dispels the myths that money and beauty will make a big difference in how happy we are. After winning the lotto, we might be a little happier for a short time, but because of our hedonic or pleasure adaptation we get used to a new situation quickly. Because we adapt, our best hope for more happiness is to reinforce it with daily, intentional activity.

Chapter three helps us determine which activities will match our own values. It’s most important to figure out which activities are a good personal fit because if we don’t want to do an activity, there is no benefit. The author suggests that if we are unhappy, a good activity would be some action directed at fixing the specific problem. Another way to select activities is to match them to our strengths and values and of course, they need to match our lifestyle. There is a survey to help us with selecting activities.

Part two includes six, in-depth chapters about the twelve happiness activities that can transform our thinking. The summary of happiness activities below matches the author’s arrangement in the table of contents. I found it much easier to remember the six large groups and then the subcategories. Following one of my own quirky practices, I have linked the twelve activities to one of my exercise routines so that I would get it firmly engraved in my brain. Please do not take this list to heart without reading the detail.

- **Gratitude and Positive Thinking**
  1. Express gratitude and positive thinking
  2. Cultivate optimism
  3. Avoid overthinking and social comparison

- **Foster Social Connections**
  4. Practice acts of kindness
  5. Nurture social relationships

- **Manage Stress**
  6. Develop strategies for coping: problem and emotion-focus strategies
  7. Learn to forgive

- **Live in the Present**
  8. Increase FLOW experiences and use signature strengths
  9. Savor life’s joys: past, present, and future
Goals
10. Commit to goals
Take Care of Body and Soul
11. Practice religion and spirituality
12. Take care of body – meditation, physical activity, act happy

In part three Dr. Lyubomirsky tells us how and why these activities work. The activities boost the frequency of positive emotion, thinking, and experiences. Notice that’s feeling, thinking, and doing, three ways we learn. These activities create a reinforcing cycle. Because it feels good to be happy, we do more. Lots of little, intermittent instances of happiness are better than one great big one. All these activities are designed to help us be the best person we can be.

On the issue of being happy because of a simple pleasure versus happiness from saving the world (or other lofty values or life-changing accomplishments), the author advises, “don’t pooh-pooh pleasure.” Positive emotions are great no matter where they come from because they help us achieve our goals and strive for meaning. The activities work when we invest effort.

For the happiness activities to have the desired outcome they must be timed appropriately and varied just enough to thwart our adaptation mechanism when it kicks in. Don’t do the same activity the same way all the time. These activities work because they provide the encouragement and social support that we need.

Throughout the book Dr. Lyubomirsky warns us that effort is required. If we decide and commit to an activity that we think will make us happy, we are more motivated to keep doing it. Motivation comes from reminding ourselves why we benefit from doing something. The ideal is to not debate with ourselves and not make the same decision over and over again. When an activity becomes automatic and unconscious, it’s called a habit. Habits form from repetition and practice. The more often we initiate a positive activity, the stronger the connection becomes between the activity and cues. Cues, triggers, and associations take time to build as well as to undo, as in breaking bad habits. Fostering good habits and making behaviors automatic reduces what we might think of as hard work. The book ends with a postscript of special advice for dealing with depression.


Since the research above by Lyubomirsky shows that happiness starts with gratitude and positive thinking, I want to offer an example of a title that helps us develop that habit of thinking good thoughts. Most of us probably look at the daily news which is the opposite of uplifting and appreciation-generating. This title on the other hand provides a daily practice of gratitude through inspirational messages, quotations, meditations, and miscellaneous ideas for personal fulfillment. It sounds corny, or cheesy depending on your generation, to recommend that we try to look on the bright side or see the glass half full rather than half empty. Regardless, it is a recurring theme confirmed by sources cited in this book that remind us that we get more of what we look for. If we look for things to be grateful for, we will find them.

This book is included because forty years after reading it I still have a copy of chapter six, “You and Your Values,” and I am not a hoarder. Life Choices is the book that asked me to describe myself in three words. Easy enough. But then, more importantly, describe yourself in the three words you want “others to use when they describe you.” That got my attention. I could decide that? I thought about that, debated for days, and finally came up with the three words. Then, I really bought into the idea. I wanted to live up to that image of myself. I worked at it. I still remember the adjectives I chose. Those are not the words others use to describe me today, but they led me down a good path for quite a long time. Recently a colleague revealed to me with much affection that I am valued for my ability to be “snarky when necessary.” Snarky was not one of my words.

Sound advice from this book is to figure out your values for yourself, don’t imitate others, no matter how difficult the decision. Dr. G. P. Miller got his degree from Columbia where he was a professor and counsellor. He was very interested in helping young people make appropriate decisions, so he became the founding director of the Decision-Making Program of the College Entrance Exam Board. The book highlights the need for awareness of our unique needs compared to societal expectations and pressures. His explanation of “uncertainty” gives a name to one of life’s nasty quirks. We decide based on a value important to us only to have that specific factor change after we make the decision. His example is a person who decides not to make a job change because he values his current boss. One month later his valued boss takes a new job. Ouch!

This author first outlines a decision-making process, then examines each step in detail. There are many fill-in-the-blank exercises designed to force us to identify and prioritize what is important. We examine the difference between accepting, preferring, and committing to a value. Then tackle an exercise to help us identify our chosen values by spending $100. A similar exercise in a more current book uses an inflation-adjusted budget of $75,000 to assign priorities. Times change, or maybe they don’t. Chapter seven cautions us about accepting information that reinforces what we already think. Dr. Miller also examines what he calls “uninformed” emotions in the decision-making process. So maybe older resources are not always completely out of date.

One other significant concept discussed here is that our own values change, and they do conflict with each other. It’s easy to say we value one thing until we are asked to compare it to something else that we also value. In this way values are always relative to something else. If we do the exercises we are forced to think about our most valuable possessions and what they represent. We will also be asked to provide evidence for ourselves of how we spend our time and money. Do we put our resources towards what we think we value? The chapter ends with a section on goal setting because Miller says, “without something specific to reach for, you are apt to suffer a kind of paralysis in life.” Best to get a clear direction for all our energy, time, and money.

The previous title on decision making was a hold-over from my personal life. This book, used at work, goes into much more detail including formulas, strategies, principles, and psychology. For example, it starts with a definition of the ideal decision which maximizes subjective (personal) expected utility (pleasure or satisfaction.) To help make a decision, we learn to score each choice for satisfaction on a scale of one to nine, divide by the cost and then multiply by the probability. That is not a formula I use often! It could come in handy for some of us, but the following nine steps have a broader appeal.

Welch’s nine steps to effective decision making are fully explained in the book.

1. Identify your objective.
2. Survey options.
3. Identify implicated values, things you care about such as wealth, self-respect. These are called “primary goods” by philosophers.
4. Assess importance of the decision. Examine implicated values. How will it affect your life, health, marriage, job, self-esteem, etc. There is no correlation between importance of the decision and ease of making it. Some important decisions are easy and unimportant decisions are hard.
5. Budget time and energy. When we’re busy and nervous we make worse decisions than when relaxed with time available.
6. Choose a decision-making strategy. Time and energy affect strategy. Strategy is the way or method of how we decide.
7. Identify Options: new options, changing situation, create options, get expert input.
8. Evaluate options. Sometimes we evaluate on one dimension, sometimes on many dimensions, e.g. house options: size, location, price, etc.
9. Make the choice: on time and on budget. Tame the demon of regret.

This book is full of useful observations and comforting, or sometimes not comforting, advice. For example, Welch states that there is not necessarily a relationship between the quality of decision-making and the outcome. Oh? We win some and we lose some. He explains five strategies, some of which we may have heard of before: optimization, satisficing? He points out that we accept more risk to avoid a loss but take less risk to secure a gain. He also covers quite a few shortcuts, biases, and rules of thumb that influence our decision-making and echo research discussed in Thinking, Fast and Slow.

To avoid mistakes the author advises us to look for and reflect on alternative explanations. He says that emotions do not always hinder decision making but they can cause fatigue and reduce alertness. Never make an important decision when angry or tired. Common errors that he elaborates on include wishful thinking, selective attention, denial, and bolstering. If we do make a mistake, he advises that we shrug it off as an unavoidable consequence of being human.

Chapter five has an interesting discussion on moral versus instrumental decisions and examines the difficulty of choosing between rules or consequence. Welch acknowledges that people don’t agree on what is right or wrong, but he concludes that as long as our moral sensibilities are essentially other-regarding and humane, they are unimpeachable.

Summary - Take Care of Your Gift

- Know your skills, preferences, and values.
• Your internal desires are your natural motivators.
• Do what you are good at and what you like.
• Create goals that build competence, connectedness, and control.
• Exercising your virtues in service to others creates meaning and happiness.
• Balance your life choices.
• Being who you are is your purpose.
CHAPTER 3 – TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

Use Your Mind/Body Connection

After the initial shock of discovering that my first husband had been making executive decisions without me, we suffered through a lot of painful conversations to see if our relationship was salvageable. We went to therapy separately and together. Within a year or so, we liquidated what was left of our rental properties, paid the taxes, got new insurance, and went our separate ways.

During all the emotional turmoil of a relationship coming unglued and leading up to the divorce, I was open to novel distractions. My employer was sponsoring a fun run, and my co-workers convinced me to be on the team. I was not a particularly athletic person; in fact, I was barely coordinated enough to not hurt myself in any team sport. I did, however, have considerable stamina from hard work remodeling houses and doing extreme gardening. Team sports had never been appealing to me. I don’t know what could have inspired me to want to run other than boredom. So, I got some running shoes and looked for a book to tell me how to do it.

This chapter highlights books that continue the theme of self-care by exploring the connection between mind and body. Topics include how to use your body, through exercise, diet, and meditation, to help your brain. There is a little aside about what you can and can’t change. Here are a few more books that contributed greatly to my sanity and longevity.


There are many wonderful things about this book but one of my favorites is that the author makes his points in short little chapters. I think the longest chapter is maybe six pages. He tells us everything we need to know about our physiology with just enough detail. It is easy to get his point. This is where we learn that the secret to being fit is to get our muscles to burn fat for us. It’s all about the muscle tone.

In the first five chapters Bailey claims that diets alone do not work because they do not change muscle structure. Diets might remove the fat on top of muscles but not the fat within the muscles. He makes an important distinction between being overweight as opposed to being overfat. The difference would be a woman who improved her muscle tone and went from a size twelve to size eight, but at the same time also gained six pounds.

The author also warns that fat can replace muscle tissue over time with no visible weight gain. Fat starts to pile up under our skin, outside of muscles, by the time the scale begins to show the difference fat is more difficult to get rid of. We should think about what we want (42-inch waist or 32-inch?) and not let the scale be the only measure. Our goal is to feel and look better and if muscle weighs more than fat, so be it.
Bailey’s proposed cure for too much fat is just twelve minutes of aerobic exercise three times a week. That would be the minimum for maintenance. We should add some warm-up time to prevent injury, and more exercise, not harder exercise, if we are working for fat loss. Bailey favors continuous exertion over stop and go. For example, he says fifteen minutes of jogging is worth two hours of tennis. He also points out that being on our feet all day, or other physical work, is not the same as getting the heart rate elevated for at least twelve minutes. That’s what makes aerobics more efficient at burning fat.

If you want to understand why aerobic exercise works to eliminate excess fat, there are several chapters that cover muscle shape, energy sources, and how calories are used by muscles. Bailey insists that it is important to know our maximum heart rate and not to exceed 80% when exercising because we could do more harm than good. Muscles use carbohydrates, fats, and protein to deliver energy. We want to expend more energy than we take in, but we do need to balance all three nutrients. He creates a vivid explanation by comparing fat to a log and glucose from carbs to the kindling. If you want to burn the fat log, you need some carb-kindling to get it going. Eliminating all carbs from our diet can force muscles to use fat and protein which can break down existing muscle. Overexertion and anaerobic exercise are not helpful.

There are chapters on how to figure out our personal maximum heart rate, resting pulse, and how to choose an exercise. He also explains the effects of fat storage, fasting, insulin, and best of all, exercising without knowing it. He stressed that we are all different, we all metabolize differently. Therefore, any tips from sources designed for athletes should be adjusted for our unique physiology. His final observation is that there is a lot of conflicting advice available. We know that hasn’t changed over time.


_100 Books to Think About_ could easily have been published under another potential title, _It’s All in Your Head_. Since I am starting to feel the lopsidedness of my own creation here, I offer you a book that has absolutely nothing to do with thinking. Even though the title promises strength for runners, this is a wonderful little book of exercises for people who can’t, won’t, or don’t want to run. How do I know this? I was temporarily sidelined by an overuse injury after running a marathon (twenty-six point two miles) at age sixty-four.

The author, Jeffrey Horowitz, is a former attorney who gave up the practice of law to teach healthy lifestyles that might possibly prevent future incarcerations. At the time he published this book he had run 170 marathons, so he has first-hand experience of what he’s writing about. We might think that running seems simple, but Mr. Horowitz explains that it is really quite a complicated process. When running, we are inherently unbalanced because we are moving one leg at a time. He explains that the body maintains balance while moving by using a form of muscle control called proprioception. We need more than just strength in the leg muscles. We need strength in our core, that is abdominal, hip, and back muscles, to keep ourselves upright.

The book covers three types of strength training: balance, core, and run-specific exercises. It also dispels myths about strength training, such as the fear that it will make us bigger or less flexible. According to my physical therapist we need flexibility, strength, and balance. Evidently, I had spent too much time using the same muscles and not
enough effort diversifying my portfolio. Chapter one describes key muscle groups with helpful illustrations. Horowitz explains that the exercises and number of repetitions are arranged to stress, destabilize, and teach the body balance and repair. Also, the exercises are complex, involve multiple joints, and engage multiple muscles. Practice imprints the correct form on our neurons while it trains the muscles. The author says we should think of muscles as a team; work the movement not just one muscle.

One of the greatest things about this book is that we do not have to join a gym, pay dues, drive to get there, and be observed by others while we pant and sweat. All we need is a mat and some weights. Chapter two describes exactly how to do each exercise and demonstrates advanced alternate versions for future use. Chapter four describes the sixteen routines, two per week, starting with the easy ones that become progressively harder over eight weeks. This is extremely helpful for people who want to exercise but either don’t know what to do or get bored with the few exercises in their repertoire. I’ve been through the book many times over and have learned that it is OK to skip around based on my aches and pains of the day.

There is a chapter on exercise for travelers and then a chapter on maintenance, avoiding injury, and benefits of exercise over time. These perks include reduced arthritis pain, improved balance, increased bone density, help maintaining weight, reduced risk of diabetes, improved state of mind, better sleep, and reduced risk of heart disease. Horowitz sums up the frosting on this cake being, “Strength training makes living in your body more fun.” Amen to that.


It’s hard to believe that thirty years have gone by between Fit or Fat and Spark. Where the previous work was all about how our body uses resources to burn energy in the muscles, this newer title is about the enzymes, proteins, and chemistry connecting the body and brain. In fact, one of Dr. Ratey’s missions was to convince us of the mind and body connection. When he wrote this, he was Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard. And now that another ten years have passed, the mind-body connection is well accepted.

Chapter one describes the case study of a school district that decided to teach fitness instead of sports. That change resulted in compelling improvements in student learning and social skills. According to the study, exercise at the start of the day prepares students for learning, invigorates them, heightens senses, and improves focus, mood, and motivation. Other schools report the success of exercise in reducing school violence. The author explains that learning is based on growing new brain cells and strengthening connections. Exercise and physical activity change the brain chemistry that affects our biology, feelings, and thoughts.

Dr. Ratey reminds us that everything we do, think, and feel is governed by the brain. As a psychiatrist he knows that who we are is based on biology of brain connections, but he says the reverse is also true. Thoughts, behaviors, and the environment can influence brain activity and patterns. Exercise works on the brain by helping to balance chemicals called neurotransmitters. You may recognize the names dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine. One advantage to exercise is that it produces all the calming chemicals
in balance unlike taking a drug that is only one chemical. Chapter two of *Spark* is a comprehensive explanation of how exercise impacts the way our brain chemicals interact.

The rest of the book is organized by chapters focusing on specific issues like stress, anxiety, depression, attention deficit, addiction, hormones, and aging. One example of the valuable information covered is that exercise teaches the brain how to handle stress by triggering the stress-repair mechanism. Stress in small doses is like a vaccine. Exercise teaches us that the physical signs of stress do not have to lead to anxiety. When we are under chronic stress with no release, energy can’t get to the thinking parts of the brain. This exercise benefit also applies to anxiety, fear, and panic attacks because a molecule secreted by heart muscles during exercise makes its way via our blood to the brain to dampen the stress chemicals. Dr. Ratey explains seven ways that running helps anxiety. If you are anxious, you should read them, and then run.

The chapter on aging explains that one benefit of exercise is that it serves as a challenge, and challenges help boost our resiliency. Although the author acknowledges that genes might determine our risk for dementia, he also says that “our lifestyle and environment can either trigger or suppress those risks.” Some ways that exercise can suppress the aging process are that it 1) strengthens the heart 2) regulates fuel and insulin 3) reduces obesity 4) creates good stress chemicals, proteins, that repair damage 5) improves mood 6) supports the immune system and lowers risk of some cancers 7) strengthens bones 8) boosts motivation 9) helps your brain strengthen connections and regenerate new cells. Wow, too bad it doesn’t come in a pill.

Dr. Ratey says that “exercise is the single most powerful tool you have to optimize your brain function.” He recommends balancing physical aerobic exercise with training for strength, flexibility, and balance. Yoga and tai chi are his examples. He suggests mental exercise through group activities, social contacts, and new experiences. As far as diet goes, eat light.


Scientists now accept much more of a two-way mind and body connection than they were willing to admit just a few years ago. That is, we now recognize that the brain is not the only controller, we know from research reported in books like *Spark* and *Focus* that our body chemistry also acts in reverse to influence the brain. *The How of Happiness* by Lyubomirsky reported on research that shows the physical act of smiling makes us experience the feeling of happiness. Neuroplasticity is the study of brain growth and change. Research shows that we can grow new neurons, and that parts of the brain can take over functions that we previously believed were only handled by a different area of the brain.

For 2500 years Buddhism has known that focused attention can alter the mind and now the study of neuroplasticity scientifically supports that. The 2004 Mind and Life Institute brought together Western scientists with Buddhist masters, including the Dalai Lama, to examine the convergence of Buddhist mindfulness practice and science. Sharon Begley is a science journalist who attended and documented the conference.
Her book discusses historical Western beliefs about the fixed nature of the brain. There are chapters on the evolution of the science of neuroplasticity, the process of growing new neurons, what happens in babies as our brains develop, and evidence of what experiences change adult brains. I was particularly interested in chapter six, which discusses how mental activity such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) changes the brain. In Ellis’s *The New Guide to Rational Living*, the first book in chapter one, we learned that this therapy involves examining our thinking to change our behavior. Mindfulness training helps us slow down the chatter in our head and examine our thoughts more closely. For both obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression, mindfulness has been proven to be as effective as drug therapy. Now brain-imaging technology shows that thinking can alter patterns of brain activity. Focusing our attention helps strengthen neuron activity for the area where attention is focused. What we see is determined by what we pay attention to. The brain can be changed physically by meditation.

Chapter eight covers methods to foster compassion and altruism, and reduce defensiveness, hostility, and prejudice. We learn how to enhance our feelings of being attached and secure. There is an interesting discussion of how thoughts, words, and pictures can serve as subliminal activators and set up a response based on whether they are positive or negative. This book refers to these as “primes” as in priming a pump. We may also know them as triggers.

Chapter nine reports research by Richard Davidson that shows our happiness set point is not stable, it can change from childhood to adulthood. That means it is not genetically fixed as in cranky baby, cranky old man. This is also discussed in *The How of Happiness* chapter two of this book. As far back as 2001 EEG tracking of a monk’s meditation brain activity showed greater development in the area associated with positive emotions. This confirms what Buddhists have always taught, that emotions are trainable. The Buddhist philosophy teaches that we can increase positive emotions and banish negative thoughts through meditation. Davidson’s research into neuroplasticity means that we can change our brain, which means we do have a choice, and we are responsible.

In the last chapter Begley cautions us about the trend of finding and assigning a gene as a cause for behaviors, ailments, and addictions. This leads to another ongoing debate about whether bad behavior is a failure of willpower or if our genes are the cause. She argues that these neuroplasticity developments show that we can control our brain. To that end she encourages us to take up new challenges and begin new activities to keep growing our brains.


This is one title that I would love to see updated because it offers an enlightening historical perspective on what societies have believed is within human control. Under ancient scriptural law, only The Almighty rules, and humans are in control of nothing. Seligman reviews the impact of historical factors and the evolution of philosophies over centuries. He concludes that we had arrived at a society in 1993 where the common belief is that the individual controls anything and everything. He then goes on to present
the latest scientific interpretations of the impact of biology, genetics, environment, emotions, beliefs, and various therapies as of 1993.

What I don’t think needs updating, and one reason for including this title, is Seligman’s explanation of depth and change. He argues that our ability to change some aspect of our personality, not necessarily an inherited trait, depends on how deeply ingrained the supporting belief is. He describes three aspects of depth. First, biological, that is genetic or inherited, behaviors are harder to change than those that are learned. If we learned it, we can unlearn it. Second, if evidence about the underlying rationale for the belief is abundant and easy to confirm, the behavior will be hard to change. Third, if the supporting belief is general and explains many facts, then it has high power. A strong belief with high power is going to be hard to change. This awareness could help us re-examine the depth of the beliefs supporting our problem behaviors. If this explanation is too brief, read the book!

Chapters on emotions such as anxiety, depression, anger, and stress, and specific habits like eating, drinking, and sex, explore the degree that differences are inherited and learned. Sadly, Dr. Seligman found that in many cases dieting does not work because weight is in large part genetic. All his diet suggestions are measured, as in they may not work, rather than enthusiastically endorsed. His advice to the overweight is to seek fitness rather than a magic number on the scale. Learn to eat only when hungry rather than by the clock or by habit. He proposes avoiding unhealthy fat as in chocolate and ice cream and points out that “alcohol is very high in calories, addicting, and brain-damaging.” This might be where I invented my own diet advice to myself which was to eliminate what I call gratuitous fats. It is possible to eat vegetables without butter or sauce and salads without oily dressings. Eliminating unnecessary fat could be worth a few pounds over time and is a habit that can be learned.


It’s hard to imagine how anyone following the advice in *The Ultimate Weight Solution* could fail since it seems to present the most well-rounded plan we could hope for. Weight-loss, smoking, and drinking are just a few of the behaviors that are extremely tough for us to reconstruct. We know they are not just physical habits. They are complicated challenges. We have to wonder what the difference is compared to other habits; what are we missing in our attempts to improve? It might be reasonable to target willpower as the culprit. We start a diet plan with high intentions and great energy but frequently run out of willpower. Fortunately, Dr. Phil argues that willpower is not a consistently reliable motivator and he offers a balanced program to sustain us when our determination wanes.

It should be no surprise that the seven keys to weigh loss freedom start with what’s in our head. Dr. Phil’s discussion of right thinking covers some of the same bad self-talk and distortions that are the familiar territory of chapter one in this book. He presents a chart demonstrating how to replace self-defeating ideas with more helpful and motivating thoughts. This book is narrowly focused on weight-loss where two other very important but more general works by Dr. Phil are summarized in detail in the last section of chapter five, “Take Action.”
Dr. Phil’s seven keys to weight loss freedom are:

1. Right thinking – self control
2. Healing feelings – emotional control
3. No-fail environment – external control
4. Mastery over food and impulse eating – habit control
5. High-response cost, high-yield nutrition – food control
6. Intentional exercise – body control
7. Circle of support – social control

One of the first pieces of advice he offers is to eliminate any sense of panic and urgency that accompanies thoughts like “I have to lose weight now.” Dr. Phil says these stressful thoughts do not help, they just create anxiety and defeat. It’s better to be relaxed and calm about the weight-loss project and view it as something we want, not need, to accomplish. His seven keys offer specific skills to use when willpower runs out. We need to understand that unrealistic expectations chip away at our body image and self-respect. Instead, we should practice being our own best friend through acceptance, respect, and love. Dr. Phil makes a strong argument for using forgiveness to release ourselves from anger, hatred, and resentment. He assures us that whatever happened is not OK and instead stresses the fact that choosing to forgive is not about the enemy, it’s about us.

Creating a supportive environment, free of temptations, and learning to substitute healthy habits is advice that does not go out of date. This book uses complicated terminology to distinguish between foods that are good for us and those that are not. Despite the definitions, the explanations shed more light on how the foods work, and this makes us more aware of why we don’t need a lot of fat and simple sugars. I like the idea of thinking in terms of a defined daily menu: three proteins, two dairy, three starch, two fruit, four vegetables, and one fat. The concept of dividing a plate into four parts makes a clear picture of how to eat better, especially for people who didn’t grow up seeing vegetables as their friends.

Happily, the doctor reiterates the value of exercise while encouraging us to find some activity that we like, are able to do, and think we can master. He reminds us that it is important to record and monitor our progress. To emphasize this point, I am reminded of an old Total Quality Management mantra that said, “what gets measured gets done.” Finally, Dr. Phil warns about the importance of examining our circle of friends for either support or sabotage. We should never underestimate the significance of those with whom we associate.


Since the diet information from Seligman in *What You Can Change* is twenty-five years old, and the previous book by Dr. Phil is already thirteen years old, I was curious to see if science has radically different advice today. *The Hungry Brain* is the newest and most authoritative title in my university’s library. Written by a Ph.D. in neuroscience, the amount of detail included might make this book most appealing to scientists and health professionals. However, for non-scientists interested in weight loss it is very enlightening and worth the challenge, especially the last two chapters.
Not surprisingly this author starts with an explanation about the food conflict raging between our conscious and nonconscious brain. Of course, when rational we want to be fit and healthy, but the biology of instinct and impulse can thwart those efforts. Dr Guyenet claims that the brain controls everything: appetite, eating behavior, physical activity, and body fat. The body takes in energy as food and puts out energy as heat or calories used. What does not get used is stored as fat. That is the simple part. Complications arise from how the brain values and selects different types of foods, food availability in our environment, cultural conditioning, learned motivation, genetics, personal physiology, sleep, and stress. That is an awful lot of variables. Fortunately, after the very detailed analysis, the author offers several practical tips for us to match to our own needs.

His first suggestion, to fix our food environment, echoes Dr. Phil’s no-fail environment advice. That includes getting rid of tempting calorie-dense foods such as chips, cookies, ice cream, and salted nuts. Try to avoid seeing the foods and the TV advertising cues (good luck) that trigger a desire or craving for those troublesome delights. If you must have them in your home, create barriers by putting high salt, sugar, and fat foods in a place where you would have to work to get them. The delay of hunting and foraging might give you an opportunity to stop and assign more value to your “future self.” Another quirk of the brain is that some of us prefer our reward now and are not willing to wait for a future value such as a smaller waistline. So, besides Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow* experiencing-self and remembering-self we now have a future-self to deal with.

To manage our appetite, we have to help the primitive brain understand that we are not in danger of starving. We can do this by eating foods that make us feel full while delivering fewer calories. That would be foods closest to their natural state as opposed to processed like a baked potato with no butter compared to potato chips, or fresh cooked meat rather than processed lunch meats. Other good choices are fresh fruits and vegetables, eggs, plain yogurt, whole grain, beans, and lentils.

Dr. Guyenet warns us to beware of the flip side of those healthy options, the comfort foods. The brain values calorie-dense foods because they biologically and chemically make us feel good. Our brains have learned to associate pleasant sensations with foods rich in fat, sugar, starch, protein, and salt so these foods motivate cravings and eating whether we are hungry or not. The book describes our lipostat which is part of our complex appetite and fat regulating system. Calorie-dense, high-reward food moves the fat regulator up so that the more high-reward food we eat, the more we want.

Sleep deprivation can increase food intake and weight gain because our decision-making, impulse-control, or willpower systems are not operating at their best. Uncontrolled stress releases a hormone, cortisol, that messes with the brain systems that regulate body fat. The hormones, neurons, peptides, and proteins that are supposed to tell our brain that our body has enough fat just don’t deliver the message. Stress is another factor that causes some people to self-medicate with chocolate, ice cream, macaroni, pizza, and other calorie-dense comfort foods.

Mindfulness practice and daily physical exercise help regulate stress as well as appetite and weight. A great relief to me personally is the fact that fidgeting is a positive form of calorie burning called “non-exercise activity thermogenesis – NEAT.” My sisters and I
are now vindicated in our foot-wagging and shoe-flipping. Finally, on more than one occasion the author emphasizes that obesity is not the result of moral failure, lack of will power, or neuroses. This is a very enlightening read whether we are fat or thin.


Since willpower is a recurring theme in the diet discussion, this seems like an appropriate place to examine a whole book on the topic. The two previous books assure us that willpower should not be any part of our diet strategy. This book states that diets only work once and fail long term. It offers three rules: 1) never go on a diet 2) never give up a food 3) never equate being overweight with weak will power. If we can’t will ourselves thin, then what is willpower and what is it for?

As Baumeister and Tierney are quick to point out, willpower is not a myth. They review the history of willpower as it was exemplified by rigid, prudish Victorian behavior. Then willpower fell out of favor through negative associations with Hitler and a film called *The Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, Babelsberg, Germany: Universum Film AG, 1935). The authors complete the review of willpower-research through 1960s marshmallow experiments up to the present-day studies of ego-depletion. A lay person might think of ego-depletion as stress, fatigue, or overload. Years of research studies prove that there is a capacity of self-control or willpower which is easiest to identify when it stops working. When our willpower is depleted, we have diminished capacity to regulate our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Early warning of this depletion is a change in the overall intensity of what we are experiencing. We feel extra sad, super hungry, or our cravings are stronger than normal.

The reason we would want to learn about willpower, also known as self-control, conscientiousness, or delay of gratification, is that it is identified with long-term success in school, work, relationships, and life in general. The information here about how the brain uses glucose converted to neurotransmitters matches what was reported by Dr. Ratey in *Spark*. The brain uses a lot of glucose, so the more we exert our willpower in making choices or resisting temptations, the more we need to continually provide new energy sources to prevent depletion. Energy comes from calories, so the authors suggest that, ironically, we can eat our way to willpower. They advise that we should not skip meals, but we should avoid sugar, and prefer a slow burn from low glycemic foods such as vegetables, nuts, fruits, cheese, meat, and fish. They warn that when we are sick or sleep-deprived our self-control or willpower is weak, so we might not want to go to work or drive. I gleefully read this section of the book aloud to my husband to prove that I banged up my car, not because I am a bad driver, but because I was driving under the influence of undiagnosed pneumonia.

We can strengthen our willpower by preventing physical depletion and through mental tips. The first step is to set a clear goal which symbolizes good planning and organizing. However, even goal setting can involve depletion. If we have too many goals, some are sure to conflict. I was particularly interested in the chapter on the to-do list. The authors recommend a book by Allen Davis called *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2001) which sounds like something that should be added to my very last chapter on getting organized. Davis offers a paper-processing formula using four d’s: done, delegated, dropped, or deferred. He also recommends...
making not a list of things to do, but a list of everything that needs our attention. Then for each item, identify a very specific, real, not vague Next Action. The lesson is that clutter and unfinished business are distractions that compete for our attention and deplete our self-control. Once we have a plan the brain can quiet down and focus on the one item at hand.

The chapter on decision fatigue provides the scientific explanation for my own personal theory of smart-and-dumb. While out to dinner with a friend one night, I was stunned, mouth wide open, to see the intelligent, successful, wealthy husband of a friend drunkenly smooching and groping a woman other than his wife. Baumeister and Tierney use much more famous examples of governors and politicians who have behaved idiotically, and the authors conclude with a quote from a former president that “dumb is the occupational hazard of ‘the decider.’” The chapter is full of examples of decision-overload and how not to make a decision. They point out that the words homicide and decide derive from the same Latin root which means to kill. So, the reason people have trouble deciding is that they hate to kill off all their other options. When our willpower is depleted, and we make no decision, that is called procrastination.

Procrastination is not so much linked to perfectionism as it is to impulsivity, that is, lack of impulse-control. Procrastinators are easily distracted away from whatever it is they prefer not to do. The tips to strengthen willpower are our only defense against this nasty habit. The first tip was identifying a clear goal, the second is monitoring it. Monitoring increases our self-awareness of where we are compared to where we want to be. According to the authors, standards and self-awareness are crucial survival tools for individuals and for society. Public monitoring is obviously much more effective than private. Religion is good for self-control.

The book is full of too many tips to mention here, but habit-formation is a big one. We should use our willpower to develop proactive habits to avoid temptation and inner conflicts. Habits form from regularly and continually practicing a rule. Once habits become automatic, they do not exhaust our willpower. If we practice exercising self-control in small steps, it will later translate to stronger willpower in other areas. I guess giving up candy or wine for Lent has its merits after all.

Another mental tip is to write down a pre-commitment for how we will act in anticipation of temptation. External orderliness is also linked to inner self-discipline, so tidy up. This is the psychology behind Marie Kondo’s tidying magic which is covered later in chapter five. Other advice is to get enough sleep and eat healthy food. Since we tend to reinforce each other’s behavior, it’s in our own best interest to look closely at the habits of our friends and acquaintances. We should reward ourselves often but only for genuine accomplishments, not everyone gets a trophy, which brings us to the chapter on self-esteem versus self-control.

Since I started this book with cautious praise of Canfield’s How to Build High Self-Esteem, the tale of how it ran amok is more than interesting. The research reported by Baumeister showed that after loving ourselves a little too much, our esteem was up but our performance was down. Some benefits of self-esteem are increased initiative, confidence, general well-being, ability to act on beliefs, and to recover from rejection. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for some criminals to register high self-esteem. The downside of high self-esteem could be narcissism manifested by self-absorption, conviction of personal superiority, and the expectation of being treated as special. The
authors share vivid examples of children throwing tantrums because parents, educators, journalists, and psychologists rejected authoritarian parenting. In contrast, the Asian-American culture represents a model of high performance and success because rigid goals and strict rules are viewed as parental devotion, not oppression. Healthy self-esteem comes from actually doing something worthy, not merely from being told you are great.


Although Baumeister and McGonigal cover the same general territory of willpower and self-control, there is enough difference in material and approach that both books deserve attention. McGonigal’s book is organized around a ten-week course that she teaches at Stanford University. Her approach as an instructor offers many self-awareness exercises and practice assignments, as well as summaries at the end of each chapter.

One of the striking advantages to this book is that McGonigal identifies three distinct ways of examining our self-control challenges. She asks us to identify and work with what she calls “I will, I won’t, and I want” because these can each be turned into a type of willpower. The “I will” is something that we have been avoiding and therefore need to develop the ability to do what we need to do. The “I won’t” is a habit we need to break and the ability to resist temptation. The “I want” is the goal, the motivation, the reason to resist temptation.

McGonigal also covers the evolution of the brain and describes how self-control was as good for survival 100,000 years ago as it is today. She says we are still stuck with the old brain, but the new prefrontal cortex has been added to help exert more impulse control. She points out that we have an impulsive self and a controlling self, both of which are valuable. The self-awareness work in this book helps us to identify our weak points. Breathing and meditation are willpower skills that get better with practice and they help strengthen attention, focus, stress management, impulse control, and self-awareness.

Chapter two describes willpower as a survival instinct just as much as fight-or-flight is a survival tactic. She reports on research by Segerstrom called the “pause and plan response” that starts when the brain recognizes an internal conflict. This triggers changes in the brain to slow down and control the impulse. She also reports on a new measure called heart rate variability (HRV) which she refers to as our willpower reserve. To increase HRV follow a plant-based diet and seek good air quality. To maintain high HRV and willpower avoid anxiety, anger, depression, loneliness, pain, and illness. These are the same things that Baumeister reported on as causing decision fatigue and reducing willpower. In chapter three she references Baumeister’s research and reminds us about the brain’s need for glucose. There is an excellent warning about how diet soda foaks out the brain to expect real sugar and why that can lead to weight gain instead of weight loss.

Meditation increases our willpower reserve. As little as five minutes of physical exercise, as long as we are willing and able, is the wonder drug for self-control. Nature and the relaxation response are both good for willpower. To relax she advises that we lie down
with our feet up and breathe. This lowers heart rate, slows breathing, blood pressure goes down, muscles release tension. This will all help restore willpower. Other tips to increase willpower include an understanding of the danger of succumbing to the “what-the-hell” effect. That happens when we rationalize that we’ve blown the diet, so why not go all the way. On the other hand, with “moral licensing” we give ourselves permission or license to be bad when we feel that we have already been virtuous enough. The remedy for these traps is to always bring the bigger, future goal, the “I want,” to mind. If we can identify strongly with the future goal, we might get our immediate and future selves more in alignment.

There is a whole chapter on how we imagine ourselves more virtuous in the future. A great tip for both resisting temptation and ending procrastination is the ten-minute trick. Just waiting ten minutes is enough time for the impulsive part of the brain to calm down and reconsider the value of the future goal. Likewise, if there is a task that we are avoiding, we can promise ourselves that we only have to do it for ten minutes. That’s usually enough time to get started and make progress on what we would otherwise not do.

The whole chapter on willpower, or lack thereof, being contagious is a little scary. Evidently, we have brain neurons that cause us to mimic others. If we see others having a treat, we want one too. Remember, seeing is a trigger so it’s a good idea to keep temptations out of sight. The worst news to me is that rule-breaking is contagious, although I’m pretty sure I already knew that. More bad news is that the media makes us believe what the norm is, and as social animals we want to conform to the norm. Unfortunately, the need to be like others and to belong “can be more powerful than the desire to do the right thing.”

Another quirk of willpower is that as soon as we don’t want to think about something, it becomes irresistibly distracting. McGonigal provides examples and evidence of how thought-suppression does not work. Dieters who try not to think about food have the least control over their eating habits. Whatever the craving is, a cigarette, donut, or solitaire, the advice is to just accept and recognize the thought. Examine how the craving feels in our body, what it does to our breathing, heart rate, and muscle tension. Then just follow it and imagine that craving is a cloud passing through our mind and body. It will pass, the craving will dissolve. We should not try to deny or distract ourselves but also, we definitely do not act on the craving. This is called an acceptance strategy where there is inner acceptance but outer control.

This is the book to own if we want to follow a real program to develop more self-control. We will learn that the enemies of willpower are temptation (no surprise here), self-criticism (be nicer to yourself), and stress (eat right, get more than six hours of sleep). There are many opportunities to practice paying attention and to develop the specific self-control skills of self-awareness, self-care, and focusing on the long-term goal.

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Learn to Cope

As the years went by my work responsibilities grew. Roles of mentoring, solving problems, and listening to difficult personnel issues came naturally to me. In trying to figure out how to help people relax and be happy, I researched mindfulness and then
Buddhism. That led to wondering about the role of religion in happiness, or religion in society for that matter. And what about the role of the library in society? It seems like _The Architecture of Happiness_ by Alain de Botton (New York, NY: Pantheon, 2006) was on my reading list at this time but I can’t find any significant notes relevant to this book. That work was not about architecture of the brain but of buildings, and the role of beauty in creating happiness. Of course, I believe there is a connection, but it will be covered in the Feng Shui discussion in chapter five.

Hindsight demonstrates my good fortune to have stumbled into my running habit, only a slight pun intended. It was terrific for my mental health; running has been the source of my own even keel. When I did figure that out, it didn’t help much at work. It would not be appropriate to suggest that employees having difficulties at work should take up jogging, any more than it would be OK to suggest that they try praying. I went looking for evidence and other remedies that I could propose for those really big, out of control life events like hurricanes, illness, and death. Here’s what I found.


The central theme of this book is that our ability to cope is based on what we believe. This echoes the findings reported earlier in the books about where thoughts come from. Dr. Siebert emphasizes that we humans act to confirm our beliefs. If we expect to bounce back from a disaster, then we assume responsibility and control, and are more likely to recover. He acknowledges that after a trauma “you will never be the same again. You either cope or crumble; you become better or bitter; you emerge stronger or weaker.” Surprise, this is another book telling us we have a choice. Like the other authors, he says we will have to do some hard work. Merely reading his book will not make us more resilient.

Before explaining in detail how we can develop greater personal effectiveness, Dr. Siebert offers the following eight principles as the framework that affects resiliency:

1. We are never the same after trauma, but we have a choice of response.
2. Mind creates barriers or bridges.
3. Blame keeps us in a non-resilient, victim state.
4. Life isn’t fair, take responsibility.
6. Self-knowledge comes from observation, experimentation, and feedback.
7. Look within ourselves to see that choice leads to control.
8. We become more resilient with practice.

For a long time after reading this book, I did not believe I had any stress because I read that it wasn’t real. Chapter four explains Hans Selye’s theory that stress comes from false beliefs and that stress is a personal, subjective reaction. This book reviews the fight or flight physiology along with the body’s alarm-resistance-exhaustion reaction to stress. There are several suggestions on how to deal with stress if we feel it, but he reaffirms that “stress is only a concept, it’s an abstract idea.” We’ve read that stress as a mere concept is hotly debated because the physical manifestations of stress are very real. When external pressures are beyond our control, it takes a lot of deep breathing.
and shoulder rotations to relax the body. Fortunately, Dr. Siebert moves on to explain four additional levels of resiliency skills and actions.

Level two resiliency teaches us about three types of problem solving: analytical, creative, and practical. This is called problem-focused coping where we try to solve the problem before we move on to emotion-focused coping. Emotional coping depends on how we feel about ourselves (self-esteem), what we expect from ourselves (self-confidence) and who we think we are (self-concept). Dr. Siebert says that resiliency comes from having these three, strong inner selves. That is a lot of stuff to know about ourselves which is why “know thyself” has been the advice of sages since the beginning of time.

Curiosity and learning are assets to resiliency. Asking questions like “what is really going on, what is the new reality, how serious is this, do I have to do anything” help us think outside of our automatic, sometimes helpless, reactions. Asking “what can I learn from this” helps us deal with life lessons. Dr. Siebert recommends that we replay the experience to observe ourselves outside of the moment. We should try to imagine other responses and mentally rehearse different reactions. This learning response is the antidote to the victim reaction.

Positive expectations, hope, and optimism contribute to resiliency because they are future oriented. These attitudes can be learned with practice that involves feeling, thinking, and doing. It is important to balance optimism with at least a little pessimistic planning for difficulties. Learning to deal with opposites helps resiliency. In chapter eleven the author examines synergy, what causes things to go well, and we are advised to be conscious of our effect on others. This is a spectacularly important idea that I wish I could keep in mind more often. Be nice. I’ve heard this before, but where? Authors Carlson, Kabat-Zinn, Izzo discuss this. We can design “our way of being in the world.”

One more resiliency skill is dealing with serendipity in a way that turns the focus of a bad event from negative to positive. The question to ask here is “what’s good about this?” Every idea offered in this book is about learning. Change is learning. Learning involves the brain. Brain affects the body. Do you see a pattern?


This title came to my attention at a 2016 national library conference during a session on getting organized. I guess the connection to that topic comes from the speaker's unarticulated realization that getting organized starts with clear thinking or maybe because it is a good idea to be doing something, anything to make progress. Constructive living focuses our attention on what needs to be done now and shifts our attention away from bad feelings toward responsible behavior. Always ask, “what needs to be done now?”

Based on the work of Japanese psychiatrist Shoma Morita, M.D., the author suggests that life is attention and awareness. He recognizes distraction is a temporary solution to negative emotions, as does Seligman in _Learned Optimism_, compared to the preferred, permanent, purposeful redirection and constructive action. This clearly explains why a positive distraction of housecleaning went into high gear when my Mom and Dad had a disagreement. Reynolds’ essential point is that behavior can directly influence feelings.
The argument for action is established through a number of simple ideas. We are responsible for what we do no matter how we feel. The focus on ourselves leads to misery. Recognize the present reality and don’t waste time wishing for something that is not. Life isn’t fair but positive action is a far better response than wallowing in self-pity. After this introduction, the book further examines solutions to shyness, depression, grief, stress, pain, and other human troubles in terms of action, behavior, and constructive living.

I highly recommend this little, easy-to-read volume because in addition to sound advice, it ends with practice exercises and helpful maxims. I particularly love the advice to exercise whether you feel like it or not because exercise generates energy. God, I hope that’s true! I think people who know me would attest to its validity. At an early age I learned to do some exercise every day and formed a life-long habit thanks to my Mom and Jack Lalaine, a 1950’s TV exercise celebrity.


The title *Wherever You Go, There You Are* reminds us that we can never escape the troubles we create for ourselves. We may change jobs, spouses, or locations but if we don’t change our thinking, the same dislikes will follow us. Kabat-Zinn believes that our lives stop working because we are unwilling to take responsibility. We either don’t want to admit that we are wrong, or we blame ourselves and think we can’t change. Meditation is learning to look just at the here and now. Whatever the situation is, especially if it’s stressful, unpleasant, or discouraging, this is the moment to let go of wanting it to be something else. The question “Now what?” is the opportunity to fully accept whatever it is that we are doing or thinking. Kabat-Zinn says this is the moment that mindfulness can be healing.

Mindfulness is one method to help us slow down, pay attention, examine our thoughts, and try to see what is really going on as opposed to what we interpret. This introduction to meditation by the founding director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine at the University of Massachusetts presents comprehensive coverage in a layered pattern that builds the topic gradually. Part one describes mindfulness as paying attention to our capacity for awareness. Awareness is not the same as thinking. Kabat-Zinn asks us to think of awareness as a vessel that holds our thoughts. When we see our thoughts in this way, we are less likely to see them as the only reality.

Kabat-Zinn repeats what other researchers have pointed out. We have a natural human tendency to automatically either like or dislike. To take things personally means that we filter them as being good or bad for me. Kabat-Zinn acknowledges that “it is in the very nature of the mind to compare and judge and evaluate.” Mindfulness helps us be aware of our thoughts without judging them. He says that in meditation we are trying to just be in direct contact with the experience without deciding if it’s good or bad. He also reminds us that our thoughts are usually uninformed private opinions, reactions, and prejudices. Knowing we have this pattern of thinking helps us find balance and clarity.

Qualities of mindfulness include patience, letting go, non-judging, trust, generosity, and concentration. This book includes a very short chapter on each of these. In the section
on patience, the author points out that being in a hurry does not usually help us. He believes that when we look under the surface of impatience, the opposite of patience, we usually find anger. He calls anger a “strong energy of not wanting things to be the way they are and blaming someone (often yourself) or something for it.” He then discusses how one thing causes another and we can’t always find the true source of the anger. If we follow his argument, it leads to the conclusion that we are all connected and therefore we are all potentially part of the source of the problem. His solution is acceptance and compassion through mindfulness and meditation, the Buddhist philosophy.

These are only a few snippets from this book. There is much more worth examining about the practice of mindfulness and mindfulness practice as a path. This book helps us examine whether we manifest the qualities we value or if we just talk about them. Kabat-Zinn hopes that we learn to see meditation as a way of being in harmony with our world rather than at odds with it. Each chapter helps us examine, and hopefully improve, our own way of being in the world.


Originally published in 1992, Dr. Carlson assures us in this fifteenth anniversary edition that our capacity for happiness has not changed. The principles of how our minds work, explained in the book, will still lead us to a more content, peaceful, and happy life. By now you recognize that other authors, like Ehrenreich in _Bright-Sided_, would challenge the whole premise that being happy is a worthy goal. I still highly recommend this book even though in my mind and heart it is permanently linked to one of my greatest professional failures, but first the book.

This book can teach us to think better even if being happy is not our big goal. Carlson’s approach, as a practicing clinical psychologist, is to help us achieve a natural state of inner peace through healthy psychological functioning. The five principles he offers are navigational guides to feelings of gratitude, contentment, and affection for ourselves and others. With very easy to follow language and style he promotes the argument that our thinking creates our life experience. In the first chapter I learned a phrase that helped my marriage immensely. Carlson reminds us over and over again that thought is a function, an ability, it is not reality. I learned that if I were proposing a new idea, and I stressed that it was just a thought, not a fact or a concrete obligation, the new idea did not meet with so much resistance. After all it’s just a thought.

Principle two is about how our moods shift with our thinking and awareness. I’m not moody so I’m much more interested in the next principle of separate realities. This one is huge! I want to think everyone already knew this by the time I figured it out, but it looks like many people still have not grasped this concept. We all think differently, and we live in separate psychological realities. We need to understand that our own personal best behavior must go way beyond tolerating differences, all the way to recognizing that the differences can’t be any other way than how they are because of how we think. This message is confirmed in an upcoming book by Haidt in _Righteous Minds_, but Carlson says it in fewer words.
Carlson’s chapter four is about feelings as a guidance system that lets us know when our thinking is out of whack. Carlson promises that to be happy “just stop thinking about things that bother or anger you.” Of course, that is easier said than done, but what if it’s true. Think of the relief! The fifth principle is to learn to keep our attention in the present moment. Carlson disagrees with a therapeutic approach that puts too much emphasis on exploration of the past. He says that our past is nothing more than the thoughts we have about it; it has no power. Thoughts only have the significance that we give them. He says that we can retain power over our lives rather than feeling victimized or defeated. “Destructive effects of thought happen only when we forget that our thinking is simply a function…an ability…"

Part two is all about applying the five principles in real life. Each chapter has helpful, practical advice worth studying. For example, we can improve our relationships by simply not focusing on the negative aspects of our partner. I’ve tried that and, for sure, it works wonderfully. Another example, Carlson convincingly states that, “Stress does not exist – other than in your own thinking.” I’m fairly certain not every psychologist and medical doctor would agree with that because we know from Spark, for one, that the body does have physiological reactions to threats, fear and anxiety. However, I practiced Carlson’s advice and I can indeed talk myself out of a lot of stress, not all of it. He offers help with problem solving, habits, and addictions. I was going to point out that, for a self-help book, this one was not overrun with self-evaluation exercises. There is only one little exercise when he instructs us to just stop reading and be present in the moment. Then watch how our mood changes when we introduce negative thoughts. The real work is all in the final chapter eleven, ten questions which make up Carlson’s checklist for life.

Now back to my big failure. Once upon a time, I had a very unhappy employee. Many people she worked with asked me for advice to help her, so I attempted to have some conversations with her about both her situation and her interpretations of it. It was not necessarily the quality of her technical skills that was the problem, it was her constant complaining, disengagement, and superiority that exacerbated her situation. She once told her local site supervisor that she did not recognize his authority, period. On the other hand, she accepted no responsibility for alienating people around her.

So, I gave her a copy of You Can Be Happy No Matter What as a gift. Sadly, when I wanted to talk about it, she said that it was still in her pile of books to read, and it never made it to the top. Her distress only increased as the months progressed and eventually she attempted to file a formal complaint accusing me of triggering her anxiety attacks. The irony of her anger at me is that she truly believed the very last words she yelled at me, “You’re not doing anything to help me except trying to get me to think better.”


This book is recommended as a comparison for people who might think that their suffering exceeds anything that others have endured. Dr. Frankl was a Jewish Viennese psychotherapist interred in various concentration camps during the Holocaust, the Nazi torment of Europe. His work, originally published in German in 1946, witnesses those who consciously decided to maintain their freedom of choice and their human dignity under the most horrifying circumstance.
Dr. Frankl saw many cases where inner strength, as well as physical strength, came from having some hope or goal for the future. But what happened when there was nothing left to live for, when prisoners expected nothing more from life? Dr. Frankl observed that the strongest survivors then reversed the question to become “what does life expect from us?” He wrote that we need to stop searching for some abstract meaning of life. Instead imagine Life asking us what we are doing here. He said our answer had to be not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct. “Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.” If suffering is the task before us, our purpose is to deal with it. Every life is unique, every task is different, every life has its own meaning.


Dr. Moody received a Ph.D. in Philosophy and was enrolled in medical school, hoping to become a psychiatrist, when he got involved in this end-of-life research and wrote the book. He admits it is not a scientific study, he was not trying to prove anything, he just found it fascinating. That is a great reason to read this work. I read it while my Dad was enduring chemotherapy and I knew death was something we would soon be coping with. The stories in this book made me feel better.

The book is comprised of six sections: the phenomenon of dying, experiences of patients and observers, parallels in history, questions, explanations, and impressions. The first section asks, “what is it like to die?” Dr. Moody reports interviews with patients who had a near-death experience. He describes what they felt and saw, but usually they claim it’s hard to explain what they experienced because it’s not like anything we know. The author reports how the experience affects the life and perspective of the survivors.

In section three Dr. Moody looks for comparison and exploration of life after death in history. He finds that the Bible does not offer much about life after death, except a reference to the possibility of everlasting life (heaven) or everlasting contempt (hell). He quotes another biblical reference about a physical body that is weak and ugly and a spiritual body, strong and beautiful.

I’m not sure if I ever tried to read philosophy, I do not remember studying Plato or Socrates. Maybe after completing this book I will try again. Given that, I am just repeating that Dr. Moody says Plato is recognized for his pursuit of reason, logic, and truth. However, Plato concluded that ultimate truth comes to us as a mystical experience. Plato believed in other dimensions or planes outside the physical. He described the body as the prison of the soul and viewed death as liberation of the soul. Our physical senses and language are inadequate to describe other realms.

Another work that Dr. Moody reports on is *The Tibetan Book of the Dead.* In this document, pre-historic sages recited oral observations and beliefs for many centuries before they were finally written down in the eighth century A.D. This ancient manuscript serves as instruction to assist the dying in preparing for their new phenomenon, and also to teach the living to release their loved ones. It describes stages that the soul passes though after the body dies. In the “shining body” inhabited after death, all physical ailments are repaired. It also describes seeing all the deeds of the dying person’s entire
life and records a sense of peace and contentment. Dr. Moody was impressed by the striking similarities to reports from twentieth century Americans. He hoped that future study of this type of experience would continue since we might more fully understand the implications for this life if we catch a glimpse of what lies beyond.

Summary – Take Care of Your Body

- Exercise and mindfulness help both the brain and the body.
- Exercise creates energy.
- Eat your vegetables.
- Work towards good physical and mental health.
- Develop good habits; do the right thing automatically.
- Stress does not exist except in your head (that might be a stretch ;>).
- A thought is just a thought, it’s not reality.
- Ask yourself, “What needs to be done now?”
CHAPTER 4 - TAKE CARE OF YOUR PEOPLE

What Your Parents Were Trying to Teach You

If we were lucky enough to have nice parents, they probably loved us and wanted the best for us. That means they wanted us to be happy, stay healthy, go to school, and stay out of jail. They probably had some ground rules that they thought would get us started on a path in the right direction. It’s highly likely that those standards of behavior included an assortment of virtuous behaviors. For many of us, the rules came from some religious background whether it was actively observed or not. You can review the list of universal virtues defined by Seligman in *Authentic Happiness* in chapter one.

Most of us live with other people. We work or go to school with them, we live next to them, we dine, shop, play, and drive around them. Sometimes we want them to do things for us. Sometimes we help them out. Life is calmer, less stressful, and more enjoyable if we have comfortable and mutually beneficially relationships with all, or at least most, of those people around us. Our parents may have modeled how to accomplish that to varying degrees. I think my parents’ number one value was family. They didn’t care so much about, or trust, all our neighbors, but, for sure, nothing could be placed above a sibling. Wacky as they are, brothers and sisters can turn out to be a gift. I don’t know if we always bought into that premise, but in our childhood, it was something we had to accept on faith.

Those who master the challenge of living with siblings have useful preparation for the real world. Of course, there are plenty of only-child adults who turn out just fine, are even more interpersonally skilled, and less tainted by the competition of sibling rivalry. In my particularly passionate family, we learned how to disagree, argue, face conflict, confront each other and our problems, and then kiss and make up, figuratively speaking. The transferable skillset is problem solving.

If a family manages to survive a few rugged battles as a cohesive unit, they may reap the added benefit of developing an indestructible support group. When we were young, we did not see the value of accepting each other’s ridiculously bad behavior any more than we saw merit in an eight o’clock mass. Now I see the past as building habits. I thank my parents for those rituals. It’s just a given that my siblings and I will be there for each other.

As the first born, I reluctantly accept the typical stereotype and admit to being a little bossy. At work that can be an advantage because I usually see what needs to be done and have no problem turning a plan into reality. At home, keeping bossiness under control is a must. The fact that I have practiced extreme restraint may explain my employment as a human resource professional, Society for Human Resource Management Certified, no less. It is ironic, though, because I did not always have the best people skills. More about that in the next section on communication. No matter how much we learn and practice, there are always new challenges.

In the very worst times, prayer might serve as another supportive habit for believers. Personally, I rely on St. Jude, Patron Saint of Hopeless Cases, and not only to ask for
help. It’s important to remember to say thanks too. Religious scholars will caution us that a spiritual connection is most valuable when it’s collaborative and proactive, not passive, fatalistic or abdicating of responsibility. For a full discussion with sources on the role of religious beliefs, sacredness, and meaning in life, read happiness activity number eleven in *The How of Happiness*. This section highlights books offering various perspectives for building a foundation for social interaction. The next section on communication is more specifically about dealing with interpersonal challenges.

*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*,

I had placed this book in chapter one because it is another description of the mind operating as two parts, but I had to move it here because of its close look at morality. Maybe our parents were trying to teach us a moral code. Anyway, according to Haidt, the two brain functions are intuition and reasoning: intuition is instantaneous and comes before reasoning. Haidt says reasoning serves mainly to justify our intuitive actions. To make the point clear he calls intuition an elephant, and conscious reasoning the rider. You would think the rider (reasoning) controls the elephant, but no. The rider serves the elephant.

The author claims that since we care about what others think of us, our conscious reasoning acts as our lawyer or press secretary to justify our intuitive thinking. He says our thinking is designed to confirm our intuition not explain reality. He does not think our reasoning leads to truth; it only justifies what is already in our mind. Haidt says our thinking is more confirmatory than explanatory. He describes our reasoning as motivated to believe and justify whatever we want. Hence his term, motivated reasoning.

This book is about a lot more than the two brains explained in part one. Part two explores the history and origins of morality, changing worldviews of morality from religious to secular, the value of an individual versus the group, and especially the variable moralities of politics. The foundations of morality that Haidt identifies include beliefs about caring for others versus harming them, fairness versus cheating, loyalty and betrayal, authority and subversion, and sanctity versus degradation. There is a lot to this, and you really should read the whole book.

In his discussion about morality, Haidt demonstrates that caring is an innate trait; not learned or constructed. It is something we are born with. When he uses the term innate, he refers to those characteristics as prewired, but not necessarily hardwired. He thinks of them as changeable. He says they exist in a certain way from birth but can change based on our individual experiences. We are prewired to care for others. As much as we care for the individual, he argues that holding only one value, caring, above all others does not play out well for survival of the group.

Part three explores how natural selection, or survival of the fittest, favors groups or societies with good cooperation and cohesion. He compares our individualistic, selfish, and competitive behavior to our less prevalent group collaboration. Haidt points out how religion, like team sports, helps create groups. Unfortunately, once we bond with a group, religious or political, we lose objectivity. Once we commit to a group, our emotional or instinctual reasoning determines our behavior and our conscious mind, Kahneman’s lazy System 2, justifies our beliefs. Our blindness to anything good on the
other side is why Haidt calls us all self-righteous hypocrites. We see everything wrong with the other side but see none of the same faults in our own group. His biblical reference from Luke 6:41-42 makes his point even more memorable. “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”

Haidt explores religion in the context of its ability to hold a group together. He observes, and many would agree, that “religion is an extravagant, costly, wasteful institution that impairs rational thinking and has a long trail of victims.” It’s not all bad though, religiously observant people are more generous and better neighbors. That kind of belonging matters to a society. On the other hand, he talks about post-911 atheists who view religion as a parasite or virus. He warns that those who rely on an internal moral compass that is too individualistic and unrelated to a group, may come to exist in a state of anomie or normlessness. Not having norms or standards is unsettling for us human; not a good place to be. For more on this topic see the next title by Jordan Peterson. Haidt’s descriptive definition of morality is “everything that is a source of solidarity, regulates self-interest and makes cooperative societies possible.”

Chapter twelve gets to the point of the whole book, which is to help us learn to disagree more constructively. Haidt does say that we construct life narratives, that is, make up our own interpretations, which are not necessarily true. Note: here is another psychologist saying that we create our own reality. His recommendation is to examine what the other group values most or holds sacred and not to be blind to its value. Rigid polarization along the lines of “my group or tribe is everything good” and “the other group is totally evil” represents the opposite of the collaboration that he argues is necessary for overall survival of society. He reminds us that “you can’t help the bees by destroying the hive.” This makes the current state of American politics a very scary situation to witness.


If I had started out trying to report these books in a chronological order as I read them, that plan has long ago gone out the window. I did start out with one of the first, most impactful books on my thinking, but after that they fell into the five major areas for us to take care of. I have just barely finished reading the _Twelve Rules_ and feel confident that it is one of the most valuable we can find for young people of this era. It is like working out a plan to get your life back on track with a loving, but deeply philosophical, parent.

Jordan Peterson is incredibly intense while treating the subject as if he is still trying to figure it out. He does not claim to have all the answers and his own personal mystery isn’t revealed until the last chapter. This is an exploration of human nature with a lot of questions for us to answer for ourselves. The book has a somewhat spiritually dark perspective in that Peterson says we all must recognize ourselves for the miserable, worthless sinners that we are. At times the author’s suffering as a clinician who has seen too much pathology is touching. The weight, and I don’t mean physical, of this tome is surprising because Peterson’s written tone differs considerably from many of his lectures on YouTube. He is an engaging, even passionate speaker. Maybe the small video chunks of discussion make the complexity of the concepts more easily digestible. Or maybe the book just really gets into the detail. This is a good place to point out that this is a book about books for the simple reason that you just get way, way more out of a book than watching a video, listening to a podcast, or skimming a blog.
Twelve is clearly an arbitrary number of rules because there are lots of sub-rules and variations on the central themes. You may have to dig deep for your own understandable interpretation of Peterson’s rules. For example, rule number twelve is “Pet a cat,” but that psychic digging is a good use of your brain. So, what is this book about? You will learn some things about the history of religion, Russian literature, a lot of philosophy, and have a thorough understanding of nihilism when you are done. I know a lot more about it now than when studying Sartre at the Sorbonne in Paris. You might recognize how belief in nothing undermines a person’s spirit and torments a society. There is more discussion about Haidt’s topics of anomie and normlessness. You might develop a fresh appreciation for the role of religions in sorting out good and evil, right and wrong, morality, and ethics. There are recurring examples of our fundamental human need for certainty, order, and hierarchy, but that is a need that must be balanced with some uncertainty and challenges. Peterson offers rules to help us live a balanced life, to walk the line between order and chaos, the Taoist Way.

There is no way for me to cover this book chapter by chapter as I have for some of the others because my notes are ten pages long. Instead I offer quotes from throughout the book, reorganized according to what I identify as Peterson’s major themes. I can only hope this proves enticing enough for you to dive into the entire book.

Peterson’s thoughts:

Hierarchy is a necessary organizing element of society. Any hierarchy creates winners and losers. When there is too much disorganization or uncertainty, people seek order via ideologues. An ideologue’s belief in only one absolute truth is unbalanced and dangerous. Not all beliefs are viable. Freedom requires constraint. Force or aggression holds tyranny at bay.

Children, if undisciplined, demonstrate innate aggression. Children, if overprotected, are unprepared. Either too much aggression or too much compassion can become a vice. Challenges, competition, and suffering help us grow and develop. Competence is what causes people to stand tall and rise in status.

Recognize your own evil, examine your own bitterness and resentment. Understand corruption (deceit) and willful blindness (remove the beam from your own eye). Atone, accept responsibility, make amends. I don’t think Peterson comes right out and says forgive yourself. He does say God owns revenge, not us. His solution is to walk with God again. If you want to know how to walk with God see below The Power of Positive Thinking by Dr. Peale. When chaos and suffering seem intolerable, look for good or God. God is whatever you believe in that represents the highest good and virtues. There are no atheists, just people who haven’t decided which God to worship.

For Peterson, meaning is the antidote to chaos. We have a moral obligation to make things better. What we aim at determines what we see. Aim for good. Good is anything that stops suffering. Evils is lies and deceit. Aim for truth, not slogans, and strengthen your own character. Seek first the Kingdom of God.

Humility is the precursor of wisdom. Learn by listening respectfully and talking truthfully through a conflict. Know that your knowledge is insufficient. Negotiate. Don’t ignore tiny chaos or it will grow into a monster. Confront chaos with care and aim for good, not more
suffering. To produce more suffering is evil. The Coda, last section of the book, offers an excellent practical tip for people in deep disagreement. Take a break and contemplate, “what have I done to contribute to this argument?” Then get back together and tell each other, “this is how I was wrong.”


Since Peterson’s _Twelve Rules_ encourage us to stand up straight, stand up for ourselves, and stand up against chaos and corruption, it seems only fitting to examine one virtue required for such a challenge. Early in this book Kidder says, “standing up for values is the defining feature of moral courage.” He stresses the difference between living by our values and just having them.

Even though I hope I never have to demonstrate moral courage, I still find this book a fascinating exploration of considerations and factors related to the topic. Kidder doesn’t argue his case for why we should care about courage until the very end. I prefer to tell you up front that Kidder ponders, by way of conclusion, that the ability to forgive might be one of the highest forms of moral courage. He further suggests that integration of forgiveness, moral courage, and justice may be the only way to secure peace in our future. He says our “collective moral courage is essential for world peace.” So now you might want to know what is in his book.

Where _Authentic Happiness_ identified six virtues and twenty-four strengths, Kidder’s methods came up with five core moral values: honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and compassion. He later argues that courage must be a value too, because without courage the others are “inoperative.” In the first chapter he introduces the concept of developing our morality. Checkpoints include learning to assess whether a situation calls for physical or moral courage. What values are in question, what are the dangers, risks, and hardships. He shares attributes of courageous leaders.

Living our values is no easy task, especially when they come up against our other conflicting values. Chapter four discusses evaluating right and wrong arguments and how to look for a higher-good reason to not act. Some lenses used in analyzing moral choices are weighing truth compared to loyalty, individual versus community, short versus long term interests, and justice versus mercy. Being aware of these tools might help clarify some of our personal ethical dilemmas.

Another framework used to resolve moral quandaries looks at evaluating three principles, either the outcomes, the rules, or care. The outcome principle values the greatest good in the end. Rules based principle asks whether we would want this moral decision to become a universal law. The care principle is the golden rule, do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

In the chapters on facing risk and enduring hardship we learn more about what it takes to stand up. Moral courage requires us to develop a tolerance for ambiguity, exposure, and loss. Not too appealing, but on the other hand Kidder promises that doing the right thing leads to greater rewards. Through practice and experience we will develop endurance and trust in our ability to secure a powerful future benefit. As we strengthen our faith, intuition, and character our ability to live with moral courage becomes stronger.
It seems like a good idea to have some exposure to these ideas before we are faced with our own huge moral or ethical choice.


Here is another book that might have been in chapter one with all the other thinking books because after all the title, “…thinking.” So, it was on the list for review and comparison to Seligman’s works on positive psychology and learned optimism. And remember that in the first section of _The How of Happiness_ Lyubomirsky recommends we start with positive thinking. I was just going to mention this book as one of my early encounters with the concept and as a tribute to the author. I first read it in about 1975, but in 2019 it is not at all what I remembered. The author tells us on page one that it is a book of applied Christianity.

Before all non-Christians skip this title, I would highly recommend reading with the open possibility that there is not only one true God whom we uniquely claim, and then proceed to fight over. Apologies to my Catholic history, but I was forced to abandon the only-one-true-god concept as being just way too narrow-minded for me. Anyway, when reading this section, translate all the references to God or the Bible into whatever higher power or greater good aligns with your own personal beliefs.

Sorry, there is one more disclaimer. As I started to write the summary, I was wondering about the author’s credentials. Peale is a Doctor of Divinity but not psychology. Clearly the book is written in a down-home style, not the scholarly, cited research paper we demand today. Therein lies the source of at least one criticism of his work. There are endless stories and anecdotes with no attribution, no way to judge the credibility of the claim. For Dr. Peale’s purpose, I would argue that citations would be counterproductive. Another criticism, that his program mis-uses self-hypnosis, is quite ironic. The research, as we know it today, suggests that our thoughts can be a never-ending barrage of self-criticism. So, I guess that kind of autosuggestion is OK, but it’s not OK to recognize a negative thought and counter it?

After all this build up what is in the book? Peale recommends developing self-confidence and he stated in 1952 that attitude is more important than facts. Funny, given how we view facts today. He teaches that peace of mind can be achieved by replacing bad news, resentment, fear, guilt, anxiety, tension, stress, ill will, jealousy, vindictiveness, and anger with prayer and affirmations. One practice that Peale describes was most definitely reported years later by Jack Canfield as a program successful in the California school system. The idea is to create vivid images of physically cleaning all negative thoughts out of our minds as if they were dust and dirt. Then the next step is to replace the bad with good, uplifting, thoughts, prayers, or Bible quotes.

Besides prayer, living in God’s presence, with him as partner and companion, will bolster our confidence and ability to practice human love and good will. Peale advises that we create positive habits like limiting our complaints. There are numerous helpful examples demonstrating how others applied positive thoughts and actions to real-life situations. Maybe the examples are designed to strengthen our faith, the ultimate solution. Have faith. Dr. Peale describes daily examples of Jordan Peterson’s advice to “walk with God.”
Peale promises that prayer gives us peace, is calming, improves confidence and optimism. He warns that too much self-love needs to be turned around. Love others. Pray for others.

Dr. Peale puts forth suggestions that have been documented in recent research including this long list of ideas: forgive yourself, seek quiet, meditate, we lose energy through emotional upheaval, the subconscious resents change, compete against yourself not others, align with helpful and positive people, hate and animosity disorganize our thoughts, reduce error in yourself and increase truth, self-knowledge is the beginning of self-correction, a prescription to reduce heartache is physical activity, do not sit and brood, do something worthwhile.

Finally, I was interested in Dr. Peale’s many attempts to increase the credibility of religion by equating it with science, especially after reading Jordon Peterson’s description of how science denigrates religion. Here are some of Dr. Peale’s thoughts about the science of religion. Religion functions through our thoughts, in fact, it is a system of thought discipline. He sees Christianity as a science, philosophy, system of theology, system of metaphysics, system of worship, and moral and ethical codes. He states that in science, the textbook contains a system of techniques and formulas designed for understanding and treatment of human nature. He describes the Bible as the textbook of spiritual science and shares his scientific spiritual practice rules. His formulas are bible verses. He says a psychiatrist evaluates phenomenon of human nature while the pastor teaches therapies of prayer. Read it, try it, and decide for yourself.


In the interest of seeking and considering contradictory information, no assessment of the value of prayer and religion could be further from Dr. Peale’s than this work by Christopher Hitchens. This was not an easy book for me to follow for a few reasons. First, I found many challenges to my vocabulary and was compelled to looked up words like solipsism, syncretism, irredentism, farrago, and parthenogenesis. Second, even defining obtuse words did not fully compensate for my lack of background in history, philosophy, and world cultures. Nevertheless, getting his points was worth the effort because it reinforced my entire purpose in writing this book. This is an extreme exercise in examining why we think and believe what we do.

Hitchens was reading the Old and New Testaments at age nine and before long started to notice “oddities” such as the deity’s requirement for excessive glorification, continual prayer with no results, weird sporadic miracles, and repression of sexuality. He further objects to religion’s misrepresentation of the origin of man and its extreme authoritarianism which stifles free inquiry and violently eradicates dissent. Fundamentally founded on “wish-thinking” and fabricated by humans to maintain dominance, the author argues that religion does not make its followers happy, it justifies many health hazards, and most of its metaphysical claims are contradictory to each other and science. Detailed chapters investigate these concepts from ancient to current times. His conclusion is that we would all benefit greatly from a new era of enlightenment that would afford greater credibility to secular humanism and encourage pursuit of truth over dogma. His belief is that we should accept the finality of death after one life, behave
better now rather than in anticipation of an unknown future life, and enjoy the fruit of this life.


If I had not read this enlightening little history before attempting Hitchens, I may not have made it through that more complex analysis. Holloway shares his deep knowledge via intriguing stories laced with contemporary wit. He attended three theological colleges, was ordained in the Scottish Episcopal Church, and served as Bishop of Edinburgh before leaving the church to pursue a more agnostic outlook.

True to the title, this is far more focused on history and allows readers to come more gently to conclusions very similar to those less subtly proffered by Hitchens. Before launching into the evolutionary story of our many world religions, Holloway identifies their common purpose. He says that humans think about the universe, where it came from, who made it, and what happens when we die. Some answers emerge from our human imaginations or hallucinations in the form of religions. Rather than eliminate any possibility of a higher power, he further suggests that perhaps some prophets have access to a supernatural world beyond our conscious and subconscious minds. Although he then reminds us that today we would be highly skeptical of a person advocating a life path to follow based on a conversation with a burning bush.

Following both chronological and geographical outlines, Holloway demonstrates how religions developed and changed to connect with and diverge from each other. His many short chapters capture the essentials of each story without losing focus in too many details. He describes how human speculation explained the forces of nature and invented numerous gods to reign over various aspects of survival. Beliefs about which were the best rules for society varied with each new prophet. Points of controversy revolve around whether there is one God or many, should we follow church dogma and structure or look only for the true words of God. Is human sacrifice a requirement for salvation? What is the reward for following the correct path? Is every bad thing that happens punishment for our sins? Holloway emphasizes that each set of rules for society is given to us by divine command and there is no tolerance of heretics.

In chapter fourteen the author examines Eastern beliefs and contrasts philosophy with religion. He proposes that philosophy is about love of wisdom and a moral philosophy involves figuring out the best way to live now. Religion is more interested in what lies beyond, the afterlife. After many more interesting chapters about prophets, church configurations and mutations, hell, schisms, cults, fundamentalists, ecumenical attempts, and holy wars, the final chapter is about the end of religion. One of Holloway’s conclusions is that if there are two religions in a country they will always be at war, but if there are thirty religions the country will live in peace. He admires the possibility that religion is tolerated in society but argues that religion should never take control over society. He reviews the concern that a secular or godless perspective erodes the authority and good associated with religion. To counter that fear he offers the hope for “secular humanism” which helps people live good lives not based on religion but on human principles. He also offers “secular spirituality” where people find meaning and beauty in this life. He envisions people coming together to offer support, examining the kind of life they are leading, appreciating it, and using it well.

This book starts out by saying "Life is difficult." Then the author goes on to advise that we accept it and learn to deal with problems. Wow, that has got to appear to be some really old-fashioned advice. Actually, it is old. It mimics the first Nobel Truth of Buddhism which is that life is sad and full of suffering. That is not a particularly uplifting place to start but since it was written by a practicing medical doctor and psychiatrist, it is probably somewhat realistic. This book could easily fit into the previous section on learning to cope but it has a strong message for the discussion of how virtues impact our relationships with others.

After telling us to basically “get over it,” Peck offers a set of four tools that he calls discipline. Those tools are delay gratification, accept responsibility, dedication to truth, and balancing. Balancing is interesting because in 1978 he was referring to our two brain systems, one emotional and one analytical. From his medical perspective, Peck believes that when people try to escape the pain of responsibility, they give away their power. They become helpless, unable-to-cope victims.

Peck explains the role of three virtues: wisdom, courage, and love in both our mental health and our relationships. The section on love is particularly helpful because Peck highlights that we have to love ourselves first. Courage is essential to self-examination, dedication to truth, and even more to commitment to those we love. Peck defines courage as moving ahead through fear to achieve change.

In part three Peck uses the term worldview when he talks about religion and our beliefs. I highlight that because it’s another discussion of how we construct our own life narrative. Part four is an examination of grace and evil. Peck’s position is that the purpose of life is to become more Godlike. Atheists can translate that to mean the purpose of life is to become more virtuous. OK, just be a nicer person. He concludes with the thought that we have to first be loving and lovable. We can’t find love, love finds us.


At this point I have no idea how I stumbled on this title. Perhaps I found it because of the link to Martin Seligman and positive psychology or because it has the word “happiness” in the title. Maybe I was trying to understand Buddhism and thought that a Western-psychology interpretation would bring me to the Eastern concepts via familiar territory. I highly recommend this title to anyone interested in either Buddhism or positive psychology.

Part one on Buddhism introduces an entirely new vocabulary of suffering, cravings, Nirvana, and the Eight-Fold Path. Comparing the eight disciplines of Buddhism to Western virtues of wisdom, ethics, and discipline made sense to me by connecting to what was already somewhat familiar. Buddha teaches that suffering is caused by ignorance, greed, and hatred. The path to finding peace involves practicing the opposite of those three poisons: seek wisdom, give up wants, and always act with compassion. The author’s examination of our development of characteristics from childishness, to maturity and then to the Eastern ideal of super-maturity is easy to grasp. Notice that
“mature” happiness is part of the title. Maturity is similar to Seligman’s concept in *Authentic Happiness* where authentic is more mature than pleasure or hedonism.

Part two introduces yoga concepts of the universal soul and the individual spirit. The yoga postures are a way of linking inner and outer selves, mind and body. The author explores enlightenment, attitudes toward the self and others, and stages of meditation. In the enlightened mind, passions are drastically reduced as we control our emotional brain, new attitudes are in place, beliefs have been inspected and selected. Sounds like critical thinking.

A straightforward summary and comparison of Buddhism, Yoga, and Western psychology is the subject of part three. Most important for this Take Care of Your People section is part four, handling anger, because obviously that’s how we wreck relationships with our people. Three important assumptions Levine makes are that 1) anger is undesirable 2) we can change our mental and emotional processes 3) our primary concern is to change ourselves. The belief in a strong mind-body connection emphasizes physiological controls to anger such as deep, slow breathing, muscle relaxation, and passage of time. The author discusses seven other methods of decreasing anger starting with recognizing that anger is our own problem.

Another method from this book that has worked for me consistently over time is to consciously reduce my attachment to a desired outcome, to give up cravings, in order to reduce my stress and frustration. Yes, stress, even though Carlson and Siebert say it is only in my head. I reduce stress quite simply by telling myself “I don’t care.” That is, I don’t care enough to make myself sick or miserable. I’m not sure that is Buddhism’s intended interpretation, but it works for me.

This review skips over the discussion of non-judging and total acceptance perhaps because I am having my own personal struggle with the whole “don’t judge me” culture. My parents had standards and we got judged regularly; we did not thank them often enough for that foundation. The first of the eight disciplines, wisdom or right understanding, is designed to teach us to see life as it is. There is a lot to be said in favor of accepting reality and not fighting what is. However, when we see things running amok, it seems that there are limits to what is acceptable. Let me refer you back to Kidder’s *Moral Courage*, Peterson’s *Twelve Rules* or Haidt’s *Righteous Mind* for a discussion of the necessity for standards.


Yes, we already looked at this book in chapter two, but here I want to highlight chapter thirteen on dealing with anger and hatred. We start with a lesson that when a person is shot with an arrow, they should not spend time contemplating the wood it is made of. It is best to first remove the arrow to stop the pain. The Dali Lama compares anger to the arrow. He sees anger as negative states of mind that destroy happiness, cloud judgment, cause feelings of discomfort, and wreak havoc in relationships.

Negative emotions such as arrogance, jealousy, desire, closed-mindedness, and hatred are obstacles to developing compassion; they destroy virtue and calmness of mind. The Dali Lama does explore positive anger motivated by compassion but cautions that it
could become blind to reality and therefore destructive. He says we cannot overcome hatred by either venting or suppressing our feelings, the solution is to cultivate the virtues of patience and tolerance.

By practicing the virtues, we avoid adding more long-term damage that comes from dwelling on negatives, that is, contemplating the wood of the arrow. The Dalai Lama understands that our Western culture may interpret patience and tolerance as weakness and passivity. He argues that on the contrary, patience and tolerance takes exceptional strength that comes from a disciplined mind. He goes on to explore the occasional value of impatience and the connection between humility and patience. He says the result of practicing patience and tolerance is forgiveness. Remember the title of the book; his conclusion is that forgiveness leads to happiness.


In reviewing this book, and other older titles like The Power of Positive Thinking, it's obvious that our terminology has shifted away from talking about inferiority and superiority complexes. Somehow that seems quaint to me today. We have evolved to terms like self-esteem and character-development, or maybe something newer that I am not aware of. In the introduction Dr. Layden tells us that hostility, including anger, resentment, and hurt feelings, is the saboteur of the mind. His definition of a superiority complex is obsession with oneself. He then reviews research of the day that interprets our instinctual reaction to threat as fear. The threat causes a depletion of status which leads to feelings of inferiority which in turn generates hostility.

As authors throughout this work have suggested, we humans have a need to be liked and appreciated. Sometimes to our detriment, but still automatically, we compare ourselves to others and we expect to believe that we are equally worthwhile. If we feel disrespected or inferior, hostility results. Dr. Layden then observes how the body shivers in response to a low temperature. He compares the shiver reaction to cold to our normal physiological reaction of hostility due to lowered self-respect. Of course, the dip in esteem can come from our own thoughts just as often as from actions of others.

Dr. Layden says the degree of hostility we experience is determined by the degree of inferiority we feel. If we are emotionally unfit, have a poor self-image, to begin with, then we react to even a trivial slight. He describes how our mental balancing mechanism can overreact to feeling low self-respect by manifesting as anxiety, superiority, or a martyr complex. In chapter two he reviews several methods that do not work to control anger. In chapters three through nineteen he offers examples of how he believes his method will work. His solution is two parts, first we must develop a healthy level of respect for ourselves and second, we should elevate the respect of others. Dr. Layden offers the analogy of a three-car crash. Car one is hit by car two because it was hit by car three. We are all just caught in the middle and reacting to other forces. He reminds us that anger is a chain reaction and we should all just cut each other some slack, my words not his.

The following words of advice are shared throughout the rest of the book. To raise self-respect of another person do not argue or contradict, rather ask for reasons. Memory, concentration, and judgment are impaired when we are angry. Never blame or belittle
others. We cannot rely on a person to whom we have been hostile. Concealed hostility is always perceived by the other person. Loneliness reduces self-respect, so when we help others feel respected, we also reduce our own loneliness. Children will behave sooner for appreciation and attention from parents than from punishment.

I am not sure how effective this method of fortifying respect is, or how it is viewed by today’s research standards. It does seem to reflect the Buddhist philosophy that we are all connected; we are empty vessels determined by interacting events; we reap what we sow. Most likely I read this when feeling particularly hostile toward husband number one and got some comfort from following this advice. If it hadn’t worked, I would have thrown the book away a long time ago.

~*~

Watch What You Say

We all get in trouble on occasion when we blurt out something incredibly stupid or hurtful before the thinking part of our brain has a chance to save us from ourselves. By now we recognize the value of a few deep breaths or a quick step away from the problem. In The Five People You Meet in Heaven Mitch Albom says, “All parents damage their children. It cannot be helped.” (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2003.) There is a fragment of truth in that, but no scientific evidence is quoted since it is a work of fiction. The point is that children believe what parents say and can easily be marked for life by some passing comment.

In How to Build High Self-Esteem Canfield offers an extremely valuable piece of advice to parents as they send a child to a timeout. Instead of telling them to think about what they did or said that got them in trouble, he recommends that the child be instructed to contemplate what better thing they could have said or done. This section offers some titles that might help us follow one of the Four Agreements which is to become “impeccable with our words.”

After reading Righteous Mind and Twelve Rules I do get a glimpse of the log in my own eye when looking at the speck in others. Another way of saying this, according to Gottman, is that we think our own faults are charming, but our partner’s faults are annoying. That explains why it is so easy for me to see my husband being stubborn, close-minded, and set in his ways. He gets an idea in his head, like the type of bowl the cat prefers. I do some research and read that cats don’t like their whiskers obstructed. I buy new cat plates. He prefers the old ones; new ones remain unused in the cupboard. Well, they were for a while, but he has seen the light. He uses the new plates; cats are much happier. Another example, my Dad was adamant that if we went out with a wet head we would come home with a cold. On the other hand, I can’t think of any examples of what I might believe that is goofy or wrong. For me to resist giving up my twelve-year-old car was perfectly reasonable and unemotional, not! One way my family points out the error in each other’s ideas is to flat out say “Well, that’s just wrong.” I know we did not invent that expression, but we certainly embrace it.

Sometimes others help us see our faulty thinking. I must have been a snotty little person at some point in my past because I was reading a lot of books on how to improve both my people and communication skills. To some extent, they are one and the same. If we don’t communicate well, we are bound to get ourselves in no end of trouble. On one
occasion I did exactly that. Our offices were being remodeled and my boss had
discussed the plans in a managers’ meeting. Meanwhile I was back in the offices
working on a deadline when some vice-presidential types came strolling through making
comments and observations as if I were invisible. More than one group came through
before I finally said something to the effect of “hello, people are trying to work here”
although that was not the vernacular of the day. That VIP went directly to my boss and
advised him that I should be counseled regarding office etiquette. I admit, I needed it.

*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie, New York, NY: Pocket
Books, 1936.

It does not matter how old this book is, it is truly a timeless classic. As proof, the keynote
commencement speaker at my grandson’s 2019 university graduation advised students
of the validity of its principles. It is still the foundation of many interpersonal skills
classes, notably the Dale Carnegie Courses. You can save a hit to your budget by
choosing the book over the workshop because the book is easy, fun to read, and it
works. It doesn’t matter if there is no theory, research, or footnotes in the original book.
Common sense and years of continued application are evidence of its effectiveness. I’m
sure that there are many psychologists who could footnote almost every piece of advice
with an impressive, scholarly research study. Just read the book. It will make you a nicer
person.


I know that the messages I learned from this book are still being used today because I
still see them in new mediation programs. The people skills discussed in this work are
communication skills. The author identifies barriers to communication in three
categories: judging, sending solutions, and avoiding the other’s concerns. Listening skills
include paying attention, encouraging, and reflecting back. Bolton points out that verbal
communication is better for reporting facts. Non-verbal body language reveals emotions
and feelings. There are many suggestions on how to improve listening and when to
listen reflectively.

This book will teach us how to deliver an assertive rather than an aggressive or
submissive message. The formula is 1) describe an observable behavior, 2) disclose
how we feel about it, and 3) state a concrete effect of the behavior on us. All three parts
must be objective, non-judgmental, and not refer to motives, attitudes, or values of the
other person. For example, “when you leave dirty dishes in the sink, I feel annoyed
because it makes more work for me.” We can usually expect a defensive response to
any type of criticism. The message we deliver should not accuse or disrespect the other
person or their values. The idea is to identify a specific behavior and its effect on you.
After writing this, I had to go back to the book and make sure I didn’t miss another part
where we ask for a solution. That is intentionally not part of this method. The solution is
left up to the other person.

Part four goes into more detail about types of conflict and their management. A conflict
can be realistic in that it is based on differing needs, goals, or values. A nonrealistic
conflict is based on error, prejudice, organizational issues, or other issues. The conflict
resolution method proposed is also three parts. First treat the other person with respect,
listen until we experience the other side, and finally briefly state our own point of view. The chapter on a collaborative problem-solving process includes widely recognized steps such as defining the problem, identifying and evaluating possible solutions, planning, doing, and evaluating. Finally, the author observes that techniques without the right attitudes are not enough for good people skills. Genuineness, non-possessive love, and empathy are also essential.

After writing this summary I wondered if this is where I first learned about “I versus you” statements. It seems like the disadvantages of using “you” in an accusatory way were already part of the common understanding of preferred communication styles before 1979. The idea of starting with how I feel, versus what you did wrong, might be somewhat more likely to minimize defensiveness. A more recent discussion of what psychologists think is “Are ‘I’ Statements Better than ‘You’ Statements?”, John A. Johnson, *Psychology Today*. Blog Post: Cui Bono (who benefits). November 30, 2012 [https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cui-bono/201211/are-i-statements-better-you-statements](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cui-bono/201211/are-i-statements-better-you-statements)


The significance of a mere four minutes is an observation from this book that left a lasting impression. How we start the day in the morning and how we reunite after work can make or break a relationship. It is most unpleasant to hear a litany of complaints the minute we walk in the door of our presumed sanctuary. Just as bad, imagine waiting with a lovely dinner prepared for your partner to return only to be peppered with all the bad stuff that happened while you were apart. What greeting do the children receive when they return home after school? I wish I could say I always remembered the importance of this message, but I did not. Lately, my awareness is so heightened that I even make sure our little black cat has had a proper greeting.

Dr. Zunin was a practicing psychiatrist who arrived at this theory based on his own observations and his desire to help his patients and other people avoid the pain of loneliness. He says personal encounters are like everything else we do. They consist of a beginning, continuance, and an end. He believes that the beginning is the key to social success, at least it may have been in the 1970s. The book is about helping us recognize and improve our own patterns of relating. He describes how we intuitively know that an average of four minutes is the time needed to decide whether to pursue or end a connection. He says these first impressions are based on assumptions and he dedicates an entire chapter to what he calls “the assumptive world.” This would be the same conclusion about the fast thinking that many of the authors, Kahneman, Goleman, Haidt, were describing in earlier chapters.

Parts of the book read like a basic course in Conversation 101. Chapters cover in great detail how to initiate a conversation, verbal and nonverbal contact, and relationships with intimates and children. Chapter twelve stresses the importance of self-awareness and self-identity as a foundation for contact with others. He argues that if we can sincerely make another person feel good about him or herself, in the first four minutes, then that person will want to continue contact with us. He lists thirteen ideas that might help even the most insecure among us develop confidence in our own positive identity. The tips
include doing more of what makes us feel successful, having positive rather than negative expectations, taking responsibility for our actions, and fulfilling our own needs.

I am not necessarily suggesting that this is a book we need to read today because there are surely more recent contributions on this topic. The focus on how we connect with and present ourselves to others in only four minutes is what is worth considering.


One evening in our kitchen I do clearly remember my husband telling me that I just had to leave work at work. I was complaining, and he surely didn’t want to hear about it because he would either get upset or try to solve my problem, neither of which was helpful. As I mentioned before, I might be a slow learner. I need things to be very explicit. Yes, I agreed with him I just didn’t know exactly how to shut it off. We must have found some other resources to guide me because that episode was well before this book was even published.

The great thing about Will Bowen’s book is the twenty-one-day challenge. Read the book to understand the downside of complaining and be inspired to then try to go twenty-one days without one complaint. We wear a fat purple rubber band as a visual reminder and move it from one wrist to the other every time we verbalize a complaint. I tried a couple times about a year apart but never went more than four days without having to start over. The process did help tremendously to raise my awareness so that now when I am complaining I apologize or joke my way back to a more productive path.

It should be a relief to know that not all complaining is bad. According to research by Robin Kowalski (cited by Bowen from the book *Aversive Interpersonal Behaviors*, New York, NY: Plenum Press, 1997) we complain to get attention, sympathy, approval, or to avoid doing something. Venting sometimes makes us feel better. We might complain to find out what others think, to create an impression of ourselves as having high standards, or to actually get something changed. Some examples of bad complaining are when it is incessant, inauthentic, not intended to improve the problem, or designed to fault others. Even though complaining might have the occasional constructive purpose, it’s still a good idea to keep a close watch on how often we rely on it and why.

Gossiping about a third party is a special type of complaining and gets the fancy name of triangulation in this book. Hopefully we all learned at an early age that it is much better to solve problems directly with the source. To legitimize a complaint, talk only about what you want and only to the person who can provide it. Bowen reminds us that dissatisfaction is the first step toward progress, but the focus has to be on achieving an improvement. He also notes that processing, which can be helpful, talks about feelings and does not rehash events, which is complaining. Finally, a recurring theme is to raise awareness of how our thoughts are revealed through words that in turn impact how others relate to us. We have the option to choose how we live and interact if we just pay attention.

As I recall, this book was required reading for my training as a mediator. The three authors were all affiliated with Harvard Law school which might explain why this volume could possibly be considered more than you ever wanted to know about difficult conversations. It was everything I needed to know then and is still deeply informative for people who would like to be better communicators and negotiators.

The table of contents alone is fourteen pages, but the detail it includes provides an excellent outline and review of the topic. Since it has been a long time since I read this book, I was impressed to see, twenty years later, that it acknowledges much of what we know now about emotional intelligence, feeling, and thinking.

The authors frame this book around different types of conversations and stories. Some very important conversations happen only in our heads and are never articulated. Those have to be examined. For both sides in a problematic situation first there is the “what happened” conversation. For those who have been reading this book, you will recognize that humans naturally believe that “I am right, you are wrong.” We make assumptions about the truth, the other’s intentions, and who should be blamed. The authors offer detailed explanations of intentions compared to impact. They emphasize the difference between blaming or judging, instead of admitting that there are contributions on both sides.

Besides the “what happened” conversation, there is also a feelings conversation. Here we ask ourselves how we feel about what happened. The authors say that difficult conversations don’t just involve feelings, they are all about feelings. They say that to not talk about the feelings is like an opera with no music. I think this is tremendously important to understand in dealing with people because there are many who will not acknowledge that they can be hurt or afraid. The authors also point out that since feelings follow thoughts, our feelings are negotiable.

The identity conversation is hardly ever or never spoken out loud and explores “what does this say about me as a person?” When a situation is difficult, we are asking ourselves, am I competent, am I a good person, am I worthy of love. Understanding that we all question our worth brings a dimension of compassion to problem solving that would otherwise not exist.

After explaining those three conversations as foundational information, the authors say we must shift to a learning conversation for solutions. In this stage we examine our purpose, whether this issue is a battle to fight or let go, and what we can do about it. In the actual learning conversation, not the one in our head, the authors recommend that we start with the perspective of a neutral third party. They call this the third story. There is my story and your story but neither of those is a good place to start. To solve a problem, they suggest we shift from persuasion to listening and expressing. They explain the value of the phrase, “help me understand.” There is a whole chapter about curiosity, listening, and how to ask appropriate, non-threatening questions. The authors show us how to acknowledge feelings and encourage us to say what matters most. We can’t blame people for not reading our minds. They also cover a tool called “naming the dynamic” which means that we make the trouble explicit. Don’t pretend it doesn’t exist.
Reframing is a tool used to translate what we observe into a more helpful way to look at it. For example, we can learn to move from insisting on one truth to recognizing different stories. We can reframe from blaming one side to recognizing what contributes to the problem from both sides. Another very helpful perspective in problem solving is the “and” stance. This is most useful in situations when people are taking an either/or approach. When the discussion digresses to opposite poles such as I think this, and you think that, the authors recommend rejecting that as a no-win choice. Instead they propose looking for another option such as “and we both think this.” Final advice from this book is that relationships require that we practice principles of mutual caretaking, reciprocation, and give and take.


While writing the summary above for *Difficult Conversations*, I recalled reading something even more life-changing many years earlier. I remembered the author’s name but could not find any notes. Fortunately, I was able to get a copy of the book out of my library’s automated retrieval center (ARC) within an hour. This little book made a huge difference in my career because sometimes communication is about conflict resolution, negotiation, and persuasion.

It is possible, however ironic, that I may have turned out to be a human resources officer because I am not afraid of conflict. From this book we learn that problem solving does not have to be messy and emotional. The method that Kare Anderson teaches is called Triangle Talk and the three points of the triangle are:

1. Know your own specific needs and wants (bottom left of triangle).
2. Find out what the other side wants and make them feel heard (bottom right of triangle).
3. Propose action in a way the others can accept (peak of triangle).

That sounds very straightforward, and it is. It is easy to remember and not so complicated that you can’t use it on a moment’s notice. However, there are many tips and techniques that elaborate on how to fully complete each step. For example, to really know, specifically what we want in any given negotiation, guess what, we have to do some self-evaluation. Then, just because we know what we want, that does not mean we should start a conversation from that perspective. We should always speak first to the other party’s needs.

Chapters one and two cover what the method is, why it works and how it works. Chapter three informs us of talking traps that we can easily fall into, such as talking too much about our needs or assuming that what worked in a previous situation will work again. We have already examined many titles that help us identify our values and strengths. The value of this book is its abundance of helpful techniques for identifying what other people want, need, value, and respect.

The book is full of insights based on the other psychological research previously mentioned throughout this survey. For example, Anderson refers to our fundamental psychological need for connection as a factor in why her method works. She talks about making this method instinctual and habitual with practice. She warns about our natural
instinct to operate on assumptions without fact-checking. In chapter six she warns us not to operate from what we would want, but from what the other side really wants. She also points out how easy, and risky, it is for us to assume another person's intentions based on our own fears. Chapter seven helps us to see the world through the other party's eyes. Did I mention that every chapter ends with exercise questions?

In the chapter on first impressions, Anderson informs us that people are more likely to tell us what they want if they like, trust, and respect us. Also, they will speak freely if they think we really want to know and if we make it safe for them to open up. This chapter covers solid introductory information about non-verbal communication and mirroring. Many of the techniques are common-sense advice worth remembering, such as, "arguing creates a gulf; questions create a bridge." She recommends that we accept reality. We don't have to like it, just listen. That is one way we help the other side feel heard.

To propose action and reach agreement, we must speak to the other side's need first. If we do, Anderson reports that the others will start listening to us sooner, pay more attention, have more respect, and several other benefits. One hundred brief and practical techniques are highlighted throughout the book and then summarized neatly in the final chapter. This is a friendly, down-to-earth approach to building interpersonal skills. This little volume will yield noticeable rewards for those who invest the time to read it.


Since this section is about communication skills, and we were just reminded of the importance of negotiation, I would be remiss to omit the importance of influence and persuasion. I never consciously felt the desire to actively persuade in my personal life, maybe I was missing an opportunity or maybe I am not all that controlling. Anyway, it is definitely a daily necessity at work for anyone who accomplishes tasks with and through others. Many of us are responsible for outcomes with no power associated to a high position on an organization chart.

There are other good books on this topic, sorry I can't report on them all. I chose this one because it offers a handy example of how the scholar or researcher can repackage his own material for a specific audience. In the book, Cialdini devotes detailed chapters full of examples and discussion to each of his six principles. The book includes a fair amount of information for consumer awareness and how to resist persuasion. The article designed for business executives, cuts right to the chase in a few pages and is limited to a manager or leadership perspective.

Another reason this book is memorable for me is because this is where we learn about the value of “because.” Research showed that if a person makes a request followed immediately by a reason, we are more likely to offer an agreeable response. For example, "Do you mind if I get in line ahead of you because I’m about to miss my plane?" The reason may not even be significant or valid, it's just a reason.
Cialdini ends his article with a caveat about ethics. It's highly likely that some of us view persuasion as manipulation and might be inclined to skip the whole topic. The author doesn't hold back, he says, “Not only is it ethically wrong to trick or trap others into assent, it’s ill-advised in practical terms.” He warns against dishonest or high-pressure tactics and says that all use of his recommended principles should be legitimate, genuine, authentic, and real.

The first principle is about the value of rapport; we cooperate more with people we like and who are like us. Looking for similarities and common ground is more likely to help us reach a common goal than highlighting how different we are. Reciprocity is the concept of “we get back what we put out.” This is the basis for the free gifts that precede a request for a donation. We are all familiar with celebrity endorsements and testimonials. These are examples of Cialdini’s third principle, social proof.

People like to be consistent once they take a stand. Even if we are wrong, we hate to change our opinion, most especially if we have gone public with it. As a principle of persuasion, Cialdini says that to garner support it helps to get people to actively and publicly commit. He warns that if it is not a voluntary commitment it will backfire. Besides the testimonials as social proof, research shows that we are influenced by authority, expertise, and status. This is why we speakers and authors tell you our credentials before we try to convince you that we know what we are talking about. The sixth principle of persuasion is that we humans consider scarce items more desirable than something common or widely available. So, for a limited time only, you can get exclusive access to a few more book reviews that only first-time readers will see. ;)

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Personal Wisdom

Lest anyone think that from all this reading I have achieved mature happiness and have no personal problems, let me clarify. Life is continually hard and then you die. Just kidding, it does not have to be so grim. You can always pet a cat according to Peterson.

After divorcing my first husband, I read a lot of books about intimate relationships, finding the right man, even using body language to establish rapport. The second marriage was not without its learning curve. I married a high-powered, well-paid executive who, only six years after our wedding, was dangerously burned out and delighted to be merger-ed out of his job. There were lots of challenges in readjusting to living on about one quarter of our previous income. Yes, wow, that is a lot less. There were challenges related to recognizing and accepting newly reversed roles. Who makes dinner? When we first moved to a new town for my new job, I would still get home from work late and then start dinner. The ex-executive had been home all day! It took us a while to recognize our new reality. Did we say what we were really thinking? Did we communicate effectively? We must have because we are still happily together. Was I pursuing happiness studies because of work issues, or was it personal? Did I come home every night and complain? Did someone have to point that out to me? Yes, he did, and that is what I love and admire, his wisdom, not just his cooking. We were saved by doing what needed to be done at that moment, that was to find a place to live within our means. We found a beautiful older home on a wooded acre in a nice neighborhood. It needed a lot of work. That was fun. We had a clear shared goal. I don't
think I studied these next Gottman titles because our marriage was in trouble, but they certainly did help. It's possible that we started talking and stopped eating dinner in front of the TV based on their advice.


Dr. Gottman’s work started with a laboratory observation project at the University of Washington where researchers observed newly married couples and were then able to predict divorce with statistically surprising accuracy. Gottman’s suggestions and conclusions are based on forty years of research. With knowledge of the predictors of divorce, he developed the principles to achieve the opposite, a sound marital house. To become a master at successful relationships the two big areas of practice are becoming better at friendship and learning to handle conflict constructively.

One of the predictors of divorce, that Gottman addresses before the seven principles, are his four horsemen of marital apocalypse: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. These are the worst negative attitudes and behaviors that can permeate our communication, undermine efforts to improve, and destroy a marriage, or any other relationship for that matter. Fortunately, there are antidotes for each. Where criticism is a personal attack on our partner, the antidote would be a complaint stated in the form of how we feel or think. It’s not about you. The solution to defensiveness is learning to accept some responsibility for our part in the problem. Contempt is our belief that we are superior in some way and that is hard to get over without looking in the mirror. The counterbalance to contempt is to devote a lot of energy to appreciating the good in our partner. Focus on why we chose the dear person in the first place and learn to minimize their current faults. Stonewalling is withdrawing or refusing to engage, especially during conflict when our physiology causes emotional flooding and our vision, hearing, and cognitive skills are impaired. Learning to self-sooth is an important life skill for all situations.

The seven principles are positive steps to practice once we have heightened our awareness to eradicate the four negatives. First, we need to make sure we truly know all about our partner’s interests, stresses, aspirations, dreams, etc. Second, we increase ways to show affection, admiration, respect, and appreciation. Just say thank you for everything. Turning towards and turning away is a very interesting concept that is worth reading about in depth and then completing the exercises. It’s important to recognize how our partners bid for attention. These first three steps strengthen the friendship foundation of a marriage and serve to increase deposits to our emotional bank account. We need lots of positive reserves for those inevitable occasions when we screw up and make a withdrawal.

The next four steps cover a lot of territory regarding dealing with conflict. To begin with, it helps to have a positive outlook, value the relationship, and give the partner the benefit of the doubt. There are lots of tips for how to manage a conflict, such as, to look for areas of agreement and ways to say yes. Men especially need to learn to accept
influence from their partners. Dr. Gottman teaches couples how to explore the difference between a solvable problem, one that is what it appears to be, and perpetual problems that are usually symbolic camouflage of a thwarted dream. When dealing with conflict Gottman recommends a “soft startup” process of these seven steps:

1. Complain without personal blame or criticism.
2. Use I statements, not you. Say how I think and feel.
3. Describe neutrally without evaluating or judging.
4. Talk about what you need – be very specific.
5. Be polite, as if to a guest. Keep a controlled response.
7. Don’t store things up.

When we make our marriage vows, I wonder how many of us are aware of the expected commitment that we will help our partners make their life’s dreams come true. We are probably a lot more interested in making our own dreams come true, you know, the girl/man of my dreams. The idea of supporting our partner’s life dreams is a very important concept, a perspective that can make all the difference. Helping the other person becomes a profound answer to “why am I here?” Even better when the dreams of both partners combine to create a mutually supportive, productive, happy-ever-after life.

Summary – Take Care of Your People
- Understand what others need and then help them achieve it.
- Be a nice person.
- Worship any God but yourself.
- Stop complaining.
- Listen carefully.
- Learn to negotiate with yourself and others.
- Forget anger; forgive yourself as well as others.
- Life is full of suffering. Deal with it.
CHAPTER 5 - TAKE CARE OF YOUR WORLD

Get Organized

I have observed a recurring pattern in several of the books described here. It seems fairly common for an author to build an argument in the early chapters by describing the problem or issue that needs attention and giving some background and history. Then they introduce facts and evidence. Sometimes that’s all there is, but just as often there are ending chapters advising what the reader is supposed to do about it. The authors want you to take these actions or they want you to believe this conclusion. This chapter does tackle a new area for you to take care of, and it is also somewhat of a summation and call to action.

The first two chapters, Take Care of Your Mind and Take Care of Your Gift, focused on hard mental work. Taking care of your body and your people is not quite so intellectually challenging as figuring out who you are and why you’re here. This fifth chapter covers other important topics that complete our world and to some extent support our efforts in the first four chapters.

In a chapter about taking care of our world I would clearly be negligent to ignore all references to environmental work. Maybe a passing reference to An Inconvenient Truth (Al Gore, New York, NY: Rodale Press, 2006) will show that I am not completely ignorant of the plight the universe. On the other hand, I am being consistent in sticking with the world that we control. In that case you might be interested in Big Green Purse: Use Your Spending Power to Create a Cleaner, Greener World (Diane McEachern, New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2008.) Since managing toxic emissions is way above my pay grade, I will merely beg you individually to please not litter. And if you are thoughtful enough to scoop up after your dog, why would you leave the bag behind?

In chapter two we talked about deciding, being intentional, and having goals. I always acknowledged the importance and value of goals, but I never had much fun with them until I started studying Feng Shui. Feng Shui (pronounced fung schway) is an ancient Chinese practice that teaches intentional and harmoniously living. Not surprising, an important first exercise in the practice of Feng Shui is analysis of where we are and what we want in life. What is different here is that our intentions are reinforced and visibly manifested by using physical objects in our environment. Our focus is organized into nine areas including the usual career, family, health, finances, and so on. Then these nine life-priorities are assigned a direction or location in our home or office so that we are always aware of each aspect, even though we might occasionally want to forget family. Using an object, color, or material to symbolize a goal helps to keep our attention and energy focused in a positive way. Feng Shui involves asking ourselves questions, identifying problems, and balancing all the demands of life.

The first Feng Shui book that I read was this one by Kirsten Lagatree. It surfaced when I had moved into a new job and new office and was having a hard time being comfortable and productive. I rearranged the furniture at least three or four times before it felt right, but the difference has truly been amazing.

My reaction was undoubtedly skeptical when I read the first chapter about what Feng Shui is. Lagatree covers the basics including the literal translation meaning wind and water, different interpretations by various schools of thought, the significance of energy, and the balance of yin and yang. In later chapters she goes into detail about the characteristics of elements such as earth, wood, metal, fire, and water. She also explains the map of directions for each of the nine life-priorities, the bagua.

It was the questions in chapter two that helped me focus and get organized. It’s always about the questions! Yes, this is another self-help book. Oh heck, all books are mostly about help in some form or other anyway, aren’t they? But when the book poses questions, you have to answer them and do the exercises in order to reap the benefit. It’s about what we actively do in our own brains, that creates a change. One exercise involves a piece of paper with two columns. On the left are all the good things we love and enjoy no matter how big or small. On the right are specific dissatisfactions with our job or professional life, remember, this book is about Feng Shui at work.

Another exercise asks us to look at our physical surroundings and answer five questions. This serves as a way to prioritize areas for improvement. A similar exercise has ten questions about how we feel at work, that is, our psychological environment. There is a walking exercise that helps build our awareness of the flow of energy at our place of work. Finally, Lagatree offers a way for us to make sure our long and short-term goals are not contradictory.

In chapter four Lagatree touches on how clutter is a distraction that robs us of energy and concentration. She cites *Taming the Office Tiger* which, of course, I had to read next, see below. The chapter on accessories is an explanation of Feng Shui cures. I really wish I still had this book, but I only have the table of contents in my notes. Chapter nine is a discussion of famous people and their offices and she writes about the Oval Office and Donald Trump, separately! The two were not connected in 1998.


This is by far the most beautiful and straightforward of the thirty Feng Shui books I have studied. The introductory material is complete enough to explain a concept without so much detail that it becomes overwhelming. By starting an explanation from the perspective of our home and other physical surroundings it is not so far-fetched to grasp how things around us affect us. We can easily relate to feeling bored and uninspired by institutional paint colors in some old government buildings, hospitals, or schools. Although by now it’s hard to imagine any organization that does not utilize the psychology of color to achieve its mission. A retail store might play classical or rock music depending on the product and ambiance it is attempting to sell.

To appreciate Feng Shui, we have to accept the possibility that just as color or music generates a particular energy, so do we and everything around us. We all are easily able
to recognize that some people give off a happy, carefree vibe while others are cautious and analytical. We accept a vibe as a common way of describing a person or place. No one has trouble understanding how a beach vibe is different from a library vibe, if there is such a thing. Feng Shui explains the idea of a vibe as an electromagnetic energy vibration. The Chinese term for this energy, that is believed to be the universal life force, is Chi. The practice of Feng Shui involves learning about different types of Chi (energy) and how to adjust our environments to encourage a harmonious and positive flow of energy.

As an interior designer, Stasney does a visually delightful job of explaining yin and yang and all the types of energy carried by various elements such as earth, water, fire, metal, and wood. Once we understand the basics of energy patterns carried by those elements, we turn our attention to primary aspects of our lives. Feng Shui teaches us to focus on nine dimensions including things like family and other relationships, career, work or whatever our life journey happens to be, wisdom, health, and of course fame and fortune. One of the aspects of this book that particularly stood out to me was the questions Stasney identifies for each life aspiration. The questions were simple, but they are valuable because they help define what each life area includes. Also, questions reinforce that fundamental law that we must know what we want, that is, have a goal, before we can get it.

Stasney wisely builds her information incrementally. We learn about the basics of Feng Shui and the energy of various elements first. Then she introduces the concept of evaluating each of the nine life areas and deciding for ourselves what dimension needs attention first. Next, she explains how Feng Shui interpretations are applied to our homes via an ancient tool called the bagua. Another outstanding method of organizing in this book is her room-by-room guide. This arrangement helps demonstrate how the location, representing a life aspiration, relates to a function such as a kitchen, front entrance, or garage. The book ends with a chapter of what Stasney calls area solutions which are additional tips and tricks based on her in-depth study of Feng Shui.


If you like a little book with short chapters and time-tested advice, try this one by the time-management expert of his day. The author provides motivation to get control in the very first sentence when he tells us that time is life. “To waste your time is to waste your life…” He will help us understand all the fundamentals of getting control in brief straightforward explanations. He covers decisions, planning, and prioritizing goals into A, B, or C. Of course, he has questions that we must answer for ourselves. He moves right from goals to activities, scheduling, and finding time.

One piece of advice that I saw work for my father many times over was to “pose a question to your subconscious just before you fall asleep.” Miraculously, there was always a new solution in the morning. Maybe I learned to love lists from Lakein. He says only a daily list will do. He offers suggestions for keeping up with paperwork, learning how to say no, and dealing with the dreaded procrastination. One solution for procrastination is his “Swiss cheese method” which involves poking holes into an overwhelming task. He advises doing instant, five-minute, tasks as easy, preliminary work that prepares us to chip away at the big project.
Lakein warns against gathering so much information that we get stuck and never actually do the project. He also has advice for boredom, fatigue, and fear. Finally, even though I never saw my Dad read this book, he lived by one of Lakein’s time-saving tips: a place for everything and everything in its place. We kids knew better than to use a tool and not put it back exactly where it came from. Lakein did not waste time looking for stuff.


There are national organizations and associations available to offer professional help to both full-blown hoarders and the merely disorganized. If I weren’t a librarian, this would be my next choice for a career. But, since I am a librarian, here is the book to get us started. It may be an old book and we can surely find a newer one if we prefer. I’m not going to do a detailed summary of this title because my purpose is to identify the high points of an area for study for you to pursue if you choose.

Hemphill exposes the emotional aspects of getting organized in the first chapter. We know that our feelings drive our behavior to some extent, so it’s worth examining what we are feeling and thinking about those piles that build up. For example, are we fearful that we may have to part with something we think we need? Are we guilty because we haven’t already cleaned up? Have we reached a point of defiance and we refuse to clear the space? Hemphill explains that this is not a moral issue, it’s just a means to an end which is greater productivity. She assures us there is no right or wrong method as long as we achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency. Notice, Hemphill is not concerned with the life-altering effects that Feng Shui or KonMari can provide.

The author reviews a number of reasons why we resist getting organized and concludes that we need five things to succeed. She suggests we develop a positive attitude, time, skill, tools, and practice. The book goes on to provide lessons on all of those. The most memorable quote from this book is the title of chapter three, “Clutter Is Postponed Decisions.” Everything that is laying around is waiting for us to decide either where it belongs, whether or not we will need it, what we are supposed to do with it, and other similar dilemmas. Examining the possibility that we just have to decide, can make a huge difference. We might have to go back to chapter two and revisit some decision-making titles, but Hemphill does walk us through some fundamental steps.

It must be from this book that I learned to maintain a list or index of my files. Not that I would ever lose a file, but I might temporarily not remember where I categorized it. If that were to happen, it would be so much easier to just look at my list rather than to physically rummage through all the drawers. Hemphill offers suggestions for how to keep unnecessary papers off our desks. An example of a helpful organizing question is, “What is the next action required?” She would use this question to sort and file items that need to be read, discussed with someone, acted on, delegated, or are waiting for further input. She suggests separating incoming papers (emails, today) into those that need action and those that will serve as a reference. An overarching theme is to use file names of simple, short words that we would think of when we are looking for that item. The index helps us remember what files we have already created so that it is easier to group items on the same topic.
Chapter five is called “Clearing Clutter,” an inspiring combination of the two previous books. The first chapters are the author’s personal explanations of her Feng Shui journey and the book as a whole has a focus on one particular cure, space clearing. According to this author, clutter is stuck energy and we certainly don’t want our energy to stagnate. She discusses our reasons for keeping things, specific clutter zones, and different types of clutter. Books? How could books be clutter? She also looks at what she calls deeper levels of clutter in our communications, relationships, and even in our bodies. And of course, there are practical steps for clearing clutter. All you have to read here is one chapter.

The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up is not about tidying up. It’s about discovering our best possible life with the help of both a physical and mental process. For anyone who has had trouble with the exercises requiring us to think about our values, this physical tidying process helps reveal what they are. Even though, from the TV version, we might have the impression that the first step is to pile all our clothes in one place, that is not the beginning. The true first step in the KonMari method is found in chapter two where we are asked to imagine and visualize our ideal life. If we think we want to declutter, there is usually a reason such as a new baby, new job, death, other major life change, or the mere recognition that something is not working or could be better.

Even though this is a very hands-on process, there is still some thinking required, sorry. Marie insists that we explore the five-why method suggested by many psychologist and motivational speakers. Once we think we know what our ideal lifestyle is, we still have to continue to explore that vision as if peeling an onion, layer by layer. We might ask why we want to be organized? Maybe it’s so we can relax. Well why do we want to relax? It’s all about stress reduction and eventually identifying what we think will really make us happy. Marie’s idea of “happy” is very much in alignment with the deep positive values of Authentic Happiness not simple passing pleasures. If we think we are tidying to have room for more shoes, we are clearly missing the point.

One of the values Marie highlights in this tidying process is appreciating what we have. We know from The How of Happiness that gratitude is a foundation value that leads to happiness. Another value is living in the present. The KonMari method helps us recognize our attachment to the past and our fears concerning the future as we examine each possession. The question is, “Do I need this NOW?” An important life skill that we learn and practice through this process is focusing our awareness and really noticing what we have. Treating our possessions as if they had feelings is an interesting way of highlighting how we hurt ourselves and our environment through disrepair, disrespect, and clutter.

We learn discipline through the daily routine of returning items to their own resting place. Folding clothing according to KonMari specifications also strengthens the positive habits.
of respect and attention. We all have a lot of stuff and when we have to make a choice about each and every item, starting with the easy ones, that practice boosts confidence in our decision-making skills. Marie points out that those decisions can be either intuitive or rational judgments. Sometimes relying on the instinctive feel is good, sometimes overthinking is an excuse to give up on the whole project because it’s just too hard.

This really can be a life-changing book for anyone who wants to change, but just like all the other advice, there is a lot of work involved. I have not included a summary of the KonMari methods because shortcuts in this work might lead to “indiscriminate discarding” which is the opposite of what Kondo intends. I would also warn that as entertaining as the TV series is, it does not tell you the “why” behind any of what you see. Best to read it for yourself so that you grasp Marie Kondo’s true message, “The question of what you want to own is actually the question of how you want to live your life.”


After all the self-examination involved in the previous chapters, and this section’s focus on getting organized, looking at finances in an objective way should not be a huge challenge. As in every other area of life, a plan is the foundation for success. I did not remember that this book explains the relationship between money and life-energy, but it does connect nicely to the Feng Shui principles we just reviewed.

These authors frame financial knowledge in terms of intelligence, integrity, and independence. Intelligence means that we know what money comes in and what goes out. Integrity is about the honest relationship between our money and our values. Financial independence is that point when we have sufficient resources for our needs coming from a source other than paid employment. That may seem like an unrealistic dream for some of us, but the authors offer a doable plan for achieving it. Of course, we must do a lot more than read.

Chapter two, about money and attitude, points out that every dollar we spend represents our life energy. We learn how to examine costs related to our jobs and figure out what we are truly earning for our paid employment. In chapter four we compare our expenditure of energy to our values and life purpose. We examine the idea of how much money is enough in terms of what we are trying to accomplish with our limited time and energy. To emphasize their point and gain credibility from ancient wisdom, the authors quote the Tao Te Ching, “He who knows he has enough is rich.”

Aside from the important philosophical decisions we make about money, the required exercises and charts are enlightening and highly motivating. In chapter one we learn the importance of tracking every penny earned and we create our own personal balance sheet. In chapter three we add expenses to the chart and identify our own personal weaknesses and impulse buys, also known as “gazingus pins.” When we plot income and expenses on the same chart it is very clear that we want income up and expenses down. Creating a nice large visual chart that we look at daily is both reminder and reward at the same time. This is an opportunity to “mind the gap.”
If frugality was ever a popular virtue, I don’t remember that during my lifetime. I was frequently the butt of family jokes because I hate waste. For example, seeing someone use six paper towels for a job that required one or two would make me twitch. My siblings teased that they owed a nickel for each towel and my nickname was Mrs. Waste-Not-Want-Not. Frugality was not trending in the 1990s when I read this book, but then the authors were advising for financial independence not popularity. They say frugality has a high joy-to-stuff ratio. In teaching us how to value our life energy, they offer more than a hundred ways to minimize spending. Some simple but significant ideas worth contemplating until you read the whole book: stop trying to impress people, live within your means, and take care of what you have.

Chapter seven is a deep exploration of money, life-energy, work, and income. The discussion should help us decide whether our job is a blessing or a curse. They claim that work is more than what we do for money, more than our paid employment. They encourage us to break that link and learn to view work in the context of all our life goals. Work is how we live out our values.

Discussions both philosophical and pragmatic continue in the next chapter. The authors get back to practicalities of what happens when expenses go down, income goes up, debt disappears, and savings increase. We are now at the point where we plot a third line on our wall chart which is income from our savings and investments. It may be a low, flat line at first but when we watch it and intend it to go up, we may subconsciously alter our behavior to make that happen. When that line goes above our expenses, we have reached the crossover point, our pot of gold, financial independence.

There is more practical financial information about investing and a primer on bonds that should clearly be compared to today’s most up-to-date financial instruments and advice. The authors’ three pillars of financial independence are capital (invested), cushion (six months of expenses), and cache (savings). These have probably not changed. Vicki Robin is still teaching financial principles now nicknamed FIRE – Financial Independence, Retire Early. This author was interviewed on November 5, 2018 by Veronica Dagher, for a Wall Street Journal podcast, “Secrets of Wealthy Women.”


This book could just as well have been titled, “An Ode to Frugality.” It is my preferred code to live by, much to my husband’s occasional dismay. He is sometimes embarrassed by what he calls my Peace-Corps mentality, but conservation was part of me even before my service in Africa. My Dad had his own small business when I was between ages ten and sixteen roughly. I learned to do payroll and some accounting in his office, but the biggest lesson was how not to use credit, thanks to the never-ending calls from Friendly Bob Adams. It must have been a challenge for my Dad, one person, to juggle all the necessary skills, technical, interpersonal, financial, and strategic, to keep his operation going. There were lots of occasions when an advance on credit was necessary to keep the doors open. Friendly Bob was a fictitious trademark name for a short-term lender operating in the Chicago-area in the 1950s and ’60s, but he was not so friendly if you were late making payments.
Some people learn the wealth-building fundamentals suggested by Stanley and Danko at an early age, at home. Most of us probably never learn the truth about money because it is not something people are comfortable talking about. Even the authors were surprised that their own pre-conceived ideas proved wrong when they began their research. They invited individuals with documented high net worth to focus groups and expected to see designer clothes, expensive jewelry, and other status symbols. It turned out that most self-made millionaires were not comfortable with champagne and caviar. The authors found that in Texas, the display of consumption where no real money exists is referred to as “big hat, no cattle.”

The authors’ definition of wealthy is people who “get more pleasure from owning substantial amounts of appreciable assets than from displaying a high-consumption lifestyle.” Seven common characteristics of people who accumulate wealth are:

1. Live well below their means.
2. Allocate time, energy, money efficiently, in ways conducive to building wealth.
3. Believe that financial independence is more important than displaying high social status.
4. Parents did not provide excessive or inappropriate financial support.
5. Adult children are economically self-sufficient.
6. Proficient in targeting market opportunities.
7. Chose the right occupations.

The book is arranged in eight chapters that expand on these topics with serious research and statistics appropriately convincing enough for any business professor. Chapter two on frugality explains the importance of living within a budget, knowing exact expenses, having clear goals and a financial plan. There are lots of examples comparing people who save, Prodigious Accumulators of Wealth (PAWs) with those who do not, Under Accumulators of Wealth (UAWs.)

In describing the mostly self-made millionaires, the authors point out the disadvantages of what they call economic outpatient care, that is, gifts parents give to adult children and grandchildren. They argue that gifts of money can diminish productivity, encourage dependence, and precipitate more consuming than saving. They advise that we should always live below our means. In the next chapter they offer rules for affluent parents to follow to develop productive children. They advise that we teach discipline and frugality.

Like other works that are reviewed in this book, this is another example of the value of observing role models. If you want to achieve a certain goal, in this case financial, look at those who have already achieved it and do the same thing. Spend time, energy, and money thinking about your net worth. Understand the difference between an income tax and a wealth tax. Invest time in learning about investing. Examine appropriate career and business options which continually change over time. Control your consumption.


Since this is a section on getting organized, it seems fitting to recognize an important little book that I discovered way too late in life. I wanted to be able to easily remember Seligman’s thirty virtues and strengths, and Reiss’s sixteen motivators, and
Lyubomirsky’s twelve happiness activities, and so on. I went looking for help, in a book, of course.

According to the book jacket, Mr. O’Brien won the World Memory Championship eight times and was banned from blackjack tables in Las Vegas for outwitting the casinos. His stories are amazing, and I can personally attest to the helpfulness of his methods. When you work through this book you will start by testing your own memory as a baseline. As in all the other books, there are exercises. The author counsels that we must train our memory by working our minds.

The three keys to a perfect memory are association, location, and imagination. We probably all learned some tricks in school like acronyms or number rhymes, but they were surely not as comprehensive as what is offered here. The first chapter explains all the tools, with examples and exercises. Once we understand the basic tools, we learn to put them together in ever more complex methods. My favorite, most helpful example is the journey method. I associated all the windows in my house, a familiar location, with Seligman’s virtues and strengths that I wanted to remember. As recommended in the book, I also associated each window with a vivid, exotic, or otherwise memorable image of a person or thing that represented each word to be remembered. It’s surprising how much can be stored up there if properly arranged.

Mr. O’Brien recommends creativity as a tool and encourages us to use exaggeration, color, humor, movement, and all the senses when we build an image. He says it helps to be relaxed when we are practicing. Another tip is to use exercise to increase oxygen to the brain. Chapter two offers methods for all kinds of specific situations such as remembering names, faces, directions, jokes, quotes, and more. He talks briefly about using mind maps and why they are helpful for presentations. Maybe the theory behind mind maps was also the inspiration behind the PowerPoint software program.

The chapters on memory power and the master class will take us as far as we want to go with memory training. I can’t help but point out that his tip number forty-eight is about healthy body, healthy memory, another example of the mind/body connection. To get the oxygen we need, he recommends we raise our heart rate for twenty minutes a day. He suggests a diet rich in antioxidants, vitamins, and free radical eliminators. He believes that stress damages our memory, so eliminate it. He says that when adrenaline from stress is not burned off, the brain stops producing new neurons. Perhaps this is the unscientific interpretation of what Dr. Ratey was reporting in Spark. Finally, he invites us to enjoy a memory meditation where we close our eyes and remember or visualize a calm, happy time from our past.

~*~

Take Action

Most of the books suggested throughout this survey include exercises. Usually there are questions with blank spaces for the reader to fill in. These are not decorations. Passive reading as opposed to thinking and doing, will not result in an improved situation. Get out there and take action.
I have read tons of leadership and management books. Most are filled with great ideas, new interpretations and strategies, and inspirational advice. This one, however, is a classic that covers all the bases. Surely, it's no coincidence that he calls these habits. Did he know that we have to learn to do things automatically without too much second-guessing of ourselves? Please do read all the new best-sellers after you have studied this one.

As the title indicates, Covey starts with an examination of character and principles. His list of ethics required for greatness pre-dates but corresponds to some of Seligman's universal virtues. We would all benefit greatly from a renewed pursuit of integrity, humility, temperance, courage, justice, etc. According to Covey the first three habits are personal, the next three are public, and the seventh habit is about renewal.

Habit one, be proactive, asks us to be responsible for our own lives. Covey explains the ideas of a circle of concern and a circle of influence and how to deal with both. Begin with the end in sight, habit two, involves more self-analysis about where we want to end up. I have applied this concept to almost every project, not just my life, by asking, “What is the end result supposed to look like?” With habit three we discover Covey’s time management matrix, a life-changing tool. Imagine a grid of four boxes, two up, two down, two left, two right. The top two are important, bottom not so much. The left two are urgent, the right side are not urgent. We can put all our tasks into one of these four boxes. There is a lot of explanation and organizing tools related to this, but the thing to remember is to not waste time on the unimportant.

Habit four is about win/win strategies and interpersonal relationships. Habit five, seek first to understand, explains the importance of listening and empathic communication. Habit six teaches us about synergy and creative cooperation. Valuing differences allows the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts. One story in this chapter is not original to Covey but it is worth highlighting. It’s about the animal school where the same curriculum applies to every student. The school makes all rabbits swim, all fish must fly, and all ducks must run. The story emphasizes the mediocre outcome achieved when the same rules apply to all, and therefore encourages recognition and use of peoples’ unique strengths.

The final habit, sharpen the saw, reminds us of the importance of balance and continual self-development. Covey discusses four dimensions for renewal: physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional. Not as detailed as the nine aspirational areas in Feng Shui but the same concept of focused intention to achieve a balanced life. One of his final thoughts is particularly gratifying to me because it reinforces a key concept from the very first book summarized in chapter one. Covey cautions us that there is a gap between stimulus and response, and we control change by what we choose to fill it with. Mind the gap!

This book has a wealth of information about communication, problem solving strategies, and self-assessment. I could easily have discussed it in the previous chapter, Take Care of Your People, but I saved it for this last section because psychologist McIntyre’s formula for personal behavior change is the best synopsis I’ve ever seen. Unlike much advice, her change management formula identified by the acronym AMISH is not something easy to forget. In some of my presentations about change management I would humorously point out the irony of the acronym AMISH. It’s a fabulous change-formula easily remembered by association with a group not known for change. Sadly, a colleague thought my PowerPoint horse-and-buggy graphic was not politically correct, probably also thought the acronym was either appropriation, disrespect, or harassment.

Marie McIntyre’s Behavior Change Formula

- **Awareness** - feedback, find out what people think
- **Motivation** – understand consequences of ignoring negative feedback
- **Identification** – exactly what specific behavior or actions must change
- **Substitution** – define the positive change you want
- **Habituate** – persist in the new behavior until it’s automatic.

Over the years I have seen other psychologists confirm the validity of these steps. In my expanded version of the formula, **A** stands for not only awareness but assessment first, then acceptance of what we can’t change, and acknowledgement of what we can control. The **M** of motivation is stronger when we **M**ove towards something we want rather than away from a negative. The letter **I** also stands for incremental change, as in baby steps. Research shows that replacing one habit with a more positive substitute makes change more likely. Habituate, to create a habit, refers back to the information about the two brain systems that was covered in the first chapter. Remember that we intuitively or instinctually respond much more quickly when this part of the brain is engaged rather than waiting for our analytical brain to weigh options and to make a decision. To change, we want to substitute a more positive response and then practice it until it becomes automatic.

The other sections of McIntyre’s book are equally as valuable for reinforcing the recurring principles recommended by many other authors summarized in this book. For example, as in other areas of life, if you want to win at office politics, you have to know your goals. The discussion of power and leverage will be much appreciated by the novice and perhaps enlightening even to those who have been around for a while. There is some common sense that is worth repeating, such as “positive relationships build political capital.” The chapter on political games and payoffs may shed light on our colleagues’ behavior. As for our own misbehavior, there are sections on political suicide, power mistakes, increasing political power, influencing skills, and finally, strategies for political success.

Her conclusion is that good values are wise political rules. She then revisits many of the same findings about values and people skills that were previously summarized from other works. She advises that we be honest and ethical, believe in ourselves and our work. That will follow from finding meaningful work and feeling good about our contributions. She recommends we keep our commitments, be a pleasant person, and offer true respect to everyone.

You can see by the title that this is another “why we do what we do” book that builds on the lessons of books covered in the first chapter. I saved this one for this take-action section because it is a little less theoretical and much more about practical application. Duhigg immediately gets our attention by pointing out that 40% of our daily actions are habits, not decisions. That’s not all bad because we need to function on some assumptions. We obviously can’t stop and analyze every little thing. A habit loop consists of a cue or trigger, a routine, and a reward. Duhigg states that when a habit emerges, our brain stops participating in decision making. There is no equivocating or scientific speculation about that explanation, and as we all know, when the brain is not participating that is not always good. Duhigg goes on to say that habits never go away, but substitutes can help remedy bad habits.

Chapter two explains the role of cravings as key to habit formation. A craving starts when a trigger sets up a routine but there is no reward. You know that panicky feeling when you click your computer mouse, and nothing happens. Craving is the power of habit. In chapter three Duhigg suggests that the way to change a habit is to leave the cue and the reward alone and focus on the routine in the middle. In other words, substitution is the solution. As usual there is a lot of self-monitoring work involved. We have to pay attention to what sets up the craving. We have to figure out what the reward is and why it is a motivator. Next, we identify alternative actions that we could substitute after the cue, to get the same reward. There is an important caveat to this formula which is that we must believe that change is possible.

In part two Duhigg examines habits in organizations. He explains the role of small wins that he calls keystone habits. He reviews various beliefs about willpower. He reports a study done in the 1990s that claimed we only have a limited amount of willpower that could be used up leaving no willpower left for later work. Fortunately for all of us, newer research (see Baumeister or McGonigal) shows that willpower can be strengthened with practice. In fact, making willpower a habit can help us change other less desirable habits. Willpower as a habit involves choosing a preferred behavior or a routine before the trigger appears. Chapter six explores crisis as a way to force people out of routines and habits. Chapter seven describes the role and power of familiarity in making a new habit stick.

Part three is Duhigg’s analysis of the habits of societies. This is a concern expressed by Schwartz in Why We Work, and other authors, not so much as habits but as what we, as a group, come to believe. Based on my notes it’s seems like the last chapter “Neurology – are we responsible for our habits?” is more of a personal than a societal issue. But since Duhigg discusses the ethics of habit and choice in terms of court cases, the connection to the group becomes clear. Courts do help set the rules and courts hold us responsible if we know we have a habit that needs to be changed. On the other hand, he comes back to us as individuals. We have to decide, we have to do the hard work. As a summary he revisits the work of William James. Duhigg concludes that we need free will to change and we must believe there is free will (not just brain chemicals). We have to believe change is possible.
Dr. Phil’s formula for examining and disputing problematic thinking is similar to what we saw in chapter one from Martin Seligman, but the Texas vernacular might be more appealing to some of us. “Is it true? Is it helpful? How’s that working for you?” Rather than cover the same observations on thinking distortions and solutions, I would like to point out the extraordinary reach, and therefore value, that a popular approach can offer. I was not alone in my addiction to the Dr. Phil Show. Through repetition on daily TV, I could clearly see the examples of other people’s dysfunctional thinking. After reading his book *Life Strategies*, I could apply his formula and recognize problems that people have when thinking, or not, about a bad situation. Interestingly, that doesn’t mean I could always use it on myself.

Both Dr. Phil’s books and TV show served as a reality check for me. We all are unhappy at times and lots of us complain about work. At home I was pretending not to be disappointed in our personal financial situation, but I definitely wanted things to be different than they were. I wanted to change things, make progress. Those thoughts of changing what was beyond my control were from my pre-enlightened days; however, I do still love a before-and-after makeover, of anything.

In *Life Strategies* Dr. Phil requires us to do a lot of self-evaluation work. There are many exercises and assignments. Ask yourself this, write your story about that. Dr. Phil helps us see common problems such as our tendency toward denial, or our failure to acknowledge reality. He says that we make initial assumptions but then fail to keep testing them for accuracy. Another problem is our inertia. We also sometimes hide behind a mask where we might “tough it out” so that we don’t have to admit to ourselves how bad things really are.

It is ironic to see that McGraw agrees with the criticisms of the self-improvement industry in Salerno’s book, *SHAM*. Dr. Phil acknowledges that solutions are being sold as fast and easy. Many of today’s cultural beliefs essentially provide us with excuses. He too objects to the overuse of disorders. He recognizes an epidemic of people not managing well. He asks this introductory question to his ten life-laws, “Is your life working or not?” The question is not, “Am I right?” One of his themes is to ask ourselves whether we would rather be right, or happy. We want or need very desperately to be right. It helps to recognize that need can be a big source of unhappiness.

Law number one explains that in order to “get it” we have to understand motivation. We have to learn about the “why” that motivates us and others. McGraw claims that we don’t learn about life in school but from role models. We do what we know, what we have seen done, and what is familiar. There are other options to learn. An important skill in life is to persuade people to support our goals. He advises that we should study human nature, in particular how the world reacts to us. We should learn what other people need as a first step in meeting our own needs. That may be manipulation, but it is not bad. We also need to manipulate ourselves. Dr. Phil thinks the number one common characteristic of human functioning, the number one need is acceptance. That matches Deci’s research on our need for connectedness.

Law number two is that we have to accept responsibility for our own lives. Dr. Phil’s phrase for that concept is that when we choose the thoughts, we choose related
behaviors and consequences. He identifies what he calls a principle of reciprocity, we get back what we put out. Law five is that life rewards action. He offers suggestions on how to get out of a rut, how to make decisions, how to take risks. The obstacle to risk taking is our number one fear, rejection.

By now we recognize what law six confirms, that there is no reality only perception. Our best strategy for dealing with the reality-perception dilemma is to identify our own personal filters. We must learn that meaning and value are only what we, or anyone else, decide.

Dr. Phil says that we have to examine our own fixed beliefs. I am delighted that he dedicates an entire law to the power of forgiveness. He provides methods for us to recognize how our own anger affects our lives. No advice would be complete without a review of the essential role of goals. Law ten helps us work on specific narrower categories of our lives: personal, professional, relationships, family, spiritual. He ends with common characteristics of successful people.


Salerno’s view in SHAM was that multiple products are just a way for self-help gurus to make more money. This title is evidence that there can be different material and there are different approaches to examining our life situations. In chapter two of Self Matters we are asked to define our authentic self through more work on acknowledging thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. A recurring theme is that we can’t change what we do not acknowledge. We examine internal versus external influences and how they impact us. McGraw explains that we reveal our authentic self when we use our gifts for the betterment of ourselves and others.

Chapter three involves completely different assignments designed to help us examine our self-concept. We examine external factors by writing about our ten defining moments, seven critical choices, five pivotal people. This is all very hard work. This self-analysis would take months with a therapist. Internal factors include understanding our locus of control, internal dialogues, labels, scripts, tapes, and fixed beliefs.

Locus of control is a psychologist’s term for where we assign cause for the events in our life. Who or what is responsible? How and where do we assign blame or credit? Dr. Phil emphasizes that a key aspect of our beliefs and self-talk is this idea of who we perceive to be in control. If we sincerely believe that external events dictate the outcomes, there is little motivation to try to improve matters. Carried to extremes this thinking can produce a fatalistic or a victim mentality. A more empowered interpretation would lead us to conclude that whatever happens is, to some extent, a result of our own actions or choices. We have to be realistic about what we can and can’t control. Believing that we have some control allows us to pay attention to opportunities and actions that can help our situation. Excessive belief in chance, luck, or fate causes us to feel powerless.

Dr. Phil acknowledges that there is a raging controversy in psychology as to which comes first; should we change our feelings and emotions first and let behavior follow? Or should we change our behavior first and then we’ll feel better? He recommends both at once and includes a five-step action plan. My favorite part is his formula for auditing our
internal response to any event and then testing for authenticity. This works for any kind of action or thought.

1. Is it true, objective, and verifiable?
2. Does holding on to the thought or attitude serve our best interest? Does it make us happy, calm, peaceful? IF NOT, STOP DOING IT.
3. Does the thought help or protect us or does it put us at risk?
4. Does this belief get us more of what we want and need?

“Value forgiveness” is a frequently repeated piece of advice in most of these works on how to take care of ourselves and others. McGraw observes that like everything else in our head, forgiveness is a choice. He advises that we forgive ourselves and others to get rid of anger, bitterness, and hatred. The final thoughts in this book offer a warning about sabotage from friends and family. McGraw cautions that it is common for others we associate with to reintroduce the beliefs and thoughts that we have worked so hard to overcome.


It’s fitting to honor this title as my concluding book summary not only because the title is so impressive, but more because it is a review of important points and includes recommendations for how to take action. Tony Robbins strongly suggested that we identify successful role models and copy their “syntax”. Sonya Lyubomirsky in The How of Happiness synthesized the research on what makes people happy so that others could copy the same strategies. John Izzo’s research here is based on a survey asking 15,000 people to identify wise elders who have lived a long and happy life. This book reports the results of 235 interviews to enable us to share their wisdom, which is, to discern what really matters and incorporate it into our lives.

If you have read previous summaries in this book, chapter two in particular, it will be no surprise that the first secret requires knowing who we are so that we can be true to ourselves. The advice of these wise elders is to know what makes us happy and make it a priority. Living with intention requires constant checking in with our thoughts and feelings. Look at our interactions with people around us to make sure we are being the kind of person that we want to be.

The second secret is that we don’t regret failure as much as we may later regret not trying. The advice is to take risks. Move towards what we want, not away from what we fear. If we do have regrets, they are best let go. Forgive yourself as well as others.

We are encouraged to think of love as a choice or action rather than love as an emotion or feeling. That frame of reference will help us choose to be a loving person which in turn will make us happy and purposeful. To emphasize, for at least the eighty-third time, the significance that our thoughts have over our lives, I want to encourage you to read the story that Izzo shares from the Navajo tradition. An elder explains to a child that we sometimes have a fight within ourselves between two wolves (thoughts), one evil and one good. When the child asks which wolf wins, the elder replies that the wolf we feed wins. Izzo’s point is that we can choose to replace negative thoughts such as regret, greed, envy, and superiority with positive thoughts of empathy, humility, kindness etc.
am reminded of another way to say the same thing. It was on a bumper sticker I wished I owned: “wag more, bark less.”

Learning to live in and appreciate the present, not the past or future, is the fourth secret. Izzo reports that when we judge our life, we diminish ourselves. The elders advise that we eliminate the need to compare, compete, grade, and judge. This research confirms what we learned from *The How of Happiness*, both gratitude and savoring the present are strategies for happiness. Remember also that Deci’s research in *Why We Do What We Do* reported the three fundamental psychological needs were control, connectedness, and competence. We have more chance to control the present, than either the past or future.

The concept of connectedness or belonging to a group is an essential part of the fifth secret, which is to give more than you get. The wise elders interviewed pointed out that when we die, we can’t take anything with us, but what we leave behind can indeed make a difference. They see giving as a way to make our lives matter.

**THIS IS IMPORTANT:** After explaining the five secrets, Izzo points out that knowing the secrets will not change our lives. It is essential to practice them, live them. He offers suggestions on how to change through our natural learning process of watching, listening, and experimenting. First, we have to observe, pay attention, and be aware. “The more we hold something in our awareness, the more likely we are to move toward that thing.” One of his suggestions, which I had forgotten, was to write a card, carry it everywhere, and look at it 10-20 times a day. No wonder I forgot it. But really, he also stresses that we should just pick ONE thing. Don’t try to change too many things at once. He thinks the card is better than goal setting because it is more flexible. So, the second time I read the book, I did write myself a card with only one idea and propped it up on my desk. I think it works.

Another way to integrate the secrets into our lives includes creating a list of questions to review regularly to help us keep focus and awareness. Natural learning occurs with help, so Izzo recommends that we find a coach or partner so that we can change together. He advises that we build in time to reflect daily about what we are looking forward to, what felt good during the day and why. Positive personal rituals, including things we say to ourselves, help reinforce habits. Of course, we must be careful to avoid negative habits like complaining and rants.

One of my favorite take-aways was this cautionary tale that our thoughts and words define our lives. The full quote is:

“Be careful of your thoughts, because your thoughts become your words. Be careful with your words, because your words become your actions. Be careful of your actions, because your actions become your habits. Be careful of your habits, because your habits become your character. And your character becomes your destiny.”

**Summary – Take Care of Your World**

- Take responsibility for your own life.
- Appreciate what you have, especially your helpful people.
- Clear out distractions and focus your intentions.
• Get your wants under control. Live within your budget.
• Copy worthy role models.
• Know how to change.
• Live in the present.
• Make a plan. Get to work. Do something, anything.
CHAPTER 6 – PERSPECTIVE

This book happened relatively quickly but after a long, long incubation period. As mentioned at the outset, I have been reading and collecting information for at least a half century. On occasion people would say, “You really ought to write a book.” And in my head, I’d go, “Yeah, right!” The book finally started writing itself out of a desire to give advice but with full knowledge that I might not have all the answers. So, it’s not me saying, “try this,” it’s all these experts with Ph.D. or M.D. after their names.

If I could remember even a fraction of what’s in these books, I’d probably be … what? Smarter, happier, richer. Maybe all of those, and that is exactly my wish for you, my readers. This review was humbling in a way because it showed how easy it is to forget. I may have learned about an idea many years ago but read it again with only the faintest glimmer of recognition. For example, we learned in one of our staff-development programs (Twenty-one Ways to Diffuse Anger and Calm People Down, Michael Staver, Boulder, CO: Career Track Videos, 1996), that the best strategy to calm down is to go to the BAR. No, not for a drink. BAR stands for breathing, attitude, and relaxation. Take a deep breath and count to ten. That was likely something we also practiced in kindergarten. Perhaps some people do incorporate it, remember it, and keep it going throughout their lives. If we forget and we see it published in a new book with a catchy title, we go, “WOW, what a great idea!” That’s human nature. We forget. We need reminders.

Breathing, for example, is not something to be taken for granted. Breathing gets more oxygen to the brain, specifically the prefrontal cortex where there is an opportunity to control an impulse and demonstrate self-control. Taking the deep breath and counting gives us an opportunity to reconsider an instant, automatic response that we might later regret. The rest of the BAR formula involves examining our A for Attitude, which is our self-talk, sometimes that even includes thinking. If we are applying labels, like idiot or moron, or expletives to the person or situation, we are adding fuel to the fire. The R for Relaxation-response means check the body for muscle tension and actively relax or eliminate it. This three-letter formula pretty much sums up most of the advice covered throughout this review.

You might wonder why I am making a big deal out of breathing at this point in the book. The reason is that it surfaced as a major topic after reviewing all these summaries. Well actually the words “slow down” appeared, but deep breathing helps us slow down.

This in an outline of the major recurring themes I identified throughout all these resources.

Self-awareness is fundamental to creating the life we want.
  Noticing
  Thinking
  Monitoring
We can’t notice if we don’t slow down.
  Deep breathing
  Focus on now
Mindfulness and meditation
Automatic responses can be good or bad.
   Habit, instinct, conditioning, learning
   Good habits – predetermined rules, routines, rituals, just do it, don’t debate
   Bad habits – tricks our brain plays on us, shortcuts, assumptions, cravings
We make choices.
   Exercise self-control
   Decide
   Visualize meaningful goals
   We get more of what we pay attention to
   Work on what we can control
We create our own identity.
   Motives are the “why” that inspires action
   Strengthen virtues
   Value relationships, others before self
   Believe in your ability to change
Our purpose is personal and unique.

As a person who always loved an outline and finds bullets most endearing, that is the skeleton of what I learned. There is a flow that connects these topics, though they might, on occasion, appear in our lives in a random order. As a teenager questioning my purpose in the universe, there were too many unknowns for me to come to an informed conclusion. Some people are lucky. They seem to be born knowing and those people cause the rest of us to either look bad or think less of ourselves. Irrational self-talk would be something like “Everybody thinks they’re better than I am.” Having reviewed all the advice in *100 Books to Think About* we now know better than to fall for that faulty line of thinking. But we must slow down before we can recognize it.

The authors who shared their thoughts in this book offered suggestions on how to focus our attention. Meditation might have been called breathing exercises, but it was mentioned by so many scholars that it is highlighted here. And what is the benefit of slowing down? The better to know thyself, of course. We can only know ourselves and develop self-awareness if we monitor what we are saying to ourselves. We need to notice our reactions and responses to see if they represent who we want to be. Of course, we can’t examine every thought. It turns out we need to do an awful lot of living automatically or we would not get through the day. Some automatic habits are good and some not so much.

If we do slow down long enough to examine some of what’s going on around us, we see that we really do have choices. Then, unfortunately, we sometimes start beating ourselves up because we don’t always make the best choices. “What is wrong with me?” Well, nothing. Just take a minute, actually, take many minutes. Very few of the books suggested here came free from exercises. Taking care of ourselves involves a lot of practice. These authors suggest plenty of tips and tricks to help us identify what we value, what we’re good at, and how to circumvent our automatic negative reactions.

All the exercises help us clarify who we want to be, not who someone else expects us to be. We might even examine our inherited beliefs and what we automatically believe compared to what we choose to believe. If we know what we value and believe in, we can create goals that help us grow into the best possible version of ourselves.
Putting all these thoughts together reminded me of dinner one night when my poor Father expressed his dismay in the face of what he referred to as me being neurotic. I know now that I was not neurotic. I was a typical adolescent trying to figure out the meaning of life. The irony is that my Father told me it was right in front of me but I, of course, didn’t get it. I just assumed he was not philosophical enough to appreciate my angst. He was obviously much wiser than he got credit for.

Years later in college a friend who was a philosophy major demonstrated for me what he had learned about the meaning of life. I still clearly see him whipping out his white handkerchief and putting it on top of his head. Was he being a clown? This was a serious quest for me. His explanation went something along the lines of, “The meaning of life is whatever you want it to be.” It’s everything or nothing. It’s serious or not. I still did not get it.

Not to worry though, with age comes wisdom. We usually just get busy and can have a great life, mostly, if we interpret it that way. After revisiting the observations of all these experts, I feel comfortable that my path was not a bad way to go. On the other hand, my husband pointed out that some people might prefer to skip all the self-analysis and just go fishing. That would be fine too. Everyone gets to come to their own conclusion, in their own time. Not being a person who picked up on subtle cues, I needed to see it in print ;>) Heck, I had to write it for myself. For me, our purpose, what gives life meaning, is to take care of ourselves and the world around us, so we can do whatever it is we’re doing. Stop looking and start seeing.

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<td>Wall Street Journal podcast, November 5, 2018</td>
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