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The Overall Process of Improving Your Social Skills

As you work to improve your social skills, you must approach the process in the right way. Many people struggle to improve their social skills not because they're up against impossible challenges, but because they approach the task from the wrong angle and get unnecessarily discouraged. With the right mind-set, expectations, and approach to improving, you'll make more progress. This chapter covers some things you should know before working on your issues. Chapter 2 troubleshoots some common questions and concerns people have about improving their social skills.

Figuring out which skills and traits to work on and which to leave alone

As the Introduction said, you don't need to change everything about yourself to do better socially. Of course, you'll want to address clear-cut problems that most people would be happy to be rid of—shyness and anxiety, low self-confidence, unpolished conversation skills, and lack of knowledge about how to make friends.

The traits listed below can also cause social problems. They're all perfectly valid variations from the norm that you shouldn't have to change. However, they can lead to practical social inconveniences when either people misunderstand and look down on the traits, or the traits cause you to have competing needs.

Acceptable, though sometimes impractical, social differences

- Having an introverted personality
- Liking to spend a lot of time alone
- Not needing or wanting a ton of friends
- Being selective when choosing who you want to be friends with
- Preferring to socialize for shorter periods of time, and then head home to relax and recharge your batteries; having a tendency to get drained by socializing
- Being into low-key types of socializing and choosing to avoid rowdy parties or getting drunk
- Preferring to hang back and listen more in conversations, rather than talking a lot and trying to hold the spotlight
- Not having a bubbly, expressive, excitable personality
- Being able to take or leave aspects of socializing, like making chitchat with strangers waiting in a line with you
- Preferring your conversations to have lots of substance
- Being into “uncool,” non-mainstream hobbies
- Not caring about seemingly popular interests like team sports or reality TV
- Living an alternative lifestyle or being part of a non-mainstream scene or subculture
- Having beliefs and values that differ from the mainstream
- Having a more quirky personality

As examples, having non-mainstream hobbies may hinder you if they cause your peers to stereotype you and write you off without giving you a chance. Liking to spend time alone may cause a conflict in your social goals. Part of you may want to go out more to make new friends, but your urge to hang out by yourself may get in the way.

You'll have to decide for yourself how to approach your acceptable differences in light of your social goals. Wherever possible, you should be true to yourself and try to find your niche, which includes looking for friends who get you and like you for who you are.

No one is socially perfect. As long as they bring enough positives to the table, they can still get by. If you read a piece of advice in this book you aren't crazy about following, ask yourself, "Would it make me happier on the whole to skip this suggestion? Could I handle the consequences of not following it?" For example, maybe you're at peace with having a blunter communication style and can live with the fact that it will occasionally put some people off. Maybe you'll even decide you're okay with aspects of your being mildly shy, even if it is technically a "problem." Be your own judge of what works for you.

At times you may weigh the pros and cons of a situation and find it suits you to go along with certain social conventions. For example, in your perfect world you'd never devote a second of thought to fashion, but you realize other people value it and so learn to dress a little better. Or you like spending a lot of time alone, but you push yourself to be around people slightly more than you'd prefer so you have enough time to practice your social skills and be with your friends.

You'll have to decide for yourself where you are and aren't willing to compromise. Changing isn't an option if something violates your deepest values or you outright dislike it. The pragmatic approach can work if you feel indifferent toward something and it doesn't take that much effort to go along with it. However, there are always going to be parts of the social world, where even if you realize intellectually it would be practical to go along with them, you're just not going to be able to play along. Most people aren't going to give up their religious or political views to fit in. As a lighter example, some men don't care about sports, but know they'd have an easier

time relating to other guys if they were into them. Some never come to love sports, but can make themselves follow just enough news about game results and trades to grease their conversations. Others can't bring themselves to do even that, and they're fine living with the minor hassles that causes.

Keep an open mind

Although you don't need to completely change or sell yourself out to do better socially, you should try to keep an open mind. Be open to new experiences and the possibility that one day you may develop traits or come to appreciate things you never thought you'd enjoy. People change throughout their lives. It's important to be true to yourself, but not to the point where you become locked in place and dismiss anything new with "No, that's not who I am." Say a friend invites you to an introductory salsa class, and you've never done much dancing. Even if you sense it's not something you'd get a lot out of, it's too rigid to blindly say, "No, that's not me! I don't like dancing and never will!" You don't have to mindlessly try everything everyone suggests, but you never know—you may actually love partner dancing and just not realize it yet.

Realizing your interpersonal skills don't have to be flawless to have a satisfying social life

Countless people in the world have fun social lives even though they're a bit shy and insecure, or they sometimes stumble in their conversations, or

they don't have a ton of fascinating hobbies, or they have a few irksome personality quirks. Even charismatic people make bad jokes or have their invites turned down. You don't need to perfectly execute every skill in this book 100 percent of the time, and you don't have to get every last person on the planet to like you. You just need to be good enough to get by and have friends who accept you for who you are. You don't need all of your interactions to go flawlessly. You just need enough of them to go well that you can meet your social goals (if you invite ten people to hang out and only three accept, but they go on to become your good friends, that's a win).

Practicing your social skills to improve them

Social skills are skills like any other. Reading advice can give you an idea of what you need to work on and help the learning process go more smoothly, but in the end you have to practice to really get things down. You've probably socialized for fewer overall hours than many of your peers, and you have to put in the time to catch up.

That seems obvious, but when it comes to interpersonal skills, some people think they can be gained all at once through the right trick, insight, psychology "hack," or confidence booster. They likely think that because social skills are non-physical and mundane. People instinctively understand it takes time to learn complex physical abilities like skiing or drawing. However, when it comes to socializing, their thought process is, "It's just talking. I already know how to do that. So just give me some secret super-effective conversation formulas, and I'll be off to the races."

Additionally, most people have found that navigating a social situation was easier when they were temporarily more confident than usual. So they figure there must be a way to be extra-confident all the time. However, although you can fleetingly become unusually self-assured, there's no way to call that feeling up on command or lock it in place for life. There really

are no shortcuts. If there were, they'd be common knowledge, and this book wouldn't be needed.

Knowing what are you working on when you practice your social skills

As you practice socializing, you'll develop the following overall abilities. In some interactions, you'll draw on only a few of them, while other interactions will require you to juggle many at a time.

1) Your ability to think on your feet. When it's your turn to say something, you can't take forever to come up with your response. Also, aside from the relatively predictable first minute or two, interactions can quickly go in countless directions. It's unfeasible to try to plan out everything you're going to say ahead of time or map out how to handle every scenario in advance. The best you can do is learn some general guidelines and then sharpen your ability to improvise.

2) Your ability to multitask. When you're interacting with someone, you have to continually attend to several things at once. The other person is constantly sending signals through their words, actions, and nonverbal communication; you have to take it in, evaluate it, and decide on the fly how to act on your conclusions ("They just said they're not familiar with cycling. I'll have to adjust how I tell my anecdote."). At the same time, you have to manage the signals you're sending ("I'm curious about what time it is, but I won't check my watch now because it may make me look like I'm not interested in their story."). As you get better at socializing, taking in all of that information and deciding what to do with it starts to feel less overwhelming.

3) Your proficiency in a variety of concrete subskills like listening, asserting yourself, or phrasing an invitation. Like with any skill, at first you'll be clumsy and exaggerated when you listen actively, assert yourself, or extend an invitation, but in time you'll develop a defter touch and be able

to calibrate your behavior to the situation at hand. For example, when you're first getting the hang of listening skills, you may sometimes come across as an over-the-top therapist. With more practice, you'll be able to show you care and that you're paying attention in a more subtle way.

4) Your comfort level with various subskills, like making eye contact or starting conversations. Some subskills, like making eye contact or initiating a conversation, will make you feel nervous or unnatural at first, but the more you do them, the more normal they'll feel.

5) Your general knowledge of people, what makes them tick, and how they tend to react to various things. Every person is different, but with enough social experience, you'll start to notice broad patterns you can act on. For example, you may notice that people who are into a certain hobby also tend to share the same political beliefs and conversation style, and you can adjust accordingly.

6) Your knowledge of various social situations and how to navigate them. You can learn this through firsthand experience or by observing other people who are more socially experienced than you. It's possible to find advice on common scenarios, like how to approach people at a party or turn down an unreasonable request, but in your day-to-day life, you'll come across other scenarios that are too rare and esoteric to end up in any book. When you come across these novel situations, you may not always handle them perfectly, but with time you can build up an overall sense about how to approach them.

7) Your knowledge of the unwritten social guidelines of your particular culture, subculture, or group of friends, and how to adjust the general communication-skills rules to fit them. This is another reason it's impossible to explain how to deal with every situation ahead of time. What may be considered an appealing conversation style in one country or among one circle of friends may be seen as obnoxious elsewhere. The only

way to learn the rules for your social context is to be in it and observe them for yourself.

8) Constructive mind-sets toward socializing. A well-intentioned, but unhelpful, variety of social advice is to suggest you adopt useful, but easier-said-than-done, mind-sets like, “Don’t care too much about people’s opinions of you” or “Just go out to have fun and don’t fret about how well you socialize.” It’s great if you can think like this, but you don’t instantly acquire those worldviews just by reading they’re good to have. Instead, as you socialize more and more, you’ll have many small experiences and successes that show firsthand these are good ways to think, and you’ll gradually add them into your worldview.

9) Your personal social style. There are some general guidelines for what makes for a better or worse interaction, but there isn’t a single right way to socialize. Everyone has his or her own personality and strengths and weaknesses. There are usually multiple ways to handle any situation. What works well for another person may not fit you at all. Your friend may be good at cheering people up by being a good listener. You may be better at being funny and helping them take their mind off their worries.

Ways to practice socializing

You can practice your social skills in three ways. First, if you feel you’re socially inexperienced all around, you can simply find ways to spend more time socializing. This method is unstructured, but you’ll still learn new things from all the extra hours you’ll rack up, and hone a variety of skills. You can

- socialize more with the people you already know (existing friends, coworkers, classmates, roommates, family members);
- get a job that involves lots of interaction with people (for example,

retail, restaurant server, bartender, call center, sales);

- sign up for a volunteer position that involves socializing (for example, fundraising, talking to seniors, helping out at a festival);
- join a club, team, or organization;
- attend online-organized meet-ups (for example, from a forum you use, through sites like Meetup.com);
- take advantage of natural opportunities to have brief, friendly interactions with people who are generally expected to be pleasant and chat with you, such as store clerks and restaurant servers;
- go to a venue where people can show up alone and be social with the other patrons (for example, a board game café, a pub or pool hall);
- interact with people online (for example, chatting with people while playing a multiplayer game). Of course, this can't be a complete substitute for face-to-face practice, but it shouldn't be dismissed entirely either; or
- if it's a realistic option, travel and stay in busy, social hostels.

A second method is to practice in a deliberate, structured way, especially if you want to work on specific skills. For example, if you have trouble starting conversations, you could attend one online-organized meet-up a week and talk to at least five new people each time. If you have trouble with a specific type of interaction, like inviting someone out or turning down an unreasonable request, you could practice by role-playing the scenario with a friend or family member. Some organizations and counseling agencies run social skills training groups that provide opportunities to practice in a safe, supportive environment.

A third way to practice socially is to take a class to learn a performance-oriented interpersonal skill like public speaking, acting, or improv or stand-up comedy. These more specialized skills don't fully carry over into day-to-day situations. A rehearsed, memorized speech isn't the same as a

spontaneous, casual conversation. However, they still provide a lot of benefits. For example, speech classes may teach you how to project your voice and use confident body language. Performing in a play may help you deal with your nerves and fear of being on the spot. Improv teaches you to be more loose, playful, and spontaneous in your conversations. Many people also find they get a small confidence boost in their daily interactions from knowing they're getting the hang of a more intimidating skill like speaking in public.

You don't have to spend a lot of time talking to strangers in public to practice your social skills. Some people think they have to chat with a bunch of randoms at the mall or grocery store. If you're specifically trying to get used to starting and carrying on conversations with people you don't know, that's one thing. If you generally want to rack up some social experience, talking to strangers is usually too stressful and inefficient. It's better to practice with people whom you know and are already somewhat comfortable with, or strangers you meet in more structured situations like an art class.

Indirectly improving your social success

Although directly addressing the less-practiced aspects of your social skills is essential, you can also indirectly help your cause by becoming a more well-rounded, knowledgeable, interesting person. This works in a "wax on, wax off" kind of way. Imagine you did nothing to directly practice your social skills for three months, but spent that time traveling, discovering new music, and learning to mountain bike. At the end of those three months, many social situations would likely go more smoothly for you. You'd have more to talk about and relate to people over, and you'd really notice a difference if you ended up in a conversation with a traveler, cyclist, or music fan. The struggles of traveling and learning to mountain bike would

have increased your overall confidence or maybe made you more fun and adventurous. The experiences you had on vacation may have some cachet and make people want to chat more with you so they could learn more about them.

That's not to say that if you pick up a bunch of new hobbies, you'll be able to duck out of the direct practice requirement. Also, some people hear this advice and they try to learn about and do everything, hoping to get the maximum social benefit. Of course that's not feasible.

Knowing how long it will take to catch up in your social skills

Of course, it's hard to estimate how much time you'll need to polish your social skills because everyone starts from a different place. One to three years is a reasonable amount of time to expect if you're behind all around, as opposed to needing help with a smaller area or two. It generally takes a few years to get half-decent at many skills.

Reading that may leave you feeling discouraged: "It may take me three years? Are you kidding me?!" That estimate isn't meant to bring you down, but to be straightforward and realistic about the process. In the long run, knowing what to expect prevents more discouragement than it creates. Hearing the news doesn't feel good up front, but when you're six months in and have a bad day, you can put it in perspective and not see it as a sign that you're hopeless. If this book falsely led you to believe social skills are quick and easy to obtain, you'd feel worse—and maybe even give up entirely—if everything didn't fall into place after a few weeks.

One to three years may seem long, but the process of improving won't be a grind the entire time. As with learning anything, it will be roughest at the beginning and then get more enjoyable and comfortable once you've

developed a basic foundation. It's like learning to play the guitar: In the first month it hurts your fingers to hold down the strings, and it's an accomplishment to play a chord properly, let alone to switch between several of them quickly and smoothly. At the six-month mark, the situation is far different. You're still a clueless beginner in the grand scheme of things, but you know enough that practicing isn't a complete struggle, and is often fun when you get the hang of a new song. It's the same with socializing. At first it may be nerve-racking to make polite chitchat with someone for a few minutes. A year in you may confidently head to a party with a bunch of friends and know you'll get in some mingling practice while you have a good time with everyone.

Not all progress comes slowly either. Some areas are easier to make improvements in than others. For example, there are some simple, common mistakes people commit when trying to make friends, and after they know how to avoid them, their social lives often improve quickly.

You have more time than it seems. Late bloomers often worry that their best years have passed them by and they've missed the window for having a fulfilling social life. That's not true at all. Social skills can be learned at any time in your life. After you're caught up, you're caught up. Learning social skills isn't like learning languages, where our brains are wired in such a way that it's harder to learn new ones after childhood. There's no door that closes when you reach 20, 25, 30, or any other arbitrary age. You will have opportunities to enjoy yourself and socialize throughout your life. If you're in your early twenties or younger, you may believe that after college all the fun dries up and everyone becomes boring and bogged down by responsibilities. Not true. People never stop socializing and having fun together.

It can be frustrating to hear you have to wait before you can get what you want, but try not to succumb to impatience. If you're impatient, you may

give up on helpful suggestions because they're not working instantly. You also might chase one supposed quick fix after another, instead of sticking with proven approaches that are slower and less glamorous. When you do get discouraged or impatient, remind yourself that social skills take time to develop; it's not realistic to expect to become an expert overnight. Also, look at where you are now compared to where you began. You'll be more likely to keep going when you can show yourself you're making improvements.

Expecting your emotions to swing up and down

You can broadly divide the process of putting your social problems behind you into an initial, more frustrating phase, and a later one where the sailing is smoother. As you improve your social skills, practicing them becomes easier and more encouraging, and you have a sense the worst is behind you —success is just a matter of time if you stay the course.

Your moods can be rocky during that first phase. Whatever happens, you'll tend to read too much into what it means for the future. If you have a good day, you'll be overly excited and feel like you've finally turned a corner and everything will be okay. When you inevitably have an off day, you'll conclude you're hopeless and you'll never have better social skills.

With more practice and a few more tastes of success, you'll calm down. You'll also realize that even if you have a few shaky interactions, your progress is still steadily ticking upward; if you keep at it, you'll get there eventually. One way to maintain perspective is to keep a record of your progress. That way you have an objective reminder that you're making positive changes ("I feel like I'm still as shy as I've always been, but it says this month I started more conversations than I ever have, and I've hung out with three new people.")

Realizing it's okay to seek professional support

This is a self-help book, but when it's appropriate, it will point out situations where it may be helpful to get some extra assistance from a counselor or support group. Sometimes you'll face challenges that are too difficult to deal with on your own. Seeing a professional isn't a shameful last resort for "weak," "broken," "crazy" people. It's just a way to get some knowledgeable experts on your side. If you're in college, your school may offer free counseling services. Many communities also have affordable mental health agencies.

2

Addressing Some Common Challenges and Concerns about Working on Your Social Skills

THIS CHAPTER FIRST COVERS common practical challenges to improving your interpersonal skills; then it goes over some concerns people have about the process.

Practical challenges

Even when you want to make changes in your social skills, the following challenges can make it hard to start, and continue, working on them. These barriers are all surmountable.

“I want to practice my social skills, but I get drained quickly in certain situations.”

It’s not uncommon for people to quickly become mentally drained when they’re socializing. They can handle a dinner party conversation for an hour or two, but after that they feel depleted, like they want to leave. After a few hours, they’re too tired to properly listen to everyone and craft their responses. Afterward they usually need some downtime to recover from their interactions.

Getting drained easily can interfere with your ability to practice, or just stay out with friends as long as you’d like. From an “acceptable, but inconvenient, differences” perspective, you may also be annoyed when

people don't understand you're wired this way; some less-sensitive people may give you a hard time when you want to take off from an event early, or they may take it personally when you look tired around them.

Short-term ways to feel less drained once the feeling has started to set in

- **Have some caffeine to give yourself a quick burst of energy.** This suggestion especially helps if you're out late and you're feeling sleepy on top of being depleted from socializing.
- **Have a snack or full meal if you haven't had any food in a while.** Your energy levels can subtly slip if you've gone hours without eating. However, don't eat so much that you go into a food coma.
- **Wait until you get a second wind.** Tiredness tends to come in waves, and your energy will usually rebound if you can gut out the grogginess for twenty minutes or so.
- **Take mini-breaks to recover some of your energy.** Bathrooms are a classic hideout. At a bigger function, moving from the hectic indoors to a more low-key conversation outside may be enough to give you a breather.
- **Consciously throw yourself into another gear and try to re-engage with everyone.** After you've started feeling drained, it's easy to give in to those feelings and sit back, zone out, and wait until you can go home. Hanging back and doing nothing is dull and usually makes you even more tired and checked out. Instead, try to find a fun interaction to join, which may perk you up and make you feel more enthusiastic.
- **If you know about a draining event ahead of time, take a strategic nap beforehand so you'll have more energy.**

Becoming less susceptible to feeling drained over the long term

Even taking the above suggestions into account, you can only do so much to hold back the drained feeling after it's already started. Here are some things you can do to reduce your tendency to get socially drained over a long haul:

- **Get more proficient at socializing in the situations that tire you out.** Anything is more mentally taxing if you're unpracticed at it. Also, you'll start to feel drained and disengaged more quickly if you're bored and not having a good time. As you get more skilled at handling a situation, it will easier to have fun in it.
- **Get more comfortable in the situations that tire you.** Anxiety is very physically and mentally draining. When you're more relaxed in a situation you won't waste your energy feeling tense and worried.
- **Over time push yourself to stay in social situations longer and longer.** You can "exercise" to build up your social endurance. When you're out with friends and want to take off, tell yourself you'll stick around for another half hour, and then later, an hour or more. After you've decided to stay, actively socialize rather than retreating to wait out the clock.
- **Hang around people who are more your style.** You'll be more prone to feel drained if you're with people who you don't have much in common with and are either too dull or too go-go-go for you.
- **Be around people more often.** Everyone has a baseline level of social contact they prefer, but it has some wiggle room. If you spend a lot of time alone, then when you do socialize, it's more of a shock to your system, and it won't be long before you want to be on your own again. If your life circumstances constantly put you around classmates, coworkers, family, and roommates, you get used to being around people constantly. Your need to escape and recharge doesn't totally go away, but your tolerance for having company is higher.

“I want to work on my social skills, but I just can’t motivate myself to get started or stick with practicing for very long.”

To improve your social life you need to be motivated to work on it, and push through the difficult patches. That motivation is sometimes hard to find even if you feel you logically *should* have it. There are a few reasons this can happen:

- **Your anxiety is holding you back.** It’s only natural you’d want to avoid the kind of social practice that makes you nervous. At times you’re well aware that you’d like to make changes but are too scared of getting rejected, embarrassing yourself, or having to dwell on your failures. At other times your anxiety will provide you with an excuse to procrastinate, like “I’ll try to make more friends in the summer, when I’m not so busy with school.”
- **If you have a personality where you have a lower need to socialize and are happy to be alone, you can get caught in a stagnant middle ground.** You wish your social life was better, but having to spend a lot of time on your own doesn’t bother you *that* much, so you never feel enough of the pain or loneliness that lights a fire under you and compels you to make big changes.
- **Your goals aren’t your own.** You may truly not care about improving aspects of your social skills at the moment, but have absorbed messages from society that you should want to address them. If you’re younger, your family may be pressuring you to change before you feel ready.
- **You’re not sure how to begin tackling your problems and are overwhelmed.**

If you struggle with motivation, here are some things you can do:

- **Learn to handle your anxiety.** The book's next section goes into detail on this topic.
- **Accept that you may not be fully ready to change yet.** Regardless of how you think you *should* feel, your heart may not fully be in it at the moment. If you don't have an inner drive to tackle your issues, no rah-rah speech or quote is going to fix that. At best that'll make you feel psyched up for a day or two before you go back to the status quo. There's nothing wrong with deciding to wait until a greater sense of urgency sets in.
- **Set aside some time to figure out what you really want.** Are you telling yourself you should try to become an outgoing party animal because that's what society says is important, when deep down it doesn't interest you? Would you feel more enthusiastic about trying to develop a more low-key social life?
- **Realize the hardest part is often getting started.** After you're over that initial hump it will feel rewarding to make progress.
- **Break your goals down into manageable chunks.** Rather than having a vague objective of "I'm so lonely" or "I'm so bad with people. I don't want to be like that anymore," try to define exactly what you'd like to change. Would you like to make three friends you see regularly? Would you like to be able to chat to your coworkers without feeling tongue-tied and self-conscious?
- **Focus on the next immediate step.** It's important to keep your long-term goals in mind so little hiccups don't discourage you. However, when it comes to motivation, your overall objective may feel impossible and overwhelming. You may not know where to start with "Have a full and rich social life," but it's easy enough to tackle "Step 1: Research some places in town where I may be able to meet people."

- **Don't try to work on every social skill or goal at once.** Figure out the few core things you'll need to get half-decent at to feel better about your social situation. Save all the smaller tweaks for later. For example, if you're shy and lonely, but okay at making conversation after you're past your initial nerves, focus on meeting new people and being able to feel comfortable enough to chat to them. Don't spread yourself thin by also trying to perfect your posture and use of humor.
- **Do what you can to practice socializing in ways that are fun and convenient.** There's no way to avoid feeling uncomfortable at all times, but as much as possible try to get your practice through types of interactions you'd enjoy anyway.
- **Alter your environment so it nudges you toward getting out and being social.** You could decide not to watch TV or play video games on the weekend, so you'll feel bored and look for something else to do. If you have a specific social task you're putting off, tell yourself you can't do certain fun things until you've completed it (for example, "I can't go on the Internet until I text Karen and ask her if she wants to hang out this weekend.").

"I'm too busy to work on my people skills."

Everyone gets really busy from time to time, and if you have more important priorities, there's nothing wrong with putting your social skills development on the back burner for a while. However, try to be honest with yourself about whether you're really too busy or if you're using that as an excuse. Don't hide behind a job or graduate program that has a culture that glorifies having no life. If you want to try to work around your hectic schedule, here are some ideas:

- **Make socializing a priority.** Don't see it as something you'll get to if your schedule happens to work out.
- **Boost your energy level.** If being too tired to go out is the problem, a nap after work or class or a strategic dose of caffeine may be all you need to get your energy and motivation back.
- **Manage your time better.** Figure out ways to use your time more efficiently and free up some hours in the day, for example, by improving your study or assignment-writing skills.
- **Streamline your social life.** Tweak your social life so it's less time-consuming and fits into your schedule. For example, make plans to see your friends after work, when you're already downtown.
- **Spend quality time with people instead of hanging out aimlessly for hours on end.** For example, have a shorter conversation-filled dinner instead of spending an evening watching TV and barely talking.
- **Organize group activities.** If you don't mind that kind of thing, try to hang out with lots of people at once instead of catching up with every person individually.

“I don’t think I can get past my social problems without an exhaustive structured roadmap with hands-on exercises for each subskill.”

Some people like to have every step of a process spelled out before they feel ready to start. This book offers lots of details that you can apply to your life as you see fit, but the content still may not be as fine-grained as you'd like. Every author has to decide what to leave out so the book can stay at a reasonable length. If you want in-depth clarification on a specific topic, you can look for it elsewhere, perhaps from a book in the Further Reading section.

Another possibility is you're not giving yourself enough credit to figure

out how to improve on your own. To learn any complex skill, you need to know how to direct your own development at times. Everyone is different, and your needs aren't always going to fit a template. You need to know how to decide what to focus on and how to come up with your own practice exercises if none are available. As a side effect of being less socially successful, some people develop a sense of helplessness and passivity around the issue. They think, "I'm clueless at socializing. I could never figure out how to get better by myself. The only way I'll have a chance is if someone holds my hand every step of the way." Not so. Figuring out how to improve is something you have the ability to do.

This is not to pooh-pooh the idea of having a detailed, personalized plan entirely. Just don't default to thinking you can't do anything without one. If you think having a personalized plan would benefit you, a counselor can help with that.

"I feel like I'm a lost cause. I'm an especially bad case. I have too many factors stacked against me to ever get past my issues."

It's not uncommon to feel discouraged in this way. However, very few people are hopeless cases when it comes to their social skills. The ones who have limits on their potential have real impediments, like congenital intellectual deficits, lower-functioning autism, or significant mental health issues like severe schizophrenia. Even then, they can still make some improvements. If you're more typically functioning, you're more than capable of developing good social skills, even if it takes a while.

When people see themselves as a hopeless case, the biggest barrier that prevents them from getting over their problems is, ironically, their belief that they're a lost cause. If you actively, consistently work on your issues, it may be tough at times, but you'll overcome them eventually. However, if you give up and don't do anything to address your problems, they are

guaranteed to stay with you. Chapter 5 goes into more detail about how you can identify and dispute some of the beliefs that may be feeding this sense of being beyond help.

“I have Asperger’s syndrome/mild autism, which makes it harder for me to improve my social skills.”

Asperger’s syndrome is an inborn condition on the mild, higher-functioning end of the autism spectrum. Those who have it find socializing more difficult in a variety of ways. However, Asperger’s is relatively rare, and most people who struggle socially don’t have it. Appendix A goes into detail about the challenges Asperger’s can cause and provides some approaches for working on your social skills if you have the condition.

Concerns about the idea of working on your people skills

A fear of having to change too much and sell out to do better socially is a common concern. This book has already touched on some of these worries, and here are some more:

“I’m not sure if I want to work on my people skills. I don’t lead a very social life, and I’m happy with it.”

Odds are you’re reading this book because you’re motivated to change your social situation. However, maybe you’re feeling more ambivalent. Maybe someone bought this book for you, and you’re noncommittally flipping through it.

If you’re content with your current social situation, this book isn’t going to try to persuade you to change. However, it’s important to make that decision with full self-awareness and honesty. Issues like anxiety,

discouragement, and past resentments over being picked on or overlooked can cloud your motivations. You can trick yourself into believing you don't want what you think you can't have.

If you want to spend all of your time at home and not have many friends, and you've arrived at that choice with a clear head, that's fine. If you think you want to live a mostly solitary life because a) your anxiety has gotten out of hand, b) you're convinced no one would like you if you did try to make friends, and/or c) you're bitter about the idea of being social because you got picked on for being "weird" in high school, that's a different story. It's okay if you're not operating at 100 percent self-awareness at all times; no one is. Just check in on yourself occasionally and adjust course if needed.

"I'm on the fence about working on my social skills. I just don't enjoy socializing and don't see how I'd get any personal benefit from improving at it."

If you truly don't get much out of socializing, then you should live your life in a way that reflects your personality. However, many people who express this view are younger. They think they don't like socializing because they haven't experienced how rewarding it can be. Simply put, they don't know what they're missing. They associate "conversation" with all the awkward or insulting interactions they've had, instead of associating it with interesting, affirming exchanges with good friends who get them.

If your social skills are less developed, you have a lower ability to "unlock" the fun in many situations. For example, attending a party is going to feel like a chore if you don't know how to mingle and participate in engaging conversations, and are uncomfortable with letting loose or dancing. Of course, if you don't get a lot out of parties even after you know how to navigate them, that's okay too. It's also okay if you're not that keen

on getting good at socializing at parties to begin with. Not everyone has to like all the same activities or be a social butterfly. However, when you're inexperienced or gun-shy, it can cloud your sense of how appealing certain types of socializing can be. Once your interpersonal skills and confidence are higher you may find you enjoy some activities more than you used to.

"It's not socializing itself that I dislike. It's that I generally think other people suck."

Sometimes when a person says they "don't like people," it's just their semi-facetious way of stating, "I'm not super social by nature. I don't need a ton of friends. I'm selective about who I hang around. My personality is on the less conventional side, and I've come to realize most people don't have a lot to offer me." That's fine. Not everybody has to be mainstream and love everyone.

At other times "I just don't like people" is said in a much more wounded, hostile manner. As with believing you don't like being social, feeling that you don't like people may be a reasonable conclusion based on your life so far. Who wouldn't dislike people if all they've known is cruel classmates, unsympathetic parents, coworkers they have little in common with, and a difficult, nitpicky boss?

It's also easier to form a negative opinion of people when you're at a distance. If you spend a lot of time alone, and your only social interactions are fleeting and superficial, a lot of the information you receive about humanity is more abstract. You read articles about the latest bar-lowering hit TV show or trashy celebrity. When you look at life from that detached viewpoint, it's easy to be down on everyone else. Improved social skills let you have the positive firsthand experiences that reinforce how great people can be.

"I'm the way I am now socially because I was picked on in the past."

Why should I have to change? It's society in general and the type of people who bullied me who should change.”

If you were picked on for perfectly acceptable differences like your interests, then I agree you shouldn't have to change those things. However, if being picked on caused you to develop social problems that are having an undeniable negative effect on your life, you probably do want to change by getting rid of them.

It's unjust that you experienced these adversities, but in the end they're still issues you need to deal with. You're only holding yourself back if you refuse to deal with them out of a sense that it's not fair. It's like if you were walking down the street and a stranger jumped out from behind a corner and shot you in the leg. Is it your fault that this happened? Not at all. Is it unfair? Certainly. Is whoever did it a horrible person? Without a doubt. But at the end of the day, you still have a gunshot wound in your thigh that you need to attend to. You can't get everyone in the world to change; you can only work on yourself.

SECTION

1

Tackling the Main Mental Barriers to Socializing



In this section

- An overview of shyness, social anxiety, insecurity, and discouragement
- Important mind-sets for working on these issues
- Four effective approaches for dealing with these issues:
 1. Addressing the counterproductive thinking patterns that sustain them
 2. Knowing some hands-on methods for reducing anxiety
 3. Gradually facing and reducing your fears
 4. Increasing your overall confidence

3

Seeing the Effects of Shyness, Social Anxiety, Insecurity, and Discouragement

IF YOU'RE LIKE MANY PEOPLE who want to improve their social situation, the biggest thing holding you back is your own mind. You may be quite socially capable and charming when you feel comfortable with someone, but in many situations, your shyness, anxiety, insecurities, and counterproductive thinking get in the way.

This chapter describes the four main confidence and comfort issues that interfere with people's ability to socialize:

1. Shyness
2. Social anxiety
3. Insecurity
4. Pessimism and discouragement

Shyness

Shyness is a multifaceted condition with many variations and nuances, but in short it's when you feel inhibited and uncomfortable in certain social situations because you're worried about how you'll come across to everyone. Just as other social difficulties can range from mild to severe, shyness also comes in degrees. If you're slightly shy, you may seem totally functional and even charming. Even though you may have some inner worries and insecurities, you can socialize in spite of them. Your shyness isn't a huge problem, but even if you're performing well outwardly, it's still

draining to be constantly worrying and doubting yourself. If you're moderately shy, you'll be more hesitant and quiet than normal in social situations, but still be able to get by. If you're severely shy, you'll be totally withdrawn, if you get into many interactions at all. Less mild forms of shyness overlap with social anxiety, which will be covered in a second.

The richest aspect of shyness is the thinking patterns and beliefs that fuel it. Shy people think in ways that increase the supposed risks and stakes of socializing. They see other people as mean and judgmental. They see themselves as unappealing and less socially capable. They view interactions as life-or-death tests of their social skills and worthiness as individuals. Chapter 5 goes into more detail about these unhelpful thinking patterns.

People who suffer from shyness often second-guess the meaning behind other people's words. They may be hypersensitive to perceived signs of rejection or hostility ("She only sort of laughed at my joke. She must hate me." "He complimented my hat. He's probably messing with me somehow.") Sometimes they dwell on past social situations, sometimes years after the fact, and beat themselves up over the things they supposedly did wrong.

Overall presentation

Regardless of how shy you are, you're likely to experience some or all of the following effects:

- being hesitant, reserved, and untalkative;
- coming across as meek, soft-spoken, and unsure of what you're saying;
- acting uncomfortable (for example, fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, crossing your arms over your chest);
- having trouble getting your words out or putting sentences together;

stuttering;

- coming across as unconfident and self-effacing;
- on occasion, being more outgoing and chatty than normal because of nerves or because that's how other people expect you to behave;
- on occasion, coming across as cold and aloof because you unintentionally act this way when you're feeling awkward, or because you're purposely trying to manage your discomfort by sending out "don't approach me" vibes;
- reacting physically: blushing; trembling; muscle tension; sweating; clammy hands; dry mouth; tight, quiet voice; increased heart rate; stomach upset; increased need to urinate; feeling amped up and fidgety.

Circumstances that can bring on shyness

You may feel shy in most social situations or only during particular ones. Situations in which people commonly feel shy include

- meeting new people;
- having to work a room and mingle;
- interacting with people you find intimidating and high-status (for example, asking a professor to reconsider a grade she gave you on a paper);
- interacting with people whose opinion you really care about and whom you want to make a good impression on;
- being put on the spot (for example, being handed a microphone out of the blue and asked to record a video message at a wedding);
- being the center of attention or doing something that draws attention to yourself (for example, being called on in class, wearing flashy clothes, calling down a hall to get a friend's attention);

- having to perform (for example, giving a speech or telling a story when everyone at the table is listening intently);
- confronting someone or being assertive (for example, telling a friend you don't like it when they tease you constantly, telling a coworker you don't want to help them move on the weekend);
- during interactions where you may upset the other person (for example, turning down a request, asking someone not to do something annoying, asking a person to go out of their way for you);
- talking on the phone or having to leave a voicemail.

Approaching social situations

Shy people dread many common social settings or interactions because they aren't sure how to act or they aren't sure how they'll be received by others. See if any of these responses for handling social situations sound familiar:

- completely avoiding social situations or interactions that make you feel shy (for example, not going to a party, crossing the street to avoid having to stop and chat with an acquaintance, sending an email when a phone call would be easier, not following up to hang out with someone you met the other day);
- bailing out of social situations early (for example, making an excuse to end a conversation after a few minutes, leaving a pub because you feel so out of your element);
- partially avoiding social situations or interactions (for example, being present in a group conversation but not saying anything);
- being less likely to take social risks (for example, not asking someone to hang out, not approaching a stranger to start a conversation, holding back a mildly controversial opinion).

Overall consequences

Being shy does more than keep you home at night. It also causes these overarching problems:

- The self-doubt and inhibition inherent in shyness prevent you from showing your full personality. When you're in a conversation with people you feel uncomfortable around, you stand there silently, and no one sees what you're capable of. However, if the people were your long-time friends, you'd be making all kinds of hilarious jokes and witty observations.
- It keeps you from going after what you want.
- It simply doesn't feel good to be so hard on yourself or feel so ill-at-ease in certain situations
- Your shy behavior may create a poor impression on other people. It's not that most people think horribly of shyness; it's just that if it comes down to being sure of yourself or being withdrawn, the former is going to come across better.
- Making friends is difficult. You can still make friends when you're shy, but the process takes longer and you may have less control. You have to hope that you'll spend enough time with the other people for you to feel comfortable around them or that they'll give you a chance and make all the first moves.

Getting a handle on your shyness allows you to reverse the condition. You'll be more willing to show your personality and put yourself out there in social situations. You'll feel better about who you are. You'll feel comfortable instead of being a ball of nerves. On the whole, your interactions will be more effective. Reducing your shyness also frees you up to work on your social skills more effectively. You'll be able to socialize

more often, during which time you can take more chances, push yourself harder, and make more mistakes you can learn from.

Social anxiety

Social anxiety is when you feel nervous in social situations. It has a lot in common with shyness; it leads to similar outcomes, like avoidance and impaired social performance, and is often brought on by fears about how you'll come across to people. However, social anxiety and shyness don't always go hand in hand. It's possible to feel shy and inhibited at a party without feeling physically nervous. It's also possible, but less likely, to feel anxious in a social situation without having a ton of worries or insecurities (for example, even though you know everything will turn out fine, you're stressed about meeting your friend's friends just because it's a new situation and you're generally frazzled from problems at work).

With social anxiety, the nervousness can become its own problem. Mild anxiety isn't oodles of fun, but it's relatively easy to tolerate and push through. Physically it doesn't feel that different from excitement. You may feel a little amped up and jittery or have some minor sweating, blushing, or butterflies in the stomach. Moderate anxiety is another story. Besides your fear levels being higher, it can cause unpleasant bodily symptoms like nausea, trembling, dizziness, hot flashes, heart palpitations, and a need to use the bathroom. Severe anxiety—that is, a panic attack—is downright terrifying. You feel incredibly bad physically, you have an intense urge to escape, and you often think you're going to die or go crazy.

Acknowledging social fears

If a social situation made you anxious, a completely understandable reaction would be to become scared of it and want to steer clear of it in the future. Stronger anxiety can also lead you to develop a second-order fear

that your anxiety is obvious and noticeable, which in turn can cause you to fear being rejected; you may worry that everyone will be put off by your looking like a shaky wreck, or that you'll do something humiliating, like throw up or freak out in public.

As with shyness, social anxiety can crop up in most social situations or be specific to a particular one. These more specific fears may be the same as the ones a shy person has (for example, meeting new people). Socially anxious people can develop other types of specific fears. First, they may get nervous and self-conscious in day-to-day situations where they feel people are watching or evaluating them, such as eating in front of their friends, writing in view of others, working out at the gym, or, for men, using a urinal with other guys around. Second, they may develop a fear of situations where they're "trapped." In situations where people feel trapped, they worry that if they were to become really anxious, they'd draw attention to themselves and perhaps become a laughing-stock (for example, sitting in the middle seat of a crowded movie theater, getting a haircut, riding the subway).

The problem is that this is all self-reinforcing. You develop a fear of fear. When you're worried about getting anxious, you're almost guaranteed to bring on the very nervousness you want to avoid. It's one more obstacle to improving socially. If you go to a party, you're so preoccupied with managing your nerves that trying to connect with anyone gets pushed to the back burner.

Overcoming avoidance

It's no picnic when your nerves screw up your conversation in the moment, so you may choose to avoid interactions that may be difficult or unpleasant for you. However, over the long run, the avoidance that anxiety encourages is more damaging. Avoiding something that scares you prevents you from

feeling bad in the short term, but often runs counter to your long-term interests. Anxiety is manageable if you're afraid of some obscure scenario, but it's another story if you feel nervous about day-to-day social situations that you want to be involved in. A key to handling anxiety is to break the avoidance habit.

Avoiding something you fear plays into a vicious cycle, which strengthens your anxiety. Whenever you avoid a situation, the relief you feel reinforces the behavior and cements the idea that you dodged something truly dangerous. Avoidance can make you miss out on important parts of life when you try to prevent yourself from ever feeling uncomfortable. You can end up rearranging your days into a lonely, sterile rut.

It's one thing to feel blatantly nervous and cancel on a dinner party or decide against trying to start a conversation with a classmate. However, anxiety can be a lot more subtle when it comes to avoiding social situations. People sometimes have a hard time admitting that they're not doing something because it makes them uneasy, and anxiety is great at providing reasonable-sounding excuses and rationalizations. Anxiety can make you think you truly aren't interested in an activity when the situation really just scares you. You can be about to leave for a get-together when you start thinking, "You know what? I really should study tonight instead." Subtle anxiety can also appear as procrastination. You really want to join that running club, but you've been putting it off for the past six months because it's never the perfect time.

Safety behaviors allow you to partially avoid a situation. These behaviors shelter you from the full brunt of an anxiety-provoking situation. For example, if you feel off-balance at parties, you may drink a lot to dull your nerves and have a ready-made excuse for any gaffes you make. Safety behaviors can also be more understated. If you're mildly anxious in social situations, you may be able to have conversations, but only when you stick

to neutral topics, keep the focus on the other person, and don't reveal any deeper personal information about yourself. If you have trouble with specific symptoms like blushing or nausea, you may wear your hair in a way that covers more of your face or always carry some stomach-soothing medication around "just in case."

Social Anxiety Disorder

Shyness is a fairly common, if inconvenient trait. Everyone feels socially anxious at times. However, if you experience anxiety in social situations often or intensely enough that it interferes with your life, a professional could decide a diagnosis of Social Anxiety Disorder / Social Phobia is appropriate. Here are the criteria for it from the latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*:

DSM-5 Criteria for Social Anxiety Disorder

- A. Marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others. Examples include social interactions (for example, having a conversation, meeting unfamiliar people), being observed (for example, eating or drinking), and performing in front of others (for example, giving a speech).
- B. The individual fears that he or she will act in a way or show anxiety symptoms that will be negatively evaluated (that is, will be humiliating and embarrassing; will lead to rejection or offend others).
- C. The social situations almost always provoke fear or anxiety.

- D. The social situations are avoided or endured with intense fear or anxiety.
- E. The fear or anxiety is out of proportion to the actual threat posed by the social situation and to the sociocultural context.
- F. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance is persistent, typically lasting for 6 months or more.
- G. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- H. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (for example, a drug of abuse, a medication) or another medical condition.
- I. The fear, anxiety, or avoidance is not better explained by the symptoms of another mental disorder, such as panic disorder, body dysmorphic disorder, or autism spectrum disorder.

If another medical condition (for example, Parkinson's disease, obesity, disfigurement from burns or injury) is present, the fear, anxiety, or avoidance is clearly unrelated or is excessive.

To be diagnosed with Social Anxiety Disorder, your nervousness in social situations has to be at least moderate. There are degrees of severity within the condition. Someone with a mild version of it may feel quite uncomfortable in social situations, but is still able to be functional. In severe cases, people never leave their house, only socialize with family, and panic if they have to speak to anyone else.

If you suspect you have Social Anxiety Disorder, make an appointment to

see a professional and get their opinion on what steps to take next.

Insecurity

Insecurity boils down to having a low opinion of your own value (particularly in social situations), assuming other people won't like you, and believing your flaws will keep you from meeting your goals. Like anxiety, insecurity is often a component of shyness, but it can exist on its own. You could go to a social function and be outgoing and calm, while still having thoughts like, "I'm too lame to be hanging out with this crowd," "Everyone probably thinks I'm annoying," or "He gave me his number and said we should hang out, but if I call, he'll probably think I'm needy."

Insecurity doesn't rear its ugly head only before a social interaction. You may experience some of the following thoughts during a conversation:

- "I'm probably screwing up."
- "They think I'm annoying."
- "They'll only like me if I'm really impressive."
- "They'll only like me if I hide who I really am."
- "He glanced away for a split second after I made that joke. He probably thinks I'm corny and trying too hard."
- "She's talking to me now, but it's probably just out of politeness. She'd never want to hang out later."

When you're facing the opportunity to pursue a friendship, these thoughts may run through your mind, causing you to second-guess whether you should reach out to the other person:

- "They probably don't want to hang out again."
- "If we meet and grab a coffee, they'll realize how awkward I really am. No point in bothering."

Even after you've established relationships, you may feel insecure about your value to the other person:

- "My friends probably don't really like me. They're still hanging out with me only out of inertia or pity."
- "She didn't return my text right away. She hates me."

Signs of insecurity

Sometimes people who are insecure show no signs of it. Some insecure people have it together on the outside, and no one would ever guess that they question their value to themselves and others. But all too often, people who are insecure subtly convey that feeling to those they're talking to. Examples include

- coming across as shy, unconfident, and fearful about saying the wrong thing;
- trying too hard to please people and do whatever it takes to get their approval;
- bragging and trying too hard to impress people; acting overly outgoing and self-assured to compensate for a lack of confidence; putting others down so you'll feel better about yourself in comparison;
- acting needy and clingy with friends (for example, contacting them constantly or always casually mentioning how much they mean to you and how devastated you'd be if they stopped hanging out with you);
- trying too hard to control your friends' behavior and force them to be considerate toward you (for example, "I invited you to my birthday dinner, and you didn't let me know you were coming until a week

- before it was happening. You should have let me know right away!”);
- overreacting to possible signs of rejection, either by giving up entirely, showing needy behavior (sending a bunch of increasingly frantic “u there?” texts if they don’t reply to you instantly), or being too quick to stand up for yourself and set them straight over minor issues (“You were half an hour late to my party. You have no respect for me! Don’t let it happen again”).

Discouragement / pessimism

Feeling discouraged or pessimistic is an issue that is different from the three above, but often goes hand in hand with them. The methods for addressing it are the same as well. A history of poor social outcomes can lead to pessimism and discouragement about meeting your goals to improve your social situation. Feeling discouraged can then cause you to develop a number of counterproductive mind-sets that can hinder you even further. It can also lead to self-sabotaging behavior where you don’t try because you “know” you’ll fail anyway. Here are some typical discouraging thoughts:

- “I’m too unlikable. There’s no point in trying anymore.”
- “I could go to that party, but it won’t get me anywhere, so I’ll take a pass.”
- “They’ll probably reject me, so I won’t bother talking to them.”
- “They seem bored by me. I’ll bow out of the conversation now to save us both time.”
- “He just gave me his number and said we should grab a beer sometime. It never works out when I follow up with someone, so I won’t bother.”
- “Maybe other awkward people can improve, but my set of issues is too much to overcome.”

The four related problems of shyness, social anxiety, insecurity, and discouragement need to be tackled directly. You should do some work on them before working on conversation or social life issues you want to fix. If you're shy and insecure around people, you can indirectly become more confident by developing your conversation and friend-making skills (assuming they're not already fine and your shyness just blocks them from coming out). One warning though: If you attempt to practice your social skills but haven't taken steps to address the counterproductive thinking at the core of your shyness and anxiety, you may end up worse off. You'll put yourself in social situations but still see them as dangerous and high-stakes; if something goes wrong, you may come to inaccurate, disheartening conclusions about yourself and your hopes of improving. You don't have to get your thinking to a flawless place before you start working on your people skills, but your thoughts should be at a level where they won't completely sabotage you either.

4

Shifting your Mind-Set about Your Social Discomfort

BEFORE YOU CAN START WORKING on any shyness, anxiety, or lack of confidence, you need to develop the right mind-set for dealing with these problems. People often believe two big myths that give their social discomfort too much power and hinder their ability to deal with it:

1. “There must be a way to totally eradicate my shyness, social anxiety, and insecurities (and therefore I’ll put improving my social life on hold until I do that).”
2. “I can’t show any signs of social discomfort to people. It’s shameful and will ruin the interaction.”

You’ll have to do some work, but you can limit the impact of these counterproductive mind-sets. This chapter presents some useful attitudes to adopt regarding social situations. If you keep these points in mind, you’ll be on your way to feeling more comfortable around people and handling any uneasiness that pops up along the way.

Know and accept that you’ll never banish all social discomfort from your life

Although the strategies in the following chapters will help you turn down the dial on your social discomfort, you’ll never banish those issues completely. Humans just aren’t wired to be blissfully happy and self-

assured 100 percent of the time. Even if you learn and apply every coping strategy there is, you need to accept that the following things will still happen:

- At times you'll have worried, insecure, or counterproductive thoughts, even if you use every technique you know to try to make them go away.
- Sometimes you'll feel anxious, regardless of how much you try to control it or logically realize there's nothing to fret about.
- Some situations will always make you a little nervous, even if you've successfully gone through them plenty of times (for example, most people never get entirely comfortable with public speaking or trying to start a conversation with someone they're attracted to).
- There will be instances where you'll make a mistake, get rejected, or look bad in a social situation, even if you do everything you can to prevent it.
- You'll feel down on yourself at times, no matter how much you try to psych yourself up or remind yourself of your strengths.
- Even if you seem to have your shyness and insecurities under control, you may go through a stressful period in your life that makes them flare up again.
- You'll never be able to predict the future or have full certainty an upcoming social event will go well.
- You may have been born with a tendency to be more anxious and insecure than average, and it's something you'll have to learn to work around.

Accepting that you may sometimes get uncomfortable in social situations takes away some of the control your shyness and insecurities have over you. For example, if you think awkward silences are terrible, you'll avoid

countless conversations in an attempt to only chat to someone under the perfect, safe set of conditions. If you make peace with the fact that lulls happen sometimes, no matter how prepared you are, you'll be willing to talk to more people.

Even when you really don't want a certain outcome, you'll often feel a kind of relief when you know for sure it's going to happen. At least the uncertainty and "what if?" worrying are gone, and you can focus on how you're going to handle it. If you knew with 100 percent certainty you were going to stumble over your words whenever you met someone new, it would be inconvenient, but you could shift your energy toward coming up with strategies to deal with that fact.

Aim to become socially functional, rather than 100 percent assured at all times

After you accept that you're still going to encounter some social unease from time to time, your aim should be to become socially *functional*, where even if you're nervous or self-doubting, you can still meet your goals. Don't put your social life on hold until you wipe all shyness from your mind, because that will never happen. A key part of being functional is to realize you can be shy, nervous, or insecure during a social event and still function and ultimately enjoy yourself.

Socializing while experiencing a case of the jitters

When people struggle with social anxiety, they sometimes look at their discomfort in either-or terms when they're deciding whether to attend a get-together. They think if they're not completely confident and relaxed, then they have to skip it. If nerves strike when they're with people, they think the whole outing is ruined.

You can get through most social situations with some self-doubt or jitters. If your nerves or insecurities are mild, they may not interfere with your outward performance at all. Even if they trip you up a little, they won't fully ruin the interaction. Only the most extreme, sustained anxiety will do that. A conversation can easily be a success, even if you trembled or had trouble putting your thoughts together at the beginning of it.

When looking back at an outing, how nervous or unsure you were at the time becomes even less important. If you get nervous in crowds but go to see your favorite band anyway, five years from now you'll be happy you went and cherish the good memories you have; you'll hardly regret the experience because you felt on edge at the start of the show.

Acknowledging that nervousness comes with valued goals

Figure out what is truly important to you in life and commit to going after it, regardless of your fears or insecurities. This will put your discomfort in perspective and help you set your priorities. If you're pursuing something you truly care about, then any nervousness that comes up along the way will be worth it. For example, you might decide it's important to increase your social circle and try new things. If you get an invitation to go rock climbing with some coworkers, but the thought of it makes you anxious, it'll be easier to get yourself to go because you know it aligns with what you want.

Accept that it's okay to show signs of your issues

Shyness and anxiety can have such a powerful hold on you because you're afraid of experiencing their symptoms in front of people. You can take a lot of that influence away if you say to yourself, "You know what? If I look scared in front of people, then so be it. If I turn red while talking to someone, it's not the worst thing ever, if I seem comfortable with myself

otherwise.” If you can start to care less about the consequences of your self-doubts or anxiety, you’ll be less likely to feel insecure or anxious in the first place.

Caring less about your social faux pas is easier said than done. The secret is to make acting against your worries a higher priority than trying to make every interaction go perfectly. You can achieve this by employing two mentalities, either of which may motivate you depending on your personality:

1. Be pleasant and understanding toward your fears and insecurities. You see your anxiety as just trying to help, but it’s going too far. If you’re nervous about meeting your new friends for drinks, tell yourself, “Anxiety, thanks for your concern, but getting to know new people is a priority for me, so I’m not going to cancel and stay home.”
2. Be more angry and defiant. You’re tired of letting your shyness and worries push you around, and you won’t let them run your life any longer. You may be heading to a meet-up and think, “If I get nervous, I get nervous. At least I showed up and didn’t let my anxiety rule my life.” On the walk home, you may think, “I was a little inhibited and queasy at the start of the night, but I hung in there. My anxiety wanted me to leave, but I beat it.”

Mention when you’re shy, nervous, or insecure

Part of accepting your shyness or anxiety can include a willingness to tell people you’re feeling shy or anxious at that moment, or have a problem with those issues in general. Being able to talk about your problems takes away the belief that you can’t let anyone find out what you’re going through. Occasionally someone will respond insensitively, but most people know what it’s like to feel nervous and will be understanding. If you tell

someone, don't phrase it as a shameful confession or go into the entire backstory of your struggles. Just casually let them know you're a bit nervous and then move on with the conversation. If you set a tone that your nerves aren't that big a deal, everyone else will follow your cues.

Know it's normal to be shy, insecure, or socially anxious at times

It's certainly not fun or helpful to feel shy or nervous, but it's not a sign you're weak or mentally defective. These problems are very common. Just because they may be giving you more trouble than average doesn't change that they're normal human emotions. Go easy on yourself and give yourself permission to feel that way.

Knowing whether working on your social skills directly will decrease your shyness

Many people who are shy or socially anxious have perfectly good social skills. Their fears and insecurities just get in the way of them using those skills, unless they're around people they're comfortable with. Other people have underdeveloped interpersonal skills in addition to their shyness and anxiety, and the two problems feed into and amplify each other. If your social skills are creaky, you may start to feel more socially confident once you develop them more, or even just learn some strategies on paper and feel more prepared.

The book's other two sections on conversation and making friends have plenty of advice on handling social situations. One warning though: If you attempt to practice your social skills but haven't taken steps to address the counterproductive thinking at the core of your shyness and anxiety, you may end up worse off. You'll put yourself in social situations but still see them as dangerous and high-stakes, and if something goes wrong, you may

come to inaccurate, disheartening conclusions about yourself and your hopes of improving. You don't have to get your thinking to a flawless place before you start practicing your people skills, but your thoughts should be at a level where they won't completely sabotage you either.

What if you can't reduce your shyness or anxiety by yourself?

If you have mild to moderate shyness or social anxiety, you should be able to apply the suggestions in the next four chapters using a self-help approach. Sometimes your anxiety will be more severe and too much to handle on your own. If that's the case, consider seeing a therapist or joining an anxiety support group. You'll still go through the same kinds of treatment approaches the following chapters cover, but a professional or others with similar issues can support you through the rough patches and customize everything to your needs. Also, go to a doctor to rule out whether your anxiety has a physical cause, like an issue with your thyroid gland.

Medication may also be an option to look into. Speak to a physician or a psychiatrist about that possibility and to get the most up-to-date information about your options. Medication dampens the physical symptoms of anxiety, but doesn't affect its underlying psychological causes. It needs to be used in conjunction with psychological treatment approaches that address those issues. Medication can reduce your symptoms enough that you can implement a treatment plan you'd otherwise be too nervous to progress through.

Although many people take medication on a short-term basis, a smaller number feel it improves their quality of life enough to justify staying on it long-term. They realize that they were born with an overly high anxiety level, and medication brings it down to a level where they can function

better.

Some people are justifiably wary about taking any kind of drug, and it's not a decision to be made lightly. Medication can cause side effects, and it can take people some time and experimentation before they find a drug and dosage that works for them. In more severe cases, it can make the difference though, so at least give it some thought if a professional makes that recommendation.

5

Handling Counterproductive Thinking about Socializing

SHYNESS, SOCIAL ANXIETY, INSECURITIES, AND DISCOURAGEMENT about your chances of improving are all sustained in part by thoughts and beliefs that are counterproductive—that is, thoughts that lead you away from good outcomes. They create unpleasant feelings like nervousness and self-doubt, and cause you to behave in ways that go against your goals, such as avoiding get-togethers or giving up on trying to be friends with people. They can pop up in the present moment or when you’re looking back on the past or toward the future. If you can rein in your negative thoughts about socializing, you’ll be more content and confident and have an easier time going after what you want.

This chapter explains the two broad ways your thinking can stifle you. Then it covers two approaches for dealing with your counterproductive thoughts. First, it gives you a framework for identifying and disputing these types of thoughts and replacing them with more-balanced alternatives. It then explains an equally effective alternative approach—using mindfulness principles to acknowledge and accept your counterproductive thoughts without getting sucked into them.

Counterproductive thinking pattern 1: Cognitive distortions

When thinking about social interactions, you may have thoughts that

psychologists call cognitive distortions. These thought patterns become misleading and irrational in ways that sustain your problems. It's possible to have cognitive distortions about all kinds of things, like your ability to grow tomatoes, but the examples below naturally focus on social situations.

Emotional reasoning

Emotional reasoning is when you think that because your emotions are telling you something is a certain way, it truly *is* that way. For example, thinking that because you feel anxious, something must be happening that is worth feeling anxious about, when in fact maybe you're just on edge because you drank too much coffee. In social situations, it often creates the reasoning of "I'm nervous about doing X, therefore X must be scary, difficult, and complicated."

Jumping to conclusions

When you jump to conclusions, you quickly assume something negative, even though your belief has little or no basis in reality. There are two variations: mind reading and fortune-telling.

- Mind reading is when you believe someone thinks a certain way without any solid evidence to support it (for example, "I just know everyone on my dodgeball team hates me" or "When she said 'hi' she was doing it sarcastically to subtly mock me").
- Fortune-telling is when you assume an event will turn out a certain way (for example, when you "know" you're not going to have fun at the bar later that night because some jerk is going to bother you).

All-or-nothing thinking / Black-and-white thinking

When you see things in simplistic, absolute terms, you're using all-or-

nothing or black-and-white thinking. This may involve extreme comparisons like perfect vs. useless or words like “never” or “always.” It often comes up when you’re thinking about your social goals or evaluating how you’re currently doing. For example, “I don’t think I’ll be able to become incredibly charismatic, so there’s no point in trying to work on my social skills at all,” or “Not every person in my class loves me, so that means I’m a complete reject.”

Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization involves taking a few isolated incidents and making sweeping generalizations about yourself, other people, or your life. For example, “My one coworker didn’t invite me out. No one at my job wants to be friends,” or “I didn’t find those two people that interesting to talk to. I have nothing in common with anybody.”

Filtering

You’re filtering when you apply a dark-tinted mental lens to your perceptions so you dwell on the bad aspects of something, while ignoring the good. This can involve “seeing what you want to see.” Because life offers up a variety of experiences, no matter what conclusion you want to reach, you can usually cherry-pick enough “evidence” to support it. For example, you may be feeling discouraged about getting over your shyness and remember the times you felt self-conscious and inhibited, but “forget” all the instances where you weren’t. Or you may believe that other men / women are macho jerks / catty gossips. You overlook all the people who don’t fit that stereotype but can’t let it go if you spot someone acting like an obnoxious bro / backstabbing Queen Bee.

Magnification and minimization

When you overstate how something really is, once again with iffy evidence to back up your thinking, you magnify the situation; similarly, if you understate a situation with insufficient evidence, you minimize it. For example, you could magnify the supposed importance of the first week of college by believing that if you don't make friends during that time, your social life for the next four years will be ruined. You could minimize the usefulness of a personal talent by telling yourself, "Sure, I'm good at singing, but there's no way that could help me meet people. How much could joining a choir or band really do?"

Catastrophizing

When your mind leaps to the worst possible outcome, you're catastrophizing. It can also mean to see a situation as totally hopeless or unbearable, when it's really just uncomfortable. This cognitive distortion unsurprisingly tends to increase anxiety. Some examples:

- "I have no plans this weekend. I can't take it. I just know I'm going to live a life of complete social isolation."
- "If I seem shy at this lunch, everyone's going to think I'm a weirdo and kick me out of the group."
- "I'm feeling too nervous right now. I can't do this, I can't do this. I need to leave."

"Should" statements

This cognitive distortion involves constraining yourself with unrealistic expectations about how things "should" be (for example, "People should invite their friends to hang out at least once a week, otherwise it's a sign they hate them"; "I should always have brilliant things to say in conversations"; "I should never get anxious in social situations").

Labeling

Labeling occurs when you slap simplistic labels on things in order to explain them, rather than looking at the unique facets of the situation. You'd be labeling if you explained away a strained conversation by saying it was because you're a geek and the other person was a jock, or if you told yourself, "I'm an electrical engineering student. It's a given that I'm awkward around people."

Personalization

Personalization involves thinking you directly caused something to happen, or that something relates to you, when other forces may have been at work. For example, you might think your friends want to leave your place early because you're so boring, when they're really just tired.

Disqualifying the positive

Disqualifying the positive is when you dismiss positive events for no real reason, probably while being all too eager to accept the negative ones (for example, "I had a really nice conversation with Amy at that party, but it doesn't count. She's friendly to everyone. I still suck at talking to people").

Attributional style

Disqualifying the positive ties into a related psychological concept called attributional style, or explanatory style, which is the way people tend to explain events to themselves. People who are socially insecure tend to dismiss positive experiences as being one-off flukes, while seeing negative interactions as being caused by their enduring flaws. If they have a good conversation, they'll write it off as the other person being in a cheerful mood or talking to them out of pity. If they have a stilted exchange, they'll blame it on how boring or awkward they are. Most people are the opposite.

They're slightly benignly deluded in a way that helps them function better. If an interaction goes well, they give themselves the credit, but if it doesn't, they look for outside explanations, like that the other person was distracted and in a hurry.

Counterproductive thinking pattern 2: Unhelpful beliefs

A lot of counterproductive beliefs arise from cognitive distortions. Odds are, as you read the preceding section, you recognized a few cognitive distortions you've had yourself. Your thinking can also interfere with your social success when you hold inaccurate beliefs that are related to socializing. A few of these beliefs are straight-up false. Most have a kernel of truth to them, but that element has been blown out of proportion. Unhelpful beliefs can be about several categories. You'll notice some of them contain cognitive distortions like mind reading or fortune-telling as well:

Beliefs about yourself

- “Being shy or socially inexperienced is a very negative trait.”
- “I’m flawed and unappealing at my core.”
- “People won’t like me because I’m too X.”

Beliefs about the risks and stakes of socializing

- “My worth as a person depends on how well I perform socially.”
- “My social performance has to be 100 percent at all times, or I won’t be successful.”
- “Every interaction is a test of my social skills and likability.”
- “It would be terrible if people thought of me as shy or awkward.”

- “Every social mistake I make will have horrible immediate consequences.”
- “If I screw up, people will remember it, hold it against me for a long time, and tell everyone they know, and it will ruin my social life.”
- “Rejection is terrible and intolerable.”

Beliefs that give you responsibility for things you can't control

- “I must make everyone like me.”
- “I’m 100 percent responsible for how well an interaction goes.”
- “I’m 100 percent responsible for other people’s reactions to me.”

Beliefs about other people

- “Everyone is really choosy about what they look for in others.”
- “Everyone else has their act together socially.”
- “Other people are constantly evaluating how I’m coming across socially.”
- “This certain type of person is mean and especially likely to reject me.”
- “Certain people have the authority to judge my value as a person. If they don’t like me, then I’m a loser.”
- “People often mock others by pretending to compliment or be friendly to them.”

Beliefs about improving your social situation

- “Something about my area makes meeting my social goals too hard.” (For example, “The people in my city are too unfriendly” or “There’s nowhere good to meet anyone in my town.”)
- “Something about me makes it too hard to reach my social goals.”

(for example, “I’m too old to make friends.” or “I have bad skin. No one will want to hang out with me.”)

- “It’s inappropriate or ineffective to do certain things to try to reach my social goals.” (For example, “I can’t just start conversations with people I don’t know. Who does that? Everyone will think I’m a creep.”)

These unhelpful beliefs may only somewhat interfere with your social success. For example, a belief that other people are putting your social skills under a microscope may make you somewhat more nervous around others, but not enough that it prevents you from meeting new friends. Beliefs can limit you when you believe them too strongly and refuse to accept the possibility that you’re wrong. For example, you could believe that you’ll never make friends in your new city because the locals are too cold and aloof; when anyone tries to say differently, you get angry. These limiting beliefs can be stubborn because the filtering cognitive distortion can kick in and cause you to focus only on things that confirm your existing views.

Now that you have an understanding of how your thinking can get in the way, let’s look at the first method for dealing with it.

Identifying, questioning, and replacing your counterproductive thinking

Because counterproductive thoughts are distorted or inaccurate, you can overcome many of them by logically picking them apart and replacing them with a more realistic alternative. Here are the steps to doing this:

Step 1: Identify your counterproductive thoughts and

beliefs

You can informally do this step and the next one in your head, but they're more effective if you make a proper written exercise out of them. It's an ongoing process. Don't expect to spot and debunk all of your negative thoughts in one twenty-minute brainstorming session.

Areas of counterproductive thinking to delve into

1. Think of what your counterproductive beliefs are. If you're like most shy or less-confident people, you're all too familiar with the messages that scroll through your brain all day and won't have trouble getting a bunch of them down on paper.
2. Follow your negative emotions (for example, anxiety, discouragement, resentment) and see where they lead you. For example, you might start thinking about some acquaintances, feel a bit sad, and then identify some worries about them not wanting to become closer friends with you.
3. Pick a specific social situation you struggle with and then examine your thoughts around it (for example, speaking up in class).
4. Look back on a social interaction you recently had. Say you tried chatting with some coworkers during your lunch break. How do you feel it went? What discouraging or self-critical thoughts are you having about it?

Step 2: Critically examine your counterproductive thoughts and beliefs

Do this step when you have some time to yourself and you're in a fairly neutral, logical mood. It is possible to analyze your thoughts when you're in the middle of a social situation or in the grip of a strong emotion, but it's a

lot more difficult to stay objective.

To begin, you want to shift your perspective. When dissecting each thought, imagine it's something a friend told you they were feeling about themselves or a statement your worst enemy made to you. You'll often uncritically accept ideas from your own mind that you would question instantly if they came from an outside source.

You could also try "externalizing" your issues. Instead of seeing your anxiety or insecurity as a core part of you, view it as an outside entity that has taken up residence in your mind and is trying to sabotage it (for example, picture it as a cartoony demon).

Next, ask several questions of each thought and see how well it holds up:

- What is the overall tone of the thought? Sometimes you'll have thoughts that are technically accurate and free of distortions, but you're still being way too harsh and unsympathetic toward yourself.
- Is there a cognitive distortion, self-effacing attribution, or unhelpful belief in the thought?
- Do you have any evidence that the thought is accurate and true? Don't just think about it for a second and come to a knee-jerk conclusion. Write out all the objective arguments for each side, like you were arguing a case in court. Say you believe no one likes you. What real-world encounters are you basing that on? Are you giving too much weight to one negative memory? What about counterexamples of people who enjoy having you around?
- If you feel you do have evidence that the thought is true, is it accurate, or is it the product of counterproductive thinking as well? If you think, "No one likes me," and for evidence you recall that last week one acquaintance didn't respond to your text right away, that's overgeneralizing or jumping to conclusions. If you say, "I just know everyone hates me. I just feel it every time I reach out to someone,"

that's mind reading and emotional reasoning.

- If you have a simplistic black-and-white thought about yourself, like "I'm boring," can you break it down more? You're not either 100 percent dull or 100 percent interesting. What percent interesting would you say you are? What are the individual elements of being interesting? Being funny? Having unique experiences and stories to share? Having insightful opinions? If you made each of those a scale from 0 to 10, where would you come out on them?

What if a belief or observation turns out to be true?

If you're really shy and insecure, you should lean toward assuming your thoughts on socializing are at least somewhat skewed. However, sometimes you'll put a thought or belief through the questioning process, and it will be accurate. For example, you can make a solid argument that two of your acquaintances truly don't want to be closer friends. When that's the case, don't overgeneralize beyond it (two people not wanting to be friends with you doesn't mean you're utterly flawed and hopeless). Even if the conclusion you came to stings, try to get any useful feedback you can from it, such as realizing you were coming on a bit too strong and scared them off.

Finally, ask yourself what the consequences are of holding a particular thought or belief. Even if it's technically true, it may not lead to the best outcomes. For example, you could make a case that humans are inherently selfish; however, socializing under this assumption may lead you to be too guarded, distrusting, and cynical. It's more adaptive to act as if people generally have good intentions.

Step 3: Come up with more realistic, balanced alternatives for your counterproductive thoughts

The key words here are *realistic* and *balanced*. The idea is not to skip around being blindly “positive.” An unrealistic counterproductive thought might be, “Everyone at this party will hate me. I’ll never make any friends in this city!” An equally unrealistic overly positive thought may be, “I’m an amazing person! Everyone there will love me instantly!” A balanced thought is, “Some people will probably like me, and others won’t. The ones who aren’t into me probably won’t be mean, just kind of indifferent. I can handle that and will concentrate on the ones who seem friendly.”

As mentioned, tone is just as important as content. Even if what you’re telling yourself is technically balanced and true, you shouldn’t need talk to yourself as if you’re an incompetent piece of crap. You can work to improve yourself while being compassionate and understanding of your struggles at the same time.

There will be several examples after the final step is explained.

Step 4: Continually question your counterproductive thoughts

If you have interpersonal issues, you have probably been thinking about yourself and your social skills in a negative light for many years. That’s not a pattern you’re going to undo in a week. You need to continue discovering and challenging your counterproductive thoughts and beliefs. Written exercises will always be useful, but after you’ve gotten the hang of analyzing your thoughts, practice noticing and quickly analyzing them as they appear. For example, you may be at a pub and suddenly stop having fun and get the urge to go home early. Why? You may realize you had a thought like, “I don’t belong here. My friends don’t really want me around. They just invited me because they feel sorry for me.” If you can nip that mind-reading thinking in the bud, your night can go on.

You don't necessarily have to sit down for an hour every day to do a full-on written analysis of your thoughts, but you should continually be on the alert for the ways your own mind is trying to hinder you. With time, your thinking really can shift. You'll never completely be free of counterproductive thoughts—no one is—but your outlook can become a lot more self-supportive and optimistic. You'll also become more familiar with the directions your mind tends to go and can learn to cut off many of your counterproductive thoughts before they pick up steam.

Common cognitively distorted thoughts with more realistic alternatives

“I just know everyone at my job hates me.” (Mind reading)

Alternative: Unless you have strong, clear-cut evidence, the odds this is the case are really low. You're probably projecting your insecurities onto ambiguous things like one person not giving you a big enough nod when you passed in the hallway. Maybe one or two coworkers aren't fans of yours, but most are probably pretty neutral about you.

“If I go out to the bar with my friends, I know all kinds of annoying things will go wrong with the night.” (Fortune-telling)

Alternative: Social events hardly ever turn out exactly as we predict or anticipate, good or bad. The more social experience you get, the more this point will be driven home.

“I can't see myself becoming extremely charismatic so I don't see the point in working on my people skills.” (Black-and-white thinking)

Alternative: Even tweaking your social skills a little can make a big difference in the quality of your life. You only need average people skills to

enjoy most of what the social world has to offer.

“Not everyone in my class likes me. That means I’m a complete reject.”
(Black-and-white thinking)

Alternative: Your worth as a person doesn’t hinge on having every last person like you. No one is universally liked. You can get by in life by having a smaller group of friends with most other people being indifferent to you.

“My one coworker didn’t invite me to his barbecue. No one wants to be friends with me.” (Overgeneralization)

Alternative: How one or a few people act doesn’t say anything about the rest of the world. There are plenty more chances to make friends.

“The first week of college makes or breaks you socially. If you don’t make a ton of friends, your social life for the next four years is ruined.”
(Magnification)

Alternative: There are lots of chances to make friends at the start of college, but if you don’t, you’ll have countless other chances to meet people.

“Yeah, I’m a really good singer. But I don’t see how that will help me make friends.” (Minimization)

Alternative: As with most skills, singing isn’t universally useful for meeting people, but it still opens some doors, such as being able to join a band or choir, and those opportunities shouldn’t be discounted. All else being equal, singing (and similar skills) is a helpful talent to have in your pocket.

“I have no plans for the weekend. I’m never going to have a social life!”

(Catastrophizing)

Alternative: As discouraging or boring as it may be, one slow weekend doesn't mean your social life is doomed for all the decades to follow, especially if you're actively working to make friends.

“I feel too nervous. I can’t take it! I can’t take it! I have to leave!”

(Catastrophizing)

Alternative: Anxiety can be unpleasant, but its worst moments are short-lived spikes. For the most part, you can handle those episodes, even if it's not the most comfortable experience.

“People should invite their friends out at least once a week.” (“Should” statements)

Alternative: There's no one way people have to act around their friends. Everyone has his or her own social style. If someone invites you out less frequently, it doesn't necessarily mean anything bad.

“I should never get anxious.” (“Should” statements)

Alternative: This is unrealistic. Anxiety is a core human emotion that everyone feels from time to time, even the most confident individuals.

“I’m an electrical engineering student. It’s a given that I’m awkward with people.” (Labeling)

Alternative: Electrical engineering is a field of study. It doesn't automatically doom anyone who's interested in it to have certain social limitations. Even if you are an engineering student and you feel you're not good with people, you can work to change that.

“Everyone left early because I’m so boring to be around.”

(Personalization)

Alternative: They could have needed to leave for any number of reasons that had nothing to do with you; for example, maybe they were tired or had to be up early the next morning.

“Sure, I had a good conversation with Amy, but she’s nice to everyone, so it doesn’t count.” (Disqualifying the positive)

Alternative: You need to give yourself credit for your successes, even if some of them come more easily than others. There’s still a lot you have to do on your end to make good conversation with someone, even if they are nicer than average.

Common unhelpful beliefs with more realistic alternatives

“Being shy and socially inexperienced is one of the worst things someone can be.”

Alternative: Those issues are common. Plenty of people have good friends and satisfying social lives despite not being socially perfect. As far as flaws go, it’s hardly comparable to, say, being a con artist who swindles money from unwary pensioners.

“I couldn’t withstand rejection, disapproval, or an awkward interaction.”

Alternative: Rejection can hurt, but you can bounce back from it, even if it makes you feel bummed out for a few days. No one ever becomes totally immune to it, but it’s possible to develop more productive attitudes toward rejection and become more tolerant to it:

- When it happens, rejection often doesn't hurt as much as you expect it to.
- Just because one person rejects you doesn't mean no one else is interested in you.
- Rejection isn't a sign that you're universally flawed; it just means you weren't a good match for that particular person or group.
- Rejection sometimes isn't about you at all. Someone may reject you because they were in a bad mood that day.
- Making new friends is partially a numbers game, and some amount of rejection is inevitable.
- Rejection helps screen out people who are incompatible with you and frees you to put your energy elsewhere.
- Sometimes you'll be rejected for mistakes you make, but at least you'll get feedback on how you can do better next time.
- People often respect someone who has the guts to go for what they want, even if they're rejected.

These mentalities tend to grow as you have more success and build up the real-world experiences that prove that even if some people turn you down, you can go on to have a good social life. Also, when you're purposely trying to get used to rejection, you'll often react to it differently than when you were unconsciously trying to avoid it. You'll tend to treat it as a form of training, like a martial artist trying to toughen his hands, rather than something scary to avoid at all costs.

“I must make everyone like me.”

Alternative: It's impossible to make everyone like you. There are too many conflicting types of people in the world for that to happen. You wouldn't want everyone to like you either. If you're progressively minded, would you

want to be friends with a bigot? Furthermore, the more alternative your lifestyle and values are, the fewer people who will be receptive to you. Even if you're a pleasant, charming person, some closed-minded types won't give you a chance based on a surface impression. There's more to life than getting approval from the maximum percentage of the population.

“It would be terrible if people thought of me as shy, socially awkward, or nervous.”

Alternative: Most people are pretty forgiving of shyness and anxiety in others. They've felt nervous in situations themselves and are understanding. Sometimes shyness or social fumbling is seen as endearing and disarming. A few jerks may give you a hard time for it, but they're relatively rare, especially after high school.

“Every social mistake will have horrible consequences.”

Alternative: People make little social errors all the time. Most of them are quickly forgotten and have no lasting effects. Again, aside from the occasional jerk, most people are willing to cut you some slack if you make some gaffes but are otherwise a good person.

“If I do something wrong, people will care about it and think badly of me for a long time.”

Alternative: Most people are too busy worrying about themselves to give much thought to whether you said the wrong thing or seemed nervous at the start of the conversation. Even if the odd person does think badly of you, you can handle it.

“Every interaction is a test of my social skills and likability.”

Alternative: You're not a failure for all time just because you have one

shaky social interaction. Everyone has them. There's no social scoreboard in the sky.

“I’m 100 percent responsible for how well an interaction goes.”

Alternative: The other people in an interaction have to pull their weight as well. If a conversation goes badly, it could be just as much a reflection of their social abilities as yours. It's a misconception that if someone's people skills are good enough, they can make every interaction go smoothly.

“I’m 100 percent responsible for other people’s reactions.”

Alternative: People's reactions are often as much about them as about you. If someone reacts badly to you, it may because they're stressed for any number of possible reasons.

“My social performance has to be at 100 percent at all times.”

Alternative: Many people do just fine in social situations even if they're not completely “on.” It's possible to socialize effectively if you're feeling a bit distracted, grumpy, or insecure.

“Everyone has super high standards for what they expect in others. I have to come across as really impressive.”

Alternative: Some people are choosy, but what most people look for in a friend is someone who they get along with, who they have some things in common with, and who they feel comfortable around. They're not looking for someone who's perfect in every way.

“Everyone else totally has their act together socially.”

Alternative: Everyone has weak areas and insecurities. Everyone has nervous moments. Most people are socially average. Only a handful are

highly charming and confident, and even they feel unsure of themselves at times.

“He just said he liked my shirt. He’s making fun of me.”

Alternative: The vast majority of the time, if a person says something positive to you, they mean it at face value. They’re not subtly disrespecting you or setting up a trap. The best way to handle a compliment is with a simple, cheerful “Thanks.”

“The people in this city have a reputation for being unfriendly to non-locals, and I’m overweight and have a stutter. It’s impossible for me to make friends here.”

Alternative: All else being equal, it will be harder for you to make friends, but that’s not even close to meaning it’s impossible. Most people have a few traits or circumstances that get in the way of their social lives, but they manage.

“It’s inappropriate to chat with strangers. Who does that? Everyone will think I’m a creep.”

Alternative: Although not everyone talks to strangers, it’s not unusual to do so, and it often goes well. Sometimes you won’t get a warm reaction, even when you approach someone in a polite way, but it doesn’t mean the act itself is wrong.

Using mindfulness-based techniques to deal with unhelpful thoughts and emotions

The preceding part of the chapter explained how to reframe unhelpful thoughts by logically debunking them. The ideas in this part offer another

approach: to deal with unwanted thoughts and emotions by acknowledging their presence, but not getting sucked in by them. The concepts may seem to contradict the suggestions above, but in practice the two approaches are complementary. Some of your unpleasant thoughts and feelings will respond better to a logical reasoning approach, while others are better managed by being mindful, which is covered in the following pages.

Being mindful of unwanted thoughts and feelings

Mindfulness involves focusing your attention on the present moment and experiencing your thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without judgment. Rather than seeing anxiety, nervousness, or shyness as horrible things you must fight off at all costs, you can accept that they will sometimes appear, but you don't have to get swallowed up by them. Instead, you can learn to experience them in a more detached way.

Our minds are thought generators. Some of our thoughts are useful and valid, but others are mental noise. The anxious and unconfident parts of the mind in particular tend to send out a steady stream of worried or insecure chatter. These thoughts aren't bad or evil. They're just a by-product of how our brains work. You can learn to simply observe these thoughts and choose not to take them at face value or act on them. You don't need to debate or break them down. That would give them too much credit and power. Instead, you can briefly note them in a distant, nonjudgmental way and then let them pass.

Try this: Think to yourself, "There's a hungry dragon nearby." When you did this, you probably thought, "'There's a hungry dragon nearby'.... Uh... Okay?" You had the thought, but you didn't automatically go, "Oh no! A dragon! I've got to hide!" However, when you have thoughts like, "No one likes me" or "I won't be able to handle meeting my roommate's friends tomorrow," you're much more likely to treat them as true and get pulled

into worrying mode or see them as a type of thinking that must be battled and purged. You'll never stop having undesirable thoughts, but with practice you can get better at not reacting to them.

The same approach can be applied to emotions. If a negative feeling such as nervousness or sadness comes on, the idea is not to fight it and inadvertently fan the flames. Your moods come and go, and if you let them run their course instead of overreacting, you'll usually feel different before long. For example, if you start to feel anxious, "be" with your anxiety, observe it with a detached curiosity, and let it do its thing; it will pass soon enough. It may not feel pleasant, but it can't truly hurt you. On the other hand, if you get freaked out by your nervous symptoms, you'll make them worse. A common analogy is that it's like being out in the ocean as a big wave approaches you. If you stay calm and tread water, it will pass under you. If you struggle and try to swim away from the wave, you'll stay with it until it slams into shore.

Practicing mindful meditation

You can cultivate your ability to experience your thoughts and feelings without overreacting to them by practicing mindful meditation. Unlike some other types of meditation, the idea isn't to achieve a state of relaxation, stop all thinking entirely, or come to some Zen insight about the universe that sweeps all of your problems away. The goal is to sit quietly and feel any number of feelings or think any number of thoughts, but not judge, label, or overreact to any of it. As with any skill, you can get better at it through consistent practice.

Here's a quick overview of how to mindfully meditate. Some books in the Further Reading section go into more detail if it's something that piques your interest.

Caution: If you have a type of anxiety that tends to get triggered by

focusing on your physical symptoms, this exercise may not be for you, at least without a counselor who's familiar with the practice to guide you through it at first.

Set aside roughly fifteen minutes. The exact length of time it isn't critical. Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Feel free to use a chair or couch. Choose whether to open or close your eyes. Go with whichever you find easiest. Focus on your breathing. You don't need to breathe in any special way; just pay attention to it.

Sit or lie quietly. All kinds of thoughts will pass through your mind, from reminding yourself of errands you need to run to feeling insecure about yourself to thinking, "I'm bored. This isn't working." It doesn't matter what the thoughts are. Try to acknowledge them in a detached way and then set them aside and return your focus to your breathing. Allow yourself to feel a variety of sensations, like noticing your face is itchy, wanting to move your leg, or feeling pangs of nervousness. Whatever the sensation is, don't try to make it go away. Just sit with it and observe it with a gentle curiosity. Watch how it changes on its own and likely dissipates. If your mind wanders for minutes at a time, that's fine. The purpose of this type of meditation is to realize that your thinking can go in any number of directions, that it's all okay, and that you don't need to react to all of it.

When you're done meditating, sit or lie still for another minute or two, then simply get up and resume your day.

Try to mindfully meditate each day. If you'd like, gradually try to increase the length of your sessions, up to about an hour. However, don't feel you must. Short meditations are still beneficial.

As you become more proficient at being mindful while meditating, you'll find the skill will carry over into your day-to-day life. You'll have an easier time letting your thoughts and negative emotions happen and pass away without overreacting to them.

6

Hands-On Strategies for Taking the Edge Off Anxiety

THE LAST CHAPTER COVERED some ways you can reduce your anxiety by challenging it or rolling with it. This one gives you some more hands-on strategies to reduce its impact. It covers broad lifestyle changes you can make to turn down the volume on your negative emotions. You will also find many hands-on tips for reducing anxiety in the moment during various situations—when you’re on your own, when you’re anticipating a social interaction, and when you’re in the middle of one.

Everything in this chapter should be a supplement to changing your overall relationship to your anxiety. As Chapter 4 explained, the best way to approach your anxiety is to make peace with the fact that it may appear and not rearrange your life to avoid it. However, from a practical standpoint, anxiety is still an unpleasant feeling, so it’s okay to try to lower its volume. The strategies presented here won’t be as useful if you let your anxiety have power over you by seeing it as something terrible you must prevent at all costs.

Make positive lifestyle changes to boost your mood

Living a healthy lifestyle reduces the overall amount of stress and negative emotions you experience. If your day-to-day anxiety is mild, a few lifestyle changes may be all you need to reduce it to manageable levels. Even if the changes don’t fully alter your mood, they can make a significant difference.

Other emotional issues like depression also respond well to positive lifestyle adjustments.

The more of the following approaches you apply, the better. However, most people find that certain suggestions are more attractive than others, so use the ones that stand out the most to you. It's beyond the scope of this book to go into detail about each of them, but plenty of other sources cover that information. Here they are:

- Deal with the legitimate problems and stresses in your life (for example, being in debt, not liking your major in college, being bothered by memories of a childhood trauma). You likely can't fix the issues overnight, but just starting to tackle them should make you feel at least a little better.
- Talk to other people about your troubles and get their support (friends, family, a professional counselor, a therapy group).
- Exercise regularly.
- Purposely fit fun, rewarding activities into your day. (Do truly fun things that make life seem richer and fuller, not mainly time-killing pursuits like flipping through TV channels.)
- Consistently take time to relax.
- Meditate regularly (mindfulness meditation, described in Chapter 5, or another type).
- Practice healthy eating habits.
- Cut down on substances that can contribute to anxiety or depression, like caffeine and alcohol.
- Get enough quality sleep every night.
- Get enough sunlight every day, especially if you live somewhere with long, dark winters.

These suggestions can be extremely useful. Regular exercise alone can

sometimes do as much to quell anxiety as months of therapy. However, because the ideas are so often suggested and easy to skim over, it's common to read them and go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Exercise more. Sleep better. Got it. What else do you have for me?" If you're not already doing them, give some serious thought to acting on several of these recommendations. You'll be pleasantly surprised at how effective they are.

Suggestions for coping with anxiety in the moment

No matter what approach you take to dealing with your anxiety, you'll be able to handle it better as you get more experience with it. Initially, intense anxiety is so scary and unfamiliar that it's easy to get swept up in it without stopping to think about what's happening or where it's taking you. The first few times you get unusually nervous, it will catch you off guard. In time, you'll develop a better understanding of your personal anxious tendencies and the course your anxiety takes when it comes on. You'll learn to step back, know what's coming, and apply a coping strategy. The following sections offer advice for dealing with anxiety when you're on your own, before an upcoming social event, during an event, and when you're in the middle of a social interaction.

Dealing with anxiety when you're on your own

You can use these approaches if nerves strike when you're, say, sitting at home and start thinking about an upcoming party you have to attend. You shouldn't use these strategies in the absence of shifting your overall attitude toward your anxiety, but as a spot treatment they're fine.

When you start to feel anxious, ride out the symptoms

If you can be with your anxiety and not overreact to it, it will often pass on its own (for more on this, see the previous chapter's section on

mindfulness). Allowing your anxiety to play out may be uncomfortable, but it will fade. Intense bouts of anxiety often feel longer than they are, but they usually last only about five to fifteen minutes. Moderate nervous episodes of the pace-around-your-house-while-worrying variety can linger longer, maybe for an hour or two. That's more inconvenient, but ultimately only a small bit of the day.

Question the thoughts that are contributing to your anxiety

Sometimes you'll be too worked up to logically disarm your nerves, but at other moments, you'll be able to calm yourself if you question the thinking that's feeding your anxiety (see the beginning of Chapter 5 for pointers). For example, if an episode of nerves is getting more intense because you're thinking, "If I keep getting anxious like this, I'm going to go crazy," you could calm down by reminding yourself that real mental illness or "craziness" doesn't develop that way.

Distract yourself

You may feel too nervous to believe you can focus on something else enough to distract yourself, but if you force it, your attention will often move away from your anxiety, at least a little. You could put on some music or a movie, play a game, practice a skill, begin a text conversation with a family member, go for a walk, or throw yourself into a mentally demanding project. The breathing and relaxation techniques described in the next paragraph also have an element of distraction to them.

Calm yourself with deep breathing

Deep breathing puts your body into "relaxation mode," which will help counteract your anxiety because you can't physiologically be relaxed and keyed up at the same time. Breathing works best if you catch the anxiety

early. The essence of deep breathing is to breathe slowly and from your abdomen.

One technique is called 4-7-8 Breathing. Breathe in through your nose for four seconds. Hold the breath for seven seconds. Exhale through your mouth for eight seconds. The exact numbers aren't super important. The key is that you're thinking about your breathing while taking time to do each step, instead of breathing rapidly, and that you're holding your breath and exhaling for twice as long as you're inhaling. This technique overrides your tendency to take quick, shallow breaths when you're nervous, which can make your physical symptoms worse by changing the ratio of carbon dioxide in the body.

Most people will find this exercise harmless and relaxing. However, you may want to be careful if your anxiety tends to get triggered whenever you focus too much on your breathing.

Calm yourself with progressive muscle relaxation

This works through the same principle as deep breathing. A loose, relaxed body is incompatible with a tense, nervous one. Set some time aside, make yourself comfortable, and lie down. Take deep, slow breaths. Work your way through each of your muscles, contracting them for about five seconds and then releasing them as you exhale. You can make the exercise more effective with some creative imagery. You could picture your stress and tension as a gas being squeezed out of your muscles, or imagine your body is melting into the bed or couch.

Put on soothing music or a recorded guided relaxation meditation

In a guided relaxation meditation, someone's voice guides you into a state of calm through instructions and soothing images ("You're floating down a warm, peaceful river on a sunny day. As you exhale you feel the tension

leaving your face”). There are lots of free recordings online. Do a search for “relaxation meditation” or “rain sounds” or “relaxing music.”

Exercise

Exercising regularly over the long term is a very effective way to reduce anxiety. It can also help in the short term by releasing mood-enhancing chemicals and letting you burn off some of your nervous energy. Any kind of exercise can do the job as long as it gets your blood pumping, even a brisk walk around your neighborhood. There’s isn’t a single correct length of time you need to exercise for. That will depend on how anxious you are and how intensely you’re exerting yourself. Listen to your body and stop when you feel yourself calming down.

Channel your anxious energy into something useful

Sometimes you’ll get really anxious and worked up, and even if you ultimately handle it well, you may still feel amped up and on edge for a little while. Getting nervous triggers chemicals in your body and puts it into an alert state; sometimes it takes a while for all systems to return to normal. Some people take the attitude of, “Well, if I have all this extra energy, I may as well use it,” and then clean their bathroom or organize their apartment’s storage locker.

Coping with nerves before an upcoming social event

Anticipating an upcoming social situation can cause you to feel anxious. The types that tend to be the scariest are the ones you know you can’t back out of. You start feeling at least a little nervous as soon as you know the event will take place. The butterflies then build up more and more as the occasion gets closer. As always, you can try the previously suggested distraction and relaxation techniques or try to challenge or ride out your

worries. Here are some other ideas:

Accept that you probably won't get rid of all your nerves

There are things you can do that may help you feel a little better, but in the lead-up to the event, you'll experience a degree of nerves that you'll have to manage as best you can. This is especially true if you're encountering a certain situation for the first time (like a get-together with your significant other's coworkers) or there's something unique about this particular event. Although you have only so many options for feeling better in the short term, in the long run you may be able to put yourself in that scenario often enough that it doesn't bother you as much.

Prepare and practice

You won't be as nervous if you're reasonably confident you're ready for the situation. Unfortunately, it's harder to prepare for loose, improvised social events like dates and parties than it is for predictable, performance-based ones like class presentations. You can semi-prepare for less structured events by coming up with questions or topics you could discuss. It may not make for the most ground-breaking few minutes of conversation, but it will help you get through an anxious patch.

You could also devise a general strategy for approaching the event. For example, when you're planning to attend a party, decide that first you'll catch up with your buddies, and then you'll ask them to introduce you to their friends so you won't have to do it yourself. Then you'll head to the backyard and try to join the people who are talking there.

These kinds of preparations will never be able to account for everything that may come up, but even planning ahead a little can make you feel more on top of things.

Another way to warm up for unstructured events is to socialize earlier in

the day, ideally in a way that roughly parallels the situation you're anxious about. For example, if you're scheduled to hang out one-on-one with a new friend that evening, you could have coffee earlier in the day with a family member.

Coping with anxiety when you're at a social event, but not talking to anyone

When you're at an event, a bout of nerves may hit you as you're off to the side and not speaking to someone, or if you're in a group conversation but hanging back. Here's what you can do:

- **Ride out the symptoms:** They'll likely pass in a few minutes.
- **Use deep breathing:** With other people around, you won't be able to close your eyes and lie down, but you can still take some subtle calming breaths.
- **Put your attention on the current moment:** Get your focus out of your head. If you're in a group, really pay attention to the conversation. If you're on the edge of a party, really take in what's going on around you—the music, the noises, what other people are doing.
- **Jump into an interaction:** It's counterintuitive, but if you're the kind of person who gets nervous before social interactions but is fine once you're in them, one of the best ways to take your mind off your jitters is to get into a casual conversation with someone. At the moment, this may be easier said than done, but it could become an option in the future.

Coping with anxiety when you're in the middle of talking to someone

Nerves are toughest to deal with when they occur as you're talking to

someone. When anxiety hits, accept that it may interfere with that particular interaction and there's only so much you can do about it. Over the long run, you may get a better handle on your anxiety so you're less nervous in that situation, but when you're just starting to deal with your nerves, realize it won't go perfectly. Here are some approaches that have been covered earlier:

- Ride out the symptoms: When you're anxious around people, usually your nerves spike for a minute or two and then start to dissipate. If you can hang in there through the worst of it, they'll usually go away.
- Have some prepared questions and answers you can fall back on: When you're anxious, you aren't as fast at thinking on your feet. So prepare some standard getting-to-know-you questions. Likewise, practice the kinds of answers you've said a million times before and don't have to think too hard about (for example, a spiel about your job or a hobby).
- Accept that you may indeed look nervous. Accept your circumstances, and realize it doesn't have to ruin that conversation or the entire outing.
- Remove the pressure of trying to hide your anxiety by admitting you're nervous. You can do this by mentioning your nervousness in an offhand, self-assured way and then get on with the interaction. Any normal person won't care if you're a tad anxious, especially if the jitters only last for a few moments before you find your footing.

Realize that your outward symptoms of anxiety often aren't as obvious as it feels they are

Symptoms like blushing are clearly visible, but others feel like they're more obvious than they are. Even when someone is fairly panicky, it often

doesn't stand out that much to an observer. The person just looks a little tense and preoccupied. Knowing this can reassure you enough to calm down.

Be more of a listener or talker, whichever one you have an easier time with

You may be more comfortable listening when you're anxious. You can put on an interested face, place your attention on your conversation partner, avoid your worried thoughts, and buy yourself some time for your nerves to settle. For other people, anxiety and listening don't go well together; all that time when they should be listening allows them to retreat into their heads and zero in on how nervous they're feeling. Some people are actually better at riding out their anxiety when they're doing most of the talking, likely about something they can go on about without having to think too much.

Coping with nerves while trying to do optional social behaviors

You may find yourself anxiously on the sidelines contemplating a social move, one that makes you nervous and which you don't *have* to do. These usually involve approaching people under circumstances where they might reject you, like talking to a stranger at a party or inviting someone to hang out.

These situations create an *approach-avoidance conflict*. Certain factors make you want to do (approach) the behavior, like a desire to form meaningful relationships. Factors like a fear of being made fun of compel you to avoid doing the same thing. When you're at a distance, the approach factors are stronger. You don't feel as scared, and may even be eager to go ahead. As you get closer to doing the behavior, the avoidance factors kick in and often make you bail out at the last second. You may get stuck mentally when the two forces are in balance ("Okay, I'm feeling better. I'm going to talk to them. Here I go... Ah! Still too nervous! Okay, let me regroup...").

Here are some ways you can make yourself act.

Give yourself time to calm down

If you arrive at an event where you have the option of doing a scary social action, it often helps to take time to collect yourself and let your anxiety fade somewhat. For example, when you show up at a party, you may feel too nervous to join any conversations right away. However, if you're not too hard on yourself for being hesitant and give yourself a moment, you may soon build up the gumption to do it. This may require several cycles of "beginning to approach and bailing out at the last moment" before you finally go ahead, but if you're patient, you'll get there.

Dive in before you have time to think

This is the opposite of the "give yourself time" suggestion and can work if the optional behavior is only a little bit anxiety-inducing for you. After you arrive at the venue, start socializing before you have time for the avoidance factors to really kick in. For example, at a party, jump into a conversation with an unfamiliar group as soon as you put your coat away, if not before. Maybe that one interaction won't go perfectly, but at least you'll have some momentum.

Warm up socially

Warming up socially allows you to mentally shift from hanging out by yourself to being in a social frame of mind where you're comfortable engaging with others. You can warm up ahead of the event by socializing earlier in the day. At the event, you can have a few quick, easy interactions before tackling the ones that make you more nervous. For example, at an Internet meet-up, you could start by chatting to the friendly organizer you already know before trying to talk to someone you've never met. You could

continue the process by approaching some non-intimidating strangers and then moving on to more intimidating ones. (This is actually a condensed version of the gradual exposure process outlined in the next chapter.)

Force your hand a little

If you're close to being able to execute a behavior, this may be the final nudge you need. You could promise yourself a reward, like a nice meal, if you go through with it. You could tell a sympathetic friend you'll buy them a drink if you don't talk to anyone new at the pub that night. You could create a sense of urgency by telling yourself, "Okay, I have to leave this meet-up in half an hour, and I have to speak to at least one person before then." What will likely happen is that you'll still be scared for the next twenty-five minutes, but once you realize time is running out, you'll think, "Okay, it's now or never. I may as well just do it!" The time pressure takes away your ability to overthink things and not act.

Don't force yourself too much, however. You want to give yourself a gentle push, but still have it ultimately be your decision to act or not. A drink is one thing, but if you tell your friend with all seriousness that they can have your car if you don't start any conversations, it's not really a choice any longer. Any reasonable person would make themselves chat with someone new to save their car, even if they were a mess the entire time and could never do it on their own.

Build up some courage

You'll usually feel a bit rusty at the start of each event during which you want to perform the anxiety-producing behavior. Even if you've managed to do it in the past, some of your courage will have worn off, and you'll need to get the ball rolling again. The first few interactions you have will feel the creakiest, but then you'll settle back into your groove.

Don't be too tough on yourself

It's easy to beat yourself up for not being brave enough to follow through on an optional social behavior. You may feel like you're failing by hovering around a group at a pub, trying to work up the gumption to talk to them. It's not that big a deal. It's extremely typical for people to feel reluctant in these kinds of uncertain social situations.

Use the principles of gradual exposure to get comfortable with your fears in the longer term

The previous suggestions address how to get past your nerves after you're already in the setting where you want to do the optional behavior and you just need to go for it. In the longer term, the best way to get used to the things that make you nervous is to expose yourself to them gradually. The next chapter goes into detail about this.

7

Reducing Fears and Insecurities through Real-World Experiences

THE IDEAS IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS certainly help reduce counterproductive thinking. However, some beliefs are harder and will start to fade only when they've been overwritten by contradictory real-world experiences. Sometimes you'll have a fear or belief that you logically know is inaccurate, but it still *feels* true and limits your behavior.

In these cases, analyzing and debunking your thoughts isn't enough. For one, your mind won't give much weight to the conclusions you come to. It responds much more strongly to real-life evidence, and wrong or not, as far as your mind is concerned, it has past experiences that show the belief is reasonable. You may feel like you've successfully disarmed a belief, but it will often return. The other problem is that when you have a fear or insecurity, it can generate a nearly endless supply of worried thoughts. If you debunk some of them, new ones will just take their place (for example, if you're scared to talk to people at parties and defuse your worries about being made fun of, you may develop new ones about accidentally making someone angry).

The bulk of this chapter covers how to get used to the social situations that make you nervous. But first, it explains how real-world experiences can affect your mind-set about socializing and reduce insecurities and limiting beliefs that don't necessarily have a big anxiety component to them.

Knowing why you must gain firsthand experiences

Real-life feedback can overwrite unhelpful beliefs, but the process is gradual. Say you have the belief, “I’m boring and people don’t enjoy my company.” As you begin to polish your social skills, people will begin to show you that they like having you around. The first few times it happens, you’ll probably dismiss it as a fluke. As it keeps happening, you’ll tentatively start to accept that some people do like your company; you may adopt some more self-assured behaviors, but you’ll largely remain skeptical. With enough time, the way you see yourself will stop lagging behind your actual progress, and you’ll be able to see yourself in a more positive light. Some traces of the original insecurity may always remain, but should be easy enough to act against.

The process is the same for useful attitudes like “Don’t care too much about what other people think.” Again, you can’t instantly take on that mentality because you’ve read it’s good to have. On a deeper level, you may fear other people’s opinion of you. However, over many small occasions, you can choose to do things you want to do, but may draw some negative responses (for example, speaking up with a less-popular belief, wearing unconventional clothes). As you continually experience firsthand that acting that way has benefits and that you can handle the consequences, it slowly reinforces the importance of not being overly concerned with what other people think of you. (“When I made that edgy joke, one or two people made mildly uncomfortable faces, but it wasn’t so bad. Everyone else thought it was really funny. And it just felt good not to hold back my sense of humor like I always used to.”)

A common piece of social advice in this vein is to “Fake it ’til you make it.” That is, force yourself to act outwardly confident even though you don’t feel that sure of yourself deep down; then let the positive reinforcement that comes from your self-assured behavior build true confidence. This suggestion has limits. You may feel comfortable outwardly faking some

confident behaviors, but others will be too nerve-racking and too much of a leap from how you normally act. If you're really insecure, anxious, and socially inexperienced, you can't slip on the persona of someone who's highly confident just like that. However, you may be able to pull off smaller tasks, like introducing yourself to someone at your job when you otherwise would have taken a pass.

The importance of facing your fears

If a social situation really makes you nervous, you need to put yourself in it until you get comfortable with it. You may never be completely unfazed by the situation, but you can get to a point where your fear is low enough that it doesn't keep you from going after what you want.

Exposing yourself to a fear works because it overwrites your mind's association of *Situation-> Cue to get nervous*. However, to do that, you need to be around your fear long enough that you calm down and experience firsthand you'll be okay. If you briefly put yourself in contact with something scary, then bolt while you're still feeling nervous, your brain hasn't learned anything new.

When it comes to situations that make you only mildly uneasy, just knowing this may be enough to get you to start changing your behavior. For example, inviting people to hang out may make you mildly anxious to the point that if you live on autopilot, you'll default to not extending invitations to anyone. Once you're aware it's important to offer invites, it may be easy enough for you to take a deep breath and go through with it.

If you have a fear that's more intense, you need to be more strategic about facing it. Psychologists have found the most effective way to face a fear is to gradually expose yourself to it; this is called *exposure therapy*. You start with a milder variation of your fear, face that until you're comfortable with it, and then work your way up to more nerve-racking scenarios. You do the

exposure sessions frequently enough that you build up some courage momentum. For example, if you were afraid of standing on balconies, you would start on some lower floors and slowly work your way up (literally) to higher ones.

Facing your fears isn't as easy or tidy when it comes to social situations

It would be easy to face a fear of standing on high balconies in a way that's totally controlled and on your terms. Socializing is trickier. People aren't inanimate features of a building that you just have to be around to get used to. You have to interact with them, and their responses can be unpredictable. Your feelings toward them are more complex too. Most people's self-esteem isn't going to be affected that much if they don't like balconies, but your confidence can suffer if you can't socialize effectively.

It's also harder to design a tidy way to gradually face many social fears. The social situations you need to expose yourself to may not be available when you want them, or they may not last long enough or go well enough for you to experience the necessary relaxation and sense that things are under control. The progression from one step to the next may not be clear, creating unavoidable large increases in difficulty from one to the next. Real-life friends, classmates, and colleagues aren't robots that you can endlessly experiment with for your own purposes. This is not to say that facing your fears is pointless when it comes to socializing. The principles of gradual exposure are still very useful. The process of applying them is just messier, and it helps to know that going in.

How to face your bigger social fears gradually

With the background theory out of the way, here's a practical step-by-step guide to how you can slowly get used to the social situations that make you uncomfortable.

Be at a point where you're really ready to make changes

The approach outlined below is the easiest way to face your fears, but even then the process won't be effortless. Facing a fear gradually with the aid of coping skills will make the task as pleasant as it can be, but you're still going to voluntarily put yourself in situations that make you feel anxious. It will take a few months of steady work. So you need to be at a place where you're really motivated to overcome your fear. It's not unusual for someone to have a fear for years, but do nothing more than avoid the situations that scare them. Even if they hate how much their fear restricts their life, they still prefer that to the work and discomfort of getting over it.

Before facing any fears, get a handle on the distorted beliefs and thinking that contribute to your anxiety in social situations

This point is extremely important. If you try to face your fears but leave all of your counterproductive beliefs intact, you're not going to get far. You'll go into every encounter feeling like it's life or death. If it doesn't go well, according to your unrealistic standards, you'll come away with the wrong conclusions and feel even more dejected and discouraged. If an interaction doesn't go smoothly, you need to be able to put it in the proper perspective. Learn and get some practice applying the concepts in Chapter 5 first.

Following a process for facing your fears gradually

The general method for facing a fear is to break it down into a hierarchy from *Least Scary* to *Most Scary* variations, then regularly face the fears, beginning at the easiest tasks and working your way up to the tougher ones. You can use rewards and debriefing sessions to stay motivated and on track. Here's the process explained in detail:

Break your fear down into a hierarchy of Least Scary to Most Scary

variations

Here's an example using a fear of talking to new people at parties:

1. Go to a party and briefly nod and smile at several people.
2. Go to a party and ask several people a quick question, politely listen to their answer, and then excuse yourself from the conversation.
3. Go to a party and ask a friend to introduce you to several people.
4. Go to a party and introduce yourself to one person who seems friendly and approachable, and who you're not particularly concerned with impressing.
5. Go to a party and join a group of approachable people. Don't put pressure on yourself to wow them or say too much. The idea is just to join them.
6. Go to a party, join a group, and try to talk to them a bit more.
7. Go to a party and talk to someone who intimidates you somewhat, but whom you'd still like to get to know.
8. Go to a party and join a more intimidating group.

It's all right if not every step in the hierarchy constitutes a "proper" way to expose yourself to your fears—that is, you face it long enough that you no longer feel nervous. As long as a step is leading up to that, it's okay. For example, if you're afraid of going to nightclubs, just setting foot in one for a minute may be all you can handle at first. That's fine as long as you're using it as a jumping-off point to stay longer next time.

Similar fears can be tackled similarly

Social fears come in many forms, and some of them need to be tackled on a case-by-case basis. However, some fears are similar and can be faced in

similar ways, which is helpful if you experience variations of the same fear:

- Fears of being in a certain environment, like a party, a dance club, or a movie theater where you're seeing a film alone. In this case, your goal for each fear-facing session is to put yourself in that environment. Eventually you want to be able to stay there long enough that you start to calm down and realize that nothing bad is going to happen.
- Fears about certain types of interactions, like making conversation, approaching strangers, or inviting friends to hang out. The interactions themselves are often on the shorter side, so in each fear-facing session, you should try to carry them out multiple times. The first conversation you have might be nerve-racking, but the seventh may feel quite tolerable. Of course, this volume approach isn't always possible. If you shy away from inviting people out, you may not have enough friends and acquaintances to invite every time you want to practice facing that particular fear.

Practice less scary variations of your fear in several ways

When creating a hierarchy, you can come up with many easier variations on the situation you're ultimately afraid of:

- Do the same basic action as your fear, but a simpler, less intense version (for example, talking to someone approachable vs. someone you're more on edge around, going to a club on a slow weekday night vs. on a busy weekend).
- Do the same action as your fear, but cut it off early (for example, asking someone a quick question and making an excuse to leave vs. sticking around to talk, like you hope to do eventually).

- Do something different from, and easier than, your fear, but that brings up similar feelings (for example, instead of chatting to strangers at a music festival, chatting to shop clerks or asking people on the street for directions).
- Practice the exact thing you fear, but in a controlled, artificial setting (for example, role-playing assertiveness techniques with a therapist or in a social skills training group).

If you're very afraid of something, initial steps may be imagining yourself facing your fear or looking at pictures related to it.

It can also help to start dealing with other non-social fears you may have so you can build your confidence in your ability to overcome your anxieties (for example, facing a milder hesitation toward learning to drive).

Here are a few more examples of fear-facing progressions:

Feeling uncomfortable in nightclubs

1. Go to a non-intimidating, low-key pub in the afternoon on a slow day.
2. Go to a non-intimidating pub in the evening on a slow day.
3. Go to a non-intimidating pub at night on a slightly busy night.
4. Go to a non-intimidating pub at night on a busier night.
5. Go to a somewhat intimidating nightclub early in the evening on a slow night.
6. Go to a somewhat intimidating nightclub at night on a somewhat busy night.
7. Go to a somewhat intimidating nightclub at night when it's busy.
8. Go to a quite intimidating nightclub early in the evening on a slow night.

9. Go to a quite intimidating nightclub at night on a somewhat busy night.
10. Go to a quite intimidating nightclub at night when it's busy.

Feeling uneasy with speaking up in groups

Have several hierarchies going at the same time:

- Start with short, simple contributions and then work your way up to more lengthy, involved, or controversial ones.
- Start by speaking up in smaller groups, and build up to sharing in bigger ones.
- Start with groups that are low key and easy to chime in to, and work up to rowdier discussions where you have to be assertive to be heard.
- Start with friendly groups that don't scare you, and work up to speaking in ones that intimidate you more.



Work up to dropping your safety behaviors

Safety behaviors (see Chapter 3) get in the way of overcoming fears. Even if you successfully face a situation, in the back of your mind you can always reason, “Well, X is still dangerous. It was just the safety behavior that got me through it.” They keep you from realizing that your fear is manageable and that you can handle it without any help. If you use any safety behaviors and they seem to help you, by all means stick with them at first. But as you make more progress in facing your fears, try to drop them and go it alone.

Face the actual situation that scares you; doing zany, gutsy stunts won't

help much

Some people, when thinking about facing their social fears, say to themselves, “I’m generally afraid of rejection, so I’ll get over that fear by doing a bunch of outrageous things to mess with strangers and get shot down as hard as possible. If I can get used to going up to random people and acting like a chicken, then anything else, like talking to guests at a party, will be a cakewalk.”

It does take guts to act strangely around someone you don’t know, and it may help build your courage, but the carryover to more low-key, day-to-day social situations isn’t as big as you might think. When you’re purposely being odd and screwing with people, you know deep down that it’s just a lark. You’ll probably never see that person again, and you’re not putting the “real you” on the line. It’s not the same as approaching someone to make genuine conversation and knowing the other person is going to respond to your true personality and interpersonal skills.

Start facing your fears, beginning with the least scary items

The item in your hierarchy you decide to start with has to feel manageable. It should push your limits, but only a little. It’s okay if it makes you slightly hesitant and requires some willpower to face, but no more than that. If the thought of doing it makes you frozen and jittery, it’s too much for you to handle right now. You need to begin with something simpler. People often quit when facing their fears and then declare that the process doesn’t work because they jump straight to a step that’s too overwhelming. Ideally your starter task should feel so simple that you think, “This is too easy. Do I even need to do this? Maybe I should start with something harder.”

Only move up the ladder when you’re fully used to the previous step. “Used to” means it only causes you mild anxiety, and is even starting to feel mundane and boring. You may reach this point for some steps in a day. You

may have to stick to other steps for a few weeks. Don't be in a hurry to complete your hierarchy. There's no award for finishing quickly, especially if you rush so much that you don't really lock in your improvement.

The relevant thing is facing the fear, not the outcome of the interaction

When you're exposing yourself to a fear, your goal is to put yourself in a certain situation and get used to it. Don't worry about any other outcomes. If you want to get more comfortable chatting to people at parties, all that matters is that you're starting those interactions. For now, it's irrelevant if you weren't an enrapturing storyteller. If you want to get used to inviting people out, as long as you asked, it's unimportant whether they said yes or no.

Once you're on the scene, know some ways to get yourself to face your fear

When you've arrived at the situation where your fear is, you then have to take the step of actually confronting it. It's very common to get there and then hesitate for a good while before taking the plunge. The end of the previous chapter covered some ways to get yourself to act.

Once you're face-to-face with your fear, have ways to cope in the moment

Once you're facing your fear, you're going to feel anxious. You'll start to calm down if you stick around long enough, but until then, it helps to have some other ways to deal with your anxious symptoms. The previous chapter covered this as well.

Partial progress is an accomplishment too

It's important to give yourself credit for even partial progress toward facing a fear. For example, if you're fearful of talking to strangers at pubs, you may go out to several venues and not be able to talk to anyone for three

outings in a row. However, on the first night you were only 40 percent of the way there. On the second night you were 70 percent close, and 90 percent on the third. Maybe on the fourth night you finally did it. That interaction wouldn't have been possible without those other three sessions, which may have appeared to be failures if you only looked at them in more simplistic "either I talked to someone or I didn't" terms.

Debrief yourself after each exposure session

Each time you face your fear, it may bring up some counterproductive thinking, such as "That person thought I was a creep when I said hi to them. Why do I even bother? I'll never get the hang of this." You must not unquestionably swallow these thoughts, or you may set yourself further back than where you began. Use the principles from Chapter 5 to address that thinking properly.

Don't dissect only the insecure thoughts you had. Remind yourself of what went well too. Did you face the fear with a lot less hesitation compared to last time? Did you find yourself thinking in any constructive ways that helped you feel more confident? Build up a written record of your small and large successes.

Reward and congratulate yourself every step of the way

Every time you accomplish something listed in your hierarchy that you couldn't do before, you should give yourself a pat on the back and treat yourself. Your reward doesn't have to be anything big, just something that adds a little *oomph* to your day and caps off the sense of accomplishment you already feel. This is another effective behavioral psychology principle that makes the process easier. Something can seem less scary if you know a treat and sense of satisfaction are waiting for you on the other side.

You can also use rewards in different ways to motivate yourself: Specify

something you like doing (for example, checking your favorite websites), and then tell yourself you can't do that until you meet your fear-facing goals for the day. This approach can be extremely effective if you pick the right carrot for yourself. You'll find yourself sitting around thinking, "Man, I really want to play more of that game I just bought. I guess I'd better get out there and try talking to people." When you meet your daily objective, you'll be proud of yourself and looking forward to the fun activity you've earned.

Face your fears on a regular basis and work up your hierarchy

Map out a schedule for how you'll work through each subfear. Not every fear lends itself to daily practice, but you can improvise. You may not be able to go to a party six days a week, but you could pledge to practice starting conversations by going to some Internet meet-ups.

The more often you work on exposing yourself to your fears, the better, because it keeps the momentum going. Building up your courage is like exercising to increase your physical fitness. You'll tend to lose your courage "gains" if you leave too much time between exposure sessions. You may not lose your gains completely, but you'll lose enough that you'll have to take some extra time to regain the few steps you lost.

Don't think you're cured after facing a scarier fear one time

The first time you successfully face one of your bigger fears, you'll probably be over the moon. In your excitement, you may feel like you've solved all of your problems, but you've really only taken the first step. It's common for people to face their fear during one session and then get discouraged when they go out a few days later and find they're nervous all over again.

Facing your fear for the first time is a huge accomplishment, but you need

to repeatedly face it to solidify your progress. It's like lifting weights. If you want to be able to consistently move a certain amount, you have to regularly exercise with it. You'll often face your fear for the first time on a day when you're unusually confident, but then you'll find it takes more work to get to the point where you can reliably deal with it when your mood is more average. You have to face your fear again and again and again to overcome it.

You will hit snags

It's rare to plan out a fear hierarchy and effortlessly move up it. You have to be flexible and make adjustments as you go. You may find you have the order of the steps wrong. You could complete one rung and find the next step is too challenging, so you need to find a task to bridge the two.

It's also common to encounter an early step that is too hard to do once you're face-to-face with it, even if it seemed surmountable on paper. You'll need to add something more basic ahead of it. The key is not to get discouraged when these hiccups happen; just keep making tweaks so the overall project stays doable.

Finally, your progress may seem to slip at times. You may go out one day and face your fears easily, feel on top of the world, and then try again the next day but find you're nervous once more. When this happens, keep moving forward and focus on the overall improvements you're making. To use the exercise analogy again, when people take up strength training, they'll have the odd bad workout, even though they're getting stronger on the whole. This is completely normal.

If you conquer a fear and then go a long time without facing it, you'll probably regress

If you do regress, it will take work to get your courage back, though it will

come much quicker than the first time. Once more, it's like exercising. It's always easier to get back into shape than to get fit from scratch. A common scenario is for someone to work to overcome their social fear, go on to achieve their other interpersonal goals, and then "get out of shape" because they no longer need to deal with the old challenge. For example, someone with fears around initiating conversations and inviting people out gets comfortable with those skills, makes a bunch of friends, and no longer needs to meet anyone new. If they want to freshen up their social circle years down the road, they may find they're nervous about approaching people again.

8

Increasing Your Self-Esteem and Confidence

LOW SELF-CONFIDENCE LIES at the root of many people's shyness, social anxiety, and insecurities. This chapter addresses the most important points for improving your self-confidence (aside from the concepts that have already been covered, like how to dispute counterproductive thoughts) by covering two concepts that both fall under the term "self-confidence." The first is core self-esteem, which is your overall assessment of your worth as a person. The second is how self-assured, competent, and brave you feel in specific social situations—your situational confidence (for example, "I feel confident about how I'll do at the party tonight").

Having high self-esteem gives you strengths that will override aspects of shyness, anxiety, insecurity, and pessimism. People with high self-esteem feel good about themselves and what they have to offer, are more optimistic and more prepared to take risks, and are better able to tolerate uncertainty, discomfort, and rejection. Their positive feelings about themselves are stable and come from within, and their emotions don't constantly go up and down based on outside factors, like whether enough people smiled at them in the hallway that day. Having a healthy level of self-esteem does not mean being arrogant, boastful, and entitled. That mentality is damaging and may be an indication of deeper feelings of inferiority; it's not true self-esteem at all.

Having situational confidence is similarly helpful. You'll feel calmer and surer of yourself, you'll perform better, you'll have an easier time putting yourself out there, and you'll tend to make a better impression on others.

Ways to increase your core self-esteem

There's no one path to increasing your core self-esteem. Rather there are many things you can do that add up to feeling more sure of yourself.

Practice self-acceptance and realize it's okay to be a normal, less-than-perfect person

The foundation of good self-esteem is realizing you're okay the way you are. People sometimes imagine that if they had high self-esteem, they'd feel cocksure and amped up all the time, but having good self-esteem feels more like a deep, solid level of comfort with yourself. You're aware of your personality traits and quirks, your strengths and weaknesses, your successes and failures, and you're fine with the overall package they create. The following factors play into being self-accepting:

- **Realizing that it's all right to be a regular human who makes mistakes and isn't perfect.** Everyone gets things wrong sometimes, and it doesn't mean they're broken through and through.
- **Setting realistic standards for yourself and letting go of perfectionism.** People with low self-esteem sometimes believe they won't be able to feel good about themselves unless they become an overachieving superhuman who's the complete opposite of how they are now.
- **Being nice and compassionate to yourself.** Accepting yourself means being on your own side. If you mess up, you can look at the situation with an understanding eye, rather than tearing into yourself.

People are sometimes wary about the idea of being self-accepting. Being self-accepting doesn't mean you have to condone or approve of everything you do wrong or embrace all your flaws. However, when you do make a

mistake, you don't need to disown everything about yourself. But don't think you need to abandon all desire to change or improve yourself either. Instead, acknowledge that there are areas in your life you'd benefit from working on. The well-known saying is "You're fine the way you are... and there's always room for improvement." When you accept yourself, personal development is something you choose to do because you see how it will add to your life, instead of viewing it as something you *have* to do to stay a few steps ahead of your supposed intrinsic shamefulness.

Similarly, being more self-accepting doesn't mean you'll become content in your rut and lose all desire to grow and achieve. If something is truly important to you, you'll still go after it. It's human nature to keep moving forward. However, you may find yourself losing interest in goals that were mostly a means of gaining faux self-esteem. For example, someone might retain their desire to become an artist because it makes them happy to develop their creative potential, but be less motivated to own an expensive wardrobe, because they didn't want it for anything other than to impress people.

Question the negative messages you've internalized about your value as a person

A core reason people develop low self-esteem is that at some point in their lives, they came to believe they were fundamentally defective. Usually this is because of messages they received and took to heart when they were young and impressionable. Kids can pick up these messages from the people they're closest to, either by hearing their words directly or through interpretations of their behavior (for example, a father has a horrible temper, and his children take it to mean there's something wrong with them).

The messages can also take the form of ubiquitous, taken-for-granted cultural values about what it means to be a worthwhile person. However,

many of these messages are inaccurate and harmful. When several are taken together, they often suggest that there's something wrong with anyone who doesn't fit the standard mold. Here are a few cultural messages related to socializing:

- There's something wrong with you if you're not effortlessly socially savvy.
- There's something wrong with you if you're not naturally sociable and like spending time alone.
- There's something wrong with you if you feel shy or unsure of yourself in social situations.
- There's something wrong with you if you don't have a giant group of friends.
- There's something wrong with you if you have quirky, non-mainstream interests.
- There's something wrong with you if you don't always act like a traditional man or woman.

Here are few cultural messages not necessarily related to socializing that cause many people problems:

- You're not a worthwhile person unless you achieve a ton in your life.
- You're not worthwhile as a person unless you earn a certain salary.
- You're not a worthwhile person unless you have a professional, white-collar job.
- You're not worthwhile as a woman unless you get married and start a family.
- You're not worthwhile as a man unless you've had a lot of sexual conquests.

These messages are wrong and potentially damaging. No one's intrinsic worth is lower because they don't meet some random societal criteria. Someone isn't automatically inferior just because they don't have a lot of friends or the right job. Is a doctor who has devoted her life to operating on premature infants a "loser" just because she sometimes feels shy at parties? Of course, you may want to have more friends or a higher paying career, and you recognize the advantages they provide, but that's different from believing you're an inherent failure for not acquiring them.

Whatever negative messages they received, people with low self-esteem believe them in a very strong, unthinking way. You can bolster your self-esteem if you identify, question, discredit, and stop living by the negative statements you follow. Some of them will stop affecting you as soon as you stop and think about them for a few minutes. Others will be harder to shake.

Many socializing-related messages are so entrenched that they just *feel* right. If you had a particularly rough childhood, you may need to see a counselor or support group to dismantle the negative core beliefs about your value as a person that were instilled during your upbringing. If you're younger, you may also need to gain more life experience and perspective before you can accept that certain ideas aren't true (for example, when you're still in high school, it can seem like your life hinges on your social status. Once you're older, you can look back and see how overemphasized it was).

Gain self-esteem through your actions, behaviors, and accomplishments

A contradiction lies at the heart of self-esteem: On one hand, everyone has inherent value that doesn't depend on their actions or accomplishments. Self-esteem comes from within. It's not something other people bestow on you or a prize you earn after you've achieved enough to prove to the world

that you're worthy.

On the other hand, self-esteem is partially affected by how you behave. It gauges whether you're living in a way that's important to you. If your life is not in a place you want it to be, your self-esteem will decrease. However, you can change your behaviors to boost it.

Make improvements in the areas where you're unhappy

Your self-esteem is affected negatively when you know you're missing something vital. One of these missing pieces could be poor social skills. They could also be problems in other spheres, like your finances, health, or career. Whatever your issues are, you should feel better about yourself once you get them under control. Doing so will take time because you can't make sweeping changes to your life in a few days. Though if you've been directionless and discouraged, just having a basic action plan for how you're going to start working on your problems may lift your self-esteem a bit.

It can be tricky to approach this point with the right mentality. Above all else, you should try to develop a foundation of core self-acceptance and a belief system that's reasonably free of harmful messages. Without a solid belief in yourself, you'll approach your weaker areas with the unconscious mentality of, "I'm worthless at my core. I'll cancel that truth by getting a lot of people to like me / succeeding in my field / making a lot of money." That mind-set may allow you to achieve a lot, and you may even temporarily feel better, but the confidence it creates is fragile and short-lived.

You need to directly address your core lack of self-esteem. You can't cover it up and compensate for it through outside sources of validation. This is not to say you should put all of your goals on hold until you become 100 percent self-accepting. Try to cultivate your goals at the same time as you work on accepting yourself.

Live a life based on core self-affirming practices

Your self-esteem monitors whether you're living a life based on certain key practices and then adjusts itself accordingly.

Practices that raise self-esteem:

- thinking and being responsible for yourself and choosing your own path through life
- living a life based on your own values, even when you encounter resistance
- showing the world your true self, even if not everyone responds well to it
- treating yourself with respect and standing up for your rights
- living constructively (for example, exercising regularly, trying to form meaningful social relationships, managing your finances)
- doing work and creating things that are meaningful and important to you

Opposing practices that will lower self-esteem:

- blindly following other people's ideas about how you should live
- breaking or selling out your deepest values (for example, valuing self-sufficiency, but purposely mooching off your family members)
- hiding your true self in order to gain approval from others
- letting others walk all over you
- living destructively (for example, abusing drugs, isolating yourself even though you want human contact, constantly wasting money)
- not doing work that feels meaningful to you

You could argue that principles like these are hardwired into people,

though everyone varies in which ones they emphasize. For example, one person may feel a strong pull to have a personally fulfilling career and lose self-esteem if they're doing something just to pay the bills. Someone else may be happy to take any old job and put more importance on thinking for themselves. Living by these standards takes consistent work, and it's easy to unintentionally stray off course. Not perfectly fulfilling them doesn't mean you're a failure.

Work to develop positive traits

You'll feel a greater sense of self-esteem if you have some things going for you. Take time to develop your existing positive traits, or work to attain new ones. This could involve trying to cultivate certain aspects of your personality or learning a new skill. However, developing these characteristics only works if it's frosting on top of a deeper positive view of yourself. You can't just pile up a bunch of talents to smother a core sense of self-loathing.

Take on challenges and accomplish goals you set for yourself

You can't help but feel more confident if you've had some successes. The goals you choose to pursue will vary based on what's important to you. Challenging yourself also increases your feelings of self-efficacy, that is, the sense that you're generally competent and flexible, and can handle what life throws at you.

Create an environment that supports your self-esteem

All else being equal, who's likelier to have good self-esteem: someone who works a degrading job and whose "friends" and partner constantly belittle them, or someone who has supportive, encouraging people in their life? On one level, your self-esteem shouldn't depend on what other people think

about you. You should be able to brush aside the inaccurate, hurtful things they say. On another level, you're human, and if you're constantly undermined and insulted, it can't help but drag you down. Try to improve or discard your toxic relationships, and seek out friends who make you feel good about yourself.

Use short-term self-esteem boosts when appropriate

Some suggestions for raising your self-esteem provide only a short-lived boost to your mood. Sometimes you just want to cheer yourself up, though, so there's nothing wrong with using them for the occasional pick-me-up. Here are some ideas:

- Take time to remind yourself of your positive traits and accomplishments.
- Say some positive affirmations (for example, "I love and approve of myself," "I have many strengths").
- Demonstrate happier, more confident body language.
- Dress up and make yourself look nice.
- Do something to treat yourself.

However, although quick mood-boosters help superficially, you can't just up the dosage to improve your core self-esteem, no more than swallowing more painkillers will heal a broken wrist. You have to use them in moderation. If you don't, the techniques will be a waste of time or become unhealthy habits. The methods above are harmless, but have diminishing returns if you do them too often.

There are two other techniques that are fine in small doses but unhealthy if taken too far. The first is comparing yourself to people who are worse off than you and realizing you don't have it so bad. Doing this frequently will get you in the habit of tearing others down in order to feel better about

yourself. The second is seeking reassurance or compliments from others. Overuse will make you needy and dependent on others to shore you up.

Increasing your self-confidence in particular social situations

If you have solid overall self-esteem, it can trickle down into your situational social confidence. The two don't always go together, though. Some people are very successful and confident at aspects of socializing, but don't think much of themselves deep down. Other people feel good about themselves on the whole, but still feel anxious and out of their depth in specific social situations.

Situational confidence comes in two flavors. When you're situationally confident, you're feeling one or both of two mental states. The first is a calm, logical knowledge that you have the ability to handle yourself in those circumstances. The second is a bold, psyched-up feeling.

Feeling calmly confident about your capabilities

When you're truly confident in your ability to succeed in a specific situation, you know you can perform well the same way you know the sky is blue. You have a well-tested skillset or some other reliable advantage. Your certainty comes from a string of past successes. This kind of confidence has to be earned.

When you feel confident in this way, you have a realistic sense of what you're capable of and believe your tools are good enough to complete the job. You don't necessarily think you're the best in the world; you're just as good as you need to be. If you've only been playing tennis for three years, you'd still feel calmly sure you could beat someone who's never held a racket. It doesn't mean you never feel nervous or unsure of yourself going

into a situation. However, underneath those natural emotions is a current of “I’ll be fine. I’ve done this sort of thing a million times before. It usually works out. And when it doesn’t, I can bounce back.”

You can build this confidence in an area you’re weaker at through small successes. If you’re a beginner, you can’t skip to having the assuredness of an expert overnight. Instead, embrace your newbie status, learn the basics, and then feel confident that you know them, and that you’ll know even more if you keep working at it. For example, if you’re learning to make conversation with people at meet-up events, you may realize you can’t have a long, engaging discussion with everyone you talk to, but you can feel confident that you’ve gotten the hang of introducing yourself and initiating interactions.

Feeling psyched

In contrast to feeling calmly assured about your abilities, the confidence that comes from feeling psyched is very emotion-based. When you’re experiencing it, you feel charged up and notice how unusually confident you are. When you’re certain you’ll do well, you feel dry, logical confidence; if you know success is a given, there’s no need to get emotional about it. Psyched-up confidence is more likely to show up ahead of events where you’re not so sure of the outcome. An untested beginner could experience psyched-up confidence, but so could a veteran going into an unusually tough or high-stakes situation. It’s like your mind is trying to amp you up so you can face the challenges ahead.

The big problem with this variety of confidence is that although it does improve your courage and performance, it’s fleeting and unreliable. If it always appeared when needed, that would be great, but it usually doesn’t happen that way. There’s no consistent technique to bring out that psyched feeling on command. However, you may occasionally have success with the

following methods:

- trying to psych yourself up physically, maybe by listening to driving music, jumping around, yelling, or pounding your chest
- listening to a passionate motivational speech or giving yourself a pep talk
- joking around with people to try to get yourself in a loose, playful mood
- trying to reframe the situation so it will seem easier or lower-stakes (for example, thinking of the situation as a potential learning experience, not your one shot at making friends)
- trying to find a piece of practical information that will make you more likely to succeed, and therefore feel surer of yourself (for example, a conversation topic that you know will go over well with the crowd you'll be meeting)
- getting other people to pump up and encourage you

Even if these techniques work, they tend to have strong diminishing returns. What fires you up the first time never seems to work as well again. If a situation makes you unconfident, it makes you unconfident, and there's no foolproof short-term method to get around that.

Chasing psyched-up confidence often sidetracks people. They normally feel unsure and skittish in a situation and don't perform well in it, but every so often, for whatever reason, they get charged up and do much better than they normally would. They understandably begin to see that temporary emotional state as the key to their success, and they think there's no point in trying unless they're fired up. Because there's no way to conjure this feeling at will, they end up wasting their time and energy looking for that one surefire psych-up technique. If you want to become more consistently confident in an area, you have to put in the time and effort to build your

skills. If you do find yourself feeling psyched up, by all means take advantage of it, but don't depend on it.

A couple of disclaimers about the task of building confidence

When you're trying to build your confidence, whether it's of the self-esteem or situational variety, there are some things you should keep in mind:

Don't feel you have to get your confidence to a super-high level before you can work on anything else

Having confidence is undoubtedly useful. However, some people get sidetracked while working on their social skills by thinking they should solve their confidence issues first. You can do quite a lot to improve your social prospects without having rock-solid confidence. By all means, work on your self-esteem, but don't put everything else on hold.

Having confidence isn't the only thing you need to be socially successful

A lot of advice on self-confidence has the underlying message that having a better opinion of yourself is the key to success. At times, being more self-confident will improve how you act and come across around people. On other occasions, your success will depend more on having particular skills, like knowing how to make appropriate contributions to a conversation. When you have the ability or traits to get the job done, you often don't need to be especially confident. If you know how to organize a group outing, it won't matter if you're filled with self-doubt while you make a plan and invite everyone. Unless your insecurities are obvious and off-putting, they won't get in the way of your organizing efforts.

Your situational confidence can't jump too far ahead of your actual

abilities

In that sense that social success is at least partially tied to confidence, people sometimes think they can increase their interpersonal skills by becoming as confident as possible first. That's not possible because your skills or previous track record and confidence in an area are tied together. If you know your skills rate a two out of ten, you can't make yourself feel eight-out-of-ten confidence in your ability to perform. Think of it as if you're building two small towers side by side, and you can only add to the height of one when you're working from the top of the other.

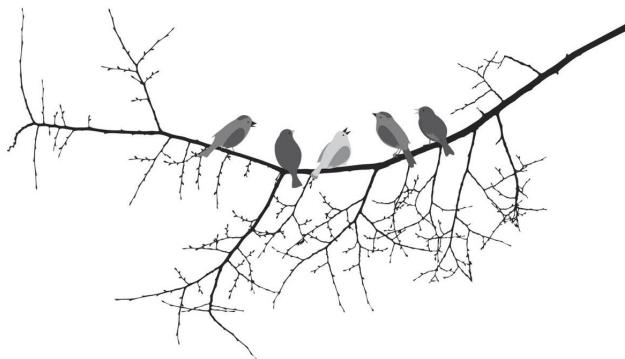
There's no quick or easy way to gain a lot of confidence

Sometimes when a person asks, "Can I just improve my self-confidence in order to be better with people?" they not only want the two to be connected, but they hope that gaining confidence is quicker and simpler than improving their interpersonal skills; by focusing on confidence, they hope to find a shortcut to changing their social situation. It doesn't work that way. Confidence has to grow slowly over time. Any attempt to increase it quickly will only result in a short-lived psyched-up feeling. We'd all be super-confident if all it took was reading a few inspirational quotes.

SECTION

2

Developing Your Conversations Skills



In this section

- Some general strategies for making conversation
- Tips on how to succeed at the stages of a typical one-on-one conversation
- Advice on dealing with different types of conversation, such as group discussions and mingling at parties
- Three core skills that will improve your conversations: empathy, listening, and understanding nonverbal communication
- Suggestions on cultivating a few important broader personality traits that will make you more enjoyable to be around

9

Getting a Basic Feel for Conversations

CONVERSATIONS TAKE WORK. Even people who are naturally outgoing and seemingly can talk to anyone occasionally get tongue-tied. So if you don't feel comfortable making conversation, you're not alone. Because they require you to think on the spot, your conversations are where the skills part of "social skills" really comes into play. How well your interactions go depends on three factors:

1. How comfortable and confident you feel in them: If you're anxious and insecure (the topic of Section 1), that can interfere with your conversations in all the ways outlined in Chapter 3. Shyness is many people's biggest obstacle to having good interactions. Their conversations are relaxed and flowing when they speak to someone they're used to, but when they get intimidated or self-conscious, their skills break down.
2. Your technical ability to make conversation: Technical ability includes your capacity to come up with things to say, your level in skills like listening and empathy, your body language, your knowledge of appropriate topics for a given situation, and so on. This section focuses on these skills and more.
3. Your overall personality, interests, values, and opinions: The choices you make in your interactions flow out of who you are as a person. You could be very comfortable around people and always able to think of things to talk about, but if you're abrasive and condescending and have a bunch of offensive opinions, your

interactions aren't going to go very well. The line between conversation skills and personality traits is fuzzy (if you're argumentative, that's a negative trait, but also a poor conversational style). Chapters 21 – 23 touch on some personality traits.

When people have trouble making conversation, one of their biggest complaints is that they “just don’t know what to talk about” or that they “always run out of things to say.” This chapter gives you some broad suggestions for keeping your interactions going.

A few reminders about social interactions

As you work on improving your conversation skills, keep these points in mind:

- You can't make every interaction go well. You won't have enough in common with everyone you meet, and sometimes the other person will be in a grouchy mood. On occasion, you'll begin talking to someone who's initially unfriendly and win them over with your rapport-building skills, but it's not realistic to expect to do this every time. Even if you became the most charismatic person in the world, a percentage of your conversations would not go well because some people would feel jealous or intimidated around you. You can't win them all.
- There's no single right way to make conversation. Every person you talk to is different, and your conversations with them can go in any number of directions and still be a success. When someone asks you a question over coffee, it's not a test where you have to figure out the one “correct” response.
- Advice on interacting with people has to be general by nature. No

book can tell you exactly what to say in every situation. You'll need to take the broad principles and fit them to the social culture and specific interaction you're in.

No matter what kind of conversation you find yourself having, the ideas in the rest of this chapter should give you a better idea of what to say in them. When you naturally get along with someone and the conversation flows effortlessly, many of the processes below happen automatically. Using them more deliberately will help you in the interactions where the words don't come as easily.

Clarify your goals for the conversation

If the average person was placed in the cockpit of a fighter jet and told to go through the start-up sequence and take off as quickly as possible, they'd sit there dumbly because they wouldn't have the first idea of where to begin. Some people go blank in conversations for the same reason. They find themselves speaking to someone and know they need to "make good conversation," but they aren't sure what to do beyond that. It's much easier to talk to people when you have a rough idea of where you should try to take the interaction. If you find yourself blanking, you can quickly remind yourself of one of the goals, and that should help you think of something to say.

Goals of day-to-day socializing

If someone says they have trouble making conversation, they usually mean they aren't good at the kinds of day-to-day interactions that are social for their own sake (if they have to give directions to their house, they're fine in that conversation). The quintessential example of this is having to make friendly chit-chat at a cocktail party. These kinds of interactions have one or

more of the following broader unwritten goals:

Goal #1: Have an interaction that's rewarding for everyone involved

A conversation that engages everyone might include discussing a movie everyone is interested in, joking around about a series of silly topics, connecting over a shared experience, exchanging insights about a philosophical question, having a friendly debate about a political issue, or just enjoying one another's company for two minutes as you chat about nothing in particular. That doesn't mean every second has to be engrossing for each person, just that overall everyone is getting something out of the exchange. Sometimes you'll give the other person an opportunity to discuss a topic that's a bit more interesting for them, and they'll do the same for you.

This all seems obvious, but if you have trouble with conversations, you can forget they're supposed to be enjoyable and only see them as verbal obstacle courses. If your only concern is to keep an interaction going so you don't seem awkward, it can land you in discussions you don't get much out of ("Man, this topic is boring...but at least I haven't caused any awkward silences"). Don't passively drift along in your conversations. It's okay to push them in a direction you think you and your partners will enjoy.

Goal #2: Learn about the other person and try to find common ground

This is more clearly a goal when you've first met someone, but even if you've known someone forever, there's always more to discover about each other. Learning about someone shows your interest in getting to know them, and it allows you to get a sense of how much you have in common and if they could be compatible for a closer relationship. You'll also tend to grow that little bit closer to someone when you find out you have similarities.

Goal #3: Share things about yourself with the other person

You want to learn about the other person, but they also want to know what you're all about. You should share your interests, personality, sense of humor, values, and what you've been up to lately. As long as you're also allowing the other person to contribute to the discussion, it's not self-absorbed to reveal yourself this way. Your conversation partners want to know what makes you tick.

Goal #4: Show you're a reasonably friendly, sociable person

When you talk to someone, come across as if you like talking to them, not as if you're aloof and feel put upon for having to speak with them.

Here's an example of how being aware of broad goals can guide your conversations: Say you're talking to a new student in your art class. If the conversation hits a lull, you could think, "Okay, one general goal is to learn about them. I'll ask them what else they're interested in aside from drawing," or "I can share something about myself. I'll quickly explain how I've felt about the class," or "What would make for an interesting topic to discuss? I'll ask them if they've been to the new exhibit at the art gallery. Maybe after that we can talk about what kind of art we each like."

Aside from those general goals, many social conversations have more specific goals. Here are a few examples:

- If you know the person already, catch each other up on what you've been up to since you last saw each other (for example, events in your life, fun or interesting things you've done, current topics that are on your mind).
- If you run into a coworker in the break room, have a brief, pleasant interaction to show you're a friendly person and a team player.
- Talk about a topic predetermined by the situation, like discussing what else you've been reading before your book club meeting starts.

Tune in to what each person wants out of the interaction

Every individual brings their idiosyncratic goals to each conversation or to smaller sections of it. For example, maybe they're curious to hear the details of how your job interview went, they want you to be impressed with them as they recount their recent trip overseas, or they hope you'll validate their feelings as they tell you about a rough time they went through last week. If you can tune in to their objectives, it gives you more information about where you could steer the exchange. Chapter 16, which covers empathy, goes into detail about how to take on other people's perspectives.

Be aware of any personal goals you have that might harm the conversation

We sometimes want things out of conversations that serve our own needs, but getting them would make the interaction less enjoyable for everyone else. For example, "I want to make everyone feel dumber than me" or "I want my jokes to get a bunch of laughs, and that's more important than what anyone else has to say."

Another more innocuous personal goal to be wary of is "I want to keep this conversation going as long as possible." If you're just getting the hang of keeping interactions afloat, this is a reasonable thing to aim for, but it's not appropriate in every situation. Your social worth isn't based on being able to talk to anyone for the maximum length of time. If you met someone you had nothing in common with, maybe you could have a long interaction if you faked an interest in their hobbies and told them exactly what they wanted to hear about everything. But after the exchange was over you might look back and realize you go nothing out of it.

Go in with an overall approach for making conversation

The approaches below often come naturally to good conversationalists. You can use the same strategies more deliberately. Having a broad game plan can help because it simplifies and clarifies what you have to think about, gives you the confidence that comes from knowing you’re using a method that works, and provides some reliable, simple starting material so you can practice. It’s good to have several approaches ready to go, and if one doesn’t work, you can try another. You can also switch up broad approaches within a single conversation as it evolves. You don’t have to apply only one strategy to every person or situation.

The broad conversation goals that were covered earlier in the chapter are one way to give yourself some direction (“I’m going to ask about their interests and try to find one we have in common,” “My grandpa is interested to know what I’ve been up to lately, so I’ll focus on telling him what’s been new in my life since I last saw him”). Here are some other approaches you can use:

Approach #1: Be interested in and curious about other people, and make it your goal to find out what’s fascinating and unique about them

This is the most popular general approach you’ll hear people mention when it comes to making conversation. It comes up again and again, going back to classic books on people skills like *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The idea is primarily to be someone who asks questions and listens to the answers, which leads to focusing the discussion on the other person. Your “mission” in the conversation is to discover what makes the other person interesting.

You don’t need to only listen to or talk about the other person the entire time; you should bring up things about yourself and share your own opinions when relevant. Generally focus the conversation on your partner, but not to the point where you share nothing about yourself and become a

forgettable nonentity that just helps other people talk.

The underlying assumption about this approach is that everyone's favorite subject is themselves, and that people like someone who takes a genuine interest in them and the things they have to say. People also tend to feel good about a conversation in which they can talk about aspects of themselves that they're proud of and passionate about. Another line you'll often hear in regard to this strategy is that you'll be more successful taking an interest in other people than you will be by trying to get them interested in you.

This approach predisposes you to adopt a positive, friendly frame of mind. Its basic premise implies that everyone is worth talking to if you dig past any preconceptions you may have of them. And because you're likely to find something interesting about the other person if you look for it, it ends up being a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Approach #2: Talk in terms of the other person's interests

Focusing on the other person's interests is similar to the approach above, in that you're mainly listening and the conversation is based around the other person and things they like discussing. This approach is not exactly the same. The approach above is more general and is about finding people's good traits, whatever they may be. This one is more about specifically trying to find out what the other person is interested in talking about, whether it's a hobby or a life decision they're wrestling with, and centering the conversation on that. You take an interest in their interest, ask thoughtful questions, and listen as they tell you about it.

The limitations of being an interested listener

Both of these listening / other-person-centric approaches can work very well and are essential to have in your toolbox. At the same time, their effectiveness is sometimes oversold. They're not the perfect, one-size-fits-all conversation cheat codes they can be portrayed as. Sometimes you'll run into people who

- don't want to do most of talking because they're shy, private, have been told it's rude to go on about themselves, or are bored of talking about their own lives;
- want to learn about you instead;
- like talking about their passions, but only with other knowledgeable enthusiasts, not anyone they have to explain the basics to;
- are self-absorbed and will use you as a prop that gives them permission to go on about themselves;
- are trying to use this strategy themselves and will be reluctant to take the spotlight; or
- will enjoy your interest and having a chance to talk about the things they like, but won't automatically want to befriend you just because of it.

Also, you can't use this approach as easily in group conversations because they're not about focusing on one person.

Approach #3: Figure out what topics you have an easy time talking about, and then try to steer the conversation in that direction

Having a conversation about your own interests is considered a more self-

centered approach. It's generally thought of as better form to focus on the other person or have your contributions be equal. However, this strategy may help you organize your thoughts and simplify how you approach an interaction. If you're just starting to get the hang of conversation, you may be most comfortable expounding on a topic in your comfort zone. In reasonable doses, it's perfectly fine to try to talk about the things you enjoy. You just have to be sensitive to other people and take care not to bore them or monopolize the air space.

Know how to ask good questions and make good statements

To use a common analogy, having a conversation with someone is like working with them to rally a tennis ball back and forth. When it's your turn to hit the ball, you don't want to send them weak or difficult shots they have to scramble to return. When it's your turn to speak and you want to continue the conversation, you have to say something that will give the other person enough to work with. At the most basic level you can:

- Ask them a question, which directly calls on them to contribute.
- Make a statement of your own, which will hopefully lead them to think of something they want to say in response.

Questions

Questions can ask for new information ("So what are you taking in school?", "How was the show last night?") or ask for more details about something the other person has said ("You're studying business? What drew you to that field?", "No way! Then what did you do?"). Aside from allowing you to get more information, they also show your interest in the

other person and let you direct where the conversation will go.

As much as you can, you want to ask open-ended questions rather than easy-to-answer closed-ended ones. Open-ended questions require an answer of a couple of sentences; closed-ended questions can be answered with one or two words. Closed-ended questions can stall a conversation because the other person may respond with only a yes or a no, or something like “It’s good.” A quick example of an open vs. closed question would be asking someone what they think of their college major (open), rather than asking if they simply like it (closed).

It’s hardly a fatal error if you ask a close-ended question. Sometimes you’ll want to know the answer to a question that’s simple to reply to, or it will be all you can think to say at that moment. Just be aware that you may not get a good answer and will need to have another contribution ready to go (for example, “Did you have fun on vacation?”, “Yep.”, “Good to hear. What would you say was the highlight?”).

Statements

A statement could be an answer to a question, an opinion, an observation, some information, or sharing something relevant that happened to you. The main guideline when making statements is that you want to say something with enough substance or “jumping-off points” to provide your conversation partner with plenty of ideas about what they could say next. If you’re answering a question, provide enough details.

Rather than saying that you liked a movie, give a few reasons why. Rather than quickly replying that your weekend was fun, mention something you did. Let your interests, values, and personality show. You won’t always know what to say, and it’s fine if you sometimes have to give short, sparse answers. However, if you give too many, it puts too much pressure on the other person to keep the interaction alive. This isn’t to say you need to go

on for a full minute every time it's your turn to speak. You can offer your partner plenty of jumping-off points in a meaningful sentence or two.

Mini-questions, statements, or facial expressions that encourage the other person to keep talking

If the person is talking about something they're interested in, you don't necessarily have to come up with an elaborate reply when they pause to let you speak. You may just need to make a quick little utterance that tells them, "I'm listening. Keep going," or "Here's my reaction to what you just said. Continue." Some examples are "Hm", "Uh huh... uh huh...", "Oh yeah?", "Go on...", "Ha ha, no way...", "Yep, that's something he'd do." Sometimes you don't even have to speak; you can just laugh, look sad, or look surprised at the appropriate moment and let the person continue what they were saying.

Mixing up questions and statements

In most conversations, you'll want to use a mix of questions and statements. If you ask someone question after question, it can create an interview or interrogation dynamic or cause a lopsided exchange where one person feels they're doing all of the sharing about themselves while the other remains a cipher. Sharing too many of your own statements may make you seem like you're not interested in the other person and their opinions, and simply want someone to talk at. Even if your responses have substance, if you only answer another person's questions but never ask any of your own, it can put too much pressure on them to keep driving the interaction forward. That too can make you seem like you're indifferent to learning anything about them.

Some types of discussions will naturally feature more questions or statements. If you're talking to someone about a mutual interest, you'll tend to make a lot of statements to each other as you share your opinions and

information. If you're getting to know someone or listening and helping them work through a tricky issue, you may mostly be asking questions when it's your turn to speak.

Get better at noticing the possible jumping-off points in the statements people make

Not everything you say has to directly tie in to the sentence made right before. However, if you pay attention to what the other person says, their statements can give you a lot of ideas. For example, if someone says, "My weekend at the cottage was fun. I went jet skiing for the first time," some possible jumping off points are:

- **Weekend:** Talk about how your own weekend was. "Oh, that sounds fun. I stayed in town and went to a concert this weekend."
- **Cottage:** "Oh cool. Was the cottage more isolated, or on a busier lake? Whose cottage is it, your family's or a friend's?"
- **Jet skiing:** "Wow, I've never done that. How'd you find it?" or "I remember doing that as a kid. The newer models must be way more fun. How was it?"
- **First time jet skiing:** "I remember the first time I ever drove a boat up at the cottage..."

There's no single correct response in this example, so any of these statements or questions, or other ones, could be valid ways to continue the conversation. Sometimes people will set up obvious jumping-off points for you because they have something they want to talk about, but don't want to launch right into it without gauging your interest. For example, they'll say, "Man, the weirdest thing happened to me at the music festival..." You just have to say, "Oh yeah? What happened?" and they'll tell you.

Ask the other person their thoughts on the question or topic you were just talking about

You can't build a whole conversation on this technique, but it's simple to use and can help you here and there if you're at a loss for words. Its most basic form is to ask someone the question they just asked you (for example, after telling them about your hobbies, you ask what they do for fun). If you give your opinion and observations on an issue first, then after you're done, you can ask them what their thoughts are.

Realize you have more to talk about than you may think

People who have trouble with conversation sometimes say they have nothing to talk about and they know they're boring because all they do is work or play video games. Everyone has more topics they can talk about than they think. Even if most of your time is taken up by one activity, you still watch the odd movie, catch bits of the news, or have funny little things happen to you as you go about your day. You have your unique perspective and opinions on all of them. You have thoughts on your dreams for the future, your family, current events, larger philosophical questions, what it's like to live in your city, what type of cereal tastes the best, what cats are like as pets, and on and on and on. Don't unnecessarily dismiss an idea for conversation with, "Well, sure, I have an opinion on that, but no one wants to hear it, so it doesn't count." Any of them could potentially be interesting in the right context.

Don't filter yourself too much when trying to think of something to say

Often when you feel like you can't think of anything to say, there are actually lots of possible contributions passing through your mind. But instead of going with them, you nix them for one reason or another: "No, I can't say that. It's too boring." or "No, that's too out of the blue." Often this thought process is quick enough that you won't notice yourself doing it. Instead of censoring yourself too much, just toss out some of the ideas going through your head. It's better to say something than nothing. Even if you put something out there that didn't get a stellar response, at least you tried and did your part to keep the conversation going. There's always a chance to recover if something you say doesn't lead anywhere.

Don't fret about saying generic things

A lot of conversation advice tells you not to bore people with clichéd, unoriginal topics. Sometimes recalling this point can cause you to freeze in social situations. You'll meet someone new and not say anything to them because you think it's a huge faux pas to say something uninspired, like asking where they work. Don't put too much pressure on yourself by feeling that every statement that comes out of your mouth has to be sparkingly original, insightful, and entertaining, or that every question you ask has to get the other person thinking about things they've never thought about before. If you watch friends hang out, you'll see they often talk about pretty humdrum topics. If someone enjoys another person's company, they're more than happy to talk about day-to-day subjects with them.

If small talk makes you feel impatient, you may hesitate to bring up anything reminiscent of it. If you've just met someone, it may be a good play to ask them where they're from or what they're studying, but if you find that kind of conversation boring, you may say nothing, and the interaction might fizzle out. More on small talk coming up in Chapter 12.

Don't fret about changing topics

Sometimes you'll have something you want to say, but you'll abandon it because you can't think of a smooth way to segue into it. If you listen to friends talk, you'll see they bring up new topics all the time. When one conversation thread has come to an end, it's normal to jump to something unrelated. It's okay to change the subject as long as the transition isn't completely random and jarring, and you haven't cut the other person off from a topic they wanted to stay on. If you do want to switch topics, follow these pointers:

- If the other person is expecting a reply, give them one first. If they tell you about their winter holiday, comment on it or tell them about something you did with your own time off.
- Make a shift seem less abrupt by tacking on a phrase like, "Oh yeah...", "That reminds me...", "Speaking of...", "I'm not sure why, but that makes me think of...", or "This is going to sound random, but...".
- If you pause for a few seconds before changing topics, it often signals, "That subject is done, switching to something else."

Pay attention and keep up with the conversation going on around you

This one applies to group conversations. It's always easier to come up with things to talk about when you really focus on what everyone else is saying. It's more likely you'll hear something that will trigger a contribution you could make. However, some people have a tendency to zone out and disappear into their heads. Group conversations can also be a bit annoying to follow at times, like if many people are talking at once or if the

environment is loud. Sometimes it seems easier to give up and not devote your full attention to what the others are saying. With practice, you can get better at keeping focused during group conversations. If you tend to get distracted by anxious thoughts, Chapters 5 and 6 have suggestions on dealing with that.

Prepare some topics or statements ahead of time

A standard piece of conversation advice is, “Before you go to a party, it’s always good to catch up on the news so you’ll have a few ready-to-go topics prepared or you’ll have something to add if someone else brings those stories up.” A similar suggestion is, “If you know you’ll get asked a certain question a lot, it helps to have an interesting little blurb to give in response.”

You can prepare for your interactions in a more general way by keeping a few topics in mind that you can bring out whenever the discussion hits a lull. This could be as simple as asking, “So has anyone seen any good movies lately?” It’s hard to remember more than a handful of these conversation starters though. There’s no need to try to memorize thirty different lines you could use at a party. In the moment, you’ll probably blank on most of them anyway, or get stuck going through the huge mental list to pick out the best option. If you give yourself only three choices, it’s easier to go with one of them.

A few longer-term approaches for having more things to say in conversations

The suggestions above were more tactical and can be used right away. You can also work over a longer period to develop your conversation skills and give yourself more to talk about.

Have more experiences and develop your opinions

This chapter already argued that even if you think your life is sterile and one-dimensional, you still have much more to say than you think. That said, if you do the same things all the time, another way to have more to talk about is... to get more to talk about. Try new hobbies. Visit new places. If you find you don't have an opinion to share on some important topic, then do a little reading and develop one so you're prepared the next time the subject comes up. If you're really busy, even a small new experience here and there can go a long way. Eat at a new restaurant. Watch a few episodes of a new show. Listen to a few songs by a new band. Spend half an hour on a website about a subject you're interested in but not familiar with. Don't put unrealistic expectations on yourself to gain a whole new colorful life in a week. Just start small and let it add up.

Know facts and details about a range of topics

The more knowledge and experiences you have floating around in your head, the easier it is to chat with people. The likelihood increases that they could say something that will spark an interesting contribution from you. It's sometimes eerie how you can be reading about some seemingly obscure new topic earlier in the day, and it will come up in conversation that very evening.

This is a pragmatic piece of advice that you may not feel like using, but it never hurts to be at least somewhat familiar with the things other people tend to be interested in and are likely to bring up. Even if you can't have an in-depth conversation about a certain area, being able to share a little factoid or ask an intelligent question about it can keep the interaction flowing.

As practically useful as it is to have a lot of knowledge and experience, it has its limits. First, it's impossible to do and learn about everything.

Second, everyone has areas that they're just not interested in, regardless of how practical it would be to know about them (for example, some women just don't care about fashion trends). That's fine. No one can be expected to make perfect conversation about every subject on the planet.

Learn to relate to a wider variety of people

You may sometimes find it tricky to make conversation with people who have different interests, priorities, and ways of looking at the world. At times their differences will intrigue you, but you can just as easily find yourself thinking, "I have nothing to say to this person. We don't think alike at all. We hardly have anything in common." You may find you can relate to these types of people better if you make an effort to put yourself in their shoes. Genuinely try to get a sense of why they think the way they do and like the things they like. Maybe try out some of the things they enjoy that you've dismissed up until now. Even if you don't share their exact worldview, you may realize you have some common ground after all, and they're not the caricatures you originally thought they were. Chapter 16 goes into more detail about this kind of empathy.

Overcoming conversation stumbling blocks

Sometimes you may have a series of conversations, but you aren't getting good reactions from the people you're trying to talk to, and you're not sure why. It's hard to see outside yourself and get an objective sense of why you might not be making the best impression on people. There are a few ways things could be going wrong:

Reasons that lie with you

- You're not actually doing anything wrong at all, but you're insecure

and seeing signs of rejection where there aren't any. You then give up too soon on interactions you "know" have gone south.

- Your conversation and shyness management skills aren't developed enough yet, and your interactions are stilted.
- You're expecting too much from various conversation techniques and think you just have to use them and everyone will instantly like you.
- Your nonverbal communication is putting people off (see Chapter 19).
- You make one of any number of possible mistakes when making conversation (see Chapter 20).

Reasons that lie with the people you're talking to

- You're trying to interact with people who wouldn't naturally click with someone like you.
- You're in a demographic that the people you're trying to talk to will unfairly dismiss (for example, if you have a Southeast Asian background and you're living in a small-minded mostly white town).

If you're consistently not getting good responses from others, the best thing you can do is ask a supportive person for some feedback on how you come across. Finding someone to do this can be tough because many people will be reluctant to be straightforward with you. They feel awkward about possibly hurting your feelings or worry you'll take their comments badly. And you may not want to ask because it's scary to willingly open yourself up to criticism and risk hearing something that may make you feel bad about yourself. This is another situation where a professional counselor can be useful. They'll be honest, and they'll word their critique in a sensitive and constructive way. They're also an impartial stranger, so their feedback will probably sting less than if it came from a friend or family member.

10

Dealing with Awkward Silences

REGARDLESS OF HOW CLOSELY you follow all of the conversation tips in this section, eventually you're going to face the dreaded awkward silence while you're trying to talk to someone. If you fear silences, you likely imagine they'll be really uncomfortable and embarrassing in the moment. Furthermore, you may believe that if one happens, it "proves" you're incompetent in social situations. Nothing could be further from the truth. Read on to find out why awkward silences happen and what you can do about them.

Seeing why awkward silences occur

Not every conversational lull or silence is due to a mistake on someone's part. Don't be too quick to blame yourself if the conversation hits a snag. Sometimes these lulls occur naturally, simply due to what was being talked about:

- You and your conversation partner(s) may have come to the end of a subject, and you both need time to figure out what to say next. When some topics end, it's fairly easy to think of the next direction to head in. With others, no immediate follow-up springs to mind.
- If someone makes a particularly profound or thought-provoking point, everyone may want to pause and reflect on it for a moment.
- Everyone may be in a somewhat tired, distracted, or laid-back mood and decide all at once they just want to relax and not talk for a bit.

Knowing when silence is okay

Silence is acceptable in some situations, and it's not necessary to try to fill it. If you've just introduced yourself to someone at a party, you both hope and expect that the conversation will flow easily. In other situations, it's natural to have quiet periods. Some cases are when you're riding with people in a car, bus, or plane; when you're chilling with a friend and watching a movie; when you're sitting at the beach or around a campfire; and when you're on a hike. If everyone goes quiet, you shouldn't consider these awkward silences that must be overcome at all costs. In fact, in these situations it's often the wrong play to try to keep the conversation going nonstop. It makes you look insecure and like you can't handle a second of peaceful reflection.

Handling a few seconds of silence with ease

Silences happen. It's all about how you react to them. If you stay comfortable and in control, you'll send the message, to yourself and to everyone else, that what's happening is normal and not awkward at all. If you keep your cool and apply one of the suggestions below, it won't be long before the conversation is back on track.

Short silences happen all the time between good friends. Because they're comfortable in each other's company, they don't stress about it and are content when a few seconds of dead air happens. They may have as many silences in their conversations as two people who just met, but they don't really notice them, and they don't see the exchange as being awkward and halting.

Don't worry about bringing up a new subject

If a silence settles in, give yourself a few seconds to try to think of something that will continue the current topic. If you can't, maybe you could go back to a dangling thread from earlier in the conversation ("So, you were saying before that you were thinking of learning to knit?"). If nothing comes to mind, you'll have to come up with a new topic.

You may worry that it will seem clumsy to switch to a fresh topic so abruptly or that your choice will be boring or that by changing the subject, you'll reveal you didn't know how to keep the last thread going. It's fine to shift gears if the current subject has come to an end. It's also all in the delivery. If you change topics in an uncomfortable, stilted way, it might be awkward. But if you speak as if taking the discussion in a new direction is the most natural thing in the world, it won't seem out of the ordinary.

Comment on the silence

When you comment on the silence, don't say something like, "Wow...this sure is uncomfortable. Can't think of anything to say...nope..." That usually makes the silence worse by drawing attention to it and putting people on the spot. Depending on why the silence occurred, you can make a casual observation about it before bringing up something new. Here are a few examples:

- If a lull settles in because everyone was kidding around and then one person made a funny but very random joke, you could say, "Ha ha, I guess there's not much anyone can say to continue off from that. Anyway..."
- If everyone has exhausted a particular topic, you could comment, "Um, looks like we've said everything we have to say about that. Um... so did you hear..."
- If you say something and it seems the other person can't think of

anything to say in response, you could ease the silence with, “Ah, I guess you haven’t thought about that. Oh, so the other week I...”

- If someone makes a statement that everyone needs time to digest, after a bit of silence you could say, “Yeah, that’s an interesting point. My mind’s mulling over it right now... I guess thinking about it more, I...”

Be open when you have nothing to contribute

Sometimes someone says something that gives you nothing to go on, and you can’t think of anything to say in reply. For example, if you know or care nothing about cars and someone tells you the McLaren MP4-12C’s engine produces 592 bhp, odds are your mind is going to go, “Uhh....” Rather than scrambling to try to come up with a relevant follow-up to their statement, you can say what you’re thinking: “Ha, ha, sorry. I don’t know much about that stuff.”

Try not to leave the conversation hanging there, though. Some people are too quick to give up on a conversation when it turns to an area they don’t have in common with the other person. Once you get your lack of familiarity about the topic out in the open, you’ll often find a way to get the interaction going again. Maybe you’ll decide to switch to a subject you can both talk about, or you could take an interest in their interest and stay on the current subject, but ask them to explain the basics and background details more so you can follow along and relate to it better.

Be prepared for surprising statements

Sometimes you experience a loss for words when the other person says something off-putting or unexpected. Imagine you’re talking to a seemingly grounded, intelligent person, and then out of nowhere they say, “I think

fashion is super important. I don't trust anyone who spends less than \$2,000 a month on new clothes." It would stun you into silence. If you were thinking anything, it would probably be something like, "Wow...That is so out of touch. I have no idea how to reply." As a milder example, say you ask someone what their favorite shows are and they reply they don't watch TV. You may not have a problem with that, but it wasn't one of the answers you were anticipating, and you may be unsure how to reply.

Knowing you may face unexpected statements can help you respond better to them. Rather than beginning to panic because an awkward silence may be imminent, you can use a few fall-back responses. You could quickly acknowledge their opinion and change the subject. Or you could adopt a curious stance and question them about it. If you don't agree with them, you could respectfully say so, assuming you don't think you'll get pulled into a pointless, nasty argument.

Take the opportunity to exit the conversation

If you were planning on ending the conversation soon anyway, a quick silence can provide the opportunity to get going. Before the lull goes on for too long, take charge and say something like, "Anyway, I'll let you get back to what you were doing..." or "Anyway, it was good running into you. I'll catch you later..." Chapter 13 is all about ending conversations.

Even when you're not intending to leave, in situations like parties and networking events, there's nothing stopping you from exiting a conversation as soon as it starts feeling awkward by pretending you meant for it to be quick all along. Be careful, though, because bailing from conversations early too often can become a bad habit that reinforces avoidance behavior and prevents you from practicing how to recover from a lull and carry on.

11

Starting One-on-One Conversations

THIS IS THE FIRST OF SEVERAL CHAPTERS on how to navigate the stages of a typical conversation. Of course, not every conversation will go through the same progression like clockwork, but thinking in terms of stages helps you know what's likely to come next.

The first stage of a conversation is obviously to start it. Beginning conversations, especially with someone they don't know, makes many people nervous. They worry that they'll say the wrong thing and get rejected, or that they won't be able to think of anything to talk about and the interaction will stall soon after it begins. When you're comfortable initiating interactions and handling their first few minutes, a lot more options open up to you.

The two substages to starting conversations

The beginnings of conversations have two parts, which often flow into each other.

The first is for one person to say something to the other to initiate the interaction. This could be as simple as a "hey." Sometimes the first step is taken care of for you: The other person approaches you, you're introduced to each other, or your circumstances force you to start talking. If none of those things happen, you'll have to start the conversation yourself if you want to chat with someone. An opening line may do nothing more than get the other person's attention and begin the interaction, so you'll need to follow up the opening with something else (introducing yourself is one

example). Other openers can potentially lead to a full conversation (for example, going up to someone wearing a T-shirt of your favorite band and asking how they liked the latest album).

The second substage is navigating the conversation's first few, sometimes uncertain, minutes. When you're first talking to someone, you often don't know much about them or what you could talk about with each other. Although at this point the usual conversation goals (like learning about the other person and showing you're a friendly, interested person) come into play, your main priority is to find a topic you both have an easy, enjoyable time discussing and settle into a comfortable groove. After that, you may continue to talk for hours about any number of issues, or you may each have to run after five minutes, but still leave the conversation feeling you had a nice chat.

Again, this part will sometimes feel simple and you'll start gabbing about a mutually interesting subject right away. Your conversation starter may lead to an area you and the other person have in common. Or after initiating the conversation with another opening line, the first thing you think to ask about after that hits the mark. It's also possible someone else will introduce you to each other and set you up (for example, "This is Alison. She's studying to be a pharmacist too"). If a good topic doesn't fall into your lap, you'll have to look for one, and you may hit a dead end or two before finding something that works.

Things to keep in mind about initiating a conversation

Technically, initiating a conversation is simple. As long as it's not rude or totally out of left field, the exact opening line you use isn't that important. How the other person is likely to respond to you and how well the ensuing interaction goes will depend more on factors like whether the person you're talking to is in the mood to chat, what their initial impression of you is, how

compatible the two of you are, and how good each person's conversation skills are.

However, your nerves may mislead you into seeing the task as more tricky and complicated than it is. Emotional reasoning may kick in and cause you to think, "This *feels* hard, therefore it must actually be difficult and require a lot of strategizing to find the perfect opener." If you're worried about getting rejected or offending someone, you may also hold out hope for a nonexistent magic line that will guarantee you won't get a bad response.

Things to keep in mind about getting through the first few minutes of conversation

There are good and bad sides to the first few minutes of an interaction. In the *Good* column is the fact that they're fairly predictable. It's also pretty easy to practice them. If you go to a big party or networking event, it wouldn't be unusual to chat with a dozen or more people over the evening. On the downside, if you're going to have trouble in a conversation, it's likely going to be in those first couple of minutes. There are two reasons for this: First, if someone doesn't feel like speaking to you or you don't have much to say to each other, that's going to become clear quickly. The other person won't give you much to work with, or you'll both struggle to find something to talk about. Remember, there's no way to ensure every interaction you have will go well. Second, you're usually feeling at your most nervous and on the spot when you're first talking to someone, and anxiety can cause you or your conversation partner to stall. If you can get past that point, the rest of the conversation is usually easier.

It's great when you find an interesting subject to talk about right away, but it's not at all unusual for a conversation to be a little stilted in its opening minutes. That's no reason to panic. This awkwardness isn't a sign that the interaction won't be enjoyable or that you have horrible people skills. It just

means that each person hasn't found their footing yet. In a few minutes, everyone may be feeling more comfortable and have found something fun to talk about.

Sometimes a conversation you start may peter out soon after it begins. Knowing this takes some of the pressure away. Every time you talk to someone, realize that they may be preoccupied, have nothing in common with you, or be too shy to think of anything to say. Also accept that sometimes you just won't be on your game and able to do your part to keep the conversation moving. Have a plan for gracefully leaving a conversation that isn't going anywhere. Rather than panicking and blaming yourself, keep your cool and move on. (Chapter 13 covers how to end conversations.)

General guidelines for starting conversations

The appropriate ways to initiate a conversation vary depending on the situation you're in. If you're at a friend's party, it's expected that people will talk to each other, and most of the guests are there to do just that. It's fine to start conversations in a more forward, familiar, casual way where you act as if you're already on good terms with everyone. In more formal settings, like a career networking event, you should be a little more reserved and mannered. Still be friendly, but don't be overly casual or chummy right off the bat.

Talking to strangers in public places during the day is on the other end of the spectrum. Some people are open to talking, but others are going about their day and have other priorities. Read their body language for clues about how open they may be to interacting with you (see Chapter 18). If they seem really preoccupied and closed off, it may be better to leave them alone. You need to respect that they may initially be wary and not know what you want from them or not be in the mood to talk. You may need to get their attention with a smile or an "excuse me" first. Still be friendly, but

speak with them in a more pulled-back, noncommittal way to give them the sense that you'll back off if they don't want to chat.

Know your city and country's attitude about what's considered acceptable too. In some areas, people are constantly, cheerfully talking to each other in grocery store lines, while in other places, the culture is "Don't intrude on anyone's space." If your culture is less talkative, it doesn't mean you'll never be able to speak to anyone you don't know. If you try, you just need to be extra respectful and realize you won't always get a warm response.

Public places where people go specifically to socialize, like nightclubs, fall in between. You have implicit permission to try to strike up a conversation with people you don't know, and you can often be more casual; however, you also have to respect that not everyone goes to those places looking to chat with a bunch of strangers. If they don't seem like they want to talk and would rather stick with the friends they came with, then move on.

Examples of types of conversation openers and early things to talk about

The following pages list several ways to initiate a one-on-one conversation and to try to find a good topic during its first few minutes. The two are together because many lines can pull double duty. Always have at least a few lines or topics ready to go. If you use one but the other person doesn't give you a response you can work with, be ready to try another.

Examples of many types of lines follow, but that's mainly to show you have lots of options. Don't feel you have to memorize every one. When you're in a situation where you want to talk to someone, go with one of the first lines that pop into your head because they could all work equally well. If you want to prepare ahead of time, settle on around half a dozen

conversation starters that you'd feel comfortable using. In general, as you get better at thinking on your feet, you'll feel more comfortable using whatever type of conversation starter you want. Even if the other person doesn't answer in an ideal way, you know you can follow up and maybe recover the interaction.

Openers that will begin a conversation, but have to be followed up with something else

The only time these openers won't need to be followed up on is if the other person replies with a comment that naturally leads to a conversation. You can't count on that though, and should have another opener ready to use.

Introduce yourself

Try something simple like, "Hey, I'm Stephen." With new people, you don't always have to introduce yourself to begin speaking to them. You could start the interaction another way, and if all goes well, after a while it will feel natural to say, "Oh, I'm so-and-so, by the way. What's your name?"

Ask them a simple question about the situation you're in

For example, at a party you could ask them if they know the name of the song that's playing or if they can tell you what kind of sauce is being served with the hors d'oeuvres. Of all the ways to start a conversation, this is the one where people use white lies the most. They aren't interested in the answer and are just using the question as a pretense to talk. Some people think they can only use this type of conversation starter because it seems more spontaneous and natural. It also doesn't put them at risk of rejection as much because they have the face-saving explanation that they just wanted a question answered. There's no need to box yourself in by always needing a believable excuse to speak to someone. When you're chatting with people

for friendly reasons, it's perfectly fine to start a conversation more directly.

Ask them to do something simple for you

For example, you could ask if they could save your chair while you get up for a second, if they have a lighter, or if they want to exchange email addresses so you can send each other your notes if one of you misses a class.

Say “Hello” or “Hey” or “What’s up?” or “How’s it going?”

This is a common way to get a conversation rolling, and it often does the job, but it can be confusing and cause the interaction to stall. The other person may think you're only greeting them, reply with something like, “Hey, I'm good, thanks,” and move on. Using a “What's up?”-type opener works better in the following circumstances:

- You have some follow-up questions or statements prepared if the other person doesn't reply with anything substantial.
- The person looks friendly and like they want to talk to you. You sense that if you begin with “Hey” or “What's up?” they'll give you a more detailed response.
- Neither of you is rushing somewhere else, and it's clear that you can both stick around and talk to each other. For example, if you catch a coworker as they're walking past you in the hall, they may take your “Hey, what's up?” simply as a greeting. However, if they're sitting at a table in the break room and you join them and say, “What's up?”, that sends the message that you want to have an actual conversation.

Lines that can be used to initiate a conversation or a few minutes in to try to keep it going

Some lines serve double duty. You can use them to initiate a conversation, or you can use them to keep a conversation going when it stalls or you finish talking about a topic.

Ask questions that are relevant to the setting

You and others in a social setting generally have something in common; otherwise you wouldn't be at the same place at the same time. With that in mind, ask an opening question that is built in to your common situation. This lets you exchange basic background information about each other or find out more about the setting you're in. Here are some examples:

- **At a party:** “How do you know everyone else here?”
- **At a gaming club:** “What games are you playing these days?”, “How long have you been playing?”
- **Upon joining a recreational sports team:** “How long have you been on the team?”, “Do you play any other sports?”
- **At a new class:** “Is this course part of your major, or just an elective?”, “I missed the first class. Did the prof hand out a course outline?”
- **At a meet-up:** “Is this your first time at one of these events?”
- **On your first day on the job:** “How long have you been working here?”, “What’s it like working here?”
- **While traveling:** “How long have you been here? What cities were you visiting before?”
- **At a dance club:** “Do you know if this place is normally good on this night?”

Comment on your shared situation

- “Man, there are a ton of customers in here today.”

- “Today’s class was pretty slow, huh?”

Make a statement about the other person or give them a compliment

- “You seem like you’re really into this song.”
- “I like your hat. Where did you get it?”
- (To the host of a party) “Wow, you’ve got a cool movie collection.”

Lines that are more appropriate once you’ve already begun talking to someone

These can be used as an opening line, but will seem too out of the blue unless you already know the person or you’re in a context, like a small, informal house party, where it’s okay to approach people in a familiar way.

Ask typical getting-to-know-you questions

- “What kind of hobbies do you do in your spare time?”
- “Have you done anything really fun recently?”
- “What do you do for work?”
- “What are you taking in school?”
- “What do you think of (a popular interest you hope they share or a news story everyone is talking about)?”
- “Have you been able to travel this summer / winter?”
- “Are you from here?” If they reply no, ask, “How long have you lived in the area?”
- “Do you have any kids?” If they say yes, ask follow-up questions. “How old are they? How many? Girls or boys?”
- “How do you know Martin?” or “You went to the same school as Martin. Do you know Carmen and Justin?”

Ask a question or make a statement about an interesting outside topic

Question examples:

- “Have you seen (popular new movie)? What did you think of it?”
- “Did you read that article yesterday about...?”

Statement examples:

- “I’m thinking of seeing (popular new movie). I saw the trailer for it, and it looks awesome...”
- “I read a really interesting article the other day. It was saying that...”

Make a statement about yourself

- “I’m so happy right now. I just handed in my last paper for this semester.”
- “So I think I finally found a job teaching English in the Japanese city I want to visit.”

If you already know the person, ask for an update about something that’s been happening in their life

- “So how was your weekend out of town?”
- “How’s your daughter doing? Has she gotten over her cold yet?”

Thoughts on asking more creative hypothetical questions

Some advice on starting conversations says you should avoid any standard lines and ask only unique, engaging questions. This suggestion is overrated. Sometimes it can work, but in your day-to-day life when you’re talking to friends, coworkers, classmates, or friendly strangers at a party, saying more

typical stuff is okay. Many people like a bit of predictability at the start of their conversations and may be caught off guard and draw a blank if you ask them something like, “If you could turn into any animal, what would you be?” Less is more when it comes to being creative in your conversations. The odd unique question can be fun, but it comes off as a bit random and gimmicky if you’re constantly asking strangers at a party things like, “If there were no laws for a day, what would you do?”

How to respond if someone tries to start a conversation with you

If someone else has initiated an interaction and you’re open to speaking to them, all you need to do is seem friendly and approachable. Use open, cheerful body language to show you’re happy to talk (see Chapter 19). Give a good, full response to whatever their opening question or statement is. Even if it’s something you’ve heard a lot and are a bit bored to talk about, still give a proper, amiable reply. Possibly end your reply by asking a question of your own.

Be willing to take the lead to help get a new conversation off the ground

Conversations sometimes die right away because each person is unsure how to act, doesn’t want to seem too selfish or pushy, and is waiting for the other to direct where the exchange goes. If you’re shy, directing the conversation may not be something you’ll be comfortable with initially, but taking the lead can come with practice and experience. Here’s how you can try to direct the exchange:

- Be the first to ask a getting-to-know-you question and pick the one you think will work best (for example, choosing to ask about their hobbies because you have a feeling you’ll have some in common and

they'll feel comfortable with that subject).

- Politely change the subject if you're on a topic that doesn't seem to be going anywhere.
- Say something to kick-start the exchange if it's petering out. For example, ask about their interests if talking about your jobs didn't lead anywhere.
- Ask general questions and make broad statements that take the discussion in that ever-important mutually interesting direction. (For example, you ask someone about their summer, and they mention working a part-time job, attending a wedding, and visiting Europe. You have a lot to say about traveling, so you choose to ask them about their trip or mention your trip to Spain.) It's selfish to always steer conversations to only what you want to talk about, but it's okay to do this occasionally, especially if it helps get or keep an interaction going.
- Do most of the talking until the other person gets more comfortable (again, this is a more advanced skill). For example, you ask them about their job, they don't say much, and you get a sense they're feeling on the spot. Rather than ask them more questions, you bring up your own job and tell a quick, funny story about something that happened to you at work. That gives them time to collect themselves.

12

Having Deeper Conversations

WHEN TWO PEOPLE FIRST MEET, their conversation usually starts on safe, surface-level topics, while the emotional tone stays neutral, or casual, fun, and positive. Once they get more comfortable and familiar with each other, they may click and start having a closer or deeper interactions. They may start sharing more personal, intimate information or really explore a philosophical subject. If you connect with someone, the discussion will naturally tend to move in a deeper direction, but this isn't to say you need to try to force all of your interactions along a lockstep template. Sometimes they're just as rewarding if they stay at a light-hearted, superficial level.

This chapter covers various ways conversations can feel “deeper”—by moving past small talk, connecting, opening up to each other, and discussing more intellectual topics. When you are able to comfortably have deeper, more intimate conversations, your interactions with people can become even more rewarding.

Moving past small talk

When you’re first talking to someone, you’ll often cover general, well-worn topics like your career and education. Asking and answering common questions sometimes has a rote, uninspired feeling to it. This is one type of the dreaded small talk that many people say they dislike. In a perfect world, we’d never have to do it, but small talk serves some purposes:

- Routine questions are a reliable way to get a conversation going.

They let each person cast around for a subject that's more engaging for both of them. A few lines of questioning may be repetitive and go nowhere, but the next one might be interesting.

- Standard chitchat helps ease your nerves when you're most likely to feel anxious. It gives you some safe, predictable, low-mental-energy topics to draw on.
- Small talk gives you a platform to show what kind of person you are, aside from the things you like to discuss. As you spend a few minutes covering familiar ground with someone, you can demonstrate that you're warm, confident, and glad to talk to them.
- Many people expect to start a conversation with some neutral small talk, so if you try too hard to barrel past it, you may seem like you lack social savvy.

Whether a conversation feels like small talk also depends on its context. If you're interested in getting to know someone, you usually won't have a problem telling them about what you do for work or where you grew up. However, if you're sure the relationship is never going to go anywhere, like if you're talking to a stranger in line at the bank, then the same topics can feel forced and like you're pointlessly going through the motions. You'll also tend to lose patience with any topic that comes up over and over in a short time (for example, being asked what you're taking in college during a family reunion).

Talking about unexciting, trivial topics

The term “small talk” also refers to conversations about mundane, trivial topics like the weather, often with someone you already know, at least casually. Many people aren't enthusiastic about this either and wish they could go into deeper, more meaningful subjects. This type of small talk also

has some justifications:

- It allows you to socialize with people for its own sake, show your interest in them, and maintain your relationship.
- Often it lets you exchange pleasantries in situations where you don't have time to have a more intense conversation or the environment isn't conducive to it. If you run into a coworker in the parking lot, you want to acknowledge them and show you're friendly, but you may have only a minute before you have to head home. Some quick talk about the local news is better than nothing.
- It can keep relationships primed for more substantial socializing down the road. Maybe you make small talk with a neighbor in your dorm when you run into each other while getting your mail. Because you've been casually friendly to each other all semester, it seems natural to one day invite them to a party where you can get to know them better.
- Sometimes people truly want to chat about fluffy topics. We can't always be in the mood to talk about subjects like whether free will truly exists.

Ways to move past routine small talk

Small talk is always going to be a part of conversations. The way out of it is through it. If you refuse to engage in it because it makes you feel bored or impatient, many of your interactions will never get off the ground, and then you'll surely miss out on the possibility of having a deeper exchange. If you play along and know how to handle small talk, it shouldn't take more than a few minutes to move into more interesting territory. Here's what you can do to help the process be faster and less painful:

- Try to tap into the underlying friendly intent of the other person's communication, rather than the surface content. Realize they're trying to connect with you, not annoy you.
- Try not to simply see small talk as a deal breaker or an ordeal to endure. Reframe it as the opening round of a potentially good conversation. Think, "If I have to do this, I may as well use it to set up the conversation to go in an enjoyable direction."
- Accept that even if you try to make the best of it, not every moment of every conversation is going to be fascinating for you. Sometimes it's necessary to get through those boring bits because it helps you meet other goals, like you want to be friendly, or the other person is enthusiastic about the topic and you want to let them share it with you.
- Whatever the other person says, even if you've heard it a million times before, treat it like a legitimate contribution, and try to answer with enough substance and jumping-off points to better topics. If they mention the weather, rather than thinking, "Ugh, do I have to talk about this?" and then answering with a flat "Yep... sure is nice out," you could cheerfully say, "Yeah, it's really warm out. I'm planning on going on a hike later today. How about you? Have any outdoorsy plans this weekend?"
- As soon as the other person mentions anything semi-interesting, grab on to that and use it to move away from the routine exchange. For example, if you ask them what they do for fun, and they say they like watching movies, ask them which ones they've seen recently and what they thought of them, or make a comment on a good film you've seen yourself.

By using these strategies, you'll hit on a more mentally stimulating subject before long. If you keep trying but don't find anything more

substantial to say to each other, take that as a sign that this particular conversation may not be destined to go to a deeper level.

Connecting in conversations

Conversations feel closer when you connect with the other person. It's hard to describe what connecting with someone means, but you'll know it when it happens. It's a combination of several things:

- generally feeling you like someone and sensing they feel the same way;
- bonding with them because you share an important commonality you can't find in just anyone; and
- seeing them as an ally or teammate, not a threat or competition.

You may connect with someone for many reasons: you both share a dry, sarcastic sense of humor; you're both going through a tough graduate program; you both had self-involved parents; or you share political values that are rare in your area. Sometimes you'll connect soon after you meet, but it's also possible to know someone for a while and only really click once you've learned a lot about each other. A connection may lead to nothing more than a warm, fuzzy feeling you share with a stranger you chat with on the bus for a few minutes, but it's often a sign that a closer friendship could develop.

Who we connect with is unpredictable. Sometimes you'll meet someone who's a perfect match for you on paper, but they'll rub you the wrong way, for a reason you can't put your finger on. Sometimes you'll meet someone who's very different from you on the surface, but you each recognize there's some indefinable commonality in how you approach the world, and you'll get along right away.

Encouraging connections

People who aren't where they want to be socially sometimes complain that they can't seem to connect with anyone. They make an effort to meet people and sometimes manage to carry on longer conversations, but they never click with anyone while they're talking to them. There isn't a way to create connections at will. You're not going to have enough in common with everyone. However, you can work on certain things that can increase the chances of possible connections happening:

- **Have your basic conversation skills and self-presentation at a reasonable level.** A connection will never have a chance to develop if people write you off before talking to you or you can't keep an interaction going with them.
- **Actually want to get to know and connect with people.** Don't just see others as puzzles to solve or props you can use to feel satisfied with yourself when you make a joke or share a clever fact.
- **Have at least a little in common with the people you're talking to.** People sometimes never seem to connect with anyone because they're an outlier in their community and don't have much shared ground with the individuals they usually meet. If they found and talked to more people in their niche, the connections would come a lot more easily.
- **Draw attention to any unique commonalities you share with the other person.** For example, "You like running? Me too. I'm the only one of my friends who's into it. They all think I'm crazy for jogging for an hour before I go to work." Pointing out a similarity or two you share with someone isn't a guarantee they'll suddenly like you, but it's better to let them know about these things than not.
- **Be comfortable letting people know you like them.** Get used to

telling new friends you find them interesting to talk to or letting yourself show a warm smile when you see them.

- **Be comfortable with self-disclosure.** People often connect over aspects of themselves that they don't share with just anyone. It is possible to connect over a safer topic, like having the same favorite band, but you'll give yourself more opportunities to find a connection if certain subjects aren't off limits. The next section has advice on how and when to self-disclose appropriately.

Finding Value in Self-Disclosure

One significant way to take a conversation to deeper territory is to exchange information that's more personal. As two people get to know each other, they'll stop talking only about safe, superficial topics and slowly start sharing more of their vulnerabilities, blemishes, and "true selves."

Safe, surface-level topics include your job and education; your living situation; your hobbies and interests; your noncontroversial observations, opinions, and humor; who you're friends with; your family makeup; and your goals and plans for the future. People are generally comfortable sharing this information with anyone.

Somewhat personal topics include your milder insecurities, flaws, and doubts; your somewhat odder quirks; your mildly embarrassing or slightly emotionally heavy past experiences; your somewhat more controversial thoughts and humor; and your less conventional, more ambitious future goals. Because these details aren't overly damaging or private, most people are fine sharing them with someone who seems at least somewhat accepting and trustworthy. They may get to this point in a conversation within a few minutes.

Very personal topics include your deeper, more serious insecurities, flaws, and doubts; past experiences that you're very ashamed of, which

most people wouldn't understand and which are quite emotionally heavy to talk about; and your opinions that are very controversial. In their day-to-day lives, most people only share these secrets with a select handful of very close, trustworthy friends. However, they may share a specific, highly private secret earlier than usual if they sense the other person has a similar one and won't judge them for it.

Overall, disclosing your emotions is seen as more vulnerable and revealing than sharing factual information. For example, telling someone that being constantly criticized by your parents made you feel sad and worthless will create more intimacy than just mentioning your mom was hard on you.

Seeing the balance in self-disclosure

As they open up to each other, people start with milder disclosures, and if they're met with acceptance and understanding, they gradually move on to bigger ones. The expectation is that if the person you're talking to reveals something about themselves, you'll match them and disclose something similar (for example, they describe how they were really stressed out during their last year of college. You didn't find college that stressful, but share how you had a tough time adjusting to your first real-world job). If someone shares with you and you don't disclose in kind, it disrupts the process of deepening the relationship. The person who opened up may feel unfulfilled, rebuffed, and perhaps a little unfairly exposed. If someone shares too many times and doesn't get anything back in return, they may decide they've hit a limit on how close that friendship can get.

Self-disclosure fosters intimacy, but sharing too much too soon puts people off. It puts them in an awkward spot. It's emotional work to take in a person's secrets and problems and be supportive in response. If someone barely knows you, they may not be ready to do that work yet, but feel

obligated because you sprung it on them. Many people see early oversharing as a red flag that someone will be needy and draining in the relationship. It also communicates that you lack the common sense to be choosy about whom you share your private life with.

That's not to say you're always obligated to reciprocate when someone self-discloses to you. Maybe you're fine keeping them as a more surface-level friend or professional colleague. Maybe you've just met them, and they showed poor judgment by spilling their heaviest secrets too soon, and there's no way you're doing the same. Maybe you're particularly guarded about that one topic, but are fine opening up about other ones. Overall, though, if you've been getting to know someone, you're hitting it off, and they share a somewhat personal detail about themselves, you should self-disclose back.

Being overly guarded and secretive

Oversharing is a faux pas, but some shyer, less secure people lean in the opposite direction and are guarded and secretive beyond a regular, sensible level. Recognize any of these?

- You see your social issues, like a lack of friends or dating experience, as shameful failures that you must hide at all costs.
- In more extreme cases, you think everything about you is boring or “wrong” and would get a bad response if it came out. You may be reluctant to talk about safe, surface-level subjects like what kind of music you like.
- You’re on edge in conversations because you can never be sure when those topics may come up and your secrets may inadvertently be outed.
- You’re extra nervous in situations where your feared subjects are

more likely to come up, like if everyone's drinking, getting loose-tongued, and talking about their love lives.

- You get touchy and defensive when people ask you innocuous questions related to your secrets (for example, "What are your friends up to this weekend?").
- You use a variety of strategies to avoid sharing anything about your secret: changing the subject; giving vague, evasive answers; straight-up lying; hanging back in groups and not contributing; shifting the attention to someone else; or finding ways to leave the conversation just as you're about to be put on the spot.

Being overly guarded, for whatever reason, is a self-defeating strategy. It's stressful to carry around a bunch of supposedly shameful secrets and worry about what will happen if someone finds out about them. Ironically, secretiveness can create more problems than it helps avoid. If you have a secret, no one may think it's a big deal if they find out what it is, but they won't form the best impression of you if you're always closed-off and cagey. Their imagination may run wild and assume something worse about you than what you're actually hiding. Or they may simply think you're not interested in being friends with them when you continually rebuff their attempts to grow closer.

How to become less guarded and open up to people

You can find ways to be less guarded and more open with people. First, change your attitude about what it means to reveal your flaws. If you're guarded, you probably believe that others will reject you if they learn about your weaknesses. Similarly, you may think that the way to be liked is to come across as flawless and impressive. Actually, the opposite is true. When you reveal your vulnerabilities and rough edges, you seem

endearingly human. When you act like you have no flaws, you become distant and unrelated. It's cloying when someone seems too perfect and together.

Many secrets are only shameful and embarrassing if you feel they are. Maybe you don't have many friends at the moment. You could believe it's a sign you're a loser and dread being outed. Or you could adopt the perspective that being lonely isn't fun, but it happens to many people from time to time, and you're not defective just because you find it hard to meet people at the moment. Being at ease with your flaws creates a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. If you tell someone about your vulnerabilities and display a calm, self-assured attitude about them, they'll often respond to your lead and feel they're fine as well.

The best thing to do is open up to trusted people and see that it's not so bad. You'll often get a positive response, and you can handle it if the odd person acts like a jerk or takes it badly.

Start by making milder disclosures to strangers or people like therapists or support-line workers who have to hold the information in confidence. Slowly work up to sharing bigger pieces of yourself with people who are more important to you. You don't want to become an open book to everyone on the planet; you just want to be able to self-disclose to the same degree most people can.

If one big secret is holding you back socially, consider getting it out in the open (for example, if you have trouble making friends because you're worried about everyone learning you've never dated anyone). Sharing the secret will take a huge weight off your shoulders, and more pragmatically, if people know you're struggling with the issue, they may be able to offer some practical help. You don't have to share it with everyone straight off the bat, but if the topic comes up, don't steer clear of it. Again, ease into things by telling the secret to people you're comfortable with and go from

there.

How to have more intellectual, philosophical conversations

People also think of conversations as being “deep” when they go into depth on more cerebral or thought-provoking topics. A common complaint from more intellectual types is that they have a hard time getting people to have these kinds of interesting, meaningful conversations. They don’t need to have deep, philosophical discussions all the time, but they start to feel frustrated and unfulfilled if they don’t have any at all.

Unfortunately, there’s no way have intellectual conversations on command. Some people are just more inclined toward them than others, and it’s a trait that’s not always connected to the factors you think it would be (you can meet PhDs who are surprisingly vacuous and factory workers who love to wax philosophical). All you can do is try to take your interactions in an intellectually deeper direction by bringing up the more cerebral ideas or topics you want to talk about. After that, it all depends on whether anyone else bites. With some people, if you mention the unemployment rate, it won’t be long before you’re both speculating about what a post-scarcity society would look like. With others, you’ll just get some silence and a shrug before they change the topic.

If you want to have more brainy conversations, the easiest way to do that is to find some similarly minded friends. It’s really the same with any interest. If you love talking about beekeeping, you can’t expect everyone to care, and the simplest way to have more satisfying discussions about the topic is to find other beekeepers.

13

Ending Conversations

EVERY CONVERSATION has to come to an end eventually. Often it's easy enough to part ways, but sometimes you'll feel more unsure about how to wind down the interaction. This chapter gives you some options for doing that. As with the other stages, you'll feel more confident going into your conversations when you know you can end them smoothly.

Ending a conversation is a pretty straightforward skill, and once you have an idea of what to do, it's easy to put the concepts into practice. This chapter may also have the side effect of illustrating various ways that someone might be trying to end a conversation with you, so you'll know if it's time to gracefully let them go.

Considering time limits to conversations

A general principle first: You can make ending many of your conversations a lot simpler if you go into them with an understanding of approximately how long you can talk so you can smoothly wind them down when the time comes. Many conversations are open-ended in length, but in the following situations, the other person may need to get going after about five minutes. They may want to talk longer, but it's always good to be considerate of their time:

- You run into a friend who's in the middle of getting groceries.
- You're chatting to someone at work while you're both grabbing coffee from the kitchen.
- You've called someone to quickly set up plans with them.

- You’re chatting to someone at a party or networking event where everyone is doing a lot of circulating and mingling.
- You’re sitting next to an acquaintance on a bus, who may want to get back to their book or headphones after catching up quickly.

It’s okay to end a conversation quickly and cleanly

Sometimes people feel that they have to give a big, formal good-bye every time they stop talking to someone. Mostly this isn’t called for, and you can finish the conversation in a to-the-point, casual way. Dragging out the end of the conversation can make it feel more awkward.

Methods of ending conversations

If you’d like to see or keep in touch with the person you’ve been talking to, you can use one of these approaches and exchange contact info, make future plans, and maybe promise to drop them a line in a few days.

Wrap it up without any window dressing

It’s often fine to just pleasantly say you’ve got to go without any explanation, especially if you know the person already. They’ll understand you have things you need to do and won’t be offended.

- “I gotta run. Good talking to you.”
- “All right” (to agree with what they just said). “Anyway, take it easy, man” (as you’re heading off).
- (Speaking on the phone) “Well, I’m gonna go. I’ll talk to you later.”

Say, “Anyway, I’ll let you get back to it...” if they were in the middle of something

- “Anyway, it was good seeing you. I’ll let you get back to your shopping.”
- “Anyway, I’ll talk to you more later. I’ll let you get back to your work.”

You can make up something for the other person to get back to. Like if you’re texting with someone on a Sunday evening, you could say, “Well, I’ll let you get back to getting ready for work tomorrow” or “I’m sure you want to relax a bit before you go to sleep. I’ll let you go.”

Use a reason, made up or not, for why you have to leave the conversation

Day to day

- “It was good running into you. I have to finish this shopping before I pick up my kids.”
- “Sorry I can’t talk longer. I’m actually on my way to meet my friend for coffee.”
- “Let’s talk more at lunch. I need to finish up this presentation before eleven o’clock.”

At parties, bars, or networking events

- “I’ve got to go find my friends.”
- “I’m going to go grab another drink.”
- “If you’ll excuse me, I just saw someone I’ve been meaning to catch up with.”
- “I just have to head to the bathroom. I’ll run into you later maybe.”
- “I just got here. I’m going to look around a bit more. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Make a statement to summarize and wrap up the conversation, then say you have to go

- “Yeah, that movie’s going to be wicked. I’m really looking forward to it. Anyway, I should get going...”
- “Wow, a lot’s been happening in our families, huh? We’ll have to catch up about it more soon... I just noticed my friends have arrived. I’m going to say hi to them.”

Use signals that show you’re ready to end the conversation

While still being friendly and polite, you can start adjusting your body language (more on that in Chapter 19) and your actions to indicate to the other person that it’s time for them to finish up the discussion or that you’re about to end it soon yourself. The idea isn’t to be passive and put responsibility for ending the interaction on them; it’s just to give them a heads-up. You could try one of the following tactics:

- Stand up if you’ve been sitting down.
- Start to give quicker, shorter responses: “Yep, yep, yep. Totally. Anyway, I should get going...”
- Look more frequently at the thing you need to get back to, for example, the direction you were walking in, the photocopier you needed to use before you started chatting to a coworker.
- Start angling your body away from them and perhaps toward something you need to get back to.
- If the conversation still hasn’t wound down, actually get back to the thing you needed to do. For example, start to photocopy your documents or resume shopping.
- If you were about to leave and a conversation is holding you up,

signal you're about to go by gathering up belongings like your coat, car keys, sunglasses, and purse.

Introduce the person to someone else, or bring them along as you join another conversation

This is a party tactic. If you join another discussion, the conversation you were having with the original person naturally dissolves. If you do the introduction move, be subtle and genuine about pulling it off. If you do it in an insincere, exaggerated way, the other person will be able to tell you're blowing them off by trying to foist them on someone else.

Get back to your book, music, phone, laptop, or video game

If you're talking to someone on a bus, subway, or plane, you may not feel like speaking the entire time you're forced to sit near each other. In these cases, it's always handy to have something else you can turn your attention to. To end the conversation, you could say, "Well, I'm just gonna get back to my book now," or you could wait for a pause, not make any effort to fill it, and then open a school assignment on your laptop. The other person should figure out your intentions. On a bus or plane, you can always pretend to take a nap as well.

You can leave some group discussions without saying much of anything

If you're talking with a group at a party and after a few minutes you decide you want to keep circulating, you can often just walk away. It's understood that people are going to drop in and out of different discussions. You don't need to slink away silently. You can quietly indicate you're leaving with a quick little nod or wave. You can sometimes do the same thing at your job. If a bunch of coworkers are sitting around on break at a table where many people are coming and going, you can join them for a bit, then just get up

when you have to go back to work. You could say good-bye, and often you will, but they won't think it's rude if you don't. They know they'll see you soon anyway.

Decoding those hard-to-read niceties that people sometimes use as they're wrapping up a conversation

One thing that confuses a lot of people is when they're talking to someone and as they're leaving, the person says something like, "We'll talk soon," or "I'll get back to you about it later," or "Let's do lunch." Sometimes they literally mean these things, and sometimes they're just saying them as niceties. They don't necessarily dislike you and are being deceptive to try to escape. They just want to end the conversation in a friendly way, and bringing up the possibility of future plans is a way to do that.

There's no reliable way to decipher what someone's intentions are here. You have to get a feel for what each person's style is and whether they tend to actually mean it when they say these things. Also, if someone ends a conversation by saying, "Let's have coffee soon," and you're interested but not sure if they really mean it, it doesn't do any harm to follow up and try to get a better sense of where they stand.

Extracting yourself from an uninteresting but determined conversation partner

If you find yourself speaking to someone who's boring you, you can usually use one of the above approaches to politely end the conversation. Sometimes it's not that easy. The worst-case scenario is when you're with someone who can seemingly talk at you forever, isn't being sensitive to your time or your nonverbal indications of losing interest or needing to go, and can smoothly transition from one subject to the next, so there's no natural break between topics where you can say you have to run.

With these people, you need to be more assertive in interrupting them so you can announce you need to get going. If you can, wait for even the smallest pause in their story or explanation, then jump on your chance. This moment may not always come, and sometimes you'll have to straight out cut them off (for example, "Sorry, I know you're in the middle of your story, but I have to go catch up with my friend"). They may get a bit offended, but you don't have anything to feel bad about. They forced your hand through their own mistakes.

14

Navigating Group Conversations

YOU'RE IN GOOD COMPANY if you're fine in one-on-one conversations but clam up or feel overwhelmed when more people are in the mix. Group conversations are different than one-on-one interactions in the following ways:

- Rather than two people sending communication back and forth to each other, each person in the group throws in their contribution for everyone else's benefit. That means many one-on-one conversation styles don't work as well. You can't ignore everyone else to lock onto one person and listen as they tell you about the graphic novel they're working on. You have to be able to chip in to the larger discussion.
- Their energy levels can vary because there are more people to influence it. One-on-one conversations are mostly conducted at a low-key level, but group discussions can range from calm and orderly to excited and rowdy.
- There's less pressure on you to keep the interaction alive because if you don't have something to say, someone else will. Unless every member in the group is feeling shy, a group conversation will keep going. The challenge becomes contributing enough. If you don't talk for a while, the interaction won't end, but you may be left sitting unhappily on the side or get the dreaded "Why are you so quiet?"
- Speaking in groups, such as if everyone's listening as you tell a funny story, can sometimes feel like you're giving a mini-performance because so many pairs of eyes are focused on you. When you're

joking around or arguing a point, you may also have the sense that you have to play for the crowd.

- They can continually shift back and forth between a true group discussion, where everyone is talking together, and several smaller subconversations.

This chapter tells you what you need to know to handle group conversations. It lists some ways to join group discussions, be more talkative in them, and hold your own and not get too annoyed when they get more hectic and energetic.

Ways to join group conversations

Chapter 11 covered various ways to start conversations. A lot of what was said there applies here as well, like how your exact opening line is less important than your ability to get along with everyone once you're speaking to them. One new thing to keep in mind is that you should roughly try to match the group's energy level. If you're at a party and see a group that's boisterous and joking around, it won't work too well if you try to engage them in a calm, dry manner. Similarly, a subdued group that's talking about world affairs won't respond as well to an amped-up approach.

Try to read how open the group is to being approached (see Chapter 18). If a group is standing way off to the side, is formed in a tight circle, and seems to be having an intense, private conversation, it may be best to leave them alone.

You may worry that if the group isn't receptive, you'll be rejected in a harsh, humiliating way. Usually this doesn't happen, especially if you were just approaching them to be friendly and not aggressively hitting on anyone. Usually all that will happen is they'll respond to you in a token, noncommittal manner, then resume talking to each other and leave you

standing on the sidelines. They might turn away from you or tighten their circle to box you out. At that point, you can quietly move on. It's a bit awkward when it happens, but hardly a scathing cut-down. To an outside viewer, it doesn't look like much happened.

Of course, this can be confused with when the group allows you to join but doesn't make a ton of effort to include you in the conversation because they expect you to use your own initiative. If you make several attempts to contribute and they make no effort to engage you, then it's likely they don't feel like speaking to you.

Introduce yourself to everyone

At parties, mixers, or networking events, it's okay to simply go up to a group and introduce yourself. A "Hey, how's it going, everyone? I'm ____" is all you need. After you introduce yourself, you could ask a standard discussion-promoting question like, "How do you all know the host?" or "Are you all criminology students too?" To join the conversation but also not interrupt too much, you can quickly give your name and then say, "Anyway, what you were guys talking about?" to get it back on track.

Sidle up to the group, listen to the conversation for a bit, and then make a contribution when it's appropriate

Sometimes joining a group conversation involves entering a circle of people who are talking. You may be able to do this silently, or it may be appropriate to give a quick "hi" or nod to everyone as you walk up to them. In other situations, like while sitting in a break room at work, you may not physically join the group, but be near them and able to hear their conversation. Either way, once you pick up on a chance to add something relevant, you can jump in with your contribution and then be part of the discussion. Make sure you wait for a small pause before you interject. You

don't want to blatantly cut anyone off.

“Mind if I sit here?”

If you're already sort of friendly with a group who are sitting around, you can join their conversation by straightforwardly asking if you can sit down and join them. This may seem intrusive, but the idea is to do it only with people you're already pretty sure would be open to you joining them, like if you're at your school or work cafeteria and see a group you'd like to know better. Once you sit down, they'll either start chatting to you directly, or they'll continue with their current conversation, and you can try to chime in when an opportunity arises.

Start talking to one person in the group to get your foot in the door

If you see a larger group, there may be a member on the periphery who's focused on something else or who looks left out or uninterested in the topic. If you strike up a conversation with them, you may be able to transition to speaking to the larger group—they introduce you, they turn their attention back to the larger conversation, and they carry you along; or the group notices you talking to their friend, and then you introduce yourself. A similar strategy is to wait until one group member is on their own, like if they've gotten up at a party to grab a drink. You can start talking to them when they're alone and then join the rest of their friends with them soon after.

However, don't join a group discussion and then immediately try to steal one or more members away to have a side conversation. Respect that they want to talk to the group. If a smaller conversation splinters off a bit later, that's fine, but don't shoot for one right away.

Join the conversation by way of an activity

Activities can be used to start both one-on-one and group conversations. It's mentioned here because it often allows you to chat with several people at once. Parties often have group activities going on, like games of one kind or another. In pubs you can find pool, darts, Foosball, and maybe an arcade machine or two. You can easily get a conversation going by joining in and chatting with the other players. Even if you can't think of much to say, the ebb and flow of the game itself will provide some things to talk about.

Start a conversation with the group the same as you would with a single person

If you're taking a direct approach with groups you don't know, it's usually simpler and more courteous to begin the interaction by introducing yourself. However, you could also open with a typical conversation-starting question or statement. You'll need to size up the group and try to get a feeling for what type of opening line they may be receptive to. Some examples:

- **Ask about your common situation:** “Are you guys having a good night?”, “So how do you guys know (the party’s host)?”
- **Comment on the shared context:** “This apartment is decorated in such a neat way.”
- **Ask them a question about themselves:** “Has anyone here been to any concerts lately?”
- **Make a statement about them:** “You guys seem like you’re from out of town.”
- **Ask a question or make a statement about an outside topic:** “Anyone here see the game last night?”
- **Make a statement about yourself:** (To a group of people you already know somewhat) “The craziest thing happened to me this weekend...”

How to be less quiet in group conversations

As a loose guideline, in a group conversation you should aim to speak about as much as everyone else. So if there are four people in the group, you should talk roughly a quarter of the time. Of course, you don't need to hit that exact percentage. What you really want to avoid is being silent for long stretches. As Chapter 1 says, there's nothing inherently wrong with being less of a chatterbox. Many social circles have members who are on the quiet side and whom everyone likes just fine. However, there are times when you're being quieter than you'd like in a group conversation, and not by choice. Here are some suggestions about how to be more talkative:

Work on the anxiety or confidence issues that could be holding back your ability to contribute in groups

As with one-on-one interactions, it's often not a lack of conversation knowledge or technique that's to blame for quietness, but mental barriers like worrying about saying something lame or inappropriate, believing you have nothing worth sharing, feeling uncomfortable being in the spotlight, and feeling psyched out by certain types of people. If you believe this is your main barrier to talking more, focus on the advice in the previous section.

Accept that the topic won't always be one you can easily contribute to

When a pair is talking, the conversation needs to stay on topics they're both interested in. With several people involved, the discussion may shift to a subject most of the people want to talk about, but which the rest can't add to (for example, a job most of them share). Everyone finds themselves left out from time to time, and it's not a knock against you if you can't chip in. Just be a good sport and wait for the topic to change. If it doesn't switch after a few minutes, try bringing up a new one yourself. If you often find yourself

in conversations about subjects you legitimately can't contribute to, that may be a sign you need to get more life experience or that a particular group isn't a good fit for you.

Make little contributions instead of remaining totally mute

You can still seem engaged and keep yourself in the middle of the action by adding small contributions like, "Yeah, I heard the same thing", "No way. Then what happened?", laughing when appropriate, or making little listening noises like "Oh" or "Hmm." These verbal tidbits are also a good way to speak a little here and there when another member has the spotlight for a longer period of time. If you're more inhibited about speaking up, smaller statements can also help you slowly ease yourself into saying more down the road.

Even if you're not talking, appear to be tuned into the conversation

If several friends are chatting at a pub, there's a big difference between someone who's not talking but is clearly attending to the discussion (by leaning in, looking at the speaker, making an effort to hear them over the background noise, nodding, and having an interested expression on their face) versus someone who's obviously bored or tuned out and trapped in their head. The first set of behaviors sends the message that even if you're not talking right that second, you're a part of the exchange. Even though you're not technically saying much, people will be less likely to consider you quiet. You're more prone to get that comment when your nonverbals show you're uncomfortable, uninterested, or checked out.

This point is also practical in the sense that if you make an effort to tune into the conversation, you'll have less mental energy to devote to fretting about how quiet you're being. You'll also be more likely to spot snippets of dialogue that could trigger a thought you could contribute.

Tell yourself that you have to say something every so often

If you want to talk in group conversations more, it's helpful to make an explicit rule in your head that you have to say something at least every few minutes. If the topic is changing constantly, you don't have to chime in on every one, but you should speak up often enough. If the discussion has been on one subject for a while, you'll want to give your two cents on it, assuming it's one you can add to. If you aren't conscious about needing to contribute, it's easy to settle back or zone out and go too long without saying anything.

The following rule trumps this one. If you find yourself getting more and more stressed out because you're too focused on monitoring your continually dropping "contribution percentage," give yourself permission to be quiet and take the pressure off yourself.

Give yourself permission to be quiet

A lot of people psych themselves out when they try to be less quiet. They put pressure on themselves to say something, and if they don't, they get more and more self-conscious and inhibited, which makes the problem worse. Take some of that burden away by permitting yourself to be quiet. If you can think of something to say, great, but if not, that's okay too. It's not that unusual for people to go silent during stretches of group conversations. Maybe in a few minutes the topic will change to one that suits you more, or you'll do better next time.

How to handle loud, lively group conversations

Many people don't have too much trouble with calm, orderly group conversations where everyone sticks to a topic, lets others finish their points, and listens respectfully. Shy, reserved types usually find group

conversations more difficult and irritating when they get more hectic—when everyone is excited and trying to talk over one another, the topic keeps changing, and the overall vibe becomes more immature and show-off-ish. Your approach to these conversations should be a mix of accepting and adapting to them for what they are, while doing what little you can to try to turn their intensity down.

Accept these types of conversations for what they are and what they aren't

What sometimes bothers people about chaotic, boisterous group conversations is that they feel they could have been something else—polite, intellectual, easy-to-follow, courteous—but they aren't. By nature they're loud, scattered, inconsiderate, and “dog eat dog.” They're for laughs, spirited debate, and enjoying the company and essence of all your friends at once. Aspects of them are an acquired taste. Being in the middle of all that noise and chaos can be energizing, and you may get a cheap thrill when trying to hold your own in it.

Try your best to tolerate the inherent annoyances of the situation

Hectic group conversations can create a maddening din as everyone talks at once. If the group is big enough, there may be several subdiscussions, and it can be confusing and overwhelming to try to follow them all. One or more people may be derailing every tangent with idiotic jokes. It's easy to become annoyed and exasperated, then give up and shut down. Do your best to put up with all the noise and stimulation so you can get what you can out of the interaction. It may be frustrating to try to keep your focus, but with time, you can improve your ability to follow along.

Realize if you want to get speaking time, you'll have to grab it for yourself

These conversations are more “every man for himself.” They’re not purposely heartless; it’s just that everyone is excited and wants to talk, and they’d rather it be them than you. Waiting patiently for the others to recognize that you have something to say usually won’t work. You have to treat these interactions like a game and find ways to get your fair share of the spotlight.

Below are some ways to become the speaker. All of these behaviors are more acceptable in wild group conversations than in standard day-to-day group conversations. You can still go overboard, but if you don’t do them too obnoxiously, no one takes these behaviors too personally.

- Make it really, really obvious with your body language that you want to talk after the current speaker is finished by leaning forward, raising your hand slightly, and catching everyone’s eye to let them know you want to speak next.
- Make a statement such as, “I’ve got something to say about that after she’s done.”
- Be the first one out of the gate when one person finishes talking.
- Interrupt someone or cut them off after they’ve spoken for a while.
- Raise your voice to overpower anyone else who’s also trying to be the next to talk.
- Repeat the beginning of your statement several times until you’re given the floor.
- Bring your point up again a minute later if you weren’t able to become the speaker on your first try.

Once you’ve got the floor, here are some ways to defend it:

- Speak with enough volume that you can’t be talked over.
- Talk quickly to get your point out before someone cuts you off.

- Make your statements to the point. You won't get away with rambling on.
- Use gestures to indicate to other people that you're not done talking so they shouldn't cut you off. For example, loosely hold your hand up to make a "stop, not yet" signal.
- Say things like, "Whoa, whoa, hold on, I'm not done, I'm not done."
- Don't be too dry. Zest up your statements with some humor or creative language so everyone will be more interested in hearing them.

Many people have painful memories of times they tried to chip in to a group discussion and got ignored or talked over, even if they repeated themselves several times. Reading about group dynamics may help put those experiences in perspective. Getting overlooked like this happens to everyone from time to time, and it's nothing personal. When people are really focused on following group conversations and are also busy strategizing about how they can talk next, they can inadvertently tune out the other members who are trying to jump in.

Ways to ease the madness and help other people be included

You have to accept that these conversations can get hairy and go along with their unwritten rules to a point, but you can do some things to try to rein them in too. Depending on how many people are in the group and how amped up they are, your efforts may not have a huge effect, but you can try.

- If you're good at getting your speech time, don't be selfish. Ease off a bit to give other people space to contribute.
- Help the quieter or less eager people in the group get a chance to talk by signaling to the others that they have something they'd like to say.
- If you can tell someone really wants to finish a point, and you're

tempted to interrupt, try to resist that urge.

- If a less forceful person makes a point and it's falling on deaf ears, direct the conversation back towards them (for example, "Sorry, what's that Natasha? You were talking about...").
- If another group member keeps cutting people off, shift the discussion back to the person who got interrupted ("So anyway, before you got cut off you were saying...").

15

Making Conversation in Particular Situations

PEOPLE OFTEN SAY they have trouble making conversation in certain situations: when they're talking to people they know well, when they're first hanging around a group of friends who all know each other well, or when they have to mingle at parties. This chapter helps you navigate conversations in those situations.

Talking to people you know well

Some people are fine talking to someone new, when there's lots of unexplored ground to cover, but they feel like they're out of material with their closer friends. The good news is if you're already on fairly friendly terms with someone, they've unofficially signed off on being interested in you and what makes you tick. You may not have every last thing in common, and certain interests of yours may do nothing for them, but on the whole they're open to whatever you want to bring up. So don't hold back too much.

When you know someone, you can devote some of the conversation to catching up on what you've been doing since you last saw each other. The better you know someone, and the more often you talk to them, the more detail you can go into. If you haven't seen someone for three years, you'll answer, "What's new?" with a sweeping summary like, "Well, I started my own contracting business, and we have a second kid on the way." When you talk to someone all the time, you'll have a more detailed answer like, "I figured out what was making that noise in my car..." When you hang out

with someone often, you'll also generate new events to discuss ("So I spoke more to that guy we met at the party last week...").

Finally, you can always find out more about each other. Even long-time friends don't know every detail about each other's childhood or their opinion on every topic. There's always more to learn.

Hanging out with new people who all know each other

A lot of us get nervous when we first hang around a group of people who know each other well, such as a friend's friends who all grew up together. Sometimes the initial meeting goes off without a hitch. You jell with the group right away and are welcomed into the fold. When it doesn't work out, the group members socialize among themselves, while making lots of inside jokes and references to past experiences, and you're left standing on the sidelines.

If that happens, it usually isn't because you did something wrong or the group is purposely being mean and exclusionary. They just all know each other, and it's easy and fun for them to stick to the familiar. They may also be a bit lazy and see getting to know someone new as work, when they could just hang out with their buddies instead. Some of the group members may be shy too, and feel inhibited about engaging someone unfamiliar.

If you don't have a good conversation with them, don't get too down on yourself. It's a trickier, more nerve-racking situation to navigate, and if the group isn't receptive to getting to know someone new, there's only so much you can do. Here's what you can try, alongside the general advice in the previous chapter on handling group conversations.

Take the initiative and throw yourself into the mix

Because it's easy for the group to benignly overlook you, take the initiative to try to get to know everyone. You can't wait and count on them to bring you in. Basically, whatever the group is doing, put yourself in there and attempt to join their conversation. If you're at someone's place and they're all playing video games, sit down and grab a controller. If you're all at a club and they're dancing or playing pool or talking on the patio, then that's where you should be.

Accept you won't be able to contribute to some topics

There's only so much you can do if the inside jokes start flying or everyone starts updating each other on what another friend has been up to lately. Maybe you'll have an opportunity to add something, but for the most part, you just have to wait out these stretches. You could also try getting in the loop by asking something like, "Who are you all laughing about? An old friend?" If the explanation is quick, the others may fill you in, but sometimes there will be too much backstory for them to cover.

Act as if you're a long-time group member instead of asking getting-to-know-you questions

When you're around a group of new people, your first instinct may be to ask them basic getting-to-know-you questions. Sometimes that works, but they won't always be receptive. Established groups already know one another's basic backgrounds and talk about other topics when they hang out. When they're speaking with you, they may not be in the mood to be interviewed about themselves. They want to talk with their buddies and want you to jump into the discussion and contribute as if you're familiar with everyone too. For example, if they're telling funny travel stories, they want you to pipe up and tell yours too. If they're talking about a popular TV show, they want you to share your opinion on it.

As the conversation moves along and hits on more topics, you'll get to know what they're like from what they add to it, and they'll learn the same about you. Chances to learn bits of everyone's life history will come up organically. This isn't to say some members won't be open to a more standard getting-to-know-you exchange, especially if you get a chance to talk to them one on one. However, if you initially try that and they don't seem enthusiastic, switch to the other approach.

Don't feel like you're at an audition

Don't put too much pressure on yourself to show your best side and win everyone over the first few times you hang out with them. That can backfire. You can get a bit nervous, try too hard to be funny and interesting, and not make the best impression. Even though you do have to take the initiative to join the group's interactions, you don't have to go over the top and dazzle everyone either. Act the way you normally would around friends. If the group is going to like you, they're going to like you. Just do your thing and see how it all plays out.

Mingling at parties

Parties are one of the top social situations people have trouble with. They know they're supposed to mingle, but they don't know how exactly, or it makes them too nervous. Depending on the type of party, there can also be an expectation to be "fun" and "on." Here are some tips for getting through parties and being able to talk to people (but not necessarily being the zaniest person there).

Acknowledging the outside forces at play

As with making conversation in general, some of your results at parties will be influenced by your interpersonal skills. The rest is out of your hands and

determined by outside forces. Some factors that will affect your experience at a party are

- what kind of party it is and whether it suits your strengths and personality (that is, is it focused around cerebral group discussions or drunken antics?);
- the other guests and whether they're the type of people you get along with;
- how well everyone knows each other. Is it mainly friends who have known each other forever or people who are strangers to each other?
- how open everyone is to meeting new people. Are they there to make new friends, or do they plan to stick to the group they came with?

Don't place too much importance on how well you socialize at parties

Parties are just one way people get together. For the average person, they come up only occasionally. They can be fun and lively, but they're not the be-all and end-all of social interaction. Some people blow the significance of parties out of proportion and measure how well they get along with the strangers they meet as the ultimate test of their social worthiness. If it's important to you to be able to mingle, then you should work on it. But at the same time, know that plenty of people have great social lives even if working the room and being memorable at big gatherings isn't their strong point.

Regarding the expectation that you have to have a caah-raaazy time, many people's idea of a good night at a party is to mainly hang out with the friends they came with in a low-key way, have a couple of drinks, and maybe chat with a person or two they don't know. They don't feel they've failed if they haven't done a bunch of keg stands, jumped off a roof into a pool, and made twenty new buddies.

Deciding the best time to arrive

How early or late you show up at a party can influence how comfortable you feel socializing with the other guests. Some people find it's good to arrive early (not overly early, of course, because that can inconvenience the host). Fewer guests will have arrived, and you can talk to everyone under more low-key circumstances and in smaller, more manageable groups. As the other guests trickle in, you can get to know them as they arrive. However, this doesn't work for everyone. Some people feel more exposed and on the spot if they're at a party early with hardly anyone else. It's also less of an option if you don't know the host(s) that well.

The other option is to arrive later, when you'll have lots of existing groups to join. You may also like that you can disappear into the crowd and not feel like you stand out. If you find a conversation awkward, you can quickly escape to someone else, rather than, say, being stuck having to chat with just the host and her two good friends for twenty minutes. There are downsides to this approach too. Some people find a room full of guests who are already talking to each other intimidating. Everyone may be into their conversations, and groups can feel harder to break into. Finally, as the night goes on, people get more rowdy, which may not be your style.

Ways to approach and chat with people at parties

Previous chapters covered how to feel comfortable approaching people and how to start and maintain conversations with them, so this section won't repeat all of that. Here are some party-specific ideas for getting into interactions:

- If you're going to mingle with strangers on your own, you can talk to whomever you want to. Pick a person who's close to you, or who seems interesting or approachable, or just go up to someone at

random. That may sound too simple, but you really don't need to think about it more than that.

- Ask the person throwing the party to introduce you to everyone. (This isn't always an option, though.)
- Give yourself a role, like the person who takes people's coats and shows them where the snacks and drinks are.
- Join one of the activities that may be going on (for example, a card game, a group watching TV or playing video games in the basement).
- Initiate a new activity to get people talking, like playing a board game or drinking game (if it's the type of get-together where that would be appropriate).

Two approaches to mingling

The first approach to mingling is to be more mechanical and try to have at least a brief conversation with everyone at the event. The second is to go with the flow, talk to whoever catches your fancy, and see where the night takes you. You might end up in a bunch of short interactions, or you may hit it off with the second group you talk to and spend the rest of the party with them.

The try-to-talk-to-everyone approach is more appropriate if you're hosting the event; it's expected of you to be polite and say hello to everyone. You'd also use it if it's important for you to meet everyone there, or if the party has a business or networking component and you want to be sure to make the rounds and talk to everyone you need to. The more casual approach is best when you're attending a bigger, purely social party. In those situations, most of the guests won't try to speak to everyone else because it's often impractical and would get in the way of their spontaneous fun.

Leaving the party

Some people find leaving parties awkward. If you don't like seemingly being the center of attention as you announce you're heading out, that's simply something you can get used to in time. If you're not sure how to say your good-byes, it's polite to let at least the host(s) and your good friends know you're taking off. If you've met some new people you'd like to stay in touch with, you can track them down and get their contact info before you go. Don't feel you have to tell every last guest you're done for the night. Whoever you tell, just say you're heading off and don't think you have to have a five-minute going-away chat. There's no need to act sheepish if you're leaving early. Every party has guests who have to go before the others. If you get flak, stick to your guns, then quickly make your exit before you can get sucked into an argument.

16

Becoming Aware of Empathy

EMPATHY IS THE FIRST of four core conversation skills this stretch of the book is going to cover. You can technically interact with people without being empathetic, but you'll be at a big disadvantage. The chapter defines the two types of empathy and explains their benefits, then offers some suggestions on how to cultivate it in yourself.

Empathy defined

Broadly speaking, empathy is the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes. There are two types:

- *Emotional empathy* is the ability to pick up on other people's emotions and have an appropriate feeling in response. For example, if your friend gets some upsetting news, you feel sympathetic for them and a bit sad yourself. Sometimes people refer to empathy as this ability to feel what another person is feeling. At other times what they mean by empathy is acting on those feelings and showing concern and support.
- *Cognitive empathy* is the ability to more logically get inside someone's head and take on their perspective. You don't necessarily feel what they're feeling, but you can rationally understand how they see the world (for example, a certain book doesn't bother you, but you can grasp how it would be offensive to someone with more traditional values). Again, some people see this kind of empathy as

simply being able to deduce what's going through another person's mind, while others don't think someone is being empathetic unless they effectively put their conclusions to use.

Of course, there's overlap between the two because you can often use one to give you information about the other (for example, knowing someone's worldview and history helps you emotionally empathize with why a certain event makes them so angry).

Benefits of empathy

Overall, empathy helps you to discern people's needs, emotions, values, interests, and overall personality. It doesn't take much effort to see how these skills could be useful in social situations:

- In conversations, it helps you answer questions like: What are they looking for from the exchange? What topics would they enjoy talking about? Which ones would make them uneasy, bored, or offended? Why are they telling this particular story, and what reaction do they hope to get from me? Having answers to questions like these doesn't mean you have to become a soulless chameleon or spineless people pleaser, but the information could help you make the interaction more mutually enjoyable and rewarding.
- In your day-to-day life, it helps you be considerate of others. Whether they're feeling cheerful or worried, you can show someone that you're tuned in and care about what they're going through. You can do thoughtful things for your friends, like being extra supportive to them on the day they have to give an important presentation or making sure to let them know you appreciate a favor they did for you.

- It helps you generally approach new people with a more open-minded, welcoming attitude. A core part of empathy is accepting that not everyone looks at the world the same way.

Knowing the mistakes that arise from not being empathetic

You can make social errors when aspects of your empathy aren't well developed and you unintentionally come off as thoughtless and insensitive. The errors fall into two categories that correspond with the two types of empathy:

Mistakes caused by less-developed cognitive empathy

When you're short on cognitive empathy, you don't always consider the other person's point of view, which may upset them. Here are some of the mistakes that arise:

- going on about a topic that bores your friend because you haven't thought, "Maybe they don't care about this subject as much as I do;"
- being offensive by making crass or edgy jokes to people who don't appreciate that kind of humor;
- bringing up topics that are inappropriate for the people you're talking to; for example, telling stories about your casual drug use to your conservative grandparents;
- being hurtfully blunt and casually critical; for example, "That shirt looks really bad on you. It looks too tight on your potbelly... What? Why are you getting mad?! I'm giving you useful feedback!"
- disregarding things that are important to other people; for example, forgetting an anniversary, or continuing to bring up a sensitive topic around a friend even after they've asked you to stop;

- seeming to take close friends for granted by always letting them do nice things for you, but not realizing they'd like you to show appreciation in return;
- getting annoyed at someone for not grasping something that's obvious to you because you don't consider that they may not have the same education, experience, or talents.

Mistakes caused by less-developed emotional empathy

When you haven't fully developed your emotional empathy, you don't always feel the emotions of the person you're speaking with. This creates a disconnect in the interaction. Consider these mistakes:

- not responding much at all when people are really upset or happy;
- giving invalidating, tone-deaf responses to people who are distressed; for example, "Why are you so upset your pet rat died? You knew it was only going to a live a few years when you bought it."
- seeming uncaring by not showing much reaction to bad news about other people; for example, looking unfazed upon learning a roommate's sister has been in a car accident.

Seeing why people may not show empathy

Sometimes people come across as unsympathetic and insensitive without meaning to. They often aren't aware that they're not responding in the most appropriate manner. Here are some reasons why people may not show empathy:

- They're socially inexperienced, and either it isn't on their radar that they should care about other people's feelings and perspectives, or they know they should, but they aren't very practiced at it. They may

unconsciously have a mind-set of “This is how I would feel in this situation, so everyone else will be the same.”

- They don’t know how to show they’re concerned or caring, or it makes them feel flustered and awkward. If a friend is upset, they’re not sure what to do with themselves, so they say nothing. They may come off as emotionally blank because they’re too stuck in their head worrying that they don’t know how to respond properly.
- They have more logical, detached personalities and just don’t get as emotional about things. News that may upset some people, like a child from across the country going missing, doesn’t get to them because they think, “Well, I don’t know them personally, so why should it affect me?” What someone else sees as an insult, they may see as a dry, rational critique.
- People with a more solitary, independent social style sometimes unintentionally become too focused on their own needs and forget to consider everyone else’s. It’s not that they’re selfish monsters, just that they develop some thoughtless habits as a side effect of spending most of their time in circumstances where they only have to worry about what’s best for them.
- People who are going through a lot of stress and emotional turmoil will naturally focus on their own problems.
- When people are younger, especially in their teenage years, their empathy sometimes hasn’t fully developed simply because they haven’t had enough life experience. They haven’t encountered enough hardship or been exposed to many contrasting worldviews, so they have a tougher time relating to people who are hurting or who see things differently than they do.

The above are benign, accidental reasons someone could seem insensitive, but the fact is, some people lack empathy because they have a selfish, self-

absorbed, arrogant, or close-minded side to their personality. Those are clearly negative traits, which we all show bits of from time to time. If you realize you have more than the usual number of those traits, you can work on minimizing them.

How to develop and show more empathy

Your ability to emotionally and cognitively empathize with people can be improved. No one becomes a flawless mind reader, but even being moderately better at figuring out what others are thinking and feeling will make a big difference in your interactions.

Ways to develop your cognitive empathy

Generally learn about a variety of perspectives and worldviews and try to respect them

It's hard to be empathetic if you unconsciously assume your way of doing and thinking about things is the only correct one. Considering another point of view doesn't mean you have to condone everything about it, but you can at least try to see the reasons for it. For example, if you're careful with your money, try to learn about the benefits of spending it more freely. Don't look at a different perspective through the filter of "My default style of looking at the world is right, so I'm going to spot all the ways this other one is ignorant and misinformed." Aim to be nonjudgmental and open-minded, and try to consider how someone could come to think this way.

Practice actively considering particular points of view

You can consider another person's point of view while you're in the middle of talking to someone or as a solitary thought exercise. For example, if you're not a parent, try seeing things from the mind-set of your coworker

who has two young children. What's important to them? What motivates them? How are they similar to you? How are they different? What types of things would they want to discuss? What wouldn't they want to hear about?

Learn people's basic needs

A component of empathy is figuring out what drives other people. Everyone has needs that are unique to them, but most people also share a set of basic ones. Most people want to

- be liked;
- be respected;
- feel like they're important to their friend;
- spend at least some time being social for its own sake;
- be kept in the loop about what their close friends and family are up to;
- feel like the things they have to say are interesting or entertaining;
- feel appreciated and acknowledged for the things they do for others;
- feel like their thoughts, emotions, and actions are healthy, reasonable, and normal;
- feel understood and supported when they're going through a tough time;
- be given the benefit of the doubt when they screw up;
- not be embarrassed or have their flaws or failures thrown in their face;
- feel accomplished.

Once you start considering these basic needs, you'll feel much more confident about how you could act in various situations. For example, if a friend is telling you a funny story, odds are they want you to seem amused by it, not bored. If they share a mistake they made, they don't want you to

tut-tut them.

Ways to develop your emotional empathy

Learn to respect the role of emotions

People with more logical, cerebral personalities sometimes look down on emotions and see them as irrational and unnecessary. When a friend or colleague is feeling a strong negative emotion, their first thought isn't "Oh no! They're so unhappy. How can I comfort them?" It's "This is so pointless. Why don't they pull themselves together and use their brain to work through their problem?" Emotions sometimes can lead people astray, but they can't be written off entirely. It's best to have a balance of emotion and logic.

Emotions are essential in making a lot of decisions. More logical individuals think dry facts are all people need, but without emotions, we're often left with two choices that have an equal number of pros and cons on each side. It's those gut feelings of "Mmm, this one makes me happy" or "Yech, I don't want that one" that break the tie. Emotions also motivate you to act. When you've been procrastinating on an assignment, the fear of failing finally gets you started. Emotions are also a part of being human. Even if you don't have much use for them yourself, you have to accept that they drive most people.

Learn to get in touch with your own emotions

People can have trouble with emotional empathy because they're cut off from their own feelings. If they see a family member looking depressed, they may feel sad for them deep down, but not be able to access it. Although some people are less baseline emotional than others, even the most logical, analytical person isn't a complete robot.

The idea of getting in touch with your feelings has a negative, touchy-

feely connotation for some people, but it's hardly New Age fluff to have a basic awareness of what's going on in your own head and how your emotions are affecting your behavior.

Here are some starter, do-at-home suggestions for getting more in touch with your feelings. As a caution, if you've experienced a traumatic event and are suppressing your emotions as a coping mechanism, it may be best to do this kind of work with a counselor. Also be careful if you're prone to anxiety attacks that are triggered by noticing that things like your heart rate or breathing have changed.

- **Get into the habit of asking yourself, “How am I feeling right now?”** Do this randomly throughout the day and when you're vaguely emotionally charged up. Sometimes you'll be feeling a certain way and won't even be aware of it until you check in with yourself.
- **Try to add more nuance to the way you identify your emotions.** For example, instead of calling an emotion “sad,” ask yourself if a more accurate label might be “disappointed,” “regretful,” or “dejected.”
- **Think about whether you use any tactics to avoid or bypass your emotions.** Some common ones are distracting yourself with work or entertainment, immediately jumping into an intellectualizing problem-solving mode, making jokes about the situation, changing your mood with substances, or always being around other people so you're forced to hold it together.
- **In general, whenever you're having an emotion, see if there's another one beneath it.** It's not always the case, but one emotion can be masked by another. Sadder emotions tend to get covered up by ones like anger and worry.
- **Think about whether you have a default emotion that you feel**

whenever you're upset, which drowns out your other feelings.

Common go-to emotions are anger and anxiety.

- **When you're having an emotion, and you're in a safe place to do so, don't try to push it away.** Take your time and let yourself soak in it. Notice what's happening in your body. Is your jaw clenching? Is your stomach upset? Do you want to make a glum face and slump your shoulders? Could you use any of these observations to let you know when you're feeling the same emotion in the future? Even if the emotion is on the stronger or more uncomfortable side, realize it won't hurt you or make you go crazy, and it will pass in time.

Practice feeling other people's emotions

Just as you can hone your skills in tuning in to other people's opinions and worldview, you can work on being able to tap in to their emotions. Start by watching a dramatic television show or movie. Pause during the emotional moments and try to imagine yourself as the characters and feel what they're feeling. Say the protagonist finds out her car has been stolen. Rather than continue on without giving it a second thought, take a few minutes to reflect on what that would be like, how confused and then angry and inconvenienced you'd feel. Next, think back on times people you know were being emotional and try to empathize with them. As you get the hang of that, empathize with people in the moment.

Practice in order to get more comfortable showing your support and concern

Maybe you aren't the best at seeming empathetic in the "showing concern" sense of the word because it makes you feel awkward and self-conscious. Even if you know exactly what to say and do to comfort a distraught friend, it feels forced and artificial. Through experience, you can get used to

showing concern. Even if you're truly feeling compassion for someone, the first few times you say something like, "Wow, that must be tough..." you may feel like an insincere bad actor, but it will become more natural.

Learn when it's appropriate to play along on the surface

You may find yourself in situations where someone else is upset about something that wouldn't bother you. Even when you make an effort to see things through other people's eyes, you're not always going to have the same emotional reactions they do. Sometimes the most sensitive move is to show the response that's expected in that situation. Acting supportive and understanding trumps getting to say everything that's on your mind right at that moment.

17

Core Listening Skills

PRIOR CHAPTERS HAVE TOUCHED ON the usefulness of listening skills. Here they are covered in more detail with explanations about the benefits of listening well and how to improve your skills in this area.

Understanding the importance of listening

At the most basic level, listening well lets you take in the most information possible in a conversation. You'll have more to go on when deciding what to say next, and your interactions will flow better. If you don't listen well, you'll miss some of the information the other person is sharing.

More importantly, listening well makes other people feel respected, understood, and like you care what they have to say. If you're not a great listener, you can come across as uninterested, spacey, or self-absorbed. People may hang out with you casually, but feel they can't have a more serious, substantial conversation with you. Listening is more than parking yourself in front of someone and letting them make sounds at you. People don't need to feel that all of their conversation partners are fascinated by everything they say, but they do want a sense that the other person cares at least somewhat. Even if you just want to tell a corny joke to a coworker, it doesn't feel good when they're obviously tuned out.

Being able to pay attention to people and take in what they're saying, and not coming off as disengaged, are bare-minimum considerations when having a conversation. When people talk of "listening skills," they're often referring to *active listening*. When you engage in active listening, you listen

in a more purposeful, focused, empathetic way; you really try to understand where someone is coming from, show your interest, and read between the lines of what's being said. You'd particularly need to use active listening if you were talking to someone about their problems, having a more philosophical discussion, or trying to see the other person's perspective during an argument. This skill helps you connect with people, make others feel accepted and supported, and resolve disagreements more easily.

While listening skills are extremely important to learn, you should have realistic expectations about the effect improving them will have on your social life. Some self-help sources oversell the significance of these skills and claim that good listeners are rare and that people appreciate nothing more than someone who truly listens to them. That's an exaggeration. Listening skills are really useful, but good listeners aren't *that* scarce, and being able to listen to people doesn't guarantee everyone will like you or that you'll easily be able to get through any conversation.

Identifying facets of basic listening skills

More goes into listening than just hearing what the other person is saying. Your ears, mind, and body are all engaged when you listen well. Consider the following aspects that create a good listening experience, for you and the person you're talking to:

Intent

It sounds obvious, but one of the keys to listening properly is to want to do it. When people are poor listeners, they usually aren't that way on purpose. They unconsciously come into the conversation with another agenda or their own issues, which overrides their listening potential. For example, they may be too focused on what they want to talk about and trying to impress everyone. More on that at the end of the chapter.

When you interact with people, make a deliberate decision to try to listen well. That involves

- giving the other person space to say what they want to say, even if you're not entranced by every last word or they're struggling to make their point;
- seriously considering what they're saying, not just technically hearing it but not giving it a second thought;
- putting yourself in the other person's shoes and taking on their perspective;
- being as nonjudgmental as possible;
- avoiding any of the specific poor listening behaviors (covered in the last section in this chapter).

Adjust the intensity of your listening depending on the context. If a friend is telling you about a funny video his brother just sent him, you don't need to try to commune with his innermost being or worry about being open and accepting. Simply let him talk and don't interrupt.

Giving someone room to speak doesn't mean you have to put all of your own conversation needs on the back burner. If someone's telling you an anecdote, you should listen respectfully, but if you have a story of your own you'd like to share, it's fine to bring it up at an appropriate time. If they say something you disagree with, you can tell them you see things differently, after you've respectfully heard them out. The good listener role also doesn't obligate you to stick in there with a long-winded monopolizer or someone who's inappropriately sharing the details of their recent trip to the doctor.

Engaged body language

This makes your listening clear. When you display engaged body language,

you:

- Make good eye contact with the speaker.
- Face your body toward them.
- Tilt your head slightly to the side
- If you're sitting, lean slightly forward.
- Turn away from any distractions.
- Have an appropriate expression on your face, depending on what they're telling you and what they hope to convey; for example, concerned and understanding as they go over a problem, or interested and amused as they tell you about their eccentric neighbor.
- Nod and make little "uh huh" or "Mmm hmm" noises to show you're taking everything in and to encourage them to continue (mix up the noises you make and how often you make them, or you'll seem robotic).

Having a mind-set of wanting to listen is still the most important aspect of listening. Even if you nail all the nonverbals, people can usually tell if you're just going through the motions. Do each of these with a light touch. The idea is to appear interested, not act like a caricature of a therapist. Again, adjust this basic template based on the circumstances. If you're lounging on a couch and watching reality TV with your roommate while they casually tell you about something weird that happened at school, you don't need to full-on face and lean into them. You could show you're listening by turning your head toward them, making occasional eye contact, and saying "uh huh" and "yeah" every so often.

Responses

Responses in a conversation show that you're listening. Check out these pointers:

- Make appropriate responses to what the other person says; for example, replying, “Oh wow, that sucks...” in a compassionate voice when they tell you about a sad childhood memory, or laughing as they get to the funny part in a story.
- Show an interest in what they’re saying. Ask for clarification if you don’t understand a point, ask thoughtful questions to get more details, make it clear you really want to explore the topic, and make insightful comments and help them think of things they never thought of.
- Make responses that show you heard and understood what they said. This can include agreeing they’re going through a tough time, making a sympathetic murmur, sharing an experience of your own that tells them you’re on the same page, and asking an intelligent follow-up question that only someone who was really paying attention would think of.
- If they shared some struggles or vulnerabilities, validate that their feelings are normal, and don’t judge them for the way they feel.
- If they shared a lot with you, it may be appropriate to sum up what they told you to show you’ve taken it all in and maybe help clarify their thoughts for them. Paraphrase if you do this. Don’t parrot back their exact words. Use this technique sparingly because doing it too much can *really* make you look like a cartoon psychoanalyst.
- If the speaker seems to want something from the interaction, like your thoughts on how to deal with an issue with their parents, don’t be in a hurry to give it to them. Let them get it all out first. Give them room to explore on their own.

Avoiding being a poor listener

A lot of being a good listener is avoiding the habits and behaviors that make

you a poor one:

- Talking so much that you're hardly ever in the listener role
- Not seeming to pay attention to the other person or seeming like you'd rather be doing something else; for example, looking around the room, checking your phone every two seconds, not turning away from the TV, not putting down the magazine you're reading
- Having bored or distracted body language (see Chapters 18 and 19)
- Interrupting
- Being too eager to fill silences; not giving the other person space to form their thoughts
- Finishing the other person's sentences for them
- Cutting in with a premature summary of what you think the other person is going to say
- Cutting off the other person to respond to what you assume they're going to say
- Abruptly changing the subject right after the person you're talking to is done speaking without responding to what they said
- Giving a short, unsatisfying token response to what the other person said, then switching to a totally different topic

People can be poor listeners because they're self-centered, sure they're right, or not interested in a topic. There's often a non-malicious explanation. Someone could unintentionally come off as a bad listener because

- They're feeling shy and nervous and are too focused on their insecurities to pay attention.
- They have a naturally spacey, short-attention-span personality.
- They're in an energetic, overeager, talkative mood.
- They're legitimately distracted by stresses in their life.

- They misjudged the mood of the interaction (for example, they figured it was light and jokey, while the speaker thought they were having a more serious discussion).
- They thought the speaker had said all they needed to about a topic and that it was okay to change the subject.
- The environment is really loud or distracting.

You can't always get it right. Sometimes there will be a misunderstanding, and you'll be seen as a bad listener without meaning to. However, if you know you're prone to any of the issues above, working on them will indirectly help your listening skills.

18

Recognizing and Acting on Other People's Nonverbal Communication

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION includes all the messages people are constantly sending out aside from their words. Someone's body language can tell you whether they're happy and energetic or tired and distracted. Their tone of voice can change a compliment from straightforward to playful teasing. They may tell you they're not annoyed, but their angry gestures and facial expression contradict their words.

You've probably heard that a huge 93 percent of all communication is nonverbal. That precise statistic is a misconception. How much of a message is nonverbal varies depending on the situation. However, the idea it captures is true. You need to have a grasp on nonverbal communication to socialize effectively. As with listening and empathy, being able to read nonverbal communication gives you useful information about the other person, which will help you make smart choices when you're talking to them. Managing your own nonverbal messages will let you present yourself more confidently and help you keep your communication clear and consistent; you won't say one thing and have your body language unintentionally say another. This chapter covers reading other people's signals. The next chapter goes into the ones you send out.

Reading nonverbal communication is a huge subject in and of itself, so this chapter covers only the core material. It focuses on reading people's signals in friendly social situations, rather than on more specialized topics like the body language clues that reveal someone is about to concede a

negotiation. The chapter ends with some tips on how you can practice reading nonverbal cues. If you'd like to know more, the Further Reading section suggests some more in-depth books on the subject.

Some overall points about reading nonverbal communication

Sometimes a person's nonverbals will reveal information they don't want to share through their words. However, reading nonverbal signals will never let you completely scan someone's mind. Tuning in to this type of communication is not fully reliable for a number of reasons:

- People know how to control and disguise the nonverbal signals they send in order to be polite. For example, they'll put a friendly attentive look on their face, even though they're not interested in the topic you're talking about. Sometimes their true intent will leak out, but they can often hide it successfully.
- People have different styles of communicating nonverbally, depending on their personality, mood, age, gender, and culture. Some are more cheery and animated; others always seem a bit flat and gloomy. Some use common gestures in idiosyncratic ways. If you've just met someone, you can't fully know what their nonverbal signals are telling you.
- A lot of nonverbal communication is quick and subtle. Most of the time, people don't feel the intense emotions that lead to obvious unspoken signals. For example, if you say something that mildly surprises them, their eyes may just go slightly wide for a split second. They won't do a cartoonish double take.
- Outside forces can interfere with the signals people would normally send. For example, if they find the room chilly, they might come

across as more tense and closed off because they're distracted and hunching up to try to keep warm.

All in all, you should try to glean what information you can from people's nonverbal messages. At the same time, know you'll never have a perfect understanding of what they're thinking, so you should focus on going after your own social goals. For instance, if you want to talk to someone in your class but you can't tell if they're in the mood to chat, give it a shot and see what happens.

Any one nonverbal signal in isolation can be unreliable. Consider the overall picture when attempting to read people. For example, crossed arms can be a sign that someone is bored or guarded, but it could also mean they find the position comfortable. You need to weigh that one piece of information in light of everything else. If they've been smiling and eagerly talking to you the whole time they've had their arms crossed, it probably doesn't mean anything. If they suddenly cross their arms while turning away from you and making a disapproving face, that's another story.

Although it's vital to know how to read negative nonverbal cues, it can be nerve-racking territory if you have shy or insecure tendencies because you'll tend to overanalyze, assume the worst, and see unhappy signals where none exist. You can read negative meaning into ambiguous signals such as someone having a neutral facial expression. If you find yourself doing this, focus on dealing with those insecure thinking patterns.

Some important channels of nonverbal communication

When you think of nonverbal communication, you may think that the face, arms, and hands are the only sources of these signals. You can find out much about a person's thoughts through other means. Consider the

following avenues of nonverbal communication:

Facial expression: This is a huge source of information because people's emotions are mainly communicated through their facial expressions. Sometimes a feeling only flashes across someone's face for a split second.

Tone of voice: You could consider tone of voice a part of verbal communication, but it's included with the other nonverbal signals because it can modify the meaning of someone's words. A simple "hi" can be injected with any number of emotions, like cheerfulness, tiredness, or polite obligation.

Use of eye contact: In Western cultures, people are seen as confident and interested in others when they maintain solid, though not overly intense, eye contact. Less use of eye contact can signal discomfort, distraction, or shiftiness.

Open or closed body language: When someone has open body language, their arms are at their sides, their legs are somewhat spread apart, they're facing you with their torso, and their body generally looks loose and relaxed. It's a sign they're feeling comfortable and accepting. Closed body language is tense and protective, with arms either stiffly held at the sides or crossed over the torso, and the legs close together. It could mean they're feeling guarded, nervous, or skeptical.

Leaning: If someone leans in toward you, it's a sign of their interest and attention. Leaning back is harder to read and can indicate anything from lower interest to just a casual, relaxed attitude.

Use of gestures and mannerisms: Individual gestures have their own meanings, like a nod to indicate interest. There are too many to list in this small chapter. Overall, when people are engaged and excited, they'll tend to gesture more. If they're tired, relaxed, or uninterested, they'll be less animated. Fidgety gestures can be a sign of boredom or anxiety.

Use of touch: Some people use touch more than others. Normally we're

more touchy with people we like and are close to, and are hands-off when the relationship is more formal. With casual friends, we normally keep touching to the upper back and upper arms. Anything else is for more intimate contacts. You may give a friend a light clap on the shoulder when meeting them or playfully nudge them when they poke fun at you. If someone shrinks from your touch, they may not be sure of you yet or just not used to being touched in general.

Use of objects and the surroundings: If you're talking to someone and they're playing with their phone or absentmindedly ripping up a coaster, it's probably a sign they're not fully engaged with you. If you're not comfortable with someone, you may move until you've put a table between you.

Use of personal space: Distances vary between people and across cultures, but we all have a variety of personal space zones. Outside of a crowded subway or really noisy bar, you won't let a stranger get as close to you as you would your best friend. Closing the space with someone means you feel more familiar and comfortable with them. You tend to feel uneasy and back off if someone gets closer to you than you think the relationship justifies.

Body and feet direction: We often unconsciously point our body where we want to go. If you're interested in talking to someone, you'll face them. If you want to be somewhere else, you'll start angling away.

Positioning relative to others: In larger groups people can reveal aspects of their mental state based on where they place themselves compared to everyone else. For example, in a larger group discussion, if three people are standing together, it may mean they're especially close friends or they want to have a side conversation. If another person is standing slightly off to the side, it could mean they're feeling shy and left out or they're preoccupied or not interested in what the others have to say. If the entire group is standing

away from everyone else at a party, it may mean they want to talk privately.

Fashion sense and grooming: The clothes people wear aren't completely reliable as a nonverbal signal, but people communicate a lot through their clothing choices. For example, they may be sending the message that they want to be seen as artsy and nonconforming, slick and wealthy, tough, or into a certain hobby. How well put together they are on any given day can also give you clues about someone's mental state (you'd know something was off if your normally well-dressed friend showed up to your house unshowered and wearing yesterday's outfit).

Some important clusters of nonverbal signals to know

When reading people's nonverbal messages, you want to be able to tune in to basic information like what emotions are showing on their face. People also make groups of signals to show their overall mood and comfort levels.

Approachability signals

You'll never fully be able to tell whether someone is open to talking to you. Sometimes the most unapproachable-looking person will happily chat to you once you break the ice. Here are some general guidelines:

Approachable

- friendly, happy facial expression
- open, relaxed body language
- looking around, as if scanning for people they could talk to
- standing near other people or in the middle of the room where all the action is
- smiling or nodding if you catch their eye
- (for groups) members are arranged loosely and are standing fairly far

apart with plenty of room for someone new to join

Less approachable

- less happy or preoccupied facial expression
- closed body language
- in their own world, not paying attention to other people
- standing off to the side, away from everyone else
- clearly paying attention to something else, like their phone
- wearing headphones
- giving you a blank or unwelcoming expression if you catch their eye
- (for groups) members are standing in a tight, closed circle

Nonverbal signs of platonic, friendly interest, comfort, or happiness

- smiling
- solid eye contact
- eagerly nodding and agreeing with what you're saying
- leaning forward
- open body language
- tendency to make more big, animated arm gestures
- body and feet facing toward you

If you're getting these signals, you can reasonably conclude everything is going well. Continue to watch the person's nonverbal signals to see if they change.

Signs of disinterest, discomfort, or being upset

There are a variety of ways someone may show that they're less than happy in an interaction with you. Again, any one signal is unreliable, but if you

pick up a group of them, it's a sign something is off. You should think about what's happening in the interaction and whether you can do anything to change its course.

Boredom, lack of interest, or indifference

- glazed or tired expression in the other person's eyes
- tired, disengaged facial expression
- saying "Uh huh" and "Mmm hmm" and nodding along as you speak, but in a dry "going through the motions" way
- yawning
- looking around the room
- checking their phone
- fidgeting, shifting on their feet, or fiddling with nearby items
- leaning away from you
- crossed arms
- arms hanging leadenly at their side, lack of animation
- body and feet pointed away from you
- starting to edge away

If you're getting these signals, try one of these approaches to recapture the other person's attention:

- changing the topic to a more mutually interesting one
- your own energy and enthusiasm
- considering whether they've been talking too long and need a break

If you try one of those approaches and get the same result, it's likely that the other person doesn't feel like speaking to you, so you should end the conversation altogether.

Unease or not being sure about you yet

- strained, tight, polite smile
- mildly nervous or suspicious facial expression
- leaning away from you
- closed body language
- flinching or tensing up if you touch them
- standing away from you or increasing their bubble of personal space
- putting barriers up between them and you (for example, a table or a drink they're holding in front of themselves)

Here are some suggestions if you're getting these nonverbals:

- If you've just started talking to someone, give them time to get used to you.
- Back off a bit if you're being too touchy or animated, standing too close to them, acting too chummy and familiar, or asking them for personal information.
- If you're speaking about a controversial or emotionally charged subject, try switching to a more pleasant or neutral one.
- If you're mingling, consider finding someone else to talk to after a few minutes if their signals don't change much.

Nervousness

- stunned, deer-in-the-headlights facial expression
- tense, preoccupied facial expression
- tight or shaky voice
- struggling to get their words out
- sighing / exhaling noticeably

- nodding quickly and saying, “Yeah, yeah, yeah” much more than normal
- laughing too much at small jokes, laughing when someone normally wouldn’t (for example, “My name’s Bill. Ha ha ha...”)
- overall tense or closed, self-protective body language
- fidgeting
- self-soothing gestures like rubbing their upper arm
- twitchy, jumpy feet

To try to put someone else at ease, try one of these suggestions:

- Give the person time to calm down in your presence.
- Act pleasant and subdued, and stick to safe, routine topics that they can respond to easily.
- Consider whether you’re doing anything that’s making them feel off balance.

Offended or disagreeing with what you’re saying

- look of anger or annoyance
- look of shock or incredulity (“Did they just say that?”)
- suddenly closing off their body language
- suddenly leaning back
- partially turning away from you

If any of these signals arise during your interaction, think about the last thing you said or did. The other person must have found it disagreeable or insensitive. Consider changing the topic, backing off a strong opinion, or apologizing (“Sorry, that joke was tasteless”).

How to get better at reading nonverbal communication

Humans have a built-in capacity to recognize each other's nonverbal communication, though some people aren't naturally skilled at reading it and need to work a little harder to get the hang of it. Here's what you can do to catch up.

Look up what different expressions and mannerisms look like if you have trouble recognizing them intuitively

It would be great if this book could include dozens upon dozens of photos of different types of nonverbal communication, but that's beyond its limits. Some books that contain this information are listed in the Further Reading section. You could also look up pictures of specific expressions online or ask a friend or family member to model particular ones for you.

Practice reading other people's body language

Here are some exercises you can try:

- Put on a movie or TV show and try to identify the emotions and nonverbal messages the actors are portraying. Of course, watch their facial expressions and body language, but also gather clues from the context they're in. Broad, exaggerated comedies or soap operas tend to be the easiest to read, while nuanced, understated dramas are the toughest. Muting the sound will make the exercise more difficult, because the dialogue won't give you hints.
- Do some inconspicuous people-watching in a busy public place like a food court or nightclub and try to read everyone's moods. Who's bored? Who's stressed out? Who's cheerful? Who's trying to be the center of attention? Who feels shy? Notice how some people have

more expressive or restrained styles of communicating their feelings.

- Ask a friend or family member to act out various expressions and mannerisms for you to try to read. They can purposely exaggerate them at first, then gradually up the difficulty by making them more subtle.
- Try to read the nonverbals of people you're interacting with. If you're having a friendly chat with someone, they're not going to show you the wildest anger or the deepest sadness, but you can still try to look for changes in the more subdued expressions they'll make. Maybe they'll look a little more stressed as they talk about an upcoming assignment, or seem mildly bored while you're talking about a topic they're only half-interested in, and then become livelier when the subject switches to one they're more passionate about.

19

Improving Your Own Nonverbal Communication

YOUR OWN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION affects how people see you. It's not the most flattering aspect of human nature, but we often size people up based on a quick surface impression. As much as possible, you want your nonverbal signals working for you. You'll also communicate more clearly and effectively if your words and nonverbal messages are lined up. This chapter shows you how to complement your words with your nonverbal communication.

Some important aspects of your own nonverbal communication

Some of your nonverbal signals are beyond your conscious control. For instance, if you're scared your pupils will dilate. There's nothing you can do to override that. However, there are plenty of other nonverbal signals you can control. Here's a list:

Your use of eye contact: Are you making eye contact in a way that shows you're comfortable and attentive? Or do you give too little and seem nervous or checked-out, or make too much and come off as intense or combative?

Your resting facial expression: Does your neutral expression make you seem approachable and content, or does it unintentionally send the message that you're bored or angry?

Your voice volume: Do you speak at a volume that's easy to understand, or are you too quiet or loud?

Your voice tone: Is your voice pleasant to listen to, or does it have an odd quality to it? Does it convey confidence in what you're saying?

Your overall level of expressiveness: Are you able to reasonably convey your emotions, or do you come off as too blank and stiff or overly animated?

Your overall body language: Does it make you seem friendly and self-assured, or something less useful such as timid, overeager, aloof, or aggressive?

Your posture: Are you holding your body in a fairly confident, attractive way?

Your use of space: Are you maintaining a distance from people that fits your relationship with them?

Your use of touch: Are you reasonably comfortable touching people in a casual, social way? Do you shrink away when people do the same to you?

The way you dress and groom yourself: Are you styling yourself in a way that complements your appearance? Are you making any errors that could unnecessarily put people off?

General thoughts on improving your nonverbal communication

Some of your nonverbal communication is influenced by your mental state. Your body language is naturally going to be different when you're feeling nervous and uncertain of yourself compared to when you're cheerful and self-assured. As your confidence and social skills get better, some of your nonverbals will improve automatically. Your body language may become more open and inviting, or you'll find it easier to hold eye contact.

However, some nonverbals are ingrained bad habits. For example, even if you become more comfortable around people, you may still find you consistently fail to look them in the eye, and you'll have to try to correct this more directly.

It takes time to improve aspects of your nonverbal communication. When people realize they have poor posture, for example, they often consciously vow to carry themselves differently. They can typically only keep it up for a few days before it gets too physically and mentally draining, their focus, discipline, and enthusiasm wear off, and they move on to other things. If you really want to see improvements in an aspect of your nonverbal communication, you have to give it more time and make it a priority project, to the point where you schedule frequent practice sessions for a few months. It's not enough to just occasionally remember, "Oh yeah, I should stand up straighter." If you have several issues with your nonverbals, you should try to tackle them one or two at a time, not all at once.

It's often distracting to try to monitor and adjust your nonverbals while you're socializing. If you're working on your conversation skills, you can't exactly throw "practice using open body language" into the mix and expect to do either well. At first, try to work on your nonverbals in situations where you can put your spoken communication on autopilot (for example, while talking to a cashier). As your new nonverbals start to feel more effortless and automatic, you can push yourself to use them in situations where you have to think on your feet more.

Ways to improve specific facets of your nonverbal communication

Eye contact

People are considered more confident, interested, and trustworthy when

they maintain good eye contact with the person they're speaking with. That doesn't mean fixing your partner in a death stare. Instead, look them in the eyes for three seconds or so, then glance away for a moment before meeting their gaze again. In general, you should make more eye contact when you're listening, which is easier to do. When you're speaking, it's okay to look away more, which often happens naturally as you get distracted by trying to put together what you want to say. When talking to a group, spread your eye contact among everyone.

Poor eye contact can be nothing more than a bad habit, but people often avoid looking others in the eye because they find it too intense and intimidating. Having a tendency to get lost in your head during conversations can also hinder good eye contact. Here's what can help:

- If eye contact makes you nervous, start with social situations you can handle and build up to the harder ones (see Chapter 7 for more details). Maybe you can't look an attractive authority figure in the eye, but you can manage when you're interacting with a restaurant server or sales clerk. As mentioned, you'll likely find it easier to maintain eye contact when you're listening rather than talking.
- Two safe ways to practice are to watch TV and make eye contact with the characters on the screen, and to stand in front of a mirror and meet your own gaze.
- You don't have to look right into the center of people's eyes. Looking between or close by them will still register as eye contact from the other person's perspective.
- Give your eye muscles time to get into better shape. If you're used to always looking down and away in conversations, it can be tiring to continually look up at someone's face and hold your focus on it.

Resting facial expression

Ideally you want your neutral face to look relaxed, happy, and approachable. You don't need to walk around grinning like a clown at all times, but it's good if you can seem reasonably content. Some people create the wrong impression because their face unintentionally looks nervous, bored, angry, zoned out, or unfriendly. There are a few reasons this can happen:

- They actually are feeling that way and may not be aware of it (for example, they're more checked out than they realize at the office Christmas party).
- Their facial features naturally make them look that way (for example, someone with large eyes may seem more stunned and nervous; someone with a prominent brow may look angrier).
- Their overall look matches a stereotype (for example, if someone dresses in a stereotypical hippie or stoner style, people may read their neutral expression as zoned out and dopey).
- They don't always give off a misleading expression, but some of their moods can be mistaken for others ones (for example, they look annoyed when they're tired, or bored when they're deep in thought).

As with other facets of your nonverbal communication, your resting expression may shift as you change your mentality and social skills. If you tend to look nervous, that may go away as you become more comfortable around people. You may start to look more relaxed and happy at parties, rather than bored, when you know how to mingle and unlock their fun.

It's too draining to do all the time, but when it's important to do so, you can consciously try to wear a happy, approachable facial expression; simply smile slightly, open your eyes more, and relax your features. If you're tall, lower your chin so you don't accidentally look down your nose at people. You may also be able to adjust the impression you create with some tweaks

to your grooming, style, and posture. For example, if your eyebrows are naturally downturned and grouchy looking, a little plucking may change the vibe they give off. If you're a big, imposing guy, some changes to your fashion may make you seem less intimidating. If you have a wide-eyed, fretful expression, better posture may help cancel out its effect and create a more confident overall look.

Voice

There are two aspects to having a decent speaking voice. The first is to be able to speak smoothly, pleasantly, and at a good volume. The second is being able to get your message out in a way that shows you're reasonably confident in yourself and what you're saying.

Voice volume

If you're shy and unsure of your opinions, you may speak with an overly quiet voice. The easiest way to talk with more volume and projection is to speak from down low in your abdomen, which is more resonant than when you use your throat to make higher-pitched sounds. Singing, acting, and public speaking lessons can teach you to use your voice more effectively. You may have to face a fear of making yourself heard and being the center of attention. If your voice is always quiet, not just in certain situations, there may be a physical cause, like weak vocal chords. See a speech therapist to rule that out.

Voice quality

Most people's voice quality is fine, but some have issues like stuttering or speaking with an unusual tone or cadence. Speech therapy can help in these cases too.

Voice conviction

The book has already mentioned the usefulness of bringing up your issues and insecurities in a “no-big-deal” tone a couple of times, so you already have a sense of how the way you say something can change the way it’s received. A somewhat cynical observation is that if you watch popular people socialize, they often aren’t saying anything that interesting or clever, but because they’re speaking with conviction, everyone around them finds them compelling. It’s too much to conclude, “As long as you seem sure of yourself, you can say whatever dumb things you want,” but you do need to nonverbally package your statements.

When you’re surer of yourself and your opinions, you’ll naturally start to express yourself more confidently. Your statements will also seem more self-assured if other aspects of your nonverbals, like your eye contact and posture, are strong. Here are some more direct ways to speak with conviction:

- Purposely try to speak in a relaxed but assured tone that communicates, “This is a perfectly natural, acceptable, interesting thing to say right now.”
- Speak with enough volume to be heard.
- Speak clearly. Don’t mumble or talk into your chest.
- Don’t speak too quickly in a rush to get your point out or not take up too much time.
- Be reasonably concise. Know what you want to get across, rather than rambling on.
- Try to cut down on filler words and sounds such as “Like” or “Uh...” (if you need a moment to think, being silent for a split second is better). Everyone uses filler words sometimes, but overdoing it can make you seem ditzy.

Overall expressiveness

In addition to your facial expressions, expressiveness comes from varying your voice and the gestures you make. If your face is always a blank mask, you speak in a monotone, and you don't move your hands or body much, you'll seem flat and bored, and be hard to read. On the other hand, being overly expressive and animated can make you seem fake, flighty, or agitated.

Aim to hit whatever the typical level of expressiveness is for your culture. If you're under-expressive, you'll have to consciously force yourself to gesture more often and put on a smile when you want to seem cheerful. More than with many of these points, this feels very clunky and unnatural at first, but showing a wider range of emotion will feel more normal in time. Again, as you get more comfortable in your own skin, you'll likely naturally start to be more expressive. If you're over-expressive you'll need to do the opposite and tone down your gestures and facial expressions. This can also feel artificial and restrictive at first, but will become easier with time.

Body language

In day-to-day social situations, you want body language that makes you seem relatively confident, relaxed, friendly, approachable, and happy. This involves

- having open body language;
- holding yourself in a loose, non-tense, and non-rigid way;
- absence of nervous or fidgety gestures like rubbing your hands on your pants or tapping your foot;
- absence of unintentionally bored or disrespectful-seeming actions, like looking around the room or fiddling with nearby objects.

You want your body language to seem self-assured, but casual and

relaxed. If you come off as overly confident, you will seem like you belong at a sales convention, not a ho-hum social gathering. You also don't want to veer into confrontational or overly dominant territory (that is, standing with your chest puffed out, body too rigid and rooted in place, hands planted defiantly on your hips, invading other people's space, or resting your hands on people's shoulders). Sure, maybe you'll need to act like that if you're living in a rough neighborhood where only the strong survive. But in most social situations, that kind of body language will either make you look angry and unstable, or like you're a jerk who's trying too hard to be the top dog at the expense of connecting with people in a friendlier way.

Posture

The most attractive, confident posture is when you're standing upright with your head and shoulders back, though not in a standing-at-attention way. There are two main types of poor posture. The first is slouching—when your shoulders are hunched and rounded, and your head juts too far forward. The second is *anterior pelvic tilt*, which makes you look like you have a potbelly, even if you're thin. This poor posture occurs when your hips tilt too far downward and your lower back arches too far inward, causing your butt and stomach to stick out.

Posture problems are caused by muscle imbalances that pull your body out of alignment. In slouching, the chest muscles are tight, while the ones in the back are relatively weak. With the anterior pelvic tilt, the lower back and hip flexors (the muscles near your hips that raise your knee up) are too tight, while the abs and butt are weaker. These issues can develop due to factors like slumping in front of a computer too much, compensating for old injuries, or simply from entrenched habits. Some less-confident people slump their shoulders because they chronically feel defeated or don't believe in themselves enough to walk tall. Genetic differences in spine

curvature can lead to posture issues as well.

To improve your posture, you need to strengthen your weaker muscles and increase flexibility in the tighter ones. If you slouch, you need to stretch your chest and work out your upper back. If your pelvic tilt is out of whack, you need to regularly stretch your hip flexors and lower back, and work your abs and gluteal muscles. If you log a lot of hours sitting at a computer, change the ergonomics of your work station so it encourages you to sit up straight.

Use of personal space

Confident people are comfortable taking up their reasonable share of personal space. To do this, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and don't be afraid to use the occasional bigger arm gesture. Don't swing your hands around wildly and try to claim six feet in every direction, but don't be shrunken and huddled up either.

Avoid unintentionally getting too close to anyone. Some people default to speaking at a distance that's too close to the person they're talking to. Observe what distances people in your area talk at and try to do the same.

You may also have a larger need for personal space and tend to pull back when people try to talk to you at a distance that seems natural to them. If your space bubble is impractically large, it can make you seem like you're scared of or uninterested in people. Try to get used to standing closer to people. Don't force yourself to put up with someone who's standing too close and being too familiar, but if you're having a casual conversation with someone who's at a reasonable distance and you find yourself wanting to retreat, try to override the urge.

Your use and acceptance of touch

You don't need to touch others very often to do well in social situations.

However, if you're uneasy touching people in even the most casual, friendly way—say, by giving a light hug good-bye or touching someone's shoulder to get their attention—you can get used to it through purposeful practice. Start with the types of touch that make you the least uncomfortable and then build up to the ones that you're more hesitant to do. If you notice people often retreat from your touch, it's a sign you may be doing it too much, too soon, and in too familiar a way.

Some people are uneasy with being casually touched and may flinch or show discomfort when someone else touches them. If that describes you, you can get more used to being touched by consciously being aware when it might be coming and forcing yourself not to react in a tense or jumpy way. With time, it won't faze you as much. Again, this does not mean you should put up with touching that's blatantly over the "casual and friendly" line.

Grooming and sense of style

How you dress or groom yourself affects how other people see you. If fashion isn't on your radar and you don't dress in the most flattering way, you may cause some people to unnecessarily write you off or assume negative things about you, like you're boring or don't take good care of yourself.

Don't worry, though. You don't need to become obsessed with clothes or completely overhaul your appearance to have a happy social life. The majority of people dress fine. They won't win any style awards, but the impression they make through their looks isn't holding them back either.

People can err two ways in their style and grooming:

1. The first, rarer one is when they make cut-and-dried errors like having bad breath, body odor, or unkempt facial hair; wearing clothes with holes or stains in them; or sporting classically

unfashionable combinations like shorts, sandals, and pulled-up white socks. If you're making any mistakes at this level, then saying you should fix them is going to be this book's closest thing to mandatory advice. Fortunately, these are easy problems to fix once you're aware of them.

2. The second is when someone isn't making any flagrant mistakes, but their overall sense of style is below average for the town or city they live in. They dress and groom themselves in a bland, frumpy, or unflattering way. If you fall into this category, you don't *have* to change. Lots of people who are indifferent to fashion have good social lives. However, polishing your appearance wouldn't hurt.

Maybe you're worried your fashion sense isn't good enough. However, just because you're reading a section on style and grooming mistakes doesn't mean you're necessarily making any. It's possible your appearance is okay as it is. If you want to know if there are any areas where you could improve, try asking some friends or acquaintances for their opinion. You can also upload some photos of yourself in typical outfits to fashion-related message boards online and get feedback.

Say you learn you could stand to polish your style. People often have stronger reactions to the idea of having to dress better than they do to things like improving their posture or speaking volume:

- Many people have been picked on in their youth for wearing the “wrong” clothes by peers who seemed overly concerned with the superficial parts of life. When these people are older, they carry baggage about dressing well. They see it as shallow and may even feel like they’re letting the enemy “win” if they begin to focus on it themselves.
- More generally, someone may not personally care much about

fashion and resent the fact that they're forced to devote energy to it because the rest of the world thinks it's important.

- Some shy, self-conscious people have a fear of standing out and making waves. One way they unconsciously manage it is by wearing very conservative, nondescript outfits. When they're told they should dress with a little more panache, it triggers their anxiety, and they react with a self-protective hostility.
- They have poor self-esteem and think they don't deserve to look nicer.
- They have an overly rigid self-image and equate dressing even slightly differently with giving up everything about who they are.

Developing your style

This subsection won't list a bunch of rudimentary fashion and grooming tips like "brush your teeth every day", "wear clothes that fit you well", or "regardless of your body type, you'll look better if you're fit." If you previously didn't give much thought to your hygiene or style, once you're tuned in to it it's easy enough to look up guides on those topics and figure out what to adjust. This chapter is also not going to give you any specific clothing suggestions, because what's considered good style varies immensely depending on your age, subculture, and the region of the world you're living in. Instead, here are some general guidelines on improving your style on your own:

- **Don't feel you have to become a fashion connoisseur to improve your look.** There are advantages to having above-average dress sense, but it takes time and effort to get to that point, and the typical person isn't going to think less of you if you don't look like you stepped off a fashion runway. You just need to dress on par with the

other people in your city. That doesn't mean you have to mindlessly adopt the same uniform as them. You just need an average level of fashion knowledge.

- **You can't develop a better sense of style in a week.** You'll improve your instincts little by little as you read up on the topic, observe how other people dress, experiment with your own look, and get feedback from the people in your life about what suits you best. Practically, this means don't go out tomorrow and spend a bunch of money in an attempt to overhaul your wardrobe. Learn and buy a little at a time.
- **Changing your look, even for the better, may make you uncomfortable.** As you're trying on new clothes, you may think things like, "That's not me. I'm not the type of person who wears this stuff." When you first wear a new type of outfit, you may feel like everyone on the street notices how weird and different you look. Try to push your comfort zone. You may be surprised at how, within a few days, you'll feel comfortable in outfits that initially made you feel like you were playing dress-up.
- **Fashion-savvy friends can help you tweak your look, but any one person can be hit-or-miss, because their sense of what looks good may not match yours.** You can get better feedback by consulting a range of people. If everyone at your job or in your social circle says they like your new haircut, you know you're on the right track.
- **Try to get a sense of how people in your area and demographic are styling themselves.** You can do this by people watching. A less conventional but efficient way to check out a lot of people's styles at once is to join a free dating site, make a fake empty profile, and then look at who's in your city. Ask yourself: What are some of the broad style categories people fit into? What distinguishes the sharper-looking people from the more generic or poorly dressed ones?

- **Find a good-looking haircut for your face.** That might involve growing it out or cutting it much shorter. If you have hard-to-manage hair, take the time to learn how to properly handle it (for example, by changing your shampooing routine or using products to control frizz).
- **Glasses can look great if they're the right frames on the right person as the right accessory of a larger style package.** Glasses can just as easily send the signal of “stereotypical dork.” If you wear glasses, consider whether you’d look better in contacts. They’re not as expensive or high maintenance as you may think. If not, make sure to choose frames that look stylish on you and jell well with your overall look.
- **If you have a more bland style, you’re at risk for two mistakes when buying clothes:** 1) Going too far and buying clothes that are overly flashy and gaudy; 2) Not going far enough and seeing run-of-the-mill clothes as too colorful for you. With experience you’ll get better at finding that middle ground, but when you’re just beginning to add pieces to your wardrobe, get a second opinion from a sales clerk or friend.

20

Conversation Mistakes

THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS have mentioned some conversation mistakes when it made sense to bring them up. This one provides a more dedicated list of mistakes to try to avoid. It can't cover every mistake you could possibly make in a conversation, but it includes the most common ones. Mistakes can be one-off errors in judgment or be more habitual and stem from larger issues in a person's personality that they need to work on.

The No. 1 thing to remember about conversation mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes while conversing from time to time. It's great to steer clear of as many bad habits as possible, but don't put too much strain on yourself to be flawless when you talk to people. No one gets it right 100 percent of the time. Also, even if you converse in a way that most people find acceptable, you'll encounter the occasional person who has a different perspective and sees something as a mistake on your part (for example, someone who's overly sensitive may take offense to normal affectionate teasing).

Don't let a fear of making a mistake paralyze you. Many so-called mistakes aren't ideal, but they're not *that* bad, and the conversation will often continue just fine. For example, it's not great to brag, but if you subtly talk yourself up one time, most people aren't instantly going to be turned off. They may not even see it as bragging to begin with, just you stating a fact about yourself.

If you're just getting the hang of making conversation and are anxious about getting rejected or making a bad impression, you can get so worried about all the behaviors you have to avoid that your mind goes blank. Saying something less-than-perfect is often better than saying nothing at all. At least that way you're keeping the conversation going and giving the other person something to react to. For example, if you mildly brag about how good you are at drawing, the other person may start talking about how they're into art as well.

If you catch yourself making a bigger mistake, you can usually smooth it over by apologizing for it. Don't say you're sorry in too serious a tone. Just quickly, casually acknowledge what you did wrong, then get on with the discussion. For example, "Whoops, I just cut you off. Sorry about that. So you were saying?"

Knowing when it's okay to break the rules

People get away with making errors in conversations all the time. An observation socially inexperienced people sometimes make is, "I've read about all these things that are supposedly bad conversation habits, but I see popular people doing them all the time. What gives?" There are a few explanations:

- **Some "bad" behaviors are okay in certain situations.** As Chapter 14 explained, it's acceptable in loud, rowdy group conversations for people to interrupt and talk over each other as they try to make their points heard.
- **Some "bad" behaviors are accepted in particular subcultures or social groups.** In a group of young, bro-ish guys, mild bragging may be common and acceptable. A circle of intellectual friends may be fine with members correcting each other.

- **Individuals vary in which social mistakes bother them.** Someone who's not a big talker themselves may have fewer issues with a monopolizer. Someone with a crasser sense of humor may not mind a less-sensitive friend. Our friendships are partially determined by what mistakes we don't mind, or even find endearing, in others.
- **People's personalities are somewhat defined by the minor, mostly tolerated mistakes they tend to make.** “Yep, that’s Norm, always telling those meandering stories”, “Mindy’s just excitable. I used to get annoyed when she interrupted me, but now I’m used to it”, “Ha ha, Dennis is a passionate guy. If you talk to him about politics, you’re going to get into a debate with him. You’ve been warned.”

Mistakes

Mistakes fall into many categories and can creep into any conversation. You can’t avoid all mistakes, but by being aware of potential missteps, you’re more likely to sidestep or minimize the mistakes you’ll make occasionally.

General

- **Interrupting:** Again, it’s sometimes okay to cut people off in rowdy group conversations, but at any other time it’s inconsiderate. Make an effort to let other people finish their thoughts and statements, even if you’re eager to share what you have to say. The rare exception when it’s okay to cut someone off is if they’re obviously floundering, but can’t get themselves to stop talking and would like someone to jump in and save them from themselves.
- **Not doing your fair share to keep the conversation going:** You don’t want to make your conversation partner do all the work. Examples include giving short answers to their questions but not

asking any of your own, or simply acknowledging their statements and not giving a fuller reaction. It's okay not to pull your weight at first if you're shy or initially getting the hang of conversation skills, but after that, don't force the other person to do all the work of keeping the conversational ball in play.

- **Being unwilling to give the types of replies people reasonably expect to day-to-day questions:** When you reply with an unexpected answer to a standard question, you throw people off and force them to scramble to come up with something else to keep the interaction going. It may also make you seem negative or difficult. For example, someone asks you how your job is going, and rather than replying straightforwardly, you think, "Ugh, this question is so boring. They must be trying to annoy me on purpose" and give a curt, vague answer.
- **Trying too hard to force a particular dynamic:** By all means, try to start a certain dynamic if you think it will be enjoyable, but be willing to change course if the other person isn't biting. For example, trying to get a teasing vibe going is fine, but if the other person indicates they want to be more serious, you should respect their wishes.

Being self-absorbed

- **Being selfish, not looking out for the overall health of the conversation, and turning every subject back to what you want to talk about:** Within reason it's okay to steer a discussion to some of the things that interest you, but not at the expense of everyone else's needs. A good conversation has elements that every person in it enjoys.
- **Monopolizing the conversation by hogging too much of the**

spotlight and not letting others speak: Although some people like talking more than others, in general everyone in the conversation should have equal time to contribute. The exception is when everyone has clearly shown interest in letting you take center stage to share a longer story or opinion. You can gauge this interest by throwing out a teaser sentence or two (“Did I tell you guys about the time I...?”), then seeing if they seem to want to hear more, rather than launching right into a longer spiel.

- **Being long-winded; going on and on when it’s your turn to speak, rather than being more succinct:** Even if you have a longer point to share, you should still aim to make it as concise as you can. People will get impatient if you ramble on too much. Continually check the other person’s nonverbal signals (see Chapter 18). If they look interested, keep going, but if they seem bored, wrap it up.

Bragging

- **Straight-out gaudy bragging:** Simply put, most people find this obnoxious.
- **More subtly trying too hard to bring up your talents and accomplishments:** It’s understandable that you’d want to make people aware of your strengths, but let them come up naturally. You may come across as insecure if you seem like you need to give people reasons to approve of you right away.
- **One-upping:** For example, “Yeah, zip lining’s cool and all, but I’ve been skydiving about a dozen times, so I don’t know how much I’d get out of it.” One way people accidentally one-up is when they’re trying to relate to someone by sharing a similar experience, but theirs is “better.” If someone wants to share an accomplishment or experience, let them have it, and don’t feel you lose something unless

you can “beat” it.

Poor choice of topics

- **Bringing up inappropriate topics around people who won’t appreciate them:** The topic could be too controversial, offensive, upsetting, disgusting, or overly personal and familiar. As Chapter 16 covered, try to consider other people’s perspectives and potential reactions when choosing what subjects to discuss.
- **Not moving on from a topic that isn’t going anywhere:** For example, you’re trying to ask someone about their job, and they don’t seem keen to talk about it, but you keep trying to get them to open up. Know when to switch gears, and don’t assume someone would enjoy a particular topic if they just gave it a chance.
- **Changing topics too abruptly:** You don’t always have to make perfect, artful segues, but switching topics too randomly can throw people off. Chapter 9 gives some tips on segueing to a new subject.
- **Over-relying on complaining, negative, or downer topics to keep your conversations going:** This simply injects too many negative vibes into the interaction, which wears most people down before long. Discussions about personal problems can feel “deep,” but be careful not to always steer your interactions into that territory because it helps you get your fix of meaningful interactions.
- **Over-relying on critiquing topics, like picking apart the plot holes in a movie you just saw with a friend:** In moderation this is okay, especially with other analyzer types, but it also adds some negative energy to your exchanges.
- **Over-sharing by telling your heavy personal problems or foibles to someone you barely know:** Chapter 12 goes into more detail about appropriate ways to self-disclose.

Mistakes often made by people who consider themselves intellectual and logical

- **Speaking in a way that's more blunt and direct than the other person is used to:** People and cultures vary in how to-the-point they are, but if you're more blunt than what your partner expects, it may offend them or hurt their feelings.
- **Correcting people about minor things that aren't relevant to the overall point they were trying to make:** Doing so usually makes you look uptight and pedantic, and can throw the conversation off course.
- **Being too quick to start debating people, especially if they weren't expecting it or don't enjoy that kind of verbal sparring:** For example, getting into an argument about politics when they offhandedly mention something funny about a politician. Most people find arguing emotionally unpleasant, especially if it's sprung on them suddenly. It's okay to disagree with people, but don't approach it from an adversarial stance where you think their view is stupid and you have to "win" with yours. Approach differences of opinion from the perspective that you're both on the same team and you're respectfully sharing ideas to help each other learn and grow.
- **Talking at people rather than with them:** That is, you're thinking out loud at someone about a subject that interests you, not having a back-and-forth interaction. The other person feels like they could be replaced with a cardboard cut-out, and it wouldn't make much difference. This is similar to hogging the spotlight, but it makes the other person feel especially unimportant. It also makes people who do it seem unaware.

Group conversation mistakes

- **Blatantly hogging the spotlight:** The bigger the group is, the more of a mistake it is to try to take all the airtime for yourself. However, you have a bigger audience, and that urge to try to capture everyone's attention can be stronger.
- **Trying to have a conversation with one other person in the group, rather than focusing on everyone:** That is, not breaking off into a side conversation, but just focusing on one person and ignoring the others. It's a group interaction. Every member deserves to be included.
- **Cutting people off, interrupting, and doing other things to fight to be heard when the interaction is low key:** These things are acceptable within reason during more hectic group discussions, but will seem domineering or attention-hogging if everyone else is interacting in a more restrained way.

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Being More Likable

AS THE FIRST CHAPTER in this section said, your interactions will be influenced by your comfort levels, your specific conversation skills, and your broader personality. One trait that affects how much people enjoy your company is how likable you are. People know this and often ask how they can be more likable. The term seems vague, but this chapter lays out some well-known traits of likable people.

But first, some disclaimers to keep in mind as you work on your likability:

- A big factor in how people feel about each other is their compatibility. We typically like those who are similar to us. Even if you're warm and pleasant, someone may not like you if you have completely opposing views on the world. The traits covered below will affect your likability in addition to, or in spite of, how well matched you are to someone otherwise.
- The traits below will help you become more likable on average, but you can't reliably use any one of them to guarantee a specific individual will like you. As always, each person has their own tastes, and you can't win them all over.
- As a whole, the list may seem like a bunch of bare-minimum requirements to be a pleasant person, not someone outstandingly likable. Likable people don't operate using a set of secret techniques. They just do more of the things below and at a higher level.
- The traits below are pretty general. That means you can express them in a way that blends into your overall style and personality.

- There are many ways to be appealing. For every point listed, there are many people who don't have that trait who are still likable because they make up for it in other ways.
- Unless you have an especially off-putting personality, you're probably already likable to some people. You don't need to be in the top 1 percent of any of the points below to be liked; just being decent enough at them helps your interactions.

Two ways to be more likable before anyone has even talked to you

People start to form an impression of your likability before you've even spoken. The first way you can seem more likable is if you make yourself more physically attractive: by dressing and grooming well, being in shape, and having self-assured body language. Even if you don't transform yourself into an Adonis, every little bit helps. People tend to see attractive, put-together individuals as having more appealing personalities. It's called the *halo effect*. Of course, attractiveness is somewhat subjective, and you'll need to adjust anything you do based on your social goals and the types of people you want to make a good impression on. An outfit or hairstyle that may be considered good-looking in an artsy neighborhood in a big city may not get the same response elsewhere.

Your reputation and accomplishments can also color people's perception of you. Have you ever seen someone from a distance and they seemed like nothing special, but then a friend told you about something they did that impressed you? It skews you toward seeing them in a more positive light when you talk to them. The opposite can happen if you know someone's a jerk. You can't actively control this point like the ones coming up, but when you become more accomplished, it may affect the way people view you.

Be able to put your personality out there

Obviously you don't want to seem unlikable. Another outcome that can be nearly as bad is when people meet you and don't form much of an impression at all. This can happen if you're extremely shy or quiet, or if you're so scared of saying the wrong thing that you discuss everything in a very safe, bland way. You don't have to become extremely outgoing or forceful with your opinions or humor, but you need to show enough of your personality that people have at least something to react to.

Be reasonably confident

On the whole, people like confidence in others. However, this isn't to say you have to come across as an ultra-assured salesman type of person. That can be too much. Just be comfortable with yourself. Some people are even likable by being slightly shy or eccentric, but owning it, rather than acting ashamed and embarrassed.

Be reasonably cheerful and positive

Likable people are usually happy. They see the positives in things. They don't complain that often, and even when they talk about their problems, they don't let their energy get too negative. They can vent about their annoying boss but have it come across as an entertaining story. A cheerful emotional state feels good to be around and is somewhat contagious. Again, you don't have to be excessively chipper or never express a negative feeling or opinion. Just try to maintain a good ratio of positivity to negativity.

Seem as if you like people

People generally find someone more likable if they seem as if they like us

and people in general. Conversely, people usually dislike anyone who comes off as arrogant or aloof. The wording “seem as if” is used deliberately. Some people inwardly feel misanthropic, but they’re seen as likable because they’re outwardly friendly and personable. If you truly like most people you meet, that’s great, but having that trait is easier said than done. Some of us are choosier than others about who we want to chat to or be friends with. You can still make it a point to be pleasant in your interactions:

- Show friendly and interested body language, like smiling, making pleasant eye contact, and giving people your full attention.
- Initiate conversations with people.
- Eagerly chat with anyone who starts a conversation with you.
- Take an interest in other people and what they have to say.
- If you don’t have time to talk to someone, at least give them a cheerful greeting.

Help people feel good about themselves

When it comes to this point, it’s less about actively trying to make people feel good, and more about not saying anything that cuts them down. If you purposely try to build someone up by cooing over every little thing they do, it can seem very transparent, patronizing, and manipulative. It’s more than enough to compliment someone or tell them you’re impressed by something they’ve done when the opportunity comes up naturally. Being a decent, friendly person who’s interested in others also makes people feel good about themselves.

If you want to work on this point, you should put most of your energy into not being petty and undermining. Perhaps you know someone who isn’t a blatant jerk, but who’s always peppering their interactions with cutting little

comments. They'll make snarky remarks, downplay or dismiss their friends' accomplishments, and make "joking" insults that are a little too stinging. Maybe that person has social status and respect for another reason, but no one would call them *likable*. When you act this way yourself, you often won't even notice you're doing it. For example, a friend will tell you they just took up rock climbing, and before you know it, you feel threatened by the fact that they have more adventurous hobbies than you and are brushing it off with "Yeah, that is a popular fad these days." Likable people aren't immune to acting petty, but they do it much less often.

Bring something to the table in your interactions

Aside from making others feel liked and good about themselves, likable people have traits that make them enjoyable to be around. They're genuinely funny, they have interesting things to say, they're fun to go out with, they're good listeners, and so on. Again, this is subjective. A sense of humor that's hilarious to one group may seem too dark or corny to another. One person may find a certain opinion interesting, while someone else thinks it's pretentious.

You can become more likable by developing your social strengths. Maybe you're fairly funny, but could refine your sense of humor. Or maybe being funny isn't your thing and you could focus on having intriguing things to talk about instead.

Have more positive than negative personality traits

In a chapter full of general points, this one is even more general than the others. A likable person could be lazy at work and careless with money, but when it comes to interacting with others, they show mostly good personality traits. The socializing-related personality flaws they do have are

often milder. They also tend to be aware of their irksome traits and can put a charming spin on them. For example, if they're a bit opinionated and temperamental, they can catch themselves at the start of a rant and poke fun at themselves about what a hothead they are. They don't randomly explode at people with no sense of how tedious they are to be around.

It's not practical for this book to list every possible good and bad character trait or tell you how to overhaul your entire personality. All you can do is tune in to your strengths and weaknesses, and work to change or eliminate the traits that may be annoying to other people.

Avoid being labeled as “nice” in the bad sense of the word

Likable people are often genuinely nice. They're pleasant, friendly, and helpful. Of course, that kind of true niceness is a positive trait. However, some people get told they're “nice” or “too nice” in a tone that makes it clear it's not meant as a compliment. What do people mean when they call someone “nice” and don't mean something entirely positive by it? The word is used to describe several interaction issues:

“Nice” = “I don’t dislike them as a person, but they’re not for me”

“Why didn’t I invite Colin to the party? Uh, he’s nice and all, but he’s not really my style...” When “nice” is used this way, it means, “I don’t hate them as an individual. They seem pleasant and like they have good intentions. They’re just not someone I’d choose to be friends with.” If you’ve been labeled “nice” for this reason, there’s not a solution. It just means someone doesn’t think you’re a match for them.

“Nice” = Bland

Someone may refer to a person as “nice” when they see them as being boring and not showing much of their personality. “Nice” serves as a description that’s used when someone can’t think of anything else to say and they don’t want to be negative. If people see you as nice in the bland sense, you should work on being a little more outgoing and forward about what drives and interests you.

“Nice” = “Not enough of an edge for my tastes”

People generally like to hang out with friends who have a similar level of “edge” to theirs. Someone may label a person who’s less edgy as “nice”—too naive, wholesome, or innocent for their tastes (“She’s one of those nice girls. I don’t think she’d want to go to the bar with us”). By this book’s definition, someone has an edge if they’re willing to do “bad” things. Or if they don’t do those “bad” things, they at least seem like they’re knowledgeable about and not totally frightened by them.

Most people aren’t edgy to the point of being dangerous criminals, but many have some edge because they sometimes do common, mostly harmless “bad” stuff like

- swearing
- telling tasteless jokes
- skipping classes
- drinking or smoking underage
- dressing in a way that’s offensive or provocative to some people (for example, having lots of tattoos and piercings)
- casually hooking up with people
- coming across like they’re tough and willing to get into a fight
- flaunting authority in small ways, like purposely skateboarding in an area where they know they’ll get kicked out of

- committing petty crimes like tagging a mailbox with a marker or shoplifting some lip gloss at age fifteen for a cheap thrill

To be clear, you don't have to do any of these things to fit in. There's nothing wrong with being innocent or a bit naive. Friendship circles sort themselves based on edginess levels. The edgier folks find each other, as do the less-edgy ones, and everyone's happy. It's a whole other problem if someone has too much of an edge.

In general, though, it's good if you can find a nice middle ground. Practically speaking, if you're unfamiliar with commonplace "edgy" things or see them as more sketchy and dangerous than they are, it can socially hinder you:

- Even if you're open to hanging out with run-of-the-mill, mildly edgy people, they may unfairly dismiss you as a potential friend because they see you as being too wholesome for them.
- You may not get invited to slightly edgy events, like parties that you'd have no problem going to, because everyone assumes you wouldn't be interested or able to handle them.
- You may simply have the wrong idea about certain behaviors (for example, you may see every last person who smokes as depraved and evil).
- You may become scared of things that are mostly harmless (for example, seeing dance clubs as risky places).

Social issues aside, if you're overly naive scummy, unscrupulous people may use your innocence to take advantage of you.

To shed that naivety, you don't need to do any edgy things if you don't want to. You just need to become more knowledgeable about them. You can even do this by doing some at-home research. For example, if you're in

college and know nothing about what goes on at parties, you could read a few articles on the rules of common drinking games. Try to get a more nuanced picture of behaviors you may initially have seen as completely bad.

You can also try some edgier activities yourself. Don't do anything that's so edgy it's illegal or could otherwise get you in trouble. However, some things that you may see as edgy are actually pretty harmless. For example, if you've been really sheltered, you may see going to a bar as a foolish, rebellious act. There's no reason not to give something like that a try.

“Nice” = “Too much of a people-pleaser”

People-pleasers are often told they're “too nice.” They engage in outwardly nice behaviors, but their actions are motivated by a fear of being disliked, along with poor boundaries and assertiveness skills. They're nice when other people wouldn't be, and they show non-assertive behaviors, like putting other people's needs ahead of theirs, being overly agreeable, hiding their true feelings behind a cheery mask, and having a hard time saying no and standing up for themselves. Assertiveness is a big enough topic that Chapter 23 is devoted to it.

“Nice” = “Being overly giving, thoughtful, and considerate to get people to spend time with you”

Some people believe that being much nicer than average is a valuable social commodity that will pay off in the form of friendships, romantic relationships, promotions, appreciation, and respect. They're often not fully conscious that they're operating on this principle. They may do lots of unasked-for favors and always be available to provide practical or emotional support.

People who are nice in this way are often disappointed, and they may

eventually become bitter when their giving style doesn't translate into the relationships and admiration they hoped it would. The fact is, most people don't place a huge amount of value on above-and-beyond niceness. It's not that they disregard niceness completely. It's just that the majority of humans are pretty nice (outside of rough dog-eat-dog environments). Being fairly nice is a bare-minimum social expectation, and once someone meets that standard, additional niceness isn't given too much credit. When they're choosing whom to be friends with, people place more importance on factors like having similar interests and values, sharing the same sense of humor, and whether they have fun together. If a "nice" person does something for them, they'll enjoy it in the moment, but it's not going to sway their overall opinion on whether the person is desirable as a friend.

Not only that, but above-average niceness can be a liability. Extremely nice, giving people may be taken advantage of. They may be looked down on as insecure suck-ups who feel they have to buy people's friendship because they have nothing else to offer. They may be seen as lacking judgment and common sense for being so loose with their time, money, and emotional energy. Many people feel uncomfortable when someone gives them too many unsolicited gifts and favors because it makes them feel obligated.

If you're "nice" in this way, realize that your preferred strategy for getting what you want in relationships isn't very effective. You don't need to do a one-eighty and become a complete jerk. Be as nice as the next person, or maybe slightly nicer, but nothing more. Learn to draw people to you through other aspects of your personality.

22

Being More Fun

FUN PEOPLE ARE simply enjoyable to be around. But fun has a time and a place. If you're at a party or in a joking mood, you generally want to be around fun people and having fun yourself. If you're going on a quiet, contemplative walk with a friend, that same fun behavior probably won't fit the situation.

There are two aspects to being more fun. There are the behaviors that make you more fun, and there are the traits to avoid that make you less fun. This chapter covers both aspects.

Being more fun

As with likability, the traits that make people fun are general, and you can fit them to your personality style. You can be fun in a more subdued manner. There's more to it than standing on a table with a beer funnel. However, though everyone can be fun in their own way, this section uses the meaning of "fun" that involves having wacky, entertaining, funny times with people. If someone were to say, "My idea of having fun is to take an afternoon to quietly contemplate my garden," then what's written here won't line up with their use of the word. If the outgoing type of fun isn't all that important to you, then you can skip this section.

Understand people can be in different social modes

Sometimes people are in the mood to have a low-key, cerebral, logical conversation about politics, parenting philosophies, or their fears and

insecurities. At other times they want to goof around, make dumb jokes, party, and blow off steam. Neither social mode is better or worse than the other. They both have their uses and drawbacks. It's the same as when you're not always in the mood for a heavy, depressing drama every time you pick a movie.

Some people are in their element in serious, logical social situations, but they don't know how to handle it when they find themselves in a more silly, party-focused one. They may feel out of their element or get annoyed that everyone isn't acting more refined. If you think like that, accept that not every situation has to be solemn and intellectual, and work to embrace your own carefree, immature side.

Some general ways to be fun

- **Purposely set out to have a fun time.** Don't approach the evening with the mentality of "We're just going to hang around and do nothing."
- **Joke around and be amusing.** Tell funny stories, make witty observations, do entertaining stunts.
- **Introduce people to fun new activities and situations.** For example, "Hey, instead of sitting around, let's sign up to sing karaoke," or "Let's check out the new stand-up comedy club."
- **Help people have more fun than they normally do.** Without being pushy, help them move beyond their default level of reserve. For example, "Hey, let's go talk to those people... Nah, don't worry. They seem friendly. Let's go."
- **Be a little more spontaneous and daring than usual.** Or to use a cliché, say yes to more things than you normally would.
- **Take things a little further than you normally would.** For example, push your jokes into slightly more outrageous territory, or

take your friend up on that stupid bet when you typically wouldn't.

- **Have little tricks and talents that make you more fun.** For example, knowing how to play darts or knowing a bunch of jokes or card games can help you and others enjoy your time together.

Be less “un-fun”

The traits that make you less fun are more concrete and straightforward than the abstract principles in the previous list. (Again, this section is based around a particular definition of fun, and these traits aren't necessarily bad in other circumstances.)

- **Don't be the person who never wants to do anything new or much of anything at all.**
- **Don't be the person who wants to quit everything halfway through.**
- **Wherever you are, don't just hang back and do nothing.** Sometimes you can't help this if you're shy or not interested in the activity everyone is doing, but as much as possible try to stay in the mix.
- **Don't be too picky about what you require to be entertained.** Make the best of the situation, and don't be someone who can only enjoy themselves when they're out in the perfect venue with the perfect music selection, crowd, and drink prices. Don't always think it's boring where you currently are and the fun must be at the next location.
- **Don't wait for the amusement to come to you.** Make your own fun. Don't expect your friends to be responsible for your having a good time. Don't think things like, "I'll only have fun once the band plays better songs."

- **Don't be a downer by complaining too much about what you're doing or by bringing up depressing or heavy topics on a fun night out.**
- **Don't be overly stingy with your money.** There's nothing wrong with being frugal, but accept that some activities require you spend at least a little cash to have a good time (for example, don't go to an amusement park then refuse to buy any ride tickets, play any games, or get anything to eat).
- **Don't see having fun as immature or beneath you.** Everyone can have fun. It's not something only dumb, vacuous people do.

Overcoming traits that prevent fun

Being too uptight or serious and having fun don't mix. You can hardly relax, goof around, and have a good time if you're irritated by everything or everyone. Here are the characteristics of someone who is uptight:

- having rigid, unrealistic standards about how you and other people should act and how the social world should be (for example, everyone should always follow the rules and be morally upright at all times)
- caring too much about whether people are acting in ways you view as inconsiderate and thoughtless
- getting irritated by everyday social annoyances that most people let slide
- thinking you always have to be controlled and proper and well-behaved
- seeing yourself as a refined, considerate, intellectual adult and looking down on what you see as silly, immature behavior
- not being able to laugh at yourself

Here are some ways you can lighten up:

Accept you can't control everything

At the root of some people's uptightness is a need to be in control and have everyone act the way they want them to. You can become more relaxed if you can let go of this need and accept that people are going to behave in a way you may not like or expect.

Develop a more realistic idea of what to expect in social situations

Lots of slightly irritating, but common and unavoidable, behaviors and events are going to come up when you're socializing. Friends will be flaky. Venues will be noisy and overcrowded. People will act crass and immature. Minor rules and laws will be ignored (for example, people will litter and play their music too loud at parties). Most people know these types of things come with the territory and don't let themselves be too bothered by them. If you're more socially inexperienced, the same things can really irk you, because you have the false expectation that a situation should go a certain way, and then feel upset when people "ruin" it.

Try not to take yourself too seriously

It's okay to be a normal dopey human, and it's fine do things like watch dumb movies with your friends while gossiping and making lowbrow jokes. It's okay to have light, brainless fun. You won't lose your Intellectual card. No one will care. In fact, they'll probably appreciate that they can let loose around you without feeling judged.

23

Assertiveness Skills

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION is when you look out for or stand up for your rights and needs in a self-assured, direct manner, while being respectful toward the person you're talking to. Assertiveness skills are often talked about in terms of intimate relationships or the workplace, but they're also needed in lots of day-to-day social situations:

- turning down drinks and letting people know you're not drinking at all, or any more for the night
- declining invitations you're being pushed to say yes to because the event isn't your style or you simply don't feel like attending
- leaving a party early when your friends want you to stay
- having an opinion about where you'd like to eat or go out
- turning down inconvenient requests for things like car rides, course notes, or free tech support
- excusing yourself from a conversation with someone who's full of themselves and not letting you get a word in edgewise
- telling someone you disagree with them, whether it's to express a minor difference in taste in movies, or to challenge them on an offensive view they hold
- telling a friend it annoys you when they're late all the time
- sticking up for yourself when people take "joking" insults and teasing too far
- generally being able to put yourself out there, like inviting someone to hang out or sharing your views with a group of people you've just

met

Knowing how to be assertive has many benefits. Your self-respect will naturally be higher if you're willing and able to look out for yourself, and refuse to be put down or cajoled into doing things you'll regret later. Knowing how to be assertive provides you with a sense of self-confidence and control. It makes your life more rewarding because you're able to get your needs met, go after what you want, and steer clear of situations and activities that you don't find enjoyable. It's a trait other people admire. Finally, if you want to live a less conventional social life, you're going to need to get the hang of standing up for what you want and resisting pressure from other people. This chapter goes into detail about what it means, and doesn't mean, to act assertively, then gives some suggestions on how to become more assertive.

Breaking down the definition of assertiveness

As this chapter's opening sentence said, assertive communication is when you look out for or stand up for your rights and needs in a self-assured, direct manner, while being respectful toward the person you're talking to. Here's that definition broken down further:

...look out for or stand up for your rights and needs... You, and everyone else, have implicit rights in interpersonal situations, such as

- the right to be treated respectfully
- the right not to be used and taken advantage of
- the right to say no and not be coerced into doing things you don't want to do
- the right to feel what you feel, even if some people think your emotions or reactions are wrong or irrational

- the right to do things like form opinions, make decisions, set goals for yourself and take action, and not have to justify any of your choices to anyone else
- the right to not be perfect, that is, you can make mistakes, say the wrong thing, change your mind, or not know how to do something

Everyone also has various needs and preferences, ranging from what they require from a friend to what type of restaurant they'd like to go to that night.

...in a self-assured, direct manner... When you communicate assertively, you're open about what you want and how you're feeling. That doesn't mean you have to spill your entire soul every time. You could be assertive just by saying, "Hey, cut it out" in a tone of voice that shows you're serious, or by ending a conversation with "Well, it was nice meeting you..." with a firmness that says, "I'm done talking with you now."

...while also being respectful toward the person you're talking to. Assertive communication allows you to protect your rights but respects those of the people you're talking to. It's different from aggressive communication, where you look out for your own rights but trample over someone else's by insulting, threatening, or badgering them.

Considering the flip side of assertiveness: Passive communication

The opposite of assertiveness is a passive communication style. That's when you don't look out for your needs and rights, and people sometimes unintentionally or purposely disregard them.

Facets of passive communication

- having trouble saying no
- not speaking up to share an opinion or preference when it would be appropriate
- going along with what other people want, even though you're not on board
- being quick to say, "Whatever you guys want is fine with me"
- committing to things you'd rather not do, and then trying to get out of them later
- not defending yourself when people disrespect you
- easily caving into pressure to change your mind when you do speak up about what you want
- adopting a false easygoing, go-with-the-flow, helpful persona to make it seem like you're happy to put other people's needs ahead of yours

If you're passive too often, and subsequently get walked all over, other people's disregard for your thoughts and needs will eat away at your self-esteem and self-respect. A vicious cycle can start where people see you being unassertive around others, so they figure it's okay to treat you poorly themselves (it's not right or your fault, but it can still happen). Being taken advantage of can cause resentment to build, which can result in passive-aggressive behaviors where you act hostile toward people in indirect ways (for example, subtly trying to undermine them or purposely being undependable). Some people aren't even aware of when they're feeling resentful and being passive-aggressive, and continue to see themselves as laid back and giving. Chronic passivity can also cause you to try to get your needs met through indirect or manipulative means (for example, rather than telling your friends you don't feel like seeing a movie, you agree, then try to plant the idea of doing something else instead).

How to improve your assertiveness skills

You can improve your assertiveness through a combination of changing your attitude and learning practical, effective assertive behaviors.

Believe that your needs, rights, and worldview matter

One big reason people aren't assertive is that deep down they don't believe their needs are important or worth standing up for. They don't have faith in their own values, opinions, and preferences, and they let other people override them (for instance, they don't like nightclubs, but have swallowed the idea they're weird and antisocial for feeling that way, and let their friends talk them into going). You need to develop a mentality that your needs and worldview are valid and worth protecting. Here are some suggestions:

- Just hearing that your needs and views matter might be enough for the idea to take hold. If you've unintentionally gone through life assuming you deserve to put yourself second, learning about a better alternative may make you think, "Wow, that makes sense. Why haven't I been doing that all along?"
- Work on your overall sense of self-worth (see Chapter 8).
- Make a list of your personal needs and rights.
- Practice putting your needs and values first. Do fun activities that are solely a treat for you and no one else. Shamelessly indulge in interests that other people may see as lame or pointless. If you're not used to doing this, you may feel guilty or self-centered at first, but with time it will feel more natural.

Question your beliefs and fears about what being assertive means

Reason No. 2 people have trouble being assertive is they have the wrong

idea about what it involves. If you have any of the thoughts below, you need to replace them with more adaptive alternatives:

“Being assertive means being selfish.”

Alternative: Being assertive means prioritizing and looking out for your needs in a healthy way. It doesn't mean you have to become totally self-absorbed; you just can't let other people's interests run roughshod over yours. Even when you want to help other people, you can't do that to the best of your abilities if you're not taking care of yourself first.

“Being assertive means being rude and bossy and forcing my will on others.”

Alternative: Forcing your will on others is aggressive, not assertive. A lot of assertive messages can be delivered with a smile. You don't need to be cold and abrupt to do so.

“If I become more assertive, I'm going to have to constantly get into battles.”

Alternative: Having assertiveness skills doesn't mean you have to use them all the time. If someone slights you in a minor, unintentional way, it's often easier to let it slide. Assertiveness isn't the only tactic for handling certain situations either. For example, sometimes it's easier to get someone off your back by changing the subject.

“I'll hurt people's feelings if I always have to be open and speak my mind.”

Alternative: Assertiveness is about being straightforward, but it doesn't mean you should pointlessly share every potentially upsetting detail. If a coworker invites you to see their band, which you don't think is very good, a quick “No, thanks. I'm into different kinds of music” is all it takes to

decline the invitation without hurting the person's feelings. If you suspect even that will offend them, it may be simpler to go with another approach, like making a polite excuse.

“People won’t like me if I’m assertive.”

Alternative: Someone who’s trying to walk all over you may not appreciate it when you stand your ground, but overall, people will tend to like and respect you more when they see you have a backbone and healthy boundaries.

“People may react badly if I’m assertive.”

Alternative: Sometimes they will, but that doesn’t automatically mean you did anything wrong. If someone has a tantrum because you don’t agree with everything they think or they can’t impose their will on you, that’s their problem. Sometimes to get what you want in life, you’re going to make other people unhappy through no fault of your own.

“I’ll be more likely to get what I want with a more people-pleasing approach.”

Alternative: Some people-pleasers tell themselves this, but deep down most of them know their strategy doesn’t work and often leaves them feeling used and unappreciated.

Practice being assertive until you get comfortable with it

Reason No. 3 people have difficulty being assertive is that it can simply be scary and uncomfortable at first. To get used to being more assertive, start by role-playing scenarios with a friend, support group, or counselor. In real life, you can begin with situations you can handle and then move on to tougher ones.

Know some techniques for asserting yourself

Knowing some basic assertiveness techniques allows you to deliver and stick to your message in a calm, self-assured way. If you get pushback, you can also avoid getting flustered and giving in, or getting angry and having your communication slide into more aggressive, confrontational territory.

Say what you want in a confident, straightforward style

Once you've gathered up the nerve to do it, being assertive is pretty simple: Plainly state what you want in a composed, self-possessed manner. You don't need to add a ton of explanations and justifications. For example, if you're at a party and your friends are bugging you to drink more than you'd like, you can say, "No, thanks. I'm not drinking any more." If you're out with a friend and they're paying more attention to their phone than to you, you can say something like, "Can you please save that for when we're not in the middle of a conversation?" Again, you don't have to be exaggeratedly firm and forceful. If someone is really stepping over a line, that may be appropriate, but you can often be assertive in a friendly, casual manner.

Use "I" statements

A standard piece of assertiveness advice is that if you're asking someone to stop doing something that bothers you, you should phrase your message so it keeps the focus on you and how you're feeling. That's better than attacking the other person, which violates their rights, puts them on the defensive, and makes it more likely a pointless argument will break out. For example, if your friend sometimes gets a little too cutting and personal when they tease you, a textbook "I" statement could be "When you bring up my personal flaws to tease me, it hurts my feelings and makes me feel insecure about myself. I'd like you to stop."

However, a lot of people feel “I” statements come off as forced and unnatural. You don’t always have to use them. As long as you’re still being respectful to the other person, it’s fine to make your message fit the communication style you’d normally use with them. For example, if you’re a 17-year-old guy asserting yourself to your immature buddy, you could say something like, “Dude, knock it off. You go too far sometimes when you poke fun at me.”

Employ the broken-record technique

A lot of the work of being assertive comes from having to hold your ground if people push back after you’ve delivered your initial statement. They may argue, pester you, question your character, get angry, lay on the guilt trips, subtly imply they’ll stop hanging out with you if you don’t give in, or insist you have no choice but to go along with them. It can be tough to resist all the social tension this creates. The *broken-record technique* is to keep repeating the same assertive phrase over and over again until they give up. You’re giving them nothing to work with, so an argument can’t break out. The best feature of this technique is that you don’t have to do any thinking under pressure. You just need to repeat yourself.

Here’s an example set at a bar:

“Here, I bought you a shot. You need a drink.”

“No, thanks. I already told you I’m not drinking any more tonight.”

“Come on, don’t be so boring.”

“I said, ‘no, thanks’. I’m not drinking any more tonight.”

“I bought you this shot. You have to drink it. It’d be rude not to.”

“Feel free to drink it yourself or give it to someone else, but I already told you I’m not drinking any more tonight.”

“You’re no fun. You’re dragging down my mood.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I already told you I’m not drinking

any more tonight.”

“Ugh, fine. Forget it.”

Agree, but don’t give in

When you agree but don’t give in, you say you agree with the other person’s arguments, but keep on point. Here’s the bar example again:

“Here, I bought you a shot. You need a drink.”

“No, thanks. I already told you I’m not drinking any more tonight.”

“Come on, dude. Don’t be so boring.”

“You’re right. I am being totally boring, but I’m not drinking any more tonight.”

“I bought you this shot. You have to drink it. It’d be rude not to.”

“Yeah, I am being totally rude for not drinking the shot, but I’m still not going to do it.”

This technique and the last one also work if you’re asking something of someone else. State what you want, and then keep repeating it if they argue against you. It won’t guarantee they’ll give you what you’re asking for because there’s no way to perfectly control other people, but at least from your end, you won’t let yourself get pulled off course.

Have a plan for the odd cases where the other person won’t drop the subject

Being assertive and standing your ground doesn’t mean you have to calmly let someone debate your decision forever. If someone keeps pushing an issue, you’ll need another response. If they’re really being disrespectful of your wishes, you may need to leave or let them know they’re acting out of line. If you have friends who repeatedly step on your rights even after you’ve asked them not to, the best call may be to end the relationship.

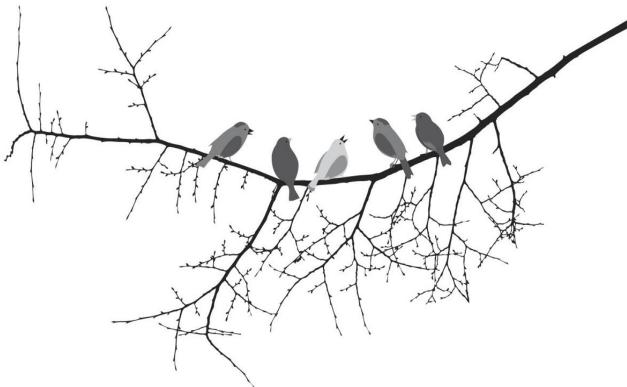
Sticking to your assertiveness guns

You may get some resistance from people when you first start acting more assertive. If your friends, family, partner, or coworkers are used to getting what they want from you, they may not like it when you start sticking up for yourself. They might make remarks about how you've become selfish or rude, or ratchet up their pressure tactics. It's not necessarily that they're evil and liked it better when you were soft and timid; it's just that people are sometimes thrown off by change and will unconsciously try to force you back into behaving the way they expect. Although there may be a rough transition period, you'll eventually earn respect when you establish you're going to have more solid boundaries. If you lose the odd exploitive or disrespectful friend, it's not exactly a loss.

SECTION

3

Forming and Growing Friendships



In this section

- Details on the basic stages of meeting people and making friends
- How to make a group of friends
- How to make friends in specific situations
- Troubleshooting the process of making friends

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Introduction to the Process of Making Friends

HERE YOU ARE at the book's final section, which explains how to make friends, build a social life, and put any loneliness behind you. Even if you're the kind of person who's happy to spend time on your own, you'll still feel lonely if your lower need for social contact isn't met. Loneliness can really eat away at your happiness and sense of self-worth. It's demoralizing to unwillingly spend that fifth Friday night in a row by yourself. The good news is it's relatively straightforward to learn how to make friends, so much so that if you're lacking the knowledge of how to form friendships, you may see some results right away once you learn the skills and start applying them. If you're somewhat able to manage your shyness and carry on a conversation, then you should be able to use the ideas in this section to improve your social life.

When one source or another gives advice on "how to make friends," they approach it in one of two ways: The first is to focus on developing positive personality traits that would make you a more appealing friend (being a good listener, being loyal, etc.). The second is to explain the practical, actionable process of meeting people and forming relationships. This book's previous section on conversation skills covered the first approach, so this section focuses on the learnable, repeatable tactics. People who are good at making friends tend to unconsciously follow the concepts this section explicitly lays out.

The basic steps to making friends

The basic steps for forming relationships are:

1. Find some potential friends (Chapter 25).
2. Invite and make plans with those potential friends to do something with you (Chapter 26).
3. Once you have some budding friendships, gradually take the relationships to a deeper level (Chapter 27).
4. Repeat the above steps until you've made as many friends as you'd like, whether it's a handful of close relationships or a giant group.

People who have trouble with their social lives usually stumble on one or more of these steps. This list seems simple, but each of the listed chapters goes into detail about it.

Some things to keep in mind as you try to form a social life

As with tackling anything you're not yet good at, the process of making friends will be easier and more pleasant if you go into it with the right mentality and expectations. Know that...

Being lonely doesn't mean you're deeply flawed

Lonely people often see their sparse social lives as a sign of how broken and unlikable they are. Loneliness is usually just a symptom of a lifestyle and set of social habits that are not conducive to meeting people and forming relationships. Everyone has the potential to go through a lonely patch if they don't carry out the behaviors that will let them make friends. Someone who was well liked and socially connected in their hometown will

be lonely in a new city if all they do is go to work and then head home to watch TV. Growing up, many people fell into their friendships without knowing how it happened, and they aren't sure how to deliberately create a new social circle from scratch when they're in a different environment.

Being lonely isn't automatically a sign that you have a horrible, off-putting personality either. There are plenty of annoying individuals who have big social circles because they're good and active at the specific skill of making friends. There are many pleasant, interesting people who are more isolated than they'd like to be because they're not as proficient at those same skills.

Trying to make friends doesn't make you lame, desperate, or needy

Many people want to make friends but worry that actively pursuing friendships means they're desperate or groveling. That's not true. It's more of that emotional reasoning: Because you *feel* desperate about something, you think it *is* desperate (see Chapter 5 for more about emotional reasoning). There's nothing pathetic about trying to make friends or taking an interest in others. It's an everyday activity that confident, sociable people do. Even if the rare person does see you as desperate, you have to take the attitude that it's all about you and you'll do what needs to be done to form the relationships you want. Who cares if a handful of people think you're a bit too eager along the way if it all eventually works out?

Don't handicap yourself by trying to hide your loneliness

Lonely people can get caught in a self-defeating cycle; they're ashamed of their loneliness and try to hide it, but that prevents them from doing the things that will let them make friends. They don't go to a meet-up because it might tip someone off that they want a better social life. They don't invite a classmate out for fear of revealing they don't already have plans. As their

loneliness gets worse, so does their need to save face, and they get pushed further into isolation. In reality, no one can tell if you don't have any friends, and even if they know, they probably don't care that much. Everyone has times in their lives when they need to refresh their social circle—they're in a new city, they've grown apart from their old friends, or their previous group atrophied little by little as everyone moved away or got too busy with work and family.

If you want a social life, you have to make it happen for yourself

It's essential to take initiative. The quality of your social life depends on how much work you put into it. A key mistake lonely people make is they passively wait for others to do the work of befriending them, then conclude they're flawed when no one ever invites them out. Sometimes people will make the first move, but you can't count on it. If you want a group of friends, assume you'll have to put in all the effort.

Don't take it personally if people seem indifferent to you

This is related to the previous point. Lonely people often wonder what's wrong with them and why no one seems interested in hanging out. Usually it's nothing personal. Other people are often harmlessly thoughtless, preoccupied, and locked into their routines. They'd be happy if they hung out with you, but they wouldn't think to ask you themselves. Sometimes you have to take an interest in others and generally get the word out that you're open to new friendships before you appear on their radar.

There's always going to be some uncertainty in the process

When you're trying to form relationships with people, there are going to be times when you'll get unclear signals. For example:

- You've invited someone out twice, and they've had other plans both times. Are they truly busy, or are they just making excuses because they don't want to hang out?
- You texted someone, and they got back to you a few hours later with a one-word answer. Do they not want to hear from you, or is it just not their style to message back and forth with their friends all day?
- You always have to be the one to invite a new friend out. Are they hoping you'll eventually take the hint and leave them alone, or are they just used to you always getting in touch first because that's what you've been doing so far?

If you're prone to feeling insecure, it's easy to assume the worst. You can never fully know what someone else is thinking. All you can do is stay focused on your own goals and continue to take steps that move toward them. If you'd like to be friends with someone, invite them out a few times or contact them to chat. It's hard to draw conclusions from one or two incidents, but before long their behaviors will reveal whether they're going to help you meet your goals or whether you need to move on to other prospects.

Don't feel that making friends is super tricky

If you're inexperienced at making friends, you may see the process as being more drawn-out and complex than it really is. Often all you have to do to make a friend is meet someone you naturally get along with and spend time with them enough. You don't have to know them for months before applying the "friend" label either. One characteristic of more social people is that they'll throw the word "friend" around pretty loosely when describing their relationships, and it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you've just met someone, it probably won't be a deep, intimate

relationship, but you can still have a good time with them as you get to know them better.

Accept that it can take time

Under the right circumstances, you can build a new social life quickly, like if you've just moved to a new city to go to college or if you join the right club or team and instantly click with everyone there. At other times, it takes longer for your social life to fall into place. It may take a little searching before you meet some people you're compatible with, and then, if everyone is busy, it might be a few months before you're all hanging out regularly. Stick in there and don't give up on anything too quickly.

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Finding Potential Friends

THE FIRST STEP IN MAKING FRIENDS is to look for some possible candidates. That's not a surprising place to start, but it's where some lonelier people get stuck. They don't put themselves around enough potential new friends. This chapter covers the two main ways to find prospects: drawing on your current contacts and meeting new people.

Draw on your current contacts

Drawing on your current contacts won't apply if you've just moved to a new area and don't know anyone, but often you'll already have the seeds of a social life around you. You don't necessarily have to go out and meet dozens of strangers. It's often easier to turn existing contacts into full-fledged friends than it is to scrounge up new ones. You might already know a handful of people who could end up becoming part of a new social circle:

- people from work or your classes who you get along with, but whom you've never hung out with;
- acquaintances you're friendly with when you run into each other, but who you never see otherwise;
- friends of people you know who you've clicked with when you met in the past;
- people who have shown an interest in being your friend in the past but you never took up the offer;
- people you very occasionally hang out with who you could see more

often;

- friends you've fallen out of touch with;
- cousins who live nearby and are close to your age.

Meet some new people

Getting more out of your current relationships can go a long way, but that isn't always an option. Fortunately there are countless possible places where you can meet new people. Before listing them, here are some points to keep in mind when starting the search for new friends:

- You'll likely have to force yourself out of your routine and make meeting new people a priority. Some lonely people fall into a rut where if they're not at work or school, they're comfortably settled in at home. If that describes you and you want to make friends, you have to shake things up and get out more. You may need to add some more social hobbies to your calendar or push yourself to get out and do things in the evenings when you'd normally be relaxing by yourself.
- You may have to try a few different spots for meeting people before one works. Finding new friends is often one of those situations where 20 percent of your efforts will get you 80 percent of the results. You may go to several meet-ups, classes, or events, and they're all busts, but then you easily meet a ton of fun people at the next one you go to. Don't get discouraged if you sign up for a club or two and don't see much potential in the other members. Definitely don't universally declare clubs "don't work" as a way to meet friends. Just try different ones.
- Realize lots of places where you can meet people aren't perfectly set up to facilitate connections, and sometimes you'll have to make the

best of the so-so hand you've been dealt. Don't hamstring yourself by looking for the ideal set of circumstances. For example, you may sign up for some art classes and feel there's not enough opportunity to get to know anyone because students are always coming and going and there aren't a lot of chances to talk during the lessons. You'll have to decide whether the situation is ultimately stacked against you and you should try elsewhere, or if you could make a few adjustments to make it work (for example, showing up earlier to give yourself more time to chat with your classmates).

Features of good places to meet people

Some places to meet new friends are better than others. The more of the following that apply to a place, the better:

- It allows you to meet people you have a lot in common with, naturally get along with, and are the types of possible friends you're looking for.
- It's somewhere where the situation breaks the ice for everyone and naturally gives them reasons to talk to each other.
- It allows you to be a long-time member or a regular and reliably see the same people several times so you can get to know them in a gradual, low-pressure way. It offers more than a five-minute chance to chat with people and then never see them again.
- It has a core of regulars, but new people continually enter the mix.

Places to meet people

The following list offers suggestions of where to meet people, keeping in mind the features listed in the previous section. The easier places are roughly listed toward the top.

- through your current friends, significant other, and other people you already know
- your job
- school classes
- if you're religious, through your faith (for example, meeting people at your church, temple, or mosque; joining an association for Sikh students at your college)
- a club or organization
- a sports league
- a recreational / hobby class
- a volunteer position
- if you're a parent, through your kids (for example, meeting other parents at a playground; the parents of your child's friends)
- through your living situation (for example, hanging out with your roommates and meeting their buddies; inviting a neighbor over for dinner)
- your extended family (for example, hanging out with a cousin and meeting their friends)
- an individual sport where you can arrange to train with or compete against new people
- online, through sites like Meetup.com, or meeting up with members in a forum you frequent
- through a solitary hobby that you can make social (for example, forming a book discussion group)
- through having something to offer other people (for example, you're good at graphic design so you approach your student association and offer to do their event posters for them)
- a job where you get to be friendly with the public (for example, working in a gaming store)

- through any sport or hobby where people congregate at certain spots (for example, a skate park)
 - bars or pubs (for example, showing up and playing some friendly games of pool with the other patrons)
 - a part of town where people from your scene reliably hang out
 - crowded places (for example, a small bar with music, comedy, or poetry readings, where someone may ask to sit at your table)
 - various one-off events, like a multicultural food festival
 - by chatting to strangers in public
-

How to find events and clubs to join in your community

If you're looking for places to meet people, an underappreciated skill is knowing how to find interesting events and clubs in your area. It's also useful when you're planning events with people and want to find something fresh to do. Most communities have more going on in them than you may realize. Even when you believe you've found everything there is to find, you'll continue to discover new activities and be surprised at how much you missed.

Change the range of your search area, depending on the size of your community. If you live in a gigantic city, you may want to limit yourself to just the downtown or your surrounding neighborhoods. If you live in a really small town, you should look within your several-town region. After you've established the area where you want to look for events, here are some ways to find out what's going on:

- search engines (for example, “[your city] event listings”, “[your city] dance lessons”, “[your city] softball league”)
- event listings in newspapers, both mainstream and alternative

weeklies

- event listings on classified ad sites
 - event listings on community center or community agency websites
 - event listing on your town's official website
 - sites like Meetup.com
 - websites and social media accounts of venues, like concert halls and artsy cafes, that hold events
 - if you're in school, its listing of its clubs, teams, and organizations
 - walking around your city and keeping an eye out for things to do (it's funny what new things you'll notice when you specifically look for them)
 - flyers posted around the city
 - bulletin boards in grocery stores, coffee shops, bookstores, and the like
 - libraries (to find out about their own events and to check out any bulletin boards they have)
 - a specific organization's website (for example, to find a listing of local Toastmasters groups in your area)
 - travel guides for your own city
 - people you know (sometimes you'll do all the searching in the world, and then a coworker will tell you about a festival you somehow missed)
-

Approaching and getting to know people

After you're in a place with some prospective friends around, you need to strike up conversations and try to get to know them (refer to the book's previous section for more advice on that area). Realistically, you won't hit it off with everyone you interact with, but if you're in an environment that

contains enough of your type of people, you should get along with at least a few of them. Maybe you'll connect right away, or you may warm up to each other through smaller interactions spread over a few weeks. Either way, after you click with someone, you could say you're now friendly acquaintances or that they're context-specific "friends" (for example, work friends). The next step is to invite them out and make plans.

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Making Plans with Potential Friends

AFTER YOU'VE MET SOME PEOPLE you click with, the next step is to try to arrange to hang out with them outside of the situation where you met. This is an important step and another one where lonely people sometimes slip up. You can meet all the people you want, and they can think you're great, but if you don't make any moves to spend time with them, you won't form many lasting relationships. Your potential friends will stay as the girl you talk to in class, or the group you chat with at work on your lunch break, or the guy you joke around with at your rec league games. Even if you get to know them quite well in that environment, if you don't take the relationship to the outside world, it may vanish when the semester is over, they get a new job, or the season ends.

This chapter covers how to make plans with people so you can hang out with them and develop your relationship. It explains how to set up your own get-togethers—with individuals and groups—as well as how to get in on other people's activities. It also touches on some important habits and mentalities to keep in mind when it comes to making plans.

The ideas in this chapter are important for getting a new social life off the ground, but they are also really useful for maintaining or growing an existing one. When you're good at making plans, you can really take charge and create the kind of social life you want for yourself, instead of having to go along with whatever everyone else decides. Being able to coordinate plans is so powerful that even people who don't have particularly outstanding personalities can have busy social lives, just because they're constantly arranging one outing or another. Meanwhile, someone who is

more fun or interesting, but lazy about setting up get-togethers, may not go out as much as they'd like.

Two useful habits

To up your odds that you'll be able to successfully make plans with people, get in the habit of doing two things.

Ask for people's contact information fairly soon after you've met them

You may meet someone interesting, but you often can't be sure you're going to see them again anytime soon. Ask for their phone number or email address, or see if they're on whatever social networking site people in your area and age group use. That way they'll be easy to reach if you want to try to get together. Also, if they have your info, they can get in touch with you if they want to chat or invite you somewhere.

Stay in the loop technology-wise

Events are often announced and planned through social networking sites, and sometimes only through them, so join whichever ones your peers are a part of. You don't necessarily have to enjoy or use them that much, but at least sign up for the social opportunities they facilitate.

Knowing how quickly you can extend an invitation

How long should you know someone for before inviting them out? There's no right answer. If you've quickly hit it off, it's fine to invite someone out right away. It's also okay to have an initial good feeling about them, but want to get to know them a little bit more before inviting them somewhere. You won't always have the option of taking it slow, though. If you've met someone you probably won't run into again, you can continue to get to

know them better through texting or social media, but for the most part, you need to act on the lead before it goes cold. In these cases, you may have enjoyed initially talking to them, but be unsure how compatible you'd be if you spent a longer amount of time together. Again, there's no right answer about what to do. You could take a risk and ask them to do something, knowing the chemistry may not be there. Or you could extend an invitation only when you're fairly certain you'll have a good time.

Steps to arranging your own plan

There are only two steps to setting up a plan, though there are details to explain about each: 1) coming up with something to do, and 2) making the invitation.

Trying to set up one-on-one vs. group plans

For the most part, the process of setting up plans with people is the same whether you're inviting one person or a larger group. The main difference is that group plans usually take more work to coordinate because you have to find something that works for everyone. That will be covered later in the chapter.

Deciding whether to have a solid plan in mind or make a vague invitation and work out the details after

Either approach can work, though it's better to come up with a plan yourself and then see if everyone is interested. Friends take the loose, "We should do something this weekend" route all the time and still manage to see each other, but that method has more potential to peter out: You ask, they say, "Yeah, that sounds good..." and then no one takes it further.

If you come to people with a solid suggestion, they have something to react to. They'll do one of a couple of things: accept it, express interest but

want to change some of the details, suggest an alternative, or turn it down. Even starting with one or two details is better than nothing. For example, “Want to see a movie next week?” is preferable to, “Want to hang out sometime?” The specific film, location, time, and day are still up in the air, but at least they can decide whether seeing a show seems like a good idea.

Step 1: Come up with something to do

One early planning roadblock some people hit is they have someone in mind they want to hang out with, but they’re not sure what to invite them to do. It’s also not uncommon for socially inexperienced people to say they don’t even know what people their age typically do when they spend time together.

Spending time with other people is always at the heart of hanging out with them

Don’t think that spending time with someone is all about coming up with the perfect event to attend. Especially don’t think that there’s no point in being with them if you can’t come up with something spectacular to do. When you choose to hang out with someone, the central reason you’re there is to enjoy their company. Of course, it makes your time together more fun and memorable if you see a band or go on a hike or whatnot, but that’s not strictly necessary.

Inviting people to get together is often more about doing variations on a few reliable activities than coming up with something incredibly original each time. If you really like your friend’s company, then you can easily hang around their house several times a week or go to the same rotation of cafes or pubs with the just the occasional more exciting event thrown in to mix things up.

Examples of activities friends commonly do together

Hang out somewhere, mainly to talk

- chill at someone's house
- grab coffee
- eat at a restaurant
- get a drink at a pub
- hang around downtown
- sit around at a park

Wander around, also to talk

- go shopping
- go for a walk
- keep them company while they run errands

See a show

- see a movie
- see live music
- see a live comedy show
- see a play

Play something together

- play video games (possibly online and not even in the same room together)
- play cards
- play a board game

- play a pen-and-paper RPG
- play darts or pool
- go bowling
- play golf
- throw a ball or frisbee around

Do something sports-related

- watch a game at home or at a pub
- play a team sport together
- do an individual sport side by side (for example, rock climbing, skiing)
- compete against each other in an individual sport (for example, tennis)
- train or practice for a sport
- go to a game

Work on something together

- work on something artsy or crafty, like rehearsing with a band or knitting
- prepare a meal together
- work on a repair or building project

Get out in nature

- go for a hike or mountain bike ride
- go fishing
- go canoeing
- go boating

Party together

- go to a bar or dance club
- go to a house party
- hang around someone's place and have drinks

Try other one-off activities

- visit a local attraction like an art gallery, zoo, or aquarium
 - go to a yearly festival or carnival
 - check out a trade show or convention
 - take a day trip out of the city
 - go camping
 - go on vacation together
-

How to narrow down what to ask them to do

What you ask someone to do will depend on what you figure they'd be interested in and, when you're first getting to know them, what you feel comfortable with. It may seem natural to invite a potential friend over to your place to watch a movie the first time you hang out. That may not feel as appropriate with someone else. As a general rule, if you think you'll be fine making conversation with someone, then invite them to do whatever you think will be fun. If you're worried the discussion may not flow that well, a more activity-focused outing is better. You won't be forced to chat with each other the entire time, and the activity will give you something to talk about. If you're not sure how well you'll click with them, a group outing is lower stakes. You're not stuck with them one on one if it turns out you don't have much chemistry. Also consider how convenient the plan will

be for them, as well as their financial situation. For example, if you know they're broke and don't have a car, don't invite them to meet you at a pricey restaurant that they'll have to take the bus for an hour to get to.

Step 2: Make the invitation

After you've come up with something to do, you have to ask everyone if they're interested in doing it.

Methods of inviting people out

Whether someone accepts your invitation will depend on whether they want to spend time with you, whether the proposed activity interests them, and whether they're available. It doesn't matter if you asked in person, through a text, or over the phone. Go with whatever method is most convenient for you. However, group invitations are easier to organize through a single email that everyone can chime in on.

The tone of the invitation

However you invite people out, ask in a non-pressuring tone that suggests, "It'd be fun if you came, but if not, that's cool."

Examples of inviting a single person to do something

There are many ways you can phrase the invitation: specific; open-ended; open-ended but somewhat specific; and immediate / spontaneous. Here are examples of each:

Specific invitation

- "What are you up to this Thursday? Do you want to get something to eat after our evening class?"

- “I’m going to go see (band) when they come to town on the 17th. Tickets aren’t that pricey. Want to come with me?”

Open-ended invitation

- “Do you want to grab a drink some time?”
- “We should go snowboarding sometime this season.”

Open-ended, but a little more specific

- “Do you feel like getting coffee one day after class?”
- “Want to go hiking one Saturday fairly soon?”

If the person says yes to a more open-ended invitation, work out the details soon after. One mistake is to get a yes and then leave the other person hanging by not following through and arranging the rest of the plan.

Immediate / spontaneous

- At the end of the workday or as class is getting out: “What are you doing right now? Feel like grabbing a coffee?”
- To a dorm-mate you ran into in the hall: “Hey, I’m heading to the mall to get some stuff for my room if you want to join me.”

It can feel a little less nerve-racking to invite someone out spontaneously. You know they may not be free right then, so it doesn’t sting as much if they say no.

Examples of inviting a group to hang out

The group of people you’re inviting out could know each other well already, and you’re trying to join their clique. Or everyone could be fairly

new to each other, and you're trying to turn them into a new social circle. Inviting a group out is similar to asking a single person to do something.

Some people find trying to organize a group event less scary, because if it doesn't work out, the rejection is more diffused. It feels like the suggestion itself fizzled, rather than one person specifically declining to spend time with you. Everyone wasn't just turning you down either; they were also saying they didn't want to spend time with the whole group (you can even phrase invitations as "We're doing X. Want to come?"). Alternatively, some people find extending an invitation to a group more stressful, because if their suggestion goes nowhere, they feel like a whole bunch of people are passing judgment on them.

Specific invitation

- "Do you guys want to hang out at my place this Friday? We could go out later if we feel like it."
- "Does everyone want to go to '80s Night at (nightclub) this Thursday?"
- "There's a fair coming to town this weekend. Who's up for it? I was thinking Saturday afternoon."

Open-ended invitation

- "Do you guys want to get together sometime soon?"
- "We should all hang out outside of work."

Open-ended, but a little more specific

- "What does everyone think of getting coffee after line dancing lessons one day?"
- "Maybe we could check out that new Korean restaurant before we all

get busy with exams.”

Immediate / spontaneous

- “Anyone feel like coming back to my place now? We could play some video games or watch a movie.”
- “Do you guys want to go downtown after class gets out?”

What’s different with group invitations is what happens after everyone starts considering the plan. When you invite one person out, they either say yes or no. If they say yes, then you only need to figure out the specifics with them. When you invite a group, more work goes into getting the plan fleshed out. Some people may say yes, some might say no. The plan may go through a few different permutations before everyone agrees on it.

Inviting one or more people to do something with your existing friends

When groups are involved, you can invite a potential new friend to do something with your current group of friends.

- “My friends and I are going out on Saturday. Want to join us if you’re free?”
- “My buddies and I get together every Tuesday evening to play poker. You should come out one week.”

If you don’t have much of an existing social circle, you can’t do this. However, if you have this option, it’s probably the lowest-stakes way to extend an invitation. You’re not inviting someone from a position of neediness. You’re offering a social opportunity. If they say no, you can still hang out with your other friends.

What if you invite someone out and they turn you down?

If someone turns you down, you may get confused because you may not know where you stand with them. Most people find it uncomfortable to directly tell someone they're not keen on hanging out. They also don't want to make future interactions awkward by directly rejecting you. Instead, they'll make excuses, "forget" to reply to your written invitation, or vaguely agree that maybe the two of you could do something some time, but never follow up. Of course, these things could also just mean they're genuinely busy.

How many times should you ask someone to hang out before giving up?

Three times, maybe four if the invitations are spread out. You can ask a second time fairly soon, and if they say no again, give them some space before trying once or twice more. If you haven't gotten together after that, they're either politely brushing you off, or they've shown they're too busy to have new friends. On occasion, someone will genuinely want to be friends with you, but their life is hectic and they have to turn down your invitations for legitimate reasons. However, after three rejected invites with no effort on their part to arrange something, it's likely they just aren't interested, and it's better to put your energy elsewhere.

The exception to this guideline is when you're extending low-effort group activity invitations to someone you're on good terms with and who comes to your get-togethers, but only occasionally because they have hectic lives. In that case, it's fine to tell them, "We're all hanging out at Tina's this Friday" for several weeks in a row without them attending because you know they will show up every now and then.

Try to set up recurring plans

Usually once you've hung out with a person or group, you have to go through another round of making plans if you want to see them again.

That's hardly a terrible amount of work, but it can make you feel like your social life is uncertain from week to week. You could try to set up a recurring plan, like watching a movie at someone's place every Wednesday night or going out for dinner once a month. Often everyone is too busy to establish an ongoing arrangement, but it's great when you can set up these reliable social activities for yourself. These arrangements take work to maintain, so don't take them for granted. Occasionally people will get distracted with other aspects of their lives, and it can take some effort to get everyone together each time, so be flexible about cancelling or rescheduling as needed. These plans also work better when a larger group is in on them, so that even if only half the members can make it each time, enough people still show up for them to be fun.

Ways to hang out with people, aside from setting up a plan yourself

This chapter just went into how to set up your own plans, and it's the most important skill because you have direct control over it, but you can find other ways to hang out with people without doing much work yourself:

Be invited to hang out

It's great when other people ask you to spend time with them, though you should never count on it and always be prepared to take the initiative to make your own plans. But when it comes to hearing about plans made by other people...

Do your best to accept every invitation

If you're trying to get your social life off the ground and someone invites you to do something, do your best to go. Why turn down a chance to get out

there? After you have more friends and invitations competing for your time, you can be choosier. If you're more of an anxious or solitary person, it's easy to overthink an invitation and come up with reasons why it won't be fun. Try to work past those worries and go anyway. You can never be sure how enjoyable something will be until you show up and see for yourself.

Sometimes you'll have to inconvenience yourself for the sake of your social life. You may get invited to a movie you're not particularly excited to see or be asked at the last minute to a party on a cold, rainy Friday night when you were planning to go to bed early. Again, being in a social setting outweighs these minor annoyances.

Most people will stop inviting you out if you decline too often. They may have nothing against you, but the next time they're planning an event, they'll think, "They've never come when I've asked before, so no point in letting them know this time." If you're interested in an invitation but can't attend for legitimate reasons, make it clear to the inviter you want to hang out with them and would if you could. The best way to show that is to extend an invitation of your own fairly soon after.

Figure out what other people's plans are and then hop on board

Many people consistently have things to do with their friends because they regularly ask around to see what everyone is up to. They don't try to initiate their own plan every single week. If they want to go out on the weekend, they'll start pinging their social circle around Thursday and ask what their plans are for Friday night and the weekend. If they hear something they like, they'll get on board. If no one has solid plans yet, but some people are interested in doing something, the "asking around" conversation provides a starting point for figuring out what they could do together (for example, "We could have a barbecue at the park like Morgan was talking about the other day"). Also, asking around is a good way to take initiative, show

you're interested in spending time with people, and generally stay on a group's radar.

Inviting yourself to social events

A tricky aspect of getting on board with other people's plans is inviting yourself to a get-together when you're not sure if you'd be welcome. The key thing to know is that on occasion it is okay to invite yourself. Sometimes you won't get an invitation, but if you ask if you can come along, everyone will be fine with it. In the end, you'll have to use your judgment about whether you should try for an invite, but here are some broad guidelines:

- When you ask if you can come, always speak in a casual, non-pressuring way (for example, "You're going to a party tomorrow? Seems fun. Is that something I could show up to? No worries if you guys are trying to keep it small").
- Generally, don't invite yourself to events like dinner parties or cottage weekends where the host is putting in a lot of work and has limited space or resources. An extra person may inconvenience them.
- "The more, the merrier" drop-in-type plans like parties or pub nights are safer bets. Some get-togethers also have an unspoken open invitation, like a group of coworkers who go for drinks after work every Thursday.
- Consider the other people who are going. Are they a loose, cheerful group of friends who are open to hanging out with anyone? Are they a pair of closed-off couples who want to spend quality time together?

- If you know who the organizer is, consider their personality. Are they a stickler for rules and etiquette, and protective of their social circle, or are they easygoing and eager to have new people around?

There's always a risk of coming off as rude, presumptuous, or needy when you try to invite yourself to an event. However, sometimes the risk is worth it. If you really, really want to attend a get-together, you may not mind if you're not entirely slick about how you get there.

Hear about someone else's plan, and then help build on it

This is similar to setting up a plan yourself, but some of the steps have already been taken care of for you. For example, someone in your gardening club suggests you all see a movie next weekend, and everyone expresses interest in the moment, but no one follows up. If you pick it up from there, it should be relatively easy to finish putting together the outing.

Mentalities to keep in mind about making plans

Now you know the basics of how to arrange to hang out with people. Here's yet another list of mentalities that will make the process go more smoothly for you.

Accept that making plans can take work at times

It's fairly easy and satisfying to get a text or call out of the blue asking if you want to go to dinner with six friends on a particular date at a particular

time at a particular location. It's a lot harder to set up that get-together yourself. Making your own plans can be hard because you have to:

- Deal with any fear of rejection about inviting people out.
- Figure out what to do.
- Research the plan (for example, looking up restaurant menus or movie times, calling around to see what bars are showing a match on TV, staying on top of what attractions are coming to town).
- Ask everyone to attend.
- Adjust the plan so it works for everybody. This is often the lengthiest step. Sometimes no agreement is reached, and you have to try again later.
- Spend time persuading people to attend or not bail at the last second (“Ah, come on, you’ve studied for the exam all day. It’s fine to come out and blow off some steam for a few hours”).
- Set up things necessary for the plan to happen (for example, making reservations, buying food and drinks for a party, booking a camping site).

If coordinating plans seems like a big hassle, realize it also feels that way for everyone else. Other people shouldn’t always have to step up and organize things for you. Do some of the lifting yourself when you need to.

After people have accepted your plan, be open to it changing

If you’re arranging something with a bigger group and everyone’s agreed to your plan, but they are still working out the details with each other, it’s not yours any more. Don’t get too hung up on it going in one particular direction. Be flexible and be prepared for the date, location, time, or even every last detail to change, possibly multiple times. Also, expect aspects of it to change up until the very last minute (they may even change on the cab

ride there). Obviously there are times when you have to be more rigid than others, like if your favorite band is coming to town for one date this year. But if you just want to get together with some friends, what does it matter if you do it on Friday instead of Saturday? Or head out at seven instead of six?

Also keep in mind that until you're actually there with everyone, the plan could fall through at any time. It may never get off the ground because everyone's schedules conflict. Or it could be canceled at the last minute because two of the four people attending can't make it after all. These things come with the territory, and it does no good to be too tightly wound about them.

Be tolerant of some mild flakiness

It's annoying, but people can be flaky. They won't respond to your texts or email invites. They'll agree to come to your party and then bail at the last minute. They'll show up late. You'll drive yourself nuts, seem insecure, and run out of friends if you get overly annoyed every time these types of things happen. If a friend is consistently unreliable or they do something more serious like stand you up on a one-on-one outing, then you should say something or stop inviting them out. However, if you're planning a bigger get-together, it's usually a given that not everyone who says they'll show up will actually be there. Make the best of it with the people who do attend.

For larger activities, don't get too hung up on certain people attending

Once a certain number of people are involved, getting the event off the ground takes precedence over every last person being able to make it or guaranteeing certain people show up (unless it's for something like their own birthday party, of course). People have stuff going on in their lives, and it's not realistic to think every last person will be free on a certain date. If

you try to set up the plan so everyone can show up, it will probably keep getting put off for a perfect time until it's eventually forgotten about.

27

Deepening New Friendships

NOT EVERY FRIENDSHIP you have has to be really close. People are often happy to have some friends who are lighter activity or partying buddies. However, we usually need at least one of our friendships to be more deep and intimate. This chapter lays out the factors that lead to friendships becoming closer. The concepts described below often happen automatically as a friendship progresses, but you can take some control of your relationships by deliberately trying to use these points. They mainly apply to individual friends, but some of them also carry over to becoming tighter with a group. Some things to know going in:

There's no formula to becoming better friends with everybody you meet

Not everyone you meet is going to want to hang out with you. And even if you get along on a surface level, not everyone you hang out with is going to become a closer friend. We're just not compatible with most people in terms of availability, interests, values, and what we're looking for in a friendship. Although you can try to apply the ideas below to your new friends, realize they're not all going to go the distance and become your soul mates. That's okay though, because people are often enjoyable to be around on a more casual basis.

On the same note, just because you may be able to successfully apply one or more of the ideas below to someone, that won't guarantee the friendship is going to go anywhere. For example, you may have a really intimate

conversation with them, but overall they'll continue to think of you as someone they run into every now and then. If you're making an effort to become better friends with someone and you get the sense you're putting more energy into it than they are, consider backing off and adjusting your expectations.

Sometimes you'll become good friends with someone pretty quickly; at other times it takes a while

Many people have had the experience of meeting someone new and immediately starting to hang out with them nearly every day. Just as many have friendships where the bond grew more gradually. Neither progression is better than the other. Friendships can get off the ground quickly in the following situations:

- when you just click with a person unusually well;
- when you're both at a place in your lives where you're looking for new friends (for example, during the first weeks of college);
- when you're both available and easily accessible to each other (for example, you live in the same building and have lots of free time to hang out);
- when you fulfill an unmet need in each other's lives (for example, you absolutely love reading and discussing books, but none of your other friends care much about them);
- when you're in a situation where the usual standards for friendship progression don't apply, like when you meet people while traveling and feel like friends for life after knowing them for only five days.

Friendships can grow more slowly

- when one or both of you are pretty busy with your day-to-day lives

and/or already have many friends who fill up your calendar;

- when you get along well enough, but there isn't that instant spark of intense compatibility;
- when you're not actively trying to deepen your friendship with them. For example, they're on the periphery of your social circle, and you get to know them better here and there.

It's natural to feel a bit awkward and insecure as a new friendship begins

There are times when you'll hit it off with someone right away and never feel uncomfortable around them. There are also those times where your friendships will develop in a low-stakes, almost accidental way. However, sometimes the process is more nerve-racking, like if you meet someone at a one-off event and then actively try to start a friendship with them. Here it's understandable that things will feel uncertain because you're not sure how much they like you or if you'll continue to get along and have things to say to each other. It usually takes a month or so before you start to feel more relaxed and secure about the relationship.

Ways to develop a new friendship

Every friendship is different, and not every point will apply to every type equally. Some friendships are more about sharing and connecting, while others are based around hobbies, joking around, and going out at night.

Spend more time together

Simply spending more time with someone is the backbone of becoming better friends with them. A close relationship isn't something that happens in a few hours. You need space for all the relationship-enhancing things

covered below to happen. Time is an important enough factor that we often become good friends with the people we naturally have a lot of contact with, like coworkers, friends of friends, classmates, and team members. With time, friendships can even develop between people who were initially indifferent to each other.

Make an effort to hang out with them regularly

The main way to spend enough time with someone is to hang out with them fairly often. Sometimes you'll be in a situation where you'll automatically put in those hours. If not, you should try to use the ideas in the previous chapter to organize get-togethers so you can continue seeing them. With some people, you'll quickly fall into a routine of hanging out all the time. With others, you may only be able to get together every three weeks for a quick bite to eat.

This step needs to be ongoing. It's not about coordinating a one-time hangout. It's about putting in the effort to keep seeing them continuously over a period of months. You might have trouble here because:

- You're a bit too busy or lazy, and don't put in the work to see your new friends regularly.
- You're shy and reluctant to invite someone to hang out because you fear rejection or an awkward moment. This most often comes up during the first few invites, but may subtly affect your actions later if you believe your friend is "above" you.
- You're insecure and prone to thinking you're not worth hanging around and your new friends must not really like you.
- You don't have the highest need to socialize, and it causes you to not initiate get-togethers as often as needed to keep your new friendships going.

Spend one-on-one time talking with them

People can get to know each other and bond in a group setting, but often the real opportunities to connect come when it's just you and one other person. Also, if you haven't hung out with someone on your own, how close is your friendship really? Many people have known someone through group outings, but have seen a different side of them when they started hanging out as a pair. They'll point to that as when their friendship really started to develop. You could get that one-on-one time by arranging to do something with them separately. You could also find moments to break off with them from the larger group. For example, the two of you may be able to retreat to the backyard to talk at a party.

Keep up with them in between hanging out

One thing that distinguishes closer friends from more casual ones is how much they stay in contact between times when they hang out in person. Good friends often keep in touch. More casual buddies think along the lines of, "I'll be happy to see them when we run into each other in person, but I don't need to keep up with them otherwise." Especially if you're not hanging out with your new friends all the time, keep up with them in between get-togethers. Send them a text making a joke or asking how their week was, email them a link they may like, or call them on the phone to catch up.

Take their response rate and their own efforts to reach out to you as a gauge of how often you should be in touch with them. Some people are happy to text back and forth all day. Others are more of a weekly contact type. Of course, after you've established a certain level of friendship, you can often get away with going weeks at a time without talking, then picking up where you left off. However, you'll only maintain the relationship this way, not actively grow it. The problems listed as hindrances to hanging out

with a friend regularly—laziness, shyness, insecurity, fear of rejection—can also crop up when it comes to keeping in touch (for example, you start composing a text and then think, “Ah, I’m probably bugging her. She doesn’t want to hear from me”).

If you do go a few months without talking to someone you know well, it’s usually not a huge deal to get back in touch and catch up. There’s nothing odd about dropping someone a line after being out of contact for a while. It’s another one of those emotional reasoning moments where if you feel awkward about doing it, you believe it’s an inappropriate thing to do. Never feel you have to throw a relationship away because you went too long without speaking and now it would be weird to get in touch. When you contact them, just say you’ve been busy lately and ask what they’ve been up to. If they don’t want to reconnect, you can handle it. It’s not like you were regularly spending time with them anyway.

Have a good time together when you hang out

What a “good time” entails depends on what you’re looking for. It could be an intellectual conversation over coffee, an afternoon working on a car together, or a night out at the bars. You can help grow a relationship by going out of your way to do things you know your new friend will enjoy. As the last chapter mentioned, you don’t have to do something incredibly novel each time. On the other hand, don’t fall into a rut where all you ever do is sit around and be bored.

Learn more about each other and expand the range of topics you talk about

When you’re not particularly close to someone, you only know their standard biographical info, and your conversations often stay on a handful of topics, like your shared workplace and a sport you both follow. We feel

closer to people when we know more details about them and can discuss any number of subjects.

Open up to each other

Not every friendship has to include tons of intimate sharing, but in general, people see their relationships as deeper and more rewarding when they can talk to each other about weighty or personal topics that they don't feel comfortable bringing up with just anyone. It also feels good to know you've shown someone pieces of your "real self" and they accept you for it, or to connect when you realize you both share the same hidden quirk or past experience. You should consciously try to steer your conversations with your new friend to deeper territory if they aren't heading that way on their own over time. If your friend is the first to head in a more intimate direction, don't shy away. Check out Chapter 12 to refresh your memory on self-disclosure.

Be a good friend in all the usual ways

Being a good friend is a broad concept that's hard to sum up in a few paragraphs. A friendship will grow closer if each person comes to see the other as someone they can count on and who makes them feel good about themselves. That means showing the standard traits of a good friend and a likable person, including

- generally showing that you like the other person and want to hang out with them;
- being positive and fun to be around;
- being dependable;
- being emotionally supportive;
- being willing to go out of your way for them;

- not gossiping or complaining about them behind their back;
- not blabbing to everyone about things they told you in confidence;
- not using them or taking them for granted;
- not freaking out at them over little things or taking out your frustrations on them;
- showing good character on the whole. You can act awesome around them, but if they hear that you're a scumbag otherwise, they may not want anything to do with you.

No one's perfect, and no one expects their buddies to be, either. Everyone's also different regarding traits they think are important and the flaws they're willing to overlook. One person may primarily look for friends who are entertaining to go out with and not care if they're unreliable. Another may see flakiness as a deal breaker and put a premium on someone who will be honest with them and keep their secrets.

Have some adventures or crazy times together

Having a shared history increases the sense that you have a strong relationship with someone. Even better is a history with some truly memorable experiences. It gives you that ability to say, "Ha ha, remember the time when we...?" Lots of people have memories of seeing someone, or a group, as casual friends until they took that one legendary camping trip together and started to think of each other as a tightly knit unit. An adventure is some sort of excursion or experience that's fun and out of the ordinary. It doesn't have to be a ridiculous drunken night if that's not your style.

Be there for them during their difficult times

People can bond when one of them helps the other. They can also grow

closer when they support each other through a shared challenge, whether it's being in a demanding graduate program, working under an annoying boss, or living together as broke aspiring entrepreneurs. They can look back over the relationship and think, "We're pretty close. We've gotten each other through some rough patches." It's harder to see someone as just a casual friend when you've seen their vulnerable side, had them lean on you, and empathized with their struggles.

As always, this isn't a guarantee you'll become closer, and you could even come to feel used and unappreciated. But if the friendship is going in a good direction, helping each other can strengthen it further. Although larger, emotionally heavy life events lead to stronger bonds, helping a new friend could be as simple as offering to give them a ride to the mechanic to pick up their car or letting them vent over something inconsiderate their mom said.

28

Making a Group of Friends

MAYBE YOU HAVE NO PROBLEM making individual friends who you can do things with one-on-one, but you also want a group of buddies to hang out with. This chapter covers how to do that. It goes over the three main ways to make a group of friends: 1) merging your individual friends into a group; 2) making one friend and then falling in with their social circle; and 3) making a new group of friends all at once. The second and third methods involve joining an existing group, so the second half of the chapter gives some pointers on how to do that.

Once more, keep in mind the social world is unpredictable, and over the short term, you'll only have so much power to create the exact type of friend circle you want. Even if you set out to become part of a group, it may not happen right away. Here are more details on the three ways to make a group of friends:

Merge your individual friends into a group

If you have several individual friends, how can you get them to start hanging out with each other? First, you'll need to arrange some way for them to meet. You could try introducing them to each other one or two at a time, perhaps by seeing a movie or going out to eat together, or you could organize a bigger get-together and have them all meet at once. However, there's no foolproof way to ensure your individual friends will like each other. Everyone hangs out with a variety of people, and they're not always compatible with each other, even though they all share the commonality of

getting along with you. You just have to put them together and see if it works out.

One basic tip is to mention things they have in common to break the ice between your friends to get them talking (“Bob, David used to work at the same nonprofit you did”). If you’re introducing one friend to a small group, don’t leave them to fend for themselves. To allow for the best chance of your friends clicking, try to hang out with everyone on several occasions. People often don’t have enough time to really learn much about each other during one meeting. Spending time with each other over multiple outings also gets everyone thinking along the lines of, “We’re a group that often hangs out together.”

Make one friend, meet their buddies, and try to fall in with that group

If you’ve made an individual friend or two already, you can try to meet their friends and see if you can join that social circle. If you hang out with someone enough, these opportunities will likely come up naturally. If not, you can take the initiative to meet your friend’s friends. If you catch wind that they do any kind of group activity regularly, you can ask to come along. You could also try to meet them by planning some sort of party or larger get-together. Here it’s also a good play to try to meet your friend’s friends more than once so they have more time to get to know you and get adjusted to the idea of having you around.

Make a group of new friends all at once

There are two ways you can do this. The first is when you join a pre-existing social circle at a class, job, or club. For example, you start volunteering at an animal shelter and quickly fall in with a group of fellow

volunteers you see often. The second is when outside circumstances force you and several other people, who don't know each other either, to spend a lot of time together (for example, you all moved into the same floor of a dorm, or you've all started a job at the same time).

When you're in these situations, try to organize a get-together that brings everyone together outside of the context where you've all met. If you want to make a group of friends in a work, school, or club setting, it's also important to be friendly with many of the people and existing groups there. You can hardly create a larger circle at your job if you only talk to two coworkers.

More advice on how to join an existing group of friends

When people talk of wanting to join groups, they usually mean one of two things:

- They've identified a group they think they want to join, haven't talked to any of the members much, if at all, and don't know how to approach them.
- They interact with the group at least somewhat regularly, but still feel like an occasional guest; they'd prefer to be a full-fledged member.

Just like you can't form a group of friends to order, there's no way to guarantee you can join any specific group. This subsection covers how to join groups that you have some things in common with and who are open to having you, not how to sneak into that one super-snobby clique. Some groups are just going to be difficult to join because the members have known each other a while and are reluctant to include new members. Whatever the group you're trying to get in with, try not to put them on a

pedestal. They're just a social circle, not gods with the power to determine your happiness. If you don't become closer with them, it may be disappointing, but there are always other prospects.

Depending on your particular situation and the group you want to join, you may not need to use every one of the following steps:

Step 1: Make initial contact

This step may be taken care of automatically if you've been introduced by a friend or your circumstances. If not, your options for making the initial contact depend on the access you have to the group. Here are the two main possibilities:

Approach 1: Introduce yourself to everyone at once

For example:

- You work at a big company. In the cafeteria you notice a group of coworkers from another department who seem right up your alley. One day you ask if you can sit with them.
- There's a gaming store on your campus, and every time you've walked by, you've seen a bunch of regulars hanging out and playing a game you're into. You walk in one day, introduce yourself, and explain how you're a fan of the game too and looking for a group to play with.

It takes a certain amount of guts to go up to a group of people and insert yourself into their conversation. You may worry it will come off as lame or overeager. If you've seen them around for a while without approaching them, you may also think they'll see you as strange for only coming over now. But if you're their type and you come off as reasonably likable and confident, it can all go quite smoothly. If it makes you too nervous, you can

always try the next option.

Approach 2: Get to know a few members, then meet the rest of the group through them

Again, these are situations where you have to go out of your way to make contact with the group. A few examples:

- You've noticed a group you want to join in one of your university classes. In a second class, it's just you and one of the members. You get to know her in that class, and after the two of you are on friendly terms, you start sitting with the whole group in the other course.
- You play in a rec softball league and have noticed one of the other teams is made up of a group of friends whom you seem to have a lot in common with. A few weeks later at a league-wide end-of-season party, you start talking to one of them and seem to get along. You ask them to introduce you to their teammates, which they happily do.

However you first make contact with a group, if you're a good fit, this step may be the only point of struggle. After you've broken the ice, the rest will easily fall into place.

Step 2: Find a way to hang out with the group consistently and become closer with everyone

Assuming you didn't effortlessly become accepted as soon as you met everybody, the work will then be in moving from "The group now knows I exist and seems okay with me" to "I spend time with them regularly, and they consider me a friend."

Don't get discouraged if things don't go perfectly the first time

The first time you spend time with a group usually doesn't make or break

you. People may form a rough idea of what you're like after talking to you once, but they don't decide then and there if they want to be friends. They usually have to hang out with someone a few times before they know how the relationship is going to develop. Occasionally, your first meeting with everyone isn't super encouraging. Your interactions may have been a little strained or inhibited, or you may have felt stuck on the sidelines despite your best efforts to stay in the mix. It can be tempting to throw in the towel, but give it a few more chances. Sometimes people get off to an iffy start and then realize they're more compatible than they first assumed.

Figure out how to get in on the group's get-togethers

Sometimes people successfully make initial contact with a group and become friendly with the members in a light, casual way. However, they're not getting in on the fun group activities that are one of the reasons they want to join the group in the first place. For example, they may be able to chat with a group of people in one of their classes, but not see them on the weekends when they all hang out. If you're in this situation, there are a few things you can try:

- As with making friends in general, you may just need to get on the group's radar as someone they could hang out with outside of the situation where you all met. After you let them know you enjoy the same activities they do, they may get the picture and start keeping you in the loop (for example, "You all go out and try new restaurants every week? I'm into trying new places too, and I'd be down to join. I can even suggest some good spots").
- You could ask about more specific future plans and then politely ask if you can take part.
- You could try arranging a get-together yourself (see Chapter 26).

Even if everyone can't make it, your invitation sends the message that you're interested in hanging out with them. For this suggestion, you have to use your judgment about whether planning something for the group would be appropriate. Some groups are fine with newer members trying to make plans. Others are more established and set in their ways and will tune out ideas from anyone they don't know well enough.

If you got into the group through one or two people, get connected to the other members

Another problem people have when joining a group is they'll start hanging out with a group regularly, but even if everyone is nice to them, it's still like they're perpetual guests of the friend or friends who initially introduced them. Aside from spending more time with the group, here are some ways to move beyond that situation:

- When you're all hanging out, take time to break away from your original friend(s) and get to know the other members. Make it clear you want to get to know everyone better and not just accompany your buddy to the odd get-together.
- Get the other group members' contact info. Aside from allowing you to get in touch with them and sending another signal that you want to get to know the whole group, it also frees you from having to rely on your original connection as your sole means of hearing about the group's plans.

You don't have to become equally close to everyone or have them all like you to the same degree. Although you want to get away from being seen as the guest of one or two members, you don't have to become best friends

with every last person in the group. As long as a group on the whole wants you around, it's okay if your connection with a few members is a little undeveloped. In most social circles, even though everyone gets along, some members are closer than others. If the group is big enough, there will be subgroups within the larger one. When you're new to a group, try to be on fairly good terms with everyone, but also look for the handful of members you get along with best. As long as one of the subgroups takes you in, you'll be seen as part of the bigger crowd.

Step 3: Put in your time with the group and deepen your relationship with everyone

After you're hanging out with the group consistently, becoming more enmeshed in it is mostly a matter of time. If you put in enough hours with them, they'll naturally start to think of you as a member. You'll get to know everyone better, even if it's only a group that gets together to party, rather than have lots of intimate discussions. You'll share some memorable experiences. You'll become familiar with their private jokes and get in on the ground floor for new ones that develop. Mostly this will all happen automatically, but you can speed the process along by consciously adapting and applying the ideas in the previous chapter on growing relationships.

Understand that you may not feel like a full-fledged member for a while

Sometimes when you join a group, you'll feel like a full-on member right away. Alternatively, you might feel like a hanger-on for a few months. That doesn't necessarily mean the group doesn't like you; if some members have known each other for years and years, they'll be more drawn toward each other and might unintentionally leave you out. Once you're hanging out with the group on a regular basis, you're in. Don't discount that and

convince yourself you're still an outsider. Just keep showing up and doing what you're doing; over time you'll get to know everyone better and become more of a core member.

Accept that becoming part of a group doesn't always work out

Exposure and familiarity generally increase bonds between people, but it's not guaranteed. Sometimes you'll join a group, feel on thin ice the whole time, and then eventually leave when you realize you'll never be fully included. You need to be willing to go through this uncertain, risky period. Any feelings of being a second-tier member may only be temporary. If you really feel yourself struggling, it may be a sign the group isn't a good match for you.

29

Making Friends in Particular Situations

UP TO THIS POINT, this section has covered a general structure for how to make friends. Here are some additional suggestions for two situations that people commonly have trouble with: making friends in college, and making friends as an adult, after university, or when you're in a new city.

Making friends in college

The college environment is one of the easiest places to make friends. You're surrounded by thousands of peers, most of whom are open to meeting people. Of course, that statement can seem like a slap in the face if you're at university and struggling with your social life. Students have two main problems with making friends in college:

- They fell into their friendships in high school and don't know how to deliberately make new ones.
- They feel like everyone effortlessly made friends during the first few weeks of school, but they didn't, and they don't know how to form a social circle after missing that window.

Making friends during day-to-day college life is mostly a matter of following the concepts laid out in the previous chapters. Meet people in your classes, at your dorm, through clubs and student associations, and at any part-time jobs you may have. Take the initiative to invite possible friends out, then try to continue to see them so the relationship can develop.

Of course, if you have problems with shyness or making conversation, you need to put some time into tackling those issues too.

Suggestions for making friends during your first few weeks of college

When you begin university, you aren't the only person who doesn't know anyone. Most of the other students have left their friends and family behind too, and need to make new friends. Here's how to more easily meet and get to know them:

- Realize pretty much everyone feels a little nervous, unsure of themselves, and overwhelmed when starting college. Most people are just putting on a brave face because they mistakenly assume everyone else has their act together.
- Get to know some people before the school year starts. If you go to an information session in the months leading up to the first semester, get people's contact info and keep in touch with them. If your major has a group on a social network, reach out to some of your soon-to-be classmates through it. If you're in town a few days before school starts, arrange to meet up with anyone who's also around.
- If it's feasible, try to get familiar with the campus and surrounding area ahead of time. You'll feel more comfortable once school starts, and you'll be able to start a few conversations by offering to help other students find their way around.
- If it's a realistic option for you and you really want to get some practice with the university experience, go backpacking in another country beforehand and stay in hostels. The hostel life is similar to living in a dorm, both practically and socially.
- Go to as many Orientation Week events as you can. You'll meet a lot of people, especially ones from your faculty. The rowdy, party-

centric atmosphere of the first week isn't for everyone, but there should be some non-drinking-related events. If you're not into partying, you won't be the only one, and you can seek out other students who are on the same page.

- If you live in a residence hall, get to know the people on your floor. Go door to door and introduce yourself, or hang around the lounge and talk to whoever comes in. Drop in to visit your neighbors on the floors above and below you too.
- If you live at home or off-campus, hang around school as much as you can. You can't meet new people if you're always holed up in your own place.
- Chat to whoever you want to. The first few weeks are a social free-for-all, and no one is going to look sideways at someone who's being outgoing and trying to meet people.
- Realize it's okay to tag along with groups of people or to go to Orientation Week events alone. The group you're going with probably just met a few days ago, so it's not like you're intruding on their clique. If you head to an event alone, you can start conversations with whomever you want because the whole point of them is for people to mingle.
- One or two of your fellow students may be vague acquaintances from your high school. If you weren't that close to them back then, chances are it's not going to be any different now. You have many other prospects, and it's better to put your energy into pursuing them instead.

Don't give up if you haven't found a group of friends after the first few weeks

After the first few weeks of school have passed, you may think that

everyone's social circles are solidified, so it will be harder to make friends. Yes, the atmosphere where everyone is open to making friends with everyone else dies down after the first month. However, that doesn't mean that every new social circle is completely locked. Groups are usually open to new members who are likable and who bring something to the table.

More important, the social circles that people fall into during the first few weeks of university sometimes don't last that long. They can form because everyone is antsy get into some sort of group and will link up with the first batch of people they meet. In the months that follow, these circles can drift apart as everyone realizes they aren't that well matched.

Making friends as an adult, after university, or when you've moved to a new city for a reason other than to go to college

These circumstances are lumped together because they're similar and the advice for dealing with them is the same. In each case, it's no longer as easy to meet people as it was in school. You're no longer surrounded by classmates who have lots of time to devote to socializing. As people get older, they become busier with their careers, families, and homes, and they have less time to spend hanging out with their current friends or meeting new ones. They also have higher standards and a clearer idea of what they're looking for in a new friend. This isn't to say it's impossible to make friends when you're new in town or when you're in your forties. You just need to work harder at it, and you shouldn't get too discouraged if everything doesn't slide into place after a few weeks.

Get what you can from your job or existing contacts

If you're lucky enough to have a job that's a source of potential friends,

take advantage of that as much as possible. Do you have coworkers you get along with, but whom you don't hang out with outside of work? Maybe they'd be up for doing something one weekend. Just because you're out of school, new to town, or older doesn't necessarily mean you have no existing social connections. Even if you've moved somewhere far away, you may have a past acquaintance or relative in the area. Maybe you could meet that old buddy for lunch and be introduced to their friends soon after.

Pursue your hobbies as a way to meet people

When you're in university, you can meet lots of friends through your classes, living arrangements, and part-time jobs. If you meet anyone through a hobby, it's almost a bonus. After college is over, your interests become a lot more central to your social life. People who have a lot of social hobbies have an easier time making friends. If they're settling down in a new city, it's natural for them to join a bunch of teams, get involved with a theater group, or start volunteering somewhere. Before long, they have a social circle. It's harder for people who have more solitary interests like reading, watching movies, or going for long hikes by themselves.

Consider getting some more social hobbies if you don't already have any. You don't need to totally overhaul your personality or all of your pastimes, but tweak how you spend your time so you can meet as many friends as you'd like. Do more activities outside of the house. Find a way to use your existing hobbies to put you in contact with more people. For example, if you normally exercise at home, join a class or running club. If you like reading about new ideas, attend some free talks or seminars, or join a book discussion club. If you like stand-up comedy, see if there are any Internet meet-ups where fans can arrange to go to shows together.

Be more active about seizing opportunities with potential friends

When you're in college, you can afford to be a bit lazy about making friends. If you meet someone you get along with in one of your classes but don't pursue the relationship as hard as you could have, it's not the end of the world. You'll probably see them again in the next eight weeks. And if it doesn't work out with them, there are tons of other prospects. When you're no longer in college, the opportunities don't pop up as often. You have to be a little more on top of things when it comes to following up with people you hit it off with.

Sure, at your job or at the start of a league's season, you can drag your feet, but there will often be times when you'll meet a possible friend only once or twice, and if you don't jump on the chance, you'll lose it. A lot of hobby-related venues like dance classes or rock-climbing gyms have people who only drop in a handful of times and then move on. When you meet a person you could imagine yourself being friends with and there's a chance you may not cross paths with them again, be more active about getting their contact information. Then follow up on the lead fairly quickly.

Expand the range of people you could possibly be friends with

When you're still in high school and college, you mostly form friendships with people around your age and from a similar background. As you move through adulthood, the range of people you meet and could hang out with increases. Don't be too quick to dismiss someone who's older or younger because they don't fit what you imagined your social circle would look like. Just because someone's age is a decade up or down from yours doesn't automatically mean you have nothing in common, or that they're silly and immature, or stodgy and out of touch. Don't assume someone with a different background is from a totally different world and could never be into the same things you are. Look at everyone on a case-by-case basis.

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Troubleshooting the Process of Making Friends

ASIDE FROM BEING UNSURE of how to handle specific situations like being new in a city and not knowing anyone, other mental and practical issues can hinder people from making friends: having various worries about trying to make friends; experiencing life circumstances, like a lack of money, that interfere with your social life; getting poor reactions to your friendly overtures; and feeling iffy about many of the potential friends you meet. This chapter gives suggestions for handling all of them.

Common worries people have about making friends

Chapter 24 covered two common concerns that arise when trying to make new friends: feeling desperate when pursuing friendships and believing you have to hide your loneliness. Here are some other ones. As with any insecurities, being aware of and challenging the counterproductive thoughts beneath them can help, but in the end, it may take several positive firsthand experiences to finally get rid of them.

“I don’t feel desperate, but I’m worried about coming across as desperate and putting people off.”

Alternative: No one will see you as desperate if you do typical friendly things like starting conversations with people you don’t know, trying to chat with acquaintances, inviting someone out, or texting friends to catch up.

You have to act blatantly desperate to be seen that way. Desperate acts can include inviting people out after they've already turned you down seven times; texting someone way more frequently than they text you; or telling them how much their friendship means to you after knowing them only a few days.

“It feels weird to ask around to see what people’s weekend plans are.”

Alternative: Asking around about others’ weekend plans is completely normal behavior. If you’re already close friends with someone, you have an unspoken okay to ask them what they’re up to or try to join a group outing they’re planning to attend. It’s two equals sharing information and figuring out something to do together. (Once more, it’s emotional reasoning to believe that because you *feel* desperate about doing something that it *is* desperate. See Chapter 5 for more details about emotional reasoning.)

“If I ask around to see what people’s plans are, I’ll reveal I have nothing going on.”

Alternative: There’s nothing weird or rare about not having plans for later in the week. Being open about not having plans is something people do all the time, and they aren’t embarrassed about it. Their thought process is, “Oh, it’s Friday, and I didn’t think to organize anything yet. I’d better see what my friends are up to.”

“Asking around to see what your social circle’s plans are is fine if they’re your friends. But I want to hang out with some people I don’t know that well. It’d be inappropriate to ask them what they’re up to.”

Alternative: That may seem inappropriate, but you have two perfectly acceptable options: 1) Take a calculated social risk and ask these acquaintances what their plans are, even though it might not work out

perfectly. Be sure to ask in a casual, low-pressure way; 2) Play it safe and get to know them a little better first, and then take a stab at making plans.

“Asking someone to hang out makes me feel like I’m ‘one down’.”

Alternative: If you invite someone out, it doesn’t automatically mean you’re lower on the social totem pole; it just means you have something fun in mind that you want to do and are trying to round up some people to do it with. More popular people try to organize plans too. They don’t sit back and wait for everyone to come to them.

“I’m really not sure if I know the other person well enough to invite them to hang out.”

Alternative: Use your judgment. If you think you may not have spoken to someone enough for the invitation to be justified, maybe get to know them a little more first. On the other hand, you can sometimes become friends with people faster than you think you can, and inviting them out can be one way to do that. Also, think about whether you truly don’t know them that well. That worry may just be your nervousness talking.

“What if people say no when I invite them out? That means they hate me, right? I don’t think I could handle it.”

Alternative: If you invite people out, you will get turned down some of the time. If you’re arranging a larger activity, it’s almost a given that some people won’t be able to come. It’s often not personal. People may turn down a plan because

- they’re not up for the activity you suggested;
- they just don’t feel like going out and want to have a quiet night in;
- they’ve already made plans with other people, but would have been

up for it otherwise:

- they have other non-social things they have to do;
- the logistics of the event are inconvenient (for example, they'd have to take the bus for an hour to get there);
- money is tight, and they can't afford to attend;
- they don't know anyone else who's going and aren't in the mood to try to get to know a bunch of new people;
- they like your company, but not in that situation (for example, they like talking to you one-on-one over coffee but not going to bars with you);
- they have their own insecurities (for example, they're older than you and your friends and worry about seeming lame by tagging along with a younger crowd).

Even if they turn you down because they don't think the two of you are compatible, everyone experiences that kind of rejection, and it's something you can learn to manage.

“What if I arrange something and only a few people show up? I’ll look bad, and the event will be awkward with so few guests.”

Alternative: There's no law that says all of your events have to be big or get a huge turnout. Getting a lot of people to come out is often as much about offering an enticing activity and being lucky enough to have everyone's schedules line up as it is about how popular you are. You'll often have an idea of what the attendance will be ahead of time, so you can always postpone if no one bites when you first suggest the plan. If you don't initially frame the event as big, it doesn't look weird if not many people show up. If the event does end up being smaller, it can still be fun, just in a different way than a giant get-together. You can always improvise

too; for example, “This party is pretty quiet. Let’s just go out instead.”

“What if I arrange something and no one shows up? I definitely couldn’t handle that.”

Alternative: It’s rare to be left waiting for people who will never arrive. More commonly you’ll get a bunch of last-minute cancellations. Many people have had the odd plan fizzle out like this. It doesn’t mean you’re a failure for all time, just that you should try again, and maybe change up your approach by suggesting something that’s more convenient or appealing to your invited guests. Most big plans end up with one or two flake-outs, and everyone cancelling at once may just be an unfortunate coincidence. However, if it seems like part of a larger pattern of your friends not respecting your time, you’ll need to talk to them.

“What if things are awkward once the event is under way?”

Alternative: Being worried about uncomfortable moments is mostly run-of-the-mill anticipatory anxiety, and everything will likely go fine, especially if you’ve previously had good interactions with everyone. If things are awkward, it doesn’t mean you’re forever hopeless; you may not be meant to be friends with those particular people, or you may need some more practice with your conversation skills.

“I feel like I’m always the one arranging things with my friends. They never invite me out. They must not like me.”

Alternative: It’s hard to read any one person or group’s mind, but sometimes friends never show initiative because they’re a bit lazy and disorganized about making plans; they’re really busy; they would suggest something, but you always ask first; or they’ve come to expect you to be the organizer.

“I feel discouraged. I tried to get some people to go out to a bar, but hardly anyone came. Then Maria proposed the exact same thing a few weeks later, and twenty people fell all over themselves to be there.”

Alternative: Worry about your own social life, and don't tie yourself in knots comparing your plan-making success to other people's. Some people will be more popular than you. It is what it is. What's important is that you have a social circle that makes you happy, even if you have to work at it a little more at the moment. Don't fall into black-and-white thinking where you believe if you're not the absolute best, you must be completely worthless.

“My life circumstances are interfering with my social life”

Many life situations, like living in a dull, isolated village, can get in the way of your making friends. These unhelpful circumstances undeniably make things harder. However, you probably can do at least a little better than you are now, and you shouldn't be too quick to throw in the towel or turn your circumstances into an excuse. Overall, when faced with one of these barriers, you have three long-term choices:

1. You can try to adapt to your situation and get more out of it.
2. You can wait for things to shift in your favor.
3. You can escape entirely.

If you're not an adult yet, your freedom and choices are limited, and you have to bide your time until more options open up to you. Even if you're stuck in a less-than-ideal situation, you can still use your time to lay the groundwork for the future (for example, saving money for a car, or honing

your social skills for university while you're stuck at home during high school). Here are some suggestions for particular situations:

Living in a small, boring town

- Make a real effort to find everything going on in your community, as well as getting to know the locals whom you have the most in common with.
- If possible, get a car and see what's available in neighboring towns or cities.
- If you really feel bored and constrained and like there's no one worth knowing where you live, the only real option is to move. That may not be a possibility now, but it could be down the road if you save up enough money to leave or arrange to attend university or take a job in a far-off city.

Living far away from everyone

- If you've decided that your far-flung location is social kryptonite, try having people over. They may not be as reluctant to visit as you think.
- Hang out at the homes of friends who do live nearby. They may understand you live far away and not care that they can't go to your place. Don't feel you must have people over to your home in order to have a life.
- Hang out with people in spots other than someone's house. The older you get, the more possibilities open up to do things outside of going over to a buddy's place after school.
- Be around people in organized settings such as lessons, clubs, or team sports.

- Try making some friends with the people in your area. Your social circle doesn't have to include only people from your school. Check out what's going on in your part of town.
- Once you're of legal drinking age, living far from all the bars and clubs can mess up a night because you may need to cut it short to catch the bus or train home. You can figure out ways around this: Consider arranging to stay at a mate's place, taking a cab home, or trying to get your buddies to come to a more local bar and then crash on your couch.

Living at home

- Unless there's something obvious getting in the way, like your parents have forbidden you from having guests over, there's no reason to assume you can't invite people to your place.
- If hanging out at home isn't an option, spend time with friends in any number of other spots.
- If you're in your mid-twenties or older, don't assume that living at home automatically carries a stigma. Living with your parents is normal in many cultures, and even in ones where grown children are expected to move out, there's an increasing understanding that not everyone can afford to do so right away.

Living in a run-down apartment or neighborhood you're embarrassed about

- Again, if doing things at your own place isn't feasible, hang out with people elsewhere.
- Don't be too quick to assume this is a mark against you. Most adults understand that not everyone can afford luxury accommodations and

may have to live in a cheaper area to save money.

- Do whatever is realistically possible to spruce up your home.

Not having a car or not being able to drive in an area where you need a vehicle to get around

- Don't feel you must have a car to have friends. If you're an otherwise solid person, no one's going to judge you because you can't pick them up or drive somewhere.
- Get rides with other people (be sure to pitch in for gas on longer trips), take public transit when you can, or take cabs. Arrange to meet people at your destination instead of picking them up.
- In the long term, prioritize learning to drive and getting your hands on a vehicle.

Not having a lot of money for hanging out with friends

- Realize many people, especially when they're young, don't have a ton of spare cash but still manage to have a decent social life.
- Hang out at friends' places as much as you can, rather than going out all the time.
- Do free activities like going for a hike or attending a street festival.
- Do inexpensive activities like seeing a movie, having coffee, or visiting a local attraction on a day of the week when admission is lower.
- Eat at cheaper restaurants.
- If you're into drinking, drink at home before going out, rather than paying inflated bar prices (of course, don't put your health at risk and drink too much too quickly just to save a few bucks).
- Go to bars with cheap or no cover. Some venues don't charge a cover

if you get there early enough. Learn which bars in your city have cheap drink specials on various nights of the week.

- If it's feasible, get a part-time job. You don't even need to work that many hours a week if you're only doing it for a bit of spending money.

Being underage so you can't get into bars, especially when your friends are old enough

- Look for all-ages events and venues.
- Try to go to more house parties with your friends instead of going to bars.
- Just wait to turn the legal age. Everyone is too young at one point.

Being really busy

- Purposely make time for your social life rather than thinking of it as something you may get to if everything else is out of the way.
- Learn to work or study more efficiently so you can free up some time to go out.
- Spend your social time efficiently: See your friends in shorter, higher-quality bursts; catch up with several people at once; or organize get-togethers that fit between things you already had to do.
- If your hectic schedule is leaving you too tired to socialize, recover your energy with well-timed naps or hits of caffeine.

“People just don't seem interested in being friends with me, and I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong”

Chapter 9 covered the issue of others not reacting well when you try to

speak with them. This trouble area is similar, but the impasse comes a bit later. People respond well enough that you can talk to them for a while, maybe even on a regular basis, but they don't seem interested in becoming closer friends. They may not take you up on your invitations, or they may not invite you out themselves. They may chat with you if they run into you somewhere, but the relationship never goes beyond that. Here are some possibilities that may help you suss out where you're going wrong:

Try making friends in a better way

- Talk to people first, instead of expecting them to come to you.
- Go beyond greeting people and exchanging some quick pleasantries; don't expect them to take over from there.
- Have longer conversations with people and invite them out, instead of expecting them to invite you out.
- Don't think you just have to perform certain social "moves," like taking an interest in people, and then everyone will instantly want to be friends with you.
- Accept people's invitations. If people have invited you out a few times, but you never accepted, they've likely given up on you.
- Get better at making plans. Instead of, say, inviting people out at the last second to events that aren't really their style, consider their interests and ask them to do something a few days in advance.
- Keep trying. Don't be too quick to give up after the first setback ("She said she was too busy to get together on Friday. She must hate me. No point in trying again").

The other people aren't interested in being friends with you

Something many lonely people need to do is to take more initiative to actively build a social circle for themselves. That advice only goes so far,

though. Just because you put effort into trying to be friends with people doesn't mean it's always going to work out. Here are a few reasons your friendship prospects may not be keen on being buddies:

- You're not the ideal type of friend for the type of people you usually approach. Some people mainly try to befriend stereotypically popular or high-status types, even though they have little in common with them.
- You're making an interaction mistake of some sort that doesn't put people off immediately, but makes them unsure about getting to know you better.
- You don't seem to enjoy the same activities your potential friends enjoy.
- Someone hung out with you a few times, but eventually decided the two of you aren't compatible.
- The people you're pursuing are your coworkers or classmates, and they aren't interested in being friends with anyone they meet at work or school. They just want to put in their time and leave.

Again, the best way to get to the bottom of the issue is to get in-person feedback on how you're coming across.

“I don’t have trouble meeting people, but I don’t like them”

Some lonely people are overly picky. It's fine to screen out jerks or anyone you have nothing in common with. Choosiness is a problem, though, if you're meeting people whom you get along with pretty well, but you're always left with a feeling of, "Meh, I don't know. I think I could do better." Studies have shown that lonely people tend to be more negative about

others in general. Although people with this problem may be somewhat choosy to begin with, the trait is mainly a side effect of loneliness. Being lonely in the longer term naturally makes people unhappy, which can sour the way they view their interactions. It also makes them pessimistic and self-protective. They unconsciously think, “This isn’t going to work out, so I won’t let it get off the ground to begin with.” They reject people before they can be rejected.

If you’re really lonely, your initial goal should be to get some sort of social life going. As long as your potential friends aren’t a total mismatch, consciously try to override your pickiness and hang out with anyone whom you get along with and who seems interested in spending time with you. Become friends with them first, and then decide if you want to continue the relationship. If you’re too choosy, you can come up with reasons not to befriend just about anyone ahead of time. But if you push through your pickiness and start hanging out with someone, you’ll often find you like their company, even if they didn’t seem ideal on paper.

The first people you meet may not be your ideal friends, but the benefits of having a social life outweigh that. At the very least, it’s easier to make more friends when you already have a few. You’ll feel more confident about your social situation and be able to meet more people through your existing friends. Also, if you’re forming your first-ever group of friends, you probably don’t completely know what you like or want in that kind of relationship. You have to see firsthand what different types of people are like in a friend capacity. When your social life and friend-making skills are more established, then you can raise your standards.

Be especially cautious about rejecting people you really click with who don’t fit the stereotypical image of a popular person. If you’re insecure, you may reject them because you’re overly concerned with how your friendship comes across to other people. You may also feel put off because you see

traits in them, like being shy or having esoteric hobbies, that you're uncomfortable with in yourself. These relationships can teach you that spending time with a person you really get along with is more important and fulfilling than having a social circle that outsiders approve of. If your new friend is comfortable with the acceptable-but-sometimes-misunderstood traits you share, their attitude may rub off on you. If they have some negative facets to their personality, which you also have and feel insecure about, you may become more at peace with these traits when you can see they're just one part of your otherwise solid new friend.

“I find it hard to make friends because I don’t relate to the mentality and interests of most people”

Although not every less socially successful person feels alienated because they don't have the same interests as other people, it's not an incredibly rare issue either. In general, they typically feel most people are more shallow and superficial than they are. They have a distaste for seemingly popular interests like sports, celebrity gossip, trashy TV, fashion, drinking, and nightclubs, and see them as a sign of how much distance there is between them and the average vapid person. This sense of disconnect has consequences:

- It is harder to form relationships when you don't relate to the things many people are into. Some interactions won't go well to begin with. A promising conversation may stall when you reply that you don't follow sports. You may be unfairly judged for not drinking. If you meet someone you click with, a wedge may appear when it becomes clear their first-choice activity every weekend is to go clubbing.
- You may become too choosy and write off potential friends because you're quick to judge them as vacuous.

- Your feelings may translate into bitter and misanthropic behavior.
- Your sense of being different from everyone may morph into an arrogant belief that you're on a higher level than all the mindless sheep. Those feelings of false superiority may stay in your head as nothing more than an ego-protecting way to reframe your loneliness. Of course, if they appear as outward arrogance, that will put everyone off.

Here's how you can handle a sense of alienation:

- More than anything else, look for people who do think like you. They are out there. Plenty of people are intellectual or indifferent to sports or not into getting plastered. You can have a satisfying social life and never get drunk or go to a loud, flashy nightclub.
- Be willing to give people more of a chance. Many of them aren't as shallow as they seem if you can look past the surface impression they create.
- Try to soften your aversion to the activities you have a chip on your shoulder about. You don't have to love them, and you definitely don't have to do them, but work not to have such a hostile perception of them. It doesn't do you any favors to carry that kind of resentment around.
- Stick to your values, but be open to the occasional compromise and generally approaching things in a less absolute way. It's fine if you don't like getting wasted or going to deafening, tacky clubs, but it's less realistic to try to keep alcohol or nightlife venues out of your life entirely. If your friends want to have a beer or two at a low-key pub, that's not so bad, and keeping them company there is better than not going out at all.
- To be frank, if you feel superior to everyone, you need to get over

yourself and develop a more humble, balanced self-image. Yes, you may be a bit more intellectual and refined than some of your peers, but it doesn't make you better than anyone. Many of them aren't nearly as dumb as you assume. Whatever your strengths are, you're not that much of a unique snowflake either. Being intelligent or having discerning taste is great, but people with those traits aren't that rare. Getting more social experience will drive all of this home.

Here are a few more thoughts to support some of those suggestions:

Reasons people may seem more shallow than they are

Many people who seem superficial do have deep interests or tendencies. The problem is that their surface features are easy to see, while their more substantial traits are hidden. Here are some things that may make layered, intelligent people come off as shallower at a glance, and cause you to pass on them too quickly:

- They belong to a social group that's stereotypically thought of as dumb and shallow.
- They've fallen into a style of dressing that's associated with shallow people.
- They have an accent or style of speaking that's stereotypically associated with less-cultured types.
- They have a naturally crude, bubbly, or scatterbrained personality.
- They don't use proper spelling and grammar when they text or email because they're more concerned with speed over perfect legibility.
- They tend to act loud and dumb when they're drinking and having a good time.
- They're in a place in their life where they want to do lots of shallow things like partying a lot.

- They're capable of discussing heavy, cerebral topics, but have learned that those discussions can cause arguments or hurt feelings, so they save them for the appropriate time and place.
- They're intelligent, but not interested in stereotypical intellectual topics like logical fallacies or Game Theory.
- They're content in life, and not in an "ignorance is bliss" way. Some people think someone can only be deep if they're angst, cynical, and preoccupied with existential questions.
- Their thoughts are concealed. It's easy to think other people are less deep than you because you only see their surface behaviors. You, on the other hand, have access to all of your inner thoughts, many of which are profound and insightful.
- They have good social skills. Some people go so far as to think that anyone who seems comfortable with social interaction, and who is at home in a group, is automatically a brainless follower.

In defense of “shallow” traits and interests

In moderation, shallowness isn't inherently bad. If you're vapid to your core, that's no good, but in reasonable doses, shallow things are fine:

- Shallowness is part of the lighter side of socializing. Sometimes people want to make childish jokes and gossip about celebrities. It isn't better or worse than being reflective and serious, just different.
- Shallow things can be fun. Most people enjoy the odd dumb movie or video game. Nothing wrong with that.
- Shallow things can be a guilty pleasure. Lots of people realize that some of the things they like are fluffy and trashy, but they're enjoyable and harmless, so why not?
- Shallow people can be fun. Even if you may never want to have a

long, involved discussion with them, more vapid people can still be entertaining enough to idly chat with or to keep you company when you go out.

- Some shallow things aren't really shallow at all. Sports and video games often get written off, but they're full of nuance and strategy. Real art, skill, and passion go into designing fashionable clothes. Some TV shows or comic books can have deeper plots than many people give them credit for at a glance.
- Some shallow things have positive benefits. For example, a guy who gets into natural bodybuilding so he can take his shirt off at music festivals is improving his health in the process.
- Some shallow things work for other people. Just because it may not appeal to you, it doesn't mean it isn't rewarding to someone else. For example, you may think a 9-to-5 job, a house in the suburbs, and 2.2 kids is soul sucking, but other people may find it fulfilling.

Some thoughts on developing a more balanced view of drinking

To be very clear, nothing in this book is trying to tell you that you need to drink to be socially successful. If you have an overly angry black-and-white view of the activity, it's just trying to get you to see it through softer eyes.

If you're not into alcohol, look for friends who aren't big drinkers either. If you are in a social situation where people are pressuring you to drink, know you're doing nothing wrong and use the assertiveness skills covered in Chapter 23 to stand your ground. Feeling bitter about alcohol is particularly a problem around college age when it seems all everyone cares about is getting hammered. Realize that lots of people besides you aren't keen on drinking. The ones who are into getting wasted make a lot of noise about it and claim a disproportionate amount of attention, but not everyone is like that.

Drinking isn't inherently bad. All kinds of people consume alcohol; many have a glass of wine with dinner. Sometimes you can think of drinking, any kind of drinking, as being more lowbrow or sinister than it is. It's more about how you go about it. There are different levels of alcohol consumption. Someone who has a beer or two while seeing some live music isn't consuming it on the same level as a guy who gets blackout drunk at a party and puts his hand through a window. It's often not drinking itself we feel negative about but the things it can become associated with. When you're young, underage drinking has all this baggage attached to it that it doesn't when you're 45 and sipping a scotch in the evening. You may have come to dislike drinking because it's a favorite activity of a type of person you resent.

It would be foolish to say there's nothing wrong with alcohol. It has a lot of potential downsides, from serious ones like addiction and drunk driving accidents, to more minor annoyances like losing your phone when you're loaded or putting on weight after two semesters of partying. However, most of the time nothing bad happens to people when they drink in moderation. They go out, share a few pitchers, feel the effects, and then head home for the night. Even when they get pretty drunk, most people still behave themselves. They may be louder, sloppier, and goofier than normal, but that's about it on most nights. If you're someplace where a lot of people are drinking, it's easy to spot the handful of people who are acting embarrassing or being self-destructive, but for every one of them, there are fifty who have their act together.

Some thoughts on developing a more balanced view of clubbing

If you can take or leave giant, gaudy nightclubs, you're not alone. They can be loud, crowded, expensive, and full of people who aren't your style. Lots of people don't like them but still manage to have great social lives while

setting foot in them as rarely as possible. As with drinking, complaints about clubbing are most commonly heard from people in their late teens and early twenties, when everyone is most enthusiastic about going to them.

Most people who go to clubs are good, regular folk. If you've been dragged to a club, it's easy to think that everyone but you is empty-headed and lives for that kind of scene, but a lot of people are occasional club-goers, who may have been cajoled into going too. The clubbing environment also makes people seem more ditzy than they are. Who doesn't come across as more superficial in a clubbing outfit? Everyone's also there to let loose and have fun, so they're not showing the more refined side of their personality.

Don't be too quick to dismiss specific aspects of clubbing. You may not like dancing to thumping dance music, but that doesn't automatically mean everyone who does is a mouth-breather. Similarly, many people go to clubs for face-value reasons like wanting to see their friends and cut loose after a long week. Not everyone has a less-flattering hidden motivation like wanting to get laid or soak up attention from strangers. Finally, not all clubs are the same. When people first start going out, they often gravitate to the biggest, most stereotypically club-ish clubs and mistakenly think they're all like that. You may not like huge venues that play Top 40 hits, but who's to say you wouldn't appreciate a smaller venue that plays more alternative music and attracts a crowd that's more your style?

31

Looking Forward as Your Social Skills Improve

IF YOU CONSISTENTLY APPLY this book's ideas over time, your social situation should get to a good place. You'll be reasonably confident and comfortable in your own skin. You won't be completely fearless, but you'll be able to get through most social situations without feeling too shy or nervous. You'll be able carry on most conversations just fine, and you'll know that if one doesn't go well, it's not entirely your fault. You'll have a social life that works for you. What are some things you can expect as your social skills develop in a positive direction?

Pitfalls that come with being more socially savvy

As your social skills get better, there aren't any major pitfalls you have to worry about. It's almost all positives. One potential problem is that as you expand into fresh social territory, you may develop some bad habits. For example, if you previously nervously hung back in conversations but now enjoy taking the lead, you may discover you tend to interrupt people or make inappropriate jokes. You can catch and correct those mistakes like you can any others.

Maintaining your progress

After you've improved your conversation and friend-making skills, the gains are here to stay. When you have the knowledge about how to handle a

particular situation, you won't forget it. It's not like losing weight where there's always a risk that you'll put the pounds back on if you aren't diligent. If you don't use the skills for a while, they can get rusty, but it won't take long to shake that off. Practically speaking, conversation skills are used so often in day-to-day life that you'll be able to maintain them without trying too hard. Your courage to put yourself in uncomfortable social situations will atrophy more quickly if you don't keep stretching your comfort zone. Though again, it's easier to get that comfort level back than it is to earn it in the first place.

If you've always liked spending time alone, your new-and-improved social life might dry up after a while. This can happen if you become less intrinsically motivated to make new friends because you no longer have anything to prove to yourself. In the past you were pushed by the pain of wanting to get past your loneliness and social skills gaps. Now you may be stuck in a rut; you know you could go make more friends if you really wanted to... but there's no rush. So for now you're going to stay in for another weekend and watch some movies. If you catch yourself in this situation, it will be easier to get out of it a second time, once you re-establish your motivation to meet people.

Your social life may also level out due to a course correction. When you get the hang of socializing, you may go through a phase of going out all the time and making lots of friends. You're having fun using your new abilities, making up for lost time, and proving to yourself you can do this. In time, however, the novelty of having "bloomed" will wear off, and you'll settle back into your true, more low-key social preferences.

Coping with challenging times

Though your more polished social skills won't tend to backslide much, there are a few situations in which socializing may be tougher. The first is if

other aspects of your life get particularly stressful or difficult. All of that extra stress and discouragement might temporarily make your shyness and anxiety worse than normal. Second, your life circumstances may change down the road, and you may find yourself in a spot where it's tougher to make friends. You'll know the strategies you need to use, but the deck will still be stacked against you. For example, you may move to a small town after college and find it hard to meet people, as anyone would.

If you hit a stressful patch, give yourself permission to temporarily function at a lower level. It may take time for your life to settle down, and it's not a knock against you if you feel a little more insecure or socially anxious than normal during that time. Think of it as if you injured your ankle and had to ease back on your physical activities for a few weeks—it doesn't mean you're crippled forever. To take the edge off any stress you many feel about socializing, use some additional stress-reducing techniques from Chapter 6. Dust off any anti-anxiety or confidence-boosting principles and techniques you may have applied in the past but haven't had to use as much lately (for example, you may need to go back to consciously questioning your counterproductive thoughts).

When you find yourself in a situation that's more practically challenging than what you're used to, be patient and don't put pressure on yourself to solve it right away. Take the time to try out different ways to adapt your existing skillset. Accept that you may never get the same results as you would under easier circumstances, and don't hold that against yourself (for example, acknowledging there will rarely be an opportunity to meet as many potential friends as easily as you did in college).

What to work on next

It's not uncommon for socially inexperienced people to think they won't feel happy and "fixed" until they've become incredibly popular and

charismatic. However, when they reach a functional, average level of social skills, they often realize that's all they need. If you want to try to take your people skills to a higher level, nothing's stopping you. As the beginning of the book said, being charismatic is more about doing all the basics a bit better than average than employing a set of special high-end techniques. Basic social skills also provide a foundation for more specialized subskills. If you haven't started working on them already, you could begin honing skills like flirting and dating, public speaking, sales, or leadership.

“Why hasn’t anyone noticed how different I am now?”

When you set out to improve your social skills, you may have wanted the validation of having your family or old high school classmates being amazed at how much you've changed. You have to accept you may never get that recognition. New people will tend to respond to the different you, but people you've known a while will often see you as you've always been. That's partially because if someone has a fixed idea of what you're like, they'll look for instances that confirm their old view of you and ignore whatever doesn't fit. Also, there may be a dynamic around certain people where your changes can't really show. When you're having dinner with your family, they won't see how much more confident you are when meeting strangers at parties.

Self-image

Our self-image tends to lag behind our current level of success. Even after you have better social skills, you'll feel like you're still “awkward,” a “geek,” or whatever label you used for yourself, for a while. You may even feel like an imposter and worry that at any moment everyone will snap to

their senses and realize you're really just a dork who's faking it. You may find yourself shoehorning the fact that you used to be shyer into your conversations because you want to pre-emptively explain away any gaffes you may make or because you feel it's such a central part of your identity. These feelings may never fully go away, though they won't outwardly affect you. They may also fade over time, and you'll start to see yourself as a regular person and not define yourself by your old interpersonal problems.

At the moment, your social issues may seem like an overwhelming, all-encompassing storm that's ruining your life. If you work on fixing them, there will come a time where all they'll be is an off-handed, single-sentence summary of something from your past. You'll be talking to someone and mention, "Yeah, I was pretty shy in high school and college... Anyway, as I was saying..."

Appendix A: Asperger's Syndrome / Mild Autism

ASPERGER'S SYNDROME / MILD AUTISM is an inborn difference in brain wiring that, among other things, makes socializing intuitively harder to grasp. It also predisposes people to committing certain types of social mistakes. Although Asperger's syndrome has a big effect on the social abilities of the people who have it, it's a relatively rare condition. Most people who struggle in social situations don't have Asperger's. This chapter briefly describes the symptoms of Asperger's syndrome. It then explains how people with Asperger's can adjust the way they try to acquire better people skills.

Considering the diagnostic criteria for Asperger's syndrome

Below are the official criteria for diagnosing Asperger's syndrome. They're taken from the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (The DSM-5 came out in mid-2013. It doesn't include Asperger's syndrome, and instead absorbed it and a few other conditions into a more general diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, the decision to take away the standalone status of Asperger's was somewhat controversial. Members of the public and many professionals still think in terms of Asperger's syndrome, so this book will use it as well.)

Even if you recognize some of your own traits in the criteria below, you should never self-diagnose. Plenty of people have a handful of Asperger-ish traits, but that's often a far cry from having the full condition. If you suspect

you're on the autism spectrum, you should see a mental health professional who specializes in the area for a proper evaluation.

Not everyone with Asperger's syndrome is the same. The condition can vary in severity, and each person will exhibit a different mix of symptoms. All the other facets of a person's past and personality and interests will come into play too. An outgoing "Aspie" from a poor, abusive household may come across very differently than one who's more naturally reserved and from a stable upper-middle-class background.

DSM-IV Criteria for Asperger's Syndrome

A. Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:

1. marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
2. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
3. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (for example, by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest to other people)
4. lack of social or emotional reciprocity

B. Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:

1. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
2. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals

3. stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (for example, hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
 4. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- C. The disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- D. There is no clinically significant general delay in language (for example, single words used by age 2 years, communicative phrases used by age 3 years).
- E. There is no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behavior (other than in social interaction), and curiosity about the environment in childhood.
- F. Criteria are not met for another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder or Schizophrenia.
-

Seeing the social difficulties Asperger's syndrome can cause

The official criteria for Asperger's syndrome don't capture the whole picture. People with Asperger's are interested in socializing and connecting with others, but they often have trouble doing so. Until they've had more practice and guidance, they tend to come across as stereotypically socially awkward. Below is a list of common Asperger's syndrome social challenges. Although some of them are objective difficulties, others aren't inherently bad but can cause problems because they go against the grain of what most people expect.

Problems with overall understanding of socializing

People with Asperger's have an intuitive understanding of socializing that's lower than that of neurologically typical people. Most people, even if they're shy or less socially experienced, instinctively grasp many unwritten aspects of the social world. Someone with Asperger's doesn't have this knowledge and can struggle to comprehend or navigate situations most people take for granted. They often compare their condition to being an alien trying to blend in with the culture of a strange planet.

They're also unaware of many social rules. This is a side effect of their lower ability to unconsciously pick up unspoken guidelines through observation and experience. For example, someone with Asperger's may make simple mistakes, like not saying good-bye to a friend after they're done talking to them, because they didn't know it was expected. They can feel uneasy in unfamiliar social situations because they assume there will be hidden rules they're going to inadvertently break.

They have a greater tendency to get drained by socializing because it requires mental resources that most people's brains can process on autopilot.

Empathy

As Chapter 16 explained, empathy is the ability to get in touch with another person's perspective and emotional reactions. People with Asperger's have trouble seeing things from someone else's point of view and adjusting as needed. For example, they may tell someone a story, but not consider how the listener isn't familiar with the background context necessary to understand it.

They also have a harder time recognizing and expressing their own emotions. Asperger's doesn't turn people into emotionless robots, but they may not always be totally plugged into how they're feeling. If they are aware of their feelings, they may struggle to get those emotions across.

Nonverbal communication

Asperger's can cause difficulty reading and understanding other people's nonverbal communication. For example, a person with Asperger's may not pick up on someone's bored facial expression and tone of voice. As a result, they may go on and on about a topic the listener isn't interested in instead of changing the subject.

Their own nonverbal communication comes across as "off" to many people. For example, they may have unusually stiff body language, poor use of eye contact, an inexpressive face, a monotone voice, or a peculiar cadence to their speech.

Thinking style

Individuals with Asperger's tend to have a particular style of thinking, which can extend to and affect many of their daily activities:

- A tendency to be very literal and concrete in their thinking. For example, you ask them if they could pick up some milk at the store. They reply with a yes and go back to what they were doing. In their mind, you asked them a hypothetical question about their ability to get milk, which they answered.
- A desire for structure, routine, and predictability, and trouble deviating from their schedule and going with the flow.
- A reluctance to disobey rules, and a tendency to get agitated and come across as uptight when other people want to skirt them.
- Difficulty compromising. They see many issues as black-and-white and don't want to budge.
- Trouble planning and organizing their time.

Use of language

There are also recurring ways they tend to use and interpret language, which can throw people off, or interfere with their ability to follow and react to conversations:

- A tendency to use language in a nontypical way. Examples include being verbose and using a lot of big words, or speaking in an overly formal and proper manner.
- Trouble grasping humor and idioms. People with Asperger's have senses of humor, but theirs can be on a different wavelength from everyone else's. They may not see what's funny about something their friends are all laughing at. Because they think so literally, figures of speech may not be immediately clear to them.
- Trouble following the flow of conversation from one topic to the next and seeing the hidden connections between subjects. For example, if someone mentions a sport, and then the other person brings up something a mutual friend did, the person with Asperger's won't necessarily see the unspoken connection that the mutual friend plays the sport.

Interaction style

The following are common features of the social interaction style of individuals with Asperger's syndrome. Their approach can make their conversation partners feel uncomfortable or unsure of how to react.

- A tendency to be very blunt and straightforward in their communication. They'll sometimes say things that other people find inappropriate or hurtful, like casually referencing someone's double chin. If they're bored in a conversation, they may simply walk away.
- A tendency to "talk at" people and deliver monologues about the

things that they'd like to speak about, rather than having a conversation with back-and-forth dialogue.

- A tendency to value truth, logic, and accuracy. Aside from contributing to their bluntness, this trait can lead them to feel compelled to correct people on minor facts in conversations. They may have trouble going along with the little white lies and niceties people use to keep relationships on an even keel. Overall they can come across as very detached and analytical, or anal-retentive and tightly wound.
- Trouble stating their thoughts in a concise, coherent way. They may start to explain a point and then ramble or go off on tangents. This is partially because they're thinking out loud about what interests them and are not considering what the other person needs to find the explanation interesting and comprehensible.

Interests

People with Asperger's often have special interests—subjects they're intensely focused on and devote a lot of their time to learning and thinking about. Their interest may be a fairly common one, like video games or wine making, but they can also be quite esoteric, like knowing everything about medieval printing presses or collecting memorabilia related to an obscure 1970s country singer. There's nothing objectively wrong with having one interest over another, of course. The issues this trait causes are more indirect, like if people think their choice of hobbies is strange, or they talk about it at length to someone who isn't interested.

Physical

Asperger's leads to physical issues as well. People with it tend to be physically clumsy and uncoordinated. They're often bad at sports (and we

all know how rough it is for those kids in gym class). They can also have sensory sensitivities to things like loud noises, particular smells or tastes, or the feeling of certain fabrics on their skin. Places like nightclubs may trigger negative emotions or reactions for them.

Any of the usual possible side effects of having social difficulties

No one—with or without Asperger's—is immune to common difficulties that can arise while navigating social situations. Other challenges people with Asperger's may face include

- poor self-esteem
- shyness and social anxiety
- depression
- bitterness at being rejected and misunderstood

Improving your social skills if you have Asperger's

If you have Asperger's syndrome and social difficulties, the best way to improve your people skills is simply to focus on the areas where you're behind. For the most part, that involves standard things like reading up on what to do differently and getting lots of real-world practice. However, you can keep certain things in mind for your unique circumstances. Here are some additional Asperger's-specific considerations:

Don't feel like having Asperger's makes you a hopeless case

People with Asperger's can develop solid social skills if they work at it. There are countless examples of individuals who have done so. However, learning interpersonal skills won't come as naturally to you, so you'll likely have to put in more effort than a typical person. Give your diagnosis the right amount of respect. Don't use it as an excuse or think it dooms you to

failure, but don't think you can casually disregard it either.

Make peace with your Asperger-ish traits

Many people with Asperger's struggle with their identity. They might put a lot of work into improving their social skills so they can pass as "normal," and their sense of self-worth may be very tied to how successful they are at doing that. Although it's understandable that someone would want to work on their social problems, their self-esteem may be so wrapped up in getting past their Asperger's that they suppress some of their other traits, which ultimately leaves them feeling unfulfilled. Don't think of Asperger's in either/or terms. Work to move past the parts of it you don't like, but keep the good aspects. Many people with Asperger's say they became a lot happier when they accepted their obscure interests and quirky tendencies.

Work to address your legitimate weak spots and decide how you'll handle subjective social differences

Some of the differences Asperger's causes are real social weaknesses, while others are variations from the norm, but not objectively bad. Many people would agree that not being good at reading nonverbal communication is a handicap. Focus on identifying and correcting clear-cut issues, like having trouble telling one facial expression from the next, making poor eye contact, or tending to monopolize conversations.

For your more subjective differences, you'll need to decide where you want to land on the spectrum between being true to yourself and being pragmatic. Some of these calls are easy to make. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with being into one hobby over another, so don't waver on that—though you probably want to learn not to go on and on about it to people who don't care. Other differences don't have easy answers. What if correcting people is important to you, even though some people find it

irritating? Maybe you'll find a middle ground where you'll be your fact-correcting self around friends who have shown they're fine with it, but hold back around anyone you don't know because randomly upsetting strangers is more trouble than it's worth.

Find people you can go to for social explanations and clarifications

The most wide-ranging way Asperger's makes improving your people skills difficult is in how it lowers your initial grasp of the social world. You may feel some social advice, which an inexperienced-but-neurologically-typical (neurotypical) person may have no trouble grasping, is too vague for you. That may include some of the suggestions in this book.

If a piece of advice leaves too much unsaid for you, you may be able to find the detailed breakdown you need in another source. However, it's possible the area you want clarification on is too specific and unique to you to have been covered elsewhere. In those cases, it's most useful to ask someone to give you a personalized, in-depth explanation. That someone could be a friend, family member, counselor, or support group member. If no one like that is available, an acceptable substitute is to ask your questions online on a social skills-related forum. A good "explainer" doesn't need to be incredibly socially savvy themselves, just someone who can break down the reasoning behind everyday social rules and who will be patient and not brush you off with a "That's just the way things are!"

Accept that some social guidelines may never fully make sense to you

People with Asperger's tend to be logical. They're usually fine with following a social rule if they can see the rationale behind it, but they may be resistant to going along with ones that don't make sense to them (for example, why people say niceties like, "We should grab lunch sometime" when they don't mean it). If you really don't like a social rule and are

willing to accept the consequences of not following it, that's your choice. For some social rules, you may have to tell yourself, "It doesn't make sense to me, but when this guideline is broken, it causes people's feelings to be upset and I'd rather avoid that."

Learn as many of the broad principles behind socializing as you can

People with Asperger's sometimes try to learn to socialize by attempting to memorize rote responses to use in every situation. For example, they'll come up with a script to use when they run into a coworker in the break room. As Chapter 9 explained, it isn't practical to predict and create a response for every eventuality. Rote replies come across as robotic and are easily thrown off if the circumstances are different from what your template had accounted for (what if the coworker is a new employee or the CEO?). Taken too far, a memorization mentality can lead you to see people as impersonal obstacles to get past through the right sequence of inputs, rather than fellow humans to connect with.

Instead, you should try to identify and understand the underlying principles behind each situation. That will give you more ability to adjust and improvise as needed. For example, if you run into a coworker in the break room, it helps to have an idea of what needs to happen in the interaction (that is, acknowledge them and have a brief, light exchange to show you're friendly; possibly talk about relevant work-related topics). Figuring out the broad goals behind each situation will take some time and memorization, but not to the degree that memorizing word-for-word responses to countless situations would.

Don't rule out canned responses entirely

Rote-memorizing what to say in conversations is clunky and a less-than-optimal option, but some people with Asperger's claim it has its uses. Their

reasoning is that because their instinctive understanding of socializing is lower, they can't always grasp the underlying principles they need to use in some situations, at least not right away. Some of those conversations lend themselves to premade responses, so they go with what works. For example, they may use the same three questions whenever they start a conversation at a party. They know they're not being as creative or flexible as they could be, but it helps them get through that situation.

Most people have certain conversations they get into over and over again, like being asked about their job, and have developed a standard set of responses. They'll slightly vary the wording each time they go into longer explanations, but may deliver shorter lines word for word. It isn't inherently a problem to have some preloaded material. You just shouldn't over-rely on it.

Be open to “good enough” alternatives to more confusing social rules

Some social situations have an ideal way to handle them that involves knowing a lot of subtle, unwritten rules, as well as the right times to apply them. If you have Asperger's, you may find it takes too much effort to get your head around it all. Luckily, social situations usually aren't black-and-white in the sense that anything less than the best is a total failure. There may be alternative ways to act that are a bit more crude and simplistic, but get the job done, don't drain your mental resources, and don't cause too many negative outcomes.

For example, it's not the smoothest move to directly ask people you're just getting to know, “Do you want to be friends with me?” That angle will often be viewed as too up-front and clumsy. It can put people on the spot. It's seen as how little kids make friends, not adults. However, under the right circumstances, someone could use this question and have everything go fine. A person with Asperger's may decide, “Trying to make friends

gradually and with a light touch is too much for me to think about. I've found that once I seem to be getting along with someone, asking if they want to be friends does the job well enough. Plus, I'm a direct person who's not always socially perfect, so if anyone is put off by my asking, it's a sign they wouldn't be a good fit for me. Maybe I'll lose a good potential friend here and there with this method, but I can handle that. In the future, I may get better at being subtle, but this works for now."

Possibly tell other people about your Asperger's

This one has its pros and cons. Telling people about your diagnosis is getting more feasible by the day, though, as more and more people learn what Asperger's syndrome is and realize it's not a big deal. The pros are that if other people know you have Asperger's, they can be more understanding and adjust their expectations accordingly. They may also be better able to help you with your social skills. Naturally, the negative side is that some people won't understand, think even worse of you, or get the wrong idea about what the condition means. Therefore, you'll need to think about whether you should tell someone like your boss as opposed to a stranger at a party you'll never see again.

1 THE JOURNEY

The warm California sun greeted Butch Connor as he stepped out of his truck and onto the sands of Salmon Creek Beach. It was the first day of a long holiday weekend, and a perfect morning to grab his board and head out for a surf. Most of the other local surfers had the same idea that morning, and after 30 minutes or so, Butch decided to leave the crowd behind. He penetrated the water's surface with long, deep strokes that propelled him away from the pack and over to a stretch of beach where he could catch a few waves away from the crowd.

Once Butch had paddled a good 40 yards away from the other surfers, he sat up on his board and bobbed up and down in the rolling swells while he waited for a wave that caught his fancy. A beautiful teal wave began to crest as it approached the shoreline, and as Butch lay down on his board to catch the wave, a loud splash behind him stole his attention. Butch glanced over his right shoulder and froze in horror at the sight of a 14-inch, gray dorsal fin cutting through the water toward him. Butch's muscles locked up, and he lay there in a panic, gasping for air. He became hyper-focused on his surroundings; he could hear his heart pounding as he watched the sun glistening on the fin's moist surface.

The approaching wave stood tall to reveal Butch's worst nightmare in the shimmering, translucent surface—a massive great white shark that stretched 14 feet from nose to tail. Paralyzed by the fear coursing through his veins, Butch let the wave roll past, and with it a speedy ride to the safety of the shoreline. It was just the shark and him now; it swam in a semi-circle and approached him head-on. The shark drifted in slowly along his left side, and he was too transfixed by the proximity of the massive fish to notice his left leg dangling perilously off his surfboard in the frigid saltwater. *It's as big around as my Volkswagen*, Butch thought as the dorsal fin approached. He felt the sudden urge to reach out and touch the shark. *It's going to kill me anyway. Why shouldn't I touch it?*

The approaching wave stood tall to reveal Butch's worst nightmare in the shimmering, translucent surface—a massive great white shark that stretched 14 feet from nose to tail.

The shark didn't give him a chance. The shark, with a massive chomp of its jaws, thrust its head upward from underneath Butch's leg. Butch's leg stayed on top of the shark's rising, boulder-sized head and out of its cavernous mouth, and he fell off the opposite side of his surfboard into the murky water. Butch splashing into the water sent the shark into a spastic frenzy. The shark waved its

head about maniacally while snapping its jaws open and shut. The great white struck nothing; it blasted water in all directions as it thrashed about. The irony of floating alongside a 3,000-pound killing machine without so much as a scratch was not lost on Butch. Neither was the grave reality that this apex predator was unlikely to miss again. Thoughts of escape and survival flooded Butch's mind as quickly and completely as terror had in the moments prior.

The shark stopped snapping and swam around Butch in tight circles. Instead of climbing back on his surfboard, Butch floated on his belly with his arms draped over the board. He rotated the surfboard as the shark circled, using the surfboard as a makeshift barrier between himself and the man-eater. Butch's fear morphed into anger as he waited for the beast to strike. The shark came at him again, and Butch decided it was time to put up a fight. He aimed the sharp, pointed nose of his surfboard at the shark as it approached. When it raised its head out of the water to bite, Butch jammed the nose of the board into the shark's slotted gills. This blow sent the shark into another bout of nervous thrashing. Butch climbed atop his board and yelled, "Shark!" at the pack of surfers down the beach. Butch's warning and the sight of the turbulent cauldron of whitewater around him sent the surfers racing for dry land.

Butch also paddled toward safety, but the shark stopped him dead in his tracks after just a few strokes. It surfaced in his path to the shoreline, and then began circling him once more. Butch came to the dire conclusion that his evasive tactics were merely delaying the inevitable, and a paralyzing fear took hold of him yet again. Butch lay there trembling on his surfboard while the shark circled. He mustered the will to keep the tip of his board pointed in the shark's direction, but he was too terror-stricken to get back in the water and use his board as a barrier.

Butch's thoughts raced between terror and sadness. He wondered what his three children were going to do without him and how long his girlfriend would take to move on with her life. He wanted to live. He wanted to escape this monster, and he needed to calm down if that was ever going to happen. Butch convinced himself that the shark could sense his fear like a rabid dog; he decided that he *must* get hold of himself because it was his fear that was motivating the shark to strike. To Butch's surprise, his body listened. The trembling subsided, and the blood returned to his arms and legs. He felt strong. He was ready to paddle. And paddle Butch did—straight for the shoreline. A healthy rip current ensured that his journey to shore was a nerve-rattling five minutes of paddling like mad with the sense that the shark was somewhere behind him and could strike at any moment. When Butch made it to the beach, an awestruck group of surfers and other beachgoers were waiting for him. The surfers thanked him

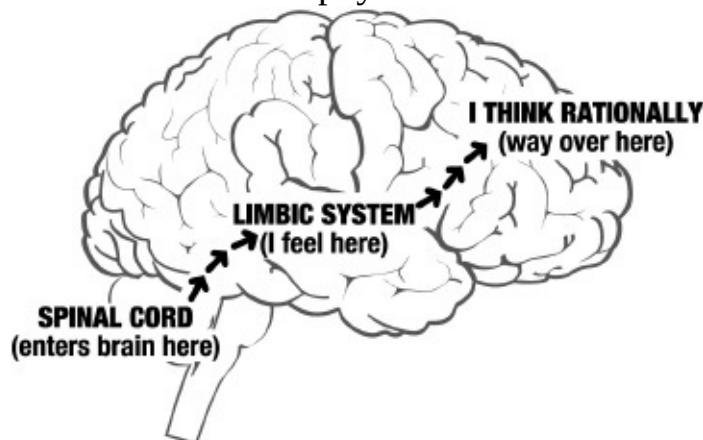
profusely for the warning and patted him on the back. For Butch Connor, standing on dry land had never felt so good.

WHEN REASON AND FEELING COLLIDE

Butch and the great white weren't fighting the only battle in the water that morning. Deep inside Butch's brain, his reason struggled for control of his behavior against an onslaught of intense emotions. The bulk of the time, his feelings won out, which was mostly to his detriment (paralyzing fear) but at times a benefit (the anger-fueled jab of his surfboard). With great effort, Butch was able to calm himself down, and—realizing the shark wasn't going away—make the risky paddle for shore that saved his life. Though most of us will never have to tussle with a great white shark, our brains battle it out like Butch's every single day.

The daily challenge of dealing effectively with emotions is critical to the human condition because our brains are hard-wired to give emotions the upper hand. Here's how it works: everything you see, smell, hear, taste and touch travels through your body in the form of electric signals. These signals pass from cell to cell until they reach their ultimate destination, your brain. They enter your brain at the base near the spinal cord, but must travel to your frontal lobe (behind your forehead) before reaching the place where rational, logical thinking takes place. The trouble is, they pass through your limbic system along the way—the place where emotions are produced. This journey ensures you experience things emotionally before your reason can kick into gear.

The rational area of your brain (the front of your brain) can't stop the emotion "felt" by your limbic system, but the two areas do influence each other and maintain constant communication. The communication between your emotional and rational "brains" is the physical source of emotional intelligence.



The physical pathway for emotional intelligence starts in the brain, at the spinal cord. Your primary senses enter here and must travel to the front of your brain before you can think rationally about your experience. But first they travel

through the limbic system, the place where emotions are experienced. Emotional intelligence requires effective communication between the rational and emotional centers of the brain.

When emotional intelligence was first discovered, it served as the missing link in a peculiar finding: people with the highest levels of intelligence (IQ) outperform those with average IQs just 20 percent of the time, while people with average IQs outperform those with high IQs 70 percent of the time. This anomaly threw a massive wrench into what many people had always assumed was the source of success—IQ. Scientists realized there must be another variable that explained success above and beyond one's IQ, and years of research and countless studies pointed to emotional intelligence (EQ) as the critical factor.

A *Time* magazine cover and hours of television coverage introduced millions to EQ, and once people were exposed to it, they wanted to know more. They wanted to know how EQ worked and who had it. Most importantly, people wanted to know if *they* had it. Books emerged to scratch this itch, including our own, *The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book*. Released in 2004, the *Quick Book* was unique because each copy contained a passcode that let the reader go online and take the world's most popular EQ test, the *Emotional Intelligence Appraisal*®. The book satisfied readers' curiosity by teaching the ins and outs of EQ and (thanks to the test) providing a new self-perspective that wasn't available anywhere else.

people with the highest levels of intelligence (IQ) outperform those with average IQs just 20% of the time, while people with average IQs outperform those with high IQs 70% of the time.

The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book hit home—it was an instant best seller that has been translated into 23 languages and is now available in more than 150 countries. But times have changed. The emotional intelligence field is on the steep incline of a new wave of understanding—how people can improve their EQ and make lasting gains that have a profoundly positive impact upon their lives. Just as knowing your EQ score was reserved for the privileged few before the publication of *The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book*, learning how to increase your EQ is something that happens only in isolated circles. Our company trains hundreds of people each week to increase their EQ, but even at this pace it would take 3,840 years to hit every adult currently residing in the U.S.! We realize that we've unwittingly been holding important information back. We believe everyone should have the opportunity to increase his or her EQ, and have created this book to make it possible.

YOUR JOURNEY

Emotional Intelligence 2.0 has one purpose—increasing your EQ. These pages will take you far beyond knowing what EQ is and how you score. You'll discover time-tested strategies that you can begin using today to take your EQ to new heights. As you transform yourself and bring new skills into your life, you'll reap all of the benefits that this incredible human ability has to offer.

The 66 strategies in this book are the result of many years of careful testing with people just like you. These strategies provide the specifics of what you need to say, do, and think to increase your EQ. To glean everything they have to offer, you need to know where to focus your attention. The first major step in your journey to a higher EQ is to go online and take the new edition of the *Emotional Intelligence Appraisal*® test. Taking the test now provides a baseline against which you can gauge your improvement as you read on and learn. Measuring your EQ takes your learning beyond a conceptual or motivational exercise—your score profile uncovers the EQ skills you need to improve the most, and it pinpoints the individual strategies from this book that will get you there. This feature is new to 2.0, and it takes the guesswork out of choosing the strategies that will increase your EQ the most.

The value of measuring your EQ now is akin to learning the waltz with an actual partner. If I tell you how the dance works, you are likely to learn something and may even get the urge to try it yourself. If, as I show you how to do a waltz, you practice each step with a partner, your chances of remembering them later on the dance floor go up exponentially. The EQ profile you receive from taking the *Emotional Intelligence Appraisal*® is your dance partner in developing these skills. It will remind you where to step with every beat of the music.

Your online report includes a goal-tracking system that summarizes the skills you are working on and provides automatic reminders to help you stay focused. E-learning activities bring EQ to life via clips from Hollywood movies, television and real-world events. You will also learn how your scores compare to other people's.

In addition to receiving the most accurate scores possible, taking the *Emotional Intelligence Appraisal*® now lets you see how much your EQ scores increase with time. You can take the test twice—once now and again after you've had enough time to practice and adopt the strategies from this book. After you complete the test a second time, your updated feedback report will display your scores side by side and offer insights into how you've changed and what your next steps should be to keep your EQ working for you. The orange insert at the back of this book contains instructions for going online to access the

Emotional Intelligence Appraisal[®], as well as the unique passcode that you'll need to access the test.

Emotions can help you and they can hurt you, but you have no say in the matter until you understand them. We invite you to begin your journey now, because we know that emotional mastery and understanding can become realities for you.

2 THE BIG PICTURE

Before you take a closer look at each of the four EQ skills in the next chapter, there are some important things you need to know about EQ as a whole. Over the last decade we've tested more than 500,000 people to explore the role emotions play in daily living. We've learned how people see themselves versus what others see, and we've observed how various choices affect personal and professional success.

Despite the growing focus on EQ, a global deficit in understanding and managing emotions remains. Only 36 percent of the people we tested are able to accurately identify their emotions as they happen. This means that two thirds of us are typically controlled by our emotions and are not yet skilled at spotting them and using them to our benefit. Emotional awareness and understanding are not taught in school. We enter the workforce knowing how to read, write, and report on bodies of knowledge, but too often, we lack the skills to manage our emotions in the heat of the challenging problems that we face. Good decisions require far more than factual knowledge. They are made using self-knowledge and emotional mastery when they're needed most.

Considering the range of emotions people express, it's no wonder they can get the better of us. We have so many words to describe the feelings that surface in life, yet all emotions are derivations of five core feelings: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and shame. As you move through your daily routine—whether you're working, spending time with family or friends, eating, exercising, relaxing, or even sleeping—you are subject to a constant stream of emotions. It is so easy to forget that we have emotional reactions to almost everything that happens in our lives, whether we notice them or not. The complexity of these emotions is revealed in their varying forms of intensity.

Only 36 percent of the people we tested are able to accurately identify their emotions as they happen.

Intensity of Feelings	HAPPY	SAD	ANGRY	AFARID	ASHAMED
HIGH	Elated Excited Overjoyed Thrilled Exuberant Ecstatic Fired up Passionate	Depressed Agonized Alone Hurt Dejected Hopeless Sorrowful Miserable	Furious Enraged Outraged Boiling Irate Seething Loathsome Betrayed	Terrified Horrified Scared stiff Petrified Fearful Panicky Frantic Shocked	Sorrowful Remorseful Defamed Worthless Disgraced Dishonored Mortified Admonished
MEDIUM	Cheerful Gratified Good Relieved Satisfied Glowing	Heartbroken Somber Lost Distressed Let down Melancholy	Upset Mad Defended Frustrated Agitated Disgusted	Apprehensive Frightened Threatened Insecure Uneasy Intimidated	Apologetic Unworthy Sneaky Guilty Embarrassed Secretive
LOW	Glad Contented Pleasant Tender Pleased Mellow	Unhappy Moody Blue Upset Disappointed Dissatisfied	Perturbed Annoyed Uptight Resistant Irritated Touchy	Cautious Nervous Worried Timid Unsure Anxious	Bashful Ridiculous Regretful Uncomfortable Pitied Silly

The five core emotions run left to right across the top of the table. Manifestations of each emotion based upon the intensity level are described down each of the columns in the table.

ADAPTED FROM AND REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION FROM JULIA WEST

Triggers and Emotional Hijackings

While Butch Connor was being attacked by a great white shark, he experienced several emotional hijackings—moments when his emotions controlled his behavior and he reacted without thinking. Typically, the more intense your emotions are, the greater the likelihood that they will dictate your actions. Matters of life or death—such as being attacked by a massive beast—are certain to induce a temporary emotional hijacking.

In Butch’s case, emotional hijackings left him paralyzed by fear, but even in the presence of a man-eater, Butch was able to use his thoughts to take back control from his emotions. Butch reasoned with himself until the paralysis subsided and he was calm enough to complete the paddle to shore. Butch’s thoughts didn’t make his feelings of fear and terror disappear, but they *did* keep his emotions from hijacking his behavior.

Since our brains are wired to make us emotional creatures, your first reaction to an event is always going to be an emotional one. You have no control over this part of the process. You *do* control the thoughts that follow an emotion, and you have a great deal of say in how you react to an emotion—as long as you are aware of it. Some experiences produce emotions that you are easily aware of; other times, emotions may seem nonexistent. When something generates a prolonged emotional reaction in you, it’s called a “trigger event.” Your reaction to your triggers is shaped by your personal history, which includes your experience with similar situations. As your EQ skills grow, you’ll learn to spot your triggers and practice productive ways of responding that will become

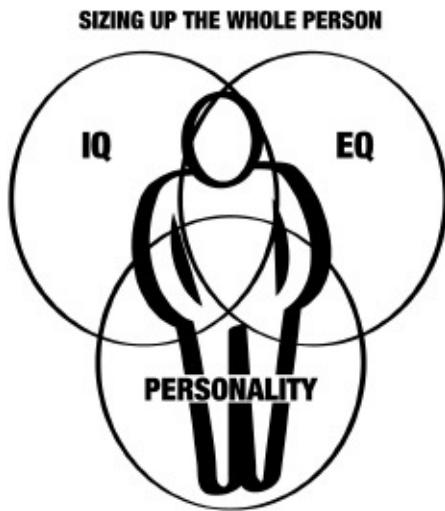
habitual.

Sizing Up the Whole Person

Emotional intelligence is your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships. Emotional intelligence is the “something” in each of us that is a bit intangible. It affects how we manage behavior, navigate social complexities, and make personal decisions that achieve positive results.

Emotional intelligence taps into a fundamental element of human behavior that is distinct from your intellect. There is no known connection between IQ and EQ; you simply can’t predict EQ based on how smart someone is. Cognitive intelligence, or IQ, is not flexible. Your IQ, short of a traumatic event such as a brain injury, is fixed from birth. You don’t get smarter by learning new facts or information. Intelligence is your *ability* to learn, and it’s the same at age 15 as it is at age 50. EQ, on the other hand, is a flexible skill that can be learned. While it is true that some people are naturally more emotionally intelligent than others, a high EQ can be developed even if you aren’t born with it.

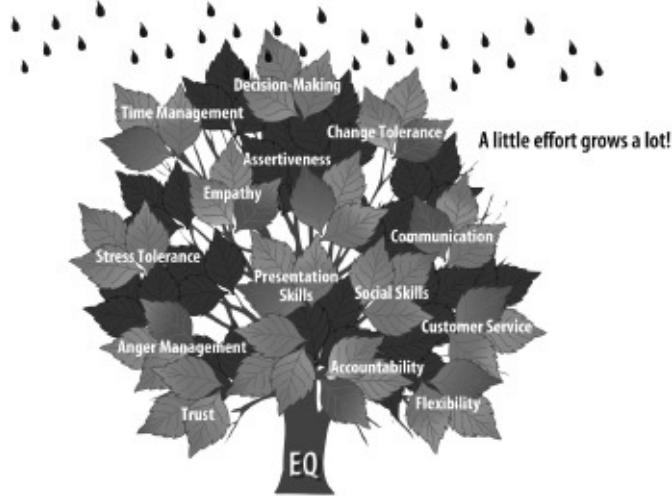
Personality is the final piece in the puzzle. It’s the stable “style” that defines each of us. Your personality is a result of your preferences, such as your inclination to introversion or extroversion. However, like IQ, personality can’t be used to predict emotional intelligence. Also like IQ, personality is stable over a lifetime. Personality traits appear early in life, and they don’t go away. People often assume that certain traits (for example, extroversion) are associated with a higher EQ, but those who prefer to be with other people are no more emotionally intelligent than people who prefer to be alone. You can use your personality to assist in developing your EQ, but the latter isn’t dependent on the former. EQ is a flexible skill, while personality does not change. IQ, EQ, and personality assessed together are the best way to get a picture of the whole person. When you measure all three in a single individual, they don’t overlap much. Instead, each covers unique ground that helps to explain what makes a person tick.



IQ, personality, and EQ are distinct qualities we all possess. Together, they determine how we think and act. It is impossible to predict one based upon another. People may be intelligent but not emotionally intelligent, and people of all types of personalities can be high in EQ and/or IQ. Of the three, EQ is the only quality that is flexible and able to change.

The Impact of EQ

How much of an impact does EQ have on your professional success? The short answer is: *a lot!* It's a powerful way to focus your energy in one direction with a tremendous result. We've tested EQ alongside 33 other important skills and found that it subsumes the majority of them, including time management, decision-making, and communication. Your EQ is the foundation for a host of critical skills—it impacts most everything you say and do each day. EQ is so critical to success that it accounts for 58 percent of performance in all types of jobs. It's the single biggest predictor of performance in the workplace and the strongest driver of leadership and personal excellence.



EQ is the foundation for a host of critical skills. A little effort spent on increasing

your EQ tends to have a wide-ranging, positive impact on your life.

EQ is so critical to success that it accounts for 58 percent of performance in all types of jobs.

No matter whether people measure high or low in EQ, they can work to improve it, and those who score low can actually catch up to their co workers. Research conducted at the business school at the University of Queensland in Australia discovered that people who are low in EQ and job performance can match their colleagues who excel in both—solely by working to improve their EQ.

Of all the people we've studied at work, we have found that 90 percent of high performers are also high in EQ. On the flip side, just 20 percent of low performers are high in EQ. You can be a high performer without EQ, but the chances are slim. People who develop their EQ tend to be successful on the job because the two go hand in hand. Naturally, people with high EQs make more money—an average of \$29,000 more per year than people with low EQs. The link between EQ and earnings is so direct that every point increase in EQ adds \$1,300 to an annual salary. These findings hold true for people in all industries, at all levels, in every region of the world. We haven't yet been able to find a job in which performance and pay aren't tied closely to EQ.

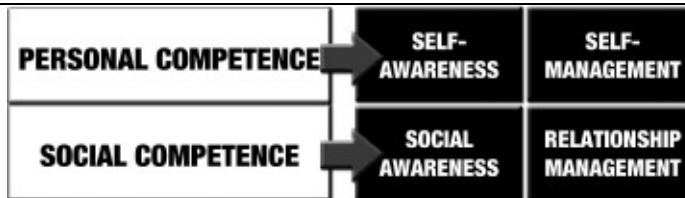
The link between EQ and earnings is so direct that every point increase in EQ adds \$1,300 to an annual salary.

In order to be successful and fulfilled nowadays, you must learn to maximize your EQ skills, for those who employ a unique blend of reason and feeling achieve the greatest results. The remainder of this book will show you how to make this happen.

WHAT EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE LOOKS LIKE: UNDERSTANDING THE FOUR SKILLS

To truly improve your ability in the four emotional intelligence skills, you need to better understand each skill and what it looks like in action. The four emotional intelligence skills pair up under two primary competencies: personal competence and social competence. Personal competence is made up of your self-awareness and self-management skills, which focus more on you individually than on your interactions with other people. Personal competence is your ability to stay aware of your emotions and manage your behavior and tendencies. Social competence is made up of your social awareness and relationship management skills; social competence is your ability to understand other people's moods, behavior and motives in order to improve the quality of your relationships.

To truly improve your ability in the four emotional intelligence skills, you need to better understand each skill and what it looks like in action.



The four skills that together make up emotional intelligence. The top two skills, self-awareness and self-management, are more about you. The bottom two skills, social awareness and relationship management, are more about how you are with other people.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is your ability to accurately perceive your own emotions in the moment and understand your tendencies across situations. Self-awareness includes staying on top of your typical reactions to specific events, challenges, and people. A keen understanding of your tendencies is important; it helps you quickly make sense of your emotions. A high degree of self-awareness requires a willingness to tolerate the discomfort of focusing on feelings that may be negative.

The only way to genuinely understand your emotions is to spend enough time thinking through them to figure out where they come from and why they are there. Emotions always serve a purpose. Because they are your reactions to

the world around you, emotions always come from somewhere. Many times emotions seem to arise out of thin air, and it's important to understand why something gets a reaction out of you. People who do this can cut to the core of a feeling quickly. Situations that create strong emotions will always require more thought, and these prolonged periods of self-reflection often keep you from doing something that you'll regret.

Self-awareness is not about discovering deep, dark secrets or unconscious motivations, but, rather, it comes from developing a straightforward and honest understanding of what makes you tick. People high in self-awareness are remarkably clear in their understanding of what they do well, what motivates and satisfies them, and which people and situations push their buttons.

The surprising thing about self-awareness is that just thinking about it helps you improve the skill, even though much of your focus initially tends to be on what you do "wrong." Having self-awareness means you aren't afraid of your emotional "mistakes." They tell you what you should be doing differently and provide the steady stream of information you need to understand as your life unfolds.

Self-awareness is a foundational skill; when you have it, self-awareness makes the other emotional intelligence skills much easier to use. As self-awareness increases, people's satisfaction with life—defined as their ability to reach their goals at work and at home—skyrockets. Self-awareness is so important for job performance that 83 percent of people high in self-awareness are top performers, and just 2 percent of bottom performers are high in self-awareness. Why is this so? When you are self-aware you are far more likely to pursue the right opportunities, put your strengths to work and—perhaps most importantly—keep your emotions from holding you back.

The need for self-awareness has never been greater. Guided by the mistaken notion that psychology deals exclusively with pathology, we assume that the only time to learn about ourselves is in the face of crisis. We tend to embrace those things with which we're comfortable, and put the blinders on the moment something makes us uncomfortable. But it's really the whole picture that serves us. The more we understand the beauty and the blemishes, the better we are able to achieve our full potential.

What Self-Awareness Looks Like

Dave T., regional service manager

Self-awareness score = 95*

What people who work with him say:

“Dave has clear long-term goals, and he doesn’t make sacrifices for short-term gains. Dave is an ‘up-front’ kind of guy who doesn’t play ‘mind games’ with people. I have witnessed this at company meetings and in meetings with customers.”

“The best example I can provide for Dave is his move to our company. I’m sure there was an intense desire to make changes within the local team right out of the gate, but Dave took extra care to diagnose the situation, the team, and the customer prior to offering suggestions or mandates for change.”

“In short, Dave manages his emotions; they don’t manage him. I’ve seen him accept difficult business news with a brief frown, and then he quickly moves beyond that and partners with his team to find solutions to improve the situation.”

*Scores are on the 1-to 100-point scale from the *Emotional Intelligence Appraisal*®. Scores and coworker comments are from actual people, though names and other identifying information have been altered.

Maria M., human resources manager

Self-awareness score = 90

What people who work with her say:

“In every situation that I have been involved with, good or bad, Maria has always remained calm, cool, and collected—even at times when I know she must have felt frustrated or angry. Maria is really honest about what she is feeling without getting bent out of shape about it. When faced with a difficult situation, she knows how to be firm and still kind at the same time.”

“She is open and authentic at all times, and it is so meaningful to everyone that she interacts with. I would suggest that Maria not change; however, she can get a bit tougher sooner in some cases. She is aware of this and watches to ensure that she does not let kindness get in the way.”

“During challenging situations with employees, Maria is very aware of her tone and makes an effort to keep the conversation appropriate. People here trust her.”

What a Lack of Self-Awareness Looks Like

Tina J., marketing manager

Self-awareness score = 69

What people who work with her say:

“On occasion, Tina’s stress and sense of urgency are projected/pushed on to other people. It would be good for her to better understand how her behavior affects others’ work and emotional stress. Also, she sometimes comes across as defensive or aggressive, so for her to be more aware of her tone and language would be helpful.”

“When things are going well for Tina, her emotional intelligence skills are stronger. She needs to learn to read herself and recognize her triggers so that she can respond more effectively when triggered.”

“She needs to become aware of how she is perceived. She can come across as being very demanding, but I don’t believe she means to.”

Giles B., operations director**Self-awareness score = 67****What people who work with him say:**

“Giles is very much in his ‘own little world.’ He obviously does care about his coworkers, but he doesn’t seem to know where to draw a line. His personality can be overwhelming, but he doesn’t notice when the other person is feeling annoyed, frustrated, or overwhelmed by him.”

“When working with customers, he is very good at talking about the products and services we offer. On group projects, sometimes he gets so focused on the outcome, the process is missed. If he were to take a moment and let all the emotions settle, then take a look at the options to reach the desired outcome, things would go more smoothly.”

“Giles is passionate about what he does. Sometimes that passion gets in the way. He might not notice that I am busy with something else before he jumps in and starts talking to me. When he is excited, he talks over you, and it is hard to get a word in edgewise. He doesn’t mean to; he just is excited about what he does.”

Self-Management

Self-management is what happens when you act—or do not act. It is dependent on your self-awareness and is the second major part of personal competence. Self-management is your ability to use your awareness of your emotions to stay flexible and direct your behavior positively. This means managing your emotional reactions to situations and people. Some emotions create a paralyzing fear that makes your thinking so cloudy that the best course of action is nowhere to be found—assuming that there is something you should be doing. In these cases, self-management is revealed by your ability to tolerate the uncertainty as you explore your emotions and options. Once you understand and build comfort with what you are feeling, the best course of action will show itself.

Self-management is more than resisting explosive or problematic behavior. The biggest challenge that people face is managing their tendencies over time and applying their skills in a variety of situations. Obvious and momentary opportunities for self-control (i.e., “I’m so mad at that darn dog!”) are the easiest to spot and manage. Real results come from putting your momentary needs on hold to pursue larger, more important goals. The realization of such goals is often delayed, meaning that your commitment to self-management will be tested over and over again. Those who manage themselves the best are able to see things through without cracking. Success comes to those who can put their needs on hold and continually manage their tendencies.

Real results come from putting your momentary needs on hold to pursue larger, more important goals.

What Self-Management Looks Like

Lane L., healthcare administrator

Self-management score = 93

What people who work with her say:

“Lane is the epitome of patience and understanding during heated, emotionally-charged meetings. Others around her become fully embroiled in the discussions, and Lane actively listens and responds with knowledge and wisdom.”

“I have seen first-hand how well she deals with difficult situations (i.e., termination of an employee). Lane is sensitive, yet direct and to the point. She listens patiently and sets a high standard of conduct.”

“Lane is great one-on-one. She communicates well and thinks on her feet. Her reaction to crisis is excellent. Her ability to separate emotion from logic makes her a good tactical manager. I wish there were many more of her.”

Yeshe M., computer programmer

Self-management score = 91

What people who work with him say:

“Yeshe handles stressful and confrontational situations very well. No matter how harshly project managers (PMs) hammer Yeshe, he never loses his cool! This gives him a lot of credibility with the PMs. He’s also able to work with other people whose working style he isn’t a fan of. I know going back and forth with them can be frustrating sometimes, but Yeshe never loses his patience.”

“I’ve seen Yeshe in an extremely frustrating situation where he couldn’t get something done because other people didn’t do their jobs. He dealt with it politely and professionally. He was able to explain the procedure again in order to achieve the best possible solution, even though he was upset.”

“I have never heard Yeshe speak negatively about someone who has a different opinion or idea. A lot of talking behind people’s backs happens around here, and he doesn’t give into the temptation, even when he feels strongly about an issue.”

What a Lack of Self-Management Looks Like

Jason L., information technology consultant

Self-management score = 59

What people who work with him say:

“In stressful situations, or when something goes wrong, Jason sometimes responds too quickly, sharply, or disjointedly. I wish Jason would take some time to cool off and slow down before responding. He’s so emotional. I have seen his coworkers respond in disbelief to the manner in which he communicated with them. Jason means well but can panic when he is stressed. His reactions trickle onto his teammates.”

“Jason should be more aware of his verbal outbursts, and how they affect both clients and coworkers. He is not mean-spirited; he cares a great deal about others but these verbal miscues are just that—outbursts that need to be thought out before expressed. These happen more when he is stressed . . . as the old commercial says, he shouldn’t let them see him sweat so much.”

“Jason lets his emotions rule his behavior. Sometimes he acts or speaks hurriedly. I wish he would be a bit more patient and give the situation an opportunity to work itself out before reacting. Many times these situations resolve themselves or aren’t quite as urgent as he perceives, but before you know it, he’s heightened the intensity with a flurry of messages.”

Mei S., regional sales director

Self-management score = 61

What people who work with her say:

“Mei needs to not be so honest. Her staff don’t need to know about all of the bull that goes down at corporate. If certain things upset her, she needs to learn to keep them to herself. When she is unhappy, it sets the tone for our team. Mei tends to radiate stress in certain situations, and as a leader, it impacts her team negatively by creating stress and negativity rather than diffusing them.”

“Mei has a hard time congratulating staff for their accomplishments, and it comes across as jealousy. It feels like I am in competition with her rather than feeling like she wants me to succeed. I think Mei is a great sales professional, and she treats clients well. I wish she would give her employees the same treatment.”

“Mei needs to be proactive instead of reactive. In times of crisis, she shouldn’t reveal to everyone how stressed she is. She’s so focused and driven to personally succeed that perhaps she takes on too much herself. She has a demanding workload managing the West Coast Team, but she needs to hold her emotions

back when people vent about their own problems in meetings.”

Social Awareness

As the first component of social competence, social awareness is a foundational skill. Social awareness is your ability to accurately pick up on emotions in other people and understand what is really going on with them. This often means perceiving what other people are thinking and feeling even if you do not feel the same way. It's easy to get caught up in your own emotions and forget to consider the perspective of the other party. Social awareness ensures you stay focused and absorb critical information.

Listening and observing are the most important elements of social awareness. To listen well and observe what's going on around us, we have to stop doing many things we like to do. We have to stop talking, stop the monologue that may be running through our minds, stop anticipating the point the other person is about to make, and stop thinking ahead to what we are going to say next. It takes practice to really *watch* people as you interact with them and get a good sense of what they are thinking and feeling. At times, you'll feel like an anthropologist. Anthropologists make their living watching others in their natural state without letting their own thoughts and feelings disturb the observation. This is social awareness in its purest form. The difference is you won't be 100 yards away watching events unfold through a pair of binoculars. To be socially aware, you have to spot and understand people's emotions while you're right there in the middle of it—a contributing, yet astutely aware, member of the interaction.

What Social Awareness Looks Like

Alfonso J., pharmaceutical sales manager

Social awareness score = 96

What people who work with him say:

“Alfonso has a rare talent to be able to read the emotions of others very well. He adjusts to different situations and manages to build relationships with almost anyone. Good examples are dinners, meetings, and ride-alongs with reps.”

“Alfonso does an excellent job relating to the frustrations reps have with other departments within our company. He is always looking out for his reps, and has the ability to put himself in the reps’ shoes, and ask himself what is wrong with the situation. People become very loyal to Alfonso.”

“Alfonso recognizes emotions very effectively when it comes to the end-of-month numbers and end-of-year numbers with his reps, getting the most out of his team. He was great at building relationships with the surgeons at the dinner table because he could read how to lead the conversation without them feeling like they were being controlled.”

Maya S., organizational development executive**Social awareness score = 92****What people who work with her say:**

“Maya has an uncanny ability to spot and address the elephant in the room. She does a good job acknowledging other people’s feelings when communicating difficult news. She reflects how others are feeling, and adapts her communication style to help reach a resolution. She gets to know people on a personal level so she can better understand their perspectives and work well with them.”

“Maya is great in executive team meetings where she respectfully listens to her peers and then offers her opinion. She has a sincere interest in understanding people and offers them valuable insights based on what they’re saying or doing. She is a good team-builder who strengthens bonds within the team.”

“Maya is the most effective ‘active listener’ I have ever seen. She is skilled at communicating the ‘context’ for her comments with the goal of ensuring understanding. She is respectful toward others while being able to establish her authority. Maya motivates and inspires people. She can uplift people and put them at ease.”

What a Lack of Social Awareness Looks Like

Craig C., attorney

Social awareness score = 55

What people who work with him say:

“Craig needs to allow others to feel good about their ideas, even when he has a better plan. He also needs to be more patient, and allow them to have equally effective plans that are just different from his plan. I would like him to seek to understand what people are feeling and thinking and notice what evidence there is regarding situations *before* speaking his opinion or offering solutions.”

“Craig needs to listen better. He needs to pay attention to what is being said rather than thinking about what he wants to say. It is usually apparent in his body language that he is not listening, which puts people off. I also wish that he would be more accurate when representing other people’s ideas.”

“Craig is not one to socialize. He is so focused on work and sometimes comes across as not interested in what’s going on with a person on that particular day. When he has new ideas (or ideas from his former firm), he has a hard time explaining them so the staff will accept them. Craig should learn to listen to others with his ears and with his heart. He seems to have a ‘hardening of his positions,’ and it makes him unwilling to accept other people’s viewpoints or include their input in his decisions.”

Rachel M., project manager

Social awareness score = 62

What people who work with her say:

“Rachel misses the non-technical currents in meetings. The mood and evolution of opinions are lost on her. Rachel needs to learn to absorb the non-technical, human side of meetings and become a student of people and their feelings.”

“Rachel gets singularly focused on a particular issue and does not see the forest for the trees. This can get frustrating for those of us around her. She is typically oblivious to our reactions. She should check with everyone around the table to calibrate where their head is at before getting too enmeshed in the details of her project. She would be better served by framing the topic in large chunks rather than taking everyone through the details straight away.”

“Rachel can sometimes get so caught up in her own thoughts during meetings and one-on-one conversations that she is not really listening to either the explicit or implicit dialogue going on. This makes her less effective because she is not actively participating in the ongoing conversation and misses opportunities to influence the direction. Rachel needs to work on considering issues from the

other person's agenda or point of view so that she can more effectively influence, or at least directly address, their perspective. It will also help her to work on making her conversations as concise and targeted as possible. People can lose interest or get confused during long explanations, or when they are unclear about the message."

Relationship Management

Though relationship management is the second component of social competence, this skill often taps into your abilities in the first three emotional intelligence skills: self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. Relationship management is your ability to use your awareness of your own emotions and those of others to manage interactions successfully. This ensures clear communication and effective handling of conflict. Relationship management is also the bond you build with others over time. People who manage relationships well are able to see the benefit of connecting with many different people, even those they are not fond of. Solid relationships are something that should be sought and cherished. They are the result of how you understand people, how you treat them, and the history you share.

The weaker the connection you have with someone, the harder it is to get your point across. If you want people to listen, you have to practice relationship management and seek benefits from every relationship, especially the challenging ones. The difference between an interaction and a relationship is a matter of frequency. It's a product of the quality, depth, and time you spend interacting with another person.

Relationship management poses the greatest challenge for most people during times of stress. When you consider that more than 70 percent of the people we've tested have difficulty handling stress, it's easy to see why building quality relationships poses a challenge. Some of the most challenging and stressful situations people face are at work. Conflicts at work tend to fester when people passively avoid problems, because people lack the skills needed to initiate a direct, yet constructive conversation. Conflicts at work tend to explode when people don't manage their anger or frustration, and choose to take it out on other people. Relationship management gives you the skills you need to avoid both scenarios, and make the most out of every interaction you have with another person.

What Relationship Management Looks Like

Gail C., chief financial officer

Relationship management score = 95

What people who work with her say:

“Gail has an innate ability to read people and their emotions, and she uses what she learns to create a safe and inviting forum for discussion. There has never been a time that Gail’s door was not ‘open’ when I have needed her, and she always manages to maintain a pleasant and professional manner even when her workload is demanding. People know that they can count on Gail and what they say to her in confidence will be respected and not repeated.”

“Gail is very sensitive to others and tries to make situations better. When someone is upset, she asks just enough questions to get a handle on the situation, and then is able to give concrete advice and help to the person, making them feel 100% better. Gail makes you feel smart and confident when she delivers feedback, even if you’ve made a mistake. She helps her staff improve and grow, and she sets a good example for dealing with people assertively and speaking up.”

“Even during tough conversations, Gail is concerned about maintaining good, comfortable relationships with all parties involved. Gail finds out something about the other person’s interests and inquires about it when meeting, even if it appears there is no common ground. Gail has a firm handle on her own emotions and almost seems to feel what you feel when she is talking with you, which helps you feel like she relates to you and understands you.”

Allister B., physician

Relationship management score = 93

What people who work with him say:

“Allister is a wonderfully patient, empathetic listener, which is why his patients love him. He tries very hard to be nonjudgmental and gives people the benefit of the doubt. He is the same way with the nurses and technicians. I’ve seen Allister in situations where his patients’ families were asking difficult questions, and he was able to remain calm and answer without alienating the family member asking the questions. He listens carefully to what others say and never shows if he is upset or bothered by it. He responds kindly but with authority.”

“Allister’s interaction skills are supreme. In situations that I’ve witnessed him less than pleased with a specific outcome, he has always expressed his position with thoughtful insight about his expectations without anger or outburst. I’d describe him as direct, yet free from confrontation or sounding out of control. He

is also quick to praise the staff's efforts and success when deserving. He is good at seeing the overall picture and then counseling in a compassionate and realistic manner."

"I have never left Allister feeling anything less than 110%. He knows when to approach an issue sensitively, and knows when to give praise and encouragement. Allister knows his colleagues very well, and this enables him to handle conflict in a calm and positive manner. He's respected for collecting feedback before drawing conclusions. He tries to find the best way to communicate with others, even when there's an atmosphere of resistance, confusion, or outright conflict. His ability to empathize with others is outstanding, and it creates positive, strong relationships."

What a Lack of Relationship Management Looks Like

Dave M., sales manager

Relationship management score = 66

What people who work with him say:

“If Dave doesn’t see eye-to-eye with someone, he makes it apparent that it’s not worth developing the relationship. I wish that he would still dedicate the time and resources necessary to make a win for the territory. When he feels that a certain person he is working with may not be an ‘ally’ but someone not to be trusted, he will be very clear about his opinion about that person. This has a ripple effect on the people he tells, and it erodes camaraderie. Dave is usually effective when he gets to know people better, and trusts that they are not a threat, but he’ll have to get over this if he wants to keep climbing the ladder.”

“Dave can get over-excited when meeting new people and this can be a good trait, but some people don’t respond to his enthusiasm, and they pull back from him. It makes it hard for them to connect with him. I would like to see Dave work on unifying his team, and dispel the feeling that some decisions are made based on his personal opinion or bias. Too often, people feel as if they’ve had their professional opinion ignored in spite of providing a solid foundation for that opinion.”

“Dave always reacts to people rather than responding to them. To have a strong opinion is fine, but to dismiss others’ thoughts is not. He also needs to tailor his communication style to the person. His approach is nearly always very direct, which can be difficult for some people to handle.”

Natalie T., floor supervisor

Relationship management score = 69

What people who work with her say:

“Natalie often minimizes a person’s point of view or experience. She justifies bad situations by stating that it could always be worse, you just don’t understand, or you should just get over it. She comes across as blunt and not empathetic, particularly with her subordinates. I want her to be more genuine in her interactions with them, and show a general appreciation for others.”

“Natalie needs to stop finding faults in every situation. It is tiring and demotivating. She needs to start recognizing people’s achievements. There is a stigma that exists that Natalie is tough, difficult to work for, and unapproachable. She may achieve results, but at the expense of others.”

“I would like to see Natalie avoid making judgmental or negative statements to her team, or others, when her statements add no value. Helping people see what

could be done different helps them develop, but her continued negative feedback comes across as her feeling the need to belittle people. People no longer value her input, and at times view it as her need to be seen as superior.”

SELF-AWARENESS STRATEGIES

Simply put, to be self-aware is to know yourself as you really are. Initially, self-awareness can come across as a somewhat ambiguous concept. There is no finish line where someone is going to slap a medal on you and deem you “self-aware.” Awareness of yourself is not just knowing that you are a morning person instead of a night owl. It’s deeper than that. Getting to know yourself inside and out is a continuous journey of peeling back the layers of the onion and becoming more and more comfortable with what is in the middle—the true essence of you.

Your hard-wired emotional reactions to anything come before you even have a chance to respond. Since it isn’t possible to leave your emotions out of the equation, managing yourself and your relationships means you first need to be aware of the full range of your feelings, both positive and negative.

When you don’t take time out to notice and understand your emotions, they have a strange way of resurfacing when you least expect or want them to. It’s their way of trying to bring something important to your attention. They will persist, and the damage will mount, until you take notice.

Facing the truth about who you are can at times be unsettling. Getting in touch with your emotions and tendencies takes honesty and courage. Be patient and give yourself credit for even the smallest bits of forward momentum. As you start noticing things about yourself that you weren’t previously aware of (things you aren’t always going to like), you are progressing.

The remainder of this chapter introduces you to 15 original strategies, which were designed to help you maximize your self-awareness to create positive changes in your life. The strategies are straightforward and packed full of insights and examples that will help your self-awareness grow.

SELF-AWARENESS STRATEGIES

1. Quit Treating Your Feelings as Good or Bad
2. Observe the Ripple Effect from Your Emotions
3. Lean into Your Discomfort
4. Feel Your Emotions Physically
5. Know Who and What Pushes Your Buttons
6. Watch Yourself Like a Hawk . . .
7. Keep a Journal about Your Emotions
8. Don't Be Fooled by a Bad Mood
9. Don't Be Fooled by a Good Mood, Either
10. Stop and Ask Yourself *Why* You Do the Things You Do
11. Visit Your Values
12. Check Yourself
13. Spot Your Emotions in Books, Movies, and Music
14. Seek Feedback
15. Get to Know Yourself under Stress

1

Quit Treating Your Feelings as Good or Bad

It's human nature to want to create two simple and easy piles of emotions: the good ones and the bad ones. For instance, most people would automatically classify guilt as *bad*. You don't want to feel it—you might even beat yourself up about it—and you do whatever you can to get rid of it. Likewise, we tend to let *good* emotions like excitement run wild. We pump ourselves up and feed off the energy.

The downfall of attaching such labels to your emotions is that judging your emotions keeps you from really understanding what it is that you are feeling. When you allow yourself to sit with an emotion and become fully aware of it, you can understand what is causing it. Suspending judgment of emotions allows them to run their course and vanish. Passing judgment on whether you should or shouldn't be feeling what you are feeling just heaps more emotions on top of the pile and prevents the original feeling from running its course.

Suspending judgment of emotions allows them to run their course and vanish.

So, the next time you feel an emotion begin to build, take notice of it immediately. Refrain from putting it into the good or bad pile and remind yourself that the feeling is there to help you understand something important.

2

Observe the Ripple Effect from Your Emotions

Consider for a moment what happens when you drop a stone into water. The stone's swift plummet pierces the water's surface, sending ripples in all directions. Your outpourings of emotion are like stones that send ripples through the people in your life. Since emotions are the primary drivers of your behavior, it's important you understand the effect they have on other people.

Let's say a manager loses his cool and berates an employee in front of the rest of the team. When the lashing happens, it may seem that the manager's target is the only one whose feelings get bruised, but the ripple effect from the manager's explosion affects all who witnessed it. As the rest of the team members wander back to their desks, the others, too, feel the manager's wrath. They go back to work with a pit in their stomachs, each one wondering when his or her turn will come up.

The manager thinks his tirade was good for productivity because the rant "scared people straight," but their fear soon settles into caution. To perform at their best, the team members need to take risks, stretch themselves beyond their comfort zone, and even make some mistakes along the way. No one on the team wants to be the manager's next target, so the team members play it safe and do only as they are told. When the manager gets docked a year later for leading a team that fails to take initiative, he wonders what's wrong with *the team*.

Your emotions are powerful weapons, and continuing to think that their effects are instant and minimal will only do you a disservice. The key to observing the ripple effects of your emotions is to watch closely how they impact other people immediately, and then use that information as a guide for how your emotions are bound to affect a wider circle long after you unleash the emotion. To fully understand the ripple effects of your emotions, you'll need to spend some time reflecting upon your behavior. You'll also need to ask other people how they are affected by your emotions. The more you understand how your emotions ripple outward, the better equipped you'll be to choose the type of ripples that you want to create.

3

Lean into Your Discomfort

The biggest obstacle to increasing your self-awareness is the tendency to avoid the discomfort that comes from seeing yourself as you really are. Things you do not think about are off your radar for a reason: they can sting when they surface. Avoiding this pain creates problems, because it is merely a short-term fix. You'll never be able to manage yourself effectively if you ignore what you need to do to change.

Rather than avoiding a feeling, your goal should be to move toward the emotion, into it, and eventually through it. This can be said for even mild emotional discomfort, such as boredom, confusion, or anticipation. When you ignore or minimize an emotion, no matter how small or insignificant, you miss the opportunity to do something productive with that feeling. Even worse, ignoring your feelings does not make them go away; it just helps them to surface again when you least expect them.

Rather than avoiding a feeling, your goal should be to move toward the emotion, into it, and eventually through it.

To be effective in life, we all need to discover our own arrogance—those things we don't bother to learn about and dismiss as unimportant. One person thinks apologies are for sissies, so she never learns to recognize when one is needed. Another person hates feeling down, so he constantly distracts himself with meaningless activity and never really feels content. Both people need to take the bold step of leaning into the feelings that will motivate them to change. Otherwise, they will continue down an unproductive, unsatisfying path, repeating the same patterns over and over again.

After the first few times you lean into your discomfort, you will quickly find that the discomfort isn't so bad, it doesn't ruin you, and it reaps rewards. The surprising thing about increasing your self-awareness is that just thinking about it will help you change, even though much of your focus will initially be on the things you do "wrong." Don't be afraid of your emotional "mistakes." They tell you what you should be doing differently and provide the steady stream of information you need to understand yourself as life unfolds.

4

Feel Your Emotions Physically

When you experience an emotion, electric signals course through your brain and trigger physical sensations in your body. The physical sensations can be as varied as your stomach muscles tightening, your heart rate increasing, your breathing quickening, or your mouth going dry. Because your mind and body are so tightly connected, one of the most effective ways to understand your emotions as they are happening is to learn how to spot the physical changes that accompany your emotions.

To better understand the physical effects of your emotions, try closing your eyes the next time you have a few moments alone. Feel how fast or slow your heart is beating. Notice the pace of your breathing. Determine how tense or relaxed the muscles are in your arms, legs, neck, and back. Now, think of a couple of events from your life—one positive and one negative—that generate strong emotions. Think through one of these events in enough detail that you can feel your emotions stir. Take note of the physical changes that accompany the feelings. Do they make your breathing or heart rate change? Do your muscles grow tense? Do you feel hotter or colder? Repeat this process with the other event, and take note of the physical differences in the emotions from the positive and negative experiences.

Closing your eyes and thinking of emotionally arousing events is simply training for the real thing—spotting the physical signs of your emotions on the fly. In the beginning, try not to think too hard—simply open your mind to noticing the sensations. As you improve at this, you’ll find that you’re often physically aware of an emotion long before you’re mentally aware of it.

5

Know Who and What Pushes Your Buttons

We all have buttons—pet peeves, triggers, whatever you want to call them—that, when pushed, just irritate and irk us until we want to scream. Perhaps you have a coworker who lives her life as if she were constantly on stage. Her entrance into meetings is dramatic and flaring, and she feeds off the energy from everyone’s attention and uses that energy to take control of the room. Her voice is louder than most, and her contributions to the meetings are always long-winded novels, as if she just loves to hear herself talk.

If your modus operandi is more subtle (or you really would like part of that stage yourself), a person like that may really eat at you. When you go into a meeting with great ideas and a readiness to just sit down and get straight to the point, a drama queen who is creating a stage in the boardroom is bound to flip your switches for frustration and rage. Even if you aren’t the type to blurt out impulsive comments or otherwise go on the attack, your body language may give you away, or you may find yourself on the drive home obsessing over your lingering frustration.

Knowing who pushes your buttons and how they do it is critical to developing the ability to take control of these situations, maintain your poise, and calm yourself down. To use this strategy, you can’t think about things generally. You need to pinpoint the specific people and situations that trigger your emotions. Your buttons are bound to get pushed by a wide range of people and things. It could be certain people (like drama queens), particular situations (like feeling scared or caught off guard), or conditions in the environment (like noisy offices). Having a clear understanding of who and what pushes your buttons makes these people and situations a bit less difficult because they come as less of a surprise.

You can take your self-awareness a big step further by discovering the source of your buttons. That is, why do these people and situations irk you so much when other, equally annoying people and situations don’t bother you at all? Perhaps the stage hog reminds you of your sister who got all the attention when you were younger. You lived many years in her shadow, vowing to never let it happen again. Now you sit beside her clone in every meeting. No wonder she’s a trigger for your emotions.

Knowing why your buttons are what they are opens doors to managing your reactions to your triggers. For now, your tasks are simple—find the sources of

your buttons and jot down a list. Knowing your buttons is essential to using the self-and relationship management strategies that come later in the book.

6

Watch Yourself Like a Hawk . . .

Hawks have the distinct advantage of soaring hundreds of feet above the ground, looking down upon the Earth and seeing all that happens below them. The creatures on the ground go about their lives with narrow tunnel vision, not even realizing that the hawk is soaring above them predicting their every move. Wouldn't it be great to be the hawk, looking down upon yourself in those sticky situations that tend to get the better of you? Think of all the things you would be able to see and understand from above. Your objectivity would allow you to step out from under the control of your emotions and know exactly what needed to be done to create a positive outcome.

Even though you are not a hawk, you can still develop a more objective understanding of your own behavior. You can practice by taking notice of your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors right as the situation unfolds. In essence, the goal is to slow yourself down and take in all that is in front of you, allowing your brain to process all available information before you act.

Consider an example. Let's say you have a teenage son who is more than two hours late for his Friday night curfew. You're sitting in a living room chair in the dark, waiting for him to stroll through the door and offer another creative explanation for why he's late and wasn't answering his phone. The more you sit there thinking about your son's disregard for your authority and the hours of sleep he's just robbed you of, the more your blood boils. Before long, you've forgotten the real reason you're so upset—you're worried about his safety. Sure, you want him to obey the rules, but it's the thought of him out there acting recklessly that's keeping you up.

Watching yourself like a hawk in this situation requires taking advantage of this calm before the storm. You know your anger is going to rumble to the surface the moment his weak excuses tumble from his mouth, and you also know he's more likely to follow your rules if you can get him to see and feel your concern. This is the moment when you need to consider what this situation looks like from above. You realize your brooding is just fanning the flames of your anger. You remember that he's a good kid who's been acting too much like a typical teenager lately. You know your anger isn't going to make him change; it hasn't worked thus far. The bigger picture now in clear view, you decide to explain the rationale for his punishment and why you are so upset, rather than just fly off the handle. When he finally comes slithering into the house, knocking the lamp off the end table in the darkness, you're grateful you can see the whole

picture and not just what's in front of you.

7

Keep a Journal about Your Emotions

The biggest challenge to developing self-awareness is objectivity. It's hard to develop perspective on your emotions and tendencies when every day feels like a new mountain to climb. With a journal, you can record what events triggered strong emotions in you and how you responded to them.

You should write about time spent at work and home—nothing is off limits. In just a month, you'll begin to see patterns in your emotions, and you'll develop a better understanding of your tendencies. You'll get a better idea of which emotions get you down, which pick you up, and which are the most difficult for you to tolerate. Pay careful attention to the people and situations that push your buttons, triggering strong emotions. Describe the emotions you feel each day, and don't forget to record the physical sensations that accompany the emotions.

The biggest challenge to developing self-awareness is objectivity.

In addition to helping you see yourself more clearly, writing down your emotions makes your tendencies much easier to remember, and the journal serves as a great reference as you raise your self-awareness.

8

Don't Be Fooled by a Bad Mood

We all succumb to them every now and then—those down-in-the-dumps moods where nothing seems to be going our way. When you feel this way, your low mood puts a dark cloud over every thought, feeling, and experience you have. The tricky thing about your brain is that, once a negative mood takes over, you lose sight of what's good in your life, and suddenly you hate your job, you're frustrated with family and friends, you're dissatisfied with your accomplishments, and your optimism about the future goes out the window. Deep down, you know that things aren't as bad as they seem, but your brain just won't hear it.

Part of self-awareness is knowing what you're going through even if you can't totally change it. Admit to yourself that your bad mood is hanging a cloud over everything you see, and remind yourself that your moods are not permanent. Your emotions change all the time, and low moods will pass if you allow them to.

When you're stuck in a down mood, it's not a good time to make important decisions. You'll have to remain aware of the mood and understand it if you hope to keep it from leading you to make mistakes that will only pull you down further. Not only is it OK to reflect upon recent events that may have brought on the mood, but this is also a good idea—as long as you don't dwell on them for too long—because often that's all it takes to get the mood to pass.

9

Don't Be Fooled by a Good Mood, Either

Bad moods and negative emotions are not the only ones that cause trouble. A good mood can deceive your thinking just as much as a bad one. When you are feeling excited and really happy, it's easy to do something that you'll regret.

Consider this familiar scenario: your favorite store is having a once-a-year sale with markdowns of up to 75%. You rush into the store on the day of the sale and end up buying all sorts of things that you've always wanted but can't really afford (at least not all at once). The rush and exhilaration of your purchases carry you through the week as you show off the goods to your friends and family and let them in on the fabulous deals you got. When your credit card bill arrives at the end of the month, it's another story.

Foolish spending is not the only mistake you can make while riding the high of a great mood. The excitement and energy you enjoy during a good mood paint a rosy picture of all you encounter. This leaves you far more likely to make impulsive decisions that ignore the potential consequences of your actions. Stay aware of your good moods and the foolish decisions these moods can lead to, and you'll be able to enjoy feeling good without any regrets.

10

Stop and Ask Yourself *Why You Do the Things You Do*

Emotions come when they will, not when you will them to. Your self-awareness will grow abundantly when you begin seeking out the source of your feelings. Get in the habit of stopping to ask yourself why surprising emotions rumbled to the surface and what motivated you to do something out of character. Emotions serve an important purpose—they clue you into things that you'll never understand if you don't take the time to ask yourself why.

Most of the time, it really is that easy, but when you are left to your own devices, the days can just whiz by with little time to contemplate why you do what you do. With a little practice, you can trace your emotional reactions back to their origins and understand the purpose of your emotions. The surprising thing about this strategy is that just paying attention to your emotions and asking yourself good questions like these are enough to help you improve. Can you remember the first time you reacted like this and with whom? Are there similarities between then and now? Can anyone evoke this reaction in you or only specific people? The better you understand why you do the things you do, the better equipped you'll be to keep your emotions from running the show.

11

Visit Your Values

The plates of life are constantly spinning above you. You juggle projects at work, never-ending meetings, bills, errands, emails, phone calls, text messages, chores, meals, time with friends and family—the list goes on. It takes great amounts of attention and focus to keep the plates from crashing to the ground.

Maintaining this balancing act keeps your attention focused outward, rather than inward and on yourself. As you run around struggling to check your daily “to dos” off your list, it’s easy to lose sight of what’s really important to you—your core values and beliefs. Before you know it, you find yourself doing and saying things that deep down you don’t feel good about or believe in. This could mean you find yourself yelling at a coworker who made a mistake, when you normally find such hostility unacceptable. If yelling at your colleagues runs contrary to the beliefs you wish to live your life by, catching yourself (or being caught) doing it is bound to make you uncomfortable and even unfulfilled.

The trick here is to take the time to check in with yourself and jot down your core beliefs and values. Ask yourself, *what are the values that I wish to live my life by?* Take a sheet of paper and separate it into two columns. List your core values and beliefs in the left column and anything that you’ve done or said recently that you aren’t proud of in the right column. Is what you value in alignment with the manner in which you conduct yourself? If not, consider alternatives to what you said and did that would have made you proud of yourself, or at least more comfortable.

Repeating this exercise somewhere between daily and monthly will be a huge boost to your self-awareness. Before long, you’ll find yourself thinking of the list *before* you act, which will set the stage for making choices you can live with.

12

Check Yourself

Self-awareness is generally an internal process, but there are a few instances in which the outside holds the clues you need to understand what's going on inside. Without question, how you feel is reflected in how you look. Your facial expressions, posture, demeanor, clothes, and even your hair all say important things about your mood.

Physical appearance is more straightforward—what you wear sends a pretty clear, established message about how you feel. For example, wearing old sweatpants and ratty T-shirts and having disheveled hair every day tells the world you've given up, while overdressing for every occasion and never missing your weekly haircut lets people know you are trying too hard. Your demeanor also says a lot about your mood, but the message often gets twisted. If you're meeting someone for the first time and you're feeling insecure about how you'll be received, like many people, you may tend to be aloof and a bit standoffish or get overzealous.

When you find yourself in similar situations, it's important to notice your mood and consider its influence upon your demeanor. Is the look that you are projecting to the world one that you have chosen, one that your mood created, or one that you tend to lean on by default? Certainly, what you project reflects how you feel, and it's up to you to understand it. Taking a moment here and there to check yourself will allow you to understand your mood *before* it sets the tone for the rest of your day.

13

Spot Your Emotions in Books, Movies, and Music

If you're having trouble looking within to spot your emotional patterns and tendencies, you can discover the same information by looking outside yourself at the movies, music, and books that you identify with. When the lyrics or mood of a song resonate with you, they say a lot about how you feel, and when a character from a movie or book sticks in your head, it's probably because important aspects of his or her thoughts and feelings parallel your own. Taking a closer look in these moments can teach you a lot about yourself. It can also provide a great tool for explaining your feelings to other people.

Finding your emotions in the expressions of artists allows you to learn about yourself and discover feelings that are often hard to communicate. Sometimes you just can't find the words to say what you are feeling until you see it in front of you. Listening to music, reading novels, watching films, and even looking at art can act as a gateway into your deepest emotions. Take a closer look the next time one of these mediums grabs your attention—you never know what you'll find.

14

Seek Feedback

Everything you see—including yourself—must travel through your own lens. The problem is, your lens is tainted by your experiences, your beliefs, and, without question, your moods. Your lens prevents you from ever obtaining a truly objective look at yourself, on your own. Often, there is a big difference between how you see yourself and how others see you. This chasm between the way you view yourself and the way others view you is a rich source of lessons that will build your self-awareness.

Self-awareness is the process of getting to know yourself from the inside out and the outside in. The only way to get the second, more elusive perspective is to open yourself up to feedback from others, which can include friends, coworkers, mentors, supervisors, and family. When you ask for their feedback, be sure to get specific examples and situations, and as you gather the answers, look for similarities in the information. Others' views can be a real eye-opener by showing you how other people experience *you*. Putting the perspectives together helps you see the entire picture, including how your emotions and reactions affect other people. By mustering the courage to peer at what others see, you can reach a level of self-awareness that few people attain.

Self-awareness is the process of getting to know yourself from the inside out and the outside in.

15

Get to Know Yourself under Stress

The mountain of stressors in your life is constantly growing. Every time your stress tolerance rises to new heights, you—or those around you—push and push until you take on more. All of the high-tech gadgets at your disposal aren't helping, either. If anything, they just seem to speed up your life. If you are like most people, you already recognize some of the warning signs that pop up when stress is looming. The question is: do you heed their warning?

You will benefit tremendously from learning to recognize your first signs of stress. The human mind and body—at least when it comes to stress—have voices of their own. They tell you through emotional and physiological reactions when it's time to slow down and take a break. For example, an upset stomach can be a sign that nervousness and anxiety are overwhelming your body. The indigestion and fatigue that follow are your body's way of taking some time off to rest. For you, intense stress and anxiety may create an upset stomach, while for others the physical signs can be a pounding headache, canker sores, or their backs going out. Your self-awareness in times of stress should serve as your third ear to listen to your body's cries for help. Your body speaks volumes when you push it too hard. Take the time to recognize these signals and recharge your emotional battery before your stress causes permanent damage to your system.

6

SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Self-management is your ability to use awareness of your emotions to actively choose what you say and do. On the surface, it may seem that self-management is simply a matter of taking a deep breath and keeping yourself in check when emotions come on strong, and while it's true that self-control in these situations is a sizeable piece of the pie, there's far more to self-management than putting a cork in it when you're about to blow up. Your eruptions are no different from a volcano—there is all sorts of rumbling happening beneath the surface before the lava starts flowing.

Unlike a volcano, there are subtle things you can do each and every day to influence what is happening beneath the surface. You just need to learn how to pick up on the rumbling and respond to it. Self-management builds upon a foundational skill—self-awareness. Ample self-awareness is necessary for effective self-management because you can only choose how to respond to an emotion actively when you're aware of it. Since we're hard-wired to experience emotions before we can respond to them, it's the one-two punch of reading emotions effectively and then reacting to them that sets the best self-managers apart. A high level of self-management ensures you aren't getting in your own way and doing things that limit your success. It also ensures you aren't frustrating other people to the point that they resent or dislike you. When you understand your own emotions and can respond the way you choose to them, you have the power to take control of difficult situations, react nimbly to change, and take the initiative needed to achieve your goals.

When you develop the ability to size yourself up quickly and grab the reins before you head in the wrong direction, it keeps you flexible and allows you to choose positively and productively how to react to different situations. When you don't stop to think about your feelings—including how they are influencing your behavior now, and will continue to do so in the future—you set yourself up to be a frequent victim of emotional hijackings. Whether you're aware of it or not, your emotions will control you, and you'll move through your day reacting to your feelings with little choice in what you say and do.

The remainder of this chapter presents 17 specific strategies—things you can start doing today—that will help you manage your emotions to your benefit. Each simple strategy is targeted to an important element of the self-management skill. This carefully crafted set has been honed through many years of testing with people just like you, and are proven methods for increasing your self-management skill.

As you master each of the strategies and incorporate them into your daily routine, you will develop an increased capacity to respond effectively to your emotions. Of course no matter how skilled you become in managing your emotions there are always going to be situations that push your buttons. Your life won't morph into a fairy tale devoid of obstacles, but you *will* equip yourself with everything you need to take the wheel and drive.

SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

1. Breathe Right
2. Create an Emotion vs. Reason List
3. Make Your Goals Public
4. Count to Ten
5. Sleep On It
6. Talk To a Skilled Self-Manager
7. Smile and Laugh More
8. Set Aside Some Time in Your Day for Problem Solving
9. Take Control of Your Self-Talk
10. Visualize Yourself Succeeding
11. Clean Up Your Sleep Hygiene
12. Focus Your Attention on Your Freedoms Rather than Your Limitations
13. Stay Synchronized
14. Speak to Someone Who is *Not* Emotionally Invested in Your Problem
15. Learn a Valuable Lesson from Everyone You Encounter
16. Put a Mental Recharge into Your Schedule
17. Accept That Change is Just around the Corner

1

Breathe Right

If you're like most people, you breathe in short, shallow breaths throughout the day that don't fully contract your diaphragm to fill your lungs—and you don't even know it. What's to stop you? It's not like you are suffering from the lack of oxygen . . . or so you think. Your lungs are built to provide *precisely* the amount of air your body needs for *all* of your organs to function effectively. When you take shallow breaths—which is any breath that fails to make your stomach protrude outward from the influx of air—you aren't giving your body the full amount of oxygen it needs.

Your brain demands a full 20 percent of your body's oxygen supply, which it needs to control basic functions like breathing and sight and complex functions like thinking and managing your mood. Your brain dedicates oxygen first to the basic functions, because they keep you alive. Whatever oxygen remains is used for the complex functions, which keep you alert, focused, and calm. Shallow breaths deprive your brain of oxygen, which can lead to poor concentration, forgetfulness, mood swings, restlessness, depressed and anxious thoughts, and a lack of energy. Shallow breathing handicaps your ability to self-manage.

The next time you are in a stressful or emotional situation, focus on taking slow deep breaths, inhaling through your nose until you can feel your stomach swell outward and grow tight, and then exhaling gently and completely through your mouth. As you exhale, go ahead and push that breath out until you have completely emptied your lungs. If you want to make sure that you are breathing correctly, place one hand upon your sternum (the long, flat bone located in the center of your chest) and the other hand upon your stomach as you take in breaths. If the hand on your stomach is moving more than the hand on your sternum as you exhale, then you know that you're getting enough oxygen and fully inflating your lungs. If you practice this proper breathing technique, it will grow comfortable enough that you can do it in the presence of other people without them noticing, which is handy for when you find yourself in the middle of a difficult conversation.

Anytime you choose to breathe right and flood your brain with oxygen, you'll notice the effects immediately. Many people describe the sensation as one of entering a calmer, more relaxed state where they have a clear head. This makes breathing right one of the simplest yet most powerful techniques that you have at your disposal to manage your emotions. In addition to engaging your rational brain on the spot, breathing right is a great tool for shifting your focus

away from intruding, uncomfortable thoughts that are hard to shake. Whether you are overcome by anxiety and stress because of a looming deadline, or fixated on negative thoughts and feelings about something that happened in the past, making yourself breathe right calms you down and makes you feel better by powering up your rational brain.

2

Create an Emotion vs. Reason List

You may not always realize it, but there are many times when you allow your emotions to sway you in one direction while your rational mind is tugging at your shirt to go another way. Whenever you find your mind having a battle of the brains (emotional vs. rational), it's time to make a list that distinguishes the emotional side of the argument from the rational one. The list will allow you to clear your mind, use your knowledge and take into account the importance of your emotions without letting them take control.

Creating an Emotion vs. Reason list is simple. Draw a straight line down the middle of a page to make two columns. In the left column write what your emotions are telling you to do, and in the right column what your reason is telling you to do. Now, ask yourself two important questions: Where are your emotions clouding your judgment, and where is your reason ignoring important cues from your emotions? Your emotions will create trouble if you let them lead you around without any reason, but your rational thoughts can be just as problematic if you try to operate like a robot that is without feeling. Your feelings are there whether you acknowledge them or not, and the Emotion vs. Reason list forces you to get in touch with them by putting them down on paper.

So, the next time a sticky or stressful situation gives you grief, grab a sheet of paper and give yourself a few quiet moments to organize your thoughts and make your list. With the list in front of you, it will be much easier to see whether you should allow the emotional or rational sides of your thinking to have more say in your decision.

3

Make Your Goals Public

Walking your talk is hard, especially when life is always throwing you curveballs. Sometimes, the biggest letdowns are private ones—when we fail to reach a goal or do what we set out to do. There is no more powerful motivator to reach your goals than making them public. If you clearly tell other people what you are setting out to accomplish—be it friends, family or a spouse—their awareness of your progress creates an incredible sense of accountability.

Much of self-management comes down to motivation, and you can use the expectations that other people have of you as a powerful force to get you up off the proverbial couch. If your boss assigns a project or your running partner meets you every morning at 5 a.m. sharp, you’re simply more likely to do something when other people are involved. Select those people whom you know will actually pay attention to your progress. When you share your goals with someone, ask him or her to monitor your progress and hold you accountable. You may even give them the power to dole out reward or punishment, such as the university professor we know who pays his colleagues \$100 anytime he misses a deadline on a research article. As you can imagine, he is the rare individual who hardly ever misses a deadline!

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4

Count to Ten

You can thank your kindergarten teacher for this one! It was way back then sitting on the classroom rug with your legs crossed that you learned one of the most effective strategies for turning the temperature down when your emotions are running hot. Adulthood has a funny way of making us lose sight of some simple, yet profound, strategies for self-control.

All you have to do is this: When you feel yourself getting frustrated or angry, stop yourself by taking in a deep breath and saying the number one to yourself as you exhale. Keep breathing and counting until you reach the number ten. The counting and breathing will relax you and stop you from taking rash action long enough to regain your composure and develop a more clear, rational perspective of the situation.

Sometimes, you might not even reach ten. For example, if you are in a meeting and someone abruptly interrupts you to blurt out something ridiculous that rubs you raw, you are unlikely to sit there silently while you breathe your way to ten. Even if you don't make it to double digits, you'll stop the flow of frustration and anger long enough to cool down your overheated limbic system and give your rational brain some valuable time to catch up.

When your counting needs to be more subtle, there are lots of great ways to hide it from others. Some people will actually bring a beverage with them to every meeting they attend. This way, whenever they feel as though they may blurt out some emotionally charged statement, they take a drink. No one expects them to talk when they are drinking. So they have the time they need to calm down (and count if necessary), organize their thoughts, and plan something to say that's more constructive.

Even if you don't make it to double digits, you'll stop the flow of frustration and anger long enough to cool down your overheated limbic system and give your rational brain some valuable time to catch up.

Reacting quickly and without much thought fans the flames burning in the emotional brain. Since a snappy comeback usually leads to a heated exchange where barbs are thrown back and forth, it's easy to find yourself in the midst of a full-blown emotional hijacking. When you slow things down and focus on counting, it engages your rational brain. You can then regain control of yourself and keep your emotions from running the show.

5

Sleep On It

In the timeless classic, *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy wrote that the two strongest warriors are time and patience. The power of these warriors comes from their ability to transform situations, ease pain, and provide clarity. Sometimes situations that require our patience can feel so uncomfortable, dissatisfying, and rife with anxiety that we jump to action just to alleviate the internal turmoil. But more often than not, giving yourself that extra day, week, or month to digest the situation before moving forward is all you need to stay in control. And sometimes, while you're waiting, things may surface that make your decision that much easier to make.

Time helps you to self-manage because it brings clarity and perspective to the thousands of thoughts that go swimming through your head when something is important. Time also helps you to gain control of emotions that you know would lead you in the wrong direction if you were to let them drive. It's that simple. All you need to do is force yourself to wait for the dust to settle before you make a move.

6

Talk To a Skilled Self-Manager

Role models come in all shapes and sizes, and they influence our lives in ways that are hard to predict. One of the most powerful ways to learn self-management is to seek out skilled self-managers to learn their tricks.

Most people's weaknesses in emotional intelligence are simply the product of skills that don't come naturally to them. In the case of people who are gifted in an emotional intelligence skill, they are usually very aware of what it is they do well, which makes it easy for you to learn from them.

First, find a person whom you consider to be a master self-manager. If you don't feel that you can spot a skilled self-manager on your own, you can always have someone take the test that comes with this book. Offer to take your self-management whiz out for lunch or coffee, explain that you are seeking improvement in this skill, and ask him or her to review the self-management section of this book before the meeting. During the meeting share your specific goals for improved self-management, and ask what tactics he or she relies on to self-manage so well. Be sure to share the emotions and situations that give you the most trouble. You're bound to learn some unique and effective ways to manage yourself that you would have otherwise never been exposed to. Before you leave the meeting, write down the best tips and choose a couple that you can begin trying immediately. Ask your self-management whiz if the two of you can meet again after you've had a chance to try the suggestions out.

7

Smile and Laugh More

Did you know that when you laugh and smile, your face sends signals to your brain that you are happy? Your brain literally responds to the nerves and muscles in your face to determine your emotional state. So what does this mean for self-management? When you're stuck on a frustrating or distressing thought, forcing yourself to smile counteracts the negative emotional state. If you work in customer service, or any time you need to look upbeat when you're really not up for it, making yourself throw on a large, legitimate smile (where your cheeks push upwards) will trick your mind into feeling the mood you need for the moment.

French university researchers measured the power of a smile by having two groups of subjects read the same comics page from the newspaper. One group of subjects was instructed to hold a pencil in their teeth while reading (which activates the muscles used in smiling), while the other group held the pencil with their lips (which does not activate the muscles used in smiling). Those who were unknowingly "smiling" found the cartoons far more humorous and had a better time while reading them than people in the group that weren't smiling.

You can also use smiling and laughter to lift your mood by watching a show or reading a book that you know you find funny. This can feel like an odd choice when you're feeling down, but it's a great way to override the negative emotions and clear your head, especially if your down mood is paralyzing your judgment. Smiling and laughter won't eliminate feeling down, and they shouldn't—every mood has its purpose—but it's nice to know you have an out when you need to put on a happy face.

... it's nice to know you have an out when you need to put on a happy face.

8

Set Aside Some Time in Your Day for Problem Solving

You experience hundreds of emotions every day, some of which you are not even aware. You spend your day bouncing around from feeling to feeling, which can lead to making some decisions at inopportune times.

Think back through some of your recent decisions, and you'll likely find that the decisions you made while hurrying through your day were seldom as effective as those made with some planning and clear thinking. The only way to ensure that you have the right space to make good decisions is to set aside some time in your schedule for problem solving. Just keep it simple. A 15-minute period each day where you turn off your phone, walk away from your computer, and take time to just think, is a great way to ensure your decisions aren't muddled by your emotions.

9

Take Control of Your Self-Talk

Research suggests the average person has about 50,000 thoughts every day. Sound like a lot? It doesn't stop there. Every time one of those 50,000 thoughts takes place, chemicals are produced in your brain that can trigger reactions felt throughout your body. There is a strong relationship between what you think and how you feel, both physically and emotionally. Because you are always thinking (much like breathing), you tend to forget that you are doing it. You likely don't even realize how much your thoughts dictate how you feel every hour of every single day.

It's impossible to try and track every single thought you have to see if it's having a positive or negative influence on your emotional state. The thoughts that are most influential are those where you literally talk to yourself. Though you might not realize you have these thoughts, we all have an internal voice inside our head that affects our perception of things. We tell ourselves to keep quiet, we congratulate ourselves on a job well done and we reprimand ourselves for making poor decisions. Our thoughts are "talking" to us every day, and this inner voice is called "self-talk."

With thoughts, the primary vehicle for regulating your emotional flow, what you allow yourself to think can rumble emotions to the surface, stuff them down underground, and intensify and prolong any emotional experience. When a rush of emotion comes over you, your thoughts turn the heat up or down. By learning to control your self-talk, you can keep yourself focused on the right things and manage your emotions more effectively.

Much of the time, your self-talk is positive and it helps you through your day ("I'd better get ready for the meeting" or "I'm really looking forward to going out to dinner tonight"). Your self-talk damages your ability to self-manage anytime it becomes negative. Negative self-talk is unrealistic and self-defeating. It can send you into a downward emotional spiral that makes it difficult to get what you want from life.

What follow are the most common types of negative self-talk with the keys to taking control of them and turning them around: **1. Turn I always or I never into just this time or sometimes.** Your actions are unique to the situation in front of you, no matter how often you think you mess up. Make certain your thoughts follow suit. When you start treating each situation as its own animal and stop beating yourself up over every mistake, you'll stop making your problems bigger than they really are.

2. **Replace judgmental statements like *I'm an idiot* with factual ones like *I made a mistake*.** Thoughts that attach a permanent label to you leave no room for improvement. Factual statements are objective, situational, and help you to focus on what you can change.
3. **Accept responsibility for your actions and no one else's.** The blame game and negative self-talk go hand in hand. If you are someone who often thinks either *it's all my fault* or *it's all their fault* you are wrong most the time. It is commendable to accept responsibility for your actions, but not when you carry someone else's burden. Likewise, if you're always blaming others, it's time to take responsibility for your part.

10

Visualize Yourself Succeeding

This is another strategy that at first glance may appear too simple to be effective, but it packs a powerful punch. Learning to self-manage well requires a lot of practice. Yet, many of the situations that pose the greatest difficulty for you don't come up all that often. So, you'll have a hard time forming the neural pathways needed to make your new skills habitual . . . unless you learn to visualize.

Your brain has a difficult time distinguishing between what you see with your eyes and what you visualize in your mind. In fact, MRI scans of people's brains taken while they are watching the sun set are virtually indistinguishable from scans taken when the same people visualize a sunset in their mind. The same brain regions are active in both scenarios.

Visualizing yourself managing your emotions and behavior effectively is a great way to practice your new skills and make them into habits. For this to work, you might want to do your visualization in a room that's free from distractions, as you'll need to immerse yourself fully in the scenes playing out in your head. A great time to visualize is before you go to bed at night. Just close your eyes and visualize yourself in situations where you have the most difficulty managing yourself. Focus on the details of each situation that make it so hard for you to remain in control; concentrate on the sights and sounds you would experience if you were actually there until you literally feel the same emotions. Next, picture yourself acting the way you'd like to (i.e. calming your nerves and proceeding confidently during a big presentation, dealing with someone who pushes your buttons without losing your cool, etc.). Imagine yourself doing and saying the right things and allow yourself to feel the satisfaction and positive emotions that come from this. Not a bad way to end the day, don't you think? Use this strategy nightly and incorporate new, challenging situations as they surface.

11

Clean Up Your Sleep Hygiene

Self-management requires patience, flexibility, and alertness, which are the first things to go when you don't get a good night's sleep. Getting more sleep at night will probably help you manage yourself better, but not necessarily. The critical factor for an alert, focused, and balanced mind is the quality of your sleep, and for quality sleep you need good sleep hygiene.

While you sleep, your brain literally recharges, shuffling through the day's memories and storing or discarding them (which causes dreams), so that you wake up alert and clear-headed. Your brain is very fickle when it comes to sleep. It needs to move through an elaborate series of cycles for you to wake feeling rested. You can help this along and improve the quality of your sleep by following these steps for good sleep hygiene:

1. **Get twenty minutes of morning sunlight.** Your eyes need at least twenty minutes of pre-noon sunlight (cloudy days are fine) to reset your inner clock, which makes it easier to fall asleep in the evening. The light can't be filtered by windows or sunglasses. So, take the glasses off and crack your car windows on the way to work, or find some time to get outdoors before lunch-time.
2. **Turn off the computer at least two hours before bedtime.** The light of a computer screen right in front of your face late at night is similar enough to sunlight that it tricks your brain, making it difficult to fall asleep and disruptive to the quality of your sleep.
3. **Keep your bed for sleeping.** The best way to check out the moment you hit the mattress is to avoid working or watching television in bed. Save your bed for sleep and your body will respond.
4. **Avoid caffeine, especially in the p.m.** Caffeine has a six-hour half-life. Have a cup of joe at eight a.m., and you'll still have 25 percent of the caffeine in your body at eight p.m. Caffeine keeps you from falling asleep and is extremely disruptive to the quality of your sleep. It's best avoided all together, or at least taken in small amounts and only before noon.

12

Focus Your Attention on Your Freedoms, Rather than Your Limitations

Life isn't fair . . . there's nothing you can do about it . . . it isn't up to you. Moms and dads tend to beat these mantras into their children's heads as if there were some secret Mommy and Daddy Handbook that instructed them to do so. What your folks forgot to explain is that you always have a choice—a choice in how you respond to what's before you. Even when you can't do or say anything to change a difficult situation, you always have a say in your perspective of what's happening, which ultimately influences your feelings about it.

Many times you can't change a situation or even the parties involved, but that doesn't mean it's time for you to give up. When you find yourself thinking that you have no control, take a closer look at how you are reacting to the situation itself. Focusing on restrictions is not only demoralizing—it helps negative feelings surface that confirm your sense of helplessness. You must take accountability for what you have control over, and focus your energy on remaining flexible and open-minded in spite of the situation.

13

Stay Synchronized

FBI agents spend much of their time trying to figure out whether suspects are lying. They study body language, voice inflections, and eye contact. The biggest clue that someone is lying occurs when *synchrony*—body language that matches the emotions being expressed—is absent.

Synchrony is also an important tool for effective self-managers. When you are doing a good job of managing your emotions, your body language will fit the emotional tone of the situation. When you can't keep your body language in check, it is a clear sign that your emotions are getting the best of you.

When a commercial airliner crash-landed safely in New York's Hudson River in 2009, the pilot, Chelsea "Sully" Sullenberger, saved every soul onboard by making sure the plane hit the water at the exact angle and speed needed to avoid breaking up upon impact. To accomplish this, he silenced the alarm bells going off in his head and the fear he was feeling. He kept his composure by directing his attention away from fear and onto landing the plane. He kept his emotions from taking the controls, even though he knew the chances for survival were slim.

On most days, you won't be crash-landing airplanes, but, if you're like most people, you'll have moments where your emotions are getting the better of you. To keep yourself synchronized, direct your attention away from your emotions and on to the task at hand.

14

Speak to Someone Who is Not Emotionally Invested in Your Problem

When problems arise, your brain is constantly thinking, constantly sorting and analyzing information to decide the best course of action. The problem is, the only information your brain has to go on is what you've given it—what you've seen before and what's happening now. The way our minds are structured, it's far too easy to get stuck in a single train of thought. Allow this to happen and you're severely limiting your options.

It's no wonder that it can be such a relief to talk to someone when you are feeling confused or emotional about a situation. Not only is it helpful to talk to someone who cares about how you are feeling, but new perspectives open up additional avenues for you to explore.

When a difficult situation surfaces, seek out someone whom you trust and feel comfortable with who is not personally affected by your situation. Use this person as a sounding board for what you've experienced and what you are thinking and feeling about the troubling situation. Their unique perspective will help you to see things differently, and expand your options.

Choose your third party wisely. The people you invite to help you shouldn't have a vested interest in the situation. The more your "counselors" are personally affected by the situation, the more their perspectives are going to be tainted by their own needs and feelings. The opinions of people directly affected by your situation will only muddy the waters for you and should be avoided at all costs. You should also avoid someone you know will simply agree with you. While their support feels good, it keeps you from seeing the entire picture. Sitting down with a potential devil's advocate may irk you in the moment, but you'll fare far better having seen things from a unique perspective.

15

Learn a Valuable Lesson from Everyone You Encounter

Think back to a time when a conversation immediately put you on the defensive. There you were, forcefully gripping your sword and shield, ready to do battle. Maybe someone criticized you, or a colleague disagreed with you strongly, or perhaps someone questioned your motives. As odd as it may sound, in moments like these you are missing out on a valuable opportunity to learn from other people. Approaching everyone you encounter as though they have something valuable to teach you—something that you will benefit from—is the best way to remain flexible, open-minded, and *much* less stressed.

You can do this with pretty much any situation that happens in your life. Let's say you are driving to work and someone cuts you off and then swerves around a corner and motors off in another direction. Even this inconsiderate jerk has something to teach you. Perhaps you need to learn to have more patience with irritating people. Or it may make you grateful that you are not in such a hurry. It is much more difficult to get angry, defensive, and stressed when you are trying to learn something from the other party.

The next time you find yourself caught off-guard and on the defensive, embrace this opportunity to learn something. Whether you learn from the other person's feedback, or just from how they are behaving, keeping this perspective is the key to keeping yourself in control.

16

Put a Mental Recharge into Your Schedule

The physical benefits of exercise are obvious, and there always seems to be someone—a doctor, a friend, an article—reminding us that we need to do it more. What most people don't realize is how critical exercise and other relaxing and recharging activities are to the mind. If you want to become an adept self-manager, you need to give your mind a fighting chance, and a lot of this, surprisingly, comes down to how you treat your body.

When you take time out of your day to get your blood flowing and keep your body healthy, it gives your mind an important break—the most significant rest and recharge you can give your brain beyond sleep. While intense physical activity is ideal, other more relaxing and equally invigorating diversions can also have a great effect on your mind. Yoga, massage, gardening or a stroll through the park are all relaxing ways to give your mind a breather. These activities—though none more so than vigorous exercise—release chemicals in your brain like serotonin and endorphins that recharge it and help to keep you happy and alert. They also engage and strengthen areas in your brain that are responsible for good decision-making, planning, organization, and rational thinking.

For most of us the biggest challenge in implementing this strategy is finding the time to squeeze these things into our day. They tend to tumble down our priority list as work, family, and friends monopolize our days. If you recognize recharging your mind for what it is—a maintenance activity that's as important to your brain as brushing your teeth is for your mouth—it's easier to schedule it into your calendar at the start of the week, rather than waiting to see if you find the time. If you want to improve your self-management skills, implementing this strategy will be well worth the effort.

17

Accept That Change is Just around the Corner

None of us is born with a crystal ball that predicts the future. Since you can't foresee every change and every obstacle that life throws in your path, the key to navigating change successfully is your perspective *before* changes even surface.

The idea here is to prepare for change. This is not so much a guessing game where you test your accuracy in anticipating what's next, but rather thinking through the consequences of potential changes so that you aren't caught off guard if they surface. The first step is to admit to yourself that even the most stable, trusted facets of your life are not completely under your control. People change, businesses go through ebbs and flows, and things just don't stay the same for long. When you allow yourself to anticipate change—and understand your options if changes occur—you prevent yourself from getting bogged down by strong emotions like shock, surprise, fear and disappointment when changes actually happen. While you're still likely to experience these negative emotions, your acceptance that change is an inevitable part of life enables you to focus and think rationally, which is critical to making the most out of an unlikely, unwanted or otherwise unforeseen situation.

**... admit to yourself that even the most stable, trusted facets of your life
are not completely under your control.**

The best way to implement this strategy fully is to set aside a small amount of time either every week or every other week to create a list of important changes that you think could possibly happen. These are the changes you'll want to be prepared for. Leave enough room below each change on your list to write out all the possible actions you will take should the change occur. And below that, jot down ideas for things that you can do now to prepare for that change. What are the signs that you can keep an eye out for that would suggest the change is imminent? Should you see these signs, is there anything you can do to prepare and soften the blow? Even if the changes on your list never come to fruition, just anticipating change and knowing what you'd do in response to it makes you a more flexible and adaptive person overall.

SOCIAL AWARENESS STRATEGIES

Have you ever had a coworker approach you, and without you saying anything, he understood what kind of day you were having and where your mind was wandering? He knew you must have come from a meeting with so-and-so because he could “see it” all over your face. He knew it was probably time to let you vent, instead of asking for that favor he had in mind. He must have picked up on something.

Or how about that waitress who seems to “just know” what each of her customers need: one couple is in their own world and prefers to be alone; another couple welcomes some fresh conversation from a new person, while another table wants professional and polite service, minus the small talk. Everyone’s sitting at a table to eat and drink and be served, and yet there’s so much below the surface that makes each table unique. How does she quickly size up these tables and know their needs?

Both this perceptive coworker and the waitress have a high level of social awareness, a skill they use to recognize and understand the moods of other individuals and entire groups of people. Though these two may be seasoned veterans at this, it is a skill that they most likely learned and practiced over time.

Instead of looking inward to learn about and understand yourself, social awareness is looking *outward* to learn about and appreciate others. Social awareness is centered on your ability to recognize and understand the emotions of others. Tuning into others’ emotions as you interact with them will help you get a more accurate view of your surroundings, which affects everything from relationships to the bottom line.

To build your social awareness skills, you will find yourself observing people in all kinds of situations. You may be observing someone from afar while you’re in a checkout line, or you may be right in the middle of a conversation observing the person to whom you are speaking. You will learn to pick up on body language, facial expressions, postures, tone of voice, and even what is hidden beneath the surface, like deeper emotions and thoughts.

One of the intriguing things about building an acute sense of social awareness is that emotions, facial expressions, and body language have been shown to translate across many different cultures. You can use these skills wherever you are.

The lens you look through must be clear. Making sure you are present and able to give others your full attention is the first step to becoming more socially aware. Looking outward isn’t just about using your eyes: it means tapping into your senses. Not only can you fully utilize your basic five senses, but you can

also include the vast amount of information coming into your brain through your sixth sense, your emotions. Your emotions can help you notice and interpret cues other people send you. These cues will give you some help in putting yourself in the other person's shoes.

The 17 strategies in this section will help you tackle the obstacles that get in your way and provide you with a helping hand when the going gets tough. You can only attend to so much, so it's critical to pick up on the right signals. These proven social awareness strategies will help you do just that.

SOCIAL AWARENESS STRATEGIES

1. Greet People by Name
2. Watch Body Language
3. Make Timing Everything
4. Develop a Back-pocket Question
5. Don't Take Notes at Meetings
6. Plan Ahead for Social Gatherings
7. Clear Away the Clutter
8. Live in the Moment
9. Go on a 15-minute Tour
10. Watch EQ at the Movies
11. Practice the Art of Listening
12. Go People Watching
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1

Greet People by Name

Maybe you've been named after a special relative or family friend, or maybe you have a nickname that abbreviates your long last name. Whatever the story is behind your name, it's an essential part of your identity. It feels so good when people use your name and remember it.

Greeting someone by name is one of the most basic and influential social awareness strategies you can adopt. It's a personal and meaningful way to engage someone. If you have a tendency to withdraw in social situations, greeting someone by name is a simple way to stick your neck out; using someone's name breaks down barriers and comes across as warm and inviting. Even if you are a social butterfly, greeting people by name is a strategy to live by.

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Enough said about the value of greeting by name. Now let's talk about following through. If names are usually on the tip of your tongue, you claim to be "great with faces, but not names," or you can't seem to remember anyone's name 30 seconds after you hear it—make this the month to practice saying, "Hello, [name]," to someone each time you enter a room and to those you're introduced to. Remembering a person's name is a brain exercise—practice may be required. If a name sounds unusual to you, ask the person to spell it for you so you can picture the name written. This will help you remember it later. Be sure to use the person's name at least twice during the conversation.

Greeting people by their names not only acknowledges them as the essence of who they are, but also allows you to remain connected to them in more than just a superficial way. By making it a goal to remember someone's name when you meet or greet him or her, you are focusing your mind, which will only increase your awareness in social situations.

2

Watch Body Language

Ask professional poker players what they study most carefully about their opponents, and they will tell you they look for small changes in behavior that indicate a player's confidence in his hand.

They check posture, eye movement, hand gestures, and facial expressions. The confident player with bravado is often the bluff, while the quiet hand is the royal flush waiting to sneak up from behind. For professional poker players, reading body language is a matter of winning or going home empty-handed. Acute social awareness skills literally make or break them.

It's just as important for us to become expert readers of body language; we'll know how people are really feeling and can plan an appropriate response. To get a complete read from a person, do a head-to-toe body language assessment. Start with the head and face. The eyes communicate more than any other part of the human anatomy. You can get a lot of information from them, but be careful not to stare. Maintained eye contact can show if a person is trustworthy, sincere, or caring. Shifty eyes or too much blinking can suggest deception. People whose eye movements are relaxed yet attentive to the person they are conversing with are more sincere and honest.

Next, look at the person's smile. Is it authentic or forced? Researchers can tell the difference. They look for a crinkle of skin in the corner of the eyes, and if it is not there, the smile is probably fake. Authentic smiles change rapidly from a small facial movement to a broad open expression.

Once you've finished with the face, move to the shoulders, torso, and limbs. Are the shoulders slouched or held naturally upright? Are the arms, hands, legs, and feet calm or fidgety? The body communicates nonstop and is an abundant source of information, so purposefully watch body language during meetings, friendly encounters, and first introductions. Once you tune into body language, its messages will become loud and clear, and you'll soon notice cues and be able to call someone's bluff.

3

Make Timing Everything

You've probably heard the phrase "timing is everything" to explain hundreds of situations and scenarios. When dealing with people and their emotions, timing really is everything. You don't ask for a raise when business is not going well, you don't try to correct someone who feels threatened by you, and you don't ask for a favor when someone is under a lot of stress or angry.

To practice your timing as it relates to social awareness, start working on your timing with asking questions. The goal is to ask the right questions at the right time with the right frame of mind, all with your audience in mind.

Just think about how it would go over if you were talking with a colleague who is venting about her spouse. She is concerned about her marriage, and is showing more emotion than ever. As a response, you blurt out the question, "Have you thought about what ideas you have for the project proposal yet?" She stares at you blankly and is blindsided by your question. Her face drops. The conversation is over.

In this case, the timing, the question, and the frame of mind were wrong. You asked the right question at the right time for you; but the time and frame of mind of the other person were way off. Remember, this isn't about you—it's about the other person. An appropriate question at that time for her frame of mind would have been, "Is there anything I can do for you?" Most likely, she would've appreciated your concern, and calmed down. At that point, you could've gently asked your question, most likely acknowledging that the timing was still a little off.

As you practice your timing, remember that the key to social awareness is focusing on others, instead of on yourself, so that you can be more effective.

4

Develop a Back-pocket Question

Sometimes conversations just don't go as planned. Either the other person isn't talking as much as you expected, or you are getting one-word answers. A 10-second chunk of silence feels like an eternity; you cringe because it is so awkward. You need to pull something out of your back pocket fast. How about a handy back-pocket question?

A back-pocket question is what you use *just in case* to bail you out of any awkward silence or uncomfortable moment. This social awareness strategy buys you time so you can get to know someone better and shows the other person that you are interested in his or her thoughts, feelings, and ideas. It can be something like: "What do you think about [fill in blank]?" Pick from a handful of issues that require some explanation like work or current events, but avoid politics, religion, and other potentially sensitive areas.

The versatile conversationalist knows exactly when to pull out his or her back-pocket question—the conversation needs a kick start, and you're just not ready to give up yet. It may feel like an abrupt subject change. Don't worry; if it injects life into the conversation, you've done well. If there's still dead air, it might be time to politely include someone else in the conversation or excuse yourself to refill your beverage.

5

Don't Take Notes at Meetings

It's been hammered into our heads that if we want to be successful, we need to learn to juggle a hectic workload and take on more and more. With multi-tasking, the more you can juggle, the more successful you are, right? Wrong. Multi-tasking actually sacrifices your quality of work, as the brain is simply incapable of performing at a high level in multiple activities at once.

Let's say you're in a meeting where several ideas are being shared. Pros and cons of each idea are tossed about the room. Though the notes are being captured on flip-charts, you prefer to take your own so you don't miss any details. As you finish your last thoughts, suddenly Oscar's voice shifts abruptly from an even tone to one that's clearly annoyed. A terse exchange between Oscar and Melinda ensues. You review your notes and can't find the cause of this shift. What just happened? You missed critical details.

By having your head focused on your tablet and your hand scribbling away, you miss the critical clues that shed some major light on how others are feeling or what they may be thinking. Someone who wants the whole story and complete picture observes others without the distraction of phones, typing, or writing. Instead, he or she simply observes. Remember, the main goal of social awareness is to recognize and understand how others are thinking and feeling. To do this, you need to focus on other people.

A great place to observe others is at meetings. There's already a captive audience, and usually there's minimal distraction with email and phone—but there's the mighty pen. At your next meeting, don't take notes. Instead, look at each person's face and notice his or her expressions. Make eye contact with whoever is speaking. You will feel more engaged and focused on others, and pick up on things that pen and paper surely miss.

By having your head focused on your tablet and your hand scribbling away, you miss the critical clues that shed some major light on how others are feeling or what they may be thinking.

Note-taking certainly has its value. But it doesn't have to be your modus operandi, either. If you need to take notes for practical purposes, temporarily stop at intervals to practice observation.

6

Plan Ahead for Social Gatherings

Picture yourself leaving a dinner party. You can't believe you forgot to bring the bread. You spent at least 10 minutes at the party beating yourself up over it, and another 15 taking ribbing from your breadless yet good-natured friends. As you put your keys in the ignition, you suddenly remember that you wanted to get Jack's business card to call him about a marketing venture, but the "bread incident" got you off track. Then there's Kate. She seemed down throughout dinner. Why didn't you ask her about it when you were there?

You planned to attend this dinner, but did you plan *for* it? Planning ahead for an event can be your saving grace, whether the event's a dinner party or a meeting for work. If you walk through the door with a plan, you free up your mental energy and brainpower so you can focus on the present moment.

The next time you RSVP for an event, in your next breath remind yourself to plan. On an index card, list who is going to be at the event and list any talking points or to do's. Don't be shy—carry the list with you!

Now let's replay the former party scenario, but this time with your plan on paper and in tow. After you arrive, you give the host that promised loaf of bread. Check. You spot Jack in the kitchen, and move toward him to fit in a quick chat and request that business card. Check. With that done, you notice that Kate is off—she looks somber. You notice right away, not as an afterthought while you drive home. You immediately address the alarm in your brain and pull Kate aside to see if she needs to talk. She appreciates your concern, smiles, and shares her story. With that, you both return to the group and enjoy the meal in front of you.

A bit of planning will not just prepare you for the event; planning will also help you enjoy the event more because you'll be less stressed and more present while you're there.

7

Clear Away the Clutter

To be socially aware, you must be socially present and remove distractions—especially the ones inside your head. These internal distractions are much like clutter in your garage or closet—there's useful stuff in there, but it's crowded and hard to get to what you need. The solution: clear away the clutter.

There are a few culprits that are worthy of spring cleaning. First, we all have conversations and chatter going on inside our heads; we talk to ourselves constantly. We're so busy having these internal chats that we tune the outside world out—which is counterproductive to social awareness. The second culprit is a process where we form our responses while the person we're talking with is still in fact talking. This, too, is counterproductive—it's tough to listen to yourself and the other person fully.

To clean up this internal clutter, there are some simple steps to follow. When you are in a conversation, don't interrupt the other person until he or she is completely finished. Next, to squelch the voice that is planning your response, it's important to catch yourself in the act; and when you do, stop yourself and clear away the clutter. Now refocus yourself on the person's face and words. If you need to, physically lean toward the speaker to focus your body into the conversation. This awareness proves you're making progress because, at one time, you didn't realize this pattern existed.

Remind yourself that you are in the conversation to listen and learn something, not to wow the other person with your insightful remarks. As you continue to be aware of your clutter and clear it, you'll become better at quieting your inner thoughts, and your listening skills will sharpen.

8

Live in the Moment

There's no one better at living in the moment than a child. A child does not think about what happened yesterday or what he's going to do later today. In the moment, he is Superman, and while he is fighting the bad guys, nothing else in the world exists.

Adults, on the other hand, worry about the past (*Oh, I should not have done that*) and stress about the future (*How am I going to handle this tomorrow?*). It's impossible to focus on the present while the future and the past loom. Social awareness requires that you live in the moment as naturally as a child does, so you can notice what's happening with others right now.

Make being in the present moment a habit; it will only lift your social awareness skills. Starting this month, if you are at the gym, then *be* at the gym. If you are at a meeting, be at the meeting. Wherever you are, be as present as possible so that you see the people around you and experience life in the moment. If you catch yourself being somewhere else mentally, snap back to the present. Remember, planning the future and reflecting on the past are valuable exercises, but doing this throughout your day interferes with what is in front of you—your present.

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9

Go on a 15-minute Tour

Didn't someone say that life is about the journey, not the destination? To become socially aware, we need to remember to enjoy the journey and notice people along the way. When you are focused only on getting to the next meeting, starting your next class period, seeing the next patient, making it to all your client sites, or hurrying to send an email, you're missing all of the people between Points A and B.

To commit some time to the journey, take some time to walk around where you work and notice your surroundings. Going on a short tour will help you get in tune with other people and their emotions, and refocus your attention on some of the smaller yet critical social clues that exist right under your nose.

During any workday, take just 15 minutes to observe things you've never noticed before. Things to look for include the look and feel of people's workspaces, the timing of when different people move around the office, and which people seek interaction versus those who stay at their desks all day.

After your first observation tour, select a different day to tour your workspace for moods. Other people's moods can provide you with critical hints about how things are going both individually and collectively. Notice what people may be feeling or how they make you feel when you drop by to talk briefly. Also observe the overall mood in the office or the school, patient care area, manufacturing floor—whatever your work area looks like. Focus intently on what you see, hear, and pick up on in other people.

Schedule 15 minutes to tour your workplace twice a week for a month. On the days you tour, be sure to avoid making too many assumptions or conclusions —just simply observe. You'll be amazed at what you see along the way.

10

Watch EQ at the Movies

Hollywood. It's the entertainment capital of the world known for glitz, glamour, and celebrity. Believe it or not, Hollywood is also a hotbed of EQ, ripe for building your social awareness skills.

After all, art imitates life, right? Movies are an abundant source of EQ skills in action, demonstrating behaviors to emulate or completely avoid. Great actors are masters at evoking real emotion in themselves; as their characters are scripted to do outrageous and obvious things, it's easy to observe the cues and emotions on-screen.

To build social awareness skills, you need to practice being aware of what's happening with other people; it doesn't matter if you practice using a box office hero or a real person. When you watch a movie to observe social cues, you're practicing social awareness. Plus, since you are not living the situation, you're not emotionally involved, and the distractions are limited. You can use your mental energy to observe the characters instead of dealing with your own life.

This month, make it a point to watch two movies specifically to observe the character interactions, relationships, and conflicts. Look for body language clues to figure out how each character is feeling and observe how the characters handle the conflicts. As more information about the characters unfold, rewind and watch past moments to spot clues you may have missed the first time. Believe it or not, watching movies from the land of make-believe is one of the most useful and entertaining ways to practice your social awareness skills for the real world.

11

Practice the Art of Listening

This sounds basic, almost too basic to mention, but listening is a strategy and a skill that is losing ground in society. Most people think they are good listeners, but if adults played “the Telephone Game” today, how accurate would the final message be? Listening requires focus, and focus isn’t easy because we’re stretched in several directions.

Listening isn’t just about hearing words; it’s also about listening to the tone, speed, and volume of the voice. What is being said? Anything not being said? What hidden messages exist below the surface? You may have sat through a speech or presentation where powerful words were chosen, but the tone, speed, or volume didn’t match the power of the words. Instead, these likely matched the speaker’s frame of mind.

Here’s the strategy to practice: when someone is talking to you, stop everything else and listen fully until the other person is finished speaking. When you are on a phone call, don’t type an email. When your son asks you a question, put your laptop down and look at him while you respond. When you’re eating dinner with your family, turn off the TV and listen to the conversation around the table. When you’re meeting with someone, close the door and sit near the person so you can focus and listen. Simple things like these will help you stay in the present moment, pick up on the cues the other person sends, and really hear what he or she is saying.

12

Go People Watching

Sometimes all you want to do is just sit back and watch the world go by—or, in this case, people. Sit back at a table at your local coffee shop and just observe all the people going in and out with their grande, non-fat, extra-hot lattes or the couples walking hand-in-hand on the street: you are actually engaging in one of the most effective social awareness strategies yet.

When you take the time to observe, you will notice people reveal their moods. Watch how people interact with each other in the line at the local coffee shop, grocery store, or other public places: these are great practice arenas. You will see people looking at shelves in stores, and the pace at which they move. You can keep a safe distance and use this as a trial run in spotting the body language or nonverbal cues to tip you off to what people are feeling or thinking.

People watching is a safe way for you to pick up on signals, observe interactions, and figure out underlying motivations or emotions without entering into the interaction yourself. Being able to identify moods and emotions of others is a huge part of social awareness, and often, these are things that fly under your radar. So, in the next week, head out to your local coffee shop, grab a beverage that strikes your fancy, and get comfortable—because it's the perfect place to work on social awareness.

13

Understand the Rules of the Culture Game

Social awareness extends beyond just picking up on another person's emotional cues. Let's say you start a new job at a company. To be successful, you will need to learn how things are done in this company's culture. You are assigned to share an office with Lac Su. To be successful with Lac, you'll also need to learn how Lac's cultural and family background influences his expectations of you as an office mate. You can't interpret his actions or reactions until you learn Lac's rules of the game.

Rules? Much of doing and saying the right things in social situations comes from understanding the rules of the culture game. Our world is a melting pot of vastly different cultures. These cultures interact, live, and conduct business with each other according to very specific rules. There is no way around it, and it is a requirement to learn how to become emotionally intelligent across cultures.

The secret to winning this culture game is to treat others how they want to be treated, not how you would want to be treated. The trick is identifying the different rules for each culture. To make matters even more complicated, the rules you should be watching for and mastering include the rules not only of ethnic culture but also of family and business culture.

How do you go about mastering multiple sets of rules at once? The first step is to listen and watch even more and for a longer period of time than you would with people from your own culture. Collect multiple observations and think before you jump to conclusions. Consider yourself new in town, and before you open your mouth and insert your foot, observe other people's interactions. Look for similarities and differences between how you would play the game versus how others are playing it.

Next, ask specific questions. This may require talking in settings outside meetings or on the sidelines. Many cultures, both business and ethnic, value social interaction around meals before getting down to business. There is wisdom in this approach because social interaction raises social awareness for both parties and prepares them for playing by the rules of the game.

14

Test for Accuracy

Even the most socially aware people have off-days or situations they can't quite read. Maybe there's so much interference and activity with people or the room that it's difficult to get a good reading in the midst of the hectic pace. Or perhaps these socially aware people are almost sure they know what's going on but need some validation of their observations. In these cases, there's a social awareness strategy to get the answers you need: just ask.

Just ask? Remember, there's no such thing as a silly question. Whether you're a novice or an expert in social awareness, we all need to confirm social observations at some point. The best way to test your accuracy is to simply ask if what you're observing in people or situations is actually what's occurring.

Maybe you have run into Steve at work and noticed that he has a sullen look on his face with his head hanging low and his eyes never looking up from the ground. You ask how he is doing, and he says he is doing "just fine."

Your evidence is telling you otherwise—he says he's fine, but he doesn't appear to be fine. In this moment, ask a reflective question to clarify what you are seeing. Say something like, "It looks like you are feeling down about something. Did something happen?" Simply stating what evidence you see (*it looks like you are feeling down*) and asking a direct question (*did something happen?*) is a reflective statement at its best. You will likely hear whatever he wants you to know for now; but you've reached out to Steve and let him know that you are interested.

Another type of question that tests for accuracy focuses on unspoken messages—or what wasn't necessarily said. Since people don't always openly and directly say how they feel about something, they'll drop hints. If you feel comfortable asking, this is a great opportunity to see if you picked up on the hints and what you think they meant. You will also have the opportunity to catch your mistakes if you've jumped to conclusions or missed a cue.

Testing your observations for accuracy will ultimately give you a keener understanding of social situations, and help you pick up on cues that usually fly under the radar. If you don't ask, you'll never be sure.

15

Step into Their Shoes

Actors do this all the time—they walk in characters' shoes for a living. Actors channel the same emotions and feelings, embodying the minds and motivations of the characters. It's how actors with great, healthy upbringings are able to play the most convincing, dysfunctional characters—and vice versa. After actors' work is complete, instead of complaining about the process, they often report that they come to appreciate the characters they inhabit—even if it's the bad guy.

Walking in the shoes of another is social awareness at its best—and it's not just for actors. It's for all of us who want to gain perspective and a deeper understanding of others, improve our communication, and identify problems before they escalate. If you don't think you need this, when was the last time you thought, *I wish I had known that Jane felt that way*. If you're wishing, it's already too late; wouldn't it be more useful to catch Jane sooner in the situation?

To practice this strategy, you need to ask yourself questions that start with, "If I were this person . . ." Let's say you're in a meeting and someone puts Jim on the spot, questioning decisions he made on a project that had issues. If you were the one who had to answer the question, your tendencies would put you on the defensive. But, remember, this isn't about you—it's now about Jim. Put away your own beliefs, emotions, thinking patterns, and tendencies—it's about experiencing this situation as Jim. Ask yourself, *If I were Jim, how would I respond to this question?* To answer this, use your previous history with Jim to help you understand him: how he's reacted in similar situations in the past, how he deals with being put on the spot, how he handles himself in groups and one-on-one. How did he act, and what did he say? This is all critical information.

How do you know if you're on target? If you're comfortable with Jim and the timing is right, approach him after the meeting and test your thoughts. If you're not comfortable with Jim, practice using another situation with someone else and test your thoughts. The more you practice and get feedback, the more comfortable you'll become in the shoes of others.

16

Seek the Whole Picture

Since we see ourselves through our own rose-colored glasses, chances are we're seeing only part of the picture. If you had the opportunity, would you be willing to see yourself through the eyes of those who know you best? Looking outward and seeking this feedback are key to social awareness, because this gives us the chance to see how others view us—to see the whole picture.

Taking advantage of this opportunity requires *courage and strength* to invite your fans, as well as your critics, to get down to the nitty-gritty and honestly share their perceptions of you. What if they're wrong? What if they're harsh? What if they're right?

Regardless of the answers, their perceptions matter because others' opinions of you influence you and your life. For example, if people think you are passive in meetings when you simply need time to think before speaking, their perceptions begin to shape what opportunities are offered to you. Soon your boss is passing you over for chairing a committee because you are perceived as passive instead of thoughtful.

The best method for seeing how others perceive you is simple and powerful. For matters of EQ, you can send a 360-degree survey that asks you and other people questions about your self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management skills. The result is a complete picture of your own and others' perceptions. Believe it or not, what others say about you is usually more accurate than what you think about yourself. Nonetheless, whatever these perceptions are, becoming aware is important so you know how they will shape you.

Muster some of that strength and gather other people to help you out in understanding yourself a bit more through their eyes. Other than becoming a fly on the wall or videotaping yourself, this is what it takes to see yourself in action through the eyes of others.

17

Catch the Mood of the Room

Once you've mastered reading the cues and emotions of other people, you're ready to read an entire room. It may sound daunting, but it's what you've already learned about social awareness—just on a larger scale.

Essentially, there are two ways to pick up the mood of an entire room. First, you can rely solely on your gut instincts. Emotions are contagious, meaning they spread from one or two people until there's a palpable and collective mood that you will feel at some level. For example, imagine walking into a room of 125 entrepreneurs who are networking and sharing their ideas. It's pretty likely that there would be excitement and positive energy there, and it wouldn't take long to become aware of it. You'd hear their voice levels and tones, and see the focused and interested posture and body language. Now imagine walking into a room of 125 people waiting to be chosen for jury duty. The room is quiet; people are trying to distract themselves with reading material, music, and anything else to pass the time. Even though it's our civic duty to attend, hardly anyone wants to be there. The two moods are like night and day.

Emotions are contagious, meaning they spread from one or two people until there's a palpable and collective mood that you will feel at some level.

Here's how you can catch the mood of the room. When you enter the room, scan it and notice whether you feel and see energy or quiet, subdued calm. Take notice of how people are arranging themselves—alone or in groups. Are they talking and moving their hands? Are some more animated than others? What is your gut telling you about them?

Another way to read the mood of the room is to bring along a more experienced guide, much like you would on an African safari. Your guide should be a socially aware expert willing to show you the ropes when it comes to tapping into your instincts and picking up the room's mood. Shadow your guide and listen to what he feels and sees. Ask what he senses and what clues gave the mood away. Eventually, you should be the one to take the lead. Size up the room and share and compare your thoughts with your guide. Through this exercise, you will soon pick up on observations like your guide does, in time doing so on your own.

Human nature and behavior may not be that far from what happens on the open African savannah. The sooner you can hone your ability to spot safety,

concern, or shifts in moods in group settings, the more skilled you will be in maneuvering through the social wilds of your life.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Most people have a spring in their step and put their best foot forward when they are in a new relationship (work or otherwise), but they stumble and lose their footing trying to maintain relationships over the long term. Reality soon sets in that the honeymoon phase is officially over.

The truth is, all relationships take work, even the great ones that seem effortless. We've all heard this, but do we really *get it*?

Working on a relationship takes time, effort, and know-how. The know-how is emotional intelligence. If you want a relationship that has staying power and grows over time, and in which your needs and the other person's needs are satisfied, the final EQ skill—relationship management—is just what the doctor ordered.

Thankfully, these relationship management skills can be learned, and they tap into the three other EQ skills that you're familiar with—self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. You use your self-awareness skills to notice your feelings and judge if your needs are being satisfied. You use your self-management skills to express your feelings and act accordingly to benefit the connection. Finally, you use your social awareness skills to better understand the other person's needs and feelings.

In the end, no man is an island; relationships are an essential and fulfilling part of life. Since you are half of any relationship, you have half of the responsibility of deepening these connections. The following 17 strategies will help you work on what's critical to making relationships work.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

1. Be Open and Be Curious
2. Enhance Your Natural Communication Style
3. Avoid Giving Mixed Signals
4. Remember the Little Things That Pack a Punch
5. Take Feedback Well
6. Build Trust
7. Have an “Open-door” Policy
8. Only Get Mad on Purpose
9. Don’t Avoid the Inevitable
10. Acknowledge the Other Person’s Feelings
11. Complement the Person’s Emotions or Situation
12. When You Care, Show It
13. Explain Your Decisions, Don’t Just Make Them
14. Make Your Feedback Direct and Constructive
15. Align Your *Intention* with Your *Impact*
16. Offer a “Fix-it” Statement during a Broken Conversation
17. Tackle a Tough Conversation

1

Be Open and Be Curious

We can imagine a few readers thinking, “Oh brother, I have to be open and curious with people at work? Can I just work on my projects and what I was hired to do, minus the touchy-feely stuff?” Actually, establishing, building, and maintaining relationships are all part of your job—even if you work with just one other person. Maintaining relationships may not be on your job description and may not have even been discussed, but for you to be successful, being open and curious is absolutely, unequivocally part of your job.

Let’s explore what “open” means in terms of relationship management. Being open means sharing information about yourself with others. You can use your self-management skills to choose how open you are and what you share, but know that there’s a benefit to opening up that may help you with your choices: when people know about you, there’s less room for them to misinterpret you. For example, if you are particularly sensitive about showing up five minutes early to meetings, and get annoyed when people stroll in at the very beginning of the meeting or even a little late, some people might interpret you as being uptight and rigid. If you shared with these same people that you were in the Marines for the first years of your career, your coworkers would understand and maybe even appreciate your sense of timing and courtesy. Who knows, your punctuality might even rub off!

Being an open book on your end isn’t the whole story with managing a relationship—you also need to be interested in the other person’s story as well. In other words, you need to be curious. The more you show interest in and learn about the other person, the better shot you have at meeting his or her needs and not misinterpreting them.

When you ask questions, draw from your social awareness skills to choose an appropriate setting and time. Be inquisitive in your tone—similar to how Santa Claus asks a child what he’d like for Christmas. The opposite tone is judgmental—think of someone who’s ever asked you a question like, “Why on earth did you buy a motorcycle?” or “You majored in philosophy? What did you plan to do with THAT?”

When you ask questions and this person opens up, you will not only learn information that will help you manage the relationship, but the other person will also appreciate the interest shown in him or her. If you are beginning a new relationship, in an established one, or even if you’re in a rough patch, take a few minutes out of your day to identify a few relationships that need some attention,

and make time to be open and curious with these people.

2

Enhance Your Natural Communication Style

Whether it's putting your two cents in when others are talking to you or shying away from a disagreement, your natural communication style shapes your relationships. Now you have the opportunity to use your self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness skills to shape your natural style.

At the top of a page in a journal, describe what your natural style is. You can call it whatever you would like. Think about how your friends, family, and colleagues experience your style. Is it direct, indirect, comfortable, serious, entertaining, discreet, controlled, chatty, intense, curious, cool, intrusive? You name it because you've likely heard about it more than once.

On the left side of the paper, jot down the upsides of your natural style. These are the things people appreciate about how you interact with them. On the right side, list the downsides or things that have created confusion, weird reactions, or trouble.

Once your list is complete, choose three upsides that you can use more to improve your communication. Next, choose three downsides, and think about ways you can either eliminate, downplay, or improve them. Be honest with yourself about what you will or won't do. If you need help figuring out what will give you the biggest results, just ask your friends, coworkers, and family for their suggestions. Making your plan public will also build in accountability that can help you make a lasting improvement in your relationships.

3

Avoid Giving Mixed Signals

We all rely on stoplights to safely direct us through intersections dozens of times each week. When the stoplights aren't working, and the lights either blink to proceed with caution or are out altogether, the intersection transforms into an every-man-for-himself situation. People are confused; and when it's their turn to cross, they gingerly look all ways before moving ahead. With functioning stoplights, we have confidence in the system because it's clear what we do—stop on red, and go on green. It's the same for signals that we send to the people in our relationships.

Feelings express truth, and they have a way of rising to the surface through our reactions and body language, despite the words we choose. Telling your staff in a muted voice and frowning face that they did a great job on the product launch doesn't match up; the words and the body language are mixed. People trust what they see over what they hear.

Even if you're a good self-manager, your emotions rise to the surface. You experience many emotions every day, and your brain can't sort through every single one. When you talk with someone, you may be saying one thing that's on your mind as your body reacts to an emotion you experienced minutes ago.

You confuse and frustrate others when you say one thing and your body or tone say another. Over time, this confusion will cause communication issues that will affect your relationships. To resolve the mixed signal issue, use your self-awareness skills to identify your emotions, and use your self-management skills to decide which feelings to express and how to express them.

People trust what they see over what they hear.

Sometimes it might not be appropriate to match your signals. Let's say you become angry in a meeting and can't really show your emotion at that moment. Just put your anger on the back burner for the moment, but don't disregard the feeling forever. Choose a time when you can express your anger: when it doesn't work against you but instead produces the most positive results. If your emotion is strong enough and you can't put off expressing it, your best bet is to explain what's happening (i.e., "If I seem distracted, it's because I can't stop worrying about a phone call that went awry this morning").

For the next month, pay close attention to matching your tone and body language to what you are really trying to say. Take mental note of those moments when you tell someone that you are feeling fine, but your body, tone, or

demeanor is sending drastically different signals. When you catch yourself sending a mixed signal, readjust to match it or explain it.

4

Remember the Little Things That Pack a Punch

It's pretty obvious on any news channel, reality show, sitcom, or newspaper that today's media feed off the idea that courtesy appears to be diminishing in modern society. With the decline of good manners, there are fewer expressions of appreciation. These days, in both personal and work-related relationships, there are far too few "please's," "thank you's," and "I'm sorry's" being expressed.

Most workers will say that they *never* get thanked for their contributions at work but yet will agree that hearing "thank you," "please," or even "I'm sorry" can have a positive impact on morale.

Think about how often you really say "thank you," "please," or "I'm sorry" when it is needed; if you don't use them often, it could be due to lack of time or habit, or maybe even a bruised ego. Begin to make a habit of incorporating more of these phrases into your relationships. Or, rather, please make it a habit to use more of these phrases during your day. Thank you.

5

Take Feedback Well

Feedback is a unique gift. It's meant to help us improve in ways that we perhaps cannot see on our own. Since you never know exactly what you are going to receive, however, feedback is sometimes like opening up a present and looking inside to find a pair of tiger-striped socks with red sequins.

The element of surprise can catch us off guard, so we need to use our self-awareness skills to prepare ourselves for that moment. *What do I feel when I am on the spot and surprised? How do I show it?* With that awareness, move on to your self-management skills: *what response should I choose?*

To help you receive feedback well, let's break it down. First, consider the source of your feedback. This person probably has a relevant perspective—he or she knows you and has seen your performance—and has an interest in seeing you improve.

As you receive feedback, turn on your social awareness skills to listen and really hear what is being said. Ask clarifying questions and ask for examples to better understand the person's perspective. Whether you agree with what was said or not, thank the person for his or her willingness to share, because it takes almost as much grace to give feedback as it does to receive it.

After you receive the feedback, use your self-management skills to decide your next steps; don't feel pressured to rush into action. Time can help you absorb the underlying point, sort out your feelings and thoughts, and help you to decide what to do about the feedback. Remember the Emotion vs. Reason list?

Receiving feedback is probably the hardest part of the process. Once you decide what to do with the feedback, follow up with plans. Actually making adjustments will show the person who gave you feedback that you value his or her comments. Take the person's feedback seriously and try what he or she suggested. There may be no better way to solidify your relationship with him or her.

6

Build Trust

Have you ever been asked to “practice” trust? The exercise looks like this: you have a partner, and you stand about five feet in front of the person with your back facing him. You close your eyes, and on a count of three, you fall backward toward the person so that he can catch you. When you’re caught, everyone enjoys a laugh and is thankful neither person wiped out. If only trust were a matter of good, strong arms and steady balance.

An unknown author said, “Trust is a peculiar resource; it is built rather than depleted by use.” Trust is something that takes time to build, can be lost in seconds, and may be our most important and most difficult objective in managing our relationships.

How is trust built? Open communication; willingness to share; consistency in words, actions, and behavior over time; and reliability in following through on the agreements of the relationship, just to name a few examples. It’s ironic that, for most relationships, a certain level of trust needs to be present in order for you to develop trust.

“Trust is a peculiar resource; it is built rather than depleted by use.”

To build trust, use your self-awareness and self-management skills to be the first to lay some of yourself on the line and share something about you. Remember, you should share parts of yourself at a time; don’t feel like you have to be a complete open book up front.

To manage your relationships, you need to manage your trust of others, and their trust level of you is critical to deepening your connection with others. Cultivating relationships and building trust take time. Identify the relationships in your life that need more trust, and use your self-awareness skills to ask yourself what is missing. Use your social awareness skills to ask the other person what needs to happen to build trust—and listen to the answer. Asking will show you care about the relationship, which will help to build trust, and deepen the relationship.

7

Have an “Open-door” Policy

Here's a quick history lesson that you may remember: the Open Door policy originated in 1899 when the United States feared it would lose its trading privileges in the East. The United States declared an “open-door policy,” allowing all trading nations access to the Chinese market.

Access: it's an important word that sums up the open-door concept. Access has moved swiftly beyond trading agreements and into the workplace. Today, a true open-door policy allows any employee to talk to anyone at any level, fostering upward communication through direct and easy access to everyone below.

Ask those around you if you should adopt an open-door policy to better manage your relationships. If you need to be more accessible and show people they can have unscheduled, informal conversations with you, then adopting this policy might be right up your alley.

Keep in mind you don't have to stretch yourself too thin by being there for everyone at anytime; you simply have to communicate your policy and then stick to it. Use your self-awareness skills to identify how the policy works for you, and manage yourself to make it work. Ongoing observations of others, also known as social awareness, should help you determine how it's working, too.

Remember, increasing your accessibility can only improve your relationships —it literally opens the door to communication, even if it's virtual (by email or phone). People will feel valued and respected because of the time you're giving them; and you get the opportunity to learn about others. At the end of the day, the policy's a win for you and a win for others.

8

Only Get Mad on Purpose

“Anyone can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way, this is not easy.”

We can thank Greek philosopher Aristotle for those words and enduring insight into managing our emotions and relationships. If you can master this one, consider your EQ journey a success. Anger is an emotion that exists for a reason—anger is not an emotion to stifle or ignore. If you manage it properly and use it purposefully, you can get results that enhance your relationships. Really.

Think of the football coach who gets straight to the point at halftime. His stern feedback grabs his players’ attention and focuses them for the second half. The team returns refreshed, refocused, and ready to win; in this case, the coach managed his emotions to motivate others to action. Expressing anger in appropriate ways communicates your strong feelings and reminds people of the gravity of a situation. Expressing anger too much or at the wrong times desensitizes people to what you are feeling, making it hard for others to take you seriously.

Using a strong emotion like anger to benefit your relationships will take time to master, because hopefully you don’t have daily opportunities to practice. There’s a lot of behind-the-scenes preparation for this strategy, starting with becoming aware of your anger.

Use your self-awareness skills to think about and define your varying degrees of anger—from what annoys you a little to what sends you off the deep end. Write these down and choose words that are specific and then write examples to explain when you feel this way. Determine when you should show your anger based on the criterion that if it’s shared it will actually improve the relationship somehow. To make your choices, use your social awareness skills to think about the other people involved and their responses.

Remember, relationship management is about making choices and acting with the goal of creating an honest, deep connection with others. To do this, you need to be honest with others and with yourself, which sometimes means using anger with a purpose.

9

Don't Avoid the Inevitable

You and Marge work in the same shipping and receiving department. She gets under your skin; if you could press a button to ship her to another department, it would've been done five years ago. The problem is, no such button exists, and there's no chance of change. To add fuel to the fire, your boss has just given you and Marge a large project to work on together. She suggests meeting for lunch to talk about the next steps, and you generate a fast list of reasons why you can't make it. You have officially brushed Marge off. Now what? You're still at square one (that's what), and you still have the project and have to figure out how to work together.

This is when relationship management skills are absolutely necessary, because though you might not choose a friendship with this person, you and Marge are now responsible for the same project. Here's a basic strategy to work with Marge: do not avoid her or the situation. Accept it and make the choice to use your EQ skills to move forward with her.

You'll need to watch your emotions, and make decisions about how to manage those emotions. Since you're not in this alone, conjure up your social awareness skills to bring Marge into the fold and put yourself in her shoes. Meet with her to learn about what experience she has to offer and her preferences for working with you on this project. Observe her body language to see how she responds to you; maybe you frustrate her just as much! This may hurt a little, but you may actually lay the groundwork for a working relationship.

Next, share your preferences for managing the project and come to an agreement. You won't need to tell Marge you don't care for her—instead, you can share that you'd prefer to work independently on separate parts of the project and meet along the way to ensure you're both on track. If Marge agrees, your work process has been hammered out. If she doesn't agree, it's time to apply more self-management and social awareness skills until you reach an agreement.

If you get frustrated along the way (and chances are you will), ask yourself why and decide how to manage yourself. Loop back with Marge at your next meeting, and remind yourselves about the goal of the project. At the end of the project, find a way to acknowledge what you both accomplished together.

10

Acknowledge the Other Person's Feelings

If you're known for being terrible with relationships, then this EQ strategy may be a great place to start getting better. Let's say that, one morning, you're pulling into your company's parking lot, and you see your coworker Jessie holding back tears as she exits her car next to you. You ask her if she's OK, and she's not. You respond with, "Well, work will get it off your mind. See you inside." Then you wonder why she avoids you for the rest of the day.

One key to managing relationships is leaning into your own discomfort and taking a moment to acknowledge, not stifle or change, other people's feelings. "I'm sorry you're upset; what can I do?" shows Jessie that if crying is what's going to help her, then you'd be willing to find her a tissue. Simple acts like this one acknowledge emotions without making them a big deal, marginalizing them, or dismissing them. Everyone has a right to experience feelings, even if you might not feel the same way. You don't have to agree with the way people are feeling, but you do have to recognize those feelings as legitimate and respect them.

To help you validate someone's feelings, let's use Jessie's example. Using your social awareness skills, listen to her intently and summarize what you've heard back to her. Not only does it show great listening skills, but it also shows that you're adept at relationship management because you reached out to show you cared, and took an interest in her. You'll end up with a better connection with a now-calm Jessie—and all it took was some time to pay attention and notice her feelings.

11

Complement the Person's Emotions or Situation

If you calmly phone your utility company to have an incorrect fee removed from your monthly bill, you would assume that the customer service representative would be helpful, friendly, and courteous with your request.

Let's say you make the same phone call, but this time you're in a terrible mood. You're feeling testy, agitated, and annoyed at the error. You've been on hold for 10 minutes, which doesn't help. When the customer service rep talks to you, he can hear it in your voice. When he speaks, he sounds serious, as if he wants to resolve this quickly. You appreciate the professionalism and service, check this problem off your list, and move on. This customer service rep is skilled at picking up on cues and adapting to them to give fast, hassle-free service—which benefits the customer and the company as well. And his high EQ makes him promotable and marketable.

What he did exactly is a strategy in relationship management that requires social awareness skills—listening, being present, putting yourself in the shoes of the other person, identifying where someone is emotionally, and choosing an appropriate and complementary response. This last piece, choosing a complementary response, doesn't require you to match or mirror emotions; it wouldn't make sense for the customer service rep to use the same impatient approach you did—that would infuriate you as the customer. Mirroring emotions would also make coworkers and friends recoil. The complementary response always says you recognize what the other person feels and you think it's important.

To practice complementing emotions in your relationships, think about one or two emotional situations you've experienced where there wasn't a lot of gray area and there was at least one other person present. How did the other person respond to you? Did his or her response help or hurt your mood? Was the person able to complement your emotional state? Once you can answer these questions, it's your turn to focus on complementing other people's emotions in the situations they face. Give yourself a week or two to be at the ready for the people in your closest relationships—the people at work or home. Tell yourself your role is to notice their moods and to be there for your coworkers and family members in a helpful way. Whether you are excited or concerned for them, you will show that you are sensitive and care about what they are going through.

12

When You Care, Show It

Here's a true story for aspiring high-EQ managers across the globe. One morning, I groggily went up in the elevator of my office building to start yet another day. It had been a long night the day before; I had stayed late so I could finish some projects for my boss. When I got to my cubicle, I saw that there was a fresh black-and-white cookie and a card that said, "Thanks for filling in the black and whites." It was from my boss. She was always such a busy person, juggling home and work. I was floored to see that she had found a few minutes to slip into a bakery on behalf of my sweet tooth, and get into the office early to put a cookie on my chair. I just about cried at her thoughtfulness.

Talk about the simple things that go a long way. That cookie motivated me to work even harder, and I did so happily and with fierce loyalty.

We hear this story in many forms, but the strategy is always the same. There are people who do great work around you every day. When you care, show it. Don't hesitate or put it off until next week. Do something this week or even today. Things as simple as a greeting card or something else inexpensive, yet meaningful, that sums up how you feel are all you need to make an impact and strengthen a relationship.

13

Explain Your Decisions, Don't Just Make Them

It's frightening to be in a place you're not familiar with and be completely in the dark. Case in point—have you ever planned to go camping but got to the site in the dark? It's hard to get your bearings, you're setting up a tent in the dark, and because you're in the wilderness, it's just eerily quiet and black. You go to bed with one eye open and hope for the best.

The next day, you wake up tired and unzip your tent, and you're amazed at the beauty around you: water, mountains, tree-lined trails, and cute little animals abound. There's nothing to be afraid of—you soon forget last night's anxieties, and you move about your day. What were you so worried about, anyway?

The only difference between these two scenarios is light—it's the same place, and you're with the same people with the same gear. This is what people experience when decisions are made for them. When you are in the dark, intentionally or not, about upcoming layoffs, contract negotiations, and the like, you may as well be setting up camp in blackness. If there are layoffs that increase your workload or change your shift, you'll find out when the pink slips are handed out. If taxes are changed, you'll see it on your paycheck. No recourse, no trial period. It's a done deal.

That's a tough pill to swallow because we're not children or dependents; we're adults. To support an idea, we need to understand *why* the decision was made.

When you use your EQ to manage relationships, keep this in mind. Instead of making a change and expecting others to just accept it, take time to explain the *why* behind the decision, including alternatives, and why the final choice made the most sense. If you can ask for ideas and input ahead of time, it's even better. Finally, acknowledge how the decision will affect everyone. People appreciate this transparency and openness, even though the decision may negatively impact them. Transparency and openness also make people feel like they are trusted, respected, and connected to their organization—instead of being told what to do and kept in the dark.

If you have a habit of making decisions quickly and independently, you're likely very personally competent. Though old habits die hard, since they're ingrained in your brain's wiring, it's time to rewire and add social competence to your decision-making repertoire.

First, you'll likely have to spot your upcoming decisions. Take out your

calendar to look over the next three months to identify which decisions will need to be made by then. Now work backward and see who will be impacted by these decisions. Make a complete list of who will be affected by each decision and plan on when and where you will talk together about each, including the details that explain *why* and *how* each decision will be made. If you have to invite people to a special meeting for just this purpose, so be it. As you plan your agenda and your words, use your social awareness skills to put yourself in the shoes of others, so you can speak to your audience before and after you make the decision as they would expect and hope.

14

Make Your Feedback Direct and Constructive

Think about the best feedback you ever received. It wasn't something you necessarily wanted or expected, but it made a difference in your behavior going forward. The feedback may have shaped your overall performance, or how you deal with a particular situation, or even your career. What made the feedback so good?

If you are responsible for giving feedback, there are several guidebooks to walk you through the process, making sure it's within legal and human resources guidelines. Sit down, we have some news: following legal guidelines isn't what makes feedback a performance-or person-changing experience; infusing EQ know-how into your feedback, though, is what does.

Here's how to think about feedback and EQ—giving feedback is a relationship-building event that requires all four EQ skills to be effective. Use your self-awareness skills to identify your feelings about the feedback. Are you comfortable with the process? Why or why not? Next, use your self-management skills to decide what you'll do with the information you just learned about yourself from answering the above questions. For example, if you're anxious about giving feedback about phone etiquette because you don't want people to think you're eavesdropping, how exactly are you going to get beyond this anxiety to confidently give feedback? It's up to you, but don't ignore the feedback because of your discomfort.

Giving feedback is a relationship-building event that requires all four EQ skills to be effective.

Next, use your social awareness skills to think of the person who's receiving the feedback. Remember, feedback is meant to address the problem, not the person. How does the person need to hear your message so it's clear, direct, constructive, and respectful? Constructive feedback has two parts: sharing your opinion and offering solutions for change. Let's take Todd: he's very direct—sugarcoating his need to make phone etiquette improvements will insult him. But if sugarcoating hard news is in his improvement plan, consider sharing feedback with and without the sugar so he can hear the difference and learn from it.

Jenni, on the other hand, is sensitive. Since this is a relationship-building experience, keep Jenni in mind when planning her feedback. Using softeners such as "I think," or "I believe," or "This time" to begin a statement may soften the blow. Instead of "Your report is terrible," use "I believe there are parts of

your report that could use revisions. May I walk you through some suggestions?” Here, offering suggestions for improvement is helpful—not prescriptive. At the end, ask the person for his or her thoughts, and thank the person for his or her willingness to consider your suggestions.

Align Your Intention with Your Impact

Let's say you're in a staff meeting and the next topic on the agenda is to figure out why some key deadlines are being missed. After some back-and-forth, it's looking like Ana might be partially to blame—and the room is getting tense. In an honest attempt to lighten the mood, you say something like, "Geez, Ana—looks like maybe taking those longer lunches is finally catching up to you!"

Instead of laughs, there's dead silence. You don't understand what you did wrong, and you later tell Ana, "I was only kidding," but she seems put off. These are the famous last words of someone who had good *intentions*, but the result, or *impact*, was not aligned. And it's too late.

Or think about the results-driven manager who has good intentions about guiding her staff toward achieving higher goals. She's so focused on success that she becomes entrenched in the work (doing most of it herself or pushing everyone to do it her way)—completely missing how to manage the work through others. Her staff deems her a hard-driving micromanager who doesn't share knowledge, and all she *intended* was for the team to learn from her and be successful. Yet again, intentions were good, but they had the opposite impact. Relationships are now tarnished, and the manager can't figure out why her staff resents her.

If you find that you spend time smoothing things over to repair a relationship, or you are unsure about what's going wrong in your relationships, know that these situations are avoidable. With the help of your awareness and management skills, making small adjustments will make all the difference.

To align your words and actions with your intent, you need to use your social awareness and self-management skills to observe the situation and the people in it, think before you speak or act, and make an appropriate and sensitive response. Do a quick analysis. Think of a situation where the impact of what you said or did was not what you intended. On a piece of paper, describe the incident, your intentions, your actions, and the impact—the end result or reaction of others. Next, write what you didn't realize in the situation—and fill in what you understand now in hindsight, including missed cues, what you learned about yourself, and others. Finally, answer what you could have done differently to keep your intent and impact aligned. If you're not sure, ask someone who was involved in the situation.

In Ana's case, you didn't realize it was the wrong moment for that joke. It singled her out publicly. Next time, you'll lighten the mood by poking fun at

yourself, not someone else. The results-driven manager didn't realize what motivated her staff members. She didn't give them space and time to learn and grow on their own. To better manage your relationships, it's critical to spot misalignments before you act, so that your actions match your impact with your good intentions.

16

Offer a “Fix-it” Statement during a Broken Conversation

Airline agents. They are often the bearer of unavoidably bad news in person—weather delays, delays due to mechanical repairs, lost luggage, overbooking. The list goes on and on. Airline agents attempt to repair your broken experience with fix-its or tools—like rebooking and vouchers—to problem solve and address the ultimate goal to get you to your destination.

It’s probably safe to assume that we’ve all had conversations where we could use a fix-it. A simple discussion breaks into a disagreement or gets stuck going around in circles. In these broken conversations, past mistakes may get brought to the surface, regretful comments are made, and blame is present. No matter who said what, or who “started it,” it’s time to refocus and fix it. Someone needs to step back, quickly assess the situation, and begin repairing the conversation with a fix-it.

To do this, you need to let go of blame and focus on the repair. Do you want to be right, or do you want a resolution? Use your self-awareness skills to see what you are contributing to the situation; self-manage to put your tendencies aside and choose the high road. Your social awareness skills can help you identify what the other person brought to the table or feels. Looking at both sides will help you figure out where the interaction broke down, and which “fix-it” statement is needed to begin the repairs. Fix-it statements feel like a breath of fresh air, are neutral in tone, and find common ground. A “fix-it” statement can be as simple as saying, “This is hard,” or asking how the person is feeling. Most conversations can benefit from a fix-it, and it won’t do any harm if you feel the conversation breaking down.

Fix-it statements feel like a breath of fresh air, are neutral in tone, and find common ground.

This strategy will help you maintain open lines of communication when you’re upset, and with conscious effort and practice, you will be able to fix your broken conversations before they become damaged beyond repair.

“Why did I get passed over for the promotion?” your staff member Judith asks with a slightly defensive tone, a wounded posture, and a quivering voice. This is going to be a tough one. The news leaked out early about Roger’s promotion before you could speak with Judith. You value Judith and her work, but you’ll need to explain that she’s not ready for the next level yet. That’s not the hardest part of this conversation—damage control is another story.

From the boardroom to the break room, tough conversations will surface, and it is possible to calmly and effectively handle them. Tough conversations are inevitable; forget running from them because they’re sure to catch up to you. Though EQ skills can’t make these conversations disappear, acquiring some new skills can make these conversations a lot easier to navigate without ruining the relationship.

1. **Start with agreement.** If you know you are likely to end up in a disagreement, start your discussion with the common ground you share. Whether it’s simply agreeing that the discussion will be hard but important or agreeing on a shared goal, create a feeling of agreement. For example: “Judith, I first want you to know that I value you, and I’m sorry that you learned the news from someone other than me. I’d like to use this time to explain the situation, and anything else you’d like to hear from me. I’d also like to hear from you.”
2. **Ask the person to help you understand his or her side.** People want to be heard—if they don’t feel heard, frustration rises. Before frustration enters the picture, beat it to the punch and ask the person to share his or her point of view. Manage your own feelings as needed, but focus on understanding the other person’s view. In Judith’s case, this would sound like, “Judith, along the way I want to make sure you feel comfortable sharing what’s on your mind with me. I’d like to make sure I understand your perspective.” By asking for Judith’s input, you are showing that you care and have an interest in learning more about her. This is an opportunity to deepen and manage your relationship with Judith.
3. **Resist the urge to plan a “comeback” or a rebuttal.** Your brain cannot listen well and prepare to speak at the same time. Use your self-management skills to silence your inner voice and direct your attention to the person in front of you. In this case, Judith has been passed up for a promotion that she was really interested in, and found out about it through the grapevine. Let’s

face it—if you'd like to maintain the relationship, you need to be quiet, listen to her shock and disappointment, and resist the urge to defend yourself.

4. **Help the other person understand your side, too.** Now it is your turn to help the other person understand your perspective. Describe your discomfort, your thoughts, your ideas, and the reasons behind your thought process. Communicate clearly and simply; don't speak in circles or in code. In Judith's case, what you say can ultimately be great feedback for her, which she deserves. To explain that Roger had more experience and was more suited for the job at this time is an appropriate message. Since his promotion was leaked to her in an unsavory way, this is something that requires an apology. This ability to explain your thoughts and directly address others in a compassionate way during a difficult situation is a key aspect of relationship management.
5. **Move the conversation forward.** Once you understand each other's perspective, even if there's disagreement, someone has to move things along. In the case of Judith, it's you. Try to find some common ground again. When you're talking to Judith, say something like, "Well, I'm so glad you came to me directly and that we had the opportunity to talk about it. I understand your position, and it sounds like you understand mine. I'm still invested in your development and would like to work with you on getting the experience you need. What are your thoughts?"
6. **Keep in touch.** The resolution to a tough conversation needs more attention even *after* you leave it, so check progress frequently, ask the other person if he or she is satisfied, and keep in touch as you move forward. You are half of what it takes to keep a relationship oiled and running smoothly. In regard to Judith, meeting with her regularly to talk about her career advancement and promotion potential would continue to show her that you care about her progress.

In the end, when you enter a tough conversation, prepare yourself to take the high road, not be defensive, and remain open by practicing the strategies above. Instead of losing ground with someone in a conversation like this, it can actually become a moment that solidifies your relationship going forward.

There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. You seek problems because you need their gifts.

—Richard Bach

Coping Strategies



When we encounter a situation or event we perceive as a stressor, some part of us feels very vulnerable and threatened. To survive the threat, whether minimal or colossal, some type of coping strategy is created to deal with it. Each stressor necessitates its own coping strategy. Some coping strategies are second nature to most people when the stressor is minimal, and a course of action is taken with little or no conscious thought involved. But as the number and intensity of stressors increases and a critical mass of tension manifests, then routine coping strategies may fail to do an effective job. The result can be feelings of immobilization, mental paralysis, and emotional fatigue until a more effective coping technique, or combination of techniques, is employed. For the most part, the expression **coping responses**, unlike defense mechanisms, has a positive connotation, suggesting that a positive outcome is likely. However, this is not always the case, as some coping behaviors perpetuate stress rather than promote inner peace.

The word *coping*, as defined by stress scholar Richard Lazarus (1981), is “the process of managing demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the individual’s resources.” He went on to add that coping consists of both cognitive and action-oriented (behavioral) efforts. According to Lazarus, this managing process involves several important criteria, including some or all of the following: an increased awareness process of oneself, the situation, and the environment; an emotional regulation process he referred to as **palliative coping**; and quite often, a series of behavioral changes, referred to as **instru-**

Coping responses: Positive skills to cope with stress.

Palliative coping: A positive emotional regulation process during a stressful encounter (e.g., responding, not reacting).

Instrumental coping: The implementation of a series of effective coping skills to alter one’s behavior to stress.

Self-efficacy: A term coined by Albert Bandura to describe a sense of faith that produces a “can-do” attitude.

Avoidance versus confrontation: A dichotomy to describe how some people deal with stress.

Combative versus preventive: Another dichotomy to describe how some people deal with stress.

mental coping, which accompany this awareness and cognitive process. Lazarus also believed that coping isn’t the employment of several techniques so much as it is a specific frame of mind. Part of this mind frame is a personality trait, **self-efficacy**, a term coined by psychologist Albert Bandura to describe an inner sense of faith culminating in a “can-do” attitude. Self-efficacy describes access to several inner resources including self-confidence, faith, willpower, and self-reliance. The possession and implementation of this trait tend to divide those who choose effective coping strategies from those who elect noneffective ones. In other words, your dominant coping style may be a function of your personality.

To date, the best and most comprehensive conceptual model to understand the coping process is that created by Lazarus and colleagues. According to Lazarus, every stressor undergoes primary appraisal to determine the extent of damage. It is then reprocessed in a secondary appraisal. At this point, a series of coping responses are lined up with the stressor to see which is the best course of action. These coping responses fall into one of two categories: action-oriented, such as time management or assertive behavior, or intrapsychic (acceptance). The responses used to cope with stress can be derived internally (from inner resources) and/or externally. Inner resources include, among other things, willpower, sense of humor, creativity, sense of reason, self-efficacy, faith, and optimism. External resources would include time, money, and social support from friends and family. Lazarus cites the purposes of coping skills as the following:

1. To reduce harmful environmental conditions
2. To tolerate or adjust to negative events or realities
3. To maintain a positive self-image
4. To maintain emotional equilibrium
5. To continue satisfying relationships with others

Coping responses can elicit three outcomes: (1) to regain the emotional status quo, (2) to resume normal activities interrupted by the stressor, or (3) to feel psychologically overwhelmed.

Other researchers have noted a dichotomy of coping styles: **avoidance versus confrontation** (Holahan and Moos, 1987) and **combative versus preventive** (Matheny et al., 1986). From the first perspective, both have positive and negative aspects. When avoidance is used to minimize exposure to a stressor (e.g., staying clear of a bee’s nest), this is considered effective. When avoidance per-

petuates the stressor (e.g., not talking to your boss about his sexual advances), then this is considered ineffective. Likewise, to confront a stressor takes courage, but there is a world of difference between diplomacy and vigilanism. Again, coping styles seem to be closely tied to personality. Matheny's dichotomy highlights the positive aspects of each style. The combative style, like confrontation, is considered to be a physical reaction or response, whereas preventive coping, initially, is more cognitive in nature, with the intent to buffer oneself against the impending stress. Taylor (2005) notes that coping styles may be a direct result of the strength of available resources. For instance, a wealthy person with many social contacts may rely more on external resources, whereas a person without these is going to have to access inner resources to deal with his or her problems, or suffer the consequences. As is typical with research, once a concept is well tested, studies then begin to investigate these models with specific populations of people, such as the elderly and coping (Krause, 2007), medical students and coping (Dunn et al., 2008), and fourth-graders' coping skills with anger (Rice et al., 2008).

Successful coping strategies to deal with the cause of perceived stressors involve four basic components. The first is an **increased awareness** of the problem: a clear focus and full perspective on the situation at hand. By their very nature, stressors tend to encourage a myopic view, distorting both focus and perspective. A good coping strategy will begin to remove the blinders to the true nature of the problem and open your view to a host of possibilities. Second, effective coping strategies involve some aspect of **information processing**. The dynamics of information processing include adding, subtracting, changing, and manipulating sensory input to deactivate the perception of the stressor before physical damage occurs. Lazarus referred to this as secondary appraisal. Information processing also includes assessing all available resources that could be used in *peaceful confrontation*. Third, the result of information processing will most likely include a new series of actions, or **modified behaviors**, which, combined with the new cognitive approach, ambush the stressor from all sides. The fourth and perhaps most important component is **peaceful resolution**. For a coping strategy to be effective, it must work toward a satisfactory resolution. If closure is not successfully brought to the stressor at hand, then the coping technique is less than effective. The following equation highlights the concepts of effective coping strategies:

Effective coping strategies = Increased awareness + Information processing + Modified behavior + Peaceful resolution

Although some coping strategies may seem appropriate for a particular situation, they might fail to achieve a peaceful resolution, in which case a new strategy should be chosen. Coping strategies can be either positive or negative. Positive coping techniques are those that prove effective in satisfactorily dealing with stress, based on the accomplishment of a peaceful resolution. This is the goal of all effective coping strategies: not merely to survive, but to thrive in the face of adversity. Negative coping strategies, on the other hand, provide no enlightened resolution. Instead, they perpetuate perceptions of stress and further ineffective responses in a vicious circle that may never be broken or intercepted. Some examples of negative coping strategies are avoidance of the problem or inhibition of action, victimization, emotional immobility (worrying), hostile aggression, and self-destructive addictive behaviors (e.g., drinking, drugs, food binging).

Is there a relationship between the use of effective coping strategies and personality? Some researchers think so. People who exhibit Type A behaviors, codependent behaviors, and helpless-hopeless behaviors are more likely to employ a negative coping style and claim victimization by their stressors. People who exhibit components of a hardy personality, self-actualization, or sensation seeking (Type R) are more likely to take calculated risks, confront rather than avoid problems, and see their stressors through to peaceful resolution. More recently, as the secrets of split-brain functions have been revealed, scholars and practitioners in the field of stress management and psychotherapy are recognizing the importance of unifying the efforts of the right and left brains to effectively deal with stress. This means that

Increased awareness: The first step of an effective coping technique when one becomes more aware of the situation.

Information processing: The second step of an effective coping technique when one works toward resolution of the problem.

Modified behaviors: The third step of an effective coping technique when one works toward a sense of resolution.

Peaceful resolution: The ultimate goal of any effective coping technique allowing one to move on with life.

some coping techniques that access different cognitive functions are most effective when employed together, such as creative problem solving combined with communication skills.

Researchers agree there are literally hundreds of coping strategies. Each coping strategy can be used alone, but quite often several are used together for a stronger defense against the effects of perceived stress. And there is a host of positive coping techniques from which to choose. Those strategies that emphasize increased awareness and information processing include journal writing, art therapy, cognitive restructuring, humor therapy, dream therapy, and creative problem solving. Coping skills emphasizing a course of action or behavior change include time management, assertiveness training, social orchestration, and communication skills. Like learning to use a computer or improving your tennis game, coping techniques are skills, and their effectiveness increases with practice. It is important to remember that no coping technique will work as a defense against all perceived stress. This is why it is important to have as wide an assortment to choose from as possible; it will make the path of resolution easier to travel. You may notice that some coping techniques, as well as relaxation techniques, have the word *therapy* attached to them. This word may connote clinical treatment for a physical or emotional problem to you, but the term is used here as an encouragement, and a reminder that each person must take an active role in his or her own well-being.



FIGURE 1

Survivors of the 2007 California wildfires demonstrated an array of essential coping skills to help deal successfully with this life-changing event. Their lives offer us tremendous examples of ways in which to work toward a peaceful resolution of stress.

Expecting the Unexpected

Amid the countless tragedies and needless deaths of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (and other calamities equally intense), there have been remarkable, heroic survival stories and wonderful examples of calm bravery and clever ingenuity, all of which underscore the importance of putting effective coping strategies to work under the most horrific of conditions. In essence, these essential coping skills are nothing less than survival skills: ones we must learn to adopt and employ to deal with the mundane to the most inconceivable events that await us. Information seeking, assertiveness (in the form of leadership), creative problem solving, reframing, prayer, social orchestration, communication skills, acceptance, and, where appropriate, comic relief are used time and time again, proving themselves worthy of their merits. It behooves us to not only learn these coping skills but to practice them so that we can rise to our highest human potential no matter the circumstances we encounter.

Lessons learned in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina revealed that rapid change can happen to anyone—at any time. The 2007 California wildfires that destroyed several thousand homes and buildings from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border and resulted in the evacuation of more than half a million people in southern California brought this message home once again.

(**FIG. 1**) Whether it's a personal crisis or a global disaster of biblical proportions, there are two ways to deal with stress: The first is to see yourself as a victim. The second is to see yourself as the victor. Those who claim victimization tend to act out with a host of stress-prone personality traits (Chapter 6) to reinforce feelings and attitudes of victim consciousness. Conversely, those who take the high road with a conscious choice to rise above the problems they face tend to use effective coping techniques to become the victor over their stress rather than the victim of it. Homeowners interviewed after the devastating California fires often showed the epitome of hardiness by stating that they would return to the rubble and start rebuilding.

If history is any indication of the future, this we surely know: There will be more floods, fires, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, and senseless acts of violence in the coming years. In each case there will be one of two ways to turn: victim or victor. We, too, can learn from the experiences of those who weathered through the turbulent times of Hurricane Katrina, the southern

California fires, and other equally devastating life transitions that happen nearly each and every day. The choice is ours.

Conclusion

It would be impossible to cover all of the positive coping techniques in this book. But the following chapters cover some of the more common and effective strategies offering assistance to the monumental stressors and daily hassles we encounter. The format of the chapters is the same throughout Part 3. First, the elements of the specific coping technique are introduced and defined, followed by a brief historical account where applicable. Then, a description of positive psychological (and physiological) effects are highlighted, and each chapter concludes with a list of steps on how to initiate the coping mechanism as a viable technique in your own strategy for stress reduction. (An exception is Chapter 13, “Creative Problem Solving,” which deviates a bit from this format in a creative style all its own.)

You may notice a crossover effect with some coping strategies; that is, some designed specifically to deal with the causes of stress also seem to promote the relaxation response. Conversely, some relaxation techniques can

augment or even become coping mechanisms in their own right. This is no coincidence because the mind and body can no longer be viewed as two separate entities. Humor therapy and laughter, once thought to be defense mechanisms, are now proven to produce a physiological homeostatic effect that strengthens the integrity of the immune system (as explained in Chapter 12). In some people, habitual practice of endurance exercise triggers a switch to include right-brain cognitive functions, thus augmenting awareness and information-processing abilities. In fact, there can be many crossover effects. In the organization of this book, however, I designated each technique as either primarily a coping skill or primarily a relaxation technique and placed it according to its greatest influence on either resolving the cause of stress or intercepting the stress response.

I recommend that you try all the following coping techniques when and where appropriate. Each technique has its particular strength. You may find many of these suitable to your own current management style. As time moves on and the effectiveness of some techniques diminishes, you may want to reread some of the chapters to reacquaint yourself with other coping techniques that may become more suitable later on in your journey through life.



Chapter 8

Cognitive Restructuring: Reframing

Everything can be taken away from man but one thing—the last human freedom, to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.
—Viktor Frankl

Abounced check. The roommate from hell. A flat tire. Alcoholic parents. Stressors come in all shapes, sizes, and degrees of intensity. Scholars concur that it is not the circumstance that is stressful, but the *perception* or interpretation of the circumstance. We now know that if the perception is negative, it can become both a mental and physical liability. Whatever the event, perceptions can become distorted and magnified entirely out of proportion to their seriousness. This is referred to as **cognitive distortion** (mole hills into mountains), and it turns everyday problems into gigantic monsters. Attempts have been made to deal with the “stress monster” from all angles, including decreasing or manipulating sensory information and teaching people to control the stress response by employing various relaxation techniques. Perhaps the coping skill most advocated—which goes right to the heart of the matter but is initially very difficult to employ—is favorably altering the stressful perception of the circumstance that has precipitated feelings of anger and/or fear. This alteration in perception is made through changes in cognition. Cognition is the mental process that includes an assortment of thinking and reasoning skills. Across the country, this coping technique goes by several names: cognitive restructuring, cognitive reappraisal, cognitive relabeling, cognitive reframing, cognitive therapy, and attitude adjustment. Despite the variations, they all suggest the same approach: to favorably alter the current mind frame to a less threatening perception, from a negative, self-defeating attitude to a positive one, which may then allow the initiation of the steps toward a peaceful resolution.

Cognitive distortion: Distorting a situation beyond how bad it actually is.

Rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT):

Developed by Albert Ellis as a means to help people cope with anxiety by changing the perceptions associated with the stressor.

Cognitive restructuring: A coping technique; substituting negative, self-defeating thoughts with positive, affirming thoughts that change perceptions of stressors from threatening to nonthreatening.

Information-processing model: A model that reveals how we potentially perceive sensory information, for better or worse.

The seeds of cognitive therapy took root in 1962 with the work of Albert Ellis in what he referred to as **rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT)**. The premise of Ellis’s work was that stress-related behaviors are initiated by perceptions and that these self-defeating *perceptions* can be changed. He explained that all stimuli sent to the brain go through a process of interpretation. When enough stimulation is interpreted as threatening, it becomes a critical mass of negative thought. Ellis was of the opinion that once a critical mass of perceived stress arises, it dims the ability to think rationally. As a result, a self-defeating attitude becomes reinforced day after day, year after year, through internal dialogue that is scripted by the tone of these irrational thought processes. Ellis became convinced that people could be educated and trained to favorably alter negative or stress-related perceptions (irrational thoughts) into positive attitudes, which in turn would decrease the intensity of perceived stress. In a 2008 news briefing, author J.K. Rowling of the *Harry Potter* series shared publicly her experience with depression and thoughts of suicide, and she credited the use of REBT as what pulled her though her darkest hour. The term **cognitive restructuring** was coined by Meichenbaum in 1975 to describe a coping technique for patients diagnosed with stress-related disorders. This coping style aimed to modify internal self-dialogue by tuning into the conversation within the mind. The practice of cognitive restructuring was an important step in what Meichenbaum referred to as stress inoculation, a process to build up positive thoughts when negatively perceived events are encountered. Work by Bandura in 1977 and Beck in 1976 also supported the concept of cognitive change of perceptions as a means to effectively deal with stress. To understand how stimuli are interpreted and how interpreted thoughts are structured from stimuli, let us take a closer look at how the human thought process works.

A Thinking-Process Model

The human mind is an extremely complex phenomenon, and one that we are just beginning to comprehend. Scholars in the discipline of cognitive science have created a theory, the **information-processing model**, to attempt to explain exactly how the mind processes information (FIG. 8.1). This theory suggests that sensory input (e.g., a flashing blue light in your rearview mirror), sensory manipulation (e.g., danger, speeding violation, slow down, court hearing), and cognitive/behavioral output (e.g., foot on the brake, pull over to the side of the

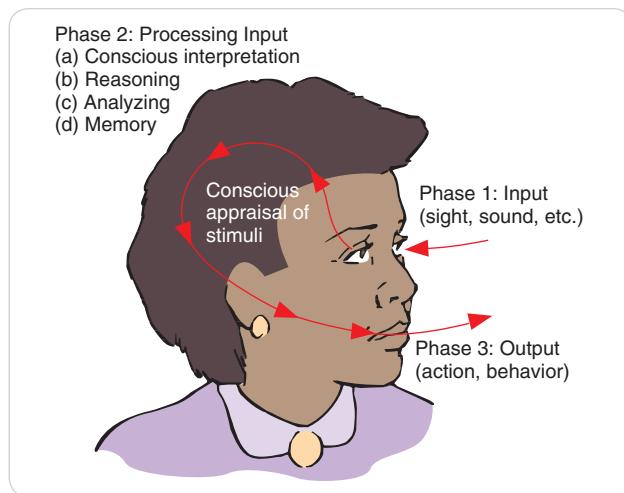


FIGURE 8.1

The information-processing model of human thought.

road, pray), as well as a feedback system to correct or refine this mechanism (e.g., several officers going to the scene of an accident, calm down), are synthesized to produce a linear progression of mental processes. Each cognitive deciphering process begins with an *interpretation* of the stimulus that comes into any of the five (possibly six) senses to determine its threat potential. In simple terms, stimuli can be interpreted as either threats or non-threats. Resulting attitudes can be labeled in one of the three ways: (1) defensive (negative), (2) neutral (innocuous), or (3) offensive (positive). Fragments of information, as well as memories of previous similar experiences, are then manipulated in a process that results in the accessing and utilization of either left- (analytical) or right- (receptive) brain cognitive functions, or a combination of both. (For a more detailed explanation, see Chapter 18.) In the final outcome, perceptions and attitudes are by-products of the interpretation of all sensory information. It is both the manipulation of stimuli and the subsequent interpretation process that are targeted in cognitive restructuring to convert negative thoughts into neutral or positive ones.

The purpose of cognitive restructuring is to widen one's conscious perspective and thus allow room for a change in perception. The ability to expand perception is not merely a poetic expression. Research by optometrist Jacob Liberman (1991) shows that an individual's perceptual field of vision actually constricts under stress. Thus, one literally sees less than the whole picture. Data analysis by Anderson and Williams (1989) corroborates this evidence, showing a causal relationship between

perceived stress and loss of peripheral field of vision. As Liberman points out, stress forces one to see through a small hole rather than view the entire field of vision or whole picture.

Unconsciously, many people use a nonproductive coping technique called rationalization that they think is one and the same as cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring should not be confused with this defense mechanism. Rationalization is making excuses, blaming, and shifting responsibility away from oneself toward someone or something else. Freud (Chapter 4) referred to this as denial of reality. Cognitive restructuring, on the other hand, involves assuming responsibility, facing the reality of a situation, and taking the offensive to resolve the issues causing stress. Creating and adopting a positive mind frame takes some work. People often find it simpler to avoid this responsibility and be consumed by their own negative thinking styles, which produce a preponderance of toxic thoughts.

Two Minds Are Better Than One

A documentary video called *The Secret* made international headlines in 2007 on the *Oprah* show and *Larry King Live*. Using the Power of Attraction as its premise, several popular self-help gurus spoke to the nature of achieving ultimate goals of wealth and relationships merely by thinking positive about these ideals. Countless examples were reenacted to illustrate the abundance of the universe and the power of intention. If they could do it, surely you could, too! The problem is . . . it's not this simple.

What the makers of the video failed to include (although this may be revealed in subsequent sequels) is the power of ego-driven thoughts from the subconscious mind (a portion of the unconscious mind). So much of our behavior (some experts think all of it) is directed by our unconscious minds. Perhaps this concept is best illustrated by the famous actor Buster Keaton (and imitated by Johnny Depp in the movie *Benny and Joon*) who tries in vain to pick up his hat but repeatedly seems to kick it out of his reach before he can grab it. If the conscious mind and the unconscious minds are not acting together, all the intentions and reframing in the world aren't going to help. In the field of psychology this is known as the "unconscious resistance," a self-sabotaging effect that undermines the conscious mind's best efforts to make (positive) things happen. It is the foundation of the negative self-fulfilling prophecy. Coaches see this all the time with promising athletes. Physicians see this in

many of their patients too, specifically with patients who say they want to be healed yet have too much of their identity wrapped up in the disease to leave it behind. Here is another common example: Consciously, you want to find that perfect person to go out with (or marry) and you set your intention. Consciously, you believe you think you are attracting your soul mate. But nothing happens. Perhaps the reason why is because unconsciously you like your carefree lifestyle and really don't want to change. Perhaps unconsciously, you still believe that you are not worthy of a quality relationship. Regardless of the reason, some belief system (usually an ego, fear-based one) hidden in the depths of the unconscious mind is holding on to old ways, thus negating the law of attraction to its highest potential.

Experts suggest that these old beliefs and perceptions are learned and adopted early in life (ages 2–6) when the child's brain, like a sponge, soaks up sensory stimuli from the child's environment (e.g., parents, teachers, siblings). As the child matures into adulthood, behavior is directed by these ingrained, subconscious thought patterns and beliefs. Until they are erased and replaced with new beliefs and perceptions, not much will change.

To use an apt metaphor, the mind is like a radio playing music from two stations (the conscious and the unconscious), but the station you want to hear is being drowned out by the one you don't want to hear. In the case of the radio, fine-tuning is in order. In the case of the mind, it is coming to terms with old, fear-based thought patterns that tend to hold us back from reaching our highest potential. If you have doubts as to the power of the unconscious mind's influence, listen to the choice of your words spoken. More than just Freudian slips, our choice of words often reveals the ego's hidden agenda.

Experts in the field of psychology suggest that the secret behind *The Secret* is combining the powers of the conscious and subconscious minds to achieve one's goals and aspirations (Murphy, 2008; Hari, 2005). Bruce Lipton (Chapter 3) speaks of this with regard to the health and healing process in which we need to erase the subconscious tapes and rerecord new thoughts to help navigate the intended direction of our lives. Some people erase and rewrite these tapes through hypnosis.

Toxic thoughts: Repeated negative thought processing that tends to pollute our view of our lives and ourselves.

Others do reprogram themselves by listening to subliminal CDs. Consciously, it can be done through neurolinguistic programming (NLP). Still others do it in a relaxed state through meditation and guided mental imagery. So, here is a question for you: What goals and aspirations do you have that are sabotaged by early childhood programming (e.g., trust issues, self-esteem issues, confidence, perceptions of leisure, money, or relationships)? How can you reprogram new (positive) thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of yourself that can steer you in the direction and to the destination you wish to go? When you can answer these questions you have really discovered "the secret."

Toxic Thoughts

Negative perceptions are often the result of low self-esteem. They also perpetuate it by suppressing or obliterating feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance. It has been suggested (Canfield, 1988; Ingerman, 2007) that toxic thoughts originate from repeated exposure to feelings of shame and guilt in early childhood. Canfield cites a study conducted at the University of Iowa where parent-child interactions were observed over a period of several days. Results revealed that, on average, there were 400 negative comments for every positive one spoken to the child. It was concluded that negative thoughts are actually a conditioned (learned) response that is then carried into adulthood. Catastrophic thoughts are also reinforced in the messages we receive from the headlines—rarely does a human interest story beat a cataclysmic event on the six o'clock news. Disasters, world problems, and crimes permeate the news, which tends to condition our thinking toward the negative side of things. John-Roger even argues that negative thinking has an addictive quality to it.

The term **toxic thoughts** was coined in the early 1980s by several psychologists to educate their clients about the dangers of negative thinking. Pessimism, a personality trait heavily grounded in negativism, promotes toxic thoughts. To demonstrate just how destructive they could be, Dr. Leslie Kaymen conducted a study at the University of Pennsylvania in 1989 to determine the physiological responses to stress between individuals who identified themselves (through a psychological survey) as either optimists or pessimists. All subjects were exposed to minute doses of pathogens (tetanus, mumps, and yeast), which, when placed on the skin, would indicate their stress-tolerance levels. Subjects were then



Stress with a Human Face

A tribute to Allison Fisher: In the spring of 1991, I had a remarkable student named Allison Fisher. Allison was bright, energetic, and beaming with success. At the midpoint of each semester, I invite my students to do an exercise called "Confrontation of a Stressor." I believe that the concepts of stress management remain only concepts if they are not practiced outside the classroom. In other words, to know and not to do is not to know. In this exercise students are asked to pick one of their top three stressors and are given two weeks to resolve it—with the condition that they must enter the classroom with no bruises or broken bones. Although students are asked to write up this assignment, on the day it's due we all sit in a circle with the lights down low and, one by one, under an agreement of confidentiality, we share our stories. This particular semester Allison went first.

"My stressor is breast cancer; it runs in the family," she explained. "My mother has had it—my aunt and my grandmother, too. For many years I have been scared of breast cancer, because I know I am at risk. Upon hearing this assignment, I decided it was time to go for a mammogram. I was extremely nervous, but last week I made an appointment with my physician."

The class was silent, all eyes fixed on Allison. With an air of confidence, she concluded her story with a smile: "I am happy to say that the test was negative!"

As a graduating senior with a major in broadcast journalism, Allison was looking forward to a promising broadcasting career. Less than a month after her graduation, she found herself working for a PBS affiliate. Within a year's time, she took a job with Voice of America and then moved to Los Angeles to start a highly coveted job as an anchor/

divided by attitude into two groups, and both groups were given an impossible task to complete in a brief time period. While the pessimists quickly gave up, the optimists continued until the last possible moment. Days later, the PNI response (skin rashes) of the pessimists was significantly greater than that of the optimists. These results revealed that an optimistic attitude was associated with sound physical health, whereas a negative attitude perpetuated the mental and physical stress response. In short, negative thoughts can have a toxic effect on the body. Kaymen's data analysis confirms the

reporter for *Channel One*, a cable program for high school youth. Several years later our paths would cross again, when I found myself in Los Angeles for a book signing. We agreed to meet for lunch the next day. At that time, Allison confided in me that she was a cancer survivor.

To be a cancer survivor means you confront death face to face. You challenge it with a mindset rather than run from it with a defeatist attitude. Being a survivor means you adopt an attitude of realistic optimism. You acknowledge the problems at hand, but you focus on the positive. You live life in the present moment rather than reliving the past or worrying about what the future may hold. You break through the fear of dying, the fear of the unknown, and the fear of isolation, and you come through on the other side as a victor, not a victim—what Joseph Campbell called the hero of the hero's journey.

"I had my first mastectomy over a year ago, my second one several months ago. The bad news is that the cancer is back and this time it has spread to my lungs. I'm okay, though," Allison said confidently. Then Allison shared with me theories and concepts that I had taught her as a student—but now she was teaching me insights and wisdom known only from the perspective of a survivor.

"It's all about attitude. I'm not sure how much time I have to live now, but I don't have time for toxic thoughts, or the fear of what might happen. I chose to look at the bright side of life, because I discovered long ago that that's all that really matters. I don't know if I will be cured of my cancer, but I can tell you right now, I am healed of my disease, because I am at peace, and there is no greater feeling than this."

Allison Fisher crossed the threshold of heaven on March 9, 1998 (www.allisonfisherfund.org).

hypothesis that negative thinking can suppress the immune system.

In an updated version of Kaymen's work, Andrew Steptoe and colleagues (2008) designed a study with nearly 3,000 subjects to examine the biological links of positive thoughts (mood). Results revealed that both men and women who reported experiencing a happy mood had lower cortisol levels, suggesting that happiness and optimism reduce biological vulnerability. Moreover, female subjects indicated significant decreased amounts

of two proteins (C-reactive protein and interleukin 6) that are associated with inflammation, a factor linked with heart disease and cancer. Steptoe concluded that mood states are not merely hereditary, but depend on social relationships and life purpose.

Attitude has also been observed to be a determining factor in the longevity of breast cancer patients. A study by Pettingale and colleagues in 1985 revealed that patients with a “fighting spirit” were more likely to survive 5 years than were those with a stoic nature or those who appeared to give in and give up. The work done by Dr. Bernie Siegel is also based on the supposition that positive thoughts can and do have a positive effect on the body. The organization of a cancer-support group called ECaP was developed for what Siegel called the “exceptional cancer patient,” one who employs hope, love, faith, and even humor to deal with his or her illness. Siegel was quick to point out that death is the final outcome for everyone; yet from his experience, he observed that a positive attitude made the transition much easier regardless of when death occurs.

Is it really possible to change the programming in our minds to break the habit of negative thinking? According to Richard Bandler and John Grinder (Andreas and Faulkven, 1994), the answer is a definitive yes! Years ago, Bandler, a psychologist, and Grinder, a linguist, combined their efforts to create and teach the theory and application of changing our mental language. They called it **neurolinguistic programming (NLP)**. The premise of NLP is based on the concept of uncovering hidden grammar woven in the unconscious and conscious thoughts of our vernacular, systematically removing these expressions as we think or speak, and learning to develop a language of affirmative thoughts to positively change the direction of our lives. NLP is an empowering skill to reprogram the software of human linguistics so that our human energies can be focused in the direction of our highest human potential or human excellence. Part selective awareness, part self-hypnosis, the dynamics of NLP work to eliminate the self-defeating thoughts that inhibit our energies and keep us from reaching our goals. Over the years, NLP has proven quite successful and is used by athletes, actors,

Neurolinguistic programming (NLP): A program designed to look at how our thoughts control our language and how our language influences our behavior.

Victimization: A mindset of continually seeing yourself as a victim.

executives, business associates, lawyers, and professionals from all walks of life. By encouraging reprogramming and eliminating from daily vernacular words, phrases, and thoughts that reinforce stress-prone behaviors, NLP helps one to unlearn old thoughts and learn a new approach toward optimal excellence. NLP Comprehensive, based in Boulder, Colorado, offers seminars and workshops in the dynamics of NLP. Understanding that one cannot change behaviors quickly as a result of a one- or two-day workshop, the NLP training coaches participants through a 21-day Achievement Program to help decondition and reprogram the human thought process.

Far more than lauding creative and optimistic thinking styles, Western culture rewards and praises critical thinking, the ability to judge and analyze situations, breaking them down into smaller, more manageable parts. In theory, when problems are dismantled into smaller pieces, they are easier to understand. Under stress, an emotional side effect of critical thinking is that smaller pieces of stressful stimuli may be considered less threatening to the ego and thus help to minimize emotional pain. In practice, though, when critical thought processes are directed toward the self, judgmental and analytical thoughts often nurture a negative perspective about yourself, making you more vulnerable to the perceptions of stress. When threatened, critical thought can become a defensive weapon to protect the components of your identity. In addition to critical thinking, a common mental attitude seen in American culture is **victimization**. Victimization is a perceptual attitude wherein one feels specifically targeted by events or circumstances and has no choice but to suffer the consequences. Individuals who see themselves as victims often seek pity and sympathy from their friends as a means of coping with the stressors at hand. Through the sympathy of others, they validate their own perceptions of personal violation. People who express feelings of victimization apply what psychologists refer to as attribution theory, blaming other people or factors for perceived injustices (Taylor, 2006).

The concept of victimization is closely associated with Rotter’s concept of locus of control, where people who feel violated by stressors are more greatly influenced by external sources than by internal strength and inspiration. Here is a simple test to detect use of the victimization attitude: During the next casual conversation you encounter, listen objectively to what is said and notice how often people appear to fall victim to their bosses, spouses, roommates, kids, traffic, the weather, or any other circumstance in the vicinity. Next, listen

BOX 8.1

Cognitive Distortions: Stop the Insanity!

The human mind can be our greatest asset or our worst liability. Under the influence of the ego, the mind becomes misguided and heads down a path of self-sabotage. All of this is exacerbated in times of stress. This behavior in psychological circles is known as *cognitive distortion*. It can be said that cognitive distortions are spin-offs of Freud's defense mechanisms. More than the ego's intent to decrease pain or increase pleasure, over time these distortions become a habitual mindset that can sabotage our best efforts. David Burns writes in great detail about this phenomenon in *The Feeling Good*

- 1. All-or-None Thinking:** There is only good or bad, black or white, no middle ground (e.g., there is only *one way* to solve this problem).
- 2. Overgeneralization:** One single negative circumstance manifests into a life pattern (e.g., A flat tire elicits the comment, "This always happens to me!").
- 3. Mental filter:** A solitary negative detail becomes the focus of your attention, obscuring the bigger picture (e.g., an hour drive is tainted by one driver early on who cut you off).
- 4. Disqualifying the positive:** A negative belief pattern that eclipses positive circumstances, reducing any that surface as insignificant all the while focusing on the negative.
- 5. Jumping to conclusions:** Affirming a negative interpretation without supporting facts often by insisting on a strong intuitive feel, which is little more than projection of one's own feelings.

objectively to how you present your perceptions to others when you describe your own levels of stress. Do you consciously or unconsciously label yourself as a victim? Many people take great comfort in being a victim because it fulfills an immediate need to feel needed, as well as the instant gratification of sympathy and pity. People who take on the role of one of life's victims (a characteristic of codependency) often see themselves as martyrs. This is a socially rewarding role, so they find it difficult to change their perceptions.

Can optimism be learned? According to Martin Seligman the answer is yes! In his much-acclaimed book, *Learned Optimism*, Seligman states that we are most likely to learn

Handbook where he describes the ten distinct styles of cognitive distortion that perpetuate perceptions of stress. Mental thought processes and the behaviors they elicit cannot be changed until they can first be identified. (It should be noted that the benefit of meditation mentioned in Chapter 18 is to become the observer of your thoughts.) As you read through this list, ask yourself if one or more styles sound all too familiar to your way of stress-based thinking. If you don't see these in yourself, ask a trusted friend to give you feedback.

- 6. Magnification:** The classic story of making a mountain out of a mole hill, by exaggerating facts with the end result in a myopic vision of the situation and thus missing the big picture.
- 7. Emotional reasoning:** Living the assumption that one's negative emotions are a true reflection of how things really are.
- 8. Should statements:** A thought process influenced by a "rewards and punishment" mentality in which one motivates oneself with the words *should*, *must*, *ought*. This behavior often results in feelings of guilt or resentment toward others.
- 9. Labeling and mislabeling:** Considered an extreme form of overgeneralization, statements such as "I'm a loser," or "He's always a jerk," are examples, in which mislabeling involves words that are highly charged or emotionally loaded.
- 10. Personalization:** Taking credit or blame for events that you had little or nothing to do with.

the traits of optimism or pessimism from our parents, but even if the environment in which we were raised was a negative one, we can cultivate the aspect of optimistic thinking and gravitate toward a positive approach to life. Seligman studied several nationally ranked swimmers prior to the 1988 Olympics and soon realized that optimism is not only an inherent trait, but one that can be augmented or learned. Using a term he coined, **flexible optimism**, Seligman (Chapter 4) states that although the

Flexible optimism: A term coined by Seligman to convey that we can all harness the power of optimism into positive thinking.

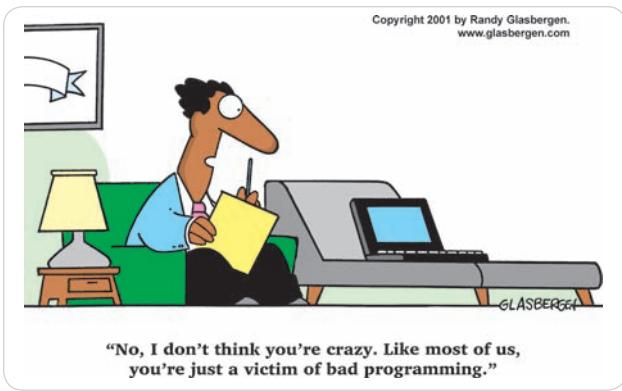


FIGURE 8.2 (©1999 Randy Glasbergen. www.glasbergen.com.)

trait of optimism is not a panacea for the bumps in the road of life, we can harness the power of positive thinking to help us achieve our goals and promote a greater state of health and well-being (FIG. 8.2▲).

The dialogue mentioned earlier that seems to run non-stop in our minds is referred to as **self-talk**, and it has been observed that the preponderance of this is negative self-thoughts. Schafer (1999) has identified several types

Self-talk: The perpetual conversation heard in the mind, usually negative and coming from the critical (ego), which rarely has anything good to say.

Pessimism: Looking at the worst of every situation.

Catastrophizing: Making the worst out of every situation.

Blaming: Shifting the responsibility of a problem away from yourself.

Perfectionism: Perpetually imposing above-human standards on oneself.

Polarized thinking: A condition where things are always viewed in extremes, either extremely good or horribly bad.

Should-ing: Reprimanding yourself for things you "should" have done.

Magnifying: A term to describe blowing things out of proportion.

Thought stopping: A coping technique where one consciously stops the run of negative thoughts going through one's head.

Brief grief: A concept that suggests that some grieving is appropriate and healthy, versus unhealthy, prolonged grieving.

of negative self-talk thinking patterns that produce and/or perpetuate the toxic-thought process. He lists them in the following categories: **pessimism**, or looking at the worst of almost every situation; **catastrophizing**, making the worst of a situation; **blaming**, shifting the responsibility for circumstances to someone other than yourself; **perfectionism**, imposing above-human standards on yourself; **polarized thinking**, where everything is seen as an extreme (good versus bad) and there is no middle ground; **should-ing**, reprimanding yourself for things you should have done; and **magnifying**, blowing problems out of proportion.

One technique to convert negative thoughts to neutral thoughts, similar to Ellis's REBT, is called **thought stopping**. When you catch yourself thinking negatively, you interrupt the flow of consciousness and say to yourself, "Stop this thought." With practice, thought stopping can help to disarm your negative critic and give balance to your emotional thoughts.

As you can see, toxic thoughts are very real. Over time, these can have consequential effects on the body as well. But stimulation received by the brain is open to reinterpretation, and perceptions can change. Metaphorically speaking, some people appreciate the beauty of the rose petals, some people sense the pain of the thorns. Cognitive restructuring is a way to focus on the rose petals. During World War II, a song by Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen hit the air waves and quickly became a national hit. It was called "Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative," and this song was one of many credited with helping the nation deal with the consequences of war.

The Choice to Choose Our Thoughts

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl credited his survival in Auschwitz to his ability to find meaning in his suffering, a meaning that strengthened his will-power and choice of attitude. Frankl noted that despite the fact that prisoners were stripped of all their material possessions and many essential human rights, the one thing concentration camp officials could not take away was the ability of prisoners to choose their perceptions of their circumstances.

One concept that evolved from Frankl's theory of logotherapy is **brief grief**, which means acknowledging and mourning an unmet expectation but not prolonging the grieving process beyond a reasonable period of time. Death-education experts suggest there are three basic



FIGURE 8.3

In this photo, a recording of opera singer Luciano Pavarotti is projected into a small sample of water. The wave trains in the water reveal the delicate harmonic pattern of the audio frequencies of his voice. From this, and many similar images, one can begin to appreciate the impact (either harmonious or discordant) that spoken words and even our thoughts—which are more subtle forms of vibration—can have on our bodies, which are comprised mostly of water. Source: © 2002 Alexander Lauterwasser. Reprinted with permission from *Water Sound Images*. © 2005 MACROmedia Publishing, Newmarket, NH. www.cymaticsource.com.

stages of grief: shock (denial), anger (depression), and understanding (acceptance). The time for each stage will vary depending on the person as well as the magnitude of loss. Feelings of loss, sadness, anger, pain, and fear are all natural, but not for prolonged periods of time. To deny these feelings is unhealthy, just as it is abnormal to prolong these feelings beyond their purpose. Brief grief is a strategy to allocate the correct amount of time to the grieving process (finding meaning in the suffering) and then move on to personal resolution and growth. When many people are introduced to the concept of cognitive restructuring, they incorrectly sense they must adopt a “Pollyanna” or cheerful attitude and that grief is not an appropriate sensation to acknowledge. As a result, they reject the entire idea of looking at the “brighter side” of a situation. Until feelings of suffering, no matter how big or small, are brought to awareness, it will be difficult to adopt a new

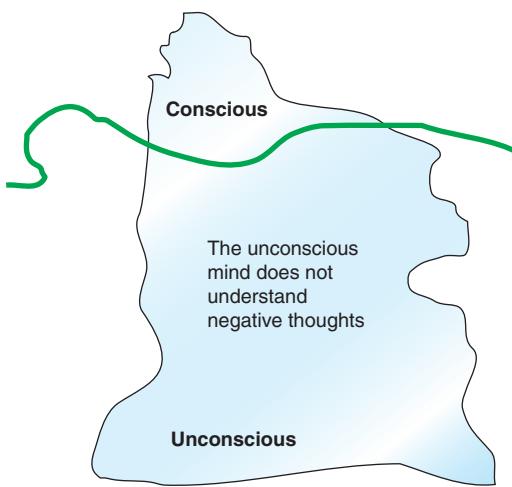
frame of mind. Frankl wrote that even in suffering there can be tragic optimism; the discovery of light-hearted moments and personal meaning in the saddest of times. Even in the death-grip of the concentration camp, Frankl found it possible to laugh at many of life’s absurdities. Moments like these helped him get through his ordeal.

In her classic book *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind*, Borysenko refers to the preponderance of negative thoughts as **awfulizing**. The process of awfulizing consists of judgmental and analytical thoughts that greatly narrow one’s perspective and put our mental processes into a shallow, one-track mode. The result is what Borysenko calls regressive coping, a nonproductive coping skill. Awfulizing creates worst-case scenarios for every situation. Although it is good to prepare for all possibilities, a worst-case scenario is only one in a wide spectrum of possibilities.

Psychologists use the term *self-fulfilling prophecy* to describe the link between perceptions/beliefs and their related behaviors. The self-fulfilling prophecy can work to one’s advantage as well as one’s disadvantage. Sports events are filled with stories of athletes who believed they were winners and proved that indeed they were. In highly competitive events like the Olympics, the difference between a gold medal and a silver or bronze is not only a superlative athletic body, but an accompanying winning attitude. Many an athlete has lost an event, and thus failed to meet an expectation, because a seed of self-doubt took root somewhere between the starting block and the finish line. Individuals who harbor negative thoughts about themselves or the situations they encounter promote behaviors generated by these perceptions. The result can be a negative cycle that sets the stage for recurring stressful perceptions and what appears to be a stagnant black cloud over one’s head; this is the fulfillment of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

An example of this concept occurred in the 1990 hit movie *Pretty Woman*, when actress Julia Roberts, in the role of a Hollywood hooker, described to actor Richard Gere how she fell into her “career rut.” She stated that while growing up she received a lot of negative feedback from her parents and peers, and that these were so much easier to believe, eroding her self-esteem. Another example is John

Awfulizing: A mindset where one tends to see (or hope for) the bad in every situation.

**FIGURE 8.4**

According to some experts, the unconscious mind does not

acknowledge negative thoughts. Thoughts such as "I won't get nervous," are interpreted as "I will get nervous," which then often results in nervous behavior. Thinking positively allows the conscious and unconscious minds to work together.

Travolta's character, Edna Turnblad, in the movie *Hairspray*; he plays an overweight woman who refuses to leave the house for many years because of her struggle with obesity. This "underdog" trait in both Roberts's and Travolta's characters was one many audience members could identify with and relate to, perhaps because this attitude is so prevalent in American society.

To break this self-defeating thought cycle, Borysenko suggests employing the concept of **reframing**. Reframing involves looking at the same situation from a new reference or vantage point and finding some good aspect in it. Quite often, stubbornness and the comfort of our own opinions become obstacles to the reframing process. Tools to initiate the process and dismantle the obstacles include the use of humor, positive affirmations, and creativity. Positive affirmations are designed to bolster self-esteem. Confidence building through self-praise in the form of positive feedback tends to counterbalance the voice of the inner critic constantly telling us we're not up to standards when we compare ourselves with others.

Reframing: The name given to the thought process where a negative perception is substituted for a neutral or positive one, without denying the situation.

For example, as a health promotion and stress-management consultant, I meet many people from all parts of the country and all walks of life. During one workshop in 2007, I met a remarkable woman from New Orleans who shared her story of the terrible devastating experience she endured (and continues to endure). My interactions with her and others from New Orleans has allowed me to experience first-hand the expression of the hardy personality, which scholars Kobassa and Maddi describe as the stress-resistant personality. Here is Chris's story:

Chris is a native New Orleanian. It is a city she loves with a passion. From the Dixieland jazz and Mardi Gras to Cajun cooking, New Orleans is loaded with a unique culture all its own. Living on the Gulf Coast, however, has its perils. One is no stranger to hurricanes. They are as much a given, Chris said, as snow storms are in New England. When Katrina was forming in the Gulf of Mexico, Chris and her husband boarded up the house, packed up the car, and headed north to Baton Rouge. With gale forces up to 150 miles per hour, they expected some wind damage to the house, but no one expected the levees to break and cause massive flooding. When they were allowed to go back to their home weeks later, they found water damage clear up to the second floor. Chris lost priceless heirlooms, family portraits, computers, and a manuscript of a book she had been working on for 5 years—practically everything she owned.

To lose everything in a flood can be devastating. How do you rebuild your life at the age 35? Chris said it would have been easy to play the role of victim, but what good would that serve? "You take stock of what you do have and build from there. I may have lost my house and my belongings, but I have my health and my wits. I am resilient. I will get through this, and I am determined not to give up, but to rise above the situation and move on." And that she has. Rebuilding her life and rebuilding her house move on parallel tracks, but within a year's time she regained her sense of balance. She says, "Losing everything is both devastating and liberating. I chose to focus on the positive and that is what has gotten me through the tough times."

One final thought about reframing (**FIG. 8.4**). Borysenko recounts the story of an Australian friend, Ian Gawlen, who was diagnosed with bone cancer and given 2 weeks to live. This man adopted the attitude that if he had 2 weeks to live, he was going to make the best of it. So,

he proposed to his girlfriend, got married, and went off on a honeymoon to the South Pacific. Twenty years later, telling of his experiences to Borysenko, he explained why he was still alive. He discovered for himself that the unconscious mind does not respond to negative thoughts such as “cannot,” “won’t,” and “don’t.” Therefore, rather than telling himself, “I cannot die,” which the unconscious mind would understand as “I can die,” he fed himself a flood of positive thoughts, such as “I will live,” and he has.

Acceptance: An Alternative Choice

Many times we encounter situations we have no ability to control: a manipulative boss, an obnoxious roommate, or a significant personal loss. The reality of the situation is not pleasant in the best of moments. A common theme found among the theories of many psychologists in these cases is **acceptance** (see Chapter 4). The acceptance of situations we have no control over is thought to be paramount as a stress-management strategy, yet it is perhaps the hardest frame of mind to adopt. There is a fine line between control and acceptance. This is the essence of Reinhold Niebuhr’s **Serenity Prayer** for Alcoholics Anonymous: “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Acceptance is not an “overnight sensation,” but rather an attitude that may take several days, weeks, or months to adopt and implement. Often, acceptance involves some aspect of forgiveness (see Chapter 16). The concept of acceptance is very similar to one described by Lao Tzu in the *Tao Teh Ching*. Lao suggested that we move in rhythm with the universal energy, not against it. Denial and manipulation, like spinning car wheels in the dirt, prove fruitless because they go against the rhythm of natural energy. Swimming against the tide can prove exhausting, and sometimes fatal. As the saying goes, sometimes it takes more strength to let go than to hang on. Finally, the use of acceptance or forgiveness appears to be a greater tool in the face of anger than of fear.

There have been hundreds of empirical studies to determine the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring on health-related problems associated with stress. These studies have focused on both mismanaged anger (coping skills for men who battered their wives and children) and anxiety disturbances, most notably substance abuse and eating disorders. The results of these studies indicate that thought processes can be changed to produce a better state of health, although this is not effective in all cases (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2637732/).

Steps to Initiate Cognitive Restructuring

A simple, four-stage process introduced by the field of behavioral medicine by Roger Allen (1983) is a model for implementing changes in lifestyle behaviors through cognition to promote health. The following model explains how cognitive restructuring can be implemented as a coping technique to reduce stress. Initially, this process does not appear to take a lot of time. Thoughts last less than seconds, yet they may resurface often in the course of a day. And the feelings these perceptions generate can last for days and weeks. A closer look suggests that cognitive restructuring is a refinement of the continuous dialogue of the mind, and as a result is, for the most part, an ongoing process. The stages are as follows:

- 1. Awareness.** The awareness process has three steps. In the first, stressors are identified and acknowledged. This may include writing down what is on your mind, including all frustrations and worries. The second step of the awareness process is to identify why these situations and events are stressors and, more specifically, what emotional attitudes are associated with each. In the last step, a primary appraisal is given to the main stressor and acknowledgment of the feelings associated with it. If the original perception appears to be defensive or negative, and inhibits you from resolving this issue, then the next stage is reappraisal.
- 2. Reappraisal of the situation.** A secondary appraisal, or reappraisal, is a “second opinion” you generate in your mind to offer a different (objective) viewpoint. A reappraisal is a new assembly or restructuring of the factors involved, and the openness to accept a new frame of mind. At this stage, a second or third opinion involves choosing a neutral, or preferably positive, stance to favorably deal with the issues at hand. Remember, a new

Acceptance: Often the final outcome of reframing a situation: Accepting that which you cannot change and moving on with your life.

Serenity Prayer: A popular short prayer encouraging acceptance and wisdom, attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr.

BOX 8.2**Optimism and Pessimism**

Over the years I have asked various people for their definitions of optimists and pessimists. All clichés aside, here are some of their answers:

An optimist is someone who:

- sees the positive, even in a bad situation.
- is carefree and seems to enjoy life without reservation.
- doesn't let failure limit his growth as a human being.
- can find redeeming qualities in just about everyone.
- sees lots of clouds in the sky and describes the day as mostly sunny.
- takes personal setbacks as only a temporary inconvenience.
- counts blessings instead of misfortunes.
- loses a job and says there is a better one waiting.
- has the ability to reevaluate her expectations so as not to become depressed when she falls short.
- is a happy person who is nice to be around.
- takes things in stride, is able to enjoy himself, and is able to adapt to the situation at hand.
- sees things clearly, and accepts what is or cannot be changed and doesn't spend time fighting it.
- describes a pessimist as a person with potential.
- continually explores new areas of life and can accept others who are different as unique.
- has enough faith in herself to see her through a crisis.
- on his deathbed, says, "I have no regrets."
- has a sparkle in her eyes and a song in her heart.
- is a person who, upon finding a penny, says, "Gee, look—now I can buy twelve CDs."

A pessimist is someone who:

- expects the worst possible outcome from a situation.
- lacks faith and confidence in himself.
- spends a lot of time worrying about the bad things that *may* happen.
- is a cynic, a person with a perpetual frown on her face.
- cannot accept opposing viewpoints or thoughts as valid.
- enjoys nothing more than finding out that his negative view is right.
- typically prejudges and pigeonholes others before getting to know them.
- delights in Murphy's law that anything can and will go wrong, at the worst possible moment.
- constantly sees obstacles in her way, which are usually put there by herself.
- is a terminally unhappy person.
- gains energy by drawing on a negative perspective.
- claims to be a realist, but he's not fooling anybody.
- sees no silver lining to the clouds, just rain and dampness, which is a reflection of her soul.
- screens his experience through a filter of negative perceptions that continually keep his expectations low so disappointment is tolerable.
- expects very little from other people and treats them accordingly.
- describes an optimist as being out of touch with reality.
- not only has a black cloud of negativity over her head, but created the thunderhead as well.
- faces a major change in life, gives up, and slowly dies inside.

appraisal isn't a rationalization process, nor is it a suppression of emotions. Also, remember exactly what factors you can control and what you must accept as out of your control.

3. *Adoption and substitution.* The most difficult part of any attitudinal change is its implementation. Once a new frame of mind is created, it must then be adopted and implemented. Humans tend to be creatures of habit, finding comfort in known entities even if the "known" is less than desirable.

Pessimism is a defense mechanism, and although it is not seen as enhancing human potential, there is comfort in the familiarity of old ways, and change does not come easily. There are risks involved in change. Substituting a positive attitude for a negative perception may make you feel vulnerable at first, but like other skills that improve with practice, a new comfort will emerge. With cognitive restructuring, the new mind frame must often be substituted when the stress is encountered, and repeated again and again.

4. *Evaluation.* The test of any new venture is to measure its effectiveness. Did this new attitude work? Initially, it may not. The first attempt to shoot a basket through the hoop may result in an embarrassing miss. Evaluate the new attitude and decide how beneficial it was. If it turns out that the new mind frame was a complete failure, return to stage 2 and create a new reappraisal. If the new mind frame worked, repeat this process with stressors that demand a change in attitude to resolve and bring closure.

Some Additional Tips for Cognitive Restructuring

1. *Initiate a relaxation technique to calm your mind.* When a relaxation technique is employed, the mind begins to unwind and consciousness shifts from an analytical mode to one of receptivity. In this unwinding process, unimportant thoughts begging the conscious mind for attention are dismissed, allowing greater receptivity to a wider perspective on the issue at hand. A wider perspective in turn fosters personal enlightenment and opens up room for positive thoughts. (See Chapter 18, “Meditation.”)
2. *Take responsibility for your own thoughts.* In times of stress we may feel victimized. We may also feel that things are out of our control. A way to gain temporary control is to blame others for the personal injustice of the perceived stressor. Blame is associated with guilt and guilt can be a toxic thought. If you find yourself blaming others for events that make you feel victimized, ask yourself how you can turn this blame into personal responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings *without* feeling guilty.
3. *Fine-tune expectations.* It is believed to be easier to refine expectations prior to meeting a stressor than to reframe an attitude after the fact. Many times we walk into situations with preconceived expectations. When these expectations are not met to our satisfaction, then negative feelings are generated. Fine-tuning expectations doesn’t mean abandoning ideals or lowering self-esteem. Rather, it means running your perceptions through a reality check, questioning their validity, and allowing them to match the given situation.

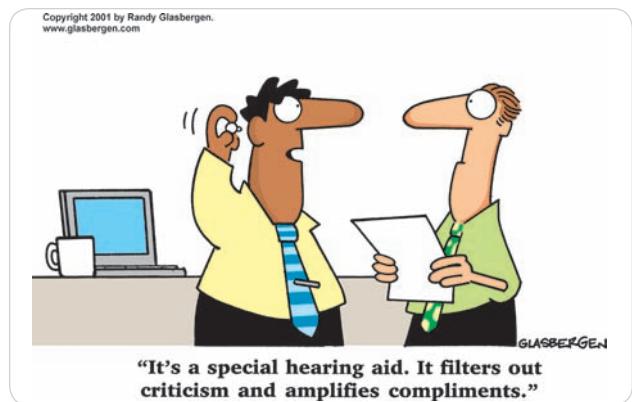


FIGURE 8.5

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4. *Give yourself positive affirmations.* The constant internal conversation going on within the conscious mind tends to be dominated by negative thoughts generated by the ego to defend itself. Although created with good intentions, a preponderance of negative self-feedback erodes self-esteem. Positive affirmations balance this internal conversation with good thoughts to enhance self-confidence and self-esteem. Repeat a phrase to yourself that boosts your self-esteem (e.g., “I am a lovable person” or “I am a winner”).
5. *Accentuate the positive.* There is a difference between positive thinking and focusing on the positive. Positive thinking is an expression of hope concerning future events. It is often characterized by setting goals, wishful thinking, and dreaming. Although positive thinking can be healthy, done to excess it can be a form of denial. Focusing on the positive is reframing the current situation. It is an appreciation of the present moment. Acknowledge the negative. Learn from it, but don’t dwell on it. Focus on the positive aspects and build on them.

Best Application of Reframing

When you find yourself stressed out and are perhaps entertaining toxic thoughts, first identify what makes you stressed, and then ask yourself why you feel this way. Get in the habit of then asking yourself, “What good can come from this situation?” In other words, what positive aspect can you learn from that which stresses you out? Recognize what feelings of anger and fear surface, and then shift your thinking to a proactive stance so you do not become the victim of your own thoughts and perceptions.

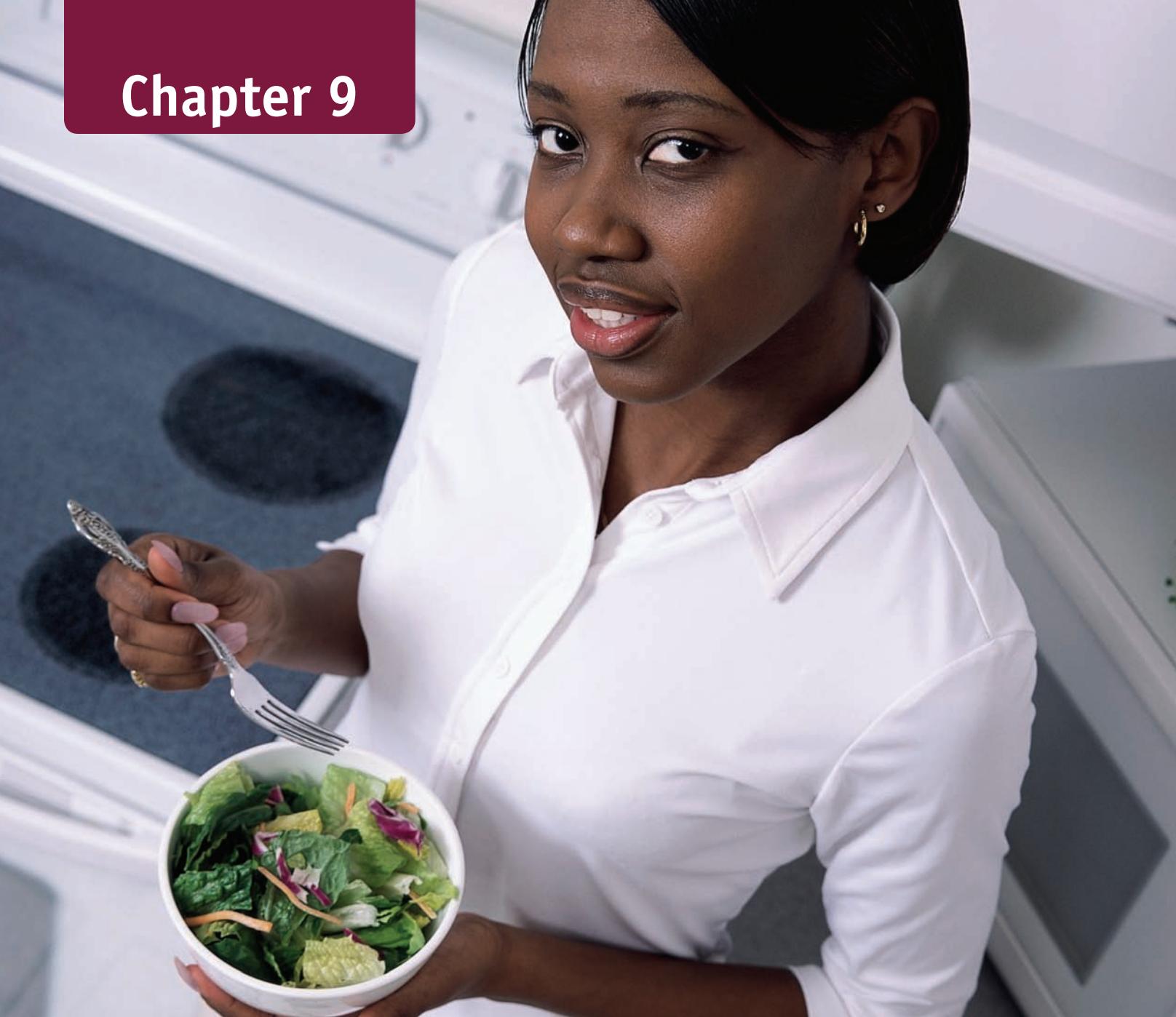
SUMMARY

- All stimuli received by the brain are processed through interpretation and classified as negative, neutral, or positive; this process is called perception.
- When the interpretation is exaggerated, it is referred to as cognitive distortion.
- Cognitive restructuring means changing a perception from a negative interpretation to a neutral or positive one, making it less stressful. This process is also called reappraisal, relabeling, reframing, and attitude adjustment.
- The seeds of this coping technique were planted by Ellis in rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT); the term cognitive restructuring was coined by Meichenbaum in 1975.
- The information-processing model describing how stimuli are interpreted consists of four components: sensory input, sensory manipulation, cognitive/behavioral output, and a feedback system.
- Negative thoughts are often called toxic thoughts. Research has now substantiated the hypothesis that negative thoughts can suppress the immune system.
- Negative thoughts are a conditioned response, starting as early as childhood, to negative feedback given by parents, which is transformed into guilt and shame.
- Toxic thoughts come in various styles, including pessimism, catastrophizing, blaming, perfectionism, polarized thinking, should-ing, magnifying, and self-victimizing.
- Frankl brought to light the fact that we have the ability to choose our own thoughts, to alter our thinking process and adopt new perspectives.
- Borysenko calls creating negative thoughts awfulizing, and explains that the way to change these thoughts is through reframing, wherein the stressful event is reframed in a positive light.
- Positive psychology is an emerging field that focuses on human attributes, rather than pharmacological aids, to cope with stress.
- When there seems to be no positive light available, acceptance of the situation (not to be confused with giving in) is suggested. Acceptance, in terms of Taoism, means to go with, rather than against, the flow of universal energy.
- Allen introduced a four-point plan to reconstruct negative thoughts: (1) awareness, (2) reappraisal of the situation, (3) adoption of a new frame of mind, and (4) evaluation of the new mind frame.
- Additional hints for cognitive restructuring include meditation to clear your mind, taking responsibility for your own thoughts, fine-tuning expectations, giving yourself positive affirmations, and accentuating the positive aspects of any situation.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. What is the thinking process model?
2. How can you best describe toxic thoughts?
3. List the steps to initiate cognitive restructuring.
4. What is cognitive restructuring?
5. What role does the unconscious mind play in the process of restructuring?
6. What effect does attitude have on human physiology?

Chapter 9



Behavior Modification

At one time or another, everyone has considered some plan of action for self-improvement. This is especially the case at particular times in our lives (e.g., when we turn thirty or forty) and specific times and seasons during the calendar

How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? One, but the light bulb has really got to want to change.

—Anonymous

year: Lent, the summer beach season, and most notably New Year's Eve, when the proverbial mental slate is swept clean by new resolutions. Implementing a change to advance one's human potential, however, is not always easy. It takes concentration, willpower, and a strategy to stay on a new course. One look at the low success rates of those who initiate diets confirms the difficulty involved in self-improvement. The reason changes are difficult to institute and maintain is that there are so many variables to manipulate. These variables include, among other things, psychological, sociological, environmental, and biological elements, all of which can act as deterrents. Bookstores are stacked with how-to self-improvement literature. To their credit, works of this nature tend to have the longest shelf life of any books, save literary classics. Biblio-therapy, or self-improvement through information seeking, has quickly become one of America's most frequently utilized coping mechanisms. Yet, although these books can help educate, influence, and even inspire, they cannot instill willpower or a desire to change. This inner resource can only be cultivated, not created, within the individual.

Behavior as a Component of Personality

One school of thought in psychology states that personality is made up of three factors: values, abstract constructs of importance; attitudes, perceptions derived from values; and behaviors, conscious and unconscious actions based on attitudes and perceptions.

Values are those aspects that give meaning to our lives. Values are abstract constructs we adopt early in life by emulating figures of authority, including our parents, grandparents, and older brothers and sisters, as well as school teachers and other influential people from whom we seek love and acceptance. They are intangible concepts such as love, honesty, freedom, joy, wealth, pleasure, education, privacy, and creativity, to name a few. They are often made tangible through objects that symbolize their value. For example, education is a value, and it is symbolized by books and a diploma. Creativity may be symbolized by a musical instrument. Values may consist of morals and ethics, but they include more than these. Research by Milton Rokeach in 1972 suggests that each person has a hierarchy of approximately two dozen values. This hierarchy consists of two levels. The first tier Rokeach described as instrumental values,

a handful of values that are "core" to the meaning of the individual. The second level he called terminal values, those important constructs that lend support to the core values. A personal value system is not static. Values can change in order of importance, moving up and down the continuum, to be replaced by or even exchanged for others. When values shift or are deleted, this may represent a conflict in values, and stress may ensue.

Attitudes are beliefs based on our values. Although the number of values in our personal value system is limited, Rokeach states that each value may carry with it hundreds of attitudes. Attitudes are beliefs, perceptions, and feelings based on a specific value. Attitudes can be positive or negative in nature. Negative attitudes are associated with perceived stress.

Behaviors are considered to be any action, direct or indirect, that is based on a conscious or unconscious thought. Behaviors are thought to be physical manifestations of an attitude based on a specific value. For example, clapping your hands at the end of a concert is a behavior influenced by your perception that the music you heard sounded pleasant. The music, in turn, can symbolize a value of freedom, or creativity. In terms of well-being, behaviors can be considered either health promoting or health impeding. The behaviors deleterious to one's health are often targeted for change.

In Chapter 6, it was mentioned that personalities are deemed difficult, if not impossible, to change. Of the three components making up personality, psychologists suggest that values are the most difficult to influence. Attempts to change attitudes have met with some success (e.g., through cognitive restructuring); however, attitudinal changes may not last without significant attention being devoted to their associated responses. Behaviors, on the other hand, have been shown to be the most likely modified or favorably altered factor to improve health status. Millions of dollars and years of research have been spent to understand the concepts

Values: Abstract, intangible concepts of importance or meaning, such as time, health, honesty, and creativity, that are symbolized by material possessions.

Attitudes: These are beliefs about our values, often expressed as opinions.

Behaviors: Actions (direct or indirect) that are based on conscious (sometimes unconscious) thoughts.

involved in behavior, particularly with respect to those lifestyle diseases resulting in astronomical health care costs. Results from these studies indicate that changes are possible when several factors (biological, psychological, and sociological) are collectively taken into consideration. For example, in the treatment of alcoholism the factors taken into account include genetics, stress levels, and social contacts.

As complex as human behavior is, there is no shortage of theories as to why we behave the way we do. Whether our behaviors are learned or innate, we are creatures of habit. Here are some of the more well-recognized theories of human behavior as applied to the practice of behavior modification. Understanding the nature of these theories may help you to modify your behavior.

Classical Conditioning. The concept of **classical conditioning** was first described by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov in the late 1920s. Pavlov's theory, based on his research with dogs, suggests that animals become conditioned to specific stimuli to act in a specific way. What Pavlov observed was that his dogs began to salivate when they heard a bell that they associated with food. People, like dogs, can also become conditioned to behave in a certain way. In this regard, when a stimulus is coupled with a physiological reflex, the result can be a behavior with some pretty deep roots, one that can take years to unlearn. I am reminded of a student of mine who, upon listening to a relaxation tape with the natural sound of a brook, felt the undeniable urge to go to the bathroom. Slightly embarrassed, she approached me after class and told me that she felt very uncomfortable with the tape. When she was a young child, she told me, her mother, who often was in a hurry to do shopping or errands, would run the water in the bathroom to get her to urinate quickly. Now whenever she hears running water, she gets the urge to go to the bathroom.

Operant Conditioning. Unlike classical conditioning, in which the behavior is specific to physiological autonomic

Classical conditioning: A learned behavior to a stimulus with regard to involuntary functions, such as becoming hungry when the clock strikes 12 noon.

Operant conditioning: A learned behavior that stems from a voluntary function or something we make a conscious decision about.

Modeling: The ability to emulate or imitate our behaviors from the observation of others we respect (e.g., parents, schoolteachers, and peers).

functions, operant conditioning speaks to the nature of voluntary behaviors—those that we make a conscious decision about. Although the concept of **operant conditioning** dates back to the late eighteenth century, this approach to human behavior became the primary focus of psychologist B. F. Skinner, whose significant work spanned from 1930 to 1970. In simple terms, operant conditioning is based on the concepts of rewards and punishments, in which good behavior is reinforced and bad behavior is disciplined. The logic to operant conditioning is that when behavior is positively reinforced, the behavior is likely to be repeated, whereas punishment is used to deter unbecoming behavior. Most likely your parents raised you under the influence of operant conditioning, because child rearing typically uses this style of behavior modification. But it doesn't stop in childhood; motivational techniques such as incentives are used with great frequency in the business world to boost profit margins and work productivity. Variations of operant conditioning are used in a host of recovery programs as well.

Modeling. Little children aren't parrots, but if you were to listen to how closely a child imitates his mom or dad, you would be amazed at the degree of accuracy in both language and body postures. **Modeling** is a name given to the concept of imitation—that is, a behavior learned through imitation. Modeling differs from operant conditioning in that usually no direct reinforcement is involved. Out of sheer will, a person is motivated to copy one or several aspects of someone with whom they are closely bonded or to whom they find some degree of attraction (Pescuric and Byham, 1996). It may be parents, but in the age of multimedia exposure, it could be any public figure with whom the individual wishes to identify. As might be expected, negative as well as positive behavior can be imitated, and often is. More often than not, the expression "Life imitates art" comes to mind when individuals are seen to model negative behavior seen on television or in the movies. Although children often model themselves after those people they see as heroes, we never outgrow the capacity to model our behavior after someone we admire. During the aging process, the word *hero* changes to *role model*, or *mentor*. Modeling is typically used as a crucial component in the practice of building self-esteem (see Chapter 6).

There are several types of *behavior modification* programs currently conducted in the United States that focus on negative health habits. Most of these programs center on substance addictions (alcoholism, eating disorders, smoking cessation, and drug addictions) and

behavioral addictions (workaholism, shopping, sexual habits). Additional programs target lifestyle improvement changes, including time management and assertiveness. Regardless of focus, the bottom line in all positive behavioral-change programs is building and maintaining self-esteem. The focus of this chapter will be assertiveness skills, which are considered paramount in the development and maintenance of self-esteem. But before we look at the skills highlighted in assertiveness training workshops, let's examine the dynamics involved in behavioral change.

The Behavior Modification Model

In learning about their stress-prone personality traits, individuals often see themselves, or parts of themselves, as less than flattering. Acknowledgment of these traits may in fact contribute to their stress. Whereas some individuals recognize these traits and behaviors and make corresponding changes to fine-tune their personalities, others have difficulty overcoming the obstacles to change. Thousands of investigations have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of changes in behaviors to promote health. The topics of these studies include everything from substance abuse and wife beating to eating disorders and insomnia. The majority show that it is far easier to *initiate* a new behavior than it is to *maintain* it over a prolonged period of time. Motivation, it appears, is strong at the start but fades fast (in about 1 to 2 weeks) when immediate effects are not observed. To first understand and then favorably alter factors associated with unhealthy behaviors, psychologists in the field of behavioral medicine have devised a model based on observational research. All successful programs contain this progression of steps to change behavior. When applied to lifestyle and behavior changes, these steps may lead toward improved health status and quality of life. This **behavior modification model** has one precursory phase (denial) and five distinct systematic stages.

Several behavioral psychologists and therapists agree that **denial** is actually the initial stage of or a precursor to a behavioral change. For example, in Chapter 4 we learned that Freud described denial as a defense mechanism employed to soften the blow of perceived threats to the ego. In the denial stage, people refuse to admit either that they practice an unhealthy behavior or that a specific behavioral practice they engage in is unhealthy. A prime example is someone with a chronic drinking problem who refuses to admit he or she is unable to control his or her drinking. Although not everyone starts

with this stage, many people do. It is often this difficult stage therapists and counselors help their clients to work beyond, to get to what many people agree is the primary stage of behavior modification: **awareness**.

1. *Awareness.* In the awareness stage, you realize that you actually think or behave in a certain way that is unhealthy or less than ideal. In the context of this book, these behaviors are stress-producing habits. Awareness may come about as a result of some educational experience (e.g., a class, public service advertising, a newspaper article, journal writing, or the advice of a close friend) wherein your consciousness is raised about a certain behavior. Awareness can also occur when you simply admit that one (or more) of your current behaviors is no longer desirable. Once you see this undesirable behavior in yourself (e.g., codependent tendencies such as ardent approval seeking and victimization, or Type A behaviors including hostile aggression), the process of change can begin.
2. *Desire to change.* Many people recognize they practice a negative health behavior, yet they are not inspired to change it. Without the desire to alter behavior, even when it becomes obvious how damaging it might be, no change will occur. Many people are aware that consuming foods with cholesterol is related to heart disease and that cigarette smoking causes cancer, yet these behaviors remain intact because the will to change is less than the immediate desire to hang on to whatever benefits the behaviors provide. Desire to change usually comes about when the behavior no longer provides the ability to cope, and in fact places one square on the path to either disaster or death. The expression "hit bottom" is often used to describe the ultimate low point experienced by people, who then generate a desire and become quite motivated to make a behavioral change.

Behavior modification model: A model that illustrates the steps taken to change a negative behavior into a positive one.

Denial: In some cases this is the first step of changing a negative behavior.

Awareness: Learning to become aware of a specific behavior in the effort to change it.

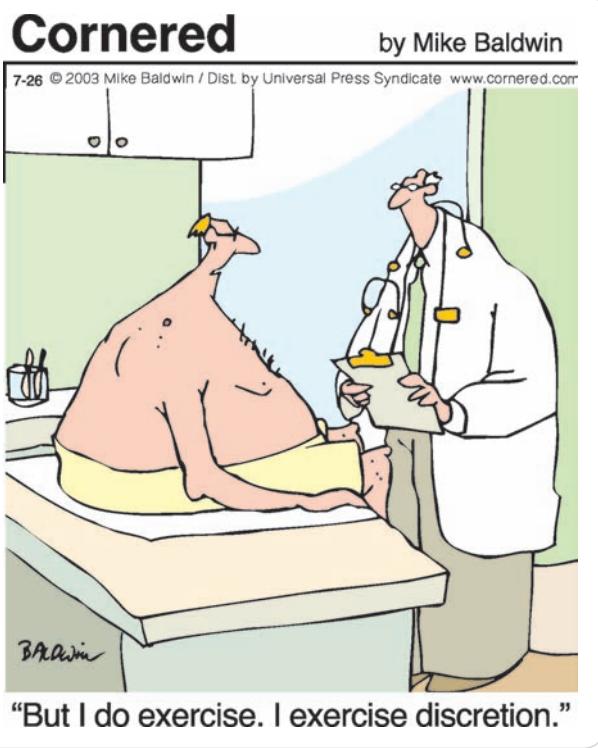


FIGURE 9.1

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3. **Cognitive restructuring.** In this stage, you actually catch yourself in the act of the undesirable behavior and think of a new and suitable alternative. For example, rather than ask someone a closed-ended, approval-seeking question such as, "Did you like my performance last night?" you ask an open-ended question like, "What did you think of the performance last night?" This gives the responder a chance to answer freely and takes the focus off you. Cognitive restructuring is really self-dialogue recognizing both current and pending behavior, as well as the option to favorably change it (see Chapter 8).
4. **Behavioral substitution.** In the substitution stage, an undesirable behavior is consciously replaced

Behavioral substitution: Substituting a new (positive) behavior for a less desirable one.

Evaluation: The process of observing and analyzing a newly adopted behavior, to see if the new behavior works.

with a healthy or stress-reducing behavior. Sometimes this **behavioral substitution** process is thought out or rehearsed in the form of mental imagery before it is acted out. In a case where you have become aware of the habit of self-victimization (in the way that stressors are described to others), you change the description of this circumstance to friends or relatives, thus shifting the emphasis off yourself and onto the real problem. Not all changes are substitutions. Some modifications may be additions to the repertoire of your behaviors. For example, the initiation of one or more of the several coping skills and relaxation techniques described in this book may be an example of additions to your behavior. Usually, however, when a new behavior is adopted, because of time limitations, something else in one's daily schedule gets pushed out of the way. This is a reflection of one's priorities and values.

5. **Evaluation.** After a substitution has been made, during **evaluation** you should figuratively "step back" to analyze whether the new behavior worked, ask yourself why or why not, and decide what can be done to fine-tune this process when the occasion arises again.

A Second Behavior Modification Model: Stages of Change

By some estimates, there are more than 300 strategies to changing one's behavior from less desirable actions to more desirable ones, from going "cold turkey" and hypnosis to 30-day recovery programs and much in between. As a child of alcoholic parents, James Prochaska became fascinated with behavior change and studied the topic extensively. In 1982, his efforts resulted in what has become regarded as one of the premier models of behavior modification, called the "Stages of Change." Prochaska and his colleague, Carlo DiClemente, observed that by and large behavior change (particularly for behavior of an addictive nature) is not a singular event but a process, if not a skill (much like an athletic skill) that may take months or longer to master. What makes his approach unique is that he acknowledges the aspect of relapse as a common part of the process and not failure unto itself.

This model contains six steps and includes the following:

1. **Precontemplation stage:** A stage that might also be called denial of the problem or unconvinced that a behavior problem exists.

2. **Contemplative stage:** A point at which a crucial mass of information is acknowledged to consider that change might be a worthy choice to make.
3. **Determination stage:** A period where willpower is called into play to put the thought process of behavior change into action.
4. **Action stage:** A stage when, indeed, action is taken, yet like an athletic skill, it may take several tries to get it right.
5. **Maintenance stage:** The stage where the person steps into the flow of making this change a part of his or her regular routine. This stage could also be called “second nature.”
6. **Relapse stage:** A period where the old behavior is resumed for a while, until the newer (healthier) behavior is readopted.

Although Prochaska's model doesn't involve a stage for self-examination per se, this model has been adopted by many groups and organizations geared toward positive behavioral change from substance addictions to personal growth programs. It also has been used for health promotion programming with regard to weight loss and exercise programming. Whereas some programs tend to focus on strengthening the internal locus of control, others include external incentives or rewards (e.g., T-shirts, tote bags, coffee mugs) as a means of behavioral modification motivation, often with mixed results. This use of external rewards is one area of criticism of Prochaska's behavior model (Robson and Carrier, 2004). As the saying goes, “Real change has got to begin from within.”

Is Stress a Trigger for Relapse?

What role does emotional stress play in behavior modification? The research in behavior change is conclusive: Stress (threatening perceptions of an event) is the most likely catalyst of unhealthy behavior. In the field of psychology, the term used to describe this is *antecedent*, and it means that various events or situations perceived as stressful act as a means to adopt stress-prone behaviors or revert to old behavior patterns such as cigarette smoking, drinking, or overeating. Outside the field of psychology, they are referred to as buttons (e.g., “He really pushed my buttons”). Does emotional stress affect your behavior? What are your buttons (antecedents) that, when pushed, steer you in the direction of less than healthy behaviors? Becoming aware of these is also part of any behavior modification process.

As the field of life coaching gains acceptance in American society, motivational interviewing has become a cornerstone to behavior modification in this profession. Motivational interviewing grew out of efforts of William Miller and Stephan Rollnick (1991) to help alcoholics identify and change their addictive behaviors. Motivational interviewing is defined as “a directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence. Compared with nondirective counseling, it is more focused and goal-directed.” Today this approach is used by many life coaches regarding all types of behavior change, from credit card shopping and career goals to fitness training and various health behaviors.

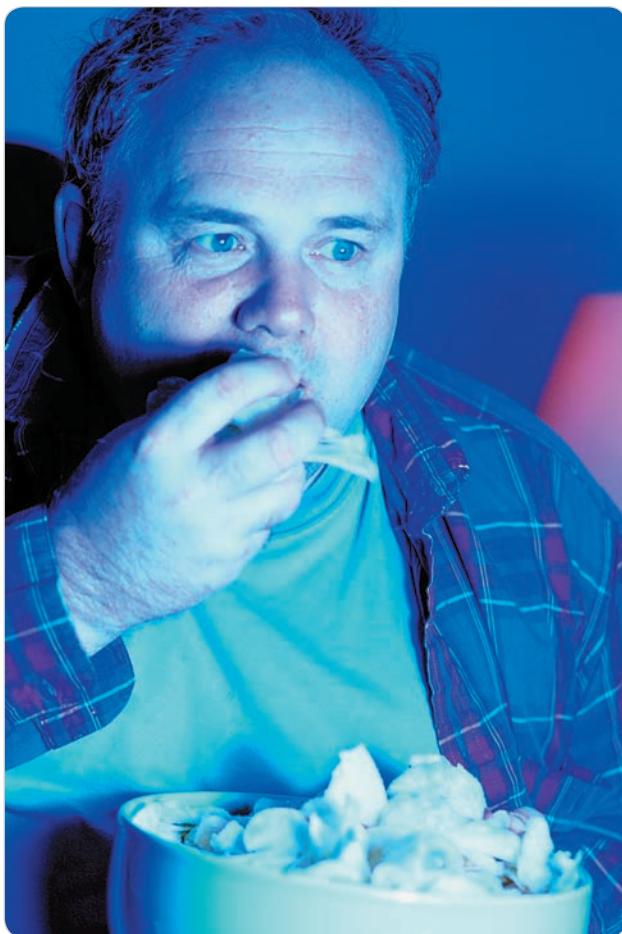
Note that when people desire to change or improve their lifestyles they are typically eager to change all their undesirable behaviors at once, almost to become new individuals altogether. This approach, though most admirable, is often doomed to failure. Behavioral psychologists suggest altering one undesirable behavior at a time as the best method.

Many behavior theories, including self-monitoring, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and modeling, suggest that behaviors can indeed be changed. From the nature of these theories and the research that led to them, it can be seen that there is no one best way to change behavior. The current school of thought is that the best approach to behavioral change is a multimodal approach (also called the biopsychosocial or holistic model) wherein many theories and their related techniques are combined in an attempt to produce a lasting effect. One major focus of all these theories is self-esteem. It appears that low self-esteem is associated with virtually every stress-related behavior. Therefore, it has taken on major importance with regard to behavior modification, particularly as it relates to assertiveness and assertiveness skills.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is described as the ability to be comfortably strong-willed about one's thoughts, feelings, and actions; and neither inhibited nor aggressive in actions for the betterment of oneself in the surrounding environment. Andrew Salter is credited with introducing the term **assertiveness**, in 1949, to mean an inner resource

Assertiveness: The term given to a behavior that is neither passive nor aggressive, but proactively diplomatic.

**FIGURE 9.2**

Changing behaviors is not always easy if they have been lifelong habits. Some behaviorists suggest that change will take place only when there is sufficient desire.

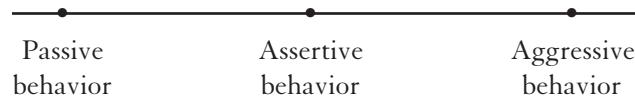
to deal peacefully with confrontations. The term was reintroduced by Arnold Lazarus, who defined it as “expressing personal rights and feelings.” Since its introduction, it has become the major focus in changing stress-related behaviors.

Passive behavior style: A behavior influenced by intimidation that can often lead to feelings of resentment and victimization.

Aggressive behavior style: An aggression-based behavior that employs intimidation and manipulation.

Assertive behavior style: A behavior style that is neither passive nor aggressive, but one that is tolerant and considerate in the quest for individual rights.

Psychologist Dennis Jaffe (Jaffe and Scott, 1984) developed a continuum of behavior styles employed by people in their relationships with others. Behavior styles at either end of the continuum are conducive to stress:



Stress often produces many needs. Specifically, it produces the need to express one's feelings; other needs are often an offshoot of these expressions. The need to be assertive exists when situations arise that involve contact with other people. The assertive style, rather than the passive or aggressive, is advocated to minimize feelings of anger or fear associated with stressful encounters, and to work toward a peaceful resolution. The following is a more detailed explanation of these three dominant personality styles:

- 1. Passive behavior style.** The passive style is where one is too intimidated to express thoughts and feelings. As a result, the person usually forfeits his or her rights and freedoms. A person employing this style comes across as shy and gives in to other people's demands so he or she will be more easily accepted. A passive style avoids confrontations at any cost. Consequently, this style makes one feel used and taken advantage of. The passive style is thought to be anxiety driven, yet the enactment of passive behavior results in feelings of resentment and victimization. The passive style is often employed by the codependent personality.
- 2. Aggressive behavior style.** The aggressive style is where one acts to intimidate others and gain control of their thoughts and actions. Aggressive behavior includes manipulation, intimidation, accusations, and perhaps fighting. There is little or no regard for other people's feelings. Aggressive behavior may result in personal gain, but also breeds loss of respect and trust in those who were walked over and bruised on the way. The aggressive style is thought to be anger driven. It is often used by people who exhibit Type A behaviors.
- 3. Assertive behavior style.** This is the preferable style, in which a person focuses on specific issues and problems, neither belittling him- or herself nor attacking others in the process of problem solving (McKay and Fanning, 2000). An assertive person recognizes his or her individual rights and

Stress with a Human Face

If you could see Patty's face today, you would notice a glow about her. She radiates self-reliance and love. As brilliant as her smile is now, it wasn't always like this. In Patty's case, the road to inner peace began with a side trip to hell. At the age of 16, she looked to all the world like a normal teenager. But the allure of Fifth Avenue beauty in a weight-conscious society soon found Patty with an obsession to control her eating habits. Anorexic behaviors gave way to bingeing and purging, and the pattern remained an addictive ritual well into her 23rd year.

Reflecting back on her earlier years, Patty confided, "I was a perfectionist. I was obsessed with my weight. Food became a way to escape from my own feelings.

stands up to protect those rights. Assertiveness includes expressing your opinion and being able to defend your rights, but not at the expense of violating others' rights. The assertive style minimizes opportunities to be taken advantage of by others. Assertive individuals are open, tolerant, and considerate of other people's feelings. To be assertive means to be able to overcome feelings of fear and to confront issues that demand resolution as well as communicate feelings of anger diplomatically, without putting others on the defensive.

Assertiveness carries with it the recognition of legitimate personal rights. These have been described by several therapists, including Davis, Eshelman, and McKay (2002), and involve the following:

1. To say no and not feel guilty
2. To change your mind about anything
3. To take your time to form a response to a comment or question
4. To ask for assistance with instructions or directions
5. To ask for what you want
6. To experience and express your feelings
7. To feel positive about yourself under any conditions

Until I was 19, I denied I really had a problem, then I tried several methods to stop. Nothing worked."

In the fall of 1992, Patty pulled out the white flag and checked into a hospital. As she put it, "I hit rock bottom. It was this or die." The recovery program she started, well grounded in the twelve-step approach, led Patty to become fully aware of her behaviors and then slowly allowed her to substitute positive thoughts and actions for existing negative ones.

"Oh, I still get the urge now and then," she admitted during a quick visit to my office one day. "But I have never been happier in my life than I am now. I am at peace with myself and my higher power. I am very grateful," she sighed. The gratitude showed; the sparkle in her eyes said it all.

8. To make mistakes without feeling embarrassed or guilty
9. To own your own opinions and convictions
10. To protest unfair treatment or criticism
11. To be recognized for your significant achievements and contributions

Typically, there are some people toward whom we are less than assertive in our manner. Usually these are people of higher authority, such as bosses and parents. Being unassertive, however, can occur with anyone by whom we feel intimidated, including members of the opposite sex, people perceived to be more attractive than ourselves, and all strangers.

Assertiveness Skills

To change one's behavior, there must first be recognition that current behavior is undesirable and may in fact be stress promoting. Once awareness and the will to change occur, then alternative behaviors can be devised and implemented. From workshops on assertiveness training come a host of skills that may be included in one's behavioral approach to potentially stressful encounters. The following are advocated to help improve assertiveness:

1. *Learn to say no.* We are often asked to assist friends, family, and co-workers with their responsibilities. There are in fact times when we cannot complete a task alone. An American ethic has evolved suggesting that we must work together and help each

other in times of need. Over time, this ethic has become warped so that individuals put other people's needs before their own (e.g., codependent personality). Saying no is mistakenly equated with rudeness, and doing so results in feelings of rejection in the other person. But saying yes when it is inconvenient or impossible results in resentment and victimization in oneself. Assertiveness training teaches people to say no without feeling guilty about hurting someone else's feelings. People have the right to refuse a request without harboring feelings of guilt. Remember that other people's problems are no more or less important than your own, and that you are not required to solve all the world's problems. If you have personal obligations that conflict with requests by others, then diplomatically refuse to offer your support at that time. Do not let other people's comments generate feelings of guilt (**FIG. 9.3 ▶**).

- 2. Learn to use "I" statements.** When one examines stress-prone personalities, it is evident that the inability to feel and express emotions is common among the various types. Assertiveness training

teaches people to feel comfortable expressing themselves by using "I" statements (e.g., "I feel angry about . . ." or "I perceive what you said to me as incorrect"). This skill also teaches people to be more spontaneous with their expressions, rather than suppressing their feelings. The use of "I" statements encourages a person to claim ownership of thoughts, feelings, opinions, perceptions, and beliefs. Assertiveness training programs teach that opinion statements may take time to formulate. Don't feel compelled to say the first thought that comes to mind. Rather, take a moment to consolidate your thoughts into a concise and direct response.

Nonassertive people often avoid describing their feelings for fear that others will disagree. Fearing rejection, they also tend to agree with other people's thoughts and take a middle-of-the-road position rather than risk expressing their own feelings. The use of "I" statements strengthens ego boundaries. Although strong ego boundaries might seem more indicative of an aggressive behavior style than an assertive one, the constituents of one's identity must first be recognized before they can be adjusted or exchanged in the ego development process.

- 3. Use eye contact.** Body language is a very important communication skill. Nonverbal communication is more readily believed than the spoken word (see Chapter 14). Lack of eye contact during self-expression is perceived by others as either dishonesty or feeling insecure about what you are saying. Eye contact is often most difficult when you express your feelings toward someone else, for fear of rejection. Assertiveness training involves increasing eye contact while expressing various thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Learning this skill starts with a short time interval (1 or 2 seconds) and progresses up to 8- to 10-second periods. When pauses in eye contact are taken, people are advised to direct their eyes neither down nor up, but in a lateral direction momentarily, and then return again to direct eye contact. Just as poor eye contact communicates lack of confidence, staring (prolonged eye contact) is perceived as a violation of personal space and should be avoided.

- 4. Use assertive body language.** An assertive tone of voice with a wimpy posture sends a mixed message to the person with whom you are communicating.

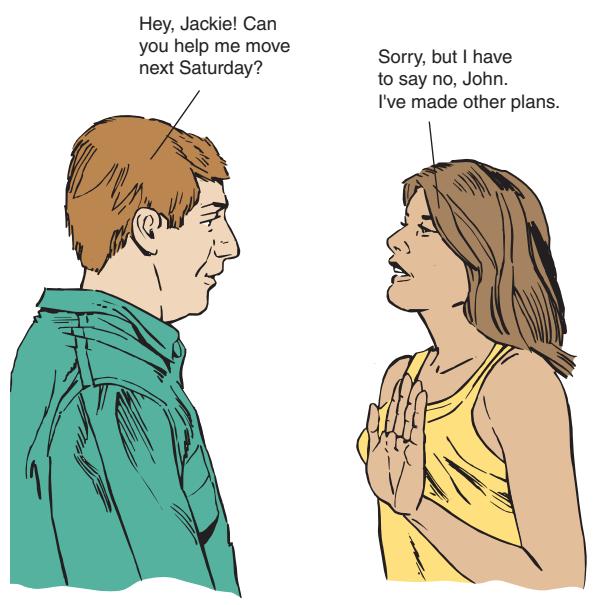


FIGURE 9.3

In the 1980s, First Lady Nancy Reagan started a campaign to stop drug use with the now-famous slogan "Just say no!" This same degree of assertiveness can be used in all types of situations, including taking on additional responsibilities you simply do not have time for.

The message is interpreted as either insincere or unsure. Postures, the ways in which you carry your body, either reinforce your message or detract from it. In addition to eye contact and tone of voice, your spinal posture and head position reveal at an unconscious level how you really feel about the messages you are communicating. It is suggested that your posture be erect, with your body weight equally distributed between both legs and your center of gravity directly above your feet.

5. *Practice peaceful disagreement.* When opinions and facts are voiced peacefully so that all perspectives can be viewed during a decision-making process, then disagreement is considered healthy. This assertiveness skill allows the individual to become comfortable with peaceful confrontation. It is employed when you feel the need to express an opposing view and want it to be acknowledged.
6. *Avoid manipulation.* In the course of asserting yourself, you may find that others may consciously or unconsciously try to block your efforts to accomplish resolution. The following are some roadblocks of manipulation to be aware of, as well as some suggested strategies that may help to dismantle them:
 - a. *Intimidation.* Asserting yourself may intimidate others who are in the habit of using manipulation and control to get their way. They in turn may raise their voices and display their tempers. When you recognize this behavior, you can defuse it by saying that you want to hold off further discussion of this issue until the other person calms down. For example, “I can see that you are quite angry; let’s talk about this after lunch.”
 - b. *Content substitution.* Sometimes people will draw peripheral issues into a discussion to derail the issue at hand. If you become aware that the concern you brought up has become lost in tangential issues, quickly shift focus back to the original topic until your issue has been put to rest.
 - c. *Personal attacks (character assassination).* You may find that in an attempt to resolve an issue, the person you are talking to comes back at you with a character flaw. One way to get back on track is to agree, in part, about the

character flaw and ignore the rest. Davis calls this response clouding, the attempt to deflect an attack by concurring with some part of it. When employing this technique, rephrase the attack in your best interest, and get back to the issue at hand.

- d. *Avoidance.* Often people deny there is a problem by avoiding specific issues or their feelings about certain concerns. This roadblock can be confronted with a bold inquiry—a direct question—to unlock their perceptions. For example, “Is there something I did to make you angry?”
7. *Respond rather than react.* A reaction is a type of reflex, almost instinctual in nature, and a very natural part of human behavior. Here, a reaction deals with spontaneous emotional thoughts. Although spontaneity is an admirable trait where creativity is concerned, following through on emotional reactions can lead to some regrets. A response, on the other hand, is a thought-out plan for a situation. Many times our response is the same as our reaction, and this is when we are likely to wish we had thought before we spoke or acted. Responding to a situation means acknowledging your initial reaction, then thinking of a reasonable response to the situation at hand. Not every response will seem adequate, but as you practice this skill, you will find that it will help you deal with your perceptions of stress.

These are just a few of the recommended behaviors taught in assertiveness-training workshops. The purpose of all these skills is to build and maintain self-esteem. Box 9.1 contains exercises to increase your awareness of your own assertiveness skills. They are based on common circumstances that typically produce feelings of anger, fear, and/or victimization.

Steps to Initiate Behavior Modification

To begin to change an undesired behavior, like smoking, biting your fingernails, or worrying about issues you seem to have no control over, you must first become aware of what this behavior is. Using the behavior modification model, select a behavior that you wish to change or modify. The following is a systematic approach to behavior modification:

BOX 9.1**Assertiveness Exercises**

Write your initial reaction to each of the situations described below, followed by a more assertive response, if necessary.

Situation 1: A Failed Exam

You receive a poor score on a test (in a class for your major). You feel as if the grade is not a true reflection of your knowledge of the subject.

Initial reaction:

Assertive response:

Situation 2: Poor Boundaries

You come home from class or work starved only to discover that your roommate(s) have eaten your food (again). You are on a limited budget and cannot feed the world.

1. Select an undesirable behavior you are aware that you perform.

2. Ask yourself how motivated you are to change this behavior. (As with any change there will be sacrifice involved.) Ask yourself if the costs will outweigh the benefits.

3. Think about what changes in your perceptions and attitudes must accompany this behavioral change.

4. Specify what new behavior you wish to adopt. It is best not to think of stating that you want to stop

Initial reaction:

Assertive response:

Situation 3: Strong-Back Favors

Your best college buddy has to move out of his apartment at the end of the month and has found a new place to live a few miles away. He tells you that he really needs some help moving and needs a car like yours, and he asks for your help with both. You have two term papers due about the same time.

Initial reaction:

Assertive response:

the old behavior, a negative thought process (e.g., I don't want to bite my nails). The new behavior should be expressed as a positive goal (e.g., I would like to have long fingernails).

5. After trying the new behavior, ask yourself how you did. Was your first or second attempt successful? Why or why not? If not, what other approach can you take to accomplish your goal?

It is a good idea to regularly monitor the thoughts and actions that seem to surface during stressful episodes and issues that disrupt your sense of inner peace. Then, using the behavior modification model, take yourself through the remaining steps. Remember, it is important not to change all target behaviors at once. Try to modify one behavior at a time.

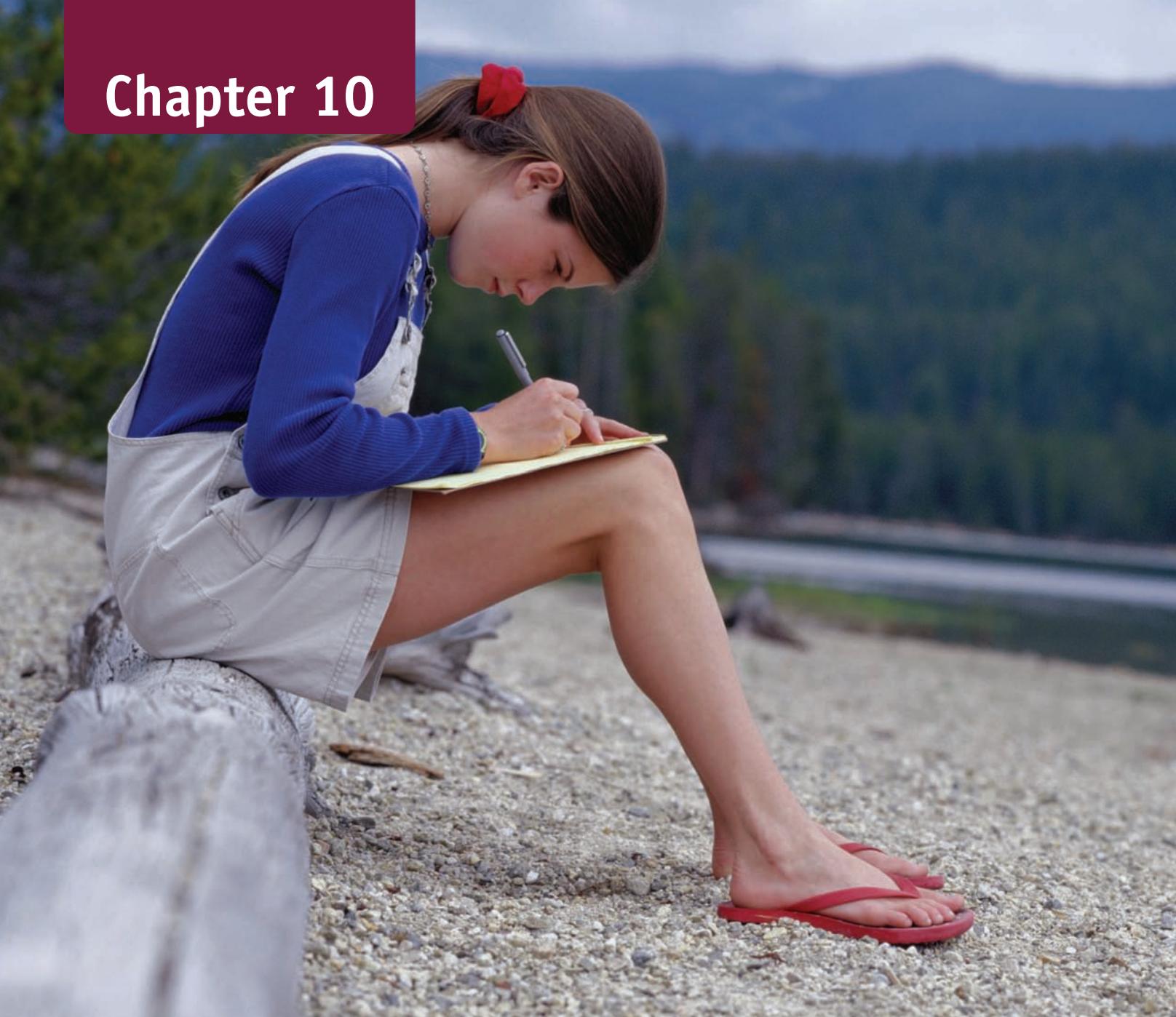
SUMMARY

- People are constantly trying to change, improve, and manipulate their behaviors. Behaviors associated with poor health are those most often targeted for change.
- Personality is thought to be made up primarily of values, those abstract qualities that give meaning to our lives; attitudes, perceptions derived from these values; and behaviors, any actions based on one or more attitudes. Of the three, behaviors are thought to be the most easily influenced.
- Many variables affect behaviors, including biopsychosocial influences. To positively affect behaviors, a multimodal approach is advocated, where biological, psychological, and social factors are all considered to provide a holistic approach to well-being.
- There are many ways to change behavior, all having a common format called the behavior modification model. This progression of stages includes denial that a behavior contributes to poor health, or that one practices an undesirable behavior; then (1) awareness of the undesirable behavior; (2) desire to change; (3) cognitive restructuring, a conscious attempt to change; (4) behavioral substitution; and (5) evaluation of the results.
- The Stages of Change behavior modification model acknowledges that falling back on old (less desirable) behaviors is part of the process of refining the skill or new intended behavior.
- Although any conscious change in behavior can be referred to as behavior modification, in terms of stress management, behavior modification generally includes assertiveness training. The three styles of social behavior are passive, assertive, and aggressive, with assertive being the most effective.
- The purpose of every behavior modification program is to foster assertiveness. Such programs educate participants to practice several types of assertiveness skills, on the premise that assertiveness increases self-esteem.
- The best results occur when an individual tries to favorably alter one behavior at a time until it becomes part of his or her regular routine. If several behaviors are targeted at once, the person often feels overwhelmed and within a short time reverts back to old habits.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between values, attitudes, and beliefs.
2. List and explain three behavior models.
3. Describe the behavior modification model.
4. Describe Prochaska's Stages of Change model.
5. What is an antecedent to behavior change?
6. Explain the concept of assertiveness and list three assertiveness skills.

Chapter 10



Journal Writing

At the turn of the twentieth century, British East Africa, as Kenya was then known, was a land ripe with adventure, from Mount Kilimanjaro to the Serengeti Plain. It attracted many an expatriate from the shores of Europe,

All sorrows can be borne, if you put them in a story.

—Isak Dinesen

Asia, and the Americas. Among these new residents was Dane Karen Blixen, new wife of Baron von Blixen, who settled down to carve out a life at the foot of the Ngong Hills, just outside Nairobi. A life of high adventure is not without its stressful episodes. In her 17 years on the African continent, Karen would contract syphilis from an unfaithful husband, sever her relationship with him, lose her farm to fire, and lose her land to bankruptcy. Perhaps worst of all was losing the one man she loved, Denys Finch-Hatton, in the crash of his two-seater Gypsy Moth plane.

Throughout her life in Africa, Karen wrote. Writing and storytelling became a release, almost an escape, but in every case, a means to cope with the changes she encountered. Upon what she called “an ungraceful return” to her home in Denmark, Karen began to organize and compose the memories of her African adventures. The result: a wonderful collection of personal experiences intertwining the sad with the sublime (written under the pen name Isak Dinesen) that became the classic memoir *Out of Africa*. Although not everyone is a novelist, we all have life adventures that merit, often necessitate, expression—expression that helps to ease the pain of the soul. In the words of Karen Blixen, “All sorrows can be borne, if you put them in a story.”

To open up and disclose feelings, perceptions, opinions, and memories have always been found to be therapeutic. Confessions of the mind lighten the burden of the soul. Many religions have adapted this concept for spiritual healing. This is also the cornerstone on which modern psychology is based. Although conversation is the most common method of disclosure, writing down thoughts occupying the mind is extremely therapeutic as well, as was revealed by countless American soldiers fighting in Iraq through their blogs. Therapeutic **journal writing** can be defined as a series of written passages that document the personal events, thoughts, feelings, memories, and perceptions in one's journey throughout life leading to wholeness. The practice of journal writing has proven a formidable coping technique to deal with stress. For years, it has been used by psychologists and health educators alike as a tool for self-exploration, soul searching, and the enhancement of personal development.

Journal writing: A coping technique; expression of thoughts, feelings, memories, and ideas in written form, either prose or poetry, to increase self-awareness.



FIGURE 10.1

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Historical Perspective

For centuries, people have felt the need to keep personal records or logs of important information, from celestial navigation to the rise and fall of the Nile River's water levels. Written records served as a basis of comparison for annual events, lunar eclipses, famines of epic proportion, and changes of world leaders. In Europe's Age of Exploration, when men were inspired to explore and travel the globe, written records were of paramount importance. To this very day, world leaders, including the President of the United States, Iraq war soldiers, and space shuttle/space station astronauts keep a daily journal.

The word *journal* comes from the French word *journée*, meaning from sunrise to sunset. Journals originally started as a means of guidance on long trips, or as a record of orientation for a safe return passage. Long before there were newspapers, most news was written by people who were describing events contributing to their own life journeys. Even today, much of what we call world history is based on the journal writings of travelers and explorers, including Columbus, Lewis and Clark, Admiral Perry, and even today's astronauts. Journals were kept to record the passage of time as well.

as distance. Throughout history, many people have kept journals or diaries to record their everyday experiences. Many important historical perspectives have been gained from the written passages of Vermont farm wives, homesteaders on the Oregon Trail, schoolteachers in the Southeast, and panners in Alaska's Klondike gold rush. Originally, journal writing was something men did because women were not educated to read or write. But when women adopted this idea as their own, the word *diary* became associated with women who kept journals. Today the words *diary* and *journal* are used synonymously, yet there still appears to be a feminine association with the word *diary*. The distinction appears to be that diary writing is a listing of personal events, while journal writing expands personal awareness, emotional thought processing, and creativity, and offers seeds of resolution in personal struggles.

One of the first psychologists to study the use of journal writing was Dr. Ira Progoff in 1975. Trained in Jungian psychology, Progoff discovered that his own journal writing allowed direct access to a higher consciousness or spiritual awareness, which encouraged the search for meaning in his own life. The fruits of these efforts led him to share this coping technique with others who might benefit from it. Journal writing, Progoff suggested, allows for the synthesis of personal thoughts, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, and insights toward spiritual growth. In 1966, he established a seminar, called the Intensive Journal Workshop, in which he trained participants in the art of journal writing for self-improvement. Progoff's method of journal writing, with its use of a three-ringed notebook divided into twenty-one sections separating various components of one's thoughts, sought to open doors in the mind through various themes or springboards to self-exploration. His sections included Daily Log, Stepping Stones, Time Stretching, Dialogue Dimension, Imagery Extensions, A Personal Autobiography, and Dream Interpretation, as well as a series of personal dialogues on a host of topics, from body awareness to societal expectations. Collectively, these topics provided lessons in making order out of chaos from the glut of sensory information that is continually processed in the mind. Journal writing, Progoff said, allows the writer to initiate a positive confrontation with several issues that contribute to the understanding of one's personal existence.

In an experiment to examine the effects of journal writing on personal growth, 300 people were recruited from New York City's welfare and unemployment programs and introduced to the practice through Progoff's work-

shop, in conjunction with a job training program. Within a 12-month period, more than 90 percent of those enrolled in the workshop improved their job status and housing conditions. Credit for these improvements was given to the enhanced state of self-reliance attained through journal writing. As Progoff states in his book *At a Journal Workshop*, journal writing "plays an active role in reconstructing a life, but it does so without imposing any external categories or interpretations or theories of the individual's experience. It remains neutral and open-ended so as to maintain the integrity of each person's development, while drawing him further along the road of his own life process." He refers to journal writing as **transpsychological**, a word describing the therapeutic effects of self-discovery through active awareness, which allows the individual to access personal resources and promotes wholeness.

The Intensive Journal Workshop offered a very organized method to journal writing, yet some people felt it lacked the spontaneity and freedom that make self-expression through journal writing unique. The current approach to journal writing, advocated by journal therapist Kathleen Adams, is called humanistic journal therapy, where journal writing is a vehicle for the development and maintenance of the transpersonal self or the bonding between oneself and one's enlightened self. In Jungian psychology, the transpersonal self would be described as a union of the conscious and unconscious minds through communication of words, symbols, and dreams to enhance human potential.

In the past 20 to 30 years, journal writing has often been combined with other coping techniques for personal growth. In the Outward Bound program, for example, which is loosely based on an American Indian rite-of-passage custom, risk-taking skills are taught. At the culmination of this weeklong experience, where survival skills are put to the test, participants are given journals to write down their feelings to enhance the soul-searching and soul-strengthening processes. In a similar type of program conducted in the Sierra Nevada, author Steven Foster writes in his book *Vision Quest* of journal writing as a supplemental tool for self-exploration in a 3-day soul-searching rite of passage. Portions of his book are painfully revealing, with candid descriptions written by those

Transpsychological: A term used to describe the therapeutic effects of self-discovery through active awareness in journaling.

who shared their experiences of inner growth and spiritual development.

Once a privilege of the upper class, reading and writing have now become birthrights of people in almost every nation. Yet, although journal writing was once a popular pastime, the evolution of the high-technology age, which, in effect, has placed a barrier between humans and the natural environment, has also undermined the impetus for self-exploration, with the exception of blogs. People just don't take the time to sit and write anymore. Instead they watch television or surf the Internet. In previous generations, clergy filled the role of sounding boards to hear confessions of guilt, the sorrow of loneliness, depression, and emotional suffering. Today that role has been largely filled by psychologists, who act much the same way. As more research, greatly inspired by the pioneer work of James Pennebaker, on the topic of journal writing is conducted, a critical mass of evidence suggests what was known intuitively all along: Expressing oneself through journal writing is a highly effective means to help cope with stress. It is a practice strongly encouraged in the allied health professions. In the field of psychology, too, journal writing has surfaced as a viable tool in the journey to the self.

Journal Writing as a Coping Technique

Journal writing is perhaps the most effective coping skill available to provide profound internal vision and enhance the self-awareness process in times of stress. Journal writing initiates the communication of self-reflection between the mind and the soul, the necessary first step in the resolution and closure of perceived stress. Journaling, in its own way, is a vehicle for meditation. As a technique to clear the mind of thoughts (by either focusing on one particular theme or jotting down random thoughts as they surface and circulate through the conscious mind), a calming effect takes place as thoughts and feelings are transferred from the mind to the written page.

Research suggests that journal writing is not only good for the soul, as a mode of catharsis to express the full range of emotions, but has proven to be good for the body as well. In a series of studies conducted by psychology professor James Pennebaker (2004; Pennebaker and Chung, 2007), students at Southern Methodist University were asked to write about a traumatic experience for 15 minutes on 4 consecutive days. Although the immediate response to these journal entries was often tears, even

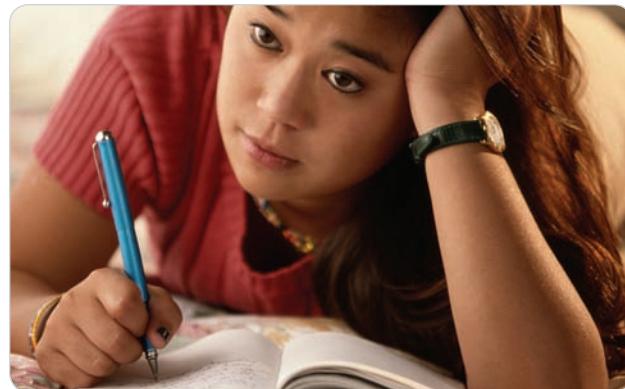


FIGURE 10.2

Journal writing is a means of self-exploration of thoughts and feelings.

unpleasant dreams, Pennebaker observed that the subjects subsequently frequented the campus health center for "illness visits" less often than the control subjects who wrote about superficial topics. When this experiment was repeated in collaboration with J. Kiecolt-Glaser, with blood samples taken before and after the writing episodes, it was noted that those people who searched their souls to uncover latent, unresolved feelings associated with personal traumas showed "heightened immune function" of T-lymphocyte cells, when compared to those who addressed superficial topics in their journals.

Pennebaker's work has influenced many others to research the effects of journal writing on both emotional and physical health. Here are some highlights:

- Expressive writing has been shown to decrease elevated blood pressure (Beckwith, Greenberg, and Gevirtz, 2005).
- Affectionate writing has been shown to decrease cholesterol levels (Floyd, Mikkelsen, Hesse, and Pauley, 2007).
- Expressive writing has been shown to decrease stress levels in college students (Opre, Coman, Kallay, Rotaru, Manier, 2005).
- Expressive writing has shown beneficial health aspects for people suffering from fibromyalgia (Broderick, Junghaenel, and Schwartz, 2005).
- Expressive writing is revealed to help people grieving a romantic breakup (Lepore and Greenberg, 2002).

- Emotional expression helps to cope with stressful life events (Ullrich and Lutgendorf, 2002; Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005).
- Expressive writing has proven to be a major cathartic release for wives of American soldiers serving in the Iraq war (Hightower and Sherer, 2007).

Prose is not the only style that is thought to be therapeutic for journal entries. Poetry is strongly suggested as a proven means to foster emotional catharsis as well. Although not all poems employ rhyme, the use of rhyme in writing poetry allows the author to make “order out of chaos,” thus giving a feeling or sense of control. In addition, poetic license to use metaphors and similes describing personal feelings allows a deeper sense of emotional expression. Emily Dickinson credited her poetry with the ability to gain a better perspective on the expression of her own feelings. The healing process of self-expression through poetry described by Morris Morrison in his book *Poetry as Therapy* incorporates imagination, intuition, and the development of personal insight—three characteristics essential in the healing process. The poems in turn augment the self-awareness process because each poem is first written and then read in its entirety. As with other journal entries, poems can address a whole host of issues and emotions. For this reason, **poetry therapy** is currently used as a therapeutic tool in the treatment of emotional disorders. Thus, this method of writing is encouraged as a complementary journal-writing style. It could even be suggested that some rap songs are a form of poetry therapy.

As a coping technique, journal writing seems to offer both immediate and long-term effects.

Immediate Effects. For a host of reasons, people naturally tend to have an inability to fully express the entire range of human emotions. This conscious inhibition of emotional expression, coupled with the unconscious suppression of perceptions, attitudes, and feelings, may eventually result in neurotic (worrisome) behavior or the manifestation of physical symptoms. The results can be devastating, perhaps leading one to several visits to a psychologist. One of the primary goals of psychotherapy is to nurture self-awareness and honest self-expression.

In the short term, self-expression through journal writing may serve as an emotional catharsis by getting out on paper the toxic thoughts roaming through one’s head. Journal writing allows the release of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that liberates the mind and



FIGURE 10.3

The art of journal writing goes back eons. When taking the time to put your thoughts on paper, you begin to process not only *what* you are thinking and feeling, but also *why* you may be thinking and feeling this way. Some suggest that writing, rather than typing, allows the mind better quality of time to process (cathart) these thoughts and feelings to come to a sense of resolution.

softens or expands the walls of the ego. Journal writing has often been called a writing meditation because as old thoughts are permitted to leave, the empty space they once occupied allows for expanded awareness of one’s internal landscape as well as expanded depth of thought. This expanded awareness is analogous to a panoramic view from a mountaintop compared to an obstructed view from the base. Increased awareness opens the door for increased understanding of ourselves in our many environments. Writing down personal thoughts gives one permission to let them go, no longer thinking about them with the intensity that may have cluttered the mind and drained energy. Release of thoughts and feelings may also act as a personal confession, an honest confrontation of one’s behaviors. And this is an initial step toward healing both one’s internal relationship and personal relationships with others. In addition, unlike conversation or internal dialogue, use of writing as a channel of self-expression makes the writer accountable for, or allows the writer to take solid ownership of, feelings as abstract thoughts become tangible on paper. (See Box 10.1.)

Poetry therapy: A therapeutic tool; a modality of writing poetry to enhance both increased awareness and emotional catharsis of a variety of issues.

BOX 10.1**Reflections: A Journal Summary**

by Jason Alvine, University of Northern Colorado

Having never kept a journal or even thought of writing down my feelings, this was a new experiment for me. Although I wasn't fond of the idea in the beginning, I learned many things from these exercises. From thinking of myself as an optimist to thinking of what makes me angry, I enjoyed writing my thoughts and feelings in a journal. This activity definitely taught me a lot about myself, how I view others, and what makes me tick. The main thing this journal taught me was that I care about others' feelings more than I let on. I think that I have more of a sensitive side than most guys would admit to, but this is by no means a bad thing. I looked at my values, which is something that I hadn't done in a long while, and realized I needed to focus more on the values that I was raised with than the values of my friends. I also looked back and saw that I have a great distaste for violence against another human being. I strongly believe that violence is a way

for people who don't know how to deal with their stress properly to relieve themselves of this perceived negativity.

These exercises really made me examine myself and look at how I was, and how I want to strive to be. These entries made me look at my future and think about what I want to do with my life. I feel that the exercises reinforced that the best way to a successful future is to have success in the present. I do this by keeping up in my classes and trying to work as much as possible. Working gives me a sense of what I want to do with my life, and what I don't want to do. With my jobs in the past I have seen the effects of not having a college degree and where you can end up without it. The journal also made me think of continuing to write my thoughts down. Because it is a new technique, I learned to vent my frustrations and reveal my thoughts without telling anybody. This was a most beneficial activity and it made me think about finding new ways to let go of my stress.

Long-Term Effects. Lewis and Clark made daily journal entries during their expedition to the Northwest coast, and they often referred back to them to orient themselves for a safe return to St. Louis. Similarly, on a day-to-day basis it may prove difficult to observe changes in personal perceptions and attitudes toward events and circumstances perceived to be stressful. All of this increased awareness is paramount to making desired behavioral changes (see Chapter 9). But by periodically retracing one's steps, by rereading previous journal entries with a degree of objectivity, an awareness of patterns begins to emerge regarding values, attitudes, and even behaviors that inoculate against, precipitate, or perpetuate the stress response. Clues from reading between the lines may shed light on the precursors to stress: elements of anger and fear, and levels of self-esteem that make oneself vulnerable to stressors. This new awareness becomes extremely valuable when efforts are made to change these factors. Perhaps the best phrase to sum up the long-term effects of journal writing is "personal resolution." When thoughts are transferred to paper, the writer can begin to detach him- or herself from the scribed contents and begin to look at these as an impartial outsider would.

As a component of stress-management courses I have taught, I ask my students to keep a stress-management journal. At the end of the course, each person is asked to

reread all entries over the duration of the course (typically 16 weeks) and write a summary. A journal summary is not a recapitulation of 4 months of stressors, but rather what the individual learned from him- or herself by rereading the entries and noticing trends or patterns in thoughts and behaviors, primarily trends that promote anger and/or anxiety, as well as conflicts in values and factors promoting or deflating self-esteem. Sometimes, first-hand accounts of the benefits of journal writing are more influential than the theories on which they are based. In Box 10.2 are selected passages from summaries written to describe what some students learned from this coping-technique experience.

Steps to Initiate Journal Writing

Only three essential elements are needed for effective journal writing: (1) a notebook dedicated solely to the journal, (2) a pen or pencil, and, perhaps most important, (3) a quiet, uninterrupted environment to collect your thoughts and then put them down on paper. There appears to be no best time of day to write; it varies from person to person. The end of the day may seem ideal, but perhaps not convenient. Although the time of day to write may vary, the suggested frequency of entries is more established. It is recommended that a good goal to start with is a minimum of 15 to 20 minutes for each entry, and three entries per week, to realize the benefits

BOX 10.2

More Journal Summary Excerpts

"For a long time now, I've known what stresses me the most. It has been a long time since I've been able to confide in or let anyone get really close to me. I've been so wrapped up in school for the past eight years of my life, and it's really getting lonely. As time goes on, it gets harder and harder to express myself. In a sense, I'm scared of situations because I don't know how I'll react. In this aspect, I don't know myself very well and I'm afraid to find out. This journal has really helped me get in touch with myself."

—A. C.

"This stress-reduction journal offered no cure-all for my problems, but it gave me valuable help. It helped me understand and see what I thought. By knowing what was going through my mind, I began to realize things about myself, some things I might have never known. A common phrase I saw in my journal was 'good enough.'

The paper was 'good enough,' the letter I wrote home was 'good enough,' I was doing things so they would be 'good enough,' and in doing so, not achieving my potential. I was striving for mediocrity. I'm trying to break this bad habit and I think I have made a little headway. Creativity is now more clear and interesting to me than ever before. I found myself writing short stories in my journal or just creating ideas for work or pleasure."

—J. S.

"When I divorced my husband of seven years I cried on everyone's shoulder for months. That was a year ago. But people get tired of the same old complaints, even from best friends. So I took refuge in writing in my journal. It served as a great sounding board. It certainly helped me heal some very deep wounds. I've learned that there are some thoughts that are best left between my mind and the pages of a journal notebook."

—B. T.

of this technique. Typically, people start out writing a couple of paragraphs mainly emphasizing events of the day rather than perceptions of these events. If continued, however, entries become longer, with more elements of the author's personality.

The current school of thought suggests that there really are no rules on keeping a journal. However, as an effective coping technique, there are some things to keep in mind. A journal should include descriptions of both stressful events *and* positive experiences. Life is full of highs and lows, and over the course of time, your journal should reflect both sides of the emotional teeter-totter. In addition, journal writing is not limited to thoughts and feelings expressed solely in words. Drawings serve as a wonderful expression of feelings, thoughts, and memories that words often cannot fully describe. Sketches also help augment recollections of images to complement the written text (see Chapter 11, "Expressive Art Therapy"). It is important for you to remember that you write for yourself and not for the pleasure or intent of others. In fact, the best journal entries are those that are completely confidential. The premise of journal writing is to strengthen the bond of honesty from your mind to your soul. The contents of a stress-reduction journal aren't for publication; thus they are and should remain confidential. Thoughts should be articulated, yet unedited. When this premise is acted

on, thoughts and feelings become easier to articulate and the rewards of inner peace are more substantial.

Although there is no specific formula for successful journal writing, some criteria may aid the writer to use this coping strategy to deal more effectively with perceived stress. These include the following:

1. *Try to identify those concerns and problems that cause the most frustration, grief, and tension.* Identification and prioritization of stressors are essential in the self-awareness process. For the first two to three weeks, this may be all you choose to include in each journal entry. Journal entries often can best be started by answering one or two questions, such as How was my day today? or What thoughts are occupying my mind right now?
2. *Ask yourself what emotions are elicited when these stressors are encountered.* The two major stress emotions are anger and fear; however, there are many shades of these emotions, including impatience, jealousy, frustration, sadness, grief, guilt, and worry. After identifying your current emotional state, the question Why? should be pondered to identify the origins of your emotions (e.g., Why do I feel frustrated? Why do I feel victimized?).
3. *Allow the writing process to augment your creative process to further resolution.* When you have begun

to feel comfortable with identifying stressors and the respective emotions they produce, the next phase is to create a process of resolution for the concerns and problems. This includes searching for viable options and employing them to bring satisfying closure to the circumstances that promoted stress (see Chapter 13, “Creative Problem Solving”).

Perhaps in an effort to address the needs of people searching to use journaling as a coping technique, several books have appeared on the market in the past decade providing guidelines to the art of journal writing. The following is a compilation of tips, hints, and suggestions that appear to have the consensus of therapists who advocate this coping technique:

1. *Centering.* Before you begin to write, take a moment to relax. Close your eyes, take a few deep breaths, and try to unwind. Centering means to be well grounded or well connected to the here and now. Sometimes playing soft music or sipping hot tea can help foster the centering process.
2. *Label your journal entries.* Identify each entry with day, date, and year. On occasion you will want to review your past entries and it is much easier to recall the events surrounding the journal entry when this information is at the top of the page.
3. *Uncensorship.* Write whatever comes to mind without editing your thoughts before you put them on paper. Don’t censor your thoughts as they travel from your mind to the tip of your pen. Let them flow naturally. Journaling is transcribing your conscious dialogue. Don’t be inhibited about expressing how you really feel. Also, don’t worry how your writing style appears. Neat or sloppy, it makes no difference as long as you can read it; that is all that matters.
4. *Spontaneity.* Let your thoughts be free-flowing. You don’t have to write in sentences and paragraphs all the time. Often, in trying to phrase a thought just the right way, the essence of the thought becomes diluted or lost. Get whatever thoughts you have down on paper and then sort them out however you choose. If you get a mental block when in front of a blank piece of paper, draw lines and store your ideas in separate boxes, or make lists of your thoughts. It is good to have variety in your journal entries, or the routine of

writing becomes a boring chore. If words fail you, make a sketch or perhaps try writing a poem.

5. *A private place.* In theory, journal entries can be written anywhere, but having a designated place of solitude lends depth to self-disclosure. Find a place you can call your own. Open spaces also provide the opportunity for mind expansion. If the weather is conducive to sitting outdoors for a while, find a tree, beach, mountaintop, or grassy knoll, and make this spot your own as well. Sometimes combining this technique with music therapy (Chapter 21) allows the mind to wander more freely and emotions to surface to a greater level of consciousness.
6. *A private journal.* Experts agree that your journal is for your eyes only. If you make it a habit to share entries frequently, then the vow of honesty with yourself is compromised. If you live with other people (i.e., roommates, girlfriend/boyfriend, spouse, parents), then it would be a good idea to keep your journal away from wandering eyes. A journal is like Pandora’s box to anyone but the author. You may choose to make it known that you keep a journal and specifically ask that no one invade your privacy. If someone does, it is at his or her own risk.
7. *Overcoming writer’s block.* One reason people find writing in a journal challenging is that there is the risk of pain from confronting one’s innermost thoughts. People become afraid of learning what is below the surface of immediate thoughts. Pain arises when the premise of our thoughts and perceptions doesn’t match the ideals or expectations we set for ourselves. Fears surface with the realization of unmet expectations or a change in our current reality of ourselves. These conflicts can be painful to the ego. But with pain comes the opportunity for learning, and learning sows the seeds of personal growth and development. Remember that Frankl believed suffering to be an essential part of the personal-growth process.

At the novice stage of journal writing, a blank piece of paper, not to mention an empty notebook, can look mighty intimidating. Some people are reluctant to write because of the unrealistic expectation that something profound must be written on every page. A journal serves as a catalyst to begin and strengthen your relationship with yourself. Relationships begin with introductions,

BOX 10.3**To Blog or Not to Blog**

The introduction of laptops and Web pages has put a new face on personal writing in the twenty-first century. While most emails contain no more than a few sentences (with a postcard writing style), many people have taken up the art of writing their personal thoughts in diary form and pasted these writings on their personal Web pages in what is now called a **blog**. (The word *blog* is an adaptation of the words *web log*.)

What's the difference between a personal journal and a blog, you ask? For starters, a personal journal is just that—personal. It's a private relationship between you

and your thoughts and emotions. Journals are meant to be confidential. On rare occasions passages or pages may be shared—but this is the exception, not the rule. The Internet (including all Web pages) is considered public; hence, blogs are anything but confidential. Although most blogs do, in fact, contain personal thoughts and feelings, they can best be described as personal editorials.

So, blog if you wish (it definitely improves your writing skills), but remember that blogging isn't the same thing as keeping a journal.

background information, and questions. Journal entries can begin the same way. **Writer's block** happens to everyone at some point. Many people go in cycles, where they write religiously for months at a time, get a block, and then abandon their journals for a stretch. Sometime later, they come back to this coping style after a hiatus of a few weeks to a month. Writer's block can be overcome by trying a new approach or theme to journal entries, including creative writing or entries in the form of letters. For example, the book *The Color Purple* was written as a series of letters by author Alice Walker to a fictitious sister in Africa. If you find yourself with writer's block, try a new format of writing.

In his book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others*, author Jamie Pennebaker advocates journal writing as a means of self-expression. Just as there can be benefits to journal writing, however, it can also be used incorrectly, negating the potential personal gains to be made. The following are suggestions to keep in mind when using journal writing as a positive coping technique:

- 1. Journal writing should not be used to replace a more viable coping technique.** Journals can be great sounding boards. The echoes from these passages should be a strong personal invitation to find solutions to the problem at hand. Remember, for a coping technique to be effective, it must work toward a peaceful resolution. When journal writing is employed in place of more appropriate coping techniques, such as effective communication with other people (Chapter 14) or social engineering of factors for the betterment of your environment (Chapter 16), resolution is compromised, if not completely prevented, and full closure on stressors never comes.

2. Journal writing should encourage, not discourage, honest feelings. As a coping technique, journal writing invites the writer to soul-search and turn thoughts inward. Although many writing themes, concepts, and philosophies can be used as vehicles to explore and augment the soul-searching process, these should not be the specific focus of one's writing. The primary theme is the writer. Ideally, journals should be kept confidential, though often people choose to share parts of journal entries, sometimes entire passages. However, if journal entries are written for an audience other than yourself, then the likelihood of honesty is greatly compromised.

3. Paralysis by analysis. Sometimes, when people get too absorbed in the expression of their thoughts and feelings, awareness gets fogged in and the effectiveness of self-expression and self-reflection is stifled. Cognitive paralysis sets in, which deters rather than augments the coping process. Be careful not to get caught in this trap. Journal writing is meant to give a wide perspective on yourself in your environment. Make sure you are able to see the forest as well as the trees.

Blog: A term depicting someone's Internet journaling practice. Unlike a personal journal that is kept confidential, a blog is a public document to express opinions, beliefs, and newsworthy items of the author.

Writer's block: The inability to write down one's thoughts and feelings, usually attributed to fear (e.g., fear of failure).

Pennebaker reached some interesting conclusions about subjects he observed keeping journals. First, only a handful of people (3 percent) wrote every day in their journals, and while more women than men kept journals, the difference was not significant. Second, journal entries were centered less on emotions than on facts to describe specific events, a style that may not have been as beneficial an experience as perceived by the journal writer. Last, he found that journal writers seemed to fall into two distinct categories. The first group tended to write only during periods of mental frustration and monumental stress. The journal became a sounding board and tended to carry the burden of anxieties. The second group wrote nearly every day; however, when a major stressor arose (e.g., death of a spouse, career stress), a time when writing might be the most help, a safe distance was kept from the journal and no writing took place. Pennebaker noted a third group of people, though, who instead of keeping a journal, wrote letters. Although this may seem similar to journal entries, letters are often less than candid about internal feelings about oneself to oneself. In my work with clients, I have also noticed a fourth group: people who do not necessarily write frequently, perhaps once or twice a week, but whose journal entries tend to be balanced between positive and negative experiences. The positive experiences are more factual, and perhaps even integrated into a creative story. The narratives of negative experiences include inner feelings to describe the reasons for these emotions.

Journal Writing Styles, Themes, and Ideas

Whereas journal entries can consist of a daily report on personal events, they can also be inspired by specific themes that surface and merit exploration to give the writer a new vantage point on him- or herself. Examples include dreams, rites of passage, values assessment and clarification, unwritten letters, self-esteem issues, free thought relationships, things to do, wish lists, creative story writing, poems, or any topic the writer chooses to expound upon. Themes can also be conveyed in many styles of writing, including linear (left to right), circular (rotating the paper as you write), in boxes, and free-form. Three of these are as follows:

Buzan writing style: A specific journal approach to access the powers of both the right and left hemispheres of the brain through words and images.

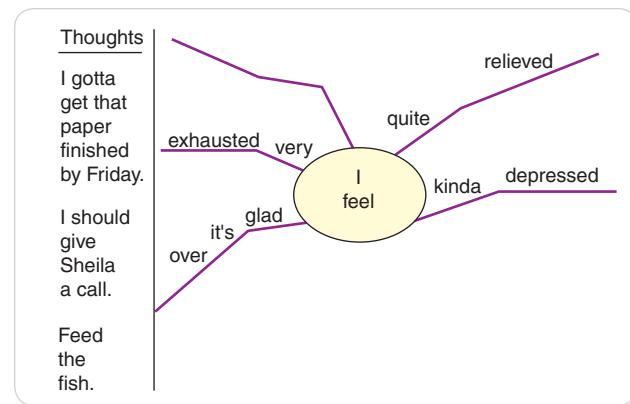


FIGURE 10.4 Buzan diagram.

1. *The Buzan style.* The **Buzan writing style** for journal entries, developed by Tony Buzan (1983), involves words in a pictorial fashion that accesses both right- and left-brain cognitive functions. In this technique (FIG. 10.4), you draw a vertical line to the left of center on the page. Everything to the left of this line is reserved for thoughts or perceptions. Examples might include “I have to feed the dog tonight before I go out” or “My boss was a jerk today.” In the center of the remaining two-thirds, draw a circle, and in the middle write the words, “I feel.” Every time you feel an emotion, draw a line from the circle out. On each line, describe how you feel in three words. (Buzan suggests the use of a different colored pen or pencil for each feeling.) Whatever comes into your mind, write down as either a thought or feeling; do this for about 15 to 20 minutes. You may want to listen to some soft, relaxing instrumental music at the same time. This type of journal entry serves as an eraser to clean the blackboard of your mind. Once the thoughts are on paper, the mind becomes uncluttered and achieves a state of mental homeostasis.
2. *The proprioceptive method.* Linda Metcalf, author of the book *Writing the Mind Alive*, has been teaching journaling for decades and it was early in her career that she discovered a way for people to really get in touch with their inner selves. She calls it the proprioceptive writing method, and it consists of synthesizing one’s emotions and imagination into a culmination of one’s own authentic voice. The term *proprioceptive* means a sense of body awareness, but in this case, Metcalf expands

the definition to include your mind. In essence, why do you have the thoughts you have? Metcalf suggests for the best response to play some Baroque music, light a candle, and have a pad (unlined paper works best) and pen ready at hand. She also suggests setting dedicated writing time several times a week for no less than half an hour each time. With the focus on writing from one's heart space, one writes with focused awareness to dissolve one's inhibitions (fears) and builds a foundation to build trust from within. Metcalf's style is to frequently have the writer ask him- or herself the question: What do I mean by _____? By answering this question one delves deeper into the soul-searching process of awareness.

3. *A dream journal.* Dreams make fascinating material for journal entries. Jung, remember, believed attempting to understand the symbolism of one's dreams would lead to psychic equilibrium, a balance of the conscious and unconscious minds promoting personal wholeness. Often the loose ends of perceptions and emotions associated with stress materialize in the dream state as the unconscious mind works on its own analysis and resolution process of thoughts and sensory information received in the conscious state. The unconscious mind is rich in color and symbols, yet poor in its ability to express these symbols as words. Thus, the collaboration of the conscious and unconscious minds is a dynamic one to deal with stressors. It should be noted that with the massive proliferation of television, DVDs, and other media entertainment, dreams may be less a function of our own thoughts and more a function of making sense or relating to that which we are consuming from these venues. Regardless, dreams should not be discounted! Although we often do not remember all our dreams, everyone does dream. But many times, dreams seem to fade into thin air the second we wake up and enter the conscious world. Researchers who study dreams have come up with the following list of ways to help people remember their dreams:

- a. Before you go to sleep, write a review of the day's events and your feelings about them.
- b. As you drift off to sleep, remind yourself, silently or out loud, that you want to remember your dreams.

- c. Reserve a few quiet moments, with your eyes closed, when you wake up to recall your dreams. Linger in a semi-dream state to observe dream thoughts.
- d. Keep your journal and a pen/pencil handy by your bedside to record your dream thoughts or fragments when you wake up.
- e. Dream thoughts can surface to the conscious state when triggered by some event in the course of your day. Write down any dream fragments.

Return to the passages describing your dream images and ponder what their symbolism can reveal to you. Jung believed that every dream was a source of information. Prompt recording of your dreams can help prevent distortions created by the conscious mind. Journal writing can also be a good outlet to draft a written closure or final scene of a recurring dream. Recurring dreams often represent serious unresolved issues that need to be addressed. Although writing a final scene to a recurring dream may not fully resolve each stressful issue, it does initiate increased awareness that may aid in the resolution of the stressor that causes this type of dream.

4. *Unsent letters.* Another topic common to journal writers is called "unsent letters." One type of resolution people tend to avoid like the plague is rifts occurring in relationships of any kind. The hardest rift to resolve occurs when a friend or loved one dies without your getting the chance to say goodbye. Kathleen Adams (1990) states that unsent letters provide the opportunity for "the three C's": catharsis, clarity, and completion. As a cathartic tool, the drafting of an unsent letter allows release of suppressed emotions including grief, anger, or guilt. For this journal technique to prove effective, it is a given that the letter does *not* go in the mail so that emotions can bubble up freely and surface without fear of self-censorship or reprisal. We all carry excess emotional baggage from unresolved relationships. The drafting of unsent letters allows us to lighten our emotional load. Clarity becomes evident when the writer realizes there is no chance for rebuttal from the addressee. Under this circumstance, you can be as direct as you wish and state exactly how you feel and why you feel this way. Although writing a

letter to someone you need to communicate with does not resolve all issues, it does *begin* to bring the unresolved issues to closure. A variation on this journal technique is to write down thoughts of anger and hostility and then crumple up the paper and throw it away. The crumpling adds to the emotional catharsis.

Best Tips for Journal Writing as a Coping Technique

Here are some additional tips on getting started on this most valuable coping technique:

1. Buy a nice notebook (leather-bound journals are great) to call your own. Investing in a nice journal deepens your commitment to the journal-writing process.
2. Sometimes making a list of things going through your head is a great way to start a journal entry. Once you get these ideas down, then begin to expound on them.
3. Consider playing some relaxing background music (instrumental music works best) to relax the mind and let the thoughts and emotions flow.
4. Consider holding a centering device (such as a seashell or tumble stone) as a means to start the soul-searching process.
5. If prose isn't your thing, consider writing in a rap style. Remember that putting things to rhyme can help you make order out of the chaos in your life.
6. Consider keeping a section of your journal for creative ideas, doodling, and photo collages.

Best Application of Journal Writing

Good-quality journal writing has several purposes. The first is to act as a personal sounding board—to cleanse the mind overloaded with perceptions, emotions, and toxic thoughts. Journal writing is a great way to vent anger. In moments of rage, a verbal description helps pinpoint how and why these feelings are surfacing.

Sometimes writing how you feel, and perhaps what you should have said or would like to say, becomes a draft script to resolve issues between you and the person(s) involved in your perceived stress. Writing down feelings of anxiety and apprehension is a good release of emotions that can drain your energy. Effective coping involves the ability to access and employ both internal and external resources.

The second purpose is to map out strategies for resolution, both attitudinal perceptions and behavioral changes. Depending on the situation, these two purposes can be used as an offensive tactic in the face of stress, or in strategic planning when in momentary retreat. As an offensive tactic, journal writing can be used to cope with an immediate problem. Just by pulling out a pad of paper and pen and writing down what is on your mind, thoughts become organized and order begins to emerge from chaos. In many stressful events, however, this option is not possible. Then journal writing can be used as a postponed coping response, perhaps at the end of the day, to collect your thoughts and process major events—those chronic stressors—that need attention. Last, a periodic review of journal entries serves to increase awareness of trends and patterns in your thoughts and behaviors. Recognition of trends is the first step in changing undesired or negative thoughts and actions in an effort to reach your highest human potential and enjoy inner peace. Although the primary resource needed for journal writing is a single notebook, you might consider having two: one very private one to be used exclusively at home, and a second one, perhaps less structured, to be used at work.

Personal computers have added a whole new dimension to journal writing that was inconceivable just two decades ago. Many people have found that using a word processor actually allows them to write as fast as they think, thereby enabling them to capture the essence of several thoughts simultaneously, rather than fighting to retrieve some. If you find it easier to type entries in a personal computer file than in a notebook, give it a try.

SUMMARY

- Journal writing has been used as a form of self-expression and soul searching for centuries. Psychologists and health educators have advocated journal writing for decades as a means to increase self-awareness on issues that need attention.
- Journal writing is said to promote emotional catharsis when thoughts, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, and the tensions these create are allowed to work themselves out on paper.
- Use of soul searching is no coincidence as a stress-management technique because this activity is the epitome of the emptying process.
- There are short-term and long-term effects of habitual journal writing. Short-term benefits include releasing pent-up feelings of anger and anxiety. When a series of journal entries is reread, long-term effects include seeing patterns and habits of thought, perceptions, and behaviors that are not detectable on an entry-to-entry basis. Putting thoughts down on paper also widens one's perspective to become more receptive to solutions and resolutions to stressors.
- An additional benefit, demonstrated by Pennebaker, is that writing about personal experiences in a journal increases the integrity of the immune system. Expressive writing has also proved to benefit fibromyalgia patients, wives of U.S. servicemen, as well as decrease resting blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- Not all journal entries have to be written in prose form. Poetry therapy is likened to making order out of personal chaos. This coping style is used in many settings, including prisons, nursing homes, hospitals, and counseling centers.
- There is no wrong way to write a journal, save writing too infrequently. This chapter gave a number of guidelines for effective journal writing, including several themes (Buzan, dreams, and unsent letters) that can add variety to your repertoire of entry styles.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Explain how journaling is used as an effective coping technique.
2. Differentiate between the immediate effects and the long-term effects of journal writing.
3. List several steps that help promote the journal-writing process.

Chapter 11



Expressive Art Therapy

Art, as a mode of self-expression, dates back several thousands of years to the cave drawings in Lascaux, France, and perhaps much earlier. But just recently in the development of modern civilization has art become a recognized effec-

Draw me how you feel.

—Sharlene Gin

tive coping technique in the field of stress management. **Art therapy** is based on the premise that many thoughts, feelings, and insights are verbally inexplicable. Several abstract constructs of the human mind lack the necessary vocabulary to adequately describe the focus, intensity, and understanding of daily encounters that the mind tries to process and grasp. This is only exacerbated in times of stress. Self-expression through visual artistic media offers a balance to verbal expression in the search for wholeness through the understanding of our personal thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes.

Art therapy has been described by the American Art Therapy Association as “the use of art in a creative process to provide the opportunity for a nonverbal expression and communication in which to reconcile and foster self-awareness and personal growth.” Art therapy is centered on exploration of the individual’s internal landscape, carved and shaped by one’s collective experiences and delivered through a visual, artistic sense. Art therapy can strengthen the bonds of self-communication, thereby promoting greater self-awareness and self-comfort. Art therapy can also be described as a voyage of self-discovery, with process and product uniting to promote self-realization and self-healing. For this reason, art therapy is considered a coping technique in the strategic plan to deal with stress because awareness of problems must occur before steps to resolve perceived stress can be taken.

If you consider that your thoughts and behaviors are a product of your unconscious mind (Chapter 8), and the unconscious mind communicates in symbols, colors, and images, rather than words, then tapping into the wealth and power of the unconscious mind as a means to cope with stress is advantageous, if not essential, for everyone. Art therapy is a proven way to do just this.

Origins of Art Therapy

The seeds of this discipline took root as early as the field of professional psychology itself. At the turn of the twentieth century, Freud and Jung engaged several of their patients in drawing to better understand several psychological disorders through the visual expression of their emotions. But it was the work of Margaret Naumburg, an American art teacher and director of Walden Art School, who found the use of art a powerful form of therapeutic communication for several children she taught. Naumburg observed that self-expression through spontaneous art became a psychotherapeutic treatment in its



FIGURE 11.1

Art as a personal expression dates back thousands of years, as shown in this photo of cave art discovered in the mountains of Patagonia, Chile, believed to be more than 6,000 years old.

own right. With the backing and assistance of her colleague, Dr. Nolan Lewis, she conducted research involving children classified with problem or troublesome behaviors at the New York State Psychiatric Unit. Her first findings were published in 1947; however, it took several more years for her theory to take root. Naumburg’s theory dealt primarily with the unconscious expression of nonverbal thoughts as an important tool in psychoanalysis. She proposed that with the interpretive help of a therapist, the patients’ artwork would aid in their own treatment and recovery.

A second theory, developed by art teacher Edith Kramer in 1971, suggested that the process of drawing itself was therapeutic, and that more attention should be given to the creative, cathartic process than to the final product, the illustration. Since its inception as a discipline, many theories have been added to the study of art therapy, based on the foundation by Naumburg and Kramer. The role of the art therapist has also matured in this evolution. Originally seen as the primary vehicle for interpretation of the artist’s work, the art therapist is now viewed as a blend of artist, therapist, and teacher. The art therapist serves as a catalyst to help the artist uncover his or her

Art therapy: A coping technique of self-expression and self-awareness employing various media to describe feelings and thoughts in ways that verbal language cannot.

own meaningful interpretation and to use that interpretation as an awareness tool to further personal growth and development. According to art therapist Eleanor Ulman (1961), the role of an art therapist is “to help people bring out from within themselves a source of motivation—the wish to organize the experience of their inner and outer worlds into a coherent form.”

Not until the 1960s did art therapy emerge as its own discipline, with specialists becoming trained and certified in the theoretical basis and application of this type of therapy. In 1969, the American Art Therapy Association was established. Originally, in its most clinical form, art therapy was designed as a diagnostic tool used by art therapists and psychologists to understand personality development and self-expression of patients with clinical disorders. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, art therapy became recognized and accepted as a coping technique for all individuals to increase self-awareness as well as act as an outlet for emotional expression. Currently, the benefits of visual expression through various art media are acknowledged for everyone. To date, research in the field of art therapy consists mostly of clinical case studies—that is, individuals, who, in their recovery process, have attained a breakthrough in self-discovery through creative art. Conventional wisdom indicates that art therapy initiates a stronger partnership between the nonverbal, artistic, and spatial right-brain functions and the analytical, logical, and verbal left-brain functions. With the evidence gathered from split-brain research, it has now become obvious that the optimal human potential involves balance and integration of the right and left cognitive functions of the brain. As the discipline of art therapy continues to expand beyond the clinical setting, a greater understanding of its benefits will be realized.

Today, art therapy is recognized for its many therapeutic effects on aspects of mental, physical, spiritual, and, most notably, emotional well-being. Art therapists agree that there are several goals associated with this technique to enhance the healing process and well-being. As described by art therapist Myra Levick (1983), these include:

1. *To provide a means for strengthening the ego:* to allow a better sense of identity through discovery of personal interests and growth issues
2. *To provide a cathartic experience:* to let emotions that have an immobilizing effect be released in the physical act of creating personal expression through art

3. *To provide a means to uncover anger:* to employ the use of colors and shapes to express and detect feelings of aggression
4. *To offer an avenue to reduce guilt:* by conveying inner thoughts of past feelings and behavior associated with the guilt process
5. *To facilitate impulse control:* to allow freedom of self-expression, rather than its repression, through a positive behavior
6. *To help patients/clients use art as a new outlet during incapacitating illness:* to use art as a tool to strengthen the mind-body connection by using various art media to augment the imagery aspect of self-healing

Clinical Use of Art Therapy

Art therapy, primarily drawing and illustration, has been employed in many settings, including drug rehabilitation centers, eating-disorder clinics, veterans' hospitals, clinics for the emotionally disturbed, prisons, and oncology (cancer) hospital wards. Often, the manifestations of physical and emotional problems inhibit people in the verbal expression of their feelings. Yet, without some type of communication or self-expression, the progress of healing is stifled. Art therapy serves to break through this barrier. The dichotomy of hemispheric cognitive functions, revealed through split-brain research, has validated the concept that verbal communication is only one way to express our innermost thoughts. Feelings of anger, depression, fear, grief, guilt, and worry, when expressed in graphic form, begin to release residual toxins of these thoughts from the depths of the unconscious mind. In guided art therapy, drawings are either directed—themes or guidelines are suggested by the art therapist—or spontaneous, with the freedom to draw whatever comes to mind, to help release suppressed or toxic feelings.

Every mark, every spot, and every line drawn, painted, or sketched is considered an extension of the individual's mind. Through repeated analysis and interpretation of the works created by a host of patients from every conceivable background and with every health-related problem, some recurring archetypal images appear to represent specific parts of one's personality. For example, trees (FIG. 11.2►) are thought to represent energy levels or a perspective on one's life. A full, leafy tree with a broad trunk is indicative of vibrant



FIGURE 11.2 A simple drawing of a tree can indicate a great many things about someone and his or her level of self-esteem.

energy and strong-willed nature, while a barren, skinny tree suggests frailty, lack of hope, perhaps even death. Houses may represent either security or imprisonment, depending on the size of windows, doors, and the location of people in the setting. All images have importance, just as all aspects of each image convey a special meaning to the person who drew the picture (Asperheim, 1982). The recognition of this importance reveals various aspects of one's psychic landscape. And, as much can be revealed by what is not drawn as by what is pictorially represented. For instance, in self-portraits, people who draw faces with no mouths or ears suggest an inability to express their feelings verbally. Long arms may express a desire to reach out for help or affection. Short arms may signify feelings of withdrawal. Short necks indicate stubbornness. Boxed shoulders hint of the inability to let matters roll off the back.

According to art therapist Evelyn Virshup (1978), the importance of art therapy is in the process, not necessarily the outcome. The expression of oneself through art far exceeds the aesthetic quality to the viewer: "Someone who is asked to draw how they feel, and is then measured by the yardstick of aesthetics will feel betrayed, and will repress further feelings. Creativity of expression is stifled by judgmental evaluation." A crucial factor in the practice of art therapy is the collaborative verbal description of the picture once it has been drawn. The role of the art therapist is to guide the artist through his or her understanding of each work. This is done by asking open-ended questions such as, What does the picture mean? In

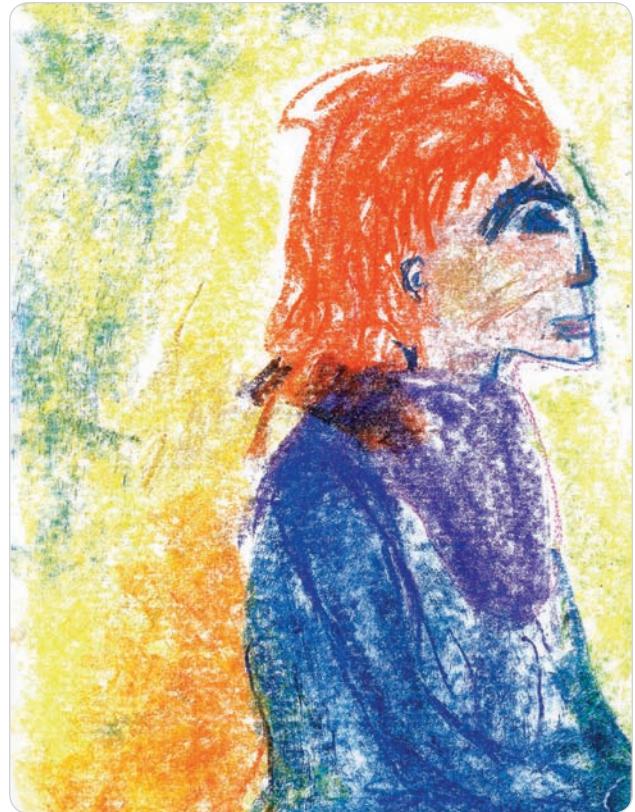


FIGURE 11.3 The artist said after drawing this, "There is indeed change in my life, but I see good things on the horizon. I am experiencing some physical limitations (with my hands) yet I plan to do some more activities such as hiking and swimming, etc."

many cases, the artist may not overtly recognize the emotional significance of the work (e.g., missing features, significant color selection, or disproportional figures) or may not be quite ready to accept verbally what has been depicted graphically. Art therapists suggest that, upon completion of the drawing, the artist try to explain what the figure represents, perhaps even to write it down on the corner of the drawing. This serves to balance the **non-verbal expression** with the verbal expression and further the communication process of the conscious and unconscious minds. This combination leads to better awareness and comprehension of the situation at hand and the emotions associated with it. (FIG. 11.3 ▲)

Nonverbal expression: Many thoughts and feelings cannot be expressed verbally, giving rise to art therapy as a means of nonverbal expression.

In 1971, a radiation oncologist named Carl Simonton formulated a concept for cancer patients involving, among other things, the integration of mental imagery and art therapy. In a pioneer program to teach cancer patients to take an active role in their own recovery, Simonton and his then-wife Stephanie designed a strategic approach to attack cancer from all sides—mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually—with a host of progressive coping and relaxation techniques. In perhaps the most significant plank to bridge the fields of alternative and modern medicine, mental imagery and art therapy were employed as complementary tools to fight cancer cells and help rejuvenate the body (Simonton, 1978).

On the premise that people must take active responsibility for their own health, Simonton asked his patients

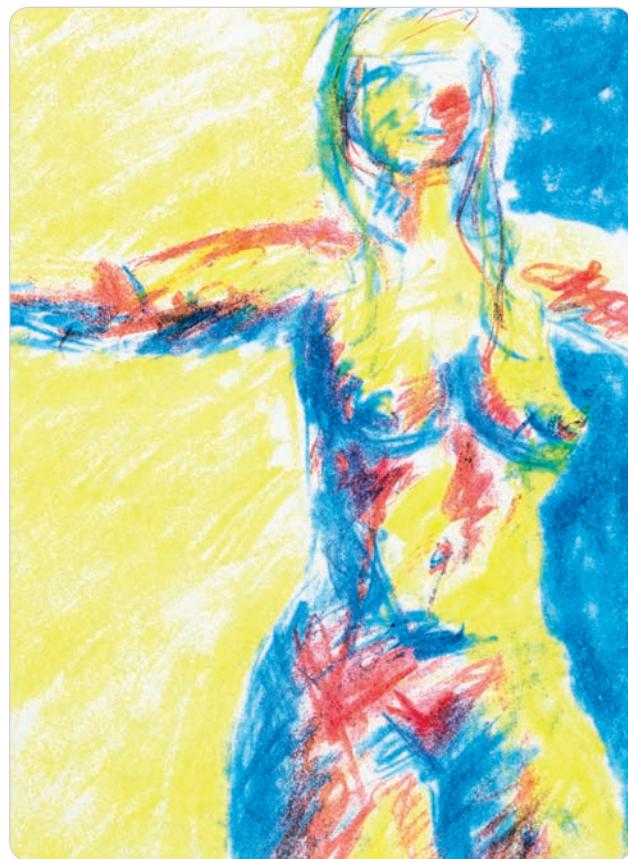


FIGURE 11.4

Facing radiation (and possible surgery) for breast cancer, this student chose to imagine the radiation as light energy that would heal her body. “Unlike some women who are forever worrying about their body image, I am very proud of my body,” she explained. A year later she wrote to say that she is cancer free.

to imagine a flood of white blood cells attacking and devastating the cancer cells in their bodies. In the creative minds of his patients, the white blood cells took on metaphorical images of armies of white knights in shining armor or schools of great white sharks in confrontation with their prey. Simonton had several patients draw pictures of these images to reinforce the power of visualization. Additional pictures were drawn at various stages of their illnesses. The progression of visual images gave striking evidence of the patients’ attitudes toward their disease and their willingness to attempt to either augment the healing process through enhanced willpower and positive attitudes (with some cases of “terminal” cancer going into remission) or remain passive, even helpless, victims.

In her pioneering work, Kübler-Ross (1981) has also used art as a therapeutic tool with children who have cancer. Those with a limited vocabulary but total lack of inhibition about drawing were able to express a multitude of feelings surrounding the many progressions of the death process. Kübler-Ross found that the utilization of illustrations and sketches by terminally ill children served as a phenomenal coping technique toward the resolution of the emotional and spiritual stress associated with this traumatic experience. She believes that self-expression through art has the potential to become a vehicle to promote wholeness in the individual.

Using an approach similar to Simonton’s and Kübler-Ross’s, physician Bernie Siegel (1986) also has employed art therapy among his cancer patients. Whereas most physicians have their patients first fill out medical-history questionnaires, Siegel hands out blank sheets of white paper and boxes of crayons and asks individuals to draw themselves in their current state of health or disease. According to Siegel, mental imagery in the form of art therapy is more useful than a battery of laboratory tests to assess a patient’s disease state and prospects for recovery. He adds that the analysis of these illustrations is one of the most accurate tools in determining the prognosis of disease and, potentially, the development of other health-related problems.

As a general surgeon with a speciality in oncology, Siegel was struck by several factors hinting at which patients would succumb to their disease and which would defy the odds of terminal cancer. Those who seemed to grab the bull by the horns and took responsibility for their recovery he referred to as exceptional cancer patients (ECaP). More specifically, critical factors included willpower, humor, hope, and love, all of

which were represented in some aspect of the patients' illustrations. Not all of his patients had this exceptional ability, and their drawings often foreshadowed imminent death. In the spirit of Jung, Siegel soon came upon the realization that messages from the unconscious mind manifest in symbolic images and characteristics. These images accentuate the patient's fears, anger, levels of self-esteem, grief, guilt, and the intensity of the personal problems and conflicts that ultimately pave the path to disease. In one illustration, a patient drew herself at the extreme right-hand, bottom corner of the page, leaving the rest of the paper blank. This was interpreted to suggest low self-esteem, which was later confirmed by the artist. In a similar episode, a young boy drew only the top half of his body over the entire page, leaving the physician curious and frightened. The young boy then turned the page over to reveal the bottom half, hinting that recovery was well on its way—and putting a huge smile on Siegel's face.

Although there are exceptions, there is a consensus among art therapists that regardless of gender, nationality, or ethnic upbringing, each color in art therapy represents an archetypal meaning. Typically, the color selection as well as the objects drawn (e.g., house, tree) parallel emotional expressions of one's mental health. The following list suggests associations between colors and their archetypal meanings:

- Red: passionate emotional peaks (from pleasure to pain); can represent either compassion or anger
- Orange: life change (big or small)
- Yellow: energy (usually a positive message)
- Blue and green: happiness and joy (blue may even mean creativity)
- Purple/violet: highly spiritual nature; unconditional love
- Brown (and earth-tone colors): a sense of groundedness and stability
- Black: (1) grief, despair, or fear or (2) a sense of personal empowerment
- White: (1) fear, avoidance, or coverup or (2) hope
- Gray: ambiguity or uncertainty

Not all professionals agree on the association between color selection and its interpretation; art therapist Rebecca Crane offers a slightly different explanation. In her professional experience, yellow and orange signify

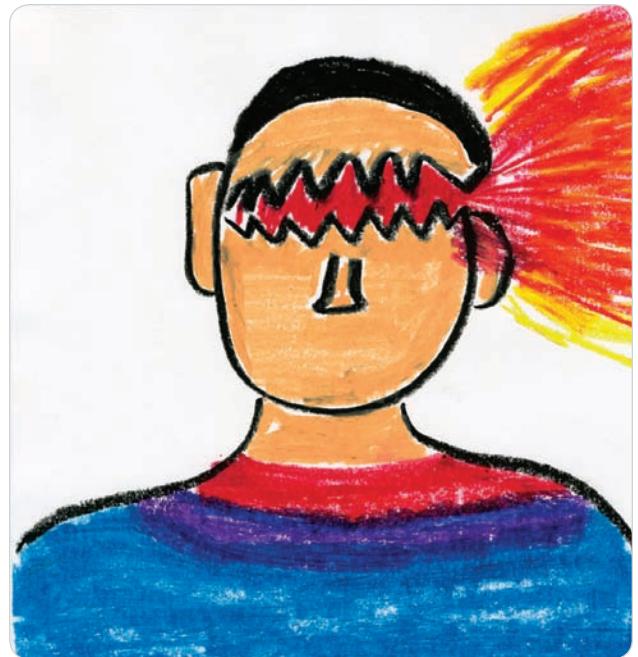


FIGURE 11.5

An example of art therapy used to treat migraine headache. Notice no mouth is drawn in this illustration (supporting the concept of the somatizer; Chapter 5).

pleasantness or happiness. Violet and red convey unhappiness. Specifically, violet represents grief or death, while red is used to express anger, frustration, and annoyance.

Although cancer patients have received the most publicity from their use of art therapy as a coping technique, art therapists have also used this tool in the awareness and recovery process of other stress-related problems, including migraine headaches (FIG. 11.5 ▲), gastrointestinal problems, anorexia, and post-traumatic stress disorders of patients surviving the atrocities of war. The creation of sketches and sculptures has been a significant tool in the treatment of Vietnam veterans with **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** as described by J. Horgan (1988) in *Scientific American*. Horgan reported that many former soldiers were still held prisoner by the haunting memories of death and carnage, leaving them emotionally immobilized after returning home. But

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): The mental, emotional, and physical repercussions experienced after an extremely stressful experience (e.g., war combat, natural disasters, rape and sexual abuse, car accidents).

through the introduction of this type of therapy, veterans found a tremendous sense of relief through transferring their destructive images from the depths of their minds onto paper, canvas, or clay. Although not particularly anxious to talk about their war experiences, the vets used their illustrations and sculptures as an outlet to help vanquish the emotions associated with their traumatic experiences and to initiate one facet of the healing and growth process. Art therapy for Vietnam veterans has proved so successful that in 1981 an art museum in Chicago was established for Vietnam vets to exhibit their work. Efforts have been made with similar art therapy programs involving Iraq war veterans, as noted by *Washington Post* reporter Jackie Spinner (2007).

The treatment of self-mutilation and eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa, has also included art therapy as a part of the process. In these conditions, the patient often feels helpless to control his or her existing environment and identity. Perceptions of stress are turned inward and manifested through a process of slow physical self-destruction. Inner conflicts regarding control issues are manifested through significant weight loss, which is paralleled by a distorted body image. In a study conducted at Goldsmiths College employing art

therapy with anorexics (Levick, 1983), it was noted that the subjects rarely drew human figures. When they were drawn, however, they showed adolescent characteristics suggesting a denial of adult responsibilities and physical maturation. Paintings and sketches by patients often depicted images of isolation and loneliness; in one case, a subject drew herself as a cactus. Progress was noted when subjects began to represent their true physical conditions—that is, they drew themselves in human form. Art as a means of self-expression by anorexic patients was perceived to help increase self-awareness by opening the lines of communication within the individual, thus acknowledging strengths and weaknesses, and an increased comfort with both.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, when schools reopened in New York City (and even other districts nationwide), students were invited to share their level of stress by drawing their thoughts, feelings, and images on paper as a cathartic exercise to relieve emotional suffering, much of which could not be articulated by words alone (Flatow, 2002). School teachers in and around military bases are known to often use art therapy with grade-school and middle-school children during military conflicts (e.g., the Persian Gulf war in 1991 and the Iraq war in 2003). Students are asked to draw their feelings regarding the respective wars and their parents' involvement. Typically, the drawings reveal fears of abandonment, detachment, sorrow, and loneliness. The bottom line is that everyone, regardless of their personal experiences, can benefit from art therapy.

Just as much can be revealed by a picture, much can also be revealed by casual doodles, the kind that accompany lecture notes, decorate grocery lists, or are scribbled on paper napkins (**FIG. 11.6**). Psychologist Robert Burns has researched the meanings of doodles only to find that they are another form of art therapy. Doodles are nonverbal messages that surface from the unconscious mind, each doodle or mark important in its own right. Often, doodles are symbols of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in visual form. Although the understanding of “doodling” is in its infancy, several observations have been made by Burns (Jaret, 1991). Aggression is often expressed in dark, heavy, jagged lines with arrows or points. Horizontal lines convey inner peace. Happiness is typically represented by soft, curvy lines. Burns discovered that men typically draw geometric shapes—squares, triangles, circles—whereas women tend to sketch faces. Like the conscious effort to draw a graphic representa-



FIGURE 11.6

Doodles may not seem like a form of therapy, but they, too, reveal what cannot be expressed verbally.

**FIGURE 11.7**

This illustration was drawn by a student who saw herself as having high self-esteem. The fish represents beauty and freedom. The color orange represents a major life change (the artist was a graduating senior) and the green plant (stability) with four leaves represented four job offers (all of which she received).

tion of our feelings, unconscious doodling also conveys important messages about the internal landscape.

Steps to Initiate Art Therapy

The beauty of art therapy is that anyone can participate and its significant therapeutic effect benefits not only cancer patients but anyone experiencing the signs and symptoms of perceived stress. In this case, as with other coping and relaxation techniques, the word *therapy* does not reflect weakness or needing help. Rather, art therapy serves to augment understanding of the personal awareness and resolution process. Art therapy appears to trigger a progression of two responses. The first is a cathartic effect, whereby you can release pent-up emotions and thoughts from your mind onto paper (or clay). The second is a greater sense of personal awareness based on an objective look at or interpretation of the artwork—that is, the message it suggests or implies. This interpretation or awareness is often a communication from the unconscious mind regarding less-than-obvious symbolic images. Although an interpretation can be helpful in the self-awareness process, without some prior knowledge or assistance, meaning could also be overlooked, mistaken, or misconstrued. Thus, there are several factors to consider to ensure the effectiveness of this technique, including **artistic roadblocks**, materials, illustrative themes, and interpretation.

Artistic Roadblocks

The most common reaction people have to art therapy is, “I can’t draw!” The truth is, everyone can draw, in a way

**FIGURE 11.8**

This illustration was drawn by a student who chose the theme in which one closes one's eyes, draws a line, and then opens the eyes and turns the paper around slowly until an image comes to mind. In this case the student completed the illustration by drawing a Santa Fe fresco in the likeness of the Virgin Mary.

specific to their own talents and abilities. A case in point is Irishman Christie Brown. A paraplegic without use of his hands because of cerebral palsy, he painted with his left foot. Many people are hesitant to draw out of embarrassment. But in art therapy it doesn't matter what your abilities are. Whether your creative talents are best described as third-grade stick figures or are undisputed re-creations of Old Masters, it makes no difference. Abstract images, fine-detailed sketches, simple lines, colors, and shapes are all equally important. Art therapy is noncompetitive. There is no right or wrong. With this obstacle out of the way, you're ready to give it a try.

Artistic roadblocks: The perceived inability to express oneself through creative expression (often based on fear).

Materials

Opinions vary greatly on the choice of medium recommended for art therapy. The one factor agreed upon is that there should be a wide assortment of colors to allow full expression. Art therapists generally agree that the best medium is colored pastels, as they are the easiest to work with for both broad strokes and fine lines. Siegel, on the other hand, advocates crayons. Crayons not only come in all colors of the rainbow, says Siegel, but they bring out the child in the artist, a characteristic that promotes familiar receptivity to this medium. While pastels and crayons are preferred, colored pencils can also be used. Virshup advocates the availability of all media, including string dipped in paint and dragged across the paper. The purpose behind all these media is to have as wide a variety of colors as possible, so pen and pencil are not advocated but in a pinch will suffice. Finger paints have been used with children, and modeling clay has also been shown to be effective for this technique. Paper selection is a less problematic decision. Art therapists highly recommend the economical blank newsprint (18" × 24"); Siegel suggests a white sheet of paper; however, any type of paper in most any size will suffice. Once you have these materials, all you need is an idea and some inspiration to put pastel or crayon in your hand and draw.

Illustrative Themes

When art therapy is used as a coping technique to deal with stress, there is a host of themes and concepts providing inspiration to choose from. One approach is just to start drawing (anything) until you achieve some level of comfort with this technique. Other themes are more specific to events, feelings, or situations that words seem inadequate to describe. I have tried (with much success) the following themes in my classes:

1. *Art therapy images.* Introductory art therapy sessions are typically initiated with two or three themes such as:
 - a. *Draw something that represents you.* This could be a symbol of yourself, a picture of something you identify yourself with, such as your profession, family, hobbies, home, or something that gives you inner strength.
 - b. *Draw two fantasy animals.* Draw whichever two animals come to mind, even creations of animals that do not exist on the planet. Then, describe the animals you have drawn in a few words (approximately three adjectives) on the



A



B

FIGURE 11.9

(A) This picture was drawn by a student who was grieving the loss of her dear friend, a fellow student who was murdered at Columbine High School. The tears down her cheek have formed a pool of blue-green water. Her black hair is a symbol of grief, yet the sunshine is working its way to warm her heart. (B) "This is how I feel when I am angry—I often feel full of rage, but feel like my mouth is a closed zipper, and I cannot express my feelings. The dress represents my family and friends expecting me to act feminine instead of showing my rage. The beer cans tell the rest of the story."

back of the paper (from Virshup's art therapy workshop).

- c. *Close your eyes and draw a line on the paper.* Make the line any shape—straight, curved, jagged, fuzzy, or thin, whatever strikes your fancy, but keep your eyes closed while you draw. Next, open your eyes and take a look at what you see. You can rotate the paper around slowly until something strikes the fancy of your creative eye. Then, complete the drawing. Make something out of the line you drew. Give the line meaning. Do with it whatever comes to mind.
2. *Healing images.* Although art therapy has been used extensively with cancer patients, many other diseases and symptoms can be represented on paper. The following themes are ideas to enhance positive internal image, body awareness, and mental imagery.
- a. *Draw yourself.* Sketch an image of yourself in a state of perfect health.
 - b. *Draw a picture of a part of your body you feel needs special attention.* Draw an area that you feel is perhaps a target organ of stress, one that shows signs of excessive wear and tear, or a part of your body that does not feel completely whole—for example, a headache, sore back, stomach cramps, clenched teeth. On another sheet of paper (or the back side), draw an image of this same body region fully healed. Use your imagination to restore this image to health through metaphor (e.g., a sock completely darned to represent a healed stomach ulcer).
3. *Mental images.* Art therapy can be a vehicle for mental imagery also. The images drawn provoke the mind to wander. For example:
- a. *Draw a peaceful image.* Draw an image that makes you feel relaxed just by thinking about it. It can be a place you have been to that you would like to return to, if only on paper. It can also be a place you have never been to but have always wanted to go.
 - b. *Draw how you feel right now.* What emotion(s) are you feeling now? Anger, fear, guilt, worry, love, joy, peace? What does your anger look like to you? How would you illustrate your feelings of love? Try to visualize your emotions on paper.



FIGURE 11.10

This illustration was drawn by an athlete who selected the theme, Draw how you feel when you are stressed (anger or fear). Titling her picture "Depression," she described the spiral around her body as a black cloud of despair. The red and yellow colors show signs of hope. Notice the similarity of this image to the depiction of the human energy field in Chapter 3 (Figure 3.4). (©T. Panagopolus)

- c. *Draw a dream image.* Try to include whatever fragments of a particular dream you can recall. Include the use of colors.

Interpretations

Interpretations are the hardest component of art therapy. They are difficult because there is wide latitude for impressions and understanding the figures, colors, shapes, and sizes that have made their way onto paper. Jung once said that the most important factor in dream analysis is the patient's impressions because dreams are the creation of the dreamer. Drawings and sketches are no different when it comes to interpretation. As a cathartic experience, interpretations of drawings are secondary to simply getting feelings down on paper. Art therapists, and even psychologists who now use art therapy in their practices, engage in a fair amount of training to understand the commonalities, expressions of colors, and a host of other components of drawings (www.arttherapy.org). When interpreting the colors you have chosen, be careful to keep in mind both the context of the illustration and mood you were in when you drew the picture. For example, black is often used to represent death or grief, but for an African American, the color may also symbolize pride.

Interpretation is the search for understanding as the unconscious mind communicates to the conscious mind

thoughts and feelings best described through a visual medium. In all art therapy sessions, patients are encouraged to explain their drawings to members of their group. Members, in turn, ask questions that may aid the artist in understanding his or her drawing. If done alone, a written description of the work helps with this process. But caution should be used when trying to interpret the meaning of your own artwork. First, go for the obvious. In the words of Freud, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

Best Application of Art Therapy

Art is a nonverbal expression of one’s thoughts and feelings—expression that is not only necessary but therapeutic as well. There are many circumstances, in times of both ecstasy and torment, in which words do not adequately describe the full extent of our emotions. These are the times to employ art therapy. Remember that emotional well-being is defined as the ability to feel and positively express the full range of human emotions. Everyone, regardless of their levels of stress or chaotic life situations, can benefit from the use and practice of art therapy. As crazy as it may sound, keeping a box of crayons or colored pencils in your desk drawer is as important as having an address book or weekly planner. If you don’t have art supplies, it might be a good idea to obtain them. And remember, pictures don’t have to be masterpieces. They can start off as doodles.

SUMMARY

- Art as a means of self-expression dates back to antiquity. Art therapy has its roots in Freudian and Jungian psychology, where illustrations were used to aid in understanding unconscious thoughts.
- In 1969, the American Art Therapy Association was established to educate and certify people in the skills of art therapy. Art therapy has since been introduced into a variety of settings, including counseling centers, hospitals, and addiction treatment centers, as well as nontraditional settings such as corporate wellness centers. It has proved an effective coping technique for all types of people to get in touch with their emotions in a nonverbal way.
- Art therapy is described as the creative use of art to provide for nonverbal expression and communication through which to foster self-awareness and personal growth.
- Every stroke, every color, every detail has some relevant meaning at the unconscious level.
- There are varying opinions on the use of materials for art therapy, meaning that there is no preferred method. Crayons, pastels, colored pencils, finger paint, and clay are all possibilities. Art therapists do suggest that a wide variety of colors be available. Colors provide specific meaning to thoughts and unconscious messages.
- Art therapists offer a series of themes to explore in this type of nonverbal communication, including a picture of yourself, a fantasy animal, and a house with trees.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Explain how art therapy is used as an effective coping technique.
2. What archetypal meanings do colors represent or symbolize in art therapy?
3. List several steps that help promote art therapy as a coping technique.

Chapter 12



Humor Therapy (Comic Relief)

In 1964, a man admitted himself to a hospital for severe pain throughout his entire body. After a series of tests, he was diagnosed with a rare rheumatoid disease called ankylosing spondylitis, a progressive deterioration of the body's connective tissue. Chances for recovery were predicted to be roughly one in five hundred; the disease was quite

*A smile is
the shortest
distance
between
two people.*

—Victor Borge

advanced. Like most people, **Norman Cousins** decided to learn all he could about the etiology of his disease. He soon discovered that there is a strong correlation between stress, particularly negative perceptions and emotions, and his specific disease. So, the question occurred to him: If negative emotions such as guilt, worry, and anxiety are thought to be related to, and perhaps even to promote, disease, is it possible for positive emotions to maintain health, or even restore one's health? He came to the conclusion that to increase his chances of recovery, he had to assume responsibility for his treatment. And that he did. He had nothing to lose.

With a defiant determination to recover and the support of his personal physician, Cousins checked out of the hospital and into a nearby hotel. He acquired copies of humorous movies and TV shows, including those of Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers. One of his friends, Alan Funt, even sent some classic clips from his hit TV show *Candid Camera*. Cousins later wrote in his now-famous book *Anatomy of an Illness* that "ten minutes of laughter allowed two hours of pain-free sleep." After a time, he checked out of the hotel and went home; his disease had gone into remission. On the advice of his doctor, Cousins (1978) wrote up his story as a case history for the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Although he attributed his successful healing process to several factors, including large doses of vitamin C, the interpretation by those who read the article was that Cousins literally laughed himself back to health.

Norman Cousins's story is now just one of many supporting the idea that positive emotions do indeed have healing effects on health. However, it was this single case study of comic relief, perhaps more than any other, that paved the road to a whole new field of study called psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), and Cousins will always be remembered for his generous contribution to it. What has been learned since his hospital discharge is that positive emotions play an incredible role in maintaining the health of the human body. Humor therapy, or comic relief, is the use of humor to promote well-being through positive thoughts, attitudes, and emotions by counterbalancing the deleterious effects of negative thoughts, perceptions, and emotions on one's health. Humor as a coping technique is not a panacea for all ills, but it does provide benefits in a bad situation, whether in a hospital bed or outside a locked car, with your keys still in the ignition. Upon the death of legendary comic Bob Hope, who lived to be 100, his daughter,

interviewed on *Larry King Live*, noted that comedians and musical composers tend to live longer than most, most likely because of having a positive attitude.

Historical Perspective

Humor is a human magnet: It attracts all ears and minds. And laughter is a universal language, breaking through cultural barriers when words cannot. Cousins certainly was not the first person to use humor as a coping technique. Comic relief has been pondered since men and women first tickled their funny bones. The ancient Greeks held humor as a virtue. The philosopher Plato, for instance, believed humor nurtured the soul, and he advocated its use as a healing practice (Shelley, 2003). From the ancient Greeks came the formulas for theater, including comedy, still used today. And as far back as Old Testament times, people in the Middle East believed "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). In fact, humor as a "healing medicine" can be found at the root of virtually every culture on the globe, from the earliest practices of the native peoples of Africa to those of the Americas. It seems that humor and the viruses it helps to fight are equally contagious.

The word **humor** comes from a Latin word of the same spelling that means "fluid" or "moisture." According to the physiology of the medieval period in Europe (the age of alchemy and potions), there were four basic body fluids, with each "humor" associated with a specific mood or general disposition. Choler, the yellow bile produced by the gallbladder, allegedly made one melancholy and depressed. Similarly, black bile, produced by the kidneys or spleen, was responsible for anger and hostility. A happy, cheerful spirit was associated with blood; while phlegm, produced by the respiratory system, was the reason behind apathy and sluggishness. If any one humor was produced in excess, it was thought to change mood,

Norman Cousins (1915–1990): An author of the classic book *Anatomy of an Illness* (1976), he used humor to help heal himself from a serious disease and brought the importance of humor to the national consciousness in terms of mind-body-spirit healing, paving the way for the field of psychoneuroimmunology.

Humor: A perception of something funny or comical; not a mood, but a perception that can trigger a feeling or mood of joy and happiness.

which put the individual at risk of social ridicule—ergo, the first comedians. If all body fluids were balanced, however, a person was said to be “in good humor.” Note, too, that the practice of blood letting, or draining the body of fluids to relieve symptoms and causes of these ailments, was a common practice in the United States as well as Europe until 1850. Sad to say, many a person died from melancholy, and a career as a physician was not looked upon with favor as it is today.

Intrigued with the use of humor as a healing agent, Dr. Raymond Moody surveyed several history books in 1978 to discover the following. In the year 1260, a progressive French physician, Henri de Moundeville, saw the important relationship between positive emotions and sound health, and made a practice of allowing family and friends to cheer and joke with their sick relatives. He wrote, “Let the surgeon take care to regulate the whole regimen of the patient’s life for joy and happiness.” European monarchs also saw the importance of



FIGURE 12.1

Because laughing and smiling were thought to be a sin at the turn of the last century, no one did so in front of a camera for fear of being blackmailed with the proof.

laughter, and often employed court jesters (those guys with funny shoes) to add mirth to their castle courts. Perhaps the most renowned court jester was Richard Tarlton, who was credited with keeping British Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) in better health than did her team of physicians.

But laughter has not always been looked upon with favor. Europeans in the Middle Ages and Puritans on the eastern shores of North America, among others, perceived laughter to be the work of the devil. People caught laughing out loud were often denounced as witches or believed to be possessed by Satan. The expression of humor was considered a sin in many Christian denominations. Other comments from those days about laughter (Moody, 1978):

Laughter on any occasion is immoral and indecent.
Laughter obscures truth, hardens the heart, and stupefies understanding.
A man of parts of fashion is therefore only seen to smile, but never heard to laugh.

—Lord Chesterfield, 1748

And if you look at the portraits of European nobility commissioned over a period of several hundred years, you are hard-pressed to find anyone smiling (except perhaps the Mona Lisa).

The words “say cheese” were not coined for use with the first camera in the nineteenth century, either; people were afraid of being caught sinning in public (FIG. 12.1). In fact, according to Allen Klein (1989), it was not until the twentieth century that people would risk a smile in a photograph.

Social norms are often influenced by figures of authority, so humor scholars have turned to the American presidency, a high-stress job, to observe the use of humor in the Oval Office. Lincoln was reported to use humorous stories in his political speeches and even read jokes to his cabinet during the Civil War period. Jimmy Carter once said to reporters at a press-conference dinner, “I’m not going to say anything important, so you can put your crayons away.” When Ronald Reagan, a politician known for his sense of humor, was brought to George Washington University Medical Center hospital after the assassination attempt on his life, he turned to the assembled medical team and said, “I hope you’re all Republicans.” And when Dan Quayle’s father said that his son studied only “booze and broads” in college, presidential candidate George H. W. Bush was heard

to reply, “Not many students had a double major.” President Clinton’s jokes we cannot print in this book. And George W. Bush readily admits that it takes him 2 hours to watch *60 Minutes*. It appears that humor helps in the stressful role as president, too.

Times have changed since the days of Victorian prudery. With the help of the American and European entertainment industries, from vaudeville to Hollywood to television, the use of humor has gained wide acceptance throughout the world as a prominent factor in enhancing positive emotions. Slow to join this opinion until it had undisputable proof, the medical community now also accepts humor as a viable technique for health promotion and wellness. And it is Norman Cousins we have to thank for validating the use of humor as an authentic therapy in its own right.

Humor and comic relief are no less important now than when Cousins first checked into the hospital decades ago. Some would say that given the state of the world today, the need for comic relief is at an all-time high. Perhaps for this reason, a recent study was conducted in England in 2002 to determine the funniest joke—ever! A multitude of submissions were sent via email from around the world and screened by a group of “experts.” The following joke was selected as one of the winners:

Famed fictional detective Sherlock Holmes and his gruff assistant Dr. Watson pitch their tent while on a camping trip. In the middle of the night, Holmes nudges Watson to wake him up.

Holmes: Watson, look up at the stars and tell me what you deduce.

Watson: I see millions of stars. And if there are millions of stars, even if a few of those have planets, it is quite likely there are some planets like earth. And if there are a few planets like earth, then indeed, there might be intelligent life, much like our own, Sir.

Holmes: Watson, you idiot, someone stole the tent!

Types and Senses of Humor

For all the philosophical studies on the topic of humor—and there have been many—there has yet to be consensus on what humor really is. It encompasses so many facets and seems so profoundly complex that it has proved quite difficult to define succinctly. Most experts agree that humor is not itself a positive emotion, but that it can elicit positive emotions, including happiness, joy, love, faith, hope, and willpower. Humor is not a

behavior, although it can produce actions (laughter and smiling) that are specific to its nature. Humor is best described as a perception, for as we all know and have experienced, what one person finds funny someone else does not. The following are two definitions to illustrate this elusive perception (McGhee, 1979):

1. Humor is “the mental experience of discovering and appreciating ludicrous or absurd ideas, events, or situations that bring pleasure or enjoyment to the individual.”
2. Humor is “the quality of being funny or appreciating funny thoughts or acts of behavior; the ability to perceive/enjoy what is funny or comical, a state of mind, feeling, or mood.”

It appears from the definitions that humor has two fundamental aspects. Simply stated, these are give and take. First, humor can be absorbed like a sponge, or experienced by internalizing this perception cognitively. Second, humor can be expressed externally through an action in an effort to share it with others. It is accepted that everyone has a sense of humor, although from your personal experience, you may think you have proof to deny this statement. Among those who have studied humor, McGhee (1979) cites three factors that must be present for humor to exist:

1. Sources that act as potential stimuli (e.g., a pie thrown in someone’s face)
2. A cognitive and intellectual activity involved with the perception and evaluation of these sources (perceiving a faceful of whipped cream to be amusing)
3. Behavioral responses that are the expressions of humor (i.e., smiling or laughing)

Types of Humor

Perhaps the reason humor has been so difficult to define is that there are so many shades of it that can be internalized or expressed. Furthermore, types of humor overlap and integrate with each other so that it is hard to separate them out sometimes. While there are several theories of how humor can be categorized, I list them here in a particular order—parody first and sarcasm last—according to their efficacy at coping with stress. Everything between parody and sarcasm is fairly equal, and powerful in its own way, as either a subtle means to dissolve anger and fear, or to distract attention away from stress long enough for the body to return to homeostasis.

1. Parody. Parody is a work of humor that closely imitates something, or someone, for comical effect. Parody is typically a verbal or physical expression of humor bringing imperfections to light. This type of humor is considered to be one of the best, if not the best, types of humor to deal with stress, as long as it doesn't sacrifice self-esteem. Exaggerating behaviors and personality traits are examples. Good-natured parody, however, should not be mistaken for self-criticism expressed as an appeal for sympathy. When individuals can begin to parody and laugh at their own shortcomings, in their own minds, it will have the wonderful effect of reducing perceptions of stress. Celebrity "roasts" are probably the best-known parodies. *The Onion*, a national college paper, and the television show *The Office* are also prime examples of parody.

2. Satire. Although satire and parody have many commonalities, satire is most often thought of as a written or dramatic expression of personal and social flaws. In the use of satire, many personal, political, and cultural quirks are described and exaggerated for humorous effect. America's most celebrated humorists, Art Buchwald, Erma Bombeck, Tom Robbins, P. J. O'Rourke, Molly Ivins, and Dave Barry, are well known for their styles of satire. Without question, Steven Colbert (*The Colbert Report*) is the epitome of a satirical right-wing conservative newscaster. *Saturday Night Live* skits are prime examples of dramatic satire, as are the movies *The Princess Bride* and *Shrek*, both satires (and perhaps parodies) of classic fairy tales. And, of course, who could forget *The Simpsons*?

Parody: A style of humor where something or someone is made fun of. Self-parody is thought to be the best type of humor to reduce stress.

Satire: A written or dramatic form of parody. Examples include the works of George Carlin and the movie *Shrek*.



FIGURE 12.2

Saturday Night Live hits upon all types of humor but is perhaps best known for its satirical skits (*Jeopardy!*). Comedians Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg, and Robin Williams (Comic Relief Benefit) also employ nearly every type of humor from self-parody, irony, and quick wit to slapstick and black humor.

3. Slapstick comedy. In the early days of American vaudeville, many actors used physical farce to generate laughs (FIG. 12.2 ▲). Slipping on a banana peel, getting a pie in the face, or reeling from a slap on the cheek was sure to get a rise out of the audience. While banana peels and cream pies were real, face slaps were faked. Behind the curtain stood a person making the sound effects. Originating in the French theater, the slap stick was a piece of leather nailed to a flat board. At the appropriate moment on stage, use of the slap stick would also produce laughs. The Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, the Three Stooges,

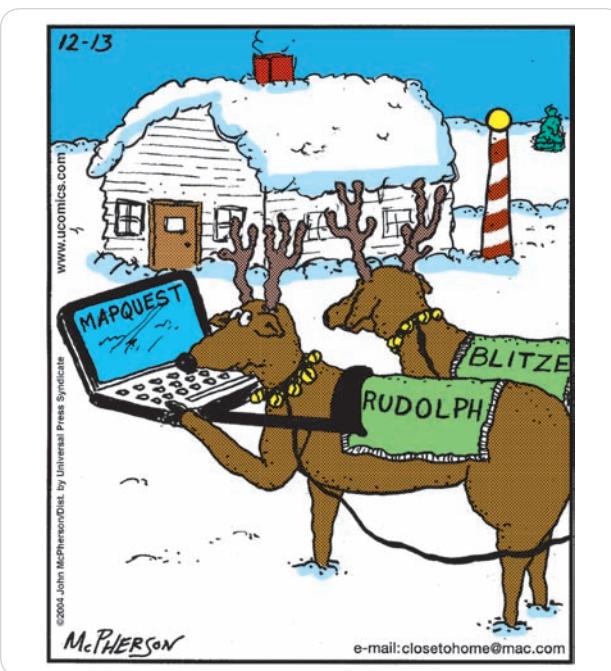


FIGURE 12.3

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and Lucille Ball all had their professional roots in American vaudeville. Steve Carell, Jim Carrey, and Steve Martin are holding the slapstick mantle today. Scholars note that **slapstick** comedy is an aggression-based humor through which audience members can release latent anger in a cathartic way (laughing) by watching someone else give and receive physical, yet harmless, blows.

4. **Absurd/nonsense humor.** **Absurd or nonsense humor** is described as two or more concepts that unite to result in a stupid, ludicrous, or ridiculous perception. The best example of this style of humor is *The Onion* newspaper. Cartoonist Gary Larson's cartoon strip *The Far Side* also qualifies. Cows driving cars, sharks wearing horn-rimmed glasses, and cheetahs using vending machines on the Serengeti plain are all absurd. Dan Piraro's Bizarro strip conveys the same humor (FIG. 12.4). Steven Wright is to stand-up comedy as Gary Larson and Piraro are to cartoons, with a brand of absurd humor that has to be heard to be believed. Absurd or nonsense humor is also thought to be a good brand of humor to reduce stress because it acts as a diversion from the inundation of daily stressors. Take Monty Python, for example. Both styles put



FIGURE 12.4

(©Dan Piraro. Reprinted with special permission of King Features Syndicate.)

a gentle chaos back into the order of everyday thinking, making one realize that life shouldn't be taken too seriously.

5. **The double entendre.** The **double entendre** is a type of wordplay, where the expression has two meanings (usually of a sexual nature). James Bond movies are filled with these verbal gags. Bumper stickers are notorious for these wordplays as well. Even Disney cartoons are written at two levels—for both kids and parents—where each laughs, but for what appears to be different reasons. Double entendres abound in everything from cartoons to political commentaries on Comedy Central. For example, Chris Rock notes that in determining legislation about the legalization of marijuana, both houses of Congress went into a joint session. Here is another example, in honor of Earth Day 2004: Clean up the Earth, it's not Uranus!

6. **Black humor.** **Black humor** is not a type of ethnic humor as some people are led to believe. Black, or “gallows,” humor is based on the fear of death. It is sometimes described as a “flirtatious brush with death.” Death is a common fear among human

Slapstick: Originating from vaudeville, a physical farce such as getting a pie thrown in the face or slipping on a banana peel.

Absurd or nonsense humor: This type of humor is best exemplified by the works of Gary Larson's *The Far Side*. The comedian Steven Wright is also a prime example.

Double entendre: A joke that has two meanings.

Black humor: Humor about death and dying; thought to decrease fear of death.

beings, and one way the human mind has devised to deal with this fear is to poke fun at it, attempting to become more comfortable with the concept, if only momentarily. Typically, during national tragedies, black-humor jokes surface as a way to cope with the gruesome reality of death, as was the case when jokes circulated immediately after the *Columbia* space shuttle explosion in 2003. Some of the best examples of black humor can be found in films and videos like the infamous *Harold and Maude* and the more recent *Bad Santa* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. Much of the comic wit used in the television series *M*A*S*H* and *Scrubs* expressed various shades of black humor. Cartoonists, including Gary Larson, also make light of this phenomenon in their illustrations.

The dead as well as the living seem to have the last laugh, as expressed in the last words of American humorist Dorothy Parker (etched on her tombstone), “Pardon my dust.” In a survey of gravestone epitaphs, Louis Schafer (1990) discovered that cemeteries are not devoid of tongue-in-cheek black humor either, as illustrated in the following examples:

John Strange
Here lies an honest lawyer.
This is Strange.

Here lieth the body of Martha Dias
Always noisy, not very pious,
Who lived to the age of three score and ten
And gave to worms what she refused to men.

Irony: A type of humor where the opposite from what was originally expected occurs.

Dry humor: Often found in storytelling (e.g., Garrison Kellor, Mark Twain), where the humor is subtle and clever.

Quick-witted humor: A style of humor that is based on quick wit without using sarcasm. Quick-witted humor often involves clever wording or phrasing that catches you off guard and leaves you impressed. Examples include the works of Mark Twain and NPR’s “Car Talk” radio show.

Puns: A type of wordplay that may leave people sighing rather than laughing.

Here lies John Bun, He was killed by a gun,
His name is not Bun, but Wood,
But Wood would not rhyme with gun, but Bun would.

William Reese

This is what I expected, but not so soon.

Here lies the body of Susan Louder,
who died while drinking a seltzer powder.
Now she’s gone to her heavenly rest,
She should have waited till it effervesced.

7. **Irony.** Irony is described as two concepts or events, which when paired together, come to mean or expose the opposite of the expected outcome (e.g., “Honk if you love peace and quiet”). Life is full of ironies: receiving a surprise check for one hundred dollars in the mail only to find a credit card bill for one hundred dollars the same day. Bumper stickers, such as “My other car is a broom,” often use irony. Irony can also be seen in everyday occurrences such as buying four candy bars—and a Diet Coke. Oxymorons (two opposite concepts) provide yet another type of irony. Examples are military intelligence, honest politicians, and jumbo shrimp. One of the best examples of irony I have ever heard, though, went like this (Klein, 1989): Charlie Chaplin once entered a Charlie Chaplin Lookalike Contest, and won third prize! Many stand-up comics, including David Letterman, Jay Leno, George Lopez, Sarah Silverman, Robin Williams, and Billy Crystal, use this type of humor in their acts, and playwright Neil Simon uses ironic twists in his films and Broadway plays. Native American humor includes a number of humor styles, particularly irony, including the works of Sherman Alexie, Gary Farmer, and Chris Eyre.

8. **Dry humor, quick wit, and puns.** Dry humor can be described as clever, esoteric wit. It often involves double entendres, words with more than one meaning or connotation (e.g., a Jewish zydeco band called So How’s Bayou), frequently with sexual innuendo. Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Groucho Marx, Winston Churchill, the cast of Britain’s *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, and, more recently, Garrison Keillor of *Prairie Home Companion* are fine examples of creators of esoteric wit. Click and Clack of NPR’s “Car Talk” fame are examples of **quick-witted humor**, as is comedian George Carlin. Puns, or plays on words, also fall into this category. It has often been said that puns are the

lowest form of humor because, unlike clever wit, they border on the silly or inane. Actually, puns have no malicious intent and therefore are not the lowest form of humor. Some examples of puns follow:

- A pessimist's blood type is always B-negative.
- I fired my masseuse today. She just rubbed me the wrong way.
- A Freudian slip is when you say one thing but mean your mother.
- I used to work in a blanket factory, but it folded.

You may find it takes effort to laugh at puns, however, whereas other types of humor provoke laughter more spontaneously. Here's one: You can pick your friends and you can pick your nose, but you cannot pick your friend's nose.

9. *Bathroom humor.* If you have seen *American Pie*, *American Wedding*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *South Park*, or *There's Something about Mary* (movies that would make Freud blush), then you know what **bathroom humor** is. If you haven't, the words *vulgar*, *ruthless*, *crude*, and *irreverent* come close to describing the topics of every body function imaginable chosen for cheap (and in some cases, hilarious) laughs. In 2006, the movie *Borat* brought the concept of bathroom humor to an all-time low (or high, depending on your taste).
10. *Sarcasm.* The word **sarcasm** means "to tear flesh," and if you have ever borne the brunt of sarcasm, then you know all too well that this is a figurative yet accurate description. Although sarcasm may share elements with clever wit, it reveals latent anger (see Chapter 4). It is an attempt to get verbal revenge. Sarcasm is perceived by its users to be a socially acceptable way to express hostile feelings through words rather than physical aggression, but words can hurt as much, if not more, than physical abuse, and the memory of it far exceeds that of physical pain. A sarcastic remark is typically followed by the punch line, "I'm just kidding," to take the sharp edge off the potential pain inflicted. Sarcasm is the lowest form of humor. Although sarcastic remarks may seem funny, they actually induce stress rather than relieve it in the person toward whom they are aimed. For this reason, sarcasm is not advocated as a vehicle for expressing humor. Almost every-

one employs it to some extent, but its use should be minimized if not altogether abandoned.

Although types of humor have been compartmentalized into various categories here, for the most part, in practice they mix and blend together to form a score of permutations. Examples would be a sarcastic joke about death, or a parody of slapstick. It is equally difficult to neatly categorize senses of humor, or why individuals laugh at what they do.

Senses of Humor

Just as there is more than one type of humor, experts of humor research have identified several **senses of humor**. Senses of humor appear to be a function of one's upbringing and collective environments. Quite possibly, each individual has the makings for all the senses of humor, but one type tends to dominate in each personality. For this reason, it is complicated to give general advice on ways to improve one's sense of humor. In his book *Laugh after Laugh*, Dr. Raymond Moody identifies four categories describing most people's senses of humor:

1. *Conventional.* In the **conventional sense of humor**, two or more people find common ground by sharing a similar humorous perception and laughing at the same thing. Laughter occurs with someone, not at someone. There is a mutual appreciation for things that appear universally funny. Johnny Carson's sidekick, Ed McMahon, who laughed at nearly everything, might be an example of the conventional sense of humor.
2. *Life of the party.* While some people soak up humorous episodes like a sponge, others have the ability to provide laughable moments for the

Bathroom humor: A form of humor often described as vulgar, crude, and tasteless, it derives its name from the use of various bodily functions known to occur in the bathroom.

Sarcasm: Thought to be the lowest form of humor, the word *sarcasm* means to tear flesh. Because sarcasm is a latent form of anger, it promotes rather than reduces stress.

Senses of humor: A frame of mind as part of one's personality in how one uses humor and laughter in one's life.

Conventional sense of humor: A term to describe more than one person laughing at the same thing, all agreeing to its humor.

amusement of everyone else. People with **life-of-the-party sense of humor** are the ones who wear the lamp shades at parties, recite numerous jokes and always remember the punch lines, and can tell any story and make it funny. These people love an audience and may have played the role of class clown in school in younger days. They are spontaneous, creative, and quick-witted. They have the ability to make everyone laugh, or at least smile. This is the kind of person you want to call up when you're feeling down and need to lift your spirits. Someone who pulls up alongside you at a red light, rolls down the window, and asks if you have any Grey Poupon mustard has this sense of humor.

3. **Creative.** The **creative sense of humor** is best observed in those whose professional career is joke writing. They are extremely quick-witted, very imaginative, and creative. These are people who can find humor in just about anything. People with the creative sense of humor frequently laugh to themselves, and if you ask them, "What's so funny?" they might tell you, or they might just say, "It was nothing." They are easily entertained. Although creative in their joke making, they often prefer to let someone else make the delivery. Anonymous graffitiists also fall into this category.
4. **Good sport.** A **good-sport sense of humor** is demonstrated by those who can laugh at their own foibles and mistakes and enjoy being human. These people know how to employ self-parody and make good use of it. With this style, laughter is used to cope with personal imperfections rather than rationalize pitfalls. These people can take a practical joke without calling a lawyer afterward. In the sense of good sportsmanship, the walls of the ego are low if not completely dissolved after a practical joke.

Life-of-the-party sense of humor: The class clown, the person who gets all the laughs.

Creative sense of humor: This describes a person who thinks of jokes or funny things, but may be shy to share them.

Good-sport sense of humor: This describes someone who can take a practical joke without suing.

Superiority theory: First coined by Plato describing the reason why people laugh is at other people's expense.

Theories of Humor

For ages, perhaps longer, humankind has tried to understand just what it is that makes somebody laugh. As might be expected, no one answer appeared. To date, there are four major theories to explain the lighter side of human nature, as described by humor scholars Ziv (1984), Goldstein and McGhee (1972), and Bonham (1988). First, according to Steve Allen, Jr. (1990), "Humor is a physical release, one of four, actually. These include crying, yawning, orgasm, and laughter. You can do them in succession, just get the order right." Where appropriate, I have included anonymously credited jokes from Novak and Waldok's *Big Book of American Humor* (1990) to illustrate these theories.

Superiority Theory

Superiority theory, thought to be originated by Plato during the fourth century B.C., is the oldest theory attempting to explain people's affinity for the ridiculous. When laughter occurs at the expense of someone else, as in mockery or ridicule, so that the end result is that the jokester feels better than the object of ridicule, then the reason for laughter illustrates superiority theory (Box 12.1). To laugh at someone else's misfortunes gives slight, and temporary, comfort to our own condition. Typically, the greater the dignity of the object—for example,

BOX 12.1

Life In The Fast Lane: American Graffiti

- Just say NO to negativity!
- Money is the root of all evil.
(For more information, send \$20 to me.)
- Never believe generalizations.
- Be different . . . like everybody else.
- Talk is cheap . . . until you hire a lawyer.
- If pro is the opposite of con, what is the opposite of progress?
- When life hands you gators . . . make Gatorade.
- Vegetarian: American Indian word for "lousy hunter."
- Always try to be modest, and be proud of it!
- Warning: Dates on calendar are closer than they appear.
- Gravity—It's not just a good idea, it's the LAW!
- Duck tape is like the Force. There is a light side and a dark side and it holds the universe together.
- Never knock on Death's door. Ring the bell and run, he hates that.

BOX 12.2

Comic Relief

A gentleman walks into a bank in New York City and asks for the loan officer. He says he is going to Europe on business for 2 weeks and needs to borrow \$5,000.

The bank officer says the bank will need some kind of security for such a loan. So, the gentleman hands over the keys to a new Rolls Royce parked on the street in front of the bank. Everything checks out, and the bank agrees to accept the car as collateral for the loan. An employee drives the Rolls into the bank's underground garage and parks it there.

President Clinton and his sexual escapades, Queen Elizabeth picking her nose in public, and President George W. Bush reading books upside down to preschoolers—the greater the laugh.

Superiority theory is also said to be the reason for negative and offensive humor. According to Goldstein and McGhee (1972), superiority theory explains aggression-based humor used to define and maintain ego boundaries. It is often used to boost or lower self-esteem, depending on which end of the joke you are on. At the extreme in this category are sarcasm and ethnic, sexist, racist, and even blonde jokes.

Incongruity (Surprise) Theory

On *Saturday Night Live*, parodies of commercials are part of the format and sometimes only seasoned veterans can distinguish the real ads from the fake ones. In one car commercial, to demonstrate how smoothly the car rode over roads filled with potholes from hell, in the back seat a circumcision was performed on a crying newborn. To the delight (and relief) of the parents, the operation was a success.

Incongruity theory concerns two unrelated thoughts joined for a surprisingly comic effect (Box 12.2). Humor arises because the mind just doesn't expect the outcome. As eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant once said, "Laughter is the affliction arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Robinson, 1991).

Ziv (1984) maintains that a surprise in the processing of information can best be described as incongruous, the juxtaposition of two strikingly different concepts (e.g., a Chinese mariachi player). Oxymorons fall into this category. Humor and creativity are lifetime partners in incongruity theory. Koestler (1964) described this cre-

Two weeks later, the gentleman returns, repays the \$5,000 and the interest, which comes to \$15.41. The loan officer says, "We are very happy to have had your business, and this transaction has worked out very nicely, but we are a little puzzled. While you were away, we checked you out and found that you are a multimillionaire. What puzzles us is why you would bother to borrow \$5,000." The gentleman replies, "Where else in New York can I park my car for 2 weeks for 15 bucks?"

ative thought process as **bisociation**, the catalyst of humor, especially incongruous humor.

There are said to be two types of incongruity: ascending, or "ah ha," which produces wonder and awe, and descending, or "ha ha," which produces humor.

Thus, the incongruity theory is a cognitive-based theory necessitating the intellectual processing of information. The formation of thoughts that do not fit the mold of pattern recognition trigger either a light-bulb effect or a smile.

Split-brain research on subjects who suffered cerebral strokes indicates that humor is most likely a right-brain function. In a study reported by Vera Robinson (1991), stroke patients with right-brain damage showed no sign of amusement at the punch lines of a series of hundreds of jokes. Incongruity theory suggests that the left brain tries to analyze the joke's contents. When the punch line is revealed, the left brain is stumped and the right brain picks up the meaning, resulting in a laugh. But as Confucius said, "He who laughs last didn't get the joke."

Release/Relief Theory

Release/relief theory suggests that people laugh because they need to release nervous energy built up from repressed

Incongruity theory: A theory that states the reason we laugh is because when two concepts come together in our head and they don't make sense, we get a chuckle.

Bisociation: The ability to perceive two aspects to a situation, in this case, resulting in a laugh.

Release/relief theory: Freud's theory of laughter is based on his concept that all laughter is the result of suppressed sexual tension, thus relieving it through humor.

BOX 12.3

Comic Relief

Overheard in an airport men's room—a guy talking on his cell phone in a bathroom stall: "Listen, I'm in the middle of some really busy paper work that can't wait. I'll call you back in a bit. Bye!"

thoughts. This theory is credited to Freud. In his study of the psychology of humor, which included works by Mark Twain, Freud asserted that the act of laughter is a physical release or expression of sexual and hostile impulses suppressed by the conscious mind. He believed that the greater the suppression of these thoughts, the greater the laughter in response (Box 12.3). Thus, humor, Freud postulated, is a reflection of underlying anxieties. Release/relief theory is applied to taboo humor, those subjects that are not socially acceptable in mixed company or professional settings. Freud's theory attempted to explain the popularity of these jokes. Taboo subjects that include sexual references are "dirty jokes," but jokes can come from other social taboos such as illegal drugs and questionable behavior, as shown on the bumper sticker "Cocaine addiction is God's way of saying you make too much money." Freud believed that humor was a "rare and precious gift," and he called it the most advanced defense mechanism. (By the way, Twain was not impressed with this or many other of Freud's theories.)

Divinity Theory

Although recognized intuitively for quite some time, the newest theory of the humor phenomenon is that it strengthens the spiritual nature of humanity. The **divinity theory** suggests that humor is a gift from God. In his book *Humor: God's Gift*, author Tal Bonham (1988) supports his theory with a host of anecdotes, from stories in the Bible to well-researched case studies. The same theory is espoused by Cal Samra (1986) in his book *The Joyful Christ*. Humor, they believe, makes order out of chaos by dissolving threats (both anger and anxieties) to the ego (FIG. 12.5). Humor can also reveal the naked truth about topics people are often unable to address any other way; in the words of Chaucer, "Many a truth be told in jest." Perhaps most important, humor has an adhesive quality that connects and bonds people

Divinity theory: The belief that humor is a gift from God.

together, if only for the duration of a joke, and connectedness is a component of spiritual well-being. This theory is also shared by the Dalai Lama, who advocates laughing and smiling as means to cleanse the spirit.

Humor, as Bonham explains, is God's way of telling us we're not perfect. Laughter and giggling are natural responses by children as they explore life. It is ironic that in a child's first year, parents are elated when the baby smiles and giggles; in fact, these behaviors are strongly encouraged. But as children mature, they are told to wipe the smile off their faces, act their age, and stop laughing. A strong message may be received that the expression of humor isn't appropriate or appreciated, to the detriment of their spiritual development.

There is also a connection between clowns and a divine presence in many cultures spanning the globe. Medicine men and shamans have dressed in funny outfits and acted in outrageous ways, which has been, and continues to be, regarded as clownlike in their respective cultures. A similar concept was adopted in Europe with the introduction of clowns in circuses as a form of entertainment. With an



FIGURE 12.5

The divinity theory of humor becomes evident in cartoons like *Non-Sequitur*. (*Non-Sequitur* ©Wiley Miller. Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.)

androgynous face mask or make-up that was neither male nor female, these people held the mystical power to heal. To this day, clowns still have this appeal and are used in hospital wards, especially in children's hospitals throughout the United States (Miller and Blerkom, 1995). There is even a story that, years ago, in Sunday services held for employees of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, the altar boys were always the circus clowns. Does God have a sense of humor? Most theologians think (and hope) so.

It is quite possible for some of these theories to blend or combine together to explain the laughter response. For example, if the Queen of England were to tell a Polish joke (which she hasn't done), it could be interpreted as an argument for superiority theory. However, laughter could also arise from the incongruity of this sense of humor among royalty, or even the release of anxiety from the perception of ethnic jokes as taboo. Despite the different theories as to why we laugh, one idea is agreed upon: Humor helps us cope with the stress of everyday life.

Humor Therapy as a Coping Technique

In simplest terms, the use of humor is a defense mechanism. Yet, unlike other conscious or unconscious defense strategies to protect the ego, such as rationalization and projection, humor seems to dissolve the walls of the ego rather than intensify them. Humor is the one defense mechanism that can increase pleasure and reduce pain at the same moment; it gives two effects for the price of one. Theorists agree that humor is an adaptive coping mechanism liberating the ego. A 1978 article in *Psychology Today* asserted that the average person laughs about fifteen times per day. Although this study has been updated, one might infer, given the state of the world today, that the quota of 15 laughs per day is not being met. Humor's greatest asset is to balance the emotional scale between positive and negative perceptions. Although the study of psychology has maintained a particular bent toward the darker side of the human psyche, even this is beginning to change, in both the focus of research and the application of psychotherapy. Many psychologists argue that the expression of laughter and smiling is nothing less than a catharsis of emotions, a physical release tied to emotional thoughts. Overall, a well-intended catharsis can be quite healthy to the mind and body. But the complexity of humor hints of something more than just catharsis. In any event, mirth serves as a catalyst to unite mind, body, and spirit for total well-being.

Humor can be used to diffuse both anger and anxiety, and it can be quite powerful at reducing both emotions. Frank Prerost (1987), of Western Illinois University, conducted a study on the use of humor as catharsis for aggression. Subjects (144 women) were first measured with a Health Locus of Control survey. Then, they were asked to rate the funniness of twelve jokes. Results indicated that aggression-based humor was the most effective in allowing a catharsis of anger in women with an internal locus of control. Research by Leftcourt and Martin (1986) and Porterfield (1987) also indicates that humor acts as a "stress buffer," or moderator, to decrease the impact of stressful experiences, particularly the anxiety of major life-event changes and everyday annoyances.

Frankl, the survivor of Auschwitz discussed in earlier chapters, noted in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* that humor was a saving grace among fellow prisoners in the shadows of death. Frankl wrote, "Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation." Fear of death even has its own brand of mirth: black humor. People often joke about death and dying in an effort to ease their tension and perhaps better understand their own mortal plight. Hollywood often uses comic relief in horror movies (e.g., *28 Days Later* and *Scary Movie*) so that the audience isn't so emotionally spent that they miss the film's climactic scene. It is virtually impossible to be both angry and happy at the same time. Thus, if you can separate yourself from your aggression for a moment and see how silly and out of character prolonged anger really is, feelings of hostility dissipate, succumbing to a crescendo of mirth. For this reason, self-parody is thought to be the type of humor best suited to dispel anger.

In the book *The Healing Power of Humor*, Klein (1989) states that the use of humor gives a sense of power in the midst of chaos. Being able to make light of a stressful circumstance allows people to feel they have control over a situation. Humor becomes a weapon to disarm the cause of the stress response. Whereas some consider humor as a catalyst to tap the power of intelligence and emotional fortitude, others see it as a diversion tactic. In this case, humor allows for an intermission in the cognitive war against stressors and a "cease-fire" of the stress response. The use of **humor therapy** in several hospital

Humor therapy: A coping technique; the use of humor and comic relief as a means to relieve and reduce emotional stress by focusing on the funny, humorous, and positive aspects of life.

settings, as noted by Norman Cousins (1989) in his book *Head First*, helps to alleviate the sterile atmosphere these institutions are known for by allowing cancer patients to momentarily forget intravenous tubes, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and bedpans.

In an attempt to better understand humor appreciation, *Psychology Today* conducted a survey of its readers in 1978. Thirty jokes were printed along with a questionnaire to gauge readers' opinions of the jokes' quality and laughability. More than 14,000 questionnaires were returned, and responses varied as much as the styles of jokes printed. Humor, like beauty, is a relative concept. The study concluded that sexual humor was the most popular topic of jest, with ethnic humor running a close second. Humor scholar Avner Ziv (1984) offers two reasons why sexual humor remains so popular. First, the craving for sexual humor compensates for the continuous desire to physically satisfy this basic human drive. Second, sexual humor may compensate for the disappointment of unmet sexual expectations.

Comic relief is currently used as a mode of therapy in many rehabilitation programs, including the treatment of physical trauma, alcoholism, and drug addiction. Psychologists who recognize the effectiveness of humor and utilize comic relief with their patients identify it as both an assessment tool, to indicate values, inner feelings, and meaning in life, and a therapeutic tool, to encourage a cathartic release of emotions. In psychotherapy, it is the patient's own use of humor that is nurtured and encouraged; it is not initiated by the therapist. When patients begin to joke about their conditions or predicaments, it is acknowledged as a breakthrough in the emotional self-healing process. Once manifested, the practice of comic relief is encouraged during laughable moments. Humor has been found to be very effective in aiding patients through the transitions of the many stages of recovery.

Just like other coping techniques that can prove ineffective for resolution, the power of humor can be abused. Negative and offensive humor such as racial, ethnic, and sexist humor, as well as sarcasm in both its delivery and reception, do not lend themselves to satisfaction as coping mechanisms. Negative humor may inflate self-esteem, but it is a false inflation with no lasting value. Humor can also be used as a means of seeking approval by controlling other people's attitudes and making them feel good. Used in this manner, humor takes on an addictive quality, where each laugh becomes a "fix" leading to the next laugh. Thus, humor employed to win the approval of

others takes on the quality of codependent behavior. In a study by Fisher and Fisher (1983) investigating the personalities of comedians, it was observed that many professional comedians and humorists were raised in less-than-enviable environments, including homes with alcoholic parents (Carol Burnett), orphanages (Charlie Chaplin, Art Buchwald), or broken families. In these cases, the use of humor often brought recognition, approval, and a feeling of self-validation. In her book *It's Always Something*, comedian Gilda Radner (1989) described her use of comedy as an occasionally negative behavior: "Comedy is very controlling—you are making people laugh. You feel completely in control when you hear a wave of laughter coming back that you have caused. Probably that's why people in comedy can be so neurotic and have so many problems. Sometimes we talk about it as a need to be loved, but I think that with me it was also a need to control."

As a coping technique, humor therapy has the immediate effect of increasing awareness of the cause of stress, which may then lead to the path of resolution. The greater the quantity of laughs and the quality of humor, the greater the sensation of pleasure. The long-term effects of comic relief as a coping mechanism at best remain a mystery, particularly because these have not been investigated to any great degree. In a study conducted at the headquarters of the United States Postal Service, a humor course was offered to a select group of employees. Meeting once a week during the noon hour for a month, participants were exposed to both theories of humor therapy and several comedy videos and cassette tapes (Seaward, Meholick, and Campanelli, 1992). Participants were measured, by means of questionnaires, to evaluate self-esteem prior to and after the completion of the course, as well as perceived stress before and after each session. Results revealed that exposure to humorous material seemed to have the immediate effect of decreasing perceived stress levels, but apparently had no significant prolonged effect on self-esteem, indicating that humor therapy is most effective in dealing with current perceptions and their related emotions.

The Physiology of Laughter

Norman Cousins was right: Positive emotions augment the mind-body relationship. Laughter indeed influences the body's physiology, resulting in restoration and possibly healing. In his own clinical tests, Cousins noted that several hours of laughter produced a small but significant decrease in the sedimentation rate of his blood, a predic-

tor of inflammation or infection. In *Anatomy of an Illness*, Cousins (1976) wrote, “The drop itself (five points) was not substantial, but it was cumulative.” Once thought of as only a coping technique, humor therapy now qualifies as a relaxation technique as well because of its physiological effects. Since this discovery, scientists have investigated the mysteries of the immune system and its relationship to the experience and expression of various emotions.

Dr. William Fry has devoted his life to the investigation of this mind-body relationship, and his work has yielded some fascinating results. Laughter appears to have both short-term and long-term effects on the body’s major physiological systems. In the short term, a bout of laughter appears to initiate the stress response, with a slight increase in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and ventilations. But this is quickly followed by a rebound effect, where these parameters decrease to below previous resting levels. The overall effect is a profound level of homeostasis, much like that seen when progressive muscular relaxation is practiced. In the short term, laughter is credited with stabilizing blood pressure, “massaging” vital organs, stimulating circulation, facilitating digestion, and increasing oxygenated blood throughout the body. As Fry (1986) stated, “Laughter is clearly related to the reduction of stress and the physical symptoms related to stress.”

Fry also conducted a series of studies on the composition of tears, those shed from pain and laughter as well as those artificially induced (e.g., from cutting onions). His research revealed that the constituents of emotional teardrops include a greater percentage of proteins and toxins than those produced artificially. Fry concluded that tears resulting from emotional responses serve to rid the body of stress-related toxins. Once again, this suggests that physical expressions—both laughter and crying—are natural and healthy to the well-being of the individual. As author Kurt Vonnegut once quipped (Klein, 1989), “Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward.”

Perhaps more impressive than the short-term effects of laughter are its long-term effects. Through the new multidiscipline of PNI, researchers are now finding that the immune system plays an ever-increasing role in the mind-body relationship. In the words of Bernie Siegel (1986), “Thoughts are chemicals; they can either kill or cure.” It appears that thoughts and perceptions are quickly transformed in the brain into chemical reac-

tions that have impact throughout the body. Negative thoughts actually trigger the neural release of the stress hormones and suppress the immune system. Positive thoughts strengthen the integrity of the immune system by inducing the release of special neuropeptides from the pituitary gland and other tissues located throughout the body. Neuropeptides—endorphins, interleukins, and interferons, to name a few—act as messenger molecules to various organs throughout the body.

Recent research has revealed that neuropeptides are also manufactured and released by the lymph nodes and other components of the immune systems (see Chapter 3). Although only 60 neuropeptides have been discovered to date, scientists believe there may be several more acting in the interest of the body’s immune system. In effect, laughter causes the body to produce its own pain killers. A study by David McClelland (McClelland and Kirshit, 1989) measured changes in secretory immunoglobulin A (S-IgA), a salivary immune-defense agent, as a result of three emotional responses (humor, cynicism, and trust) elicited by three types of movies. Films of W. C. Fields and Mother Teresa produced a significant rise in S-IgA, while a Nazi propaganda film corresponded with a decrease. The long-term effects of humor and the positive emotions it produces may serve as one of the most beneficial health practices currently known to humanity. It would be unwise to suggest that humor-induced laughter can cure all ailments; this simply isn’t true. But humor can “lighten the load,” making the pain of some diseases more bearable. In some remarkable incidences, such as that reported by Norman Cousins, there may also be a true healing effect. As discussed in Chapter 3, there are currently too many missing pieces to complete the mind-body model to our full comprehension. But in the short time that humor therapy has been employed as a therapeutic agent in cancer wards, many patients have been given the opportunity to die with a smile instead of a lonely frown. And their loved ones have that fond memory to look back on.

Steps to Initiate Humor Therapy

Years ago, I designed and taught an experimental course entitled Humor and Health. At least once a week, I was asked by students how they could improve their sense of humor. From the volumes of resources I read in preparation for this course, I gleaned a number of ways to incorporate humor therapy into your arsenal of stress-management coping techniques. The best suggestions are as follows.



good-looking, athletic kid about to enter high school. That day, he and his younger brother were making the most of their summer freedom. The odds of what was about to happen were about as great as winning \$20 million in the lottery, except Andrew wasn't that lucky. For some reason no one seems able to explain, the angle at which he entered the deep water was just enough to snap his second vertebra and paralyze him from the neck down. Within the blink of an eye, *freedom* became a word he would cry over. And cry he did. In his therapy, he withdrew into his own world of darkness.

But one of his nurses had a natural funny bone that reverberated in its enthusiasm, and in time it became

Stress with a Human Face

It was a hot summer day, and the pool looked so inviting. Andrew was a bright,

infectious. Soon Andrew asked to have some cartoon books brought in to him, as well as some comedy videos. His bouts of depression became fewer and fewer. It seemed that with his change in attitude came a desire to leave the hospital and get back to as normal a life as could be expected.

If you could see Andrew today, you would be drawn immediately toward his smile, an attribute he cherishes. Oh, he still has his downtimes like the rest of us, but he will be the first to tell you of the healing power of humor and how it enabled him to cope with a stressor he would have never imagined facing that fine summer day. Currently, he is a self-proclaimed ambassador of humor therapy for the disabled, traveling around the country to share his stories of comic relief. The new joy in his life is his wife, Lauren, and their newborn baby girl, Alexis.

- 1. Learn not to take life too seriously.** Chris Flanagan, R.N., is the former head nurse on the oncology unit at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Rockville, Maryland. Chris was awarded a grant from the Hyatt Foundation to start a Humor Cart on her cancer ward. Describing her work, Chris said, "We have a policy on my floor: Take your work seriously, but take yourself lightly." Most oncology wards have high turnover rates among nursing staff, but this philosophy has kept the nursing staff at Shady Grove intact for several years now. In a nutshell, this attitude means seeing yourself as more than your work. Many times we place all our eggs in the career basket, and if we have a bad day at work, then our self-esteem withers away. See yourself as a whole person, with many aspects and talents, not just as a student, spouse, or professional. People who are able to laugh at their mistakes are considered more emotionally sound than those who fret at the slightest hint of imperfection. We start out in life as a square block. Through a multitude of life's experiences, we polish the rough edges and, by the end, finish up a gem.
- 2. Find one humorous thing a day.** Humorous events and concepts are around us all the time. Life is full of ironies, incongruencies, and just plain funny

stuff. One's frame of mind is either receptive to these or simply dismisses them. If humor is a perception, as is currently believed, then the way to adopt comic relief as a coping mechanism is to adopt this humorous frame of mind and make it your own (cognitive restructuring). It is commonly understood that if you make yourself consciously aware of and receptive to an idea, you will attract things to reinforce this perception many times over. Take planning a holiday, for example. You decide that this summer you want to go on a safari in Kenya. Once you commit yourself to the trip, you discover all kinds of people who have gone on safari with the same touring company, you start noticing ads in magazines and TV specials, and your mind becomes a magnet for news and ideas about Africa. The same can be done with humor, if you make yourself receptive to the lighter side of life. Tell yourself that you want to find one funny thing each day. You will find that instead of just one little tickle, you will discover a wealth of humorous experiences each and every day. In addition, allocate some fun time for each day, whether this means watching your favorite sitcom on television, reading comics, or going to your nearest comedy club.

It is important to remember, however, that there are times when it is inappropriate to laugh. People can interpret laughter as rude during serious moments, so use caution and judgment. On the other hand, life is full of *laughable moments*, when it is quite acceptable to laugh and smile. When these times arise, capitalize on them and give yourself permission to let go and enjoy.

3. *Work to improve your imagination and creativity.* Creativity and humor are virtually inseparable. One has only to read headlines in supermarket tabloids to be reminded of this: "Termite Baby Eats Newlyweds' House," "Bigfoot Seen Boarding a UFO," "Ski Mask Found on Surface of Mars," "Teenager Swallows Seed, Grows Palm Tree in Stomach." Lately, the creative "muscle" of many an American has atrophied as the adrenal gland has hypertrophied. Remember, the funny bone is just as susceptible to the general adaptation syndrome as is your adrenal gland. Start placing more emphasis on this target organ. It is commonly thought (and currently under study) that the use of one right-brain cognitive function enhances other functions of the same hemisphere. Imagination is a right-brain function. So is humor. They tend to feed off each other. So how does one augment imagination skills? Here are a few suggestions:
 - a. Read more books (fiction and nonfiction) and watch less television.
 - b. Write a story, fable, or poem every now and then.

BOX 12.4

American Graffiti

A bunch of inmates gathered together every Friday afternoon after basketball practice to tell jokes and lift their spirits. Because they had been together so many years, rather than telling the actual joke, they assigned a number to each joke. Some guy would call out a number and the group would laugh, sometimes uncontrollably. One day a new inmate joined the group and after observing the process of joke telling, yelled out the number 9. No one laughed! After a few moments, one inmate muttered under his breath, "Jeez, some people just can't tell a joke."

Comedian's lament: "I don't have health insurance. Too expensive . . . and I was told I have a pre-existing condi-

- c. Play with children. Kids have wonderful imaginations. Maybe some of theirs will transfer to you by osmosis. Get closer to the earth. Observe the world from the eye level of a young child.
- d. Go exploring. Do something completely new and outrageous. Spend an afternoon in a hardware store, a museum of fine art, or a greenhouse. Get out of the comfortable rut you take refuge in and discover the world all over again.
- e. Create something. Pull out a cookbook and play "Wolfgang Puck." Make your own holiday presents this year. Invent something. Plant a garden. Bonsai a tree. Plan a trip around the world. Start a new hobby. Make your world a better place to live in.
4. *Start a joke/cartoon-of-the-week swap with a friend.* Use either the U.S. mail or email so that you have something to look forward to, as well as making someone else's day with a chuckle.
5. *Learn to hyperexaggerate when describing a situation or story.* A comedian begins his monologue, "I knew a guy so ugly . . . , and a call comes back from the audience, "How ugly was he?" The comedian continues, "He was so ugly that if you were to look up the word *ugly* in the dictionary, you'd find his picture beside the definition." Exaggeration is a staple in virtually all comedians' joke repertoires. Comparisons are hilarious when they are exaggerated, and they can lighten up the description of the most stressful event. Ways to employ exaggeration

tion. But I do have a good car insurance policy. It's the law! So whenever I come down with the flu or start to bleed, I get in my car and drive around looking for an accident."

Three elderly men are at the doctor's office for a memory test. The doctor asks the first man, "What is three times three?" "274," came the reply. The doctor rolls his eyes and looks up at the ceiling, then says to the second man, "It's your turn. What is three times three?" "Tuesday," replies the second man. The doctor shakes his head sadly, then asks the third man, "Okay, your turn. What's three times three?" "Nine," says the third man. "That's great!" says the doctor. "How did you get that?" "Simple," he says, "just subtract 274 from Tuesday."

BOX 12.5**Classic Jokes for Your Tickler Notebook****The Good Son**

An old man lived alone in Idaho. He wanted to spade his potato garden, but it was very hard work. His only son, Bubba, who always helped him, was in prison for armed robbery. The old man wrote a letter to his son and mentioned his predicament:

Dear Bubba, I'm feeling pretty low because it looks like I won't be able to plant my potato garden this year. I've gotten too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me. Love, Dad.

A few days later, the old man received a letter from his son:

Dear Dad, For HEAVEN'S SAKE, don't dig up the GARDEN! That's where I buried the GUNS and the MONEY! Love, Bubba.

At 4:00 A.M. the next day, a dozen FBI agents and local police officers showed up at the old man's house and

dug up the entire area. After finding nothing, they apologized to the old man and left. That same afternoon the old man received another letter from his son:

Dear Dad, Go ahead and plant the potatoes now. It's the best I could do under the circumstances. Love, Bubba.

Mother Superior

The wise old mother superior was dying. The nuns gathered around her bed. She asked for a little warm milk to sip. A nun went to the kitchen to warm some milk. Remembering a bottle of whiskey received as a gift the previous Christmas, she opened it and poured a generous amount into the warm milk. Mother drank a little, then a little more, then before they knew it, she had drunk the whole glass down to the last drop. "Mother, Mother," the nuns cried, "give us some wisdom before you die!" She raised herself up in bed with a pious look on her face and, pointing out the window, said, "Don't sell that cow!"

include substitution of familiar words with others (e.g., since your last communiqué...) and use of figurative versus literal meanings (e.g., Why do we drive on a parkway, and park on a driveway?). Creative use of metaphor is also a component of exaggeration for a good laugh, as in "My final in economics was worse than the Spanish Inquisition."

- 6. Build a humor library.** One of the essentials of coping is the use of available resources, which can include anything and everything. For humor therapy, resources involve the collection and use of books, tapes, and videos, and even hand buzzers and water guns. Designate a small corner of your home for a humor library and start to fill the shelves with a collection of every conceivable resource. Record and video stores have designated comedy sections; bookstores have humor sections. No matter how often you have heard favorite tapes or read favorite books, they will still trigger a laugh. Don't let these resources collect dust, either. Make a habit of using them frequently.

Tickler notebook: A collection of humorous items (e.g., cards, letters, JPEGs, jokes).

Here is another idea: Start a **tickler notebook**. Buy a notebook and fill it with anything that puts a smile on your face. (See Box 12.5.) It can include, among other things, cartoons, favorite jokes, letters, funny photographs with your captions attached, favorite newspaper columns, love poems, and a host of personal items (e.g., JPEGs/photographs, birthday cards, postcards) that make you feel good inside. When I assigned the tickler notebook to my Humor and Health students, I gave these instructions: "Imagine that one day you are diagnosed with a major illness (e.g., cancer). What humor time capsule can you assemble that upon review is bound to jack up your white blood cell count and put you on the road to recovery?" We all have down moments; this is perfectly natural. But an extended period of negative emotions is neither natural nor healthy. A tickler notebook is your personal prescription. And it is a growing organism; keep feeding and looking after it. Treat it well and it will repay you a hundred times over.

- 7. Find a host of varied humor venues.** Telling jokes is only a pebble of the mountain we call humor, yet it is often the first thing we think of when we hear the word. But humor can be found in a multitude

**FIGURE 12.6**

Patch Adams, M.D., has dedicated his career in the healing profession to the use of humor—rather than drugs or surgery—as his primary tool of trade. Sharing humor seems to multiply the effect of laughter on well-being. Here Adams is with refugee children from the former Yugoslavia.

of venues, and the greater the access to a wide variety of humor media, the more advantageous this coping skill will be to deal with stress. Humor venues include (but are not limited to) movies, theater, books, music, television, and live stand-up comedy. Humor and entertainment are also very compatible, if not always the same. The human mind likes to be entertained. Be on the lookout for ways to incorporate a wide variety of humor venues into your lifestyle.

- 8. Access your humor network.** Every now and then, there are bound to be times when you find yourself on the bottom rung of the emotional ladder. These moments should be recognized and, perhaps for a short time, even appreciated. But if, after an allocated period of “emotional downtime,” you need some help getting up again, don’t be afraid to call for help. We all know someone who can make us smile at the mere thought of his or her name. Call this person and ask for a “humor lift.” It’s the next best thing to being there. Conversely, it would be a good habit to minimize time spent with people who seem to live with black clouds over their heads; their pessimism is

not conducive to enhancing your positive emotions. You don’t have to go down with their ship.

- 9. Improve your self-esteem.** It is hard to laugh when your self-esteem is deflated. At times, we all think we are fat, ugly, or stupid, and these characteristics constitute the punch line of many a joke. Low self-esteem derives from negative feedback we create in our own minds and come to believe. Remember Einstein’s theory: Everything is relative. Separate fact from fiction. Give yourself positive affirmations every day, accentuate your good qualities, and learn to accept and love yourself and all your human potential.

Best Application of Comic Relief

Humor therapy integrates a little cognitive reappraisal, a little behavior modification, and a lot of fun. Employing comic relief as a coping style involves a conscious effort to live life on the lighter side. Humor therapy does not try to eclipse the emotions associated with anger, fear, or sadness; it only attempts to neutralize them so that there is balance to your emotional responses. To best apply the use of humor in your life, take note of what sense of humor you best identify with and see if you can sharpen

this edge a little. Also note which type of humor you find most gratifying and make a habit of employing more of it in the course of each day. In addition, monitor your high and low moods and their durations. If you find that the majority of your thoughts are negative, jaded, or laced with pessimism, try to balance these out with a greater number of positive, even humorous, thoughts. No one who advocates humor therapy suggests that everybody should always be smiling. This is neither real-

istic nor healthy. Emotional well-being is the ability to feel and express the *full* range of human emotions, both positive and negative. The danger lies in the imbalance of positive and negative emotions because a preponderance of the latter will ultimately inflict bodily damage. Cousins highlighted humor as a symbol of all the positive emotions that can lend themselves to emotional well-being. Use humor therapy to find and maintain that balance of human emotions in your life.

SUMMARY

- Cousins legitimized the use of humor therapy when he treated himself with hours of funny films, which contributed to the remission of his potentially fatal disease. The premise of the therapy was that if negative thoughts can result in illness and disease, positive thoughts should enhance health. Cousins also believed that for his health to return he had to take personal responsibility for it.
- Greeks advocated humor therapy more than 2,000 years ago, as did ancient Africans, American Indians, and medieval European kings and queens. However, laughter was declared by the Puritans to be the work of the devil, and to laugh or smile was considered a sin.
- Humor is not a positive emotion, but it can elicit several positive emotions. Humor, like stress, is a perception.
- Humor is a very complex phenomenon. There are many types of humor, including parody, satire, slapstick, absurd/nonsense, black, irony, dry, and sarcasm.

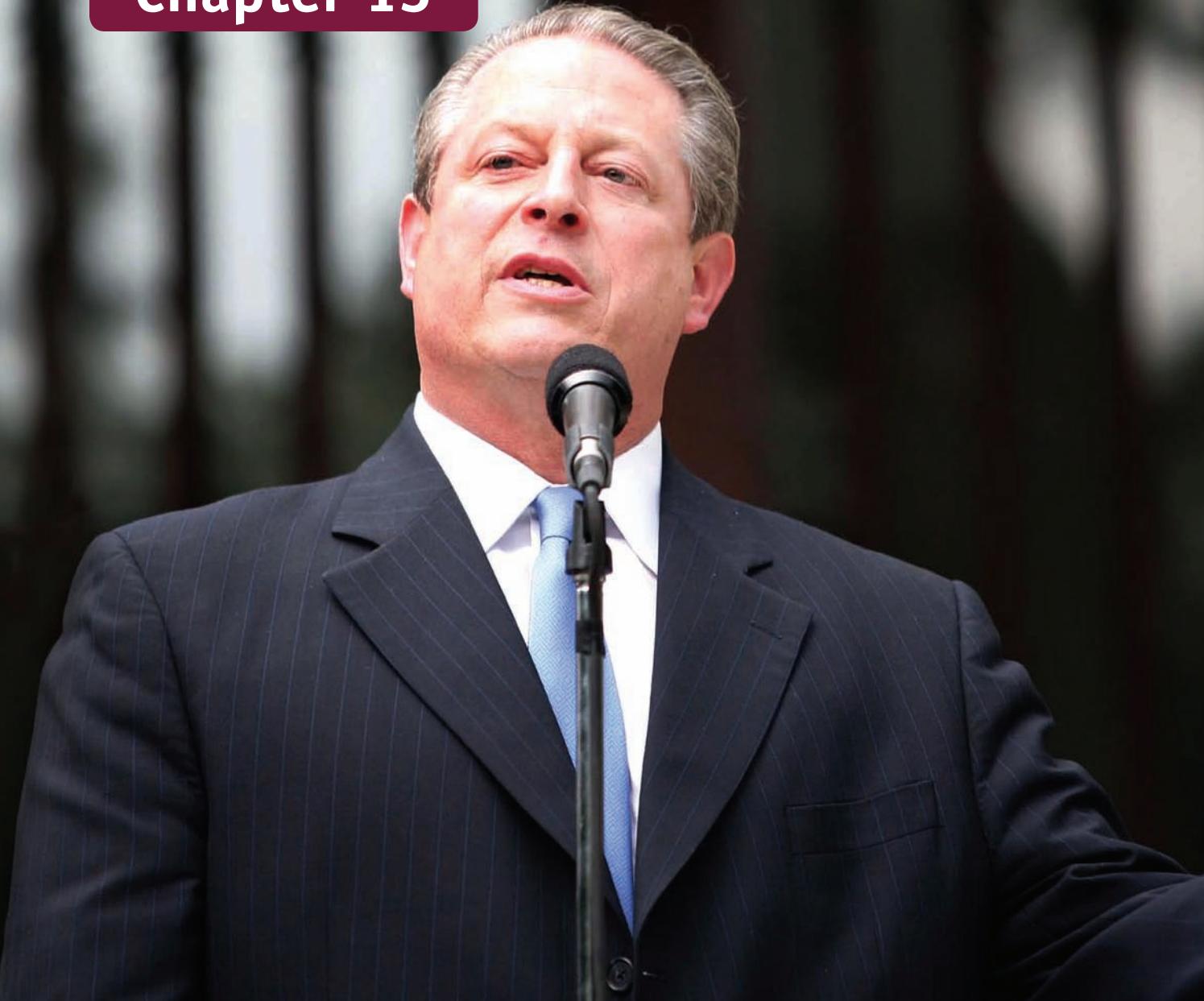
Self-parody is thought to be the best type of humor to reduce stress, whereas sarcasm is the worst.

- Just as there are different types of personalities, there are also several senses of humor, including conventional, life of the party, creative, and good sport.
- There is no one accepted reason why we laugh. Four theories attempt to explain the nature of the funny bone: superiority theory, incongruity (surprise) theory, release/relief theory, and divinity theory.
- Research investigating the psychoneuroimmunological effects of laughter have found that there is a strong relationship between good health and good humor. In essence, laughter helps restore physiological homeostasis.
- Studies also show that humor promotes mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.
- There are many ways to tickle your funny bone and augment your sense of humor, but like anything that is worth having, you have to work at it.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. How is humor best defined?
2. List five different types of humor.
3. List the four theories of humor (why we smile/laugh). Each humor theory can be associated with one component of the wellness paradigm (mind, body, spirit, emotions). Which goes with which?
4. How do humor and laughter work together as a coping technique for stress?
5. List four ways to incorporate more humor and laughter into your life.

Chapter 13



Creative Problem Solving

Make it a practice to keep on the lookout for novel and interesting ideas that others have used successfully. Your idea only has to be original in its adaptation to the problem you are working on.

—Thomas Alva Edison

Light bulb. Bicycle. Printing press. Airplane. Cotton gin. Telephone. Each one has become an item of necessity. Necessity, it is said, is the mother of invention, and the human mind has risen to the occasion to create some fantastic inventions. There is no better time for necessity to bear the fruits of creativity than during times of frustration when one needs to get from point A to point B.

At one time, the United States took pride in its American ingenuity. Young in age and pregnant with possibilities, early generations of Americans made more improvements to the proverbial mouse trap than there are stars in the sky. Before the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was a productive society, the vast majority of its citizens making more than 70 percent of their household items themselves. As the country became a consumer society, however, more and more items were bought rather than made at home. The availability of several new inventions, like the washer and dryer, provided more leisure time. But with some of these inventions, lifestyles became very comfortable, and our collective creative skills became dull (Mander, 1978; Jackson, 2004). With the advent of television, it is said, the creative American mind began showing signs of atrophy. People now take a passive role in the creative process, letting other people do the important, creative thinking. Experts agree that a happy mind is a creative mind. The inability to deal with many problems is directly related to the inability to tap into and utilize creativity. It would be unfair to point the finger of blame solely at television. Many critics believe that the American educational system continues to play a role in the decline of creative skills as well, by stifling the limits of imagination with conformity and critical-thinking skills. Moreover, American companies are now looking

to hire Asians who are deemed more creative. The dominant style of thinking in the Western hemisphere is considered left-brained: linear, logical and rational, analytical, and judgmental. Left-brain modes of thinking are those most rewarded in both school and work environments. And this style of thinking has devalued recreational and play time.

Music. Poetry. Architecture. Fiction. Art. Pottery. Photography. If necessity is the mother of invention, then play can be said to assume the paternal role in this relationship. Creativity definitely has a playful, relaxed side to it. Playing is as much a part of human nature as is work, although playful behavior often atrophies as individuals make the transition from childhood to adulthood. But play, like the creativity it stimulates, can be nurtured. It has been said that more good ideas have arisen from play in garage and basement workshops than anywhere else, including the genesis of Xerox Corporation, Hewlett-Packard, and Apple Computers. Why is creativity so important? Why do corporate executives currently pay big bucks to bring in creative consultants to conduct workshops for their employees? The answer can be summed up in one word: change.

Change is inevitable. There is comfort in familiar routines, even if they are boring or stressful. Change meets resistance. Someone once said that the only person who likes change is a wet baby. But we live on a planet that travels at a rate of 66,000 miles per hour in its ellipse around the sun, with a population of more than 6.6 billion people. Given these dynamics alone, change is inevitable. In 1970, Alvin Toffler wrote a book, *Future Shock*, describing the rapid changes the human race would encounter in the age of high technology by the end of the twentieth century and beyond. The book might have been titled *Future Stress* because, as Toffler

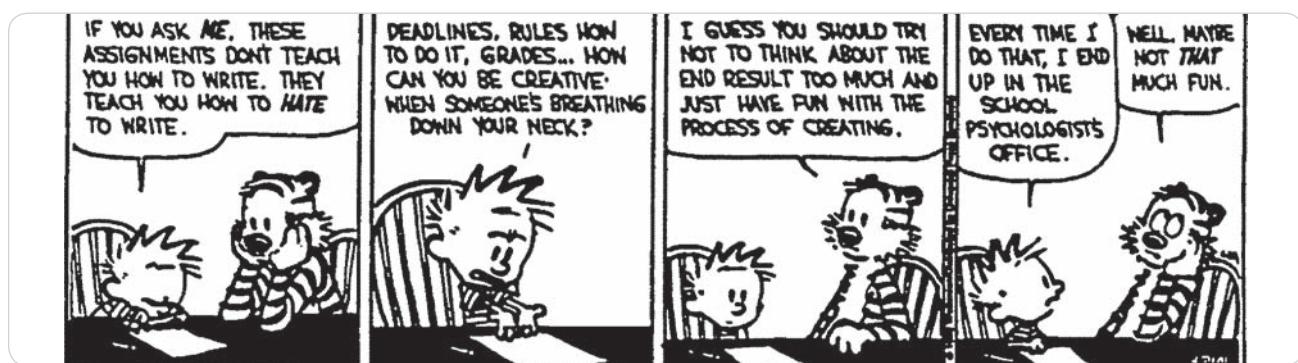


FIGURE 13.1

Calvin and Hobbes © 1992 Watterson. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

indicated, the shock from rapid change can be very difficult to handle, and even more difficult to adapt to. Resistance to change seems to be a basic part of human nature. Change is often equated with chaos, and chaos spells stress. This is where the importance of creativity comes in. Futurists agree that, given the state of the world today and the direction in which it appears to be headed, the inner resource of creativity and the skills of creative problem solving will be the most important coping strategy in the coming decade.

Creativity can help make order out of chaos. It has the ability to make change palatable, even enjoyable. But to be creative takes the right attitude and a workable strategy. The ability to be creative resides within each and every one of us. Creativity is not a gift—it is a human birthright. But like muscles that atrophy with disuse, creativity must be exercised to be effective. For those of you who have let your creative abilities slip into hibernation, here is a refresher course in the basics.

Julia Cameron is convinced that creativity is truly a birthright for each individual. In her book *The Artist's Way*, Cameron states that because of a series of factors found in American society, we have, in essence, not just dulled the edge of our creative abilities, we have buried them. But what is lost can certainly be recovered, if not discovered, by reacquainting ourselves with the creative juices that course through our human veins. Cameron insists that the creative process is a spiritual one, and that to engage in the creative process invites us to par-



FIGURE 13.2

Creativity isn't a gift for a chosen few. It is a birthright for everyone. The renowned Blue Man Group show has been described as a visual and sensory extravaganza, just one example of people who have put their creative talents to use. You can, too, in a way that empowers you.



FIGURE 13.3

If you think you're not creative, you'll prove yourself right. You may not be a Steve Jobs, but everyone has the makings of a creative person, including you!

ticipate as co-creators with that aspect of the divine self. Connecting with what she calls "spiritual electricity," Cameron invites people to step outside the left-brain way of thinking and unite both hemispheres of thought when calling upon the creative forces to solve problems or to enjoy life in its fullness. Quoting sources from Johannes Brahms and Louis Armstrong to Louis Pasteur and Carl Jung (who all give credit to a divine co-partnership in innovativeness), Cameron illustrates a tapestry of creative skills that is available to everyone.

Think Like da Vinci!

When lists are compiled of the world's most brilliant, creative minds, Leonardo da Vinci is found at the top of many lists. A painter, inventor, scientist, and philosopher, and a man many consider ahead of his time, da Vinci is revered as a genius by everyone, including Michael Gelb. So impressed was Gelb with da Vinci's creative genius that he pooled da Vinci's talents into a book, *How to Think Like da Vinci*, so that the rest of the world could rise a few steps in creative consciousness by emulating the Italian. Among the many tips in Gelb's (1998) book are the following:

1. Be curious about how things work; don't take everything for granted; ask questions.
2. Make a habit of using all five of your senses to explore the world.
3. Be willing to embrace ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty.
4. Be willing to make mistakes and learn from them.

The Creative Process

The creative process is not complex, but it is wonderfully profound because there are so many possible ways to get from point A to point B. During the 1980s, intense interest in the human creative process developed. And like the goose that was cut open to find out how she laid the golden egg, the creative process has since been examined from every side, angle, and perspective, and has been dissected and inspected. Unlike the goose, though, the process wasn't killed; instead, it has become well understood so that the creative muscle could flex with strength, power, and agility for the whim and benefit of those anxious to use it.

The creative process has two parts, which by no coincidence match the functions of the right and left hemispheres of the human brain. Remember that Maslow (1987) observed a number of characteristics contributing to total well-being, or as he called it, self-actualization. Creativity was among these characteristics. In his later work on self-actualization, Maslow concluded that the creative process and the path to self-actualization were one and the same. He called the creative process the "art of being happily lost in the present moment." He divided the creative process into *primary* and *secondary* parts. **Primary creativity** is the origin of ideas: the playground of the mind where ideas are generated and hatched. **Secondary creativity** describes the strategic plan to bring to fruition the ideas brought forth in primary creativity. Secondary creativity is like the mind's workshop: a place to saw, chisel, glue, hammer, and polish ideas.

Players on the Creativity Team

Creative consultant Roger von Oech took Maslow's idea one step further, dividing primary and secondary creativity each into two phases. In his celebrated book from 1986, *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants*, von Oech's model of creative thinking includes a team of four players—the **explorer**, **artist**, **judge**, and **warrior**. The explorer and artist provide primary creativity, and the judge and warrior provide sec-

ondary creativity. The explorer and artist team together for what von Oech calls the germination phase of creativity. In this phase, inspiration and imagination are used to their fullest potential. The germination phase involves soft, pliable, right-brain thinking. Examples of this thinking style include irrationality, nonlinear perceptions, synthesis, metaphor, dreams, humor, and global awareness. The judge and warrior join forces in the harvesting of the creative crops sowed in the depths of imagination. The harvest phase of creativity involves hard, critical, left-brain thinking. Examples include logic, rationality, linear analysis, and factual thinking. Each type of thinking style has an equal responsibility in the creative process. The key is to let each player do its job without interference from the other three. In the footsteps of von Oech, Charles M. Johnson, founder of the Institute for Creative Development, delineates the creative process as a combination of creative differentiation and creative integration. Like von Oech, he divides the creative process into four stages: (1) incubation, (2) inspiration, (3) perspiration, and (4) administration (Johnson, 2005).

The overall goal of creative thought is to sharpen the skills of all four team players so that one or two aspects don't overpower the others, cause them to atrophy, and stifle the entire process. Let us take a more detailed look at the members of the creative team.

Primary creativity: Maslow's term for the first stage of the creative process in which ideas are conceived.

Secondary creativity: Maslow's term for the last stage of the creative process in which a strategy is played out to have the selected idea come to fruition.

Explorer: Von Oech's term to identify the first stage of the creative process in which one begins to look for new ideas by venturing outside one's comfort level.

Artist: Von Oech's term to identify the second stage of the creative process, in which one plays with or incubates ideas that the explorer has brought back.

Judge: Von Oech's term to identify the third stage of the creative process, in which one selects the best idea and prepares it for manifestation.

Warrior: The last stage in von Oech's creative process template, in which the idea is taken to the street and campaigned to the rest of the world for its merits.

The Explorer. Although some ideas may actually bubble to the surface of consciousness, the human mind generally needs to be stimulated. If the mind is like a field, it needs frequent fertilization for robust growth of ideas. In the words of Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling, “The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas,” and to get a lot of ideas you need to look around. Whether abstract or concrete, the construction of almost everything requires raw materials. The explorer searches for raw materials with which to create ideas. People tend to get into cognitive ruts. We become prisoners of familiarity, unwilling to leave our turf, and the consequence is boredom and burnout. The walls of security can become the bars of imprisonment. As a result, our ability to create becomes obstructed. Where should you explore? Anywhere and everywhere; the possibilities are limitless. Bookstores, national parks, museums, magazines, rock concerts, libraries. Leave your territory and go explore a new environment. Make an adventure out of it. In the spirit of *Star Trek*, “Go where no one has ever gone before.”

Singer/surfer Jack Johnson goes exploring by reading books by Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Campbell. In an interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Johnson said, “A lot of artists fall into a thing where they’re constantly trying to create art. But I think you can forget to take things in. You’ve got to fill up your mind” (Scaggs, 2008). Rock singer Sting shared that, when looking for inspiration for his album *Sacred Love*, he turned to several volumes of Shakespeare and other notable classics in his beloved library and, using poetic license, exploited them to come up with new lyrics to his songs. Examples like this abound in the arts and humanities. The most important equipment the explorer needs, then, is an open mind: a container in which to put the raw materials. If you explore with a closed mind, there will be no room to transport the makings of ideas to your mental workshop. Negative thoughts, too, close a mind watertight. An open mind employs several attitudes to act as fertilizer; among these are curiosity, optimism, and enthusiasm. Curiosity is permission to get lost. In fact, many explorers do get lost. And when they emerge from the “woods,” often they have discovered something far different, and more important, than what they had set out to find. Columbus was looking for spices in the Far East and “discovered” a whole new hemisphere. Roger Sperry was looking for a cure for epilepsy and discovered how the left and right hemispheres of the brain process information. Chef “Crusty” George Crumb was looking for a faster way to cook French fries (to please his customers), and he ended up with the

potato chip. Alexander Graham Bell set out to create a hearing aid and invented the telephone instead. Exploration should be fun. Fun is generated from optimism, a positive outlook, and enthusiasm, the application of optimism. When doubt or fear is introduced, fun disappears and the mind closes up like a steel trap. Another important piece of equipment for the explorer is a notebook or pad of paper. Good ideas are like butterflies: They may land, but they soon take off again. Write them down!

The Artist. Poet William Blake once said that every individual is “an artist, a child, a poet, and an animal.” Although you may not consider yourself the likes of Picasso or Rembrandt, every individual has what it takes to be an artist. In the role of the artist, you cultivate, manipulate, and sometimes incubate the raw materials gathered for ideas until they are molded into functional use. The role of the artist is perhaps the most challenging. It also takes some dedication and persistence. If the explorer asks Where? then the artist asks How? and What? How can I adapt other ideas for my own use? What can I do to make this idea my own?

A creativity course was introduced into the College of Business at Stanford University in 1981 in response to the criticism that American business lacked creativity. In their 1986 best-selling book *Creativity in Business*, Michael Ray and Rochelle Myers highlight this aspect of the creative process by including a chapter entitled “Ask Dumb Questions.” To the artist, questions are the paintbrush and canvas; to the architect, questions are the pencil and tape measure. Questions probe for the seeds of solution. You can begin by asking “What if” questions (and not all of these have turned out to be dumb!). Consider these examples: What if we made a music video with musicians dancing on treadmills? What if you could store 5,000 songs in a hand-held listening device? What if a car ran on electricity rather than gas? What might seem like a dumb question now may hold the answer to a nagging problem down the road. Regarding the creative process, there is no such thing as a dumb question. “Dumb” questions shift the train of thought from the left (analytical) to the right (receptive) hemisphere of the brain, and receptivity is needed to play with the raw materials of thought. What if? questions are as valuable a tool to the artist as the compass and map are to the explorer. Asking What if? questions gives permission to manipulate and tailor ideas. Sometimes being an artist means being ridiculous, turning thoughts upside down or inside out. To an

artist, paint, clay, plaster, and bronze are some of the media with which to create. In the creative process, there are many cognitive media as well. Thinking styles to manipulate ideas include reversing the perspective on concepts (e.g., throwing a barbecue for Christmas), connecting ideas together (a squirt gun and toothpaste), or comparisons ("Life is a cabaret, old chum"). And here is some food for thought: Picasso once said that "every act of creation first involves an act of destruction." Ideas that worked well in one situation may not be applicable to other circumstances; however, they can be adapted to the situation at hand.

The Judge. When the role of the judge comes into play, a shift from soft to hard thinking takes place. The crops are ready to be harvested. The judge decides thumbs up or thumbs down for each idea, with the good ideas becoming reality. The role of judge is crucial, for it can just as easily destroy good ideas as bring them to fruition. In American culture, the judge is usually the strongest player on the creative team. More often than not, in fact, the strength of the judge overwhelms and destroys the team. Rational thought and overanalysis used at the wrong time are a waste of both time and resources. To kill or use an idea before it has been manipulated by the artist's hands is like walking out of the middle of the best movie you ever saw. You wouldn't do that. Neither would you make a habit of eating unripe fruit. As a rule, Americans are "top-heavy" in judgment to the detriment of the other necessary aspects of the creative process. In the Stanford creativity course mentioned previously, one of the first concepts students were taught was to "unlearn" judgment skills. Judgment in the germination stage of creativity is unhealthy. Later on, in the secondary phase of creativity, judgment skills are reassembled and strengthened. The skill of intuition is also emphasized. Although intuition is regarded as a right-brain function, it serves as a bridge to left-brain thinking. Intuition is the quarterback in the football game of creativity.

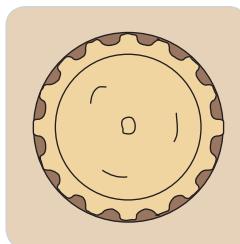
The role of judge involves taking risks. As inventor Grace Hopper once said, "A ship in a port is safe, but that's not what ships are built for." To that we can add this advice from business executive Harry Gray: "No one ever achieved greatness by playing it safe" (von Oech, 1986). Risk taking can seem like a dangerous proposition because there is always the possibility of failure. Failure, of course, can prove painful, a sensation the ego would rather avoid. With failure is the chance of rejection, and rejection tends to lower self-esteem. This may sound incongruous, but failure is the first step to success. Edison

tried 1,800 different types of filaments before he found one that worked in the light bulb. Author Mario Puzo approached nineteen different publishers before he found one that would accept his manuscript entitled *The Godfather*. Contrary to popular opinion, failure isn't lack of achievement—it is lack of effort. In the words of comedian and film producer/director Woody Allen, "If you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign that you're not trying anything innovative."

Risks can be classified as either good or bad. With a little bit of intelligence, a calculation can be made regarding the strength of an idea. A good judge weighs the positive aspects against the negative ones. A good judge isn't biased by assumptions that preclude future possibilities. In the event of a calculated risk that sours, failure can still be a great teacher. Use your intuition and go with the good risks.

The Warrior. Giving the green light to go ahead with a good idea doesn't signify the end of the creative process. As von Oech explains, the role of the warrior is to campaign for the idea. It tries the idea out and markets it. The warrior is the anchor leg of the creative relay team, and it doesn't take any coaching experience to figure out that the anchor leg has got to be strong. Many good ideas sit around collecting dust because the warrior never finished the race. The role of the warrior, in tandem with the judge, is to take creative ideas to completion. The warrior devises a strategy, a winning game plan. On Wall Street, the importance of strategy and campaigning is summed up as follows: To know and not to do is not to know. Warrior skills include good organization and administration abilities. The warrior also takes risks, but good risks. To be a good warrior, you need strength and endurance—strength to carry the idea to reality, and endurance to carry it far, if need be. A good warrior is an optimist. A good warrior has confidence. And a good warrior is persistent.

A quick review of books on creativity reveals that although women are just as creative as men, they rarely receive any acknowledgments. Madame Curie, Fanny Mendelssohn, and Georgia O'Keeffe notwithstanding, women receive little if any credit for their creative efforts. In her book *The 12 Secrets of Highly Creative Women*, author Gail McMeekin (2000) not only highlights scores of creative women and their achievements over the past few centuries, but also notes the trends that got them to success. Like von Oech, McMeekin sees the creative process in distinct stages. Some of the twelve secrets include acknowledging your creative self, fol-

**FIGURE 13.4**

Slice a pie into eight pieces using only three cuts. There is more than one right answer.

lowing your fascinations, conquering your saboteurs, and selecting empowering alliances.

Obstacles to the Creative Process

The act of creation can be most pleasant. Roger von Oech called it “mental sex.” Maslow (1987) called the feelings associated with it “peak experiences,” describing exhilaration or euphoria. If creativity is so much fun, why do so many people shy away from it? Lately, researchers have directed much attention to the reasons people shun the creative process as a whole, as well as its constituents.

Contrary to what you might think, creativity is not solely a right-brain function. Rather, it is a partnership between the right brain, the house of the imagination, and the left brain, the source of organization. There are many reasons why the creative process becomes stifled. Most of these have to do with the inability to access the functional powers of the right brain, the overbearing powers of the left brain, or a combination of the two. What is needed is a balance of right- and left-brain cognitive skills. Lack of balance is induced by attitudes and other obstacles that block the creative process. These attitudes are called mental blocks, or in von Oech’s terms, mental locks. Von Oech describes ten mental blocks in his book *A Whack on the Side of the Head*, each an attitude debilitating to the creative process. Four of the most common pertaining to stress management are The Right Answer (explorer), I’m Not Creative (artist), Don’t Be Foolish (judge), and To Err Is Wrong (warrior). According to von Oech, “We all need a whack on the side of the head to shake us out of

BSAINXLEATNTEARS

FIGURE 13.5

The creative word game. In the following line of letters, cross out letters so that the remaining six letters, without altering their sequence, will spell a familiar English word.

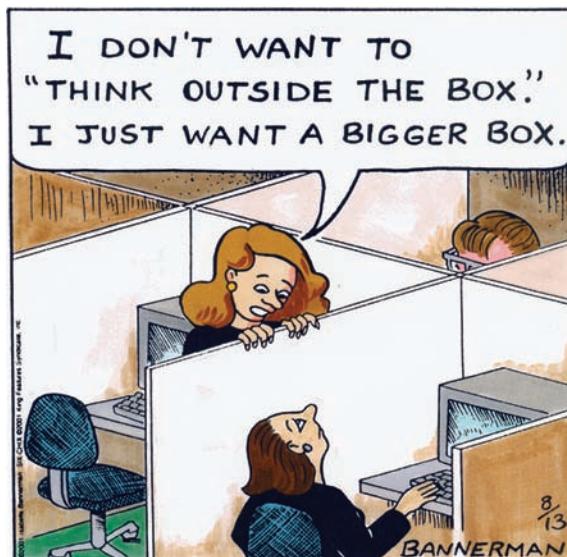
routines and force us to rethink our problems.” With each following description of a “lock” is an exercise to “whack” the side of your head so that you become more creative.

The Right Answer

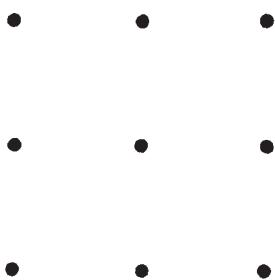
Is it possible there is more than one right answer to any problem? More than likely, yes! (See **FIG. 13.4**.) But people generally look for just one answer, call it right, and then stop looking. Years ago, singer/songwriter Harry Chapin wrote a song called “Flowers Are Red.” The song was inspired by a note sent home with his preschool-aged daughter that said that she had not colored the flower assignment correctly. “Flowers are red, not black,” the note said. “My flower died,” his daughter explained. Chapin’s daughter symbolizes just one of many millions of such experiences. From day one we seemed to be educated that there is a “right” way and a “wrong” way to everything. In the germination phase of the creative process, there are many possibilities. If you are in search of one right answer, you will surely stop once you have found it. Nothing could be more dangerous.

I’m Not Creative

In one of my courses, I assign students a creativity project on the first night, to be completed by the end of the semester. The moans can be heard from one coast to the other: “I’m not creative.” But in the words of author Richard Bach (*Illusions*), “Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they’re yours.” Creativity isn’t a per-

**FIGURE 13.6**

Learning to think outside the box. (©2001 Isabella Bannerman. Reprinted with permission.)

**FIGURE 13.7**

Connect all nine dots with four straight lines. Go through each dot only once. Do not lift your pencil from the paper. (And don't be afraid to make a mistake or two.)

ception, it is a process. When it is thought of as a perception, it can be very stifling. Everyone is creative—it just takes work. What separates Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Paul McCartney from those who say they are not creative is belief in their own creativity. The inspiration from this belief is phenomenal. At the end of each semester, I am told repeatedly by students that the creativity exercise was the best thing they ever did because it taught them they really could be creative.

Don't Be Foolish

Have you ever dropped your tray in the cafeteria, walked around all day with your fly open, made a presentation with food stuck in your teeth, or locked your keys in the car? The embarrassment resulting from such episodes is painful to the ego. Being foolish is thought of as being stupid, and stupidity earns no points in the game of life. We are so cautious about making mistakes for fear of how we will look in public that we constantly keep our guard up. But guarded behavior promotes conformity, and conformity breeds staleness. In the creative process, this mentality can lead to a concept called groupthink, where everyone conforms, goes along with the crowd. Groupthink is dangerous; it stifles creativity. Sometimes it is necessary to be foolish. A giddy outlook gives a new perspective on a situation. Playing the fool can augment the role of the judge to determine the worth of ideas. Being foolish can also mean having a sense of humor, and humor and creativity make wonderful partners (see Chapter 12).

To Err Is Wrong

There are times when making a mistake is not a good idea. It may cost you your job, marriage, or life. Then again, there are times when making a mistake may

result in the most appropriate course of action. Mistakes offer invaluable learning experiences. In the creative process, mistakes are necessary. Each mistake bushwhacks a clearer path to a more viable answer. Errors are stepping stones to the next workable possibility. Fear of failure can immobilize the creative process. To the mind of Thomas J. Watson, founder of IBM, "The way to success is to double your rate of failure."

From a different vantage point, Arthur VanGundy (1982) discusses several types of obstacles or roadblocks to the creative process in his book *Training Your Creative Mind*. They include the following:

- 1. Perceptual roadblocks.** Perceptual obstacles involve the inability to separate yourself from the problem. Ego attachment blurs creative vision. Perceptual problems occur when left-brain cognitive skills overrule the primary creative processes. Analysis, judgment, and negative perceptions place plaster casts around the creative muscle and cause it to atrophy. There is a time to open up, and a time to narrow your vision. Creativity is like humor: Timing is everything.
- 2. Emotional roadblocks.** The primary emotion acting as an obstacle to creativity is fear—fear of making a mistake, fear of the unknown, and fear of rejection, once others find out about past mistakes. When people say they are not creative, many times what they are really saying is, "I am afraid of failure." Fear of failure can paralyze the creative thought process. Fears are natural, but with a little work they can be alleviated or resolved to enhance creativity. Conversely, sometimes we fall so deeply "in love" with an idea we have given birth to that we become blind to its true value or contribution. In these cases it is often best to "sit on" the ideas, and give them time to hatch and prove their merit. But don't sit on an idea too long, or someone else might come along with the same idea and leave you bobbing in the wake of their creativity.

Perceptual roadblocks: Obstacles to the creative process, placed by the ego, in the role of the judge.

Emotional roadblocks: Obstacles to the creative process, in the guise of fear, such as the fear of making a mistake (failure), rejection, or the unknown.

- 3. Intellectual/expressive roadblocks.** Humans rely very heavily on vision and hearing, sometimes to the exclusion of other senses. The consequence can be poor receptivity to additional information that could be employed in the gathering and processing of creative ideas. Language can also be a real barrier. Words have specific but different connotations to the people who hear them. For example, a doorway to one person is a passageway to someone else. Each word represents a different image and a different result. Don't let language become a barrier to your creative thoughts.
- 4. Cultural roadblocks.** We become socialized to certain thinking patterns. Western culture is now widely recognized as encouraging left-brain-dominant thinkers. That is, the critical styles of thinking associated with the left brain are praised, while the cognitive thinking styles of the right brain are ridiculed or ignored. The net result is asymmetrical thinking. How can this barrier be dismantled? One way is to access your right-brain thinking styles through meditation, yoga, or recreation. Sidney Parnes, a creative consultant to the Disney Corporation, advocates listening to instrumental music to set the imagination free and get creative juices flowing (see Chapter 21).
- 5. Environmental roadblocks.** Environmental factors include personal constraints such as time, noncreative influences (i.e., your friends, spouse, or boss), and resources such as a support network of other people. Have you ever had what you thought was a really good idea and then received feedback that was less than favorable? Negative feedback invariably has a toxic effect on creativity. Be on the lookout for toxic influences and learn to avoid them.

Intellectual/expressive roadblocks: Obstacles to the creative process, in this case, created by the language we use that gives bias to our way of thinking (e.g., doorway vs. entrance).

Cultural roadblocks: Cultural thinking patterns that limit our ability to take in new ideas, leading to asymmetrical thinking.

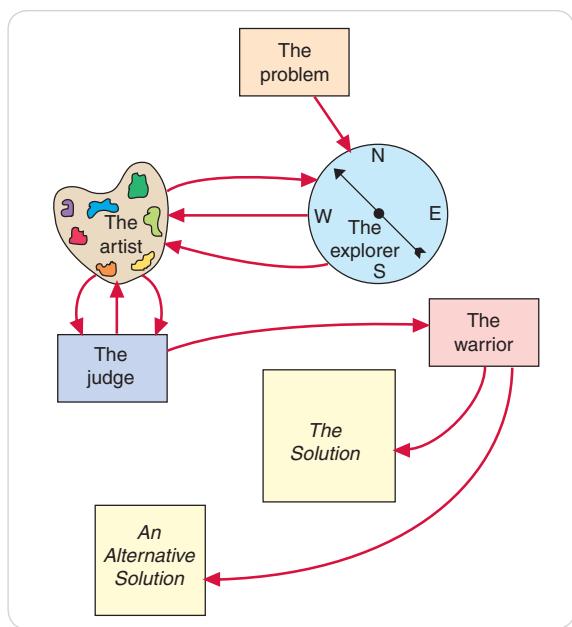
Environmental roadblocks: Personal constraints such as time, money, or a host of responsibilities that impede the creative process.

Roadblocks are seldom dead-ends. They are merely influences impeding the fruits of creative labor. Several of these roadblocks are self-defeating attitudes, but attitudes can change. If you want to move beyond a roadblock, surrender the attitude. Other roadblocks may involve people, places, or things. In these cases, a roadblock just means that you have to travel a longer distance to get to your final destination. The removal or diversion of roadblocks takes a little time. Sometimes you have to be creative even in the dismantling of obstacles. But in the end, much strength will result from the effort.

From Creativity to Creative Problem Solving

Creativity is perhaps one of the most valuable coping techniques to use in your personal battle against stress. If the mechanics involved in creative problem solving—awareness, new ideas, new courses of action, and evaluation—seem familiar, it is because they are the cornerstones of many other coping techniques. In addition, several coping techniques can be included in the creative strategic plan (e.g., cognitive restructuring, social engineering, and communication skills). At first glance, creative problem solving might appear to be a linear sequential process. Linear thinking, however, is a left-brain skill. Without a trip through the corpus callosum for a visit to the right side of the brain, your chances of bringing troublesome situations to closure are about as good as an ice cube's in hell. It makes sense, then, that use of creative skills in the problem-solving process may be circuitous rather than a straight line. Creativity may be used to make order out of chaos, but no one ever said that orderly is synonymous with linear. This is all right because many problems are nonlinear, too. Some are like amoebas, amorphously stretching about.

To illustrate nonlinear thinking (FIG. 13.8), let us say that you start out gathering ideas to solve a problem, which is the most logical way to begin. So, you put on your pith helmet and go exploring to collect ideas. When you have a lot of raw materials, you pull out your artbox, toolbox, or whatever toys you need to play with, and hammer away. But in the course of playing, you find you need a few more ideas. So, you change hats and explore some more, and then return to hammering away again. Soon the hammer becomes a gavel as the judge steps in to review the progress so far. The judge approves. "Hmm, not bad," says the warrior. "Let's take this baby out and see if it flies." In flight, the artist says,

**FIGURE 13.8**

Creative problem solving is rarely a linear process.

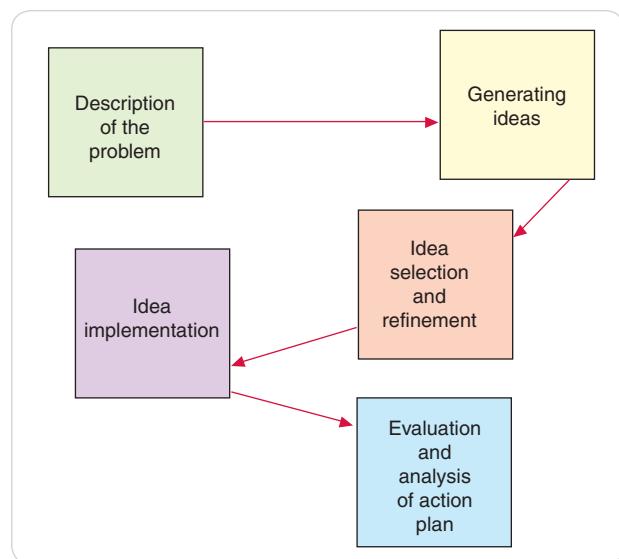
"Wait! Let's add this to make it stronger." So, there are a few more trips back to the workshop before the product is finished. As you can see, the process, in practice, is anything but a straight line.

Steps to Initiate Creative Problem Solving

Just as there are many paths to enlightenment, there are many solutions to each problem. Granted, some may be more viable than others, but rarely, if ever, is there only one way out. This is perhaps the most important concept in **creative problem solving**. Among the several theories of creative problem solving, some common concepts do emerge (FIG. 13.9), yet the paths to and from these concepts vary significantly depending on the person using them. The first step in creative problem solving is to write everything down on paper. This will make the other steps easier.

Description of the Problem

Before you can attack a problem successfully, you have to understand it. This means looking at the problem from all sides. Objectively state the problem. Define it. Give it some history. Give it someone else's perspective. Project its future influence. Then, subjectively state how you feel about it, the depth of your involvement,

**FIGURE 13.9**

The map of creative problem solving. Creative problem solving is rarely a linear process because what appears to be a good idea at the start may result in heading back to the drawing board and starting all over again until success is achieved.

and the impact or influence it has had on you. Next, analyze the problem. Dissect it. Look at its components. What are its strengths and weaknesses? What is its face value and what is the bottom line? Once you have a handle on the nature of the problem, then you can move on. Remember, though, that throughout the creative process, you will want to revisit this description because over time you will gather more information about it. Any subsequent changes to it may, in turn, alter the final approach you select to handle the problem.

Generating Ideas

Generating ideas is fun; it is also challenging. So, where do ideas come from? Memory is a good place to start—previous experience is always a good teacher. But memory alone isn't enough. Ideas should come from any available resource, both internal and external, from books to people, movies, museums, and you name it. This is where the explorer role comes in. The more

Creative problem solving: A coping technique; utilizing creative abilities to describe a problem, generate ideas, select and refine a solution, implement the solution, and evaluate its effectiveness.

ideas you can come up with, the better your chances of solving the problem effectively. When searching for ideas, leave mental censorship behind. Take in every conceivable idea, even if it seems ridiculous. If you start to censor ideas before you gather them, you will come up empty-handed.

Idea Selection and Refinement

Not all of your ideas will be good or usable. But you won't know that until you spread them all out and look at them collectively. Play with the ideas. Order them. Circle them. Line them up like an army of troops. Once your ideas are out on the table, one or two are likely to jump out at you. You might also want to rank-order (judge) your ideas by degree of feasibility (plan A, plan B, plan C, and so on) because not every idea will work, and the idea that looks best now might flop the hardest. Now bring in the artist again and manipulate your idea of choice. Manipulation means adapting the idea to "best fit" the problem. You may need to streamline the idea or to otherwise change it a little to suit your specific needs. Once you have selected your first choice, play it out in your mind. Visualize the idea. What are the pros and cons? Explore hypotheticals and look for potential weaknesses that could be corrected to avoid major pitfalls. Expect the unexpected. Now remember plan B and plan C. A person without options is a person in trouble, so you will want to have some back-ups. Give some thought to your second and third choices because there is a good chance you will someday use them. Once you have narrowed your ideas down to one choice, it is a good practice to do a quick inventory to see what resources it may require. Not all ideas require additional resources, but many do. Remember that resources may include people as well as material goods, and don't overlook those intangible resources, the hidden talents within each individual.

Idea Implementation

Implementation takes bravery—perhaps not much, but in the face of stress, maybe a lot. Implementation involves a game plan, a strategy. This means thinking about how the idea can be put into effect and end in resolution. It means trying the idea out. In addition to bravery, implementation requires faith.

Evaluation and Analysis of Action

A good inventor observes his or her invention to see how well it works. When the tests are through, either a bottle of champagne is opened or there is a trip back to

the proverbial drawing board. Problem solving works the same way. The final lesson a problem has to offer is if and how well it has been resolved. This takes a bit of analysis, so once again call the judge back in to declare a verdict. But there is no verdict of guilty or not guilty. There is either a hard pat on the back or a soft kick in the seat of the pants. In life's journey, you will do well to have an equal number of each, as all of our rough edges need to be polished.

Best Application of Creative Problem Solving

We all have the skills to be creative; the issue is whether we choose to use them. With this coping technique, there really is no choice if you want to deal effectively with stress. How good are your exploring skills? Do you have a curious nature? When was the last time you ventured someplace you have never been before to shop around for ideas? How good are your artistic talents? When is the last time you played in the garage or basement? For that matter, when is the last time you just plain played? Is your artist's hammer a judge's gavel in disguise, ready to smash an idea before it is ripe? These are some questions to ask yourself to find out your strengths and weaknesses in the creative process. Once you identify these areas, you are ready to sharpen these skills.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow said that creativity is a necessary skill to deal with the stress of change. As the understanding of right- and left-brain cognitive skills continues to unfold, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the mind is capable of much more intelligence than was thought before. Creative problem-solving skills are life skills—skills to not only survive but also thrive through the potential chaos of change. Once refined, these skills can and should be used repeatedly as the foundation of every strategy used to confront and resolve stress.

Here is an idea for you to enhance your creativity skills. Be on the lookout for great ideas that you can adapt for yourself. Begin this adventure by finding a three-ring notebook. Then, start collecting images, ads, anything that inspires you to be creative. What you are doing is collecting raw materials to adapt for future projects or problem-solving solutions. This notebook will become a very valuable resource. Know that the most brilliant minds have one of these (and refer to it regularly).

SUMMARY

- Necessity is the mother of invention. When problems arise, solutions come from creative thinking. However, in American culture, critical rather than creative thinking is rewarded.
- In troubled times, people look to the epitome of genius for guidance. da Vinci's creativity offers insights on how we, too, can be creative.
- Maslow found two stages to the creative process: primary creativity, where ideas are generated in a playful mode; and secondary creativity, where these ideas are refined and implemented.
- Von Oech outlined four phases of creative thinking: the explorer, the artist, the judge, and the warrior. The first two roles are responsible for searching out and generating ideas, whereas the second two refine and implement the selected idea.
- Roadblocks to the creative process can occur at any stage; however, most occur at the explorer and artist phases. Four roadblocks were described in this chapter: The Right Answer, I'm Not Creative, Don't Be Foolish, and To Err Is Wrong.
- VanGundy categorizes obstacles to creativity as roadblocks—emotional, intellectual/expressive, cultural, and environmental.
- The creative problem-solving strategy has five phases: describing the problem, generating ideas, idea selection and refinement, idea implementation, and evaluation and analysis of action.
- Creativity is a large component of mental well-being. The right and left hemispheres of the brain work together as a team to overcome problems resulting in acute or chronic stress.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Why is creativity thought to be such an important coping technique?
2. Describe the four stages of von Oech's creative-thinking process model.
3. What are four common roadblocks to the creative process?
4. List the five steps in the creative problem-solving process.

APPENDIX: ANSWERS TO CREATIVE PROBLEMS

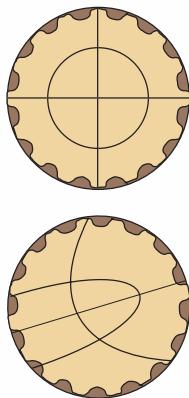


FIGURE 13.4

BANANA and/or LETTER

FIGURE 13.5

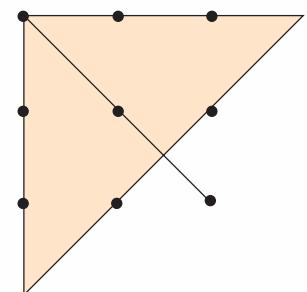


FIGURE 13.7

Chapter 14



Communication Skills

The three most important words for a successful relationship are: communication, communication, and communication.

—Anonymous

Communications in the WiFi age

John owns an up-and-coming telecommunications firm. Just years out of college, he is the epitome of success: a great job, a beautiful wife Sherry, two children (twins), a 4,000-square-foot house, and a six-figure salary. What began as a fascination with software programs in high school quickly led to a management position with the biggest phone company in the country. But the cell phone technology that launched his career nearly became his downfall. One day his wife gave him an ultimatum: the cell phone or her.

John, it turns out, had quite the addiction to his BlackBerry. During conversations with Sherry, he would constantly check his email, text messages, and voice mail. These communications were not only business links to the outside world, they were an ego-driven fix of sorts, at the expense of his marriage. At first Sherry was upset that John interrupted every conversation with what she called “the other woman.” Then, she became indignant—she couldn’t even have a decent conversation with her husband unless she called him on the phone. Finally, she gave him an ultimatum: If the BlackBerry wasn’t turned off at home, she was leaving—with the twins! John admits he had no choice, so now the BlackBerry stays in his car when he pulls into the driveway each night. He knew she was right.

Experts find that John’s troubles are not a singular event (Koprowski, 2006; www.abc.com, 2008). Moreover, people, particularly young adults, are changing their communication styles about as quickly as the technology that they communicate with changes. Ironically, young people (from middle school to graduate school) send text messages, email, and voice mail, often while in proximity of the person with whom they are communicating. For some it’s a whole new language (e.g., LOL, 4EAE, and BTDT). For many, it’s the preferred way to communicate. But instant messaging doesn’t mean an instant reply, despite expectations to make it so. Unmet expectations often result in frustration (stress!). If young people aren’t instant messaging or sending email, they are keyboarding information through their MySpace page or Facebook page. In fact, so new are the changes in technology that few studies have been done to understand the ramifications of how communication skills affect relationships when convenience holds a greater priority than content. But this we do know: Email doesn’t convey voice intonation. Text messages don’t convey body language (an important part of communications), and voice mail can’t replace eye contact. All

this means that much is lost in translation. As such, the potential for stress in interpersonal relationships is increased dramatically when incomplete forms of communication are used. Poor communication skills of one’s thoughts and feelings not only affect roommates, spouses, children, and colleagues; the ripple effect goes beyond the family and worksite to the entire community, as was observed with the Virginia Tech massacre. Despite the rapid advances in technology and how we employ these means to express ourselves, the basics of communication skills remain the same.

The Basics of Communication Skills

If you were to make a list of your top ten stressors, you would probably find that at least half of these involve relationships with family, friends, and co-workers. Strong relationships necessitate good communication skills. To paraphrase poet John Donne, “No man is an island entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” As such, our lives are filled with much interaction. Like molecules ricocheting around a glass jar, we are bound to come in contact with a number of people over the course of any day. These “contacts” often prove stressful because of the nature of our communicative interactions. Experts indicate that the average person spends approximately three-quarters of his or her waking day communicating with others. Included under the rubric of communication are phone calls, emails, text messaging, blogging, lectures, staff meetings, dinner conversations, listening to radio and television, and simply talking with friends and acquaintances. The degree of perception and interpretation required for communication, and the many layers of meaning in even common words, leaves much room for misunderstanding—and hence stress. This is why the practice of good communication skills is so important to help minimize and resolve misunderstandings. Good communication skills are *essential* as a coping technique.

To be a good communicator, one must not only express thoughts and feelings in understandable words, but also listen, clarify, and process information as it is intended. Communication skills are so important in the business world that workshops and seminars are given regularly on this topic; poor communication skills are simply not cost-effective. As you will see in this chapter, almost every theory and accompanying skill is based on common sense. Yet common sense is often bound and gagged when the ego is threatened. When people are defensive, their ability to gather, process, and even exchange information becomes greatly impaired. The

BOX 14.1**What the Professor Really Means*****What He or She Said***

You'll be using one of the leading textbooks in the field.

The answer to your question is beyond the scope of this course.

You'll have to see me during my office hours for a thorough answer to your question.

In answer to your question, you must recognize that there are several disparate points of view.

Today we'll let a member of the class lead the discussion. It will be a good educational experience.

The test will be 60 questions, multiple choice.

The test scores were generally good.

The test scores were a little below my expectations.

Some of you could have done better.

Are there any questions?

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What It Really Means

I used it as a grad student.

I don't know.

I don't know.

I really don't know!

I stayed out late last night and didn't have time to prepare a lecture.

The test will be a 60-question multiple guess, plus three short-answer questions (1,000 words or more), and no one will score above 75 percent.

Some of you managed a B.

Where was the party last night?

Everyone flunked.

I'm ready to let you go.

result is miscommunication and the stress that miscommunication produces.

Conversational Styles

Each person has his or her own distinct style of communication. According to linguistics expert Dr. Deborah Tannen of George Washington University (2001), not only do the interpretations of words cause misunderstandings in relationships, but so do the styles in which people speak. Both, she notes, are a major reason for marital problems and, in some cases, divorce. Moreover, Tannen indicates that people from different regions of the country have specific communication styles (e.g., New York City versus Texas). And, perhaps to no surprise, men typically display a different communication style than women do. Communication styles include, among others, dominant, interruptive, manipulative, polite, creative, sarcastic, and passive means. It is friction caused by differing conversational styles that causes or adds to conflict. In our attempts to communicate under stress, styles become exaggerated, which Tannen terms **schismogenesis**, thus further widening the gap of misunderstanding.

A particular conversational style is a type of behavior, which in some situations may need to be refined, adapted,

or changed to resolve issues between two people. Take, for example, the case of a woman from Texas who moved to Washington, D.C., as an assistant director of human resources management for a large company. Within weeks her communication style and demeanor were perceived as unassertive, whereas in Texas she had been praised for being appropriately polite.

In her much-acclaimed book *That's Not What I Meant*, Tannen also describes the serious problem of misinterpretation of the spoken message. Tannen calls the underlying intent of communications **metamessages**, or the meanings of the messages that are clear to the speaker but masked by a particular vernacular and style construed as polite or nonoffensive. Misunderstanding is compounded by the interpretation of the listener as well. For instance, upon learning that his sister Sheila is pregnant, Mark may ask, "Did you quit smoking yet?" The metamessage

Schismogenesis: A term coined by Deborah Tannen suggesting that exaggerated conversation styles become intensified under stress, thus adding to miscommunication.

Metamessages: The underlying intention of verbal communication when people are indirect with their comments, thus adding to miscommunication.

expresses concern for the health of the baby. But Sheila's interpretation may be that Mark is passing judgment on her health habits, making her quite angry. From Tannen's research, she has come to the conclusion that people—or Americans, at least—tend to be indirect rather than direct in the messages they communicate, whether out of politeness, fear, or manipulation. This indirectness is a precursor to perceived stress, and greatly compromises the effectiveness of communication, leading to further misunderstanding and potential conflict. Verbal communication is one way to get a message across, but by no means the only way. Metamessages also are stated indirectly through postures, clothes, and facial expressions. Thus, communication is basically categorized as verbal and nonverbal.

Verbal Communication

Verbal language is a series of expressive thoughts and perceptions described through word symbols. Linguistic experts divide verbal communication into two components: encoding and decoding. **Encoding** is the process wherein a speaker attempts to frame thoughts and perceptions into words (e.g., someone saying to the person next to her, "Boy, it's stuffy in here"). **Decoding** is the process wherein the message is translated, dissected, analyzed, and interpreted by the listener (e.g., the person hearing this thinks, "Yeah, the room does smell rather gamey"). Misunderstanding, confusion, and stress can arise anywhere in this process.

Although it may seem that two people who speak English would have a common understanding of all English words, in fact variations in the meanings given to words can lead to much confusion as well. Anyone who has traveled to Great Britain, Australia, or New Zealand has discovered that even in English-speaking countries, language barriers exist. For example, a jumper is a dress in the States, whereas it is a sweater

Encoding: The process in which the speaker attempts to frame his or her thoughts and perceptions into words.

Decoding: A process in which the listener attempts to understand what the speaker has encoded in his or her verbal message.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: The idea that our perception of reality is based largely on the words we use to communicate or express ourselves.

Down Under. Moreover, you don't have to leave America to experience this phenomenon; vernacular differences can be found all across the country. For example, the words *tonic*, *soda*, and *pop* are all used colloquially to describe soft drinks. But in the Boston area a tonic is considered a cola, whereas in Denver it denotes seltzer. Additionally, cultural vernacular gives rise to new meanings for words, often representing the opposites of their dictionary definitions. For example, the word *bad* may have negative connotations to you, but currently many people employ this adjective to describe something emphatically good, as in "That's a bad hat." Quite often, the meanings of words are arbitrary. And possessing both literal and figurative meanings, words and expressions can also be ambiguous. FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover once corrected a memo his secretary typed with a note to "watch the borders" (margins). Misunderstanding, she added his comment to the memo and sent it out nationwide. Immediately all FBI agents on the Canadian and Mexican borders were placed on alert. Verbal and written communication is more complex than meets the ear or eye.

The key to interpersonal communication can be summed up as: Say what you mean, and mean what you say. In other words, be direct. Implementing this rule in our conversational style, however, is extremely difficult. One reason confusion arises is that there are many concepts, ideas, and particularly feelings that are difficult to articulate within the limits of vocabulary. Thoughts, like color photographs, can often be described only in black-and-white terms, leaving many details to assumption, interpretation, and imagination. Some thoughts cannot be expressed in words at all, and the words we choose to describe the contents of our conscious minds can limit our own understanding of what we wish to express as well.

The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, created to explain the use of words, suggests that our perception of reality is largely based on the depth of the vocabulary in which we express ourselves. In other words, our vocabulary limits our understanding of our current reality. So, someone with a limited vocabulary will have a more difficult time expressing him- or herself, as is easily illustrated when learning a new language. Even when vocabulary does appear to describe thoughts adequately, words are often used to camouflage true feelings in an attempt to avoid hurting others or even ourselves. The inability to express how we really feel can also promote unacknowledged anxiety.

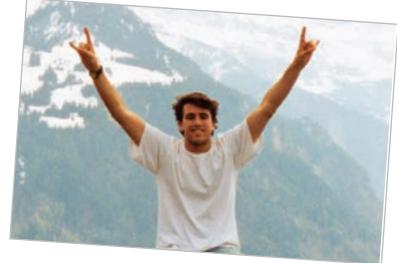
Stress with a Human Face

Swimming was Johnny's passion, and you could tell just by listening to him talk about it. He was a freestyle sprinter, and proud of it. Training and competition are not without their stressful moments, nor is the transition from high school to college swimming an easy one. In a visit to my office one day, Johnny confided that he was having some problems, specifically communication and attitude problems, with the coach. "I'm a sprinter, not a distance swimmer," he exclaimed. "And I thrive on positive reinforcement. All I seem to get is negative talk. I can tell he really doesn't like me."

"Johnny, have you made it a point to sit down and talk with the coach?" I asked. "Does he even know you feel this way?" The answer was No! "I know this guy," I continued, "and he's a lousy psychic. He can't read your mind. You've got to talk to him. Make an appointment to see him, tell him how you feel, and give it to him straight. Tell him exactly what you've told me."

It didn't take much for Johnny to agree this was the only reasonable course of action. Although I saw him at several home swim meets after that, the subject never came up and I never thought to ask about it. But about 6 months later, when I was at a basketball game talking with the swimming coach and he mentioned Johnny's name, I inquired about the rapport between the two.

"Oh, we get along great," the coach replied. "Less than a month into the season, he came to see me and presented his perception of our relationship, his need for lots of positive feedback, negotiating some sprinting events with distance events, and a few other aspects of training." I just nodded and smiled. I know someday Johnny will be not only a fine swimmer but a wonderful coach himself.



Communicating Ideas and Feelings

Sharing personal ideas and feelings is referred to as **self-disclosure**, opening up and revealing a part of you that is not obvious from external appearances. Self-disclosure is based on mutual trust. It is believed by those who study communication skills that all verbal communication involves some element of self-disclosure. It can be a double-edged sword, for there is risk in divulging personal insights and feelings. When individuals sense that sharing feelings will promote a closer relationship or bonding, then the risk is assessed as minimal and opening up is worth it. If rejection or alienation may ensue, however, then the degree of openness will be greatly limited. Likewise, when trust has been violated in the past, the ability to self-disclose is greatly compromised. One might think that the closer two people are, the greater the depth of self-disclosure there is, and initially this may be true. But in many cases, once the parameters of a relationship are established, laziness sets in and styles are taken for granted, thus leaving many perceptions and assumptions that may or may not represent true feelings.

Describing feelings differs from expressing feelings, in that description involves the use of words, whereas expression may include physical responses such as crying, laughing, touching, or some other physical action.

Although there are many ways to express emotions, verbal communication is deemed essential when they involve other people. When feelings are not put into words, assumptions occur in the minds of those with whom you interact, and assumptions can be dangerous. These guessing games often lead to confusion about the intentions and thoughts of everyone involved. Again, the result is frustration and emotional pain.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is described as any communication that does not involve words. It may include postures, facial expressions, touch, and even style of clothing. Nonverbal communication differs from verbal communication in that it is multichanneled—addressing all senses—not merely stimuli received through the sense of hearing. Nonverbal communication is not only indirect, but often unconscious. Conversely, verbal communica-

Self-disclosure: The process in which a person reveals various aspects of him- or herself that are not readily apparent.

Nonverbal communication: All types of communication that do not involve words, including body language and facial expressions.

tion is typically dominated by conscious thought. Ideally, nonverbal messages support verbal communication, reinforcing words with gestures to promote a clearer understanding of the intended message. However, a spoken message can also be contradicted by nonverbal gestures. The result is a series of mixed messages and the feelings these incongruencies generate.

Research shows that when a contradiction occurs between verbal and nonverbal messages, people are more inclined to believe nonverbal cues ("the body doesn't lie") (Barker and Collins, 1970). Several factors have been identified as elements of nonverbal communication, any of which can either reinforce or contradict spoken messages. These are categorized as either physical or nonphysical elements.

Physical Elements

Research shows that there are many styles of nonverbal communication, involving a number of physical movements:

- 1. Touch.** Touch is thought to be a universal form of communication. Handshakes, pats on the back, and hugs are the most common forms of touch. As a rule, Americans tend to be less contact oriented than other cultures (Stoeltge, 2003; Field, 1999), although comfort levels vary greatly from one person to another. Depending on the style of touch, the individual, and the circumstances, this nonverbal form of communication can be perceived as either threatening or reassuring.
- 2. Emblems and illustrators.** **Emblems** are defined as physical gestures that replace words, such as the "OK" symbol and the thumbs-up sign. Many emblems have been incorporated into American

Emblems: Physical gestures that tend to replace words, such as the thumbs-up signal.

Illustrators: Movements or postures used in combination with verbal conversation, such as various hand motions.

Affect displays: Facial expressions used to express a particular emotion (e.g., amazement).

Regulators: Nonverbal messages used to regulate or even manipulate a conversation, including eye movements and other types of body language.

Adaptors: The most difficult type of nonverbal communication to decode, such as the folding of one's arms across the chest or the crossing of one's legs.



FIGURE 14.1

Body language can be more revealing than the spoken word. Studies show that people trust body language more than verbal communication.

Sign Language, used by those with hearing impairment. **Illustrators**, on the other hand, are movements that augment verbal communication, such as waving your hand by your face to show how hot you are. Emblems are often used when speech is prohibited (in a church or lecture hall), while illustrators typically accompany a verbal narrative.

- 3. Affect displays.** Facial expressions, or **affect displays**, are often used to express a point also made through the spoken word. Banging your thumb with a hammer hurts, and the facial contortion usually following afterward suggests the intensity of the pain.
- 4. Regulators.** **Regulators** are nonverbal messages used to regulate or manipulate a conversation. Eye movements, slight head movements, and shifting weight from foot to foot can send a message for the speaker to speed up, slow down, repeat, or hurry up and finish a sentence. Although regulators are sometimes important to communication, they can also be construed as rude, depending on their nature.
- 5. Adaptors.** **Adaptors** are often called body language, and they are important (FIG. 14.1▲). Adaptors are believed to be among the most difficult physical

elements to decode in nonverbal communication. Folding your arms across your chest or crossing your legs away from the speaker may, or may not, indicate boredom, defensiveness, or aggression.

6. *Paralanguage.* **Paralanguage** consists of the elements of speaking that color the use of words. Pitch, volume, and rate all convey inferences that influence the listener.

Nonphysical Elements

Many additional factors sensed by speakers and listeners communicate a host of impressions, from values to feelings:

1. *Territorial space.* Each individual maintains an area of comfortable personal space or territory around him- or herself. When personal space is invaded, it causes feelings of discomfort. Too great a distance between people may also cause uneasiness or feelings of rejection.
2. *Clothing.* Styles of clothing send very strong messages about personal values, attitudes, and behaviors, and may or may not meet the expectations of other individuals in one's environments. Professional settings, for example, call for a particular style of clothing. That which deviates from the expected or normal dress code can communicate anything from ignorance, to disrespect, to a rebellious attitude.

Knowing that communication involves both verbal and nonverbal messages, it is important to recognize and utilize elements of both to make your style of communication as effective as possible. Recognition and utilization of effective verbal and nonverbal skills require, specifically, listening, attending, and responding skills.

Listening, Attending, and Responding Skills

The process of communication is like the two sides of a coin. The first side represents self-expression; the second, listening. You have probably heard someone say, "He heard me, but he didn't listen to what I said!" Hearing is the *reception* of auditory sensations, whereas listening is the *understanding* of these auditory sensations. Research shows that in a typical day more than 50 percent of communication involves listening (Burley-Allen, 1995). Under closer observation, however, individuals show a general complacency about listening and attending skills;

they may hear, but they do not listen very well. In the words of Tannen (2001), "Communication is a system. Everything that is said is simultaneously an instigation and reaction, a reaction and an instigation. Most of us tend to focus on the first part of that process while ignoring or downplaying the second." Typically, in conversation, when people finish expressing a thought or feeling, they almost immediately begin to prepare their next statement, listening only to the first couple of words of response. The most common example occurs during introductions, when a new person states his or her name while you prepare to say yours. Seconds later, you cannot remember what the person's name is. As a rule, the concentration required for listening is very tiring.

The key elements involved in effective listening, attending, and responding are the following:

1. *Assume the role of listener.* Listening requires that all attention be paid to what the speaker is saying. Your mind should be clear of all thoughts that direct attention away from the speaker. Attention to your own thoughts, rather than the message directed to you, is the primary reason for poor listening habits. Although the role of speaker and listener shifts back and forth several times in the course of a conversation, don't prepare comments or rebuttals while you are in the role of listener.
2. *Maintain eye contact.* Good eye contact is considered essential to effective listening. Wandering eyes suggest wandering thoughts. Lack of eye contact can also convey disinterest in the subject or the person. Good eye contact does not mean continual staring, as this can be construed as an invasion of personal space. Good eye contact conveys respect for the person to whom you are listening.
3. *Avoid word prejudice.* Some words elicit obvious emotional responses, which then lead to disinterest or surprise. Words such as *feminist*, *gay*, *Jew*, or *liberal* can press buttons and set emotional wheels spinning, resulting in raised eyebrows, frowns, and side glances. Recognition of these types of words and the responses they elicit will enable the listener to prepare to be objective. The listener's objectivity is believed to enhance the communication process.

Paralanguage: A term used to describe speaking aspects such as volume, tone, and pitch, that actually color verbal language.

4. *Use “minimal encouragers” to indicate that you are on the same wavelength as the person speaking to you.* Minimal encouragers include short-word questions such as “oh?” and “uh-huh?” and repeating key words to encourage the speaker to give you more detailed information. These should be used genuinely, not mechanically.
5. *Paraphrase what was said to ensure understanding.* Paraphrasing is a more elaborate style of minimal encouragement. In addition to repeating key words, paraphrasing includes the use of personal observations to ensure understanding of the content of the message intended.
6. *Ask questions to improve clarity of statements.* When you are at a loss to understand facts, concepts, or feelings expressed to you, questions become imperative. But beware. Questions can sometimes put the speaker on the defensive. Use questions to clarify your understanding, not to confuse the person you are listening to.
7. *Use empathy to reflect and share feelings.* Empathy is thought to be an important attending skill that galvanizes the listening experience. Empathy refers to attention to the speaker’s feelings as well as thoughts. This does not imply that you must adopt these feelings as your own. Rather, you should recognize the feelings in the individual with whom you are conversing.
8. *Provide feedback.* Responding to the speaker often requires feedback from the listener. Before you offer feedback, however, inquire whether it is desired. Sometimes people speak as a means to increase self-awareness using you, the listener, as a sounding board. The speaker may not want feedback. If your viewpoint is wanted, offer comments and criticism in a constructive way. Feedback should be specific, combining feelings and reasons for or details of your opinions. If and when criticism is elicited, balance positive and negative perceptions, and be specific. To be effective, criticism should offer insights.
9. *Summarize the content of what was said.* Summarization is similar to paraphrasing thoughts, but it

Conflict resolution: The resolution of arguments displayed as three styles: content conflict, value conflict, and ego conflict.

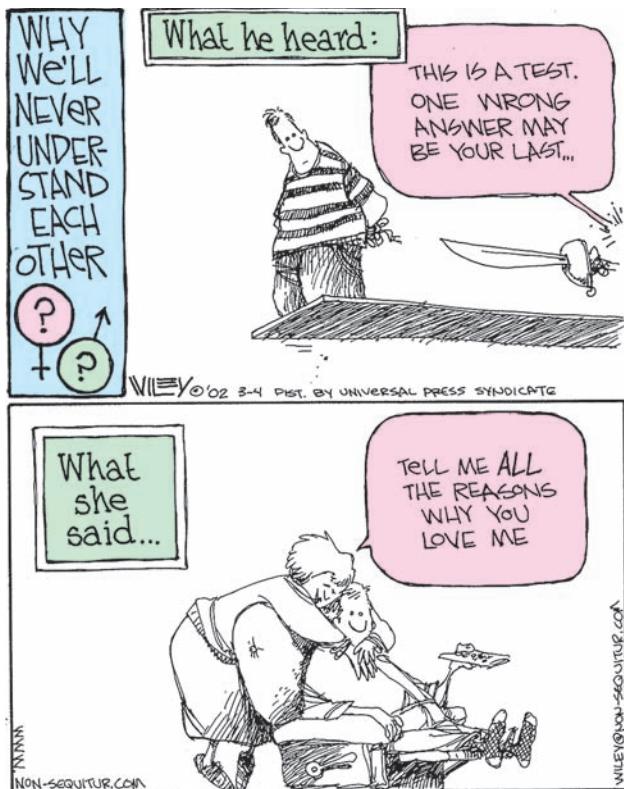
requires more concentration on and synthesis of the speaker’s thoughts and feelings into an integrated understanding.

These are just a few elements that can be used to enhance your listening skills. They can also increase the effectiveness of delivery and interpretation of your thoughts and perceptions. Regardless of how effective you think your communication skills are, even under the best circumstances there is still room for misunderstanding and conflict as, for example, in the interpretation of a mixed message.

Conflict Resolution

Conflicts often arise because of misunderstanding both verbal and nonverbal messages that are sent and received. Although conflicts can occur within yourself as well as between you and other individuals, it is the latter type of conflict this section will address. Typically, conflicts between individuals involve emotions associated with anger and fear. Left unresolved, they can generate many toxic thoughts, including resentment and hostility. Ideally, conflicts should be resolved right away; however, not every situation allows for this. A roommate who goes away for the weekend leaving the apartment a shambles, or a boss who sends an email at 4 p.m. asking you to hand in a report by 5 p.m. are two instances that necessitate a postponement of **conflict resolution**. People often need some time to organize their thoughts for conflict resolution. In any case, the sooner a plan of resolution is implemented, the better. Although conflicts tend to be multidimensional, scholars divide them into three categories:

1. *Content conflict.* Content conflicts arise from the misunderstanding of factual information, definition of terms or concepts, goals, or elements of strategies used in a cooperative effort. Disagreement occurs over the perception of information available. In this type of conflict, the problem is not in dispute; rather, it is the solution to the problem that generates conflict. Examples include how to finance a house, where the best place to go on vacation is, or what time the movie starts at the cineplex.
2. *Value conflict.* When a person has conflicting values within his or her own value system, value clarification is needed. But when values between people collide, resolution is much harder. Value conflicts can often be seen on the political scene, as when

**FIGURE 14.2**

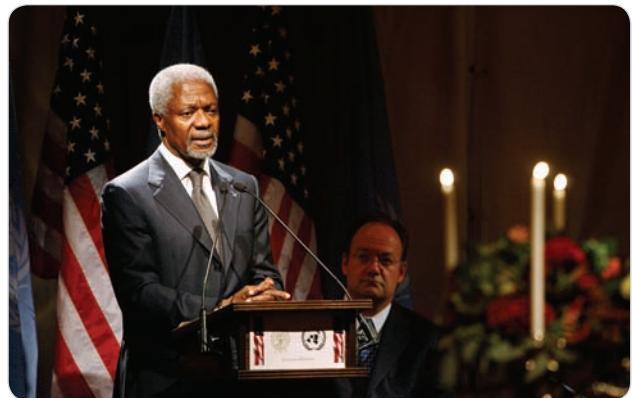
Communication skills are paramount in resolving conflicts, but each person must have a chance to share thoughts and feelings to make this skill effective in reducing stress. (Non-Sequitur © 2002 Wiley Miller. Reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate. All rights reserved.)

forces lobbying for the environment (spotted owl) oppose economic forces (lumber industry). The result is often a compromise, with neither side obtaining a complete (or satisfactory) victory.

- 3. Ego conflict.** Ego conflict is based on a win-lose mentality. Conflicts of this nature involve the manipulation and control to support one's identity, and to prove one is right. Ego conflicts are based on power, competency, identity, and emotional attachment. They are thought to be the hardest type to resolve (FIG. 14.2▲).

Conflict-Management Styles

Several management styles deal with conflict. Not all styles are beneficial and, in fact, some may actually perpetuate conflict. The following offers descriptions of both negative and positive **conflict-management styles**:

**FIGURE 14.3**

Conflict resolution requires adept communication skills, such as those demonstrated by Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan during the Kenyan crisis of 2008. All conflicts, large or small, require these same diplomatic skills.

- 1. Withdrawal.** When a conflict seems overwhelming, the first reaction is usually avoidance. Withdrawal can be defined as either a physical or a psychological removal from the problem. Walking out of a room, taking a circuitous route to your office or dorm room, or merely remaining silent are examples of avoidance. Many people fear confrontation because of previous conflict experiences that left deep emotional scars. Withdrawal is seen as a coping style, albeit regressive, when conflicts involve figures of authority, such as bosses or parents, or when a person feels outnumbered by colleagues or peers. On the positive side, withdrawal can be beneficial when it is used as a time-out to cool off, as long as a "time-in" follows shortly thereafter. Withdrawal is typically regarded as immature behavior, and thus a negative conflict-management style, because physical or verbal absence prevents resolution.
- 2. Surrender.** To habitually give in to a situation or problem is also construed as a negative conflict-management style. Like withdrawal, surrender is a type of avoidance people use to appease fellow workers, family, peers, and especially close friends and spouses for fear of rejection and damaging

Conflict-management styles: There are five conflict-management styles: withdrawal, surrender, hostile aggression, persuasion, and dialogue.

relationships. But surrendering to the will of others deflates self-esteem. What might look like a noble act actually inhibits complete resolution. Resolution of conflicts involves decisions by all parties involved. When one person holds back, merely expressing dissatisfied agreement, the merits of a solution are unbalanced. This style of conflict management generates feelings of victimization.

- 3. Hostile aggression.** The words *conflict* and *confrontation* often bring to mind visions of yelling, fists pounding, and objects flying across the room. Indeed, this is how some conflicts are handled. Aggression is often used as a form of intimidation to manipulate others into submissive agreement. Verbal aggression is more common than physical aggression, with the use of harsh words and increased speaking volume to win points. Rarely does aggressive behavior result in the resolution of any conflict and, in fact, it often perpetuates resentment. Unbroken, this cycle can repeat itself forever.
- 4. Persuasion.** Persuasion is defined as an attempt to alter another person's attitude or behavior. It is believed by some scholars that all verbal expression is rooted in persuasion. When persuasion is used to win a conflict at the expense of others, it is viewed as negative. But persuasion can be a positive style as well. In the initial stage of the conflict-resolution process, all voices need to be heard. Persuasion may include the use of reason, emotional awareness, or motivation to get a point across. When used tactfully, persuasion opens new lines of thinking, which can then be tools to resolve issues and promote mutual agreement.
- 5. Dialogue.** Dialogue is a verbal exchange of opinions, attitudes, facts, and perceptions that opens the doors to greater understanding of the nature of the problem. During the dialogue process, discussions center on the costs and benefits of solving a problem. Dialogue involves the same steps as those employed for creative problem solving (see Chapter 13). In dialogue, negotiations are a means to a solution to which all parties feel they have made a contribution. Compromise plays an important role in the dialogue process because the intent is to reach a decision that is agreeable to everyone.

Steps to Enhance Communication Skills

The following are additional suggestions to strengthen your communication skills and help promote conflict resolution. They may look like common sense, but they bear listing because under stress the walls of the ego are thick. The more we remind ourselves of these skills, the more likely we will be to use them.

- 1. Speak with precision and directness.** To express yourself clearly, select words that accurately describe your thoughts and feelings. Be direct about your thoughts and perceptions by verbalizing the intent of your message as clearly as possible.
- 2. Enhance your vocabulary.** Vocabulary affects the effectiveness of verbal communication. A small vocabulary decreases the ability to express yourself, whereas a greater number of words to choose from provides you with greater flexibility to say what you want to say.
- 3. Use language appropriate for your listening audience.** The manner in which you speak to a child probably differs from that which you use with an adult. Assess which words, expressions, and gestures are most conducive to getting your point across.
- 4. Attack issues, not people.** When trying to resolve conflicts with others, focus on the problem, not the people involved. In other words, avoid character assassination. Attacking people clouds the issue and makes it harder, if not impossible, to resolve issues.
- 5. Avoid putting others on the defensive.** When initiating self-disclosure or a dialogue to resolve conflicts, begin your statements with "I perceive. . ." Placing the responsibility of understanding on yourself rather than blaming others minimizes defensiveness.
- 6. Avoid asking someone else to pass on your thoughts and feelings to a third party.** The most effective communication involves talking with someone face to face. Involving a third party (e.g., "Please tell my roommate to call John") not only increases the chances of miscommunication, but not making personal contact also sends one or more non-verbal messages.

BOX 14.2

Pillow Talk

A chapter on communication skills would be incomplete without some mention of the dialogue that takes place between sexual partners. In light of the facts that more than 1 million people in the United States are now infected with HIV or have AIDS, and that the incidence of date rape is so high, this aspect of human behavior can no longer be left to assumptions. Tannen was right that men and women have different styles of communication, and nowhere is this more evident than in sexual relations. Because of American social mores, the issues surrounding sexual relations are still considered taboo in normal conversation. Ironically, it may be these very mores that have nurtured an environment of hostility and anxiety with regard to sexual issues. At a time when trust is paramount, sexual desire and arousal seem to short-circuit the self-disclosure so vital to one's health.

There are many issues involving sexual intercourse that are stressors behind closed doors. These include contraception, birth control, the risk of pregnancy, infertility,

sexually transmitted diseases, vaginismus, molestation, celibacy, guilt, rape, self-respect, abortion, impotency, premature ejaculation, intimacy, the ability to reach orgasm, homosexuality, and sexual satisfaction. As you can see, this (incomplete) list is quite long, and each topic weighs heavily as a stressor for those who experience it. Problems of a sexual nature do not go away once a couple has initiated sexual relations, either. To the contrary, if communications are poor at the start of a relationship, they tend to get worse as the relationship continues. Sex counselors advise that *before, during, and after* every act of sexual intimacy there should be a thorough conversation airing problematic sexual issues. As any AIDS patient or woman with an unwanted pregnancy can tell you, the short-term pleasures of sex are surely not worth the risks involved. And days, months, or years of agony may ensue when other sexual matters go unresolved. Make a point to include a healthy conversation as part of your sexual habits.

7. *Avoid information overload.* Attention span is limited, as is the amount of information that can be received and processed. The greater amount of information given, the greater the chances some of it will get lost. Be careful to pace your conversation, allowing ample time to process the messages that have been expressed.
8. *Validate your assumptions.* Confirm what you think to be true with those who have given you this impression.
9. *Resolve problems when they arise.* If you feel there is a misunderstanding, there probably is. Avoiding it, or giving it too much time to fester, allows the conscious mind to validate feelings of victimization, anger, or fear. Try to deal with issues as they surface by talking them out with those involved. In the short term, this may seem confrontational and threatening, but in the long term, it relieves the pressure of undue stress and promotes inner peace.

SUMMARY

- Three-quarters of our waking day is spent in some form of communication. Typically, stressors involving other people are caused by miscommunication.
- There are many conversation styles. Miscommunication may result when two or more styles are incompatible.
- Schismogenesis refers to the process wherein people become more deeply entrenched in their own communication style, widening the gap of misunderstanding.
- Tannen believes that one reason for misunderstandings between people is that they tend to speak in metamessages, or indirect expressions of thoughts. Indirectness can result from many different intentions.
- Communication is divided into verbal and nonverbal forms. Verbal communication involves both encoding our thoughts into words and decoding other peoples' words through the filter of our perceptions. During the encoding and decoding process, some thoughts can get lost in translation.
- Verbal communication involves some level of self-disclosure. The degree of disclosure depends on the level of trust among those involved.
- Nonverbal communication involves a host of gestures and postures, as well as intonation. Handshakes, hugs, finger gestures, clothing, and territorial space are examples of how we communicate nonverbally.
- Communication also involves listening and attending skills: the ability to receive and interpret information as it is intended.
- Miscommunication can lead to conflicts, which are broken down into three types: content conflicts, value conflicts, and ego conflicts. The last are the hardest to resolve.
- There are effective and noneffective conflict-management styles. To withdraw, surrender, or act aggressively is not effective. Persuasion and dialogue are advocated as effective ways to negotiate, compromise, and come to a peaceful resolution.
- Sexual intimacy without dialogue is an open invitation to acute and chronic stress. Sex counselors advocate a healthy dialogue before and after every act of sexual intimacy.
- Several suggestions, based on common sense, were listed to improve your communications skills. For these skills to be effective, they must be practiced regularly.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. Why do many stress-related problems involve poor communication?
2. List three aspects of verbal communication.
3. List three aspects of nonverbal communication.
4. List the five conflict-management styles and highlight the most effective one.
5. What are five ways to improve your communication style?

Chapter 15



Resource Management: Managing Time and Money

The best way to save your money is to fold it in half and put it back in your wallet.

—Anonymous

Time and money. Time and money. For most people, it seems as if every stressor involves time and money because these two resources are constantly in high demand and often squandered. Would you agree? If so, you are in good company. A great many people think that most of their problems would simply vanish if they had a few more hours in the day and a few extra thousand dollars tucked away in a private bank account. The sad truth is that old habits die hard. Unless a change of attitude is adopted, more time and more money will merely result in more responsibilities and more purchases (and possible debt). Consider these sobering facts: The average American typically pays off his or her December Christmas shopping bills in June of the following year. The average American has 2.5 credit cards with approximately \$5,000 of credit card debt and little or no savings. Perhaps it's true that Americans have "champagne taste on a beer budget," but bad habits start early in life. The average college student owns four credit cards and has about \$2,327 of debt, according to MBNA (Wilmington, Delaware), and that amount doesn't even include tuition or school supplies (McPeak, 2005).

This chapter first looks at the topic of finances. It then examines the essentials of budgeting your time so that you can begin to utilize these two precious resources for your best interest. Before you continue reading, please consider completing the "Self-Assessment: Your Relationship with Money" survey in the workbook titled *The Art of Peace and Relaxation Workbook* to help you determine what your relationship is with money.

Money Matters

You might think that maintaining one's personal finances, including keeping a checkbook balanced, would seem rather simple with these four simple rules:

1. Make a budget and follow it.
2. Don't spend what you don't have.
3. Pay all your bills on time.
4. Put away at least 10 percent of your monthly income into a savings account (and don't touch it).

If only it were this easy. Giving in to life's many temptations, big and small, can add up significantly over a short period of time. For example, the cost of a high-end cup of coffee priced at \$4.00 each day adds up to approximately \$1,400 per year—enough for a spring-break vacation. It is good to live in the present moment, but don't squander

it! The key to managing your money is to maintain a healthy balance. On the one hand, you don't want to be a neurotic, penny-pinching Scrooge; on the other hand, you cannot afford to be fiscally flamboyant. People never get rich throwing their money away. Today, it appears that too many people are squandering their income, spending their paychecks as if they were all discretionary income, or—worse—living on credit cards.

The relationship between finances and stress has always been a dubious one, ever since the first coin was exchanged for goods millennia ago. However, with the advent of credit cards, it became all too easy to spend what you don't have, making financial debt a very common stressor, and for most a way of life. Although it's true that buying now and paying later with a credit card provides a sense of power, the truth is that it's an illusion of power. Think back to Chapter 4 and Freud's concept of the ego. Remember, the ego (whose purpose is to decrease pain and increase pleasure) also loves power, even if it's a delusion.

Mass Marketing to Your Ego

Are you one of the countless Americans who lives outside your means? Do you spend your money eating at restaurants and buying lots of nice brand-name clothes? Do you purchase expensive coffee and entertain yourself with a huge plasma TV screen? Does shopping give you a sense of power? Do you purchase material possessions to fill a spiritual emptiness? Do your mood swings mirror the daily stock report? Are you swayed by instant gratification? Do you make purchases (**retail therapy**) to allay your anxieties and frustrations? Do you buy items that your friends have, like iPods or satellite radio? Keeping up with the Joneses is a full-time job, and sadly one that never pays a dividend. Rather, it takes hard-earned money away.

The next time you watch TV, pay close attention to the lifestyles of the characters. Few, if any, shows deal with poverty—it doesn't make good viewing! Actors in TV sitcoms and crime shows alike portray upper-middle-class people striving to become upper-class people. According to researchers, the subtle advertising in TV programming is akin to an intravenous tube delivering a desirable lifestyle that most people cannot afford (and

Retail therapy: The behavior attributed to people who go shopping to alleviate their stress. The consequence is buying things they don't really need on a budget they cannot always afford.

this doesn't even include the commercials). The ego, looking for pleasure (and a quick fix), is easily manipulated by slick corporate marketers eager to sell you anything and everything (remember P. T. Barnum's philosophy, "There's a sucker born every minute!").

Take a quick look around you at the clothes people are wearing. How many people do you see walking around as unpaid billboards for corporate America? Take a look around your house or apartment. How many purchases have you made on impulse that are now collecting dust? Marketing to the insecurities of the ego has become an art form in corporate America (Schlosser, 2001). With the proliferation of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies to determine the brain's neural code for each thought and behavior, scientists have now teamed up with marketing experts to unlock the code for greater purchasing power, which may soon allow marketers to bypass the ego altogether. The term for this strategy is "neuromarketing." Harvard marketing professor Gerald Zaltman has filed a patent (#5,436,830) for his technique to market goods and services to your unconscious mind using Jung's theory of archetypal images (Szegedy-Maszak, 2005).

The Psychology of Poverty

A theory, often attributed to 1998 Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, suggests that if you took all the money in the world from the wealthiest people and distributed it evenly among all the planet's inhabitants, in less than 2 years it would all be back in the hands of the people who initially held it. Why? Because human nature is prone to act on fear (and laziness). As such, people's attitudes are very hard to change. Most people would quickly spend their portion, some would simply lose theirs, gamblers would gamble their money away, and very few people would save or invest their funds. As odd as it might sound, many people have a fear of money, or simply stated, a fear of the lack of money, often called **poverty consciousness** (Twist, 2003). Unfortunately, the fear of poverty becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that repels money rather than attracts it, and this thought process becomes a never-ending cycle played out in daily behaviors, according to Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, authors of the best-selling book *Your Money or Your Life*.

Poverty consciousness: A term used to describe an attitude or perception held by a person reinforcing the idea that he or she never has enough money, which in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Money Problems? Try This . . .

Perhaps the causes of money problems are as varied as the amounts of money found in each person's checking account. Stated in simple economic terms, the demand for goods and services always exceeds the supply of cash in hand. Regardless of what the expenses are, the result begins with fiscal hemorrhaging and ends up with undeniable debt. Catastrophic medical bills and huge car repair bills are one thing, but frivolous spending is another—and currently in this country it's reaching epidemic levels. There is no shortage of suggestions on how to pull in the reins of one's financial spending. Here are some time-tested tips to consider.

Tips for Financial Freedom

1. **Make and follow a budget.** If you don't already have a budget, now is the time to create one. If you do have one, when was the last time you fine-tuned it? The Self-Assessment included in the workbook is an example of a typical personal budget sheet. You should know, within a few dollars, how much you have each month to spend as discretionary income.
2. **Live a sustainable lifestyle.** Life isn't a sprint, but rather an ultra-marathon. As such, spending money should be well paced, yet some people spend like there is no tomorrow. A sustainable lifestyle means living a conscious lifestyle, in which purchases are made consciously rather than frivolously. It also means enjoying the present moment, while keeping a wary eye on the future. A sustainable lifestyle also means buying only what you will use and not wasting precious natural resources. Behaviors include using reusable cloth grocery bags; carpooling when possible, library DVD rentals, and driving a hybrid car.
3. **Freeze your credit cards.** Credit cards are nothing more than expensive loans. Every time you pull out a credit card, you are borrowing money and paying a high interest rate (13 to 23 percent). Get in the habit of going cold turkey with your credit cards. One suggestion is to cut up all but one card, stick the remaining card in a glass of water, and then place the glass in the freezer. This tactic ensures that you will use it only for emergencies.
4. **Keep a spending journal.** If your money or debit card burns a hole in your pocket, and you are not sure where it really goes, start a spending journal

to see where your money is wasted. (Quicken is a recommended accounting software program that allows you to keep track of your spending habits.) You may be quite surprised at how quickly frivolous spending adds up and reflects a habit of hard-earned money going down the drain.

- 5. See each purchase as an investment.** What are your assets? Your house, your car, your stock portfolio? Every purchase you make is an investment, yet most of these items depreciate to nothing quickly, including clothes. Here is a question to ask yourself: Will I want or use this item a year from now? If the answer is no, then walk away.
- 6. Consolidate your debt.** Do you have several credit card bills and other loans? Talk to your bank manager about consolidating your debt into one loan, and pay it off as soon as possible.
- 7. Consider opening a 401(k) or a Roth IRA as soon as possible** (Kranz, 2005). As a college student, retirement may seem like a long way off, but when it comes to investing in your retirement, it's right around the corner. Tuck a small amount into a retirement plan each year (even if you think you cannot afford it) so that you can live a comfortable life in your golden years.

Michelle Singletary is a syndicated columnist for the *Washington Post* and the author of *Spend Well, Live Right*. Following are some of her tips for achieving financial stability:

- 1. Remove yourself from temptation.** If you don't have money to spend (or waste), then don't hang around people who go shopping and spend lots of money because this can become a trap. Also, before you go shopping, make a list of what you really need and maintain the willpower to buy only what's on your list.
- 2. Ask "why" before you buy.** Do you really need the item you're about to purchase? Underwear and toothpaste are necessities. Lattes, appetizers, weekly DVD rentals, and new shoes are not.
- 3. Don't buy on impulse.** If you find something you like, hold off from buying it that day. Sleep on it. If it's still something you think you need, go back the next day.
- 4. Be wary of bargains.** You may save money on sales, but many people end up spending more

money than they expected by purchasing more items than they need. Rather than saving money, they spend money they don't have.

- 5. Clean your house.** One of the best incentives to curtail uncontrolled spending is realized by taking stock of what you already have. There is no need to buy something, only to find out you already own it. And follow the 2-year rule: If you haven't used an item or article of clothing in 2 years, donate it to a charity before it collects more dust.
- 6. Learn to say no to your kids, spouse, friends, and marketers.** Don't allow other people to spend your money for you. Identify good boundaries with your money and be assertive with these boundaries.

Suze Orman is a best-selling author on the topic of financial planning and a syndicated television financial expert. Her tips for financial freedom include the following:

- 1. Adopt a healthy attitude toward money.** What is your relationship with money? Do you have poverty consciousness? Do you waste money? Do you repel money? Do you maintain the fiscal poverty attitude of your parents? Your attitude toward money has a lot to do with how little or how much you have, and will have over time.
- 2. Make sound financial goals.** Do you intend to work for the rest of your life? Do you have a retirement account? Can you see beyond your next paycheck? Do you want to take a yearly vacation? Financial goals are guidelines to help you achieve financial security. What are your goals? What is your long-term strategic plan for financial security?
- 3. Put your money to work for you.** Even if you think you have no money to invest, you really do, even if it's only \$100 per year. There are mutual funds, IRAs, shares of stock, Treasury bills, and savings accounts available for investment. Talk to a financial advisor (usually the first consultation is free) to discuss your options and make a plan to have your money make money for you.
- 4. The best financial advisor is you.** Having a financial advisor is good, but remember that advisors are making money off of your money. Get sound advice, and then do your homework by reading books on this topic. Check out information on the Internet. Learn how to budget your money, how to invest your money, and how to make your money work for you.

Money management is a skill that takes practice. Now is the time to put these skills into practice. Your wallet, your marriage, and all aspects of your life will thank you.

The Hands of Time

The constructs of seconds, hours, days, months, and years are creations of the human mind. It is believed that the concept of time was originally created to master the natural environment, particularly the position of the sun over the earth and the change of seasons. The Babylonians are credited with the first 360-day calendar, comprised of 12 lunar months, each with 30 days. In due time, 5 days were added to the year by the Egyptians to compensate for rotational differences between the earth and moon. Additional changes were made by the early Romans, and again by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, who devised the contemporary, or Gregorian, calendar. On a smaller but no less important scale, the first mechanical clock is credited to an eleventh-century Chinese man, Su Song. Two more centuries would pass before a similar machine would appear in the Western world, a clock constructed of iron gears and weights built for an English monastery. The pendulum clock arrived 300 years later, through the creativity of a Dutch scientist, Christian Huygens. Pocket watches were in vogue at the turn of the twentieth century until the invention of the wrist watch. With the advent of high technology, time is now measured in nanoseconds through the use of quartz crystals and digital displays (O'Connor and Robertson, 2002).

As civilizations developed and technology was shared among cultures, awareness and utilization of time contributed to the organization and advancement of the human race, and hence became accepted ways to make order out of chaos. Time became a tool used by various societies to unite and synchronize the efforts of individuals in their communities. American time zones (Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific), for example, were created by railroad companies to synchronize their schedules over various parts of the country, and were eventually adopted by the United States government in 1883. Global time zones followed suit in 1884 (Boslough, 1990).

Once conceived, time has been manipulated constantly. The international dateline, daylight savings time, and leap year are three examples of attempts to refine and manipulate the basic constructs of time. The 8-hour workday is another. In an attempt to harness time and

manipulate it for gain and pleasure, however, citizens of the industrialized world have often found themselves to be slaves to the concept rather than masters of it. The result: Time, or the lack thereof, is now considered to be a premier stressor in the lives of many people. And although time is not considered a precursor to disease and illness in itself, a rushed lifestyle, or as psychologist Robert Levine (1989) calls it, "clockwork blues," which constantly disrupts the body's biological clock, is now associated with the incidence of coronary heart disease, ulcers, and other stress-related illnesses. Perhaps not surprisingly, more people have heart attacks on Monday mornings than on any other day of the week.

Looking busy might be considered a status symbol to some people, but not to Stephan Rechtschaffen, M.D. In his highly acclaimed book *Time Shifting*, Rechtschaffen explains that being overproductive is an index of stress, a fast-paced rhythm that leads to dysfunction. Rechtschaffen says that the rhythm of society itself is increasing, and many people are unaware they are caught up in it. People are entrained by the rhythm of their working environment in what he calls *hyperproductivity*. The short-term gains may seem impressive. The long-term results are devastating to one's health. Rechtschaffen, who founded the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies in Rhinebeck, New York, suggests that we need to learn to time shift—that is, to decelerate from the fast-paced lifestyle by consciously changing the rhythm of our activity to live in the present moment.

He's not alone. With daily quantum leaps in technology and continual access to information at one's fingertips, experts agree that good time management means getting back to basics of simple organization (Morgenstern, 2000; Allen, 2003).

Current research into leisure habits suggests that the two limiting factors (stressors) on recreation and leisure are time and money (Edginton et al., 2005). Many people who have come to the conclusion that time equals money compound the effects of this stressor. With advances in technology and perceived increases in responsibility, time, or the mismanagement of it, has often become an enemy—and a major stressor unto itself. In light of time as a stressor in today's culture, this chapter places special emphasis on changing negative perceptions of this construct as well as manipulating it to allow individuals to make order out of their personal chaos.

**FIGURE 15.1**

Taking time to balance your checkbook (either electronically or on paper) is essential for managing your money. In an age of credit card debt, make a habit of only spending what you have, and make sure you know where you stand financially.

Time management is actually a part of a larger coping skill referred to as social orchestration (FIG. 15.1▲). Social orchestration is a cognitive strategy employed to help minimize stressors without avoiding them. This technique is a reorganization process where you manipulate factors and elements (not people) in your environment to your best advantage so as to travel the path of least resistance. Social orchestration involves analyzing a problem, creating a series of viable options, and then choosing the best option to clear stress-prone obstacles out of the way (see Chapter 17). To manipulate time in a well-organized fashion so that it can bear the fruit of productivity is the essence of time management.

According to time-management expert Robert Roesch, despite the fact that the pace of life is speeding up with the rush of technological advancements, from cell phones to palm computers, the age-tested means to manage time remain the same. However, with the impending invasion of technology in our personal lives, maintaining proper boundaries is paramount to one's sanity and overall health. To paraphrase Roesch (1998), unless you are a physician on call, you do not need to be accessible 24 hours a day through cell phones. Finally, technology is marketed to be time saving, all in the name of increased productivity. As we all know, this is not always the case. Use technology to simplify, not complicate, your life.

In attempting to be more efficient, the human mind tends to break down and compartmentalize entities, such as time, into smaller parts to better comprehend

and manipulate them. Neurophysiologists who have studied right- and left-brain cognitive functions have observed that the right hemisphere has no concept of time, and they therefore agree that time awareness is clearly a left-brain function. Yet imagination and spatial awareness have been found to be crucial factors in the effective utilization of time. So, it would be wise to assume that the effective management of time involves the cognitive functions of both cerebral hemispheres.

Time management can be defined as the ability to prioritize, schedule, and execute personal responsibilities to personal satisfaction. Time management is a relatively new concept in both personal and professional development. Corporations that desire greater productivity invest their own time and money in creative consultants to train and educate their employees to manage time more efficiently. The following are some of the lessons they teach.

Roadblocks to Effective Time Management

Before one can begin to employ strategies for the more efficient use of time, several roadblocks must be overcome. With a greater awareness of pertinent attitudes, issues, and concerns, the ability to employ time-management skills, without becoming stressed in the process, will become a strong coping strategy when needed. There are many reasons for mismanaged time, including attitudes about oneself and one's working environment or organization, personality styles, values, and lack of knowledge about time-management skills.

The most prevalent of these are attitudes and their associated behaviors. In her book *How to Put More Time in Your Life*, Dru Scott addresses some of these attitudes. Scott refers to these as "secret pleasures" because the human ego can actually derive pleasure from them; they ultimately act as defense mechanisms. Some of these simple pleasures include attention or recognition for being late (e.g., for meetings and appointments); manipulation or control; avoidance—walking or running away from the task at hand; and "hex-insurance" or rationalization—an attitude that too much organiza-

Time management: The prioritization, scheduling, and execution of daily responsibilities to a level of personal satisfaction. Effective time management does not mean you have more time; it means you make better use of the time you have.

Cornered by Baldwin



FIGURE 15.2

(Cornered ©1997 Mike Baldwin.
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tion will result in something bad down the road. As a defense mechanism, mismanagement of time is actually considered a good quality.

Scott also cites several myths people harbor with respect to the feasibility of effective time-management skills. One myth is the illusion that time is an adjustable, rather than fixed, variable and that there are more than 24 hours in a day. This perception suggests that there will always be “more time” to get a job done. A second myth, perhaps based on one’s prior experience, is that time-management techniques just don’t work. This perception arises when specific time-management skills are used individually instead of collectively and then fail to meet expectations. Another common perception

Type A personality: A time-conscious (aggressive) personality that, in terms of time management, rushes to meet deadlines.

Workaholism: A personality style that inhibits good time-management skills with excessive hours devoted to work, often at the expense of other responsibilities.

is that a methodical strategy to organize oneself is unexciting and even boring, compared to the stimulation of a crisis orientation. In other words, some people (e.g., codependents) thrive on crisis management.

Personality Styles and Behaviors

To try to understand the attitudes that become obstacles to efficient time management, scholars have also targeted behaviors that influence one’s personality as a whole. Six distinct personality behaviors have become evident. These are Type A’s, workaholics, time jugglers, procrastinators, perfectionists, and those who fall into lifestyle traps. These behaviors are labeled “time robbers,” or time wasters, because they steal valuable time rather than promote effective time usage. Although these behaviors are listed separately, it should be noted that the personalities of some people include many of these behaviors, making effective time management even more elusive.

1. **Type A personality.** Type A personality is thought to comprise several dominating behaviors: time urgency (a rush to meet deadlines), anger/hostility (explosive aggression), lack of planning (poor organization skills), and polyphasia (preoccupation with many thoughts at one time). Although time urgency might seem to be the target behavior for efficient time management, the combination of all four factors contributes to inefficient use of time. People who exhibit traits of Type A behavior may appear to be organized and productive, but studies indicate that Type A individuals are less organized and complete no more work than their Type B counterparts, and their work is often of lower quality.
2. **Workaholism.** Workaholics spend grossly excessive amounts of time working (FIG. 15.3). Workaholism is considered a process addiction wherein self-validation is received from prolonged working hours to maintain a sense of importance or self-esteem (Robinson, 2007). Whereas the average person may spend 8 hours a day at work, the workaholic spends 10 to 14 hours. Workaholics spend time doing many little tasks between 9 and 5, then feel the need to stay longer to get the big projects completed. They tend to shy away from time-saving techniques and productivity measures because these threaten the security of their self-confidence-building strategy. Workaholics may

**FIGURE 15.3**

Putting in extra time after hours does not always indicate increased productivity. It may, in fact, be a sign of wasted time during the working day.

complain about the excessive time they spend on work, but the simple truth is, long hours give them great pleasure.

- 3. Technophile.** Cell phones, iPods, WiFi, laptops, text messaging, MySpace.com, the Internet, and new technologies that have yet to come on the market are great and can certainly save time, but they can also rob you blind when it comes to time management. What is a device of convenience for some is an addiction for many. Technophiles spend countless hours with their computers, and although they may give the impression of high efficiency, don't be fooled. The clock is ticking and time often runs out for other important responsibilities including spouses, families, and sleep.
- 4. Time juggler.** A time juggler is someone who tries to do more than one thing at a time. An example might be someone who shaves or puts on make-up with one hand while making a call on the car phone with the other hand, leaving the knees to handle the steering wheel. Time jugglers also schedule themselves to be at more than one place at a time and make cameo appearances at both or skip one altogether with an award-winning excuse. Time jugglers overbook and double-book appointments in hopes that something might be canceled. In any case, a time juggler is someone who bargains for time and quite often loses: Many responsibilities get dropped in the juggling process.
- 5. Procrastinator.** Procrastination is a diversion tactic. Procrastinators avoid responsibilities and put off

until tomorrow what should have been done today. There are three factors associated with procrastination: laziness or apathy, fear of failure, and need for instant gratification. Scholars of time management classify procrastinators as follows:

- a. Straightforward procrastinator.** Someone who knowingly does something other than the job at hand, like going to a ball game or movie rather than studying for an exam.
- b. Deceptive procrastinator.** Someone who takes a stab at a task (e.g., filing taxes or creating a résumé), but finds excuses to drift away from completion of it until the last minute. On the surface, it looks like progress is being made, but it is a deception.
- c. Time-trap procrastinator.** Doing the less difficult tasks rather than required ones (e.g., cleaning, washing the car, or walking the dog before completing homework or term papers). The result here is that there is not enough time for a quality job, and these procrastinators then feel like they are painted into a corner with the clock ticking. In addition, other responsibilities are neglected while completing the required task at the last minute.
- 6. Perfectionist.** A perfectionist is someone who is obsessed with carrying out every task and responsibility to perfection. Although aiming for quality

Time juggler: Someone who multitasks, overbooks, and double-books oneself and bargains for time, often dropping responsibilities in the process.

Procrastinator: Someone who employs diversions and avoidance techniques rather than tackling a host of responsibilities.

Straightforward procrastinator: A person who knowingly avoids completing a task.

Deceptive procrastinator: Someone who attempts to work on projects, but only scratches the surface, stalling on the completion of tasks.

Time-trap procrastinator: A person who does other tasks, such as laundry, thus keeping busy while still avoiding the more important responsibilities.

Perfectionist: A person who is obsessed with the details of every task, aiming for quality, yet who ends up getting caught up with the details and missing the whole picture.



can set your watch by them. Bernhard not only sets his watch by the trains when he returns home to Frankfurt, but also keeps his eye on the plane schedule. Bernhard, you see, is an executive at Lufthansa Airlines, which itself has a pretty good eye on the time departure schedule. Bernhard came to the United States to obtain his MBA. While in graduate school, he learned to master a precise time schedule that included his studies, family time with his baby boy Philip, and his arduous triathlon training, which in itself could be a full-time job. Bernhard's dream was to qualify and compete in the Hawaiian Ironman competition, a goal he accomplished in 1998. After returning home to Germany and taking a job with Lufthansa, he was soon transferred back to the United States to head up the company's North American regional headquarters.

Stress with a Human Face

The train schedules are so precise in Germany it is said that you

New York City is a far cry from Frankfurt, and it's fair to say that no one sets their watches by the New York subway schedule. In fact, there are constant jokes about what "a New York minute" really is. Despite the culture shock, traffic, typical congestion, and repeated terrorism alerts you would expect to find in the Big Apple, Bernhard has adapted quite well. He organizes his affairs for the next day each night before he goes to bed. He uses technology—cell phones and email—to serve him rather than become a slave to them. He creates healthy boundaries between work and his personal life. He also carves out quality time with his wife Netti and his two children, Philip and Sophie, and makes time to do his cardio workouts as well. Equally important, Bernhard sets aside dedicated vacation time so that his hard work is balanced by his hard play time. Bernhard will tell you that Germans as a rule are indeed punctual, a trait he finds very beneficial in a rapidly changing world—and a survival skill necessary for all people.

is an admirable attribute, the perfectionist gets too caught up in the details and never sees the whole picture. Thus, projects (or other aspects of life) are compromised. Evidence shows that about 20 percent of all human acts are mistakes. Total perfection is an illusion; it does not exist. But the perfectionist deceives him- or herself by thinking it is possible.

- Lifestyle behavior trap.** People who fall into this category are individuals who have a hard or impossible time saying no. These individuals, who show many codependent traits, are extremely nice people. They receive validation of their self-worth by helping other people, often at

Lifestyle behavior trap: A behavior in which people have a hard time saying no and end up overwhelmed with multiple responsibilities.

Prioritization: The first of three aspects necessary in effective time management, for which tasks are given priority for completion.

ABC rank-order method: A time-management technique for which things are prioritized by order of importance.

the expense of their own needs. These people take on inappropriate responsibilities (e.g., house sitting, feeding the neighbor's cat, driving someone to the airport), often for approval or acceptance to build self-esteem. They may even volunteer for responsibilities they have not been asked to do. But feelings of victimization may result after the task is completed, when just a thank-you is not enough and self-esteem is not enhanced.

Steps to Initiate Good Time-Management Techniques

Effective time management can be broken down into three skills: prioritization, scheduling, and execution.

- Prioritization.** Prioritization means ranking responsibilities and tasks in their order of importance. Before this can be done, however, a list of all current responsibilities must be made (see workbook Exercise 15-3). List making is an invaluable skill in one's time-management strategy. The following three methods are advocated:
 - The ABC rank-order method** involves assigning the letters A, B, or C to various responsibilities.

- ties: A for the highest-priority activities (must do immediately), B for second-priority activities (anything that is not A or C but you should do soon), and C for low-priority tasks or things you would like to do (can wait to do). In this method of prioritization, once a list of responsibilities has been made and a letter assigned to each item, rewrite the list in this new order and complete the tasks in the same order.
- b.** The **Pareto principle** states that 20 percent of the tasks we do give 80 percent of the rewards or satisfaction (Reh, 2008). Also referred to as the 80/20 Rule, this principle suggests that individuals should focus on one or two significant tasks that are worth the time invested in them. According to this principle, out of every ten responsibilities listed, only two will produce recognizable gains. These tasks should be given attention and time. (These two tasks will most likely fall in the A category, suggesting that completion of C, and even B, items may prove unfruitful in the long run.)
 - c.** Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate among responsibilities, all of which seem important, what to do first. One answer is to employ Stephen Covey's **important-versus-urgent method** (Box 15.1) as highlighted in his best-selling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Divide your responsibilities for the day (or week) into four boxes. Note that people tend to direct their energies toward box IV (Not urgent, Not important) because these responsibilities look quick, easy, and perhaps enjoyable. Covey suggests that one's overriding attention should go to the box labeled II (Important but not Urgent) because this will yield the highest results. Box I (Important and Urgent) needs adequate time, but this is not where the majority of your attention should be placed, for it will only lead to a reactionary lifestyle. Covey suggests that it's not time that needs to be managed but ourselves that need attention. Quadrant II is the key to effective personal management.
 - 2. Scheduling** (Box 15.2). **Scheduling** is time allocation for prioritized responsibilities, or the skill of matching a specific task or responsibility with a designated time period in which to accomplish it.
- Time-management experts use the three-C's method and the three-P's method for scheduling. The three-C's method consists of clocks, the designation of time periods for short-term time management; calendars, for weekly, monthly, and even yearly forecasts of goals and responsibilities; and completion times/dates of designated goals and responsibilities. The three-P's method is planning, implementing a schedule of tasks; priorities, doing a regular check on the relative importance of tasks; and perhaps most important, pacing, or the rate at which each task is performed. The following scheduling techniques are advocated. Remember, though, that flexibility in scheduling is essential, or these time-management techniques will cause stress rather than reduce it.
- a. Boxing.** The concept of **boxing** involves breaking down your daily waking hours into 3- to 5-hour chunks or boxes of time such as morning, afternoon, and evening. In each time box, you designate a specific responsibility. Boxing is primarily geared toward big projects that necessitate large blocks of time (e.g., yard work, term papers, and other major projects).
- Example:
- | | | |
|------------|---|----------------|
| 8–9 A.M. | } | Term paper |
| 9–10 A.M. | | research |
| 10–11 A.M. | | at library |
| 11–12 noon | | Lunch/exercise |
| 12–1 P.M. | } | Word process |
| 1–2 P.M. | | paper |
| 2–3 P.M. | | |
| 3–4 P.M. | | |
- Pareto principle:** Also known as the 80/20 Rule, this time-management technique prioritizes tasks by the satisfaction factor.
- Important-versus-urgent method:** A prioritization time-management technique in which tasks are categorized.
- Scheduling:** The second of three aspects necessary in effective time management, for which prioritized tasks are scheduled for completion.
- Boxing:** A scheduling technique used in time management for which the day is divided into 3- to 5-hour chunks of time devoted to accomplishing big projects.

BOX 15.1**Time-Management Skills Worksheet****Prioritizing**

To Do List

Date: _____

Write down all the things you need to get done today, with no regard for order.

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. | 9. |
| 5. | 10. |

ABC Rank-Order MethodDirection: In column A, list all the things that you *must* get done as soon as possible. In column C, list all the things that you would like to do but that are not essential. In column B, put everything else.

A

B

C

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Organize your list of things to do in the important-versus-urgent matrix:

		<i>Importance</i>	
		<i>Low Importance</i>	<i>High Importance</i>
		III. A. B. C.	I. A. B. C.
<i>Urgency</i>	<i>High Urgency</i>	IV. A. B. C.	II. A. B. C.
	<i>Low Urgency</i>		

Then begin to work on these tasks in the following order:

- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| I. A. _____ | III. A. _____ |
| B. _____ | B. _____ |
| C. _____ | C. _____ |
| II. A. _____ | IV. A. _____ |
| B. _____ | B. _____ |
| C. _____ | C. _____ |

BOX 15.2**Time-Management Skills****Scheduling**

Once you have a solid idea of what needs to get done, there are several choices you can make about scheduling your responsibilities. If you have a few major projects to do, try the boxing method.

Boxing

Divide your day into five parts: morning, noon hour, afternoon, dinner hour, and evening. Then, write down the significant tasks and assign them a block of time that is most suited to your schedule.

8–12 noon _____

12–1 _____ Lunch _____ (perhaps
do some small errands) _____

1–6 _____

6–7 _____ Dinner _____ (exercise)

7–10 _____

Remember: To be effective you will want to take small breaks during these large blocks of time.

b. Time mapping. **Time mapping** is similar to boxing, but with this strategy, the day is broken down into very small blocks of time, usually about quarter- to half-hour segments. Specific tasks (e.g., drafting a letter, making a phone call, running a quick errand) are designated for specific times:

- 9 A.M.—Meet with boss, pass in budget report
- 9:15 A.M.—Mail letters
- 9:30 A.M.—Phone Atlanta
- 9:45 A.M.—Pick up book at library
- 10:00 A.M.—Pick up résumés at printer

c. Clustering. When you orchestrate your own responsibilities, it's known as **clustering**. When life frantically throws several responsibilities at you at once, it's known as a "cluster" expletive. Clustering is a scheduling technique for the completion of errands outside the house or office. Responsibilities are listed and then clustered or mapped out by location. Clustering is a time-saving device allowing the individual

to complete errands in close proximity to one another rather than ricochet around town.

As you can see, prioritization and scheduling are partners. At the end of each day, look at your list to see which tasks weren't finished and then reprioritize your responsibilities for the next day.

3. Execution (workbook Exercise 15.5). The **execution** of responsibilities is a systematic progression of steps taken toward the satisfactory completion of each task. More specifically, execution can be described as the implementation of an established schedule. A prioritized schedule is like a blueprint or military strategy. The most effective method of execution is the establishment of goals. Here are some tips to improve execution:

- a. Assign a deadline (goal) for each task or project.
- b. Break large projects down into smaller tasks, and assign a deadline for each task.
- c. Work on one section or task at a time. Work on it until it is complete. Experts indicate that it is better to have one or two completed tasks than a handful of unfinished ones.
- d. Reward your accomplishments with small pleasures to motivate yourself to accomplish designated goals. Avoid immediate gratification, though. In other words, reward yourself after satisfactory completion of each job, not before.

Additional Time-Management Ideas

The following are some additional ideas that don't fall into any specific category but are nevertheless helpful in managing your time effectively:

Time mapping: A time-management technique; breaking down the day into 15- to 30-minute segments and assigning a task or responsibility to each segment.

Clustering: A scheduling technique used in time management for which errands are grouped by location (e.g., dry cleaners, post office, pharmacy).

Execution: The third of three aspects essential for effective time management, in which tasks are actually completed.

- 1.** *Delegation.* The old adage “If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself” can lend itself to stress if you feel you have to do everything yourself. Many people dislike delegating responsibilities; it is equated with loss of control and personal identity. **Delegation** involves trusting yourself to relinquish control, as well as trusting the individuals to whom you delegate the responsibilities. In many cases, items marked as B or C on your To Do list can be delegated to or shared with other people. When you delegate responsibilities, explain instructions clearly and assign a completion time or date to each task. Avoid delegating responsibilities for which the time to explain the task exceeds the time to complete it. Follow-up is a crucial component of delegation to prevent reverse delegation, wherein the task comes back to you unfinished.
- 2.** *Schedule interruptions.* One time-management technique advocated by experts is to be flexible with your work schedule. Office visits, phone calls, meetings, and 2-hour “power lunches” can become distractions and interrupt your work when they are not expected. Resulting feelings of frustration, impatience, and anger can contribute to the pressures of task completion. If you allow for a small number of interruptions of your day, however (FIG. 15.4), anger and hurriedness can be minimized. Experts suggest that interruptions should actually be scheduled into your daily activities by allotting them 7 to 10 minutes per hour. Conversely, interruptions should also be prevented during crucial time periods when continuity of work flow is paramount. Taking the phone off the hook, closing the office door, or leaving the worksite when distractions are unavoidable may be necessary.
- 3.** *Schedule personal time in each day.* Experts agree that a day filled to the brim with career and family responsibilities, leaving no time for oneself, results in burnout and possibly disease and illness. Your health should be a high priority. Time allocated for a walk, jog, or meditation alone is crucial to the effectiveness of carrying out personal responsibilities. But health is often taken for granted until illness occurs. So, keep your health a top priority. As Ben Franklin once said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”
- 4.** *An idea book.* An idea book, like a journal, is a place to record various ideas that surface to the conscious mind. Often important thoughts flash into the conscious mind at the most inopportune moments. The mind has limited awareness, with many thoughts competing for attention. An idea book, like a second brain, can become a receptacle for a multitude of important thoughts. Once written down, you can refer back to them at any time. An idea book can include To Do lists, dream lists, names and phone numbers, or any other idea you don’t want to forget.
- 5.** *Edit your life.* This journalistic phrase is used here as a personal house-cleaning technique. (It is also known as the emptying process of spiritual well-being.) Despite the fact that civilization has progressed light-years since the days when people lived in caves, we have not lost the Neanderthal trait of hunting and gathering possessions. Whether material in nature or not, we tend to carry around a lot of excess baggage. In the editing process, a regular assessment of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs is conducted. This includes an objective evaluation of relationships, values, and personal needs. Once you have listed your various needs,



FIGURE 15.4

Good time management requires you to balance your life between work and leisure. Remember that balance is essential for optimal well-being.

Delegation: Relinquishing control of a responsibility by turning it over to someone else.

decide which factors in your life are essential or core to your life, and which factors are peripheral ones draining your energy. Then, let go of the ones you feel are draining off valuable time and energy. The editing process, then, is a technique by which you reduce your life to its simplest terms. In the book *The Dove*, a true story of a teenager who sailed around the world by himself, author Robin Lee Graham said, “It’s not how much I need to survive, it’s how little I need to survive.”

6. *Networking skills.* Tracking down resources to accomplish tasks can be a time waster if the time it takes to access the resource exceeds its importance. In many cases, people are resources. There is a saying in the business world: “It’s not what you know but who you know.” In reality, time management requires a combination of the two because all the connections in the world will not help without a brain to use them. Connections are important, and **networking** is the establishment of solid connections. Learn who can help you accomplish the satisfactory completion of tasks that cannot be done alone. Learn who you can rely on for help, whether you need an important phone number, to borrow a truck, or a helping hand to move to a new apartment.
7. *Organizational skills.* Although some people think that organizational skills are innate, the truth is that, with practice, anybody can learn strong organizational skills to increase personal productivity. The following tips will help to sharpen your organizational skills:
 - a. Some people receive up to 100 email messages a day. Reading and responding to these can become a full-time job. Here is a tip: If emails are a stressor in your life, delete all the forwarded emails to save time for those that are really important.
 - b. Once used in cars for emergencies, cell phones can now be found attached to anyone’s ear practically anywhere rather than just for emergencies. Make it a habit to limit cell phone use to practical hours and turn off the phone while at the movies, restaurants, classrooms, and other inappropriate places.
 - c. Much time is wasted looking for items that seem to have fallen into a black hole. Precious

time can be saved by designating a place for bills, assignments, budget sheets, and so forth, and keeping these items where they belong.

- d. Learn what resources are available to help you complete what you need to get done, including fellow students as study partners.
- e. Learn where these resources are, and when you can use them.
- f. Make a master chart including a list of deadlines, or coursework responsibilities with a time limit attached to them. Update the list regularly.
- g. Buy a master calendar or daily planner and write down all your deadlines to get a comprehensive picture of the events in your life. Learn to look at the entire week, and then the entire month to get a wider perspective. Then, zoom in and focus on immediate as well as long-term needs.
- h. Learn to make outlines of projects, papers, lectures, and proposals—introduction, development, conclusions.
- i. Keep files of letters (both incoming and outgoing) to refer to when you need to get in touch with someone. Also, regardless of what letter or paper crosses your desk, *handle it once*. Studies show that when mail is opened and stacked to be responded to, the more times that it is looked at, the longer it takes to get done. Handle it once and be done with it.
- j. Learn when people you need to contact are available. Learn/remember to tell others where you are or when you can be reached.
- k. Learn/recognize your physical/mental limitations. Learn *how* to say no to people who plead for time you don’t have (e.g., I’m sorry, but I simply don’t have time). Be gentle but firm! Learn *when* to say no to people who plead for time you don’t have.
- l. A lot of time can be spent on the Internet (this might actually be a great time to practice

Networking: Establishing and nurturing personal and professional relationships to assist with the completion of personal responsibilities.

diaphragmatic breathing). Addiction to the Internet is no laughing matter. Monitor your computer usage time and if it exceeds 2 to 3 hours a day (outside of work), consider limiting it to a respectable amount.

8. **Balance.** All work and no play means poor work quality. Balance your life between work and play. Don't place all your self-esteem eggs in one basket.

True to the Puritan ethic that "worth equals work," Americans, by and large, spend an inordinate amount of time at their jobs. According to the International Labour Organization, the additional hours that Americans work each week amounts to an extra week of work each year (Moyers, 2003). Experts detect a cultural shift with professionals working longer hours and taking less vacation time out of fear for job security (Kinsman, 2006). Because of corporate downsizing and restructuring, people are more inclined not to use their entire vacation time, for fear that if they take time off from their job, they might be next in line to leave permanently. Time-management expert Jeff Davidson notes that not only do more people spend more time at work, but they also tend to sleep fewer hours, resulting in feelings of fatigue and irritability while on the job. Davidson also notes that as we continue to wallow in the throes of the information age, we tend to become suffocated in information, from junk mail to the Internet. The following are some additional tips on managing your time more effectively:

1. **Watch less television.** Television is definitely a time robber. People say they watch TV to relax, but what is really happening is that they are substituting one form of sensory stimulus for another. And because of the addictive nature of television watching, even though you may plan to watch only one half-hour show, you may end up sitting in front of the television for the entire evening, wasting the night away.
2. **Change your Internet home page to Google.** High-tech gadgets are great, but they can certainly become huge distractions and result in getting little done. One distraction is the home page of Internet service providers, chock full of ads and trite news headlines. Consider changing this home page to Google to minimize distractions

and focus your mind on what really needs to get done. Set healthy boundaries for time spent surfing the Web.

3. **Clean your office, room, desk, or work space once a week.** Things tend to accumulate rather quickly in the course of a week. Mail, books, papers, and odds and ends all take up space. They also compete for your attention. Using what Davidson calls the "urge to purge," don't be afraid to throw away those things you know no longer serve you. By making a habit of clearing off your desk and work space, you will not only spend less time searching for things throughout the week, but at the same time start the cleansing process in your mind to focus on your work.
4. **Get a good night's sleep every night.** The average recommended time for sleep is between 6 and 8 hours a night. When we get pressed for time, the allocation of time for sleeping is often the first thing cut. In the short term, what may seem like a clever idea to cram for an exam, write a paper, or finish a project is in the long run an invitation to disaster. Although scientists who study sleep do not agree why adequate sleep is necessary, they all agree that sleep is essential to our health and well-being (Maas, 2001). Denying ourselves adequate sleep not only affects the quality of the work we do the next day, but ultimately affects the quality of our health as well.
5. **Create personal boundaries, and honor them.** Boundaries are those invisible lines we draw around ourselves to keep our identity and give structure to our lives. Just as it is important to be flexible and go with the flow when working with the element of time, it is equally important to honor personal boundaries, both yours and those of other people in your life. Honoring boundaries includes knowing when to leave the library, office, worksite, or friend's house and call it a day. By honoring your boundaries, you maintain a sense of personal integrity. When boundaries are not honored, feelings of victimization surface, and these too can have a negative impact on the quality and quantity of the work you do.
6. **Do one activity at a time.** In this day and age, it is easy to get caught up doing many things at once, like sending a fax while talking on the phone, or

writing a term paper while watching the football playoffs. Dividing your attention between two or more activities results in less quality in the work done. It wastes time as well. Learn to focus yourself by doing one task at a time.

7. *Learn and practice the art of decision making.* We are constantly faced with choices in both our personal and professional lives—where to eat, what movie to see, what topic to present, or what job to take. Decision making requires a good sense of judgment, coupled with a sense of compassion. Some decisions can be made rather quickly, whereas those with long-term implications need more time to survey and process. When we have big decisions to make, we tend to drag our feet and, in the information age, it is not hard to become overwhelmed with tidbits of facts and figures. In the words of Davidson, more choices mean more decisions. He suggests that we avoid being overwhelmed by learning to limit our choices and, hence, the decisions that come from too many choices.

Best Application of Time-Management Skills

Time-management skills can appear overwhelming and stress producing if they are seen as dogmatic and rigid. Use of time-management skills should be proportional to the number of responsibilities one assumes. In all likelihood, you are already fairly adept at these time-management techniques and may even use some of them in your normal working schedule. It is during periods when responsibilities accumulate beyond normal that these techniques may assist in your overall coping strategy. Before you begin to apply these techniques, first inventory your attitudes and behavior styles for the roadblocks listed earlier in the chapter. See if you can relate to any factors that sabotage efforts to get tasks accomplished on time. Then experiment with the techniques to find out which work best for you. After employing these techniques, evaluate their effectiveness. It is fair to say that virtually all other stress-management skills hinge on time management, for without adequate time allocated to rethink strategies to deal with stress or practice relaxation techniques, learning them serves no lasting purpose.

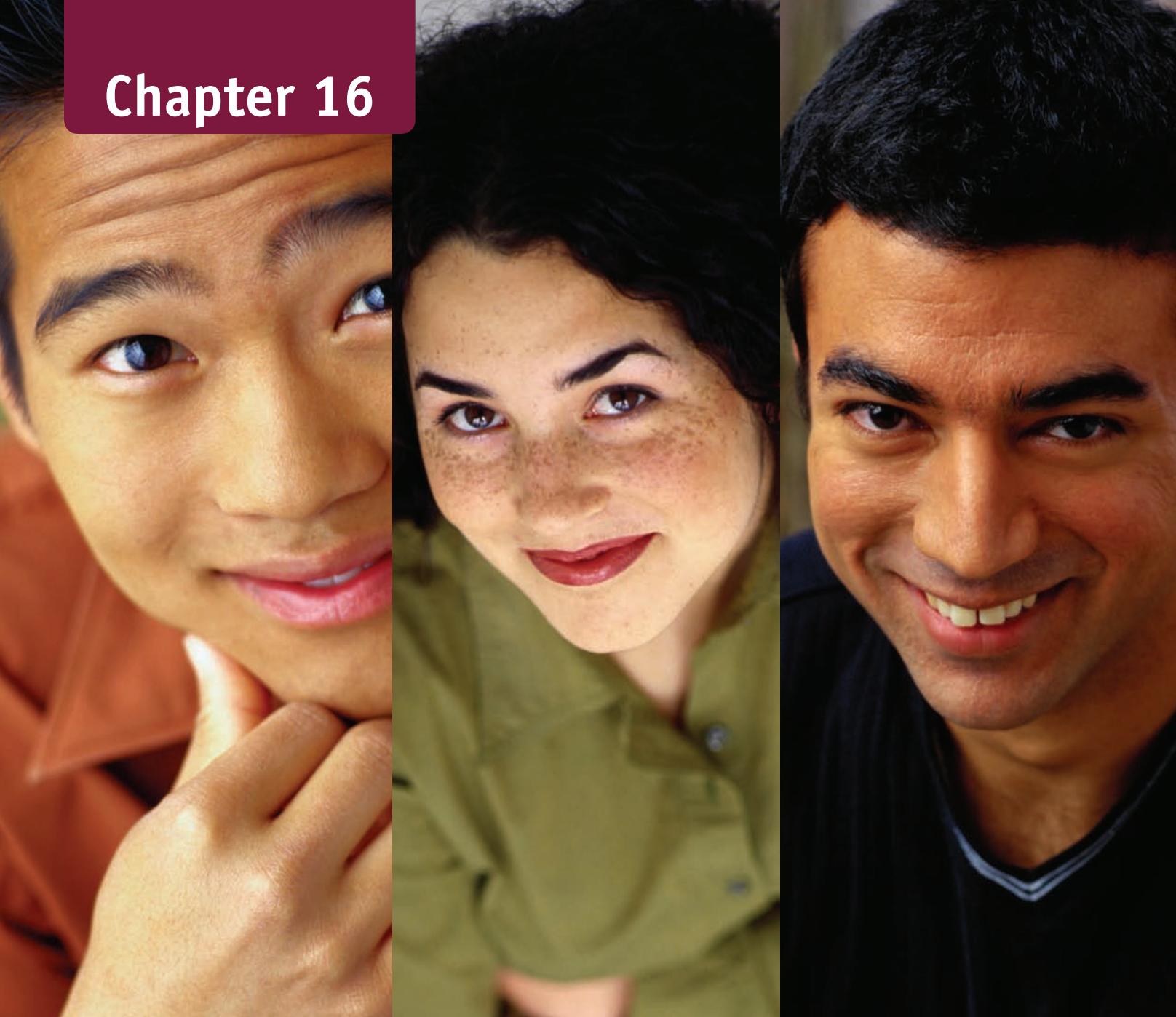
SUMMARY

- Time and money are considered the two primary resources necessary to navigate the shoals of a stressful life, but people tend to waste both, resulting in a personal shipwreck.
- Financial responsibility means making a budget and following it rather than spending money you don't have and accruing a mass of credit card debt. There are many ways to incorporate fiscal management into your life that can reduce personal stress.
- Time is a human-made concept. Calendars and time zones were created to bring organization to cultures and civilizations that needed to coordinate activities.
- Although the concept of time was created to help organize, people often find themselves becoming slaves to the clock, and hence become stressed by it.
- Time management is defined as the ability to prioritize, schedule, and execute responsibilities to personal satisfaction. Time-management skills are now taught to people to help them gain a sense of control over personal responsibilities.
- There are several roadblocks to effective time management, which impede productivity and, in essence, rob us of valuable time. They include Type A personality, workaholism, time juggling, procrastination, and lifestyle behavior trapping.
- Three methods of prioritization are the ABC rank-order method, the Pareto principle, and the important-versus-urgent method.
- Recommended scheduling techniques are boxing, time mapping, and clustering.
- The execution of personal responsibilities is the last step of time management. Setting goals and providing rewards can be powerful incentives to finishing the task at hand.
- Additional tips to help manage time better are delegating responsibilities, scheduling interruptions and personal time each day, using an idea book, editing your life to the bare essentials, and using networking and strong organizational skills.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. List the four rules for financial stability.
2. Describe the psychology of money.
3. What personality styles undermine one's time-management skills?
4. Explain the following time-management concepts: the Pareto principle, boxing, time mapping, and clustering.
5. List five strategies for effective time management to decrease stress.

Chapter 16



Additional Coping Techniques

One cannot collect all the beautiful shells on the beach, one can collect only a few.

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

According to several psychologists, just as there are many shells on the beach, there are hundreds of coping techniques. Some fall nicely into well-defined categories; others do not but are every bit as important in their function and outcome. Much like acquiring a personal collection of seashells, chances are you will choose a handful of coping strategies for your own stress-management program and leave the rest behind. And just as a return to the beach may inspire you to pick up a new shell, which at another time seemed unattractive or banal, a new encounter with stress may entice you to select a new method of coping. This chapter outlines some additional coping techniques that are often used to deal with stress effectively. Although they may not serve as your first line of defense in every case, at some point in your life you may find them very helpful.

Information Seeking

Fear of the unknown accompanies many formidable stressors, from job interviews to cancer diagnoses. Several circumstances we encounter are perceived as threats because of our lack of information about the event. Lack of information allows the mind to fill in missing pieces with hypothetical facts or worst-case scenarios, which often perpetuates the stress response. To conquer fear of the unknown, gathering information about a specific circumstance becomes one of the best defenses against stressors. **Information seeking** involves collecting and processing facts about a stressful event or situation, which can then be used to help solve the problem and regain emotional stability. As suggested by psychologist Shelly Taylor (2005), the gathering and processing of information also allows mastery of control because knowledge can become a powerful tool with which to confront and dismantle a stressor.

Information seeking has been found to be an essential skill following diagnosis of terminal illness, in the recovery process of alcoholics and drug abusers, during pregnancy, and for any other stressor that makes an unpredictable change in your life, however big or small. When encountering stress, people pose many questions in an attempt to gain a handle on the unknown. When an individual contracts a disease such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, or atherosclerosis, all attention becomes focused on gathering answers to a host of questions. What is the nature of this disease? How did I contract it? What is the best method to manage it? Similarly, when your car breaks down, a set of questions runs through your mind. What's wrong with the engine or transmission? How long will it take to fix? How much will it cost? Can I afford this? Or academic stressors: How many exams are

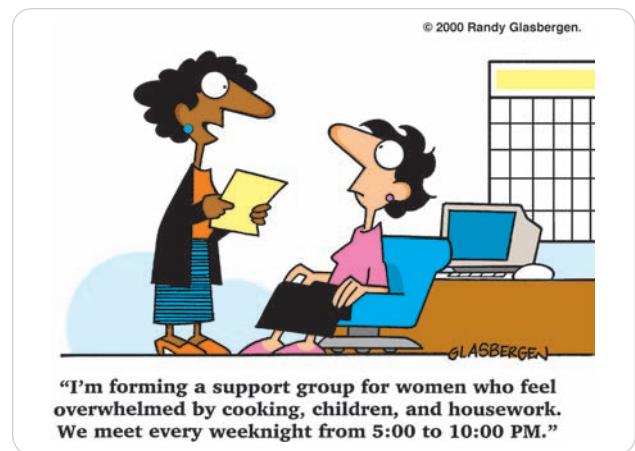


FIGURE 16.1

Never underestimate the power of support groups. (© 2000 Randy Glasbergen. www.glasbergen.com.)

there in this course? What types of questions are on the exams? How much is the term paper worth toward the final grade? Like a large jigsaw puzzle, small pieces of information become crucial to the ability to cope with the cause of the stress so as to assemble a wider perspective on the whole problem as well as potential solutions.

In times of distress, questions necessitate answers, and there are many resources that are typically accessed to provide answers. The three most common references are people, books, and the Internet. An individual becomes a reference when he or she appears to be "in the know" about a certain situation, either because of personal experience or the acquisition of knowledge pertaining to your situation. Usually when information is disseminated through people, however, facts are intertwined with emotional perceptions. As a result, the objectivity of this information must be assessed very carefully. Believe it or not, not all information in the world is located on the Internet. Although surfing topics on any search engine is a good place to start to seek insights on various issues, your search shouldn't end there. A lot of valuable information can be found only by talking to people directly. Books, journals, magazines, the Internet, and newspapers are also valuable sources of information on virtually every topic known, often offering several viewpoints (FIG. 16.1▲). The

Information seeking: A common coping technique; searching for detailed information to increase awareness about a situation that has become a perceived threat.



Stress *with a Human Face*

Curiosity is one of humanity's noblest traits. And for every dangerous situation that may result from too much inquisitiveness

there are ten times the number of stories that result in personal victories. None, however, is as compelling as that of Augusto and Michaela Odono, which is the epitome of information seeking as a coping strategy.

The story began in 1984, when their son, Lorenzo, then 6 years old, was sent home from school for displaying hyperactive behavior. As days turned into months, additional symptoms appeared, and eventually Lorenzo was diagnosed with the newly named and little understood adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD), a lethal genetic disease of dysfunctional nerve tissue, resulting from an extremely high number of very long fatty-acid chains in the blood. Lorenzo was given a maximum of 2 years to live.

But his parents did not accept Lorenzo's death sentence. Upon learning of the prognosis for their son, they took

turns going to the National Library of Medicine to research ALD and staying home to care for Lorenzo.

With persistence, willpower, luck, and what Augusto calls a "whole lot of love," their search for clues not only enlightened the medical community about the dynamics involved in the etiology of the disease, but led to the creation of a medication, Lorenzo's Oil, which arrested the progression of the disease. Lorenzo's Oil is now used to treat this disease in children all over the world.

A lawyer for the World Bank, Augusto has earned an honorary doctorate in medicine for his achievement. Now hundreds of children are living normal lives thanks to the inquisitive nature of Augusto and Michaela Odono. But in the words of Augusto, "I wouldn't like it that people think our efforts were out of intellectual curiosity. This is a story of love." Lorenzo Odono lived a triumphant life for two more decades after he was first strucken with ALD, giving inspiration to many who have also been diagnosed with this disease. He died on May 30, 2008.

use of these references to cope with stress even has its own name: bibliotherapy.

Like other coping techniques, though, information seeking can be a liability as well as an asset. Too much information can be as detrimental as too little because it can feed the imagination to create worst-case scenarios, which are then adopted as reality. Nevertheless, when you are confronted with a stressor that promotes fear of the unknown, information seeking can be your best strategy to begin to cope with this problem.

Social Orchestration

Perhaps the most common response to events or circumstances that elicit the stress response is avoidance. Whereas avoidance of life-threatening events such as fire is wise, avoidance of mental, emotional, and spiritual threats is not a viable option. Avoidance is a defense mechanism deeply

rooted in the ancient flight response. It is popularly believed that if we avoid situations that cause fear or frustration, our lives will become simple and stress free. But what may seem like a quick fix offers no permanent resolution, only further problems down the road. Avoidance is a negative coping style, especially when the stressors involve relationships and human confrontation.

Can you make educated choices about how to minimize stressful situations? Yes! The answer is **social orchestration** (formerly called *social engineering*, a term that has now been adopted by political and technological fields to mean "mass societal influence" or "obtaining confidential information by manipulating people"). Social orchestration is a positive coping style designed to help minimize stress by following a path of least resistance, but not avoidance. Social orchestration involves analyzing a problem, creating a series of viable options, and then choosing the best option to resolve feelings and perceptions of stress. It is also described as a reorganization process wherein individuals manipulate factors and elements (not people) in their environment to their best advantage.

There are two approaches to the social orchestration process. The first is to change factors in your environment that can cause stress. If this is not a viable option,

Social orchestration: A coping technique; either (1) changing stress-producing factors in the environment or (2) changing the entire stress-producing environment; the path of least resistance (as distinguished from avoidance).

your health status is at risk, and attempts at cognitive reappraisal prove fruitless, then the second approach is to change your environment. Changing factors in your environment might include driving a different route to work or blocking out time periods during the day during which you do not answer the phone so as to get a major task completed. In situations where you change specific factors, you attempt to manipulate or control your environment so that your encounters with potential stressors are minimal. To change your environment means relocating from unhealthy or intolerable living conditions to a new setting that is conducive to better health status. Because changing one's environment is both costly and time consuming, this approach is often used as a last resort. Keep in mind that if you choose to change your environment so as to avoid people or run away, then this coping technique is being used improperly and no resolution is guaranteed. Also, recall from Chapter 1 that Holmes and Rahe found that relocating to a new environment is a stressful experience in itself.

On a larger scale, social orchestration can be seen in many political grass-roots efforts—lobbying Congress to pass legislation favoring particular issues and concerns, for example. In fact, social orchestration is the coping skill of choice at both local and national governmental levels for issues such as landfills and recycling. On a smaller scale, social orchestration is a strategy we employ regularly with personal chores and responsibilities, but it is an effective one in the management of major life stressors.

A prime example of social orchestration where factors in the environment were changed for all Americans was the fallout from the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In Manhattan, commuter train routes were disrupted for months, as were some roads and highways leading into the city, which changed going to and coming home from work into a challenge. Many people learned to telecommute and actually found they preferred this style of work. Many businesses whose locations were either devastated in the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings or closed because of smoke and falling ash needed to open temporary offices in outlying areas. Perhaps one of the biggest changes that affected the U.S. population related to air travel, when new security checks required additional hours of time before take-off, readjusting time schedules for everyone involved. Additional examples include changes made by those who lost their homes during Hurricane Katrina and the southern California wild-fires of 2007. Whether it's reorchestrating your life because of a new addition to the family (e.g., new baby or aging parents) or some world event that landed on your

doorstep, social orchestration offers a way to gain an upper hand in the situation.

Although social orchestration is often the coping skill of choice for large-scale issues like earthquakes and human-made disasters, the ability to change factors in the environment can be done at a personal level as well. Many coping skills are used at the same time to deal with a stressor; there is strength in numbers. Thus, social orchestration may incorporate the use of other coping skills, including assertiveness, cognitive restructuring, creative problem solving, and time management. Cognitive restructuring is essential to create a new frame of mind in which to manipulate factors in the environment. The following is a step-by-step process for social orchestration:

1. *Define your stressors.* Write down what is bothering you by trying to describe what this stressor really is (e.g., an obnoxious roommate, a bad marriage, car repair problems).
2. *Identify your initial response.* Do you feel angry, frustrated, afraid, impatient, or resentful? Does this stressor cause you to worry or feel guilty? What emotions are running through your mind? Write these down. Next, describe what your first reaction or course of action to this stressor is (or was). Do you feel the urge to avoid a certain person? Do the words *retaliation* or *avoidance* come to mind? How would you describe your first course of action?
3. *Generate alternatives.* This is the creative stage, where you write down any and all possible solutions. Let us say, for example, that the route you drive to work is under construction and now it takes you an extra 25 minutes to get there. You find yourself feeling pretty irritated with the traffic and the fact that you are wasting so much time. What are some viable alternatives? Perhaps carpooling, taking a bus or subway, leaving for work 20 minutes early, finding a new route to work, working at home on a computer with modem hook-up, or walking.
4. *Choose the best alternative.* Once you have a handful of ideas that are plausible, pick the one that seems most suited to your circumstances. Regarding the preceding example, assume that the walk is too far, and that there is no mass transit or potential carpool members readily available. Working at home with a modem hook-up sounds attractive, and you decide to go with this plan of action. To your surprise, your plan is approved by your boss for 3 out of 5 work days until the road construction

is done. So, you work at home, while miles away road construction takes place.

5. *Evaluate the outcome of your choice.* In this last step, you take a moment to analyze the option you have chosen to measure its effectiveness. If the option is a good one, you keep it. If not, you pick a new option and give it a try. In the case of the road-construction problem, it turns out that working at home seems to require much more discipline than you realized. It actually takes more time to get your work done because of distractions from the refrigerator and the television. After evaluating this option, you decide to return to your office, leaving 30 minutes earlier than before, and this second option works fine.

The key to social orchestration is to provide yourself with many viable options from which to choose. Options are like cushions that soften the blow when a stressor disrupts your center of gravity, causing you to fall. People with only one option—or worse, no options—begin to feel that a stressor is beyond control and that they are victims of their environment. By creating and choosing one of several options, you strengthen your internal locus of control and get an early start on resolving the issues at hand.

Social-Support Groups

There is an old proverb suggesting that misery loves company. This does not mean that we wish our troubles on others, nor does it mean that we are happy to see others encounter the same problems we faced ourselves. Rather, it means that when two or more people experience a problem of daunting magnitude, the emotional burden seems to be shared, is more bearable, and is consequently not as heavy a load as a solo attempt at working against the odds. This is the premise that has given rise to the recommendation of regular social contact and the plethora of support groups across America.

Social support: A coping technique; those groups of friends, family members, and others whose company acts to buffer against and dissipate the negative effects of stress.

Buffer theory: A theory that suggests that people invited to a support group act to buffer the participants from stress to lessen the impact.

Compensation theory: A theory suggesting that support groups compensate for various emotional losses one experiences during stress.

The first support group to gain a foothold of respect in the American culture was Alcoholics Anonymous (AA Services, 2002). Since its inception more than 50 years ago, this group has helped millions of people cope with the problems of alcohol addiction through the care and love shared by its members. Because of its tremendous success, the philosophy, format, traditions, and twelve-step recovery process have been borrowed by virtually every support group for all substance and process addictions.

Research has also shown that feelings of connectedness, belongingness, and bonding arising from social contact contribute to one's health (Ornish, 1998; Pelletier, 2000) (FIG. 16.2 ▶). This is the social well-being aspect of spiritual well-being. The desire to belong is considered a basic human need, as was first suggested by Maslow in 1943. There are several theories as to why **social support** is considered an aid in the coping process. The **buffer theory**, proposed by Cassel (1976), suggests that social support acts as a buffer against stress, in that social ties tend to filter out the deleterious effects of both ordinary hassles and devastating life events. This theory is shared by several researchers in the field of health psychology, but the exact dynamics of this buffering action are still uncertain. Connell and D'Augelli (1990) hypothesized that when individuals express fondness for others and make themselves available to both receive help (succor) as well as give help (nurturance), perceptions of stress are significantly decreased. In the **compensation theory**, social support is thought to act as a compensation for those who are at an emotional loss because of life's stress-



FIGURE 16.2

More and more, evidence points to the idea that strong social support from friends may act to buffer against the ill effects of stress and add to both the quality and quantity of life.

BOX 16.1**Virtual Friends in Need?**

The term “social support group” has taken on a whole new meaning because of new arenas of social networking, including MySpace.com, Facebook.com, and other forums not yet created. In an age where the world is at your fingertips (through a keypad), friends are as close as the farthest corner of the globe. But what constitutes a real friend? Is it merely interfacing with a name and photo on a Web site, or is it receiving several emails or text messages a day from acquaintances? Nothing can replace the empathy of eye-to-eye contact and a familiar human voice, yet emails, text messages, and the newest virtual contacts can serve as a powerful supplement to the human connection and evaporate feelings of loneliness. How strong is your support group, and is there a balance between your real and virtual worlds?

ors. Perhaps the landmark study of the power of support groups was designed by Spiegel and colleagues (1989). This study showed that metastatic breast cancer patients who were involved with a support group lived statistically significantly longer than those who did not belong to such a group. Spiegel called this coping technique **supportive-expressive group therapy**. Connectedness, through the loving support of friends, family, and colleagues, appears to be an essential factor for optimal health (Ornish, 1998). The **direct-effect theory**, suggested by Andrews and Tennant (1982), indicates that social contact only provides positive exposure to the individual and that these positive stimuli are pleasing to the ego. Finally, the **cognitive-dissonance theory** states that when individuals are engaged in social contact where values and attitudes are similar, the collective energy far exceeds the negative feelings experienced by any one person individually.

Pilisuk and Parks (1986) found evidence supporting the hypothesis that social support not only acts as a buffer against stress, but may in fact contribute to health and longevity by enhancing the integrity of the immune system. Results from both the Alameda County Study (Berkman and Syme, 1979) and the Tecumseh Community Health Study (House, Robbins, and Metzner, 1982) revealed that social support was a significant factor in both the health status and longevity of those subjects studied. These investigations, as well as those conducted by Kaplan and colleagues (1988) and Berkman (1986), indicated that men seem to benefit more than women with regard to the

effects of social support on the progression of cardiovascular disease. Raphael (1977) and Lowenthal and Harven (1968) reported that social withdrawal was a significant factor in coronary mortality in bereaved spouses, most notably men. From these and other studies, it seems that companionship is truly a basic human need. When this need is filled through the demonstration of caring, love, and moral support, the intensity of stress is alleviated, suggesting a greater tolerance for frustration and worry. In their reviews of the merits of social support as a coping technique, Brannon and Feist (1992) and Pelletier and Herzing (1988) concluded that it is a significant factor contributing to health and longevity. Thus, its use as a coping strategy is strongly encouraged.

Hobbies

Is there such a thing as a therapeutic escape? Perhaps. Whereas psychologists and stress-management counselors caution against the hazards of avoidance, the practice of diversions has often been advocated as a bona fide coping strategy. Healthy diversions are any activities that offer a temporary escape from the sensory overload that can produce or perpetuate the stress response. Diversions offer the conscious mind a “change of venue” to promote clear thinking. Taking your mind off a problem, or removing an issue from conscious attention for a designated period of time, and diverting attention to an unrelated subject focuses the mind and enables it to deal better with these issues upon return. As with most strategies, diversions offer either positive or negative repercussions. Positive diversions are those in which the individual takes an *active role* in the escape process. (An example of a passive escape is watching television or sleeping.) Active escapes are those that contribute to one’s identity, character, and self-esteem. With this in mind, the best temporary active escape is said to be a

Supportive-expressive group therapy: A term coined by Dr. David Spiegel for women with breast cancer to share their experiences, grief, and healing with others going through the same experience.

Direct-effect theory: A theory suggesting that social contact serves to provide uplifting aspects to the individual, thus pleasure to the ego.

Cognitive-dissonance theory: A theory suggesting that the collective energy of one’s support group supersedes any individual’s negative experience of stress.

**FIGURE 16.3**

Involvement in hobbies allows people to make order out of chaos on a small scale, which often transfers to larger-scale problems. Any activity that boosts self-esteem is thought to be worthwhile.

hobby (FIG. 16.3▲), the pursuit of a leisure interest that provides pleasure (Kaplin, 1960). Most hobbies, such as needlepoint, photography, and many others, involve some degree of creativity as well as the ability to make order out of chaos on a very small and manageable scale. The latter factor tends to give a person a sense of control over life, which in turn augments self-esteem. And high self-esteem transfers from outside interests to areas of one's life where factors contribute to personal stress. Moreover, the ability to bring order to a small-

Hobby: A pleasurable pursuit or interest outside one's daily work responsibilities through which one begins to make order out of chaos (e.g., botanical gardening).

Forgiveness: A coping technique for anger-related stressors for which a shift in attitude is adopted toward those against whom a grudge was previously held.

scale operation, like haute cuisine cooking or bonsai gardening, also has a carry-over effect in dealing with larger problems. In fact, many people find that their time spent in the pursuit of hobbies transfers to solutions for major life problems.

However, not all experts agree that hobbies are stress relieving. Relaxation therapist Edmond Jacobson in his book *You Must Relax* warned of drawbacks of hobbies, indicating that they produce tension and frustration when expectations are not met. Jacobson believed that for relaxation to be most effective, the individual must be doing absolutely nothing. In his opinion, leisure activities—and hobbies in particular—actually compound the accumulation of stress. His point is valid when people focus on perfectionism rather than leisure. When pleasure is absent from leisure activities, it is definitely time to stop and do something else.

One reason why hobbies are advocated as self-esteem builders is that they allow you to invest yourself in several areas. If you have a bad day at the office or school, hobbies can neutralize the negative feelings and bolster self-esteem. In essence, self-esteem remains intact when not all eggs are placed in one basket.

Forgiveness

Every stressor generated by anger that results in feelings of victimization is a prime candidate for **forgiveness**. Forgiveness is a cognitive process, and although it might seem to fall in the domain of cognitive restructuring, its significance as a process merits separate recognition. In their book *Forgiveness*, authors Sidney Simon and Suzanne Simon describe acts of pardon as an essential step in the resolution of major life stressors. When many people hear the word *forgiveness*, they associate the process with condonement, absolution, and self-sacrifice, which, in the opinion of some, perpetuates feelings of victimization. Consequently, because of the emotional pain involved, forgiveness is not initially looked upon as a viable option to reduce personal stress. Strange as it may seem, holding a grudge or feelings of resentment appears to be a form of control over the person or circumstance involved. But these feelings are an illusion of control. The toxicity of these thoughts sours one's outlook on life and eventually seeps into other aspects of one's personality, causing defensiveness and even more vulnerability to stressors, perpetuating the cycle of self-victimization.

Simon and Simon paint a different picture of forgiveness as a coping style. They describe it as an internal healing process where self-esteem is restored through devictim-

ization, where toxic thoughts and emotions are diluted and released, and where one can begin to move on with one's life, not by just forgetting the past, but by coming to terms with stressful issues to find peace. As directors of several workshops for adults who were sexually abused, adult children of alcoholics, and people who were divorced, Simon and Simon teach that forgiveness is not an easy process. Based on their research, they propose six emotional steps to work through in the process from victim to survivor. These steps are very similar to those outlined in the grieving process by Kübler-Ross (Chapter 4): the denial stage, or refusal to admit you have been wronged or taken advantage of; the self-blame stage, or directing hurt inward and accepting other people's responsibility as your own; the victimization stage, or realization that you have indeed been violated; the indignation stage, or anger toward those you feel have violated your personal rights; the survivor stage, or reassessing your self-worth and beginning to feel whole again; and finally, the integration stage, or forgiving and getting on with your life. Simon and Simon agree that the major hurdle to jump to get to the last stage is the ability to demonstrate unconditional love toward yourself and others.

Some of the newest research on the topic of forgiveness comes from the work of Fred Luskin (2002), the director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project. Luskin's work, based on subjects from war-torn northern Ireland, has become the hallmark of forgiveness therapy and his HEAL method is now being used by survivors of other war-torn countries. Colin Tipping (2002) and Robin Casarjian (1992), also noted experts on the topic of forgiveness, state that one of the essential aspects of forgiveness as a coping technique is that we must not only forgive others but learn to forgive ourselves for our thoughts and behaviors that are less than appropriate. An interesting study by Friedberg, Suchday, and Shelor (2007) supports the work of Luskin with regard to forgiveness and heart physiology.

Dream Therapy

Since ancient times, dreams have been espoused as a vehicle of divine communication. They have also been valued as a tool to unravel the complexities of life in the waking state. Although for centuries dreams have been regarded as an intriguing aspect of human nature, their importance to mental and emotional stability has been neglected for quite some time. It was not until the work of Freud that these nocturnal images produced by the unconscious mind were considered worthy of scientific investigation. Like Hippocrates in ancient Greece,

Freud discovered that dreams were closely related to the physical symptoms many of his patients demonstrated. It was this insight that led Freud into the study of dreams and dream analysis.

Calling dreams "the royal road to the unconscious," Freud (1950) became convinced that they act to disguise sexual desires and thought. It was his exploration in the field of dreams that paved the way to a greater scientific understanding of the unconscious mind. But, whereas Freud viewed dreams as a means to *conceal* conscious thoughts, his protégé, Jung, regarded dreams as a means to *reveal* a whole new language to understand human consciousness and restore psychic balance. The work of these two men gave birth to the modern practice of **dream therapy**. Today, this work continues with dream researchers Gayle Delaney (1988), Patrick Garfield (1995), and Robert Van de Castle (1995).

The popularity of dream interpretation with the American public waxed and waned throughout the twentieth century in tandem with that expressed in clinical research. But from research in this area, it has become clear that dream analysis and the therapeutic effects of dreams are powerful means to increase awareness of personal issues as well as viable tools to help resolve them (FIG. 16.4). The following is a collection of observations reported by several experts in the field about the dream process:

- Everyone dreams, though not everyone remembers their dreams.
- For the average person, the dreams that stand out are those that are perceived as utterly bizarre, terrifying, or triggered by something in the course of a day.
- The majority of dreams consist of information received in the waking state during the previous day or two.
- Recurring dreams represent significant unresolved issues.
- Dreams were once thought to occur only during rapid-eye-movement (REM) periods, but are now thought to occur during several other times in the course of a night's sleep.

Dream therapy: A coping technique in which dreams, including recurring dreams, are explored and deciphered to help understand acute or chronic stressors.

**FIGURE 16.4**

Dream therapy experts believe that the more we try to remember our dreams, the better we are able to deal with problems in our waking state.

- Opinions vary on the issue of categorical dream symbols (e.g., water signifying the spirit of life), but virtually all experts agree that interpretation ultimately resides with the person who created the dream.

Dream therapy is a cognitive process that includes dream interpretation, dream incubation, and lucid dreaming. The purpose of dream therapy, which can be done either with the assistance of a therapist who specializes in dream therapy or by yourself, is to access a greater share of consciousness through dream images and symbols to clarify and resolve personal issues (Foulkes, 1985; Flanagan, 2000).

Dream interpretation involves three phases. After writing down the actual dream images, the first step is to find any possible associations between these images and those that take place during the waking state. The best method is to write down brief descriptions of a dream and then list as many associations with the symbolic images that come to mind. For example, viewing a plane crash from a farmer's field could be associated with one's career, a relationship, driving a car, or a new

Dream incubation: A process in which an idea to be used as dream material is consciously seeded to prompt the unconscious mind during sleep; a technique effective to help resolve stressors.

diet. The more associations that can be made, the greater the chance for a solid connection.

Dream therapist Robert Johnson, in his book *Inner Work*, states that the second phase is to draw parallels with these associations by asking yourself a series of questions. For example, What do I have in common with that image? Have I seen this image in my waking state? What behavior(s) do I have that is like that portrayed in this image? What emotional response does this dream image elicit, and what circumstances in everyday life elicit this same emotional response?

The third phase of the interpretation process is to select the interpretation that seems to be most relevant to your life at that moment. The best choice can also be made by asking questions such as the following: What is the central message of the dream? Did the dream have any advice or moral to it? When choosing a dream interpretation, consider each possibility a viable one because the ego-controlled conscious mind tends to protect itself from that which is unflattering or potentially harmful to itself. Dream expert Ann Faraday advises looking at the dream from someone else's perspective to allow a greater expansion of possibilities to choose from. Then, make a selection with your heart, not solely with your analytical mind.

Dream interpretation is still an art form, not a science, and the true interpretation rests solely with the dreamer. However, Johnson's advice to get the best results is, first, to consider as an interpretation something you don't already know; second, to avoid interpretations that inflate the ego; and third, to disregard dream interpretations that pass blame from you to someone or something else. Also, be careful to consider only the obvious because dream symbols look different from various perspectives. Finally, Johnson says, dream interpretation is useless if it is not acted upon. Each dream, no matter how obvious its relevance, is a message—and messages that are ignored may prolong the stress associated with them. It is up to the dreamer to grasp the message and resolve the issue that inspired it.

Just as dreams reveal messages to the conscious mind, they can also be used as drills to tap the wealth of knowledge hidden beneath consciousness for advice when dealing with problems, a practice dating back to ancient Greece. This process, called **dream incubation**, has been explored by researcher Gayle Delaney. To incubate a dream, a person ponders a specific concern or issue by asking a question and perhaps even writing it down before going to sleep. Upon awaking, he or she writes down whatever images come to mind, and then follows the process of

dream analysis to determine what information the unconscious mind has suggested. From her research, Delaney has found this technique to be very effective in the resolution of stressful issues. It can be combined with journal writing to augment the awareness process.

Lucid dreaming is the ability to enter the dream state while still conscious. As in the practice of Jung's active imagination or creative visualization, in lucid dreaming you consciously choose to add aspects of your dream while in the waking state. In essence, you direct the script of your dream. Lucid dreaming is often practiced to finish dream fragments or to provide an ending to a recurring dream.

When utilized effectively, dreams offer a wealth of knowledge that begs to be addressed during the hours of conscious thought. To ignore the advice, to waste this resource, to leave inaccessible the knowledge of the unconscious mind only perpetuates the perceptions, emotions, and behaviors associated with stress. The importance of dreams cannot be overstated; they have proved many times over to provide a means of mental stability. Or, as Jung stated in his book *Man and His Symbols*, "One cannot afford to be naive about dreams."

Prayer and Faith

Prayer is one of the oldest and most commonly used coping mechanisms known to humankind. In its simplest form, prayer is thought: a desire of the heart, and often a call for help in what can best be described as a plea for divine intervention. Although prayer is not synonymous with meditation, these two processes share many similarities in that they both initiate a process of centering, increased concentration, and connectedness. They differ in that as a coping technique, prayer specifically elicits the element of divine intervention. It is a request, whereas meditation can encompass many modes of thinking and is not specifically limited to divine thought (see Chapter 18). Studies by Manfredi and Pickett (1987) and Koenig (1988) report that prayer is the most common coping style used by the elderly, especially when dealing with issues related to death. Schafer (1992) writes that prayer can lower anxiety, increase optimism, and instill hope in the individual. Yet when abused, prayer can promote dependency, escape, and even doubt.

Although there are many definitions of stress, one that comes to mind with regard to spiritual well-being is this: "Stress is a 'perceived' disconnection or separation from our divine source." The operative word is *perceived*, for in the words of sages and wisdom keepers the



FIGURE 16.5

Prayer (from any denomination of faith) is viewed as a tremendous coping technique, particularly for fear and anxiety.

world over, we are never disconnected from our divine source. It is unresolved fear and anger that creates the illusion of separation. The premise of prayer as a coping technique rests on **faith**: the belief that each person is connected to a divine source (however this is named or described). Faith in a higher power, the ultimate source, can certainly be tested in times of stress.

Types of Prayer

When it comes to prayer, the styles are countless. Perhaps most common to many people is a recited prayer (much like a poem) that draws our attention from the self to the higher self. American Indians dance their prayers so as to reinforce their connection to the earth. South Africans have an expression: When you sing, you pray twice. There are prayers of gratitude and prayers of forgiveness. Prayers come in many forms. The type of prayer most commonly associated with stress is called **intercessory prayer** (Dossey, 1993). Basically, this is a call for help, in which one seeks divine guidance or, more likely, divine intervention. Intercessory prayer is most common in two situations. The first is when you need help yourself; the second is when you offer a prayer for the assistance of others. Those who study the nuances of prayer describe it

Faith: An optimistic attitude adopted to cope with stress for which one perceives a connection to something bigger than oneself (e.g., a divine source).

Intercessory prayer: One style of prayer for which the individual seeks assistance from a higher (divine) source to intervene or assist with his or her problems.

Stress with a Human Face

The first signs of stress began with Matt Pfenniger telling his father Jack, a physician, that he woke up with double vision. The last thing anyone suspected was a brain tumor. But in 1994 Matt, a high school sophomore, was diagnosed with exactly that. Actually, the diagnosis wasn't immediate. In fact, Matt spent a fair amount of time in and out of hospitals. If you were to ask him, he would tell you that he has seen more than his share of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machines. Matt's mother has a standing joke: "The only specialists we didn't consult were those in obstetrics." Eventually the diagnosis did reveal a brain tumor, a pineal germinoma—a rare form of brain cancer. It also revealed cancer cells isolated in the fluid of Matt's brain and spinal cord.

Matt began to receive the typical treatment: surgery followed by radiation. At first, things looked great. Ten months later, however, a follow-up MRI showed three golf-ball-sized metastases in the brain and one in the spine. This time Matt was given a round of chemotherapy. Although often effective, chemotherapy is not infallible. It can not only kill cancer cells, but also destroy healthy cells. And it doesn't always work. In Matt's case, the overall situation simply worsened.

Both Jack and his wife Kay have a strong faith in God, and they believe in the power of prayer. One day the couple had an idea. They invited members of their local community in Midland, Michigan, to come to a healing prayer service for Matt at the hospital. Jack was delighted to see about 60 of his fellow physicians attend and participate. What happened next can only be described as a miracle.

"Ten days later there were no tumors," Jack said. "I went to the neuroradiologist and asked him if he could recheck the films to be sure that they were, indeed, Matt's. The shunt tube was there. The dye had been injected. They were Matthew's films. The tumors were gone! I asked him how this could happen, since even an abscess would not be totally resolved in just 10 days. He said he could not

explain it." In sharing the good news, Jack sent a letter to all the physicians

and the medical staff thanking them for their help. This is how he explained the healing power of prayer to his colleagues: "For those who do believe in prayer, no explanation is necessary. For those who don't believe in prayer, no explanation will do."

In Matt's words: "I think I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I can walk. I can talk. I can see. I have good friends. I'm playing my four musical instruments. I'm taking electrical engineering courses and I'm doing well. I have my family to take care of me and a lot of people said, if my dad wasn't a doctor, I would have died."

In Jack's words: "I don't wear my religion on my shirt sleeve, and I still do not pray with my patients. However, I am being forced, not only from my own experiences, but from the science of prayer, to encourage more patients to pray. I am a fan of Larry Dossey's work on prayer. Did I tell you that in 2004, Matt graduated with a master's in electrical engineering from the University of Michigan just before Christmas and took a job with General Electric in Cincinnati? Not bad for a kid with ten major operations who was told five times he wouldn't make it through the night, spent 1.5 years out of 3 in the hospital, and had a tracheostomy for 3 years and a feeding tube in his stomach for 1.5 years! Truly, a miracle."

My advice to your students: Attitudes, beliefs, friends, and strangers (all unknowingly) play a role in survival and recovery. Be positive. Do not dwell on the negative. Ask for and focus on recovery. It will be given to you. Life can change in a mere instant. Don't look forward and don't look back. Enjoy what you have and be thankful for everything. See the sunrise. Smell a rose. Experience a hug, and ask God for help when you need it."

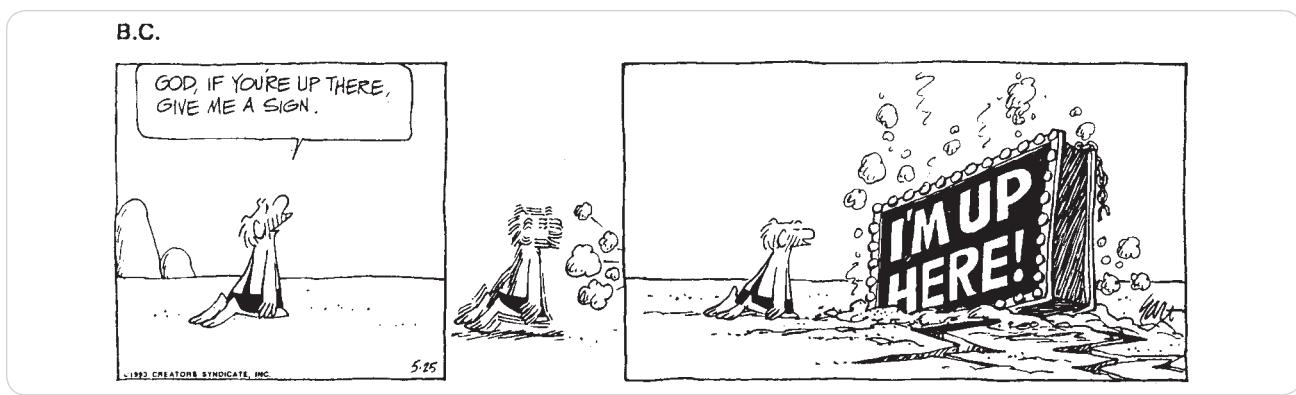


as a form of energetic consciousness. In simple truth, all thoughts are prayers.

Of Prayer and Meditation

There is a joke by comedian Lily Tomlin that goes like this: How come when we talk to God, it's called praying, but when God talks to us, it's called schizophrenia? To some, prayer and meditation may be the same activity, but in the strictest sense, they are not. As you will see

in Chapter 18, meditation is a clearing of the mind to gain insight and wisdom. Praying, specifically intercessory prayer, is more of a soliloquy. As the expression goes, praying is when we talk to God, meditation is when God talks to us. Indeed, there are times when prayer and meditation may seem the same, and this is all right. However, to those who study the art and science of meditation, there are significant differences, and the two should never be considered to be the same.

**FIGURE 16.6**

(Reprinted with permission from Johnny Hart and Creators Syndicate, Inc.)

Research on Prayer and Faith

With regard to scientific inquiry, there is no lack of studies on the healing power of prayer, particularly in the past two decades. As mentioned in Chapter 7 with regard to Einstein's view of spirituality, the most famous study on prayer was conducted by Randolph Byrd involving prayers for cardiac patients. Shying away from the word *pray*, researchers have coined the more scientific term "intercessory distant healing." To date, Byrd's study has been replicated several times (Sicher and Targ, 1998; Harris et al., 1999), showing statistical significance beyond pure chance.

A recent investigation into the efficacy of prayer by Herbert Benson and colleagues (2006) at Harvard Medical Center found that intercessory prayer had no effect on cardiac bypass patients. Conversely, David Hodge from Arizona State University compiled empirical data from more than 17 recent studies on intercessory prayer. Based on 12 criteria, he concluded that as an experimental intervention, prayer indeed had a small but significant effect. Prayer as a mode of compassionate intentionality is now being studied by several researchers including Marilyn Schlitz of the Institute of Noetic Sciences and Lynn McTaggart, author of the book *The Intention Experiment* (2007). You can visit McTaggart's Web site and participate in this worldwide study by going to www.theintentionexperiment.com.

Some scientists remark that if divine intervention is scientifically valid some of the time, why not all of the time? Perhaps the answer is found in the standard joke: When you pray to God and your prayer isn't answered, it isn't that God didn't hear you. It's just that the answer was "No!"

Are people who pray more healthy? As usual with research studies, there is proof that lines up on both sides of the argument. A 2008 study conducted by Gonnerman and colleagues at the University of Northern Iowa found that people who attended church services were more likely to be healthy (e.g., not suffering from loneliness, depression, or insomnia) than those who did not. A study by Pressman found similar results nearly two decades earlier in 1990. Keeping in mind that science and religion have been at odds for several hundred years, these findings came under much scrutiny. In his book *The Faith Factor*, Matthews cites habitual attendance at church or synagogue as a factor that promotes health. Although these findings suggest that a strong relationship with the divine is certainly healthy, skeptics argue that religious behavior (attendance) itself and not belief per se, as well as the support of friends in church and marital status, are the true health factors. As was also mentioned in Chapter 7, religious practices are easy to measure, but spirituality is not. There are those who are spiritual but not religious, and there are those who are religious but not spiritual.

Prayers for Non-Believers

Are people who are less than sure about a higher power, or who perhaps don't believe in a divine source, divinely disadvantaged in times of stress? Perhaps not (**FIG. 16.6 ▲**). There is no research that suggests that **agnostics** (those who don't know) and **atheists** (those

Agnostics: Individuals who do not know if there is a higher source.

Atheists: Individuals who do not believe in a higher source.

who don't believe in a higher source) fall dead at an earlier age or are prone to lifelong chronic illnesses. More than likely the conversation in their heads resembles a style of nonscripted prayer that might be heard in the heads and hearts of believers in a higher power. Just as no religion has a monopoly on *the* style of prayer that gets the best results, people of strong faith are not necessarily at an advantage. Remember that coping with stress involves changing perceptions that are threatening. Prayer (in whatever form, whether it be a Hail Mary or a positive affirmation) is a way in which to allay the fear involved. Similarly, faith for believers is trust in the unknown, whereas faith for non-believers may be viewed as an internal locus of control. Like prayer, faith is subjective, meaning that it comes from a personal experience, not something learned in a book. Intention is paramount.

Ways to Pray

Is there a right way to pray? Perhaps! You may ponder this very question should you feel at times that your prayers have not been answered. Author Sophie Burnham (*The Path of Prayer*) states that the style of communication is very important in the process of prayer. Burnham hypothesizes that people are rarely taught to pray correctly, and she offers the following guidelines to practice this coping skill most effectively so that these thoughts may be received as intended.

1. *Clear transmission* of prayer thoughts is crucial to delivery of the message. A mind cluttered with several thoughts is analogous to a radio tuned to static. Clearing your mind of all thoughts save that which necessitates attention is imperative to the prayer process. There is no sacred place to pray. It may help to find a quiet spot, but temples, churches, and mosques are no better a conduit for this form of communication than your bedroom, shower, or car.
2. Prayers, Burnham explains, must be expressed in the *present tense*. With divine energy, as expressed by Jung as the collective unconscious, by Einstein as the cosmos, or by whatever term you wish to use, time does not exist. It is a human-made concept, a fabrication of the human mind. Therefore, past tense and future tense are not understood.

Prayers as thought forms must be expressed in the present moment.

3. Burnham writes that prayers must be phrased in a *positive context* and not a negative one. The universe, she states, does not understand the words *not*, *can't*, and *don't*. When a prayer such as "Don't let me do badly on this exam" is expressed in negative terms, it is interpreted as "let me do badly on this exam." Similarly, the unconscious mind does not recognize negative words. Stress therapist Joan Borysenko tells a story of an Australian friend who lost a leg to bone cancer and who was subsequently given a few months to live. Twenty years later this gentleman is enjoying life to the fullest. She explained that his coping mechanism focused on positive rather than on negative thoughts; instead of thinking, "I can't die," he thought, "I must live." Like Burnham, Borysenko insists that the unconscious mind does not recognize negative verbs.

Burnham adds to this list that special attention be made to notice the response. She says that in many cases people ignore or deny the response because the prayer or the timing of it was not answered to one's liking. One's style of prayer may be a function of one's personality type. Research by the Spindrift Organization in Salem, Oregon, suggests that introverts and extroverts tend to organize their prayer thoughts in different ways (Sweet, 2007). The prayer style of extroverts tends to be more goal oriented, while introverts are noted as being more general (e.g., Thy will be done, or go with the flow), with both styles showing effectiveness.

There are those who hesitate to include prayer as a viable coping strategy because they believe that it nurtures false (negative) hope and perhaps even encourages an external locus of control, both of which are thought to negate the premise of positive coping techniques. However, it is held by those who do believe in prayer as a viable coping strategy that it can draw upon those inner resources that contribute to dealing with stress successfully. In the words of Jackson H. Brown, "Do not pray for things, but rather pray for wisdom and courage." When prayer is used as a means to strengthen faith and provide hope, it can be an effective coping mechanism; in the words of John F. Kennedy, "*God's work must truly be our own.*"

SUMMARY

- No one strategy works for all people in all situations to cope effectively with the causes of stress. In many cases, several coping techniques should be used together.
- For a coping technique to be effective, it must do one or all of the following: increase awareness of the cause of stress, help process information about the stressor, and adjust attitude and possibly behavior to work toward a peaceful resolution.
- Information seeking is a coping technique that helps to increase awareness of facts regarding the problem at hand.
- Social orchestration is called the path of least resistance. The purpose of this technique is to favorably alter specific factors in your environment to minimize stress, or change environments completely if current conditions are deleterious to your health.
- When people bond together in times of trouble, they are better able to cope with the problems at hand. There is mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual strength in numbers. Social-support groups provide coping that individuals cannot generate themselves.
- Avoidance is considered a negative coping technique; however, to step outside your problems for a short while to gain a better perspective on them is thought to be quite healthy. Hobbies can be used as positive diversion tactics that allow for a healthy release from daily stressors. When approached in this way, hobbies can contribute to self-esteem, which then transfers to other areas of one's life.
- Stress can induce a sense of personal violation. Harboring feelings of resentment and anger is a means

of maintaining control over someone we feel has unjustly attacked us. But when feelings of anger are not released correctly, they become toxic. Forgiveness allows these feelings to be released so that a peaceful resolution is the final outcome.

- Dream therapy—the practice of dream seeding and dream interpretation to find answers to problems and decode the meaning of dream symbols and images, respectively—is a cognitive technique that has been employed since ancient times. The use of dreams to resolve problems with the help of the unconscious mind continues to be used and explored in the field of psychology as a means to deal with stress.
- Prayer, the original chat room, is one of the oldest coping techniques known to humankind.
- Although there are many different ways to pray, intercessory prayer is the most common type in times of crisis.
- Prayer and meditation are not the same thing.
- Several research studies on the topic of prayer reveal a statistical significance with intention, particularly relative to aspects of health and healing.
- Although there is no one way to pray, suggestions for intercessory prayer are similar if not identical to mental imagery (Chapter 20).
- The relationship between stress and spirituality is gaining more and more attention in the allied health fields. Prayer is defined as a thought form directed toward divine consciousness. In more subtle terms, prayer is a request to nurture our self-reliance.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. How does information seeking both reduce and promote stress?
2. Why are support groups thought to enhance coping skills?
3. How do hobbies help one to reduce stress?
4. Why is forgiveness considered an effective coping skill?
5. How can dream therapy help one reduce stress?
6. Why is prayer considered an effective coping technique?