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The 12 Secrets of Health and Happiness

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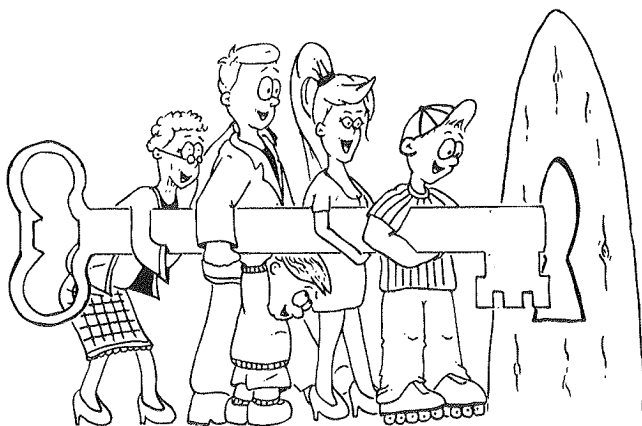
To my husband and children for their loving support and for the fun and joy they bring to my life.

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

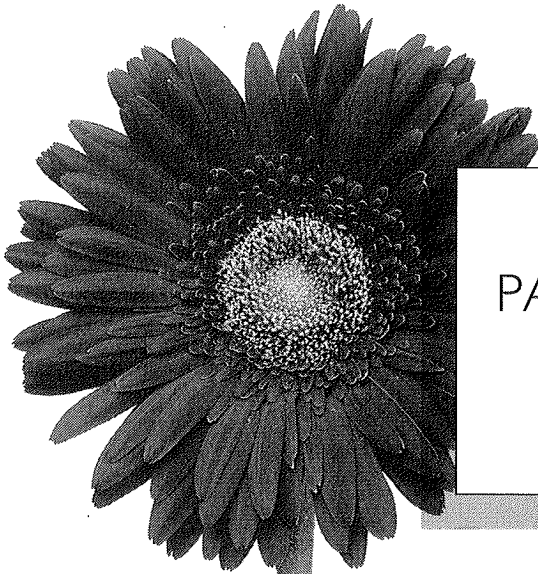
Thoughts, the emotions they create, and other psychological and social factors have been found to affect the outcome and course of every major disease: cancer, kidney disease, gastrointestinal illness, rheumatoid conditions, neurological illness and lung disease.

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

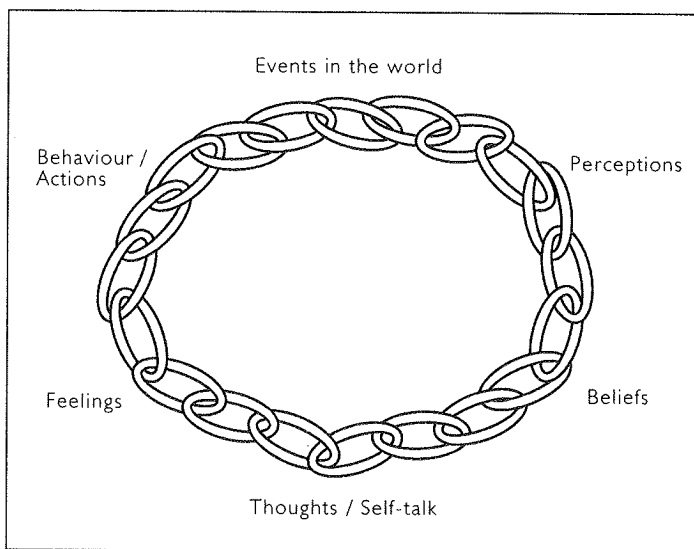
Many studies have explored the connection between thoughts, feelings and actions. For our purposes let us

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.

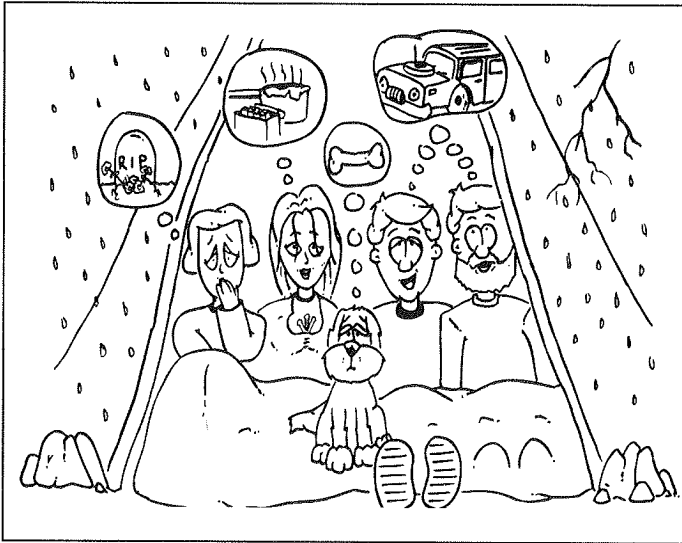
We moved fire and tent to higher ground five times that day as the water continued to rise with the incessant rain and the wind cutting us like a knife.

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.

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'.

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.

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.

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.

☞ 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! ☞

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

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

'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 ...

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.

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

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

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

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.

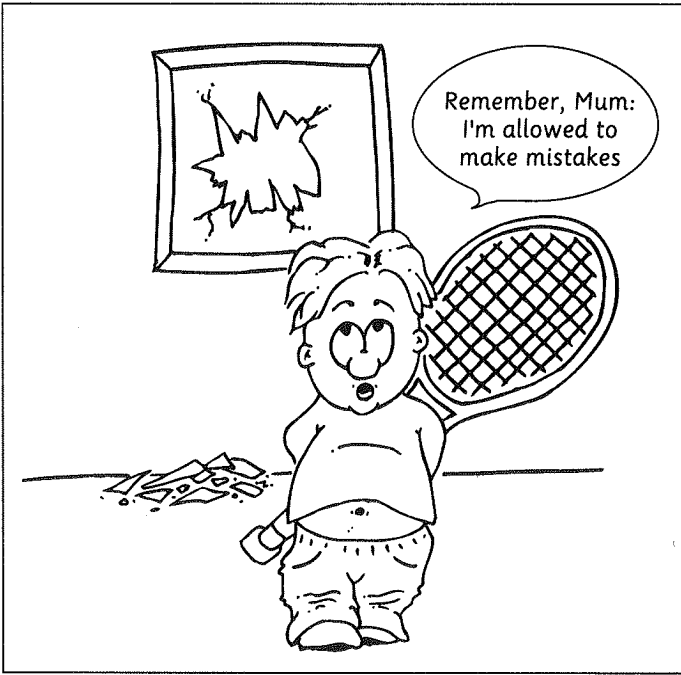
Men and women who believe they should always try to please their partner can be in for a miserable guilt-ridden existence if their partner takes advantage of their self-sacrificing behaviour.

Men and women who believe that masturbation is taboo miss out on the delights of different kinds of sexual pleasure once they are married or have a partner. Masturbating or making love to your partner is like choosing between an apple and a banana. Sometimes you just like something different.

Although becoming aware of unhelpful and damaging beliefs is important, it is just as important to be aware of healthier and more helpful alternatives. You might like to consider adopting the following beliefs.

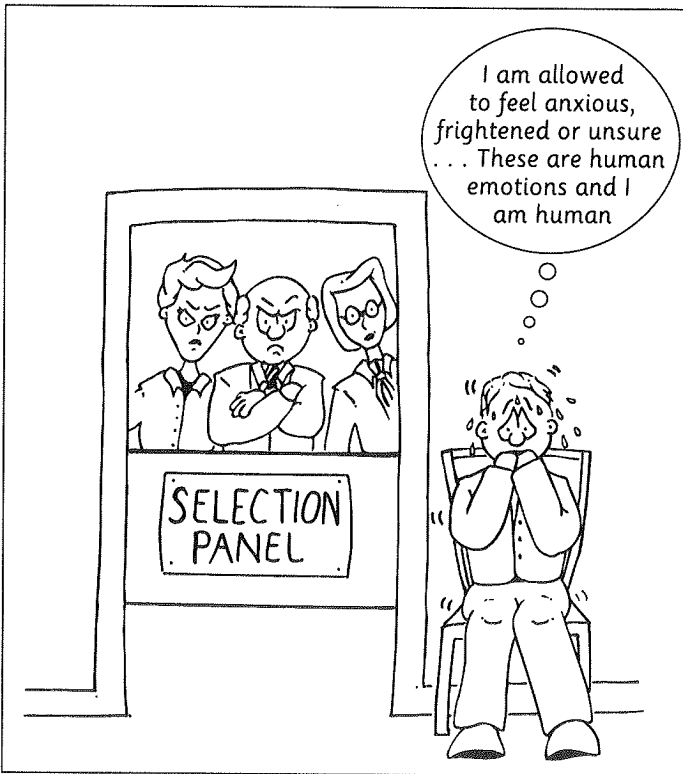
Seven beliefs to make you happier

1. I am a human being and as a human being I have a right to make mistakes (even catastrophic ones). It means I'm human, not bad. I have a right to have strengths and weaknesses. Nobody else expects me to be perfect, so why should I?
2. I like to be loved, appreciated, respected and approved of but I can't expect to have the whole world think of me like that or even all the people I know. Their approval is good but I do not have to depend on it to be happy.
3. Other people or situations can't make me unhappy; it is what I tell myself that determines how I feel. For example, if someone criticises my clothes I



can choose to let that upset me or I can choose to ignore it.

4. I am responsible for making my own happiness but I am not responsible for making other people happy. Nor am I responsible for other people's problems. I am, however, responsible for my behaviour towards other people, especially children.
5. While unhappy, sad or traumatic things may have happened to me in the past, they don't have to devastate my future. I can let go of feelings about those unhappy times.



6. No matter what life throws at me, I know I can cope alone if necessary. I may not like what happens but as a human being I have been designed to cope with good and bad, happy and sad, and to survive! If I am anguished it is because I am fighting the situation. If I accept it I will have the strength and energy to deal with it.
7. I am allowed to feel anxious, frightened or unsure.

These are human emotions in certain situations and *I am human*.

Such beliefs acknowledge you as a human being with a full range of strengths and weaknesses, and the right to feel a complete range of emotions. Combine these beliefs with a strong sense of your own ability to tap into the resources necessary for dealing with whatever arises (even if you don't like it), and you will be well equipped to access the secrets of being happier and healthier and to have empowering thoughts or self-talk.

Self-talk: Controlling the CDs playing in your head

Thinking is really like an internal dialogue with yourself. It is perfectly normal for it to seem like voices in your head telling you things from different perspectives.

One day a worried mum brought her four-year-old son to me. He had started to talk about the voices in his head that 'wouldn't shut up'. Finally I realised it was his thinking he was 'hearing'. This internal talking or self-talk plays a vital role in our interpretation of events and how we choose to respond.

FRANK - A CASE STUDY

Some years ago an eleven-year-old boy called Frank was referred to me by his local school. Frank had been expelled from three private schools and now had a full-time minder employed by a State education department to sit next to him in class and follow him around the school grounds to stop him attacking other students or teachers. Numerous psychiatrists and psychologists had seen him and his family, and his file with the State's community services department was thirty centimetres thick.

Thinking is really like an internal dialogue with yourself. It is perfectly normal for it to seem like voices in your head telling you things from different perspectives.

He arrived for his appointment sullen and dressed in cut-down army fatigues and heavy boots. Sitting with his arms crossed, he became very cocky when I asked him to explain what event had resulted in his throwing a chair at the teacher and putting a fellow student in hospital with head injuries.

'They made me do it,' was his explanation. 'The teacher told me to stop talking and I didn't want to.'

'That kid [the one now in hospital] said he wouldn't play marbles with me because I cheat.'

I asked him why he gave other people so much power and if he was happy letting other people have such fantastic control over him. At first he looked as if he would explode

with rage but then he looked puzzled and asked me what on earth I meant.

This boy had never been shown that he had choices over his reactions to events and that these choices determined whether he was in control or whether someone else could push his buttons and control his reactions.

He soon realised that other people were controlling him more and more as the rest of the students realised what good sport it was to goad him. This idea appalled him and even in that first session he was intrigued to know about other ways of reacting that would put *him* in control.

It had never occurred to him that if you were teased you weren't compelled to react violently. He soon learnt that being teased was a nuisance but that depending on the self-talk he chose he could control how he felt about the teasing and what he did about it. To his surprise, he found he felt infinitely stronger (and more superior!) when he ignored teasing rather than when he let himself froth at the mouth with rage, and attack.

As you will see on pages 68–70, a good style of self-talk does not mean blind positive thinking, which denies your reactions, needs or reality. For instance, it is not helpful to say to yourself 'every day in every way I am getting better and better' when in the bathroom mirror each morning you can see yourself wasting away from

cancer. And it can be sheer hell for family and friends if nobody is allowed to openly discuss the reality of the situation.

One of my patients was absolutely besotted with New Age beliefs and healing practices. She believed that because she didn't want to be ill she could never get sick. Regardless of a family history of breast cancer – her mother, grandmother, aunt and two sisters had died of breast cancer – she refused to have mammograms or examine her own breasts. When she was diagnosed with advanced metastatic breast cancer, her whole belief system was shattered and she was left to die in extreme anger, confusion and anguish.

There are ten very common types of distorted or wacky thinking practices that we all use to varying degrees. They underlie many of our inappropriate negative feelings.

Cognitive distortions

David Burns, in his book *Feeling Good* (invaluable for a comprehensive understanding of thoughts and moods), categorises ten main kinds of *cognitive distortions*:

I. All or nothing thinking

People who habitually use this kind of thinking see

things in black or white. They cannot cope with the grey. Unfortunately for them, most things in life are grey.

Their own personal qualities are seen as all bad or all good. One mistake means they are helpless failures; anything not as it 'should be' is a disaster. This kind of thinking leads to obsessive perfectionism where they cannot be comfortable if everything is not the way they think it ought to be. One thing out of place and the house is a mess. One hair out of place and they are sloppy.

But if you look around you will realise that life rarely fits the extremes of all bad or all good and that we can easily develop personally distorted perceptions of what defines clean, tidy, good, bad, ugly or beautiful.

2. **Overgeneralising**

If you fear rejection and avoid putting yourself in situations where you could be rejected, you may be overgeneralising from when something unpleasant has happened. For instance, if you miss out on a job application and then say to yourself 'I'll never get a job' you are overgeneralising from one particular incident to always. Or if you forget your wife's birthday you might say 'My memory is hopeless'. An overgeneralising student is prone to say 'I failed that maths test so I'm hopeless at maths'.

It's very important not to globalise individual negative events. Instead acknowledge the unpleasantness of a specific incident that is now over and move on. For example:

- 'I didn't get *that* job.'
- 'I forgot my wife's birthday *this* year.'
- 'I failed *that* maths test so I'll study harder for the next.'

It's very important not to globalise individual negative events. Instead acknowledge the unpleasantness of a specific incident that is now over and move on.

3. Using mental filters

You may have heard of people who look at everything through rose-tinted glasses. Well, people who use mental filters look at everything through black-tinted glasses! They can see only the bad aspects of a situation and are completely blind to the good. For instance, they may list a litany of woes, illnesses, complaints and criticisms but not bother to tell you they've just won Tattsлото!

4. Disqualifying the positive

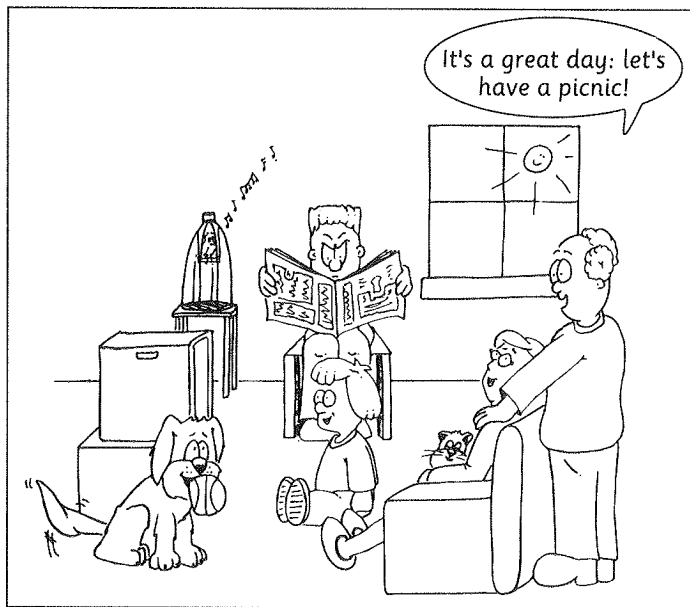
People who feel they don't deserve to be happy will frequently use this technique to shoot themselves in the foot or make sure they can't feel good. For instance, it's a gloriously sunny morning and you're going on a picnic but they will announce, 'It's sunny now but it's sure to rain later'. They refuse to see positive

things in themselves or around them because they feel they are not allowed to be happy or because being miserable brings them secondary payoffs like attention or power.

If you compliment this kind of person they will deny the compliment, denigrate it or point out something negative about themselves instead. This kind of thinking not only makes them gloomy but pulls everyone around them down as well.

5. Jumping to conclusions

You can often read other people's body language very accurately. You can be acutely aware of changes in





mood, attitude or feelings in others. However, if you go on to draw conclusions about the reasons behind the mood or behaviour they may be quite inaccurate and unnecessarily self-blaming.

Mind-reading is one form of jumping to conclusions when you assume you know why a person has behaved in a certain way without checking it out. This can lead to awful misunderstandings in relationships.

- A friend fails to return your phone call and you assume the worst – he's not interested in your friendship any more. In fact his answering machine was out of order.

☞ The other kind of jumping to conclusions which can make your life hell is fortune-telling. You are frightened of something happening in the future, but you turn it into a fact even when it hasn't happened! ☞

- Your wife is evasive and defensive about her Saturday out. You assume she is having an affair when in fact she was shopping for a stereo for your birthday.
- A friend ignores you when you pass in the street. You assume

you are being snubbed but then you find out she'd lost a contact lens and didn't see you.

Don't assume – check it out!

The other kind of jumping to conclusions which can make your life hell is fortune-telling. You are frightened of something happening in the future, but you turn it into a fact even when it hasn't happened! In your mind you definitely have Alzheimer's disease, when, like many people at forty, you get a bit absent-minded and forget things.

6. **Magnifying and minimising**

This is the same mental process as using the telescope we talked about earlier to control and manipulate your perspective.

You tend either to make everything worse than it is, 'catastrophising' so that your imperfections become monstrous disabilities, or to shrink anything good about yourself to insignificance.

7. Emotional reasoning

This type of thinking causes you to conclude something must be true because you *feel* it is so.

- I *feel* useless ... therefore I *am* useless.
- I *feel* depressed ... therefore I *am* depressed.
- I *feel* inadequate ... therefore I *am* inadequate.
- I *feel* guilty ... therefore I *must be* guilty.

This pattern of 'I *feel*, therefore I *am*' can become a hopeless merry-go-round that is very difficult to jump off unless you recognise that you are using distorted perceptions to trigger bad feelings.

8. Making lists of 'shoulds' and 'should nots'

As previously discussed, thinking that is dominated by dogmatic and judgemental lists of what you and

others should and should not do will trigger guilt and shame when you fail to meet your own unrealistic demands. You will also become very angry and condemning of others who don't fulfil your

☞ Once you start adopting kinder and more realistic rules for yourself you can stop being so judgemental and condemning of other people. ☞

expectations of what they should or should not be doing. This kind of thinking promotes hostility, a trait found to be highly correlated with cardiovascular disease.

Once you start adopting kinder and more realistic rules for yourself you can stop being so judgemental and condemning of other people.

9. Labelling

Taking a particular personal mistake and generalising it to a pervasive character trait is an extreme form of generalised thinking. For instance:

- 'I broke a dish, therefore I am a clumsy fool.'
- 'I failed that exam, therefore I'm hopeless at studying.'
- 'My mother was upset because I disagreed with her, therefore I am an ungrateful, insensitive son.'
- 'I burnt the cake, therefore I am a hopeless cook.'

The tendency to do this can be established very early in childhood by parents and teachers attacking a child's whole personality when the child does something wrong:

- 'You're a nuisance, stupid, thick, selfish, ungrateful ...'
- 'You're naughty, bad, impossible, a pain in the neck ...'

If this was done to you, look long and hard at the labels you give yourself and challenge their validity by examining the evidence that conflicts with your label:

- 'I've washed thousands of dishes and only broken one occasionally, therefore I'm not a clumsy fool.'
- 'That's the only exam I've failed in three years, so I'm not a hopeless student.'

- 'I'm allowed to disagree with my mother and we normally have a considerate loving relationship, therefore I'm not an ungrateful, insensitive son.'
- 'I've cooked lots of things without burning them, so I can't be a hopeless cook.'

10. Personalising

This involves taking responsibility and blame for things that not only are not your fault but are often none of your business either.

Instead of accepting that you have only a degree of influence over events and people, you take responsibility for controlling everything. In your life, things can't just happen: somebody, inevitably you, has to be blamed and therefore judged and condemned.

Let others take appropriate responsibility for their actions ... Unburden yourself, take the hairshirt off and be responsible only for what is really your domain.

If this is you, start to show a little humility. You just don't have that much power! Let others take appropriate responsibility for their actions. Parents who assume responsibility for their children's mistakes (and successes!) have children who grow up believing their parents feel they are incapable of running their own lives. Unburden yourself, take the hairshirt off and be responsible only for what is really your domain. If as a child you were used as the family or class



scapegoat for everything that went wrong, you can now liberate yourself as an adult and give responsibility back to those it really belongs to.

Taking inappropriate responsibility for feelings can be a common trap for women who become the family peacemaker. By stepping in and trying to fix everyone's moods, disagreements and problems, you stop others from realising they have any responsibility for their

own feelings, let alone how to develop skills to deal with them.

It's hard to watch your kids in physical and emotional pain, but you insult and undermine them by immediately stepping in, taking control and telling them how to fix things. Teenagers in particular don't want your advice or solutions but instead they want you to listen, to be a sounding-board for them as they explore their *own* solutions. The more you shut up and listen, the more likely they are to actually ask for advice. But even then it is more empowering to suggest possible options for them to consider than to provide a definitive answer.

Teenager: Do you think I should go to the party tonight?

Parent: What are the pros and cons?
Is there anything concerning you about the party?
How could you deal with these concerns?
Can I help in any practical way? (for example, provide a lift home if necessary).

Teenager: Do you think I should do maths next year?
I hate it.

Parent: If you dropped maths what would that mean?

If you decide to continue maths is there

any way I could help? (for example, would a tutor be any help?).

This process encourages people to gather more information, explore alternatives and come up with helpful strategies themselves in order to make appropriate decisions.

Even if a decision turns out, with hindsight, to have been unwise, the feeling that it seemed right after proper investigation at the time develops self-confidence.

Feelings

Rubber band' therapy

To become aware of distorted thinking patterns, you first have to become aware that you are even thinking! To do this, it's often easier to notice what you are feeling and work backwards to the self-talk that caused the feeling. That way, you can modify the self-talk and choose something more constructive. The most effective way to achieve this is through 'rubber band' therapy. Put a firm rubber band on your wrist, and when you become aware of an unwanted feeling pull the rubber band, hard! The pain will freeze the thought or wipe it from your mind completely so that you

can now deliberately choose what you want to think and consequently control your feelings.

ROBERT – A CASE STUDY

Robert was 28 and very angry – all the time. His uncontrolled behaviour had caused him to be expelled from two schools as a teenager, and he'd lost count of the jobs from which he'd been sacked for his physical and verbal outbursts. He had three children under five years of age and his wife, although never physically abused by him, had recently left as she was 'sick of being the scapegoat every time he got angry'. Robert had been referred to me by his solicitor because he was now up on charges after deliberately ramming his wife's parked car. Thankfully no one was hurt.

Robert knew a lot about how he felt and had talked endlessly about his feelings to many counsellors. When he stormed into my office for the first time he exclaimed: 'I know how I feel. I've talked about my feelings ad nauseam. But what do I do about them? How do I change them?'

I knew that Robert would never get control of his feelings until he understood that they came mainly from distorted thinking patterns that he was totally unaware of. To get him to slow down his reactions to situations, we used 'rubber band' therapy.

Robert came to realise that his self-talk was extremely self-blaming and self-condemning. Nearly all his anger was

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directed at himself for never meeting his own expectations: 'I'll never be as successful as my brothers' (he was the second of three boys); 'Mum and Dad don't love me as much because I've caused them so much trouble' (his parents were actually extremely loving and accepting of his difference, which he later admitted); 'I can't do anything right' (although his brothers were academically gifted, Robert was skilled with his hands and demonstrated outstanding survival skills in being able to get work).

'Rubber band' therapy slowed his reactions enough for him to realise what he was thinking, to question its accuracy, and then to replace it with self-talk that was more self-accepting and optimistic. Within a few weeks he was quite overwhelmed by how much happier and in control he felt. A year later he was doing very well in his own business and had successfully reconciled with his wife.

Understanding his self-talk made him confront what he *could* do, not just what he couldn't do. He was then able to create situations in which he could be successful, rather than setting himself up for constant frustration and failure.

<i>Feeling</i>	<i>Self-talk</i>		<i>Alternative self-talk</i>
Guilt	'I shouldn't have said that.'		'It would have been wiser not to have said that but I'm allowed to make mistakes.'
Guilt	'I should've been more patient.'		'Usually I'm patient but I'm allowed to have limits too.'
Guilt	'I shouldn't be so aggressive.'		'I can be needlessly aggressive but I'm trying and I'll change that.'
Uselessness	'I never get anything right.'		'I need to look at why I tend to choose to do things with little chance of success.'
Incompetence	'I'm always the one the boss has to speak to.'		'I don't do this as well as others but then I hate this kind of work. I need work that gives me the chance to do what I know I'm good at.'

'Rubber band' therapy

If nothing changes, nothing changes

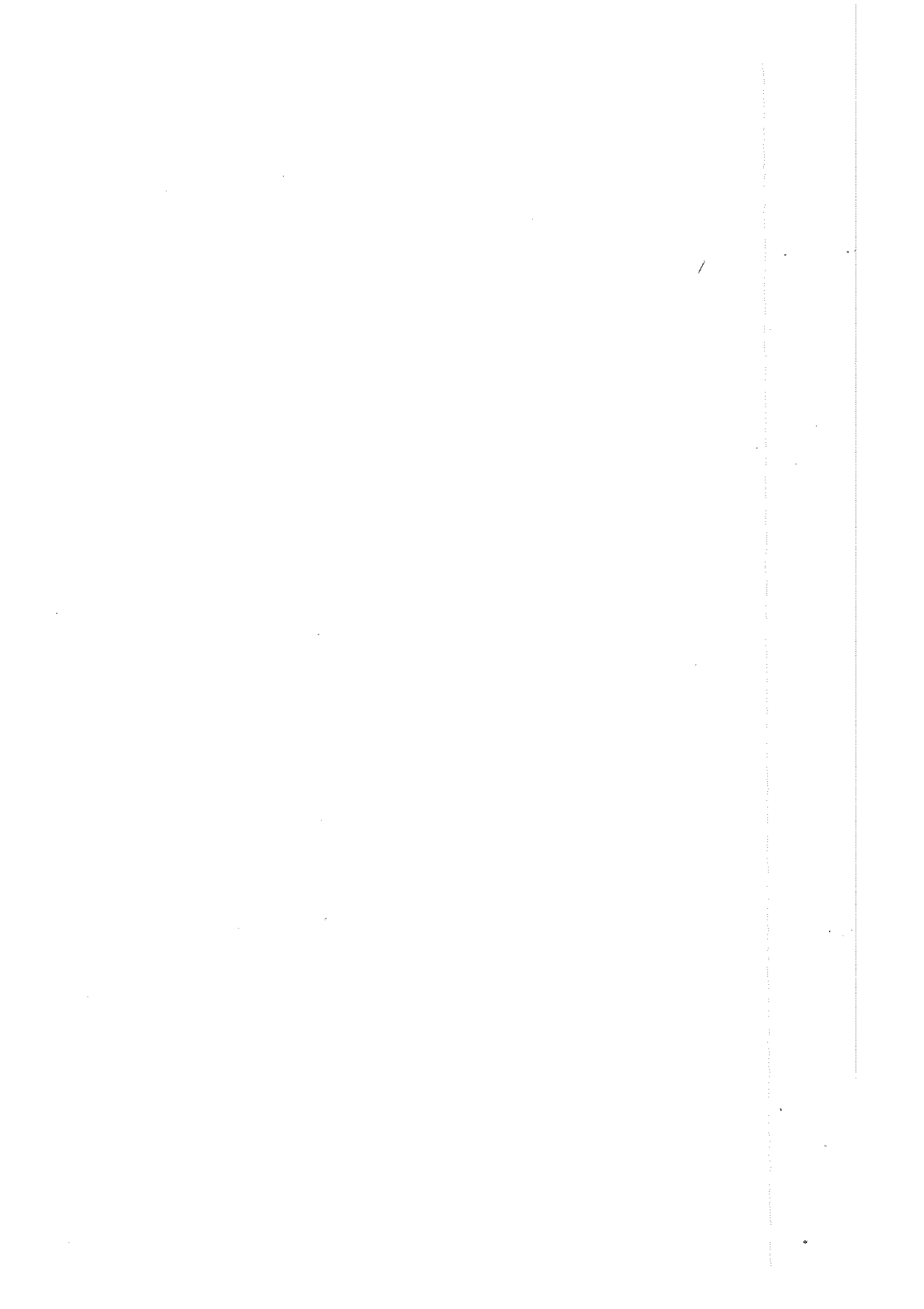
Now that you have discovered the connections between thinking and feeling, you have the vital key for unlocking the secrets of happy and healthy people and making them work for you.

Understanding and having the key, however, is not enough. You have to be prepared to use it. That may mean being prepared to look at yourself hard and honestly and then asking yourself to change. If you are reluctant to change, remember that if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got!

In short ...

- ☞ You form beliefs based on your perceptions of your experiences.
- ☞ Your beliefs determine your self-talk about yourself and your world. Your feelings come from this self-talk.
- ☞ Knowing and changing your core beliefs enables you to change your self-talk, feelings and reactions to people and situations.

- ❧ You can adjust your focus so that negative features of your self and your life will blur and fade, and the positive will clearly fill your life screen. Changing your perspective is usually more constructive than trying in vain to change events and other people.
- ❧ Put your energy into dealing with a situation rather than fighting it.
- ❧ Modify or get rid of rigid 'should' and 'should not' rules from your thinking.
- ❧ Be prepared to change.





PART TWO



Secrets of Happy People

The 1st Secret: Happy people are optimists

Optimism is not simply positive thinking

What is meant by optimism? A common misconception about optimism is that it means always looking for the

best in a situation and ignoring the bad: the 'Pollyanna' outlook. As a child I hated that story and Pollyanna in particular. I probably remember my anger and frustration because, like Pollyanna, I had an illness for many months that left

A common misconception about optimism is that it means always looking for the best in a situation and ignoring the bad: the 'Pollyanna' outlook.

me bedridden, in a lot of pain and unable to walk.

To my mind Pollyanna was a dill. My mother, very young, worried sick most of the time and nursing me at home while she ran my father's business, constantly used Pollyanna as an example. I felt more and more wretched, alone and helpless because I didn't

feel like Pollyanna. I couldn't ignore my situation and focus on the 'silver lining', another of her favourite phrases at that time. I discovered that if I ignored my mother's attempts to cheer me up I could be quite happy most of the time. I did this by withdrawing more and more into a fantasy world of my own, talking to myself. In my world I was *allowed* to miss my friends, I was *allowed* to feel bored for lack of stimulation. I talked endlessly to my dolls and teddies about how I felt. The telling and silent acceptance and recognition from Teddy, who could not talk back, soon relieved my anguish and so I could become engrossed in some other happy game or endless imagining about what I was going to do when I was better. Once I could talk to Teddy about being sick, I never doubted I would get better.

And I did!

My mother's attempt to focus on the positive rather than on the negative was a well-meaning attempt to stop me from being miserable. However, perhaps due to her own frantic lifestyle, her own fears that I might not get better or might die, or her efforts to try to protect me, it often felt as though she tended to want to deny the reality. This prevented

☞ Whereas positive thinking focuses attention on the outcome of events, optimism focuses on how you explain the causes of these events. ☞

me from feeling any recognition of what I was going through. Without recognition of my reality I became more and more upset. I felt that even though I *was* sick I wasn't *allowed* to be sick.

So if optimism isn't blind positive thinking, what is it? Whereas positive thinking focuses attention on the outcome of events, optimism focuses on how you explain the causes of these events. Such explanation has three important components: *permanence*, *pervasiveness* and *personalisation*.

The three faces of optimism

Permanence

People who are optimistic tend to link the good things that happen to them to permanent causes and see the negative events in their lives as having temporary causes. Pessimists do the opposite. Pessimists see good things as having temporary causes and bad events as having permanent causes, especially regarding themselves and their own character traits. For example, in the case of a negative event such as losing a valuable watch:

Pessimist: I'm always losing things.

Optimist: I lost it because I didn't replace the worn strap.

In the case of a positive event such as winning a swimming competition:

Pessimist: It was a fluke, the other competitors were having a bad day.

Optimist: I'm good at swimming.

If you are inclined to use words such as 'always' and 'never' when things go wrong, you are using a self-blaming, pessimistic style of self-talk. But if you can use words like 'sometimes', 'this time', 'recently', then you are seeing negative situations as temporary and therefore changeable in the future. Pessimists condemn the future as well as the present, whereas optimists accurately recognise the present without either condemning or predicting the future. Pessimists see problems in life as similar to falling into a hole. Optimists see such problems as dark patches in a tunnel that has light up ahead and a way out.

If you use a pessimistic style of self-talk, over time you will tend to put in less and less effort and finally you won't even bother trying. But if you use an optimistic style of self-talk and see any success as due to a permanent character

☞ If you want to be happier, start thinking in terms of 'always' rather than 'sometimes' for the good things in life, and 'sometimes' rather than 'always' for the bad! ☞

trait, you will try even harder the next time, increasing your chances of success even further. The permanent

style of self-talk of optimists extends good things over time, whereas the temporary style of self-talk of pessimists restricts good things to isolated 'flukes' with little chance of their being repeated.

If you want to be happier, start thinking in terms of 'always' rather than 'sometimes' for the good things in life, and 'sometimes' rather than 'always' for the bad!

Pervasiveness

This component of optimism refers to whether you see the causes of events as specific to a particular situation or more universal or global across many situations in life. How pervasively you view causes of events is again revealed by your style of self-talk. For example, if something good happens:

Pessimist (specific):

- 'I'm good at football.'
- 'I got that promotion because I sucked up to the boss.'
- 'They only play with me because I own a basketball.'

Optimist (universal, global):

- 'I'm good at sport.'
- 'I got the promotion because I was the best.'
- 'They play with me because they like me.'

• ‘She broke off our engagement because I’m hopeless at relationships.’

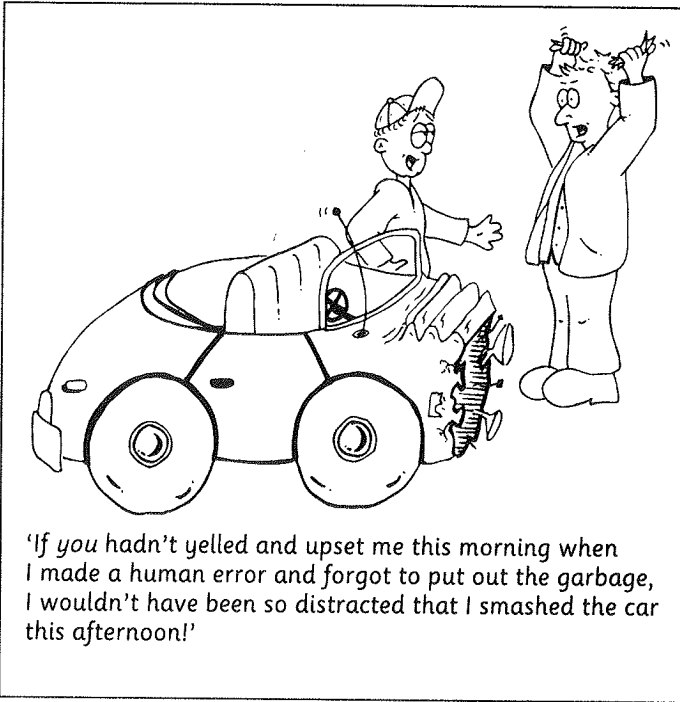
• ‘She broke off our engagement because we just didn’t click.’

The more your self-talk reflects good things happening because of your great general character and bad things happening because of specific situations, the more optimistic you will be. However, it is also important to keep your feet on the ground and not be blinded by optimism that denies realities you should be aware of!

Personalisation

Do you believe causes are internal or external? This component of optimism can be a double-edged sword with pitfalls for both optimists and pessimists. Optimists tend to see other people or external events as being responsible when something goes wrong. Since they don’t blame themselves, they feel less guilty and less ashamed than pessimists, who blame themselves for anything and everything going wrong.

Because optimists tend to blame external events, they have higher personal esteem than pessimists, who internalise the blame. But that also means optimists can get very angry when things go wrong, because it’s always somebody else’s fault!



The trick is to view what has happened honestly and accurately and take an appropriate degree of individual responsibility for what has occurred. If you are responsible, take the responsibility but see it as a specific temporary lapse (optimistic self-talk), not as a generalised permanent flaw in your character (pessimistic self-talk).

In summary, then:

	<i>Pessimists:</i>	<i>Optimists:</i>
<i>Permanence</i>		
• Positive events	Temporary causes	Permanent causes
• Negative events	Permanent causes	Temporary causes
<i>Pervasiveness</i>		
• Positive events	Specific reasons	Global reasons
• Negative events	Global reasons	Specific reasons
<i>Personalisation</i>		
• Positive events	External causes	Internal causes
• Negative events	Internal causes	External causes

Optimism makes you successful

An optimistic style of self-talk has been found to be the single most important predictor of who is successful in life. By success I mean how well you are able to reach your full potential – intellectually, educationally, socially, emotionally and financially – given the limitations of the opportunities available to you, the



traits you inherited and your responsibilities. An optimistic style of self-talk allows you to maximise and seize opportunities when they occur without necessarily compromising your responsibility to others.

An optimistic style of self-talk has been found to be the single most important predictor of who is successful in life.

(However, do remember that a little pessimism can sometimes allow you to see things more realistically. In life – and especially in business – you may need to temper optimistic thinking with

appropriate caution. If you are naturally optimistic and you are dealing with someone who keeps saying 'Yes, but ...', it would be wise to hear them out. Apart from the fact that they may balance your

enthusiasm with caution, hearing them out shows a respect for and a recognition of their views. It also makes compromise much easier to negotiate!)

Although there does seem to be a significant genetic component to the tendency of a person's style of self-talk, there is also overwhelming evidence that it is influenced by the style of those around you in childhood. There is absolutely no doubt that you can change from a pessimistic to an optimistic style by changing your self-talk and in doing so you can effectively immunise yourself, and your children, from major depression. Doctor Martin Seligman, an American psychologist, recently co-ordinated a Depression Prevention Project for children, with startling results. By teaching children optimistic styles of self-talk, they were able to dramatically decrease the children's chances of developing serious depression. This program is outlined in his book *The Optimistic Child*.

Not only are optimistic people more successful and less likely to become seriously depressed, but they are also healthier, suffer less chronic illness, and make better recovery from serious illness such as cancer or heart disease.

In short ...

- ☞ Be a realistic optimist. You don't have to deny real pain. You *are* allowed to feel it.
- ☞ Try to avoid using 'permanent' words like 'always' and 'never' when you hit a rough patch. And don't be too ready to blame yourself in your self-talk.
- ☞ Terms such as 'this time' or 'sometimes' are better applied to the negative events. This way you give yourself a sporting chance of success the 'next time'.
- ☞ Be honest with yourself when things go wrong: it's more likely a temporary lapse (perfectly human) than a permanent character flaw.
- ☞ Even if you learnt to look on the black side as a child, it's never too late to unlearn this habit. Change your self-talk to a more optimistic style. The results will astound you.

The 2nd Secret: Happy people like themselves

The myth that high self-esteem
makes you happy

Happy people have good self-acceptance but not necessarily high self-esteem.

As a newly qualified psychologist working initially as a consultant in schools, I often felt distinctly uneasy about the heavy and increasing emphasis well-meaning teachers and parents placed on making children feel good about themselves regardless of the circumstances. A child's failures, lack of skill or aptitude, and lack of effort were ignored so that only positives were openly discussed. A philosophy emerged that claimed 'everyone is special'; there are no gifted children because everyone is 'gifted'. This led to radical changes in teaching methods and to the complete abandonment of the needs of children with high ability levels

(although children with low ability levels were given special attention).

Primary schools were riddled with exercises on 'Who am I?' or 'I am special' that asked children to list all their positive characteristics, usually based on how they compared with other people or how other people saw them: 'I'm pretty' or 'I'm good at running' – ad nauseam.

Although teachers and parents were heavily into the denial that not all children are special (if they are all special then nobody is special by definition), the children themselves were not deluded. Whether you called reading groups red, yellow and blue according to ability, the children still knew that red were best at reading, yellow were average and blue were hopeless. Instead of being allowed to accept their differences, frustrations and inadequacies and then being taught how to deal with them, the children were left in a fantasy land of pretence and denial with no opportunity to learn how to constructively use negative feelings. Failure, with its accompanying frustration, anxiety and challenges, encourages greater effort to achieve mastery and success, but only if the child is not protected from sometimes feeling bad.

'At least you tried' sounds reassuring, but in fact it stifles the expression and explanation of bad and

negative feelings. Kids grow up avoiding any situation likely to create bad feelings, because they have had little practice in dealing constructively with such feelings.

A source of great conflict between myself, as a consultant representing the interests of the child and his/her parents, and schools was in deciding whether a child should be promoted to the next grade when it was clear they had not mastered the skills taught in the grade they were in. Teachers were

☞ 'At least you tried' sounds reassuring, but in fact it stifles the expression and explanation of bad and negative feelings. ☞

often obsessed with a belief (and a fear) that the discomfort of not going up with their peers would somehow doom them for life. Parents could often see that because of age or for developmental reasons their child needed more time at the same level. Invariably when I spoke to the child there was an enormous sense of wide-eyed relief: 'Could I really stay down?' It was finally being acknowledged that they were struggling, and with sensitive teachers these children benefited enormously from being allowed to move at their own rate.

This 'let the child go up regardless of performance' policy is having disastrous consequences at secondary schools. In some state systems a student can enter

Year 7 and decide not to hand in a single piece of work. Unless the parents agree, the school is powerless to keep them down. Consequently you end up with the kids getting the message that no effort is required to proceed through Years 7, 8, 9 and 10. Apart from undermining other students and teachers wanting to take their education seriously, this causes these students to flounder at Year 12 with none of the skills needed to complete their final years of schooling, let alone face the realities of life and the workforce.

High self-acceptance, confidence and self-esteem come from doing things. They come from successfully working around and over obstacles rather than breezing to success with no effort.

Martin Seligman, originator of the depression prevention program, takes this further and hypothesises

that one of the reasons we are now having an epidemic of youth suicide is that these child-rearing and teaching practices stop children exploring and using negative feelings constructively. From my own clinical experience I have to say I tend to agree that this could

High self-acceptance, confidence and self-esteem come from doing things. They come from successfully working around and over obstacles rather than breezing to success with no effort.

be one of the vital factors in the complex causes of an increase in youth suicide.

High self-esteem based on *external* measures of your worth and how you compare with others actually makes you emotionally very vulnerable. If for some reason you can no longer be a great footballer or are retrenched from your job, you no longer have this externally given self-worth. So what's left? Who are you without your job, your membership of a club, your sport, your public positions?

A group of doctors I was giving a lecture to on this topic became extremely defensive at this suggestion. They could not accept that so much of their self-worth was driven by their profession – until I asked them to think about who they were without their stethoscopes. The shocked and uncomfortable silence that followed clearly demonstrated how hollow their self-esteem was.

If your self-opinion and self-esteem are based on labels (see page 56), you are even more vulnerable. Labels have inherent value judgements attached to them. They are often negative and illogical, incorporating generalised opinions that are often personal attacks on you: clumsy, idiot, silly, hopeless, useless, bitch, dill, stupid, dumb, nerd, wimp, scatterbrain, airhead ... Even positive labels have value judgements attached to them comparing you, or your achievements, with others: pretty, clever, intelligent, caring,

conscientious ... If the labels are given to you by others you feel good, but if you depend on them for your self-worth then you have to live with the fact that others may take away or change that label if you don't continually live up to it. This keeps you insecure, anxious and a victim of other people's values.

Avoiding the trap of feeling good because of external opinions of you and your achievements means avoiding labels and sticking to the facts. Facts concentrate only on what you did, not on who you are. They are specific rather than global, so even if you've made a monstrous mistake only the mistake is attacked, not you as a person. For example, 'I lost today, but I'm not a loser. This is not the end of my life' (Greg Norman on losing the 1996 US Masters Golf Tournament).

If others try to label you, use your internal self-talk to change the label into a specific action. For example:

External label: You're stupid, you smashed the car.

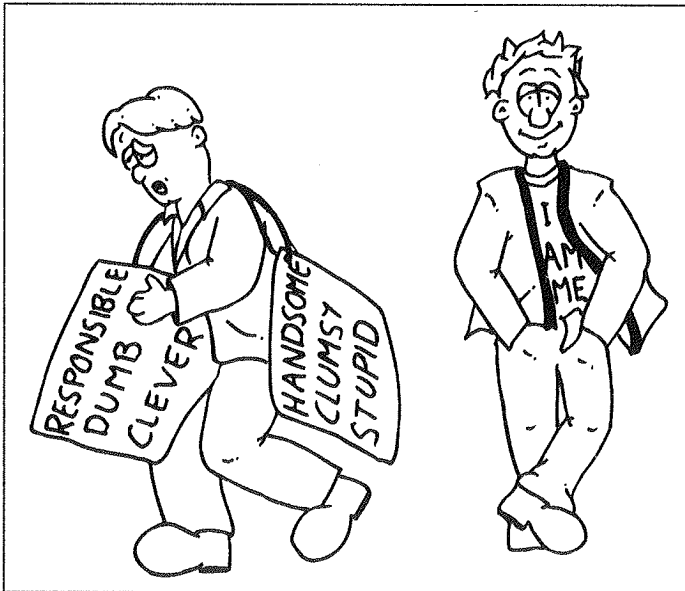
Internal self-talk: I smashed the car and he's upset.

External label: You're a pain in the neck.

Internal self-talk: I'm annoying him at the moment and he wants to be alone.

If you are dealing with other people, you can promote self-acceptance and self-liking in them by always sticking to the facts and never using labels. People who like themselves are much easier to deal with, so it's in your interest to promote happiness not only in yourself but also in others.

If you constantly rate your worth as a person on an external barometer, you tend to worry a great deal about what others think. To protect yourself from being scrutinised too carefully you put up barriers both to realistic self-appraisal and to the appraisal of others. The fear of not being thought well of by



others makes you avoid risks and new situations and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to take appropriate

☞ If you constantly rate your worth as a person on an external barometer, you tend to worry a great deal about what others think. ☞

blame or responsibility if something goes wrong: 'They might discover the idiot I really am'. You can become totally controlled by trying to please others to gain positive feedback about your

worth. Alternatively you're so consumed by your own worries that you become self-centred.

In relationships, relying on an external barometer of your worth can make it impossible for you to work collaboratively because you must win, you must be better – not just different. You tend to see people as either on your side or actively against you. You see ambivalence in others as a judgement against you. Your self becomes like an air-filled sponge; bland, with no substance. It is only attractive when you add external extras on top: icing, sprinkles, lollies, cream, chocolates. It's the extras that make it taste good.

But when you start to accept yourself, you are like a luscious fruitcake, with a rich full-flavoured body and firm texture, spiked with glistening jewels of fruit and nuts. Any decorations placed on top are a bonus, but the cake itself is richly fulfilling and can stand alone.

Self-acceptance makes you happier

Self-acceptance allows you to be comfortable with all aspects of yourself, good and bad. You feel confident that you can change if you want to change. You can be yourself; you don't need to hide behind a role. Because you are not competing with others, you can work collaboratively to fix a mistake or to solve a problem. You can accept other people's mistakes and you can genuinely enjoy their successes, because their mistakes and their successes make no difference to your own sense of self-worth.

Accepting yourself frees you to make rules and to change rules according to your own needs and responsibilities, not other people's.

Self-acceptance allows you to be comfortable with all aspects of yourself, good and bad.

The freedom to choose your own rules liberates you from unnecessary guilt. Once you no longer keep rating the worth of yourself and others, you can enjoy the challenge of competition and winning without needing to reaffirm yourself. Accepting yourself allows you to enjoy the doing rather than focusing on the outcome. It becomes easier to live in the moment and therefore to be happier.

JADE – A CASE STUDY

Jade was fifteen and a brilliant, gifted athlete. Ever since she was at primary school she had excelled at running. She ran because she just loved the feeling of the air moving against her body. She'd run in the sun or in the rain. The light track clothing made her feel free and relaxed as she moved.

But then she was chosen for serious training as a potential Olympian. The focus was no longer on the joy of running but on goals, trophies and medals. The coaches were beside themselves with her ability and soon Jade's parents also became consumed with the goal of winning. Jade had always liked to win but for her it had been a bonus, the icing on the cake. It was the actual running that gave her joy.

Jade had always enjoyed the approval of others but had never really needed it. Within twelve months of serious training she was severely depressed and literally running out of control. It was only when she refused point-blank to move to the blocks at the start of a championship that her coaches and parents started to listen.

Do you *need* approval or do you simply *enjoy* approval?

If your self-worth is externally based, you will be constantly pursuing approval and adjusting your life to gain it from others. But if you truly accept yourself you will enjoy approval as an incidental bonus, while

being motivated in your life by what gives you satisfaction and pleasure.

This does not mean that you become oblivious to other people's opinions or needs, or your responsibilities to others. We are social animals that must naturally support each other. Self-acceptance and self-liking mean you are appropriately aware of your responsibilities to others and of what is an appropriate degree of influence for them on you and for you on them. But accepting yourself makes it easier to accept the blemishes and failures of others without judgement and condemnation. Eliminating hostility promotes better interpersonal relationships generally.

☞ *Accepting yourself makes it easier to accept the blemishes and failures of others without judgement and condemnation.* ☞

Being yourself

One of the most rewarding aspects of liking and accepting yourself is the relief of being able to be yourself. There's no need to hide behind a role or image, no need to build a fort around yourself so others can't see the terrible *real* you.

Liking and being yourself also protects your sense

of self from external changes in your life. When you are *you*, regardless of your job, friends, interests and achievements, you are more resilient and able to adapt

Many people don't allow themselves to be themselves. Instead they squash themselves into moulds of other people's expectations.

with yourself intact if these things are threatened. If your identity is not dependent on any one particular aspect of yourself, be it a job or a skill, you will have tremendous freedom to experiment with lots

of other activities and occupations: you can focus on enjoying the doing, which is what happiness is all about.

Many people don't allow themselves to be themselves. Instead they squash themselves into moulds of other people's expectations: their parents', friends', spouse's or peers'.

TONY AND BILL - TWO CASE STUDIES

Tony had always loved working with wood. His parents were both professionals who thought Tony's extraordinary skills were fine as a hobby but certainly not to be considered for a future occupation. He attended highly academic schools where his reports repeatedly said Tony was not working to his ability. He knew himself that his 'A's could have been 'A+'s but he hated the academic subjects and preferred art, graphics and technology. He fulfilled the

school's and his parents' expectations anyway and studied computer science.

In his late twenties Tony came to see me, seriously depressed. His work paid him handsomely and gave him and his wife an enviable lifestyle. But as we explored what made him happy, it became obvious that Tony's need for an active physical lifestyle and an outlet for the extraordinary creativity that bubbled in his mind were being constantly stifled.

Unfortunately Tony's wife could not accept the idea of being married to a carpenter rather than a computer programmer, and after months of anguish and his being on antidepressant medication, they separated.

A year later he wrote to me about his wonderful new life and described feeling as if he had been released after years in prison. The depression was long gone and he was now doing all kinds of highly skilled woodwork, had a new relationship and didn't mind the huge drop in income.

'I now feel like I'm *me* and my parents are just going to have to get used to the idea that their son is not what *they* want him to be.'

Bill was twenty-four and was referred to me by his psychiatrist and physician. Two years previously his father had developed emphysema and his health was deteriorating rapidly. Bill hated school and had left at the age of fourteen. He had worked, or more accurately had slaved, on his

parents' large dairy farm ever since. He had no social life, and soon after his father's illness was diagnosed he developed severe asthma, which stopped him from working. Both parents had expected Bill to take over the farm 'one day' but in the meantime he had been paid little and desperately wanted to become a chef and work with people. Bill's highly extroverted and likeable personality was totally at odds with life on this isolated farm.

He soon realised that the physician and psychiatrist had been right and that his sudden asthma attack was more psychological than physical. He was unable to separate himself from his father's expectations to the point where he took on his father's health problems as well.

Finally his parents were forced to sell the farm and Bill no longer felt obliged to live with them. He took a job, first as a kitchen hand and then as an adult apprentice. By the time he graduated from college as a chef his asthma had disappeared.

If you feel a sense of pervasive unhappiness and discontent with your life, it may be worth exploring why you are doing the things you do. We all have responsibilities to others but this must be balanced by considering your responsibility to yourself.

So often I see young people struggling with higher education or particular courses because everyone tells

them education is crucial to their future. But languishing in a course or lifestyle you hate can stop you discovering your real talents in the workforce. Some young people need to try working before they can really discover what they are good at and what they would actually enjoy studying.

In short ...

- ☞ It's better to acknowledge and to learn to deal with your less charming characteristics and inadequacies than to live in a fantasy land of never feeling bad.
- ☞ Learn to explore and use your negative feelings constructively.
- ☞ Don't look only to external measures of your self-worth. This can make you vulnerable if or when these externals fail you.
- ☞ Don't hang value-laden labels on yourself – either negative or positive. They are probably based on other people's value systems anyway.
- ☞ Don't be controlled by a desire to please others in order to boost your self-worth.

94 Secrets of Happy People

- ② Enjoy the relief of liking and accepting yourself. You'll be free to enjoy the doing, you won't be intimidated by the outcome and you'll be able to live in the moment. This is being really happy.
- ② Consider your responsibility to yourself as well as to others.

The 3rd Secret: Happy people have a sense of personal control

Who's in control?

One of the strongest predictors of who feels happy is the degree to which an individual feels in personal control of their life.

If you tend to think 'the average person can influence government decisions', you would have a strong internal locus of control. However, if you think 'the world is run by a few powerful people' then you would have an external locus of control.

A sense of control over your life also improves your health. An experiment done in a nursing home gave each patient on one floor a pot plant to look after. Patients on another floor were given pot plants that the staff looked after. Those patients looking after the pot plants were also given a choice of meals whereas the other patients were given the same meals

but on days determined by the staff. At the end of one year 93 per cent of those patients who had been given more control of their daily lives were more alert and active, happier and healthier than the patients given no more control.

A sense of control over your life improves your health.

Animals put in a highly stressful situation that they could not control had tumours that grew much more rapidly than the

tumours in animals that could control the stress of the situation (in this case being able to stop electric shocks).

In the workplace, giving workers more control over their work space, air temperature and decision-making has consistently improved productivity and the level of job satisfaction, and has decreased sick leave.

JIM AND HELEN - A CASE STUDY

Jim and Helen both held good jobs, which should have given them and their three children relative security and a high standard of living. Helen had been educated at an exclusive girls' boarding school and Jim had been educated in the State system. Helen had enjoyed and appreciated her own privileged education, which had given her many advantages. Jim felt he had missed out and was determined his children

would be educated at the best private schools.

When the children entered secondary school, fees and extras began eating up all Helen's income and some of Jim's as well. Within the prevailing economic climate, the future of both their jobs became uncertain and they lived in constant fear that they might have to withdraw their children from their schools.

This fear came to dominate their lives and great tension developed in their relationship. Jim worked harder and harder, taking every promotion he could get to try to accumulate a reserve of funds in case one of them lost their job.

Neither did, but Jim developed serious heart disease. He was faced with a choice: either reduce his working hours or lose his life. When he came to see me he was contemplating suicide, as he rationalised that the insurance would allow his children to finish their private education!

Most distressing for Jim and Helen was the feeling that their lives were not theirs to live but were controlled by some external factor: school fees. It was Jim's children who eventually straightened out his thinking. They told him how much they had missed him when he went overseas on regular business trips and that although changing schools would be hard, losing their dad would be infinitely worse.

Consequently, Jim took a less demanding job in the same company and the family moved to a smaller but more expensive house in order to be in the zoning for a highly

regarded State secondary school. Suddenly the family had money for the theatre, good holidays and leisure activities, as well as more relaxed time together as a family. Jim's health improved dramatically and he described his enjoyment and happiness as being greater than at any time in his life.

Reassessing their priorities and values had been difficult for Jim and Helen. They had locked themselves into thinking 'our children should go to private schools', and it was hard to change. They also had to challenge the rules in their heads that said 'Children won't receive their best chance in life at a State school' and 'Parents are totally responsible for their children's chances at success'. However, once they accepted the realities of their financial situation they were able to find a constructive alternative.

Jim and Helen came to realise that their old assumptions implied that their children had little control or input into their own education: the parents unwittingly fostered a belief that their children's futures were solely determined by the particular schools they attended.

To have an internal locus of control does not mean thinking you are in absolute and total control of (and therefore to blame for) everything that happens to you. It does not mean believing 'I chose to be molested as a child' or 'I choose to be sick'. These kinds of

beliefs are attractive to some people because they deny the reality that they can't actually control everything that happens.

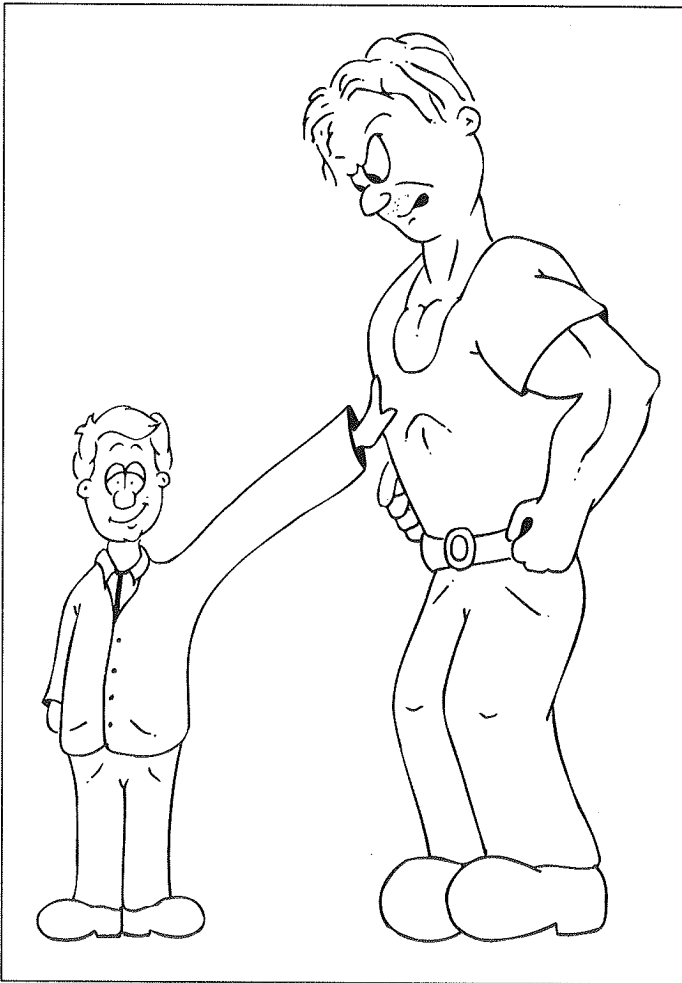
Having an internal locus of control means that you tend to see yourself as having an influence over your life. You don't see yourself as a helpless victim buffeted every which way by life.

You determine how stressed you feel

In order to have a sense of personal control, you need to have a very good understanding of the chain reaction linking events, thoughts and feelings.

It is not the events themselves that are inherently stressful but the meaning we attach to these events. Some years ago I worked with groups of army wives who were constantly moving as their husbands were reposted. Most of these women had had to move several times in the previous two years, and they and their children were severely affected by the constant breaking of friendships and changes of school.

However, as each woman related her tale of misery (quite justified I thought) one woman said nothing. After an hour of anguished weeping by the others in the group, this woman suddenly said, 'Well, I don't



understand you all. Moving all the time is great. I don't have to put up with the same decor, the army paints the house I'm moving into, I make new friends and my kids have pen pals all over the Pacific. Every

holiday we go and stay with a different old friend at one of the previous postings. It's marvellous'.

We all gaped at this woman's happiness with her situation. The same situation (and she had actually moved the most in the shortest time) had a totally different

It is not events themselves that are inherently stressful but the meaning we attach to events.

meaning for her. But what was particularly interesting was the effect she had on the other women. By then, they had all had their chance to fully express their anguish and have it recognised, so her comments helped them to steer their own thinking in quite a different direction. Within a short time there was much laughter and hope as they swapped funny stories about people and places, removalists, lost belongings and children's reactions, and started to actually plan and look at their next move quite differently.

These women had suddenly discovered that they had a choice about how they perceived the situation and what beliefs they developed about it. Their self-talk changed and consequently so did their feelings. They realised that if they pooled their experiences they could write a short survival manual for moving and making new friends – for themselves and for their children at their new schools. Sharing and learning these moving skills dramatically reduced the stress of

the next move: they had the necessary skills to deal with the situation, and they had more control.

It's your choice

When you are faced with the responsibility for something you don't want to do but feel you should, it can relieve the anguish considerably to say to yourself 'I don't have to do this, but I choose to'.

When my grandmother was in a nursing home for some years, visiting her could be an emotionally draining and depressing occasion. I felt for her having to live there and knew that taking her young great-grandchildren to visit was something she really enjoyed. Once I started to say to myself 'I *choose* to visit her' rather than 'I *have* to visit her', my feelings also changed.

I actually found it quite easy and pleasant to think of things to do with her and with the children whenever we visited.

Nobody is holding a gun to your head, so saying 'I choose ...' puts the locus of control back inside you, whereas saying 'I have to ...' externalises the control. It

makes you feel a victim of circumstances and of other people's demands.

☞ Saying 'I choose ...' puts the locus of control back inside you, whereas saying 'I have to ...' externalises the control. It makes you feel a victim of circumstances and of other people's demands. ☞

Controlling time

Happy people also take control of their time. They make manageable plans and commitments. They are busy, purposeful and punctual.

Activity promotes happy feelings whereas aimlessness, boredom, and poor time management is a characteristic of unhappy people.

☞ *If you want to be happy, you need to act happy and that means doing the things that happy people do.* ☞

If you want to be happy, you need to act happy and that means doing the things that happy people do. It is a myth to think that you can't do more or do happy things until you *are* happy. Happiness is very much a state in which the pleasant things in life outnumber the unpleasant, and in which there are high experiences of intense pleasure to look forward to, for example a weekend away or seeing a show.

Sorting out your priorities

To have time for the pleasant things in life you may have to become ruthless about your priorities. There just isn't enough time in the day or money in the bank to do everything. To stop feeling overwhelmed and to give yourself more time, simplify your life. Consider the following:

- How much of what you do is necessary, how much

is habit and how much is 'because everybody else is doing it'?

- Which relationships are important to you, which are no longer relevant and which are 'dead'?
- What do you really need in your home and what is unnecessary clutter? (If you haven't used, appreciated or worn something in the last twelve months, maybe it's time to get rid of it. The fewer possessions you have the less time you have to spend looking after them.) How big a house and mortgage do you really need?
- What do you *need* and what do you *want*? (Sort out your financial priorities in this way. Get good financial advice, budget, and liberate yourself from future debt by cutting up your credit cards.)

Simplifying your life by reducing it to basic needs and to necessary and rewarding commitments gives you more time, money and energy for yourself and your *real* responsibilities. When you start sorting out your priorities, you start controlling your life.

You *can* stop worrying

You may believe it is impossible for you to feel a sense of personal control because you can't stop

worrying. Worrying keeps you focused on the past and the future, which makes it impossible to enjoy the present.

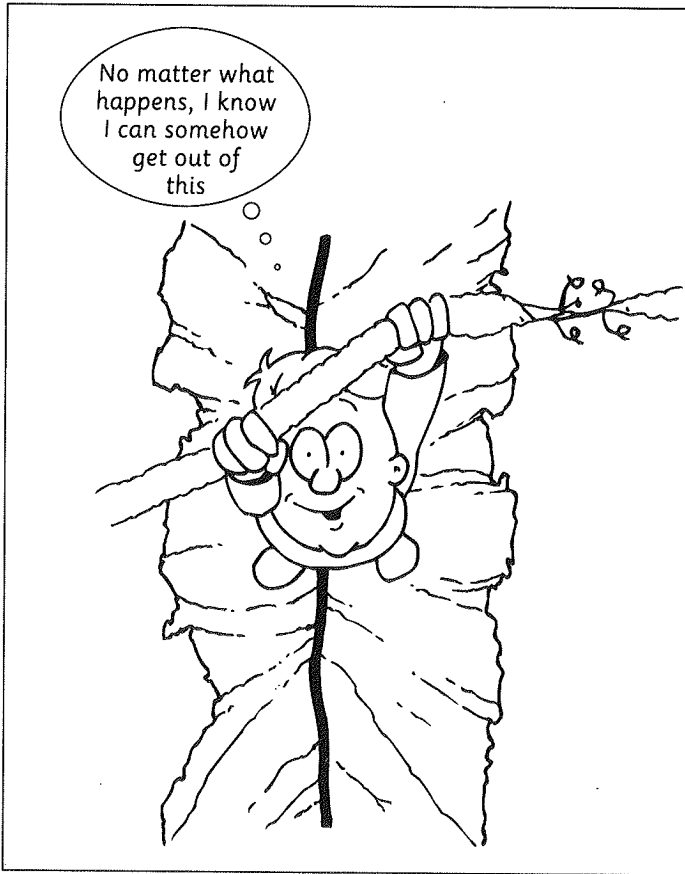
To stop worrying you can:

Try 'rubber band' therapy (see page 60). This is a way of stopping unwanted intrusive thoughts. The sharp pain wipes the thought and allows you to choose to focus on something more pleasant.

Practise self-talk. A very powerful form of self-talk for constant worriers is to say to yourself, 'No matter what happens, I know I can somehow cope with whatever I have to'. At the same time take a deep breath and breathe out slowly, imagining all tension draining away as your body fills with new energy.

It is very important to remember that as a human being you have been designed to cope with a great many unhappy and sad things – 'the roughage of life' – as well as the good things in life. Even terminal illness can be coped with extremely well if you allow yourself to cope and make use of any outside help you may need. *Many things happen that we don't want to happen, but that doesn't mean that we can't deal with them.*

When I was being threatened and harassed on the



phone by people unhappy with my last book, I had to stop and say to myself, every time the phone rang, 'No matter what this call is about I can stay calm and comfortable and deal with it in the most appropriate way'.

I surprised even myself at how well I could manage difficult and dangerous situations with this self-talk.

Set aside 'worry time'. Another useful strategy is to set aside a 'worry time' each day so that the rest of the time you can focus on the 'now', not on the future or the past.

As something that's worrying you comes to mind, write it down and deal with it later in your worrying session. Make the duration of your worrying session the same each day, perhaps fifteen minutes. Allow yourself to relax and contemplate each concern. Explore possible solutions. Break down each concern into the things you can and can't do about it.

Make time for exercise. For distress that causes physical pain, particularly in your chest, aerobic exercise or using weights to work the upper body may be the only way to get relief. (But first make sure the pains in your chest are emotional, not physical.) Very distressing situations create stress hormones that build up, particularly in the cardiovascular system, increasing the deposition of plaque in blood vessels. Sweating from hard exercise is a highly effective way of releasing these hormones from the body. Even better is exercise that involves social contact such as dancing, gym work or team sports, because it helps distract you from your troubles.

Allow yourself to enjoy this moment. Patients find that one of the most difficult things to cope with is waiting for medical test results with a possible life-threatening outcome. For many the uncertainty of not knowing what they are facing can be more difficult when a series of tests are taken over months or years of check-ups to monitor the progress of a previously treated illness such as cancer.

You can start to feel that your whole life revolves around these tests, that your life is suspended as you approach a test and then wait for the results. Coping

with this situation entails focusing very much on each second. Ask yourself if you are prepared to allow yourself to really enjoy this

☞ *Focus on fully experiencing each moment as it occurs.* ☞

moment; to ignore the past and the future. Focus instead on fully experiencing each moment as it occurs.

Turn anxiety into specific fears. For those facing greater and greater dependence on others as illness progresses, the need to do what you can do and accept what you can't becomes even more important. If you feel anxiety as a generalised sensation, turn it into a specific fear and do what you can about that. If you have disturbing physical symptoms or are recovering from serious illness or trauma, don't worry about unexplained

symptoms: do something about them. Ring your doctor or have tests. Find out specifically what you are dealing with. Imagine the relief if you find your fears are groundless, and reassure yourself that even if the news is not welcome, you will be able to find the resources you need to deal with it.

If you are frightened of dying, work out exactly what bothers you about death. Is it the process of dying that worries you? Are you concerned about what will happen to your family? Do you have religious concerns? Are you bothered by the thought of your spouse marrying someone else? Get help to deal with the practical aspect of your fears; good counselling will help you with the spiritual or emotional aspects.

If you worry about your teenage children, think about what specifically you are frightened of: unprotected sex? drunk driving? sexually transmitted diseases? drugs? dubious friendships? all of the above?! By focusing on your specific fear you can deal precisely with that subject by providing information, transport, or effective listening. If all of the above are a problem, maybe you need to seek some expert help in dealing with the situation. Whatever the fear, don't just think about it: do something about it!

Whatever the fear, don't just think about it: do something about it!

Make decisions. Worriers often have great difficulty making decisions because they are frightened of the consequences of being wrong.

If this is you, remind yourself that decisions can be made only based on the information available at the time. On weighing the pros and cons, make a decision and allow yourself the right to perhaps be wrong in hindsight. Remind yourself that nobody makes decisions without sometimes making mistakes. It's often better to make a wrong decision than to make no decision at all. Tell yourself 'I'm allowed to make a mistake' and 'I know that no matter what the outcome I'll be able to find the resources to deal with the consequences'.

Take time-out. Sometimes worrying develops because you really need a holiday or some time-out from the routine and hassle of everyday life. Worrying about little things can mean that you need to take a break either for a few minutes or a whole day or a few weeks. It can be the first sign of a general burn-out, so treat it seriously.

Occasionally all you need to do is to continue living your usual life, but begin to ruthlessly discard what isn't strictly your business. 'See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' for a while. Avoid all bad news on

TV, radio and newspapers until you feel you are able to keep a better sense of proportion.

When worrying becomes obsession

It is perfectly normal to worry, even to worry a lot. However, if you find yourself preoccupied not only by thoughts but also by images or impulses, or if you feel compelled to carry out some ritual to try to neutralise anxiety, you may have an obsessive compulsive condition. Once properly diagnosed, these conditions can be treated extremely well. If you suspect this is you, consult a psychologist trained to treat obsessions and compulsions with a treatment called cognitive behaviour therapy. Often this condition is associated with clinical depression that may not be obvious. It is essential that the depression is also treated.

It is perfectly normal to worry, even to worry a lot.

Whose responsibility is it?

To have a sense of personal control also means taking only appropriate responsibility for your own and other people's feelings and/or behaviour. Some people tend to try to make other people feel better, becoming family peacemakers burdened by other people's

problems. Others tend to try to control behaviour, either their children's or their spouse's.

It's often difficult enough in life managing your own feelings and actions without loading yourself up with other people's. Some of us use controlling others as a way of escaping our own conflicts, unsatisfying relationships or difficult behaviour, saying to ourselves 'If only you were happier, nicer, kinder . . . , then I would be happy'.

Teenagers commonly use their parents as scapegoats for everything wrong in their lives: 'They don't understand me'.

It can be quite healthy for teenagers to start to have a more realistic picture of their parents' strengths and weaknesses in order to become more independent and develop their own sense of self. But this does not have to be a destructive condemnation of their parents' bewildered attempts to muddle through parenthood, often with only very poor parenting role models in their own background.

If teenagers start to take more responsibility for their own feelings and actions and stop blaming everyone else, they are not only empowering and making themselves happier, but they also allow a far deeper and more adult-to-adult relationship to develop with their parents.

Taking responsibility for others' problems

Abdicating responsibility for yourself or poking your nose into other people's business will have two destructive consequences.

Firstly, people resent your interference and get irritable and angry with you. They get angry because you are giving them clear messages that you don't think they are capable of solving their own problems. The more you control your children's lives physically and emotionally, the more dependent and less secure they will become. This is not to say you abandon them, but rather from a very early age you encourage them to do as much for themselves as possible – physically and emotionally. Children and adults need loving support, but they don't generally need you to give them all the answers and to fix the problem.

For instance, if your child complains of being teased you could march down to the school next morning, child in tow, and demand that everyone from the principal down 'do something about it'! Or you could empathise with how hurt your child feels and help them explore what is also going on in their own head about the teasing.

☞ The more you control your children's lives physically and emotionally, the more dependent and less secure they will become. ☞

Help them identify their own self-talk. 'He said

'I'm dumb, therefore I am dumb, so I feel stupid.'

Help them to realise that someone else's label isn't necessarily true and that they can change the voice in their head to 'He said I'm dumb, but what would he know? I can find maths tricky but I can read well and tell great stories and ... so I'm definitely not dumb'.

Even very young children are impressed to realise that they can control their feelings by the self-talk in their heads. Of course, if the teasing is not a minor isolated incident then you should notify the school immediately.

When someone starts to tell you their problems, just listen instead of coming up with all the answers, or if asked for advice, explore different options but insist they decide the best option for themselves.

The more you either state or give the impression that you believe they have the ability to choose the best option for themselves, the more they tend to live up to that trust and faith.

The second thing that happens when you take responsibility away from others is that you end up worn out. If you go around trying not to upset anyone, you inevitably put your own needs last and nobody ever

It can be a wonderful relief to hand back the problem to the person it belongs to.

listens to *your* problems. They suck you dry and move

on, leaving you gasping. It can be a wonderful relief to hand back the problem to the person it belongs to:

- 'Where is my maths book?'
'I don't know, go and look for it.'
- 'I haven't got any socks.'
'The drawer was full of socks. Look harder.'
- 'He won't turn the music down.'
'Perhaps you had better talk to him.'
- 'That daughter of yours is getting very cheeky.'
'Perhaps you had better talk to her.'
- 'Johnny is upset about his exams; you can get through to him better than I can.'
'In that case you had better talk to him so you can practise how to get through to him.'
- 'If you hadn't insisted I do my chores I wouldn't have been late for football practice.'
'If you had taken responsibility for doing your chores instead of watching TV you wouldn't have been late.'

Before you blindly step in to solve either an emotional upset or a problem, STOP and ask yourself two questions:

- 'Whose problem is this?'
- 'Whose responsibility is this?'

Only then take appropriate responsibility, if any, for fixing it. Put the responsibility back where it should be and insist that those responsible solve it. Initially people will be annoyed with you as they are used to using you and not having to learn the skills to do what's necessary themselves. But once they get the message they will start to enjoy the responsibility because it empowers them with more personal control of their own lives.

That's one of the secrets of being happy.

In business this can mean not just happier workers but much more profitable businesses. A manager needs to learn to direct responsibility and facilitate an environment where possible solutions are offered for

his or her consideration rather than allowing problems to be dumped on his or her desk. The more managers are able to put faith in those directly responsible for creating the solutions, the more per-

☞ The energy gained from no longer carrying the world's problems makes you feel lighter, bouncier and happier. ☞

sonal control these workers will feel and therefore the greater the personal satisfaction they will have in what they are doing.

The energy gained from no longer carrying the world's problems makes you feel lighter, bouncier and happier.

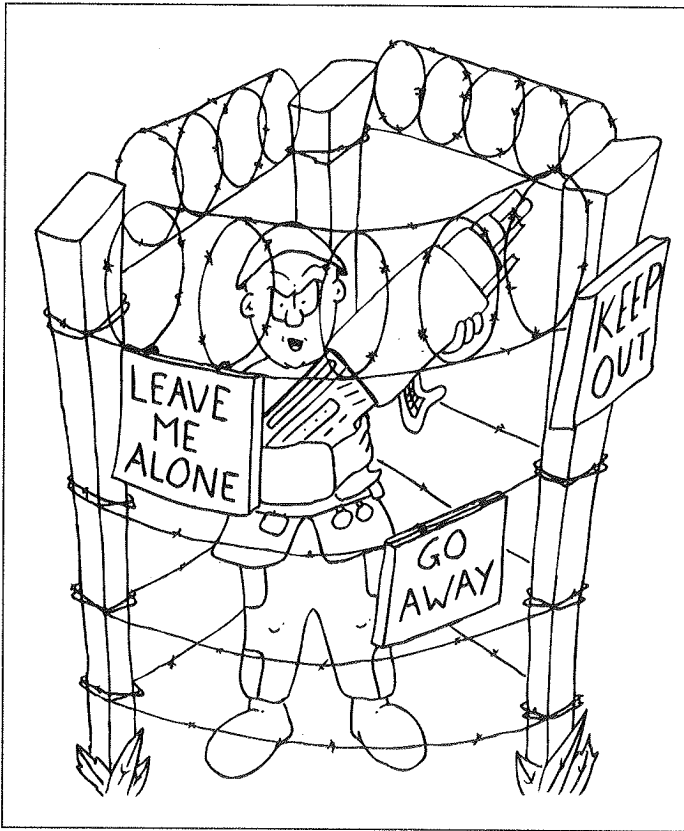
Personal boundaries

Many people would love to off-load all that inappropriate responsibility but they find it hard to work out how much or how little responsibility they should feel. Either they build a wall around themselves and don't let anyone in, or they are unable to create appropriate personal space.

This is particularly the case with anyone who has grown up in an abusive environment where their physical, emotional or sexual space has been violated or not allowed to develop.

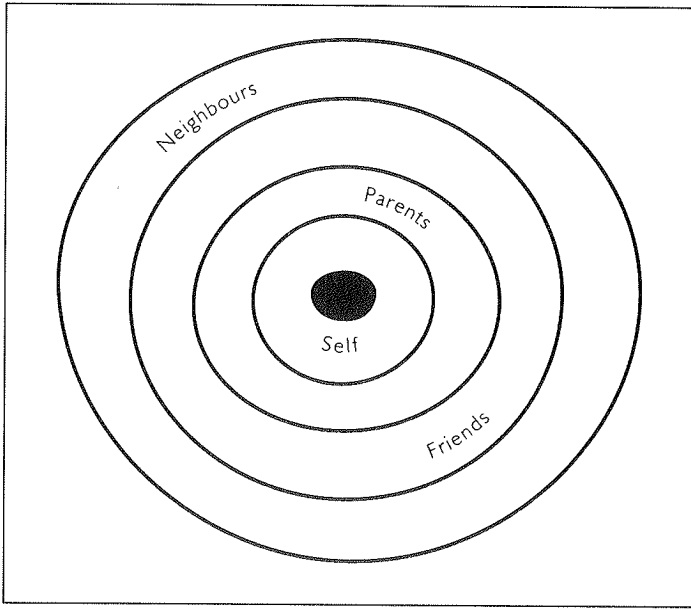
One of the most insidious consequences of child abuse is that the child, then the adult they become, does not feel they have any right to a personal private space. They come to believe that anyone can intrude right to the centre of their being and, depending on the abuse, this can be the emotional, physical or sexual self. In fact there is little concept of self; they belong to others, who do with them what they wish.

This can also happen with people who have never been abused but who are particularly emotionally sensitive and have never been encouraged or allowed to develop limits to their sensitivity for their own survival. Sensitive people can be easy to manipulate for the benefit of others. The child who senses friction between his or her parents and so does everything to



keep the peace between them can be unconsciously or quite deliberately used by the parents as the peacemaker, not only in the parental relationship but in sibling relationships as well.

The following diagram illustrates the concept of appropriate personal boundaries. A young baby does not see itself as separate from its mother. The baby becomes distressed when its mother is away or out of



Appropriate personal boundaries

sight because the degree of closeness is such that their personal boundaries are tightly intertwined. As the baby grows, and plays with its toes to explore its own physical boundaries, it also begins to explore its world. With development comes a stronger and stronger sense of self as separate from others and the environment. If the growth of this self-concept is allowed and nurtured, the child develops independence and self-confidence. In the teenage years healthy development means that the concept of self becomes even stronger and the relative emotional position and distance of family and friends starts to change.

The strong centre spot in the diagram represents you. Each concentric circle surrounding this spot is an emotional boundary. With healthy emotional development your family, friends and acquaintances will be at different distances from you, so some people will be allowed closer to you than others, and some people will be allowed to influence you more than others. The important thing is that it is up to you to decide and control which people are within which boundaries. In this way you will not be overwhelmed by competing and conflicting demands. Demands and influences will be prioritised according to what suits you and will vary at different times in your life. When you are a child your parents may be in the innermost ring, but when you are an adult your spouse or children may occupy this space and your parents assume a more distant space.

If you feel overwhelmed by emotional and physical demands from other people, it can be useful to draw this diagram, placing people at different distances from yourself so that you prioritise your relationships. This makes it much easier to take only appropriate responsibility for issues. It is still necessary to recognise even those closest to you as separate from yourself. When you meet someone, immediately place them on an appropriate boundary (this can change later). In

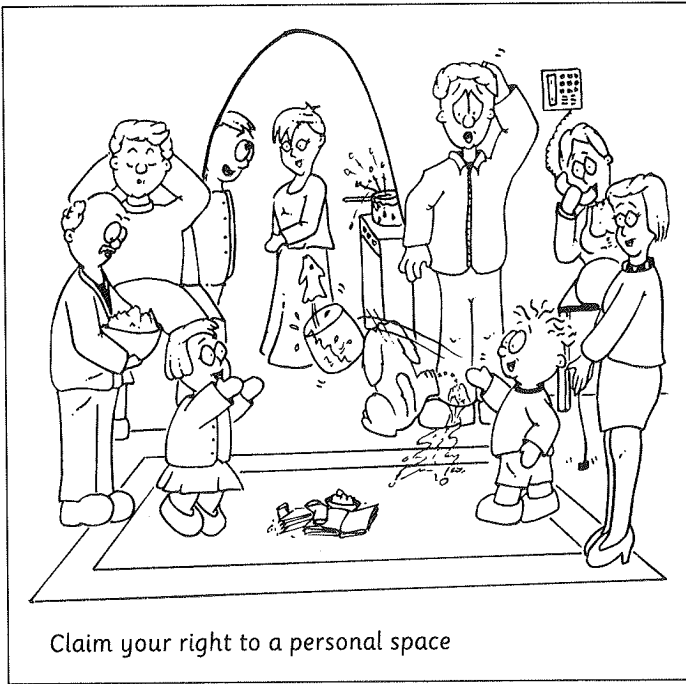
this way you can control the level of your involvement with different people. Claim your personal space so that you are not owned by others.

Those of you who are very sensitive or who have been abused may need to first establish yourself as having the right to have a personal space: physically, emotionally and sexually. People in these categories often have no real personal boundaries at all and everything that happens to everyone else is felt as if it is happening to them as well. They suffer with the people in war zones; they suffer with their neighbour's cancer; they feel the anguish of the death of a local child whom they don't even know; a bird killed by a car and dead on the road pains them; their children's rejection or failure at school tortures them; their sibling's marriage difficulty haunts them; their husband's lack of confidence distresses them.

☞ *Once you allow yourself to claim your right to a self with personal space, and you place the people in your life within different boundaries, you suddenly take control.* ☞

These people have no filters. Every bit of conflict, anguish, unhappiness or pain in the world is like an arrow shooting towards them and piercing their heart. It's very common for them to live, literally, with constant heartache and an aching jaw.

Such a lack of filters and boundaries around



yourself means that you have little sense of personal control and feel a victim of an unhappy and anguished world. It is common to end up in abusive family or work situations as you continue to allow people to dump their rubbish onto you. However, once you allow yourself to claim your right to a self with personal space, and you place the people in your life within different boundaries, you suddenly take control. The boundaries become see-through shields like bullet-proof glass allowing you to see and hear what's going on, but controlling how far you allow things into your

space, if at all. In this way you can imagine yourself observing lots of things but deliberately choosing your degree of involvement and type of response.

Developing a clear idea of your personal space and your personal boundaries allows you to recognise more clearly what is an appropriate degree of responsibility, and also what your priorities are.

Priorities can be cultural dynamite, because what are accepted priorities in one culture can be totally unacceptable in another ...

When an Australian Prime Minister cancelled an official visit to Japan to be with his wife while she had major surgery, the Australian community was completely supportive that he put his family needs and responsibilities first. However, Japan was outraged. In Japanese society public duty comes before family and many sections of the Japanese community saw his actions as an insult to Japan.

Cultures and people who do put family needs above duty to country or employer report much higher levels of happiness than those where there is continual personal sacrifice to the needs (as stated by the government) of the country or an employer.

Creating and controlling appropriate personal boundaries does not mean abdicating proper responsibility to and for others. As you will read later, feeling

socially and emotionally connected, committed and responsible to and for other people is vital for happiness and for physical and emotional health.

The key is balance, and the crucial word is *appropriate*. A healthy degree of self-centredness allows you to create appropriate boundaries so that you don't walk around suffering everybody else's pain and trying to solve everybody else's problems. On the other hand, selfishness stops you from being able to empathise with other people. If you can't empathise, it is almost impossible to form harmonious communities and long-term, healthy relationships between individuals.

The often cruel selfishness now being promoted and applauded by politicians under the euphemism of 'individualism' is the antithesis of what is needed to make us healthier and happier – as individuals and as communities. Policies that reduce individuals' responsibilities to each other lead to personal and social distress and deep insecurity. Not only does the health and happiness of individuals suffer, but the fears generated can lead to divisive intolerance and violence.

If we want happy and safe communities, the message to corporations and governments is clear: to foster *long-term*, productive and peaceful communities, human needs – based on appropriate, shared responsibility – must take priority.

Standing up for yourself

Once you can recognise how much responsibility you should take about an issue it can be quite another matter to stand up for yourself.

Personal interactions tend to fall into three main styles:

- assertive
- passive
- aggressive.

From my professional experience most of us grow up in families that operate in either a passive or an aggressive manner towards each other. If your preferred style is passive, you may also be highly manipulative in order to get your own way. You don't know how to do things directly, so you do it indirectly.

Aggressive and passive styles are closely allied to the physiological fight-or-flight responses that we experience when threatened. When angered or cornered by a threat, the tendency is to run away. If we can't run away, we try to make ourselves invisible so that we won't continue to be attacked. Alternatively, we may be forced to become aggressive to defend ourselves. The fight-or-flight physiological response is not

Aggressive and passive styles are closely allied to the physiological fight-or-flight responses that we experience when threatened.

confined to physical threats; it is generated by emotional threats as well.

In relationships and human interactions, the start of potential problems is the start of the chain mentioned on page 16: the perceptions that each person has of a particular event or interchange. If each person or at least one person hasn't learnt to manage and control the accuracy and appropriateness of their perceptions, beliefs, self-talk, feelings and responses in the chain reaction, then ordinary interactions can be fraught with misunderstandings and misrepresentations that are perceived as threats. Depending on the style of response (aggressive or passive) that you have seen in your own role models and your personality, you will tend to respond either passively or aggressively.

An aggressive person respects their rights and gives no rights or respect to the other person. If you are aggressive, perhaps you need to remember that you don't have to be very clever to get your own way. To treat others with respect and to be unselfish takes integrity, honesty and an honourable personal moral code.

A passive person acknowledges and respects the needs and rights of others but puts their own needs and rights last.

Standing up to an aggressive person is particularly

difficult if they have or take more power, and are physically bigger than you and use their size to intimidate or bully you by invading your personal space. Although the assertive option is usually the best option to try, there are many situations where being passive is safer or where aggression is warranted for your own defence and safety.

For instance, if you are mugged by someone who is armed, definitely take the passive stance. If a policeman pulls you over on the road, be passive. If your physical safety is threatened, depending on your assessment of the relative power of each person, you may decide to be passive or aggressive, but rarely assertive.

Yet there are some people who are used to using aggressive tone, body language, volume and physical presence to get their own way. Under these circumstances you may well find you simply have to raise your own voice, tone and so

With its strong emphasis on competition, Western culture champions the strong over the weak. Aggression is encouraged in everything from school contact sports to business take-overs.

on simply to be heard, but you can still keep your words assertive rather than aggressive. Such people can perceive a quiet controlled voice as passive even when in fact it may be extremely assertive.

But there is another way for human beings to

interact. We can use verbal problem-solving skills. Until recently few of us in Western cultures had developed the skills needed to use them. With its strong emphasis on competition, Western culture champions the strong over the weak. Aggression is encouraged in everything from school contact sports to business take-overs. The passive approach is for weak 'wimps'. However, while this may have been wonderfully successful in the short term for business and the 'economy', it's no way to behave if you want successful long-term relationships or a successful long-term economy.

Sooner or later, in order to defend themselves and their human dignity, passive people become passively aggressive. Passive aggression occurs when you say nothing openly but you just don't co-operate fully, or you 'throw spanners in the works' to mess up things in such a way that it is difficult to lay blame.

For instance, a passive spouse who has an aggressive, abusive partner may give 'the silent treatment', sulk, refuse to do jobs around the house that are normally their responsibility, be deliberately late and keep their spouse waiting.

In the workplace the passive-aggressive worker can make deliberate mistakes, go slower, be unco-operative about change, give away company secrets, petty-pilfer,

or even deliberately sabotage the company.

In the long term, human beings and businesses need to develop better verbal problem-solving skills that respect the rights of all parties. This is called assertiveness.

Before you can use the verbal problem-solving skills of assertiveness you need to adopt certain beliefs. In his book *When I Say No I Feel Guilty*, Manuel Smith describes ten rights people need to claim as beliefs in order to effectively stand up for themselves. (This book is one of the easiest to read on the subject and goes into more detail than is possible here.)

For situations where there is relative inequality between you and somebody else, for example family, friends, other adults and colleagues, and for those whose religious beliefs run counter to the idea of equal rights between men and women, use this information according to your own discretion.

Bill of Assertive Human Rights

- I. **You have the right to judge your own behaviour, thoughts and emotions and to take the responsibility for what they are and their consequences.**

This is basically saying you have the right to take control and manage each step in the chain reaction we talked about on pages 16–65.

Many people give to others the right to judge: their parents ('father/mother knows best'), spouse or anyone other than themselves. Decide this moment to claim that right for yourself and you'll be free from having to constantly please other people and feeling guilty if you don't.

2. **You have the right not to justify your behaviour by offering excuses or reasons.**

As an adult you are not answerable to other people for your beliefs or your actions (unless they impinge on other people's rights and freedoms, or they are against the law!). You are no longer a child having to answer to parents and teachers and being obliged to justify your actions.

Next time someone asks you to do something you don't wish to do or can't, try saying 'I'm sorry, I can't help you' and STOP. Don't make excuses. It's a wonderfully liberating feeling.

3. **You have the right to decide the degree to which you are responsible (if at all) for finding solutions to other people's problems.**

Ultimately each person must take appropriate responsibility for their own feelings, behaviour, pain, health and so on. You may be able to temporarily please someone by altering your behaviour to suit them, but over the long term this

simply undermines *your* self-respect and stops *them* from taking responsibility for their own actions and lives.

Denying this right of a person also happens when responsibility for a problem is shifted onto the victim: you make a legitimate complaint and an organisation accuses you of being unreasonable, denies responsibility or tells you to see the subcontractor they organised to do the job. Or a victim of abuse is told by his or her tormentor that if the victim changed their ways they would not be abused.

When you make a complaint you upset people, and if they don't handle that complaint appropriately the first thing they do is accuse you of being a troublemaker. Unfortunately, the average person falls for this hook, line and sinker, and is made to feel that the problem would go away if only they would simply shut up and disappear.

4. **You have the right to change your mind.**

Circumstances change, people change, you change. Changing your mind does not imply incompetence, inadequacy or indecision. It indicates that you are flexible enough and confident enough to claim the right to reassess something and change accordingly. This flexibility is a virtue, not a fault

(unless you have a real problem making any decisions).

5. **You have the right to make mistakes and be responsible for the outcome.**

If you discover you are wrong, the most assertive thing you can do is to claim the right as a human being to make mistakes and take action to correct them.

If someone is criticising you or pointing out a mistake, claim this right by saying 'You're quite right. I'm wrong'.

If you are quite comfortable with the idea of being wrong, the other person's attack collapses. If you are responsible for a situation with a disastrous outcome, forgive yourself with the thought: 'I did what I could at the time'.

If, however, you are being criticised or attacked but you don't agree you are wrong, use words such as 'probably', 'could be', 'perhaps' or 'maybe': 'Perhaps you've got a point ...'; 'You could be right ...'; 'Maybe you're right ...'; 'You probably have a point ...'; 'I hadn't thought of it like that ...'

These phrases give recognition to the other person's viewpoint, which takes the heat out of the situation but retains your right to have a

different opinion; to agree to disagree.

The criticism may be general and aimed more at deliberately undermining your self-acceptance: 'You look like you've put on weight'; 'That colour really doesn't suit you'; 'You're so aggressive'.

Acknowledge their opinion, but keep asking for more information so they have to keep justifying their comments and you appear totally unconcerned but genuinely interested in their comment.

Friend: You look like you've put on weight.

You: You might be right; what makes you think I have?

Friend: Your hips look bigger.

You: Do they? Do you think it's these pants, or the colour or is it actual weight?

Friend: Well, it could be the pants, I suppose.

You: I was wondering myself whether they were a good choice. Thanks for your opinion.

This approach is guaranteed (as long as you are not sarcastic and you look the critic straight in the eye) to give you a fantastic feeling of personal control and make the other person reluctant to ever try picking on you again.

6. **You have the right to say 'I don't know'.**

What a relief not to have to know everything!

You are now free to try things before you know all the answers, to experiment, to explore, to ask. As Huckleberry Finn realised, other people love showing you what they know, and if they can do so, let them. If you are really clever, you can stand back and let them help you a great deal while you stay quite comfortably ignorant and save your energy for more important things. This right also allows negative consequences for your actions. If you don't know everything; sometimes the consequences can be unexpected and unwelcome. But that's OK because you don't have to know everything.

7. You have the right not to be liked by everyone you have to deal with.

It's very nice to be liked and approved of, but if you go around thinking that this is a prerequisite for dealing with people you may well find yourself being manipulated mercilessly as you try to please others.

In fact the more people see you as your own person, willing to be pleasant but not needing approval, the more you will find them wanting to please you! Independence will make you attractive to others, who want to be approved of by someone they see as strong.

However, there are organisations that find such independence extremely threatening. They often have a highly authoritarian structure where power is claimed by people feeling that those under them have to grovel and please. If you are not prepared to play these games, get out of the situation if you can because you are a major threat to the whole way the organisation operates (see pages I49–I55).

In ordinary person-to-person situations with people of equal standing, trying to please can mean you end up agreeing to lots of things you just don't like in order to avoid hurting their feelings. Remember – they are responsible for their feelings, not you!

8. **You have the right to be illogical in making decisions.**

My teenage son is an expert at finding weaknesses in my reasoning and arguments about why he should not do certain things. Worse still, he remembers what I said months or even years previously and has no difficulty pointing out that I am hopelessly illogical and inconsistent.

The fact that things are logical does not make them right, nor does it make them what you want. Take the right to do things and feel things because you want to, not because they are logical.

9. **You have the right to say 'I don't understand'.**

If you live or deal with people who expect you to be able to read their minds and automatically know what they want, when they want it and how, they can become very irritable and aggressive with you when you don't comply.

It's not your responsibility to work out what's going on in somebody else's head or to guess their needs. It's up to them to spell it out clearly. Put the responsibility squarely back with them to tell you what they want.

Sensitive people tend to expect this mind-reading from others because they may be good at intuitively responding to other people's needs. They assume this characteristic in others, and its absence leads them to imagine lack of interest or caring. Really intuitively sensitive people, well tuned to others, are actually quite rare. Most people are too wrapped in themselves to use such sensitivity, even if they have it.

There are also some interesting basic differences between the way men and women communicate and these can cause misunderstandings. If in doubt, check it out! The book *You Just Don't Understand What I Mean* by Deborah Tanner explores these fascinating differences in gender communication.

10. **You have the right to say 'I don't care'.**

A rather nasty form of dogma has recently crept into a great deal of Western culture. It demands that everyone should be trying to improve themselves, whatever that means. Constant striving to improve yourself according to the dictates of a mythical perfection means the search is never-ending. The money keeps flowing into the 'personal development' business, but your enjoyment of life is suspended until you have sorted yourself out – the 'I'll be happy when ...' or 'I'll be happy if ...' trap.

None of us is perfect, nor did anyone have a perfect upbringing. If you are comfortable with and used to your 'hang-ups', and they don't impinge on the rights of others, then don't let anyone else bully you into getting rid of them. Often these 'hang-ups' are very important survival strategies that you have adopted for good reasons and need to hang on to until circumstances, or opportunity or time, allow you to change them to something more constructive.

On the other hand, you may resist changing yourself as a form of passive aggression in response to someone else's refusal to accept you as you are.

Often the less someone is hassled about changing

to what others think they should be, the more likely they are to change because it suits *them*. You can't change other people; you can only change yourself and your own behaviour. But that in turn can cause a chain reaction that *allows* other people to change too.

If you are being pestered by people telling you what you should or should not do, say to them: 'You might be right, but I don't care to change right now'; 'You may be right but I don't want/choose to change'; 'You might be right but I choose to do this in my own way'.

Knowing that you have the right to choose to be assertive if you wish is one thing; knowing how to do it is quite another. It's very important to realise that being assertive is a verbal problem-solving option to add to your repertoire of strategies for dealing with people. It is not always the right option for all people, of all religions or all cultures. It's up to you to choose this assertive option appropriately, according to your own values and your desire for particular kinds of relationships.

It is also important to remember that you will need to modify how you use these skills depending on the power differential between you and the other

person and the organisational structure.

When you start using these skills and asserting your rights it will seem quite strange, like breaking in new shoes. There may be a few blisters to start with: people close to you may get quite angry and annoyed that they can no longer manipulate you the way they are used to or that your attitude and behaviour is no longer predictable. You therefore need to give some thought to the effect of the consequences of this assertiveness on personal and professional relationships. There can be advantages: as you feel better about yourself, other people tend to treat you with more respect and you attract people who operate in a more assertive way. However, some people may have a vested interest in keeping you as a doormat and will try very hard to undermine you. Think it through before you start. Are these people important enough in your life that you care whether or not they can cope with the changes?

Being assertive does not mean operating in a way that is contemptuous of other people's feelings, but rather in a way that shows mutual respect and your acceptance of only *appropriate* responsibility for other people's reactions.

Being assertive does not mean operating in a way that is contemptuous of other people's feelings, but rather in a way that shows mutual respect.

The basic skills of standing up for yourself

The broken-record technique. The easiest way to manipulate people is to distract them from the real issue. This is usually done by making them feel they are being unreasonable, or by using red herrings or attacking the person so they feel they have to defend themselves.

So to be assertive you need to be persistent and stay focused on the real issue. The broken-record technique works by forcing the other person to deal with the real issue and no other.

Let us explore the example of a customer returning a clock to a store after a hand fell off while it was being used for the first time.

Customer: I bought this clock yesterday and the hand broke off the first time I wound it. I'd like my money back.

Sales assistant: That is a very good clock; the hand couldn't just fall off. (*You are lying.*)

Customer: The hand did just fall off, and I want my money back. (*Broken record.*)

Sales assistant: We've never had this happen before. You must have overwound it or something. (*You are lying.*)

Customer: No. The hand fell off. I'd like my money back. (*Broken record.*)

Sales assistant: You'll have to contact the manufacturer. It's not our fault. (*Evasion of proper responsibility; you are being unreasonable expecting us to pay.*)

Customer: You sold me the clock. The hand broke. I want my money back. (*Broken record.*)

Sales assistant: Look lady, we didn't make the clock. We can't do anything about it. It's not our fault. (*Shifting blame; you are unreasonable.*)

Customer: You sold me the clock. The hand broke. I want my money back. (*Broken record.*)

Sales assistant: I'll get the manager.

Manager: The hand wouldn't just break. My assistant has explained our policy and you are upsetting him. (*You're a liar, a nuisance and a bully.*)

Customer: The hand broke and I want my money back. (*Broken record.*)

Manager: Give her the money! (*We're not going to get anywhere with her.*)

Because of your sticking to the issue and not allowing yourself to get drawn into side issues or to be forced to defend yourself against attack, the sales

assistant and the manager have to face the issue and solve the problem – you are obviously not going to give in! Your tone of voice is very important. The same words can be assertive or extremely aggressive. Practise a tone that is respectful of the other person and is therefore assertive.

The broken-record technique is also ideal when people refuse to take no for an answer. For example, sales techniques these days are more likely to consist of subtle methods to get a conversation going so that sales staff can discover your needs, fears, and any obstacles to a sale. So no matter what they might say, stick to the issue: 'I'm not interested'.

Saying no to friends can be more difficult as they may use emotional blackmail or issue veiled threats that your friendship will be jeopardised if you don't comply. If they do this, perhaps you'd be better without them as friends. Real friends will respect your right to say no and have limitations. Again, make sure your tone is assertive, not aggressive.

Friend: Could I borrow your car tomorrow while mine is being serviced?

You: No, I don't lend my car to anyone.

Friend: What, not even me? (*You don't trust your friends; I'm hurt.*)