

# Beyond Happy:

## Formulas for Perfect Days

What ancient and new thoughts, and traveling three-fourth of the world teaches you.

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## About The Author

Meet Christian: part globe-trotting undercover anthropologist, part brain scientist, part entrepreneur and full-time human guinea pig in the grand experiment called life. When he's not accidentally crash-testing luxury cars or surviving enough wild encounters to make Indiana Jones jealous, he's helping others transform their lives using his unique cocktail of neuroscience, potent psychology, ancient wisdom, and battle-scarred street smarts. Now he's sharing his crash course in surviving and thriving (emphasis on the 'crash' part). Sure, he's got fancy degrees and has visited more countries than most people can name (150!), but this book is a direct result of decades of getting down and dirty with different cultures in every possible walk of life: billionaire/bum, politician/punk, academic/astronaut, executive/engineer, celebrity/criminal, geek/genius, artist/athlete, lawyer/loiterer, cook/crook, spy/scientist, activist/anarchist, doctor/data analyst, unemployed/unemployable, teacher/tech, homeless/homemaker, therapist/translator, clerk/construction worker, hotel staff/hotel guest, prostitute/podcaster, driver/diver, and accountant/assassin. Yes, he met a friendly (and seriously happy!) professional international killer, and this is no Tom Clancy novel.

Christian isn't your typical self-help author dispensing wisdom from an ivory tower, insisting you should simply 'think positive and manifest success' fluff, or recycling hot trendy topics. He's lived through trauma, addiction, psychotic episodes, separation, and countless challenges – emerging not just survived, but indestructible. His insights come not only from prestigious universities and scientific research, but from real conversations with commoners, comics, influencers, innovators, millennials, mothers and mystics across six continents. This isn't a story of perfect solutions or miracle cures, but rather a raw, honest exploration of what it means to be human, to fail, to rise, and to keep growing. Through his distinctive blend of scientific knowledge, philosophical perspective and rare cultural understandings, he offers practical tools for anyone brave enough to embark on their own journey of transformation.

You may see Christian avoiding crevasses near Antarctica, talking to another stranger with a smile or turning ski slopes into personal physics experiments (spoiler: trees don't move), but we will not see or hear him complain about anything. He is too busy appreciating life. Christian likes many things as you will see—humour, people, pop culture, poetry, mathematical equations, writing, skydiving, horseback riding, playing, philosophy, history, science, silliness and stillness—many things but not suffering and misery. Let him teach you to be happier and experience perfect days.

If you think perfect is impossible, think again. Or don't think at all, just experience it. These hard-won insights may not be intuitive, but the good news is they can be trained. From international business consulting, revolutionizing healthcare and mental health with new theory and technology to dodging doom and trouble in nomadic Mongolia, what makes his story truly fascinating is how he's turned every catastrophic misadventure into a masterclass in human potential. Picture this: a guy who's been deported and detained in multiple countries, survived psychotic episodes, and still thinks the best way to understand humanity is to pick up hitchhikers in places where he's just been robbed. He's that rare combination of humble human, respected by researchers and rugrats alike. He manages to extract profound wisdom from most people, papers, books, situations and experiences, and then flip it on its head to look at all the unseen angles before he squeezes it into a useful concentrated fresh juice.

He speaks four languages fluently, as well as the specific jargons of business, psychology, science and technology. He speaks here as a human being to another, sharing and caring, inviting a discussion.

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## Preface: The Purpose of the Book

Every morning, millions of people look into mirrors – but how many truly see themselves? Beyond the superficial adjustments of hair and clothing lies an unexplored territory: the authentic self. Beyond the self we may even find selfless awareness. My journey began in my teens writing a novel about life's meaning and purpose—individual and collective search for happiness. I've since learned that the greatest mystery isn't the meaning of existence – it's the person staring back at you in that reflection. This book is an expedition into that territory, dismantling the machinery of self to understand its working parts, and rebuilding it with newfound clarity. Through stories, science, and shared wisdom across centuries, we'll illuminate the most fascinating subject you've never truly studied: you

We'll also learn about others, what they learned, think, feel and how the more differences we find in the world the more similarities we find in the human condition. This book is both a search for that elusive person beyond the mirror and an examination of the humanity at large in key, useful facets, tricks, shorthand and advice.

The hope is to see less suffering, shame, self-loathing, self-sabotage and more happiness, openness, connection, and concentration/focus on what matters most in the end. As a Quebec French saying goes, it may lead you to "go to bed less stupid tonight<sup>1</sup>," which roughly means simply being better than yesterday.

### Suffering and Happiness

What happens when life doesn't go your way? Or worse, when life goes as planned or better and you are still not quite happy or satisfied?

How can we reduce our expectations without shying away from our goals, actions, and achievements? We need some redefinition of our self, a constructive deconstruction, before a "build back better" approach can be done.

Have you ever experienced setbacks that seemed insurmountable? Have you ever looked backed and questioned your actions and perhaps your very existence? I have.

Suffering is real yet mostly imaginary. We choose to suffer, once we know we are responsible for all suffering. Let us awaken together some of the missing pieces you may still be yearning. Perhaps to calm the unease of simply being, the unbearable struggles you sometimes believe you are in. The illusions you still harbor and that hurt you deeply, all at once, or occasionally. Conceivably to simply enhance your enjoyment even more. Perchance the happiness and circumstances you already appreciate are all you need. Only, we would not want our happiness only to depend on chance, would we? Learn the tricks in this book before it is too late. Parts of us (our mind, reactions, tendencies, and patterns) sometimes overshadow our otherwise amazing, near-perfect, existence. It can take an instant to "ruin" our day or our lives. It can, so we must build renewed and more resistant resilience, regardless of the circumstances that may befall us. The rock like Gibraltar or Alcatraz. The thing is: it is your mind most likely that is in prison.

#### **Suffering = Self(-administered)**

Complain, conduct yourself worse than you want, think or act with unguarded emotions, ego identify, fail to value life and be grateful, be unable to cherish every passing moment as gold and just die or slowly be old. This is what most do. Yeah, you too! At least at times. Probably more often than you

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<sup>1</sup> « On va se coucher moins niaisieux à soir. »

think or want to. Don't worry, we all do. I invite you to change that story together. It is all about percentages and incremental but transcendental changes. Let us figure out some simple formulas together and simplify the sometimes-complex concepts. We will look at what is happiness. Where is happiness? Is it our default state? Unfortunately, not.

We do have everything in front of us already, and inside of us too. We are enough. We have enough. Yet we must find what is already there. How can that be and how to apply this to your daily life?

Regale in the tools, tales and reflections in this book to turn average living into awesome aliveness, awareness and giving.

### **Aliveness + Awareness + Giving >> Living**

#### **Why I Chose to Write this Book?**

I consider myself blessed. I am grateful and have been for years, cherishing life's every moment and objectively being happier than most people I know, in general and even in various trying circumstances. I have achieved various forms of "success", have been praised and ventured off to accomplish a few exploits that few have. I have followed my dreams and realized most of them. I have attained my life goals in many aspects. My ego has been stroked, yet I still found myself missing at times. Lacking something or lacking myself. Missing myself?

Finally, a few wake-up calls beckoned me to dig deeper. The mother of my child was diagnosed with breast cancer, my son started to act out at school, my business clients questioned my value as a consultant, my family ostracised me for not following the norm and my insecurities grew. Followed a painful separation and my world was turned around.... Once more.

With previous stoicism incorporated in my life, I was already ready and prepared to lose my family, my loved ones, even my life, but when "shit hits the fan" you are never as ready as you want to be. I calculated that with my insipid curiosity and unquenchable energy, I had lived approximately three lifetimes by the time I was forty-three, meaning I had experienced a mix of situations most had not by their average life expectancy of seventy-five or even eighty. Yet I realized that this was all too quantitative and was perhaps missing a qualitative check. What then would my "fourth" lifetime look like? Once more with feeling!

I took a deep dive for a year into topics I was proficiently familiar with: psychology, philosophy and physiology. As I read and listened intensely, I got many eureka moments and started to put things in perspective and in practice. I found myself again, grounded, secure, self-assured, and happy. I bounced ideas with the hundreds of people I met a month (extra-extrovert, yes, I admit) over 2 years based on my original ideas for this book. I talked to several scientists and researchers about the most recent findings, and I became a researcher myself doing that! New research is so fascinating as you will see.

I started to put things in place, and I am now ready to share them for your benefit. And, along the way, my preliminary book became at least 5 distinct book projects! This is only the tip of the iceberg yet has enough substance to help you in a meaningful way. As I went deep in many subjects that required more attention than I imagined initially, I made sure to get robust and rounded conclusions and complete explanations for you, dear reader. You may thank or curse me later for it as the book is longer than your average nonfiction. First lesson about happiness: spend your time on things that matter with motivation and purpose. It will always be time well spent.

#### **Why Me?**

The answer is another question: Why not?

Why am I particularly qualified to write this book? You tell me after you read it!

That is if your attention span is greater than your peers<sup>2</sup>.

I know I have something worthwhile to share and that I researched these topics with an open mind to try to give a big picture “summary of what we know thus far” on the issue of “living a good life” and being aware and happy. Did I succeed?

Well, there is always a difference between knowledge and practice. I found out there is also a huge difference between knowledge and awareness. I hope I can lead the way without being patronizing. My goal is to have a holistic approach to health, mental health, happiness, and life, as well as to help predict, prevent, and be positive and proactive instead of reactive, fear-ridden, and flat-footed towards the unavoidable challenges of life.

“Why me” is also directly linked to my immense curiosity I hope I will help you cultivate in these pages. I am more of a risk-taker, I love challenges, I have more energy and enthusiasm than most and I can make links and draw insights where many see a narrow piece of the picture. Some of these innate traits touch the giftedness spectrum, but that is the topic for another book. Curiosity can be trained and practiced to a large degree, as well as many other habits and I will show you how. With knowledge and insights from all fields, I hope to share useful tools you can adapt to your distinct liking, evolving life, and personal situation.

It is not only that I have traveled to 150 countries to find answers and more questions, I have also talked to hundreds of world travellers and asked them insights too. It is not only that I have been in business, art, science, sports, etc.—and no, I have not been into criminality, although I spoke to many how have. I have not been homeless or to war yet, I am not a cook or a vet (veteran or veterinarian). In short, I speak to more people than most journalists and get realer stories, compare, and analyze them. I back it up with scientific research, cross-check if any spiritual or philosophical sources have anything similar, opposite, or different to say, talk again to a bunch of people, listen, discuss, digest, and refine. I said I am not a cook, but this is a part of my recipe.

Why me?

Not many can be as curious about so many things, so many people, equally as social, maybe seem so fearless that appears suicidal, and be able to put teachings from divergent sources together in a new way.

Now, this may seem arrogant if you are reading this quick, but you will see one of the first thing I seek is low or no ego. Just enough to have some confidence. Ego can also help you survive but even that is not necessary. You will die anyway. Get used to it. Me too, don’t fret.

Why me?

Supposedly, I am positive.

Possibly, I am negative and not funny. Remains (like ashes of dead bodies) to be seen.

I am not a comedian.

At best, at times, a well-dressed chameleon.

Not a lizard (like celebrity handbag<sup>3</sup>). Just adaptable.

Why me?

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<sup>2</sup> A 2021 small study of college students found they now only focus on any one task for 65 seconds. A different study of office workers found they only focus on average for three minutes. (Hari, Johann. *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention*. 2022)

<sup>3</sup> Colombian Nancy Gonzalez sentenced to prison for smuggling crocodile (caiman) and python handbags sold to celebs, including Salma Hayek, Britney Spears and Victoria Beckham.

Simply because I did it and I am not completely dim-witted.

## Slow Progress

I find writing this book difficult not because I feel ashamed or vulnerable to share some of my past along with my progress as a human being. In fact, we will see it is not so much progress as a constant journey. I strive to be authentic and ready to use my story, not a vehicle for arrogance or misplaced pride. It is neither a publicity stunt, nor an overly vulnerable exposition of self. Rather, I wish it to be a raw example of cumulative learning from obstacles with gifts, griefs, and grievances to stand here, slightly better than yesterday, still conscious of my mortality and minuscule role in face of eternity. I am giving this my full focus and passion because I found there is no other way to live well. The Jedi Master, Yoda, said it best in the legendary Star Wars quote: “Do or do not. There is no try!” I simply say to my son from as long as I can remember: “If you are going to do it, do it right.” As we will see, action is at the center of the journey, but BEFORE there is reflection, awareness, wisdom and sometimes surrender, acceptance, and inaction. And AFTER, there is also reflection, refinement, stillness, and serenity. That doesn’t mean that the NOW is any less potent and powerful. We can also find the greatest power in peace.

The noble war is never done. We may as easily lose this inner peace that we wish to be permanent. It is easily perturbed by our biological brain, a mushy soft fragile organ, which is both primitive and sublime at the same time. We will see more about neurology, how to understand our brain and use it better for our purposes in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. There, we will attempt to go beyond and recalibrate the similar-structured brain of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Later we will dig deeper and find best practices of all the world’s religions, spiritual and psychological teachings in *Beyond Spirituality*. We will entangle relationship traps and opportunities and tweak them for deeper harmony in *Beyond Sex*.

I find writing this difficult not because writing is hard for me. I have written three and a half novels, over a dozen poetry anthologies, hundreds of film and music critics, hundreds of business reports, and a few checks before electronic funds transfer (EFT) and cryptocurrency was a thing.

I find writing this difficult because as we will see in *Beyond Spirituality*, message (words, spoken, written and context) and non-verbal communication are crucial for connecting to others and ourselves. Does the written form convey all I have to exchange with you? And with me? For now, it will have to do.

I am social yet cannot meet everyone and before social media, the written form as survived, entertained and enlightened us for millennia.

I had written an ambitious “bucket list” (things to do before I die) of 100 items in my twenties, of which I accomplished 98% before 30. I wrote an extra 100 which I all accomplished before 40, including the initial 2 % missing from the first 100. One was being a father. In fact, in my original bucket list, I wanted to write a novel before I died and wrote one at 21 and 2 more afterward. I wanted to see 40 countries before I was 40 and did that at 28 instead. I found myself not only dreaming but doing many “impossible” things or things that no one around me had done, nor thought was possible. As mentioned, I often think and say that I feel I have already lived 3 complete lives and am now on my fourth. Truth be told, I know now that every instant is a new life, possibility and opportunity for delight, awareness, and appreciation. Each moment is equal in its grace and importance if we can realize it. The famous Rastafarian singer Bob Marley used to answer interviewers when asked his age that he was “today” arguing that each day is a form of rebirth.

Now. Just this moment.

Now, I have no bucket list and only two life principles and life goals:

- 1) make sure I am happy (I am the only one responsible) &

2) help make everyone else as happy as can be.

Nothing I have found, made me change these goals in a long time. Still, I am open to revisit them with new information or consciousness at any time. If it is no longer useful, change it. In general, do not hold undue attachment to anything, to anyone or any thought.

On that thought, let's begin the journey together.

The progress may seem slow and arduous, even look like it is regressing at times, but it is cumulative if you are willing to wait and to keep on learning. And most importantly, the journey with its ups, downs, and long straightaways, is the most beautiful part anyway! Let's keep it moving and enjoy the happiness ride.

## Introduction

*Don't be a supporting character in someone else's story,  
Don't be the main character of your own story, that's simple ego identity  
Understand and become the whole story to be wise, free and happy.*

— Christian Dominique

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

$$2 + 3 = 5$$

We learned how to add and subtract around age 5. We use the easy concepts in our daily lives without thinking much about it. It makes us more efficient yet not happier.

What if I told you that simple formulas (not algebra, calculus, complicated financial or statistical models), ideas and perspectives were enough to make you happy every day? Would you try and use them? That is, regardless of who you are (or think you are). You can be joyful independent of your situation: single, sick, in difficult relationships at home or at work, in legal or financial bind, in grief, in pain, in uncertainty, in boredom, being bullied, beaten, rejected or getting too much attention. You can be ecstatic even with tendencies to be too relaxed or workaholic, addict or aloof, amoral or asocial. You can be blissful being rich or poor, young or old, overwhelmed, underwhelmed or procrastinating. Whether they are stressed, depressed, anxious, underachievers or even “successful” in whatever way, 99% of people have not learned to be happy. Two reasons account for that:

1. Our brain and biology are against lasting happiness in most cases
2. Our education, customs, morals, views, family and friends do not teach us to be happy<sup>4</sup>

We can however use our brain and biology to our advantage, as well as transcend our teachings, conditioning, culture and limiting beliefs. Everyone feels misunderstood to some degree, yet the reality is that most people do not understand themselves well or can even imagine that they are not their thoughts, nor their emotions (ego) which feel so real, nor even their ideas and values which are not “theirs” (they are someone else’s stories and ideas).

The promise of this book is to show you how to be happier, perhaps happiest. Much happier than you are now. Also, a more stable, lasting, resilient and real happiness. The problem is that although most ideas and practical tips are simple, they do require practice and your involvement. There are no quick fixes. No magic pill or mantra alone can get you instantly to the goal of living a fulfilled and happy life every single day. A few principles based on useful philosophy and the latest scientific discoveries can be practised with much less time that you spend on the internet a week. Once understood and trained in real life situations, they become easy and even effortless. It is what I call “habitual happiness”. Then you can go back to the internet (or not) and smile.

I will teach you how to see the world with new eyes, to hear better than with hearing aid or supersonic enhancements, to embrace each challenge and fear as an opportunity, to understand yourself, others, and the world better with practical philosophy and psychology that goes beyond hundreds of self-help trivialities. Believe me, I read many of them before writing this book. It seems to me that most of the recipes for happiness we are told do not hold up in real life. Are we missing the right ingredients, correct instructions or are we all bad cooks? I also read hundreds of recent and relevant emerging scientific

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<sup>4</sup> We will redefine what happiness is later in this book.



articles and talked to hundreds of individuals to see if the ideas of this book were applicable and helpful to real people. To date, they overwhelmingly are.

It is proven that your mind and mindset can have positive effect on your well-being, mental and physical health. It cannot cure cancer, give you your deceased loved ones back, repair your irreparable relationships, or give you your dream job or partner. It can however make you happy in not only most but all circumstances. If you are not sure, I am happy 95% of the time (not yet 100%, but I can live with that). I am extremely happy generally, whatever happens to me. It is possible. I trained myself to be. I am just a “flawed” human being with daily difficulties, challenges, obstacles and hurdles like you who is going to die. But before that, I will live, and I invite you to live a happy life with me. Let us then go beyond happy.

## Seek Rejections

*“Embrace rejections. They may become your gifts.”*

—Jia Jiang

I got rejected by 7 top universities to do my PhD in Psychology. The main reason why: lack of publication credit and experience in a psychology research lab. Luckily and with determination, this is what I am doing now, psychology research. Will I apply again in one of those top schools or any school is to be seen. Do I want to be a PhD student? The answer is also “why not?”, but I do not want it so much that it would cloud my judgement. Nor do I want it for the wrong reasons (like power, prestige, reputation and recognition). I am old enough to be a professor, yet I am a constant student of life. It takes courage to go back to school at my age, By the time I would be done any PhD, I would be past 50 years old.

I may be rejected if I apply again. Do not worry, rejections are good. We must seek them to learn, widen our horizon, challenge ourselves and push the limits. Will they call me doctor and cite my prestigious alma matter or teacher, maybe. Yet I do not really care either way. Every path is acceptable if you have purpose as a basis and not ego-based goals and expectations. Deep down, I do not want to be a only a researcher, teacher, nor a writing celebrity. I just want to be the best and give my all always, enjoying every moment in the process. Fame and attention also have their costs. I want to help the world. Might it be by studying, doing science, lecturing, coaching people one-on-one, in groups or writing. Here we go. This is me helping. Honestly and with humility.

The first step of the 12-Step Program Is honesty. We can take advice from anywhere (and anyone) without judgement. I am not a fan of the 12-step program personally, yet it has worked for millions of people. I do not judge. It has some goof elements. Honesty and authenticity. Be deeply honest with yourself. We are all in various forms of denial in our lives, including the denial of death, a scary prospect for many.

## Death-Defying or Death-Embracing

We will come back to death, or it will come back to us eventually. Suffice to say, our lives are precious, and we should be the best guardians of our thoughts, words, and actions. We have some perceived control of these three things and often much less than we think. As we become aware of our body, our brain, thought-patterns, habits, and behaviors, we can navigate life as better captain of our very own special ship. Even when we know it is a sinking ship, the voyage is no less incredible. And perhaps we find out too that ships are only part of a greater ocean and an even better story.

“Not only the ships sink but minds also sink, most especially the minds who does not know the secrets of being happy with all kinds of ordinariness in life!”

— Mehmet Murat ildan

But before we take that doomed ship together, as I know for a fact that you are sometimes lazy, I will save you reading this whole book by giving you the punchline early. To understand it fully, you may want to read the rest of the book. Maybe re-read it, think about it, talk about it, experience it and see, to eventually make it even better than this version. As of today, this is the secret sauce of my recipe for life:

**A) Negative Empowerment**

- 1. No Mind / Nonjudgement**
- 2. No Self**
- 3. No Expectation**
- 4. No Ego + No Attachment/Aversion**
- 5. No Fear + No Resistance**
- 6. No Negative Narrative**
- 7. No Negative Reaction**

**B) Positive Empowerment**

- 1. Equanimity+ (Emotional Regulation + Positivity) + Forgiveness**
- 2. Embrace Impermanence (and Death)**
- 3. Awareness + Mindfulness + Gratitude**
- 4. Awe & Wonder**
- 5. Smile & Laugh**
- 6. Kindness + Caring + Sharing**
- 7. Contentment, Curiosity, Creativity, Compassion, Compersion, Courage & Connection**
- 8. Presence, Positivity, Purpose, Peace, Playfulness, Passion, Patience & Perseverance**

Okay, this may seem far-fetched now, but these are ways I found useful to empower myself and others. I can tell you from experience that they are not just theoretical, they work in the real world. That is if the world is real. Now, do you want to be selflessly empowered? I do. If you don't, take these 14 ideas and at least leave with something. Come back when you are ready or go on your journey. I do want to help people, yet I learned long time ago I cannot help everyone so please choose. No pressure, no shame. Whatever time you spend, show curiosity and passion to it, might it be this book or whatever dozens of alternatives you may have at your disposition. I personally have no expectation and no ego. I care, so I simply share. If we are all dying and sinking, let's not sink too deep yet.

“Don't sink too deep into yourself. That is the secret to happiness.”

— Richelle E. Goodrich

Please excuse me in advance for my physical sciences background where knowledge can sometimes be simplified by equations. I find them more digestible than long sentences. Simpler and to the point. Let's continue with two important formulas, the first of which you have surely heard of before.

**Knowledge = Power**

And let's experience an even more amazing one:

**Wisdom = No Need for Power**

It does not mean “no need for knowledge” exactly, and knowledge can be used to attain wisdom yet there are other ways to achieve wisdom like experience. In any case, I like this wisdom definition because it challenges conventions. Maybe with some wisdom you need power and knowledge and with absolute wisdom you need neither. It is a much better definition of wisdom than the Merriam-Webster, I would say, which states:

1. ability to discern inner qualities and relationships: INSIGHT

2. good sense, tempered and refined by experience, training, and maturity: JUDGMENT
3. generally accepted belief (see *Chapter 2: Sociology* for in-depth discussion on this)
4. accumulated philosophical or scientific learning: KNOWLEDGE
5. sense and judgment far above average

The various definitions of wisdom range from “spiritual/biblical over cognitive” to “true or right over false and wrong”, which I will spare you the unhelpful equations. Just imagine you can accumulate enough insights and knowledge (power) that you do not need any more power (knowledge). I am not that wise yet, but the equation lends itself to a paradigm shift. Let’s get on that boat, shall we! We are in this journey together. No rowing needed. Maybe a little reading, laughing, and thinking.

And for those who love money, which is fine, we can also say that

### **Money = Power**

However, wisdom does not mean “no need for money” because survival and some forms of “exchange”. “security”, “choice” and “freedom” may have some value. We have temporary survival (remember death earlier) and we may see that we have illusions of “security”, “choice” and “freedom” later in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*. For now, let’s look at a business concepts that states:

If you have any 2 of the 3 following and missing the last one, exchange the two for the third one.

### **Money, Time, Knowledge**

Now time is not like money and knowledge, it is not exactly power. Yet, once you understand its hidden powers with wisdom, you will stop waiting your life as much as you do now.

### **Wisdom + Time = Greatest Power (for True Happiness)**

You already have at least half this equation if you are alive and reading this. Two University of British Columbia studies (Whillans, 2016; 2017) find that:

1. Prioritizing time over money is linked with greater happiness<sup>5</sup>.
2. Exchanging money for more time promotes happiness<sup>6</sup>.

The first association does not say if have more time focus makes you happier or if happier people generally prioritize money, but in other words and in any case:

### **More Money Focus vs. Time = Less Happy**

Biggie had it kinda right when he said “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems”. In Martinique and Guadeloupe, the marvelous French Caribbean Islands they say “*Pa ni pwoblèm*” in local creole. It means “no problem”, like “no worry” in Swahili which Disney popularized with the Lion King song “Hakuna matata.” I traveled to Congo, Tanzania, and Kenya where they speak Swahili. I saw warthogs and meerkats in mesmerizing safaris there (Serengeti, etc.), although the animals were not signing “Hakuna matata” to my great surprise. I did lean about the different perception of time in Africa and of what we may call (“first-world”) problem in the Western world.

Bottom line, both in the Caribbean breeze and sun, as well as sub-Saharan Africa savannah or town, we can be sure these cultures prioritize time over money as we will see in *Chapter 2: Sociology*. We now know that means fewer mental “problems”, simpler outlook on life and less unhappiness.

Yet even with more time, we are far from optimizing happiness. We still create so many unnecessary “problems”. Let us go *Beyond Happy*. Let’s be wiser, kinder and happier.

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<sup>5</sup> Ashley V. Whillans, Aaron C. Weidman and Elizabeth W. Dunn. (2016) Valuing Time Over Money Is Associated With Greater Happiness. *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2016, Vol. 7(3) 213-222 <https://doi.10.1177/1948550615623842>

<sup>6</sup> Ashley V. Whillans, Elizabeth W. Dunn, Paul Smeets, and Michael I. Norton. (2017). Buying time promotes happiness. *PNAS*. July 24, 2017, 114 (32) 8523-8527. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1706541114>

## Chapter 1: Beaten but no Broken

*The world tried to break me.  
And at times, it felt it almost did.  
But it didn't. I am still here. I am still me.*

— Logic (Sir Robert Bryson Hall II), 2023

Eric, an acquaintance with gambling addiction and benzodiazepine dependence, attempted to commit suicide by taking 60 Xanax pills, alone, during pandemic lockdowns, after losing over \$100,000 and owing money to loan sharks. He failed and tried a few days later to slit both his wrists. He is now living healthily and in moderation. He has slowly reconnected with his family and friends.

A different Eric, a friend of the family, lost the kind-hearted love of his life in her thirties to cancer. He spends most of his waking hours when not working attending his dead wife's parents who became sick after her passing. This has been going on for years: grief and sickness. Last Fall, his young cousin died in a motorcycle accident. He went to the funeral to console his sister and came back to take care of his in-laws. I barely get to talk to him but when I do, he is positive. He accepts. He does not complain.

My friend Eric (this time a fake name) fled the US military and later faced harsh judgement by a military court and scrutiny by others, drank a bottle of antifreeze in an apartment in Asia. Antifreeze is very deadly. My friend suffered horrible pain and confusion but found himself alive almost a week later. The medical staff that treated him were shocked he survived. He irrevocably injured some of his internal organs, yet last I heard he braved the Mongolia harsh weather for months, restarted his life, remained under the radar, had a child (some organs still work at least) and a girlfriend somewhere in the world. Life goes on until it doesn't.

### Tragedy

Tragically my uncle died alone in the Fall of 2022, and his body was found decomposing approximately two weeks later in his home. My mother had been on bad terms with him for decades and his two daughters were estranged. I spoke to my cousin, the elder of the two sisters, after the news and she was not on speaking terms with her own sister. I also know something about the ego and sibling rivalries, having three younger brothers myself. How is it that my uncle had lost touch with his ex-wife, my mother, his daughters and that his daughters themselves were fighting? He died alone in his apartment, and nobody noticed for weeks. We all technically die alone, ok, but this is my funny, smart, well-educated, well-intentioned, musician and music producer uncle who lives in the same city. This is not a homeless person we are talking about, I told myself. He had been estranged with the whole family for years, but I had seen a few months before at a funeral for our lovely great aunt (his aunt) who was a kind lady and never remarried (or even looked at another man) for decades after her husband passed.

I used to go to my uncle's old place frequently. Now I do not know where he last lived and where he died. He used to come to our family Christmas parties. What went wrong? Where did he take a wrong turn? Where did we all? What could I have personally done to help bridge the gap and growing chiasm of years of estrangement, of possible mental derangement? Was I present enough? I am not blaming myself or anyone else. Rather just sharing so we can reflect on. No self-pity, just information. What would one do today in similar situation?

Later is always too late. Now is the time. I often think of arguments in my life with people close to me and often take a step back and say, “what if this is the last thing I was to say to this person, is it what I really want to express?”. Every day is your legacy. My ex-girlfriend’s mother, when she was still healthy, always used to say: “Don’t give me flowers when I am dead, give them to me now while I am alive. They are of no use to me when I am gone.” This bright nurse and loving mother of two happy and successful children died of a demanding battle with dementia and Alzheimer’s. It took years of gradual neurodegeneration, and she could not recognize her grandchildren in the end, and barely her children. I was unfortunately not there at the funeral of this introverted and caring person who always treated me well and had a witty sarcasm to boot. I can imagine there may still have been flowers, but the point is that people close to her showed her their love every day. So, let’s make sure we give “flowers”, in whatever physical or intangible form every day. Smile at strangers, call someone you meant to but “couldn’t find time to”, make someone laugh or feel special. Say “I love you” more often and mean it. Feel it.

Really feel it. Do that to your annoying spouse, friend, family member, boss, or coworker too.

Easier said than done. I understand. I can only tell you how being both a peacemaker and the first to stop any dispute or misunderstanding has helped me create time, connection, and happiness. We will look at other reasons to feel and express a general compassion towards all (yes again, all), and all the time (the most limited resource we have) as we go through the book and see potential tangible benefits.

I am always the one who throws an olive branch in a dispute. The relationship should always be more important than being “right”. It does not mean that the other(s) will take the step on the peace bridge you offer, but as we will see later with Epictetus’ teachings, that is out of your control. We will look at other reasons to feel and express a general compassion towards everyone, all the time as we go through the book and see potential tangible benefits. Do your best always and expect nothing in return.

#### **Compassion + Kindness - Expectation = Unconditional Love**

My friend’s dad died in 2022 too. He was killed by the Narcos or gangs in his home in Mexico. A bullet in the face in his vast and valuable property. He was not alone in his apartment like my uncle. Death and disaster come in many ways. My friend helps victims of violence in Montreal. She inherited some property from her dad with her sister yet does not know what to do with it. Money and murder. More than that she feels she is missing time. His early death left her realizing she did not take the time to know and perhaps to forgive her father before it was too late. She too had some unresolved issues with her dad. She will have to resolve them in her head.

Oppositely, another Latina friend has been visiting her mother every day at the dreaded hospital she now calls her second home. Her mom was diagnosed with a rare disease and is in-between life and death for over a year now.

Yet another friend took years of his late teenage years to take care of his dying mother, before he went on with his life. He now has two thriving monster kids, a very patient and loving wife and still throws kiss-ass Halloween and New Year parties. Time over money, even in tragedy.

#### **Time cannot be regained and is a constant meaningful measure.**

#### **Money can be regained and is fluctuating/fleeting.**

We will see in *Chapter 4: Psychology*, that our general impression and appreciation of time is severely flawed. Our brains are playing tricks on us. The good news is that I have a few tricks to help you navigate your neurons better.

My Indian Canadian friend lost her thirty-something sister to a slew of mental health issues. My friend became a mental health professional herself because of that, but could not save her sister. She took a long time to cope and regain hope in life and the world. She found resilience, self-compassion and

self-care but had to deal with serious health issues herself on top of running a bustling multi-location business. Her sister died during the Covid-19 pandemic at the height of social distancing. Her family is thousands of miles away. She called me up one day and I went to see her. She confessed she had not been hugged since her sister's passing, so I gave her a warm heartfelt hug. Yes, the pandemic taught us the importance of touch again. We will talk more about this and how it affects our hormones (oxytocin) and the brain in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. She is a clinical and research psychologist. Ideally, she can use this experience to not only have empathy for her patients but also as a breakthrough for her research and teaching. With renewed purpose and context, can she find the flame, energy, and power? Grief is a process and can eventually elevate us instead of holding us back. My thinking is always: shorten the cycle of the "bad" and enhance the "sublime".

**Lessen the "Bad" + Enhance the "Good" = Double Progress (Intensity-wise)**

**Less Time in the "Bad" + More Time in the "Good" = Increase in "Happy Times" (Time-wise)**

Sometimes we are lucky if we can be in neutral time. Neutral can be effective as we will later see with the concept of equanimity explored in *Chapter 3: Philosophy* and *Chapter 4: Psychology*.

I recall the day I found a lump on my life partner's breast and later found out she had a form a breast cancer that needed to be urgently operated on. It all happened so fast, a lump, two biopsies and a life-threatening surgery. I remember feeling like "this is it, the woman I love is going to die in my arms, and I will have to raise our adolescent kid without her". Luckily, the surgery was a success, and the follow-ups generated hope of much less complications and life-haltering visits to the hospital for chemotherapy, radiation therapy, immunotherapy, hormone therapy, targeted therapy, or a combination of some of these. It turned out, that wasn't going to be the tragedy. We quickly went from "bad" to neutral and were able to lessen the fear and increase happy times. We were made more conscious of the good fortune and luck to be alive and healthy. Time can also lessen lessons.

Fast-forward to a few years later with her and I in a torment of miscommunication and, in her case, outright hatred and contempt for me. Why do we hurt the ones we love the most? Maybe because we think we can get away with it. Not in a legal sense, but in a social sense. Some people would never act the way they act in private with their close ones in a social setting. This can be useful for intimacy and trust but also problematic for taking liberties. A modern Greek tragedy.

Time passes and we forget to pay attention and be present.

My dear friend in her twenties lost her 8-year-old brother, to a swimming accident in Senegal. The adventurous boy told the housekeeper he would be right back. He never did. His body was found blotted and lifeless in a nearby river. A fatal accident. My friend was then in France, studying. She felt powerless, yet acted strong for her family and especially her mother for a year until she broke down herself unable to contain the devastation. She is better now, finally finished her master's degree, writing and publishing poetry and moving up in the world, but when she talks to me about her brother, I feel he is still there with her. Can his presence be a strength instead of a handicap? Can we change the negative into the positive? It is not easy. Most things that are worthwhile are not. Can a tragedy not be seen as a tragedy? There are ways we will explore together with theory and real examples like the one below.

Another friend lost her loving grandfather and was telling me about this while smiling at a café on Mont-Royal Street in the Plateau. My friend lived in Quebec and was from British Columbia. This was a Covid-19 pandemic-time funeral arrangement involving a Zoom call from all the way across Canada. It was slightly impersonal and distant. My friend was, however, radiant and happy. I was genuinely shocked as I had never seen someone so joyful and serene after the death of a loved one. I asked her: "can you tell me why you seem so happy?" She explained that she had spent some quality time with him that year and the

previous years. Again (quality) time. Let us further define it as time well-spent. She had enjoyed his presence, his love, his wisdom and took the time to be there. In short, she had not taken him for granted. She felt absolutely no shame, regret or guilt, and although she was not thrilled that her grandad passed, she was pleased enough of life, of him, of herself and their relationship that she readily accepted it as a necessary part of life, that does not need to be more hurtful than it is. She missed him, of course, yet was glad that he lived and was grateful for all the precious moments they both co-created. She was content. Yes, a grandfather is not a little brother, but death is death, and no one is expected to live forever. The principle is the same.

**Expectation of Eternal (or Long) Life = Error in Judgment = Unhappiness if Expectation is Not Met  
Time (Well Spent) + Wisdom = Happiness**

She had shortened the cycle of grief by being mindful and grateful before, during and after.

**Mindfulness + Gratitude = No Regret**

## Play

I saw a local play in Quebec with an actress who lost her beloved sister and niece in a fatal car accident. Years after the catastrophe, a unique collaboration between the devastated actress and a writer finally able to extract the essence from the actress's grief and desolation, allowed to transform the sad story into a wonderful one-woman play where the actress would play a version of herself. The actress couldn't seem to write a coherent play on her own, as she was too close to her trauma to transcend and share with a wider audience. My friend (yes, I have a lot of them) happened to know the play director who is also a well-known playwright, actor and theatre executive. We conversed with the director and the actress after the performance to get deeper insights into this emotional, personal, and autobiographical elevated work. The actress remembers having found an anchor in my eyes during the performance, being tall and sitting in the middle front row with my equally tall friend. I also found strength in her eyes as she explained how she broke down when she heard the news of her sister's sudden death and the ensuing immense hole her absence left the entire family with. The play was in a way therapeutic for her, like art creation can be, yet also useful to an audience filled with people who had all experienced anguish, loss, trauma, and pain. Projections and alternate realities in our minds are always eventually cut short by the brutal, unwavering, and uncaring reality of existence (and non-existence).

We all secretly or overtly expect life to go our way, beyond wishful thinking, and sometimes it does... for a while... until it doesn't. I wrote a poem as a teenager that said, "great expectations cause great sorrow:" Dickens revisited of sorts. Beyond theatre and literature, which I love, *Beyond Happy* aims to remain accessible and relatable. Remember that I have spent quite a bit of time with the illiterate, unschooled, and "uncultured". There is no labeling, elitism, or exclusion here. I equally tend my ear to the person with broken grammar, limited vernacular, as I do to the oftentimes puffy scholar, buffy businessperson (*drunk* for the ones with less vocabulary), self-important artist, or cynical critic. In fact, traveling as much as I did and connecting to people of all social classes, I can only see a shared humanity in the joys and momentary triumphs, as well as in deflating defeats, common sorrows, and suffering. The school of life teaches in many methods. We can only honestly expect death and loss, even if we cannot expect when and how.

Grief comes from and manifests itself in various forms. Few can not only bare it but truly make something useful from it. As Marcus Aurelius (see *Chapter 3: Philosophy*) said: "the obstacle is the way," meaning life challenges can be the greatest teachers and enablers if we are able to switch our perspective to a positive ("challenges are good"), grateful ("I am happy for the opportunity to learn, practice and

grow”) experience, instead of falling into bitterness, despair, and waves of seemingly unbearable suffering. The truth is, it is bearable, even if barely. “This too shall pass” and “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” come to mind as idioms of resilience, yet does it always make you stronger? Ask Kanye West. While many prevail, some succumb to adversity at some point and give up in many ways, being only shells of their previous selves or committing the ultimate bow before the stage of life. And even if they eventually prevail, why does it sometimes take years or decades? How can we shorten the cycle of grief, and speed up change, acceptance, and growth?

## No Guarantee

All these stories to tell you my story is no worse, nor better, it is just a story of survival, of struggle and perhaps a heroic battle. Not against the world, but against myself and my disposition, born from my genetics, thoughts and proclivities, familial trauma, cultural expectations, social norms, legal frameworks, unconscious choices, fate of the universe, and luck of the draw. I choose to see it as a lucky journey, even if some parts seem like horror to an untrained outside observer.

I wake up every day with two certainties I tell myself:

1. Be genuinely grateful to be alive.

Just that. Living always beats the alternative, even when you cannot momentarily see or feel it. Now appreciate the experience of existence.

2. Be curious and content.

I may not be my optimum self. It is a process and constant search. What can I do today to be, even slightly, better than yesterday? Slowly, incrementally, but surely and purposefully. In the meantime, you are enough, and your life situation, whatever it is, is enough.

### **Contentment = Gratitude = Higher (Longer Lasting) Happiness**

We need to seek out information that challenges our assumptions, not only confirms our beliefs. It is known that confirmation bias is one of many cognitive biases we will see *Chapter 4: Psychology*. It is reassuring and releases “feel good” chemicals like the neurotransmitter dopamine (*Beyond Neurons & Hormones*) yet may not be accurate and helpful in the long run. Curiosity in your challenges is a better approach than anxiety. Courage is a better mindset than fear. Curiosity also cultivates wonder. We will examine more of what I call the “7Cs” as we go on this exquisite excursion to find the happiness we already have at our disposal.

I am challenged every day with life as it unfolds and try to be conscious of its precarious nature. I came close to death a few times, but more concerning is to see your only son almost perish. We were trekking in Patagonia, Argentina, and it took us almost six hours of mostly rain, snow and a steep uneven climb to reach the peak of a mountain which was home to a hidden glacier. As tough as it was, we were mentally ready. Besides our wet and cold hands, the physical part was not too difficult for us. This teenager and dad were in good physical shape. What I was not mentally ready for was to see my son’s leg disappear in a crevasse once we managed to be on top of the magnificent glacier. For those who do not know what a crevasse is, it is a vertical hole of varying size (depth, width and length) that forms, especially as the glacier constantly moves. It is a deep open crack you can fall into, especially if you do not see it because of the snow and the slow motion of ice. It is extremely dangerous, and my son’s whole leg was tangled in this abyss that had been hidden by the snow.

He was able to pull his leg out and his other leg was stable enough on solid ground (ice and snow) to get him out of it. My jaw dropped when I saw the blue bottomless steep curve of the crevasse his leg revealed as he pulled it back from the natural booby trap. It is almost indescribable. It’s tantalizing,



terrifying, breathtakingly beautiful, and awe-inspiring. Dangerously beautiful as we also saw erupting volcanoes in a few other countries. When he was safe, I gasped seeing the depth and width of the crevasse he had uncovered and realized a few centimeters difference might have instantly pulled him under right in front of my very eyes. I later learned a tourist had fallen into a crevasse on the same glacier a few months prior but was luckily rescued from the glacier hours later. Crevasses can lead to severe injury and deaths. An epidemiology study from Switzerland found that from 415 crevasse accidents, death occurred in 11% of victims and was primarily determined by the depth of the fall<sup>7</sup>. This crevasse was deep. I will not speculate, but one thing for sure my son's survival rate was nowhere near 100% if he fell, which was a very close call. What is also clear is that at any given moment, our own survival rate, and that of our loved ones, is not 100%, and in the long run, always 0%. Keep that in mind without having to see your child almost fall to his death in front of you!

I've reminded my son at least weekly since he is very young that he or I will die. This is a stoic approach we will learn more about in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*. I was already prepared for his death or mine and like my friend's grandfather, I've giving him my full presence (active listening and attention) and love each moment since he was born. Maybe the fact that his birth was tumultuous helped, and maybe to realize how close he came to death again in the depths of Patagonia helped as well. Small reminders. Lest we forget.

Living through and seeing this solidified my focus on being here and now. Knowing this has helped me maintain the mindful presence, consideration, and kindness I try to give my son on every and any occasion. This is not just for my kid, but for everyone; the person in the elevator or crossing the street, the person on my business videocall or a barista serving me coffee. This is a form of connection, another of the 7Cs. My son's name is Claudius, mine Chris. Is that 2 more Cs? No, just my quirky humor that I cannot get ride of like a tenacious tumor. Fortunately, humor is good for happiness.

Would seeing my son die in front of my eyes break me? Would I feel responsible? Would I never be the same happy person again?

I hope not. My son is not mine. I do not possess him or his destiny. I can love him, teach him, learn from him, enjoy every moment with him and wish him well. The rest is out of my control.

#### **Near Death = Dear Life**

#### **(We are all nearer to death than we think, so should appreciate life more)**

Why was the HBO show *Six Feet Under* so successful besides the stellar writing? It's because the protagonists working in funeral home faced death daily as part of their jobs. Medical dramas like *E.R.*, *House M.D.*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Chicago Hope*, *Code Black*, *Scrubs*, *New Amsterdam*, *Transplant* and sublime *Au Secours de Béatrice*, have that too, but *Six Feet Under* got us much closer to death and its inevitability. Each episode starts with an ordinary person dying and forced the viewer to confront his or her own mortality. We all had to have a tingly feeling that we may be next, that our death was as certain as these ordinary people going about their lives and still dying every week. We had to imagine that our loved ones may perish unexpectedly and reluctantly become aware of our ultimate impermanence. Stoics and Buddhists have this practice as we will see in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*. Instead of death frightening us, it can bring us closer to life and its ephemeral beauty.

The near-fatal crevasse incident is a vivid reminder, that, in a broader sense, in life there is no guarantee. We may think we are safe and exaggerate our existence by temporarily thinking we've become

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<sup>7</sup> Mathieu Pasquier, Patrick Taffé, Alexandre Kottmann, Ueli Mosimann, Oliver Reisten, Olivier Hugli, Epidemiology and mortality of glacier crevasse accidents, *Injury*, Volume 45, Issue 11, 2014, Pages 1700-1703, ISSN 0020-1383, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.injury.2014.07.001>

immortal. This is insanity. We are not and never will be. We and our loved ones will get sick and die, or perhaps vanish suddenly.

Our identity is also subject to death. Our loved ones may leave us, slowly or abruptly. Our employers may fire us even if we are hard working and feel falsely safe in our role. Relationship or job security? Our hopes and expectations are only that. Who will be next to be hit by a bus (like my bisexual friend now living in New York), be hit by a streetcar (like Frida Kahlo 100 years ago in Mexico City), suffer a malaise (like my friend's father who died in his taxi), die of a heart attack (like my ex's young boss), be impacted by natural disaster (like my family in Haiti), or have a life-altering stroke and never be able to work again (like my stepdad)?

I met an older man at a bar years ago. We spoke for almost two hours with usual Montreal friendliness and chatter between strangers. He was cheerful and remarkably happy, so I was rather shocked to later find out he had lost his wife and two daughters in a car accident a few years before. He was widowed, still single and not at all drinking his sorrows in a bar. He was sincerely at peace. My jaw dropped, not from the tragic news, but because of his poise, resilience and felt happiness after an apparent catastrophe. I did not know where to begin. He told me the story simply, softly, and with his signature smile. He received the news of a fatal car accident. All three dead on impact. He loves them and misses them. They were a special part of his life. Now, life goes on.

Simple, yet true.

Again, easier said than done. Don't worry, we will learn how and practice together.

The widowed man speaks of that day matter-of-factly when he heard from the emergency services he lost the 3 most precious human beings in his life and takes a sip of his tasty microbrewery beer. He smiles and we eventually change the subject, not because it was uncomfortable but because there was nothing else to say. I saw that jolly widower a few more times in the neighborhood throughout the years. Always as happy to be alive.

### **Death = Simple, Inevitable**

If we do not want to be broken; if we want to practice getting up fast when life gets "rough", we need to train our brains and practice.

## **Grief**

When I almost lost the mother of my child to depression in 2019 and then to breast cancer the following year, I was grateful for her presence, patience, and paramount importance in my life. I supported her as best I could and knew nothing was guaranteed. We had been through difficult times before, as most humans who live long enough and not in a glass house do. We had thus far managed to be there for each other. Her for me and me for her. When I did lose her forever through a drifting relationship that failed after years of counselling, loss of simple thankfulness, loss of trust & communication, accumulated faults, and fate itself, I cherished her until the very last day I departed from my once happy home.

I do not blame or hate her, even as she possibly plotted to take my rights away to see my son. I do not idolize her either. She is a human being like all of us. I do not curse her betrayal or sit around and wallow, I move forward with the force of a tidal wave to come out of it, not intact but at least integral, somehow whole. Perhaps even better, wiser, more determined to do good regardless of the outcome, instead of fearful and mistrusting of women or the world. I assume she had her reasons and rationale, that she could have not done otherwise in her mind, and I cannot be wise for her or force her to do anything. I can also love myself and others, including her. It is what it is. Life goes on.

I remember her cuddling me in the middle of night and saying “baby, everything is going to be okay” when I would wake up in sweat from my chronic nightmares. I remember her confronting me for infidelity in the defined boundaries of our flourishing open relationship. I remember when she found a heart-warming educational video about psychosis after my second psychotic and paranoid episode, and watched it with me while holding my hand. I remember her offering me sensual and intellectual rewards to help me through some of my addictions. I remember her joy, her laugh, her sense of humour, her smile, her touch and most importantly her presence. Presence may be our greatest gift to ourselves and others. Presence is one of the 8Ps that we explore in *Chapter 4: Psychology*.

I remember the thousands of nights I cuddled her to sleep, massaged her feet, traveled the world with her, laughed, cried of bliss, basked in peace, and found solutions to the hostile world together. I remember kissing her radiant and elated as her water broke while we were at home, told her some of my darkest secrets, celebrated countless birthdays and mostly celebrated life every day. I hold dear the unorthodox couple and family we unapologetically created. I will not let these fond memories be jaded. We will see that humans have a built-in negativity bias, especially with emotion and memory in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. I will neither let my brain tell me otherwise, nor embellish the past. At times it was Hellish. At times, we were both selfish. Yet out of seventeen years, both objectively and admittedly subjectively, we had a special bond, strong connection and uncommon understanding that faded with time, wear, and tear. There was infinitely more peace than warfare, more love than despair. I had several fulfilling and flourishing love relationships, including this one, that fell victim to many factors. I am far from the far-fetched fantasy of “the one” as a concept of romance or relationship. She was not my “soulmate”, but she was for a long time, an exceptional mate, mother, and friend. I prefer to see her as one of my favourite songs of all time by Quebec’s very own Les Cowboys Fringants “*Les étoiles filantes*” which equates love relationships to passing shooting stars. She was my bright shooting star for a long moment and now my Earth keeps on spinning without her luminous presence.

Couples separate. They do so at an alarming rate. Each separation has its own grief and sometimes relief. There are many forms of grief, my own is not particularly special or noteworthy. It is a drop in the ocean of infinity.

In a way, I personally see our abrupt separation as akin to a natural disaster. A seismic surge that leaves devastation before slow reconstruction; a 19<sup>th</sup> century fire that ravages an unsuspecting city; a tsunami that sweeps you in an instant (as love sometimes does) and leaves you displaced half-dead ashore. I was displaced that is for sure! But maybe it was man-made and not natural, maybe it was arson or even arsenic. A failed sneaky assassination attempt. Assassinate my character?

Like Logic said: “I am still here. I am still me.” At worst, a better me.

And what if man-made is also natural? Why put more emphasis on the intention of someone? A mere perfectly flawed human being. A human may be no more than a shooting star or a volcano that occasionally erupts, like the Mayon in the Philippines, which I was able to see - from very close! - in 2019 with my son and my girlfriend who, in turn, erupted three years later.

**Change = Impermanence = Inevitable**

## Life is Biology and Chemistry

Stephen Jay Gould came up with the theory of punctuated equilibrium as an addendum to Darwin’s theory of natural selection. It states that although genetics are selected for survival traits slowly (natural selection), in a form of evolving (evolution) equilibrium, certain significant Earth events will affect the gene pool abruptly (punctuate) and create massive change of the gene pool in a short time before

resuming the slow evolutionary tract. Our human lives in an even shorter scale and cycle often resemble that.

### **Change = Slow + Abrupt**

I would also equate Life to chemistry, not only that biological life is in essence organic chemistry, but rather in the linear sense of irreversible reactions. World elements, including humans and their genetic makeup, experiences, memory, brain, thoughts, and actions will eventually react and form new components of reality which we cannot go back from (irreversible). These unidirectional reactions can also be seen in baking, where ingredients are mixed and baked together to form a cake that cannot be converted back to the original forms: the eggs, flour, and the likes. Life is similarly transformative.

An example of an irreversible reaction is combustion. Combustion involves burning an organic compound with oxygen, producing carbon dioxide and water. We may say that we are burning or consuming every moment with a no return policy.

### **Life is A Movie**

I recently watched *Triangle of Sadness*, the thoroughly enjoyable and funny film from Swedish writer/director Ruben Östlund that explores class structure and struggle, capitalism and communism, couple dynamics and vanity in a memorable voyage in and off a luxury cruise ship. Beyond the satisfactory uneasiness I felt after being challenged by its thought-provoking material and reflections on human nature and implicit and explicit social contracts, I was stunned and chagrined to learn shortly after that the lead actress, a young South African model, whom I had spent two and a half hours enjoying the performance had died before the official release of the film. What did that mean to her who would not have the joy to see the “fruits of her labour” and the film being nominated for Best Picture at the world’s biggest film stage? And what did that mean to me, the audience, who was invested in an invented story and who fell for the illusion that this character was lively and alive on screen?

Could life and our lives also be a patented illusion?

Sometimes I look at some of our family genuine old travel videos, where we are a happy family, not just on camera. We can see the easy-going joy, laughter, and togetherness. I now see this footage as the same way I see the dead South African actress. The actress that was the person playing the loving wife and mother of my child is now dead. A devastated disease took her from this wonderful world. It was not cancer after all, but perhaps a disease of the mind.

In that way, we die and are reborn every moment. There is a fork in the road that let us build our precarious sandcastles or snowmen together for a while. Most get tired or find it difficult to play and do not finish or protect against the tides or potential snowmen street vandals. These sandcastles with no moat or the snowmen who were left to be taken their heads off by zealous youth perish promptly. Some become beautiful artistic sandcastles and snowmen, but the tide and the spring always come reclaim the illusion of a sustainable structure. We must always face impermanence in this way.

The kids you learn to play the best with become your besties. Life mates if there is also mutual attraction and commitment. You work as a team against the harsh and cruel elements and external world. You protect the castle, predict the tide and weather as best you can. You build the sandcastle carefully, but the castle will perish like you. All you can hope is to have a longer and better building voyage, and to enjoy the building and protecting process. Relationships are:

1. a castle of playing cards; or
2. a sandcastle; or
3. a straw house; or

4. a smiley, melting snowman.

Destruction can come in steps but often also abruptly like the strong wind, tide or heat wave and we are never far from that final annihilation. I am neither complaining, bitter or bittersweet or reminiscing. What is past is past. Neutral or positive. Never negative. I am Mr. Practical and Positive remember.

Seventeen years with her and a healthy kid. Not bad. I am grateful for all of them. I also wonder how many relationships (love, work, friendship, and family) are at the brink right now and may just barely avoid fate? May this book be helpful to know yourself and others better to play longer with more purpose and laughter with your best friends or life mates. Forget soulmates. Almost every relationship is work. If you do not work to protect your illusion, it will disappear fast enough. Same with admiration and desire. They are innate at the start of “honeymoon love” but are modulated by many factors. We cannot wait for them to happen because body’s hormones and neurotransmitters are different, but they are not gone. I now study them among other subjects in psychology. With time almost all couples need to:

**Cultivate Desire > Disgust, Aversion, Avoidance, Anger, Resentment  
Communicate & Elevate**

**Fight Cultural Bias + Unfairness Perception of the Brain**

But enough about my rather average failed loved story. No big drama. Go watch a fun romantic comedy instead. The idea is only to share the lessons. Like our realisations about our loved one who will all die, let’s try to see our relationships as that too. Again, shorten the cycle by being mindful and grateful before, during and after.

**Mindfulness + Gratitude = No Regret + No Resentment**

Can we even avoid fate? Life may already be written like a play or screenplay. Is it an original screenplay? I think so. The writer is very creative even if we can see some clear patterns and repetitions. There seems to be periodically something unpredicted, fresh, and juicy to the story. Would it be useful to see ourselves as actors in our own movie or better yet, the entire universe or multiverse movie where our part is unfortunately not a leading role? Would it be useful and is it the truth? Truth is not always practical, useful, or desired. We will see the “red pill vs. blue pill dilemma” later. In the meantime, let us enjoy our momentary bliss in relative ignorance.

**Ignorance = (Momentary) Bliss**

## Life is Music

*Así e' la vida, sí  
Yeah, that's just life, baby  
Yeah, love came around and it knocked me down  
But I'm back on my feet  
Así e' la vida, sí  
Yeah, that's just life, baby  
I was barely standing, but now I'm dancing*  
— Camila Cabello, “Bam Bam”, 2022.

Dancing after a breakup is a catchy pop song and hymn to resilience and living. In reality, the process is often more grueling than not. My friend was sexually abused for years as a child by her father and then, one day, he committed suicide. It was not a relief. It was more or different pain. She had to surmount mountains most of us cannot even contemplate. She is now a successful writer and translator,

has a loving boyfriend and is constantly smiling and laughing. How can we develop such resilience without hopefully going through something like this?

My other dear friend was born in Canada to an addicted mother. Her mom had her older sisters at 14- and 16-year-old. The first sister was taken up by the grandmother. My friend and her sister were not so lucky and spent time in various foster homes until finally adopted by inspiring and loving parents. The dad was wise, wealthy, and well-educated. He was a professor in linguistics. He gave good advice to his daughters and cared for them. Still, she fell into addiction, including cocaine. One day she stopped using cocaine and was looking at the end of the tunnel. She met a charming guy who ended up kidnapping her, using her as a sex trafficked prostitute with perpetual debt to repay and later selling her to another sex trafficker. She lived through terror but says the other girl in the house got it even worse than her. She once saw an underaged teenager get caught up in the same blackhole of bondage and slavery. By some grit, wit and resilience, my friend eventually got out. Her long-time friend who helped her escape the grips of the ugly underworld finally got shot some time after. He died for saving her. This is not in an underdeveloped nation; this is right here in Canada, in my otherwise peaceful city. I saw an interview of a survivor of a similar tale in the United States. Impossible, unimaginable situations are not only possible or plausible; they exist and persist. Why would you think you are exempt from hardships? Slavery was abolished in most of the British empire in 1833, still, between 1879 and 1916, indentured Indian labourers were voluntarily brought to Fiji, Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago by the British colonial government with false promises of prosperity to work on sugar cane plantations, many died in ships<sup>8</sup>. Very few Indians were able to return after their 5-year contract. Previously, slaves were brought to work on sugar cane plantations like my West African ancestors who were brought to the Caribbean from Western Africa. Different laws, same human nature.

African music beat drum in unison.

Thankfully my ancestors showed resilience, fought for freedom and here I am! Only if life was so simple and self-righteous. It is not. My family also admittedly comprise of at least one slave owner, my French ancestor. He was a slave owner and had to change his name not to be killed by the slave rebellion. Life is seldom black or white, wrong or right. Life is<sup>9</sup>. Like it or not. Don't be so quick to judge or take sides. Don't play the card of the oppressed, the victim, nor the victor.

Play music in your head, or in real life. Music is magic and has many benefits as we will see.

The early origins of jazz trace back to New Orleans history where:

-African slaves played music in Congo Square since they were legally confined to only play and sing there in 1817.

-Creoles who were classically trained in European orchestras blended the musical landscape.

-Pianists in New Orleans invented a new combined style of music called "ragtime" with syncopated rhythms in the 1890s<sup>10</sup>.

Further South and much earlier, capoeira was invented in Brazil by slaves and incorporate music, martial arts, acrobatics and dance. It unofficially defied authorities. Since 1789, it was criminalized and repeatedly outlawed and its performers persecuted. It was further declared totally illegal and banned in

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<sup>8</sup> National Library of Australia. <https://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/indian-emigration-passes-to-fiji-1879-1916>

<sup>9</sup> *C'est la vie / Así e' la vida*

<sup>10</sup> Padillia, C. (2016). The American Sound: The Evolution of Jazz. February 05, 2016. <http://blog.act-sf.org/2016/02/the-american-sound-evolution-of-jazz.html>

1890<sup>11</sup>. In 2014, capoeira was granted a special protected status as a world intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. My son performed capoeira for many years in the 2010s.

Still, slavery exists even today in many forms.

My close friend got of sequestration and sexual slavery in 2020 after over a year of unimaginable experiences. No glorification like the Indian movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) based on real-life social activist who was sold into prostitution in Mumbai in the 1940s. Yes, this still happens today and in an otherwise safe country like Canada. My friend continues to have vivid flashbacks but developed methods to have such episodes less often and less severe. Methods better than numbing the pain with drugs or alcohol. She is a survivor, not a victim.

She is visibly affected. She doesn't look someone in the eyes for too long and can seem odd at times. She does smile, laugh, love. She has a beautiful present and hopeful bright future. She loves music. She just came back from a concert in Miami, became a restaurant assistant-manager and is interviewing to be a flight attendant. She wants to travel the world.

She was beaten, but not broken.

Let's travel the world together in the next chapter, but before more music. A song called "Interstellar" covers a lot of ground in one long verse:

*In a hotel room, contemplating my death  
I been on tour so long, feel like ain't nothing left  
It's in these moments that I find freedom  
In the midst of a bad day, good thoughts, I greet 'em (positivity)  
When I'm riddled with anxiety, it's hard to find sobriety  
I'm being honest now, entirely  
Physically and mentally drained  
But no matter how life move, do my best to maintain  
I could focus on the positive or bitch and complain (no complaining or blaming)  
Gripping this fame, feeling like I'm lost in the game  
It's hard to see the bigger picture when you're feeling restrained  
'Cause everything you dreamed to attain can't fit in the frame (mental reframing)  
Luckily, your mind's a gallery  
Full of artistic expression that could fill up the galaxy (creativity)  
It's okay to not be okay  
Just don't let that present mood dictate the rest of your day  
Children grow up, go to work then forget how to play  
A lot of people that I meet tell me about their dreams  
And how they wish they could attain 'em even though it seems  
Like it's not a probability  
Be nicer to yourself, show humility (Humble, kind and confident)  
While you compare yourself to others on a screen  
You could put that phone down, look around, and feel serene  
But this thing in our pockets are part of our daily routine  
Distraction from taking action*

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, J. Lowell (1992). *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira*. London: The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0-226-47682-0.

Full of synthetic satisfaction by dopamine hits  
From swipe, likes, and captions  
Comparison is destroying your passion  
Used to be full of dreams, now you barely have a ration  
Yo, listen  
If you ain't rich doing what you love, then what's the point?  
And it's because of this mentality that you can't pass a certain point  
Think of the millions of dreamers that did what they did then they died (**accept mortality**)  
Some were celebrated, others crucified  
I'm not saying quit your nine to five  
That's unrealistic in this world that we live in, and you must survive  
But do not deprive the heart on your sleeve from the blood underneath  
Sharpen your sword daily, don't just keep it in the sheath  
Wake up every day as if you could relive it  
Then whenever you feel negativity, come and just pivot (**see Chapter 4: Psychology for negativity bias tools**)  
Appreciate the good and not the bad, be yourself and not the fad  
It's okay to wake up sad  
But it's a lot of people that woke up today in body bags  
332, 648 to be exact  
And you mad that you ain't get that big promotion? Fuck that  
Man, it's okay to be upset, but don't let it affect your life  
'Cause 13, 860 just lost they life in an hour  
231 in a minute, man, that's three a second, yo  
And your heart still beats as you listen  
So take it day by day and make the right decision  
Add something to this world, don't multiply division  
Focusing on the past is not the present vision (**rumination vs. mindfulness**)  
Worrying about the future is just a head-on collision (**mind wandering and catastrophizing**)  
Live in the now if you can (**presence and being in the "now"**)  
I find it hard myself, but I'm just trying to lend a hand  
I said, I find it hard myself, but I'm just trying to lend a hand

(Chorus)

'Cause they can't  
Take it from you  
They never understood what you've been through  
What's life without pushing? (**courage and perseverance**)  
They can't believe what you put yourself through  
And I love you for it  
And I love you for it

—Logic, Interstellar, 2024



This brilliant song talks about anxiety, sadness, sobriety, dopamine, dreams, culture, courage, conformity, negativity bias, big picture perspective, resilience, mindfulness and gratitude for life itself. It examines and reflects on many concepts we will continue to see and explore in *Beyond Happy* together.

Feel free to listen to the song now as a reward for finishing the first chapter. I suggest you also come back to it after you read the book to try to decipher deeper understanding behind the words. Logic's real-life journey is that of rags-to-riches, of broken home and addiction to stardom, money and fame, but also of growing wisdom, awareness, agency, happiness and compassion. Your journey is different and no less beautiful. Let's start with a journey around the world.

## Chapter 2: Sociology

*I have travelled the world to find myself in every corner.*

— Christian Dominique

*I have traveled the world many times. Do you believe me if I tell you that even though I travelled the world, I didn't really see anything?*

— Celine Dion, I Am: Celine Dion. 2024

My maternal grandmother died in her fifties from an asthma attack in Haiti. I had asthma as well when I was young and once had to be rushed to the hospital and given oxygen and overnight stay after a severe asthma attack. The state of healthcare and development being what it is in Haiti (very low), my grandmother was also rushed to the hospital, yet she passed away almost on arrival. She had remarried with a lovely man named Carl who always had a smile and considerate attitude towards the world. My grandfather was in the military and was not a particularly kind man to my grandmother. My mother had urged her mother to divorce her dad and was thrilled to see her with this gleaming man. Carl, as kind and caring as he was, would lose his equally empathic wife, my grandma Jacqueline, that solemn and sad day. He would also lose his otherwise healthy son (from his previous marriage), Carlito, less than 3 months later from a blood clot reaction to a drug. Carl remarried (a third time) a year later, with my mom's blessing and permission, to try to soothe the pain. He however shortly thereafter died of "chagrin" a few short years later, refusing to take treatment for a simple yet persistent pneumonia, leaving his eldest daughter without a father or brother.

Grandma studied geography and became the Air France country manager for Haiti in the 1970s after years of service for the airline as ground staff. My mom and grandma used to go to Paris together in my mom's youth. My mom visited the Montreal 1967 World Expo with her best friend as teenagers before she immigrated to Canada to study chemistry at McGill University. A form of privilege, especially in a poor nation like Haiti. They were part of the socioeconomical elite, with permanent house staff and cooks, as opposed to my dad who lived with his aunt and slept in the same bed as his older brother for years. My dad's brother eventually won a worldwide French essay contest and obtained a scholarship to study in prestigious La Sorbonne University in France. My dad, inspired, also went to Europe, learned German in six months, and studied mechanical engineering in Munich. Similarly, he received a scholarship and stayed there six years to complete his degree. He worked odd jobs in the summers and received some additional small monthly stipend from his sister who had married into a richer family.

My grandmother's love of geography was passed down to me and I had my first 100% grades in school in geography and history. Later this would manifest in receiving a highest ever awarded grade in anthropology (98%) where my tough teacher was challenged by my inquisitive essays and imaginative examinations. This led me to attend anthropology lectures for fun with my friends (unofficial audits) and to chat extensively with many anthropologist researchers around the world. More about anthropology and science later in this chapter.

My son benefited from his geographically inclined somewhat savvy father and with his own curiosity and interest managed to know all the 200ish countries in the world, where they were located, approximate population, languages, and much more, by age six! His primary school teachers also gave

him his first 100% grades in geography and all admitted that he likely knows more than them on the subject. Geography is part of the family DNA it seems. Sociology is seeing patterns and digging deeper into collective human behavior. In this chapter we will go from the personal to the communal, and sometimes to the universal.

My great grandfather, Jean-René, who died when I was in my mother's womb, was an entrepreneur and had the opportunity to create the Canadian Caribbean Chemical Corporation (4C) and employ over 300 workers helping healthcare in Haiti and collaborating with Canada. He was a pillar of the community and regarded as a generous and benevolent "boss". His success, mission and vision also trickled down in the family. His eldest daughter went to the United States and worked for a nonprofit organization with her husband dedicating their vest years for decades living in many developing countries around the world and doing as much "good" as possible. His only son, Roland, went to private boarding school near Montreal, Canada and later immigrated there with his wife and three children before my mom. Roland became an entrepreneur in turn, and his last daughter still is, although all generations in different fields. Roland had a classical romance with lots of love and I remember seeing him and his wife finish each others sentences, as well as being partners in life and business. They were a model family in fractured Montreal when I was growing up. My mom got divorced and mom's brother too, both after two kids. We were two boys; my cousins: two girls.

My mom had a happy union after the messy divorce and made me another brother (as if we needed more boys!). My stepdad was as supportive as my mom's stepdad in many ways. Later, my serene stepdad had three gradually debilitating strokes in his early sixties and left my brave brother fatherless just before starting university. Decades before, my great uncle Roland died at the same approximate age but from a single stroke (apoplexy). His widow would remain "without touching another man" for the next 26 years and passed away at age 89 this year. She was a happy person and always had close friends and family.

My great grandfather was a pioneer and allowed my grandmother to be educated and explore the world. My mom gave me the opportunity to be born in a much wealthier country with even better education and to eventually have a Canadian passport which opened many doors.

My son was also born in Canada with the same privileges, in addition to starting to travel and discover the world at 3 months old. Traveling may be the best form of education one can give his children I would say. Outstandingly better than expensive schools. I met numerous traveling families who were not just sightseeing or acting like tourists with a checklist and gloating story to match (ego and identity). Traveling families were also learning, discovering and sometimes even "home" schooling their kids for a year or two. These children grow up knowing the entire world is their home.

Let's see what I can share from speaking to, seeing, sharing, and living with people from different climates, cultures, and socioeconomic classes. All the while I was thinking about the differences, similarities, and lessons learned around the world I could incorporate in my life for betterment and contentment. After seeing distinct and sometimes diverging ways to maintain and go beyond an elusive happiness barometer, I have a full chapter of insights we can dig into together.

## Between Life and Death

She held my hand tight, did as instructed "pretended to poop", popped a few facial veins, as she repeatedly pushed and pushed our unplanned (but wanted), unnamed, unborn, child into the world. As the warm, gooey, fresh out the oven baby popped out, a quiet commotion happened, and a dozen healthcare professionals rushed in the room in seconds. Our son was not breathing. His zeroth birthday

was his first brush with death. Day 1 is going to be fun if you survive it, son. I could see his oversized genitalia (as newborn have) and it was a boy. The mother was thankfully unaware. She had given all the energy she could (un)humanly muster, and then some. And still had a placenta to push out.

Multiple hands, trays, and tubes everywhere. The calmness and efficiency of the staff was alarming and awe-inspiring. The balance of life and death right in front of my eyes. My son's vitals were almost inexistent and his APGAR<sup>12</sup> score indicated: "needs immediate resuscitation." My son did die in front of me... way before the glacier scare.

Suction of his airways, finger cardiac massage of his tiny body. Seconds elapsed and I watched this tense drama of his struggle for survival. I was thankful we were in a hospital and not a home birth. I had to trust (yes, complete and utter trust) these trained strangers to affect the course of my life and the beginning (or end) of his. Metaphorically and metaphysically, we are reborn every moment. My son was "reborn" a few seconds after he lived and died. Besides this trivial fact and the two other diseases he had the first few days of his life in NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) and in an incubator, I had to tell his mom at this moment not that he had died and been brought back by the miracles of modern medicine, but that he had a penis and not a vagina. We had no chosen name for a boy, only for a girl. Yes, another boy in the family!

Even my aunt who used to send money to my dad in Germany to buy food had bought a pink blanket for our unsexed baby. She unfortunately died while we were pregnant and never saw the baby (like my great grandfather never got to see me). Our son still got the pink blanket! We taught him young that there is no shame in appropriating and owning traditionally sexist color or clothes arbitrary divisions. That or any other custom or cultural norm that should be challenged. Less division and barriers lead to more union, trust, sharing, respect, community, and unity.

#### **More Division = Less Union = Less Happiness**

I asked the new proud mother if she wanted to see the sex for herself, trying to keep the surprise. She gasped, "just tell me"; exhausted beyond belief. "A boy", I said with joy, even though we both wanted a girl and knew the boy's name would be part of a political family feud. "Ah no," she managed to say exasperated, before I was rushed to the NICU with him.

### **Trust or Mistrust**

Our son's name is Claudius and three months later he was traveling the world with us on a whirlwind world tour for a year. I thought Claudius to trust others and the world, from a very young age. When he was three years old, my mother tried to scold me when she rang my door and my son answered with a smile.

"Don't teach your son to open the doors to strangers," she said.

She has spent her childhood in Haiti, which is a low trust culture, as we will define below, and had some understandable real-life traumas, triggering and dictating (yes, like dictatorship in Haiti and elsewhere) her actions and attitude.

"I am sorry mom, but I will teach Claudius the opposite, to trust and be open to strangers. Also, he opened the door to you, and there is a big window in the front door. You are not a stranger! You are his grandma."

The point was, I was born in Canada which is a high trust society, and I had also traveled the world and decided I did not want the world to be or look scary to him. Traveling puts things in perspective. Many

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<sup>12</sup> Appearance, Pulse, Grimace, Activity, Respiration (APGAR) Scale

travelers, even solo woman travelers, have shared with me that true traveling has increased their trust in the world, in others, and also in themselves!

### **More Traveling = More Trust**

Trust is a term we may have various feelings about and defining experiences that shape or level of trust and mistrust. In Ruben Östlund's film "The Square", a fictional museum exhibit asks the museumgoer to decide if he or she identifies as "trust people" or "mistrust people". The museum director goes to the exhibit with his children, and they hesitate and take the "trust people" route. Life is indeed a choice and here goes the metaphor of the left or right fork on the road. On the "trust" side museumgoers are encouraged to leave their wallet and cell phone on the floor on a square and see if they really trust people and put their thoughts in action. Hopefully they will get it back at the end of the tour. This is Sweden, an even higher trust society than Canada, but it is still an interesting experiment to do with interactive art, and your wallet and smartphone on the line. Which path would you choose? Would you be brave and sure enough to leave your smart phone and wallet on the museum floor? I would choose the "trust people" path, but I am aware that choice has many pros and cons I must accept along with it. Claudius chose "mistrust" people, but nuanced his answer to me and explained he would rather mistrust the world in general and highly or completely trust selected few individuals. He mentioned for example that he would rather give his phone, wallet or even laptop to a specific person to hold for 15 minutes than leave it unattended. I considered further with him that by asking someone, he would also indirectly see the nonverbal response (see *Beyond Spirituality*) for the individual approached and allow the chosen individual to be visually identifiable because he (and maybe others) saw him or her, thus lowering the odds of that person subsequently "stealing". See also the concepts of imposed and self-imposed morality in *Beyond Spirituality* and the wallet experiments below. The real question is when would you implicitly trust a stranger, in particular, or in general, or should you even? What are these pros and cons? Where do we increase or decrease our odds of this having a "good" ending?

There have been many "lost wallet" tests in the real world as well to see in which city or country a (planted) lost wallet would be reported or brought back to the owner (the experimenter in that case). Many such experiments may not have had the best experimental setting or statistically significant, but a larger scale study put together a team that dropped off more than 17,303 "lost" wallets in 355 cities (of 100 000 plus population), 40 countries from 2013 to 2016<sup>13</sup>. The test wallets held local business card/grocery list (to identify owner as local resident), a key, and either no money, the equivalent of about USD 13 or 100. One may assume that wallets with more money would be less likely to be returned but research found the opposite. 46% of wallets with no money were reported, compared with 61% of those with about \$13 and 72% of those with \$100. Tests were also made to test altruism where some wallets contained only a key (something valuable only to the person who lost it) and were found to be about 10% more likely to be reported than those with no key. For some qualitative analysis, online surveys revealed that many people said that if there's cash or more cash in the wallet, it "feels more like stealing". It is thus not only a question of trust and possibly altruism but also of how people see themselves. In this case, most people don't want to see themselves as a thief. So the rational decision-making process may be more from a social norm perspective than a risk-reward calculation (monetary gain – directly for keeping it or indirectly for returning it -possible reward or "Finder's Fee"- vs. fear of punishment). I would suspect that a significant or life-changing amount, of say USD 10 000 or more, may have a lower return rate than 72% and that perhaps a ridiculously high amount, say USD 100 000 (maybe in a bag instead of a wallet),

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<sup>13</sup>Cohn, A. *et al.* Honesty and selfishness across cultures. *Science* Vol 365, Issue 6448, pp. 70-73. (20 Jun 2019)

may create high suspicion and fear, thus creating other decision-making factors. I do not have millions of dollars to make this experiment and test this hypothesis however!

Socio-economically, countries with higher rates of primary education were more likely to see high rates of reported wallets, but wealth, income or purchase power of returners were not examined in that study. Education can often be linked with wealth, but also education may be linked with learning socially accepted behaviors. Civic honesty or dishonesty is a barometer of people's reactions in society that will either benefit or hinder cooperation. We know that our genetic ancestors had to work together to increase their chance of survival, so that we are also hard coded to exhibit some degree of cooperation and altruism. Societal norms, education, local laws, personal experiences and constructed values and realities, as well as personal genetic will affect this variation between and within a given society. Marked cultural differences can be seen in the wallet experiment as well as looking at crime rates (antisocial behaviors) and other factors around the world.

#### **More Education = More Ethics**

In a Reader's Digest Study published in 2023, only 192 planted wallets (with cellphone number, a family photo, coupons, business cards, and the equivalent of \$50) were dropped (12 in 16 cities), and revealed the following "most honest" cities by wallet return rate:

1. 11 out of 12  
Helsinki, Finland:
2. 9 out of 12  
Mumbai, India:
3. 8 out of 12  
Budapest, Hungary:  
New York City, U.S.A.
3. 7 out of 12  
Moscow, Russia.  
Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
4. 6 out of 12  
Berlin, Germany.  
Ljubljana, Slovenia.
5. 5 out of 12  
London, England  
Warsaw, Poland.
6. 4 out of 12  
Zurich, Switzerland.  
Bucharest, Romania.  
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
7. 3 out of 12  
Prague, Czech Republic.
8. 2 out of 12  
Madrid, Spain.
9. 1 out of 12  
Lisbon, Portugal.

With 13 out of 16 cities being in Europe and only 12 wallets per city, it is of limited value to suggest clear geographically supremacy of honesty, yet we see overall return rate of 47% which is closer to the

wallet with no money lower return rate of the previous study. Did something change in the six to nine years between the studies? What is the most important is the fact that the return rate varies immensely (from 1 to 11!) depending on the geography.

### **Cultural Conventions = Different Attitudes and Actions**

I also did some research and talked to researchers about corruption in the world in the business, political and private spheres. Northern Europe always comes at the top of the list for low corruption with Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark leading the way for the past decades. No wonder, the “Trust” museum exhibit in the movie in Sweden had a higher chance of success. One of the reason Scandinavia has less corruption also has to do with the level of transparency they have for people in public functions as well as private citizen. The cost they pay however is what other countries would call and fight for: “privacy”. When we stop to be so self-centred (including privacy), we may aspire perhaps to have a better society. Some may argue that lack of privacy is a big risk to our security because of the potential abuse of our private data from public governments and “public” and private businesses, but in fact we live in a world where these entities are much less transparent than our own lives. To have better society we need transparency at the “top” first and foremost. It became more and more apparent that “whistle-blowers” are been silenced in as many ways as possible, censorship is more rampant than “cancel culture” and we are carefully conditioned to trust and believe a narrative (sensibly created story) that may be far from reality. We may hope that true transparency can generate adequate trust.

### **More Transparency = More Trust = Less Corruption**

Recent polls show increased mistrust in our governments and social media moguls who hold our most precious current asset (data) for ransom, as they did our real most precious asset (time) for so long with a mix of slavery and modern slavery (work and debt, including mortgages – a word that means “death bond” in French).

A survey<sup>14</sup> found that a mere 61 percent of the United States (US) public did not trust the government in November 2021, a 3% increase on 2020 data. The same study found the lowest levels of mistrust in government were seen in China (only 9%!) and Saudi Arabia (18%). I would argue that these two repressive governments where expectation of no reprisal for free speech against the government is low have a combination of respondents fearing saying they mistrust their government (privacy of data may be dubious) and that these governments may also be very good at convincing people of their narrative. We know that Nazi Germany had huge success 90 years ago with their propaganda minister and more recently North Korea, Turkmenistan, and the like. It would be illusionary to think that our “democratic” governments and media do not create propaganda, although they may not have a minister named or dedicated to it.

### **Propaganda (overt or covert) = Increase Trust (on False Basis)**

It is also to note that repetition of the same information regardless of its validity and especially coming from different sources will invariably lead to potential eventual belief even if initial skepticism. I was convinced once in Bangkok Thailand to buy a “precious” gem at a “discounted” price for a gift for my mother from a gang of well organized (crime? scam?) and elaborate tourist trap with many people involved to repeat the same information until you believe it yourself. They also gain your confidence with hired foreigners speaking to you (in your language) so that you can relate. I lost a few thousand dollars, yet I learned a valuable lesson of peer persuasion which is slightly different than peer pressure.

### **Repetition of Information (ideally from Diverse Source) = Belief = Social Normative = Trust**

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<sup>14</sup> Edelman Research Trust Barometer 2022

In the South of Sri Lanka, years later, I was lured by a single man who tried to over clock his rate at the end of a day tour in Galle and we narrowly escaped violence with menace and more men demanding unreasonably high amount of money. I made sure my son and girlfriend got into a bus unharmed, and I also eventually made it safely without paying the cheat. Subterfuge can be in many forms. Trust is tricky and the risk of trusting too easily can be high.

#### **Excessive Trust = Increased Danger**

In Puebla, Mexico, I was enjoying a lively evening and decided to follow a friendly guy in a taxi to another part of town only to realize he had brought me to a dark deserted alley and that there were a dozen men waiting for me at the corner. In shock and disbelief, I looked at my “friend” in the taxi who said and did nothing. I understood this was possibly a life-or-death situation, so I did not wait to see what the dozen guys wanted from me, but I could guess: money, organ, passport, kidnapping ransom, etc. All I knew was it I was likely nothing good or that I wanted to find out. I ran for my life for kilometers and because I was relatively strong and fit, I outran all of them in what seemed like 15 or 20 minutes.

Fear is a protective mechanism that will create mistrust and is adaptive for survival. Trust is also adaptive to create cooperation and allow families, communities, and societies to care for and protect one another. Trust can allow to have more protection from the harsh realities of life and the environment and also to create more than one could ever do alone. No man is an island, and we will see the importance of social bonds biologically mediated by oxytocin and vasopressin in *Beyond Sex*.

After the run of my life in Puebla, I found a young man listening to music at a bus stop and evaluated the situation before talking to him. I told him what had just happened to me frankly and a little frantically. He helped me find my hotel because I was totally lost having ran for my life in any direction in an unfamiliar city. He first pointed me in the right direction, and I was ready to walk alone in the unforgiving night again, but he saw the lingering fright in my face of body language and offered to walk me all the way to my hotel, which was over half an hour out of his way. I will never forget this kind gesture from this complete stranger I decided to trust just after having been targeted and seriously threatened.

#### **Effective Trust = Decreased Danger**

Same thing happened in Jamaica when I was forced to take out money from the ATM in Montego Bay by two scammers and then met a woman who took the time to drive me to my hotel.

So, we can and should trust (some? most?) people. How about governments?

In Argentina, where I went recently and saw the ravage of another currency hyperinflation<sup>15</sup>, 78 % of respondents said they did not trust their government. When you first cannot afford to travel and eventually to pay rent, you see your life savings lose value day by day, you may start to be disillusioned from your government’s promise of prosperity and liberty for the people.

#### **Trust = Time-bound**

Trust is thus also changing in a temporal manner, and not just geographically. In “The Square” film, the museum director tells a story to his grade school children that when his father was a child, he would go to the big city alone at 6-year-old with his address and name label around his neck with a chord and nothing “bad” was expected to happen. He said that in the past a child was expected to be taken care of and be safe by any adult in society, regardless of if he or she was “their” child or even a child they knew. It was an implicit societal trust of community. Nowadays, many have been conditioned to expect our kids to be molested by a friendly lurky sexual predator. Why? In Colombia, my friend tells me that in his crime-ridden neighborhood where there was legitimate mistrust for the police and authorities to prevent theft

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<sup>15</sup> Second only to Venezuela in South America and the highest in the G20 in 2022



and other crimes, the neighbors would take it in their own hands and scream “*ladron*” (thief) if they spotted someone stealing in the community and the neighbors would proceed to properly beat that person. That is an example of a sense of trust in community in the face of mistrust of government and authority, although I am not advocating this practice to attack presumed robbers.

## High Trust vs. Low Trust Cultures

In the world, we can imagine countries, cities/villages or neighborhoods as being “high trust” (HT) or “low trust” (LT). HT societies have high relatively interpersonal trust, strong shared ethical values and LT societies have the opposite. Research has identified a correlation between linear-active cultures (i.e. following a daily schedule with a single task at a time) with HT societies, and multi-active cultures (flexible schedules with many tasks at once, often in an unplanned order) with LT cultures<sup>16</sup>.

### **More Structure = More Trust**

It seems that organization and structure may lead to predictability and decrease level or uncertainty. Uncertainty is probably the greatest or deepest source of fear which would be linked to mistrust. We will talk about the perception of time in different culture later in this chapter.

In my travels, I was surprised to find LT societies not necessarily linked to lack of resources, wealth or even education. I had to challenge my preconceived myth that crime is linked with poverty. Sure, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has a lower disposable income or Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita than Western Europe and is one of the most violent places on Earth. The region accounts for 7 of the top 10 highest crime rate (reported crimes by 100 000 people)<sup>17</sup>: Venezuela (83.76), Honduras (74.54), Trinidad and Tobago (71.63), Guyana (68.74), El Salvador (67.79), Brazil (67.49) and Jamaica (67.42). Why then does Armenia have the 7<sup>th</sup> lowest crime rate (22.0), even lower than Japan and Switzerland? According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2022, GDP per capita in Armenia is below USD 17 000 and ranked 90<sup>th</sup> in the world, while Japan is a known HT society with \$48,813 (36<sup>th</sup>) and Switzerland \$84,469 (5<sup>th</sup>). By the way Guyana is 40<sup>th</sup>, Trinidad and Tobago 58<sup>th</sup>, Brazil 86<sup>th</sup> and El Salvador 118<sup>th</sup>.

### **Low Income ≠ High Crime**

The reason why is: culture!

I went to both Armenia and El Salvador in 2019. El Salvador first in February, although I was aware of the low trust/high crime current reality of the country, I met half a dozen wonderful people there (some are still friends today) and had an unforgettable (positive) time. El Salvador tops the Highest Homicide Rates world index. It had 52.02 murders per 100, 000 in 2018, just before my visit. Why I choose to travel there is another story. Ask my mom, maybe. What I learned about violence there is the same culture I saw everywhere in the world homicide is high, mostly LAC and South Africa: “the value of a human life is low.” Gangs will have people get married at gunpoint for instance (but for different reasons than shotgun weddings in Bihar, India) and get the couple to ask for life insurance. Months later the groom is killed, and the widow collects the cheque, which obviously she doesn’t get to keep. She doesn’t keep her husband either.

### **Low Value of Human Life = High Homicide and Violent Crime**

In Armenia, and most of Asia, currently, the value of a human life is respected. We can think of the politically motivated genocides in Indonesia and Cambodia, of the atrocities of Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hopkins, B. Cultural Differences and Improving Performance: How Values and Beliefs Influence Organizational Performance (2012).

<sup>17</sup> Crime Index by Country 2023 (142 Countries out of 200)

century and the wars in Korea and Vietnam, but if you go to Asia now, you may get robbed, but unlikely killed or kidnapped. In Armenia, I found the society to be so welcoming. If you know anything about Armenia, they also suffered a genocide and are still in a “cold war” with neighbor Azerbaijan, but instead of making them mistrust people, they took it in stride and found how to trust, help, and live together. I immediately felt it in the capital city, Yerevan, and I am told it is even more so in the villages where people will automatically welcome you with open arms. I found a similar openness, without warmth necessarily, due to the necessity of nomadic life in Mongolia, where anyone is automatically welcomed to temporary shelter and a meal in the Mongolia harsh environment. This arose from centuries of successful survival if the families could ensure a bad season would not see them starve and they could count on the hospitality of people along the way. Besides Armenia, I was similarly ecstatic about the hospitality in Myanmar and Bangladesh, both countries with little wealth, one Buddhist and the other Muslim, both incredibly welcoming and warm even beyond the notorious Latin American hospitality.

#### **Low Trust Society = High Crime**

#### **High Trust Society = Low Crime**

HT societies do not only have low crime or low murder rate, but they also have a sense of community and very few can equal that of Japan. Japanese culture is riddled with problems, including sexuality and excessive politeness at the expense of being themselves sometimes, but in terms of understanding what is the greater good versus selfish and individualistic pursuits they are a glowing example. The crime is low, even with the *yakuza* organized crime popularized in films. In reality, the membership to this tattoo-clad street gang and mafia-like syndicates has been steadily decreasing for decades and its members aging. More importantly, you can certainly leave your wallet on the street with little fear of theft and can probably eat directly from the pavement of a busy city too as Japanese cities have a cleanliness record and attitude that few cities can come close to. Japanese smokers even carry their personal ashtrays for years now, not to ash or put cigarette butts on the streets. A trend that is barely being picked up in other places in the world.

To recap, HT society starts with culture and let’s not forget education. I have seen Colombia slowly start to switch from the drug cartel and corruption stigma and have very positive programs aimed at changing the culture from the ground up. I hope more countries can follow, if not countrywide, start at the communities.

#### **Education + Culture = Trust**

The GDP per capita in the US is 8<sup>th</sup> in the world with \$75,180 with 2020-2021 mean medium household income of \$71,000<sup>18</sup>, yet its crime rate is 55<sup>th</sup> with 49 per 100,000 and its prison system is currently incarcerating about 1.5 million people. As of January 2023, the incarceration rate of the United States is the sixth highest in the world, at 505 per 100,000 people, but it peaked above 1000 for many years. Besides the prison-for-profit and discrimination issues, the US has a big gap in income and increasing income inequalities. Also, it has a culture and laws that favour and glorify gun possession and use.

Crimes rates vary significantly between the states, with Alaska, New Mexico, and Tennessee experiencing much higher crime rates than states such as Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. I would rather be in El Salvador than in some neighborhoods of New York, Chicago, or Detroit! Montreal has had some of the lowest homicide rate of most major cities in the Americas for decades. The Canadian

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<sup>18</sup> United States Government Census – note: median earnings of men (\$61,417) and women (\$50,982)

government Crime Reduction and Prevention Strategy states simply that “reducing crime and the fear of crime leads to an improved quality of life for all residents.”

Education is always key. In Chicago, a \$1 billion a year violence prevention spending and increased policing, to reduce crime in Chicago by 50% was pledged. More money and more policing may not be the answer and does not equate to education. Oppositely, a mostly private donor-funded new program called READI costs only \$20 million a year and is already producing results to decrease crime and violence. The “high-risk” men enrolled in the 18-month READI course were two-thirds less likely to be arrested for a violent crime and nearly 20% less likely to be shot compared with the men who weren’t taking part in the program<sup>19</sup>. This job and educational training program has a strong focus on cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and is a welcome tool, yet crime reduction should be a more holistic and comprehensive approach.

Glasgow, Scotland, has a different take on crime prevention, since the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) launched, the city’s murder rate has dropped by 60% and facial trauma by 50%. In 2005, Karyn McCluskey, principal police analyst, wrote a report pointing out that traditional policing was not actually reducing violent crime. She started this unit with the Cure Violence methodology which was pioneered in 2000 in a Chicago neighborhood. Within the first year, there was a 67% drop in homicides in that US neighborhood<sup>20</sup>.

One of the primary indicators that someone will carry out an act of violence is being a victim of one beforehand. The idea that violence spreads between people, reproducing itself and shifting group norms is behind the “seeing crime as an epidemic” model of epidemiologist Dr. Gary Slutkin. Twelve more Chicago neighborhoods have now seen a 40% or more drop in homicide with his technique. Reduction of shootings have been reported in New York City (63%), Port of Spain, Trinidad (39%) and San Pedro Sula, Honduras (93%). If you are interested in lower crime rate and having more trust and cooperative society, I suggest you look at the Cure Violence website (<https://cvg.org/>). Always an interesting topic, but let’s get back to trust.

My personal understanding of trust is threefold:

**1. You must trust yourself**

Believe in yourself, in your abilities and adaptability. Trust your tenacity more than your current judgment. Know that your thoughts are also constructed from (emotional) experiences and hearsay. It is a process, so do not be complacent and challenge your intentions and assumptions, including potential proclivity to either trust or mistrust too much or for the wrong reasons.

**2. You must implicitly and quickly trust others and build trust**

By collecting my own experience and evidence and that of others, I found that the reward is invariably greater than the risk/fear you perceive. Building a culture and community of trust, wherever you can, will foster this even more. In your family, workplace, neighborhood and most importantly with strangers. Strangers are only friends you haven’t met yet. Withhold judgment as long as possible, create trust by example and be the change you want to be. Who really wants to live in a LT society? All the people I know who experienced that say they lived with a constant low-level stress or anxiety. We will see these may be elevated baseline cortisol in *Chapter 4: Psychology and Neurology*. Trust can start by transparency and openness.

**3. You must trust life (or the universe – God?) itself and accept fate with humility and dignity**

Trust is also available beyond people. When you trust that the world may be a hostile place and environment but that you are equipped to live (and even to die) with it, your anxiety lessens, and

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<sup>19</sup> READI anti-violence program is proof that crime prevention can work. Chicago Times. (April 2022)

<sup>20</sup> Shackle, Samira. Why we should treat violence like an epidemic. BBC Future. (July 2018)

your appreciation heightens. Remember that the opposite of trust is mistrust and fear. We will talk about radical acceptance and some of the stoic views of this in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*.

#### **Mistrust = Fear**

All in all, we looked at different experiences and expressions of trust and mistrust around the world as a spectrum. In an ideal (almost utopic) world, but perhaps one we can create with the help of the following chapters, if we could make the gap from high trust society to absolute trust, we would avoid many potential societal and personal problems, including of course the possibility of having a wallet never returned or been shot. There is an adequate saying that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I want to imagine a better society with perfect trust.

#### **Absolute Trust = Complete Trust = No Fear**

### Hidden Addictions

I was addicted to alcohol according to the DSM-5<sup>21</sup> definition. I fit about 10 out of the 11 criteria of substance abuse disorder (six or more is severe, but two is still a disorder), including the first three:

- Taking X in larger amounts or for longer than you're meant to
- Wanting to cut down or stop using X but not managing to
- Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from X

Alcohol is the most common (substance) addiction due to its wide availability, legality, direct and indirect marketing & promotion, and link to “positive” social norms in many countries. Tobacco or nicotine products had the same trait in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and although the promotion and positive social norm is less, they are still legal and widely available. No wonder Islam in its wisdom try to forbid alcohol consumption and some Buddhists prone to live with no intoxication of any kind as we will see in *Beyond Spirituality — Chapter 3: Spirituality (or Lack Thereof)*. How about the simulant caffeine in coffee and tea and found worldwide in homes and offices? Alcohol, tobacco, marijuana (now legal in Canada) or other physical intoxicants are not the problem per se, however. I have replaced Substance by X above. Try now to see if you are addicted to something. Do you do anything at all for longer than you are meant to? Do you have to recover from X? What if X was work for instance? Do you having difficulty cutting down X?

It is estimated that over 20% of the population are battling some form of addiction or another, mainly drugs, second is gambling (declining), gaming (increasing), and lastly shopping (mainly online) and sex (mainly pornography). In the US, 12% of boys and 7% of girls are addicted to video games in 2023. Statistics Canada estimates that as of 2017 approximately 19.5% of Canadians (excluding those living in the territories) aged 12 and older drank heavily and 80% drank in the past year, so 1/4<sup>th</sup> who drink exceed the health guidelines. In the territories, the native population rates of alcoholism are so high that many reserves (ethnic camps) are “dry” and do not sell or allow alcohol on the grounds. In Canada, approximately 21% of the population will experience a substance use disorder or addiction at some point in their lifetime.

Still, this is a rather narrow definition in my view. I would estimate that well over 90% of the population have some form of addiction. Over 80% of the world population is religious to various degree, and “religion is the opioid of the people”. There are 1.75 billion TV households in the world, some homes have more than one TV, and the average US adult watches almost six hours of TV and video per day in pre-pandemic 2019. That's already 25% of the day or 38% of your waking hours<sup>22</sup>. There are over 5.22

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<sup>21</sup> Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, Nicole. Psychological Research Explains Why TV Viewing Is Higher than Ever. Forbes (December 2019)

billion smartphone users in the world in 2020<sup>23</sup>, representing 66% of the global population. 3.2 billion out of 4.7 billion monthly active internet users use Google Chrome as their main browser<sup>24</sup>. As of January 2023, there were 5.2 billion internet users worldwide of which, 4.6 billion, or 60% of the world's population, were social media users<sup>25</sup>. Facebook had 1.9 billion daily active users (DAUs) and 3 billion monthly active users (MAUs) on average in 2022. YouTube had 2.5 billion, while Instagram and WhatsApp had 2 billion MAUs each and both owned by Meta, formerly known as Facebook. Facebook messenger had about 1 billion MAUs by itself. Chinese social media stars Tik Tok and WeChat had over 1 and 1.3 billion MAUs, respectively<sup>26</sup>. Over 90% of Americans watch or read “the news”, often or sometimes in 2020<sup>27</sup>. Many people feel that without the “news”, they feel they are not in “the know” or disconnected from the world. Looks to me like an addiction withdrawal. Have you seen someone who doesn’t have his smart phone for 3 days lately?

In 2019, there were 42 billion visits to Pornhub. That is 3.5 billion per month (more than Facebook MAUs in 2022) or 115 million per day. And that is just one pornography website and that was also before the pandemic! Yes, some viewers may be sex addicts (compulsive sexual behavior disorder) or pornography addicts (problematic porn use), but what of the others? Could they be engaging in addictive activities? Can they say that they are, have been or could become addicts at some point in their lives?

Instagram invented the infamous infinity scroll to suck you in, like an addict. Youtube and Netflix have an automatic equally addictive “play next” feature. Netflix had over 230 million paid subscribers worldwide in 2020, but “only” slightly over 100 million MAUs. It still made USD 31.6 billion in revenue! The users are paying so they normally only see Netflix content ads. Meta/Facebook, Alphabet/Google, and other social media giants do not ask you to pay for their services. Even though, it is true that the best things in life are free, in this case your data is the most valuable thing on Earth so, if there is no product to sell... you are the product! Your “eyeballs”, your time, your addiction and your very “soul”. Most know that souls don’t exist, but some greedy execs still will grab at them or at least the wallet attached to it.

When I speak of addiction, learning from it and going beyond it in this book, please think more broadly and see if this could apply to you or someone you know in a bigger sense and use some tools to get ride of some non-useful, detrimental, time-consuming actions and habits to free yourself. The first step to recovery is seeing the problem and admitting it. We are however very good to justify, deny, minimize, and stay asleep when it comes to our own addictions. It is much easier to blame and point the finger. We will see in *Chapter 4: Psychology* that behavioral addictions are functionally the same as substance addictions.

#### **Substance-Related Compulsive Habit ≈ Behavioral Compulsive Habit**

Substance abuse may have the potential for quicker addiction (from impulsion to compulsion) and some serious health effects from withdrawal because of its biochemical basis, yet in every other aspect, it is a behavior addiction and targets the same neural network and neurotransmitter. In all instances, desire-defining dopamine is the potent perpetrator and always wants “more”. We can be as addicted to alcohol, to gambling, to gaming, to food or even to love (Cupid is not the culprit).

Using time (quality time, engagement, or presence) as the equalizer and ultimate currency for all, let us look at this together. How about you ask yourself this frankly: “What are the top 2 or 3 things I am

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<sup>23</sup> DataReportal, 2021

<sup>24</sup> Dean, Brain. Web Browser Market Share In 2022: 85+ Browser Usage Statistics. (July 2021)

<sup>25</sup> Petrosyan, Ani. Number of internet and social media users worldwide. Statista. (February 2023)

<sup>26</sup> Dixon, S. Global social networks ranked by number of users 2023. Statista. (February 2023)

<sup>27</sup> More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices. (January 2021)

doing in my life that are taking too much time and are not so useful?” Once you are at least certain of these (because I assure you there are others), admit that they are “time-waisters” or addictions and start the process. It will not be as easy as it seems. Habits are hard to break. Later once you are hopefully free of 1 or 2, you can sit back down and do the exercise again and you will invariably see there are even more addictions lurking. Eventually, you may use your time for the best purpose of your current knowledge... until you do it again and realize all the time you were still wasting!

Mental disorders still have very negative stigma around the world, although since the pandemic it is getting slightly better. Don't worry about it, yet. You don't have to tell your spouse or coworkers. It will be our little secret. You can trust me. Yes, trust. For the purpose of this book, I urge you to now think of yourself as having a mental disorder. Yes, without judgement, just a realization. The first mental disorder you have is likely some form of addiction. This is truly as certain as you still have some type of fear (of death, but most likely of the unknown and of being irrelevant). If you do not realize you are afraid and addicted, you may be stuck there forever. Once you do, you will find you have other disorders too. You may find them if you are both honest and courageous, thus free to examine yourself objectively and openly, even if it sometimes hurt (the difference between your subjective perception and actual reality, if you can open your eyes and mind to it). We do not want to be stuck in our ideas and confirmation bias already, do we?

Besides the bad odor, the occasional burnt clothing, apartment or forest, cigarettes do not have overly negative direct effects on your behavior, but they do however have very negative long-term (and even short-term) effects on your health. Same could be said for some types of food or exceedingly sedentary (read couch potato) lifestyles. Food and “lazy” lifestyle addictions? Oh yeah, they exist. Have you seen the riveting psychological drama play or movie *The Whale* by Samuel D. Hunter?

There are still over 1.3 billion tobacco users worldwide according to a 2018 World Health Organization (WHO) report. It is supposedly very slightly in decline. A friend started smoking cigarettes during the boring days of the pandemic lockdown. He didn't have a dog to walk, apparently, and shit to pick up (in a plastic bag). He did quit later it seems, after many painful attempts and it was a hard-won journey. He may be susceptible to relapse for years to an unhealthy and financially costly habit or compulsive behavior. Cigarettes market revenue in China alone amounted to approximately USD 273 billion in 2022<sup>28</sup>! And cigarettes are cheap there. What other behaviors are costing your health, wallet and, your most precious resource, time?

Lastly, we will see that addictions (substance or behavioral) and other unhealthy use of your body and brain, may be learned and unlearned and may have no need to even be called a disease after all, unless, of course, you are into the multibillion addiction-solving industry. The substance abuse treatment market, including drug & alcohol rehab centers and nicotine/tobacco addiction treatment were close to USD 20 billion in 2018<sup>29</sup>. And that was before the pandemic and opioid crisis had addiction rates skyrocket!

**Addiction = Unhealthy (Learned) Behavior Difficult to Change (Unlearn)**

## Dealing with Toxicity in the Moment

We are looking at sociology which is not the same as specific relationships. We will see more on that in *Beyond Sex*. For the moment, I just want to talk about a specific situation which is dealing with toxic people, words, or actions, since we just looked at toxic behaviors, substances, and addictions. First,

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<sup>28</sup> Statista. Revenue of the cigarettes market worldwide by country 2022. (January 2023)

<sup>29</sup> Reports and Data. Drug Addiction Treatment Market To Reach USD 31.17 Billion By 2027. (February 2020)

I would stay away from the very popular idea that you must get ride of “toxic people”. Who are they? How do you define them? If so, are you sometimes one of them?

I do not want to label anyone. We can only see an action, an attitude, words or even a pattern, but that is never the whole picture, or the whole person. We can however deal with a specific toxic situation. A toxic situation at its highest level could be a crime, but let’s imagine a more mundane situation: I must deal with someone accusing me, blaming me or maybe screaming at me. My mother, father, partner, boss all did. Imagine your momentary toxic “attacker” for a second. How do you feel? Angry? Boiling up? Frustrated? What are you thinking? It is unjust/unfair? That person doesn’t understand and if freaking out? How do you react? What do you say? And how do you say it? We will examine non-verbal communication in *Beyond Spirituality*.

My suggestion at this point is:

1. Examine your emotions and thoughts before any reaction.
2. Don’t take it personal (leave your ego out of it – it is the other person not dealing with their ego)
3. Know for a fact that responding with toxicity leads to more toxicity (like the virus of violence)
4. Calmly say: “I do not accept any harsh word or action that you give to me.”  
You can even add: “I am not accepting them so they are yours” Meaning the toxicity-spreading person’s sole responsibility. They will have to bear the consequence, not you.
5. Do not show you are sad, angry, or annoyed in any way. Put on a genuine smile and be a “bigger person” than that (mentally perturbed, weak, or deluded) person who is expressing his or her anger, frustration, jealousy, contempt, resentment, etc.
6. Listen to the words with attention without taking the nonverbal cues and assess with the clearest judgement as possible, including empathy (see *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)*) and understanding If the reproach is something you can correct.
  - a. If so, correct the action if needed, but do not create conflict.
  - b. If not, use patience and practice loving kindness (to love yourself and others) to never create opportunity to be pulled into the toxicity too.
7. Like my father says on his voicemail “keep on smiling” (although my father can be toxic)

Be aware that when you renounce toxicity in this way (a form of non-violence) you do not engage in hurtful behavior for yourself or others. The toxicity can disappear, slowly calm down or intensify, but you are not responsible for it. You disengage and dissociate, even if you do not agree. There has been similar non-violent historically from Martin Luther King Jr. to Ghandhi. Non-violence is not the only way, but it is one where you have the most control of you, never of others. Apply it not only to physically violent situations, which I hope is not a daily occurrence for you, but to verbal and nonverbal micro-violence and aggression we see very often. Of course, try not to create them yourself and to see them when they are even forming in your mind to stop then. If you verbalize them, stop talking until you find the right words and quickly and sincerely apologize for you words and even your tone. If you act upon them beyond words, stop, stop, stop. Breathe, go for a walk, meditate, calm down. Then come back and sincerely apologize. You can ask for forgiveness, but you are not entitled to it. Forgiveness helps the person that forgives more than the one being forgiven in fact. Apologize sincerely and be free. The key word is “sincerely”. You may recall kids apologizing but it is obvious that they don’t mean it. Adults are better at subterfuge, but when you apologize, you know if it is sincere. Still, double check and examine your true intention.

**Sincerity = Serenity**

It may not be easy, especially at first, because when we perceive an attack (physical, emotional, or societal), it creates stress and engages the flight-or-fight survival system in our brain, as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. The key word here is “perceive”. I had a girlfriend who didn’t particularly get my sometimes cynical and dark sense of humour among other things, and constantly perceived my words as attacked, when they were not my intentions at all. She was an insecure anxious-avoidant attachment type as we will examine in *Beyond Sex* and high on the neurotic trait (see *Chapter 4: Psychology*). Even so, the fear/anger response and cycle coming from the amygdala part of the brain can be avoided with a quick change of perception or mental reframing. Defensiveness is part of evolutionary survival yet when you find yourself defending things that are not crucial for your survival but only your ego, you may know you are creating toxicity.

### **Defensiveness = Delusion Your Integrity is Being Compromised = Toxicity**

Dealing with toxicity with pose is not easy but can become one of your greatest strengths and gift to yourself and the world. You can prove them wrong by your stoic attitude, success, and happiness; not with more toxicity, retortues, harsh words and actions. I have been in a physical fight only once in my life. It was on a very festive Quebec Holiday (St-Jean Baptise) and I found myself in park with my best friend at the time. Young men were jumping up at trees and taking out leaves in a rather aggressive fashion. Thinking myself perhaps an environmentalist crusader for nature and defender of trees and their ilk, I simply said: “what did the trees do to you? Please leave them alone.” The tree haters must have thought I was an annoying tree hugger and obviously wanted to destroy more than leaves. Suddenly three cars pulled up and about 15 guys descended in what could have only resembled an unpalatable movie. I am writing my first non-fiction book here, so this story is true, but writing it, it still feels like bad fiction. So first there were three and now there were 17 guys circling my best friend and me. My friend was not like me and had gotten into many fights in high school, some of which I had to get him out of but never participated in directly. He was short and had a short temper. He was ready to pay for my environmentally excessive word and get ready to fight. They split the huge magically-appeared menacing group in two and about 8 aggressive-looking guys circled my staunch stumpy friend and 9 me. I was not particularly scared for some reason, I found it rather funny that I was going to be beat up for the words I said and that these guys were so obviously unsatisfied with their lives that they decided to best celebrate our common Provincial Holiday with virile violence (testosterone gone wild?). National or local celebrations are supposed to bring us together instead of dividing us, yet division seems as common as cell division in this life sometimes akin to a prison.

My friend was not going out without a fight, even if the odds were against us at least 8-to-1. He started punching and kicking away at the 8 attackers. He quickly found out he was neither an octopus, nor Chuck Norris. I instead observed, as the group circled around me like vultures. They waited, slightly scared. Maybe it was my height, but also the determined look on my face. My amusement instead of fear, made them think twice and even three times before making a move. Maybe they thought I was crazy. Maybe I was. Surely, I am. Yet they were 9 of them and they were the ones scared. Two of them finally dared come close and one of them clearly hit me square in the face. Bang!

It hurt and shook me, but fortunately, I didn’t fall. Instead of using the adrenaline in my body to bash their faces in turn, I took the blow, realized it didn’t kill me or knock me over, and did what my father still says in adversity, I kept on smiling. I was again amused more than afraid, definitely grinning, and almost laughing. I did look at the two guys, now centimetres away from me, as if to say, why are you doing this? You are only hurting yourselves, not me. I looked in their eyes, not menacingly, but with a look of pity for their stupidity, suffering and ignorance.



Seconds later the whole 15+ gang left in a hurry and disappeared with the sunset. My friend who had fought fiercely was worst of than me but my stand had prevented him from getting a worse beating. My face was bruised but nothing else. Not my ego, which I try to let go of anyway. Remember this story next time someone is raising their voice at you and not even hitting you in the face with all their strength and anger to destroy you.

Toxicity is never solved with more toxicity. Do not fight fire with fire... unless you want to get burned. All forms of violence start in the brain. They can end their too. Learn to know and control your emotions. They are only hormonal and neural predetermined reactions to your external (and internal) environment as we will see in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. Do not feed the circle of violence. A vicious cycle can be replaced by a virtuous cycle.

**Violence = Virus = More Violence**

### Marginalization, Conformity and Group Thinking

People are marginalized in almost any given society, unfortunately. You can also choose to put yourself in a situation where you risk being marginalized. Each society often has strict and rigid rules, explicit or implicit, that when you do not follow you are ostracized, cast off, punished or in the worst cases exiled, imprisoned, or killed. You can see this in the microlens of your family, workplace, or community too, for example. Gossip is one of many tools of marginalization. In the world's macrolens we now see a rampant censorship, discrediting and "cancel culture". Dictionary.com defines cancel culture as: "withdrawing support for (canceling) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive." The phenomenon has occurred with both public figures and private citizens. Publicly boycotting people, organizations, etc. regarded as promoting socially unacceptable beliefs is a widespread practice. It has its undeniable usefulness as a tool to foster and create positive socioeconomic change. However, its current use is arguably used to foster fear and as a deterrent for going against any normative narrative.

Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson has been "canceled" two or three times for his views and comments on the mandatory use of pronouns, the differences between sexes and his political views during the pandemic about excessive restrictions. He has faced legal action. He has also been ordered by the College of Psychologists of Ontario (a regulatory body) to undergo a compulsory media training program. He is not the only one to be marginalized because of his views. "Misinformation" has become a blanket term for censoring any views that are not publicly acceptable.

While I do not suggest you purposely try to put yourself at arm's length of your peers, it is important to examine if you may be doing this out of fear. Life can be a scary place and group approval (from teenage peer pressure to adulthood) is important because it may mean our survival. We are hardwired to perceive threats and react to protect ourselves. Our brain is so good at perceiving threats that it will also act on them, regardless of if the threats are real or imagined. Also make sure to distinguish between immediate perceived threat and more long-term and damaging threats to your integrity and well-being.

We have seen marginalized groups based on political views worldwide. People being jailed or murdered like some of my family members in Haiti, or my friends in the Democratic Republic of Congo. We know that people discriminate because of skin colour, socioeconomic background, culture, religion, sex, sexual identity, and sexual orientation, among many others. You may genetically or sociocultural be born in one, or more, marginalized group(s) already. If so, do not blame anyone or scream inequality and injustice pointlessly. Do not enter the power game, if it is in a vindictive mindset. Life in the margins may

be better than in the falsehood of the limelight. If you are perchance born non-marginalized in most aspects, you can still choose to have the risk to become so for righteous reasons. Do not complain, do not blame, the best you can do is share. You can educate with no expectation, but most importantly live your life authentically.

### **Authenticity = Awareness + Action**

Atheists are 15-20% of the population, but are still largely being marginalized, including in public institutions. You cannot become a US President today if you claim that you are an atheist. You can be “black”, a woman, maybe eventually homosexual, but atheist, no. Polyamory is still marginalized in many societies, even if a 2020 study shows that 5% of Americans are currently in a polyamorous relationship and 20% have experienced such relationship at some point in their life. 20% is roughly the amount of people who play a musical instrument! Yet we do not see a taboo around piano players. We will see how playing and listening to music have positive effects in our brain in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. In 2016, single parent homes in Quebec represented 30% of the population, with Montreal surrounding region of Montérégie close to 40%. In 2016, mothers represented over 75% of single parents responsible for these families<sup>30</sup>, and in all accounts Quebec is one of the best places in the world to be a father both culturally and legally. We can imagine that single fathers are much less than 25% in other parts of the world. More recent studies show the number of separated couples and single parent families is still growing.

The point is even if your deepest authentic values, once you do the long and never-ending introspection process to be the “best you”, end up being less than 1% of the population, don’t be discouraged or try to cling on to a popular view that does not represent you. Being authentic in my experience requires you, more often than not, to be marginalized one way or another. When you accept the inherent risk of life, you are freer to act with intent, purpose, and conviction, instead of being a “blind follower” of the current majority.

The dangers of herd mentality may be greater than the dangers of not belonging to the horde. We know of many genocides from Europeans did to Native Americans; to Nazi Germany in Europe; to Japan in Asia; to Indonesia; to Cambodia; to Congo/Rwanda. They have all been perpetrated by humans just like you. Not by demonic entities or antisocial monsters. They were not forced upon by one or two diabolic inhumane master(s). Adolf Hitler did not personally kill millions of people. Millions of people (again, just like you) allowed a prevalent majority thinking to let millions be ostracized, ghettoized, gased and incinerated for years. King Leopold did not murder 10 million Congolese on his own, nor kidnapped children, performed uncountable rape, sexual torture, and forced sexual slavery on his own. Most Indonesians truly believe communists were their enemies, even after about 1 million were rounded up and killed in 6 months. The Congo and Rwanda radio broadcasters who encouraged people to seek revenge with their ethnically different neighbors, did not kill and rape hundreds of thousands of people in weeks, mostly with machetes. People (just like you) did. If you think you are different, think again.

### **Majority Thinking = No Thinking**

I remember talking to a taxi driver in Croatia who was a soldier during the Yugoslav Wars, which the world describes as an ethnic conflict. I had a long (and costly) taxi ride from a remote bus station I shouldn’t have gotten out the bus from to the majestic Plitvice Lakes National Park. Not letting the costly error bother me, I took the opportunity to enjoy the unexpected ride and to get to know my courageous driver willing to bring me way further than his usual taxi ride. In that hour or so, we had a very interesting

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<sup>30</sup> *Structure de la famille de recensement (7B) et présence et âge des enfants (15) pour les familles de recensement dans les ménages privés du Canada, Recensements de 2016, Tableaux de données – Numéro au catalogue 98-400-X2016392, mis à jour le 21 juin 2018*

conversation and I got him to express what it felt to be fighting in that war. He said that like in all wars, the war machine tried to picture the “enemy” as different and deserving death.

### **Enemy ≠ Different ≠ Deserving Death (Defamation, Hate or Anger)**

I spoke to Canadian, Australian, and American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as well, and it is a recurring theme, I can assure you. In 2023, an Australian ex-military man was one the first arrest of potentially 19 from a military report published in 2020 found evidence that Australian troops unlawfully killed 39 Afghan prisoners, farmers, and civilians<sup>31</sup>. This means that they were “brainwashed” or motivated to go to war against an enemy known by the name “terror” enough to lawfully kill dozens or hundreds of people, and may have killed 1 or 2 unlawfully with the same flawed mentality. What is not said, is that in the 20 years that Australian forces were present in the troubled country, more than 39,000 military personnel served there. These 19 men and women face potential life sentences in prison, but the unnamed war machine who convinced them to go there in the first place continue to send young men and women to go murder other humans... legally.

### **Double Standards = Scepticism + Cynicism**

For most people, killing someone is not easy. Even soldiers who go there willingly often have post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) and other unhealthy consequences of killing and seeing your friends being killed or injured in a warzone. To make the proposition attractive, the army appeals not only to your wallet and sense of security (free education, pay and pension), but also your sense of duty as a protector and potential hero (G.I. Joe the Real American Hero). The machine must convince you to go kill people after breakfast by painting them as non-human. Maybe you do not feel good about killing someone who eats, thinks, dreams, laughs, cries, has a family just like you. Better to kill a cow, sheep, or chicken. Maybe easier as sheep don’t dream. Or “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” Even easier to paint them not as farm animals, but as despicable animals: rats, snakes, cockroaches, etc. If you ever listen to soldiers talk about the “enemy”, listen closely to their attitude, verbal, and nonverbal communication. I heard a soldier refer to them as “sand niggas” and “goat fuckers”. Should countries get rid of armies altogether like Iceland and Costa Rica? That is another debate but suffice to say that there are questions behind the motives, motivation and *modus operandi* of military operations and strategy.

### **More Dehumanization = More Dead People**

As for dehumanization and demonization of the enemy as been a common tactic since the antiquities, it is sometimes harder when the enemy looks and thinks so much like you. It was done in Vietnam, Korea, and the US Civil War for instance where the enemy had the same language but supposedly wildly divergent politics that required mass murdering for years. In the Yugoslav Wars, my taxi driver explained to me, the external world claimed it was an ethnic conflict, that there were unpeaceful-solvable tensions between different groups, that Serbs hated Croats and so on. It did not make any sense to him, however. Serbs and Croats both spoke Serbo-Croatian and had similar culture and values. They lived together for thousands of years and all of a sudden had to fight each other to death? After the war, the Serbo-Croatian language does not exist anymore. Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Bosnian are now new languages and new countries. Although they are not identical languages, they are extremely similar and mutually intelligible. In Croatia they call their language “Hrvatski” which of course means Croatian, but it is so close to Bosnian or Serbian or Montenegrin, and the variations may depend on where they live in the countries. So yes, he tells me, these four languages are basically the same. I later traveled with my Serbian friend in all four and he understood and was understood perfectly. When my ex-soldier

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<sup>31</sup>Former Australian soldier charged for alleged war crime in Afghanistan. Sky News (March 2023)

now-taxi-driver fought for years against his “enemy”, he could not believe this masquerade and lie that they were fighting someone different than them. He would hear the other soldiers speaking the same language and it did not make sense to continue to ambush and kill them. It gave him great pain and dissonance and he finally quit the military. Quitting the military can get you court-martialed, imprisoned, or worse depending on the country and the time. Remember my friend Rich who attempted suicide? Not an easy choice to leave the war machine, I tell you. Being marginalized comes in so many forms and flavours. Do not seek it, but do not shy away from it if warranted. That is one form of courage. We will see that courage is one the 4 stoic virtues in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*.

**Courage = Conviction > Fear**

### Scandinavia Success with Happiness

Successful socialism, as opposed to failed communism, allow lower level of individual stress, because of the social safety net. In Finland, 99% of schools are public and of good quality. Kids have more time to play and less time at school, as opposed to Australia, Americas and even worst in Asia! Children are also encouraged to be more independent earlier.

Swedish “Lagom” is the principle of living a balanced, moderately paced, low-fuss life: Swedes routinely take time to appreciate their surroundings and be content with their (quiet) lives. The word literally means “just the right amount” like the Goldilocks story.

**Lagom = Enough + Balance = Life Satisfaction**

Danish “arbejdsglaede” roughly means “happiness at work”. The Danes believe you should be both excited to go to work and go home in the evening. This speaks of work satisfaction, of work-life balance and all in all the realisation that time is precious and that all our time and energy should be motivated by the right virtuous and invigorating goals.

As a life philosophy, *hygge* has become unabashedly bourgeois, mainstream and commercial with books claiming it's the new *fen shui* or lifestyle fad. At its core, it is a cozy quality that makes a person feel content and comfortable. It is also a way of living, of being, and of being together while sincerely connecting with people. The key word here is connection.

**Connection = Opportunity to Trust**

**Deep Connection = Deep Trust**

Danish writer and speaker living in France, Malene Rydahl, remarks that trust in Denmark is about 80%, where the average in Europe is 25% and in many countries is below 5%, like Bangladesh. We can see babies sleeping outside while you are having lunch. LT society would say “no one is watching the baby!”, while HT societies would say as we say, the opposite: “everyone is watching the baby.” Trust is built and starts with you. To be trustworthy and show trust in others you can start by doing what you say and saying what you do. The latter part is also the transparency aspect of Scandinavia we mentioned before. Judgement is discouraged from society and family, including career choices. Everyone is free to do and be what they want. The communality is important and 70% of Danes are happy to pay income taxes because they benefit not only them (the self or Ego), but society at large. Similarly at work, there is much less importance on job title, but on a job well done together. Everyone feels individually responsible for all which gives purpose and belonging at the same time. It contributes to positive outlook, hope and happiness.

Norway's concept of “friluftsliv” refers to being in the moment (mindful presence), and specifically in nature. Nature is a doorway to wonder and can be tapped as one of many helpful cues as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

Icelandic “Glugavedur” allows this small Nordic country with gloomy weather and chilly summer nights, to let its inhabitants slow down with intention and appreciate the view from a distance (in this case a window looking out). It is a welcome detachment, perspective, time creation, relaxation, and

contemplative mindfulness. Don't mind that Iceland is not part of Scandinavia. Swedish, Danish and Norwegian are really variants of the same language (Remember Serbo-Croatian?), and these three corresponding countries are the official Scandinavian peninsula.

Remember that Finland was ranked first in the last world experience, so have one of the highest trust societies, including equality and transparency between people and reflected in their institutions and culture at large. As of 2023, Finland also came first six (6) years in a row in the UN World Happiness Report since 2018! (From 2012-2016 Denmark was the champ<sup>32</sup> and in 2017 Norway) Finland is not technically part of Scandinavia either but is often mistaken to be because of its proximity. It doesn't change that the culture is in many ways similar. In the Finnish culture, there is a tendency to neither complain or show off, which leads to serene acceptance and humility.

**No Complaining = Contentment**

**No Ego = Humility**

Finland (like Scandinavia, Russia, and Canada) is cold and has less daylight hours in winter. Instead of bringing them down, the Finns use it to build their resilience and grit in a concept they call "*sisu*". They practice cold and hot exposure, including jumping in near-freezing water or snow (Russians and some Canadians, me included, do this too). We will see more about the mind and biological benefits cold and hot exposure have in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. *Sisu* also means satisfaction with what you have, similar to Swedish *lagom*. This means their happiness stems from the simple contentment with their current life, without shooting for the stars, or for possibly unreachable lofty goals and dreams, like other cultures. We also know that if and when we reach these goals, our satisfaction is normally temporary, until we reach bigger goals and so on. At the opposite, Finns care little about status or status symbols, and prefer humbleness and humility. Which neighborhood you live, which car you drive, how old you are or which school you or your children went to, adds little value to the communal conversation. I spent a few days in Finland and was greeted and treated as a welcome addition to that conversation, with no judgement or preconceived positive or negative views. This is also linked to the definition of equanimity which is a desired mental state and key concept throughout the book.

**Equanimity = No Positive + No Negative = Calm + Balance**

Besides *sisu*, the Finns also have "*kalsarikanni*" which literally translates to "pants drunk" and refers to the practice of spending time alone at home. If it is in your underwear, enjoying a drink, so be it! It is a simple and effective way with little resources or arrangements needed to relax, recharge and relieve any potential stress. It is also keeps in the theme of no showing off, posing for others, performing or pretense, a social event might require. It is indeed being authentically happy with what you have, even if you have no clean pair of pants.

The Dutch also have a similar concept called "*niksen*" which is the ability and intention to relax and do nothing without feeling guilty about it. The Dutch have an even better way of seeing life called "*gezellig*" which is a multi-use word which sense can best be described as a state of cosiness and togetherness or a shared sense of joy of spending time together. With friends or feline companions too.

## Parenting

Michele Hutchison & Rina Mae Acosta wrote the book "*The Happiest Kids in the World: How Dutch Parents Help Their Kids (And Themselves) By Doing Less*" which shows a world-class Dutch way of child-rearing leading to less anxiety to parenting for both parents and children. UNICEF rated Dutch kids as the happiest in the world from a study of 30 developed country. 95% of Dutch children self-reported themselves as happy. The keys to this parenting model can be summarized as follow:

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<sup>32</sup> Except for 2015 when the top 5 were: Switzerland, Iceland, Denmark, Norway and Canada

1. Freedom of Playing Unsupervised (Builds Autonomy, Play and Trust)
2. Riding Bicycle in The Rain (Builds Autonomy, Exercise and Resilience)
3. Family Time Valued in Time and Quality (Work-Life Balance)
4. Less Homework at Primary School (More Play, Exercise and Leisure Time; Less Stress)
5. Open Conversation About Sex (Communication, Choice, Awareness and Boundary-setting)

We talked about babies sleeping in Denmark, about Swedish six-year-old walking about, and now the Dutch are telling us our fear-fuelled society is wrong and that our most vulnerable members of society, the children, should be encouraged to play outside alone instead of fearing the world. By giving into imagined or grossly exaggerated cultural fears (rapists, thieves, terrorists, pedophiles, deadly viruses), we are making these LT societies exist or persist and everyone anxious and fearful, including our kids. The wisest parents in the world, me included (ego excluded), are telling you to do otherwise. Parents should be happy, selfless and fearless and let their kids model their attitudes. Children will hopefully in turn adults and parents, and building a better society arguably comes from them and their formative years.

#### **Autonomous Fearless Children = Autonomous Fearless Adults**

In Holland, people work on average 32 hours which is the second lowest in the world after prosperous African country Rwanda, while having the world's second highest productivity per capita. This means people work smartly, not only hard and long, and spend lots of time with the family to have happy kids and homes. At the opposite end of the spectrum, many Asian countries and culture capitalist quest for "good" education, grades, money, and status, lead Asian parents to over stress their children with endless homework, extra tutoring, after school classes and strict expectations for school grades, good schools and profession. See the 2018 Taiwanese Wei-ling Chen-directed science-fiction anthology series "On Children" (*Ni de hai zi bu shi ni de hai zi*) for vivid examples of oppressive Asian parenting and its repercussions.

#### **Increase Social Pressure = Decrease Freedom**

Much less social pressure, lack of status symbols and materialistic values are extremely useful realities in the Netherlands, in that sense, and decrease stress and social pressure for adults and kids. Lastly pragmatic Dutch values tend to empower not only children but people early with forgiveness and right to fail continuous growth and learning attitude. Autonomy and play are thus providing to have better current and future outcomes for kids than rote memorization of didactic subjects.

#### **Do Less = Less Stress**

#### **Forgiveness = Growth**

#### **Autonomy + Play > Rigid Education + (Home)Work**

Northern Europe has good examples of practical and philosophical happy living best practices, including parenting. We must remember that "it is not what you have but what you do with it" however and as less than 1% of the world population was born or lives in these countries, they can inspire us to change our unhappy ways, sooner than later.

The last Dutch word of note here is "*relativeren*" which simply means putting things in perspective. Something that is hard for most (fear-primed, ego-focused) people to do, consciously or unconsciously. We will see about perspective in the section below.

### **Perseverance and Perspective**

I met Sebastien and a Syrian refugee named Ahmed on separate days on the Lachine canal in Montreal. They were both in wheelchairs and both happy to look at the beauty of the waterway and surrounding scenery. They both took over half an hour to talk to me about their life's perspective.

Sebastien had lost both his legs from frostbite complications in the Albertan wilderness near Edmonton and Ahmed had lost his due to the war in the country he fled. Ahmed lived in subsidized lodging nearby and received money from the government. He has a quiet if uneventful life, missing his family and friends in Syria which he communicated with daily on his newish model smart phone. Sebastien worked part time and had a home somewhere but seemed unkept, unwatched and with little material possessions. Seb loved to leave the city to find a new canyon, mountain and stay in nature. He couldn't as much since the double amputation 2 years ago. He tried karting, 4-wheeling, and snowmobiling for a while to stay connected with nature but found that age and health were preventing him from fairly physical activities now. He had not kept in touch with family and roamed around Canada between cities and nature for years. He felt Canadian and that was his turf. Being the world's second largest country and having visited some of its breathtaking sights and scenery I understood him. I did to a point, because I still had two legs, a semblance of a family and would not survive days or weeks in the woods solo like he used to. I told him of my friend living in the woods with no cellphone coverage, low hygiene too, building his cabin in the woods like many Europeans think many Canadians still do. Some do, yes. Not that many. More Europeans may come and populate these empty lands nowadays, like they did centuries ago with colonization, minus the genocide. So I tried to relate to Seb but couldn't fully. What drove him? What did he learn in his journey? He told me he was happy, content, and found out he was the quiet type (high self-awareness) and of slow disposition. Time seemed to pass with not much worry or plan. He just lived. He had an aura of peace and embodied the complaint-free lifestyle that some (most!) of us cannot achieve with much more (money, health, social support, status, etc.). They say less is more. Ask minimalist lifestyle queens slow living Sophie (Malama Life) and professional organizer Marie Kondo.

Sebastien finally admitted his medium-term goal was to settle down and buy a place to have more stability, instead of his Canadian nomadism that reminded me of modern Mongolian nomads. He is not in the capitalist overconsumption mindset. He sits quietly with a smile and watches the canal and birds. Part-time job, full-time life.

Ahmed's conversation was more jovial and less introspective. He told me he was offend bored and found it hard to learn French, although he was taking government-paid free classes. He was still happy and I found both legless men to softly by their presence, patience and undeterred perseverance to teach me unspoken lessons. Life always has something to be grateful about. Complaining is counterproductive. Always forward, even with no legs! Further.

### **Perseverance = Continuing in the Face of Obstacles**

**Perseverance = Positivity in Difficulty = Action > Avoidance/Abandon or Inaction**

**Perseverance = Resilience + Patience + Push Forward**

Life itself is to be grateful for. The journey. Every step. The light and the heavy ones. I recall my ski accident and femur fracture at ten-year-old which took me years of physiotherapy to fully recover. I remember my sweetheart's ski accident that was even worse and near fatal. We spent Christmas at the intensive care unit between life and death. I remember my sporty brother who tore ligaments in both knees simultaneously and was bed-ridden for months before he could slowly relearn how to walk. Patience. Time and health are precious commodities. Perpetual immediacy of our perceived path is illusionary and bordering lunacy. We must learn to slow down.

**Patience = Slow**

We are in a fast-paced society where we want to have everything now<sup>33</sup>, instead of appreciating what we have now. Life is what happens when you are making plans.

### **Life = Now**

Leanne is a Montreal radio-caller who wanted some advice and perspective from the public for her “situation” with her partner. She wanted Montreal radio listeners to weigh in in the game “date him or dump him” because she fears her partner does not have enough ambition and she may possibly be in the position to feel like a “sugar mommy”. She clearly stated to her that he valued “quality of life” more than material wealth and that he was happy with his part-time job and not planning to seek a full-time job any time soon. This reminds me of Sebastien with two functioning legs, a stable address, likely less apathy and unkept attitude.... and a girlfriend. Some audience members sympathized with his honesty, transparency, and life choice to value life over money, yet the vast majority of both male and female listeners simply told her to “dump him”, ending the relationship in fear of future lack of financial capacity. When I say majority, the poll was 89% dump him! A listener said sarcastically that he could have his “quality time” on his own and could backpack through Europe for 20 years for all he cared but that life costs money and you need a solid foundation. I didn’t vote in the poll, but remained quite appalled that this is the city and society I live in. Montreal is known for its *joie de vivre*, a very artistic community, less social hierarchy and status symbol. It has in almost all aspects (culturally, legally, etc.) a much greater work-life balance than financial capital Toronto, oil capital Calgary and most of the US major cities. I can only assume the relationship-breaking ratio would be well over 90% elsewhere in North America. This is certainly not Scandinavia!

What is interesting about this attitude is that it shows that the cultural majority view (as we saw) is often conditioned, blinded, and biased beyond any awareness. Montrealers (or majority thinkers anywhere) are probably utterly ignorant of the assumptions, blind spots, hypotheses, cultural hegemony, and pre-conditioning they incorporate in what they assume is a logical and rational conclusion.

Let’s break it down for the breakup party of 89 and see if we can add some perspective.

1. Leanne is worried about appearances (being seen or feeling like she is paying more than him) Appearances have limited value. We already live enough of a masquerade and hopefully not with our partner as well.
2. Leanne is worried about a potential (imagined) future. She does not seem to have any immediate cause for concern. He works part time, has more free time and is happy. She is the unhappy or unsatisfied one. He could (should?) have concerns.
3. The audience assumes that money is more valuable than time. Although a balance is necessary, we saw that focus on time makes people happier in the *Introduction*. Her (now probably ex-) boyfriend made that conscious choice and can articulate it. Most people do not make a choice and just follow the path that is laid in front of them without much question or introspection. For instance, how much money do I absolutely and optimally need in a year or in the bank account? How much time do I absolutely and ideally need not giving my time away from money? Bottomline, Leanne (like many) doesn’t even know what she wants, why she wants it and what she needs.
4. Most relationships are asymmetric in many aspects. This can include money and many other spheres.

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<sup>33</sup> See the hilarious comedy routine of *Ronnie Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!* where he expands on how we live in an Amazon Same Day shipping mentality of capitalist addiction.



5. Relationships are not static, but they can evolve purposefully and with a partner's preferences into consideration. He seems to be open and only experience his current thought-out views without judging or imposing anything on her life. Did he ask her to stop working full time to spend more quality time with him, for instance? He respects her values, but not her. She prefers pre-cooked, pre-determined, social overarching desire for money, and even worse, fear of not have enough, both now and in the future!
6. Leanne is imagining a future where she makes more money and sees it as a righteous injustice. Her man may be making more time for himself now and less money by choice, but what is to say that Leanne one day gets sick and has to work part-time (not by choice) or that she loses her employment (as life happens unexpectedly to all of us). Would he then feel equality condescending when he may have to work full time (by choice to support his partner) in a different period with different circumstances?
7. Leanne is ungrateful and does not communicate well within her relationship. Why is she asking random people if she should leave a guy she obviously have some interest for and is open enough to tell it like it is, instead of communication her potential fears and worries to him?

In all honesty, I hope Leanne leaves this noble, transparent man who knows what he wants because if she has doubts in the first place, and can't even express them openly, he can likely find better. The minority often is. 11% it is. Sometimes even 1%. Don't seek people with unaligned values if possible as we will see in *Beyond Sex*.

Money is almost a religion people follow blindly like we will see in *Beyond Spirituality*. People see it as an automatic goal (and the more the better, even if Notorious B.I.G. told us *More Money, More Problems*), a default way of life and almost moral value, instead as a tool of exchange. People do not see and seemingly do not want to see the big picture, where everything seems clearer from a distance instead of being potentially a rat in a pointless maze or a dog chasing itself tail to use animal analogies. We are animals, we should remember, if we are to have even more perspective. We will see more about our biology and how it affects our often-limited perspective, habits, habitual thoughts and actions in *Chapter 4: Psychology*.

We will also see in *a later book of the series*, how "zooming in and out" techniques can help us keep even greater perspective on life and our perceived privilege or predicament, which are almost invariably incorrect from our reactive thoughts we may think are well thought out or back by years of intuition, experience, and knowledge. Talking about experience, let me bring you on a voyage with me.

## Enlightening Experiences

In Pune, India, I finally did get naked to prove a point at a private party (and not my McGill philosophy class) and was also taking likely illicit drugs in front of OSHO International Meditation Resort with an Indian international model and her friends after a fashion show with ex-Prime minister in attendance. Did I potentially learn more outside than inside the Ashram or center of the guru who teaches us about reconnecting with wonder?

In the Namibian desert, I left the small comforts of my tent to sleep alone on the floor of the cold desert night admiring and contemplating the sky, and actually hardly sleeping from the cold and the spectacular sight. In the morning, I did some horseback riding to discover some cave painting in the vicinity from human beings like who expressed themselves artistically millennia ago. What does it mean to be human? To be (at least partially) aware? What is this connectedness, shared experience and oneness?

In Pompei, Italy, another volcanic eruption that marked the world near modern day, busy Napoli (Naples, and not Naples, Florida). I see casts of people's reaction to their near-instant horrific deaths. I see kilometers square of an archaeological site with ancient lore still underground. Many sites are still partially uncovered and will take decades still, thousands of people and millions of dollars to uncover. I think also of the partially jungle-reclaimed awesome Angkor Wat and the hundreds of neighboring temples near Siam Reap, Cambodia; of the ancient million population mud-constructed city of Chan Chan in Peru (no there is not only overly touristic Machu Pichu to marvel upon) who has less than 10% of the site's mysteries uncovered; of the iconic Tautavel prehistoric site in the South of France. I revel in having the opportunity to be in the birthplace of man and the over 3 million year old Australopithecus woman commonly known as "Lucy"<sup>34</sup> in culture-rich Ethiopia; to see the sexy and alluring almost 2000 year-old colorful frescoes of Sigiriya in Sri Lanka or the over a millennium years older ones in Abu Simbel, Luxor and Karnak, Egypt; to walk among the Bronze Age monuments in remote Jargalantyn Am, deep in the Mongolian steppe; to gaze upon and grasp the immensity of the vast and amazing Aztec ancient cities and temples in Mexico (Teotihuacán, El Tepozteco, Xochicalco, etc.) which saw a century of religion-ruled complex 6 million people empire before the Spanish religion-ruled Empire took over from Europe; to climb and be enchanted by the Mayan ruins in Mexico (Palenque, Calakmul, Coba, Chichen Itza, Monte Albán), Belize (Caracol, Altun Ha, Xunantunich), Honduras (Copán) and Guatemala (Tikal) all more awe-inspiring than the other; to be in the presence of Roman greatness in the Colosseums of Rome (Italy, along with the Verona Arena), Alexandria (Egypt), Amman (Jordan) and the mighty El Djem (Tunisia); to imagine the early European Hellenistic knowledge in Greece (Athens, Corinth, Delphi, Delos) and Turkey (Ephesus); to marvel at Chinese creativity in Xi'an, modern Shanghai, Beijing and beyond.

On the paleontology side, I visited the UNESCO-protected since 1979 Dinosaur Provincial Park, located at the heart of the Alberta, Canada's badlands and having produce dspecimens located in more than 30 museums around the world. The diversity and research there is world class. When I was there with my young son in 2016, they had just discovered a new dinosaur! Geologists all have a field day (pun intended) in that region! Stunning insights into the far past.

We are just scratching the surface.

Epic cultural events and festivals I attended around the world like Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Thingyan in Myanmar, Carnival(s) in Brazil, Holi in India, World Expo in China, the Olympics in Canada, taught me how it is to be feel vibrant and alive, even briefly.

My brother had the "chance" to be literally run over by a bull in the surreal San Fermin festivities in Pamplona, Spain. He could have indeed been alive briefly (!) but his injuries turned out to be minor.

I attended various beer festivals (Canada, China, Latvia, South Korea) and music festivals. I am particularly found of jazz which cannot be surpassed in creativity in its live form. I saw jazz festivals in Argentina, Switzerland, South Korea, Turkey, and the biggest in the world happens to be held in my city, so I attend regularly.

Living in tribal villages in Fiji and Vietnam taught me humility, ancestral traditions, and strong communal bonds. Jewish, Coptic, Hindu, Catholic Italian, Muslim Bangladeshi weddings all had their peculiar festivities. First birthdays in South Korea, Colombia, and Venezuela are of outmost importance. Just a few centuries ago, children often didn't make it to adulthood, some not to childbirth even. Funerals can be festive, fun, and solemn too. A celebration of life and death. Death anniversaries customs vary. In Fiji, the items of the last meal of the deceased cannot be eaten for 99 days for the close family and then

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<sup>34</sup> Scientifically AL 288-1 or locally Dinkinesh (ድንቅ ነሽ, which means "you are marvellous" in Amharic)

a feast is prepared with these items on the 100th day. Deathdays are honoured in many Asian cultures. Celebration of adulthood passage in Vanuatu island of Pentecost is the origin of modern bungee. In life we must plunge. Always forward. Fear must be tamed.

## Trust Thrust Further

As we saw, trust will be one of the recurring themes of this book. I think trust is a paramount key to happiness, fulfilment, elevation, and connection. Coming from a high trust society and seeing my parents carrying the baggage of a low trust culture, I have decided to give almost unconditional trust to others and it has been mostly to my benefit, yet I find myself taking betrayals very badly and either blaming others or myself, when I should simply accept that trust is malleable and movable.

Also, and most importantly, and partly due to my addiction(s), I also feel I cannot sometimes trust myself, and especially in certain situations where my nature may be vulnerable, I found myself confronted mostly with myself. I can sometimes think of myself as a person with Alzheimer putting post-it notes to remind himself/herself not to fall off the wagon, or a forgetful person who has constant reminders in their electronic agenda (Google or other) to remind him/herself of crucial aspects of the day. I was once juggling 4 agendas. 3 electronics (personal, business and client's business) and one in pen and paper in plain site in my home for the family activities. As we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, multi-tasking is not the best way our brain functions. In our fast-paced, multi-faceted lives, minimalism has its merits and can increase focus, attention, performance, and joy. As trust is concerned, the more variables, the more uncertainties. Learning to trust yourself is also learning to trust the process. Same goes for life and existence itself.

Trust is the foundation of life, and the opposite is fear and mistrust. When you look at the alternative, fear brings racism and prejudices, wars, and power games, when trust brings collaboration, support, strength, levity, joy and worry-free mental energy.

### **Trust = Confidence**

One day, my then 3-yr old son was walking down the street in Montreal, Canada (one of the safest and arguably friendly city over 1 million in population in the Americas) and said "hi" to a middle-aged lady and she didn't say hi back. He was so shocked and devastated. I was too, but quickly said to him: "continue to say hi to everyone and if they do not say hi back, it is their problem and not yours." I feel the same about trust: I will continue to trust, and if your misguided views want to misuse this trust and try to hurt, that is your problem. I will not be hurt. Slightly disappointed perhaps but also knowing this is life and a minority of people are untrustworthy or simply pushed by a mix culture, experience and biology to act selfishly, with greed, hate, vengeance or jealousy.

I also understand now that I am the same and that is why I may sometimes not trust myself. I am not in control of my brain, experiences, and culture as much as I would hope and strive too. Maybe I will be the victim of my own thoughts and unwise reflexes. I am more influenceable than I would like to believe. You are too. If one knew and could comprehend all the elements of your journey and could decipher the intricacies of your neurocircuitry to a level much greater than the current limited scientific understanding, that person would potentially know exactly what you would do in a given situation. You do not know yourself that well. Have you ever been surprised by your words or actions in a situation as it happened or later when you looked back with a distance and different perception? I have. Many times. Unfortunately, at the time, it was impossible for you or me (or anybody) to act differently. Knowing this can help foster compassion and self-compassion as we will see in *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)*. That is the knowledge of common suffering and desire to decrease it for all.

About the same year, I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter that my mother once came and rang our doorbell and my young son answered without verifying who it was. My mom was rather furious. Not to see her grandson, but to see that I had not raised him to fear strangers yet. I listened to my mom's plight and complaint and remembered she came from a culture and world where you could be kidnapped, raped, killed or worse by anyone at any time. She had had a getaway bag always stowed away in her room, forever ready to flee the country at a moment's notice.

My family in Haiti had been sometimes cherished, but also persecuted and some members had been imprisoned and worst raped & killed in front of their family. My mom witnessed the displayed dead body of a person who was said to have spoken ill of the government exposed in a public place as a youth. She was a 9-year-old grade school student forced by her teacher to go with her classmates to examine the body to instil fear of speaking against the government. They were not allowed to look away at the macabre display.

I witnessed a similar low-level fear, initial mistrust, and point of view from my ex-girlfriend from Venezuela who had seen much less atrocities, but was from a country with growing fear, violence, and insecurity. Trauma (big or small) can be imprinted in our neurology, and I saw some similar constant low-level underlying stress and vigilance from my Colombian friends even after years living in Canada. We know that genes (especially FKBP5) can pass down fear, anxiety, and trauma-response from ancestors. Also, gene expression is affected by events perceived as threats. Genetics and epigenetics can accentuate negative moods and emotions from your own lived experience, from your parents' or even grandparents' experiences! More fear, less trust. More on trauma, PTSD and cPTSD in *Beyond Psychology*.

Being from a high trust culture, I was aware of the vultures, but they represented such a small portion of society and even if they existed did not threaten my life or livelihood as drastically. More philosophically and intentionally, knowing my first novel as a teenager was about a utopia, I wanted to believe the world would be a better place if everyone trusted and respected each other. I sincerely hoped we could and should trust each other de facto, instead of the fear some parents, medias or experiences teach us. I did not need any other reason else to trust, maybe even "love" everyone the same, regardless of if I knew them for a decade, a day or a minute. This would make the world better for everyone and it had to start with me. If someone took advantage of me, so be it. That was their problem, not mine. With that in mind, I told my mom "You were raised in a place not to trust anyone. You were brave, smart, and lucky enough to move to Canada and have your children and grandchildren here. Thank you for your remark. Still, I will teach my child to trust everyone. Trust is better than fear and mistrust." Obviously, she was furious. She still is about that and other things too. I was however able to teach my child to trust and to love all, even with his mother and grandmother's apprehensions. One way I did this was through Couchsurfing, but it was a constant teaching by example.

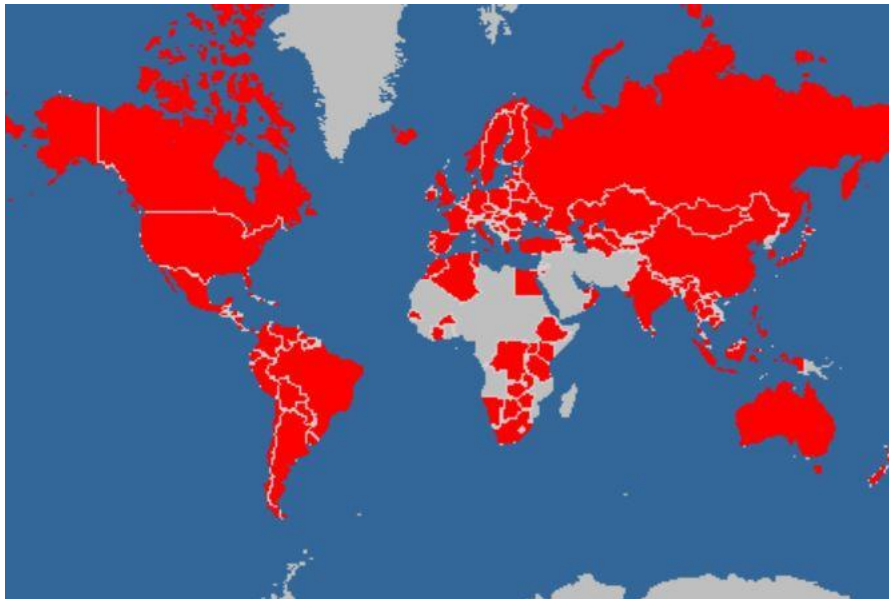
Years later, we would go for two weeks to Mongolia to film a documentary and using Couchsurfing. We found out that agricultural nomadic people (vs hunting-gathering types) need to trust each other to survive. Anywhere we went and entered a random yurt (tent mobile home), they would offer us food and welcome us. We realized that with the harsh weather conditions, climate, disease, and water variation and more, if you didn't learn to help your neighbour, your whole society may be lost very soon. Our trust in one out of many Couchsurfers in our wonderful Mongolian experience was ultimately misplaced, yet we came out alive. We only lost a considerable some of money and were threatened, but that happens everywhere in the world. Lessons learned, but we will do like Jesus and turn the other cheek instead of having to live in a world where we trust no one.

Now more about the Couchsurfing movement.

## Couchsurfing

Couchsurfing, or CS, was invented by Casey Fenton in late 1999 and slowly popularized in the first decade of this millennium with an official 2004 website launch. I would describe the website, concept, community, and later app, as the greatest social positive impact of that decade. Besides giving people access to more affordable (free) travel accommodation options, and invaluable insights into other cultures and lifestyles, fundamentally it challenged our often-rigid assumptions on trust and mistrust, especially in the developed world. Would you let a total stranger sleep in your home? In 15 years, I did over 300 times, from 1 to 3 people at a time. It gets easier after the first few I assure you.

*Figure 1: Couchsurfing, Traveling, and Hosting*



As of 2025, I visited about 150 countries, been hosted by over 400 hosts in over 100 countries and hosted over 500 “surfers” from over 80 countries in 6 different homes in Canada. When Muhammad does not go to the mountain, the mountain goes to Muhammad! When I do not travel, I get to exchange culture, customs, history, insight, language, laughter, food, friendship, arts and more from around the world. You can understand that the “world news” is of little interest to me. I get stories straight from the source, not through the lens of reports and medias who have less rapport with reality than the rich, kind, and brave people I met almost weekly.

The concept of CS is to open your home to potential strangers, normally travelers. to stay according to your rules (it is your home after all) for as long as you both agree, for free. Why would one do that? To learn about strangers, cultures, develop interest, curiosity and build trust, instead of fear, ignorance, and mistrust. Equally, a traveller could request to stay at a complete stranger’s home, usually on the couch (hence the name), and trust that his host would treat him like a friend or family, even though they never met before and only had a profile and perhaps some references to rely on.

### **Couchsurfing = Modern Trust**

With over 400 stays in people’s homes in 250+ cities, including all Europe and across Canada, China, Australia, Argentina, Brazil, India, The Philippines, Tanzania, Kazakhstan and the US, to name but a few, I could write a whole book about Couchsurfing, and maybe one day I will. A friend of mine in New Zealand wrote her Master’s Thesis about the movement in 2011. Some people have referred to me as a

“Couchsurfing Legend” yet this is not a legend or even far-fetched, it is reality come to past. Suffice to say, again like your brain, the more you train, the better you become at it. Maybe I am a Couchsurfing gold medalist, still this could not be possible without the hundreds of incredible hosts, travellers, and guests the community calls “surfers”, I met along the way, yes even the 2 experiences that were less stellar out of 1500+, because I met many more for food, drinks, sightseeing, art, event, social gathering, or other across the world.

I always explained Couchsurfing of meeting a long-time friend, except you haven’t met them yet. It is thus treating and trusting strangers (with some key affinities) without the usually long timeframe to “build trust”. Trust can be embedded in a community or in a mindset.

### **Stranger = Friend**

A friend or family can ultimately betray you even more than a stranger in fact. That is often the case! Family and proximity can create conflict and feud (like the famous game show). We all know of sibling rivalries at all ages, decades in divorce court, custody/child support fights and family succession destroying family bonds. Make sure to watch Home Box Office (HBO)’s show “*Succession*” if you want a vivid example of ego, pride, and politics in action.

“*Tu quoque mi fili*,” allegedly said Julius Cesar to his son, Brutus, who had betrayed him and helped plan his murder. Who here has never been betrayed by a trusted family, friend or loved one? We must move on and trust again. Couchsurfing is a great way to build trust and decrease our programmed fear circuit we will explore in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. It is no longer free as its original organic and community spirit was and started to fees and ads on the platform since 2020. This book is not paid to promote its paid services. I do not know about the company’s future, yet I do still care about the concept and community. Ultimately, I can say with certainty it impacted millions of lives positively in this modern-day culture of increased individuality and manufactured fear.

### **Increase Trust of People = Decrease Fear of People and Life**

My Uzbek friend might have said it best:

*“Ultimately, Couchsurfing has enriched my life in so many ways. It has given me a deeper appreciation for the world around me, and a greater sense of empathy and understanding for people from different backgrounds. I'm grateful for the experiences I've had through Couchsurfing, and I look forward to many more adventures in the future.”*

— Zohid Ernazarov

“A stranger is a friend you haven’t met yet.” Cultivate a sense of openness and curiosity.

My friend Benjamin finished his master in France in his early twenties and decided to travel the world for one year with 5 challenges. We will see the importance of challenging ourselves even more later. In the stories we tell ourselves constantly we have comfort. Ben was anxious and a social awkward introvert. He challenged his assumptions and for over 100 days as I write this he succeeded to

1. Go towards others to discover charity altruism and god will
2. Live from the kindness of others and give back in other ways
3. Challenge his fears of speaking to stranger
4. Seek and accept rejection and learn

When he was staying with me, we had an evening when we kindly asked for food and two fast food chains gave us fries. That challenged me. I had never really done that myself. We were 2 for 2 so no rejection. However, I wanted to challenge him and said we should now go to a fancy restaurant. We did.

It was quite fancy and Ben did the talking with some little help from me. We got to sit in this posh place and get a \$30 plate for free. The benefits of getting out of your comfort zone.

Sometimes you also need to have perseverance (8Ps) and one night he asked over 80 random people if he could stay in their home for a night or two before someone said yes. That person who finally said yes was a stranger and now is a friend.

## Native Cultures

*“Don’t get angry at the rock or the human,”* Is a possible native quote or folklore saying. It means to accept the world and people as they are without judging, blaming or being angry.

### **Acceptance = Nonjudgement, nonanger, nonaccusation and nonaggression**

Lakota culture in the Native America sees sickness as a community problem instead of individual. When someone is sick, the community gathers and says we will help, support, and hopefully cure your illness. The individual is not alone. This can be for physical, financial, and mental illness and distress.

Indigenous and native cultures around the world, even though many have been deceived and decimated by various forms and periods of conquer and colonialism still have lots to teach us. Spiritual and sacramental practices, teachings, languages, and learnings have value in understanding some forms of existence. We often see a strong link to community and the reliance on nature.

I lived in a tribal village in Northern Vietnam and tried to understand their culture without affixing a “Western” judgement. I spoke to Natives and Inuits across Canada, met a researcher who studied rape and incest in Brazilian amazon culture, spent weeks with modernized/Christianized tribes in Fiji and Vanuatu. The overall positive lesson from tribal life is strong sense of community.

### **Community = Decrease Stress + Increase Survival and Happiness**

Oppositely, we see that tribal identity (tribal ego or amplified/transposed self-ego) in any form leads to expulsion, exploitation and often violence, including war, cannibalism, pillage, rape, genocide, including infanticide and feminicide. Yes, my Fijian friend’s great grandfather ate people from other tribes. My grandfather was in the small Haitian army and killed people for his government to “protect his tribe”. Modern tribe may be a cultural difference within a country, a single nation or organized (crime?) bodies from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or even the United Nations (UN) which doesn’t just do “peacekeeping” or does it often poorly and politically. Same lesson:

### **Amplified Ego = Amplified Aggression**

We will look at ego later as a key factor of failure to go beyond happiness and collective ego or at least the identification and feeling of belonging to it can create mini-tribal wars in everyday life.

### **Collective Compassion and Kindness = Contentment**

### **Collective Ego = Disastrous Division and Destruction Dormant**

## Culture Change

I learned that culture, like individuals, are never static. They evolve (or devolve), in other words, they change (impermanence). They are often moving along and playing in the same 5 spectrums of individualism-collectivism, capitalism-socialism, (mock) democracy-authoritarianism, liberalism-conservatism and nationalism-globalism. From a history and practical perspectives these are not real changes but minute tweaks in the same tried-and-true social constructs.

Quantitative changes do not mean qualitative changes. That is one of the core reasons, I haven’t watched or read the “news” in years, because if you know about history and anthropology, it is never

“news” to me. A few legislative changes or change in government have some impacts for sure, but not when you take the macro lens. A few human or natural tragedies and occasional triumphs “advancements” or adversity are nothing new. They are extremely predictable. Why attach so much importance to the details of what we know is going on, has been going on and will continue to go on for the foreseeable future? Real change, now that interests me, but it rarely comes from the “top” where people in power are concerned on preserving their foothold, their wealth (newfound or generational), status and similar versions of *status quo*. Changes comes and reside in the individuals first and foremost. If they are lucky, they may lead by example, still don’t get your hopes up too soon.

In Colombia, effective non-violence “positive propaganda” campaign has had some success. In Scotland and China, many resources were used to stop the local habit of spitting in public, especially during the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. In some African countries HIV-AIDS prevention campaigns have had some breakthrough after years of culturally inappropriate and inadequate tactics failed miserably. In Canada, France, and the US, I saw some “Don’t Drink and Drive” campaigns and others that seem to have a level of positive outcomes (less deaths). “Don’t Text and Drive” is next but it’s the same thing. Artificial Intelligence and self-driving cars will be a real cultural shift.

In South Korea, an interesting controversial 1990s TV producer spearhead Younghee Kim called “yangsim<sup>35</sup> nangjanggo” meaning “Conscience Refrigerator” which through its popularity helped post-war Korea switch higher towards collectivism in the individualism-collectivism spectrum by give valuable prizes (materialism) and public recognition (status) to ordinary citizens for changing their behaviors for the “good of the people”. For example, they gave away refrigerators for respecting traffic lights (and later road rules at large) in South Korea, then later compared the still chaotic Korean driving to the all-to-respectful Japanese drivers in Japan, which was a World War II enemy and couldn’t be seen as superior. This touched the reward (tangible and intangible aspects) of people psyche as well as the comparison to neighbors with perceived “better behaviors”, including shame, jealousy, and competition. It put a mirror in front of Koreans social behaviors for all to see (on TV). The show was expanded to include altruist or collective values like helping elderly to carry heavy bags and picking up fallen public trash bins in the streets. The results in rapid cultural behavior adjustments were astounding. Maybe it was a predecessor of likely less moral “cancel culture” movement.

In Singapore, the government changed (undesirable) behaviors by imposing very strict laws ranging from public urination, drug trafficking to public gum chewing. We see that the stick and carrot approach is still with works most for people around the work. Reward and punishment. We will look at the brain’s reward system and its mechanisms in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

In Greece, one of the oldest cultures, the word “Philotimo” (Greek: φιλότιμο) has the literal translation of “love of honor”, but signifies much more, including a sense of community and expression of love and kindness to strangers. Something I saw this year in my new Greek odyssey (not Greek tragedy) as well as a highly tactile culture with loads of public display of affection (PDA). Sense of community even in a disastrous state of economy, compared to other European Union (EU) countries. Greece compared to many other countries (Ghana, Indonesia, Colombia, etc.) Is still doing just fine. There is always better and worst in this multiverse! Greece did change and adapt however, and it was easier for me to see the results after having not seen the place for exactly 20 years. It changed in subtle ways and a relatively stable and strong culture for millennia will often change less than newer ones yet change there always will be.

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<sup>35</sup> 양심 (Yangsim) means “conscience” but also has another significance closer to “scruple” which is a moral principle or belief that make you unwilling to do something that seems wrong.



. Let us focus on individual change in this book without forgetting that cultural change is possible, will happen inevitably and we can have positive effect on it, if we pay attention and bring proper action. Let us only make sure not to be victim of current (limited) cultural norms and fast or slow evolving cultural changes. We are our environment, largely if not entirely.

**Awareness = Self + Environment = Selfless Universe**

More on that in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*.

## Time Perception

We talked about touch and how Greeks are “touchier” than say Brits or Americans. More on that in the next section *Space Perception*. Mindfulness has to do with presence in the moment, often at the (temporary) detriment to past and future ideas, goals, and commitments.

What is being “on time” to different people and culture? Individually, punctuality may be because of different brain makeup and habits. Culturally, it takes a whole new level of understanding.

High Time Perception (HTP) cultures experience time as rigid and very important.

Low Time Perception (LTP) cultures experience time as fluid and equally, if not more important.

LTP cultures experience the moment of time in the present and worry less about the future!

For example, a friend in DR Congo asked me to be at his place for 2pm. I arrived at 2:05pm like a good Canadian and I ended up waiting over 2 hrs for he to come home. He was not even home and had no intention to be. His maid told me to wait, was not even sorry and he neither when he arrived hours later.

There is “Western Time” (Canada/Australia/Northern and Central Europe) which is more HTP than “Eastern Europe Time”, which is more rigid than “Mediterranean Time”, than “Latino Time”, than “Caribbean Time”, than “Central African Time” and so on.

Germany and Japan are HTP cultures and incidentally created world wars! Switzerland is known for its incredible precise (and expensive) watches that keep time. It is also a neutral country even if it has obligatory military service and training for its males population aged 18-30. Swiss Army is not just a knife or a brand for bags.

When it comes to time and perception it is always a balance between:

**Enjoying the Present Moment vs. Empathy for Someone in the Future**

If you are waiting for someone from a LTP culture and you are from a HTP culture, simply use that time to be fully present in the moment to. Waiting is only perceived as suffering when time is idle and full of unfulfilled expectations. In those cases, always have a book at ready, like this one! Or an even better one and the time will fly by, you won’t even wish your friend, family member, colleagues, date or other arrive! Alternatively, if you have nothing to read avoid, the incessant dopamine-addiction of your phone and use that time to be curious and discover the surrounding (old or new) with a new light of awe, delight and playfulness and complete presence and awareness.

**Time = Free + Fun**

**Time Waiting Upset = Loss + Unpleasant**

To be fair, if you are from a LTP culture and are always late and make your HTP culture friends wait, trying to muster additional empathy, put yourself in their shoes of slightly (or largely) tighter schedule and potential repercussions to the rest of their day planning. Plan and motivate yourself to get there early than you would usually (aim for on time, or for In advance if you still always find a way to leave and arrive late). While you plan and motivate yourself to be there, bridge the cultural time gap and make your friend/family or acquaintance appreciate your (semi-)punctuality, be also grateful and mindful that the time you spend less being late for whatever reason you may be or might have been is also well spent

in the journey, preparation and extra early time you get to experience with the person potentially waiting for you.

**The Journey and Every Moment Count = Punctuality/ Early is Lovely Too (No Ego Needed)**

### Space Perception

Touch is important for bonding as we will see in later chapters. It releases oxytocin (and perhaps some vasopressin) to form pair-bonding or social bonds. Touch and sex have been used in humans and pre-humans for millions of years. Modern societies have adopted and changed views and values around touch, privacy, and personal space in a high degree, robbing us in a sense of its biological utility, and often making it a scarce commodity with shame, taboos and religious or cultural lens aberrant restrictions.

Religion can be said to have a huge negative impact of sex in general, with sex often being relegated to only procreation purposes, instead of bonding, connection, and sense of security (you really hug or have sex with your enemy, unless they are your husband! – See my 3<sup>rd</sup> novel for more on that). Touch is slightly different but in the same spectrum. Space, or rather perceived acceptable space, between people is often an indicator of a societal or cultural cue not to be discounted if you are trying to “fit in”.

Japanese, although atheists on average, have the least amount of reported sex and sex satisfaction. They also rarely hug or shake hands. I can attest to hugging a Japanese girl I spent the day with in Nara who had probably never hugged someone in her life (even her parents) from the puzzled look in her eyes as I departed in a Shinkansen (fast train).. Still Japanese need hugs and sex so developed a perverse sex industry and have now “hugging services” to help a population where the biology does not match the current cultural norms. Japanese, Korean and many Asian cultures bow in respect instead of touching.

Latin Americans mostly believe in a Catholic God, yet the religious repression is often dormant in the highly sexual, breast-revealing attires found in the streets. They also exhibit as high degree of touch, we can also ascribe to “Latin Culture” like the French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian. I identify with this culture of touch, yet we will see later the dangers of identification (to any and everything).

A good handshake (firmest matters like sex apparently), and eye contact (which also helps release bond hormones) is the golden standard in most English-speaking or business setting. Some managers use friendly touch to bond with their employees. Yet in a world of MeToo, touch is becoming less and less acceptable. I find it “touchy” to hug a work colleague or close client sometimes.

### **Touch = Tricky Culturally**

In Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, I was bewildered to see even higher touch culture! I had a Serbian woman friend (no sex), and we would sometimes hold hand in the movies, casually and not romantically. It was a bit odd to me, but as I try to stay open-minded and non-judgemental it was just an oddity, I thought was specific to her. Lo and behold, two weeks in the Balkans and especially Serbia and Kosovo, I saw a whole new level of cultural touching. We would hold each other for a time and space I had never been accustomed too... and I absolutely loved it! Once the unease fades, I was able to appreciate its pure beauty.

Greece also impressed me with men and women hugging and kissing me easily. Again, just friendly, and not sexually or romantically. Early Romans may have had different views of touch, slavery and sex as depicted in the well-preserved frescoes in Pompeii and found in ancient Latin texts.

Luckily for me, I was kissed rather often, sometimes fashionably, freely, frugally, or friendly (let's keep the fetish part for the next book that digs deeper into sexuality). Yes, closer than hugs, may be kisses.

Arabic men give themselves three close kisses. Congolese 3 as well, but both sexes. Some cultures give 4. My French culture gives 2.

Personal space and touch is thus very culturally specific even in its individual variations. I also know people who are either overexcitable to touch and feel it is overwhelming and “too much” (perhaps high in giftedness or sensory overexcitability—OE—; more on Dabrowski theory of positive disintegration later in the *Beyond* book series) or simply unable/unwilling to experience touch as closeness and bonding. Space, boundaries, and touch can be very personal. They are also crucial and culturally curated to a high degree.

We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that touch releases mainly Oxytocin (OT), the social bonding hormones and decreases stress directly and indirectly.

**Touch = Essential Life Component = Motion + Sensation + Increase Social Bond (OT) = Decrease Stress**

However, in High Space/Low Touch cultures touch can be seen as a threat.

**Touch = Potential Threat = Increase Stress = Anxiety = Decrease Social Bond**

Communication is key and consent about appropriate sexual or non-sexual touching can be expressed and discussed to minimize misunderstanding. There is also a large variation within a same culture as we mentioned with the OE and preference of place, pressure, angle, texture, timing, duration, motion, vibration, and frequency of the touching.

**Consensual Touching = Increase Bond (OT) = Decrease Stress + Decrease Aggression**

The nose if perhaps the most misunderstood sense organ so far, but studies are being made that indicate that people subconsciously smell their hands after the shake hands with someone. Someone is also prone to report closeness, intimacy and friendship more often if they share similar smell patterns.

**Touch = Proximity + Increase Pheromones and Olfactory Sense**

## Sphere of Focus

When we think of society, we think of the many. The question is how many? In other words, what is the focus of your everyday action and preoccupation.

We can see that there are normally 4:

1. Individual
2. Family
3. Community / Collectivity / Society
4. Higher Good (God, Nation, or Nature)

We have only so much energy or time to live that we normally have to focus on one of these spheres to achieve any lasting results.

As my Greek barber likes to say:

*“We live every day.*

*We only die once.*

*Hopeful we can really live before that.”*

The problem is that once we focus enough on one, which is ideal for results, we will undoubtedly have some negative impacts on the other spheres. So how to choose the best, knowing they are probably all important for different reasons. For let us understand that few people actually “choose”, as they are immensely impacted by the culture they live in.

Japan is the only country where I say a predominance of number 4. Japanese believe in the higher good (in their case Japanese nation and not God) and that is reflected in almost all aspects of their lives. They are the most “respectful” including in the subtleties of their language. Their streets are clean and

their over-packed subways very quiet due to the concern of “noise pollution”. This higher good also caused genocide and war more than once. Other number 4 cultures are usually linked to God but can be on occasion Nation. As for nature, Greenpeace and ecology has been on the rise for decades. A subcultural of environmentalist, animal rights activists, sustainability professionals and vegans are now ready to access the realm of majority cultural thinking with the global warming, carbon-restriction that is about to take over our lives.

Number 3 is the remnants of tribal culture. It can be seen in much of African countries. The Caribbean is also a hub for community-thinking. In villages, it is the way of life almost everywhere. In cities, sub-communities with geography (neighborhoods) or interests are close substitutes but at a far lesser extent.

Number 2 is still the largest portion of the world thinking and includes extended family. It can also include “gangs” in the organized crime sense. It means “blood \genetics or gang) is thicker than water”. . In that construct of the world, many will send or receive money from their relatives. Actions and preoccupations are for the family first, even when individual needs need to be met and considered.

Number 1 is the capitalistic and individualistic world we live in so called “developed” countries. Family can be a priority but only normally limited to immediate spouse and children. Maybe parents in some cases. This mean “me” and the “ego” is more important than empathy and the external environment. This also means more stress, loneliness, and lack of support in crisis. This also means marriages and couples unions fail at an astonishingly higher rate and families are broken, often beyond repair.

### Systems, Rules, and Rigidity

Societies developed and are developing with various systems and structures, both implicit (often through culture) and explicit (found with rules, regulations, laws, etc.). Societies can be distinguished with how many rules (sometimes called “red tape”) they have and buy how much people adhere to these rules.

People in any society can chose to adhere strong to must rules, ignore most of them or expressly reject or challenge them. We will see in another book of this series that people high in the giftedness-gullibility spectrum tend to challenge any rule or construct while more gullible people will tend to follow rules without much questioning. This is true for any society or structure, still most people are in the middle of the spectrum (not too gifted, nor too gullible) and will be greatly influenced by the society and culture. This is also why most “revolutions” will attempt to imprison, kill, or exile intellectuals, not just because of their power but rebellious nature. Dictatorships or authoritarian states also often burn books, limit access to information and replace it with various forms of propaganda. “Non-authoritarian” states also do that but normally much more subtly and specifically.

Individual people, perhaps my parents at times, or others you know, may be authoritarian as well. They try to repress your ideas and freedom with authority and desire for control. They metaphorically burn books and bridges. There were times where I did not talk to my parents for months or years because of their attempt at been dictators. They must have learned from the best in Haiti.

We can imagine that a religiously repressive country like Iran and Saudi Arabia, or an ideologically repressive country like North Korea and Turkmenistan would have many rules, some that do not “make sense” to the average citizen but that they must obey through fear and repression. More “open” or “free” cultures will also have rules but offer more choice or “liberty”. They will exert their control mainly through:

1. Communication
2. Education

### 3. Motivation

This is the carrot instead of the stick approach and has been used on your TV and social media as well as in Aztec and Maya cultures. They both work but citizens with more sticks (or perceived threats) will be in hypervigilance mode from their stress-response brain being constantly triggered. We will see more about how our brains interpret threats, dangers, and traumas in the following chapters.

Sociologically speaking, I would qualify cultures as being into 4 categories:

1. High and rigid rules with high acceptance
2. High and rigid rules with low acceptance
3. Low and lax rules with high acceptance
4. Low and lax rules with low acceptance

Examples of the first would be current Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Egypt at different levels of course. USSR and Nazi Germany could have been examples in their times. Citizens seemed to respect the rules and play along with the perhaps harsh system. Most of the world also complied rather acceptingly to the new restrictions during the covid-19 pandemic. Overwhelming. Was there a “good” reason for them? Time, history, and sociology will tell. Although history, like science, philosophy, and religion, is still written by perfectly flawed and fallible humans.

Current Iran and China could be considered in the second tier with more dissidents or rebellious elements (covertly and overtly) to the harsh regimes in power. China has many people downloading VPNs to have access to information beyond the Great Firewall for instance. Chinese culture does not necessarily respect rules when they have the opportunity and that may also be why the country has tons of anecdotal stories of rampant corruption at all levels.

Russia could now be a candidate for number 4 with no overwhelming authority like it was in the USSR days, but with low following of the few rules left.

I would argue that most of the current “civilized” world falls into the category 3 with some freedom in rules and their application (law and law enforcement), and almost complete acceptance of them with few real fundamental challenges. Regular legislation sessions change the rules ever so slightly to adjust to the population concerns with very few real game-changing reforms. Look at the failings of “Obamacare” which was already a rather weak reform, all things considered. Real society changes tend to occur drastically and not incrementally. This may be true for individuals as well. Although there is something to be said for seeking to always be slightly better than yesterday. Science is one of these tools for fluid change and understanding.

### When Disaster Strikes

My cousin died in an Earthquake in Haiti. I was in Hawaii when a Category 5 hurricane loomed threatened to devastate thousands. My flight to Vanuatu was canceled due to an active volcano and two cyclones devastated the islands weeks before. My friend’s husband in Kōchi, Shikoku Island in Japan, rushed to help nearby island’s earthquake victims. I helped fundraise for my friend in Turkey whose family and friends lost their homes in a devastating earthquake. I saw people evacuated from their homes in a safety perimeter in Luzon Island in the Philippines.

When communal or personal disaster strikes the individual, community and sometimes global reaction is all that really matters. Not the frantic fundraising based on pushing “privileged guilt” buttons, like sending money to Africa for poor children or a fundraising campaign for Ukraine victims, but actionable assistance and human camaraderie.

Judge someone or a society by how they respond to a tragedy. My friend Kloe is in her twenties and spent a year 16-hour per day in dialysis for her kidney failure. She is now “only” going to the hospital 20 hours a week and has started the kidney transplant list process. She is always smiling when I see her and saying she should not complain because others have it even worse. Kloe met a friend last week that was even younger and was stuck sleeping in a long-care facility with older dying people for her dialysis. She was impressed how her friend could hold on (to life and sanity). I was impressed how Kloe could not only hold on, but smile, laugh and be genuinely radiant. Kloe invited me to her place for a tasty barbecue and talkative evening of sharing and caring. I cannot be happier (or content) to be her friend. Not because she is worst off than me, but because she is happier (grateful, hopeful, joyful, peaceful, nonattached, nondemanding, nonjudging of her life situation) than me! I can learn from, not pity her. As a kid she also experienced a series of life events that may have left some to abandon an ascending path of hope and growth. Yet there she is, patience, persistent and present. Kidney or not, happiness embodies her.

When something you can perceive as “bad” happens, try to see it as a tsunami or hurricane in your life and react to it positively. Don’t complain, simply build back, better, different, stronger, again and again. Life is like a sandcastle. We know the tide must come and sweep it away at some time. Never stop building. The piece of small beach we have that is the metaphor for existence is beautiful. Just Be, Breathe, Bathe in its beauty.

**No Complaining Allowed = There is Also Worse Than You (Always)**

**No Complaining Allowed = Life is Beautiful as You See/Be It (Even the Rough Tides)**

Be sincerely grateful and count your blessings instead! We will see about journaling and grating in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* and *Beyond Spirituality*. If you are not sure someone is worse off than you, look out for a war history book, find an internet disaster crowdfunding platform and read sad stories, travel to a different country or read *Chapter 1: Beaten But Not Broken* of this book again. If you’re worse off than all this, please write or call me immediately!

## Suicide

Trying to go beyond happiness as individuals and as societies, perhaps on a canvas of utopia as in the *Chapter 3: Philosophy*, before getting more specific with tangible tricks in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, we are still missed the real cost of its opposite unhappiness. Yes, my business and global health background is coming back! We talked about happiness index as self-reported and subjective. We can also look at unhappiness with harder quantitative measures of mental health diagnostics, types, comorbidity, severity and prognostic. A particularly poignant statistic is the suicide rate which single a failed safeguard either at the societal or individual emotional level.

**Decrease Happiness = Increase Unhappiness = Increase Depressive Diseases = Increase Suicide**

Trying to go beyond happiness as individuals and as societies, perhaps on a canvas of utopia as in the upcoming *Chapter 3: Philosophy* will try to elucidate shortly can sometimes seem a shortcut without looking at the harsh realities of old and young people ending their lives prematurely, and not just because of assisted suicide which is another topic all together. I have quite a few friends who have attempted the act and over a dozen close friends who had someone very close (son, girlfriend, friend, husband, cousin, co-worker, etc.) commit suicide and devastate not only their lives but the tsunami of grief, doubt and guilt it invariably leaves behind. Tim Ferris spoke out openly about his serious suicidal thoughts, there are many good survivors who regret the act and are now advocates, including one I found on the Soft White Underbelly series from Mark Laita. I recommend Eric Steel’s 2007 documentary on suicide in San Francisco, impacts (physical and emotional) which showed an era before a) 2008 Financial Crisis b) 2020

Health Crisis c) San Francisco rising rampant socioeconomical and drug issues. Golden Gate Bridge (GGB), was the one of most popular suicide site in the world during the documentary's filming, between 1200-1600 deaths by 2003-2023<sup>36</sup>, and 24 attempts during the filming in 2004. Its death toll has since been surpassed only by the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge in China with more than 2000 suicides from 1968 to 2006. Niagara Falls, Canada, tops the list with 2780 known suicides between 1856 and 1995 and about 20 to 25 per year<sup>37</sup> like the GGB.

In 2015, the New Zealand Film and Video Labeling Body requested Netflix to remove the documentary from its streaming service for being classified as "objectionable". Netflix complied with their request and removed the documentary from their library. New Zealand has the highest rate of youth suicides in the OECD<sup>38</sup>. Currently suicide rates of all ages as of 2019 ranked had four Caribbean countries with the lowest suicide rates (per 100 000) in the world, including Antigua (0.4), Barbados (0.6) Grenada (0.7). Seems like "Caribbean Time" has its merits. Surprisingly Syria is 7<sup>th</sup> lowest (2.0) which may mean that when life is in peril it may be perceived a more precious. Honduras and Venezuela follow (2.1) with violence and poor economy and insecurity. Jordan (1.6) and Philippines (2.2) are 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> respectively.

At the opposite end, besides Guyana (40.3) / Suriname (25.4) in South America, Kiribati/Micronesia (28.2) in the Pacific and South Africa (23.5) / Lesotho (72.4) / Eswatini (29.4) in Southern Africa, South Korea (28.6) has the fourth highest rate in the world and was often number one in the past. One factor stems from family expectations where, traditionally, children have been expected to care for their aging parents. With more recent changes in family dynamics and economy, many older adults commit suicide, rather than feel like they are a financial burden on their families. Students and young adults also have higher-than-average suicide rates, at least partly because of high levels of pressure to succeed academically or in the workforce with long hours and little vacation or leisure time. Expectation to achieve lofty "socially acceptable/desirable" goals, may lead to dishonor/shame/guilt towards their families or society at large.

### **High Expectations = High Suicide Rates**

Alcohol use (Soju!), sleep deprivation, stress, and poor social relationships can put students and young adults at increased risk. Similarly in Japan, suicide is the leading cause of death in men between the ages of 20-44 and women between the ages of 15-34. Car carbon monoxide poisoning is popular in South Korea as method as well as the Seoul, Mapo "Suicide" Bridge and the Han River that crosses the populous city. Montreal has many bridges, and a metro that stops often. I am sure the statistics of suicides are hidden from public access as well as never broadcasted in the media. It is in hopes to reduce the temptation of people to be inspired and pass for thought to attempt/act. Same idea as New Zealand and Netflix request, yet is it working?

Solution from researchers I know and activists in the field all point to mental illness and depression diagnostic as primary concern element to redress with education and outreach, community leaders to help prevent suicides at a local level, instead of continuing to focus on "suicide hotlines" which are useful to delay action of a person in immediate distress, yet show limited impact holistically.

Up to 90% of suicide victims in South Korea may have a diagnosable and treatable mental health condition. It may be so in many developed countries wit increased isolation and daily stress demands. I would encourage more studies yet it seems clear to me that communication, community, education, prevention and access to the right resource (medical or otherwise) is key to save the bottom of the

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<sup>36</sup> Guthmann, Ed. *Lethal Beauty*. San Francisco Chronicle. October 30, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Hudson, Mike. *Suicide season*. Niagara Falls Reporter. 27 May 2008

<sup>38</sup> Illmer, Andrea. *What's behind New Zealand's shocking youth suicide rate?* BBC June 15, 2017



happiness trail before they fail and fall off the trail. The hopes is that they can later get the tools to go beyond unhappiness and happiness highs and lows to be truly joyful, grateful, fulfilled and content, however big their struggles may seem at the time.

My bisexual Korean friend had a girlfriend for over a year in high school and one day after they were not together anymore, she took her life and was no more. My friend from Ecuador lost her cousin to suicide. She was 19. It happed in July 2023, and as per her family she looked otherwise happy. In Murakami's short story "With the Beatles", he talks about fictious and real double suicide in the 1920s and 1980s. He talks about ideological suicide. Dying for any idea is both noble and sad. We will see later not to attach ourselves to either ideas or ideologies. Japanese exquisite director Masaki Kobayashi showcases culturally accepted suicide in his masterpiece *Harakiri* in 1962. Americans will remember the term *Kamikaze* from Pearl Harbor and World War II history. Suicide for love is another ideology. Chikamatsu's 1720 *jōruri* drama (puppet play) *The Double Suicide* in Japan and Shakespeare's 1597 famous play *Romeo and Juilet* in England (inspired by an even earlier Italian tale). In both instances the individuals are sacrificed to the social systems in place. Is it to "save face" instead of disgrace and disapproval? If not suicide, why not live life worry-free and frugal?

Self-harm and self-destructive behaviors can be precursors to a more permanent and fatal act. Drug (and alcohol) use may also have perverse effects on suicidal thoughts, attempts (increase emotions – negative and positive, decrease inhibition) and psychedelics especially have some concerns of suicidal actions by mistaken hallucinatory or persecutorial drug effects on the brain. We will look at the potential positive and negative effects of some psychedelics in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Demographically, most drug and alcohol in general increase many health risk factors like accidents, injuries, violent incidents, incarceration, and unprotected sexual encounters. Another reason to kick these physical substance abuse/addictions/compulsions out of the way.

## Science

Sociology is a science. It is the systematic study of societies or more precisely the development, structure, and functioning of human society. It includes anthropology, the scientific study of humanity, concerned with human behavior, human biology, cultures, societies, and linguistics, in both the present and past, including past human species.

Now, is the use of science cultural? Is it opposed to various forms of dogma?

To examine the question, we most understand that science is only a method, not a goal or truth. It does not require trust, nor is it only systematic mistrust or cynic skepticism. There is such things as destructive doubt and groundless dangerous hope.

Science, like philosophy we will see in the next chapter, is not a goal and does not have expectations other than be an evolving tool which will put current hypothesis, theories, or philosophies as placeholders for any new better working theory, based on correct evidence and analysis.

Societies that rely more on unfunded or unchecked beliefs, stories, superstitions or media/social media, friend/neighbor/co-worker biased analysis of an information without being able to check a sizable portion of its validity will be prone to more propaganda and manipulation of the masses to perhaps dire degrees. Without science it is not only the valid fear (not stress and anxiety) of not advancing, but also of regressing substantially. Stoics will talk about progress as a virtue, motion and not stagnation and sloth in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*.

Science is also corruptible like government because like lobbying it requires funding from the industry and in case of pure research and development (R&D) from government and non-government



organizations (NGOs) for or not-for-profit and with their own expectations, selective decision-making and serious biases. Some more open science projects are being built and hope to see more engagement in the worldwide scientific and tech community on that front. Open Blockchain seems to have the most transparency and traceability as a technological tool right now.

### Courage vs Conformity

Courage-conformity spectrum is what I suggest is necessary to understand and challenge within ourselves and communities. We must share the desire to cooperate, coordinate but hopefully not only be compelled to conform. We should also share at all levels more readily to avoid all the division inherent in conformity and egoistic human nature.

*Quand on partage un bien material, on le divise, alors que quand on partage un bien immateriel, on le multiplie*

— Idriss Aberkane

This means that sharing a physical asset automatically divides it, while sharing an intangible asset acts as a multiplier instead!

#### **Sharing = Caring**

Sharing is important and we can share much more than we think. The ego wants more but we cannot leave with more. We only should have enough. Sharing knowledge and wisdom is infinite. I hope traveling the world has thus now been shared and passed down to the reader's benefits. Happy to have a coffee or videocall to discuss more soon.

### Sociology Recap

We saw that societies can be understood in many ways, and we can observe and learn from all of them. Specifically, we saw the difference and effects of 9 major axes:

1. Trust Spectrum
2. Time Perception Spectrum
3. Space Perception Spectrum
4. Rules Rigidity Spectrum
5. Resilience vs. Reliance (Learned Helplessness and Victimhood)
6. Individual-Family-Community-Higher Good (God or Nation)
7. Courage-Conformity Spectrum
8. Sharing Spectrum (intangible > tangible) ex. Couchsurfing
9. Philosophy/Science vs. Superstition/Storytelling

Let us now switch focus to a few key profound philosophies to see how we can conceive better selves and perhaps societies.

## Chapter 3: Philosophy

*I have come to accept the feeling of not knowing where I am going. And I have trained myself to love it. Because it is only when we are suspended in mid-air with no landing in sight, that we force our wings to unravel and alas begin our flight. And as we fly, we still may not know where we are going to. But the miracle is in the unfolding of the wings. You may not know where you're going, but you know that so long as you spread your wings, the winds will carry you!*

— C. JoyBell C

Philosophy has always been a quest of mine, yet I quickly found that as intellectually captivating as it may be to tackle the biggest questions of our sentient minds and search for purpose, if it did not have a practical application, it may have limited immediate value. After raising philosophical question since my teens and started writing my first novel at age seventeen, I continued participating in countless classes, lectures, discussion groups and doing further research, reading, writing, and listening to audiobooks, guided meditations (virtually and in person), podcasts, capsules and picking the brain of people who applied a whole host of philosophical concepts with various successes.

Like in the business world, where only a handful of start-ups survive, I found that many philosophies, beliefs, and pop psychology shortcuts do not work consistently when practiced in different circumstances. I did discover, however, 5 key pillars to apply simple and effective philosophy to our daily life. They all revolve around the notion that arbitrary external events (past, present, or imagined) do not have to affect our thoughts, mind, and body the way we allow them to; that is if we train our brain not to and that in many ways human suffering (not pain or misfortune) is not required, but rather almost optional. That is the promise of philosophy we will explore together and in reference to the 5 consistent pillars I discovered throughout my extensive research and reflection. I will highlight them simply here and define and dissect later in the chapter. Here we go (EDAAO):

**Pillar #1: Equanimity**

**Pillar #2: Disillusionment**

**Pillar #3: Acceptance**

**Pillar #4: Awareness**

**Pillar #5: Oneness**

### Anarchism

A political philosophy, rather than a life philosophy, I include anarchism here because we just saw the wide effects and variations in sociology in the last chapter and because it is often misunderstood and misused. A useful definition I found was as follow:

“(A) movement that questions authority and opposes government rule and the creation of bureaucratic enforcement systems. Often used negatively as a nickname for violent extremism, anarchism is (...) calling for the abolishment of government and all government systems that enforce laws in unequal or unjust ways. Anarchism seeks to replace government-sanctioned power structures considered to be naturally unfair to minorities, such as capitalism or the prison industrial complex, with non-bureaucratic systems in which decisions are made by the people.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Longley, Robert. *What Is Anarchy? Definition and Examples*. ThoughCo. February 09, 2021

As a philosophy, anarchism envisions a freer, peaceful, kinder, more compassionate, aware, and equitable society. Is this philosophy practical, or even actionable, is another question. Capitalism-communism-socialism present concepts as applied political philosophy, including possible use of universal basic income (UBI), will not be examined in this book, but are the current counterparts to anarchy as different types of non-tribal/non-native governments. Another option than (potentially nihilistic) anarchy, could be forms of better thought-out and transparent meritocracy or a revival of sortition (a.k.a "lottocracy") from ancient Athens, Greece. Elected democracy (including possible demagoguery, lobbying, and various forms of pressure and manipulation of the votes or voters' minds) has counterparts in monarchies, dictatorships, and authoritarian regimes, although they can sometimes overlap and coexist, depending on interdependencies, depth, and sophistication of propaganda. Totalitarianism is the most extreme form of authoritarianism but can be disguised as many things. According to its constitution, Turkmenistan is a secular democracy. Who is to say that other states are not playing along this spectrum of political might, menaces, veiled or overt threats, lucrative rewards, and deceptive decorum?

Anthropologists speculate that many prehistoric societies operated as anarchies. Historical anarchist philosophers emerged around 800 BCE in ancient Greece and China and began to question the authority of government to limit individual freedom. From ancient anarchists there are now mainly 5 modern types of anarchism movements

1. Anarchist Capitalism (laissez-faire capitalism with lax—or ideally no—laws)
2. Anarchist Communism (self-governed, i.e. government-less, collective ownership)
3. Anarchist Socialism
  - a) social anarchism (collectivist society)
 

**Needs of individual < group**
  - b) individualist anarchism (individualist society)
 

**Needs of individual > group**
4. Green Anarchism (environment focus as a goal)
5. Crypto Anarchism (digital currency as a tool for freedom and independence)

Anarchism is an extreme way to show nonconformity. But is it truly courage? Stoics will have a definition of courage below.

### Criticism of Anarchism

Anarchy could be inherently unstable and as its prehistoric roots should evolve back into structured government rule one way or the other over time. The starting point for most social contract theories is an examination of the human condition absent of any political order, in other words anarchy, termed the "state of nature" by Thomas Hobbes<sup>40</sup> in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He and other political philosophers<sup>41</sup>, who worked on the social contract theories and philosophies, hypothesised that government naturally emerges as a corrective response to anarchy which maintains order and protects the interests of the people. Hobbes claim that bellum omnium contra omnes (Latin for "the war of all against all") or each man for himself like fictional works of Hunger Games, Squid Games where lawless human life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".

Thomas More wrote the socio-political satire landmark novel Utopia which was published in 1516 and is now the namesake for the word utopia. I wrote my first novel contrasting a utopia to our modern

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<sup>40</sup> Harrison, Ross. *Locke, Hobbs, and Confusion's Masterpiece* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 70

<sup>41</sup> John Locke (1689), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) and Immanuel Kant (1797) among others.

world. The way utopias could come about seem to be isolation, event-specific opportunity, or generational radical multi-level educational reform. Critics argue that “it is nearly impossible for individuals or small groups, no matter how dedicated, to destroy or deconstruct a current established governmental structure. It would be better, they argue, to concentrate on the inequality, and threats to liberty posed by the ruling government and work for reforms through the existing political processes<sup>42</sup>”.

German philosopher (Johann Wolfgang von) Goethe (1749 – 1832) would say “None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free”. Freedom can be moral (value, belief, speech, action, movement, decision), economical, political, or philosophical. This supposed there is such a thing as “free will” or even “free thought” which is not as certain as it seems as we will see. Determinism has some strong arguments as neurology and our understanding of the brain questions these very notions of manifestly modulable will, thoughts, and even emotions, experiences, memories, preferences, decisions, etc.

Regardless of if anarchy is either desirable or even feasible, let us now look at what “free” human beings could do if they had to choose the best way of thinking and living (including purpose/meaning, values/virtues, and actions/nonactions) for themselves.

## Stoicism

Being an addict, I am familiar with the Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) Serenity Prayer which says: “God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time. Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace.” If we dig deeper, this idea predates Christianity and although the Stoics also have a “God” which they call “Logos”, it is not an omniscient, omnipotent, conversational God to pray to but rather a concept much more akin to what we know call the deterministic universe, or fate. No faith required. If faith is something you hold dear due to cultural or personal value, it also works, and spirituality will be discussed in more details in *Beyond Spirituality*. The crux of the “prayer” claimed to first appear around the 1930s in America is a stoic idea and evokes three of the stoic virtues of Temperance, Courage, and Wisdom. Let’s break it down together and see where Stoicism and Mindfulness come into play. In fact, the short version of the prayer includes only the 3 first parts which are Stoic:

1. Serenity to accept the things I cannot change (Temperance/Acceptance)
2. Courage to change the things I can (Courage)
3. Wisdom to know the difference (Wisdom)

There are many versions of the Serenity Prayer include words like acceptance of hardships or things out of our control.

## Dichotomy of Control

The dichotomy of control is attributed to former slave turned famous philosopher, Epictetus, and dates to the writing of the *Enchiridion* (The Handbook) around 125 CE. The dichotomy of control is a cornerstone of Stoic philosophy as a whole: It states:

1. Control the controllable (thoughts, actions, reactions, emotions)
2. Let go of everything else (similar to Daoism and radical acceptance – both explored later in this chapter)

### **Pillar #3: Acceptance**

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<sup>42</sup> Longley, Robert. What Is Anarchy? Definition and Examples. ThoughCo. February 09, 2021

The Serenity prayer in some incantations (“Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time”) and the AA movement in general stress the present moment and focus on now, which is a form of mindfulness practice. Do not attempt to see too far in the future. One day, or one moment suffices.

The Serenity in the prayer can be seen as both a prerequisite and direct benefit or consequence of accepting. Serenity is a form of equanimity and is linked with temperance, tranquility, stillness, sobriety, peace, harmony, humility, quietude, calmness, and contentment. Marcus Aurelius also says: “the universe is transformation: life is opinion.” Urging us to accept impermanence but take a critical eye towards rash judgements, thoughts and opinions.

### **Pillar #1: Equanimity**

Philosophically speaking, an argument can be made that even our thoughts, emotions, reactions and actions are out of our control (ultimate determinism). Practically, Stoics try to discern and dissect things that are truly out of our control, mainly external events and some internal events, like sense perception, reaction and some types of emotions. It then gives the Stoic practitioner the possibility to have some control over the world and exhibit the four virtues by exerting influence on one’s non-reactionary emotions, thoughts and actions. In the East, Buddhist philosophers, as we will see next, try to influence personal thoughts, words and actions, very akin to Stoics. Daoists, on the other hand, may feel that ultimately, we have no control except resistance and nonresistance.

A 2011 survey asked people from different “Western” countries “Is success in life determined by forces outside our control.” Percentage of respondents that answered affirmatively were as follows:

- Germany 72%
- France 57%
- Spain 50%
- Britain 41%
- United States (US) of America 36%

This means Americans feel they have more control of their lives which may be useful, as well as delusional. This is due to higher dopaminergic attitude culturally and most likely genetically. We will see some of the role of dopamine in *Chapter 4: Neurology and Endocrinology* yet remember for now that it is the driving force for motivation and action. In the US and in Western Europe, those without a college degree are less individualistic (or feel they have less control) than those who have graduated from college; this is especially the case in the US and Germany. About three-quarters (74%) of Germans in the less educated group believe that success in life is largely determined by forces beyond one’s control, compared to 55% of college graduates. Among Americans, 41% of those without a college degree say they have little control over their fate, while just 22% of college graduates share this defeatist view<sup>43</sup>.

The more education (and possibly indoctrination), the more belief we have in the control of our lives. This may be due to the belief that knowledge will enable us to direct our lives better. Yet we saw that knowledge is neither wisdom nor awareness. We can infer that knowledge coming from formal education, experience and culture although useful, may lead to major errors of judgement and may also need to be unlearned for optimum clarity, awareness and applicable living.

### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment**

We can classify people who think external events are more important in the fate of their life as *external locus of control* in psychology. Oppositely, *internal locus of control* people believe their volition and actions have greater impact. In effect, they believe in free-will and their ability to affect the world.

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<sup>43</sup> *The American-Western European Values Gap*. Pew Research Center. November 17, 2011

These people

1. Achieve more in general
2. Have more stress (which can be positive or negative)

**Internal Locus of Control = More External Achievement + More Internal Pressure**

People with more external locus of control, may have difficulty to accept responsibility and improve on themselves. They may have the tendency to blame others and/or circumstances, thus learning less and potentially provoking or antagonizing peers more. At the same time, they may feel less internally motivated stress, self-blame and regret.

**External Locus of Control = Less Self-Blame & Learning + More External Blame**

**Pillar #3: Acceptance (and Adaptation)**

The percentage of people who feels either internal or external locus of control can also be changed and manipulated based on culture, environment, media and marketing. The Stanford Research Institute (SRI) found in the late 1970s, that what they called as the inner-directed group (internal locus) was on the rise and was attempting to satisfy the self-actualization and self-realization higher part of the Abraham Maslow's pyramid (hierarchy of needs) in different ways. The marketers then invented the different "values and lifestyles" well-defined groups to understand, mold and satisfy these needs and attempt to allow the illusion of internal control. Ronald Reagan campaigned on that knowledge in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, which they won and were respectively re-elected once and twice in the 1980s. As the sociology, subconscious psychology, and society can sway the vote, as well as the internal or external locus of control, so can one's reasoning.... Hopefully!

The reality is possibly that a balance between feeling you have some control of the world around and admitting you do not is most conducive to have a complete toolset for adequate and useful mind states. The proper framing and reframing may change considerably depending on the situation presented. Some situations may require more belief in one's ability to impact the world, and others more acceptance of our limited impact. This situational switch or selected subjective state of mind affects both internal stress and external results as we saw. We can thus choose the best balance in given circumstances, regardless of if we philosophically believe either, neither or both of these control/no control statements to be true in purely theoretical basis. Practically, they are both useful mindsets and should be fluid and interchangeable way to see the world and us within it.

**Different Indifferents**

The Stoics sagely realized that there were no external good or bad per se. They suggested we view the world with a detached, distant and dispassionate eye. Dispassionate in the sense of calm, and not meaning without potential healthy passion or vigor. They thus categorized the world as:

1. Preferred indifferent
2. Dispreferred indifferent

Preferred indifference are things that with all things being equal may be preferred than not like health, wealth, work, fun, food, family and friends. All things, people or situations are considered indifferent in themselves, and we must remind ourselves of this, but some may be preferred because they can contribute to a virtuous life if used correctly.

**Equanimity = Indifferent**

**Equanimity+ = Preferred Indifferent**

We will see the 4 Stoic key virtues shortly, but there are also other values for living a virtuous life. What good is health or wealth if used to take advantage of people? What good is family or friendship if

used to betray, belittle or hurt them directly or indirectly? This is why they may be preferred yet judged as indifferent.

Sex may one of the best preferred indifferent and necessary for life. It can lead to passion, connection, creativity, complicity and deep intimacy. However, sex can also lead to addiction, abuse, infidelity, rape, violence, and even slavery<sup>44</sup>. Modern human trafficking is mostly due to sex. We will look at positive sex and relationships in more details in *Beyond Sex*.

Gain may be preferred to loss or winning to losing, yet there should be no inherent preference if we know how to react to the loss, or gain. Moreover, we cannot prefer to win by cheating or gain by hurting others.

Dispreferred indifferents do exist like illness, isolation, pain, prison, poverty or bankruptcy. We may not seek them readily (unless we need them to practice courage!) and even avoid them. Still, if they come and we cannot control their arrival, we can remain indifferent through stoic mental training.

### **Pillar #1: Equanimity**

### **Pillar #3: Acceptance (Courage > Avoidance)**

With discipline and courage, we can make appropriate action after dispreferred indifferents.

## **Discipline and Flexibility**

Self-discipline is the ability to do difficult things for a sustained period for future benefits that may not be immediately apparent. This involves will or willpower and the higher brain cortex on top of the, and often against, the more impulsive (immediate) motivation brain circuit. The Stoics believe that discipline and mental training will prepare them to better deal with current and future events, be it change, hardships and adversity. This discipline is also tied to the core virtues the Stoics wish to vehiculate and embody. In psychology discipline can be emotional regulation and rational regularity, yet it is more.

Marcus Aurelius suggests “Tolerant with others, strict with yourself.” Beyond rigidity of strict self-discipline, a flexibility of mind and action is also necessary to bring about lasting and adaptive change. Flexibility is thus even more important mentally than physically and we all know that to be more flexible, healthy and ready for the world, we must often stretch. It is not only about having stretch goals in your personal or professional life but stretching the limits of the known and familiar knowledge, behaviors, experiences, and habits to attain greater possibilities of thoughts, actions and enlightenment. You must train your mind and thus have the discipline to maintain that flexibility throughout your life as opposed to the safety of reassuring thoughts and perpetual patterns. Most have many vicious cycles before attaining virtuous cycles.

Virtues as core values. Stoics believe in 4 core virtues that should be cultivated and guide everyday actions. The only things that can be inherently good or bad, according to the Stoics are virtue and moral character. One can (probably successfully) argue that nothing is good or bad even character, but just is. Still, in the interest to seek personal growth for ourselves and impact the world around us in a positive way, let us look at the 4 Stoic Virtues more closely and see how adapted and adaptive (as opposed to maladaptive in psychology parlance) they are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium:

## **1. Temperance**

*“Remember to act always as if you were at a symposium. When the food or drink comes around, reach out and take some politely; if it passes you by don’t try pulling it back. And if it has not reached you yet, don’t let desire run ahead of you, be patient until your turn comes.”*

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<sup>44</sup> MacRae, Brechen. *Indifferents In Stoicism Explained Through Gain, Loss, Pleasure & Pain*. 2023

- Epictetus

Moderation or voluntary self-restraint in action, but also in thought/emotion. We will see that Buddhist have similar ideas of curbing unchecked desire and attachment. Same goes for its opposite: aversion. Accepting potentially perceived situation that could be aversion/"hardship" (things we do not want to happen to us and loathe or fear) or unmet desire/"wishes" (things we want/expect) is a pathway to peace. We will see in *Beyond Spirituality* how even using words like detest, despise, disdain or hate affect our negative emotions and beliefs. We are better to simply use "dislike at the moment" and remain calm.

It is however perfectly fine to enjoy the beautiful opportunities that life gives us when they are within grasp, without unduly clutching to them as everything is impermanent and will be lost. Keep things in perspective. Yet we must remember the power of desire (dopamine) and want and be willing to constantly fight for an adequate cognitive control.

**Equanimity+ = Preferred Indifferent in Moderation (not Excess)**

"Mastering one's appetites for food and drink is the beginning of and basis for self-control.... The more often we are tempted by gastronomic pleasures, the greater danger it presents. And, indeed, at each meal, there is not one chance for making a mistake, but several," says Musonius Rufus.

We will see that impulsive and compulsive behaviors based on desire are strong human brain drivers that have their rightful place in human behavior yet that have potential for grave dangerous to oneself and others. Desires can lead to overindulgence and unhealthy addictions. More on this in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

Desires can be difficult to control with powerful dopamine which deregulates rational thinking in some instances. Note that equanimity would not label such things as hardship in the first place, but simply as things occurring naturally. Equanimity means calm and composure. In Stoicism it is called *Apatheia* which is central to the philosophy. Stoicism had an idea of what automatic reactions were. What we will see if often triggered by the limbic system in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

Although they had biological errors due to the science of their times like supposed existence of a soul and the seed of it in the human heart, the Stoics already understood a great deal about the equally tricky and marvelous mind. They incorporated and named 6 things in their philosophy of mind touching four of the philosophical pillars we are focusing on:

**Pillar #1: Equanimity**

**Pillar #2: Disillusionment**

**Pillar #3: Acceptance**

**Pillar #4: Awareness**



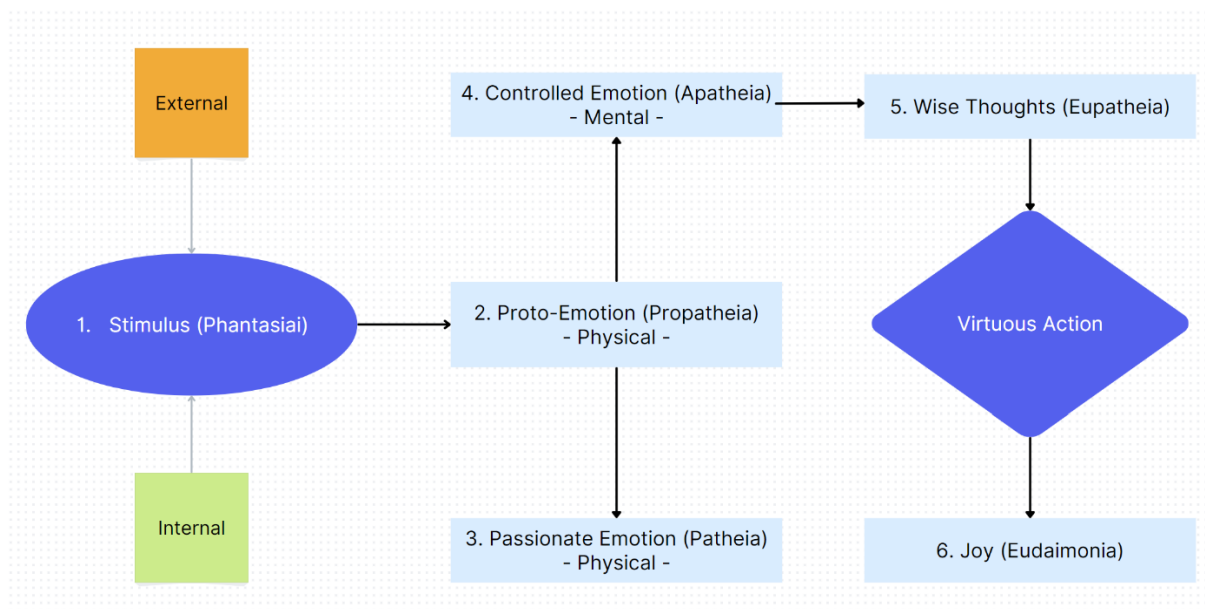


Figure 2: *Apatheia OR Patheia (Passion or Control of Emotions)*

1. *Phantasiai* (Perceptual and cognitive presentation) = Stimulus – BODY or MIND  
 Coherent and aware analysis of mental content and intentional objects and assigned identities. Sensations can come from the 5 classical senses (mostly external) and from proprioception (internal) as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. The presentations can be:
  - i) drawn directly from the senses (aisthetike phantasiai)
  - ii) produced by the mind from previously experienced phantasiai.
 The most basic power of the mind (*hêgemonikon*) is the ability to form presentations [phantasiai]. Other psychological states and activities such as mental assent, cognition, impulse, and knowledge are all either extensions or responses to presentations. Zeno defined a presentation as an imprinting [tupôsis] in the mental faculty. All our cognitive experience is drawn either directly or indirectly from sensual experience, i.e. empirically. Zeno saw the phantasia as containing two elements<sup>45</sup>:
  - i) the phenomenal (objective) experience of its object
  - ii) the (personal/subjective) representational content
 It thus represents an object in the world, yet is not that object faithfully and can never be. We know now that what we perceive is far from an accurate representation of the world as we will see in the sensory networks section of *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Cognitive perceptions of the senses (or remembered sense perceptions) involve perceptions as:
  - a) Negative: danger; stress; limitation; pain; pathological sickness; motion sickness; environmental impact (air quality, heat/cold, humidity, etc.); certain textures, tastes, sights, smells, sounds, etc.
  - b) Neutral: pressure; color; certain textures, tastes, sights, smells, sounds, etc.

<sup>45</sup> Rubarth, Scott. *Stoic Philosophy of Mind*. Rollins College. <https://iep.utm.edu/stoicmind/#H2>

c) Positive: pleasure; arousal; aesthetics; certain tastes, sights, smells, sounds, etc.

**Phantasia = Perception of Stimulus (External, Internal or Imaginary)**

**Pillar #4: Awareness**

2. *Propatheia* (Pre-Passion or Proto-Emotion) – BODY over MIND

Call out, name and accept your physical involuntary raw emotional sensations/reactions (“reactive passion” like dilated pupils, increased heart rate, red/blood-filled face, stomach/gut turning, automatic thoughts and feelings) for exactly what they are. Be ready to do nothing in most instance and resist these emotions, urges and impulses. These reactions are physically-based and can come from physical or mental stimulus or trigger. They affect both body and mind yet can be overcome by the mind before they become hazardous and non-desirous passions. Visceral states of the body (heart rate, blood pressure, perspiration, gut, and nervous system activity) are not impossible to change by the mind, yet they may be initially reactive and difficult to control from the onset.

**Propatheia = Reactive Emotion (to Phantasia)**

**Pillar #4: Awareness**

3. *Patheia* (Passion or Emotion) – BODY over MIND

If a proto-emotion is not controlled, it can give way to full feelings, emotions or passions, with associated thoughts and sensations. I have classified full-blown emotions in 4 categories. You will understand why I separated the positive with the ultrapositive emotions as such, later in this and following chapters and books.

a) Ultranegative: dread; despair; despondency; disgust; rage; retaliation/vengeance; hatred; grief; terror, panic, etc.

b) Negative: fear; anger; anxiety/apprehension; apathy; aversion; envy; jealousy; sadness; loneliness; helplessness; resentfulness; feeling overwhelmed/inadequate; boredom; guilt; shame; disappointment; etc.

c) Positive: attraction; anticipation/expectation; curiosity; desire; excitement; confidence, pride; passion; satisfaction; motivation; etc.

d) Ultrapositive: awe; amusement; joy; inspiration; hope; gratitude; sense of purpose/meaning; contentment; serenity

**Patheia = Expression of (Full) Emotion**

**Pillar #2: Disillusionment (of being victims of emotions without regulation)**

4. *Apatheia* (Lack of Passion or Emotion) – MIND over BODY

If a proto-emotion is controlled by the mind, it can be avoided or extinguished/lessened over a period of time so that it can not bloom into a negative/ultranegative emotion or appear ever so briefly and disappear. If the feeling is positive, it may be wished to be experienced but also briefly, and more importantly with less intensity (temperance and moderation). Remember that momentary positive emotions can also cause possible later grief, loss and disappointment, after elation/excitement/expectation or attraction/attachment.

With that caution in mind, it may be appropriate to engage in some moderate positive and all the ultrapositive emotions if we have the opportunity.

Apatheia (different than apathy) can also be seen or conceptualized as peace and calmness, as we do not engage with any overexcitability (OE) or emotion but choose tranquility, quietude, stillness and awareness.

**Pillar #1: Equanimity**

**Apatheia = Equanimity = Peace**

**Apathy = Indifference or Inaction**

5. *Eupatheia* or *εὐπάθεια* (Positive Choice of Moderate Emotion) – MIND over BODY  
“Good” feeling (as contrasted with pathos), when performing correct judgements and actions from wisdom. Appropriate and active thoughts focused on virtuous priorities. The wise lets go of simple desire/appetite to accomplish a worthy “wish” (*voluntas*). This can be kindness, generosity, warmth, and affection. Instead of feeling fear or hedonistic pleasure, one experiences “watchfulness” [*cautio*] or joy [*gaudium*]. Oneness means living in accord with nature (*logos*), including one’s nature and the nature of things.

**Pillar #2: Disillusionment**

**Eupatheia = Correct Thought and Action**

6. *Eudaimonia* (Special type of internal well-being, joy, and health) = Life worth living  
It is a contented state of being healthy, happy, and prosperous, because of our actions and behaviors and not because of the results. It can be also seen as the coherence between one’s thoughts and actions with inner values and voice. The eudaimonia approach focuses on meaning and self-realization and defines well-being in terms of the degree to which a person is realized. This opposes the hedonic approach, which focuses on happiness and defines well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance.

**Pillar #3: Acceptance**

**Eudaimonia = Deep Contentment of Eupaithai (Regardless of Results)**

**Lasting Contentment > Fleeting Happiness**

Using tactics number 4 (Apatheia) and 5 (Eupatheia) instead of 3, which is simply allowing emotions to take control of our mind and body, is the goal. The goal is to be aware of stimuli and mounting emotions, observe, assess, and respond accordingly.

A study was conducted to help build a framework for these tactics for unhappiness and suicide in US students<sup>46</sup>. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that suicide rates among teenagers aged 15 to 19 rose by 56% between 2007 and 2017 (CDC, 2019) which is substantial to say the least. 20% of students had given suicide significant consideration in the year prior to the study, and 9% had attempted it. 38% of people between the ages of 15 and 17 reported having severe or very high levels of psychological distress<sup>47</sup> which is linked to stress (high or extremely high), anxiety and mind worrying/wandering about the future. We will see more about mind wandering later in this chapter (Tolleism) and in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Students can develop a good balance of emotional regulation, which can play a significant role in their success and happiness, by nurturing both Apatheia (4) and Eupatheia (5) states<sup>48</sup>.

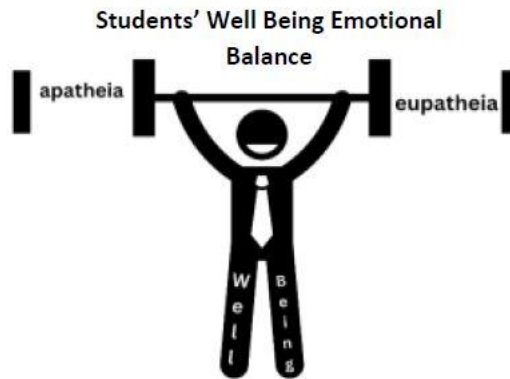
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<sup>46</sup> Husain, Farhat. Apatheia and Eupatheia- A Framework to Deal with Academic Anxiety. British Journal of Education Vol.11, Issue 3, 64-75, 2023. March 12, 2023

<sup>47</sup> Garbutt-Young, *Stress and anxiety in high school students: 1 in 3 students are stressed*. Art Of Smart Education. January 2022

<sup>48</sup> Massimo, et al. *Five additional crucial words*. How to Be a Stoic. February 2016

Figure 3: Apatheia & Eupatheia Balance



Cognitive reappraisal or reframing, which is changing one's perception of a circumstance to alter one's emotional reaction or response is the key to reduce stress and anxiety. It is a useful technique for emotion management as we will see in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. Philosophical reframing tools using the prefrontal cortex (PFC) to counteract amygdala (see *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*) fear-based natural stress response can involve both Apatheia and Eupatheia. Participating in activities that encourage rest and stress reduction, such as exercise, meditation, or deep breathing, as alternative or complementary tactics. All of which and more, we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

## 2. Courage

*"Sometimes even to live is an act of courage."*

-Seneca

Courage is the opposing force of cowardice. It is the first and most important Stoic virtue. Courage is not the elimination of fear, desire, or anxiety, it is acting in the "wisest" way despite our fear, desire, and anxieties. It can be construed as many things, but for the Stoics it is always tied to "ethical" or "righteous" action with positive energy and discipline. It can be broken down into:

- a) Endurance
- b) Confidence
- c) Cheerfulness
- d) High-mindedness
- e) Industriousness

Courage also requires discipline to pursue with purpose. I would add that courage is a virtue I hold dear, yet as we must not be attached to our ideas (or often that of others), I found a way to deconstruct, destroy or make courage even irrelevant.

### **No Fear = No Need for Courage**

Since having no fear is unrealistic for now and for most, and also dangerous for your survival and some instances, let us still look at courage as a tool to surpass our fears or aversions. The Greek Goddess of Victory, *Nike*, appearing in the form of sports shoes told the marketing team to tell the masses to: "Just Do It." One of the most successful campaign of all time, then prompted to Simo twin brother to start their lifestyle clothing brand called "No Fear", a year later in 1989. Sportswriters and coaches still speak of "We

are our own worst enemy when it comes to realizing our potential.” Ryan Holiday’s eloquent 2016 book is called “Ego is the Enemy.” The Stoics thought us all this thousands of years ago. Yet there must be more to it than “just do it,” although I love the succinct and encouraging three words. Let me try to break it down for you to understand the calculated and effective courage the Stoics were referring to. Not just jumping of a cliff for a Red Bull commercial.

For the keys ways how to augment courage or lessen fear, I came up with my 8Ps of Bravery:

**1. Preparation**

Canadian All-Star Astronaut Chris Hadfield which I met in person and received a free copy of amazing “An Astronaut’s Guide to Life on Earth” maintains that preparation for multiples outcomes, physically and mentally increases readiness and calmness amid uncertainty.

**Preparation = Less Fear**

**2. Pinpointing**

Breaking down root of fear with logic. Use you reason over your reactive negative emotion.

**Deconstruction = Less Fear**

We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, that this consists on using or executive control network to by-pass or amygdala fear hijack, although the fear response does indeed inhibit rational thinking to some or to a large degree at times.

**3. Perspective**

Taking a broader perspective than you (Ego) and the situation allows for seeing the perceived drama, as just that drama in a play, a movie or TV show. Worst things has and will happen to you and to others. Whatever you are afraid of is not as grandiose as you make it to be. Remember the useless drama you created as a teenager you now life now. Imagine you are now 112 years old and laughing at the you now, panicking for peanuts.

**Less Ego = Less Fear**

**Play Down the Drama = Less Fear**

I remember my Tunisian immigrant friend in Montreal facing his first cold Canadian winter. Although to some who never saw snow before it is excitement, the prospect of -40C/-40F degree days is still daunting to most, although many cannot even imagine how cold that is if they haven’t experienced it. I remember my friend firmly and simply saying: “if some other human being did it why can’t I?” A very useful phrase when faced with something new and uncertain. Same can be applied perhaps for prison, or for a new challenge, whatever it is. Why is that so scary? Strip it from the legend, perceived pain or danger and anxiety.

**4. Presence**

Mindfulness and more specifically being present in the here and now activates the sensory network (and at times the central executive network) while the fear (anxiety from the amygdala) gathers less attention fro your brain. We will see more information about this in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* and Eckart Tolle talks about presence, as opposed to being stuck with past or future mind wandering, as described later in this chapter. The key is not to apply rash judgement to either or thoughts of the past, present or future and simply observe them before we can try to guide or change them.

**More Presence without Judgment = Less Mind Wandering (Ego) = Less Fear**

**Pillar #4: Awareness**

**5. Pertinence**

Remember the profound, thought-out and real reason why you are being courageous for will give you additional resolve. This again is using your central executive network to overpower the reflective innate and initially uncontrollable fear. When you deeply know the “why” you are doing something courage, the better you may be able to cull your courage and convince yourself the risk is worth it. That is why armies and militias spend so much resources, time and strategies to convince their soldiers of the “legitimacy” and “urgency” of any military action or war. Most businesses now have similar approaches for employees. Likely, the old, ingrained fear of not having a salary is now been challenged by the fear of nothing doing something self-actualizing. Headhunters may also use this tactic to have employees jump ship for a new clear purpose.

**Clear Goal and Reasons = Courage Increase = Courage More Unwavering**

#### **6. Perseverance**

With this resolve, be happy to meet obstacles and situations, to seek help if needed and persevere through adversity. Courage may require repeat willpower, grit, resilience and follow through. Each failure, fall or miss is another opportunity to get up and try harder, better of both.

**Perseverance = Courage + More Courage + Even More Courage**

#### **7. Patience**

As mentioned, some courage is momentary, yet many require longevity. Think about the courage to be with someone for a twenty or more year relationship! Think about the years it takes to get a university degree or get a book writing and published (yes, like this one!)

**Perfect Patience = Reward in the Courageous Action Regardless of Results**

#### **8. Plunge**

Plunging means accepting the risk, including death, and going beyond any lingering fear. Accepting our mortality should be a necessary practice to be free of any enslavement. It is useless to fear a certain death with uncertain worries and preoccupations.

**Pick Your Priority... Then Plunge**

*"If they can force you to do it, you have forgotten how to die."*

- Seneca

*"Death and pain are not frightening, it's the fear of pain and death we need to fear. (...) Pain too is just a scary mask: look under it and you will see."*

-Epictetus

In essence, life is too short to be afraid. If we accept impermanence, we live with low level of fear. Courage can become a habit if you practice taken “righteous” risks. If it is humanly possible, you have to believe you have the ability to do it.

Controlled adversity in Stoicism is referred to the Greek word *Askēsis* and involves gradually exposing oneself to dispreferred indifferent. This dispreferred indifferent will give resistance

**No (External or Internal) Resistance = No Courage**

Knowing that resistance is not optional but actually needed to exhibit courage will allow us to welcome it more easily in our lives. We need obstacles to become better persons. And also life would be boring without them!

The major drawback of courage is that it may sometimes overestimate our abilities and minimize our shortcomings. This may happen, but as long as you do not die, you can simply try again and learn from the courageous act or experience. More likely, we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* and *Beyond Spirituality* that our brain mostly has a negativity bias towards life, towards others and towards yourself as well. In general, only people with strong narcissistic traits have sustained and exaggerated feelings of self-importance. Others normally only portray an external (fake) image yet have lingering doubts about their abilities, including more severe imposter syndrome cases. If you are too self-assured and identify with your ego, all is not lost, courage can still be cultivated including the courage to challenge your own assumptions.

**Self-Confidence = Courage**

**Self-Importance = Ego**

Now, even though courage is an integral part of my 7Cs, or conditions for happiness (along with contentment, curiosity, creativity, compassion, compersion and connection), we must keep in mind that some people are genetically or environmentally affected in a way that they cannot express courage as much or as often as others. Some people are more conformist and conservative and I think it is in no way indicative to the degree of happiness they can achieve and maintain. However, at any level of risk-taking, goal-seeking, boundary exploring or surpassing that you may currently have, cultivating courage in all types of internal and external situations is assured recipe for a happier, fuller and more exciting life. A simple example of courage is not being afraid of other people's judgement.

**Courage = Conquering Fear or Aversion**

**Courage = Doing the Difficult**

Courage does not mean being gung-ho, giddy, exhibit boisterous bravado, savage or stupid actions or reactions to your surroundings just for the sake of shaking the appearance of fear. Some fears are healthy, mainly the ones affecting your real survival, although even your survival is never assured and never for too long. Most fears are illusions. Aversions are also simple neurological patterns that cloud our judgements and allow us to avoid instead of accepting and appreciating. We will see in *Beyond Spirituality* how not using words like "hate" can lower our aversions and increase our courage. Still, when to use courage and in what amount is significantly impacted by the wisdom you have.

### 3. Wisdom

Wisdom for Stoics is your ability to determine what is and isn't in your control and then to define what is:

- Good

- Not good (aka "bad")

- Indifferent

We saw the distinction about the preferred indifferents and dispreferred indifferents.

Then to apply wisdom you must focus not on what is external but on your own:

1. Judgment

2. Opinions

3. Decisions

For example: "Good" could be acting according to one of the four virtues like showing courage in the face of fear, showing moderation despite the dopamine-driven desire of greed, gluttony, lust, or indulging in addictive or compulsive behaviors.

“Indifferent” could be receiving material things. The Stoics are not against have material things and maintain we can enjoy them, but stress that it is neither good or bad “morally” and does not add and virtue. It is what you do with the material things that is the most important. I tend to agree strongly to this idea. On the other hand, I would argue that the concept of “good” and “bad” in philosophy, ethics or morals in general is greatly flawed. I prefer the psychology term adaptive or maladaptive that is based on adaptation to environment or situation and removes the ego-based judgement of “right” or “wrong”. Virtue and values are subjective and like life itself changing rather than immutable.

#### 4. Justice

Justice in Stoicism is broader than justice in our language and legal systems today. For the Stoics, justice is our duty to our fellow man, and to our society and by extension to the universe (Logos).

The Stoics refer it more to what would be moral in our dealings with others by treating others fairly and doing the best, correct or “right” thing. Marcus Aurelius said: “Do the right thing, the rest doesn’t matter.” Screenwriter/director Spike Lee simply said: “Do the right thing.” So, the “Justice” virtue may be the most complicated as we can imagine a workable world with no right or wrong, and no justice. Still, of the Four Stoic Virtues, Marcus Aurelius said justice was the most important. To him, it was “the source of all the other virtues.”

“After all, how impressive is courage if it’s only about self-interest? What good is wisdom if not put to use for the whole world?” asks Ryan Holiday.

We can think of justice as the undeniable and fragile bond of human society and community. It paints the human as the deeply social animal he is. Whereas the 3 first virtues are independent of others, this last one is the most interdependent and thus interesting in its inherent ambiguity.

Justice can seem capricious and affected by the whims, fancies and vagaries of changing values of civilizations and societies over time, geography and culture. In all account it is! That is my personal main problem with this concept as a core virtue or moral imperative. We will also see in *Chapter 4: Neurology and Endocrinology* that our brains are sensitive to injustice in a perhaps emotional and visceral way that is not always rational and beneficial. Nonetheless if we were to define a practical application of justice in a world full of injustices and inequities, what could it be?

- That no one do harm to another, especially kills; as most morality and religious teachings vaguely agree on. (See *Beyond Spirituality* for a deeper discussion on the source, use and implications.)
- That community and common good may prevail on private property. Or oppositely not.
- That all have a civic and communal duty beyond themselves (their ego).
- That doing good to one another benefits all.
- That nature and truth may guide us, especially when we most come and act together. (See further books in the *Happiness Series* for more on collaboration and cooperation—11Cs)

Acting unjustly is defined by Cicero as “anything that inflicts injury or harms another being”. “For the most part,” Cicero explains, “men are induced to injure others in order to obtain what they covet.” This means that the possessive, aversive and desirous ego is often the main enemy of justice. In that way, I agree that justice can be a virtue in hopes to stop the ravenous ego.

**Enemy of Justice = Ego**

**Justice = Egolessness**

“What injures the hive injures the bee,” Marcus Aurelius said. Compassion and care for others is an intrinsic part of Stoic ethics. This also refers to *Sympatheia* which we will examine below and claims that we are all connected (7Cs) to each other and the universe (Oneness or Non-Duality). Lastly the



physical (neuroanatomical) seed of the feeling of injustice will be revealed, revered, challenged, and moderated further in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Let us now see what else Epictetus had to say.

### Epictetus' Disciplines

Beyond the 4 Stoic Virtues, there are also the 3 Disciplines in Epictetus' *Enchiridion*:

1. Aversion/Desire (sections 2 to 29): reorientation of aversion and desire from maladaptive (bad) to adaptive (good)

2. Actio/Inaction (sections 30-41): why (decisions) and how to act towards ourselves and others - Motivations

3. Assent (sections 42-45): using reason to challenge our judgements - Opinions

Section 12 of *Enchiridion* mentions that "you are an actor in a play" and "your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part, belongs to another."

#### **Pillar #3: Acceptance (your Role and Responsibility)**

This predates by centuries William Shakespeare play and poem that says:

"All the world's a stage,  
and all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
and one man in his time plays many parts, ..."

Shakespeare goes on to explain the seven different typical parts of a complete life, like Lukas Graham did halfway with his 2015 song "7 Years" and Manu Militari did for the last stage of life in 2006 with his song "*Marche funèbre*". Regardless of the typical or atypical role you must play, you can choose to play it right and with compassion and conviction. It does not mean you cannot or should not try to change your life circumstances, yet that they are just that "life circumstances" and that you can use psychological reframing to be satisfied in all of them. See *Chapter 8: Psychology*.

As actions are concerned, Epictetus says "above all do not gossip." Even if gossiping is evolutionary significant and allowed humans to socialize and know who was trustworthy or not in earlier societies, it is quite harmful today as it means talking behind someone's back with incomplete information about someone.

#### **Gossip = Bad Intention + Incomplete Information**

Even when the gossip is positive, it can bring undue praise or wasted resources on superficial achievements instead of character, wise opinions and thoughts. Look at the celebrity culture with popular news outlets, paparazzies and people caring more about romantic relationships of the rich and famous instead of fundamental values and judgment vehiculated and lived. Think how much the world could be better if we spent all the energy we spent gossiping by instead doing something worthwhile ourselves. Same goes for energy spent praying (idly hoping) rather than doing.

Epictetus' *Discourses* also talks about the 3 disciplines and allows us to think and act more correctly and adapt to any situation, without automatic and easy judgement. For example:

"I have a bad neighbor—bad, that is, for himself. For me, though, he is good: he exercises my power of fairness and sociability" or

"'Being healthy is good, being sick is bad.' No, my friend: enjoying health in the right way is good; making bad use of health is bad."

The idea is again that there is no "good" or "bad" person or situation, just what we make of it. There can only be preferred or unpreferred indifference. For example, sickness can be an unpreferred or "dispreferred" indifference. There is no unqualified or supreme "good". It only depends on the

circumstances. As a Stoic or sage, you must practice your thoughts to be ready and react appropriately and practically to any given situation. We can learn from all situations to refine your craft at living well and content with kindness and compassion.

Lastly, Epictetus suggests we also need meaning and purpose (scientifically proven to be beneficial and explored in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*), while balancing all our diverse roles as human beings: friend, artist, employee, citizen, child, parent, etc. Since resources are finite we must ultimately sacrifice some aspects, yet wisdom and discipline will guide us on what is truly essential (internal) and what is out of our control (external to our mind, including partially our body). There is an argument to be made that even our minds and thoughts are out of our control (determinism, genetics and environment), yet some parts may perceive to have more control than others and the point is that like the body for muscle strength and agility, the brain and mind can also be trained.

### **Train Your Brain**

#### Morality of Stoics

Moral good is the highest form of stoic living. As Stoics are indifferent to material things as having value and only allow to prefer (or disprefer) them and enjoy them while they are there and while they last, Stoics view morality as the highest value.

#### **Moral Value >> Material Value**

Stoics view the potentially rational nature of human as what distinguishes us from other animals or beasts. In *Chapter 4: Neurology and Endocrinology*, we will see that equates to our central executive network (CEN) which is mainly located in the prefrontal cortex and parietal lobes of the brain. This is opposed to the lower (animal or “reptilian”) brain, including the fear and anger center in the amygdala.

Moral value is viewed as virtue and character. They must be cultivated, curated and protected, as in the moral ways Socrates had shown as per Plato’s account (Arrian of Nicomedia was Epictetus’ student and scribe similar to Plato). For instance, we should only engage others in positive ways and not respond to others’ insults emotionally. We can respond justly, ignore the insults or even encourage them with wit and careful humour. Again, we are responsible for our actions and words, and not that of others.

#### Value Judgement vs. Reasonable Judgement

*“Whenever someone criticizes or wrongs you, remember that they are only doing or saying what they think is right... it is they who come off worse for having their ignorance exposed.”* - Epictetus

The Stoic motto “Live according to nature”, actually means:

1. Accept the universe like Daoism and radical acceptance do.

#### **Pillar #3: Acceptance**

2. Nurture reasonable and rational judgement, instead of reactionary unrefined value judgement

**Reasonable Judgment (True Nature) > Value Judgment (Limiting Beliefs)**

#### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment**

#### **Pillar #4: Awareness**

Stoics were very clear that most people did not have good rational judgments, even if they thought they did. Stoics were either actively learning, teaching or experts in the domain of “the art of living”, wisdom, inner peace and happiness. They mentioned that most people had little respect and understanding for practical philosophy (which is also true today more than 2 millennia later), and that we should concern ourselves little of untrained or poorly trained philosophers who may not even care about

philosophy as indicators of how we should think and live our lives. Epictetus had a beautiful metaphor about philosophy as music and said:

“If one hears a man singing badly, one does not say, ‘See how badly musicians sing’, but rather ‘This man is no musician’.

Similarly, if we see someone with a bad philosophy, it does not mean that the endeavor of philosophy itself is doomed. Moreover, the apprentice musician should not seek lessons from someone who knows nothing or very little about music if he wants to learn, but rather from an adept and accomplished musician. Why then do most people listen to others who know very little about philosophy and the art of happiness?

### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (The Majority Seek but Fail to Be Happy)**

Human nature means we can be:

1. Prosocial
2. Reasonable

Occasionally or often, depending on where you are in your awareness of the world, people will criticize your thoughts or actions and be correct to do so. You must be open to positive criticism and even negative criticism if it serves the purpose to

1. Pay attention (present, mindful) instead of getting upset or mad (taking it personally)
2. Provide opportunity for reflection and learning

We can also build true self-confidence (as opposed to ego or collective ego) resulting in letting people with unrefined thoughts speak or act without influencing us negatively one way or the other. We never have to be baited and stoop to their level including their:

- A) quick value judgments
- B) old unshakable or unquestionable tradition traps – see *Beyond Spirituality* for details on deities, dogmas, rules, rites, and religions.

“No expert needs validation from an amateur,” explains Epictetus. I may add “advice” as well.

Be and become an expert in living, love, compassion and happiness. Once you are there, you can help others without malice or mockery.

“When a guide meets up with someone who is lost, ordinarily his reaction is to direct him on the right path, not mock or malign him...”

-Epictetus

Patiently engage, listen, try to understand, instead of fighting, disputing or wanting to be “right” or “righteous”.

### **Prokoptein**

Prokoptein, is “to progress” or personal growth, and talks about constant improvement and advancement in wisdom and the other 3 virtues to become the sagest Stoic (or practical person) possible. Oppositely, akedia or sloth, was known, but not thought to be directly linked to emotions like apathy and brain states like depression. Progress at all costs seems like the hedonic treadmill we will see in *Chapter 6: Psychology*, but to the Stoics it was a “enlightenment” and “wisdom” progress more than a material world or goal progress. It is important to note that the seeking of enlightenment can also be ego-based and treacherous as we will see later. Stoicism is however in opposition to the Greek Hedonism philosophy of the pursuit of pleasure; sensual self-indulgence, we will see in *Chapter 4: Neurology and Endocrinology* is linked to the motivation-reward pathway and useful but dangerous dopamine.

## Sympatheia

*"Everywhere, everywhere, beauty and life, and glad rejoicing action."*

- John Muir

*Sympatheia* is a Stoic goal of oneness or connectedness to the universe (Logos). It echoes many philosophers, poets, and artists vision that wonder is a key component of communion with nature and the universe. Osho calls it "wonder", Pierre Hadot "oceanic feeling", Eckhart Tolle "presence" and Lao Tse calls it the "Dao."

### **Wonder + Connectivity = Oneness**

#### **Pillar #5: Oneness**

The concept is a strong belief or awareness in our mutual interdependence and connection with everything in the universe. We are all one. Everything is one. There is no plurality or duality.

## Mind Illusion and Control

*"He who indulges empty fears earns himself real fears."*

– Seneca

### **Imagined or Perceived Fear = Real Fear**

Humans have a built-in fight or flight mechanism that triggers anytime there's a perceived threat (More in *Chapter 4: Neurology and Endocrinology*). It works by riling up your emotions so you react instantly and intensely. However, as we evolved to have more control over environment (and thus more safety and security) this mechanism has remained in place, causing us to overreact to situations that aren't life or death. With practice you can learn how to master this mechanism instead of allowing it to command you.

#### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

Marcus Aurelius also mentions that virtue and the achievement of greatness does not come with achievement from outwardly sources like success and recognition. Rather it simply arises action by action, trying to be "better than yesterday" every single day. These actions are your own, like your thoughts, and no one can take either of them away. In fact, Stoicism like any practical philosophy or healthy habit comes from training the brain. As one would train our bodies to be fit to compete for marathons, Olympics (Greek references to keep with the Stoic theme) or spend several years perfecting our career path or craft. It is work, practice, and substantial self-discipline. We will also see that relationships require some of the same skills and determination in *Beyond Spirituality — Chapter 6: Relationships & Sexuality*.

Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* mentions many times seeing the world clearly, as is (not how we think it is or wish it to be), and that requires (more often than we think) the unraveling of its illusory perceived nature, propagated by both genetic and cultural influence.

## Memento Mori

*Memento Mori* is Latin for "remember you must die". Active awareness of our death is not exclusively a stoic idea. Socrates and many other philosophers and cultures around the world recognize the inevitable. Instead of being morbid, it can be integrated to life like the Torajan tribe, in the Sulawesi mountains of Indonesia who conserve and spend time with their dead relatives and friends in the flesh for years after they pass. Death in most modern cultures is too acetized and becomes removed from people's daily lives and minds because people rather ignore it, doing and thinking a hundred other (potential useless) things.

Stoics do go one step further than most philosophers and actively train themselves to be conscious that not only death will come but also every imaginable loss is also possible. Practicing Stoicism may mean you actively think of the fact that every kiss you give to your lover or every time you put your children to bed may be the last. Instead of being macabre, this practice makes sure you don't take things for given and only appreciate them when they are gone, like your health as well.

***Memento Mori = Death is Nearer than You Think = Embrace Impermanence***

The point of acknowledging, and even embracing, impermanence is to inspire, motivate and cultivate a sacred appreciation of the present (and present situation/circumstances) like the Buddhist may do with mindfulness. Be present and do not take anything or anyone for granted.

### Amor Fati

*Amor Fati* is Latin for "love fate". Stoics were proponents of accepting fate as it is, without resistance, protest, grumble, or grievance.

***Amor Fati = Accept Fate = No Complaining***

**Pillar #3: Acceptance**

This does not mean to accept anything in action but rather in awareness. Action can change or direct fate of the future, yet fate now must be accepted with humility and lucidity.

**Active Acceptance = Awareness followed by "right" Action**

Stoics had strong ethics and would resist in action, sometimes being killed, and imprisoned for it, but never resist in the sense of claiming someone, something, or life itself was unfair. Life only is. My grandfather was imprisoned in Haiti because his cousin, Justin Dominique, was brave enough to make a coup d'état to overthrow the bloody dictatorship. It failed and Justin was killed. My great uncle, Jean Dominique, was murdered in broad daylight in his radio station for talking against the President even after pleading warnings from his daughter, his acclaimed return from exile and receiving countless death threats. These are examples of the stoic value of courage.

Accept, then do something about it. Don't worry or blame. We will see in *Beyond Neuroms \* Hormones and Endocrinology* that the default mode network is responsible for this worrying and the motor control and executive control networks for action. There is also a specific region of the brain that assesses "unfairness".

A fun game I used to play with my friend in the Philippines was a dice game that would let us choose all actions that had any significance, like where we would go and what we would do, in an entire night, based on the results of a six-sided dice. It is a fun, often hilarious game and enhanced by the creativity (7Cs) and options of the players. The most important is that it trains us to trust fate and accept the outcome. To more than accept it, to love it.

### Ataraxia

*Ataraxia* is Greek and means to achieve calmness and be untroubled, unperturbed by mental or emotional disquiet. It can be understood as tranquility, or a lucid state of robust equanimity characterized by ongoing freedom from distress and worry. Buddhism has a similar concept with permanent inner peace, as we will see later in the chapter. Marcus Aurelius' uses the metaphor of the imperturbable rock that does not care of the raging ebbs or tides of the river or sea.

**Pillar #1: Equanimity**

Thoughts and emotions must be examined and controlled to remain at peace. Surprisingly to some perhaps who still see the caricature of Stoics as still and Epicureans as more pleasure-seeking like

Hedonists, it was the Epicureans (as well as the Pyrrhons) who saw *ataraxia* as the ultimate goal of life, above the simple pleasures of the senses. The difference from pure hedonistic pleasure (physical: here and now) is the concept of *ataraxia* for the Epicureans, seen as that the absence of mental (focus on past and future) suffering and fear, which constituted the greatest pleasure. Epicureans also advocate for a simple life.

Stoics still seek this *ataraxia* serenity (like in the prayer) and try not to get sad, upset or angry. Although for them it is not their ultimate goal. They seek first to act virtuously according to the 4 virtues, while clearly acknowledging the importance of *ataraxia*, serenity and stillness.

“Remember, too, on every occasion that leads you to vexation to apply this principle: not that this is misfortune, but that to bear it nobly is good fortune,” writes Marcus Aurelius. This is starting to sound like equanimity can even start to have a positive attitude associated with temperance, even if perhaps mediated through false identity of “bad” or “good” fate or state.

#### **Equanimity+ = Equanimity + Positive Perception**

If we infer that there is no intrinsic “good” or “bad” like true equanimity and determinism does, we may be missing out on priming our brain with positivity like we will see in later chapters. This may be the difference between theoretical and practical philosophy. If we are aware of these false identities and representations, we may still use them for our actual advantage without sacrificing our overall awareness or true consciousness.

#### **Pillar #4: Awareness**

The Stoics believe that life is borrowed and impermanent. Stoics practice to imagine losing everything as we will eventually lose health, wealth, family friend, freedom and life. The universe, God or the Logos will take everything back that was lent to us during our existence. This comes back to the ideas of philosopher Heraclitus (born in 544 BCE) and incorporated in much stoic ideology. especially Marcus Aurelius and seem to strongly agree with the man’s most famous quote: “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.” This can be true for reading a book, seeing a film, meeting friend or making love to your partner. Each time is different, and the universe is in constant flux and change.

#### **Pillar #3: Acceptance**

Finally Stoic masters may accept impermanence and death rather easily. yet would tend not to accept injustice as easily. We will see in *Chapter 4: Neurology and Endocrinology* about the physical location of “injustice” in the brain and why we react so strongly to it. Seeking peace may be ideal while seeking justice may turn out to be too ideological, and perhaps lead to blame, vengeance, retribution, attribution, and less inner and outer peace. This brings us to some other criticism of this beautiful ancient philosophy which is mostly still applicable today.

### **Criticism of Stoicism**

Stoicism is by all accounts a stellar philosophy that stands the test of time and scrutiny in most ways. Some philosophers, psychologists, and other critics, including myself, have a few areas where Stoicism can be improved or may be inadequate.:

1. Biology
  - A) Stoicism holds that moral virtue is necessary and sufficient for long-term happiness.
    - i) It may not be neither necessary.  
One can achieve happiness with healthy habits without elevating them to moral virtues.
    - li) It may not be sufficient alone.

It offers no remedy or cure for depression, degenerative diseases, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, anxiety disorders, PTSD, etc..

B) Stoicism ignores the major influence of genetic predispositions on outlook and happiness set-point. See *Chapter 4: Psychology and Neurology*.

C) Stoicism sees emotional disturbance as unwanted which is ideal, yet fails to recognize the mechanisms in place besides rational thoughts.

## 2. Control

Stoicism emphasizes the dichotomy of control: those things we control and those things we do not control. It does not talk much about the continuum of what we can influence but not control. See example diagram of circle of influence, concern, or control. Neuroscience says we have much less control than we think, with both rational and irrational thoughts being heavily if not totally influenced. Determinism and Daoism conclude that we have no control at all, only an illusion of control.

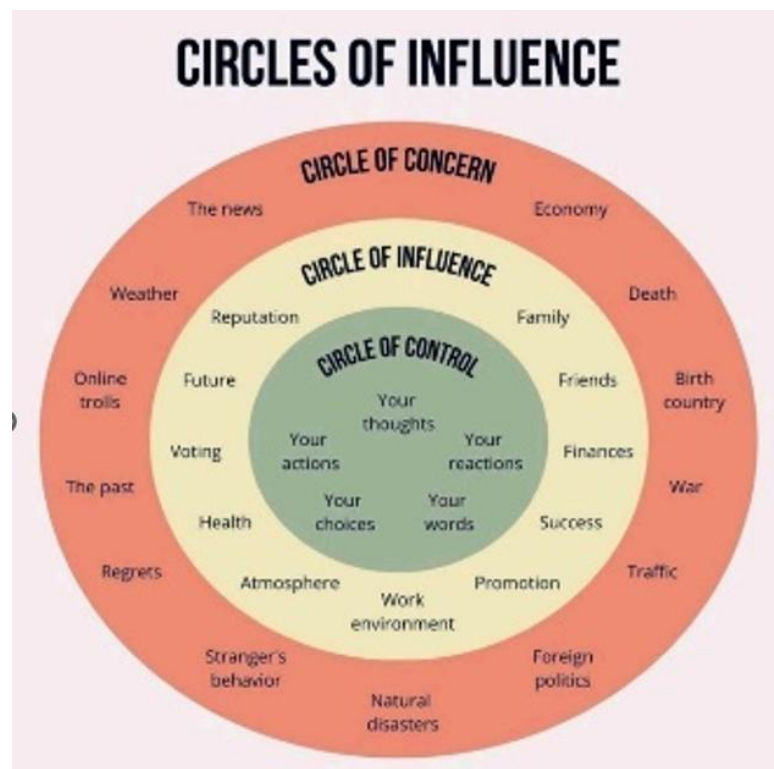


Table X: Circles of Influence

## 3. Equanimity

It may be overly unrealistically to feel neither negatively nor positively about all things we don't control. I always say to shorten the negative cycle and to lengthen the positive as long as it doesn't become the realm of the ego (pride, privilege, fortune, entitlement, etc.)

$$\text{Equanimity+} = \text{Equanimity} + \text{Positive} - \text{Ego}$$

We will see that wonder, mindfulness and laughter can all be part of this positivity. Don't take it personal. Don't take it too seriously (see more on the benefits of laughter in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*).



## Criticism According to Stoicism

Stoics believe that one should not criticize and blame others without seeing one's own faults first. "Don't throw stones if you live in a glass house." Moreover, the opinions, judgement and actions of others are not in our control, and we should focus on changing and acting upon ourselves with as little judgment as possible for others. This does not mean that positive criticism cannot be expressed, only that those personal opinions, even our own, are no more than that. "If you have nothing nice to say, stay quite..." or the more comical: "arseholes or like opinions, everybody has them." Be forgiving of other's thoughts and actions and concentrate on yours. Buddhists think very similarly in that aspect.

## Exile, Imprisonment and Death

A true Stoic has no fear and sees freedom as within. Instead of finding a way to satisfy a desire (dopaminergic motivation reward system as we will see in the *Chapter 4: Neurology and Endocrinology*), we should simply be able to extinguish this desire. Buddhists also seek to control their desires, aversions and attachments. For a Stoics, external circumstances, including people and places should have very little effect on the ability to enjoy life.

*"Exile? Wherever I go, I will be well with me: for even here it was not the place that made me well off, but my judgments, and these I shall carry away with me, for no one can rob me of them."*

-Epictetus

The people I love now could have been other ones, the friends, family and even foes are arbitrary.

"But now the time has come to die," says a scared student of Epictetus. He calmly responds:

"What do you mean by 'die'? Do not use fine words but state the facts as they are. What you mean is that now is the time for your material parts to be restored to the elements of which it was composed. What is dreadful in that? What loss to the universe will this mean? What strange or irrational event?"

## Buddhism

Buddhist has a religious aspect we will examine in *Beyond Spirituality* which includes concepts like karma, a perhaps hopeful and incorrect vision of the afterlife which relies on the concept of justice. We will see the seed of justice/injustice has a physical location in the brain in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Here, we will stick to the fundamental, non-dogmatic philosophy proposed by Buddha, a wise man who found ways to be happier and wanted to share with the world. Buddhist teachings tell us to strive for permanent inner peace (what I call "PIP", and it is funnier in my native French). This equates to equanimity. Equanimity is the state of being calm and balanced, especially in the midst of difficulty, but also in the midst of success and ease. In Buddhism, equanimity (in Pali, upekkha; in Sanskrit, upeksha) is one of the Four Great Virtues (along with compassion, loving kindness, and sympathetic joy) that the Buddha taught his disciples to cultivate. This overlaps with Stoicism in some ways, as should all easy, simple, and effective human wisdom.

### **Pillar #1: Equanimity**

The virtues being slightly different than Stoic Virtues, Buddha, being born in India, thought and taught the same as cause of suffering is in the mind of Zeno in Greece 200 years later.

The cause of happiness is compassion according to the Kadampa interpretation. Compassion for other is noble and necessary for growth and detachment from the Ego. When we think of other first, our own importance and worries diminish or even disappear. Compassion goes beyond compassion for other humans, but to all living beings as is often repeated in Kadampa mantras. It also crucial, and more often



acknowledged, to practice self-compassion and treat ourselves as would a parent or dear friend: with kindness, care, and nonjudgement. More on this in *Beyond Spirituality*.

**Equanimity = No Judgment**

Another importance Buddhist concept similar to Stoicism is impermanence. Buddhism defines it as slowly or abruptly losing your loved one, your health and eventually your life. This knowledge allows you to seek nonattachment to worldly things, and by extension to have no fear.

**Embrace Impermanence (Disease and Death) = No Attachment = No Fear**

or

**Embrace Impermanence (Constant Change) = No Attachment = No Fear**

Buddha also talked about *tathata*, translated as "thusness" or "suchness," referring to the nature of reality free from conceptual elaborations and the subject-object distinction, or self-other. It talks about non-duality and oneness. It is the selfless as opposed to the ego (self) identity. The ego thus opposes "suchness" and this opposition is the resistance we should most avoid as will later see in Daoism.

**No Duality = Oneness**

**No Opposition = Oneness**

**Pillar #5: Oneness**

3 fundamental Buddhist principles include:

1. Everything is impermanent
2. Everything is "empty"
3. Suffering is created by attachment and clinging to a changing chaotic uncontrollable reality

The struggle of trying to make impermanent existence permanent with identity creates dissatisfaction, suffering and can be manifested through ego-based emotions and behaviors like greed.

Twentieth century French existentialist and humanist philosopher and writer comes to terms with death and impermanence and states:

"There is only one liberty, to come to terms with death, thereafter anything is possible."

— Albert Camus

He would also claim the 4 conditions for happiness are<sup>49</sup>:

1. Life in nature (see *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*)
2. Love for another being (see *Beyond Sex*)
3. Freedom of ambition (see *Chapter 6: Gratitude, Empathy and Mindfulness*)
4. Creation (see *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*)

Freedom of ambition is ambiguous, because we are never completely free of our limited biology, environment, and experiences. We do approach liberty when we absolutely accept death and impermanence continuously and completely as we will see later with radical acceptance. For now, let us get back to a specific branch of Buddhist philosophy.

## Control in Buddhism

Buddhist tradition focuses on 3 aspects of ourselves we can control:

1. Thoughts
2. Words
3. Actions

We will see much more about righteous words and communication in *Beyond Spirituality*.

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<sup>49</sup> *Les quatre conditions du bonheur : La vie au grand air, L'amour d'un autre être, La liberté d'ambition, La création.*

## Courage in Buddhism

We saw that courage is a cardinal virtue of Stoicism (and a key for happiness for this modest modern writer you kindly purchased the book from). So it is as well as per Buddha's teachings. To the false belief that fear will protect you, a Buddhist teacher or monk may say:

"Fear won't protect you. Knowledge or understanding protects you, not fear. Fear will hamper true learning and only learn to have more fear, anxiety and perhaps paranoia. Fear does not allow the mind to update its knowledge easily."

### **Knowledge > Fear**

Fears distorts the mind and makes it prone to be controlled, influenced, blinded by other people (especially in power) or by circumstances. It has a strong emotional tint and means you are not able to see the world as it is.

Fear arrives from image or thought of future pain. It is a desire to avoid pain. It is the mind wandering and experiencing imaginary pain, regardless of real pain awaiting or not.

### **Fear = Fake**

Fear leads to inaction, avoidance or action with wrong awareness. If fear is from inaction, and you avoid any danger constantly, you may end being isolated, alienated and lonely. Remember another of the 7Cs : connection. We need it for happiness. If fear is action with wrong awareness, we may end up hurting someone else, ourselves or both. Sure, without fear and true courage, we may still end up hurting ourselves, but for the real reason and inherit risks of life.

### **Fear = Not Accepting Fate**

You can control your thoughts, words and actions only and security lies only in the hand of fate. You didn't choose if, when and where you were born, but you will also die, no if, only when and where. Chiefly, we show lack of courage because of fear of pain, including death.

### **Fear of Pain (External or Internal) = Cowardice > Courage**

Now if the pain were mild, we may not fear it much and maybe even laugh at it. Like when a little kid plays with you or your lover plays pillow fighting with you. So the fear is of strong or even unbearable pain. We know that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger from the Stoics and others. Small or manageable obstacles are necessary, and again can be even fun (board games, sports, crossword puzzles, etc.). What we fear is unmanageable obstacles or unbearable pain.

### **Fear of Intolerable Pain or Impenetrable Obstacle = Courage Killer**

We are thus resolved to flee, avoid the situation (fate) and even sometimes think of or commit suicide out of this unshakable and strong fear. It could be the fear of agonising humiliation or rejection for example. Maybe some Koreans and other humans have experienced that and I am sure you can imagine it. The trick then is simply to know the only way to freedom is to accept that no pain is unbearable. That is the definition of a bearable pain if you do not die (or pass out).

### **Unbearable Pain Does Not Exist = We Die or Not (and Death is up to Fate)**

#### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment**

#### **Pillar #3: Acceptance**

### **Accept Fate + Reject Fear = Freedom = Constant Courage**

A wise person is then beyond fear (beyond happy?) and is truly free but eliminating fear from the mind. Courage also comes from accepting that any bearable pain is necessary. Again, you can simply not avoid fate. Everything that is, is.

Pain Is unavoidable. We can avoid suffering and accept bearable, necessary pain.

## Zen Buddhism

Zen Buddhism has a Chinese origin (Ch'an school) and has been popularized and practiced in Japan, as well as Vietnam and Korea, and now the rest of the world. A significant form of awakening experience is known as "*Kensho*" in Japanese which translates as "seeing or perceiving one's true nature". Jed McKenna distinguishes between New Zen and Real Zen. New Zen is marketable and palatable. It sells ideas, furniture, and little Buddha statues, while Real Zen is the unrelentless pursuit of the truth.

I personally went to Jufuku-ji, the oldest Zen temple in eastern Japan, in Kamakura, with little previous knowledge of Zen. I was still able to appreciate the architectural beauty of the many temples. Kamakura began a Zen hub with many beautiful temples after Japanese Buddhist monk Eisai (1141-1215) returned from China where he discovered Zen Buddhism after wanting to deepen his understanding of Buddhism. Japanese Buddhist schools had banned Zen school in Kyoto, the imperial capital, in 1194, so Eisai went to Kamakura where he was welcomed and propagated the Rinzai branch of Zen. Walking around these marvelous temples, including the "Five Mountains and Ten Monasteries System", and neighboring streets in one of my favourite Japanese cities, I felt a glimpse of the stillness, balance and peace Zen inspires.

Zen emphasizes rigorous self-restraint, meditation, and insight into nature of mind (見性, jiànxìng) and nature of things (without arrogance or egotism), and the personal expression of this insight in daily life, especially for the benefit of others. It de-emphasizes knowledge alone and favors direct understanding through introspective practice and interaction with an accomplished teacher or master. Jed McKenna has a similar approach in terms of introspection, but without the need of teacher, master, or guru.

### Truth = Purpose

#### Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)

## Korean Buddhism

Buddhism had its roots in India and went through China down to Indochina and as far as the Korean peninsula and Japan. Korean Buddhism has a slight Confucian flavor, yet I take an example of self-reflective writing found in a modern temple named Bomunsa in Ganghwa Island, South Korea, bordering North Korea in the Yellow Sea.

나를 다스리는 글

행복도 불행도, 모두 나 스스로 짓는 것,

결코 남의 탓이 아니다

나보다 다른 사람을 위하는 일로 복을 짓고

겸손한 마음으로 덕을 쌓아라

모든 죄악은

탐욕과 성냄과 어리석음에서 생기는 것,

늘 참고 적은 것에 만족하라.

웃는 얼굴 부드럽고 고운 말로 남을 대하고

모든 일은 순리에 따르라.  
 나의 참된 삶이  
 세상을 위한 길임을 깊이 새길 것이며,  
 자식 아끼듯 부모를 섬기라.  
 웃어른을 공경하고 아랫사람을 사랑할 것이며  
 어려운 이웃에게 따뜻한 정을 베풀라.  
 내가 지은 선악의 결과는 반드시  
 내가 받게 되는 것,  
 순간 순간을 후회없이 살라  
 선 남자 선 여인이여!  
 하루 세때 나를 되돌아보고  
 남을 미워하지 말고 참회하는 마음으로 살라.

Let's take apart these "Writings That Govern Me" and see how we can reframe our minds daily (3 times a day according to the suggestion). We will look at reframing more in *Chapter 4: Psychology*.

"Happiness and misery, all of which I build by myself,

#### **Responsibility of Controlling Your Mind**

It's not someone else's fault.

#### **No Blaming**

Blessings are made by doing things for others rather than for yourself.

#### **Compassion (7Cs) and Action for Others**

Cultivate virtue with a humble heart (mind)

#### **Humility and Perspective**

All iniquity arises from greed and anger and ignorance (foolishness),

#### **Suffering = Ignorance + Desire + Unchecked Emotion**

Always be patient

#### **Unperturbed Permanent Patience and Peace**

and content with what you write.

#### **Contentment (7Cs) + Communication (11Cs) = Happiness**

Treat others with a smile

#### **Importance of Smile (More on smiling in the *Happiness Series*)**

and gentle words.

#### **Communication (11Cs)**

Let all things be according to reason.

#### **Right Thoughts > Unpredictable and Biased Emotions**

(Confucianist passage skipped)

Show compassion to your neighbors in need.

#### **Compassion (7Cs) and Altruism (Again - Emphasis)**

The result of my good and evil will surely be what I will receive.

Karmic (Religious) Belief – See *Beyond Spirituality*

Live moment by moment

**Appreciate the Now = Be Present and Mindful = No Dwelling in Past or Future**

without regrets, good man, good woman!

**Presence + Acceptance = No Regret + Seeing the beauty in Yourself (and Life)**

Looking back at me three times a day,

**Repeated Self-Reflection (Mental Training - Maintenance and Improvement)**

Do not hate others

**No Hate (Even in Words - See *Beyond Spirituality*)**

but live with an apologetic heart.

**Forgive Effortlessly and Sincerely**

### Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhist tradition involves the creation (7Cs) and destruction of mandalas made from colored sand. Once complete, the sand mandalas are dismantled. This physical and purposeful act serves to remind us of the impermanence of life, art and everything. We must bring our awareness to it and accept our ephemeral nature.

**Pillar #3: Acceptance of Impermanence**

**Pillar #4: Awareness with Art**

### Radical Acceptance and Fate

Radical acceptance is a term coined by Tara Brach, an American psychologist, author, and proponent of Buddhist meditation including mindfulness. Radical Acceptance is a meditative practice which acknowledges what is being experienced—positive or negative—and welcome it with an open mind. It's a powerful tool that allows full presence in each passing moment, while avoiding getting stuck in our judgements. She describes the many types of stories (unworthiness, imperfection, etc.) we often tell ourselves and how to get out of them. We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, that the default mode network (DMN) is the seed of our brain which creates these stories and mind traps, with mind wandering and identification. *Chapter 4: Psychology* will also dig deeper into our innate negativity bias.

Acceptance is at the core of many philosophies as we will see below, and it involves letting go of perceived identities and thought attachments. Radical acceptance allows the welcoming of whatever fate or life situation is to be experienced now and going beyond it to seize the opportunity of the experience without worry or fear. It beckons inner strength in face of isolated events that should not define or further isolate us from the oneness of existence.

Radical acceptance asks to accept absolutely everything about ourselves, our lives, and our experiences. It involves:

1. Recognition (knowing clearly and being aware of what is accepted without fear)
2. Compassion (adding care and tenderness instead of judgment)

**Radical Acceptance = No Fear + Awareness + Compassion**

Both aspects may require a pause or meditation before being actualized. As is always my goal, with more practice, the pauses should get shorter and radical acceptance more natural.

**Pillar #3: Acceptance**

Acceptance is not being a pushover or saying “yes” to everything, all the time blindly. Saying “no” strategically is useful and powerful. Saying “no” to something is saying “yes” to many other possibilities yet ignoring or resting what is unproductive. There is wisdom and strength in complete surrender.

**Resist Reality = Unnecessary Tension = Unuseful**

**Insist Incessantly = Fear (Ego) + Delusion = Hurtful (to you and others)**

**Persist = Passion (8Ps) + Perseverance (8Ps) + Determination = Powerful**

Tara challenges us to pause and create space to let go of thoughts (we will look at no-mind” below and the ego identity in default mode network in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*) while also noticing body’s biology (senses and emotions). When we are aware of our defensive stance, protective reaction or automatic resisting we can then take information from it without letting us rule or overcome us. We can oppositely overcome it and consciously (instead of unconsciously) say “yes”. Tara stresses that it is “not saying yes to everything for the rest of your life. It is barely saying yes for this moment. Your heart relaxes and your mind opens.” That is your parasympathetic “flight (insist/resist or fight” stress response lessens, the limbic system (emotions) stops hijacking your powerful reasoning and creativity (7Cs) to find suitable solutions for the longer term while accepting the now more readily and with equanimity.

**Flight = Insist/Resist = Stressful Unacceptance + Potential Loss or Gain**

**Flight = Avoid or Escape = Stressful Unacceptance + Present Loss**

**Freeze = Unaware Inaction = Terror or Dread**

**Acceptance = Aware Action or Inaction + Lower Stress + Increased Future Possibilities**

## Equanimity

Equanimity goes one step further than mental acceptance and asks our minds not to jump to any conclusion by labeling an event, experience, or person as positive or negative, good or bad.

### **Pillar #1: Equanimity**

**Equanimity = Nonjudgment = State of Psychological Stability and Composure**

It is core to Buddhist and Stoic concepts and an ancient virtue in various spiritual and philosophical traditions. It allows us to remain composed and centered when faced with challenges, and also not overly excited when faced with success or rewards. It is a cure for the ego being rampant either way. Evenness of mind and temper brings balance and better decision-making. We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that emotions (amygdala and limbic system), overactive imagination (default mode network) and impulsion/compulsion (reward-motivation pathway) can downregulate the rational part of our brain (prefrontal cortex) and decrease the ability to make the best decisions.

Equanimity will

1. Enhance inner peace
2. Lower conditioned reactivity to external stimuli
3. Lower conditioned defensiveness and reaction to inner stimuli and identifications
4. Cultivate non-attachment to specific outcomes

Dr. Anna K. Schaffner explains that “An equanimous person remains calm in the face of challenges and adversity. They are not easily shaken by external stressors. They do not panic or react hastily or angrily, but instead assess situations with poise and grace. They are cognitively flexible and remain unattached to specific outcomes and can shift their perspective if required.” We saw that our new definition of improved equanimity is:

**Equanimity+ = Equanimity + Positive - Ego**

Positivity without ego is preferred, or as Ryan Holiday would say “Ego is the Enemy”. We will see later that positivity has some desirable effects on the brain health and that our brain is also wired to focus on the negative already. Let us thus think of a useful, adapted and appropriate acceptance as this:

**Augmented Acceptance = Equanimity + Positivity**

**Pillar #3: Acceptance**

Daoism

*By letting it go it all gets done. The world is won by those who let it go.*

*But when you try and try the world is beyond the winning.*

-Lao Tse

“Resistance is futile” says the Dao and the archenemy fictional Borg in *Star Trek*. We may insist and resist the uncaring ways of the world, we may fight against the immensity of the sea and sometimes feel we have a modicum of control and that we matter, yet if we try to do the opposite of confrontation (i.e. struggle) and “go with the flow” of the river of life, we may find the ride more enjoyable.

“Letting go” is a rather recent approach now proposed by modern psychology but has been known to be helpful by philosophers and ordinary people in the East for millennia. Letting go of our expectations, attachments and narratives of the world which are not always aligned with reality. The Beatles also made the song “Let It Be” in 1970, but many are still having difficulty daily of letting go of so many uncontrollable elements and been comfortable with the uncomfortable and uncertain.

**Pillar #3: Acceptance (of Reality and Uncertainty)**

It is somewhat counterintuitive because our survival often requires this battle (fight or flight system as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*) and our genes are programmed to refuse and confront the unknown. Our survival brains are wired to refute reality, to avoid challenges and resist change. Safety and security lie close to the known and near certainty. Why expose ourselves to chance, chaos, uncertainty, the unfamiliar, entropy and its vagaries?

Lao Tse, also known as Laozi, the claimed Chinese philosopher and founder of The Tao or Dao, says: “What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the rest of the world calls it butterfly.” He stresses that most people’s desire or ability to be aware is minimum. People are comfortable in relative ignorance. People spend undue energy resisting the flow of the beautiful river of life. Laozi literally means “the elder,” and not much is known about this famous figure, his exact birth and death dates and if he even existed!

There may still be valuable wisdom in fairytales, fiction, lore, legends and myths. The Tao says that “the sage sees people as stray dogs” and this is similar to many analogies of zombies acting without much consciousness. The opposite is true for most folklore about vampires being immortal and powerful, while seeing humans as stupid and asleep, and sometimes as fools and food!

The Tao refers to “the way”. It talks about fearful resistance versus accepting (*Te*) without clinging or attachment. It leads to humility and knowledge of the (one) way.

**Pillar #5: Oneness**

**Oneness = Only Reality = One Way = The Way**

Wu-Wei is a fundamental Taoist approach that includes:

1. Nondoing (Stillness)
2. Nonaction
3. Not forcing / Allowing
4. Effortless Action

5. Noninterference
6. Intelligent Spontaneity

### **Pillar #3: Acceptance**

Taoists embrace oneness and see life and causality is synchronicity instead of chance, coincidence, or casualty. They see fate and destiny as determined. Because there is no avoiding fate, the best approach to it is complete trust. We saw that complete trust equals no fear. Complete surrender is liberating.

Dao wisdom rejects the idea of chance. Our ego (duality instead of nondual oneness) or conditioned identity thinks it knows what is best for us, mostly our desires and aversions (as the Buddhists also observed), but is out of touch with a greater experience of living and the universe. Consciousness is beyond thoughts and we must be able to free ourselves from the traps of the mind. We think that we are all self-justified Frank Sinatra, proud to do it “My Way”.

#### **Ego = My Way**

#### **Entitlement = (Unrealistic) Expectations**

We are in constant need of control, where the natural world is something we should control or avoid. I Ching, a Chinese text which predates Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, suggests that all events in life are connected in a way that is beyond human comprehension, but it does not prescribe this understanding to a God or an entity that is beyond the natural world we can observe.

The goal of Taoist teachings is to bring synchronicity and connection between the inner and outer worlds. Awareness of this synchronicity can bring greater alignment in one’s life with contemplation of nature and interconnectivity. We will see more about nature in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

When we stop seeing things as separate, we arrive to the still-point, harmony, or stillness, which is similar to a Stoic concept as well.

### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

#### **Pillar #5: Oneness**

*De* is a Daoist principle of responding by attuning and is echoed in the West by Marcus Aurelius’s philosophy of The Obstacle is the Way (“What stands in the way, becomes the way.”). When faced with a potential problem or obstacle, facing it instead of avoiding and resisting it, yields better results and a better appreciation of the journey.

Daoists understand the source of suffering and conflicts, as mostly desires and greed (dopamine activation and overactivation). Daoists believe that even when we try to regulate human action with moral systems and norms, we still fail to realize a flourishing society and good life. Harmony is possible by living life in accordance with what is natural. While Mohism and Consequentialism (other Chinese philosophies) judge the morality of an action based on the happiness it creates, Daoism equates moral actions with those that promote harmony and accord with the natural way.

Laozi, also written as Lao Tzu, the founder of philosophical Daoism, lived during the sixth century BCE (Chan 2018). He authored a short book, the Daodejing (sometimes written as Tao Te Ching). In Daoism, the dao is often translated as “the way.” The dao is represented as the source or origin of all that exists. Daoism tells us that we must live in accord with the dao if we want to live a good life or live well.

In the very first chapter of the Daodejing, we learn that the “dao” that can be spoken of or named is not dao: “Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth. Naming: the mother of ten thousand things” (Laozi [ca. 6th century BC] 1993, 1). When you name something, when you speak about it, you pick it out and give it a definite identity. Dao is the source of all that exists, of all characteristics and properties, but it is itself without limits and impossible to define. It represents the underlying connectedness and oneness of everything. Dao is an inexhaustible source of existence, of things, and it is that to which all things return.



Daoists believe in doing nothing, but that's not quite right. Instead, it means that a person should do nothing that conflicts with the Dao. So what is the Dao?

The Dao, which means "the way," is the natural order of the universe. Daoists strive to be in harmony with this natural order. Rather than following particular rules, Daoists cultivate a sense of naturalness, called *ziran*. By being in tune with this, they believe they can avoid violence, suffering, and struggle.

Sixth-century Daoist text, the Dao De Jing (or Tao Te Ching), sometimes translated as "the Way and Its Power," describes the central philosophy of Daoism as:

"Being and non-being create each other. Difficult and easy support each other. Long and short define each other. High and low depend on each other. Before and after follow each other. Therefore, the Master acts without doing anything and teaches without saying anything. Things arise and she lets them come; things disappear, and she lets them go. She has but doesn't possess, acts but doesn't expect. When her work is done, she forgets it. That is why it lasts forever."

**Force = Fight**

*Fame or self: Which matters more?*

*Self or wealth: Which is more precious?*

*Gain or loss; Which is more painful?*

*He who is attached to things will suffer much.*

*He who saves will suffer heavy loss.*

*A contented man is never disappointed.*

*He who knows when to stop does not find himself in trouble.*

*He will stay for ever safe.*

—Tao Te Ching - chapter 44

This text, which emphasizes the balance between opposites and the importance of yielding to the natural order, is usually attributed to the Chinese sage (scholar) Laozi (Lao Tzu). But historians aren't certain when—or if—he existed. We will see in *Chapter 4: Psychology* the importance of stories, but his existence is not necessary for our purposes. The idea of aware nonaction and decreased desire is what we can get from this nonintuitive yet powerful philosophy. Buddhism explained the value of nonattachment and Daoism emphasizes the beauty of nonattachment to outcomes and the wisdom of aware nonaction in many if not most situations. Both philosophies allow us to live our lives with more harmony and more effortlessly, even if effort has its use on specific occasions.

**Attachment ≠ Acceptance**

**Surrender = Synchronicity = Stillness**

Contentment (7Cs), acceptance, balance and the benefit of not accumulating or saving (minimalism) are also strong concepts of Daoism. Life is transient, temporary yet so tantalizing.

## Consequentialism

Consequentialism values considered an action righteous or virtuous when it produces the greatest good for everyone. Application of this morality required educated agents to assess potential consequences to determine which action maximizes overall well-being for all affected parties. I like this

part of the philosophy as it was one of the first that considered big picture thinking and overall “good” or benefit.

## Mohism

Mohism added its own flavour of consequentialism by enabling a strong, smart, wise, peaceful, pragmatic and compassionate state. Compassion is one of the 7Cs (condition for happiness) and if it can be done at the state level all the better!

Mohism is a consequentialist ethic emphasizing:

- A) active opposition to military aggression and injury to others
- B) Impartial concern for all (akin to universal human rights)
- C) Centralized, authoritarian state but managed by
  - 1. virtuous, benevolent leader (sovereign)
  - 2. hierarchical, merit-based bureaucrats
- D) Devotion to utility and frugality and condemnation of waste and luxury
- E) Reverence to traditional folk religion (spirits/ghosts) and obedience to Heaven (Sky or God)

The four main concepts of Mohist ethical theory are:

- 1. Morality: Determined by benefit at the center
- 2. Benefit (“li”): Material goods for human needs.
- 3. Benevolence: Treating others as we want to be treated (like many religions)
- 4. Care: Concern for others’ well-being.

Because Mohism was an application of Consequentialism with a focus on the power of the state to regulate the greater good (like Socialism), to the material goods (benefits) were added state or social goods (or goals) including social order and population growth.

Mohism like Socialism have promise on paper, yet it seems that the belief in religion may also have them falsely believe many men can be in authoritarian power and act for the good of all. Even in democracies, that is not often the case. The famous Lord Acton saying goes:

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

I had a talk recently with a friend and we were trying hard to find ethical, uncorrupted politicians around the world In the last decades and the list was very thin. Everyone may have similar feelings and it may be one reason why voting rights are not exercised to the fullest and that politicians are generally mistrusted (even more than lawyers!) or trusted to a certain degree only. Trust is Important as we saw in *Chapter 2: Sociology*. Maybe we should find a way to have more trustworthy politicians by changing the system of monarchy, oligarchy, scandalous socialism, directed dictatorship and deceptive democracy.

A sortition (or lottocracy) with a pool of qualified, competent and passionate candidates could be such an option to investigate yet we are veering off our fundamental foray into philosophy. Let us however applaud the ancient Chinese philosopher, which instead of the Greek ideals of participative democracy thought of a controlling benevolent leader. No comment on if China succeeded as such then or in recent years. As for North Korea, Kim Jong Il was nicknamed “Dear Leader” after his father Kim Il Sung, the “Great Leader”.

## Confucianism

Confucianism original belief included respecting elders, having high morals and believing in the goodness of human nature. We can imagine that human nature is neither “good” or “bad” with our anthropology, determinism, daoism and equanimity lenses. To see if human nature can be altruistic and for the greater good or be best adaptive for itself and its happiness, we can also doubt. Many still believe

babies are born good. Even Canadian comedian Rachid Badouri made a sketch about this in his 2024 Netflix Comedy Special. He is perhaps funny, but unfortunately not a scientist. Philosophers have played with the idea of humans being “good” or “bad”. Some have also claimed “both” or “neither”. Another Canadian Steven Pinker devotes a whole book published in 2002 called *The Blank Slate* that deconstructs the myths one by one explains we are not born “blank”, nor pure or good. We have human tendencies. They are called genes. It seems Rachid was too busy making us laugh and did catch a copy or Coles Notes or Shortform of Dr. Pinker’s book or ideas in 22 years. The idea of “good” or “bad” is too easy, like “black” or “white”, “us” and “them”. We are not born blank and still we can learn and adapt (to some degree) with neuroplasticity, purpose (8Ps) and perseverance (8Ps).

Confucius or his followers did get it right that humans are in all account teachable and improvable, especially through self-cultivation and self-creation. Isn’t that why you are reading this self-help(ish) book? I hope you believe it and in yourself!

Confucianism emphasis on the importance of the family and social harmony is useful in principle, It is a secular philosophy as opposed to Mohism. It is humanistic yet puts a lot of stress on behaving in society such that it impacts conformism, social judgement and work ethics for the better and for the worse. There are still many schools of Confucianism in China and Korea. The late twentieth/early twenty-first century rise of the East Asian economy, including China and South Korea, may in part be due to Confucian work ethic. We do know the suicide statistics of South Korea, however from *Chapter 2: Sociology*.

Daoists rejected the narrow Confucian view of dao as a way of behaving in society to ensure order and social harmony, and instead view the dao as the natural way of the universe and all things.

**Confucianism = Humanist + Conservative = Control Chaos**

Yet can we really control chaos and avoid uncertainty and impermanence?

What if like the rapper’s Eminem Oscar-winning and ultra famous song, we only had one moment and one chance, would you capture it?

## Nishkama Karma

Beyond Buddhism, Indian philosophy is mostly wrapped with a variety of religious Hindu ideas and the belief in karma, like in religious Buddhism. These are the concepts of the East with reincarnation as a tenet, while the East prefers the afterlife as an answer to the primal fear of death. We will look at all this in *Beyond Spirituality*. For philosophical purposes, I want to focus on the concept of Nishkama Karma which emphasises the part of the Bhagavad Gita texts that speaks of action without attachment to results.

Sakama Karma is action with desire and Nishkama Karma is desireless or selfless action.

**Nishkama Karma = Proper Action = Action - Ego**

If we come back to Eminem’s son “Lose Yourself”, the idea is to “lose yourself in the moment, you own it, you better never let it go.” However, Eminem and most people go further and expect this moment to lead to something, to somewhere to some goal: success, recognition, fame, money, a promotion, a life partner, marriage, children, a house, a “white-picket fence” with a car, a dog, or both.

Yes the moment is what you really own, everything else is temporary so why put so much emphasis on the outcome. Sure there is nothing wrong with all these things and more and if you have them (temporarily), you should certainly cherish them at that moment, yet the thing our schools and consumerism culture do not tell us is to enjoy the process (in our complete control) of whatever goal we are trying to achieve or attain without having any real attachment to the outcome (things out of or at best “partially” in our control).

**Sakama = Selfish action = Motivation-based**

**Nishkama Karma = Selfless Action = Inspiration-based**

Inspiration allows us to imbue in the moment for its own sake. If we want to add a value/virtue component to it, which we absolutely do not have to, but we can, we can talk about duty for duty's sake or creation for creating. It is a 'Detached Involvement', which is neither negative attitude nor indifference; Some modern businesses emphasis has shifted to ethical business practices adhering to intrinsic human values and reducing stress at the workplace has been an impact as we focus less on results and more on process and mission or meaning. This reminds me of the Buddhist mandalas mentioned earlier in the chapter. Work for work. Art for art. Moment mentalization and immersion.

The moment is thus the key to happiness. We will see later in *Chapter 4: Psychology* that this is the experiential self.

**Moment > Material Outcome**

### Tolleism

*"To see the world in a grain of sand,  
And to see heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hands,  
And eternity in an hour."*

-William Blake

Being present in the moment is something Buddhist monks meditated about in Asia with mindfulness, in Detroit (Michigan) with Marshall Mathers "losing himself in the moment" and European Enlightenment period poets like William Blake contemplated in his poem "Auguries of Innocence" which many are familiar with the first four lines above. The poem however continues to say "The Lamb (...) forgives the Butcher's knife" which questions the blame we easily ascribe the cruelties of life. Later the poem muses about intent with "A Truth that's told with bad intent / Beats all the Lies you can invent." The poem opposes faith and doubt without arriving to a conclusion, but with a clear penchant for letting go of hesitation. Beyond a healthy or unhealthy skepticism, Blake goes further, by making the point moot and declares "We are led to Believe a Lie". If all is a lie or illusion, the only thing left is the light. In that sense, our perception of that light or life and our presence is the key to unlock our potential to grasp infinity and thus be happy.

Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century German self-help author and spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle can be said to prone a philosophy of life where alertness to the world (outwardly and inwardly) is a higher state of being than thoughts and the mind. In his two wildly popular books, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* and *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*, along with several talks, lectures, and videos, he explains and expands on the trap of the mind which focuses on the past and future, while too often relinquishing the present. Early 20th Century French author Marcel Pagnol wrote: "The reason people find it so hard to be happy is that they always see the past better than it was, the present worse than it is, and the future more complicated than it will be<sup>50</sup>." I would argue that above the exaggerated nostalgia Pagnol talks about, the perception of the past can also be negative with potential regret, resentment, victimization, bitterness, or powerlessness. The past can thus be seen as worst than it was but thinking about the past or the future (especially in loops) can be synonymous to "living" in the past or

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<sup>50</sup> « La raison pour laquelle tant de gens trouvent qu'il est si difficile d'être heureux c'est qu'ils imaginent toujours le passé meilleur qu'il ne l'était, le présent pire qu'il n'est vraiment et le futur plus compliqué qu'il ne le sera. »

future and not living in the now. Thinking itself can be a seldom-seen trap according to Tolle and should be only done when necessary. Instead, he prescribes the “power of now” like mindfulness yet prefers to attain at state of “no-mind” where thoughts are observed yet pushed away kindly to reveal the connectiveness and symbiotic oneness with the specific and universal. The single elements, the groups and the totality can be appreciated or taking in in turns, freely and spontaneously. Choiceless (or effortless) awareness is an expression in Zen Buddhism and echoed by philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, which is very similar.

#### **Pillar #4: Awareness**

I personally found that looking at potential “problems” (small or big) can be daunting yet put into context when actively mentally zooming in or out of the situation. We can zoom in to the details of the problem and break it down into manageable chunks or break them even more into irrelevance, void, oblivion while putting them in context or our relatively minuscule importance or outright insignificance. Sometimes relegate them to the past. Alternatively, and in alternance, we can zoom out and realize with humility that in human history it is really the same thing happening again and again: humans being humans, scheming, succeeding, failing, rarely getting all they envisioned and planned for life, and always dying. Cosmic history is even more humbling, and our importance, our urgency and our insecurities are truly insignificant in the grander scheme of things. “There are not problems, only solutions” can now be seen as “There are no problems, just situations.” If there is a solution even better, but if not, it is still a situation. Harmful or harmless, not matter. Nothing is bad or good, it just is.

I am reminded of a tongue-in-cheek geeky chemistry T-Shirt my brother wore often when I was young that said “I am the solution, not the precipitate.” (instead of the problem). My mother is a chemist, so chemistry jokes were part of the family pathos!

We should simply (although it may not seem simple) accept the present and even relish it in all its forms, without using the mind to attach a judgement, we can be connected by presence and truly “be” without the shackles of the mind. This state of alert attention and spaciousness can be a practice to become a natural way of being. Some meditation practices have “wonder walks” which allows meditators to be active walking in nature or man-made environment and be amazed by your surroundings like a child seeing things for the first time with wonder, joy and excitement. My son and I exercise this weekly and find it very beneficial. Controversial Indian philosopher, Osho, has a book called *Innocence, Knowledge, and Wonder* which also explains the need to lose adulthood cynicism by allowing the deep early ability to be excited about everything. “Innocence” was also in the title of Blake’s famous poem, and should not be seen as the often-negative view of innocence and naivety as opposed to knowledge and wisdom. Innocence can be linked to awareness of the awe-provoking nature of being.

Tolle states that you are already all and complete. Stoic writer, Ryan Holiday, writes about having the feeling that everything is enough in a slightly more pragmatic approach. In both cases, the idea that something is missing or that all will be better when X or Y happens should be discarded to be truly able to appreciate the moment.

#### **Contentment = Enough = (Inner) Peace**

Nostalgia is not unhelpful per se. If it can be appreciated in the moment. For instance, I recently went back to the home I lived in my late twenties and early thirties and where my son first lived after he was born. There were tender moments and memories with two of my girlfriends living with me in that top floor of a Montreal triplex. There were countless friends and neighbors who shared moments of joy with me. The elderly couple in front of our house who watched the street from their street-level porch like a vigil and who was always smiling and greeting us as we came and went. The man was not only full of funny

gossip, but also helpful and often saved me undue parking tickets by knocking on my door to move my car before the ticketing began. There was the baby stroller we had to haul up step stairs in the icy Canadian winter. There were garden barbecues with the downstairs neighbors. There were amazingly crazy parties, including one on 2 floors that last 3 days straight. There was a moment when I lost my keys and had to monkey-climb the balcony to enter my own home like a burglar. There were many philosophical talks on this precarious balcony with grandfathered clause low railing. There was even a time when a local washing machine repair man admitted to me that he used to live in the same top-floor apartment as a child and that repairing my leaky washer gave him found nostalgia, being in the same space. Over a decade later, I was having nostalgia looking at the recently on sale old building with new construction around it. I was thinking of the past with affection, yet I was also aware I was thinking and feeling it now. I was present enough to see the leafless winter trees standing strong until a new spring, and two new buildings with modern architecture showing their artistic and practical beauty. The old with the new. The past in the now. A walked away from the scene with a smile of many lives and moments past. I was here and now. Present, proud, plentiful, and grateful.

Tolle suggests honouring the things of this world with only relative importance and not to get lost in your stories or your cultural stories of the world. There is something fundamentally unstable with the world and with people in particular. To not become untrustful of the world, we need to trust in the world itself. We can become disillusioned with the world when we have attachment or give it near absolute importance. As Buddhism and Stoicism say, we will lose everything, but we are quite ready to recognize the limitations of this world and the mental conditioning of other and I would add: even ourselves. In my McGill University philosophy class where I nearly took off my clothes in front of a 200+ student auditorium to prove a philosophical point in a class discussion, we were posed a question on the final exam to the effect of would a person that would be the exact copy of you be you. My teacher was a free-will advocate and possibly a dualistic proponent. I went against his reasoning, thinking to myself: truth over grade. In short (because it took me 5 pages of neuroscience, genetic, psychological, and philosophic argumentation), I explained that that person would be “you” or at least think like “you” at the exact moment he or she was created. However, as soon as that infinitesimal moment would pass, this doppelganger or clone would be his or her own person with the same preconditions as you (genes, hormonal levels, proclivities, and experiential memories), but with a now divergent reality and would start to have his or her own unavoidable life trajectory. I managed to get an A+. Was that determined?

I find that with a deterministic view of the world, even ourselves, which we may be illusioned to think have some free will and control over our lives, thoughts, words, and actions, may be victim of the same mental and physical makeup and conditioning we may see in others. Have you not ever said or did something that surprised you or, worse, failed to do something you knew and thought you would do, especially in a tense situation. If your mind and body could do something you did not really plan in some instance, who is to say it is not doing so constantly and you have the illusion that you are making choices, when in fact, anyone (in that case you) with your genetic, your exact life experiences and put in this specific situation would have reacted predictably and only in one way, regardless if you are aware of that reaction or not in advance or think it is your volition. An interesting 2014 Swedish film about this is, Writer/Director Ruben Östlund’s *Force Majeure* explores the reaction a father has when faced with an avalanche that threatens his family. He and his wife would have expected him to react one way and he reacted another. They have grave difficulty reconciling this apparent aberration. Östlund also gets it right in the human exploration of how we can react in different situations in his 2022 triple Oscar-nominated *Triangle of Sadness*. Czech writer, Milan Kundera explores this from his very first scene of his first novel,

*The Joke (Žert)* (1967) to the rest of his thrilling bibliography of human behavior from a personal and omniscient view. Kundera's awareness that life is one big joke will be touched upon further when we deconstruct the underused power of humour in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

Tolle states that thinking can be better replaced by awareness and presence.

### **Pillar #3: Awareness**

If we look at it through psychological, social, and genetic lenses of thinking, we may find ourselves limited. Look at your thoughts and even actions as an observer. I would add that the no-mind Tolle talks about is in fact far-fetched as we cannot completely control or erase our thoughts and that presence and awareness requires the mind. What I think (yes, I must think with my mind) is that he refers to both his "rediscovery" that the mind focusing on the future or the past too much is not helpful, and perhaps what Buddhists call "mind perturbations" or useless thoughts like desire-aversion, attachment in the face of impermanence, ego, etc. As I like the simplicity of no-mind, I will make this other formula to illustrate.

### **No Mind = No Mental Perturbation**

Similar but perhaps at times beyond mindfulness, Tolle suggests that the presence in the Now eventually abstracts the mind all together. And thoughts become superfluous, or in fact a hindrance. As for the brain, when there is attention and focus, the nucleus basalis area of the brain is stimulated and releases Acetylcholine neurotransmitter to increase adaptive neuroplasticity, thus enhancing learning. When the mind is no longer active, as in rest, meditation or sleep, it will also allow for hippocampo-neocortical replay of a given learned sequence to crystallize a given training or understanding. We will look at the science together to put things in context and go further in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

Tolle also emphasizes that it is much more important to focus on *how* you do what you do than on *what* you do. Do not judge (too harshly or positively) what you may be doing right now or where you may be (physically or mentally). There is a wonderful 2023 Japanese movie by famous German director Wim Wenders called "Perfect Days" that chronicles the days of a "beyond happy", pleased, if not particularly joyful Japanese man. He spends his days cleaning toilets in Tokyo with delight, enthusiasm, and care. His dedication and duty are not just for society's sake but come from a deep internal happiness and consciousness that a task well done (with presence and passion) is beneficial to you first. That the transient occupants of the public toilets find cleaner bathrooms is just a welcome bonus. The protagonist's estranged sister asks him with disdain in a sublime scene: "Is it true that you clean toilets?" He says yes with moderate pride and a heartfelt sincere smile. Inner contentment (7Cs) requires no external approval. The stigma on the value of your current state and action is your own identification with your individual and collective ego. The journey outweighs the future projection of the unpredictable destination. This film is cinema at its finest and philosophical in many aspects, including the ability we all have to have perfect days if we focus on the *how* (what we can control) and not the *what* (what we have less control).

### **How >> What**

The *why* is also important of course. Being fully present does not mean to completely forgo the important lessons of the past or to overlook a possible better future. We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that meaning, purpose and hope are important components of a healthy brain and mindset. We can thus wisely choose our life goals and objectives in the short, medium, and long-term, and hopefully achieve or over-achieve them like I often did. The importance lies in the realization that we spend much more time towards our goals than the short-lived moments we may achieve them, therefore we may as well appreciate, cherish, revel in and relish whatever we are doing regardless of the potential outcome. This requires what I would describe as a difficult balance of maintaining high motivation without expectation, while fully enjoying the process.

### **Purposeful Goal ≠ Expecting or Waiting for the Goal to be Achieved**

Even when we are not in action, idle or waiting, because of life's situation (external or own procrastination), we may use this idleness to our benefit and as a respite from forward-moving, forward-thinking (future and expectation outweighing the present) action. Waiting can be a space of mini-meditation or different action. I use waiting time not only to think and reflect but also to smile and talk to strangers if I am out and about in the city or to read (I try to always have a book on me for these idle times – much better than an addictive smart phone as we will see in *Chapter 5: Gratitude*). There is never “wasted time” if you really appreciate the value of time and the gift of existence with presence. Even in prison when you are “serving time” or “doing time”, use that time to your advantage with your true attention to the present.

Lastly Tolle stresses that it is also Being that is more important than doing.

### **Who (Being) >> What (Doing)**

### **Presence (Now) >> Motivation (Dopamine + Future)**

The main points Tolle makes is to

1. Think less (CEN and DMN – See *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*)
2. Feel less negative emotions (limbic system)
3. Be less dependent to dopamine (attachment to future expectation) while
4. perceiving more now (sensory networks)
5. being more aware (consciousness of thinking, feeling, wanting, attachments and aversions)

### **Pillar #3: Acceptance**

Tolle states that constant contentment, acceptance, and presence is better than transient and impermanent see-saw love-hate, desire-aversion, win-lose, pride-shame, pleasure-pain, black-and-white reality most experience over and over.

### **Joy > Happiness (and its opposite forms of emotional suffering)**

Tolle trilogy of “non” include:

1. Nonresistance (like Daoism and Zen Buddhism)
2. Nonjudgment (like Buddhism)
3. Nonattachment (like Buddhism)

He talks about addiction to anger (and other negative mind states) and classifies reality as:

1. The forms we think we are, see or want to be/avoid and identify with, consciously or not.
2. The greater formless (stillness and timeless) awareness above mere (egoic) existence.

### **Reality = Form (Ego/Identity) + Formless (Egoless)**

### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

Tolle says we can rise above thought (when you are less burdened by your mind) or fall below it (when you are preoccupied and unconscious/unaware). Like Buddhists and Stoic teachings, he agrees that problems are all mind-made and proposes equanimity by not identifying with the past, future, or present roles/forms/labels/masks we may create falsely. He focuses on ego (individual and collective) and our attachment to illusory identities as the main underlying problem.

He proposes we be present with awareness/alertness 3 interchangeable action modes:

1. Acceptance
2. Enjoyment
3. Enthusiasm



In every action we do, we can enjoy the action by bringing joy to it, instead of expecting (ego) joy from it. If we have difficulty enjoying it, we can at least truly accept it (instead of rejecting or resisting it). If we do not accept it, we can also stop until we accept it. Enthusiasm is enjoyment with a goal, yet the goal itself is not the purpose, rather the action and journey. Everyone's inner purpose should simply be awareness or consciousness and is much more important than any outer goal based on the false form identities we have like acquiring material (things) or immaterial (recognition) rewards. A balanced life would have outer goals reflect inner goal more and more.

#### **Inner Purpose >> Outer Purpose**

#### **Enthusiasm = Enjoyment (Inner Purpose) + Goal (Outer Purpose)**

Enthusiasm is thus not motivated by ego and involves intensity for its own sake instead of in search for outer identity, meaning, and purpose.

### **McKennaism**

The analogy of the onion has never been more apt than to Jed McKenna's (if that is indeed his name), attempt to deconstruct reality one layer at a time, always further. Each time, less illusion and more direct awareness until we are left with the simple truth. We don't matter much or at all. We (what Sigmund Freud calls the Ego) do not even exist. There is no true self, but only no-self. This awareness goes further than Tolle's no-mind and may cause catastrophic (cataclysmic and potentially calamitous) reactions to your world view and sense of existence. That is why as you peel the layers like an onion, you may find your self crying, but not always of elation, and may perhaps end up one day in a mental hospital (like I did twice for a few days, but for different reasons) which I do not necessarily recommend, although I did enjoy the experience in retrospect.

#### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

Jed McKenna's Enlightenment trilogy is not for the faint of heart or the faint at heart. He deconstructs reality to come to the fundamental truth at all expenses, including perhaps our concept of happiness and bliss. He claims that most spiritual and enlightenment gurus and practitioners have an ego-centric and romanticism sensoperceptory nirvana-seeking focus. He states that the road to truth and enlightenment is all the contrary. It is painful and difficult. It does not lead to bliss, but rather to a sober non-duality. Non-duality is a form of oneness, but not that sought-after feeling of belonging (to the group, to humanity or to the world). It is a lonely awakening and realization that an overwhelming majority are sleeping, unaware and will likely never wake up.

#### **Pillar #5: Oneness (Non-Duality or Non-Plurality)**

McKenna is humorous and happy in his own way. He conveys a no-nonsense approach to philosophy and spirituality (more on this in *Beyond Spirituality*) where we are forced to imagine and eventually see our lives and ourselves as a lie or illusion. As the most famous English writer, William Shakespeare, wrote: "All the world's a stage... and one man in his time plays many parts."

In modern terms, we are the screen of the TV and not the drama playing out on it. If the drama stops or is just seen as drama, the blank screen is still there. Or as with the science-fiction films of the late 1990s, we are in *The Truman Show* or *The Matrix*. The only thing is there is no higher plane watching us. We are also the watchers. We are one and can, with a lot of work, but also quite simply, see the

trickery. We can then decide to act or part and live life, with the significant difference of the deep knowledge that we are merely actors. McKenna argues that most are not ready to take the Red Pill<sup>51</sup>.

In the meantime, we can listen to meaningful music like 1996 “ATLiens” with André 3000’s verse:

*Softly as if I played piano in the dark  
Found a way to channel my anger now to embark  
The world's a stage and everybody gots to play their part  
God works in mysterious ways, so when he starts  
The job of speaking through us, we be so sincere with this here  
No drugs or alcohol, so I can get the signal clear as day  
Put my Glock away, I got a stronger weapon  
That never runs out of ammunition, so I'm ready for war, okay*

## Thought Experiment

Inventor, writer, businessman, biologist, thinker, and friend, Yvon Brousseau is investigating the nature of thought in his book “*L’impensée de l’intelligible*”. From the premise that intuition allows *proto-thoughts* (*non-thoughts or thoughts in the process of being formed*) to make useful judgements and approximations of the world from a zone of no-thought before having useful, harmful, neutral, irrelevant, or redundant impact on the train of thoughts from thought idea, ideation and fuller ideology, Brousseau single-handedly invents a new science with a framework to test his philosophical hypotheses and new nomenclature.

**Judgment = useful in speed of computation of partial and imperfect information analysis**

If Tolle explores the No-mind in a broad sense, Brousseau wants to study the no-thought or not-quite-thought and unconscious (sub-awareness) aspects of our humanity, with high value items, highlights, limitations, and patterns of our complete thought process. Hierarchy, structure, strategies, preponderance, pathways, groupings, conclusions, gradient, go/no-go decision trees, fine and gross error-checking, memory, processing, and retention can be approximated by models comparing our thoughts to

Creation, sorting, analysis, evaluation, selection, comparison, combination, and coalescence of thoughts at the individual, group and societal level will soon be a science that artificial intelligence, quantum physics and photonics can help grasp as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. The groundwork of its study and implications into understanding unconscious portions and overall patterns of intelligible thoughts and ideas is ground-breaking.

**Intelligible = Intuition (non-thoughts) + Idea (thoughts)**

## Thoughts and Dreams

Dreams are physiological and psychologically useful to process all the information and strength or weaken brain pathways after a full day of neural activity and with our neuroplasticity as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Dreams can be a form of non-awareness or of fleeting awareness. They are at the subconscious level and can rise to consciousness or unconsciousness. Have you ever seen a sleepwalker or heard a sleeptalker?

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<sup>51</sup> The red pill and blue pill analogy (from Wachowski, Lilly & Wachowski, Lana, *The Matrix*, 1999) represent a choice between the willingness to learn a potentially unsettling or life-changing truth by taking the red pill or remaining in the contented conditioned experience of ordinary reality with the blue pill. It is a dilemma between painful irreversible truth and blissful ignorance.

What is a thought or a fraction of dream in general? It can be an image (color or not), a word or sentence (in different languages or even an intelligible sound), or a vague sensation and comprehension of a situation. What else? Is the sensation of hunger a thought or a sensation or both? Same goes for attraction, alertness, anger or tiredness. What is the most common denominator and how can we attempt to qualify and understand it better like we did with the atom and eventually subatomic particles. Dalton revised the theory of the atom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, proposed by Democritus almost 2400 years before. The discovery of the electron happened in 1897 by J. J. Thomson and his student Ernest Rutherford found the further main subatomic particles of proton in the atom's nucleus in 1909. The neutron was discovered by James Chadwick in 1932, who was yes Rutherford's student under his direction in the laboratory.

It may take decades, centuries, or millennia like the atom, but we may get there. Who will discover the nature of thoughts and dreams? And are they the same? McKenna seems to suggest that all our thoughts are dreams and illusions.

**Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

**Pillar #4: Awareness (Thoughts and Non-thoughts)**

## Descartes Revisited

French philosopher René Descartes famously and succinctly declared in 1641 A.D. "*cogito, ergo sum*" in Latin or "*je pense, donc je suis*" in French which means: "I think, therefore I am." This thought had ripples in philosophy until today as Descartes skilfully deconstructed all supposed knowledge with skepticism and arrived at the conclusion that the only thing he could know for sure is that he is thinking. This enabled philosophers and people to question more and deeper their surroundings and assumptions. I have some serious problems with his later "proof" of the existence of God, but also cannot fault the era he lived in and the influence religious thinking has on us in general as we will see later in *Beyond Spirituality* and its fulfilment of entrenched human needs.

More importantly, the beginning exercise of destruction of layers of illusions is noteworthy. This systematic destruction is noble and courageous. However, as we know now that thoughts and the mind itself can be out of our control, and not a desired state to reside, perhaps it is time to revisit this almost 400 years later. Let's then change the declaration to include the present awareness without the bothersome and elusive thinking mind.

"*ego conscientiam, ergo sum*" or "I am aware, therefore I am."

If we use McKenna's approach to the truth, and admit non-duality, we can go even further and remove the "I". The "I" is in fact the ego and our unconscious identification with our body, brain, mind, memories, and awareness.

When we die, we may cease to be aware, like when we were not born, but the world exists or existed (if time exists) to the degree that we experienced it. Life is thus experience and existence. If we try to strip away all possible illusions, including the possibility that we are not separate from this unfathomable universe or multiverse (still seen as a unique whole), we can then come up with a new basis which is even more devoid of subjectivity. The "I" is no more, but something clearly is.

"The world exists."

"Universe exists."

Notice the "uni" in "universe" or "unique". One.

"There is (only) one."

The deterministic Descartes at its extreme enlightenment before his digression into deity.

Now, does this mean that I single-handedly revolutionized human philosophy of existence, with my brief conclusion? Of course not. Is it brilliant? Who am I to judge? Who are you to judge? Who are “I” and “you”?

“There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages.”

-Mark Twain

Writer/Musician Rapper Nas (Nassir Jones) updated the conception in his 2002 song:

“No idea's original, there's nothing new under the sun.

It's never what you do, but how it's done.”

We can be unoriginal, even lack fundamental purpose, but playing our part and being aware of the play, can still be fulfilling for what it's worth. No idea is original or novel, not because we are guided by an invisible human world knowledge, but rather because all ideas stem from one. Maybe the only idea is the universe or existence, and everything simply follows from that. Going back to Daosim, we should follow the flow and enjoy the ride.

“My” mesmerizing or useless (likely neutral) thoughts, in written form here, are not “mine.” They come from my genetics, my life experiences and the lives of people before me. They come from the existence of the universe itself and the existence of humanity and myself which I did not choose. They are enabled by the invention and proliferation of languages for millennia, for the written language for about 5000 years, by the fateful inventions of German Johannes Gutenberg's printing press in the 1440s & American Thomas A. Edison's electrically operated typewriter in 1872, combined with the more recent Canadian (Montreal-born like me) Stephen Bernard Dorsey's invention and commercialisation of the programmable word processors in 1972. I cannot take credit for this potentially potent written quote for prosperity or this philosophical debate or discovery. I cannot take credit for anything in fact. I can just play my part.

This means indeed that blame or praise are in the bigger picture irrelevant. And if we (“you” and “me”) may also be irrelevant, we can at least take comfort in the fact that something beautiful is still going on.

Our collective or objective experience can be noteworthy and awe-inspiring in its own overall (not individual) uniqueness and quirkiness.

Shakespeare's poetry or Monk's music (art); the shape of animals or organelles (biology); the composition of our atmosphere we breathe and transform constantly unconsciously (chemistry); the food we delight in (gastronomy); the billions of stars and planets that we glimpse at and imagine (astronomy); the Gods we worship (religion or idolatry); the goods and services we produce, trade and buy (economy); the better ways of thinking & living (philosophy & psychology) are all wonderful!.

Be aware.

Be

In the context of journey, and our psychological (but ultimately often detrimental) need for acceptance and praise, I remember 3 parts of poems I wrote decades ago.

“I write for me

Like I need award or praise

I raise my eyebrow slightly.”

**No Expectation = No Outer or Inner Judgement**

**Equanimity = No Praise/Reward = No Shame/Reproach/Self-Punishment**

**Pillar #1: Equanimity**

“Great expectations cause great sorrows.

You will hear my words in your conversation tomorrow.”

**Great Expectations = Great Sorrows**

“If I make one soul understand I’m Glad

Like the garbage bag.”

**Low Expectations = Great Joy**

If “I” make no one understand, or if souls do not exist that is also fine. The “I” and “my” in these poem chunks are figurative and imaginary like the idea of a soul. They are not reality but concepts we should not attach any importance other than if they point to transcendence. I found that focusing on the process and only faintly the outcome is always the way to go. Enjoy the journey, as well as whatever destination life throws at you. Surrender. Accept. Enjoy. It is the real “all-inclusive” vacation, or trip, of your life. Better enjoy it because there is no other and no refund or guarantee. The closest things we know for certain is our mortality and the impermanence of form.

**Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

**Pillar #3: Acceptance (Joy, Peace, Contentment)**

**Pillar #4: Awareness (Impermanence)**

## Old Wisdom

Historically, people who had lived long had perhaps more perspective and wisdom to share. It is not always the case and depends not only on age but experience, awareness, and capacity to extract universal, worthwhile lessons or specific advice for narrow perceived problems.

Dan Buettner’s TV series called “Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones” explores wisdom from geographies that have much higher rates of people who live past 100 years old. It gives some suggestions on clues that could help live a longer and happier life, like the support of the community. More succinctly, an elderly Japanese woman in Okinawa seems to summarize the secret to longevity as “I never get angry.” She also laughs a lot, dance and generally enjoys life.

The grandfather of a Korean friend died at age 97 last year. He was known to sing and laugh a lot and be of generally good humour and disposition. We know that positive mood and mindset can positively affect the body and reversely that constant stress, and its various forms including fear, anxiety, and anger, can negatively impact health.

Personally, in Kyrgyzstan, I met a progressive and effective teacher, Mirbek, who told me the story of his maternal grandmother. She was born in 1910 in a nomadic tribe in Kyrgyzstan and died in 2007, at the young age of 97. Before she died, she told Mirbek that even through her many and severe struggles in life she remained happy and seldom complained.

She faced two world wars, an ethnic genocide, decades of communist regime, de facto dictators and more. During World War I, Russia decided to draft indigenous peoples of Central Asia into the army as unarmed workers who would build trenches and fortifications. Many Kyrgyz and Kazakhs refused to go and openly rebelled against Russian authorities which led to a mass killing of around 250,000 ethnic Kyrgyz. The Tsarist Russia punitive battalions were merciless and systematic. Hundreds of thousands of others fled to the neighboring Chinese province of Xinjiang. Mirbek’s grandmother was one of them.

In 1916, at the age of 6, she narrowly escaped the genocide. It was in November and was very cold and close to 50% died on the way to their uncertain fate. In 1918, after the end of the war, she came

back. Decades later she witness many other human failings and follies, yet needed little and kept her good spirit. She mostly lived a nomadic life in yurts with no indoor plumbing, electricity, modernity, or common commodities. She had her family and community. She told Mirbek that the generation she saw growing up in this new millennium was an “unhappy generation”, always complaining and never having enough.

### **Complaining = Lack of Contentment**

#### **Pillar #3: Acceptance (Joy, Peace, Contentment)**

Moreover, Mirbek told me what he was doing in his small community as a teacher. He was integrating many notions to teach the new generation with relevant and current material. Making sure to pique interest and arouse curiosity of an often-jaded youth with low attention span, high technological connectivity but low real connection to themselves and others. He organized a Book Donation campaign where students were tasked to knock on doors and ask for a book or money equivalent to buy a book from the whole town. The money collected was used to buy books for children but innovatively also for parents and teachers. Parents were encouraged to come share takeaways from the books they read and share knowledge, insight, and wisdom. This allowed parents to also be more involved in their children’s education. Old wisdom of grandparents and books can thus perhaps become vibrant, alive, iterative, and interactive in our youth to pass along the baton and bring contentment from an early age, instead of waiting to be old and suddenly become a sage.

### Russel’s Reverie

*“You will find that unhappiness meets you everywhere.”*

—Bertrand Russell

For British Bertrand Russell, the key to happiness is to focus on externals and cultivate interests in ideas, passions and people. Focus outward. Is a cure for our unhappiness for him, while Buddhist thought similarly with the difference that curing your own suffering could be the first step and the next logical one was to help reduce that of the rest of the world with patience and compassion.

Russell advocates abandoning self-absorption (Ego), as much as possible.

### **Ego = Unhappiness**

Once mundane (self-important) worries were removed, we could focus on better things. Yes, there are better things than ourselves!

He looked specifically at three avenues that could give sustainable meaning to life:

1. Love

Lessens our loneliness and much more (*Beyond Sex* will explore the details)

2. Intellectual Curiosity (part of the 7Cs)

To have a wide, deep and sincere curiosity (more in *Chapter 4: Psychology*)

3. Compassion (part of the 7Cs)

Earnestly try to do our best to alleviate the suffering in the world<sup>52</sup>.

### **Selfless = Egoless = Happiness**

### Nihilism and Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche is a complex and controversial German philosopher associated with nihilism. His is popular in philosophy circles. For Nietzsche, there is no objective order or structure in the world

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<sup>52</sup> Austin, Michael W. Achieving Happiness: Advice from Bertrand Russell: From self-absorption to engagement with the world. Psychology Today. September 2019

except what we give it. Of all he writes and elaborates I believe this is the essential point and is in line with three of the philosophical pillars.

**Pillar #2: Disillusionment (No Order)**

**Pillar #3: Acceptance (No Worry)**

**Pillar #4: Awareness (Now What?)**

I tend to agree that knowing there is no purpose, objective or order does not preclude us from creating (one of the 7Cs, with Contentment, Curiosity, Compassion, Compersion, Courage and Connection) our own purpose and meaning. We can enjoy life as is without dissatisfaction, undue expectation or fear.

### Asymmetric Life (New Wisdom)

An asymmetric life refers to the ups and downs that come with progress and the necessity to embrace the downs, the loses, the difficulties and tragedies without always striving for stability and perceived safety. Arguably personal growth requires periods of struggle to enrich the experience of life and allow new perspective to propel us to new heights of awareness and action.

Graham Weaver lectures in “How to Live an Asymmetric Life” that we are going to suffer as Buddha found out, so that it is best to do something worth suffering for. In a perhaps more business and investment mindset Weaver’s philosophy is also applicable to everyday life. His four pillars are:

1. Do Hard Things (Embrace Challenges)
2. Do Your Thing (Unique Passion and Values) - Nonconformism
3. Do It for Decades (Incremental Long-Term Achievements)
4. Write Your Story (Vision and Action)

Doing hard things means going beyond ingrained fear and outside our comfort zone constantly. Doing your thing, talks about knowing yourself and knowing what you aspire to and truly desire, as opposed to what your entourage, culture, upbringing and even genetic may dictate you to do and spend years doing things that may not matter to you in the end.

#### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

Doing it for decades alludes to the necessity for persistence and consistency (even in asymmetry) to perfect your craft, learn from the unconventional paths and pitfalls you encounter. Your determination will give you reward in itself and may unlock some sought after and unforeseen doors along the way. Something you can never do, playing it safe or quitting at the first sign of hardship.

Do not accept mediocre when you write your story. Picture your paradise, prune your bucket list. Dream big and focus less on the how but on the what and why. Try not to focus on the immediate but give yourself the space and time to achieve in an aspirational, hopeful way. We will see later how hope is an adaptive factor for happiness and resilience.

“Don’t write a story about what happened. Write a story, then make it happen.”

I personally overachieved my two optimistic bucket lists, wrote my story, wrote stories and am now writing this modest manuscript for happiness and contentment. Weaver stresses that we should always avoid to say “not me, not now,” thus not avoiding action in awareness. We face fear and uncertainty constantly and the antidote to fear is action in the present. We need to give ourselves permission to live the life we aspire to, unencumbered by the “limited beliefs” we have about ourselves and the world.



Yet, what is “ours”, “ourselves” and “our life”? We may sometimes take ourselves too seriously (ego) and need both humility and laughter (see *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*) to accept the smallness of the role we really play.

### Parfit's Personal Identity

Weaver and I may still be too linked to identity in that sense. What is “I”? What is doing “Your” thing? Scottish Philosopher David Hume tried to describe how the mind works in acquiring knowledge. He concluded that no theory of reality is possible; there can be no knowledge of anything beyond experience. This differs from Descartes in that experience proceeds cognitive thought and is the basis of his theory of knowledge.

#### Experience > Thought > Knowledge

Hume has an analogy between a person and a nation. A nation consists of a group of people living together on a territory. A nation is neither the territory or exactly that group of people, yet the concept of nation does not involve anything above or over that group of people. Philosopher Derek Parfit extrapolates with his own analogies and conclude that human personal identity is a concept that does not involve anything beyond the accumulate temporal experiences and thoughts of individuals. This goes against the debatable dualist ideas of soul or even modern emphasis on identity (gender, cultural, class, etc.). This exposes a structural flaw in our self-understanding that is tainted by individual and collective ego.

Parfit makes the analogy that teleportation, as seen in popular science-fiction like Star Trek, is in fact the destruction, or death, of a person and the reconstruction in the teleported location (at approximately the speed of light). If there was a malfunction and the teleportation created multiple copies for example or the original copy was not destroyed properly, personal identity would be challenged because It would not fit our conditioned idea of persistent memory and identity. Even with flexible memory managing to attempt to fill in the gaps and connect the dots, it is not false to say the we die and are reborn in each instant. Identity is thus subjective and is an illusion. Ask people with memory loss for instance (neurodegenerative disease or brain injury) how have short-term or long-term memory limbo. See brilliant movies “Still Alice (2014)” and “Memento (2000)” on these philosophical and psychological issues.

In Parfit's main self-defeating moral theory, namely the “self-interest theory of rationality”, he posited that self-interest has been dominant in Western culture for over two millennia, often making bedfellows with religious doctrine, which united self-interest and morality.

Most notably, the self-interest theory holds that it is irrational to commit any acts of self-denial or to act on desires that negatively affect our well-being. Parfit contrived situations where self-interest is indirectly self-defeating—that is, it makes demands that it initially posits as irrational.

Parfit offered the “critical present aim theory”, a broad catch-all that can be formulated to accommodate any competing theory. He constructed critical present aim to exclude self-interest as our overriding rational concern and to allow the time of action to become critically important. But he left open whether it should include “to avoid acting immorally” as our highest concern. Such an inclusion would pave the way for ethics. Parfit admitted that many would avoid acting irrationally more ardently than acting immorally, he could not construct an argument that adequately united the two.

Parfit showed, using interesting examples and borrowing from Nashian games, that it would often be better for people if we did not put the welfare of our loved ones before all else. For example, we should care not only about our kids, but everyone's kids. This is a conclusion I came to as well in my first novel



“Paradise on Earth?” and saw through my travels, egoless aspiration and as explained in my sociological survey in *Chapter 2: Sociology* for individualistic to collectivistic spectrum empirical examples.

People, and perhaps my own kid too, may not understand the higher compassion, love and freedom of form and possession I offer when I tell my son: “You are not my son.”

I mean by that: “You are you, now. I do not own you. I care and love you. I have compassion for your past and future and I do not identify with a narrow predetermined, prearranged, or possessive view of our relationship or restrictions around being our best selves.” Now you will die, and I will give you my all now. After now, I have limited control of what may happen to you although I have a compassionate care and good intention for your future, knowing you will ultimately die again, and again, until you will cease to exist. I also deal with false or factual duality in my second novel “Two Heads Are Better Than None”.

My personal identity and that of those around me are illusions.

### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

#### **Lydia’s Green Grass**

Interestingly, my dearest Lydia from Indonesia said that we should be happy for what we have and similarly for what we don’t have! Not because we should pursue it, but rather the opposite, we should cherish its absence.

#### **Contentment = For What You Have + What You Do Not Have**

#### **Pillar #3: Acceptance (Joy, Peace, Contentment)**

The grass is not always greener, and even if it is, great for that other person (compersion), but it is not your type of green. Enjoy your green and that you do not have the burden of another unsuitable color. More about compersion which is the opposite of jealousy in *Beyond Sex*. Suffice to see that compersion is a relatively new word which means to be happy and experience joy for someone’s positive experience when we would normally be reactively jealous for someone’s success, achievement, possession or sexual promiscuity. The first step is to acknowledge the reflective innate jealousy we may feel and learn with practise to change it into contentment and compersion (7Cs).

#### **Determinism, Decision-Making and Optimism**

*The intertwined influences of genes and environment are so complicated that no mortal will ever trace them out with enough precision to predict behavior exactly.*

– Steven Pinker, *The Blank State*.

As our scientific knowledge grow and especially our understanding of neuroscience, we may feel that we may explain more of human behavior, without quite being able to infallibly predict a specific action, behavior, emotion or thought. This does not mean that a theoretically omniscient entity could not determine every sub-thought, proto-thought and neural event as well as every other physical event in the unfolding universe. We know that it is very likely that most, if not all, events in this universe can be predicted with enough intimate knowledge and understanding. Humans, super-computers or even emerging artificial intelligence are not such entities. We are thus in a philosophical deterministic reality which will never been fully understandable intellectually and perhaps only intuitively or conceptually. This does not mean that we have the need for either superstitions or concepts of “soul” (eternal or at less

indivisible). To accept we have no “free will” we must first accept we are “too stupid” to be the determining factor and then accept that no human or science has the capacity to understand this determined path with precision. The easy escape is to then invent an entity called God or the universe and give them the property that man cherishes the most, its (meek) intellect. So we imagine an intelligent design or entity when intelligence is an animal trait (perhaps plants with the mycelium network) or human construct. The rocks or the billions of stars do not care about this intelligence. The rocks outlast humans and their problems and do not care (they cannot care since they have no thought or emotion) and the stars burn and die, unperturbed by our constant futile wars of physical violence or incendiary ideas. Similarly, “you” may think you care one way or the other, but your neurons and genes do not. All things from the very small to the very big just are. The universe is not intelligent, nor even complex. It just is. We call it complex because we are too stupid to see its simplicity.

#### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (dispelling many mind-made illusions)**

We now know our minds are divisible and subject to physical events. Someone with a brain lesion, seizure, disease or degeneration thinks differently. The fact that our brains are more complex than we thought, but not complex enough to warrant a magical-thinking romantic view of human awareness as being “special”, “God-chosen” or otherwise. Our brain and body biology are beautiful enough to marvel at without fanciful false fantasies around them.

Determinism is often also pitted against its nemesis, the arch-inimical idea of “free will” or freedom of thought and action. We can infer from philosophy that we do not choose our birth, body and brain, so therefore must accept our life and reality as a sort of confined prison instead of unbounded freedom. I always say the best we can do is to make the absolute best out of whatever prison you find yourself in. We have a brain, a body and environment we did not choose to be in at first. We can intellectually revise our entire life as:

1. Predictable (instead of free)
2. Ordinary (instead of special)
3. Of little intrinsic worth (instead of divinely purposeful)
4. Time bound (instead of eternal)

That may make for a slightly less interesting story, and as humans we absolutely love stories. We can however understand that even if our life at the macro level is predictable, it is not to us at the micro level. We can still be surprised of what happens to us tomorrow. We can still choose what we will do next week or next year. Decision-making is not the same as philosophical “free will”. Decision-making is a real process that happens in our brain thousands of times a day. It mostly takes place in the central executive network as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. We can be optimistic that our increased knowledge about the brain will allow us to make better decisions and lead better, happier lives.

#### **Pillar #4: Awareness (of Neuroscience and Nature)**

Even if “God” or the universe has no purpose for us (at the macro level), we can create small, meaningful evolving (like biology!) purposes for ourselves and positively affect art, science, people, animals and the environment around us. Our awareness of mortality can also be an impetus to do the best every day and occasion instead of waiting to be better tomorrow.

#### **Pillar #3: Acceptance (of Impermanence)**

#### **Pillar #4: Awareness (of Mortality)**

Determinism and its acceptance may be a momentous achievement of “man” yet is not only a philosophical debate, it has very real moral, societal and ethical implications. Robert Sapolsky points out in his 2024 book *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will*, that all are actions perceived as free will

come from previous states or experiences. If we go back far enough, all our actions are predictable from the circumstances (if we had all the minute information of casual time and space down to subatomic particle and nonparticles much smaller than neurons). Many play the game to quote quantum physics and the mechanics of randomness and chaos as examples of an undetermined future. This exercise is futile, and their understanding of physics is flawed. A chaotic system is still a system. Randomness is in the eye of the beholder like beauty. If you are reading this sentence now, everything that happened in the universe has brought “you” to read this sentence now. You can have the illusion to choose this book or think you came to it randomly but in this universe there is not other reality so no other choice. No will or choice at all. Again, only illusion of choice which is practical decision-making based on your biological and circumstantial state.

More importantly, morally this means that all the actions you are ashamed of are not “your fault” and all the ones you are proud of are not your egoic self-importance. No one choose to be born. No one choose where they were born. No one choose to be beautiful, successful or rich. The Cinderella and rags-to-riches stories we love are illusions. Bill Gates and Elon Musk dropped out of college and became billionaires because they were born in these circumstances. I think few would have wanted the childhood that Elon Musk had. And few would want to work 100 hours a week and sleep on the floor of a factory but Elon had to do it. He had no choice. He was born and his environment shaped him. The same goes for Hitler and all the mass murderers, pedophiles, rapists, dictators, as well as small time criminals. We should not blame or praise anyone. We should only have compassion and kindness to all.

This is a hard pill to swallow for even most who consider themselves kind and forgiving. Surely criminals deserve punishment. Why? Why don't they deserve love? Maybe some never experienced real love and compassion, had no role models or were born with bad genetics. Some are born beautiful and rich like say Paris Hilton and others are born Charles Manson. You are born you and are not worse or better than either. Determinism means we should lessen our fixation on worshipping success and a meritocracy supposed apogee of beauty, finance and fame capitalism. It also means our prisons should not be focused on prison but rather on genuine helpful and compassionate environments, not the inhumane and insane criminal breeding grounds they are now.

We can be compassionate while still encouraging altruistic and pro-social behavior and limiting anti-social behaviors. We should however focus on the behavior and not the person. Dr. Bonta studies show that the more time a criminal is in prison, the more crime that person is likely to commit, the more time on probation, the same! If it is behavior change, we want, we should listen to the psychologists and not the people or politician who prone punishment instead of atonement and growth. If we want to protect the society, there are humane and compassionate ways. We can also do more education and prevention instead of thinking that fear of punishment is the only or best way to have a better society,

How many times to you have to punish a kid before a behavior change? And what if each parent took 30 to 90 minutes to ask compassionate (7Cs) and curious (7Cs) questions to their child like I did instead of going to their repertoire of punishment right away? Society gave the government a proxy role of parent, but neither society nor government is doing very good parenting. We are instead creating more disconnection, potential trauma and making things worst. All this because we assign blame (or praise) and are convinced people are responsible for... being born.

## Practical Philosophy

*“Don't explain your philosophy. Embody it.”*

-Epictetus

Let us remember that beyond the very useful theory and pillars we discovered together, philosophy is not meant to be masturbatory and self-serving intellectual exercise. We must espouse and put in practice what we learned and hold dear. We can review our philosophy based on our actions and results which can either enhance or challenge our resolve. Philosophy should be cumulative, fluid, fundamental and become part of us in every and all situations. Philosophy is universal rather than unilateral. Take from it and give as you live it and become an example for those around you and for yourself too. And when is the right time to focus and start? Everyone from Tolle to Epictetus agree: Now.

*"When faced with anything painful or pleasurable,  
Anything bringing glory or disrepute,  
Realize that the crisis is now... and waiting is no longer an option."*

-Epictetus

*"Enough talking about how to be a good person,  
Just be one already."*

-Marcus Aurelius

## Time and Space

To make whatever philosophy we think we can with reason put into practice, we need resources and these resources are time and space. Time is the only ultimate resource we have and we must use it wisely. When I started working in the corporate world, I quickly realized that I had more money than time and living in Canada had for instance only 2 out of 52 weeks of vacation. I would not call this necessarily "modern day slavery" yet I questioned the reason I was a productive and passionate employee making millions of dollars per years to a corporate entity, have a small portion back in salary and having to ask for time with considerable constraints. I eventually started my own business and traveled to more than half the world with most of my peers continued to give up their time for more money, financial safety, and the illusion of safety. Remember to embrace impermanence and that the devotion to your employer may not mean much when the company misses a quarterly financial objective and need to layoff a percentage of the employees, close or sale a whole division or worse. Then you may end up with more "time" yet you will not have chosen it.

Time is also a matter of mindfulness as we will see in *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy and Mindfulness)*. Are you present in each precious moment of each day or are you letting time pass by? Are you grateful for each waking moment? Do you rather complain or just being complacent?

When people say "I do not have time," what they are really saying is "I am not making time." They are in the illusion that their time is not their own and they "must" do whatever it is they think they must do. The really is that you "must" not do anything. When you realize this, you can be much more conscious of the time (this precious resource) you choose to spend and to be mindful of how that time is valuable in its own. Do not be convinced by social media, social norms, corporate edicts, cultural cues, advertising, or your own misguided views to give your time mindlessly. Some people say "wow, where did this week go?", "this month went so quick" or "this whole year passed so fast". This is probably because they are not conscious of every moment of every day. We all have the same objective time in a day.

It true that perception of time is relative (like Einstein!) and we saw the cultural aspect of it in *Chapter 2: Sociology*. It is said that "good time" passes quickly and "bad or boring time" passes slowly. In reality, mindless time passes fast, and mindful time makes time almost stop.

**Mindfulness = Increase Appreciation and Perception of Time**

Next time you think you are having a “good time” make sure to soak in every second and you will see your perception of it increase. Next time a “boring time” is perceived, appreciate whatever you can of this moment still. Do not give time mindlessly away.

Depression generally comes from negative perception of the past and anxiety from the fear of the future. The more present we are, and appreciative of the now, the less of either we will experience.

To survive and plan ahead with appreciation of the past and prospect of a bright future, we cannot be 100% in the infinite beauty of the present if we want to preserve our time by preserving our lives. We need to plan to eat, work, sleep, socialize, have sex, and more. We need to remember the past fondly and for what we learned from it. We need to mix the past and present to imagine the future with imagination. This is all of course happening in the “now”, yet it can refer to the past and potential future, making it less mindful. We can also be mindful of our imagination, our memory subjective appreciation and our projections of the future. We can observe and modulate our mind as we will see in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. For now, let us remember that time focus can be wither of 4 forms.

**Time Focus = Present + Past + Future + Imagination = 100%**

Imagination can be about the future, the past or the present or more than one together. Imagination, as creative (7Cs) as it is, will still be rooted in experience, predictions, inventions and rearrangement of the known. It is perhaps impossible to imagine some things. Can you truly imagine 26 dimensions? We can write the words, yet unlikely understand this concept or properly imagine it beyond an idea based on our understanding of the 3 or 4 dimensions we are familiar with. See Yvon Brousseau’s theoretical framework on thought and idea formation.

How should we balance these 4 options of time focus? It is up to each person to be aware and to modulate as needed. Different situations or periods of life may require more or less of these elements and some people may genetically be more or less inclined to have or use imagination, although it can be cultivated. In general, the more present focus the better. More explanation on why with a neuroscience basis in *Beyond Neurons and Hormones*.

Stanford psychology professor and author, Dr. Philip Zimbardo, suggests the ideal balance, is to be<sup>53</sup>:

1. Moderately future-oriented (enough to be motivated to strive towards our goals)
2. Moderately past-positive (generally positive outlook when looking back on our lives)—more on positive narratives in the next chapter!
3. Moderately "present hedonistic" (taking time for pleasures—food, fun, sex—, desires and social—family, friends— but not so much as to have addictive tendencies)—more on addictions in the next chapter!

I would add that we can be present without being hedonistic, which is pure joy and contentment (7Cs) which should be perhaps more than 50% of the time focus equation. If it was up to me, I would set a standard close to the following:

**Median Mindful Time Focus = Present (65%) + Past (10%) + Future (10%) + Imagination (15%) = 100%**

Space is also something we have yet it is not only the external space in our homes, offices, the limits of our arbitrarily assigned or chosen country. I am talking about the space between thoughts, the internal space and that has a strong link with psychology.

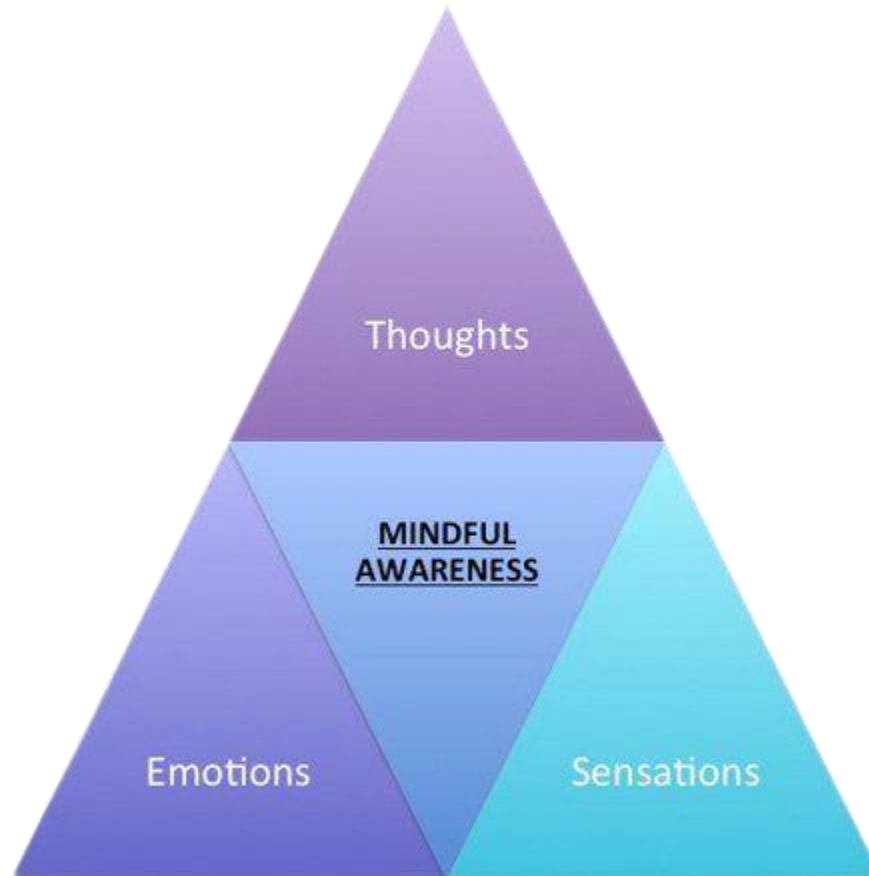
We can imagine the silence between sounds, the immense space between atoms and this space can be expanded with awareness. We do not need to react hastily with our innate and often inappropriate

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<sup>53</sup> Gregoire, Carolyn. *How Technology Speeds Up Time (And How To Slow It Down Again)*. Huffpost. Dec 6, 2013.

biology and mind. Psychologist Dr. Elisha Goldstein writes in *The Now Effect* that “you are more likely to move out of the autopilot cycle and into a space of awareness where you can intentionally consider alternatives, practicing a more flexible mind, regulating your body, and developing a more reliable intuition... it’s all about practice.”

He suggests we should practice awareness and create space before action/reaction by noticing (not judging) more and more our triangle of awareness: thoughts, emotions (physiological and mental) and physical sensations (external and internal).



This triangle is an adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism and mindfulness practice (Kagyu tradition and others) yet is not the end of it. These three poles and experiences all have biases and do not reflect exact reality as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. We can also have awareness and knowledge of these biases, actions, and proclivities when we are present and pay attention to them.

#### **Pillar #4: Awareness (Mindful or Other)**

Psychology is a tool to understand our beautiful mind, its huge potential, as well as its traps and flaws. We must know and notice that beyond mindfulness or conscious awareness there is also a strong unconscious awareness (intuition and more) that influences and shapes many of our thoughts and actions.

#### **Money and Modern Philosophy**

Scott Galloway talks about diversification of risk and portfolio in his written work and talks but his podcast with Stevn Bartlett on Diary of A CEO reveals another key insight which reflects one of the pillars we saw in this chapter.

#### **Pillar #4: Awareness (of Mortality)**

He explains that rejection and social shame is one of the greatest human fears (more on this in *Beyond Spirituality*) but that mental reframing in the context of realizing we and the people we are afraid to be rejected by will all die (very soon) allows for comfort in uncertainty and impermanence.

**Pillar #3: Acceptance (of Impermanence)**

This leads to what he calls “squeezing all the juice out of life.” Or living/thriving and being authentic instead of simply surviving and being fearful and too careful.

## Chapter 4: Psychology

*"To forgive is to overlook, or rather to look through."*

-Eckhart Tolle, A New Earth

Awareness and active (prefrontal) reframing are the key to shifting our behaviors, not avoidance, resistance, ignorance, or active denial. The modern neuroscience of fear, traumas, and addictive/compulsive behaviors (thoughts, actions) all point to the fact that simply erasing trauma or compulsive behavior does not work. There needs to be an active mental shift or reframing which will lead to neurological wiring of the brain for better adaptive behavior in lieu of current maladaptive circuitry. And yes, all though we are adaptive, we are all maladapted in some way, you, me and everybody.

Erasing small or big traumas, shunning inappropriate or unhealthy sexual urges or simply resisting specific substance (food, alcohol, drug or other) consumption does not work. Same goes for maladaptive self and relationship behaviors and habits like complaining, faultfinding and blaming, which feeds the negativity bias already inherent in our brain makeup instead of valiantly fighting it. Fighting our rigid resistance (ego) to accept and cherish reality as is (equanimity+) passes by curving it instead of tackling it head on. It does not mean to accept what we cannot control passively, but rather to open possibilities by being aware before we react defensively and automatically.

**Inner (Rigid) Resistance = Closeness = Negativity**

**Awareness + Radical Acceptance = Openness = Positivity + Possibilities**

I used to tell more than one girlfriend to simply "stop," when I say them get into a cycle of negativity, bad brain habit or bad behavior. This would repeatedly reinforce their defensive rigid stance and rapidly degenerate into more blaming, complaining, claimed that I was trying to control them or their thoughts. Their egos were clinging on the perceived "right" to be mad and angry. Their ego had to be "right" to preserve their identity (attached to the ego in some explicit or implicit form) and of course someone had to be "wrong", habitually me. With knowledge, practice and training I could detect the ego (located in the default mode network of the brain as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*) taking over or an exaggerated fear-response (amygdala) in myself or others. When I had the audacity to point that out to others, even if nicely, lovingly, kindly, and non-threatening as possible, and even if my girlfriend had previously expressed the desire to be less angry (perhaps like an alcoholic promising not to drink again), my attempt to make them realize their state, stop and switch failed over 90% and made it worse as well.

**Reality + Ego = Nightmare**

Stopping does not work well with our brain that has strong pathways and habits. Switching or reframing works best yet there needs to be both awareness first and desire/incentive in the moment, not in the past.

**Mental Reframing = Awareness + Openness + (Present) Motivation**

How do we motivate someone who is not aware they can do better and even if they do, are conditioned not to and rewarded by the ego to maintain a problematic and maladaptive stubbornness. I was told at first to switch my tone which I did. I can understand that someone can feel attacked; a strong ego often does. I was told then that the problem was that my kind suggestions still felt like I was trying to control instead of inspire. I later realized that people's brain polluted by their experiences, culture, parents, teachers and enhanced by a fear-based, negativity-biased genetic were the ones with the control, not the person feeling threatening by a helpful suggestion. I keep repeated to my girlfriend in "fight mode"



(sympathetic “flight or fight” response and ego) that “I am not trying to change or fix you, simply giving you tools to be slightly more aware every day like I appreciate when you do the same for me in a loving way.” Still, no awareness, no openness, no motivation.

Are we all egomaniacs?

## Egomania

A collection of (strongly) held ideas can be characterized as forms, even if ultimately fleeting.

**Ego = Form = Attention Away from Awareness**

**Ego = Forgets Formless Existence or Presence (Now)**

The analogy of spiritual sleepers for most of the untrained brains means that the dreamer does not even know he or she is dreaming. When my girlfriend says “I am X”, and I say, “no, your ego clings to that identity. You are the unchanging awareness which observes changing identities, thoughts, behaviors, actions, including impermanent perception of your ego saying you are X.” I always get: “You think you are so smart with your concepts!” and a snarl, followed by no further discussion or further discord. I reply if I can: “I am not smart. That would imply that I am saying this based on my ego. I am simply sharing my current imperfect and impermanent awareness to give you insight so you can hopefully be more aware yourself, yet it is not with any expectation, nor by desire to feel morally or intellectually superior. It is potentially useful information; you can do with as you please. I hope you can one day be open to it for your and our sake, but again I do not expect you to. I love you. I care. That is why I say that.” This also fails miserably almost every time. So, what works?

Tolle explains: “They are addicted to upset and anger as others are to a drug.” and “Many people will live like that, like sleepwalkers, trapped in old-dysfunctional mindsets that continuously re-create the same nightmarish reality.” I was like that too: a sleepwalker and sleep-talker, figuratively and literally. I could sit and tell stories in my sleep. I could also act unconsciously while “awake”. I am more awake and aware (not a woke) now. “I” (the awareness or true consciousness, not the ego) can see myself and other sleep and be unconscious. I am reminded of the excellent Richard Linklater 2001 animation movie “Waking Life” which explores lucid dream, the nature of our existence and other philosophies. In this film, the main character knows he is dreaming and is thus awake within the dream, although he cannot get out of it. This awareness is the first step to selflessness and oneness. Few reach it, even fewer periodically, and rare are those who can stay longer and longer in that state. The ego finds a way to pull you back to your false identity, to dream without knowing you are asleep. Fewer even get to be completely and permanently awake, and we can imagine this state is both sought after and scary. It means, more or less, losing yourself (Eminem again). And attaining this awake state is not for ego’s sake. Quite the opposite.

**Ego = Status Quo = Safety = Stories**

**Identity = Status + Self-Importance**

No ego? No identity? There must be a way for them to be healthy? Maybe, but better deconstruct before we construct on shaky grounds.

“Ok with the philosophy, but practically the ego is there for something, right?” says almost everyone. Well, yes, the ego is there for only two reasons:

1. Protection
2. Procreation

Biologically, that is all the ego is for. Biologically that is all our wonderful and beautiful bodies are created and must do before they inevitably perish. Everything else is pretense or illusion. Even our need to survive or have sex is sadly not that important or crucial. It does feel important to us and that is what the ego is for. Yet the ego also extrapolates the world and creates with seemingly unbounded (bounded

in the brain in reality) imagination and creativity. Both of these faculties can be used to make us extremely happy and they can also be used to make us worry, want, fear, regret, reject, or conjure up plans for revenge, war, control, lying, accumulated at others expenses, etc.

We will see how to use imagination and creativity positively later. Let us look at how to avoid how to use them negatively first.

### When the Form Prevails

Dehumanization is what is done to indoctrinate soldiers into causing harm to others with purpose and collective or self-righteousness. Another word for dehumanization is objectifying. It means you no longer see the person as a person but as an object. This can be done in various other collective or individual forms. For example, a human manager or executive in a corporation may identify with the corporation goal to make more profits and see employees as corporate cost to be reduced or eliminated, thus losing the opportunity to see the employee as a human being with emotional attachment to his or her work, perhaps even (ego) identification with the corporation itself, and with need for livelihood, and thus able to fire, layoff or terminate without cause. The cause being of course short-term or long-term profits. I was such a manager once and did lay off a few employees for the “corporate good”. Even though I felt empathy towards the employees chosen to be let go, I was able to construct adequate justification for the “good” of the act. I now recount this restructuring episode as one of the worst days in the corporate world I can remember, yet I still planned it and went on with it. Creative accounting. Creative firing...

Similarly, we can create forms, mental representations, objects, and ideas around a person and not see them for who they really are. Racism comes from a preconceived bundle of idea about a group of people we were falsely told were a “race”. Classism or snobbery comes from the assumptions that people with less physical (culturally accepted beauty), monetary (assets), cultural (education and etiquette) and/or social (family and friend hierarchy) attributes are lesser human beings and should not be treated the same way. Sexism can often be seen as the objectifying of women in a cultural or personal way which may lead to not seeing women for their full human attributes and perhaps only for their physical attributes. Pornography, media, social media, advertisement, and art may all contribute to this cultural misrepresentation or oversimplification of the complexity and diversity of woman power, prerogative and pluripotential. This may lead to increased harassment, and to the extreme as rape and other forms of violence. In countries or subcultures where human life is devalued below money, people sometimes get killed for money, a necklace, a cellphone or even a pair of shoes because that person does not exist in the mind of the gangster, gang member, robber, or attacker. When you no longer see another human being as that, but as a mental representation you firmly attach above that, no wonder people perish or hurt others needlessly.

### Ingroup vs Outgroup

Without complete dehumanization, the classic brain distinction is between “us” and “them”. Or the ingroup/outgroup dichotomy in psychology. When we consider someone to be “other” (even if “human”) are brain (consciously but often also unconsciously) perceives disgust! Yes disgust for a different social class, color of skin, belief or even someone who likes different music or has a different favorite color! This is the augmented ego or collective ego. Instead of crying “me, me, me!” like a baby, it sophisticatedly cries out “us, us, us!”. Bigger group, bigger ego! We saw in Chapter 2: Sociology the spectrum of :

**Individual->Family->Community->Higher Good (God or Nation)**

In fact, the higher you go the bigger the ego, because it is still “my” family, “my” community, “my” country and “my” God. The only way to kill the ego is to have oneness (which includes all ideas, people and Gods – not pretend there is only one true one) and try to feel true universal love and compassion for the world. We will see in *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)* that to try to do that is quite difficult because our mind can conceive of infinity and huge numbers very poorly. It has few survival reasons to do so. We need to focus on our surroundings to survive, not on the origin of the universe and oneness. We can better tell relatable stories about them. Very few humans, if any, can really love the whole human race more than in theory and when faced with a choice will likely choose a loved one rather than a stranger. Few can even think a random person in need (or not in need and enviously wealthy, healthy and lucky) is as important as your lover, son, sibling, parent, or daughter for instance. In this case, both genetic drives (survival of your offspring, potential mate or proximate genetic pool) and errors in morality caused by emotional empathy can cause these faulty conscious or unconscious drives. We will dig deeper into empathy’s use and limits in the next chapter. Know now that universal and rational compassion is the key to happiness and a better world but that we will have to fight our ingrained psychology very hard to achieve it.

And if you want to be a near Saint-like morally like Jesus and Buddha and love someone who did you are your family wrong in your eye (sense of injustice and unfairness is also innate and hate is alive and well around the world I assure you), you will have to work even harder to love a criminal, a psychopath or a politician. I try.

Start maybe by someone who just annoys you, that wronged you slightly or that you can’t stand and work your way up to loving Hitler, Pol Pot, and Ismail Enver. Then your child’s rapist and murderer. It has been done. Not loving Hitler, that’s obvious! There are still many neo-Nazis to this day. I mean loving your child’s murderer. Humans are an incredible bunch, I tell you.

## Negativity Bias

The negativity bias, also known as the negativity effect, is a cognitive bias that, even when of equal intensity, things of a more negative nature (e.g. unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or social interactions; harmful/traumatic events) have a greater effect on one’s psychological state and processes than neutral or positive things. Another cognitive bias example include the tendency to overestimate one’s talent.

There is a survival reason why we may want to remember negative events and situations more and not die. It is extremely important that we are constantly and deeply aware of this fact that all our brains are wired that way, so we must constantly and actively fight our biology for our happiness.

Our brain is wired for survival, not happiness.

When people make decisions, they put greater importance on the negative event aspects than on the positive. This can affect choices and willingness to take risks.

One other outmost important fact few people know is that we have two voices in our heads, and no, they are not a little angel and a little devil! Our brain has both a narrative remembering self and an experiencing self. This means the stories you tell yourself about the past are automatically quite different than the experience you had when you were going through any experience, even if your mind wants to convince you otherwise and you believe your memories are accurate.

1. Experiencing self = what you feel in the moment
2. Narrative self = the stories you tell yourself about past moment, distorted present and possible future

We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that the narrator of your brain is in the default mode network, and like its name it is the default network of your brain. The experiencing self is in many networks, including the sensory networks (hear, see, smell, taste, touch) and mediated by “Here & Now” molecules we will examine further. As we saw in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*, to be happier we want to be more present and have less mind wandering and unreliable, often negative storytelling.

Dr. Daniel Kahneman, author of *Noise: A flaw in Human Judgment* and *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, is a Nobel Prize winner and expert in cognitive biases. Cognitive biases are ways our brain steers us from thinking rationally even when we may not be aware of them, maybe even convinced of our outmost rationality. There are many such biases we are all too blind too! People often attribute other people's failures to internal characteristics, while blaming their own shortcomings on external factors, for instance. The negative bias is a form of cognitive bias. We will see that emotional empathy is another in the next chapter.

Kahneman's 1993 research with Barbara Fredrickson were revolutionary and revealing in qualifying and this major brain bias: negativity. They looked at cold water exposure as a measure of perceived pain by both the experiential and narrative self. We will look at the potential benefits of cold exposure in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, but this is not the focus here. The study found that the experiential self experience event (in this case pain) as it happens second by second and that the narrative self and the one later used for “rational” cognitive decision-making had a ‘peak-end rule’ bias and was crucially duration-blind. This means that the remembering narrative self interprets the past with reference to peak experiences (most painful or least pain, or positively most pleasure vs. least pleasure) and the last experience (end) is also overemphasised. All this with no regard to exactly time spend in each peak or intermediate state. Average pain, joy or pleasure are often overlooked and the duration of each has much less impact than real elapsed time experienced by the experiential self. If you have say an almost ecstatic bliss at the end of a long arduous, painful and pleasureless journey, you will tend to remember the “happy ending” (and we will see that orgasm is a peak positive state in *Beyond Sex*). Our narrative self may also actually begin during the journey and convince us that the pain is worth it in expectation of the big peak at the end. Our narrative self is always present and often dominates as it is the default mode. More on this in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Many people miss enjoying the scenery or the journey and focus already on the expected goal and the stories they will tell themselves and often other lately. People pose for pictures and do not take the time to truly enjoy the moment the experiential self would relish in.

Oppositely negative experiences beyond the norm will be flagged by the narrative self and a rationally good experience overall in terms of time (added moment per moment) versus one negative perception will give rise to an overall negative perception. Just think of ex-partners who lived years with someone and when they breakup remember mostly the last and the peaks, often negative. In reality, day to day couple life might have been not as they remember later. In marketing, they say you need only one bad review to taint ten good reviews. The brain is programmed for fear and survival so even if the probabilities of occurring in time are low, it tries to protect itself – at the expense of our happiness and experiential self that had a better experience than told, thought, or felt later and sometimes even during.

In the second landmark experiment Dr. Kahneman did a study with Daniel Redelmeier from the University of Toronto to have a more quantitative component of the peak-end rule. They showed that minute by minute experience and narrative self-report of overall pain after a colonoscopy procedure (rectal invasion is not always fun, but I will reserve judgement) differed in significant ways. The peak end rule was respected and confirmed that the narrative self does not add moment by moment

experiential self appreciation of the world but rather averages them. For demonstrative purposes look at two reported results for subjective pain:

1. 8 minutes duration, max pain = 8, last minute pain = 7; perceived overall pain of 7.5
2. 24 minutes duration, max pain = 8, last minute pain = 1; perceived overall pain of 4.5

So, the happy ending idea, does work! Even if patient #2 endured 16 more minutes of pain in the anus. Let us take reaching any worthwhile (peak happy) goal: running a marathon to see the finish line; taking a painful night hike for a spectacular sunrise; not sleeping well for days and missing time you're your family and friends to complete a work project or prepare for an exam; hours or days of child labour to see an ugly and crying baby we love (because of oxytocin and other hormones) and perhaps our culture also told us so, as better and relatable examples. That is also why the waiter is extra nice at the end when he gives you the bill, so your overall rating is based on the last event. Bigger tips. Hope I am giving you good or at least decent non-monetary tips. Don't get me started about 2023-2024 "tipflation" in North America.

The motivation-reward network mediated by dopamine also plays a role in some of these goal-directed actions and the narrative self (default mode network) can help create and entertain fantasies about a future outcome to spark and keep motivation throughout the struggles. But let's get back to the negative with a positive awareness perspective.

UC Davis researcher and professor of psychology, Alison Ledgerwood, also found with 3 landmark published research that it is not only that the brain is wired to see negative events as more important. The research shows that it is harder for our brains to reframe a negative perception to positive as it is to reframe a positive perception to negative.

### **Negative > Positive**

#### **Positive to Negative > Negative to Positive**

The amygdala (see *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*) is estimated to focus about two thirds of its neurons to assess and alert for threats (negativity). Positivity is neuronally and numerically challenged!

Negativity is an overrepresented and overpowered bully.

Ledgerwood stresses that are brain often get "stuck" in a frame or perception and that it is much easier to get stuck in the negative frame (glass half empty) than in the positive frame (glass half full). Research shows it takes 7 secs to go from positive to negative and 11 seconds to go from negative to positive quantitatively. Qualitatively, many report they have difficulty or are even enable to get back from a previously held positive view once they were prompted to think of the same thing in a negative way, perhaps even not fully believing or accepting the prompt as absolute truth or view.

Grief comes from major perceived loss (attachment) and can be quite destructive and long in duration. It could be from death of a loved one or significant relationship breakup. It is easy to see that we are often "stuck" in grief, sometimes for years. Imagines all the other negative emotions being "stuck", often at the small duration, except "anger" and "resentment" that for some can last a lifetime.

The negativity bias is against positive, but also neutral experiences. We even tend to focus on the negative even when the negative experiences are small, insignificant, or inconsequential.

In dirty politics, voters are more likely to vote for a candidate based on negative information about their opponent as opposed to their candidate's personal merits. This is the same for office, family, or community or even the legal system. It doesn't matter how many good things you did if you did one thing (maybe even one moment out of decades bad). Same for the cancel culture we mentioned in Chapter 2: Sociology. R. Kelly, Kevin Spacey, Kris Wu, Kanye West, all "Cancelled". Our same morality, judgments, laws, judges, and ordinary people suffer from this cognitive bias. And we haven't touched emotional

empathy yet and others. As in many biological and cultural biases, including sexism, homophobia, transphobia, exclusion and bigotry, we must tackle our negative bias and fear to emerge enlightened and energized for a positive life with awareness as a guide to mitigate our imperfect mind. Remember the negative is overrepresented by a large margin, constantly and by default.

Lastly, Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman wrote in 2001 that there are four distinct ways the negativity bias manifests itself<sup>54</sup> to expand on the peak-end rule:

**a) Negative potency**

Negative entities are stronger than the equivalent positive entities.

**(b) Steeper negative gradients**

The negativity of negative events grows more rapidly with approach to them in space or time than does the positivity of positive events.

**(c) Negativity dominance**

Combinations of negative and positive entities yield evaluations that are more negative than the algebraic sum of individual subjective valences would predict.

**(d) Negative differentiation**

Negative entities are more varied, yield more complex conceptual representations, and engage a wider response repertoire.

These seems rather technical, so let us try to explain it further. Negative events (real or imagined) have a stronger impact on our nervous system, endocrine system, and our body in general. The changes negative events produce in us appear quicker and take longer to be removed. The narrative self overpowers the experiential self and does the math in favour of negative events even beyond the peak-end rule bias. Lastly, there are more shades and expressions of negativity than of positivity in our biology, brain and mental constructs so they are a higher focus and more prevalent.

They also observe and suggest that negativity is contagious, which we may already know by intuition. They even infer that one feature of negative events that make them dominant is that negative entities are more contagious than positive entities. Yes, a smile and a laugh are contagious as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, but a sad story, a negative idea, comment, or critic is always more contagious withing ourselves and the culture. Again, look at cancel culture, medias and politics as vivid examples, but it is also happening within you. Fear may be the most contagious negative emotion of all. So how to stop this dangerous contagion before it spreads? We must arm ourselves with tools and apply them many times a day, just to keep up with the inherent imbalance.

Knowing this major bias and its (at least) 4 manifestations affect us every single day, I suggest 7 ways to combat our natural negativity. I found through researcher, modified and added a few tricks and tips to come up with the 7 Negativity Protectors or possibly “Positive Paladins”, although this is not a Holy War and there are only 7, not the mythical 12. I do imagine them as sorts of inspired and courageous warriors that must fight our animal drives daily. Then again, we love story telling, might as well be good ones. Maybe you can write me when you find 5 more that work so we can expand our arsenal against ourselves. In the meantime, here are the 7 ways you can fight negativity (and win):

**1. Catching and challenging negative self-talk**

By remaining aware of your thoughts and emotions, and checking in with yourself throughout the day, you can start to be alert of your overly pessimistic views, of your doubts, victimization, phobias, fears, and all other limiting beliefs. We will talk about the strength of self-talk in *Beyond*

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<sup>54</sup> Rozin, P., & Royzman, E. B. (2001). Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(4), 296-320. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0504\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0504_2)

*Spirituality.* If you are aware of a negative thought, emotion or feeling, do not judge it or self-blame, observe it or them, catalog them, before you can change them.

Extra tip: If you are having a hard time capturing, checking in or understanding your thoughts or emotions (positive and negative), cognitive behavior therapist, Dr. Jennifer Guttman, suggests “one way to do this is to keep a log of thoughts. This could be a mental, paper, or digital log that you reflect on daily.”

## **2. Cognitive Restructuring or Reframing**

Negativity biases are often not best challenged head on, instinctually thoughts or emotions can be resilient, especially negative ones. Misery loves company and the ego loves its identity, including putting you and your fears (founded or not) as a priority. As you are aware of the biases, start by:

- a) Isolate the event (put it in quarantine and lockdown) to cure the potential sickness. Name it for what it is and do not tie it to possible previous, future, related or unrelated events. Most “what ifs” are pure fantasy.
- b) Dedramatizing the situation (the power and danger of the narrative self – see section below – as our imagination just loves drama over boring peaceful nothing), See the neutral or the less bad. (Equanimity). Tell yourself a small setback should have no impact on your day, year or overall life.
- c) Start to see the positive: the opportunity, the humour, the interesting story, the excitement, etc. (Equanimity+)

Extra tip: To help reframing faster and better, prepare some shortcut reframing responses like when X happens I will think Y. For example “when it rains, it is romantic and good for vegetation” or “when my spouse screams at me, I stay calm and find it amusing before responding calmly”.

## **3. Gratitude**

Negativity biases can be lessened, countered, or even positively transformed when actively seeing the aspects of whatever experience, person or condition you can be genuinely grateful for. More on this in *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)*. Smile or laugh when you are able to switch your negative to positive. Acknowledge it to yourself and hopeful next time it will become even quicker and fuller gratitude glasses adjustment.

Extra tip: If you are not aware of your negative filter or glasses, ask the most positive person you know to lend you their glasses on occasion to see the world with more positivity.

## **4. Active Awe and Wonder (Presence).**

Relishing the present, creating, and capturing positive moments. It can be with yourself, your pet, nature, even technology, Also, truly try appreciating others around you, whatever mood they are in and whoever you may normally categorize (judge) them as. When you stop and take some time to savour a positive experience, make sure to allow positive experiences to register deeply. This can be to prevent the negativity bias to show up or to woo it with wonder. Neuroscience (experience dependent neuroplasticity) supports that memory (which influences the narrative self) is store more strongly with the intensity of the emotion (positive and negative) and duration. It is suggested to “take in the good” for at least 20 to 30 seconds. If you can do more (which I often do) all the better. Wonder walks will be explored in *Beyond Spirituality* and I highly recommend them. Another way to see this is simply appreciating the small stuff or little things.

Extra tip: Think of new words for the experiences like Japanese do (see below *Japanese Wonder*)! Create a vocabulary of wonder and think/feel/drink the world around and inside of you.

## 5. Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness in the moment will decrease your fertile imagination and mind-wandering (downregulate your default mode network) that can lead to you to the negatory abyss or blackhole. Instead, it will intensify your mental focus and reasoning (central executive network) or any or all of your 5 senses to concentrate on the world around you, allowing for a more neutral or positive view of the external and internal. Mindfulness reminds us to simply exist.

### **No-Mind (Wandering) = No Negativity Bias**

Extra tip: Breathing, exercise and other forms of focus or meditation can also be helpful as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. A mantra may also be useful and there is a perfect one at the end of this book, so read on. Yes, a mantra, just the power of words, no cult religion or request for any sum of money. Something that can help you catch, prevent, reframe your negativity or in this case be present and overthink less. I promise my mantra at the end works for me for everything and is not “this too shall pass”, although I have used that one successfully before.

## 6. Positive Distractions

If you find yourself slipping down a negative spiral, that you couldn't catch, isolate, change and you see the vicious cycle of negativity appear clear as a tornado, make a concerted effort to distract yourself from going any further. Any distraction, neutral is even good but even better positive.

Extra tip: Find 3 or 4 positive distractions that you can conjure at any time to break the cycle of negativity and work in different settings and situations. When X arise, I do Y or distract myself by thinking Z. Once you are back to neutral, try the positive reframing again.

## 7. Do the Math

Use positive or even neutral to negative events and count them in your head objectively as possible knowing that you automatically remember more negative ones, Dig deeper in your memory, Then remind yourself that even though it feels like the negative should weigh heavier than the positive, in terms of impact in importance that's our distorted, biased, bullying brains talking, and we are better than that (appropriate use of ego!).

Extra tip: If you like sports or gambling try to have daily matches of positive versus negative and make sure positive always win in the end.

In terms of neuroscience, we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that the NMDA (N-methyl-D-aspartate) receptor (not MDNA!) may be involved in signaling the most intense emotions once they reach a certain threshold. This creates a neural cascade and opens the flood gates for the now and the future. We saw how we could prevent and protect our perception of reaching overly negative appreciation of events. Know now that it is even more important to calm these negative beliefs, judgements, and feelings before they reach extreme, exponential proportions, and start to be encoded in your brain and body as traumas or damaging nightmares.

## Narrative Self

Narrative identity(ies) is(are) the ego and self-esteem told with emotions and thoughts. It is meant to be coherent but with further examination often fails further scrutiny based on factual or logical inconsistencies with rather flagrant major discrepancies like the fact that most cells die and are replaced in our body. The ego often exaggerates and distorts indiscriminately, sometimes to hide perceived faults and failures or reversely heighten them. Idiosyncrasies can give one the tendency to do one more than the other, but most can switch back and forth from:



1. self-doubt, self-criticism, remorse, regret, shame, guilt, modesty, humility
2. self-esteem boosting self-stories (at times at the expense of devaluing others mentally or verbally) including confidence, conceit, pride, self-regard, self-worth, assurance, arrogance, haughtiness, vanity, vainglory, lordliness, self-exaltation, superciliousness, insolence, self-love, pretentiousness, assertiveness, self-importance, boastfulness

Too much ego love can lead to narcissistic tendencies and is nefarious to you and others.

**Confidence > Conceit > Insolence**

**Assurance > Assertiveness > Pride > Vanity > Arrogance**

**Self-Compassion > Self-Regard / Self-Worth > Self-Importance > Self-Exaltation**

Too much ego bashing is also not healthy,

**Humility > Modesty > Self-Doubt > Regret**

**Humbleness > Self-Criticism > Shame / Guilt > Remorse**

Yes, I know most people have regrets (and even cherish them sometimes) but they are not useful. No one has invented a time machine yet, Better to have transient self-doubt, open constructive criticism about your past actions, modestly and humility to admit your suboptimal action, “wrong” or “mistake”, move on and consciously try to learn and be better than to sit and sulk in long-term regret and remorse that accumulate as life goes on.

Both mechanisms to tell positive or negative stories about yourself. We know your “worth” is actually neutral, no better or worse than anyone, and as certain as everyone of dying, although you may often not think so (that you are net neutral... and going to die too). Normal have their uses .ly only if they are to provide information (for adjustment and learning) rather than debilitating expressions of emotion that hurts yourself or others. Harsh self-criticism or criticizing others in a non-constructive way are both unuseful for instance. Stories should be used in moderation and the key is to always remember they are stories and not reality. Flexibility of the mind is always better than rigidity. We have neuroplasticity as we will see in *Beyond Neurons and Hormones* so have the capacity to change our minds (literally) and should do so more often than not. This means to keep an open mind and not necessarily to change your mind about everything and live in an unpredictable chaos. Life is unpredictable and uncertain as it is, we can adopt it as such yet some stability and direction is good for mental health, meaning and reaching any goal that requires perseverance and some constancy,

The narrative self is a powerful tool and a product of our consciousness and awareness, although it can be manifested in the unconscious, including dreams. It is based on our evolving self-representation (ego). We can say “I saw this, I did this, I am doing this, I want to do that.” It is important for learning, motivation, imagination, and creativity. It is our default mode network in action and involves us going through existence and trying to improve our conditions and ourselves in thoughts and actions. We need to represent ourselves as aging and evolving to be able to self-govern this life that was given to us and have the illusion of free-will. We constantly construct and deconstruct our identity to self with stories (narration). We are prone to suppose that there is a narrative unity to the self like assuming automatically “I am the same person I was 10 years ago or 1 minute ago”, although when we truly think about it, surely, we are not. I explore this problem in my second novel *Two Heads Are Better Than None*. It is very difficult not to think of ourselves as a linear continuum in time, We see past (already distorted memories), experience the present (with our subjective lens), and imagine the future as one. This is the false oneness and the basis of egoistic thoughts and actions. Again, we need disillusionment.

**Our Stories ≠ Reality**

**Our Life ≠ One**

See, I told you I had lived many lives! Oh wait, I am not “I” and this is just a story. Let me let go of my narrative identity to think clearly.

Internarrative identity is building upon the notion of narrative identity, the idea that our identities are shaped by the accounts, crafted descriptions, and explanations we give of our lives. Ajit K. Maan argues that the ability of individuals to shape their lives is extended by multiple autobiographical narratives with associative principles beyond temporality, meaning we have ideas and identities that transcend time in our heads. We connect stories, we modify stories, we are very good at it!

We are creative so use conflicting stories not as disruptive or dead-ends but rather as quasi-infinite possibilities for self creation. Narrative conflict becomes a non-issue. We are very good at believing what we want. If you have not seen that in yourself yet I am sure you have seen it in others!

We also live with the strange and sometimes strict stories of others, our friends, family, community and culture. Some stories are easily believable and integrated (consciously or not) in our own stories, other seem more suspicious and we may point them out as false but by in large they are all stories.

*“Universal truth is not measured in mass appeal, this is the last time I kneel and pray to the sky, cause almost everything I was ever told was a lie.”*

— Immortal Technique, *The Point of No Return*, Revolutionary, Vol. 2. 2003.

Humans are masters of cognitive dissonance and the person they tell the most lies to is always themselves. Self-narrating existence with constantly constructing self in-between authoritarian discourses and dominant cultures enables an extended form of agency and assumed free thought. One can undermine traditional associations, assumptions, concepts, and at the same time, create links between otherwise incommensurable world views. Rather than being a passive recipient of dominant discourses the Internarrative individual is uniquely able to subvert regulatory identity practices<sup>55</sup>. This is done by deconstruction, constant remodeling and wilful or ignorant disregard for novel ideas and new points of view. We can what psychologist call confirmation bias and is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior ideas, stories, conclusions, beliefs, or values. This may be the information you seek, but often the people you spend most time with. To avoid the later part, do like me, travel, far and a lot. Don't be a tourist, talk with the locals, and of all walks of life. See how other people think completely differently, and also how (and why) some think the same.

To combat our false narrative identity, here is the recipe:

1. Tell yourself you know some things, but you “do not know” much more things than you “know” (humble)
2. Be genuinely curious (7Cs) – question, ask, dig, ask again
3. Cultivate openness and remember to be flexible and never rigid
4. Seek discomfort and challenges and welcome them not knowing where that may lead you (never have expectation of the outcome but go with the flow like the Dao)

New ideas, insights and innovation primarily come from seeking challenges and challenging yourself... not by simply challenging others. Challenge and Cultivate could well be other internal Cs but perhaps we already have too many. Or is this just a story I tell myself because I am lazy? See how brain can dismiss both internal and external challenges. Try this four-step (better than twelve) recipe but still be ready to challenge yourself and your biology to achieve success and sagacity.

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<sup>55</sup> Maan, Ak. *Internarrative Identity*, second edition. Rowman and Littlefield, 2010

Our brains are wired to swiftly quell counternarratives (even as atrocious and far from the truth as our stories often are!) to protect our self and story identity (ego). When we hear a story or idea, we don't want to hear we are quick to ignore it, claim the person who said it is ignorant, call them out, or go one step further and call the witch hunt, censorship (burning books, banning in school or deplatforming), or the gallows. Stories are indeed powerful and sometimes deadly. We will see more how to use them better and for the benefit of you and others. The truth can wait. Propaganda of the media or self-propaganda, same, same. Coherence could be another C but we are so far from it.

In the meantime, remember not to get too attached to your stories. That is your ego.

## Positive Emotions

From an evolutionary and survival standpoint, positive emotional states like joy, peace, serenity and gratitude don't seem as useful as fear, anger, or disgust. Sure, the pleasure of food and sex, especially orgasm serve the purpose of subsistence and reproduction. We will see in following books that Oxytocin can mediate peer-bonding and parental protection and affection which serve these biological purposes. Similarly, endogenous endorphins can bring physical and mental euphoria to mitigate pain. Wonder and awe can produce and maintain curiosity to allow learning by new experiences and increase intellect, knowledge and ingenuity by experimentation.

So what is the adaptive value of gratitude? It seems that it is to help prevent and recover from the stresses of existence. Barbara Fredrickson developed the Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions to explain the mechanics of how positive emotions were important to survival. Fredrickson and colleagues measured the amount of time it took each person to recover from the anxiety about the possible speech. Results indicated that positive emotions led to a quicker return to a resting state than neutral or negative emotions. This is called the undoing effect.

The implication is that positive emotions are useful, and they undo the stress caused by negative emotions. Still, we can often observe that negative emotions take longer to recover in general from a biological standpoint. When you are happy, you can be angry in a second and when you are sad or angry it is more difficult to get back to your normal state, much less happy state, for most unless you have trained yourself extensively. Emotions are a biological manifestation in earnest. We will see that negative emotions mostly activate the sympathetic pathway of the autonomous nervous system in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* and what that entails in terms of stress and other factors.

## Hedonic Treadmill (or Hedonic Adaptation)

The hedonic treadmill is a theory based on the observation that there is a marked tendency for people to quickly return to a relatively stationary level of happiness or “set point” despite experiencing major positive or negative events or life changes. Adaptation is how the temporary effects fade over time and the assumption is also that there may be a biological or genetic baseline for each individual. We will see that dopamine may be a key neurotransmitter linked to motivation and feelings or euphoria and happiness. I would also add that this theory could also be applied to small events, as perceived to be “negative” or “positive” and that the brain resets from highs and lows, and adapts, in a small cycle timeframe (minutes, hours, days) as well as longer cycle (months), but can also change its baselines to some extent.

## Happiness Set-Point

Psychology research has shown we all have a happiness set point. Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky has identified three factors that contribute to a person's happiness set point and how much they matter:

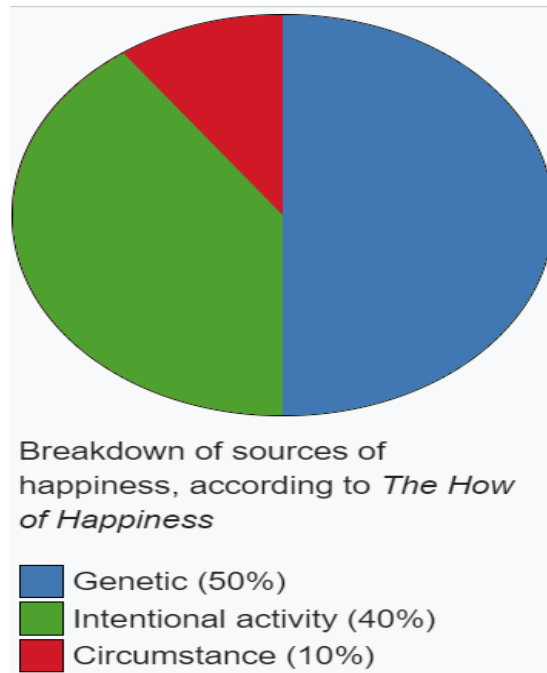
Out of one's control (60%)

-50% is determined by genetics

-10% is determined by environment and circumstances

Under one's control (40%)

-40% is determined by mindsets, choices and habits



**Table X: Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. 2008**

Therefore, although we can determine how happy or unhappy we are to a certain degree, most of our happiness is determined not by things we can control but by things we cannot control, according to this research. What is most interesting here is that environmental factors, situations, and events only account for 10%, so our mindset, intention and habits are about 4 times more important than where we were born or what has happened to us, including triumph and trauma.

Stoics have shown us to focus on what we can control and 40% is enough to work with. Perhaps you will never be as happy as someone with an optimum disposition for happiness and applying an optimum mindset (Matthieu Ricard?), the important thing is to be as happy as you can be! From what I have seen around the world, humans are relatively happy and unhappy in a rather unpredictable way and they have no clear understanding through their surrounding cultures or their own personal journey of discovery what it takes to be happy. People are struggling and happiness still seems to be mixture of luck and some pseudo-spiritual, expectation-oriented motivational, health, wealth and exercise. Wrong! Happiness is here, but people do not know how to access it readily. I hope to show you before the end of this book that you can be happier than you are today. We saw that being not as negative as nature intends is the beginning, but there is more.

Genetics is the biggest factor in the mix and can account for brain plasticity (your capacity to learn and your rigid construct of the world) yet these capacities although hardwired can still be enhance and expanded with knowledge and practice within their biological range. Many genetic influences affect our neurocognition, as we will explore together in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones and find hacks to help you enhance whatever biology you were given at birth, which turns out is still not too different in the human range. We think quite alike in general.* Yes, neurology can be affected by genetics, environment and behaviors and mindsets and is linked with mental health and happiness.

Biology should not be a barrier as such, just the tool we have to play in this playfield which is the universe. We may not understand the universe any time soon, but we can understand our body and brain better every year. Neuroscience and genetics have gone leaps and bounds in progress since I first studied these topics at McGill University in 1997. The more we know about your brain and body's nature, functioning and potential, the better we can act to make us truly content. The better chance we will have to achieve our own definition of happiness. Let us look about how others have defined happiness before I attempt to define it for our purpose of going beyond the traditional definitions.

### Happiness Defined (Two Forms)

Psychologists struggle to define happiness because it is subjective and self-reported. Happiness researcher, Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, and most psychologists define happiness in two parts:

1. How much positive versus negative emotions and moods in a quantitative way
2. How people feel overall about their lives in a qualitative way

The problem with these two aspects is that they are still both evaluated by the narrative self and the narrative self also has a negativity bias as we have seen earlier in this chapter. Even if the first form seems like the experiential self, and it may be in actuality, the reporting of the daily, weekly, monthly or yearly experience is in fact always in the past so involves the negativity and intensity sensitive narrative self appraisal of past happy/unhappy actual actuarial balance.

The reality is that one may experience much more happy or neutral moments in a week or month in terms of minutes and hours, but if one or two bothersome and intense experiences colour the narrative brain's (default mode network) perspective, it may tilt the self-reported happiness of both 1 and 2 to the dark side. The ego is not often happy. Even if you stroke it constantly.

Most current happiness measurements then:

1. Evaluates the past
2. Are biased towards unhappiness

It would be much more accurate to measure happiness in the moment and with technology, including, just-in-time digital journal or surveys, smartphones, smart watches, IoT, and even fMRI in experimental settings. Some studies have started to do that, and I encourage experimental psychologists worldwide to address this important knowledge gap as well as clinical psychologists to start to raise awareness with their patients.

### Third Form of Happiness

We have seen two types of happiness, short-term hedonistic happiness, and longer-term eudemonic well-being from the Stoics. Dr Robert Waldinger, the director and researcher in the world's

longest happiness study (Harvard Study of Adult Development), adds a third type of happiness in importance to study<sup>56</sup>, we then have:

1. Hedonistic Happiness = moment to moment dopamine surge (experiential self)
2. Eudemonic Well-Being = narrative self alignment with stories and values = meaning
3. Psychological Richness = Curiosity (7Cs)

Dr. Waldinger and Columbia university researchers agree with me that curiosity is a cornerstone of happiness, and more so for some. He and his colleague Dr. Marc Shultz, also add that meaningful relationships are also a key for happiness as they help reduce and regulate stress. We will look at relationships in more detail in *Beyond Sex*. Good relationships may also extend enjoyment with shared experiences, for instance touch and shared laughter. We will look at both touch and laughter in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Genetics and neurology may have a role into spending more energy in trying to fulfil one of the three types if your neurology make you more inclined to either:

1. Enjoy the day-to-day activities
2. Have introspection and need greater meaning
3. Seek novelty and adventure in experiences

A good life can be simple, but complexity is also part of life. “People make plans and God laughs” means that as simple and stable as we may want our lives to be, uncertainty and unexpected events are sure to come so flexibility and adaptability are good traits to have and good traits to look for in potential life partners as people and the world are sure to change. Adaptability to change is second most important predictor of stable and satisfying relationship according to the study.

The curiosity component as the third form of happiness is interesting as it adds an element of variety that may be crucial to some. Few can imagine a full life having been born and died with little novel experience may they be relational, artistic, athletic, craftsman-like, creative, humorous, or otherwise. A life well lived most have an “interesting” label to it for many. At least some aspect out of the mundane and ordinary. To me that curiosity is high and probably why I traveled the world so extensively, but in whatever capacity and whatever level of inherent curiosity you may have, I encourage you to explore and develop it to be happier.

Psychological stability, meaning how long after an incident it takes for you to go back to baseline, also plays a role in happiness, as it will affect your experiential self substantially when negative perceptions occur. Hopefully, this book series will give you tools to return to a happy baseline quicker which is my sincere goal and reason for writing this comprehensive, if not exhaustive, guide.

## Brooks Book

Arthur Brooks is a sociology professor, happiness expert and author who defines happiness as

1. Satisfaction: Joy you get after a successful struggle (dopamine)
2. Enjoyment: Pleasure + People + Memory
3. Meaning: Purpose + Coherence

Brooks encourage people to practice taking responsibility for their behavior, instead of letting emotions and impulses rule them. Desires and wrongly tuned compulsions lead us to distractions that do not make us happier in the long run.

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<sup>56</sup> Williamson, Chris; *Dr Robert, Modern Wisdom: Lessons from the World's Longest Happiness Study*. 2022

His idea is consciously build your life around what will truly make you happier. For him, that means nurturing four pillars that will elevate you: family, friends, meaningful work, and spirituality. We will go beyond spirituality in *Beyond Spirituality*, talk about the benefits of good relationships in *Beyond Sex*, and look at the neuroscience of meaning and purpose In *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Brooks' ideas are worthwhile, and his onus on the self instead of outer circumstance is correct, yet we haven't found the definition that serves us best yet.

## Beyond Happy (A New Definition)

Daunting task to redefine happiness, but let's keep it simple. We saw at the beginning of the book the 13 factors I mentioned for happiness, the 7Cs we have started to explore, the 7 tricks to combat the negativity bias and the 5 pillars of philosophy we can take from thousands of years of history. When we think about happiness we generally think about self-reported happiness. People report their subjective happiness yet we have already seen that this reporting is biased so why should we focus on that?

The narrative self is a nasty liar, this is biology truth we must accept and come to terms with. This self is incapable of telling the truth in fact, it automatically distorts it. Only the experiential self, although also subjective in many ways, is closer to the happiness we can strive for. Then we can use our narrative self, even if it is a liar, to tell us and others nice stories so we can be doubly happy.

Our new definition of happiness could succinctly be:

1. Current Contentment: experience the deepest joy in the moment
2. Positive Narration: of the past, present and future

What do you think about that? This would allow our narrative and experiential self to work more closely and coherently in unison.

Now that we have a working definition, we can expand on what will allow us to maximize these two aspects for our increased true happiness.

We can now see that the first of the 7C s is the first aspect and the 6 others touch on the positive narratives: Curiosity, Creativity, Compassion, Compersion, Courage & Connection. Connection and curiosity can also help you find profound contentment in the moment.

## Children and Happiness

Having children is one of our strongest biological drive that acts through hormones affecting our body and brain. Adults, especially women (who have a "biological clock"), in their 30s and 40s who want to have a child and cannot conceive overwhelming feel anxiety (fear of uncertainty) and feeling of inadequacy or worthlessness. Most parents attach meaning to raising their children and often mention it as one of their most important factors of happiness. Still, many studies show that adults who elected/chose not to have children are either equally as happy or even happier than adults with children in self-reported happiness results.

How can that be? Many studies show a U-shaped happiness curve tendency where adults are less happy than elders and young people, who both have less responsibilities. This underexperienced happiness during work-heavy years is likely due to the responsibility load, which includes not only work, but finances and family. Can someone tell me what is a bigger responsibility than spending two or more decades raising an infant through childhood, challenging adolescence, and early adulthood, supporting him/her/they physically, psychologically, emotionally, financially, and more?

Even though we have a biological drive to procreate and then take care of our children, we find that they may in fact impair our happiness in some levels, when faced with the harsh reality of the responsibility of raising children. How can we then counteract this?

I suggest three possible solution tracks to curve the happiness experience of parents who have children.

1. Attach meaning to the process of parenting (and not to the results)
2. Detach yourself from overidentifying your role and responsibility as “a parent”
3. Learn or relearn about playfulness, worry-free, wonder and awe from your youth

The capacity for astonishment and play of children (#3) is something we should not lose as adults or actively relearn if we have lost it. Awe, wonder and play positively affect the brain and happiness as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Worry-free mindset means thinking less about the past and future, and although it seems crucial as a parent to think about your children’s future, if you do so too much you may become anxious, angry, fearful, worried and affect you and your child. Worrying is the ego with fearful and cynical creativity (the danger of this 7Cs along with destructive creativity). It is also affected by memory and the negativity bias and takes place in the imaginative default mode network.

**Worry/Anxiety = Ego + Imagination/Creativity + Negativity Bias**

Smile and laughter are some things children do much more than adults and also incredibly powerful happiness boosters. We will see the details in *Beyond Spirituality*.

The importance of meaning (#1) will be covered later in the chapter and the traps of identity and ego (#2) have been touched upon earlier in this chapter and the previous one. You can be an excellent parent without identifying yourself as the “role of parent”. Being identified with the ego as “I am a parent now” often results in frustrations, expectations, overprotective attitudes and actions, “overgiving” or spoiling your kids, and controlling or overbearing behaviors. Just be the best human being for your kids, inspire by words and actions, learn, listen, be vulnerable and authentic, give and grow together.

On the flip side, children may be automatically happier than adults, yet to maximize their youthful experience, psychologists agree on a few things which I will add upon and slightly twist with my personal enlightening experience as a parent.

## Parenting 101

From infancy to teenage years, here are some suggestions to increase your children development and happiness (both brain functions).

1. Allow children to experience 3 types of time: alone, with adults, with children (play time).
2. Learn how to reprimand your child appropriately (time-sensitive, sensible, consequence matching undesirable behavior, empathic, empowering, curious/learning more than questioning/accusing, rational with a rationale explained instead of authoritative, reasonable and redeeming instead of demeaning).
3. Encourage multilingual language acquisition from 2 to 5 years old when children can acquire several “mother tongues” and grammars at the same time, even if each language may take more time than learning a single one and that language mixing/confusion is bound to occur.
4. Avoid exposing your child to trauma and stress yet explain to your children they can expect trauma and stress from life and prepare them to be resilient now and in the future.
5. Let your child be as worry-free, playful, and creative as possible, yet involve your child in increasing level of responsibility and ownership to increase confidence, sense of community and accomplishment.



6. Listen to your children and let them take decisions that affect their life as much as possible. Teach your children that you are there to help/assist/inspire/guide with your advice and possibly resources, but that ultimately it is their lives. Do not construct a dictatorship in your home. Rather involve your kids at the level of their increasing ability and take your input seriously, even, and especially, when you disagree and must put your foot down.
7. Teach your children to be aware, not only of their surroundings, but of their emotions and thoughts. Teach them to challenge their thoughts and those of others, including their culture, their schoolteachers and including you!! No one has the absolute truth so encourage them to be ever curious and to come to their own conclusions, only to revisit them periodically.

Once my son is an adult I may write a full book about parenting, yet these are 7 easy steps I can happily share for your benefit. Your children will thank me (and hopefully thank you!) later.

### Curiosity, Learning and Wonder

Curiosity has been shown to be linked with both achievement/success and happiness. Total learning potential is in fact dependent on both interest and intelligence.

#### **Learning = Curiosity + Capacity to Learn**

If you are not curious, it is difficult yet not impossible to learn. We learn by experience and learning is the rewiring of our neuroplastic brain. Seeking new experiences with curiosity allow us to learn better and faster. In the business world or non-profit organizations, a strong sense of intellectual curiosity allows for overcoming inhibition and the necessary drive for novel innovation and change.

Inquisitiveness is a hallmark of many children and young people, and tend to diminish with time. Why do many children ask one question after the other around age four or five? It is part of their cognitive development. They ask a lot of “why’s”. So why stop there? Don’t we want to continue to develop as adults? I do!

Curiosity can also lead as to appreciate more readily what is in front of us and lead to contentment. Children are also better than adults at this and can marvel at things we find insignificant, unimportant, or boring. Curiosity is almost unbounded at childhood and we should cultivate and nurture it as adults.

Author Scott Shigeoka, author of *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World*, writes that a lack of curiosity is at the heart of society's divisions<sup>57</sup>. Let’s consider the power of curiosity. “I wanted to learn more about how we use curiosity to strengthen our relationships, bring our happiness to our lives, to reach across differences,” he says. “At the heart of the division and disconnection so rampant all around the world is a lack of curiosity,” he said. “When we turn away from one another, we operate from assumptions and biases. We’re more likely to dehumanize a group, which makes it easier for us to fear or hate those people.” We talked about this earlier in the chapter. Curiosity may be an even greater force than emotional empathy to have true connection (7Cs) with others.

He continues: “When you're more curious, you’re happier. You tend to have stronger and higher-quality relationships that give you meaning and give you a sense of joy, and in which you feel connected to people around you.” Curiosity can reduce anxiety and depression, by focusing with intention on the present instead of the past or future.

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<sup>57</sup> Hannon, AK. Author Q&A: Curiosity is key to happiness and success. Yahoo Finance. February 3, 2024

In the workplace, the research shows that curiosity is a trait that people are looking for from their leaders. Curious leaders are more liked and they're seen as more competent. Curious teams tend to be more creative (7Cs) and more collaborative (11Cs) and more innovative too.

It is important to be curious about the world and especially about others, it also serves to be curious about yourself: What are you really good at? What are you not good at? Can you be better at it or get external help in that matter? What are you passionate about? What excites you and gives you meaning?

Staying relentlessly curious rather than operating from assumptions or ego is crucial for learning and happiness. We talked about accepting and seeking challenges, that is also part of curiosity. Curiosity can help us with the fear of change or uncertainty. Using mental reframing we can replace anxiety with curiosity. It creates a sense of possibility. It gives optimism, hope, positivity, and excitement. It makes the narrative self happy. Try then to cultivate the mindset of constantly discovering and learning new things.

**Curiosity = Excitement + Nonjudgement > Judgement**

Research has shown that when you are truly curious about someone else it reduces hostility, and it increases empathy. Curiosity allows us to be constantly attuned to the external and internal worlds, the experiential and narrative selves. Own and fine-tune your observational skills and you will be able to see and discover so much. Ask more questions and resist from having easy answers from your superficial easy explanations or quick categorizing.

### Curiosity Killed the Cat

Predatory curiosity is when you're asking questions for an ulterior motive and that is what we can consider nosy and noxious. Yes, there could be too much curiosity in some instances when it relates to people but if your intentions are compassionate and caring, I would say be as curious as you can and if someone does not want to answer a question, simply leave it as that with a smile.

You can also be too curious in the world and end up in trouble or even dead. Curiosity has gotten me in trouble on several occasions. Yet the opposite of curiosity and courage is fear so when you have no fear of death, trouble or the uncertainty, try to be curious wisely and take calculated risks.

### Children's Wonder

Children see the world with wonder and it enables them to learn quicker, like curiosity, but with a slightly different mechanism. While curiosity is the motivation, wonder is more like the reward. We will see more about the motivation-reward pathway as well as explore in vivid detail the power of awe, wonder and the beginner's mindset in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Still know that wonder is a seldom focused on key to happiness and Japanese are perhaps more advanced than other cultures in that aesthetic and poetic appreciation of the world.

### Japanese Wonder

Komorebi (木漏れ日) in Japanese means "sunlight leaking through trees," this word describes the beauty and wonder of rays of light dappling through overhead leaves, casting dancing shadows on the forest floor.

kōyō describes the changing leaves of autumn. That is why Japanese tourists flock every year to Canada to see this wonderful transient event. These Japanese words, embedded in the culture and philosophy, specifically describe the beauty around us. They are detailed enough to encourage us to notice, observe like a novice, and take a moment to marvel at the wonder of nature.

## Louis' Wonder

Louis Armstrong immersive song lyrics is the definition of seeing wonder in the world, basking in it, analyzing its intricate and mixing it *with* positive imagination.

***Wonder = Presence + Positive Creativity***

Read the simple and timeless poetry in the second verse:

*The colors of the rainbow  
So pretty in the sky  
Are also on the faces  
Of people going by  
I see friends shaking hands, saying how do you do  
They're really saying, I love you*

*I hear babies cry, I watch them grow  
They'll learn much more  
Than I'll ever know  
And I think to myself  
What a wonderful world  
Yes, I think to myself*

And yes, we should be saying this to ourselves every day as we experience our familiar or foreign surroundings. The mundane can become magical just like that. We will be more about arts, creativity, music, and wonder in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

## Natural vs. Synthetic Happiness

Psychologists have started to distinguish two types of so-called happiness, one that we are born with (natural) and require little mental effort and another that we need to reframe our external world and create (synthesize) with more effort, although the level of that effort normally decreases with practice.

Natural happiness is when you receive some expected or habitual reward like food you know is tasty, money or material possession, job you are seeking, achievement you are aiming, mate you are perusing, etc. We know now that the anticipation or expectation of that reward is often greater than the reception of that reward and that once the reward is reached, happiness (dopamine) level decreases rather quickly. Still, this is something our biology and our culture allows us to experience since a young age and we keep on relying on through adulthood and old age.

Synthetic happiness is something we create, although it is no less false or fake. It is proven to be equally effective or more and is often also more long-lasting. It makes use of our same biology of the brain, yet is activated in a different, less intuitive way. You can expect to be happy when you receive a birthday gift, a promotion, an award, or an inheritance, be it from hard work or from luck. It is less evident that someone who gets fired, ends a long-term relationship, goes to jail, or files bankruptcy, loses an important sports match or anticipated contract, can manufacture happiness through the same brain circuitry. From our new definition of happiness, synthetic happiness is positive narrative's result.

**Positive Narrative = Synthetic Happiness**

From our brain and experience, there is no difference between natural and synthetic happiness. We feel happy either way. The neurology and sensation are the same.

**Synthetic Happiness = As Real as Natural Happiness**

## Get To Know Yourself

We will look more about psychological approaches and psychology in general in following books, and I am a psychologist so love the profession. However, the best psychologist or therapist should always be yourself, same as ultimately the best medical doctor for you should be you. To get a Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) in psychology or medical doctorate (MD) may be out of reach for many, yet to systematically seek to get to know yourself including your personality type (as it also evolves) may help you understand how your mind (and brain) functions. Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) may be the most popular in Western countries, including an exaggerated popularity in South Korea and especially in dating culture. In ex-USSR countries, a somewhat similar 16 personality type system called Socionics also classifies people yet seems to have less scientific rigor and data. MBTI and Socionics have been criticized for their scientific validity.

Still, we will see more about MBTI in *Beyond Sex* as well as the love and sex languages. Other popular personality tests are PEN, Belbin, DSM, or DISC but none are as accurate or comprehension as the Five Factor Model, or Big Five.

## Big Five

The best personality classification, with more robust science, is the “Big Five” or “OCEAN”, and looks at 5 axis or scales:

1. Openness to experience (inventive/curious vs. consistent/cautious)

**Openness = Curiosity & Creativity (7Cs)**

2. Conscientiousness (efficient/organized vs. extravagant/careless)
3. Extraversion (outgoing/energetic vs. solitary/reserved)
4. Agreeableness (friendly/compassionate vs. critical/rational)

**Agreeableness = Compassion (7Cs)**

5. Neuroticism (sensitive/nervous vs. resilient/confident)

**Low Neuroticism = Calm = Contentment (7Cs)**

We talked at length about curiosity and will look at creativity more in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. In general, people are too fearful and should be more open to experiences. The two first scales can be related in the way people deal with new situations, order/disorder, and uncertainty.

**Embrace Uncertainty = Open to Experience**

High degree of openness to experience can sometimes be conceived as risk-taking behavior and there is a clear genetic component to this. However, the idea is not to take unnecessary or dangerous risks all the time, but rather to be open to new experiences and even seek challenges as we saw. By creating more and different experiences we can change our environment and at the same time our neurology to be more flexible, open, and capable to appreciate the opportunities before us, whatever they are. This leads to fulfilment and contentment. We can train our brain to be better than our biology by decreasing fear and anxiety and replacing it with excitement. Remember that the opposite of open is closed so we want to cultivate an open mind. A common problem is that most people think they have a relatively open mind, until they are faced with new experiences, they never taught possible. Seek challenges out of your comfort zone to open your mind in a real way. Never think it is open enough. Travel to different places; talk to different people and different kind of people; speak new languages; read new books; watch foreign movies and of different genres; try different sexual positions and propositions... and why not skydive once or twice! I did and still have lots of new experiences to be even more open to.

Conscientiousness is how organized or how you enjoy routine, and the opposite is the ability to be spontaneous, easy-going, and going with the flow. This scale is neither good or bad for happiness and one should simply know where they are in the scale to practice have a more fluid and flexible mindset. That is to say, if you are more organized and routine-oriented, get out of your comfort zone more and try to embrace uncertainty, and if you are too spontaneous and careless, practice to organize yourself in some situations and key important elements of your life. The more you can do both ends of the scale, the more choices and happiness you will create for you and others. Still, refrain from being paralyzed by perfectionism while still being dependable.

When it comes to agreeableness, it is a double-edge sword and especially women are prone to be “people-pleasers” as they may care overly and for the wrong reasons what other people think or may think, often neglecting their needs or building revengeful resentment. Although compassion is always preferred and is an inner intention as we will see in the next chapter, in action in our social world, it can be maladaptive to always yield to others demands and expectations in action and one should train to be more assertive and critical. The reverse is also true, and the two ends of that spectrum could be called rational compassion which is having egoless intentions without letting your aware ego be trampled (setting healthy boundaries), nor empathy or emotion cloud your judgement.

#### **Rational Compassion = Agreeableness and Assertiveness with Reason**

Neuroticism is about how we react to worry, stress and anxiety. It is essentially emotional regulation. Low neuroticism is a clear better adaptation to the modern world where it might have been more important to a more hostile environment where we need to worry about all type of potential threats for survival. A high neuroticism has a link to a Serotonin transporter gene that has a longer form of the gene and makes neurotic people stress with serotonin production, making them take much more time than others to come back to baseline happiness. We will look at serotonin and its link to contentment as a Here & Now molecule in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, but for now we can assume that neuroticism trait can be the most linked Big 5 trait to what we saw in *Happiness Set-Point* section above about genetic component of happiness for individuals. Neuroticism affects:

- A) baseline happiness (regular level of anxiety and serotonin) - genetic
- B) transient happiness (response and fluctuations to environments and mindsets)

Level of neuroticism affects the time it takes for your body to remove the cortisol, epinephrine and other stress hormones that keeps your body and mind in high alert. Even if there is a genetic component, remember that awareness and mind training can allow you to be better equipped to be joyful and return to your baseline quicker when external or internal stimuli puts you in alert. Even people with low level of neuroticism can improve this adaptive autoregulation with practice. We can always do better. This is the psychological stability metric we talked about earlier in the chapter in *Third Form of Happiness*. An emotional stability scale was proposed by Chaturvedi and Chander<sup>58</sup>.

It has 5 dimensions which I reorganized as AAAAP:

1. Anxiety vs. Calm
2. Aggression vs. Tolerance
3. Autonomy vs. Dependence
4. Apathy vs. Empathy
5. Pessimism vs. Optimism

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<sup>58</sup> Chaturvedi M, Chander R. Development of emotional stability scale. *Ind Psychiatry J*. 2010 Jan;19(1):37-40. doi: 10.4103/0972-6748.77634. PMID: 21694789; PMCID: PMC3105556.

From these dimensions we can see we have 5 specific areas to work on to be better regulated and happier. First, we must use positive narratives to calm our anxiety as quickly as possible daily. Second, we must keep our anger in check to promote acceptance and tolerance.

**Less Anger and Anxiety = More Acceptance + Peace + Tolerance**

Third, we must have less attachments to people and things and be autonomous. We will look at attachment styles (attachment theory) in more depth in *Beyond Sex* and how they affect relationships.

**Less Attachment = Less Insecurity = More Autonomy**

Fourth, apathy is the opposite of action and courage. Empathy has its pros and cons as we will see in *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)*. Let us focus on decreasing apathy then.

**Less Apathy = More Action + Confidence + Courage**

Fifth, we saw that our brain already has a clear and strong negativity bias, so the aim is to counterbalance it with as much optimism as possible.

**Less Gloom = More Glory + Greatness + Hope**

## Extroversion and Aversion

You may have noticed that I purposely skipped the extraversion scale above. All 3 popular models of personality archetypes (OCEAN, MBTI, Socionics) identify an introversion/extroversion scale which are the same for all intent and purposes. People may think that introversion/extroversion is related to the degree someone is social, yet it is related to the energy one feels when being social or not.

Introversion is when being in a social setting or interacting with people seem to require energy (some or much) and needs to be recuperated later, whereas extroversion gives mental energy to a person more than it requires. An extrovert may feel rejuvenated after being in contact with (positive) people. Introvert may also enjoy social interactions, although perhaps with a more limited set and number of people. They do mostly feel “drained” after such an interaction, even when they enjoyed it. Introverts often talk in terms of “limited energy” or “(social) battery”.

**Extroversion = More Energy (In and After Social Setting)**

Even people can be prone to be more or less extrovert, and this baseline can change at different points of one's life, there may be benefits from acting in an extroverted way. An Australian study defined acting in an extrovert way as outgoing, talkative, bold, and assertive. Acting introvert was defined as calm, quiet and sensitive. When asked to act extroverted for one full week as opposed to a randomized control, the frequency of interactions did not increase but positive mood was increased significantly by changing the behavior in social interactions. However, introverted participants had weaker increases, reported more tiredness (lower energy level), and decreased feelings of authenticity<sup>59</sup>. The positive effects were still significant, and it is possible to act socially even if introverted. We can thus respect the desired energy level balance but enhance each of our interactions with closed ones and strangers by being more social and thus happier, with increased well-being in the moment (experiential self) and retrospectively (narrative self). We are a social animal, regardless of where we stand in the introversion-extroversion spectrum.

Separately, aversion is not a specific personality trait, yet many studies link the feeling of repulsion or disgust as linked to several personal and social spheres. We can imagine that as we lower our dislike, disgust, or aversion, we get to experience life with more equanimity or even positivity.

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<sup>59</sup> JJacques-Hamilton, Rowan; Sun, Jessie; Smillie, Luke. (2018). Costs and Benefits of Acting Extraverted: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. 148. 10.1037/xge0000516.

**Less Aversion = Less Loathing = More Love = More Openness = More Social**

Studies show that women in general have more aversion and higher sense of disgust than men. There are some evolutionary psychology reasons for that based on mate selection criteria. Women should be even more aware of their propensity for aversion to increase their happiness. More on the neuroanatomy of disgust in *Beyond Neurons*. Remember that Buddhist philosophy tells us that both desire and aversion are barriers to true happiness.

## HEXACO

Dr. Lee & Dr. Ashton theorized a 6<sup>th</sup> factor to add to the Big 5 in their book *The H Factor of Personality*. Their modified version has the acronym HEXACO which stands for honesty-humility (H), emotionality (E), extraversion (X), agreeableness (A), conscientiousness (C), and openness to experience (O). The H factor is thus honesty-humility. In some research, this extra dimension is found to be worthwhile to study. The HEXACO-PI-R assesses the six broad HEXACO personality factors, each of which contains four "facets", or narrower personality characteristics for a total of 24. An additional 25<sup>th</sup> narrow facet, called altruism, is also included and represents a blend of the honesty-humility, emotionality, and agreeableness factors. Let's compare HEXACO facets to Big 5 subtypes.

HEXACO (25 subscales)	OCEAN (30 subscales)
Altruism	
<b>Honesty-humility (H):</b>	
Sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, modesty	
<b>Emotionality (E):</b>	<b>Neuroticism (N):</b>
Anxiety, fearfulness, sentimentality, dependence	Anxiety, anger, depression, dependence (aka immoderation), self-consciousness, vulnerability
<b>Extraversion (X):</b>	<b>Extraversion (E):</b>
Social self-esteem, social boldness, sociability, liveliness	Friendliness, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity level, excitement-seeking, cheerfulness
<b>Agreeableness (A):</b>	<b>Agreeableness (A):</b>
Forgiveness, flexibility, patience, gentleness	Altruism, modesty, morality, trust, cooperation, sympathy
<b>Conscientiousness (C):</b>	<b>Conscientiousness (C):</b>
Organization, diligence (aka perfectionism), prudence (aka cautiousness)	Cautiousness, dutifulness, orderliness, self-efficacy, self-discipline, achievement-striving
<b>Openness to experience (O):</b>	<b>Openness to experience (O):</b>
Inquisitiveness, aesthetic appreciation, creativity, unconventionality	Imagination, aesthetic appreciation (aka artistic interest), emotionality, adventurousness, intellect, liberalism

### Table X: HEXACO vs. OCEAN

We can see that the HEXACO is not necessarily better and has 5 less subscales. It takes altruism out of agreeableness and takes modesty into the new category of honesty-humility. Note that the OCEAN subscale of emotionality is the awareness of emotions which is adaptive and useful (see *Chapter 3: Philosophy*) while the HEXACO scale of emotionality means the dysregulation of emotions or emotional instability which is maladaptive. Similarly, self-consciousness in neuroticism is not the same as self-awareness, and is a unnecessary concern for what others may think of us.

I personally like agreeableness subscales better in HEXACO than OCEAN. Morality is debatable when there is no undisputed right or wrong, good or bad, on a philosophical level. Modesty can be false to be appear agreeable or real but too strong and make for lack of confidence. We saw the right balance of self-perception to be neutral or slightly positive earlier. Modesty can become negative. For HEXACO, Forgiveness is a key topic we will discuss further at the end of this chapter and a cornerstone of happiness (one's own and others).

#### Forgiveness = Happiness

Cognitive flexibility allows resilience, achievement, agreeableness and happiness. Patience is a virtue like the Stoics and Buddhists (it is one of the Eight Ps below). Gentleness in the sense of kindness and mildness of temper is also an excellent recipe for happiness of self and others. Once you are happy, the next best thing is to make others happy, and making other happy can make us happy. Studies showing kindness and compassion for others being even more beneficial than self-compassion and self-kindness are starting to emerge.

#### Happy OCEAN

Very happy people are:

1. More open to experience (O) — curiosity, creativity & courage (7Cs)
2. Not too conscientious (C) — less disgust
3. More extraverted (E) — connection (7Cs)
4. More agreeable (A) — compassion & compersion (7Cs)
5. Less neurotic (N) — equanimity & emotional regulation

The last three have been demonstrated in a 2002 study of 222 participants<sup>60</sup>.

#### Personal Psycho

Remember that psychologists can help you discover and tweak some of your brain states and patterns, yet it is ultimately up to you to put in in practice. The sooner you get to know yourself intimately, the good, the bad, and the ugly, the better you can reach and go beyond happiness.

It may be important to go back to how we grew up, as Sigmund Freud suggested and find for instance what were the best and worst moment in our life as a children and teenager... as per our distorted narrative self. Most importantly how did we cope from the difficult as well as happy situations (wired our neuroplastic brain), what did we learn (memory, emotional triggers, and habit formation). The question is often then, if we ever thought or tried another way then are childhood, adulthood adaptive (learned) patterns and habits, from experiences, including various (minor or major) success and trauma imprinted in brain states and network circuitry. How did we feel about ourselves in many important different aspects (self-stories and self-identity). This requires many reflections, auto-awareness ("soul-searching") and

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<sup>60</sup> Diener E, Seligman MEP. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*. 2002;13:81–84.



inquires to find out. Some online tests exist that help you with some basic questions and directions. You may do the Big 5 test online and redo it once or twice a year to see if any significant changes for example. Psychologists, psychiatrists and other therapists or social workers can help with finding out, but you can start and must in any case continue the process.

How a psychologist challenges the way their patient's think is very important to potentially better be able to find the missing piece(s) of the puzzle, try new ones, and discard or transform old ones. It can help us understand ourselves (and our brain) better and help willingly rewire our brains to be a healthier (more adapted) version of ourselves, benefiting ourselves, loved ones and others. This transforming of some harmful (maladaptive) behaviors or habits, or earnest enhancement of some currently suboptimal helpful (adaptive) behaviors is the crux of psychotherapy.

1. Discover (Curiosity (7Cs))
2. Diagnose (Does not need to be Disease or Disorder)
3. Do (Test and Try Tools)
4. Do Again (Build Better Brain)

### Are You a Psychopath or Sociopath?

The dark triad describes three notably offensive, but non-pathological personality types: Machiavellianism, sub-clinical narcissism, and sub-clinical psychopathy. Then there are clinically diagnosed disorders as we will see below. Peterson defines a psychopath as come who has no compassion for others as well as no self-compassion for his or her future self.



### Psychopath Vs. Sociopath

Psychopathy is a rather real and common type of personality (disorder) that is best diagnosed with the PCL-R (revised psychopathy checklist) and found in about 1% of adult population but it could be as high as 4.5%, and higher in men<sup>61</sup>. I suggest not trying to diagnose anyone you know with any disorder and leave that to psychologists because many subtiles and factors can be confounding. For instance, gifted individuals who represent 2% of the population can often be misdiagnosed as narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) or psychopaths, even by trained psychologist at times. Psychopaths may have perceived stunted emotional response yet still some empathy, while sociopaths seem to have cognitive empathy used for deception and gifted individuals normally more of a rational compassion yet may also be emotionally overexcitable and show marked emotional empathy. We will see more about empathy in the *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)*.

I attended a riveting 2025 conference on psychopathy by Belgian researcher Dr. Thierry H. Pham, where he explains that psychopathy can be an adaptive personality type because it does not blunt emotions as previously thought, but rather decreases the emotional motivation, leading to a marked emotion regulation capacity better than the “normal” population. Psychopathy lowers the integration of (emotional & intense) stories—narrative self—or less self-defining memories (SDM), which may lessen

<sup>61</sup> Sanz-García A, Gesteira C, Sanz J, García-Vera MP. Prevalence of Psychopathy in the General Adult Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Front Psychol.* 2021 Aug 5;12:661044. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.661044. PMID: 34421717; PMCID: PMC8374040.

growth and learning. However, it increases resilience and is a protective factor to trauma, including developing less post traumatic stress symptoms and better adaptation in stressful isolation. It even shows higher subjective and biological measure of emotional regulation (equanimity) while maintaining appreciation, comprehension and feeling of emotions in the moment. With biological markers, psychopathic personality disorder (PPD) population has heart rate variability (HRV) at rest much higher than control and about the same as control during stressful event. Sociopathy refers normally to antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) and in this case, subjects in contrast have much less variability (nervous regulation) than control—and than psychopaths. Similar findings were found with electrodermal activity (EDA) with weaker regulation with ASPD than PPD and control.

The fact that they cannot integrate memories well is very interesting and relates to old adages that “psychopaths cannot bind time” (Hare, 1970) or “cannot benefit from the experience” (McCord, 1964). It is also said that they “know the words of a song but not the music”. There is less resistance and less automatic negative stories, thus less cognitive energy needed to combat and regulate them.

Although psychopaths have less temporal collage of importance stories of self, they still have a strong self. The biggest contributor to the violent or antisocial behavior of psychopaths is not the lack of emotion but rather the overemphasis of the ego. For instance, they use more self-referential words like “I”, “my”, “mine”. More about communication and self-talk in *Beyond Communication*. While superior regulation of negative emotions is good for happiness—coupled with positive emotion expression, which may not be as impaired in psychopaths as previously thought—, ego identity is inversely correlated with long-term happiness as we have seen. Psychopaths may focus on current subjective wellbeing over quality of social bonds and tend to exploit relationships in a utilitarian way. Lastly, PPD typically expresses anger more and this is linked with impulsivity<sup>62</sup>. We can see that the demonization of psychopaths is unwarranted and more nuanced than we may have supposed. With compassion (7Cs), we can start to see it as a rarer form of neuroendocrine adaptation to avoid emotional ups and downs, with associated mental energy.

The term narcissist is also over-used recently in media and social media. Please merely remember that almost everyone has an inflated sense of self (exaggerated ego) to my knowledge (even “me” at times) so worry about yours first.

#### **Your Ego is Still Too Big = Tend to Further Erase Your Ego (Selflessness)**

ASPD is also characterized by a pattern of deliberate manipulation—although we all manipulate and are being manipulated constantly consciously or not—and disregard for and violation of the rights of others. It is a behavior pattern (often formed before the age 15) and not strictly a “personality disorder” or trait like psychopathy. One can exhibit antisocial behavior with or without psychopathy. “Sociopaths” are highly impulsive, risk-taking, and violent. Their behavior is more erratic than the controlled psychopaths and prevalence in adult population is about 1%<sup>63</sup>.

You may not diagnose others, yet if you diagnose yourself with one of these symptoms, traits or behaviors, there is not “cure” from the psychologically community, yet this book is here to tell you that most people are suffering, including psychopaths and sociopaths. If they honestly address their struggles after they realized their ways may not be sustainable for long-term happiness, there is still hope. These traits exhibit dishonesty and manipulation in general, yet so does the non-psychopath population. Most people lie to others and themselves to various degrees! All have a chance for a better life if they accept and are open to their current pattern of thoughts, feelings/non-feelings, and actions. *Chapter 3:*

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<sup>62</sup>Pham, T. H. (2015). Psychopathie et affects : Du centre à la périphérie. Forensia. March 12, 2025.

<sup>63</sup>Charlotte Ruhl, C.; Mcleod, S. *How Sociopaths Are Different From Psychopaths*. Simply Psychology. 2024

*Philosophy* showed us the importance of acceptance and disillusionment as two of the five pillars of philosophy.

### Vulnerability and Authenticity

Susceptibility is defensiveness or resistance to often benign stimuli with overreactions.

**Susceptibility = Resistance = Taking it Personal = Low Emotional Regulation**

Vulnerability is openness (to attack) so almost the opposite.

**Vulnerable = Open = Emotional Expression = Acceptance**

Vulnerability lets the self exposed to examination by self and others, so is taking risks, but also being courageous (7Cs) and not weak, as some may choose to perceive.

**Vulnerable = Courage = Accountable**

**Vulnerable ≠ Weak**

**Invulnerable = Limits and Barriers**

Vulnerability is the willingness to be wounded and is part of seduction for instance, as we will see in *Beyond Sex*. It is also part of growth as pain is part of progress.

**Pain = Possibility = Progress ≠ Suffering**

To protect ourselves from harm, we used to wear armor. If we go to war, we still do. Bulletproof vest and helmets are worn when we go out in a dangerous zone. However, when we get back to the safety of the base, we take off our helmet. Since most of us are not in physical war, which threaten or limb or life, we still tend to protect ourselves every day. How socially? With what? Not a helmet, a mask! We wear many masks to fit in situations and not show our vulnerabilities. However, we are because of the masks not ourselves and authentic. The problem is that unlike helmets, we very seldom take off all our masks. We are so attached to (and fear) other people's judgement. I would argue that at times masks or protection can be necessary to live in a social and sometimes hostile world. Still, you should endeavor to:

1. Be aware you are being inauthentic temporarily and why
2. Be able to be as authentic as possible and as often as possible
3. Cultivate flexibility to shed off social masks quickly
4. Know that even alone you are often trapped by thoughts of conformity
5. Explore and challenge your identities—be naked with yourself and dig deeper
6. Acknowledge authenticity arises and is changing—do not attach yourself to it either
7. Genuinely go towards settings that and people who allow you to be yourself

When faced with fakeness or judgemental people, do not judge them back. If you need a funny anthem to cheer you up, play Eminem's 1999 song *Still Don't Give a F\*\*\** and be as authentic, vulnerable and self-deprecating as can be. Humor is the key as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Do not take yourself too seriously. Do not let people's possible perception prevent you from anything.

### Mental Training

Mental fitness, is a process and needs the reason, direction, right elements, rigour, tools, flexibility and regiment to transcend your basic and biased biology. It will not happen alone, I guarantee you. Would you be excellent at sports sitting on your couch all day? Same idea.

**Physical Fitness = Increases with Training (and Diet)**

**Mental Fitness = Increases with Training (and Right Tools)**

## Self-learning > Self-blame > No responsibility for thoughts and actions

### Learning Styles

We know that the brain is constantly learning and adapting with its wonderful neuroplasticity. A new habit can best be formed by reframing instead of inhibiting a behavior, as we will see later in this chapter. It is important to know that for the other types of learning, it may be very beneficial to know what your learning style is to maximize your learning acquiring and retention. There are dozens or hundreds different types of learning styles and we can also enhance learning with some of the tricks and concepts we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. An easy differentiator for learning can be separated in two main axes.

1. Visual-spatial
2. Auditory-sequential (aka Linguistic-verbal)

Do you remember names or faces better? Do you remember the name of a store nearby or a cross-street in your spatial map of a neighborhood? Do you understand more with clear graphics or effective explanations?

People with visual-spatial intelligence normally:

- A) Are good at putting puzzles together
- B) Interpret pictures, graphs, and charts well
- C) Enjoy drawing, painting, and the visual arts
- D) Recognize patterns easily
- E) May be less punctual (stretched sense of time) and organized

People with linguistic-verbal intelligence predominantly:

- A) Are able to explain things well + show steps of work (and follow directions, including recipe)
- B) Particularly enjoy reading and writing (with good punctuation, spelling and handwriting)
- C) Remember written and spoken information
- D) Tidiness and good organization
- E) Use humor when telling stories and may enjoy debating or speaking in front of a group

Remember that many people have a mix (45%) between the two visual and auditory, with a predominance for visual-spatial (85%) vs auditory-sequential (15%) in a US study of 4th and 5th graders. Strongly visual-spatial (31%) also outpaced the strongly auditory sequential (24%). More than 60% are thus visual-spatial, even if current teaching methods lean on auditory-sequential learning. Gifted classes showed even more visual-spatial penchant with over 85% in some cases. Visual-spatial is also increasing as a whole, as our society has primed us with many screens in each household and workplace. Anecdotally, types of intelligence integrations which is often seen in highly gifted individuals, may be more marked in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Scandinavia for reasons we saw in *Chapter 2: Sociology* with better education and child-rearing, as well as multi-lingual culture. Newborns who cannot speak normally start with the visual-spatial intelligence up until the age of about 9 year-old where they may switch or gain access to the auditory-sequential. Incidentally, visual-spatial also have a sense of humour yet they are better at making and understanding puns (or quirky humour aka “dad jokes”). There is also visual humour of course.

A trick for all your fully or partially visual-spatial readers is to highlight important sections and sentences of your books (including this one!) or other reading materials when you read them. I was notorious during my undergrad to have 4 different colors of highlighters to categorize different ideas by

colour. I also write down notes and sometimes make charts and graphics. You can perhaps now understand the many equations sprinkled throughout this book to deepen understanding, highlight comprehension with key points and big picture thinking. During business meetings I also always take down various notes that I seldom re-read. The fact of writing them down helps me learn the concepts visually and remember them better! That is why I seldom re-read the notes unless there is a specific detail I need to find.

Furthermore, multiple intelligences is a theory proposed by Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner and updated since. It includes at least 7 more types<sup>64</sup>:

3. Logical-mathematical
4. Body-kinesthetic
5. Musical
6. Interpersonal
7. Intrapersonal
8. Naturalistic
9. Existential

Although there are no current clear empirical evidence linked to brain regions, brain states or even that learning styles based on these extra 7 types of intelligence enhances learning, it is useful to note them, just perhaps so you can recognize yourself. This will not only tune in to the perhaps best type of way your brain can interact with reality (objective and subjective), but also reassure you that you too are quite intelligent in your own way. You learn and discern the world with uniqueness and valuable understanding.

Whatever and however you are doing it you are learning. Reading this you are learning. Maybe you are reading the words out loud because you are more of a auditory or “linguistic-verbal” learning type. Perhaps you are reading this with a friend like I used to read short stories, poetry and book chapters with close intellectual or artistic friends, because you are an “interpersonal” learner. Maybe you are dancing or signing to the words of this diatribe or tiresome tirade to learn “mean and lean”.

And no, naturalistic learning does not mean learning naked. At least, I don’t think so...

There are many ways to be authentic and to learn. We can also easily avoid as in the flight part of the “flight or fight” response. I suggest we stay the course, seek challenges, and nurture courage, but when is it good to avoid?

## Avoidance

Avoidance is an adaptive reaction humans have to certain situations. It can be seen in some contexts as the opposite of courage (7Cs), yet in many cases it is exactly the attitude and non-action required. We saw that aware non-action is a virtuous and valuable reaction in our happiness toolbox. However, when avoidance is coming from either cowardice or ignorance, we must question it and expose ourselves to the dispreferred indifferent or aversive situations (external or internal).

There are 4 main types of avoidance.

1. Experiential avoidance
2. Emotional avoidance
3. Mental avoidance
4. Communication avoidance

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<sup>64</sup> Cherry, Kandra. *Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. March 2023

Mental avoidance is not well documented and is an addition of mine. To give an example, people who are depressed normally sleep more or become addicted to behavior or substance that will allow them to escape. Mostly, they are escaping their unwanted or uncomfortable thoughts. We saw that “no-mind” or “no-thought” can be a desired state for contentment and happiness. We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that these negative thoughts are generated in the default mode network with rummaging and mind-wandering. Is sleeping or loss of memory like Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) good to avoid damaging thoughts? Sure! That is also why people who feel they experience trauma or grief often avoid recalling or recounting their traumas because they want to avoid thoughts and emotions associated with these thought patterns.

Experiential avoidance is simply avoiding an object, place, person, or situation in the external world. It is highly linked to aversion. It is often associated with the word “hate”. A word and emotion we will learn to irradicate in *Beyond Spirituality*.

Emotional avoidance is avoiding feeling an emotion either indirectly by avoiding an experience, a thought or communicating (the 3 other avoidances) or by avoiding it directly despite an experience, thought or communication that could trigger that unwanted emotion.

Communication avoidance is linked to personal, partner, group, or cultural taboos. We will see the importance of communication in both *Beyond Spirituality* and *Beyond Sex*. We should by enlarge avoid taboos although communication avoidance should be considered if:

1. *No amount of communication can solve a specific issue*
2. *Communication will only increase hurt/harm*

The problem with communication avoidance is often they people are correct in assuming communication can create temporary pain or hurt/harm (not necessarily suffering), yet they may be quick to judge and label a situation as unresolvable if they do not take the time to think outside the box to find workable solutions, use creativity, cooperation, and collaboration (11Cs). A comprehensive approach may also view communication in itself as a goal or positive process. On many occasions, there is no absolute need for resolution and the aim of communication can be simply to listen and be listened to.

This implicit assumption about potential difficult communication parameters is a pitfall that should be avoided to avoid communicating when in essence needed.

#### **Avoid Taboos = Open Possibilities**

#### **Avoidance = Maladaptive for Experiencing and Learning**

We spoke in *Chapter 3: Philosophy* of aware non-action. I am certain that this is a better way to deal with the world than fearful avoidance. Aware avoidance allows acceptance when needed (no other immediate solution despite openness, courage, and creativity) and can also be a strategy to limit use of finite resources like time, energy, money, technology, social capital, etc.

#### **Avoidance = Adaptive for Real Danger or Resources Drain**

The popular phenomena of “ghosting” is not aware non-action. Remember that communication is one of the 11Cs. Speak your mind with authenticity, bravery, and nonjudgement.

The opposite of avoidance can be anxious or overly attached which brings us to addiction.

## **Addiction**

Being an addict, having a grandfather and brother who were addicts, I will touch briefly on some specifics for the lot of us. Yes, we are a lot! In fact, I do know only one or two people that I can truly qualify as not being addicts. When we take a closer look, my brother who was a hard drug addict is still addicted to video games and it affects his health. My mother is addicted to anger and control, my father is a



workaholic, my friend is addicted to food... and most of us are addicted to our smart phones to varying degrees. What is the difference between a passion and addiction? I am a cinephile (movie buff), but am I an *alcoholophile* (lover of alcohol) or an alcoholic? Unfortunately, the latter, my brain and body won't allow me to only take one or two drinks like most people can do with ease. Is it simply lack of willpower? I assure you not!

### Addiction Is Not a Choice

I was animating an addiction group and teaching my second session on how to reframe our stories by identifying them as stories and not us when Sylvain a 60-yr old addict started to cry. I admitted to the group that alcohol abuse had given him bad health consequences including constant diarrhea. He had to pay a taxi to come to the weekly group meeting which was a bit out of his budget but feared if he took public transport, he might defecate on himself so was willing to pay more and still attend. He was shockingly wearing diapers as he spoke to us and with reflection and his customary smile, he said that the taxi cost was high but still much less than all he spent on alcohol and cigarettes every week. He was on the road to recovery but was still stuck with negative even if creative stories. He told himself he would go by alcohol every morning and not to feel bad lied to himself that he was not only going to get alcohol so would buy cheese or another food item just to fool himself. When he told us the story he cried and said that he knew it was just a story he had created to justify buying his poison of choice. Yet at this point it was not a choice anymore. It was ingrained and he could rationalize anything to get his fix. You may think this example extreme but I guarantee you that you also justify some of your actions, emotions or thoughts you know deep down are bad for you and/or others often. Our brain is very good at telling compelling, seemingly coherent and correct stories. We need to see them and create better stories. It is a process, and it is hard because we do not know how to deprogram and convince ourselves better than ourselves. It is not about a single choice, say "just say no" (to drug) like Nancy Reagan campaigned in the US in the 1980s and 1990s. It is a long process of learning (and unlearning). Luckily, we can. We have neuroplasticity, creativity, and resilience.

Addiction is not a choice. It is however still a stigma. My addiction meetings and the people in them are very careful on privacy, almost a shrouded secrecy, because in the outside world, it doesn't look good to be labelled an addict. It takes strength to ask for help. The popular alcoholic anonymous (AA) groups or similar (narcotics anonymous, etc.) are available in most cities for support but are not a fit for all and often are not enough. Alcohol and now marijuana are some of the toughest addictions to battle because of their not only readily available and legal status in many countries, but also because of their cultural positive portrayal in social, business, art, and entertainment. Beyonce and Jay-Z sing "Drunk in Love", your boss or colleague invites you to for a drink. A joint is passed by a friend at a party or music concert...

An addiction is loosely when a behavior causes problems (in one or various spheres) and the person is having difficulty to stop that behavior, even with repeated attempts. Addiction is by definition when it is no longer a choice. And even no "addicts" have much less choices than you think. Can you really say that you choose your thoughts and feelings? Few can, and what percentage? What has been given to you by years of upbringing, schooling, culture and your limited view, knowledge, and experience of the world? 100% is the answer but if you still believe in free will (another false story we tell ourselves), let us say 80 or 90% so you can believe in absolute agency and freedom of action.

### **Addiction = Maladaptive Behavior Difficult to Stop**

Behavioral addictions and substance addictions are slightly different because of the pharmacology component of some drugs. However, they use the same brain circuitry that goes from impulsive behavior



to compulsive behavior. It is the motivation-reward pathway mostly governed with the small but potent molecule: dopamine. When activated in the lower (ventral) striatum it produces impulse and gradually if activation occurs in the higher (dorsal) part, it will start to give compulsion, and at the same time deregulate your prefrontal cortex, the cognitive and thinking part of the part. That is why addicts do not think straight. But wait, that is also why lovers do not think straight and we say: “love is blind”. Yes, romantic love and attraction (especially of early courtship) uses the same brain pathway, so you can understand when I say that almost everyone has been an addict at some point in their lives.

We need to remember that every addictive behavior was adaptive and helpful at one time. Even taking hard drugs is either a coping mechanism or recreational playfulness and fun. It may have a social component and assuage the need for being part of the tribe. Social drinking is certainly part of this, except in some parts of the Muslim world. Luckily, alcohol-free beverages and non-drinking culture has slowly been more popular in the last few years in North America but remember that culture and environment affect our internal narratives greatly. Even as we are trying to be the masters of our stories, we must first recognize the stories we are told and what we believe before we can remodel our thoughts and lives.

Knowing that a behavior served a purpose at one point, the key is then to use reason and awareness to see that this behavior is no longer adaptive and produce more harm than good and rewire your brain accordingly. Better said than done of course! And a reason for that is that addiction impairs reason as we just saw! Strong emotions also impair reason and people can easily be addicted to anger, sadness, or spirals of anxiety.

#### **Addiction = Maladaptive Thoughts and Emotional Patterns**

Addiction creates a superhigh in the brain so that a specific pattern of thoughts, emotions and often actions are easily accessible and run almost on automatic. They become habits and addicts can find their way to their addictions sometimes without even thinking, perhaps like driving a car or riding a bicycle. They become learned patterns embedded in the neural circuitry. Thoughts also are part of this mechanism and the various ways to justify, embellish the habit, discard or diminish the associated drawbacks become highly varied and effective. These are narrative stories that serve the purposes of the addiction. They may be positive stories, yet the consequences are negative. Then the negative consequences can lead to negative narratives like shame and guilt.

#### **Positive Narratives → Negative Narratives**

Addicts may start to lie to others and themselves, to hide and to justify, even with mounting evidence of negative outcomes created. The addicted brain becomes very efficient at thinking and doing that unhealthy behavior, at the expense of other wiser actions and the choice point to exit that vicious cycle becomes more and more difficult to be seen, even less to be taken. That is why addiction removes the choice that non-addicted people can easily take. For addicts, it has become a compulsion.

#### **Addiction = Narrow Narratives = Focus and Efficient**

Do well and with passion whatever you do, said Tolle and others, well addicts do addictive behaviors very well! And other things perhaps less well, although addicts can also excel at other aspects of their lives. It is just that concerning the addictive behavior it is not a choice anymore. Of course, there are different severities of addiction and often there is an illusion of choice. That is why it is so difficult for people not addicted to a behavior to understand why addicts “just don’t stop” as if it was an easy choice and lack of good judgement or character.

One of my two friends who may be the farthest from addiction is actively assessing every action to insure she is not being addicted to anything. I was surprised to hear that level of insight, awareness and action, yet she is definitely proving that prevention is easier than treatment!

### **Awareness = Addiction Prevention**

The definition of the DSM-V of addiction is by in large something that we:

1. cannot or can difficultly stop doing
2. has negative impact on our lives

Best then to be vigilant and stop before we cannot stop, and it is no longer a choice. This goes for any behavior that you may think positive and worry-free now but may become a monster to manage later. It can be as simple as the habit to scream at your kids or spouse when upset or to scroll through your phone first thing in the morning.

Mengtai Zhang's virtual reality (VR) short film *Diagnosia* (2021) looks at Zhang's teenage memories of being incarcerated in a military-operated internet addiction camp in Beijing in 2007. The film asks the larger question of is "internet addiction" really a psychiatric disorder and what is an addiction diagnosis. I think today's definition of addiction is practical yet still limited.

Compulsive sexual behavior disorder (CSBD) was recently added to the ICD-11, but not to the DSM yet. We will see also that disease or disorder may or may not be the right name or nomenclature.

### Addiction Is Not a Drug

"Addiction is not caused by a drug or its chemical properties. Addiction has to do with the effect a drug produces for a given person in given circumstances," says psychologist Stanton Peele. Many people can try alcohol, cannabis, coffee, sugary ice cream or cigarettes and not become addicted. We know that cigarettes are addictive by design but still some people can smoke occasionally and not be hooked.

### **Addiction ≠ Substance or Behavior**

#### **Addiction = Neural Change (Learned Behavior)**

Addiction has thus more to do with the brain's reaction to the drug, thought or behavior and is influenced by both genetics and environment. We suppose that some people have "addictive personality traits" passed on with hereditary and probably linked to dopamine circuitry which would make them more likely to develop addictions. Then there is experience and environment that may be social, cultural as well as purely personal. Is the behavior serving any needs like escaping from perceived problems or forgetting worries and anxiety? Remember that all addictions started by serving a purpose. It might have helped temporarily help psychological distress before causing some psychological distress in turn.

#### **Addiction = Learned Behavior for a Valid Purpose**

In Sylvain's case above, he was trying to fill the void of being active, social and attending events for decades in his new situation of recent retirement. Sure, less work may be less stress. Still, he faced less income, less meaning, less interpersonal interaction every day. He found his days lonely, boring, and tedious. Often watching sports and finding solace in a steady substance to numb the emptiness. Who can fault him for his basic need looking for an outlet. Other lonely or not lonely people are addicted to their pets. Their pets schedule become so important they sometimes miss out on the world. I dated a young woman like that once. She was sleeping with her dog every night and had no real room for a boyfriend in her life. Others yet are addicted to people or relationships, long-term or casual. Emotional dependency, despondency, or debauchery.

### Addiction Is Not a Disease

More than 3 billion people play video games globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that up to 3% of people (almost 100 million) who play video games have a video game addiction, but the reality is that the addictive behavior is in most of them, not only 3%. The video game industry was

worth about USD 180 billion, and videogames like cigarettes, smart phones and social media are designed to be addictive. They even have an in-game reward system built-in to stimulate your brain reward center. There are many types of video games with varying levels of addictiveness. For instance, US gamers who reported playing at least 20 hours per week of the listed types of video games amount to:

1. 21% - Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG):
2. 21% - Multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBA)
3. 19% - Massively multiplayer online games (MMO)
4. 18% - Role-playing games
5. 16% - Shooter

We can say that playing games is part of playfulness which I encourage greatly yet if 20 hours or much more of weekly video gaming (3 hours of each waking day) is not allowing 20% of gamers to play sports, music, read or even socialize in the real world because they are less addictive activities in nature, what does that say about video gamers behaviors?

The social aspect and sometimes anonymous of multiplayer games make them more addictive through dopamine and oxytocin release in the brain but it is not the same as real social interactions. It leads to isolation which we know is a punishment (prison and pandemic lockdowns) and even a form of torture for the social animal.

We saw that behavioral or substance addictions are sensibility the same, as they use and change the same brain pathways, networks, and chemicals. Now, is addiction a disease? Let's take a look:

1. Does it change the brain structure to make the addictive behavior more ingrained? Yes
2. Does other "healthy" or "normal" behaviors change do the same? Yes
3. Does learning an adaptive, healthy hack, habit or ability do the same? Yes
4. Is it then fair to call these behaviors a disease? No

A disorder then? Impulse Control Disorder? Everyone displays impulsive behaviors from time to time. Whether it is in the form of eating something sweet, carbs or a drink when on a diet or buying clothes or collectibles you don't need, occasional impulsivity is normal. However, for a person with an impulse control disorder, they do not feel in control of what would be considered "normal" behavior if done to a lesser degree or done infrequently. Gabor Maté explores the *Myth of Normal* in his riveting 2002 book which has implications at the societal level as well. We will explore some of these findings in later books of this series. Currently, impulse control disorder is defined by the following key features:

1. Repetitive engagement in a behavior despite negative consequences.
2. Performing problematic behavior to release pressure or feel pleasure.
3. Inability to fully control the problematic behavior.
4. Experiencing strong urges or cravings to engage in the problematic behavior.

Genetic factors can influence your set-point level of happiness, circulating dopamine levels and reward system sensitivity to addictive behavior to a small to substantial extend. As mentioned, my family is genetically prone to have poor impulse control. Still, as in many other aspects of living, spectrum of vision, hearing and pitch, balance, memory, theoretical and emotional intelligence, they create a person with certain difficulties, easiness, and proclivities. In fact, without certain repeated behaviors, you probably not be you or even recognized by your loved ones as such.

If it is "normal" behavior, brain learning, adapting, habit-forming and living, then what can be impulse control disorders? Right now, five types of impulse control disorders are identified as stand-alone disorders: kleptomania, pyromania, intermittent explosive disorder, pathological gambling, and trichotillomania. Impulse control is also a key feature in other mental illnesses, including bulimia,

substance abuse and paraphilias. However, these are categorized as other types of mental health disorders rather than as impulse control disorders. Let's have brief overview for fun.

1. Kleptomania

Inability to control the urge, or impulse, to steal. This stealing is in essence unnecessary, and has low relative value as opposed to stealing for survival or necessity.

2. Pyromania

Inability to control the impulse to set fires. Often an intense urge (anxiety, excitement, or emotional blockage) is only relieved by setting fires. Relief is the most reported feeling, although some may feel intense pleasure or both as well.

3. Intermittent Explosive Disorder

Inability to control the impulse to respond in rage to minor triggers. In some cases, this rage may escalate to physical violence. The impulsive outbursts of anger are "excessive compared to the triggering event". With this definition alone, I would think many people would have met such people or recognized them in themselves. Rage or anger can also be seen as deep upset and most people get upset profoundly all the time. If we recall from Chapter 3: Philosophy that no external event or trigger requires negative emotion like anger, this means almost everyone would have this disorder de facto. Physical violence (direct, indirect or self) is only a small portion of ways we can express violence (passive aggressive, microaggressions, verbal, emotional, etc.) and sometimes the intense (irrational) upset is only internal. The fact that any external trigger requires an "appropriate" anger is maladaptive in my view. Yes, anger onset can be used to sense information of the need to set boundaries for instance, but that communication does not require any actual anger experience or expression beyond the initial alert, unless perhaps one's life is in deadly danger and even then. People have been able to communicate non-violently for centuries, and without the unnecessary suffering.

**No Equanimity = Intermittent Explosive Disorder**

4. Pathological Gambling

Also called compulsive gambling or gambling disorder, it is the inability (or difficulty) to resist the impulse to gamble. The thought of gambling becomes so overwhelming and intrusive that the only relief is to engage in the activity. Originally an impulse control disorder, it has also been categorized as a process addiction and now a disorder due to addictive behaviors or behavioral addiction. The process is the same, whatever the name. Gaming disorder is rather new and internet gaming addiction is officially still under review. Can we start to see that the psychology pundits are struggling to substantiate their disease and disorder claims with consistency because they are all the same neural mechanisms. Same as eating. Replace eating in the sentence: "The thought of (eating) becomes so overwhelming and intrusive that the only relief is to engage in the activity". Same mechanisms with a few tweaks for autoregulation of satiety and autonomous nervous system, but our brains are made to learn repeated behavior. Seek food, seek random rewards. After some time, you will eat or think of eating and fight hard to resist.

5. Trichotillomania

The funny one start, except of course for those experiencing it. It is an "irresistible impulsive urges to pull out your hair". It may be from the head (scalp or beard) or other areas of the body. The urge to do it is so intense that it overrides concerns for pain, which may vary greatly. This disorder was also recently recategorized and is now considered an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

6. Unspecified Impulse-Control Disorder

This diagnosis focuses more on people who show the general signs and symptoms of an impulse control disorder without the impulse in question falling into any pre-established categories.

In this we can already think of onychophagia. What is it? A rather common oral compulsive habit of biting one's fingernails. Nail biting. Could nose picking be one? Skin picking certainly is! The possibilities are endless including a woman who could not stop eating her dead husband's ashes. Gabor Maté's was to buy classical music CDs. What is yours?

Again, all these compulsions can also be thoughts like the recurring thought of having a serious illness, known as hypochondriasis. What thoughts would you have difficulty get read of? What is "normal" to you may be excessive to others. Are you worried about money for instance? Maybe you are excited about money instead of sports. How often do these thoughts come in your head? Some sports fans think about their teams, past and upcoming games and make fantasy leagues....

I was on a rooftop pool in Fiji and two Canadian girls had to watch the hockey game instead of enjoying the beautiful island they flew halfway across the world to see. Does that seem familiar? People have a hard time disconnecting from their thoughts, habits and comfort zones. Are sports fans addicts? Music fans? Well, the word fan comes from fanatic.

### *Symptoms of Impulse Control Disorder*

Impulse control disorder symptoms vary somewhat depending on the specific type of disorder. However, there are some symptoms common to most listed impulse control disorders, including:

- Obsessive thoughts (most have many)
- Lack of patience = impatient (most people are impatient!)
- Inability (or limited control) to delay gratification = impulsion/compulsion
- Anxiety and tension before engaging in impulsive behavior
- Continuing to act on a specific impulse repeatedly despite negative consequences

Remember that you do not need to exhibit all symptoms. Have you ever had any of these symptoms? Of course you have, or you would not be "you" or human.

Stevens just loves sports. He spends hours watching and reading about sports every day. Christopher loves music and plays in two bands. Maybe they do not have the associated anxiety before engaging, but they do have the anxiety if they are not engaging for some time. They have obsessive thoughts about sports and music. Christopher's wife once gave him an ultimatum: music or me.

How about people who watch the news ("religiously") every day to "be in the know" (nice narrative to reinforce narrow focus of – mostly negative - media consumption). Social media infinity scrolls have replaced the weak appeal of and speculation about the Dead Sea Scrolls or reading and re-reading the Bible, Torah, Quran, Mahabharata or other. Other addiction? We will see more about why religious fervor is so strong in *Beyond Spirituality*,

Netflix binge-watching may be more addictive than binge drinking. Then remember the first symptom: obsessive thoughts. Praying in your head; fantasizing about the one you are in lust or love with; wondering about a certain outcome; seeking the next income; obsessing over the sitcom (Seinfeld or Friends fanatics) or romcom (K-drama?); imaging yourself in a certain situation; fearing something; judging something; seeing injustice; seeking vengeance, power, fame, recognition, or control.

Feelings can also be compulsions and emotions are often already impulsive fast-tracked neural pathways. Being jealous is the opposite of compersion (7Cs) and often a nasty habit in couples, at work or in the community.

Compulsion is a mental (neocortex) habit before a behavior. Marc Lewis argues that “all habits, once formed, are compulsive to some degree.” Again, we can see that it is a fluid spectrum, and far from black and white. Desires are normal, although Buddhism warns against attachment, aversion and desire and end up shaping impulsive behavior and, more or less, compulsive habits. Aversion, anxiety, shame, fear, disgust, and other negative emotions can also cultivate many habits, from phobias to milder forms of direct or indirect avoidance for instance. These are all outcomes of (perfectly) “normal” (healthy) human brain functioning and create or prune appropriate neural pathways (connectivity, density, etc.). Mostly prune and pragmatically direct towards a well-oiled machinery that requires less effort and gives more reliable outcomes. Conditioned consolidation in fixed feedback loops..

#### **More Compulsion = Less Computing = Less Uncertainty (More Rigidity)**

The reason habits are formed is to reduce the workload of the brain and create strong stable pathways to reduce the computational complexity of making judgments and decisions with incomplete information for solutions we learned work. Information is never complete via our senses that by design do not represent reality adequately – and our memory too! – so we constantly make best guesses and adjust until we find a strategy that works. We then put in on our mental limited “playbook” and it becomes more automatic, sometimes even unconscious. We think, feel, and do one (or a few) rehearsed way(s) with small variations. Actors do this in the theatre and in the cinema. We do not like improvisation in life as much. Most like security (even those with high openness to experience - curious). We are less initially open than we think, but the good news is that we can train ourselves to be. Join an improv class for instances, play jazz or make jam sessions with a band, travel to new places, seek the unfamiliar, create challenges, accept uncertainty, cultivate creativity, keep yourself on your toes, take a cold shower randomly, ask a ninja to surprise you in your home like inspector Clouseau in *The Pink Panther*.

#### **Embrace Change Constantly = Less Compulsion**

Still, even these tactics will lead to some forms habits and patterns, although perhaps less compulsion-prone. You will still have some specific ways to deal with less structure and rigidity. It is however progress and all we can really hope for.

#### **New Habits = New Neural Networks**

These habits can be actions, but also thoughts and feelings. In fact we can think of habits as thinking habits primarily, That is where positive narratives are so powerful to change our thought patterns.

#### **Negative Thoughts = Negative Brain Pattern**

#### **Positive Thoughts = Positive Brain Pattern**

We thus need to acknowledge again and actively fight the negativity bias, We can directly feel happier more habitually if we practice. And when we have more of our needs met, we need less maladaptive quick fixes. The problem is not the drug, behavior, feeling or thought. We can eventually observe all these with awareness and some detachment with practice. The problem is the environment. External and even more internal. We must build brick by brick a wondrous mental resilient rock of peace and contentment. Cocaine, hookers, shopping, power and fame will lose their addictive power, perhaps permanently.

#### **Contentment (7Cs) = Less Compulsion**

How to be content? Stop seeking and appreciate here and now. Seek serotonin and not reward dopamine. Be mindful, grateful, and present.

### *Impulse Control Disorder in Children*

Impulse control disorder symptoms in children may be harder to define than in adults. Defining the disorder is not difficult because the symptoms are different, but because children are usually less adept at expressing their thought processes, feelings and emotional experiences, and their impulsive behaviors can be common. Maybe adult with impulse control issues have just not matured or grown up which may be wonderful for wonder, laughter, and play, but less for control, balance, and safety.

Dr. Gabor Maté adds that addictions and impulse control behaviors and disorders, including obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are all equivalent to underdeveloped impulse control in infants and children. Infants and small children do not have the brain circuitry to resist impulses and compulsions. They require parents or others to help them plan future consequences of immediate rewards or pain-mediators.

They may be underdeveloped due to genetics or environment. Addictions as explained earlier are in essence coping mechanisms, often for some type of discomfort or suffering that requires escape from. Addicts found themselves trying to find solutions to their challenging environment. An addiction treatment must then look at the entire history and environment and not just the undesired behavior. If rats (or humans) are isolated they may take drugs to fix their isolation feeling, yet when with the proper social supportive environment, prefer water (to “addictive” morphine), as was shown experimentally by another Canadian in British Columbia, Bruce K. Alexander. This was known as early as the 1970s. So why did the government want you to believe that you should “just say no”? Maybe because of money. Prisons and addiction centers are big business in the US, so as funds for the “war on drugs” locally and overseas.

The answer was right there however, make people’s environment better instead of putting them in jail. That would be too easy and not as strong as a stance against an already vulnerable population they want you to believe are so far removed from you. Dehumanization in action again. Ingroup of “normal” people and outgroup of deviants that deserve everything they got coming to them. We will see in the next chapter that people have less emotional empathy for people if they believe their circumstances are their choice or fault. The classical “blame game”.

Compulsions are impulsive behaviors done several times so that other unused pathways die off. Compulsions become predictable and the chosen pathway from a greater range of initial stimuli or starting points. In fact, these characteristic key patterns become part of one’s personality development. A set of rather fixed, views, judgments, values, ideas, and opinions. To combat it, we need more than nonjudgment but active awareness and keeping our flexibility of thought with mental exercises and training. We do not want to be the old dog which cannot learn any new trick or the human adult that has the virtually identical version of the same circular thoughts. Few ideas are original. Mostly only reformulated or adapted. Philosophical we can say that all or no idea(s) is(are) original, but practical we can look at the spectrum of narrow/rigid to wide/flexible.

### *Positive Behavioral Addictions*

Beyond gaming and gambling (which both have their merits in moderation), you can be addicted to falling in love, parenting, or working, all thought to be positive experiences. However, ask many fathers who see the mother of their child’s brain hijacked and commandeered for parenting and they will tell you parenting can be an addiction or brain disorder. I would esteem motherhood reshaping of the brain may be a key core issue of relationship breakup for partners with children, perhaps in the top reasons along

with sex (with your partner or not), commitment and communication, as we will see in *Beyond Spirituality and Beyond Sex*.

If we remember that compulsions are activated and stored in the brain, let me be a bit more precise.

#### **Motivation Dopamine = Activate Acumbens**

**Motivation Dopamine = Attention / Perception (Sense/Cognition) + Emotion (Limbic) + Action (Motor)**

This does not have to be maladaptive if we can regulate attention, emotion, thought and action. We can with awareness and deidentification to these four and the ego. Then we can use compulsions to our aware advantage yet remain flexible for the future.

**Aware = Flexible and Open-Minded**

**Unaware = Narrow and Closed-Minded**

#### *Disease, Disorder or Not?*

A disorder is a disruption in the normal functions of your body, the cause of which can be unknown and subjective. Mental disorders are disturbances in the brain.

“Strictly speaking, the terms 'diagnosis' and 'disease' are both best avoided in psychiatric discourse (...) identifying disorders by assessing the number and severity of individually non-diagnostic symptoms from an agreed list. Most currently recognised disorders are no more than symptom clusters, and there is no particular reason why most patients should be expected to have only one of these. Viewed in this way, it is clear that it would be more honest for psychiatrists to use other terms, such as 'co-existing disorders' or 'multiple disorders'” says John Cooper<sup>65</sup>.

So, addictions are a list of symptoms that we can sometimes call disorders, but not disease, and the disruption, because of neuroplasticity, is theoretically treatable or even reversible, although it is not an easy choice or change, as per the definition of one of the symptoms.

#### *Addiction Non-Treatment*

Most addicts surprisingly stop their addiction(s) without treatment or drug. My brother quit crack-cocaine (yep!) cold turkey, my father stopped smoking 2 to 3 packs of cigarettes per day one day to the next and never looked back for over 40 years, my grandfather and my ex's stepdad both quit alcohol without treatment and were sober for decades. More and more research supports these anecdotal findings, including William White who found most addictions end without treatment.

We can also note that the environmental and social support can affect greatly the ability to “kick the habit” of unhealthy compulsion as demonstrated by Bruce Alexander's rodent experiment where rats chose morphine when alone and isolated, but surprisingly water over morphine when given the opportunity to socialize. No wonder addictions and alcohol consumption went up during the isolation, social distancing, and lockdowns. My brother is a beer company executive and had his employees on overtime and his beer considered “essential” as people struggled alone in their home, building compulsions with repetition, slowly reinforcing their drug of choice or bad behavior, including domestic violence if they happened to be locked up with a loved one.

Luckily positive environment can also work for humans. Many US soldiers in the Vietnam War became addicted to heroin. Of those addicts who survived the war (and the addiction) and came back, it

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<sup>65</sup> Cooper J. *Disorders are different from diseases*. World Psychiatry. 2004 Feb;3(1):24. PMID: 16633446; PMCID: PMC1414656.



is estimated that about 75% quit when they came home. Treatment was not necessary for most because external conditions were positive.

Non-treatment may also come from an emphasis on the environment as we explained, removing the root cause or making it more positive in many ways. The main reasons for addictions/compulsions are:

1. Social Isolation
2. Social Conformity (Cultural Norm or “Peer Pressure”)
3. Trauma (Adult) or Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
4. Neurological / Mental Health Conditions

Then there are the genetic factors that can increase the vulnerability to developing or maintaining compulsions. This may contribute to 40-60% of vulnerability (similar to genetic factors of “happiness” we saw before), but again let us try to focus on what we can control. Acknowledging that sometimes even our thoughts, emotions and actions are slightly out of our (illusory) control. We can be more aware of our thoughts and emotions as well as our sensations if we practice presence/mindfulness. It can be in the form of formal meditation, yet it really does not need to be. Meditation is not for everyone. Mindfulness should be, as we will see in *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)*.

Many learned behaviors become compulsions to some extent even if they are not problematic. Examples of potentially addictive activities include:

1. Eating.
2. Sex (with yourself, others or even just fantasies) or “lust”
3. Exercising
4. Working
5. Relationship, dating or “love” – online or in person

These 5 activities are all essential behaviors that can be deregulated more often than one thinks. Mindfulness may be a way to appreciate all 5 and more, as well as appreciate and accept their absence without panic or undue desire/want. Many addictive activities may produce pleasure temporarily, but motivation dopamine is the molecule of desire, of more and of expectation. See *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* for more yet know here for instance that compulsive sexual behavior disorder (CSBD) is often associated with less or no pleasure (fun or joy) in sex and only in seeking or desiring (more) sex. *Beyond Sex* will also look at more biology of love and lovemaking.

Other useful behaviors that can become compulsions are:

1. Shopping (Survival and Necessity) – online or in person (actual or fantasies)
2. Gambling (Fun and Play) – online or in person
3. Gaming (Fun and Play) – online > in person
4. Pornography (Sex)
5. Dieting (Health)

And a few weird ones:

1. Body image (Tanning, Tattoo, Cosmetic Surgery, etc.)
2. Social Praise / Attention
3. Specific Craft or Art (Argentinean Tango<sup>66</sup>, Harry Potter<sup>67</sup>, etc.)

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<sup>66</sup> Targhetta, R. , Nalpas, B. , & Perney, P. (2013). Argentine tango: Another behavioral addiction? *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 2(3), 179–186. doi:10.1556/JBA.2.2013.007

<sup>67</sup> Rudski, J. M. , Segal, C. , & Kallen, E. (2009). Harry Potter and the end of the road: Parallels with addiction. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 17(3), 260–277. doi:10.1080/16066350802334595

4. Saving / Hoarding / Collecting Things or Money (Physical or Virtual)
5. Smartphone / Mobile Phone / Messaging / Social Media

Yet some suggest or prefer the terms problematic use, excessive or maladaptive behavior over compulsion or addiction<sup>68</sup>. Let me reiterate that they are similar enough in brain mechanism, use the same pathways and vary only in degree depending on the individual, environment, and time. Compulsions come from impulses in many cases and can be reversed.

Lastly, there are risky behaviors that may become unhealthy habits like:

1. Stealing / Shoplifting (Kleptomania)
2. Self-Mutilation / Self-Harm
3. Sports or Activities with High Risk (Sky diving, free-diving, cave diving, bungee jumping, etc.)
4. Anger / Abuse / Aggression Towards Others or Objects (Words, Physical or Emotional)
5. Biting on Hard Objects (Nails, pens, pencils, ice, etc.)

Yes, many are addicted to ego and anger/upset/resentment and have a hard time to stop. All this to say that when we talk about addiction treatment, it does not need to be about crack-cocaine, hard opioid or daily drinking until you pass out. Please know they are all a degree of the same spectrum and that no one has not succumbed to impulse. If they have not as adult, they have as infants. Knowing the mechanisms and methods to influence them may help people stay in the more balanced side of the spectrum. I assume people also want to be spontaneous and fall in love sometimes!

Remember that addictions can be dealt with without treatment, with right environment, support, mindset, brain chemistry, and tools. Unfortunately, I required years of “treatment” or “tool-box building and support”, although in the end, I cannot say that it is only the treatment that helped me, but I also must give it some due credit to enable my change in behavior and in the brain. Addiction therapy and group support may have its place, yet it is good to know that many can overcome compulsions without treatment. Remember again that addiction is not a disease but a simple common disorder to hack back and beyond healthy to an optimum mind. Still, let us see some of the most interesting knowledge from traditional treatment and therapy. I was also lucky to be able to animate addiction groups for adults and talk in front of teenagers and get real feedback from the field. Please see these tricks as useful tools, awareness and narratives that can be used in many circumstances even if you are not dealing with specific compulsions.... For now!

And procrastination could be considered an avoidance compulsion. Watching too much TV, being consistently late (see cultural perception of time in *Chapter 21 Sociology*), overthinking about the past (regret, resentment, depression) or the future (anxiety), or checking your phone for messages and notifications, are also all simple items that can easily go up on the compulsivity scale. Try to take a smartphone away from a teenager for a few days or even hours and see for yourself!

Being unable to say “no” to others is lack of assertiveness and potentially problematic from of people-pleasing or agreeableness. Addiction in action?

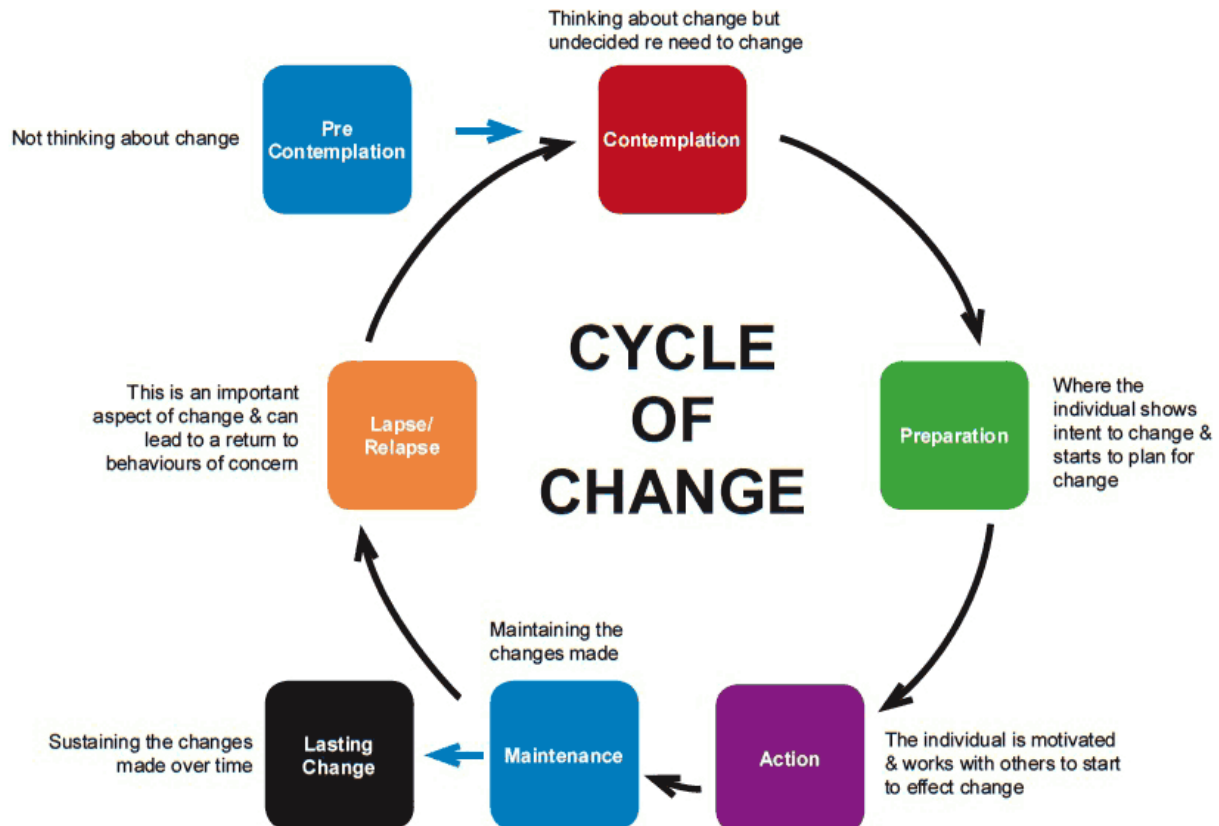
## Addiction Treatment

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) can contribute to our overall mental and emotional wellbeing. We will see many other types of psychotherapy treatments in *Beyond Psychology*. Also,

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<sup>68</sup> Panova, T., & Carbonell, X. (2018). Is smartphone addiction really an addiction?. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 7(2), 252-259. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.7.2018.49>

learning and using REBT can help us prevent everyday upsets from leading to lapse/relapse urges. Disputing is one technique for change in the well-established addiction cycle represented below.



## ABC

The ABC technique allows us to discover our irrational beliefs which contributes to emotional upsets. Disputing helps us eliminate our irrational thinking so we can think, feel and do better. In SMART Recovery (see below) we will see that our thoughts affect our feelings and emotions.. As Stoics and Bundists stress, it's not unpleasant events or situations that disturb us, it's the way we think of them. By changing our thinking (narrative self), we change how we feel before we act on our negative emotions.

ABCs of emotional upsets:

**Activating Event or Adversity** which we normally assume is the cause of our emotional upsets.

**Beliefs**, perceptions, ideas, and cognitions (real cause) about the real or imagined adversity.

**Consequences** (emotional – thoughts and feelings - and behavioral/words/actions) consequences of your thoughts: upsets such as discomfort, anxiety, anger, jealousy, fear, and suffering.

When doing the ABCs, we can classify 3 categories of common irrational beliefs:

1. Beliefs about yourself. Example: I'm no good, because...
2. Beliefs about others. Example: Others are no good because...
3. Beliefs about life in general. Example: The world is an awful place because...

The ABCs are a way to dispute, challenge (yes, again) and change our erroneous beliefs.

## DEADS

Another hallmark of addictions are cravings or simply thoughts and physical sensations caused by dopamine depletion that directs us to an undesired compulsion. DEADS focuses on resisting urges and fighting your cravings. The acronym stands for Deny/Delay, Escape, Avoid/Accept/Attack, Distract, Substitute. Triggers are various cues (people, places, objects, time, environment, emotions, etc.) that often lead you to your undesired behavior, thought pattern or addiction.

### 1. Deny/Delay

Delay responding to the urge. Cravings normally lasts only minutes and will normally decrease in duration, frequency, and intensity with time. Deny and delay as much as possible as reflex while you use the other tools. AA suggests one day at a time mindset, yet often you must delay many times a day. Just say to yourself: “not now”. Deny the response but not the urge. It exits.

### 2. Escape

Escape triggers like you are an anti-weapon pacifist instead of a gun-ho card-carrying NRA (National Rifle Association) advocate. Escape like Alcatraz. This step overlaps with the H.A.L.T. mnemonic we will see below, in that many of your strategies to deal with hunger, anger, loneliness, and tiredness, are essentially ways of escaping triggers. Triggers are the easy and know way to your addiction. There is a highway and highly effective affective, rational, and motivational mechanisms that can bring you from any of the identified (and even unidentified) triggers to the behavior so until you are strong enough stay away from them. When you have become a master again, acknowledge previous triggers, always be aware of them, and move beyond them to live a new “normal” life with your new neuronal development.

### 3. Avoid/Accept/Attack

Identify ways to live with the urge without giving in, or downright fight the urge directly. We will see later in this section that avoiding or attacking may not the best strategies in the long run because of “ego fatigue” but accept (like the Dao) and reframe is better than simply refrain. Accept your desire and use dopamine to delay gratification, enjoy the missing behavior like you miss a loved one. The longing is powerful and beautiful by itself.

### 4. Distraction

We saw in the 7 Positive Paladins that distraction is a way to avoid our negativity bias. It is also a way to avoid our overly positive false stories when our compulsive brain is in disarray and disorder. Engaging activities can provide powerful distractions to urges and envies. I could often distract myself from cravings by simply picking up a book, doing dishes/housework or going for a walk.

### 5. Substitute

This is active mental reframing. See below section for more tips. Substitute new thinking patterns and create healthy actions and activities. Let go of your old addiction stories, as powerful (and narrow) as they may be. Positive stories and actions will soon replace and surpass, not only substitute.

To achieve addiction recovery or sobriety, it is often useful to break down goals to smaller, manageable components to make sure we can build momentum and move forward. It is realistic and recognized that relapse and “two steps forward, one step back” rollercoasters pave the road to hardcoded behavior management, yet the more “wins” we can accumulate in our neurology will allow better and more robust recovery. SMART goals can help us build this resume and pedigree.

## SMART

SMART goals (or SMART criteria) refer to a goal-setting guide that outlines five important spheres for smarter goals. They should be:

**Specific:** aim and break down the goal with quantitative and/or qualitative details.

**Measurable:** identify which metric(s) to measure and how. In the corporate world, we often talk about key performance indicators (KPIs).

**Achievable (or Assignable):** ensure you can achieve your goals with the given resources (or assign part or all of it to someone who can equally achieve it, when there is a component out of your control).

**Realistic and Relevant:** outline what results you can feasibly achieve using the available resources and how that relates to your overall objectives.

**Timely:** specify how goal should be time-bound for achievement. Think of it in terms of weeks or months normally. Exceptionally, you can have daily smaller ambitions to surmount specific obstacles. One of my favorite is always to cumulate “complaint-free” days.

These 5 attributes make objectives “smart” and can be used in other areas of life, including art, business, rest & relaxation, sports & fitness, meditation, nutrition and any other.

I have been known to be an “over-achiever” in many spheres. I recommend what many claim as the best course of action: have clear and manageable (as opposed to overwhelming) objectives, do and track them. It is the first step to achieve (and even overachieve) your goals. Break your life goals down to incremental, cumulative chunks and get them done. Repeat.

Be consciously aware that the process is key and never guarantees results. Do not fall into the trappings of expectations, even as you start to achieve some goals and see positive trends. The pot of gold is never promised. Enjoy the rainbow to recovery, not just the end. Trust that you can make it however, step by step. And it doesn’t have to be the 12 steps. We will see more about small wins in the next chapter.

## RT and HALT

Reasons why you do the behavior are very important to know as well as the specific stimuli or triggers you associate with undesired behavior.

### Reasons + Triggers = Behavior

Reasons can range from intellectual, social, and emotional. Triggers, as we saw, can be as varied as cognitive, emotional, environmental (specific time, event, object, people, places), physical/sensation, etc. One must take the time to inventory them with curiosity to understand better before action and aware nonaction. The reasons may at first seem very convincing, so we must deconstruct them and reconstruct better narratives. Then the triggers will not matter as much.

To prevent relapse into undesired action, there are 4 common triggers (2 emotional and 2 physical) that one should be alert of. The feelings of hunger, anger, loneliness or tired are some of the most common and reported. Ask yourself: are you hungry, angry, lonely, or tired (HALT)? Yes, another addiction acronym. Addicts need all the easy tools they can get, as they cannot think straight about addictive thoughts or behaviors, until they actively rewire their brains. After building an adequate toolbox it is time to use the tools. What is you are “hangry” alone and tired? Breathe, call a friend, read, eat, and take a walk before getting some sleep!

## Optimum vs. Maximum Pleasure

Many addicts seek maximum pleasure, most or all the time. Their brains are wired to seek more and may be already habituated to the dopamine-enhancing substance or behavior. Their geared genetic, culture, environment and experience lead them to seek the maximum enjoyment. The idea of moderation is frankly not that sexy!

The addicted brain, yes, “your” brain on occasion, needs more and more of the same to have the same satisfaction or often even less satisfaction. We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that motivation dopamine is the molecule of “more” and at the core of many achievements and pleasures yet suffer from the hyperfocus goal-seeking blind spots. The striatal dopamine moves from the fun, spontaneous and impulsive ventral part to the dominatrix dorsal part where control is not ours anymore. Compulsive activation and dominance of dopamine pathways in the dorsal striatum lead to the shutdown, disconnect and downregulation of your usually balanced brain arbitrator: the executive central network. You do not know what is optimum anymore since the judge and just judgements are gone. You seek maximum “enjoyment” at all costs and then the costs are getting costlier and costlier, and enjoyment... not so much.

When we see patterns of maximum enjoyment leading to negative consequences in one or many spheres of our lives, it is useful to see if we can modulate and balance or pleasure to be at its optimum, meaning maximum without starting to encounter the outcomes that would make it suboptimum. This is a question I now often ask myself in a give situation: will this action lead to optimum or only maximum pleasure? I believe I am all the better for it yet am also aware that in some circumstances and brain chemistry, asking the question may lead to failure of fine reasoning if my assessment is already clouded by lazy, fast-tracked neural pathways.

Many of you have one or more things they cannot stop doing or can with noticeable difficulty. Remember then, that it may be hard to judge how negative the impact of that (or these) thing(s) is(are) and even more how close to been catastrophic or disastrous the impact may be. What may seem like optimum pleasure may soon be maximum pleasure and maximum disaster!

Ask any addict how quick you can reach devastation, tragedy, and calamity. I have heard almost every story. It is not pretty. Compulsions are sneaky and pernicious.

A drunk friend had a serious drunk driving accident. Another friend got violent and ended up in jail, then stayed home two years with crippling anxiety. A workaholic friend had a burnout for almost a year. A gambling young man tried to kill himself twice. So many men lost their wives. Women lost dignity, family, children. Child protective services, I am familiar with. Addicts lost their job, their health, their finances, their fame, their face, their form, their place, their home.

In a blink of an eye, it can all be taken away. Even without addiction!

Embrace impermanence. Balance your desires to curve uncertainty. Maximum pleasure for too long will cause issues certainly. Optimum is better. What is optimum? Stay open to your bias and blind spots, be positive but not overly optimistic. Positive narratives cannot be nefarious if we want more positive narratives.

One way to lower the momentum for maximum pleasure is simple satisfaction and enjoyment in the moment, including mindfulness. Contentment and connection are two of the useful 7Cs here.

**Connection (To Yourself or Others) = Less Addiction (Connected to Habit)**

**Contentment (Enough) = Less Addiction (More)**

**Mindfulness (Now) = Less Addiction (Near Future)**

Remember that we think of addiction as being impulsive, spontaneous, and perhaps an inability for delayed gratification, yet addiction is never exactly in the now, it is in the very short-term near now. We can thus stop its powerful grip by focusing on the right now. No opium. Now is optimum. Done.

Stay grounded.

## Mourning

An addiction has served an adaptive part of our life at some point and has taken more and more of our time, thoughts, and actions over time as it became a compulsion. It is often useful to acknowledge and mourn the loss before we replace it with new behaviors. You can even write a short goodbye letter if you find yourself having difficulty letting go and really choosing to stop the behavior (as opposed to scale back which may lead to mixed results depending on the addict and addiction). For some ingrained behaviors and thoughts, letting go of them may feel like a substantial loss and even outright grief. It is important to acknowledge it to better move on. “Goodbye my X”. You can write a letter, sign a song, or invent another ritual that may help you overcome your well-intentioned but dumb brain which is stuck like an old vinyl record skipping.

## Nicotine

Nicotine has been thought to be highly-addictive. In fact, a Harvard paper showed that it is a class of compounds called pyrazines, found in both commercial cigarettes and e-cigarettes, which are the most addictive. There are about 600 compounds in cigarettes other than nicotine and 15 or so that are pyrazines. Nicotine does not cause cancer and other unhealthy effects by itself, and it may be less addictive than was previously thought. Non-nicotine compounds seem to significantly enhance dependence by helping to optimise nicotine delivery and dosing and through cueing and learned behavior<sup>69</sup>. Nicotine is found in tobacco plants but also in many vegetables such as tomatoes, potatoes, celery and eggplant. Cigarettes can deliver nicotine in the matter of seconds and with a spike, however. If it is given in a slower acting and less “addictively” paced and dosed manner, it does have some potential for therapy and positive benefits.

Nicotine can be used to treat and prevent viruses, including the flu, measles and others, as well as help inflammatory conditions and even insulin-resistance in diabetes! It can help attention, memory and learning. Tobacco products may be harmful and addictive, yet nicotine may not be the sole or even primary culprit for these unhealthy behaviors. Nicotinic receptors are an important part of our biology and neurobiology. Get your nicotine fix with your veggies instead.

## Ego Fatigue

Ego fatigue is when we attempt to go against our impulses and compulsions, to “stop” in the moment. Eventually we get tired of resisting, and it becomes more difficult or even impossible to resist. Studies show that the more we resist the harder it is. The Dao would agree. What can we do instead? We saw that mental reframing is a powerful tool and it is much more effective than simply “telling ourselves not to think or do something”. We need to create stories with our narrative self. Build and repeat strong, positive, compelling stories that are alternatives and better than our old addictive “positive” stories.

### **Non-Addictive Stories >> Addictive Stories**

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<sup>69</sup> Alpert HR, Agaku IT, Connolly GN. A study of pyrazines in cigarettes and how additives might be used to enhance tobacco addiction. *Tob Control*. 2016 Jul;25(4):444-50. doi: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2014-051943. Epub 2015 Jun 10. PMID: 26063608; PMCID: PMC4941150.



In fact, stories are so important that they affect our beliefs and outcomes. 'Decision Fatigue', 'Ego Depletion' or just the idea that we have finite willpower, instead of an unlimited source like we will see about compassion in the next chapter has been challenged by Carol Dwek's research. It seems that people who believe willpower or self-control is a limited capacity behave as such and have difficulty with self-control or no succumbing to cravings<sup>70</sup>.

### **Stories of Failure = Failure**

However, a 2023 study with 3 times as much participants as the initial 2010 findings were not able to replicate findings, meaning there may be some type of ego depletion going on after all, regardless of belief<sup>71</sup>. Perhaps our self-control is not illimited, but surely less limited than we may think. It may partly be due to brain glucose level. In both cases there also another easy trick to avoid excessive need for self-control. Brandon Oto writes:

*"How can we combat this tide of will-draining, energy-sapping ego depletion? The single best way is to reduce our decision load to begin with. One of the most interesting findings in the studies on decision fatigue is which types of people seem to manage it best. By and large, those individuals who could conserve willpower the longest and maintain the highest quality in their decisions weren't doing it by being tougher than the rest of us. They weren't adhering to higher principles or demonstrating stronger character. Instead, they simply set up their circumstances to minimize the amount of self-control they'd need to exert. They planned ahead. They scheduled, made lists, finished to-do's early, and handled problems before they escalated. They built their lives so that they wouldn't need to make as many decisions. In other words, they had good habits. You see, if a certain action is a habit, then it doesn't drain any self-control."<sup>72</sup>*

We will take about habits in the next section, and it is important to remember that ego depletion may be less impactful than previously thought, especially for some, yet we may not want to "tempt the Devil" by constantly being required to test our willpower by attractive exposure to our addictions, cravings or desires.

### **The Last Step**

The 12-Step Program's last step is to help someone in need. This can be an activating step because one of the ways to learn something to the highest point is to be able to teach it. In that way the "addict" can verbalize, internalize, and believe the stories he or she explains to others while helping them. While the person carries the message to others, the 12-step achiever is also carrying and reinforcing the stories within him or her. These again are stories and stories are strong to synthesize happiness.

### **Teaching = Concretizing Learning**

### **Helping Others = Helping Oneself + Others**

Helping others help us and makes us accountable. If we are teachers now, we must practice what we "preach". This means that the stories we tell ourselves will reinforce our changed "identity" which will come with new (healthier) habits.

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<sup>70</sup> Job V, Dweck CS, Walton GM. (2011) Ego depletion—is it all in your head?: implicit theories about willpower affect self-regulation. *Psychol Sci*, 21(11):1686–1693, Nov 2011

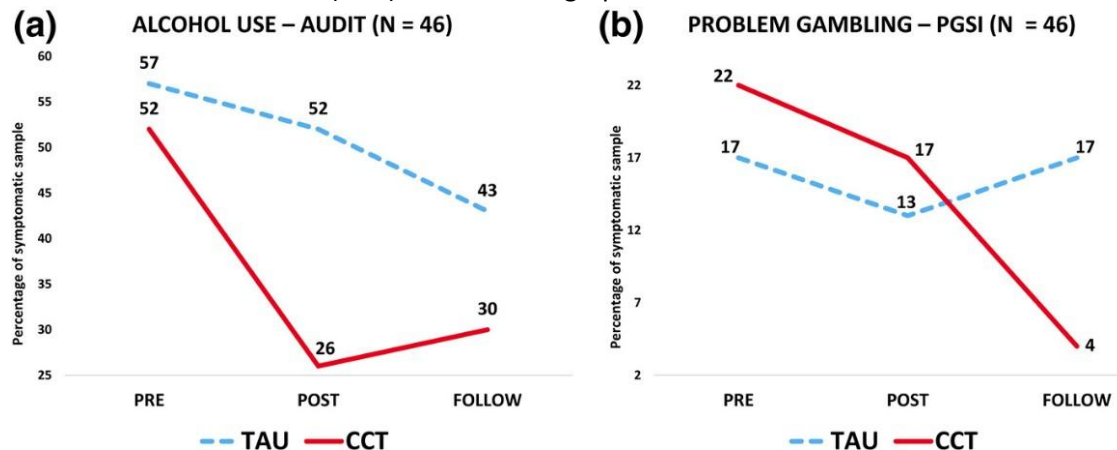
<sup>71</sup> Carruth, Nicholas & Ramos, Jairo & Miyake, Akira. (2023). Does willpower mindset really moderate the ego-depletion effect? A preregistered replication of Job, Dweck, and Walton (2010). *PLOS ONE*. 18. e0287911. 10.1371/journal.pone.0287911.

<sup>72</sup> Oto, Brandon. (2012). When thinking is hard: managing decision fatigue. *PubMed*, May 2012



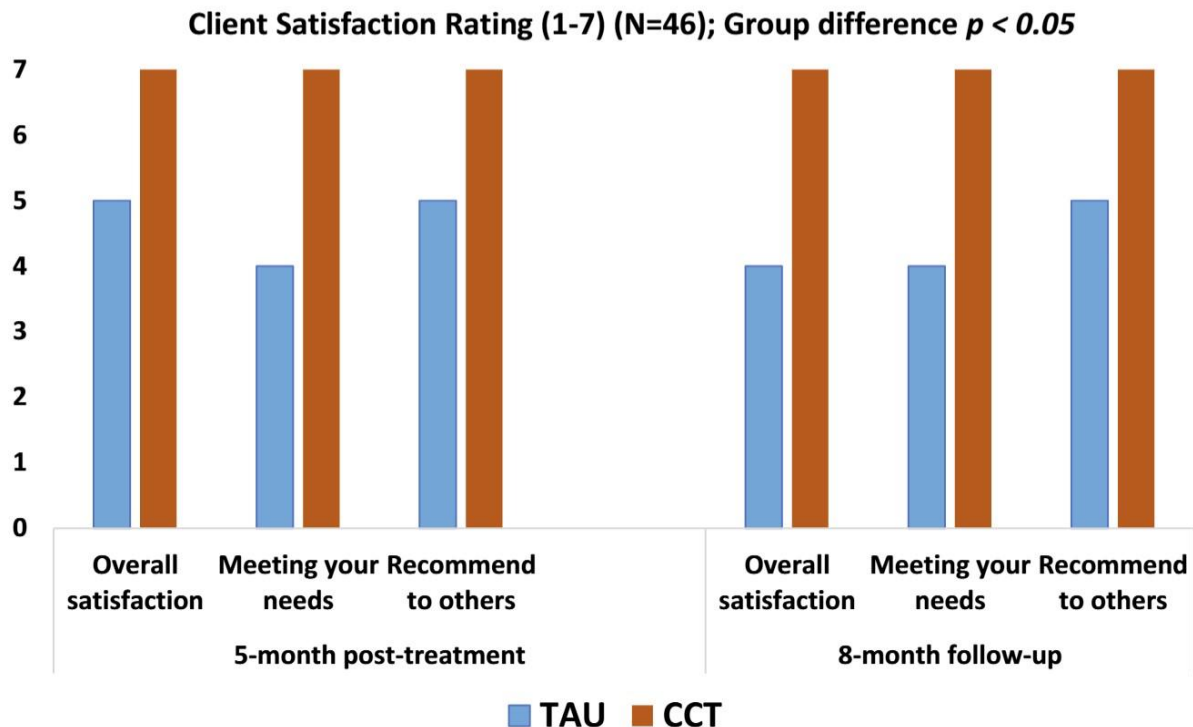
## Congruence Couple Therapy

Addiction is often seen as an individual battle between vice and willpower. Dr. Bonnie Lee innovated the field of addiction by suggesting that a family and relationship-based approach may lead to better results. Not surprisingly, it does! Congruence Couple Therapy (CCT) showed marked progress versus treatment-as-usual (TAU) as shows the graphs below<sup>73</sup>:



Its approach is centered on the 3 A's: Awareness, Acknowledgment and Alignment. It looks on how couple dynamics, including dysfunction, and previous or current trauma can impact addiction and positive outcomes in the long-term. Instead of treating the family, friends and especially the main life partner of the person dealing with bad habits as peripheral, they are seen as central. Couples may both suffer from “addictions” or only one of them, yet the idea is to communicate and construct better habits with acceptance, compassion and awareness. The people who experienced this type of therapy also seemed more satisfied or content (7Cs) as we can see below. This also means they must be telling themselves better stories with their narrative self, and probably to their better halves.

<sup>73</sup> Lee, Bonnie & Ofori, Marvin & Brown, Matthew & Awosoga, Olu & Shi, Yanjun & Greenshaw, Andrew. (2022). Congruence couple therapy for alcohol use and gambling disorders with comorbidities (part I): Outcomes from a randomized controlled trial. *Family process*. 62. 10.1111/famp.12813.



We also know for the famous “rat pack” study that rats who were addicted to cocaine completely ceased their hardwired addictive behavior when put in a cage with other rats<sup>74</sup>. We can assume that humans able to interact and socialise instead isolated from others may have less need for addiction behavior as substitutes.

#### Positive Social Interaction > Social Isolation

We already spoke about romantic love being a form of addiction. Some studies looking at brains of people in love show that they activate similar brain areas as most addictions. Further being in love is shown to be a protective factor for people who are in the process of changing addiction behaviors<sup>75</sup>. Although love can have negative impact as an addiction like stalking, self-harm, domestic violence and depression, we can imagine that positive, safe and nurturing love is a much better natural and adaptive addition (necessary for child conception and rearing) than most other addictions we talked about.

### Beyond Addiction

We saw that addiction is not a disease, but a temporary disorder and that most will be afflicted by an addiction or compulsion at some time in their lives. The good news is that new research has found that neuroplasticity of the brain is such that even hard drug addicts have shown to regrow healthier neural networks not only to the degree of which it was prior to the addiction but surprisingly beyond. More and

<sup>74</sup> Alexander, B. K., Beyerstein, B. L., Hadaway, P. F., & Coombs, R. B. (1981). Effect of early and later colony housing on oral ingestion of morphine in rats. *Pharmacology, biochemistry, and behavior*, 15(4), 571–576. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0091-3057\(81\)90211-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0091-3057(81)90211-2)

<sup>75</sup> Fisher, H. E., Xu, X., Aron, A., & Brown, L. L. (2016). Intense, Passionate, Romantic Love: A Natural Addiction? How the Fields That Investigate Romance and Substance Abuse Can Inform Each Other. *Frontiers in psychology*, 7, 687. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00687>

different neurons can be established by making new pathways through creativity (7Cs) and learning. Dopamine is the same neurotransmitter responsible for learning and reinforcement.

**Addiction = Narrow Focus + Limited Learning**

**New Narratives (Creativity) + Learning = New Neural Pathways and Possibilities**

Dr. Marc Lewis writes in his revolutionary book *Biology of Desire*, “In addiction, as in love, our habits can grow with remarkable speed”. We just need to right positive narratives to learn and adapt beyond addictions. Maybe like the lushy stories we tell ourselves about love. More about the biology and psychology of love in *Beyond Sex*.

Might it be addictive acts, behaviors, thoughts, mindsets, or fantasies (unbounded lust and desires) that become maladaptive and unhealthy, addictions have many forms, shades, and degrees. They can come from, an return to, a healthy form and are natural neural processes. You can temporarily (life itself is temporary) be addicted to sex, food, technology or simply to being angry. Addictions have many names and forms:

- Automatic reactions (thoughts or actions)
- A string of bad relationships, unremitted desperate love, unhealthy lust
- Attention-seeking (physical or virtual), arrogance or low self-esteem
- Collecting and hoarding (physical or virtual), things or money (savings can be addictive!)

All these are temporary, tampons, sometimes tempting patterns we do not want to be stuck in. We do not want to be stuck in anything. We want to be free, and freedom is flexibility.

**Addiction = Narrow Mind + Stuck**

**Flexible Mind = Wide Mind + Soar**

### Addiction, Business and Politics

Addiction is a very well-known pathways for business marketers as emotional empathy is similarly well known by politicians and charitable organization who rely on their tactics to attract sympathy as we will see in the next chapter.

Many businesses benefit of the addictive capitalist and consumerist culture that was created over the last century, where things are disposable instead of sustainable, to the point of planned obsolescence. Businesses can sell you a brand-new product faster and faster. The technological industry has been fine-tuned by understanding addictive behavior and making their products more and more addictive. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has hooked us to our screens so much that Netflix was eventually forced to ask its viewers if they really wanted to continue watching as their products and formats became so successful and addictive the viewers did not even know how much in trance they may have been in their compulsions, as mild as they may seem.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the most addictive and harmful companies were undoubtedly the tabaco industry who blatantly lied to the public and choose profit over people, as the capitalist system does by default. The 1999 Michael Mann film *The Insider* talks about some of the grievance with the tobacco industry, still they operate and continue to make profits in most of the world, some places only taxing more and putting various unattractive labels and marketing & sales restrictions. Cigarettes are still popular in films and e-cigarettes has replaced some of the market attrition. New smokers still become addicted, and a new generation of future customers are still born every day.

New Zealand’s 2024 legislation is a world-first banning tobacco sales for future generations. The toughest anti-tobacco rules in the world banned sales to those born after Jan. 1, 2009. It also cut nicotine

content (arguably the most addictive component of the chemical bouquet) in smoked tobacco products and reduced the number of tobacco retailers by more than 90%.

"A package of measures... to increase the tools available to help people quit smoking," Health Minister Casey Costello claimed. "Large-scale clinical trials and modelling studies show the legislation would have rapidly increased the rates of quitting among smokers and made it much harder for young people to take up smoking," said Hoek, co-director of a group studying ways to reduce smoking. Regulations on vaping would also be tightened to deter young people<sup>76</sup>. Is this enough?

In January 2024, Canada only increased cigarette packaging photos and messaging to be a further deterrent along with the heavy cost. This seemed to work with one man I talked to early that year who said the new packages photos were disturbing and he had not bought packs for weeks... yet still found ways to get individual cigarettes! What I may suggest is that negative imagery and narrative are going in the direction of resisting and ego fatigue. What we need is not negativity towards something that is available and highly addictive. We should ban it outright. There is no positive benefit to individuals or society, only to the tobacco companies. Short of that, or at least in parallel, positive narratives about health, smell, sports, and active alternatives should be encouraged. This is the opportunity to reframe, not only shame and disgust.

## Habits Hacks

We saw that all forms of addictions and compulsions are simply fast-tracked, partly unconscious, reactive (instead of proactive and conscious) behaviors and thought patterns. Everyone has them and we do not need to call it a disease.

There are good reasons for habits, including efficiency and automaticity. Habitual behaviors can be executed without conscious thought and effort, making them efficient and fast (Seger & Spiering, 2011; Wood & R  nger, 2016). Conscious effort takes mental energy, willpower and fortitude. Our brain wants to use as little energy as possible to attend its objectives. Yes, our brain is lazy and rightfully so. The question is how can our conscious help mold our unconscious to be effective, efficient, fast and steadfast in our SMART and existential goals?

Most new habits are said to take several weeks or months to be incorporated fully, and, even then, some compulsions may have residual resilience and neurology can reopen old pathways in certain circumstances. There is no permanent closure, and everything is always in some functional chaos and flux. What is recommended may be a restrain more than restriction mindset, where nothing or very few things are forbidden, yet the right proportion and balance can be attained for optimum functional habit and happiness. Optimum is not always maximum! Watch out for the traps of the opium dens which may not always be in the form of illicit drugs. You can simply have a habit to complain, blame, avoid, procrastinate or to slouch, for instance. Most "bad" habits are easily accessible and unconscious habits often manifest by judgemental and justifying conscious thoughts, words and actions. Remember that you are not your thoughts.

"You must unlearn what you have learned," said master Yoda in Star Wars. I also said this in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*, where:

### **Pillar #2: Disillusionment (Unlearn)**

There is a knowledge unlearning we need to do, as well as unlearning our habits so we can build better ones. Our minds are sponges and learning machines. We may learn faster as children but retain the

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<sup>76</sup> Craymer, Lucy. *New Zealand set to scrap world-first tobacco ban*. Reuters. March 2024

ability to learn (and unlearn) until we die. To change our minds and habits for the better we must at the same time learn and unlearn.

Jordan Peterson suggests to first clearly define the supposed problem and potential ideal end state. Then it is important to make one or more potential paths from one state to the other and look at actions and habits. We can choose a path and start. Starting is often the most difficult. He suggests breaking down the path to current situation and envisioned ideal situation into small enough steps until you can take the first step (SMART goals can be a way). The rest will eventually be exponential as action gains traction and momentum. Peterson is known to encourage an easy small step like “clean your room every morning” and to build accountability and build upon success.

A few other ideas:

1. Limit distraction or worry.
2. Lower the chaos in life. Some order and routine do not mean lack of openness.
3. Self-reflection daily with a neutral yet loving view.

Ask yourself: “What habits do I need to give up and what new habits can I develop?”

Then, find out a few ways how. Be creative (7Cs). As for when, it is almost always now. Why wait *mañana*? Why procrastinate, defer, delay what is right there for your betterment?

## MOST Goals

Before creating or changing habits, we need to figure out what are the life goals that matter MOST:

**Motivating:** meaningful in a passionate and sustainable way

**Objective:** measurable (as in the M of SMART goals) and monitorable

**Small:** small enough to guarantee success

**Timely:** Time=sensitive (as in the T of SMART goals) to achieve in about 3 months

This acronym comes from Dr. Aditi Nerurkar’s 2024 book, *The 5 Resets*. It is the first reset and emphasize making space and time for what matters MOST. Get clear on it and then clear the way for it! And yes, that means even your coveted smartphone and social media! She even suggests putting your phone on black and white mode if the colorful screen is too addictive for you and you cannot stop the doom scrolling.

## Bookend Method

Creating rituals to begin and end activities, romantic dates, days, or workdays. We know from the narrative self bias that the last event and the most extreme stand out in our mind and stories so let’s make use of our cognitive bias we now know. First impressions also set the mood for an activity or artistic expression like stories. Let us make the beginning and end of things great to motivate us day after day.

**Narrative Self (End > Beginning > Middle)**

## The Power of Habit

A monumental book for habit is the one by Charles Duhigg. It takes about cue, routine, and reward as 3-step loop. To change a habit, Duhigg suggests keeping the cue and reward but changing the routine to change a behavior. He cautions that some cues are emotional. And the others are often: preceding action, people, place, and time. I would add things and other triggers like thoughts and the 5 senses.

He recommends finding the often-hidden real rewards that can be uncovered with trial and error and with a creative (7Cs) and systematic exploration of rewards, perhaps like the 6-pack we will see later in this chapter, should be done before assessing the most important reward or need met by the habit.

Willpower can be strengthened over time is one of the books' claim that perhaps lacks neuroscience context because will is in the prefrontal cortex (PFC). It is not only that it can be increased (mainly with better and stronger positive narratives and reinforcement) but that the other brain regions and networks that affect the PFC can enhance or reduce willpower. We will explore further in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* as well as the fact that habits are formed to save our brains effort. Our brains constantly look for ways to automate routine tasks and be more efficient with neuroplastic learning. Duhigg's book highlights 3 special forms of habits:

1. Keystone habits are those which have a knock-on effect on other areas of your life. Changing or cultivating these can cause widespread shifts.
2. Social habits are driven by friendship, community, and a sense of identity.
3. Primitive habits: some habits are almost purely unconscious like sleepwalking and sleep terrors, which me, my brother and my son all had, and are even more difficult if not often impossible to override consciously.

All habits have an unconscious component and to consciously try to reappraise an unconscious choice could help us not be completely unconscious. We must try to not always act without (much) thinking, which is the goal of habits! Understanding how habits work gives you the freedom and responsibility to change them. Change might not be fast or easy, but almost any habit can be reshaped with time and effort. That still not to stay that addiction is a choice. Like my sixty-five year old friend Peter says: "happiness is a choice." That is by in large true, if we can get there with incremental choices and changes. It is more of a journey and a constant relentless choice to be happy and content without being complacent.

#### **Habit Shaping = Contentment (7Cs) – Complacent = Constant Choice (Now)**

As with addictions, companies can predict and manipulate your habits for their own gains. With big data tracking so many of your habits are known in real-time and compared to your old habits and that of your peers. Exponentially since Duhigg's book more than a decade ago, don't be surprised if your favorite tech provider knows more about your habits than you. Habits are so powerful. If they can make a profit with that knowledge and influence, they will likely do. If you can take ownership of your data and use it to your benefit, power to you!

#### **Atomic Habits**

Another famous habits hack book written by James Clear has a few remarkable elements I will summarize for secrets to results that last as we change our default behaviors. Clear himself wrote regular articles and newsletters online until he grew a sizable following and landed a publishing deal that increased his reach and achievement with tiny wins that accrued over years, hardly overnight.

#### **Incremental Habit**

The first contribution to Clear's work is his commitment to always going forward, even if slowly. He shows that a mere 1% "better than yesterday" improvement every day makes you almost 38 times (3778%!!!) better in a year. "Habits are the compound interest of self-improvement," he explains. I would add the for each new positive habit the process eventually plateaus, yet the idea in itself is compelling in ties into the 3<sup>rd</sup> law we will see below (make it easy). The reverse is also true if we

- Let "bad" habits get slightly worse or
- Let "good" or neutral habits

In both cases, we risk slow decline eventually leading to problems. Asks addicts that let their habits get slightly worse and worse slowly and cumulatively how happens over time. Bang, problem knocks at the door!

#### 4 Layers of Behavior Change

Clear mentions that most people have a desire to change behavior yet lack the framework to achieve lasting results. He mentions that most only focus on changing outcomes without looking at real vectors or layers of change: He describes 3 layers and I will add a 4<sup>th</sup> one to make it:

1. Outcomes
2. Behavior
3. Processes
4. Identity

Focusing on outcomes can help us plan SMART or MOST goals yet miss the fact that because habits take time to develop and achieve results, processes may often be more important than the results. Because we learned early that expectations are not useful, even if we have goals, we must not focus our assessment on external effect on outcome, but rather on actual action and behavior.

#### **Behavior >>> Outcomes (Expectations)**

Furthermore, to maintain and improvement behavior, proper processes should be put in place to create habits. Habits can form with time, yet they are also subject to further change. To cement further the behavioral change and make it more permanent it is useful to start to identify with the new habit. Remember that we have no real ego, and that any identity is only a story we can create, shape and choose to identify to or not.

#### **Positive Narrative + Flexible Conviction → New Identity > New Process(es) > New Behavior(s)**

For example, if you want to change your behavior and write more, not only do you need processes but to start to identify as a writer. If you want to run more, be a runner, want to spend more time with your children, identify as a dad or mom. If you want to rekindle desire with your romantic partner as we will see in *Beyond Sex*, we yourself as romantic, courting and admiring. Believe in the identity enough for the purpose of the behavior and habits yet know with certainty and awareness you are not any of these identities but can choose the most useful one(s) with mental creativity and flexibility. Normally, the more you repeat a behavior, the more you can reinforce an identity if needed, as well as other factors like saying this identity to yourself and others often. However never forget the power of narratives even over physical repetition. Repeat your narratives if needed, write them down, mumble them to yourself in a mantra (see *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* for why) and convince yourself momentarily and flexibly.

For example, you may have a habit to complain about cooking at home more often than your spouse, you may say to yourself: "I love cooking for my spouse. This is one of the things I do." Eventually your identity will not let you complain and the desired behavior of not complaining interiorly (resentment) or externally (blame) will disappear with less effort than simply saying "I will not complain" (ego fatigue).

#### 4 Stages of Behavior Change

The four stages of habitual change are:

1. Cue
2. Craving
3. Response
4. Reward



The cue is a stimulus (internal or external) we have associated with a learned reward that elicits a craving and a response. Yes, Pavlov's dog and Skinner's operant conditioning (Psychology 101). In the motivation-reward pathway we will explore further in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, the reward is dopamine and its slightly euphoric feeling. Remember that *Chapter 3: Philosophy* showed us we should not respond to every cue or stimulus. We have also learned that we can modulate this response with many mental tricks and practice.

#### 4 Laws of Behavior Change

Clear's Four Laws of Behavior Change are:

1. Make it obvious
2. Make it attractive
3. Make it easy
4. Make it satisfying

Habits that can be made to fulfil one or more of the four laws, would be formed, improved, and kept with greater success.

##### **Obvious (Visible) > Hidden (Invisible)**

The first law relates to the cue which triggers a habit. For example, if you want to incorporate a new habit to read, the cue could be putting your book somewhere visible so that it's the first thing you see when you wake up. If it is hidden in a drawer or box, it may be less easy to start and maintain the habit. Even better, bring the book in your bag during the day and put it in display when you get back home. Similarly, if you want to play tennis more, leave your rackets in your trunk instead of in the back of your closet, storage space or garage.

##### **Attractive > Unattractive (Ugly, Unappealing)**

The second law refers to the craving stage of the habit loop. Thinking about how great you'll feel after a workout can help motivate you to move and do it. We want to reframe to the positive, beautiful and attractive, and refrain from simply trying to stop a previous habit (ego fatigue).

##### **Easy > Hard (Difficult)**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> law relates to the response stage. Don't make the habit too difficult or time-consuming or you won't want to do it. Start with a very achievable goal (SMART and MOST goal setting) and build up from there.

##### **Satisfying > Unsatisfying**

Finally, the fourth law refers to the reward stage of the habit. Make the habit pleasurable so you want to repeat it; for instance, listening to music while working out, studying, cleaning the house, or doing the dishes. Also, an accountability partner can go a long way to keep you motivated and become the social habit Duhigg mentioned had more dimensions like friendship.

#### 5-Seconds Rule

Author and speaker, Mel Robbins, talks about her 5-seconds rules which is counting backwards the seconds from 5 to 1 like a space rocket launch to propel (like a rocket) yourself, your action and your life in the direction from doubt, fear and inaction. I used this technique with success way before her bestselling book, as it is otherwise known as the 3-second rule. I used to do that when I was younger and afraid to approach a good-looking girl. It is a well-known technique in male dating seminars or courses. It comes from the idea that people have about 3 to 5 seconds to have their attention grabbed normally and that a decision or judgement will or should be made during that time window. If you can decide to go in



that time, go and do not look back from your decision, it will bring momentum to your decisive action and propel you from inaction or other habitual action. Counting backwards in your head or even out loud from 5 or 3 can enable you to start a new action with better awareness and conviction. Then you can start again in the next similar situation, until it may become a healthy habit and you may not have to count anymore.

### **Assured Action = Quick Behavior Change**

#### 2-Changes Rule

Our brain may have difficulty to process more than 2 significant changes at a time. Choose 2 changes you want to focus on for the next two months and once you achieved and incorporate the changes, you can work on two more changes. That is 10 to 12 sustainable changes per year! That should be enough to make amazing breakthroughs every year.

Some research points out that more than the 2 changes at a time may overwhelm most and detract from achieving any goal at all. If you want to do 3 and let me know how that turned out, please do. Expand your horizon and make some trials and errors. I know some turning points in life may require you to juggle even more than 3 or 4 changes. Still, make it a habit not to change more than 2 habits at a time when possible. Pun intended.

Habits are most susceptible to change when your life changes, especially during a personal crisis, although you do not have to wait for such crisis to implement calculated changes. You can try to “avoid” some potential crisis perhaps (in a non-deterministic, nor dogmatic way), make incremental positive changes periodically and readjusting. Yet crises do come from both internal proclivities and problems as well as external things completely out of our control. If you have a crisis at hand, make sure to revise your new habits carefully as they will be harder to change once they become ingrained. Try to view a “crisis” with equanimity and as a learning and profound change opportunity to make the best of it.

#### 21 to 90+ days

It is said to take about 8 weeks or 60 days to build a sustainable habit. Some say 4 weeks or 30 days, yet others insist it can take 3 months or 90 days depending on the difficulty. Finally, some suggest as little as 3 weeks of 21 days is needed. There is no clear consensus, and it likely varies greatly on the individual and the habit. It can be affected for instance by experience, mental and neuronal rigidity as well as the Four Laws of Behavior Change we saw above. Beyond Neurons & Hormones will look at the principal habit-forming neurotransmitters and brain structures like the striatum and nucleus accumbens. For now. Let us just remember that range of days so we do not assume that most habits can be formed in a week only for most people. Months even seem to be the sweet spot. Patience (8Ps) is a virtue and useful for powerful transformation through habit hacking.

### **Environment/Experience + Genetics = Habit**

### **Patience (8Ps) + Practice = Habit Change**

In a wider context and to dig a bit into the complexity, scientifically significant studies, theories and models of habit have emerged to better understand habits.

#### *Lally & Gardner*

Landmark studies from Lally and colleagues (2010) state that habits can range from 18 to 254 days depending on the individual and the habit. Dr. Lally and Dr. Gardner are Co-Directors of the Habit Application and Theory group, at the University of Surrey, UK. Their studies highlight key points<sup>77</sup>:

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<sup>77</sup> Lally, P., et al. (2010). How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world. *Eur. J. Soc. Psychol.*, 40 pp. 998-1009

1. Asymptotic curve of habit formation

This means that initial rapid progress gradually slows and plateaus. This suggests that habits take time to develop and may not be formed immediately. Their incorporation over time is nonlinear and have different levels of stability or instability, also affected by context and environment.

2. Variation in habit formation time

There are significant variation in the time it takes for individuals to form habits, ranging from half a month to almost nine months—a pregnancy and “hard habit to create” baby. This highlights the importance of individual differences in habit formation.

3. Consistency of behavior

Performing the behavior more consistently was associated with better model fit, indicating that consistent repetition (practice) is crucial for habit formation.

4. Contextual cues

Habits are triggered automatically in the presence of corresponding contextual cues, such as external stimuli, thoughts, or emotions (Lally & Gardner, 2013)<sup>78</sup>. This is linked to the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of habitual change we saw earlier in this section.

As it may be true that some individual may be able to form a healthy habit as early as 3 weeks (18-21 days), most will require much more time. The average plateau period is around 10 weeks (66 days) after daily performance<sup>79</sup> so more than three times more. Some may even require 36 weeks or more than 8 months. Simpler actions become habits more quickly so more complex ones may take more time. Remember that consistency and cues are also important. The 2 Cs of habit-formation! So be patient (8Ps) and persevere (8Ps).

Gardner and colleagues (2022)<sup>80</sup> found that habit formation may be neither necessary nor sufficient to maintain long-term behavioral changes and that motivation plays an important role of equal or greater importance. If the new desired behavior is to be maintained, there must have either:

1. Positive motivation towards the desired behavior, or
2. Absence of motivation to cease the desired behavior

**Motivation + Habit = Behavior**

Also, new habitual behavior can be maintained not only because of the habit but also because of other factors, mainly:

1. Internal: dopaminergic desire/liking or serotonin satisfaction/contentment (7Cs) of new habit
2. External: cue disruption by environmental changes favoring new habit

In fact, Gardner and colleagues (2024)<sup>81</sup>, including Lally, further clarified that habits and habitual behaviors are two distinct aspects. The habit is only one factor that will determine if a specific behavior is enacted in any given situation. Another factor to consider is self-regulation, including cognitive, somatic and emotional regulation. Somatic regulation is the regulation of our bodily states like breathing and heart rate.

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<sup>78</sup> Lally, P., & Gardner, B. (2013). Promoting habit formation. *Health Psychology Review*, 7(Suppl 1), S137–S158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2011.603640>

<sup>79</sup> Gardner, B., Lally, P., & Wardle, J. (2012). Making health habitual: the psychology of 'habit-formation' and general practice. *The British journal of general practice : the journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 62 605, 664-6 .

<sup>80</sup> Gardner, B., Rebar, A., & Lally, P. (2020). Habit interventions. In M. S. Hagger, L. D. Cameron, K. Hamilton, N. Hankonen, & T. Lintunen (Eds.), *The Handbook of behaviour change* (pp599-616). Cambridge University Press

<sup>81</sup> Gardner, B., Rebar, A., & Lally, P (2022) How does habit form? Guidelines for tracking real-world habit formation, *Cogent Psychology*, 9:1, 2041277, DOI: 10.1080/23311908.2022.2041277

### **Habit ≠ Habitual Behavior**

#### **Motivation + Self-Regulation + Habit = Habitual Behavior**

#### **Self-Regulation = Somatic Regulation + Cognitive Regulation + Emotional Regulation**

For instance, if you have a habit but you are hungry, angry or both you may accentuate or go against the automatic impulse the habit generates towards a habitual behavior. Same goes for thoughts that may support or suppress the habitual impulse. Note that overall motivation and intention in the moment can either combine or conflict with the habit to produce the habitual behavior. A few other takeaways from the research:

1. Habits can be useful to maintain desired behavior when motivation or intention dips or declines temporarily but only to a certain point
2. When self-control is low, unwanted (old) habit will generally win over counterhabitual (new) intention, but when self-control is high the opposite is true.
3. Self-control can be affected by many internal (e.g. Fatigue) or external elements (e.g. distractions)
4. Relapse (occasional) or full relapse (sustained) to unwanted behavior despite moderate to high motivation is often due to improper self-regulation which can cascade into further dysregulation with negative thoughts and emotions like (shame, self-blame and loss of hope)
5. Occasional slips in the habit system is normal and can lead to some habitual behavior change not being 100% accurate, yet over time people can adjust their actions to discontinue unwanted behavior taking into account motivation, intention, self-regulation and possible a new healthier habit.
6. There are hundreds of habits and even more non-habits that can compete for any given action selection. Actions, behaviors and habits are rarely in a silo and may not reproduce findings in the controlled laboratory conditions to the real world. The complexity of cues, opportunities and resources of habit formation, maintenance or deviance are exponential in real life. We will see more about this in the next section.

These findings can help promoting healthy habits and breaking unhealthy ones, including various “addictions”. By understanding the mechanisms of habit formation and habitual behavior maintenance, we can develop more effective strategies for behavior change and habit hacking. Remember to personalize it to your circumstances, both internal and external.

Lastly, individuals with habitual tendencies often fail to consider new, potentially superior, alternatives <sup>82</sup>. Remember to foster flexibility and openness even as you are building better habits for yourself.

#### **Creativity (7Cs) + Curiosity (7Cs) = New Potential Action**

### 100s of Habits

We are said to have hundreds of habits that assist us navigate the world efficiently every day and most are relatively healthy and helpful. Some are simple and others are complex. Examine some of them if you can, make habit audits fun activities you can incorporate periodically. Find new hidden habits, create new ones with curiosity (7Cs) and creativity (7Cs). Do not get attached with any of them and do not let habits define you, still choose the most helpful habits to propel you and tell positive stories about them.

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<sup>82</sup> Henriquez-Jara, Bastian, C. Angelo Guevara, Marcela Munizaga, Omar D. Perez, (2025) Habits and the subexploration of better transportation options: A dual-system approach. Travel Behaviour and Society, Volume 38, 2025, 100877, ISSN 2214-367X, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tbs.2024.100877>.

## Cognitive Distortions

Negativity bias is part of a bigger umbrella of cognitive distortions. These distortions seem rational to ourselves, and sometimes even to others and we may have a very difficult time dissociating ourselves from them and seeing them as false. There are many but here are a few:

1. Overgeneralizing
2. “absolute” or “all or nothing” thinking
3. “extreme” or “black and white” thinking
4. Mind reading – assume you know how people think about you
5. Telepathy – assuming someone can read your mind or emotions without communicating
6. Catastrophizing or exaggerating worst case scenario
7. Emotional reasoning – assuming your emotion reflect reality
8. Labelling – putting a behavior as an identity – Ex. one crime = “a criminal” (hopelessness)
9. Mental filtering – ignoring or minimizing aspects and focusing on others
10. Personalizing – “taking things personally”
11. Unreal ideal – comparison to others and unrealistic ideas
12. Imposter syndrome – doubt skills/talents/abilities and fear of being exposed as fraud

There are many tricks to work against some common (and even uncommon) cognitive distortions and we will look at some of them in other books, however I list them here simply to increase our common awareness. The more aware of our mind, the more we can change it and keep it in checks from its numerous biases.

## Popcorn Brain and Balance

Roughly equivalent to Swedish “Lagom” of balanced living and Danish “hygge” we saw in *Chapter 2: Sociology*, comes Japanese word “shoukakkou” (小確幸) which concept was created by popular writer Haruki Murakami’s 1986 essay entitled *Afternoon in the Islets of Langerhans*. “Shoukakkou is also compatible with the Epicurean idea that essential and natural pleasures, such as a drink of water after exercising, are the best”, notes bloggers Richard & Minjung. “The essay was about finding small daily joy in the face of economic uncertainty. He describes eating a freshly-baked loaf of bread made with your own hands, wearing a clean new shirt and enjoying the sound a cat makes when it climbs into bed<sup>83</sup>”. An easy, mindfulness and grateful appreciation of natural happiness

**Shoukakkou = Small Satisfaction = Serenity = Contentment**

In South Korea, “sohwakhaeng” (소확행) which means “small but certain happiness” was introduced by K-Pop mega-idol group BTS in a 2018 music video. It claimed to suggest stopping obsessing about money, possession, status, appearances, and future, while focusing on small but guaranteed wins every day. It is mindful and simple. It can be free yet has a consumerism aspect to it since its introduction as trading longer goals for smaller, more immediate experiences like small hotels, meals, gifts, etc.

Ideal life could look like a perfect balance of rest, relaxation, eustress (good stress), long-term motivation, magic moments, and meaningful work. We are looking to find that sweet spot or Goldilocks “just right” place where we get the best of both or multiple worlds. However, we are now bombarded

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<sup>83</sup> Richard. *How Sohwakhaeng (소확행) or Shoukakkou (小確幸) Can Change Your Life*. July 2022

with and accustomed to consuming content in traditional or digital media with a rising trend of being shorter and more intense.

This becoming increasingly prevalent. A simple example is a short-form video that lasts less than one minute. Popcorn Brain is a term coined by Professor David Levy of Washington University. The brain's frontal lobe responds positively when exposed to visual or emotionally immediate and stimulating images. Repeated exposure makes it more ingrained, less salient, compulsive, and resistant. As a result, people lose interest in daily life and seek only greater stimulation, like "popping" popcorn.

Korean, Jini Jung reports four not so surprising findings about popcorn brain culture<sup>84</sup>:

1. Repeated exposure to short stimuli develops tolerance in the frontal lobe
2. Depression rises when insensitive to *sohwakhaeng* (small happiness)
3. The young (and consuming adults) should increase contact with nature (natural happiness)
4. The more you become addicted to short contents, the more 'popcorn brain symptoms' can appear. (Watch out for Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok, YouTube Shorts, X, etc.)

Professor JeongSeok Choi of the Department of Psychiatry at Samsung Seoul Hospital stated, "Usually, we feel better when we watch movies, dramas, beautiful nature, or listen to music. But when popcorn symptoms persist, people would likely inure (harden) to the small, day-to-day pleasure. As a result, helplessness, depression, anxiety, impulsive, emotional changes may occur, and cognitive decline such as poor concentration may also follow."

#### **More Short Content = More Cognitive Decline (Frontal Lobe) = Less Attention**

Active isolation and decrease socialization since the pandemic lockdown have exasperated the trend. Professor EunJoo Kim of the Department of Psychiatry at Gangnam Severance Hospital added, "41 previous studies have shown that the younger, the more adversely the frontal lobe is affected, causing a decrease in concentration."

#### **Younger = Lower Concentration = Less Mindful**

People should maintain a balanced online and offline (sports, social, nature) to prevent popcorn brain harm. Fixed time to use electronic devices is always an option as well as placing smart phones in different room or off. People can also remember to play diverse and longer content like hour plus podcasts and documentaries if they are to engage in social media. I try to stay away of traditional media all together as it is not only rather short and intense but often negative and biased.

If you do not have access to nature directly, healing images such as nature, burning firewood, white noise, nature sounds or others are also effective for brain health management and mitigating popcorn brain. For a balanced brain, a back and forth between parts of the brain that are active when you are focused and concentrating (CEN) and the parts of the brain that are active when you are relaxing is recommended (DMN). We will see these networks in detail in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, as well as the importance of brain breaks and periodically letting your eyes look at the horizon and relax.

### **Elusive Expectation**

*I want it all*

*And I want it now.*

—Queen, I Want It All.

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<sup>84</sup> Jung, Jini *Frequent use of short forms gives you a 'popcorn brain'* K-Health. January 2023.

British rock band Queen sang the desires of the youth in 1989 and US West Coast rapper Warren G did the same a decade later with songs both called “I Want It All”.

French writer and philosopher, Fabrice Midal, writes “Stop wanting to fill the void. You will never have everything.” Expectations are never-ending. We should never try to fill the void, but rather traverse and transcend the need, desire, or want. We saw in *Chapter 3: Philosophy* that we must cultivate the feeling of satiation for everything and “enough”. The here and now is good. The more is almost superfluous.

### **Contentment = Enough = (Inner) Peace**

A lack, a shortage, an absence is the aberrant, strange yet normal feeling most humans harbor constantly in the short, medium, and long-term. What do we expect? Always something slightly different than the reality before us. The grass is always greener on the other side. Instead of happiness, this strategy to fill that lack leads to failure and loss of the magic of the moment. We must accept that all expectations are limited in their capacity to make us happy and none for the long run. That void will remain. Instead of fighting it, we can instead accept it, make peace, and live with it. We are not Insufficient or incomplete. We are whole even with our hole.

It is perfectly normal to miss someone. It gives us strength and numerous songs about such subject. If we can praise and accept our appraisal of an unmet desire, we may make even better than the Buddhists who simply try to repress or control them. Live with the desire knowing it does not need to be met. Don’t expect it to.

As we saw, identifying with an expected outcome, including plans, wants and fears, can lead to anger, disappointment, discouragement, rage, jealous, etc. We remember the negativity bias and emotions hijacked by the amygdala and limbic system. To create space between consideration of current circumstance versus previous expectation is also how we can train our brain better before reacting with a negative judgment.

### **Reality – Expectation = Expectation Gap (Judgment)**

As we learn to observe this disconnect of an expectation with a “lesser” reality as it happens can allow potential detachment and freedom from this harmful visceral denial or reaction of rejection of reality. As we consciously practice to lower expectations on a life from which we have less control than we admit, it may hopefully allow us not to cling to ideas, people, concepts, things and various attachments and accept reality as is with non-judgement and only healthy curiosity and learning opportunity.

When are expectations are met exactly, we are moderately happy and will need to reach another expectation to remain happy. We saw in addition that these expectations can get higher and higher.

Sometimes reality can seem “greater” than or expectations. They come in two forms:

- a) Quantitatively: overachieved our want or desire (more than we initially wanted).
- b) Qualitatively: something that we did not expect pleasantly surprised us.

Everyone loves “positive” unexpected, even people with low openness to experience, although perhaps to a lesser extend because the unexpected part may still trigger some anxiety and fear response. Yet this “positive” unexpected still comes as a surprise and seems out of our control. What can we do to train our brain better? We can work on are expectations in 3 ways.

1. Lower all are expectations
2. Increase awareness of our mind judging reality based on expectation as it occurs to intervene
3. Allow any unexpected reality to be seen as positive

Expectations are the fuel of the dopaminergic system and are essential for motivation to some degree. We cannot pretend to get ride of all expectations in a psychological sense as hope is also an

important part of mental health. We can however recognize it as often more maladaptive than helpful and as an overreaction to often innocuous or harmless events or even perceived events. How many times do we react or overreact to things that are completely in our minds?

Like science, which is ready to reject any hypothesis, even decades of research when something new or better comes along, an adaptive mind should have goals, motivated actions yet limit expectations to be able to see the new information (i.e. reality) quickly and lucidly. Reality will inevitably contradict the expected outcome at some point in life's journey and awareness and acceptance are the key to undue resistance.

**Expectation + Resistance = Unhappiness = Unhealthy**

**Goal-setting + Persistence = Growth**

We will look at the science behind growth mindset, persistence, grit, and hope in following books of this series. Let us now use a popular 2010 song as an example of the expectation dilemma.

Although full of hip hop braggadocious and self-importance, as well as undue focus on capitalist money and fame, DJ Khaled's song "All I Do Is Win" and its remix are in a way positive mindset uplifting anthems that encourage self-elevation. The chorus claims resilience by stating "all I do is win, win, win, no matter what." The no matter what means that a winning mindset is irrespective of other external factors as was highlighted in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*. It doesn't mean to win at all cost or against people, but it may mean to "win" against all odds. Ludacris elaborates with "can't never count me out." Diddy raps in the remix "I'm a natural born winner" while Jadakiss takes it further by saying "all I do is win, I'm allergic to losing." All these cheeky rhymes serve to illustrate that losing is a mindset. Using psychological reframing, we can say that all "losing" is in fact simply "learning".

**Losing → Learning = Winning**

We should cultivate hope, resilience and a positive mindset with curiosity and infinite possibilities without falling victim to attachment to outcome or rigid expectations. We should thus expect positive outcomes in general without being bugged down by details or any narrow specificity.

**Love the Process = No Expectation = No Disappointment = Always Win**

David Robson explains in *The Expectation Effect: How Your Mindset Can Change Your World* that people who believe they are capable of doing something are far more likely to do it. Similarly, people who believe they can recover from injury, illness, grief, or setback do so quicker and more consistently. People who expect to learn a skill quickly and easily... tend to learn that skill quickly and easily. The key is not a specific expectation (although at times it can help motivation) but rather a mindset, a positive, hopeful, grateful and resilient attitude and outlook cultivated in any circumstance to overcome and overachieve. The caveat is that whenever achievement is not reached, we must refuel and regroup quickly, or basically get up and try again with a smile and renewed determination. We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* how motivation dopamine mediates the expectation gap. For now, remember that "no or low expectation" is a key for happiness and contentment, yet we need some motivation to move forward and achieve some goals. Our motivation should be mostly about the now and the process while not losing our future aspirations, being open to a wide range of positive outcomes and accepting any outcome quickly and framing it as positive whatever it may be.

## Reframing Tips

We now know that our narrative self combines with our negative emotions to make situations seem worse than they are. Physiologically, we should be able to appease any negative emotion in less than 5 minutes. I can now deal with most situation in even less than a minute, but this require training and upkeep. Our mental health requires training like our physical health requires good food, sleep and

often exercise. After 5 minutes, tell yourself that anything else is your mind tricking you into unhappiness, may it be stress, anxiety, anger, sadness, disappointment, or simple upset. The key to reframing is that we have to be open to new stories. That require awareness, curiosity, and creativity (7Cs).

### **Awareness + Curiosity + Creativity = New Positive Stories**

Popular psychotherapist, Emma McAdams, suggests that we can use tips and tools to help train our mind and reframe situation for the better, and quicker. She developed a tool called “How to Reframe Black and White Thinking And Become Less Emotionally Reactive” and also suggest a simpler active “6-pack” exercise of reframing a trainer had once taught her.

The first tool reminds us that we “distort reality by ignoring the good and exaggerating the bad”. This is the negativity bias we talked about in length and we must often remember that it is present and an automatic reaction in every human mind, yes including yours. Exaggerating, dramatizing, or catastrophizing often uses “black and white” words or absolute: always, never, nobody, nothing, every, worst or best. We will see in *Beyond Sex*, that when deal with relationships, we should “never” use absolutes. Yes, the oxymoronic “never say never”. Using absolutes does not allow us to see nuances or to think of new perspectives. Even without absolutes, negative and reactive thinking seems compelling and convincing to you but is not truer than any other story. It is effectively the ego talking. The ego takes a lot of space in most people’s mind. We must tame it and first recognize it. Then we can admit it is a grave distortion and often even an outright “lie” that is not reality. For that we need curiosity (7Cs) about our thoughts and emotions.

### **Curiosity About Self = Consciousness = Awareness**

1<sup>st</sup> step: Notice your ego (example: absolute words: terrible, awful, hate) – *Beyond Spirituality* will look at words we should not use in more depth

2<sup>nd</sup> step: Pause: take one or more deep breath, stop and slow down

3<sup>rd</sup> step: Name the emotion your body is feeling (5 minutes physical reaction)

4<sup>th</sup> step: Reframe the situation

5<sup>th</sup> step: Be accountable and action-oriented (what was your part? What can you do now?)

To reframe we can first understand why we may be seeing the situation in a negative way. Some typical reasons are to:

1. Justify yourself (your actions, thoughts, feelings) – defensive reaction
2. Excuse yourself from further action (physical AND mental) – the work starts “now”
3. Protect yourself from current or future negative feelings
4. Attack (vindication/revenge) – Feeling good for someone’s pain (false sense of justice)
5. Amplify our ego – Feel powerful (artificially)
6. Do nothing – Feel powerless

Once we know or guess why we are ego-distorting and mind-disturbed, we can curve the negative trajectory before it gets out of hand and “ruin” or morning, afternoon, day, week or even month. Again, 5 minutes is enough. In these 5 minutes, we can think of 6 different ways we can reframe the story (sometimes multiple cumulative stories) we are telling ourselves. That is the “6-pack”, not of beer or of abdominal muscles. 6 stories seem a lot at first, yet the idea is to train our brains to be creative and see positive stories our ego is not letting ourselves see because of our narrow viewpoint. If we create space and positive alternatives, we can have more “choice” about which sets of stories are better for all.

### **Creativity + Practice = Positive Stories**

Which stories do you want to believe and act on? Let’s look at an example.



Initial Story (set of stories): A roommate or your life mate is leaving dishes out often and the story you tell yourself is that that person is selfish, stupid, and dirty. It is embarrassing when guests are over and it is making you constantly stressed and angry. It is disgusting. It is unjust and unjustified. I am being mistreated. I am the clean one and should not have to deal with this. That person is mean. Maybe I deserve this because life is always unfair to me.

Yet, these stories are not helpful, only hurtful to you and your mate. They also do not give you room to resolve your emotions (in 5 minutes or less). Using the 6-pack exercise you must think of at least 6 alternative and positive stories to your negative self-talk (default mode network). Let's try:

Story 1: Maybe my mate has a different threshold for cleanliness and does not see it as I do. I am sure there are other things they see differently and are probably better than me at.

Story 2: Maybe that person's culture, childhood or previous environment made cleaning dishes a secondary preoccupation. That person is not attacking me or wanting to hurt me directly.

Story 3: Maybe that person is overwhelmed with something (work, worry, stress, study, etc.)

Story 4: Maybe my mate is depressed and has no energy to do dishes lately

Story 5: Probably that person cannot understand how important this may seem to me even if I may have expressed it in the past several times. Perhaps I can learn how to better communicate my needs without having undue expectation, pressure, blame and anger.

Story 6: Maybe the time I spend being angry is more than the time it takes to do the dishes so I should do it with a smile (maybe put some positive music) and do not expect anything from doing this simple task.

Now, because we are super-creative, let us add two more for fun.

Story 7: This is an opportunity for me to practice patience and compassion.

Story 8: This is an opportunity to be at the service of this person without seeing relationships as transactional.

Story 9: Maybe I am too uptight and have a high disgust threshold. I could learn from that person and be more relaxed. Dirty dishes are not the end of the world, my negative thoughts are exaggerating. No one has died. My mate and I are healthy, and we can also be happy.

Now which ones do you think are better stories? With practicing the six pack exercise you will develop not your abs, but nothing less than your daily happiness. It develops your creativity, as well as compassion, while giving you the chance to be better at returning to your baseline happiness by dealing with distributing emotions and thoughts. Soon you will be able to remain calm even before previous emotion could take hold because of your rich repertoire of positive stories you will have built and ready to recall or invent others as needed. Frustration is not only from the situation but from our inability to create better stories, regardless of the reality. After the stories, we must also act. Ghandi said: "You must be the change you want to see in the world." And Yoda said: "Do or do not. There is no try."

McAdams also suggests as we reframe our new stories to ask ourselves if the stories are:

1. True (what are the facts without feelings) - equanimity
2. Kind (kind to ourselves and others)
3. Lead to action (is the information there for us to complain or to do something positive about it?) – remember that emotions' use is to convey information and that after that keeping negative emotions are no longer helpful. 5 minute max!

**Awareness + Kindness = Positive Stories**

**Awareness + Kindness + Creativity = More Positive Stories**

**Positive Stories + Action = Positive Actions**

We now know the importance of kindness, creativity, and action not to stagnate in our sad stories. To stress the importance (not to stress you) of creativity, here is more food for thought. The opposite of a creator is a consumer. People consume products, services, content, and ideas. People consume the news, instead of creating. People are also consumed by their thoughts and feelings instead of creating their dream life. People let their culture, media and mind consume them, instead of creating their current reality with contentment (7Cs).

**Consume = Take + Survive**

**Create = Give + Live**

We can change our negative self-talk and negative talk about others to compassion for ourselves and others. More on compassion in the next chapter and in *Beyond Spirituality*. Gratitude and mindfulness are also happiness hacks we will examine together shortly. Mental reframing is an incredibly powerful tool which is available to all who have a brain. If you happen to have one, start your training now.

Are thoughts are important. They shape our internal and external lives.

**Thoughts → Judgements → Decisions → Action or Aware Nonaction**

We have an estimated average of 70 000 thoughts a day. Unfortunately, only 5% of them are actually new thoughts, so 95% (over 65 000 thoughts a day) are repetitive or ruminating. Rumination is our daily affliction and means chewing on our old thoughts, instead of reinventing ourselves and relishing in delicious new food for thought. Awareness, creativity (7Cs) and exposing ourselves to new situations, people, ideas, and seeking worthy challenges are the key to refreshing reframing and reclaiming our powerful brains to our benefit.

We can develop cognitive (mental) flexibility by challenging rigid thought patterns and embracing alternative perspectives. Engaging in activities that encourage creative problem-solving, exploring different viewpoints (cognitive empathy – see *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy and Mindfulness)*), and cultivating a expansive open and aware mindset can flex these brain muscles. The flexible thinking of cognitive restructuring done often and in different ways will support the advancement of an equanimity mindset (see next section) in all types of situations.

We saw that reframing is useful in addition to redirect desire instead of trying to suppress it resulting eventually in ego fatigue. In emotional regulation, reframing is also more successful in bringing more positive and less negative affect than trying to suppress emotions. Reappraisal/reframing is also associated with better interpersonal/social functioning, whereas using suppression is associated with worse relational outcomes. Reframing is better for you and others around you. Now, we have a clear killer tool to help you go beyond happy.

## Equanimity Mindset

Equanimity is the opposite of neuroticism. It is emotional regulation instead of alarm or panic. An equanimous person does not let emotions take control of him, her, or them. It is perhaps one of the most important traits of a leader. Yes, we can couple it with courage, curiosity, and creativity (7Cs) as we saw, but equanimity may be the cornerstone to enact all the others. If emotions overtake your rational thinking and relaxed flexible global view, how can you do anything else than limited action.

Equanimity is also understood as a mindset, even a skill that we can cultivate. The skill of equanimity is linked to notions such as resilience, emotion regulation, emotional reactivity, mindfulness, cognitive flexibility, and perspective taking. Equanimity understood in that way remains closely related to ancient philosophical ideals yet has a practical psychological modern-day value for mental health.

It has been shown that developing the ability to effectively understand and manage our emotions, we can cultivate equanimity and experience enhanced well-being and mental wellness<sup>85</sup>.

One way to practice equanimity and see ideological judgment/perception pitfalls is trying to find the middle way instead of extremes (emotional regulation) by avoiding any automatic finding as:.

1. Praise or Blame
2. Pleasure or Pain
3. Success and Failure
4. Gain and Loss
5. Good or Bad
6. Wrong or Right

Your perception should not be limited and can actually encompass all realities (stories) at the same time (not choose the reactive or easy one). We can then later choose the most equanimous one or keep all the stories as equal and true without attaching any identity or value to any one above the other(s).

#### **Many Stories Can Exist at the Same Time = Equanimity**

Use the six-pack stories seen above to create more stories if needed.

#### **Creativity = Increase Reality**

#### **Choose the Best Story for Happiness (Yours and Others) = Equanimity+**

Cultivate neutrality (and not passionless or passivity). We will see in the next chapter that equanimity allows for gratefulness, compassion, mindfulness, and loving-kindness and are not incompatible but work together. Cultivate equanimity by being mindful and aware of your:

- a) Body and Emotions
- b) Feelings and Attachment/Aversion
- c) Mind and Thoughts

Remember not to take the external world, including people, as personal. People are not attacking you, they are not refusing you, only the situation, perhaps a request or an idea, not you. If there is even a you (ego). All people are rather ignorant, suffering or searching something that has nothing to do with you. Remember not to take your feelings and thoughts too seriously. We will see about the power of humor in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. A situation can be (feel) both personal and (is) impersonal. Accept the two stories, the two realities and interpretations and remember not to attach yourself to the “blame game” story. The “he said, she said” gossip.

My father emailed me lately that I haven’t done “anything” as a business partner in 13 years and that our business venture is not worth “one penny more” because of me. Almost everyone is wired to seek recognition, approbation and even praise from their parents. Probably especially dad’s. I did for decades until I realized I would get no such approval. I could “take it personal” and complain. My dad hates me, my dad screams at me. He did write “you” did not do anything... but was he really talking to me? Why was he trying to hurt his eldest son? It wasn’t the first time unfortunately.

Instead, I recognized his suffering. He had expectations about his eldest son that did not match reality. We just saw expectations erroneous claim to success and happiness. My dad is objectively financially rich, and to him that is success. He came from Haiti, poor, very poor. He slept with his brother in the same small bed, at his aunt’s house because his parents could not afford their own. His siblings struggled but with some smarts, courage and luck, four out of six left Haiti. One in France and Italy, One in Canada, One in the US and he tried his luck, penniless in Germany. My dad studied hard, worked hard,

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<sup>85</sup> Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. *Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348–362. 2003

got lucky, learned some hard, got good advice (including mind), survived 3 horrible breakups and antidepressant years, physical health challenges, including diabetes, zona, a blocked artery....

My dad is using all the extremes above: blame, wrong, loss, bad, failure. He is using the absolute "anything" word. No nuance. How does that even make sense that I did nothing in 13 years. There is no factual basis to this claim. I have legal and material proof of this, but why would I start defending myself. I would only do that to fight and if I felt attacked or attached to my ego. I don't feel attacked at all. I take a deep breath and laugh. My dad is funny. He is 80-year-old but acting worst than an 8-year-old. Why is he being a clown? He is suffering. I do not suffer as I do not identify to his words. You may think be delusional but he is the delusional one. I let his "hurtful" words pass right through me, I do not need his validate. I do not need his judgment or anything from him. He gave my mom his sperm and then gave me love for years. That is enough. I will give love, patient and compassion with no expectation in return. He can expect and be visibly unhappy. Does he think he is happy writing and thinking these things? Maybe. Maybe he feels superior. Maybe his ego is well stroked. Maybe one feels good temporarily when one puts someone down. I don't.

I remain equanimous and continue to find it hilarious. I do not value my self-worth based in my father's false view of the world. Either I do not blame him and understand his story with compassion and curiosity. He lives the capitalist dreams, sues people in court regularly. He uses the law as a weapon and has used it twice against me already, calling the police on my when I was 17 and evicting me on a technicality on another occasion. My dad loves being "right", and who doesn't? I don't. No one is ever right. Life just is. My dad is almost twice my age but cannot understand my wisdom. Few can. No worry, unlike him I am not here to impress anyone. Not him, no me, and not you, dear reader. If what I write is useful, good. If it is garbage to you, sorry. I tried, I do, I do not judge or expect. I give my best, learn and do it again. I enjoy the process. I know I will die with nothing and came with nothing. My dad can create his inflated ego with his education or with his money. I had both. Both useful but not a character I want to attach or identify to. I love my dad and he has accomplished much and has many funny stories. His girlfriend is much younger, and he has 3 boys and many cousins. He feels like he is the boss of the family like a benevolent mobster. I hope his stories serve him well. I observe that he is too busy to appreciate the few years and moments he has left with his family, friends, art, literature (I have no time to read he tells me), and his purpose has become out of whack. Money, media, power, and law. The law he uses to destroy, not build. The power he yields for his ego, even when altruistic in action. He keeps sending emails to the family. I made so much amount in the stock market today or this week. A sort of social media dopamine hit for wealthy seniors, perhaps. Ego, pride. Even though he often says the word "humility". I heard it from his mouth, and he is not someone with a fancy lifestyle. Still arrogance and impunity is more often what we can see. Dad deserves reverence and probably in his head fear. I fear not, fear not. Courage is part of the 7Cs, and I will not part the Seven Seas, but will not partake in childish come and see who is bigger, better, richer, smarter, stronger, and most stubborn.

Thanks for letting me see he flaws in reasoning of an endearing old man, dad. Thanks for letting me love you and care despites your decades of attack and ego. You are right, dad. If that makes you even temporary happy, papa, be right. I do not care about such things. I did not do "anything" in 13 years. Just a funny story. It is out there. It is your perception. It exists. I am doing nothing now, as well. I just am. Sorry, not sorry, for being. My equanimity mindset has me immune to you scorn like your 5 covid-19 vaccines. Maybe better. No more booster dose needed. I am good. No ego, no sarcasm, no retaliation. Just sharing the story as is for readers to see how to react or rather not react.

## Mindfulness, Mental Flexibility and Equanimity

Mindfulness is the practice of nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment and can foster the equanimity mindset. Engaging in mindfulness-based exercises and interventions can lead to increased equanimity and decreased emotional reactivity<sup>86</sup>. Remaining nonjudgmental, non-reactivity, and experiential acceptance (as opposed to resistance) are key to the psychological equanimity scale (ES-16)<sup>87</sup>. Practicing mindfulness helps us observe our thoughts and emotions without getting entangled in their narratives, thus fostering equanimity in the form of detachment (or defusion) from our thoughts.

**Mindfulness = Mental Detachment to Narrative(s)**

**Mental Acceptance = Narratives Are Just Stories (We Accept Reality)**

**Mental Flexibility = Adaptation to Narrative(s) and Reality**

Mental (or cognitive) flexibility, the capacity to adapt our thoughts and perspectives, also plays a crucial role in the cultivation of equanimity. Individuals with higher levels of cognitive flexibility are more likely to maintain emotional balance during challenging situations<sup>88</sup>. Developing cognitive flexibility enables us to approach difficulties with open mindedness and adaptability.

Various researchers have now established what the ancient Stoics, Buddhists and others told us in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*. Equanimity is one of the primordial keys for our psychological wellbeing.

Mindfulness practice leads to increases in brain gray matter density in regions involved in learning and memory processes (hippocampus), emotion regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking. Positive structural changes in the brain are associated with mindfulness practice, including areas related to emotional regulation/equanimity, like the posterior cingulate cortex, the temporo-parietal junction, and the cerebellum<sup>89</sup>. The amygdala's response to emotional stimuli can also be mediated by mindfulness<sup>90</sup>. We will see these regions and more in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

Various mindfulness exercises allow the benefits of presence, attention and create positive shifts in mental, physical, and emotional health. It can help:

1. Increase focus (sensation or attentive thought)
2. Increase awareness
3. Decrease ego or mind wandering
4. Clarity of thinking
5. Increase connection (7Cs)

We will see more about mindfulness shortly in *Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)*, but let us return to equanimity mindset.

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<sup>86</sup> Garland, E. L. et al. (2010). Upward spirals of positive emotions counter downward spirals of negativity: Insights from the broaden-and-build theory and affective neuroscience on the treatment of emotion dysfunctions and deficits in psychopathology. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(7), 849–864. 2010

<sup>87</sup> Cheever, J., Cayoun, B. A., Elphinstone, B., & Shires, A. G. (2023). Confirmation and validation of the Equanimity Scale-16 (ES-16). *Mindfulness*, 14, 148–158. 2023

<sup>88</sup> Bonanno, G. A., & Burton, C. L. (2013). Regulatory flexibility: An individual differences perspective on coping and emotion regulation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(6), 591–612. 2013

<sup>89</sup> Hölzel, B. K. et al. *Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 191(1), 36–43. 2011

<sup>90</sup> Desbordes, G. et al. *Moving beyond mindfulness: Defining equanimity as an outcome measure in meditation and contemplative research. Mindfulness*, 6, 356–372. 2015

## Meditation and Equanimity

One definition of mindfulness is “close, clear-minded attention to, or awareness of, what is perceived in the present”<sup>91</sup>. We will see in the next section that presence is the number one of the 8Ps. There is a reason for this. The more present and aware we are, the easier everything becomes, even in its inherent complexity. Attention is something we are more and more lacking as we saw in Popcorn Brain. We have so many more and different types of distractions, how can we cultivate clear-minded attention?

Another definition can be “the quality of mind that notices what is present without judgment, without interference”<sup>92</sup>. We already talked about the value of nonjudgment. Even if it is almost impossible to have true nonjudgment because our brains function with predictions and judgments, the idea to reduce or withhold judgement to a minimum is key to a healthy, happy, creative and flexible mindset.

Since these profound states of mind (mindfulness at different degrees of “perfection”) are transient and difficult to attain and maintain, meditation can be a doorway to practice and achieve mindfulness in a more sustainable and natural way. Meditation is possibly overhyped and often refers to peace of mind, no-mind or thought-clearing. However, we cannot truly clear our thoughts, we can modulate and observe them. We can thus see mindfulness as a spectrum from somewhat mindful to complete awareness. Mindful meditation is one of many ways to reach the higher stages of this spectrum, but by no means the only one. Paying attention to the present moment (including to what is happening in the mind, body, and environment) is a psychological skill and should be practiced one way or another.

Dr. Anna K. Schaffner suggests engage in regular mindfulness meditation practices as a way to develop present-moment awareness, acceptance, and non-reactivity<sup>93</sup>. She advises allocating “a dedicated time each day to sit quietly, observing your breath and bodily sensations. Over time, this practice can foster equanimity by training the mind to remain calm amid the fluctuations of experience.” Again, this is a way among many. French giftedness psychologist, Dr. Jeanne Siaud-Facchin’s approach is active mini-meditations that you can do while commuting, driving, doing the dishes, walking, waiting or other. Either way, practice being present often and more mindful in the spectrum. I personally love mindful eating and highly recommend it.

## Motivation and Emotional Regulation

To be more equanimous, you can also learn and practice strategies for emotional regulation. This includes cognitive reframing as we saw, as well as different types of journaling and various breathing techniques we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. They can all increase mindfulness. These techniques can help you regulate intense emotions, prevent compulsive thinking and impulsive reactions, and cultivate equanimity, daily and especially during challenging situations.

Emotional regulation will help being less vulnerable to maladaptive addictions and compulsions. Amygdala calming protects the envy to engage in easy quick fixes and keeps the motivation dopamine available for adaptive longer-term goals that suit our bigger purposes. We want to be equanimous and emotionally stable before we dig into our motivational core. Being too excited, afraid, anxious, or sad can easily lead us to known safe patterns of mild to extreme addictions, instead of being motivated to seek better and to be better constantly.

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<sup>91</sup> Quaglia, J. T., Brown, K. W., Lindsay, E. K., Creswell, J. D., & Goodman, R. J. (2015). *From conceptualization to operationalization of mindfulness*. In K. W. Brown, D. J. Creswell, & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *Handbook of mindfulness: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 151–170). Guilford Press. 2015

<sup>92</sup> Goldstein, J. *One dharma: The emerging western Buddhism*. Rider. 2002

<sup>93</sup> Schaffner, Anna Katharina. *Equanimity: The Holy Grail of Calmness & Grace?* June 2023

## Cognitive Detachment

We will learn about Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in *Beyond Psychology*. It offers a range of excellent tools for practicing distance from our emotions and cognitions for better vantage point and appraisal. We can practice observing rather than becoming entangled in our thoughts to maintain clearer big picture rational thinking.

The goal in psychotherapy, may be for the patient to be detangled and disengaged from emotions and then make cognitive shifts, including detachment and reframing. Often detachment or distance may be key before exercising creativity and mental shifts for better, clearer thoughts.

“The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts,” says Marcus Aurelius. When your thoughts become too negative and in a thought loop or rumination begins, you may not be able to have a cognitive reframing right away.

Equanimity is a fundamental component in mindfulness. It is an accepting and non-reactive mental state that allows for emotional regulation and cognitive clarity and creativity.

## Positivity Paradox

South African psychologist, Susan David, proposes that we live in a society plagued with forced positivity and denial. We tend to reflexively deny emotions and avoid negativity in self and social settings. Her main argument is that when emotions are pushed aside or ignored, they get stronger. This is called emotional amplification and is a similar principle as ego fatigue we saw earlier with addiction. We repress an emotion (grief, sadness, anger or other) and it gets stronger. Most of you can relate to this assertion. You may lose a loved one, a job, your health, etc. and try to avoid feeling bad or showing you feel “bad” but it eventually gets amplified and worse. Emotions are not inherently good or bad, they can only be adaptive and maladaptive. Emotions convey information and are in fact only “predictions based on past experiences” as per psychology professor Lisa Feldman Barrett. These predictions are not reality but only our limited interpretations.

**Emotions = Predictions ≠ Reality**

**Emotional Awareness = Important Information (Data without Suffering)**

We can accept our negative affect emotions to the degree that they are helpful in giving us information. Positive emotions also give us information, which is useful, yet we have less need to reframe them in general. Again, happy states and emotions are rarer based on our biology, so when you have them do not fall in the trap of attaching too much importance or ego to them but do cherish and enjoy them as much as possible without developing compulsions, addictions and unhealthy habits around them. Sometimes we may also try to pretend we are “happy” without dealing with the underlying thoughts and concerns (information). This is the positivity paradox and positive thinking, as powerful as it really is, also needs to be authentic and reinforced by coherent thoughts, validated values, and agile emotional regulation.

**False Positivity = Emotional Rigidity**

**True Positivity = Authentic Acceptance**

Do not identify with the emotion only with the sensation and information. Feel, truly and authentically, then be courageous and creative to be content (7Cs). We talked about mental flexibility as opposed to mental rigidity. We can also think of emotional agility as opposed to emotional rigidity.

**Emotional Agility = Emotional Courage (7Cs) + Compassion (7Cs)**

**Courage = Acceptance of Fear + Action**

Words are essential in our purposeful positive narratives as we will see in *Beyond Spirituality*. Positive imagery, foci and feelings can too as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. What is important to remember is that emotions are not a mystical force or hard-coded biological curse outside our control. We can own emotions, and not let them own us. Honing the skills of emotional awareness, agility and regulation takes practice, but like any skill, becomes easier with time. Work on your emotional proficiency regularly and become an expert. Again, people give so much weight to their physical state and not enough their mental states. Some even say that psychologists are “not real doctors”. The good thing is that you do not need to be a medical doctor to eat well and exercise or need to be a psychologist to train your brain for happiness, or should we know say contentment, satisfaction, and fulfilment.

To use a visual art metaphor, experience the full pallet and diversity of emotions, then use the proper paint brush and desired colours on the canvas of your emotional life. Studies show that women in unhappy marriage who constantly repress their anger are four times more likely to die than women in unhappy marriages who express their anger. We can see that both of these are not ideal. The idea again is neither to be angry inwardly or outwardly but rather to reframe the information to have true positivity instead of false positivity. Anger and other emotions can be:

1. Repressed
2. Expressed
3. Processed and changed to positive

We have seen that positive narratives and equanimity mindset can help us (among other tools) to really process the emotion as information. This is the key not to lash out and express hurtful emotions or keep them inside where they will hurt ourselves or others later. Also remember that the narrative self and the negativity bias will be quick to recall past negative emotions and perceived situations to amplify negativity in any given moment. If the hurt is not properly processed, it will come back and perhaps stronger. Hurt or pain is temporary will suffering can last a long time. Feel the hurtful emotion for as short as possible and then pamper it with positivity and conviction. You must practice not only being positive but truly believing whatever is there is positive.

You may know that about the placebo effect in medicine which is when the mind responds and creates real physical or mental health improvements after taking a fake or nonexistent treatment. When people believe negative outcomes in life or medical treatment, their outcomes are similarly worse on average. This is called the nocebo effect in medicine. Nocebo effects can modulate the outcome of a given therapy in a negative way, as do placebo effects in a positive way. Do not underestimate the power of positivity, or negativity. Emerging neuroscience evidence implicates multiple brain systems and neurochemical mediators, including opioids and dopamine to create the placebo effect<sup>94</sup>. More on these systems and neuromodulators in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

The rational optimist is a perspective or worldview that combines rationality with optimism about human progress and the potential for a better future. It involves using reason and empirical evidence to assess the state of the world and make informed judgments about the likelihood of positive change.

Despite ongoing challenges and setbacks, humanity has made significant progress in areas such as health, longevity, peace, and prosperity. He attributes this progress to the application of reason, science, wisdom and enlightenment values. There is still room and potential for moral improvement and the positive growth, at the personal and social level. Careful examination of the evidence can reveal

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<sup>94</sup> Wager TD, Atlas LY. The neuroscience of placebo effects: connecting context, learning and health. *Nat Rev Neurosci*. 2015 Jul;16(7):403-18. doi: 10.1038/nrn3976. PMID: 26087681; PMCID: PMC6013051. 2015



encouraging trends (like decreased world violence and increased health and technology) and the potential for a brighter future, despite the challenges we currently face.

**Perfect Positivity = Personal + Society**

### Let Them Theory

“Let Them” theory or mindset is an idea argued by popular author Mel Robbins that she uses personally to detach from people’s inadequacies, lack of awareness or frustrating actions. As we are becoming more aware of our thoughts, emotions, and actions we will face many people who are not. I would say that is most people on this planet! Unfortunately, that includes the people close to you: your spouse, siblings, parents, children, coworkers, friends, etc.

Generally, two things can occur that may ring alarm bells and prepare you for action:

1. They do or say something you do not like that is bad for you (Ego)
2. They do or say something that may harmful for them and others, sometimes including you (Egoless Compassion)

It may be very difficult to distinguish between the two because you would be arrogant (ego) to think you know what is best for someone else. We will look at empathy and compassion in the next chapter, but as amazing an empath you may be and as wise, kind and present you may think you are, you cannot be them and cannot predict the future. So, Mel, simply says “let them”. Do not try to argue, be angry, convince or control them. “Let it be” like the Beatles. This is the acceptance we saw in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*. The Dao says to not resist, and the dichotomy of control says to accept the things you cannot control.

Still, since you perhaps care and love them or have to interact with them one way or another, these daily situations can be difficult to assess and act accordingly. The first step is to take a (mental) step back and to try to ask yourself if your initial reaction is truly out of compassion, care and kindness (#2) or is it because you genuinely feel you can help them and the world by saying or doing something that may go against their wishes (#1). Be honest with yourself. Try to step “out” of yourself and assess from egoless awareness. If it is the first (egoist) kind, remember that you should not expect anything from the world, including people and even people who may expect things from you.

**Expectation = Ego = Narrow View + Potential Pain / Suffering**

**Ego + Action = Attack (or Defense) = Dangerous = War (Win-Lose or Lose-Lose)**

**Egoless Action = Peace (Win-Win)**

In short, avoid all ego-centred action or reaction, yet we also know the ego has one and only one useful purpose: survival. The ego may be telling us through emotions (information) and thoughts that this person is hurting us. In most (if not all) cases, we are hurting ourselves and often others. When you have been training your brain in all the ways we have discussed so far in this book for months and years, you may reach a point where you can easily see destructive patterns in others, including ego, negativity bias, narrative self, blaming, catastrophizing, defensive or offensive stances, prolonged upset, anger, jealousy, envy, etc. Remember that it is often easier to see these patterns in others than in yourself and keep challenging yourself first. As of today, I ask you to continuously seek challenges (not create problems!).

See the world as constructive challenges instead of constant struggles and personal dramas also allows your brain to use its problem-solving prefrontal cortex instead of its problem-creating default mode network as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*.

If we have good intention and useful tools to share with a loved one, remember that you cannot control their thoughts, emotions or actions. You are not their slave owner or their psychologist, yet you

can genuinely potentially help if you are aware of things like the narrative self and the negativity bias we saw in this chapter. You can say in the moment are after, here is what I know and may be helpful and here are some resources, info, books, etc. Add: “I can only show you the door, but you are the one who is going to have to walk through it.” Show them and let them.

Going back to the rare case, where you are not the problem, you are not creating problems, you are not seeing a situation through the ego, you have authentically analyzed the situation and positively reframed it, you are aware and have compassion for the other person’s suffering (#2), and there is still the egoless emotionless information that this person is or can be doing something hurtful, then nonaction can turn to egoless action.

For example, if your friend is drunk and wants to drive home, do not just “let them”. The danger to themselves and others is real and there is no ego or “being right” sentiment behind the action. If the person is screaming at you or using hurtful words do not just “let them.” You do not have to scream back or use hurtful words, and you can even acknowledge that the person is suffering while still saying; “please stop screaming at me or using hurtful words.” Do not tolerate abuse, hate, malicious intent, clear physical danger, to name a few, although remember to always assess these “threats” from an equanimous and egoless state as our brain is very quick to “cry wolf” and play the victim card. Try to communicate calmly and know that when the other person is overly emotional, it may not be the best time to speak rationally and sensibly to them. In most cases, just “let them” and their actions will say much more about them than you can think than arguing endlessly with them. Take their actions not as hurtful, but as information and if the information eventually egolessly says that you may need to take your distance from certain family members or friends, change partner or job, you will have done so peacefully and happily. Talking about peace, let’s get to the eight Ps.

## Eight Ps

Let us now finally look at the 8Ps after having looked at many of the 7Cs. Here they are in order:

1. Presence
2. Positivity
3. Purpose
4. Peace (of Mind)
5. Playfulness
6. Passion
7. Patience
8. Perseverance

Presence is simply the ability to pay attention to the present, the immediate, the now. It involves both external and internal awareness and mindfulness. This includes your thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensations. Positivity is subjective appreciation of objectively neutral (equanimity) reality.

### **Presence + Positivity = Equanimity+**

Purpose and meaning are important for the ego not to dwell in the negative self-talk. It increases action, motivation, and memory. We will look its benefits in more details in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Peace is the state of mind many practical philosophies aspire to have as seen in *Chapter 3: Philosophy*.

### **Peace = Equanimity + Acceptance**

Playfulness we will also play more with in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, along with laughter and smiling. Passion also affects motivation, but contentment (7Cs) as well. Patience is a tool to overcome or

unchecked desires. In my native French Canada, we have an expression called TTT (*Tout, tout de suite, tabernak*), which roughly means: everything, right now, damn it. Not far from the title of 2022 Oscar-winning, creative, and fun film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Patience allows us the space of awareness and the opportunity for psychological and positive reframing. Perseverance finally allows of to welcome rejections and life hurdles as part of the path for our passions and purpose. Like Marcus Aurelius wrote: “the obstacle becomes the way.”

**Patience = Peace**

**Perseverance = Passion + Purpose**

## Forever Forgiveness

We started the chapter with a quote about forgiveness. Forgiveness is a way to create positive narratives and letting go of past hurtful events. Forgiveness can be to forgive others of what you perceived at the time as hurtful, and also to forgive yourself of hurtful behaviors, words or even thoughts you may have had in the past. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do,” as he was being nailed to the cross and put to death. This is an example of compassion at its finest. Forgiveness comes from a place of curiosity and not pity. This passage symbolizes not only the deep love for humanity but also the acceptance of its flaws, including ignorance. We can also imagine with benevolence and care that anyone who has ever harmed us just simply did not know better and was probably suffering in some way. Compassion gives us an intention to reduce the suffering of the world. Forgiveness, even to our murders and executioners, comes easier with that bird’s eye view perspective rather than taking whatever attack or act as personal and seek revenge, retaliation, or resentment.

**Forgiveness = Freedom**

**Forgiveness = Accepting Ignorance and Unconsciousness**

Forgive yourself also because you often are unconscious and do not know what you are doing. Forgive others, yourself and even the universe. Forgive interiorly and exteriorly. Forgive loud. Love. Forgive God if you believe in him. Yes, forgive him instead of waiting for him to forgive. Forgive your judge, instead of letting her pardon you once she sees fit. Forgive freely and easily, even if you disagree with an action. You can state your disagreement, but do not let the associated emotions take over. Understand its possible causes with curiosity and let it go, so it does not occupy your mind with negative thoughts and emotions.

Eckhart Tolle writes in *Stillness Speaks*:

“Guilt is another attempt by the ego to create an identity, a sense of self. To the ego, it doesn’t matter whether the self is positive or negative. What you did or failed to do was a manifestation of unconsciousness—human unconsciousness. The ego, however, personalizes it and says, “I did that”, and so you carry a mental image of yourself as “bad”.

Throughout history, humans have inflicted countless violent, cruel, and hurtful acts on each other, and continue to do so. Are they all to be condemned; are they all guilt? Or are these acts simply expressions of unconsciousness, an evolutionary stage that we are now growing out of?”

People often do not understand when they hear I have no regret or remorse. Along with guilt, they are emotions, yet emotions only serve to convey information. I did or say something that could have been better. I acknowledge it, Perhaps I was completely unconscious or perhaps I was somewhat aware but did not do the best at that time. It is done and in the past and all I can do is do better now. Awareness grows with this information, not with the associated guilt.

Next, we will look at one of the most reliable sources of positive thoughts and emotions: gratitude. Before then, let us simply recap what we saw in this chapter.

## Psychology Recap

We delved into a lot of topics together and let us try to summarize before we learn how to be more grateful and mindful.

1. Our mind is designed for survival and not happiness.
2. Our ego gives us narrow view of the world and its possibilities.
3. We must combat our negativity bias and first be aware of it.
4. We have two minds (an experiencing and narrative one) who can contradict each other.
5. Happiness has overvalued the narrative self in the past, at the expense of the “now”.
6. The narrative self can be our ally with creativity instead of running on default (negative).
7. Curiosity is a source of great joy, growth, and social well-being.
8. Addiction and compulsion are normal human process we can use instead of abuse.
9. Habits can gradually, happily be changed to increase health and happiness.
10. Expectation is a restrictive trap and open positive attitude is more adaptive.
11. Equanimity lowers unhappiness, stress, and negativity. It is not passivity.
12. Mental reframing is a useful skill that can be practiced.
13. Forgiving quickly, sincerely and letting go is good for you and others.
14. The eight Ps = Presence, Positivity, Purpose, Peace, Playfulness, Passion, Patience & Perseverance

## Chapter 5: Gratitude (Empathy, Mindfulness)

*He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.*

— Epictetus

Gratitude is now a pop culture term that almost everyone has heard of, and some have already used for their benefits, although often with mixed or inconsistent results. Now, I want you to think of gratitude in the light of our new definition of happiness. Gratitude is simply a very powerful tool to create positive narratives, as well as allowing us to be content and joyful in the moment.

Why do we take things for granted? Maybe because our autonomous nervous system breathes and regulates our heartbeat for us. Maybe because if you had to focus on everything we already had, and be happy beyond belief with that, dopamine could not motivate us to want and to get more. Yet, we know from experience, we are doing ourselves a disservice by taking people or things for granted whatever they are. You realize it often only when it is too late. We are mostly dumb and don't know what we got until its gone.

### **Ungratefulness = Missing Magic (in Memory or Moment) = Blindness to Beauty**

"Gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift. It liberates us from the prison of self-preoccupation." said John Ortberg. Again, our default mode network has ruminating neutral or negative thoughts centered on the ego and gratitude refocus our thoughts on the beauty available in absolutely every moment and situation. Positive narrations can be found in art to give us examples.

The Iranian film *The House is Black* shows lepers in a village who still have gratitude and see beauty in the apparent ugliness, sickness, and poverty. The Oscar-winning film *American Beauty* shows beauty in a floating garbage plastic bag.

In the Documentary "From Stress to Happiness", monk Mathieu Ricard (the "happiest man on Earth") speaks of Inner Freedom as being freed from our inner mind's machination or "monkey brain". Inner Freedom or Inner Peace (8Ps) is when you are fully content with the present moment and enjoy the beauty of every moment that passes by with freshness. Simple and complete quality of rich appreciation and pure awareness of the mind. This realisation is enough and allows of to free ourselves from superfluous or detrimental desires, cravings and fears.

93-year-old Brother David says anxiety is different than fear and we can survive it when we get into a narrow a spot to either be afraid and get stuck or trust and go through as a new birth. Again, trust in the world, sometimes in others and in yourself is a must. We do not have enough energy to be distrustful. It is a waist of energy. If you do not trust life, the worse has already happened. Life is constantly doing everything for you already. Even to breathe, sleep and digest is done unconsciously by life and the universe. Even language and the words you are reading are coming from life and the universe.

Stop, listen to what life wants and respond accordingly, whatever the response. Listen more and see the beauty and the gift in the meantime. Do not wait for you to have difficulty walking, seeing or breathing to appreciate your ability to walk, to see and breathe. What is the purpose of life? Simply to live and to really live! To appreciate and be grateful.

Possessions are fine if we do not cling to them. The sense of contentment (7Cs) can be cultivated anywhere and anything with familiarization. Meditation is a form of familiarization. Contemplating art, nature and beauty with the right view helps to get to this state, yet we can also summon it in the darkest, must "ugly" places and circumstances.

## GEM

It took Australian Hugh van Cuylenburg, 3 and a half months sleeping on the floor in a poor Indian village as a grade-school teacher to understand the problem with the Western World's inability to be grateful for simple things and always seek satisfaction and happiness at an elusive later state.

He came up with the acronym, GEM:

Gratitude  
Empathy  
Mindfulness

I had many similar experiences in my travels around the world and was shocked to find some of the happiest and kind people living in the most precarious situations, may it be in a forgotten tribe with no infrastructure in Northern Vietnam, war-torn Beirut, politically unstable and poor Myanmar, or overpopulated Bangladesh.

According to "Positive Psychology Progress" research by Martin Seligman, if you do some gratitude exercise each day for a month, you rewire your brain to start scanning the world for positive. One of the best exercises is to simply notice and hopefully write 3 things that went well today every day. Writing is a more effective exercise, and you can make a gratitude journal. A minimum of 3 things you are grateful for may become repetitious after a while if you are not creative (7Cs). It trick is to make it more pragmatic and day-specific. Not only "I am grateful from my family and loved ones." My best friend "Chrid" is a master of creative gratefulness and would come up with things like "I am grateful for indoor plumbing, for trains that are running on time, for construction workers who built my home, for the fan keeping me cool enough so I don't have to use the AirCon, or for no natural disasters making irreparable damage to my city." Here are a few more:

- Grateful for the garbage collectors every week
  - Grateful for the coffee machine brewing up a hot one
  - Grateful for the rice that is cheap and filling
  - Grateful for the really good Japanese movie I saw (Ran, 1985)
  - Grateful for the hug that my wife gave me after the hockey game
  - Grateful for the sunscreen that's keeping my face, arms and legs from burning
  - Grateful for the noticeable and random moments when my mind went quiet
  - Grateful that I jogged by a fisherman who stopped and asked me to take a photo of his big catch of the morning
  - Grateful for Logic's new album that dropped today
  - Grateful for every day I do not need to buy a new phone
  - Grateful my bicycle is holding strong even though I've put it through a lot
  - Grateful that my apartment had no leaks during and after the storm yesterday
  - Grateful for the time and energy last night to step up after school studying
  - Grateful my ankle feels better after being soar during my run
  - Grateful my wife's MRI results came back negative, so she can continue to live as well as possible
  - Grateful for the bread, eggs, sausages and soy milk I used to make breakfast this morning
  - Grateful that my stepdad is still around to pick up the phone on Father's Day.
- Chrid never runs out of creative gratefulness. I want to add some of mine in 2022 too:
- Grateful for the June 21 summer equinox (longest sun day)
  - Grateful for the pain because it means I have loved whole-heartedly and unconditionally

-Grateful for learning every day

In 2024, I lost my expensive and sentimental branded Swiss watch which I wore pretty much every minute of my life for roughly 20 years since my mother gave it to me as present for completing my MBA in 2004. This event might have been significant or negative for most. The cost, the possible replacement cost, the loss and trouble to replace it, the emotional attachment, the meaning behind the gift. All these are attachments, and I was able to quickly realize these inner narratives and detach from them with clarity and compassion. In the matter of minutes, I had accepted that I had lost my watch and the next thing I did was simply to be grateful for every minute I was able to spend with it for 20 years. We can do the same thing for everything, even romantic relationships as we will see below.

I have been familiarized and practiced various forms of “the daily gratitude journal” since it was introduced to me by my long-term girlfriend Andrea in the late 1990s. I cannot thank her enough and recommend practicing gratitude as a fundamental pillar of mental health and happiness. Andrea also thought me to be more present and attentive to the people we come across every day, like the cashiers and waiters. Smile more, acknowledge their presence, genuinely say thank you, wish them well on your way. Cultivate good intention, words, and actions.

Another scientifically supported practice Cuylenburg talks about is writing thoughtful “thank you” notes or letters and giving them to the chosen recipients, and I would add with no expectation.

#### **Say Thank You → Expect Nothing**

It is shown to have happiness and well-being effects that last for weeks and months and improve your mood, self-esteem, life satisfaction, optimism, while decreasing stress, anxiety and depression. Alcoholic Anonymous and others’ Step 9 of the 12-Step program encourages seeking forgiveness, in person or in letter, and to “make amends” but I find this approach is more positive by saying simply “thank you” and not tying it to forgiveness. It could be for instance “Thank you for being there when I was not at my best.” Asking forgiveness is also setting expectations. We should forgive (others and ourselves) but cannot demand or expect forgiveness. We can simply act and maybe ask. Better yet, be grateful for it all.

#### **Say Sorry → Expect No Forgiveness**

#### **Still (You) Always Forgive + Be Grateful**

### 10-Finger Gratitude

We talked about the gratitude journal and of 3 to 5 items we may find remembering as grateful for the day. This 10-finger version adds a tactile component instead of a writing journal but asks for 2 or 3 times more things to be grateful. The idea is to have more things, be more varied and to be more specific. As we recount grateful moments in the day finger by finger, we want to visualize what we appreciated with intellectual gratitude and also feel viscerally with wonder. For example, here I share my actual 10-finger gratitude for today (March 25, 2024):

1. I appreciated the redness of feet in my hot bath
2. I am grateful for my flushed cheek when I walked in the cold
3. I enjoyed the texture of the egg in my Japanese ramen
4. I reveled in the different orange hues of the sunset
5. I was grateful I was able to resist my hunger at lunch and enjoyed the stomach pain
6. I am thrilled I wrote some interesting ideas today – specifically about habit hacks
7. I am happy when I wanted water, I was able to drink “tasty” tap water from the faucet
8. I am thankful my friend called me and thought of me even if I was not able to answer
9. I am happy my father texted me honestly (although I do not agree with all he said)



10. I am thrilled my laboratory partner did the statistics for our research (even if slightly late)

You do not have to acknowledge the “negative” like I did in brackets for the last two, but if they come to mind, do not worry either. If you focus on the grateful part, you are there already. As you practice to find 10 specific things and your 10 fingers a day (you can do 10 toes too if you want to do 20-digit gratitude and be a pro), you will practice finding grateful moments in the past and also practice finding new moments to be grateful day after day as you notice all there is. Have respect and reverence to all that let’s you live. In the morning, I always start by being grateful to simply being alive.

Practicing this will become a habit and if we use the atomic habit yearly scale, 10 grateful things a day would lead to 3650 things to be grateful a year with an exercise that cost you 5 minute or less, less time that it probably takes someone just to get to the gym or to the office.

After a few weeks, you will be challenged to come up with new things and perspectives to be grateful for as 95% of our thoughts are similar every day so remember to use creativity (7Cs) and not give up the simple and effective habit. You can eat too much food, work, exercise or play too much, even have too much sex, but never be too grateful!

10 grateful thoughts are only 0.015% of your daily average thoughts! There is room for much more than 20 and if a reader can get to 100 finger daily practice for a considerable period, please reach out to me and I will be happy to discuss your experience and the results.

### Gratitude in Youth

Earlier research by Dr. Emmons found that children and adolescents who wrote and delivered a thank-you letter to someone who had made a difference in their lives did not significantly improve their own well-being, although they likely made letter recipient happier, thus achieving an altruist function.

#### **More Gratitude = More Altruism (Less Ego)**

This finding may suggest that the affect effect of gratitude may associated with emotional maturity. My hypothesis is that the timescale of the study might have been too short, and that gratitude training may take even more time for children. Emotional maturity is likely not linear with physical age, as it is also the case for awareness and wisdom.

My teenage son has been trained in gratitude since very young and it seems more than anecdotally that his mood is both happier and resilient than other children or adolescent at various stage of his changing age in the last decade. A newer 2024 study shows that I was in the right direction, finding significant correlation between life satisfaction and gratitude among young adults aged 18 to 25 years old. Greater expressions of gratitude are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction<sup>95</sup>. Another study showed scores of three different gratitude scales were positively correlated with each other for 14- to 19-year-olds, but less so far 10 to 13-year-olds<sup>96</sup>.

Is an 18-year-old much more mature than a 14-year-old? It all depends. My son lived two weeks in Mongolia at 7 years old with no running water or electricity for most of it. When we came back to Canada, he was so grateful and decided to give away most of his toys to neighbors and charity. My son’s life satisfaction score when tracked for months on a calendar were constantly high.

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<sup>95</sup> Arora, Anannya. (2024). The Impact of Life Satisfaction on Gratitude Among Young Adults. International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology. 419-431. 10.48175/IJARSC-17057.

<sup>96</sup> Froh, Jeffrey & Fan, Jinyan & Emmons, Robert & Bono, Giacomo & Huebner, E. & Watkins, Philip. (2011). Measuring Gratitude in Youth: Assessing the Psychometric Properties of Adult Gratitude Scales in Children and Adolescents. Psychological assessment. 23. 311-24. 10.1037/a0021590.



## Gratitude in Relationships

How to be grateful during and even after a relationship? Relationships are hard, romantic relationships even harder, and living with a partner is probably the most difficult thing any of us will have to deal with, even when all is fine.

We celebrated our 15-year anniversary in a small town in Quebec, called Baie-Comeau. Our son was with us, and we were on our way back from August Anticosti Island remarkable remoteness and Cote-Nord two-week trip with Perseid-filled skies of shooting stars (like the song "*Les étoiles filantes*", and analogy yes). As we enjoyed a lovely romantic torch-light dinner, we both expressed 15 things we were grateful for in the other partner. This was a perfect night and the insights we found, shared, and communicated (even with our ten-year-old who laughed and giggled at most of the 30 grateful confessions) lasted with us for months. Surely, we should have done so more often. Do not wait fifteen years!

When I met Isabel, she had recently received her refugee status, fleeing her home country where a dictatorship took power. She has been living precariously, often eating expired free food, and using generous food bank services. She spoke little English and no French, had had to cross the US-Canada border on foot in December when it was below -20C and was working part time as a cleaning lady, not using her computer engineering degree. Every time I saw her for the first year, and perhaps that is why I feel hopelessly in love with her, she was smiling and happy. When she moved in with me, she was radiant, playful, and joyful for years. I am sure I contributed to her happiness in many ways, yet I am not here to take the credit. Rather, I want to express that one of the reasons I was with her is to learn how to be this happy with, what we could perceive in our privileged mind's view, "so little". After all, I did not have to flee my country, risk my life and be far from my family forever, I was working in my profession with a manager title, getting a decent salary and proportional societal recognition (whatever that means), spoke the local languages and had never thought a day in my life where was I going to get food today. Yet, unquestionably, externally, and internally, she was happier than me!

The answer of course was gratitude. Hugh van Cuylenburg also talks about an Indian kid who compelled him to stay 15 weeks instead of 2 in an extremely poor village because that kid (and most of the village too) was so happy in his surroundings.

Isabel and I broke up after 17 years and a healthy bright kid. There are many factors, including the pandemic measures, money, stress, her family in crisis in Venezuela, etc. I was not a without reproach and she neither, we both tried to keep it together, we faltered and eventually failed. I tried until the end, she gave up big time and had no more admiration, compassion, or love for me. Yet the months leading up to and until the last day before we broke up, she was completely unable to tap into that gratitude she once wore and lived with every day. Is life fair? The answer is no. Get used to it.

I was grateful, she was not. Is she grateful now? I hope so. After 17 years, you can imagine that the negativity bias is high with a focus on any and all extremes, negatives and the last which was also negative. Her narrative self cannot comprehend the 17 years of happy experiential self. She cannot do the math and is thus unable to be grateful (and probably to forgive quickly and easily too). The thing is this incapacity and cognitive bias is not hurting me as much as it is hurting herself. I am free of such anger, resentment, jealousy, and desire for vengeance, being "right" and righteous.

Will my son write a poem about our separation one day and say we created the same lose-lose situation my parents did? Years in court. Financial and time loss. Fighting with children in between. Time will tell. I just know it is not my wish and I am sorry my brave and courageous son must go through this,

as if life was not cutthroat enough. I do know he will learn from this and do his best. I have trained him to be grateful for over a decade. He is an amazing student, son, and friend.

When Andrea broke up with me after 7 and a half years, she had started to be ungrateful as well and I remember her being in the hate side of the love-hate relationship and me just being in the love and on the nondramatic side. She would often yell at me and blame me. I would just laugh as it didn't affect me. Not a laugh of malice or provocation, just a laugh of finding the situation humorous and light instead of dramatic and worth a fight. I had started to take Buddhist meditation classes near our home, and it was already having its effects in me in a big way. Why suffer needlessly? Why go in these dramatic and destructive patterns? I was beyond everyday drama and loved her for her in all circumstances. I love myself too and life and could accept constructive criticism and change some actions without having to go to the hate or fight-mode. Andrea later regretted her hasty decision to leave and asked me to get back together, but as life is not fair, I was already with happy Isabel.

I am also grateful for every minute I spent with his mother.

I am eternally grateful for both Andrea and Isabel, my two past long-term romantic relationships. Amazingly, they actually met in 2019, sang and played piano together while our kids also played together. I said "thank you" and wrote countless "thank you notes", cards, letters, and poems to both. When I was in a relationship with them and years after, I have nothing but good to say about these two women. Thank you. I felt, said, and showed it constantly to the best of my ability. I say it again here. It costs very little to be grateful in fact and there is so much to gain, learn and grow with gratitude. As I explained, gratefulness is infinite. At least it is for me. I am grateful for all my lovers, friends, and hold no grudge, enemy or animosity.

Being grateful can improve or help maintain relationships. A study of couples found that individuals who took time to express gratitude for their partner:

1. Felt more positive toward their partner
2. Felt more comfortable expressing concerns about their relationship.

### Gratitude in Business

Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania researchers found that receiving a grateful talk from a manager for employee past year efforts increased motivation, mood, and results. It showed 50% more outgoing fundraising calls in the following week from employees who heard gratitude "thank you for your hard work" message than those who did not. Gratitude helped perceived altruism also.

### Gratitude in Science

Gratitude is a trait that can be trained. A ten-week gratitude journaling intervention was associated with improved "trait gratitude scores" in a 2016 study<sup>97</sup>. The study also found the following health and mental health benefits:

1. Reduced inflammatory factor for heart failure (HF)
2. Increased parasympathetic Heart Rate Variability (HRV – see more in *Beyond Neurons and Hormones*) meaning better response to stress and healthier heart.

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<sup>97</sup> Redwine, L. , Henry, B. , Pung, M. , Wilson, K. , Chinh, K. , Knight, B. , Jain, S. , Rutledge, T. , Greenberg, B. , Maisel, A. & Mills, P. (2016). Pilot Randomized Study of a Gratitude Journaling Intervention on Heart Rate Variability and Inflammatory Biomarkers in Patients With Stage B Heart Failure. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 78 (6), 667-676. doi: 10.1097/PSY.0000000000000316.

University of California researcher, Dr. Robert A. Emmons, studied the effects of gratitude on two groups ranging from 8- to 80-year-old. Separate groups were asked to keep a journal in which they were to write for each day:

Group 1: five 'gifts' that they were grateful for.

Group 2: five 'hassles' they encountered.

The 5 'hassles' or problematic events are easy to recall with our negativity bias we saw in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. Group 2 is not neutral like in some other studies with control groups who do nothing, but they are also very close to reality. Not many people have complain-free days yet. Hopefully more after reading this book.

Examples of 'gifts' people wrote were:

-Watching a sunset through the clouds

-Generosity of friends

Examples of 'hassles' were:

-Overcooking dinner

-Difficulty in finding a parking space

The research found that those who had focused on gratitude daily experienced significant psychological, physical, and social benefits. A 25% improvement in overall health and wellbeing in comparison with the group focusing on the daily mistakes or mishaps (Group 2) was observed.

Dr. Emmons saw similar findings in 3 studies looking at neutral condition and neuromuscular disease (physically unhealthy but mentally healthy)<sup>98</sup>.

In adults seeking psychotherapy, gratitude writing shows better mental health outcomes than expressive writing or psychotherapy only, after 4 and 12 weeks<sup>99</sup>. Lower negative emotion words were also found in gratitude writing compared to expressive writing. This means that healthy individuals and those with difficulties (mental or physical) can benefit from the practice. Gratitude benefits also take time and patience (8Ps) as the effects were not noticeable after 1 week but were after 4 weeks and even more after 12 weeks.

Two other studies showed that more grateful moods were linked to:

1. More frequent daily episodes of grateful emotions
2. More intense gratitude per episode
3. More people to whom they were grateful for.

In these studies, gratitude as an affective trait appeared to enable participants' grateful moods to be somewhat resistant to the individual changes in episodes<sup>100</sup>.

Still some people and studies are sceptical about the benefits of gratitude. Happiness guru, Dr. Dunn, and her PhD student, Dunigan Folk, did a systematic review of preregistered happiness experiments and found that expressing gratitude had significant value in positive mood and life satisfaction, They

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<sup>98</sup> Emmons RA, McCullough ME. Counting blessings versus burdens: an experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2003 Feb;84(2):377-89. doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.84.2.377. PMID: 12585811.

<sup>99</sup> Wong, Y. J., Owen, J., Gabana, N. T., Brown, J. W., McInnis, S., Toth, P., & Gilman, L. (2018). Does gratitude writing improve the mental health of psychotherapy clients? Evidence from a randomized controlled trial. *Psychotherapy Research*, 28(2), 192–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2016.1169332>

<sup>100</sup> McCullough ME, Tsang JA, Emmons RA. Gratitude in intermediate affective terrain: links of grateful moods to individual differences and daily emotional experience. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2004 Feb;86(2):295-309. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.295. PMID: 14769085.

caution however that the significant changes may not be long-lasting<sup>101</sup>. In one study the positive mood was immediate but faded five days after<sup>102</sup>. In both studies gratitude practice was only 1 day and 3 days within a week. This would be consistent with the fact that gratitude lasting benefits seem to be higher as the daily practice goes from 1 month to 3 months. Alternatively, if the full daily benefits eventually never last long, then the take-away would be to never stop the active gratitude practice to reap the most benefits.

If you take away only one undeniable practical advice from this book, which should work for most people in most circumstances, learning to be more grateful would likely be number one. Even if you are already grateful by nature or by practice, you can always find ways to be even more and do avoid your gratitude to fade with time and circumstances. Therefore, practice gratitude daily and even multiple times a day. You can never be too grateful in my book. Gratitude is inexhaustible and always beneficial. You only need to tap into it whenever you can and find the best ways to activate your gratitude state.

Dr. Lyubomirsky 's lab did two experiments looking at the most beneficial ways to share gratitude. One study looked at structured vs. unstructured, social vs. non-social and lists vs. long-form and findings were <sup>103</sup>:

1. Long-form writing exercises (i.e., essays and letters) resulted in greater subjective well-being and other positive outcomes than lists. They also reported feeling higher levels of elevation and positive affect at the follow-up assessment 1 week later.
2. Lists were not as strong yet those who wrote unconstrained gratitude lists (about any topics they wanted) reported greater feelings of gratitude and positive affect.
3. No significant differences were found for social (gratitude “to”) compared to non-social (gratitude “for”) in general, except for greater (negative) feelings of indebtedness.
4. Social gratitude letters showed higher uplifting feelings, as well as gratitude state and positive mood but also should more feelings of being indebted to the person it was addressed to.

In my view this shows that the best gratitude practice is not external but rather a sincere story we tell ourselves as unrestricted and compelling as possible.

### **Gratitude = Positive Story**

#### **Strong Gratitude = Strong and Complete/Compelling Positive Stories**

This is why writing long-form seems more successful than lists, however even if you do not spend the time to write long-form or even write a list but you take the time to tell yourself a complete story of why you are grateful for such and such, the more grateful and happy you will be. For instance, do not list or say you are grateful for “the roof over your head”. Tell yourself or write a story of the work you or another had to do to afford and pay that roof, then the work the people who built that roof and home had to do. Then expand to the architects and building planers, perhaps city officials. Think back to city planners and engineers going back centuries, inventing and building so many infrastructures we take for granted. Now that is a better story to be grateful for!

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<sup>101</sup> Folk, D., & Dunn, E. (2023). A systematic review of the strength of evidence for the most commonly recommended happiness strategies in mainstream media. *Nature human behaviour*, 7(10), 1697–1707. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01651-4>

<sup>102</sup> S. Katherine Nelson-Coffey, Claire Johnson & John K. Coffey (2021): Safe haven gratitude improves emotions, well-being, and parenting outcomes among parents with high levels of attachment insecurity, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, DOI: 10.1080/17439760.2021.1991454

<sup>103</sup> Regan, A., Walsh, L. C., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2022). Are Some Ways of Expressing Gratitude More Beneficial Than Others? Results From a Randomized Controlled Experiment. *Affective science*, 4(1), 72–81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00160-3>

Social or relational benefits of gratitude, including greater relationship satisfaction and relationship maintenance are decidedly positive. Regrettably, relational benefits, if the ego is involved may, come at a cost, as gratitude is sometimes experienced as a mixed emotional state<sup>104</sup>. Some people report more indebtedness, guilt, and shame being grateful to someone. I would argue they are just stuck into their own and their interpersonal ego struggle.

**Gratitude + Ego = Positive + Negative Stories**

**Social Gratitude - Ego = Only Positive Stories**

The benefits of sharing gratitude to others should not be to feel indebted to them, we should feel unrestricted gratitude about anything and share to be inspired by others' stories of gratitude rather than be bound by ego and justice/injustice of who owes more gratitude and thanks to who.

**Genuine Gratitude = Free + Infinite + Creativity (7Cs)**

**Gratitude ≠ Commodity or Debt**

**True Social Gratitude = Cumulative + Inspiring**

In another study from the same lab, more modern technological options than lists and letters were considered. Personalized text was the best way to express gratitude compared to social media or no sharing. This study used technology to evaluate if the best way to express social gratitude was to be expressed privately, communicated directly to the benefactor one-to-one, or shared publicly. The results were<sup>105</sup>:

1. Shame and indebtedness were not significant with any of these technology-mediated social gratitude
2. Social connectedness (7Cs) and support were highest on the 1-on-1 text condition.
3. Even if 1-1 text was better in these two areas, it was not better across the board.
4. More importantly all 3 types of gratitude were better than no gratitude. Gratitude (4 times in a week) showed:
  - a) more gratitude feelings, positive emotions, elevation, connectedness, support.
  - b) less loneliness and negative emotions.

**Social Gratitude = Connection (7Cs) + Good Mood – Bad Mood**

That makes a lot of positive points for gratitude and sharing gratitude. The only way to see if it works for you and tell me about it (in a gratitude letter or not) is to try it for 4 or 12 weeks. Yes, you can do it. Start with less than 5 minutes a day and you may eventually end up like me, normally actively grateful about half the day.

*"No amount of regret changes the past. No amount of anxiety changes the future. But any amount of gratitude changes the present."*

—Marc & Angel Chernoff

So that was some of the stories and science of gratitude. Now let's be grateful for science. Scientists for decades and centuries have brought us so much and we can be grateful for that too.

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<sup>104</sup> Layous, K., Sweeny, K., Armenta, C., Na, S., Choi, I., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2017). The proximal experience of gratitude. *PLoS ONE*, 12(7), e0179123. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0179123>

<sup>105</sup> Walsh, L. C., Regan, A., Twenge, J. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2022). What is the Optimal Way to Give Thanks? Comparing the Effects of Gratitude Expressed Privately, One-to-One via Text, or Publicly on Social Media. *Affective science*, 4(1), 82–91. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00150-5>

## Gratitude and Goal

Dr. Michael Gervais has a 90-sec morning rule/routine. Before he gets out of bed, he thinks and visualizes 3 things he is grateful for and 1 thing he wants to get done in the day. We talked about the gratitude practice and how it should be a daily—or several times a day—habit and the visualization part would be consistent with the scientific findings that narrative forms of gratitude are more effective than only listing gratitude objects without deepening their context and value. I would extend even the gratitude exercise to 1-min for each of the 3 and 20-30 seconds for the goal, making it a 3 ½ min or 200-sec routine. The 1 daily objective serves the purpose of motivation and focus, but in the context of not expecting too much (low expectations) and appreciation forward momentum, appreciation of the process and progress in small measurable increments. Accomplishing one important thing a day may be enough to go to bed with a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. We do not need to do 6 or 12 things necessarily. If we happen to do more than one, then each is a welcomed bonus.

**1-min per Gratitude > 1-sec per Gratitude**

**One Good Goal + Motivation + No Expectation > Many Goals + Expectations**

## Counting Wins

Another thing to be grateful for is small wins. If we have a 200-sec morning routine of deep gratitude for things that are outside our control, we should have a night routine or remembering in detail 3 things that we did in the day that we are proud of. Knowing that expectations and deviations from expectations are philosophical and psychological traps embedded in our motivation dopamine neurocircuitry, we should not judge our wins compared to expectations but rather focus on genuine effort.

**Effort > Expectations and Results**

What did we do today that was in synch with our morning main goal and our life's overall purpose? What did we do to discover, to seek or accept discomfort? What challenges did we embrace? What uncertainty and fear did we overcome? How was our mind flexible enough to have radical acceptance of something we may not have wanted? How were we supportive to ourselves? How were we helpful, kind, caring and compassionate to others? What small steps did we take towards incremental growth?

*It's one small step for man...*

-Neil Armstrong

In truth, anything can be a win as much as anything can be a source or object of gratitude. It shouldn't be difficult to find 3 a day. Start with obvious ones and practice to find less obvious ones so that you can eventually be grateful most of the day and not only in the morning and at night. Small wins can include getting out of the bed or the house—I know a friend that couldn't get out of his house for two years—, taking a shower, reading a chapter, doing housework, getting started on a homework, sending an important email, telling or showing someone you care, giving yourself needed leisure, learning, sharing, experiencing, being present, grounding yourself in contentment, starting a conversation, active listening, cooking with love, taking a walk, smiling to a stranger, taking out the trash, compost and recycling. You may think that they do not compare to big wins like seeing the concert of your favorite musician, getting a promotion, traveling to an exotic destination, climbing a mountain, running a marathon, beating your best score at the gym, reaching your weight goal, achieving financial or romantic success, but they are.

Every moment counts and every small win counts. You just have to provide the positive story around that moment. Remember every second is equal and death is the equalizer. Make time your most cherished possession and with patience (8Ps) make time your friend. Then, “bigger” wins may or may not come. Who cares? You are already content (7Cs) without being complacent.

### **Contentment ≠ Complacency**

Wake up, get up and do more. Expect nothing. More importantly be more. Be grateful of your perfect self and previous actions (never guilt or shame—they are never useful). Be creative (7Cs) and curious (7Cs) to explore more and espouse the daily findings with openness and flexibility.

### Counting Kindness

We will see more about kindness in the below section, but a brief note to say the gratitude can be linked to kindness when we count our acts of kindness. A landmark Japanese article with 2 studies shows the following<sup>106</sup>:

1. Happy people scored higher on their motivation to perform, and their recognition and enactment of kind behaviors. This is a clear association of kindness and happiness.
2. Happy people have more happy memories in daily life in terms of both quantity and quality.

#### **Happiness = More Positive Stories + Better Positive Stories**

They have slightly less unhappy memories in quantity and duration, but not to a significant degree. One of the goals of this book is to teach you how to decrease the duration drastically and accept that everyone can and do have unhappy experiences.

3. Subjective happiness was increased simply by counting one's own acts of kindness for one week. The narrative self benefits from positive stories by creating and cultivating happiness.

#### **Happiness = Stories of (Acts of) Kindness**

4. Happy people became more kind and grateful through the counting kindnesses intervention. A virtuous circle and positive reinforcement.

This confirms that happiness is a predisposition (genetic and learned) that is associated with certain traits, as we saw in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. Further, gratitude is an important human strength that contributes to subjective (narrative self as well as experiential in the moment) happiness. It can be gratitude for others, for self, for the world, for the “little things”. Sweat the small stuff.

**Kindness = Experiential Self (Action) + Narrative Self (Counting Acts of Kindness) = Happiness**

**Gratitude = Experiential Self (Gratitude State) + Narrative Self (Appraisal of Past) = Happiness**

Beyond gratitude and kindness, psychologists and neuroscientists have understood significantly aspects about empathy in the last decades. You may be shocked to find out what we now know. Let us enter the world of empathy together.

### Shades of Empathy

We may remember the curvy counselor Troi in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* who was part of a race of empathaths. They felt emotion, thoughts, and motivations of other more deeply than humans. We are still empathaths in general as humans, and there are even parts of the brain dedicated to that as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Psychologists call a part of empathy the theory of mind.

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<sup>106</sup> Otake, K., Shimai, S., Tanaka-Matsumi, J., Otsui, K., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2006). HAPPY PEOPLE BECOME HAPPIER THROUGH KINDNESS: A COUNTING KINDNESSES INTERVENTION. *Journal of happiness studies*, 7(3), 361–375. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-005-3650-z>

Theory of mind is the capacity to understand what others are thinking and feeling. It is also called social intelligence or cognitive empathy. It is a tool and understanding that can be used to help, hinder, or influence others. Empathy is the ability to understand or feel what another person is feeling and thinking.

*“Empathy is the listener's effort to hear the other person deeply, accurately, and non-judgmentally. Empathy involves skillful reflective listening that clarifies and amplifies the person's own experiencing and meaning, without imposing the listener's own material.”*

-Carl Rogers (1951)

The emphasize of empathy on culture has gained popularity with Barrack Obama mentioned it with a call for action. Empathy Day is now celebrated Feb 16, 2024. Previously it was celebrated on June 9<sup>th</sup> since 2020 with this premise.

Empathy Day was celebrated on June 9th, 2020, to help teach, learn, and experience the transformational power of empathy. During the pandemic, we have seen the need for empathy more than ever before. It is said that:

1. Empathy is a vital human force that creates happier people, stronger communities, and a better world.
2. Scientists say that we can train our brain with stories, and the more we empathise with characters, the more we understand other people's feelings.

Empathy Week 2024 runs from 26th February to 1st March 2024, with a theme of 'Home'. Empathy Day, established by the Empathy Lab, is celebrated in the UK in since 2017 to foster greater consideration between various cultural backgrounds and embrace their common humanity, and to remember that behind every person lies a unique story, worthy of compassion and understanding.

Day of Empathy is celebrated in the US in since 2017 to “generate empathy on a massive scale for millions of Americans impacted by the criminal justice system. On March 6, 2018, Americans impacted by the criminal justice system nationwide met with lawmakers to share their stories and experiences.”

#### **Empathy = Stories (About Other)**

Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen goes as far as equal the lack of empathy (we may see in narcissistic or autistic traits or other) is the basis for cruelty and “evil”.

#### **Less Empathy = More Evil**

Daniel Batson shows evidence that emotional empathy can be a key to altruism.

#### **More Empathy = More Altruism (Less Ego)**

Yet he also admits and proves with a study that empathy can also cloud rational judgment that may have a better moral decision if empathy did not play a part in decision-making modulation. Emotional empathy is strong and focus our concern, but that focus is narrow. Bias and disproportionate appraisal of situations exist when emotional empathy is involved. Empathy has a vulnerability if we want to look at the big picture, which hopefully we do if we care about every human being. Buddhist would extend this care and compassion to every living being. Altruism can be increased with empathy, yes, but it can be increased with gratitude as we previously saw which is better and less biased. There are also other healthier ways to increase unselfish acts and care for others.

#### **More Empathy = More Bias**

. Biases from empathy include bigotry, sexism and racism and all other types of ingroup vs. outgroup grouping. A study even showed that people would let others suffer much more if they happened



to be a fan of another football team<sup>107</sup>! So much for empathy. Compassion is a wish to lessen everyone's suffering. Compassion scores on the empty emotional empathy net....

Compassion 1, Empathy 0. More on compassion and kindness later.

Dr. Paul Bloom argues that empathy has its limits, and that morality should rather best be determined by rational compassion than simple emotional empathy. Emotional empathy can be good for us to relate to stories and fictional characters for instance. Empathy allows for both positive and negative opportunities and realities.

Positive

1. Greater consideration
2. Emotional learning and understanding
3. Communication and collaboration

Negative:

1. Greater bias
2. Emotional manipulation
3. More focus, yet narrowed vantage

One's ability to recognize the bodily feelings of another is related to one's imitative capacities. It seems to be grounded in an innate competence to associate the bodily movements and facial expressions one sees in another with the proprioceptive feelings of producing similar corresponding movements or expressions. Empathy is not necessarily a universal response to the suffering of others. It has been proposed to be an extension of "monkey see, monkey do" mimicry for learning, and even elusive and misunderstood mirror neurons.

Most of what people see either as "empathy" or "lack of empathy" are highly romanticized versions of empathy. In reality, there are at least 4 forms of empathy, as well as subsets and subtleties:

1. Cognitive (intellectual or imaginative) = theory of mind (found in the default mode network)
2. Affective (emotional) = limbic empathic response
  - a) associative empathy = sympathy or feeling other people's feelings
  - b) dissociative empathy = feeling other (possibly the opposite) of other people's feelings
3. Social (cultural)
4. Somatic empathy = body's empathic response

**Cognitive Empathy = Stories (About Other)**

**Affective Empathy = Stories (About Other) + Emotions**

**Social Empathy = Stories (About Other) + Different Stories (About More Diverse Social Groups)**

**Somatic Empathy = (Physical Manifestation of) Emotions +/- Stories**

Affective empathy involves the ability to feel and respond to someone's emotion. Associative type will be in the same direction and same emotion as the person but may lack of the intensity in general and on occasion may be more intense than even the original person's emotional response to a situation. One could simply feel concerned for another person's well-being, or it may lead to feelings of personal distress.

Cognitive empathy involves being able to understand another person's feelings as well as their mental state and what they might be thinking in response to the situation. This can vary in degree, accuracy and complexity of understanding and is related to what psychologists refer to as the theory of mind or thinking about what other people are thinking. This is also an effective tool for fiction writers who

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<sup>107</sup> Hein, G. et al. *Neural Response to Ingroup and Outgroup Member's Suffering Predict Individual Differences in Costly Helping*. Neuron. Volume 68, Issue 1, 6 October 2010, Pages 149-160

must put themselves in character's shoes and emulate real thoughts, emotions, feelings, actions and reactions along with imagination.

Somatic empathy can incorporate story of others yet is primarily a physical response. When you see someone else feeling embarrassed, perhaps, you might start to blush or have an upset stomach. Mechanically mirroring someone's posture, raising your arms as your friend wins a race or letting out a deep sigh as a response to something said could be concrete examples of somatic empathy. Many of the sports fan across the world experience somatic empathy when "their" team scores, loses a point or a game. A sports fan whose team just lost experiences physical effects of defeat and when the team wins also shares in the somatic euphoria. That is why I suggest you pick winning teams for your happiness. Dr. Dominique's order.

Some talk about compassionate empathy as caring deeply about others. For our purposes, let us simply call this type of empathy compassion as it is quite different than empathy as we will later see in this section. Others talk about intuitive empathy, yet this may simply refer to the speed and the quality of understanding based on obvious or more subtle cues to indicate other people's emotions. Posture, tone of voice, word choice, facial expression and others can be tell-tale signs that less empathic or emotionally intelligent people may miss. We will talk more about nonverbal communication in *Beyond Spirituality*.

The cultural empathy model includes contextual understanding and social responsibility which tends to consider social justice and awareness of systemic or structural flaws and inequities<sup>108</sup>.

Altruism or helping behavior is linked with experiencing all forms of empathy. Other people are also more likely to help you when they feel empathy from you (and for you). In relationships, empathy can be an element of emotional support, helping partners understand each other's emotional needs and thoughts. It helps deal with daily difficulties and adapt to new stress and situations more in synch and synergy.

Greater empathy allows better understanding of other's perspective. Which should lead to less criticism and judgments. After all, we would think, feel or do the same if we were in their shoes.

#### **More Empathy = Less judgement**

The more we understand the story and relate to it, the less we judge. Unfortunately, this also means that if we cannot relate due to lack of experience or imaginative empathy, we will judge the person or group of person more severely.

#### **Apathy, Empathy and Equanimity**

In *Chapter 3: Philosophy*, we saw that apathy is a lack of passion, feeling, emotion, interest, or concern about something. An apathetic individual has an absence of interest in or concern about the world that is beyond equanimity. It is a state of indifference, or the suppression of emotions such as concern, excitement, or motivation. It signals a lack of purpose, hope and meaning in life. More about this and apathy neuroanatomy in *Beyond Neurons and Hormones*. In mental health, apathy can often be associated with depression or dementia. Dementia, like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, have over 50% of pathological apathy independent of depression diagnosis, whereas the normal healthy population can have about 2% of apathetic people and perhaps up to 5% with ageing.

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<sup>108</sup> Segal, E. A. (2011). Social empathy: A model built on empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility that promotes social justice. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 37(3), 266–277.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2011.564040>

The opposite of apathy is not empathy, however. Positive psychology founder and author of *iFlow: The psychology of happiness*<sup>109</sup>, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi characterized 10 component states of achieving “flow” which is conceptualized as the opposite of apathy:

1. Balance of skill and challenge (seek challenge, build skill and knowledge) = Courage
2. Clarity of goals (SMART?) = Purpose, passion and meaning
3. Concentration on the task at hand (focus and attention) = Presence
4. Effortlessness and ease (Daoist nonaction) = Peace
5. Immediate and unambiguous feedback (real-time learning loop)
6. Merging of action and awareness (mindfulness) = Connection
7. Loss of self-consciousness and rumination (no self or ego)
8. Paradox of control (dichotomy of control and radical acceptance)
9. Transformation of time (timelessness) = Patience
10. Autotelic experience (see below section for details)

The paradox of control means that the more we try to control a situation, potentially the less we have control over it. The attempt to control may create more uncertainty and potential failure points in many domains. Csikszentmihalyi said the highest intrinsic motivation is a flow state where self-consciousness is lost, one surrenders completely to the moment, and time means nothing<sup>110</sup>. This is one transformation of time and immersion in the moment like mindfulness which we will see later in this chapter. He goes on by saying: “The most important step in emancipating oneself from social controls is the ability to find rewards in the events of each moment”. This is creating positive stories!

#### **Contentment (7Cs) = Positive Stories + Presence (8Ps) in the Moment**

Timelessness will also automatically combat boredom or worry! Although “how you do” is more important than “what you do”, if you cannot do the task with purpose and presence, change it to activate more passion. Be creative with your options and with your stories within each. While you experiment between optimum tasks to find inner flow, playfulness and seeing the experience as a game is also encouraged to keep positivity in case true purpose is momentarily lacking.

For the gateways to a fulfilled and happy state, Csikszentmihalyi is in clear agreement with at least seven of the 8Ps (Presence, Positivity, Purpose, Peace, Playfulness, Passion, Patience) and five of the 7Cs (Contentment, Connection, Courage, Curiosity and Creativity).

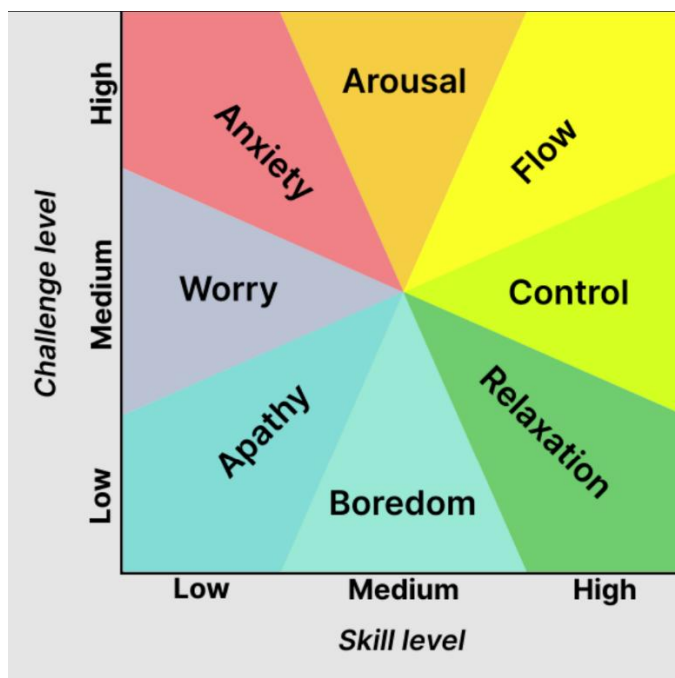
We could spend more time on each item yet let us examine the first and last flow components more closely. To achieve a flow state, a balance must be struck between the challenge of the task and the skill or perceived skill of the person performing the task. In psychological emotional terms, we can speak of the three zones of safety-challenge-overwhelm.

We mentioned many times that it is beneficial for happiness and health to seek challenges with curiosity. However, if the challenge or task is too easy or too difficult, flow cannot occur as both skill level and challenge level must be corresponding and high for maximum effect. Skill and challenge can be matched, but if both are low, apathy can occur (see diagram below).

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<sup>109</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *Flow: The psychology of happiness: The classic work on how to achieve happiness*. London, UK: Rider.

<sup>110</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2013). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York, NY: Random House.



**Figure: Mental and emotional states according to Csikszentmihalyi's challenge-skill balance**

Apathy can sometimes use empathy to mobilize action and commitment to a cause. This can increase the willingness to face challenges and be an antidote to apathy.

Apathy is a form of saying "I don't care" while empathy may be perceived as saying "I care". It is possible to care too much, and equanimity may be the middle ground where healthy neutrality is preserved. You can also add a positive narrative to the neutral story.

#### **Equanimity+ > Empathy > Apathy > Antipathy**

Antipathy is a strong feeling of dislike or aversion for something or someone. It opposes and, in the context of empathy, can be linked to dissociative empathy and potential antisocial behaviors. If we see someone in pain and it gives us pleasure for instance, this could be dissociative empathy and potential antipathy.

Let us now look at the last of the 10 flow components: autotelicity.

#### **Autotelicity**

One state that Csikszentmihalyi researched was that of the autotelic personality. This type of personality is one in which a person performs actions or behaviors because they are intrinsically rewarding, rather than to achieve external goals (like material gain, status, or recognition). Autotelic people "do things for their own sake" rather than chasing some external and short-lived dopamine high. This type of personality is distinguished by certain mental skills such as

1. High interest in life
2. Persistence
3. Low self-centeredness

Perseverance is the last of the 8Ps so we can say that Csikszentmihalyi is in total agreement with my 8Ps in his theory of flow as part of happy inner state. People who can learn to enjoy situations that most others would find neutral or miserable are in much better position to encounter and maintain happy states. When current task or experience is intrinsically rewarding and future reward is not an immediate focus, serotonin wins over dopamine and fulfilment is direct and instant.

### **Intrinsic Rewarding Experience = Contentment (7Cs)**

Research has shown that aspects associated with the autotelic personality include curiosity (7Cs), perseverance (8Ps), and humility<sup>111</sup>.

### **Humility = Low Ego**

Maybe these traits may be more difficult for some to develop, yet almost everyone has some form of innate and learned empathy as we will see below. The question is: is it such a good thing?

### **Signs of an Empath**

Let's go back to *Betazoid* counselor Deanna Troi and the science-fiction race capable of feeling people's emotions and understanding their thoughts and feeling. This race of "empaths" is fictional, yet all humans have some innate degree of empathy that can further be cultivated in a nature-nurture spectrum. When one's current state of empathy is highly responsive, these characteristics can be called (human) empaths. In more neuropsychological terms these people have emotional overexcitabilities, high or hyper sensibility. They are sometimes referred to as HSP (highly sensitive person). This increased response to both positive and negative influence or perception can lead to being easily overwhelmed by people's emotions and events.

In an affective (subjective) sense, there are two types of empathy that a person may experience.

#### **1. Positive Empathy**

Capacity to feel happiness for someone else's success and joy.

#### **2. Negative Empathy**

Capacity to feel another's sorrow, anger, or grief in difficult times.

Although they are linked, one can see how I will try to encourage the first part and not necessarily the second part. The first part involves what I explained as compersion (7Cs), being happy for one's happiness or the opposite of jealousy.

Some signs that could show high emotional empathy tendencies are:

1. Emotional and visceral experiencing of life.
2. Often feeling overwhelmed by tragic events.
3. Trying to help others who are suffering.
4. Being good at telling when people aren't being honest.
5. Sometimes feeling drained or overwhelmed in social situations.
6. Can find it difficult to set boundaries in personal relationships.
7. Feeling emotions and various states of mind that other people are experiencing.
8. Permeable and not having the same filters or defenses that other people may have.

People with high emotional empathy and knowing we have many levels of negativity bias to contend with as seen in *Chapter 4: Psychology*, have tendencies to be emotionally burdened, mentally exhausted, and physically stressed, anxious or inundated. They may also develop co-dependency in

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<sup>111</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Nakamura, J. (2011). Positive psychology: Where did it come from, where is it going? In K. M. Sheldon, T. B. Kashdan, & M. F. Steger (Eds.), *Designing positive psychology* (pp. 2–9). New York: Oxford University Press.

relationships and show insecure attachment styles that may lead to maladaptive (“toxic”) dynamics in relationships. On the positive side, they may experience a broader and deeper range of emotions and could be more adapt at some social situations.

For those who’s emotional empathy is creating unrest and difficulties in their lives, setting healthy boundaries is beneficiary. However, I will go one step further and suggest that few people really need to feel the negative type of empathy to be effective kind, loving, caring and compassionate people. One can exhibit all the other empathic traits, often found in psychotherapists and other counselors for example, without the negative emotional burden. Think of the following skills and think if you need negative emotion to be effective:

- Being attuned and picking up on how other people feel in real time and dynamically.
- Sincere attentive listening with intent and curiosity (7Cs)
- Understanding and noticing how other people are feeling and thinking
- Helping others understand why they are feeling a certain way
- Perceiving and projecting past and future emotions, feelings and behaviors in self and others

These traits are all helpful and may be some of the cornerstones of counseling. Openness to receive people’s perceived problems and offering reflections, guidance, or advice involves cognitive empathy without the need for emotional empathy.

### **Cognitive Empathy > Emotional Empathy**

Caring deeply about other people does not require one to feel their pain. To be effective in helping people, a certain degree of detachment is essentially necessary. The same as a medical doctor who may care for the patient yet needs to concentrate details of diagnosis to make best life or death decision. The neurosurgeon needs to concentrate on the intricacies of the operation and not the feeling of his patient, the pilot of the plane and not feel the passengers’ feelings or potential fears. Same for the psychologist, sexologist, or social worker. They need to understand emotions, not feel them.

### *Positives of Empathy*

Empathy allows:

1. Better emotional regulation of oneself (learning from others)
2. Better understanding of others (thinking and feeling),
3. Better and more appropriate response to social situations
4. Better connections (7Cs) with others.
5. Better creativity (7Cs) with cognitive empathy and imagination

Having social connections is important for both physical and psychological well-being. We will explore this more in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* and *Beyond Sex*.

Emotional regulation and equanimity can help prevent someone from becoming overwhelmed by external or internal events. All these benefits again require only cognitive and not necessarily affective empathy.

### *Pitfalls of Empathy*

Always thinking about and/or feeling other people's emotions can lead to:

1. Overwhelmed
2. Overstimulated
3. Burnout (empathy fatigue)

Empathy fatigue refers to the exhaustion felt, emotionally, physically, and sometimes mentally, after repeatedly being exposed to events, situations or people activating empathy circuits. People often feel numb or powerless and themselves from social stimuli when facing empathic burnout.

Acting as a caregiver (health or security) like nurses, doctors, firemen and policemen may increase the likelihood of empathy fatigue. Healthcare workers who can't balance their feelings of empathy (affective empathy, in particular), can develop both empathy fatigue and compassion fatigue. Empathy fatigue is from feeling the vicarious negative emotion, while compassion fatigue is the unmet desire to help everyone in regular contact with.

**Empathy Fatigue = Feeling Negative Emotions of Others Overly and Repeatedly**

**Compassion Fatigue = Unmet Desire to Help**

More on compassion and compassion fatigue in following sections of this chapter. New findings suggest that compassion fatigue may not exist but more on that later.

Some research has linked higher levels of empathy with a tendency toward emotional negativity, potentially increasing empathy fatigue or distress risk<sup>112</sup>. We covered some bases of emotional and cognitive negativity bias in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. Another potential health risk of higher empathy could be higher vagal tone response that could even lead to higher stress or even a vagal shock. Preliminary research in this area show that high affective empathy levels are associated with higher vagal response. Cognitive empathy can at times show lower vagal response and results are also based on the type of emotion and arousal level<sup>113</sup>.

**Arousal > Relaxation > Neutral**

Empathy has also been shown to impair rational reasoning and clear-headed judgment by prioritizing emotional feeling or concerns. Anger makes us more irrational so simulated anger does too.

In short, high empathy can bring the following difficulties:

1. Impair judgment and reasoning
2. Emotional negative tendencies
3. Empathy distress risks

*Sex Differences and Source of Empathy*

Women score higher on empathy tests, including the one developed by Helgeson & Fritz about “unmitigated communion”<sup>114</sup>, which translate to concern for community, other people and perhaps people-pleasing. Men’s “communion” scores increase with age, lowering the sex difference with time<sup>115</sup>. Still, women tend to feel more affective empathy as well as exhibit more cognitive empathy than men<sup>116</sup>.

The two main factors that contribute to the ability to experience empathy are no surprise:

1. Genetics
2. Environment and learning

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<sup>112</sup> Chikovani G, Babuadze L, Iashvili N, Gvalia T, Surguladze S. Empathy costs: Negative emotional bias in high empathisers. *Psychiatry Res.* 2015;229(1-2):340-346. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2015.07.001

<sup>113</sup> Yoo S, Whang M. Vagal Tone Differences in Empathy Level Elicited by Different Emotions and a Co-Viewer. *Sensors (Basel)*. 2020 Jun 1;20(11):3136. doi: 10.3390/s20113136. PMID: 32492974; PMCID: PMC7309171.

<sup>114</sup> Helgeson, V. S., & Fritz, H. L. (1998). A theory of unmitigated communion. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2, 173–183

<sup>115</sup> Jones, C. J., Peskin, H., & Livson, N. (2011). Men’s and women’s change and individual differences in change in femininity from age 33 to 85: Results from the intergenerational studies. *Journal of Adult Development*, 18(4), 155–163.

<sup>116</sup> Kret ME, De Gelder B. A review on sex difference in processing emotional signals. *Neuropsychologia*. 2012; 50(7):1211-1221. doi:10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2011.12.022

The famous nature and nurture. After genetic and personality tendencies people are also socialized by their parents, peers, communities, and society. How people feel about others, think about and treat each other, can be a reflection of cultural and/or familial beliefs and values that were instilled throughout life and perhaps especially at a young age.

### Self-Empathy and Alexithymia

Alexithymia describes a deficiency in understanding, processing, or describing one's own emotions. Empathy is about comprehension (and perhaps concern) with someone else's emotions, but what about our own emotions and thoughts. I will term that "Self-Empathy" or emotional intelligence of the self. Some people have difficulty recognizing the emotions and feeling they have or what cause them without an alexithymia diagnosis. My suggestion is not practice naming your emotions. People with lack of emotional awareness can write down daily emotions with intensity, context, and possible causes. It is often said in psychology emotional processing that we move first "name it to tame it".

### Sympathy, Kindness, and Compassion

Sympathy is simply the expression of the affective associative empathy felt. We can have "fake" sympathy by expressing an empathy we do not feel. For instance, we may feel cognitive empathy but not emotional, may feel emotional but to a much lesser degree or may feel dissociative emotional empathy and feel differently than the person we want to sympathize with. Sympathy is a feeling (or faking) of care for someone in need. It is a form of empathic concern for another person, based on some emotional understanding.

#### **Sympathy = Expression of Empathy and Caring (Real or Fake)**

Compassion (7Cs) is often associated with empathy yet is by all accounts better. Paul Bloom talks about rational compassion rather than emotional compassion.

#### **Rational Compassion > Irritational Compassion (Emotional Empathy)**

Compassion means a desire to decrease suffering and we will examine self-compassion and compassion for others in more details below and in *Beyond Spirituality*,

While sympathy and compassion are related to empathy, there are important differences. Some consider compassion and sympathy to be more passive, while empathy generally involves a much more active attempt to understand another person. We saw that sympathy is an expression so can be active but fake and shallow. Empathy can be energy-consuming and draining. There are other ways than empathy to motivate people to help and exhibit altruism.

Noticing others are in need, can be from emotional, intellectual, social, or somatic empathy. Empathy does not necessarily mean you want to do something about it, it means you see, understand, and perhaps feel partially or overly. Compassion is the intention or desire reduce the suffering you see, imagine, intellectualize, or feel.

Compassion is a positive thought directed towards you, friends, foes, and everyone.

#### **Compassion = Positive Narrative = Egoless Desire**

What about kindness? Kindness is more active than compassion, empathy and sympathy. It is an action intended to affect other positively. It can be communication with words or gestures.

Buddhist philosophy has 4 states of mind (metta, karuna, mudita, upekkha). They are also known as "Four Immeasurables" or "Four Perfect Virtues". We already examined the state of equanimity extensively. I have rearranged the four logically for better understanding with their original names and descriptions:



### 1. Upekkha

#### **Upekkha = Equanimity = No Suffering for Self**

Upekkha is balanced mind, rooted in wisdom and insight. This balance is not indifference, but active mindfulness, free as possible to attraction, aversion, excitement, emotion, or judgment, either negative or positive. It is calm and insures one can experience physical pain but never suffering, objective victory but never ego or pride. The source of suffering is only in the mind. We need to recognize impermanence and practice detachment to achieve neutrality.

### 2. Mudita

#### **Mudita = Sympathetic Joy = Positive Emotional Empathy = Compersion (7Cs)**

After, equanimity the 3 next states of mind are akin to empathy.... But better! Mudita is taking sympathetic or altruistic joy in the happiness of others. As it is a positive perspective, it as an antidote or remedy to envy and jealousy. Rejoice in one's merit or success. It increases the actions of other (small or big). It is compersion in action (opposite of jealousy) and requires actively experiencing joy for someone else without ego. It may be a prerequisite for developing true karuna and especially metta below.

### 3. Metta

#### **Metta = Loving Kindness**

*...pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with loving-kindness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.*

— The Buddha, Digha Nikaya 13

Metta is benevolence toward all beings, without discrimination or selfish attachment. By practicing loving-kindness, we can overcome aversion, anger, ill will, hatred, resentment, disgust, and distrust to name a few negative emotions. It is a pure wish for others to be happy and live meaningful life. It can start with an intention for loving-kindness to yourself and then extend that wish to others:

1. one person we love
2. one person we love less (do not think "hate")
3. every human being

To put metta in practice, the altruist act of serving others can be a tangible manifestation of the mental state and reinforce it.

"According to the Metta Sutta, a Buddhist should cultivate for all beings the same love a mother would feel for her child. This love does not discriminate between benevolent people and malicious people. It is a love in which "I" and "you" disappear, and where there is no possessor and nothing to possess."<sup>117</sup>

### 4. Karuna

#### **Karuna = Compassion (7Cs) = No Suffering for All**

Karuna is active caring and positive well-wishing extended to all sentient beings. Another important aspect of compassion is the wish or intention to reduce suffering, troubles and hardships of others as opposed to loving-kindness which increases happiness. Another important component of this intention is that it is coupled with the recognition of the connection (7Cs) between every human being, every being and everything in the universe. This will thus increase awareness and unity to the points where the heavy, omnipresent ego can finally be free and let go. Oneness and openness. Modern psychology talks about self-compassion as a separate from of compassion which we will explore in future books, but original compassion does not distinguish it as you are part of everything, and your ego is not particularly important or even interesting.

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<sup>117</sup> O'Brien, Barbara. *Brahma-Vihara: The Four Divine States or Four Immeasurables*. Learn Religions, Sep. 16, 2021,

These four states also inter-relate and support each other. It's important to understand that these mental states are not necessarily emotions. Being loving, kind, compassionate, positively empathetic, and equanimous takes mental practice and emotional regulation. Truly living and staying in these four states requires changing how you experience and perceive yourself and others. Detachment from self-reference and ego is a good start.

### **Less Ego = More Compassion for Others + More Loving-Kindness + More Equanimity**

Kindness can be induced by:

1. Empathy
2. Ego (personal incentives to be kind)
3. Emotions (shame, fear, joy, etc.), including anger and outrage in the case of injustice
4. Social expectations
5. Compassion

The 5<sup>th</sup> kind is the best path to lasting and genuine kindness.

### Emotional Contagion

We know that “misery loves company” and that sadness is contagious. A recent study by my friend Sara-Kim Boivin in the Electrophysiology in Social Neuroscience Laboratory (LENS) at Université de Montréal found that emotional regulation of empathic tasks changed with time (including forms of fatigue) and with types of empathic negative emotions. For instance, fear had much lesser correlation than anger. Shame had the second most correlation. As we expected, sadness was the emotion subjectively and physiological felt the most by study participants<sup>118</sup>.

### **Sadness > Shame > Anger >> Fear**

Negative emotions have stronger and more consistent effects than positive ones in the literature as we can also infer from the negativity bias section of *Chapter 4: Psychology*. If we could spread the virus of joy and contentment better than sadness, it would be easy. However, knowing other people’s negative states can be positive and useful information.

Studies also show that experiencing something with someone when the emotions elicited are high can be enhanced compared to a solitary emotional high<sup>119</sup>.

If an empathic self–other distinction is not present, we can still witness emotion contagion, a precursor of empathy, present in babies as they develop empathy from ego.

### Cultivating Empathy

Too much empathy may not be ideal, yet too little either. There are ways to practice and train our empathic muscles. First let us look at potential obstacles.

### *Difficulties, Disorders and Dirty Thoughts*

Some rare people lack empathy or have low empathy. They are normally in the autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and borderline personality disorder (BPD)<sup>120</sup>. They can also be diagnosed with narcissistic

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<sup>118</sup> Boivin, SK. Awada, A. Di Fruscia. G. Gagnon J. (2024). Étude sur la variabilité du rythme cardiaque: l’impact du contexte temporel et émotionnel sur les mécanismes physiologiques de l’empathie. LENS-UdeM

<sup>119</sup> Yoo S, Whang M. Vagal Tone Differences in Empathy Level Elicited by Different Emotions and a Co-Viewer. *Sensors* (Basel). 2020 Jun 1;20(11):3136. doi: 10.3390/s20113136. PMID: 32492974; PMCID: PMC7309171.

<sup>120</sup> Haas BW, Miller JD. Borderline personality traits and brain activity during emotional perspective taking. *Personal Disord*. 2015 Oct;6(4):315-20. doi: 10.1037/per0000130. Epub 2015 Jul 13. PMID: 26168407.

personality disorder (NPD) or other cluster B disorders (i.e. antisocial and histrionic), although there may be evidence, that this population may lack emotional but not necessarily cognitive empathy. If someone is unable to understand what another person may be experiencing or feeling., this can result in behaviors that are perceived as uncaring or hurtful. This can manifest in many ways and make relationship forming or maintenance very difficult. Narcissistic and histrionic personalities usually have low concern for others due to exaggerated ego and self-importance. We saw before that ego is the enemy. If not, others become enemies. Other reasons why people sometimes lack empathy include cognitive biases (which we saw a few in *Chapter 4: Psychology*), dehumanization (ditto), objectification, and victim-blaming (lack of accountability and responsibility). Low emotional intelligence or stress and trauma can lead to temporary or enduring low empathy.

Emotional empathy is however not needed to reduce or avoid dehumanization. Moreover, some natural desire and behavior may involve the wish to demean, humiliate and dehumanize in some perversions, fantasies, fetiches or other. This can include full empathic capacity and even encompass contentment from the degraded party. Bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadomasochism, (BDSM) play may have some of these qualities. It is important to keep an empathic perspective even in these consensual perversions.

### *Training and Practicing Empathy*

Fortunately, empathy is a skill that you can learn and strengthen. If you would like to build your empathy skills, there are a few things that you can do. Here is an enhanced list I adapted from psychology expert Kendra Cherry <sup>121</sup>:

1. Practice listening to people without interrupting
2. Pay attention to body language and other types of nonverbal communication
3. Ask people questions to learn more about them
4. Try to understand people, even when you don't agree with them
5. Imagine yourself in another person's shoes (their perspective)
6. Immerse yourself in their narratives and seeking greater understanding
7. Imagine new situations for others and how they would react
8. Strengthen your connection with others to learn more about how they feel
9. Seek to identify biases you may have and how they affect your empathy
10. Look for ways in which you are similar to others versus focusing on differences
11. Be willing to be vulnerable, opening up about how you feel
12. Engage in new experiences, focusing on how others in that situation may feel
13. Get involved in organizations that push for social change
14. Practice understanding fictional characters in movies and novels (you may discuss with others to get their perspectives as well and learn different viewpoints about thoughts and feelings)

### *Animal Empathy and Artificial Empathy*

Some animals can exhibit forms of empathy for each other and between species. Some animal interaction with humans have health and mental heal benefits as we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, including zootherapy. Humans can feel empathy for animals, especially pets. I remember my

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<sup>121</sup> Cherry, Kendra. *What Is Empathy?* Verywell. February 22, 2023

budgie birds who were a beautiful, colorful, and signing couple. When the male bird died, his mate died a few days later of what seemed like sadness or loneliness.

Humans can even have empathy for fictional characters, supernatural creatures, or anthropomorphic objects. A doll, figurine or stuffed animals can help children build empathy and nurturing skills. We can have empathy for plants, trees, Pokémons and Tamagotchis.

Artificial intelligence algorithms and programs can simulate sympathy and empathy. Robots and chatbots also can have empathic components to create artificial empathy, trust and appearance of understanding. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says in his posthumous book *The Art of Living* that we all seek love and understanding. Even from a robot it seems.

### Bias in Empathy and Big Picture

Emotional empathy is biased because it emphasizes someone or a group of people's emotions, so must deemphasize the rest of the world doing so. Ideally, if we had infinite capacity of empathy, we could have equal and powerful empathy for all. However, our brains do not work that way. We have limited functional capacity to imagine the suffering (or joy) of others. Our brain will always focus and spotlight the few and the rest will remain abstractions, statistics, numbers, or even worse, sub-human or loathed "others", as we saw in dehumanization and ingroup vs outgroup psychology.

People tend to feel more empathetic toward some people and less so toward others. Some key factors in this tendency include:

1. Perception of other person (judgement) – physical, mental, behavior, beliefs, etc.
2. Subjective explication for the person's behaviors (narrative theory of mind)
3. Subjective explication for other person's predicament (themselves, others or circumstances)
4. Your past experiences and expectations
5. If we fear the person or find them scary (empathy decreases)
6. If you envy the person (empathy decreases)
7. If you pity the person or find them vulnerable (empathy increases)
8. Close and similar people (empathy increases)
9. Attractive people we desire and do not envy (empathy increases)

Empathy intensifies our inherent biases, and even if most do not want to see themselves as racist, sexist or bigot, the truth is we all prefer to favor people close to us. "Blood is thicker than water" means we will choose our family over strangers most times and the stranger we judge the person, the less empathy we will feel. We saw that nonjudgement is preferred yet our brains automatically judge and even more so when it chooses to feel empathy or not. We like people who look like us and think like us more in general, may we be aware of that fact or not.

Praise for a person can be from sheer luck, team effort or singular success from intrinsic qualities and hard work. Blame can be attributed to personal flaws, victimization of the person (others' fault) or victim of fate and circumstances (limited responsibility). All these types of blame or praise perceptions will affect the level of emotional and cognitive empathy one feels. We feel less empathy for someone we think is responsible for his current situation or difficulty.

Even if you are able with practice and nonjudgement to feel empathy for everyone, as different, ugly, scary, and unworthy as they may originally appear, you will still have the narrow, myopic focus of one individual or at best group of individuals. It may enable you to clearly see one perspective with appreciation and affection. This still leaves many other perspectives unseen.

Empathy's power in a philosophical sense is to remind you that you are not special and allow you to expand your ego beyond your bubble. The problem is you simply increase the ego bubble without bursting it.

Emotional empathy prefers the now and the people we can relate too and leads us to have a blind eye or even aggression towards people we cannot understand or feel empathy for, may it be murders, rapists or simply a work colleague you dislike. Imagine your friend telling you a one-sided emotional story about relational problems. You may feel deep empathy for your friend yet are you able to feel similar empathy for the other person in the couple whose voice is not heard or distorted by your friend's perspective?

Empathy doesn't look at the big picture and it doesn't find holistic future-driving solutions for betterment. It tries to feel and fix a problem right now without addressing true consequences for all very well. Emotion is ego-based, prejudiced, narrowly focused and impairs reason. Emotional empathy is an emotion and impairs reason and rationality.

### **Emotional Empathy = Reduce Rationality**

#### **Empathy = Ego Expansion to Specific Others at the Expense of Others**

We know that emotional regulation is a key factor for happiness, health, as well as maintain healthy relationships. We must than regulate and reduce our emotional empathy and change it to rational compassion as much as possible.

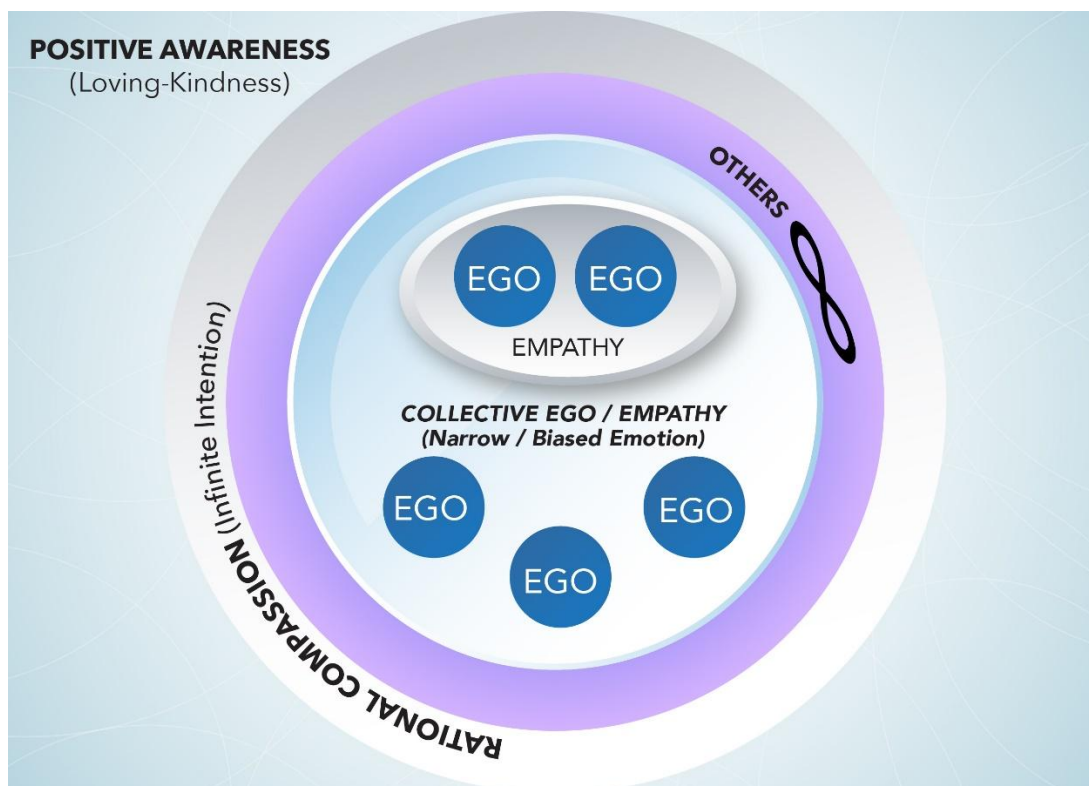
Emotional empathy also enhances our negativity bias because we learned that negative emotions are richer in variety and dominant in our minds compared to positive ones. By mirroring other people's emotions, we amplify the negativity, instead of finding sustainable ways to increase positivity.

We also know about emotional contagion and if we had a positivity bias, which we unfortunately don't, that could be a could thing to propagate, maybe like laughter and smiles are contagious. The reality is that for kindness and compassion, concepts like "paying it forward" are laudable. Still, anger, anxiety, resentment, jealousy, sadness, grief, and despair are much more contagious. This means negative actions like revenge and violence as we saw in *Chapter 2: Sociology* are more contagious than peace and forgiveness. The criminal justice system and the politics of war reflect this.

For instance, Willie Horton was convicted of first-degree murder in Massachusetts in the US and serving life in prison. He was released for ten weekends on a legal policy that first-degree murderer, after serving an average of 10 years in prison, are eligible for 18 to 48 hours of unguarded furloughs. This seems like a humane policy instead of having people simply rot in jail forever. Unfortunately, he escaped, tortured a husband and wife in their home, and raped the wife<sup>122</sup>. Because the public felt empathy for the unfortunate couple of a vicious and violent crime, the 1972 law was abolished in 1988 to supposedly prevent future victims. However, because empathy impairs rationality, the consideration that recidivism rates had gone down in the state since the 15 years of the law implementation. This means that much less new crime and victims resulted because of the law, on top of increasing the quality of life of many eligible prisoners. Prisoners who benefited from the program were happier and less likely to commit a crime after release, making it a win-win situation and a safer, happier world for all. Because of empathy, this useful law by any rational measure was eliminated because empathy but the focus (like the narrative self) on the last and most extreme. It did not matter that it was only one prisoner out of fifteen years of successful program, with a tangibly safer and better world. Fear and empathy for the victims made people and politicians make a completely irrational and uncompassionate decision.

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<sup>122</sup> National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS). Willie Horton Case. NCJ Number 112660. 1988



In this diagram, we see that empathy allows to incorporate the ego of others.

**Empathy = Ego Expansion (to include one or more people besides you)**

Ego can also expand to collective ego and that is still too small. Collective ego is still ego. Examples include community, country or nation, religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation, but the types of collective ego can be as diverse as human, individual egos.

**Empathy = Ego Expanded but Still Limited and Not Infinite**

Empathy is still a form of inflated ego and allows continued duality or plurality, focusing on only one part. Only more diffused compassion for the infinite amount of people and even creatures, nature, can allow for clear non-duality or oneness.

**Empathy = Divided Love and Care**

**Rational Compassion = Oneness = Infinite Love**

Compassion is the intention to decrease everyone's suffering. We can also have loving-kindness to increase everyone's joy and happiness. The two combined are infinitely better than emotional empathy. Yet, what about the perhaps important extra care for family and friends?

Paul Bloom suggests he does not know the right balance between the following equation:

**Self + Close People + Strangers = 100%**

I would first reframe it as

**Consideration Focus = Self + Close People + Similar Strangers + Strange Strangers + Unknown Strangers  
= 100%**

I would distinguish similar strangers as people we have some time of affiliation or bias towards (might it be gender, language, culture, interest, opinion, etc.) and strange strangers as people we may have less attractive to (physically and mentally) and less communality in general. The unknown strangers are people who exist only as an abstraction and that we will never meet. Remember that we can have

quite a hard time imagining and caring for large number of unknown people. Since we know that we already have a strong ego to help us survive and take care of our selfish needs, I would recommend to have the percentage of self as low as possible without going into neglect (either physical, mental or emotional). Since we also know we have tendency to care much more about close people and similar strangers, I would encourage everyone to try to have high percentages in strange strangers and unknown strangers. We should aspire to feel greater shared humanity, think, and act accordingly. Oneness. This is the big picture thinking instead of the small cap of limited empathy.

Empathy is a trap we barely see because we are so happy to see our thoughts or emotions going from the ego to include someone else, that we forget that we are also ignoring everyone else than us and the focus of the empathic feeling or thought.

For instance, we can see some chosen testimonials to make you feel emotional empathy like:

*Before the Syrian civil war began, Hassan Zaroid, 42, owned his own business in the Syrian city of Homs. "I was happy. I had a house. I had a car," he says. "But then I lost everything."*<sup>123</sup>

I can certainly understand that Hassan's lost of house and car is not desired and I wish with all the compassion in the world for his suffering to be reduced. However, if I am too emotionally empathetic with his "sad" story, would I not risk not caring for homeless Sudanese people or homeless British people or rich Indonesians who all have their unique sets of problems and suffering. Why is Hassan more important? Because emotional empathy appeals to our irrational emotions. And would you be surprised that this testimonial was in hopes to your opening your wallet and giving or increasing your donation to the charity organization.

### Reducing Bias

Traveling is a way to increase compassion by visiting new countries, which I did and highly recommend, yet a cheaper and easier way is also to go beyond your community in your own country! Go to a different social class, learn a new language or join a new group, venture off again with curiosity (7Cs). Still our minds can hardly understand what it is to feel for 800 people, much less 8 million or 8 billion people. Dunbar's number is a suggested cognitive limit and is about 150 people. Dunbar further estimates an inner core of about 5 people to whom we devote about 40 % of our available social time and 10 more people to whom we devote another 20%<sup>124</sup>. About two-thirds of our time are spent with 15 people or less on average. I may be an exception with thousands of encounters in most given year. I am a rare "hyperextrovert", although I have my quiet times, especially when writing.

Empathy is a very human scale, whereas compassion is too conceptual and immaterial to most, regardless of morality or ethical issues.

Would you prefer to cut your finger or let the entirety of the Chinese population die? Most would prefer keeping their finger, even if they have 9 more! They may say otherwise, but with their egoist emotions they would sleep better at night with the deaths of millions or billions than some personal injury. You can also think of what you would be willing to sacrifice for you child's life... even if you can perhaps have 9 more too! Empathy provides a very narrow view. It is bigoted, biased, bigoted, and often possessive, righteous, and revengeful.

To reduce these biases, be curious, creative, have compersion and more compassionate. 4 of the 7Cs. Compersion allows the change from envy and jealousy into joy, reducing empathy bias and providing

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<sup>123</sup> Catholic Relief Services (CRS). *Syrian Refugees: Meet the People Everyone's Talking About*. 2024

<sup>124</sup> Dunbar, Robin (10 August 2018). "Why drink is the secret to humanity's success". Financial Times.



greater delight and contentment (7Cs). Travel, be curious abroad and at home, care for all types of real and imagined (unknown) people and practice compassion and loving-kindness.

### Injustice and Empathy

An angry and empathic person wants a perceived wrongdoer to suffer which is the opposite of compassion. It is an “eye for an eye” vengeance. We know from experience this leaves everyone blind in the end with little room for repair, restoration, learning, growth and forgiveness.

#### **More Empathy = More Anger = More Punishment / Revenge / Retribution**

Most justice systems, and especially the US where states spend over USD 48 billions on corrections (over 7% of budget), are very punitive and lack compassionate and constructive avenues for atonement and active rehabilitation that works. Instead, they spend more, create more crimes and criminals. Lawmakers, judges and juries claim to be impartial and rational, yet they often are driven by revenge and narrow emotional empathy for the victim at the expense of compassion for the community as a whole and all its individuals including law breakers.

2002 Canadian research and review from Smith, Goggin & Gendreau revealed that prisons and intermediate sanctions should not be used with the expectation of reducing criminal behavior. Longer sentences also produces more, not less, crime and the financial and human cost is higher<sup>125</sup>. How can we know this for over two decades and continue to incarcerate more and more people? Politics , optics and even financial interest perhaps. More likely, we do this because of empathy and the unfounded belief that harsh punishment deters crime and criminals. Let’s be honest however, we, as a society, do not care about community, we simply believe “criminals” deserve it and had it coming. We have cognitive biases and empathize with the victim more than the criminal or the community. As we saw in *Chapter 5: Psychology*, our cognitive bias blinds us so we pretend we do not have the criminal character traits necessary to commit a crime and that criminals are other people than us, so we do not have real empathy for them. A sizable portion of crimes are committed with the influence of alcohol, drug or mental illness, not malicious criminal intent, and desire to harm others.

Psychologist Dr. Bonta remarks in a 2024 lecture I attended live that punishment needs to be of appropriate intensity and only inhibits behavior without allowing for new teaching or learning. Imagine trying to learn piano and every time you hit a wrong key you receive an electric shock... probably not the best way to be taught music, an instrument, or anything for that matter.

#### **Punishment = Inhibits Behavior + Inhibits Learning New Behavior**

### Identification and Impact

Empathy can impact quality and quantity of relationships at home, work or other. Most strikingly, having empathy increases your capacity for forgiveness, especially in romantic relationships<sup>126</sup>. We saw in *Chapter 4: Psychology* the importance for forgiveness.

#### **More Empathy = More Forgiveness**

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<sup>125</sup> Smith, P. et al. (2002) The Effects of Prison Sentences and Intermediate Sanctions on Recidivism: General Effects and Individual Differences. Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2002. Cat No.: JS42-103/2002 ISBN: 0-662-66475-2

<sup>126</sup> Kimmes JG, Durtschi JA. Forgiveness in romantic relationships: The roles of attachment, empathy, and attributions. J Marital Family Ther. 2016;42(4):645-658. doi:10.1111/jmft.12171



In families, when empathy is high, siblings have less conflict and more warmth toward each other<sup>127</sup>. Similarly, at work, empathy can reduce conflict and crises.

Identification is an important factor when considering, measuring, and manipulating empathy. How much does the empathic person truly identify with the thoughts, feelings, and emotions? This can touch all 4 types of empathy.

This is important in art and advertising for instance. It is also important in a philosophical way as in how much identification to egoic form or social constructs and illusions can we allow. Lastly it is important practically and can change behaviors and impact.

With marketing and advertisements for instance, it is known that Identification with content and character could make customers watch advertisement longer<sup>128</sup>, feel similarities with the advertisement content and have a favorable response to the advertisement. The entertainment industry uses empathy to attract audiences physically and virtually. The education industry positioned positive affective empathy as a way to increase students' engagement with eLearning, virtual or distance education<sup>129</sup>. Empathizing with negative emotions such as anger<sup>130</sup> and guilt<sup>131</sup> could increase helping or giving behaviors, including donations in targeted population. Empathy is used to increase enrollment in the military. The impact of empathy is real, and my suggestion again is to stay lucid and decrease your empathy in exchange for rational compassion and kindness. Empathy is subjective and lowers rational judgment and reasoning.

### Neuroscience of Empathy

Empathy's root seems to be in the default mode network, at least for cognitive empathy. Different regions of the brain play pivotal roles in empathy, including the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), the anterior insula, and inferior frontal gyrus (IFG)<sup>132</sup>. The IFG may specifically help recognize emotions linked through facial expressions although emotion expert warns on relying too much on facial expressions. The same or very similar expressions may mean different things in different contexts, and not just different cultures.

Besides the default mode network, the amygdala of the limbic system and the medial prefrontal cortex of the central executive network also play a part in empathy.

We will examine these regions and others in more details in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Mirror neurons in the brain plays a part in the ability to mirror and mimic the emotional responses that people would feel if they were in similar situations. Their proper function, excitability and activation is key.

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<sup>127</sup> Lam CB, Solmeyer AR, McHale SM. Sibling relationships and empathy across the transition to adolescence. *J Youth Adolesc.* 2012;41:1657-1670. doi:10.1007/s10964-012-9781-8

<sup>128</sup> Jeon Y.A. HCI International 2018-Posters' Extended Abstracts, Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, Las Vegas, NV, USA, 15-20 July 2018. Springer; Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany: 2018. Skip or Not to Skip: Impact of Empathy and Ad Length on Viewers' Ad-Skipping Behaviors on the Internet; pp. 261-265.

<sup>129</sup> . Holmberg B. *Handbook of Distance Education*. Routledge; Abingdon, UK: 2003. A theory of distance education based on empathy; pp. 79-86

<sup>130</sup> van Doorn J., Zeelenberg M., Breugelmans S.M. The impact of anger on donations to victims. *Int. Rev. Vict.* 2017;23:303-312. doi: 10.1177/0269758017710819

<sup>131</sup> Basil D.Z., Ridgway N.M., Basil M.D. Guilt and giving: A process model of empathy and efficacy. *Psychol. Mark.* 2008;25:1-23. doi: 10.1002/mar.20200.

<sup>132</sup> Shamay-Tsoory SG, Aharon-Peretz J, Perry D. *Two systems for empathy: A double dissociation between emotional and cognitive empathy in inferior frontal gyrus versus ventromedial prefrontal lesions*. *Brain.* 2009;132(PT3): 617-627.

What is most interesting is that compassion is linked with different parts of the brain than empathy, mainly the orbitofrontal cortex and ventral striatum. Emotional empathy, cognitive empathy and compassion all seem to have their different and separate brain circuitry.

### Biology of Empathy

The opposite of emotional empathy is emotional detachment. This term may seem negative, but as we have seen, detachment does not mean bad because it allows for better reasoning. In fact, emotionally detached people were found to have a higher density of dopamine receptors in the brain allowing them to suppress their emotional empathy and think more globally and rationally. Dopamine has an ability to plan whereas emotional empathy is more reactive and focused on here and now solutions with less thought of future repercussions.

Although we saw that emotional empathy can be a key to see other human beings and expand our ego, we should only see it as the first step in the process to access our greater compassion. No empathy is not good and can lead to problems like narcissistic behavior at its extreme, yet empathy is also a limited tool, and we should all try to go beyond it for our and others greater good.

### Beyond Empathy

We saw that empathy is biased and focuses on the same often inappropriate and inadequate gut reactions that cripples rationality (central executive network) and morality. What are alternatives and what can be better? Cognitive empathy is a useful tool but not so much better than emotional empathy.

#### **Thrive = Truly Live > Survive**

Compassion for others is the sincere desire for others to simply thrive by

1. removing or reducing their suffering
2. increasing their well-being
3. caring
4. sharing
5. participating in a tangible and transformative way

Compassion has a subjective and emotional (physical sensation) component to it yet is not the same as feeling what another person is feeling. It can include it but is not limited or tainted by it.

The first 3 aspects above of compassion are thoughts and desires and require no action, although they will often guide compassionate actions. The 5<sup>th</sup> aspect is participative and requires some form of action, even if only in words. Words do not need to be excessively kind or empathetic. Sometimes harsh words could be coming from a compassionate intention.

#### **Emotional Empathy = Feeling**

#### **Compassion = Intention**

If the rationale is to reduce future suffering and not current transient suffering for instance, rational compassion may seem like a lack of emotional empathy yet have great (or greater) practical and moral value. We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that Here & Now molecules make people that we know or are closer to us a focus, but our rational self can see beyond the here & now for greater wisdom and action. It starts with intellect and an intention, not feelings that cloud our judgement and reason. Compassion training meditation showed better subjective feelings compared to empathy training, as well as kinder behavior towards others. When you are experiencing empathy, you are less happy, less able to think properly and less effective at helping.

#### **Rational Compassion > Emotional Empathy**

Compassion can also be for non-human animals, plants, the planet, and the universe. It is an ideal intention for “good”, better, best or beneficial. The main problem with compassion conceptually is that it may not seem to be linked with motivation, as it is more diffused and distant. Emotional empathy attempts to focus on helping or connecting with a person right now. It is like taking that person’s ego and identifying with it.

**Emotional Empathy = Ego Identity with Someone = Focus**

**Rational Compassion = Small or No Ego for Everyone = Diffuse (and Difficult)**

Compassion may seem unrealistic and far-fetched yet let us look at the experience of someone who experienced incest as an extreme case and came to push her hard feelings further through reparative justice and reflection.

*« La volonté d’aller jusqu’au bout permet d’assister à quelque chose d’extraordinaire : une ouverture insoupçonnée, une empathie à la souffrance humaine même si celle-ci est ressentie par un agresseur. Dès lors, l’agresseur n’est plus une bête, un monstre, un démon, il devient humain. »*

– J., victime d’inceste

Translation:

“The will to go to the end of things allows to witness something extraordinary: an unexpected openness, an empathy to the human suffering, even if it is felt by an aggressor. From that moment, the aggressor is no longer a beast, a monster, a demon, he becomes human.”

-Anonymous Incest Victim

Empathy to human suffering seems much more like compassion than what we now know is limited empathy. Empathy and compassion can both make you forgive your familiar rapist and aggressor providing palpable peace, but one is better than the other and goes beyond. It may forgive all rapists and murders and love all humans equally. My friend asked me if I would forgive and have compassion for the murderer and rapist of my son. I said “yes” promptly, authentically, and truthfully. She was shocked and admitted she could not. Maybe you are still stuck at that stage. I am simply telling you with two examples that it is possible to think and even feel this way.

Sure, positive empathy can amplify feelings of joy, accomplishment, adventure and more. It can help live vicariously positive and negative emotions like roller coaster. Real roller coasters and amusement rides provide fear in a controlled environment, like horror and thriller movies can produce potent fear without real danger. In the safety of your own home, you can enjoy sports without risking much injury or real defeat. You can share in the personal and social joy of supporting a sports team, player, or other game. Cinema, theatre, literature, and other arts use empathy. Fondness in friendship and shared pleasures in sex and romance can have empathy as an enhancer. Cognitive empathy brings curiosity (7Cs) to see the world with different points of view beyond the individual ego and creativity (7Cs) to simulate engaging stories. Let’s make sure these stories have a positive spin in some ways.

*“The concern about empathy is not that its consequences are always bad, then. It’s that its negative outweighs its positives—and that there are better alternatives.”*

-Paul Bloom, Against Empathy

### Concern, Care and Warmth

We saw that care and caregiving do not require empathy and that empathy can in fact hinder them in many ways (bias, fatigue, etc.). Simple healthy concern (not possession, jealousy, fear, or anxiety)

as an intention to be watchful and benevolent for someone's well-being is also better than empathy. Less empathy can lead to more warmth, kindness, and care. Actions speak louder than feelings.

### Compassion Concepts and EASE

*"Move quickly from feeling (empathic) distress of others to acting with compassion to alleviate it."*

-Thupten Jinpa

In psychological literature, compassion is conceptualized as the desire to alleviate the suffering of others. Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*) refers to the same definition. However, these two compassion concepts different in the context and are revealed to seem alike but differ in application and comparison with linked concepts. For instance, "Western" compassion seems limited and have potential negative consequences, while "Eastern" compassion seems limitless.

In short, Buddhist philosophy attempts to resolve the potential downside of compassion by proposing the 4 states of mind we saw earlier in the chapter. The 3 others are essential to the full expression of compassionate intention and action in the world.

1. The (altruistic) joy element (*muditā*) can help balance our depression in the face of other people's sufferings.
2. Equanimity (*upekkhā*) can help reduce our attachment to loved ones, thereby lowering in-group favoritism and out-group dehumanization.
3. Loving-kindness (*mettā*) brings an inexhaustible and unconditional love positive parameter to shelter and embrace all the potential suffering of the world.

The "four immeasurables", together, are a pathway to move from ordinary people's imperfect compassion towards flawless, boundless "great compassion" demonstrated by enlightened beings or "buddhas". Buddhist compassion can be defined as "helping sufferers and wrongdoers in a calm and equal manner. The four specific dimensions can be conceptualized as: edification for wrongdoers, alleviation for sufferers, serenity within, and equality without (or EASE). " <sup>133</sup>

1. Edification for wrongdoers = Curiosity (7Cs) for their circumstances and suffering
2. Alleviation for sufferers = Compassion + Creativity (7Cs)
3. Serenity within = Contentment (7Cs)
4. External Equality = Equanimity

When we understand that any "wrong" action comes from suffering, we stop blaming, shaming, pointing finger and instead try to figure it out with curiosity and care. The legal and criminal justice is an extension of the extinction of compassion in lieu of limited emotional empathy, jealousy, and revenge. Even if we cannot always figure out the underlying suffering, as human minds, actions, and life in general can be more complex than we can grasp at times, we can still stop judging and start helping.

Edification means learning, improving and growth. Even if we understand or learn nothing in the moment, we can regardless attempt to alleviate any suffering we see or surmise. Suffering is part of the human existence, and few have been able to surpass it. Most only suppress suffering temporarily and often create more suffering doing so! Their thoughts and actions are meant to stop suffering, yet they simply do not know better at the time. True compassion is being able to see anyone's suffering and not only selective compassion (emotional empathy bias). We have selective memory, selective opinions, selective empathy, and selective "compassion". We can do better in at least the last three.

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<sup>133</sup> Chou, Sophia & Yeh, Kuang-Hui. *Conceptualize Buddhist compassion: Differentiating Buddhist compassion from Western compassion*. 2023

When we have true compassion for all, we can act.

### Compassion in Action

Let me share some instances of compassion in action, knowing that my objective is to give personal examples so they can be relatable to you, the reader, and not bolster my ego, confidence or politically correct or conformist value to society. I systematically train myself to refrain from judgement of others and care little of others often rash and misguided judgements towards me, may they be praise (positive) or criticism/cynicism (negative). I use equanimity and non-judgemental awareness in that regard.

#### **Compassion = Intention = Positive Narrative**

During the early covid-19 pandemic frenzy, fear, restrictions, lockdowns, and social isolation, I wanted to lessen the suffering of the world in general. I decided to act on this compassionate feeling by creating a community a share inspiring poetry. I started a worldwide poetry 40-day challenge which had people from 6 continents. It was so successful that the group continue to share during the difficult and often isolating, painful pandemic restrictions. A year later the challenge was repeated to another resounding success. The intention to alleviate people suffering throughout the world, led to an idea with creativity and then to an action.

Compassion is the cornerstone of secular or humanist view of the world. Instead of obedience to rules, compassion is a sentiment to better the world as much as humanly possible. There is where courage comes in again. Empathy is not action.

**Empathy = Emotion**

**Courage (7Cs) = Action**

**Courage (7Cs) = Opposite of Cowardness**

**Courage (7Cs) = Contrary of Conformity**

### Self-Compassion

Because we cannot exclusively feel empathy or compassion for others, we must also train our brain to have compassion for number one, ourselves. The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) is a tool that defines self-compassion as a dynamic balance between the compassionate versus uncompassionate ways that individuals emotionally respond to pain and failure (with kindness or judgment), cognitively understand their predicament (as part of the human experience or as isolating) and pay attention to suffering (in a mindful or over-identified manner). A six-factor structure is divided into positive (compassion) and negative (criticism):

#### A) Self-compassion

1. Self-kindness
2. Common humanity (oneness)
3. Mindfulness

#### B) Self-criticism

4. Self-judgment
5. Isolation
6. Over-identification (Ego)

Self-compassion training increases scores on the positive SCS subscales (1,2,3) and decreases scores on the negative components (4,5,6). Self-compassion allows more compassionate and fewer

uncompassionate responses to perceived suffering<sup>134</sup>. More on self-compassion in *Beyond Spirituality*. Both self-compassion and compassion can be learned.

*In contrast to empathy, compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern, and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other's wellbeing. Compassion is feeling for and not feeling with the other (...) how such (different) emotional responses can be trained and changed (must be understood).*

-Dr. Tania Singer & Dr. Olga Klimecki, Social Neuroscience Lab

## Compassion Fatigue

*Authentic compassion, as opposed to being polite or nice, is a complex neuropsychological process that is related to frontal lobe executive functioning, the most recently developed and most complex of cognitive processes. To engage in compassion, you have to be cognitively present, understand one's social surroundings, and be aware of one's impact on others.*

—Dr. Eric Zillmer, Professor of Neuropsychology

Compassion although infinite in theory and only a positive intention seems to have its limits in the human brain. There is research on compassion fatigue as well as empathy fatigue that looks at professions where people must exhibit compassion or empathy regularly (ex. caregivers) and it shows that at the opposite scale of compassion satisfaction is compassion fatigue. Can there be too much of a good thing?

When examined further however it seems that compassion fatigue is more related to emotional empathy and not rational compassion. For example, a 2024 article abstract says “Occupational and physical therapists who routinely provide potentially painful and distressing rehabilitation to burn survivors are at risk for developing compassion fatigue. Burn therapists may also experience compassion satisfaction based on the successes their patients accomplish<sup>135</sup>.” We know that compassion and satisfaction should not be based on success (or failure) of therapy and recovery, only on pure intention to alleviate suffering. What the authors must be talking about is the result-dependent, reward dopamine, emotional roller-coaster of emotional empathy.

### **No Expectation + No Emotional Empathy = No Compassion Fatigue**

We should remember that most people wrongly assume that emotional empathy is positive and necessary. We also know that expectation is a classical conductor of action and even care. So how can a caregiver care and act in the best possible mindset without expectation? Meaning and positive thinking does not require expectation. Doing the task you are good at, and want to do, in the moment does not require any specific outcome that will determine satisfaction or fatigue. We can simply be satisfied in the moment, doing.

### **Satisfaction = Serenity = Contentment (7Cs) = Being (and Doing)**

Expectation may be linked to hope, and hope is a positive mindset helpful for mental health as we will see in later books of the series. However, hope can also be linked to intention without expectation, and the best example of good intention is compassion.

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<sup>134</sup> Neff, K.D. The Self-Compassion Scale is a Valid and Theoretically Coherent Measure of Self-Compassion. *Mindfulness* 7, 264–274 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-015-0479-3>

<sup>135</sup> Yelvington, Mi. et al. A Scoping Review of Compassion Fatigue and Compassion Satisfaction in Burn Therapists. *Journal of Burn Care & Research*. 10.1093/jbcr/irae029. 2024

### Positive Intention = Compassion (7Cs) = Hope - Expectation

A study of 120 intensive care unit (ICU) nurses (60 men and 60 women) in Chandigarh, India, a city I love for its architecture, history, and greenery, had interesting findings<sup>136</sup>:

1. Level of empathy (Toronto empathy questionnaire) was significantly higher in female nurses as compared to male nurses.
2. Empathy had significant and positive association with compassion satisfaction.
3. Empathy seemed to prevent burnout.
4. Empathy seemed to decrease secondary traumatic stress.
5. Compassion satisfaction and burnout are negatively associated.
6. Compassion satisfaction and secondary traumatic stress are negatively correlated.

This means that empathy and compassion may mitigate typical burnout and taking on other people's trauma as our own. Compassion fatigue is in fact sometimes referred to as secondary or vicarious trauma. Again, my claim is that compassion fatigue is a misnomer. It refers to empathy fatigue.

What are the differences between burnout and compassion fatigue? Burnout refers to a state of work-related exhaustion that causes poor motivation, low energy, and a lack of interest in work. Compassion fatigue can be seen as a specific type of burnout, but also can occur outside of work. It refers to the negative emotions and loss of empathy experienced after being exposed to other people's trauma, pain, and suffering. Compassion is more cognitive and empathy more emotional. Negative emotions come from empathy, not compassion.

The dichotomies of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction; apathy and hyperpathy; can be reframed and rethought as compassion as a virtue, a reasoned middle ground, agrees Garcia & Pinto-Bustamante<sup>137</sup>. Again, intention of being and doing, can outdo undue attention to feeling and achieving.

Singer & Klimeck echo similar thoughts saying that empathic distress is negative to physical and mental health, yet that compassion training promotes prosocial behavior and augment positive affect (emotion and disposition) and resilience<sup>138</sup>:

Compassion and kindness can exist independently of empathy. It is possible to shutdown the negative emotional response without losing compassion. We saw that these circuits are even different in the brain. Understanding, respect, attention, caring, compassion and warmth can be used in lieu of empathy, especially if there are many daily exposures to hardships. People can develop aversion to deal with people who are suffering. Compassion is simply an intention without damaging emotional investment. Compassion is always pleasant. Empathy for someone who is suffering is unpleasant.

This is also true from the point of view of the person suffering. We saw that most people want love and understanding. That does not mean they want others to suffer too. That would be ego and hidden jealousy. People prefer someone calm and grounded that can minimize their suffering or just listen, instead of someone who can become as distraught as them. Empathy may be used to potentially double our joys, yet calm compassion is better to lower or sadness and fear. If we want people to feel our pain, that is pure ego and selfishness. Same goes for the justice system of punishment and desire for perpetrators to suffer the same or more pain than the victim.

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<sup>136</sup> Kaur, Baljinder & Ram, Hema & Kaur, Lovepreet & Yadav, Rajendra & Pandey, Shikha & Dutta, Monika & Kaur, Prabhjot & Dhaliwal, Navneet. 2231-9104-1-PB. 19-29. 2021

<sup>137</sup> Garcia, John & Pinto-Bustamante, Boris. *Beyond compassion fatigue, compassion as a virtue*. Nursing Ethics. 31. 1-10. 10.1177/09697330231196228. 2023

<sup>138</sup> Singer, Tania & Klimecki, Olga. (2014). Empathy and Compassion. Current Biology. 24. R875–R878. 10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054.



## Burnout

- Tends to build slowly over time
- Caused by occupational stress and overwork
- Creates work dissatisfaction
- Linked to excessive pressure
- Leads to loss of motivation, energy, and interest

## Compassion Fatigue

- May occur suddenly
- Caused by caring for people who are suffering
- Creates life dissatisfaction
- Happens when people feel helpless or out of control
- Leads to lack of empathy and PTSD symptoms

In another study in Brazil, while over 25% of healthcare professionals (nurses and assistants) reported compassion satisfaction, almost 20% showed signs of compassion fatigue<sup>139</sup>!

How do we combat compassion fatigue? “The first step is to set boundaries. Recognize and accept what you can’t control and focus on what you can control,” says Dr. Shakira Espada-Campos<sup>140</sup>. Well, isn’t this directly from the page of Epictetus’ dichotomy of control? To be infinitely compassionate, as I mentioned earlier, you can only always care about your intentions and never the results which you cannot control. I argue again that compassion fatigue is really “emotional empathy fatigue” and that most people have not learned and practiced being rationally compassionate to all and not only “compassionate” to the person suffering close to them. Emotions have a physical component so are prone to exhaustion like any other physical activity. Enjoy the altruist action of helping and pure compassionate intention without egoic expectation or emotional entanglement.

### **Altruistic Action – Expectation – Emotion + Infinite Intention = Compassion Satisfaction**

Easier said than done, you will say. At least now you know the way. Some have already found and practised this. Charles Goodman distinguishes the “sentimental compassion” (emotional empathy) with the great compassion” which is more diffused, distant, and removed but not less potent. Meditator Mathieu Ricard, the “world’s happiest man”, showed tried empathy training which he described as intolerable, exhausting and draining after less than one hour. In stark contrast, compassion training and exercise provide<sup>141</sup>:

1. Warm positive state

<sup>139</sup> Lourenção, L, et al. *Compassion Fatigue in Nursing Professionals from Complex Care Units of a Brazilian University Hospital*. 10.20944/preprints202201.0379.v1. 2022

<sup>140</sup> Cherry, Kendra. *Compassion Fatigue: The Toll of Caring Too Much*. Verywellmind. 2023

<sup>141</sup> Singer, T. & Bolz, M. *Compassion. Bridging Practice and Science*. Max Plank Society 2013



2. Prosocial motivation
3. No empathic distress (subjective)
4. No empathic distress (objective with fMRI findings)
5. Recovering from empathic distress
6. No exhaustion

Nonmediators showed similar findings with different Singer & Klimecki studies<sup>142</sup>, showing that compassion fatigue may be false. Compassion in theory could be sustained indefinitely. Go ahead and practice. It is possible.

### Solidarity and Sentimentality

We saw the pitfalls of empathy and collective ego. Sometimes empathy can be used to rally the troops for a “good cause” like social justice or against bigotry and tyranny. In this case empathy can be a temporary tool. Recent findings from Lori Gallegos show that<sup>143</sup>:

1. Transitory empathy, which is experienced as a passing moment in time, are more susceptible to failure.
2. Accretionary empathy, which is developed over an extended period of time, can make vital contributions to intergroup solidarity.

Sentimentalism, in the context of moral philosophy, is the view that moral judgments and behavior are primarily driven by emotions, sentiments, or feelings, rather than rational principles or logical reasoning. It emphasizes the role of empathy and affective responses in shaping our moral sense and guiding our actions. Steven Pinker, in his writings, often critiques sentimentalism, arguing that a purely sentimental approach to morality can be problematic. He suggests that while emotions like empathy are important, they can also be biased, inconsistent, and subject to manipulation. He advocates for a more balanced approach that recognizes the importance of both emotions and rationality in moral decision-making. Also empathy, while seemingly altruistic, can still be influenced by self-interest and a desire for personal gain, cognitive or emotional gratification (psychological egoism).

Paul Bloom engages with Pinker's critique of sentimentalism to highlight the limitations of relying solely on empathy in moral judgment. He suggests that sentimentalism, in subtle forms or taken to the extreme, can lead to moral judgments that are overly subjective, emotionally driven, and lacking in critical reflection. By referring to sentimentalism, Bloom underscores the importance of rationality and understanding in moral decision-making. He argues for a more nuanced approach that recognizes the role of emotions while also emphasizing the need for critical analysis, context, emotional control, restraint, reflection and a broader understanding of consequences. This discussion of sentimentalism adds depth to Bloom's argument, as it showcases his effort to strike a balance between affective and cognitive processes in shaping our moral judgments. It highlights the proposition that a fully ethical life requires perhaps some forms of empathy but mostly rational reflection, care and compassion.

Now let us have a brief overview of mindfulness to close off the chapter.

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<sup>142</sup> Klimecki, Olga & Leiberg, Susanne & Ricard, Matthieu & Singer, Tania. (2013). Differential Pattern of Functional Brain Plasticity after Compassion and Empathy Training.. *Social cognitive and affective neuroscience*. 9. 10.1093/scan/nst060.

<sup>143</sup> Gallegos, Lori. (2024). Does Empathy Contribute to Intergroup Solidarity? Navigating the Pitfalls of Empathy in the Pursuit of Racial Justice. *Hypatia*. 1-21. 10.1017/hyp.2024.12.

## Meaningful Mindfulness

We saw mindfulness can be linked to equanimity and emotional regulation in *Chapter 4: Psychology*. This impacts happiness and return to happiness directly. It also:

1. Reduces addiction and compulsion.
2. Combats negativity bias.
3. Cultivates peace, contentment (7Cs), and serenity.

Mindfulness buffers the experience of stress by activating the relaxation response, “rest and digest” or parasympathetic branch of autonomous nervous system. When you induce a state of relaxation, which can be achieved through mindfulness, as well as other activities, you can achieve:

- Higher brain functioning
- Increased clarity in thinking and perception
- Increased awareness
- Increased attention and focus
- Increased immune function
- Lowered blood pressure and heart rate
- Lowered anxiety and stress
- Calm and stillness
- Connection

Gaining some of these key benefits can be as simple as:

1. Closing your eyes and being silent for a few minutes (meditation)
2. Keeping your eyes open and focusing your attention on the positive present (mindfulness)

Some claim that mindfulness is hard to define, but with functional magnetic resonance brain studies and sturdy protocols we will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, it is more and more an exact science and not just some bogus spiritual state only achieved by meditation. Let us define mindfulness for now as been present in the here and now and appreciating with active gratitude and awareness.

### **Mindfulness = Focus on Here & Now + Awareness + Gratitude**

We will see in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* that our brain and body actually have corresponding Here & Now molecules and how we can better understand and activate them. We will also look at mindfulness in action and practice even further in *Beyond Spirituality*.

Many people may have negative almost aversive reactions to the mainstream terms of mindfulness or even meditation. They are not the same and there exists many forms of meditation which may or may not be beneficial to some individuals in some circumstances. Mindfulness as properly defined and practiced is normally useful to almost everyone in almost all situations. Think of it as been mentally healthy and content. It is a perfect preferred indifferent and coincides with wisdom.

### **Mindfulness = Mind Full and Healthy**

Mental illness can have a physical or biological basis, and can be influenced by:

1. Genetics – nature and predisposition
2. Geriatrics - natural degeneration of cells
3. Environment, including cancer (uncontrolled multiplication of cells) and physical trauma.

Many of the non-physical or mental basis of mental illness or maladaptive mental thoughts, emotions, moods, and behavior can be greatly alleviated with meticulous practice of mindfulness, gratitude, and compassion. GMC is more the acronym for the possibly polluting American car company headquartered in Detroit, US. It is not as sexy and evocative as GEM, but perhaps more accurate.

Gratitude

Mindfulness

Compassion

Even some physical-related mental problems can benefit from this trio of tools easily at our disposal daily for free. In some cases, no need for expensive psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy, although I am convinced there is place and situations which either or both are necessary and very beneficial. Please refer to your local health professional as they say. I am giving you extra tools that are free, relatively easy to learn and practice and good for the sick and healthy.

Be fully present to fight boredom or bothersome thoughts. We will see in *Beyond Neurons and Hormones* that breathing can help you bring you back to the present moment and regulate your body to calm your mind. Positive narratives and contentment or serenity in the moment are the cornerstone of mindfulness practice.

**Mindfulness = Moment Awareness + Positive Narrative = Increased Happiness**

### Mindfulness Works

Mindfulness may have Buddhist roots, but it is a practice that simply focuses on the present with no or minimum prerequisite. Awareness, acceptance, openness, curiosity, wonder, and non-judgment are key components. Even Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote: "Concentrate every minute like a Roman on doing what's in front of you with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice."

Research show that it helps improve:

1. Focus and concentration
2. Clarity and quality of thoughts
3. Equanimity and letting go
4. Care and empathy

Focus and concentration are a big societal issue as we saw in popcorn brain. Lack of patience can be associated with scrolling social media and consuming live media.

A landmark study on the impact of mindfulness 4<sup>th</sup> grade student<sup>144</sup> shows that teaching mindfulness in school versus a control group where students have no mindfulness training can:

1. increase effective emotional regulation by 250%
2. Increase prosocial behavior by over 600%
3. Increase academic achievements by 550%

Course satisfaction for students and teachers was extremely high and teachers even report extra focus and attention for the students. Less distraction, disruption and daydreaming also saw additional learning class time created by the practice.

### Mindfulness at Work

Mindfulness is good alone, at home, with people and also at work. My engineer friend, Umugaba, had mindfulness training at work for him and his employees who do dangerous industrial equipment maintenance. Mindfulness was shown to quantitatively decrease work accidents as people were less daydreaming on the job and prone to accidents, as well as qualitatively appreciate the tasks they were doing with meaning, purpose, and presence.

**Meaning/Motivation >> Money**

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<sup>144</sup> Rossi, Annemarie. University of Colorado Denver and Denver Public Schools. TEDxYouth@MileHigh, *Why Aren't We Teaching You Mindfulness*. 2015

Start with the “why” instead of the “\$\$\$”. Then go further in enjoy every moment in this magical, chosen purpose and process “how”.

### **Moment > Meaning/Motivation**

So the ends never justify the means. The means are the end and goal in themselves! This within a bigger pursuit of presence and being, without missing any magic in between. Then you won't be able to say that a month, a year or even a decade passed you by, because you will have been used to savour each moment and elevate your experiential self (satisfaction = serotonin) over your usually nagging and negative narrative self. As you capture the moment (contentment), you can curate captivating, charming, caring, compassionate, loving, kind, grateful, helpful and supportive stories.

### **Positive Narratives + Active Joy = Contentment + Fulfilment**

So here are indeed a few keys to unlock the latent happiness in all of you. The search for happiness led us to different places, times, and ideas yet it all comes back to you.

## Mindful Total Eclipse

Montreal and a few lucky locations got to experience a total eclipse April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024. I was privy to witness it with a beautiful spring sunny day and happy people. I also got to interview a dozen people about their experiences afterwards. All school children had a day off and many employers allowed their personnel to revel in the “eclipse of the century”. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in various venues throughout the city and the weather was perfect. Hottest spring day with sun and no cloud in sight.

It is for many a once in a lifetime experience. The next total solar eclipse in the United States and Canada will be in 2044. But Canada is the second biggest country of the world, and the eclipse path is narrow like empathy. The next solar eclipse in Montreal will be in 2205 or in 181 years!

The last total eclipse was in 1932 and I did not meet anyone that old that day. I interviewed a man who saw one in his youth in Burkina Faso, but for most this is a once in a lifetime thing. Hundreds of thousands of people were out armed with their special solar glasses not to damage their retina enjoying the 2-hour long phenomenon of partial eclipse and the ecstatic cumulation of total darkness and an immensely beautiful glow of the sun and its surface behind the moon in less than 90 seconds of total eclipse. Myself, and everyone I interviewed, young and old, were bewildered by its beauty and its significance. It showcased our smallness, made us humble and happy. It showed how much is impermanent and out of our control. In the far future, the celestial objects will have moved to a time where there is no total solar eclipse anymore. Every second of eclipse totality had people mindful, cheerful and focused. My question is: why do we not have more moments like this collectively and individually (in our control)?

Mindfulness does not require an event of this magnitude. We can be mindful when washing the dishes, walking, working, eating, going to the bathroom, sunbathing or playing sports. We can be mindful listening to music, talking, writing, driving. Perhaps the only thing we cannot be mindful doing is sleeping. We can be mindful when we wake up, even if drowsy, we can be mindful even when angry. Mindfulness is not an obscure (like the sun that day) meditation practice, it is a healthy mental habit we can use all the time. We do not need to wait another 181 years to be mindful for 90 seconds. We can be mindful for hours every day. Happiness and mindfulness are simply beneficial choices.

**Mindfulness = Choice**

**Happiness = Choice**

Luckily there will be a total lunar eclipse March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025, yet each time we look up at the moon, the sun or the stars, we should be equally in awe and mindful of the beauty of each passing moment. I personally enjoy immensely almost all the sunrises and sunsets I can be privy to. I had a small series on YouTube Shorts entitled “another beautiful sunset”. And another one, and another one. Talking about technology, let’s look at it in the lens of mindfulness.

### Mindfulness vs. Technology

Not holding on to all the external and internal stressors, resentment, accumulated anxiety, and unforgiven events. We should not use our phones to try to alleviate our loneliness and numbing us.

One of the common modern addictions (by design) is to our smart phones and social media. The average person picks up their phone over 100-150 times a day! The average businessperson receives 100-150 emails a day. How can we be mindful in that context?

5 things to be more connected to life and less disconnected (connected online)

1. Remove addictive apps from your phone (I never registered to Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok...)
2. Remove all notifications from your phone
3. Check your work emails at 3 to 4 specific times a day (I was doing this way before Tim Ferris’ 4-Hour Workweek)
4. Put your phone away from you at home for specific hours (or lock it in a time-restricted jar if your will is weak)
5. Leave your phone at home (or in your car or turn it off) more often when you go out
6. Play videogames / watch TV for education/entertainment with purpose and with specific time limits

In 2023, I lost my phone at the end of the world. I highly recommend it! It fell out of my pocket in a car when my friend Gaston from Ushuaia, Argentina brought me to the airport. I was so present and mindful of the moment and thanked (gratitude) him, his wife and young son for their kindness and hospitality as I gave them hugs goodbye that I was not mindful about my smartphone! I didn’t react overly anxious or stressed in the airport and said to myself “it is just a phone”, being very conscious that to most their phone nowadays is their lifeline, and they can hardly imagine themselves without it. I was only able to reach my friend once I was in Buenos Aires and my layover was short, so I had to fly home, 12 000 kilometers away without it. Gaston and I had to experience firsthand how inefficient Argentinian service and courier is and tried to laugh at the reality of bureaucracy and useless paperwork before we found a way to ship it with the aid of a friend of a friend who was traveling to Buenos Aires, and another friend in Buenos Aires who helped the arduous task of reconnecting me with one of my primary attention-grabbers.

My phone arrived weeks later, and I did not miss it. I was much more focused, present, and happy. Thank you again Gaston and thank you life.

My phone hiatus increased my reading focus and quantity. Moreover, it probably allowed me to write tasty, good chunks of this very book. Not saying it is a delicacy. To some its may be an acquired taste.

Moving on to the dessert, mindfulness is noticing things as they are. Be mindful of your surroundings and of your mind.

Mindfulness is one of the best mental habits one can develop. It is so easy to stray and go to bad habits, old or new of the mind. We are inundated with options of lesser value and usefulness. It is our aware compassionate core that needs to shine through all the options and distractions our modern world provides. It is easy to be happy when all is well and going our way. A person is judged by his character when things are difficult, not easy. We do not want to judge, but if we did, we would judge on one’s

capacity to take responsibility and action. On the positive side (positive narrative and awareness), with training, the difficult things become easier, and the natural state of mindfulness can be maintained. Same as with gratitude, compassion, and contentment.

It is illusionary to think we can always be in the state, yet reasonable to strive to attain and maintain it in our mundane and chaotic lives.

### Beyond Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an incredible ability to use but are there drawbacks or risk of misuse? Is there better like compassion is better than empathy?

Dr. Helene Brenner and Larry Letich argue that since mindfulness is paying focused attention to the present with the inside world (thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations) and the outside world (with our senses), seems easy enough, but with nonjudgement and awareness but is not our default state, we must acquire this skill by training. Our default state, or default mode network as we will see more in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, is endless distractions but in the inside and outside worlds.

**Trained = Mindfulness = Awareness + Nonjudgement**

**Default = Distractions = Less Mindful**

Detachment instead of attachment and reactive thinking, feeling, doing is useful. Mindfulness and nonjudgement can provide this emotional regulation like equanimity. “While mindfulness professes a non-judgmental and compassionate acceptance of emotions, it also views them as not particularly worthwhile or useful,” complains the two therapists. Dr. Brenner is a Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT) proponent and practitioner. “Focusing brings a special kind of interested and compassionate listening to our distressed inner states.” This is different than nonjudgement from mindfulness. They claim that this approach may be closer to most people’s reality who do not see themselves as stoics, equanimous or meditating monks like Mathieu Ricard. They may have a point. Many want to be in touch with their emotions and not just look at them with amusement, awkwardness, and awareness.

“What we least like about ourselves can change more easily when we listen to our troubled inner places as we would a dear friend,” they claim<sup>145</sup>. This troubled inner child and dear friend analogies are of course self-compassion techniques.

**FOT = Awareness + Self-Compassion**

“Felt sense” Is a term to describe not only emotions but vaguer body states which may be linked to the vagus nerve (see *Beyond Neurons & Hormones* for more). Focus-oriented therapy seeks to explore these “felt sense” states and try to create “felt shifts” by identifying and exiling this sensations instead of explaining them. When separated, they self-compassion process can begin and an inner relationship can communicate and nurture care, kindness, conversation and conversion. “These are bodily-felt solutions that you wouldn’t have reached by “thinking things through.” Felt shifts are completely different from consciously trying to become a “better,” less reactive person. They feel as if something disconnected within your being has been reconnected, something misaligned has come back into alignment,” concludes the focus-oriented duo.

So, we have mindfulness with compassion, nonjudgement versus self-compassion. Comprehension versus transformation. I would advance that they are all tools that can serve different purposes in different situations. Lastly, let us put back gratitude in the mix.

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<sup>145</sup> Brenner, H. & Letich, L.. Focusing: A Step Beyond Mindfulness Meditation: Focusing is a powerful method for working through our distressing emotions. Psychology Today. 2022.

## Mindfulness + Gratitude

Now we saw the benefits of mindfulness and gratitude separately, why not combine them in creative (7Cs) and interesting ways. Both require a particular attention, awareness and different viewpoint than our default brain reaction. There are so many ways we can combine mindfulness and gratitude and since we are doing something that require effort and is not default, might as well get the best bang for our mental money or cognitive currency. Here are a few examples:

### *Body scan meditation*

Body scan meditation involves slowly going the major part of your body in a still position and focusing your attention with mindfulness and nonjudgement. If there is pain or incomfort accept it. If there is none, cherish the sensation or lack of sensation for a while before moving on to the next part. This is a rather standard mindfulness practice. I encourage people who want to try it or may be doing it already to add an element of gratitude incorporated to be grateful for every part of your body that you scan. "Thank you neck for holding my head together so that I do not look like these bobblehead figurines on car dashboards bobbing and bobbing."

### *Soles of our feet practice*

Soles of our feet is an active exercise where you walk, preferably shoe and sockless and appreciate the sensation of your feet on the ground. It is better barefoot and perhaps on grass, sand or earth, but can be adapted to almost anything. As you walk, you are mindful of your feet and especially the sensations of the sole. Again, you can add a gratitude component and compliment your feet for their hard work every day.

### *Gratefulness for eyes and vision*

I'm neither a good cook or particular foodie. I have touch overexcitability and vision is likely my second most favorite sense. Gratefulness for eyes and vision is an exercise I invented to make sure to be grateful for this gift that may be taking away at all moment, suddenly or slowly. I used to have 30/20 vision, yes about average golden standard of 20/20 and now need glasses that I pretend I don't until I am asked to read menu items in a dimly lit restaurant. Vision better than taste, but I am losing one in any case. As you practice gratitude for the simple sight ability and acknowledge its fragility, you can be mindful of all the colors you see, the depth, the peripheral vision, the reflection you might have missed, the details you did not focus on. Be mindful and see the hidden beauty. I remember seeing an ugly pothole with water from fresh rain and being enthralled by it. Be grateful and mindful at the same time.

The same can be applied to out other senses. As we are more mindful and present, let us be grateful as well!

## GMC

Gratefulness is eternal thanks. Some do it praying as we will see in *Beyond Spirituality*. Compassion is savouring life, softly wishing less suffering with action or non action and no expectation. Mindfulness is being aware of all, allowing awe but also less pleasant emotions and experiences, even pain, with a nonjudgment acceptance and awareness. Not you have your GMC Sierra or Ford F-150 workhorse for your brain work. All this and no real need for breath work. Breathe, be grateful, mindful and compassionate.

Add new technology and you have a F-150 Lightning or Tesla Cybertruck. Forget to cyberpunk dystopia and forge your inner utopia



## Chapter 6: Connecting the Dots

*I haven't seen it all, but I have seen enough,  
Truly unbelievable stuff.*

— Canibus (Germaine Williams)

When in Rome do not follow the Romans. They were among other things, murders and rapists, misogynists, and slave owners. Make your own path.

### Practical Wisdom

Wisdom can come at all ages and for many reasons, yet it often comes easier when you purposely seek it with openness. As a teen, I already sought the wisdom of older people and of dead people, through writing. While becoming a role-model to ourselves and others, we can also seek wisdom, insights, advices and perspective from role-models or even every day ordinary people around us. I often sought perspective from people who had lived much more than me as much as I sought insights from geographical differences and history. People who are wise or have at least one piece of useful wisdom, awareness or knowledge come in many forms. I have sought and found some in the elderly, children, rich businessmen, professor emeritus, prostitutes, homeless beggars, struggling and successful artists alike, people living their ordinary lives and others with lavish luxury & luck, many more with all kinds of drama, trauma, tragedy, maybe comedy. I tried to learn from all, not just in the books. How we appreciate what we have, how we cope, what we do from rote or from realization. What clicks? What happens when you dare to put in in practice. Why does a decade-long homeless man who hugs me on the street and smiles seems happier than many gainly employed people going to work? He is grateful for the little he has and doesn't need or expect much. He has enough. Most minds on the other hand are somewhere else. Not present, not smiling, choosing not to connect (7Cs). On autopilot. Maybe they have excellent music on their earpieces at best. Are they connected to the world and themselves? How many minutes of the day will they be distracted from being there?

**Connection (7Cs) = No Distraction = Presence (8Ps)**

I observe. I do not judge. I hope only my observations are useful to you. If they are not, that is perfectly fine too. I am grateful you at least took the time and tried. Thank you. I see wisdom as increased awareness.

**Wisdom = Awareness = Acute Observation (Direct & Indirect) + Knowledge + Reflection**

**Practical Wisdom = Awareness + Action (or Aware Non-Action)**

### Incremental Action

Even though we can and should have goals and stretch goals, the results should not be the focus. This is trap because it involves expectations which we may have small or partial control of. Motivation is linked with dopamine molecule and circuit which we will cover more in depth in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Instead of caring so much about results or outcome, we can focus on the process and systems. This is the best to achieve repeatedly and to create and hold these habits, we need to create an identity and values around this. For instance, if you want to win 4 straight Stanley Cups like Yvon Lambert which I met in 2023 at age 72, it is not only important to have this far-off dream, but first to see yourself as a hockey player. When that is one of your key identities, it will be easier to do the habits that comes with



being a hockey player: waking up early to go to the skating ring, practicing, playing, and perfecting your skills. You must love the “grind” as much or more than the success. The success is great and often fleeting. Although it is still awesome to rock a Stanley Cup ring in your seventies, it is even better to have enjoyed all your days as a hockey player (or a lawyer, a lover, a friend, a parent, a writer, a volunteer, an engineer, etc.) than to have your happiness based on your success which you ultimately have moderate or no control over.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023, about 3000 people died in hours in the United States of America and in Turkey by man-made and natural disasters. Also from 2022 global statistics, every day, over 3000 motorists, passengers and pedestrians die worldwide of motor vehicle accidents. That is every single day and can happen to anyone, including you. Life is unpredictable and uncertain. We do not know the destination, so we better enjoy the journey with purpose. Every hour we say “yes” to something we close to possibility to say “yes” to others. When we say “no” strategically, we may open up the space for newer or better “yes”. Like 1990s R&B singer Montell Jordan, we should resoundingly sing “I Say Yes”. Victor E. Frankl’s book “Yes to Life: In Spite of Everything” is also inspiring, yet we must assuredly know what we are saying “yes” to and be willing to change it. Flexibility is not only for yoga practioners and gymnasts, but adaptability of the mind is also one of human’s mind and life in general’s greatest trait. We must continue to cultivate it by challenging ourselves, and sometimes others respectfully, constantly.

There are also some “no-proponents”, but hear them out, they may not be the “nay-sayers” that you think. As mentioned, it may be healthy to know what you want (without absolute rigidity) with an introspective why and say “no” regularly.

*“All of us regularly say yes unthinkingly, or out of vague attraction, or out of greed or vanity. Because we can’t say no—because we might miss out on something if we did<sup>146</sup>. We think “yes” will let us accomplish more, when in reality it prevents exactly what we seek. All of us waste precious life doing things we don’t like, to prove to ourselves or people we don’t respect, and to get things we don’t want.”*

-Ryan Holiday

Ryan is right of course. By “life” he means time, focus and energy and by “things” he means tangible or intangible objects or states you desire consciously or not (probably both). We may often think and embrace the “only when I have, achieve or be X (in an idealized future), will I be happy” attitude or delusion. Which means, I will never be happy that way, or only very temporarily, and is linked to the hedonic treadmill or adaptation in psychology we saw in *Chapter 4: Psychology*.

So, yes is the attitude I would suggest (accept and do not resist like the Tao), but knowing *why* (Egoless I would hope) we say yes and also why it is often perfectly okay or better to say “no”, with the right words, tone, nonverbal communication, etc.

In the constant (and only) perceived battle of “yes” and “no”, what do we know so far? Let me summarize how we may slightly be wiser together.

#### **Negative Empowerment**

- 1. No Mind = No Mental Perturbation + No (or Few) Distraction**
- 2. No Self = No Duality (Truth) + Ability to Step Out and Simply Observe (Omniscience)**
- 3. No Expectation = Pure Intention + Presence**
- 4. No Ego + No Attachment/Aversion = Humility + Universality**
- 5. No Fear + No Resistance = No Stress + No Suffering**

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<sup>146</sup> Fear of missing out (FOMO) is now actively (and successfully) being marketed in this capitalist consumerism culture in that way, so that consumers are more receptive to transient products, services or “experiences”.

6. **No Negative Narrative = No Sad Story**
7. **No Negative Reaction = Tolerance + Nonjudgment**

**Positive Empowerment**

1. **Equanimity+ & Forgiveness = Serenity + Harmony**
2. **Embrace Impermanence = Radical Acceptance + Cherishing Uncertainty**
3. **Awareness + Mindfulness + Gratitude = Joy**
4. **Awe & Wonder = Excitement + Bliss**
5. **Smile & Laugh = Lightness of Being = Optimum Body and Mind**
6. **Caring & Sharing = Kindness + Loving Kindness**
7. **Contentment, Curiosity, Creativity, Compassion, Compersion, Courage & Connection**
8. **Presence, Positivity, Purpose, Peace, Playfulness, Passion, Patience & Perseverance**

We could add “no whining allowed” (specific negative reaction) as a funny and important reminder because we know that our brains have inherent negative bias and an attachment to ego. Maintaining complain-free days, weeks and months should be as important as cultivating gratitude. They work in tandem. I always prefer a bit more positive than negative so we have more positive empowerment although they also work in intimate collaboration and cumulation. In short, be inspired by innocence and childhood with the wisdom of true Adulthood. We may find others a still sleeping, seeking and stuck in their untamed mind with many mental perturbations and distractions. Do not just them. Treat them kindly, like lost children. You do not even have to show them the way. Lead by example. Smile and laugh at everything. They may join you or find you unbearably unknowing, because you are busting their ego bubble of self-importance, while you can easily laugh at yourself in any circumstance at at laugh itself, this silly but beautiful and wondrous game.

These 15 concepts and practical tools are by no mean “commandments”, or rigid rules. They represent the causal reality as has been observed. Feel free to adjust, adopt as you see fit and feel free to let me know what works and doesn’t so we can refine together. I do not consider myself any cleverer than anyone, and feel I am only a vehicle to share what I have learned so far. I have no attachment to any of this! I am just playing the game like you. We will look at different, additional and other rules of life from psychology, spirituality, and religion critically in *Beyond Spiritually*.

Additionally, we will dig deeper into the

**7Cs: Contentment, Curiosity, Creativity, Compassion, Compersion, Courage and Connection**

We will focus on compassion in *Beyond Spiritually* and focus on compersion and connection in *Beyond Sex*. We will look at relationships and sexuality specifically to help couples navigate the ins and outs of a shared lives in whatever capacity through impermanence and hopefully not impatience. The Seven Seas (7Cs) will be complemented by the 11Cs, including communication, care and cherishing. We will see the Four Aces (4As) in the following *Happiness Series* book, and eventually the 9As and 12Es.

I strongly suggest you not try to apply all the 15 concepts or “commandments” at once. Pick a few (remember two substantial changes at a time) that you value and understand well, or oppositely that you maybe understand less and want to explore (12Es). Play with them, be curious, have fun with them and apply them in unexpected ways. The more you play with these concepts in your daily life and situations, the more they will be clearer, and the pieces of the puzzle may start to fit. If they don’t fit, don’t worry, don’t force them, just find other pieces for now or leave them blank. Try to be coherent and holistic. Caution: do not put anything there out of habit. Try to build from scratch. You may need much deconstruction from our commonly held and your specific delusions than you think. it is a moving puzzle, and it is impermanent. Constant change is the game. Yes, what a lovely game.

Action is incremental, but it aggregates. Don't only stay in your thoughts, get out of them and start to see the world differently, your "self", your actions and thoughts differently. Act knowing old habits will creep in. See them at first. Be aware and alert. Catch yourself complaining. Give yourself a "complain-free" week challenge or start with a day. Watch your ego and attachments play tricks on you. Observe your lack of control and clinging insistence instance, instead of curious acceptance. Stop your worries and fear on their track and feel your body tension relax and your mind mellow out. Breathe in and out the fresh air, or find a previously annoying noise, smell, sight, or chore interesting. See the beauty in between and not just at your goal or temporary destination. Realize death is the destination, but not to be feared. Live your life carefree, but not careless, have intention and presence as your purpose. Pursue. Always further in your refinement, without letting your deepening understanding be undue pride and ego. Humility in all. Sharing is all you can do. Love is even superfluous. It is the opposite of hate like desire is to aversion. Do not let these distract you or trap you. Mind games generate drama. Life is already a pleasant one, do not create unnecessary mental harm. Simplify. Keep the essential. It is always enough whatever it is. Nothing can scare or stop you now. Death and loss are expected so no surprise. Embrace evanescence. Do not expect anything more. Goals are only directions. Destination uncertain. Enjoy each step of the journey with wonder and irony. No anger, agony, anguish, despair, resentment, grief, fear, jealousy. They are mental prisons. At first, they still surprise you, then more and more you see them coming. They are not welcome. Eventually they stop coming all together. You have found better company. Equanimity at the minimum. Enjoyment of each moment at best until you peacefully rest. Enough. Content. Lightly wake up. Share what you got. Only time. Only here and now. Smile all the while. Nourish and nurture your curiosity and compersion. Life is complex when you are in it, but simple and surprising from no self. Know yourself, then be ready to leave your illusions. There is no better or worse, there just is. Keep a few attachments if you must but regard them with loving suspicion. Not mistrust. Just gratitude they are still here!

Change is sometimes sudden, yet often incremental. Man's achievements often take years and decades. As we may sometimes be anxious looking at the uncertainty of a far-off future, we can be grounded on what we do today or this moment. Alcoholic Anonymous prone to focus sobriety one day and a time. A marathon is raced one foot after the other. A book is written one word after another, with many alterations. A degree is a cumulations of many years of studying, learning, preparing, presenting. Yet again, if you are studying for the degree and not the joy of learning, you can imagine it will be bleak years. Each moment counts and hopefully in thoughts, words and actions we can be, even slightly. "better" than yesterday. Small, micro-actions accumulate. If you are 1% better each day you will be 37 times better by the end of the year, explains James Clear. Some days can be 0.5 or 2% and many days can unfortunately be negative. Yet we wake up every day and try again. We are armed with knowledge, wisdom, will and more than capable body, mind, and no-mind. Trust yourself and life. Discipline until it becomes easy and second nature. I have full trust in you if that helps.

Forget the fantasy of be being special and able to do anything you put your mind to. Just do what you can, with the best of your knowledge and ability. Don't put yourself down or sell yourself short either. You have God-like powers when it comes to your internal world. Now, you just need to fight your mind, brain and biology. No small challenge. Know your friends and enemies within, not just in the outer world. Define them, don't lie to yourself (we are expert at that in so many levels), and put on a fair effort. Make surer to enjoy the challenge. That's part of the fun... or even the fun part.

When you have destroyed and reconstructed your inner world, built a rock, an impenetrable castle, the outer circumstance of the world matter little. My CEO friend who, like most executives, loves

short summaries, tried to summarize these thoughts in one sentence. She came up with: “Humble yourself until nothing more in this world has the power to devalue you.” I would enhance it as follows:

**“Humble yourself, deconstruct even the “self” until no one, no event or nothing has the power to detract you from the inherit joy of being.”**

### Convergence and Transdisciplinary Transcendence.

My Turkish friend Zeynep is a university teacher and expert in transdisciplinary. She taught me a thing or two about the difference between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary.

Multidisciplinary is additive: one discipline + another.

Interdisciplinary is interactive and integrated.

Transdisciplinary is holistic and may apply one disciplines paradigm to a new one for new questions and different perspectives.

University of Guelph professor, Dan Gillis writes: “transcending disciplinary boundaries is becoming increasingly important for devising solutions to the world’s most pressing issues” and yet “undergraduates lack an in-program, experiential, transdisciplinary learning opportunity.”<sup>147</sup> This constitutes an issue way beyond the classroom and university bench, although transdisciplinary learning has increased in academia with transdisciplinary programs in engineering and integrated programs in neuroscience, especially in Canada. The pressing fact is that knowledge between fields even less connected (degrees of separation) is necessary to advance further, and that includes the quintessential quest for happiness. As Dr. Joshua Bengio begs data scientists of the future to start learning other specific fields in a conference I attended, I must suggest that everyone open their viewpoints, not only for eclectic erudition but rather for enlightenment and deep insight.

That is one of the reasons I started writing this book series and in the next book, *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*, we will try to bring neuroscience advancements into our discussion about philosophy and psychology we began here together.

### Alignment

Alignment is the key to avoiding discomfort. In business, I have often helped companies align their vision, resources (financials, materials and human) with their objectives, network, client realities, external factors (economy, competition, culture, geopolitics, etc.) and processes to achieve coherence and desired results. A sales team which compensation structure is not in alignment with the company objectives or clients benefits will wreak havoc to the company turnover and client’s retention rates. Doing my MBA, I also started to see myself and ourselves as a business: finance, HR, operations, communication/marketing, sales (social and self-motivation), accounting (assets and liabilities!), etc. To be the best version of ourselves, we need to be in alignment. With our resources (health, people, financial, non-financial) and goals, but must importantly with our thoughts, words (as we will see in *Beyond Spirituality*), actions.

I appreciate your patience going through some dense philosophy and pretty intense psychology based on neuroscience. Some of the understandings I gained thinking about and writing this book can be summarized with easier common-sense sentences. Let’s try:

1. Don’t take things or people for given, nor take them personally.
2. Ask to be forgiven, accept being forgotten.

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<sup>147</sup> Gillis, Dan. *Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research and Education in Canada: A Review and Suggested Framework*. 2017

3. Forgive easily, even yourself.
4. Say sorry for perceived errors and sincere thanks for everything.

## Journey

This book was also a journey for me. Life is in fact only this, a beautiful journey. The destination is death, so we only have this journey. Researching and writing these chapters have made my journey fruitful and transformative. I can now revise the two pillars of my personal perspective on the purpose of life (in the preface) which were:

- 1) To be happy
- 2) To make people around me happy

With deeper reflection these are outcomes and not journeys. Ultimately, I have less control on people's happiness than I thought or even want to think. Also, my happiness is also in flux and elusive. I can better refine my new purpose in life to:

- 1) Love life and be present
- 2) Love myself while constantly learning/evolving
- 3) Loving kindness to others and sincere compassion for all

The first one is the most important and answers the question simply and succinctly. What is the purpose of life: to live. To celebrate and revel in life for its own sake. To savour existence unadulterated by any easy misconception or expectation.

The second is a better version of continuously trying, fighting to make myself happy, This one evokes self-compassion without ego, arrogance, or judgment. Acceptance does not mean complaisance so there is always a need for periodic reflection, refinement and sometimes refocus or redefinition of our ideas, values, actions, and habits.

The final purpose is to share this love for life and compassion for ourselves to others. This extends to loved ones, stakeholders, strangers and even "enemies" or people who "wronged us". Focusing on others lessen our egos. We are no better, nor worse than anyone. As we do not judge ourselves, we cannot judge others either. The last two purposes are also in balance based on the amount of energy, emotion and empathy we can muster at any given moment. This self-awareness can help us calibrate and not derail by being either too selfless or too selfish. This can lead to our detriment or the detriment of others. One interesting exercise is the compassionate breathing or "breathe in, breathe out" meditation exercise that starts with a balance of:

- 1) Breathe in for me, breathe out for other; or
- 2) One full breath for me, one full breath for other

Based on what you feel you need or can give at the present, you can change the balance to give yourself or other more breaths. Example: one breath for me, three breaths for others. You can also specify if you want specific people for other(s). Example: two breaths for me, one breath for my spouse, one breath for my boss. You can also use this meditation mentally without pausing to actually breathe slowly, but simply acknowledging the need to always think of others and yourself and to figure out the right balance you need in the now.

As for judgement and blame, I am reminded of Epictetus who states in *The Manual* transcribed by Arrian: "It is the part of an uneducated person to blame others where he himself fares ill; to blame himself is the part of one whose education has begun; to blame neither another nor his own self is the part of one whose education is already complete." As translated by W.A. Oldfather in 1925's edition. Anthony Long's 2018 translation is even more powerful in *How to Be Free: An Ancient Guide to the Stoic Life*:

“Uneducated people blame others when they are doing badly.

Those whose education is on their way, blame themselves.

But a fully educated person blames no one, neither himself nor anyone else. “

This also comes back to the stoic idea and Nietzschean ideal of *Amor Fati*, or “love fate”, where one is encouraged to perceive every twist of fate, every event or moment, regardless of our initial judgement of “good”, “bad” or even “ugly”, as something to be embraced and cherished, not avoided or resented.

## Parting Words

We now know the importance of words, so let us conclude with the closest approximation of understanding humbly.

Life is a game. It is not your life, and nothing is yours, not even your sense of self (ego). Your choices are in effect not yours either, but you can pretend they are in order to play the game.

The game is rigged, and you cannot really do anything to change, confront, avoid or resist it in any significant way, even though your brain and biology tell you otherwise. Assuming you have a choice in the fork of the road (amusement ride), you can attempt to

1. Leave the game all together

- a) Physically by committing suicide (assisted or not)—which I do not recommend

You will then find out if there is another game, i.e. an afterlife (unlikely) or more likely nothingness (like before birth) or oneness which is arguably the same, but perhaps leaves room for interpretation. This may be an instance where words and imagery fail, and we have to experience it. People who choose this normally cannot find peace, stillness and quietude in this world so seek to make the sometimes-surprising game stop, like someone who cannot bare to watch a horror movie, full of startling shocks, designed to scare you. But if the horror is an illusion, why not sit back with popcorn and watch? Fear is no longer useful. “Courage” becomes effortless and irrelevant when there is nothing to fear.

*Note: Smaller forms of self-harm and slow deaths also exist if we look at this holistically. We can call it sabotaging the game to lose/leave early or weaken our character, but as long as do not exit the game, we are “still in the game”! Remember we cannot unrig it.*

- b) “Spiritually” by finding Non-Duality and No-Self

This is perhaps a better (Ego) death, although the process may be grueling and requires steadfast erasing of the self you started creating even in your mother’s womb and have been actively maintain with all you might for decades. The interesting news is it seems that people who have achieved this are admittedly disconnected to the (sleeping) people who play the game with self-importance, drama and (inner and outer) conflicts, but may be able to step back in the game as aware and lucid.

2. Play the game—until your physical form or representation (avatar) dies

- a) Pretending to varying degree it is serious business and worth all the agony and suffering you put yourself through voluntarily

- b) Knowing full well and with absolute certainty it’s a game

In that case, you can enjoy the show simply and, if you wish, study some rules of the game and interact with it for your enjoyment

Remember in any case it is a game, so find humour, good humour, grace, play and patience, as you encounter different levels of excitement, enlightenment, ecstasy, and excess. Do not take yourself or it too seriously. *Après tout, c'est la vie!*

Be present and purposeful as much as you can and when you cannot, be absent, but wide awake, aware, accepting, at peace and giddy with genuine curiosity. What's next? Bring it on! Further.

## Perfect Days

I mentioned the movie *Perfect Days* in *Chapter 3: Philosophy* and have adapted it as a sort of mantra. I say to myself every day at the start, during and as the day ends: "Another Perfect Day." These simple three words help me and a few friends who agreed and tried to see gratitude in everything. It directly and powerfully helps both your experiential and narrative self to see the positive and even the hidden perfection in all that comes about.

### **Perfect Days = Everything is Perfect = Equanimity++**

If you cannot see the perfection in every moment and still struggle to judge this or that thing as better or worse, challenge yourself to see one single day as perfect as a whole, or at least as more positive than negative. Small steps. Remember to combat vehemently your negativity bias.

### **Negativity is the Enemy (yes, really!)**

My son invented a system to rate the perception of each day on our family calendar. A simple rating out of ten we use to tally before he went to sleep. It was a fun exercise we did for almost a year and allowed us to see how each family member felt, how we could help the others have a better day in many ways, and keep each of us accountable for our own happiness. It allowed empathy and more importantly rational compassion with communication and often humour. I can say that most of my days were 8 and 9s and occasionally a rarer 10. My son as well and his mother a little less on average, yet the family was averaging above 8 which is great. Writing this book has challenged me to, retroactively and proactively, proclaim all these days as perfect. Yes, all 10s!

### **Narrative Self = Ego + Creativity + Negativity Bias**

To combat our negativity bias and our identification to our ego, the only thing we have to tip the balance is our crucial creativity (7Cs) and that is how we can use our narrative self to tell better, more beautiful stories that are as true and become truer than the negative ones in our mind, awareness and subjective reality.

Barney Stinson in the popular comedy TV show *How I Met Your Mother* had a concept of a "perfect week" being having sex with seven different women in a week. Although admittedly not impossible, and I will not put any judgement on this hedonistic endeavour, it may be difficult to achieve perfect weeks often or to most ever. With my strategy, it is quite easy to achieve perfect moments, matter of fact to reach perfect days, easy to have perfect weeks, still simple to have perfect months, achievable to have perfect years and conceptually trivial to see your entire existence and decades of life as perfect. One day at a time, all days at once. Oneness. Perfection.

If you were looking for a simple short cut and secret to happiness at the end of this book, this is it. See every moment, day, your unfolding life, and that of others as perfect. If you think that is impossible, I can, and believe me I am not special or perfect. Oh, wait, with all humility and egolessness, I am perfect. And so are you! It does not mean you and I should not improve on our awareness, actions, thoughts and intentions. It just means that our intention to improve does not make our current state any less perfect.

In practice, my simple suggestion for perfect days:

1. Be grateful every time you wake up. To help you, always remember you could be dead and life is an opportunity to play and just be. Cherish with sincere intention the (weird and wonderful) experience to be alive.
  2. Encourage yourself to have another perfect day.
  3. Remind yourself you are having a perfect day throughout the day (even and especially when you don't believe it).
  4. Before you go to sleep, purge any negativity by transforming it to a perfection narrative.
- This is the highest level of "perfectionism". That is how you make everything perfect!

#### **Perfection = Awareness that Everything is Already Perfect**

This will become a powerful conscious and unconscious awareness: another perfect day. Think it and even say it to yourself and others. When others challenge you, just say "it is perfect to me." Do not only mumble it or say it without conviction. Smile with confidence. See the irony, the beauty, the unexpected and the familiar as a perfectly enthralling story that predates and will outlive you, but that you are an intricate and interesting part of. Be creative, think of all the things it took for you to be here right now and experience this. Be grateful (and no spiteful) for all these things. For your many ancestors random or arranged sexual encounters; for the inventors, engineers and construction workers who build many of the things you take for granted daily; for the artists, musicians, poets and writers who searched beauty and meaning; for the people who made your life difficult to test your patience, resilience and compassion; for the events that shaped this wonderful world; for the illnesses and deaths who remind us of the preciousness of every moment.

I absolutely adore this song by Congolese-Canadian singer Corneille called *Parce qu'on vient de loin*. The charming chorus chants that "We live each day like it's our last" and explains that you would do the same thing if you knew how many times death passed you by. Embrace impermanence. Cherish every moment. The unifying equation is thus:

#### **EMC = Every Moment Counts**

Eternity in a moment. Perfection in a day. A perfect day is manageable and meaningful and does not require precious or future days to be perfect (yet). One day at a time with augmented awareness and contentment (7Cs) will allow you to eventually have the capacity to see all as perfect.

If you are like my son, write it down in a journal or calendar. Instead of counting your calories, your steps, your sex or your money, count how many perfect days you can have in a month. I am at 32. Then try how many in a year... compare months, years and improve (even though you are perfect and all is perfect). Then, each period, check your calendar and journal carefully when your narrative self is trying to trick you again to say that everything is mostly negative. Count the perfect days and tilt the balance of your lying self with a smile. Now you have proof for yourself! Better proof than your photos and posts on social media. Perfect days. There is nothing better than that.

If you're not into French music or Japanese cinema, I can also point you to the 2012 song by Owl City and Canadian singer Carly Rae Jepsen called "Good Time". The lyrics very simply and succinctly say and repeat 24 times in a 3 minute and a half the upbeat temp: "It's always a good time." Play that 24 hours a day if you are not having perfect days. We will also see the many added benefits of music to the brain in *Beyond Neurons & Hormones*. Happier by the minute, happier by the music.

Using our powerful narrative self, we can accumulate curiosity, compassion, creativity, wonder and gratitude every day instead of being upset and expressing it in words and actions, or holding it in resentment and regret.



Maya Angelou adds awe, humor, and curiosity (7Cs) when she says: “This is a wonderful day. I have never seen this one before.” And Jed McKenna says with implacable reason: “I do not and cannot share the view that something is wrong and needs fixing. No matter how absolutely certain someone might be that something is wrong, and no matter how terribly wrong it may appear, I am absolutely, unshakably certain it is not. I am incapable of perceiving error. I reside in a perfect universe where nothing can ever be wrong. We all do, I just happen to know it.” All perfect days.

### A Note on Fear and Ego

This book talks about fear and ego. We are definitely happier without them. Still, we cannot pretend to be completely ride of them. In a more nuanced view, we can see both with awareness and continually try to transcend them. With fear we can use courage (7Cs). We can get to know and understand our fears and tell each other better stories to enable growth and advancement in face of adversity and uncertainty. In *Beyond Spirituality* we will dig deeper into human fundamental fears. That is the fears underlying most other fears. We can act not blindly with no fear but rather with awareness and act despite of our fears. We can in essence tame them.

As for ego, we can first make sure to never identify with again and identify with oneness if we must identify with anything. If we take a needed distance with the ego, we can then rebuild a relationship with it where we do not serve the ego but it can serve us. It can be a support system to the story of our authentic self we tell ourselves. Again, positive stories for perfect perspective and constant contentment (7Cs).

### 12-Year-Old Test

I wrote in my parting words section the word “decades” as in more than one, as I assumed extremely few teenagers could understand this or would have this book in their hands to begin with. To challenge my assumptions (challenge everything, remember, but don’t resist), I had my twelve-year-old, at the time, son read it and explain it to me to make sure it was as clear and digestible as can be (at least for an “averagely open and intelligent adult). My son found the game and horror movie analogies strong and simple. He then explained the gist of it all in his own analogy.

“It is like you wake up in the middle of the night and you see everyone else sleeping. You see incredible auroras in the night sky. After enjoying their intensity, colours, and beauty, you decide to try to wake up people so they can also see, but they are fast asleep and cannot (or do not want) to wake up. No matter, you can still enjoy the auroras and smile. Let them sleep if they want. This is mega cool!”

My son sees zombies and magical auroras.

I think he is already more awake and ready for the world than me.

And to clarify, he is not *my* son, but I love him.

## Chapter 7: A Fishing Story

*“Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”*

-Human Proverb

I finally taught my son how to fish last year. In reality, I never caught a fish in my life, so I got a friend of mine to teach him how to fish. After hours of fishing and enjoying the journey more than the destination, we gave up and came back to shore. What is the sport of fishing (as opposed to often noble and skilled fishermen who practice the art for their livelihood), but a practice in patience and enjoying the moment and unpredictability of life? Sure, it can also be social, an afternoon spent with your perhaps drinking buddies. It can also be solitary and meditative.

In our case it was social and meditative. We were happy coming home with no fish. Late in the day, my son decided he wanted to fish again and against all odds, he caught his first fish. My friend showed him how to kill it as kindly as possible, clean it and then cook it. It was an important experience for both him and I, and I hope for my friend as well. The fact that my son now knows how to fish will likely not allow him to survive in the wild or to feed his own eventual family, but it was the first time that he fed me and three of my friends (two African sisters were with us as well). This is the fishing story which leads to the teaching story.

For over a decade now, I never taught my son how to fish. Instead, I taught him how to think. Most importantly I taught him to challenge me and to not be afraid to think different. To challenge his parents, his teachers, and the world. Not for the sake of being rebellious or confrontational, but to be curious and see where that leads. To not take things for granted, like life itself, and be grateful. I taught him to share and teach me. We learned together about the optimum challenge zone, versus safety and overwhelm zones. He started to teach Stoicism to his friends and challenge his mother and me to be happier, better listeners, more grateful, more empathic, complaint-free and solution-seekers.

I also taught him about addiction, about group thinking, about jealousy (and compersion<sup>148</sup>) and about all the ways our brain, emotions and survival short-cuts may lead us to think wrongly. I taught him then how *not to think*. Or how to not just stop at the rational or irrational thinking our brain is often doing for us, without us noticing. How to deconstruct fully before building a foundation, and how periodically you must dig even deeper (disregarding your impermanent attachments) to build stronger foundations.

He is not my son, as you know, but he may be the first recipient of what I had to learn the hard way (the best or only way?) before being able to share.

Sharing is caring, I say out loud and smile genuinely.

I can't seem to get this grin of my aging, stupid face. Seriously?

No, not that serious at all, but oh so wonderful.

Every Day is April Fools Day, even if I am the only smiling fool.

Don't take it personally, never take yourself seriously, but others only slightly more.

*“The person who writes for fools is always sure of a large audience.”*

— Arthur Schopenhauer

Large or small, I wrote for fools who hopefully acknowledge they are fools; the clueless fools can remain asleep and angry as long as they want. I want or am in want of nothing. My slim hope is that this book has helped mainly in the deconstructing aspect of your delusions. This deconstructing is never done

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<sup>148</sup> More on compersion in *Beyond Sex*

and a pledge to continue re-examining, reframing, recalibrating, and reaffirming yourself in this incredible oneness we are privy to be aware of, is all I hope a few of you can incorporate in your daily lives.

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:*

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

— Rudyard Kipling, 'Brother Square-Toes'—Rewards and Fairies (1910)<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> A Choice of Kipling's Verse (1943)

## Negative Empowerment

- ☛ No Mind = No Mental Perturbation + No (or Few) Distraction
- ☛ No Expectation = Pure Intention + Assured Satisfaction
- ☛ No Fear + No Resistance = No Stress + No Suffering
- ☛ No Attachment/Aversion + No Ego = Humility + Freedom
- ☛ No Self = No Duality (Truth) + Ability to Step Out and Simply Observe (Omniscience)
- ☛ No Negative Narrative
- ☛ No Negative Reaction (Contempt, Complain, Blame, Shame, Anger/Hate/Resentment, Jealousy, Judgement, Defensiveness, Disgust, Despair, Frustration, Avoidance, etc.)

## Positive Empowerment

- ☛ [Equanimity+] + Forgiveness (Sincere, Simple & Complete)
- ☛ Embrace Impermanence = Radical Acceptance + Cherishing Uncertainty
- ☛ Awareness + Mindfulness = Gratitude + Joy
- ☛ Awe & Wonder
- ☛ Smile & Laugh = Lightness of Being = Optimum Body and Mind
- ☛ Caring & Sharing = Kindness + Loving-Kindness
- ☛ Contentment, Curiosity, Creativity, Compassion, Compersion, Courage & Connection
- ☛ Presence, Positivity, Purpose, Peace, Playfulness, Passion, Patience & Perseverance

### **Negative Empowerment**

- 1. No Mind = Minimum Mental Perturbation**
- 2. No Self = Oneness = Universal Understanding**
- 3. No Expectation = Pure Intention + Assured Satisfaction**
- 4. No Ego + No Attachment/Aversion = Humility + Freedom**
- 5. No Fear + No Resistance = No Stress + No Suffering**
- 6. No Negative Narrative = No Sad Story**
- 7. No Negative Reaction (Contempt, Complain, Blame, Shame, Anger/Hate/Resentment, Jealousy, Judgement, Defensiveness, Disgust, Despair, Frustration, Avoidance, etc.)**

### **Positive Empowerment**

- 1. Equanimity + Forgiveness = Serenity + Tolerance + Harmony**
- 2. Embrace Impermanence = Radical Acceptance + Cherishing Uncertainty**
- 3. Awareness + Appreciation/Gratitude + Mindfulness = Joy**
- 4. Awe & Wonder = Excitement + Elevation**
- 5. Smiling & Laughter = Lightness of Being = Optimum Body and Mind**
- 6. Caring & Sharing = Kindness + Loving-Kindness**
- 7. Contentment, Curiosity, Creativity, Compassion, Compersion, Courage & Connection**
- 8. Presence, Positivity, Purpose, Peace, Playfulness, Passion, Patience & Perseverance**

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Sincerely,

Christian



# Beyond Happy:

## Science and Philosophy-Backed Formulas for Perfect Days

Enough books about happiness, mindfulness, and the rest already! Another new one claims to have the secret(s) to happiness?

First it wasn't out of the blue. This is **decades of research** with philosophical texts of thousands of years to the present coupled with the very latest scientific advancements and the adventures of **150 countries** with transcending travel tales.

Second, Christian **redefines and refines happiness** in this book so it may not even be what you have in mind. This is no simple recycling but **brand-new insights**.

Third, don't judge a book by its (back) cover. Dig in and find out for yourself.

Fourth, Christian **simplifies difficult concepts with stories and formulas**, yet this book is complete with **examples & explanations**. This should be a fun journey. If you want an **easier life after reading**, you picked the right book.

Fifth, learn how to **seek rejection** and **challenge** with **curiosity**, **creativity** and **resilience**.

Sixth, build an intuitive sixth sense to have **happiness on autopilot** or **habitual happiness**.

Seventh, find out about the **7Cs** and **8Ps** for **mental awareness and prosperity**.

Eighth, explore the useful **5 Pillars of Philosophy**.

Ninth, fight your **negativity bias** with the right tools.

Tenth, learn about **sharing**, **space**, **time**, **trust**, **touch** and more in the quest to relentlessly travel the world with Christian.

Eleventh, cultivate **awe** and **wonder** in your daily life and find perfection everywhere.