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# The 12 Secrets of Health and Happiness

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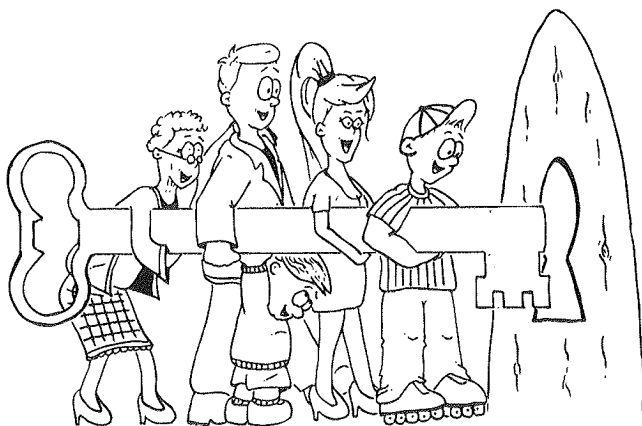
To my husband and children for their loving support and for the fun and joy they bring to my life.

To all my patients who have taught me about the extraordinary capacity of people to be happy and to feel healthy despite overwhelming tragedy and serious illness.

To Ray McLean, who interpreted the illustration brief with such good humour, skill and patience.

# The 12 Secrets of Health and Happiness

LOUISE  
SAMWAYS



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## Introduction: The intriguing nature of health and happiness

'By your late twenties you will be a respiratory cripple dependent on oxygen, and you will probably die by your mid-thirties. You may be lucky and reach forty.'

After months of tests and deteriorating health I had insisted on some straight answers.

I was nineteen, in love and very happy. The specialist may have been talking about my body, but he was not talking about me. I got a few more opinions; they all said much the same thing. In many ways I was relieved: being dead at forty was a long way off. It certainly allayed my fears that how awful I felt meant I was on the way out now.

I visited the hospital pharmacy, and emerged with a shopping bag full of six months' supply of various medications, some of them experimental with ghastly side effects. I tried them all and then flushed them down the toilet. I ignored notices of appointments for more tests. (I don't advocate this course to others, but at

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nineteen that's what I did.) As far as I was concerned my lungs might be sick but *I* wasn't, so my body would just have to tag along with what I wanted to do.

The following years are a bit of a blur. I continued studying and working. That meant ruthlessly prioritising everything. I would get home and immediately fall into bed, where I stayed until I dragged myself up the next morning. Weekends were for recovery and preparing for the next week. There was no energy for a social life, but I was still very happy.

I never queried or anguished over my unusual lifestyle; it was simply what I had to do. I loved

teaching but it was physically too hard for me, so I began clinical training as a psychologist.

'You have nerve deafness. Your hearing is deteriorating rapidly. You'll never work as a psychologist.'

'But I like this work.'

More expert opinions. All the same result. I finally convinced myself the hearing tests were the problem and my tinnitus just confused the tests. To supplement the hearing I still had I learnt to lip-read and continued training as a psychologist. Hearing aids just made the deafness louder and reminded me I had a hearing problem, so it was best not to use them. I was enjoying my work and was very happy.

'You should not have children.'

'But I want children so much. Everywhere I look I see pregnant women, prams and babies.'

Then years of trying.

An internationally respected gynaecologist: 'Your Fallopian tubes are completely blocked. Because of your lungs the anaesthetists refuse to allow elective surgery to unblock them. They are so badly damaged surgery probably wouldn't help anyway.'

No surgery.

I got pregnant. Twice. I had two children. The most wonderful and joyful time of my life. Physical health not too good. I am very happy. Hearing worse.

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More difficult working as a psychologist.

'You'll have to give it up!'

I started writing. Great fun and a new challenge. Fortieth birthday! Not dead yet! Still working as a psychologist, and I'm now forty-five.

Even when I have been in hospital with my body feeling very sick I have never thought of myself as a sick person. And even though in my adult life I have grieved deeply for many relatives and close and cherished friends who have died suddenly or slowly, and have known the despair of depression induced by illness, I have seen my life as being happy and fortunate.

My story is by no means unique. People who believe they are healthy can better predict their morbidity than can their doctors.

## So what is health and happiness?

Strangely enough, health and happiness appear to have little to do with what's actually happening in your life or in your body. So long as basic needs for safety and comfort are met, and you are not being physically or emotionally threatened by other people, you can feel healthy and happy.

I have seen many people close to death who have said that although they are not happy to die, they feel peaceful and happy. Others living with chronic and debilitating illnesses described themselves as well people, while there have been many with enviable physical health and no personal hassles who are miserable.

☞ *So long as basic needs for safety and comfort are met, and you are not being physically or emotionally threatened by other people, you can feel healthy and happy.* ☞

Because each of us has a unique perspective on the world, it is better that we each interpret the meaning of happiness and health for ourselves.

### *Chasing rainbows*

The fact that there are no tangible definitions probably explains why the search for health and happiness can become elusive and frustrating, like chasing rainbows or fossicking for gold.

For some it is a ravenous, consuming passion that drains energy and time but also provides a distraction or even a complete escape from other issues too difficult to confront. What is often completely missed is that happiness comes from being involved in doing things. If, however, your attention turns more and more inwards on a fascinating study of your own navel, then friends, family, lots of money and your

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real self can be lost with no improvement in health or happiness. Worse still, as explained in my previous books *Dangerous Persuaders* and *Your Mindbody Energy*, the

What is often completely missed is that happiness comes from being involved in doing things.

seeking in itself can be devastatingly damaging. Personal development is one of the fastest-growing industries of the Western world, worth billions of dollars

per year. And yet academics have sadly neglected this human need for health and happiness, and our often anguished search.

### Is happiness abnormal?

Over the last twenty years psychological journals have cited 29 216 studies on depression, 27 244 on anxiety, and 5199 on anger. But in all that time there were only 1664 on happiness, 1207 on life satisfaction and a tiny 614 on joy. Misery studies outnumbered happiness studies 18:1!

With such a heavy emphasis on the study of misery, you could be forgiven for thinking that the people of the world are a very unhappy lot. Doctor Richard Bertall, a clinical psychologist, set psychiatric and psychological academics abuzz with a 'spoo'

article in a leading scientific journal in which he used this disproportionate amount of research on misery (you can use statistics to prove anything!) to suggest that happiness was so 'statistically abnormal' that it 'probably reflects the abnormal functioning of the central nervous system'. He went on to propose that perhaps happiness should be declared a psychiatric illness: 'major affective disorder, pleasant type'.

That article got people thinking, and since then there has been a dramatic increase in research by social and health psychologists and sociologists into what makes us happy and healthy. These 'happiologists' or 'subjective wellbeing' experts (trust an academic to come up with a label like that!) are discovering the fascinating secrets of what makes people happy and healthy. Contrary to what you may think, most people *are* happy and reasonably healthy. Happy people tend to be healthier, but chronically ill or disabled people can still feel very happy. And as long as basic needs are being met, money has little to do with the degree of happiness, nor does age or race.

Many, many books are written with an incorrect underlying assumption that a particular stage of life – adolescence, marriage, divorce, parenthood, midlife, menopause, retirement, even life itself – is inherently distressful and causes a high degree of dissatisfaction

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and unhappiness. But the age or stage of a person's life cannot predict their degree of happiness. People tend to be just as happy at any age or stage.

*The age or stage of a person's life cannot predict their degree of happiness. People tend to be just as happy at any age or stage.*

Men and women tend to suffer their misery differently. Although women are more vulnerable to serious depression, men are far more likely to be alcoholics or to have antisocial and personality

problems. But when measuring the overall or 'global' level of happiness and unhappiness there is no significant difference between men and women. Surveys show that most women in the Western world appear to be quite happy working part time and making their families a much higher priority than a full-time career. Most women do not seem to need or want a full-time career to feel fulfilled and happy.

In the Western world the pursuit of more money and a higher material standard of living is becoming an obsession of governments and of many individuals that is often at odds with the quality of life. Social factors, lifestyle priorities and values are more important than money in determining how healthy you are.

In America, although national income and what it can buy doubled between the 1950s and the 1990s, surveys asking people how happy they feel have shown

no change in the degree of reported happiness.

In other studies of the reported happiness of people in different countries, there has been a significant correlation between the length of time a country has had a democratic government and the degree of life satisfaction: a sense of control over your life and individual freedom is crucial to health and happiness.

Particularly significant is that regardless of life events people tend not to change their degree of reported happiness over ten years. Those that were originally miserable stayed miserable and those that were originally happy stayed happy. People tended to be either chronically miserable or chronically happy!

## You can be happy now

If you tend to fall into the trap of thinking 'I'll be happy when ...' or 'I'd be happy if ...', then being happy or happier is always in the future. It is common for people to think and feel that 'I'll be happy when':

- my debts are cleared
- my health is better
- my marriage improves

*☞ If you tend to fall into the trap of thinking 'I'll be happy when ...' or 'I'd be happy if ...', then being happy or happier is always in the future. ☞*

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- my exams are over
- my kids appreciate me more ...

Or 'I'd be happy if':

- I lost weight
- I was married
- I was more attractive
- I had more friends ...

To be happier you first have to decide to be happier right *now*, this second! Are you prepared to allow yourself to be happy *now*? Do you feel you deserve to be happy *now*? Probably the greatest inhibitor of feeling good is the kind of thinking that is focused on the past or on the future: what has happened; what could have happened; what might happen; what will happen. You will never be happy or happier if you think you 'have to have all the answers'.

☞ *To be happier you first have to decide to be happier right now, this second! Are you prepared to allow yourself to be happy now? Do you feel you deserve to be happy now?* ☞

As an experiment just see how much happier you are prepared to allow yourself to be by focusing on *this second* of your life. Allow yourself to really experience *this second* with all your senses: what can you see? hear? feel? By allowing

yourself to focus more on this moment in time you'll realise that most moments can be very pleasant. And these can become most minutes and most hours.

### *The Happiness Cake*

One of the most common things that can prevent people from letting themselves be happy right now is an underlying belief that happiness is like a cake with only a finite number of portions available. This belief leads to thoughts such as:

- 'If I'm happy now there won't be any happiness left for later.'
- 'If you're happy, there won't be enough happiness left for me.'

If you are frightened that there isn't enough happiness to go around, you may be the kind of person who either deliberately or unconsciously sabotages other people's pleasure:

- 'My son just won the local tennis club tournament.'  
'Oh really? My nephew is state champion.'
- 'Harry just got a wonderful new job. It's so exciting. We're off to live in Paris!'  
'Isn't that where they have all those bomb scares?'

Happiness is like love. It expands to fill the space *you* make available. When you have another child, you don't take love from other people to give to that new baby instead. The love just expands infinitely. Start thinking of happiness as being infinite with plenty to go around for all those who want it, and you will

immediately allow yourself and others to be happy right now.

### *Mind over matter*

The type of thinking you allow yourself to indulge in involves one of the most crucial secrets being revealed about happy, healthy people. Not only are your emotions and feelings determined largely by your thoughts, but the remarkable and profound effects of thoughts on the physical body are only beginning to be properly understood.

Try these experiments on yourself:

- Imagine cutting six very juicy lemons, squeezing every last drop of the sour juice and putting it into a glass. Now imagine you are drinking that very sour juice. What do you notice has happened in your mouth? Copious amounts of saliva begin to flow; you may grimace with the muscles of your mouth, neck and shoulders. Merely thinking about some lemons has created psychological, biochemical and muscle changes in your body!
- Think of the most embarrassing moment in your life. Can you feel yourself blushing?
- Imagine sitting in school. The teacher 'squeaks' a piece of chalk across the blackboard. This simple thought runs shivers up and down your spine.

- Imagine sitting naked in a bath full of iced water with ice blocks bobbing around you. Your whole body starts to shiver with this thought!
- Now imagine a nice deep, warm bath, just the right temperature. You feel warmer already.

These little fantasies show how much your thoughts can affect your physical body and your feelings.

*Blind positive thinking is not the answer!*

Blind positive thinking will not make you genuinely happier. It is deliciously seductive because it promotes a denial of the limitations of individuals' control over their lives. This can produce a wonderful and euphoric anaesthesia, protecting a person from reality. 'You can be anything you want to be'; 'If you are sick, it's because you want to

*While a little bit of denial can be very healthy, too much can distort perceptions to the extent where individuals can no longer function effectively in the world the way it really is.*

be sick'. While a little bit of denial can be very healthy, too much can distort perceptions to the extent where individuals can no longer function effectively in the world the way it really is. Such people often start to withdraw or join groups with similar delusions. As the conflict between their distorted perceptions and the real world becomes too painful and too difficult to manage, their isolation increases, in

some cases leading to serious emotional problems or psychoses.

## The mindbody connection

Thoughts, the emotions they create, and other psychological and social factors have been found to affect the outcome and course of every major disease: cancer, kidney disease, gastrointestinal illness, rheumatoid conditions, neurological illness and lung disease.

The great news is that you can be healthier if you learn to change, and to control, your feelings and physical reactions. To do this you must not deny the way you feel but instead recognise and acknowledge your situation and your reactions to it realistically. But remember to remain aware of the present and future consequences of your actions. You can then go on to choose to develop appropriate self-talk, which empowers you and maximises your ability to cope and your own natural healing response.

So why are some people happier and healthier than others?

What are their secrets?

Read on. You are about to find out!



PART ONE



Unlocking the  
Secrets of Health and  
Happiness

# The chain and its links

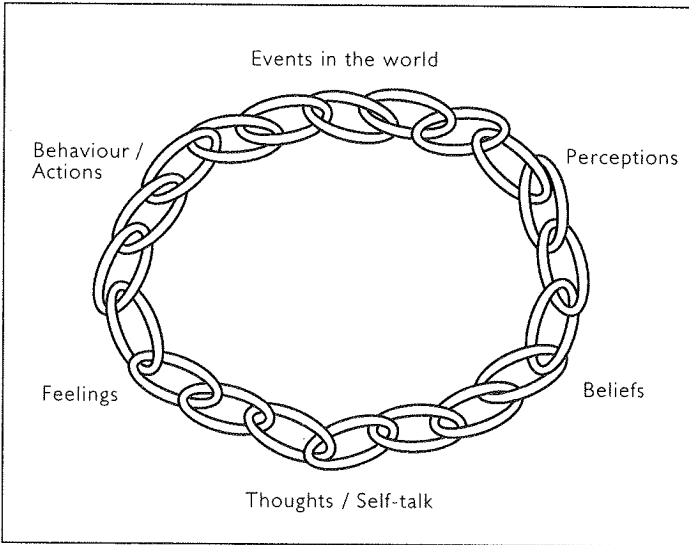
Many studies have explored the connection between thoughts, feelings and actions. For our purposes let us

make the starting point of this chain reaction our perceptions of events in our lives, which create underlying beliefs about ourselves and the world around us. The creation and development of a set

*The creation and development of a set of beliefs are vital to every aspect of human functioning.*

of beliefs are vital to every aspect of human functioning. If we didn't develop a consistent set of beliefs, every event would be newly encountered; we could not learn from experience and there would be no level of predictability in our lives. We would all be nervous wrecks with no idea of what might happen next.

In order to use the secrets discovered about healthy and happy people, you need to be aware of the chain reaction connecting thoughts and feelings so that you can control and manipulate each link in the chain.



**The chain**

Awareness and control of each link is even more important when you realise that the chain is linked in a circle. So making mistakes tends to lead to more misery, leading to more mistakes and more misery ... a truly vicious circle! Getting it right leads to feeling good, which leads to getting it right even more and feeling even better – an empowering and exciting cycle of good feelings and experiences.

As a young child you may experience (event) a number of adults being cross with you (perception), so you develop a belief that you make adults cross (belief). This results in your thinking that you are bad or naughty (self-talk). In turn you feel unhappy,

confused and angry because it's not your fault (feelings). Your behaviour becomes difficult and deliberately naughty to provoke the adults who are cross with you (behaviour and actions). The adults get crosser! Your perceptions are confirmed and so the vicious negative cycle continues.

Alternatively, imagine you are a young child experiencing kind and loving adults with plenty of time, energy and patience (event). You see adults as rewarding people to be around (perception) and believe that since they are nice to you they like you. This lets you develop the idea that you are lovable (belief) and you think good things about yourself (thoughts), arousing lots of positive feelings. The good feelings generated by being around adults lead to co-operative behaviour, which makes the adults even more kind

and loving, confirming your original perceptions and so a wonderfully positive cycle feeds itself, getting stronger and stronger.

Unfortunately, although we can dramatically influence events and experiences in our lives we can't totally control them. But we

can learn to take extraordinary control of our perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and actions. By

☞ Although we can dramatically influence events and experiences in our lives we can't totally control them. But we can learn to take extraordinary control of our perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and actions. ☞

becoming aware of these links in the chain, then deliberately manipulating them for positive outcomes, we are using the basic tools necessary to put into practice the secrets of healthier and happier people. Just knowing their secrets isn't much help. Controlling the chain is the key to unlocking each secret and making it work for you.

## Events and experiences: Things just happen!

Whether we like to face it or not, the uncomfortable truth is we cannot control everything that happens in our lives. However, we can choose how we are going to perceive or read these events. Perhaps one of the most significant features of an event is how large or small we choose to make it: cataclysmically huge or a mere blip.

With a sudden thud the engine died and all that we could hear was gurgling floodwater rushing into the truck and around our feet. Without thinking, my sister shoved the matches from the glove box inside her bra and I grabbed the single-burner gas stove just as the water level almost reached the window. Quickly

we (husband John, brother Greg, sister Charmaine and dog Rufus) scrambled onto the bonnet of the truck as the rushing water rose higher and higher.

We had been caught by an eight-year drought breaking (in the dry season) on a little-used outback track between Oodnadatta and Maree in the gibber desert of South Australia.

The night before, we had camped at the top of a thirty-foot embankment down to a perfectly dry river bed. The torrential rain had started at midnight and, realising how quickly this land could turn from never-ending desert to never-ending water, we had broken camp and sat in the truck anxiously waiting for first light so we could make a dash out of the area. It was too dangerous to travel in the dark because it was too easy to miss the vague track and drive off into the desert.

As we moved off with the first inkling of a grey dawn, we saw only water; the previously dry riverbed was nearly breaking its banks. In four-wheel drive we ground our way along through constant water. Every now and then we reached a depression indicating a water course. With no way of telling depth, we'd take a run and plough through the raging creeks now merging across the desert. But after fifty kilometres, countless such crossings, continual blinding rain and

visibility of only a few yards, our luck ran out and the truck fell into a wash-out in a creekbed.

Using the winch cable and rope, we tied ourselves to a lifeline and waded and swam out of the creekbed into shallower water, using the desert mulga to stop ourselves being washed away.

The grey sky and water merged as we struggled onto a mound of dry ground no more than ten feet in diameter. Shocked and shivering uncontrollably, we realised we had to find shelter somewhere in this sea of water.

Where we stood seemed fairly safe for the moment so we lit the gas stove and piled sopping mulga over it. Somehow we got a fire going which, while it cheered us, didn't warm us. The chill factor from the wind made the rain feel as if it came straight from Antarctica. We later found out a depression coming from Antarctica was actually the reason for the weird weather in the dry season.

Realising we couldn't stay long where we were, we pitched a hiker's tent rescued from the truck. As I was the coldest I stayed put with Rufus, piling on mulga while the others went to look for higher ground.

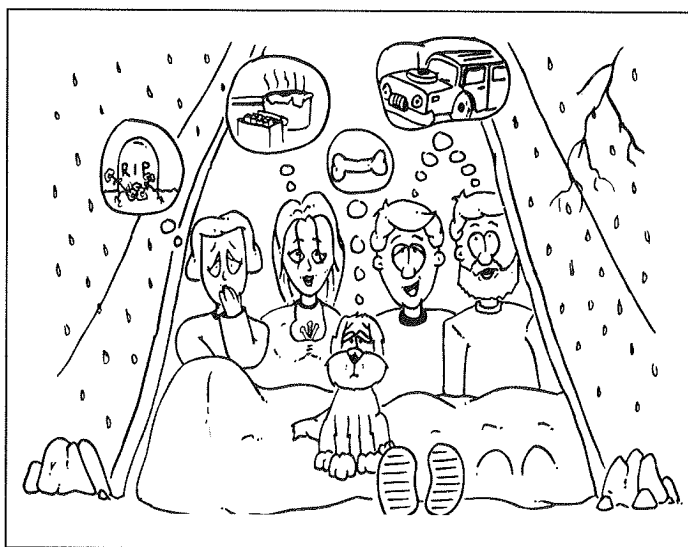
We moved fire and tent to higher ground five times that day as the water continued to rise with the incessant rain and the wind cutting us like a knife.

## Perceptions: Interpreting what has happened

That night we all squashed into the single hiker's tent with Rufus and shivered until a bleak but rainless dawn. As the desert was rocky shingle we couldn't get a tent peg into the ground, so the guy ropes had to be held down by piles of rocks. Periodically in the night a rope would come loose and I thankfully let the men go out in the cold to fix it. It was no time to be a feminist.

We were too cold to sleep so we talked. To my amazement John and Greg were planning rescuing the truck. They discussed for hours the effects of water, mud and silt on every working part: gearbox, engine, wheels, brakes, and so on. It didn't enter their heads to worry about our very dangerous position.

Charmaine started longing for a cigarette and wondered if she could rescue some soggy ones from the truck, then dry them in front of the fire on a grid made from mulga twigs. She talked incessantly about what provisions we had and how they could be dried and what interesting food we could create. She held absolutely no thoughts of despair. Rufus was obviously hungry, but he was happy as long as he was in the middle of us all.



I was just scared stiff and painfully obsessed with the rocks sticking into my bottom. I decided I was so cold I could easily roll over and go to sleep permanently and not care. I was the only one who had read about flash floods in the desert and how unsuspecting travellers could be washed away by three-metre walls of water that came from thousands of kilometres away in northern Queensland. With a shock I realised I was a wimp in a crisis.

We were all in the same mess but our respective perceptions of our position varied according to our beliefs about ourselves, our priorities and our knowledge.

These were rather extreme circumstances to have to deal with but some people forget that, as human beings, we have been designed to adapt to and cope with all kinds of negative situations, even quite dangerous or unhappy ones.

*☞ We were all in the same mess but our respective perceptions of our position varied according to our beliefs about ourselves, our priorities and our knowledge. ☞*

Marooned as we were in the desert, we depended for survival on quickly and accurately perceiv-

ing the situation so we could mobilise our energy constructively towards survival. While John, Greg and Charmaine focused on what they could do now, I focused on my discomfort and what might happen in the future.

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#### SUSAN AND NEIL - A CASE STUDY

Susan and Neil were in a self-help group for parents of brain damaged children. Their eight-year-old son Jack had recently survived an accident in which he was knocked off his bike while riding to school. He was now severely brain damaged. Susan and Neil were both the least educated and sophisticated parents in the group, but their intuitive wisdom and insight were remarkable. While the other parents were understandably suffering obvious and varying degrees of distress, anguish and desperation, Susan and Neil calmly talked about Jack's rehabilitation and how they

would manage when he came home from hospital.

After a few sessions I was beginning to wonder whether their apparent calmness was in fact a denial of the seriousness of Jack's disabilities. But in one particularly difficult session another parent accused them of being heartless as they appeared to be coping so much better than the other parents. Their accuser was an enormously successful businessman who was used to being able to control or remove obstacles or people who got in his way.

At this attack, Susan and Neil instinctively reached out to hold each other's hand. Very quietly, and with tears welling in his eyes, Neil explained that they were grieving deeply for the loss of Jack who they felt had 'died' on the day of the accident. They regarded the Jack they now had as being 'born' on that day, and that this new son was someone they had to get to know and love.

To Susan and Neil, the two Jacks were like twins, identical but different. Unlike the other parents, they were allowing themselves to fully grieve Jack 'One'. To help themselves, the family had already held a very private memorial service for Jack 'One' so that they could move on to loving Jack 'Two'. By grieving for Jack 'One', Susan and Neil were not as tortured by the comparisons between a pre- and post-accident Jack.

Initially the other parents were shocked by Susan and Neil's way of coping, but over the next few weeks they all

said their own anguish had become more manageable as soon as they had accepted that the child they had known had 'died', and that a disabled twin had been 'born'.

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Some people seem to know the trick of keeping an appropriate perspective and deliberately choosing the easiest and most expedient way of dealing with things. Good copers don't create anguish within themselves by distorting the size of the problem or by fighting it. They simply acknowledge its existence and put their energy into finding a solution.

For other people, things that don't go their way become huge mountains to be scaled. They'd never dream of taking the easy way by walking around the mountain or even away in the opposite direction! No, everything has to be a looming cliff face to be battled head-on. Alternatively they rail against fate and fight the situation. Their anguish leaves little energy to do what is necessary or to think clearly.

The emotional and physical impact of even very serious events can be dramatically affected by how a person chooses to perceive them. Many of the people I see have terminal illnesses or are receiving lengthy, time-consuming and distressingly uncomfortable treatment. Cancer patients particularly can find their whole

lives and those of their families quickly dominated by their illness and its treatment. Many complain that the treatment is far more intrusive and difficult to deal with than the illness itself.

However, perceptions can become very distorted because patients start to spend so much time thinking about the illness and treatment and the anticipation of their discomfort. When they keep a diary of the actual time spent on treatment, excluding the thinking time, they are often amazed at how much less it is than they thought.

Similarly, students can moan and complain about how much work they are doing but again a diary can reveal the reality that more time is being spent thinking about studying than actually doing it.

By focusing on actual time and leaving thinking time free to experience other things in life, in other words by focusing on the moment rather than on what has happened or what will happen, you can suddenly discover a whole lot more living time and the chore or hassle ceases to encompass your life. Here is a useful trick to help you cope with all kinds of unfortunate events or things in your life you don't like. Imagine yourself looking at a giant screen filled with all the things happening to you at that time, including the mundane, the habitual, the good, the

not-so-good and the downright unpleasant. So the screen is filled with *everything*.

Now imagine you have a telescope. If you look through a telescope one way you can adjust it to make

things look bigger so that the entire visual field is filled with just one object or incident on the screen. However, if you look through the telescope from the opposite end you can adjust the focus so that the same incident or

object can almost disappear as the visual field is filled with the total picture.

You can practise now with something you don't like. Perhaps your nose. Imagine a picture of yourself on a very large screen doing everyday things: going to work, playing sport, participating in a hobby, being alone, doing the dishes, cleaning your teeth ... As you watch yourself, take the telescope and adjust it so your nose fills the entire visual field; you can see nothing but nose. Yuk! Nobody's nose looks good close up. Now take the telescope and look through it from the other end and look at the screen. Now your nose is so small compared with everything else you can hardly see it!

Changing your perspective changes what you see.

🌀 By focusing on the moment rather than on what has happened or what will happen, you can suddenly discover a whole lot more living time. 🌀

The same trick can be used with what you hear. Imagine you have a volume control or a sound filter. You can now choose how much you hear and what you hear. (This is often called selective deafness, a very handy trick for parents – and their children!) What you hear can also be dramatically affected by what you believe about yourself or about the person talking. If you like yourself and think the other person does too, you will tend to look for language, tone of voice and non-verbal behaviour that confirms this belief. Even if you are actually being criticised, you will try to rationalise it as not really being the way the person feels.

If you are uncertain of yourself and don't like the other person much, you tend to magnify the significance of tone of voice and non-verbal language, interpreting what is said in a very negative way to reaffirm your own negative beliefs.

## Beliefs

Our beliefs about ourselves and about the world around us develop over many years. In childhood we are physiologically and psychologically designed to acquire beliefs and modify them more easily than

adults. Once acquired, beliefs that have been consolidated in adulthood are difficult to change, although they can be modified.

A very significant event which dramatically increases your level of arousal can make beliefs easier to change. An example of this is people who experience a religious conversion after serious illness or bereavement. There are also a number of persuasive techniques widely used in the community to deliberately manipulate and modify beliefs.

Except for religious beliefs, most of our beliefs are unconscious. We are not usually aware of them or of how much they are influencing our thinking. For instance, it has been common for women to be brought up to see their own needs as less important than those of other family members. Unless they are aware of this belief many women find themselves constantly giving in to others to their own detriment, angry with themselves for being 'doormats' but unaware of why they continue to allow it to happen. Once they are aware of the underlying belief, they can choose to modify it to be something more appropriate for the way they now want to be. Believing they have equal rights and demanding that their needs also be respected changes their behaviour.

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CASSIE – A CASE STUDY

Cassie was thirty-five, single and extremely lonely. She'd read many books on being happily single and knew all the things to do to get people in her life. But somehow she could never get past casual acquaintanceship with anyone. There were lots of people in her life but there was no intimacy.

As we explored how long Cassie had felt this way, it became clear that her natural shyness had led to a protective belief that 'I don't belong'. If she believed she didn't belong she didn't have to confront her fear of people.

Once she adopted this belief she then made damned sure it became true either by unconsciously avoiding other people's overtures for a more friendly relationship or by attacking and judging people so that they avoided her. But once Cassie became more aware of this underlying belief and why she held onto it, we could begin to face the issue of her wariness and distrust of people.

She realised that her wariness might have been entirely appropriate as a small child but that as an adult she had other skills that could protect her. It wasn't long before she felt confident enough to believe 'I can now belong'. This change in belief about herself changed her feelings and her behaviour. She no longer found fault with everyone and there was no need to avoid other people's friendliness.

Using her new-found 'people skills' she now felt able to handle intimacy.

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### *Core beliefs*

Because core beliefs tend to be unconscious, discovering what they are can be very difficult, especially as they generate ways of behaving, attitudes and thinking patterns that can cause you to either maintain, avoid or compensate for them. The underlying core belief can become well and truly hidden behind a life that just doesn't seem to 'click', and can create chronic discontent.

It's not just what happens to us when we are young that affects the development of these core beliefs: genetic and personality factors also come into play. For instance, shy children like Cassie may be at a greater risk of developing a feeling they can't belong than gregarious children, regardless of their experiences or what their parents did or did not do.

So don't start blaming your parents for being the sole cause of your wacky beliefs! In my experience nearly all parents, no matter how inadequate, muddle along as well as they can with the best of intentions, their own inadequacy often feeding from their less-than-perfect backgrounds.

The most common destructive core beliefs are:

*'I don't deserve to be happy, successful, free from pain ...'* If you feel you don't deserve the good things in life, you will act in ways that don't allow you to access or enjoy these good things – even when they fall in your lap! This core belief can be created when people feel guilt as a result of abuse or religious belief, or if they are a member of a minority group that suffers discrimination in the community.

*'My emotional needs will never be met by other people.'* This can stem from parents who are unable or unwilling to give a child what they need emotionally, for example encouragement, affection, love, nurturing, caring, guidance.

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*'You can't rely on close relationships because they don't last.'* This is common in adults who come from broken homes, who lost a parent through death or who were left alone at home inappropriately for their age.

*'You can't believe people – they'll only hurt you.'* This belief can lead to defensive barriers being created against intimacy by means of aggression and vindictiveness, for example, or 'pay-back'. It can develop when a child

is emotionally, physically or sexually abused by parents, peers, teachers, siblings or carers.

*'I can't belong.'* This belief can stem from personality factors that make a child timid, shy or self-conscious. It can also stem from experiences of isolation and/or rejection due to real differences in a child's culture, ability or values.

Children who have been abused can be deliberately prevented from becoming intimate with anyone or from belonging to any group outside the family. This ensures the 'family secret' is kept safe. These children can grow up with the core belief that they cannot belong anywhere outside the family.

*'There's something wrong with me'; 'I'm inadequate.'* Such beliefs can develop where children or adults are in a highly critical, condemning environment where approval is conditional on unrealistic expectations being met.

*'I'm not attractive enough to be liked or accepted.'* This is extremely common with children and teenagers but can last well into adulthood. It is often based on clearly remembered experiences of being teased and actively rejected by school peers or family because of

some aspect of their appearance, or when the school or family is obsessive about appearances.

People with this belief will often go to extreme lengths to reinforce it by neglecting basic grooming or deliberately choosing unattractive clothing and hair styles. Chronic problems with obesity can be maintained by this underlying belief.

*'I'm not capable of achieving as much as other people.'* This can

evolve not only from being put down when you are young but also from not being taught how to handle failure and disappointment. Achieving requires perseverance and self-discipline, and these

☞ Achieving requires perseverance and self-discipline, and these in turn demand the resilience to handle disappointment. ☞

in turn demand the resilience to handle disappointment. People with this belief often don't bother trying, even when they have obvious talent.

*'I can't look after myself without help'; 'I can't look after myself on my own.'* These beliefs of being unable to be autonomous, and of being dependent on others to meet basic day-to-day needs, have become an epidemic among many young adults. Keeping children at school longer is commendable but, unless parents actively encourage and promote independence and autonomy

from an early age, young adults can leave school at eighteen without basic emotional and physical survival skills. This dependency makes them anxious and angry and does not prepare them well for adult relationships or for the workplace.

*'Living is dangerous.'* A fearful, overanxious parent with poor emotional and practical resources can give a child an exaggerated view of the likelihood of all kinds of catastrophes occurring. The parent's fears stem from another belief: *'If something terrible occurred I couldn't cope.'* People with these beliefs can limit their life experience and take excessive precautions to try to protect themselves.

*'I don't know who I am.'* Very sensitive children or those in families that are abusive, over-protective or too controlling may not be encouraged or allowed to develop a strong sense of self as separate from other people. People with this belief tend to be indecisive and easily manipulated. They commonly describe themselves as feeling empty, hollow or like a rudderless ship at sea.

*'I must give in to others to be accepted and to avoid unpleasant consequences.'* This belief can stem from a fear of being rejected or hurt by someone else getting angry, and

leads to passive or compliant patterns of operating that deny the person's own needs and feelings. Many people with this belief readily lie to avoid conflict.

*'My own needs are not as important as other people's.'* This belief leads to self-sacrificing behaviour that is very common in women. It may be not only social expectations and parenting causing this belief but also the tendency of women to be generally less self-centred in their outlook than men. However, it can also be very powerful in men who, at a young age, have been made inappropriately responsible for their family's welfare through, for example, a parent's death, illness or alcoholism.

*'I must not show my feelings.'* This belief inhibits spontaneity in relationships and deprives the person of real intimacy in their lives. There is a fear that sharing feelings will expose vulnerability or cause rejection and embarrassment. This may also be a fear that sharing feelings, especially anger, will unjustifiably upset others. Such beliefs evolve from cultural, community and family expectations.

*'No matter what I do it will never be good enough'; 'Status, wealth and power are more important than relationships, health*

*and happiness.*' I have put these beliefs together because they tend to occur together and are caused by the same kind of upbringing. The family hasn't necessarily fostered these values but the school and social network have. I'm seeing increasing numbers of parents deeply concerned and shocked by discovering that values like these operate in the particular private schools their children attend. They feel torn between what they perceive (often incorrectly) as the educational advantages that these schools are supposed to offer and the price their children may ultimately pay.

*'I'm entitled to what I want now regardless of other people's needs.'* There are two environments that tend to develop this self-centred belief. The first is a home or school environment that overindulges children and gives them a feeling of entitlement and superiority over others. The other is an environment in which a child has been socially rejected and/or emotionally deprived, forcing the child to give up on relationships and pursue self-esteem and satisfaction in material rewards.

*'I can do what I want when I want.'* If your upbringing fails to teach you self-control or how to handle frustration, you are likely to believe this to varying

degrees. In extreme cases this belief can lead to criminal and addictive behaviour.

If you suspect you have other destructive beliefs, one of the most revealing ways to discover them is to write down all the things you think you and other people *should* and *should not* do.

### *Rules*

The exercise described above will reveal the underlying rules you apply to yourself and to others which, if unrealistic or unreasonable, can make you and those you live with very miserable. For example, I should:

- be tidier
- be more punctual
- eat less
- remember everyone's birthday
- not get angry ...

Or he or she should:

- appreciate me more
- keep their room clean to my standards
- drink less alcohol
- stop smoking
- understand me
- not upset me
- do as I say ...

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JACK AND MARY - TWO CASE STUDIES

Jack was five and rather shy. In the classroom he was quite attentive and adored his teacher, who made him feel very comfortable. In class there was always someone to talk to or to work with, so he never felt left out or lonely.

But the schoolyard was different. The rowdy unpredictability of so many children left him confused and frightened. His timidity often isolated him even from his own school friends. Being alone and not having anyone to be with seemed the most appalling social sin, even though he was not actively rejected. Jack's rule said: 'I *should* always have someone to play with'.

As he sat on my knee and sobbed his heart out he could only hiccup his distress to me until I hugged him and said, 'Oh, but hasn't anyone told you! You don't *have* to have someone to play with at school. You can play on your own and I'll show you how.'

Jack stopped sobbing and looked at me, wide-eyed. His shoulders relaxed and his little body slowly stopped quivering. Soon he was joining in making a list of all the things he could have in his bag in case he wanted to play on his own: a bat and ball, marbles, cards to play patience, chalk to draw on the asphalt, and so on.

And, of course, as soon as the other children saw him happy on his own they wanted to play with him too!

Mary was the eldest and had grown up in a migrant family from southern Europe. Her parents had each worked two jobs to support their brood of six children. At thirteen Mary disappeared from school to look after the younger children and help her mother meet the sewing deadlines of her contract work at home.

She dearly loved and respected her parents but, hearing the constant stories of their hardship in their home country and the unrelenting work in their new country, she came to believe that even as an adult she had no right to any leisure time and that life meant continual self-sacrifice and exhaustion.

Even when she married a successful businessman she was still driven to create work for herself and felt panicky and irritable if he insisted on some leisure time. Mary's rule said: 'Good mothers and fathers suffer and sacrifice themselves for their children'.

When she came to me she realised she had no reason to work so hard now, but she was riddled with a guilty feeling that by not working she was betraying the values and suffering of her parents.

Mary could never allow herself to enjoy parenthood and life generally until she changed the rules in her head.

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Rules can be helpful guides to living but they can also trigger despair and guilt when they are broken. If you

have too many rules in your life, check that they are realistic and reasonable.

### *Guilt*

If you are plagued by guilt, look at the underlying rule you think you have broken and ask yourself

*Rules can be helpful guides to living but they can also trigger despair and guilt when they are broken.*

whether it is appropriate for this time of your life. Many rules that were entirely appropriate for childhood, your parents' era and even another stage of your own life can

be plain dangerous and provoke unnecessary guilt at other times. Maybe the rule merely needs to be updated to fit your current life situation.

Instilling a rule in children that they should always do what adults tell them to can put them in dangerous situations if approached by child molesters, be they relatives, acquaintances or complete strangers.

Someone brought up to believe that marriage is always forever will suffer far more if their marriage breaks down than those who will try to make it work but realise that in fact marriages often don't.

Men and women who believe they should always try to please their partner can be in for a miserable guilt-ridden existence if their partner takes advantage of their self-sacrificing behaviour.