

The background of the entire image is a close-up, high-resolution shot of numerous jelly beans. Most of the jelly beans are a vibrant yellow, while one single, dark red jelly bean stands out prominently in the lower-left quadrant. The lighting is bright, creating soft highlights and shadows on the smooth, glossy surface of the beans.

# Go Suck a Lemon

Strategies for Improving  
Your Emotional Intelligence

Michael Cornwall PsyD PhD

# Go Suck a Lemon: Strategies for Improving Your Emotional Intelligence

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## Personal Reflection Statement

MY PRIMARY OBLIGATION IS TO RESPECT THE INTEGRITY and promote the welfare of all individuals, families and groups. When discussing particular individuals and my experiences with them, I must take precautions to protect them from any harm resulting from that discussion. Unless agreed upon by a party, I have taken every precaution to disguise the identity of the individuals discussed in this manuscript. Any data derived from a client relationship and used in this manuscript has been disguised so that the informed client's identity is fully protected. Any data which could not or was not disguised was authorized by the individual's informed and un-coerced consent.

# Dedication

ALBERT “AL” ELLIS (SEPTEMBER 27, 1913 – JULY 24, 2007) was an American psychologist who in 1955 developed rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT). He held M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in clinical psychology from Columbia University and was a member of the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). He founded and was the president emeritus of the New York City–based Albert Ellis Institute. He is generally considered to be the originator of the cognitive revolutionary paradigm shift in psychotherapy and the founder of cognitive–behavioral therapies. Based on a 1982 professional survey of U.S. and Canadian psychologists, he was considered the second most influential psychotherapist in history. (Carl Rogers ranked first in the survey; Sigmund Freud was ranked third.) Prior to his death, *Psychology Today* described Albert Ellis as the greatest living psychologist.





# Foreword

MANY OF THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES to the issues you face in your life, regardless of how much strength you've given them through experience, can be brought down, deconstructed and reshaped. You will just have to learn how to give your knee-jerk response to emotional stimuli less strength – LESS OF A JERK. To do that you will have to commit to reinventing the way you think and behave. You will approach that task by accepting and then adapting to a no-nonsense style of emotional problem solving. You will learn and use a process of level-headed decision-making. You will try to become more efficient, flexible and open-minded when addressing your emotional problems. You will know that there is always another emotional option. You will make fact–

based observations, something most of us are unfamiliar with doing; and, you will incorporate in vivo (in life) exposure, i.e., homework, to encourage you to independently act against your learned thoughts and behaviors.

In the end, you will become more informed, increasingly more capable and far more emotionally self-reliant. Instead of being your own worst enemy, you will become your own best friend, your own therapist.

We may be strengthened when we learn to be emotionally self-reliant, to free ourselves from emotional helplessness and our dependence on others for our emotional solutions.

It will take the force of will to do that.

\* \* \* \*

Since writing *Go Suck a Lemon* and

publishing it in 2010, I have lived and learned and kept notes. That in mind, I decided to edit the Lemon to include a number of observations I believe will help my readers better grasp the emotional intelligence (EI) concepts I write about.

I am aware that this book is used in classrooms and I hope this new version will be more useful for your purposes. I want to thank everyone who has supported the Lemon over the years, particularly my friends in Wisconsin who have been sucking lemons since it was first published. Your support and encouragement have meant a great deal to me. I also want to thank my critics for, without your criticism, this second edition would not have been necessary.



# Introduction

THERE IS NO ESCAPING emotional hardship. If you're lucky, emotion, in all of its glory, will always be a part of your life. Emotion is what makes us human, gives us drive to succeed, pause for thought, connects us to one another. Art, music and murder depend on it.

No book, technique or person who claims to offer safety from emotional hardship will ever fulfill that promise. You will always have ups and downs, good times and bad. Each time you experience some level of adversity, however, you can view it as a disaster, an impediment or an opportunity.

Mental health is not achieved by seeking perfect emotional balance. Instead, we may seek to adapt to emotional imbalance. We may start by

defining happiness as a combination of failures and successes, joys and sorrows. Expect that things will sometimes not go your way and know in advance that you can and will stand it.

Your definition of happiness is entirely up to you.

It has always been up to you.

Much of how you respond to life is very much potentially under your control. If you don't approach each day with that confidence, your emotional life may be quite impulsive, externally influenced, a powerless journey that relies on how you are treated, always vulnerable to what happens to you. But if you know where your emotions live, and you learn how take charge of them, to make them work for you instead of against you, you could knock on the door of your emotional mind

and have a chat. The first thing you might say is, “We’ve not formally met, but I’m about to take control.”

The experience of emotional hardship is not a time for being impulsive, relying on taking direction from others or simply doing what you’ve always done. It is a time for thinking clearly and planning. That is only possible if you know how your emotions are brought to life and how well you have gotten to know and understand them.

Time is an astonishing treatment for emotional difficulties.

Do you remember your first love?

In high school, perhaps?

If you’re like most of us, it was a whirlwind, 3.5–day romance, filled with your commitment to one another, together, FOREVER!



You imagined the two of you struggling to make ends meet, possibly in a run-down flat in some glamorous city. You'd be poor, but you'd be happy! After all, you had your love! No matter what happened, you knew your love would be the only food and water you would ever need, cemented together for life, nourished by your mutual embrace.

And then KAPOW!

The note, passed clandestinely in the hallway, from one friend to another, between classes.

No eye contact.

Finis!

Just like that, down the toilet.

Your life was over!

The phenomenon of losing the person of

your dreams, you believed, was an insurmountable problem unique only to you and possibly sulky, gloomy poets. You hung a new poster over your bed that read: The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.

And you cried.

Then one day you found yourself free of the burden of pining away your life in your room with your new puppy, and you wondered instead what all the fuss was about. That question became even more perplexing when you showed up at your ten-year high school reunion and saw the object of your love balancing a plate of pasta salad on his belly.

Time is never wasted on emotional problems. Time, it seems, helps us prepare for the next time shit happens. For, while you were

suffering through the loss of your first love, you were influencing, building and fine-tuning your emotional vocabulary, having an inner dialogue that was designed to help you cope with future episodes of rejection. You see, time doesn't usually erase these connections to your past. Time actually strengthens. Your thoughts become a blueprint of sorts, charting the course for how you will behave in similar situations later in life. The inner dialogue you may have had after losing your first love might resemble text messaging with yourself:

He broke up with me.

I can't stand it.

It's horrible.

I don't know what to do!

I must be too ugly.

I should get my hair cut.

My acne was out of control.

I need to lose 20 pounds.

Then I will be perfect.

He will wish he didn't break up with me.

I'm going to ask Mom if I can have implants!

I will need 'em if I want to make him feel like shit.

That is totally a plan!

Depending on what you attributed the rejection to, you developed an emotional text, a self-talk dialogue representing what you will do next time someone rejects you. And you cemented it in your mind through repetitious thought. Your self-talk became very logical to you, because you told yourself the same thing so many times it just

took on a dimension of logic through reiteration and echo. In the above case, the person associated appearance with being rejected.

Just like text messaging, there will always be a trace of the text left somewhere on your internal hard drive. For example, the person in the above dialogue may, when establishing future intimate relationships, attempt to portray a perfect appearance, using old texts to navigate present challenges and overcome immediate difficulties. *If I look perfect, I cannot be rejected. If I am rejected I must not have been perfect enough.* Although some self-talk is not likely to result in achieving the intended goal or overcoming the adversity, it is, after all, the only text available at the moment to meet the challenge.

Not even shredding will destroy whole text

beyond all recovery. Likewise, improving your EI will not eliminate any of the emotional texts you now use to address the particular issues you face in your life. You will have to review what you now have stored and make rational judgments about its value to solving your present emotional difficulties.

You will have to learn to think twice.

Your original texts may always be there. They don't, however, have to be the text you continue to use to guide your emotional responses. You can always rethink your emotional texting and you can add new text.

As a lecturer, I regularly tell my audience, to their surprise and amusement, that mental health treatment is best applied to those who are not particularly in need of it. The best place for happy,

content people is in therapy! The therapy couch is NOT a place set aside exclusively for the anxious, depressed or angry!

Are you happy?

Make an appointment with a therapist.

Think about it.

Have you ever tried to teach new skills to someone who is in an emotional crisis? Playing old texts over and over? Using the same self-talk? Playing the same tapes? It's like when a computer gets a virus and the screen starts rolling thousands of messages across your monitor and you can't shut them off. Do disturbed people listen to reason? Do angry people want to actually solve problems? What, pray tell, could anyone have ever said to help you adjust to losing your first love? And we wonder why medication is our first option when

seeing people in therapy. We must prepare for emotional hardship if we are going to confidently and successfully meet the challenge.

I am a firm believer in strengthening one's coping skills before those skills are actually needed. The worst time to prepare for a computer virus is when the computer is infected.

As a culture, we don't adequately prepare our young ones for misfortune and hardship. In fact, we do what we can to shield our children from the unfortunate side of life; making reality even more of a shocker later on.

Emotional adversity will likely to be part of your life until the end of your days. There is no way to escape unhappiness, in all of its emotional forms. We will be better served by preparing for it; building coping skills that will be available when



life isn't going as well as we had planned.

STOP! avoiding and reacting to adversity.

PREPARE! for it.

I will be most happy when, somewhere on this planet, a therapist has the following dialogue with a client, "What brings you in today?"

"Well, doc, I am as happy as a clam."

"OK, so you've never been happier?"

"You bet'cha!"

"Great! Let's begin."

"I'm ready!"

The best way out is always through.

Improvement in your EI may provide you with the tools you will need to navigate that path.

It will, however, take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter One

## Something Truer

I RECEIVED MY UNDERGRADUATE education in English. I fancied myself a fiction writer. Soon after graduation I realized that I had taken a degree in nothing more than a dream; so, to get better in touch with my dreams, I logically pursued my graduate education in psychology. Where else are dreams more examined than by a psychologist in active practice? Given that a majority of psychological theory is a product of fiction and dreams, I rarely run out of things to write about.

I studied counseling theory, particularly the interpretation of dreams and any hidden motivations I may have had for wanting to

be a writer. I discovered that I didn't have any hidden motivations. Sometimes it simply is what it is and there is nothing more to it. I did, in the process, discover a theory of helping that I liked more than any other of the more than 700 + established theories of psychotherapy. Rational emotive behavior theory (REBT) provided me with the most personal value. REBT helped me understand myself. To that end, I attended a conference in Chicago, my last year of graduate school, organized to train new practitioners in the effective and professional use of REBT. While I waited for everyone to be seated, and the conference to get started, I remember hearing a commotion in the back of the room.

“It's him.”

“It's Al.”

“Look, it’s him!”

“That isn’t him.”

“Yes it is!”

I turned to see a small, very thin and frail man heading up the aisle, carrying a can of juice and a cookie wrapped in cellophane. He didn’t really say nor do anything unusual, but everything about him provoked an emotional reaction in me. Grumpiness wafted after him like dust. He grinned, but his grin was somewhat sinister, boyish. His long nose and horn rimmed glasses made him look unapproachable, yet he shook hands with those who reached out to welcome him, showing a certain measure of enthusiasm and caring. The man could have passed for a janitor, the guy who adjusts the audio–visual equipment or the president of some small,

impoverished eastern European nation. He was no one and everyone, all at the same time. His clothing was disheveled, pants pulled up well past his hips, close to the collar of his shirt, and he was hunched over, as if carrying a huge bundle of kindling in a bunch on his back. He ascended the single step to the stage, carefully shuffled across to his seat and sat down in front of the assembled audience. He paused for a moment, squinting through his glasses at everyone in attendance, as if looking painfully into the sun. He tapped the microphone, pushed his glasses up closer to his eyes, leaned to one side and farted!

“How dreadful!”

“Is this a serious person?”

“What kind of crackpot is this?”

He continued squinting over his

glasses, while inspecting the microphone and looking out over the crowd gathered in his honor. In his nasally New York accent, he grouched, If I have a seizure, someone come up here and feed me this juice and tapped the tin can with his yellowing fingernail.

It was 1992.

His name was Albert Ellis.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Ellis (who liked to be called Al) was fond of quoting Epictetus by saying as repeatedly reminding his listeners that *People are disturbed NOT by things but by their VIEW of things*. He is also remembered for his overuse of the word *fuck*. He used it in diverse and mixed company as a noun, an adjective, a verb and an adverb.

According to Al, people possess a fucking innate human potential for deciding their fucking emotions. He stressed that this innate human potential was a product of humankind's ability to think about h/er own thinking. This innate ability, however, is frequently left undeveloped in most people. Instead, we believe our emotions are fixed and the product of how events unfold or how we are treated by other people, making emotion something outside our control. Instead of taking responsibility for our own emotions, we want to whine and complain about how other people have to change for us to be content in our own lives. Al grumped and grouched, "People don't just get upset. They contribute to their own fucking upset-ness. They always have the power to think, and to think about their thinking,



and to think about thinking about their thinking, which the goddamn dolphin, as far as we know, can't do. Therefore they have much greater ability to change themselves than any other animal has, and I hope that REBT teaches them how to do that."

He made exaggerated squeaky and whiney sounds to emphasize his points. "There are three basic musts that hold us back," he said, "I must do well; you must treat me well and the world must be easy. We'd better work hard on getting rid of those ideas. We'd better do something about that," he said.

It was an idea worth pursuing, I thought.

\* \* \* \*

Over the course of that weekend in

Chicago, Al shared his bodily gases and unapologetically used cuss words to describe everything from his childhood, his inability early in life to get a date and his lifetime of precarious physical health. Later, as a newly-minted therapist in eastern Kentucky, I decided that, in order to practice Al's REBT more authentically, I would have to say fuck as regularly as he did. No experience left more of an impression on me than when a man and his wife came for marriage counseling.

The man was well over six feet tall, died black hair, three piece suit, gold crucifix hanging from a chain over his polyester, blue tie. He clutched a well-worn Bible under his arm. His wife was quite plain, diminutive. Her hair was piled at least a foot in the air, making her seem a

bit taller. She stood close to her husband's shoulder, as if relying on its firmness to maintain her balance. There was no sign that there was anything askew in their relationship. They seemed like a particularly well-matched couple.

The man spoke first.

Apparently he was concerned that men were looking longingly at his wife while she shopped at the grocery store. "It makes me angry," he said, looking at his knees. He hinted that the only solution to his problem was divorce.

It was tough for me to generate discussion with this man and his wife. If I asked a question, they looked at each other, shrugged, and then back at their laps.

No answer.

I thought, considering their obvious

religious convictions and their apparent affinity for one another, the man had some very strong beliefs about how women should behave in the presence of their husbands' (and vice versa) beliefs that were so strongly held these same beliefs would lead the man to conclude that divorce was his only option. I talked about thinking and how thinking contributed to how we express emotions. I talked about getting in touch with thoughts and how doing that would reveal the information we would need to address the problems they faced. *What were you saying to yourself when you noticed men looking at your wife in the grocery store? What was your self-talk?* I talked about how we could change our thinking, by changing our self-talk and, by doing so change our emotions.

“We can feel better. We just have to

think better,” I stressed.

The man said, “I don’t want to feel better when men look at my wife.”

“How would you like to feel?”

“I would like them to stop doing it.”

“Is there anything you can do to stop it?”

“Yeah, we can go our separate ways. I ain’t living with that.”

“Is there no other solution?”

“Nope.”

I tried to stimulate more discussion about thinking, self-talk and perception. (Al’s therapy endorsed the idea that if we can create emotional events in the therapy session, gather in-vivo, real-time thoughts, the client would provide more useful information than just relying on h/er

memory.) My goal, at that moment, was to encourage the man and the woman to locate their thoughts, but it wasn't going well. I chose to use a technique where I would say various words, and they would just tell me what their immediate thought was in relation to those words. That way they could be guided into hearing their self-talk. I used words like home, love, church and meatloaf.

“How about the word *fuck*?

They seemed unperturbed. After a few seconds, however, the man said, “Mister, my thoughts is that if you say that ag'in, we'll be leavin'. Me and her don't talk like that.”

“Great! What else do you say to yourself when you hear that word? Do you tell yourself that you can't stand it when I say that? Do you tell yourself that I have no right to say that

word? Do you tell yourself that people should live according to your rules so that you can be happy? How about you might tell yourself that you can't stand it when men look at your wife in the meat section of the grocery store and that because you can't stand it, they should stop doing it. Do you tell yourself that people should live by your rules and forfeit their own just so you can be happy?"

"I don't think we think all that. We just think you shouldn't talk to us that way. That's about it."

I turned to the man's woman. "What about you? Do you find the word fuck offensive? Do you think I should stop saying it simply because you don't like it? Do you think I should live by your husband's rules? How about what you think, eh? How about your thoughts about how

men look at you in the grocery store? Do you have any ideas on the issue?" The woman recoiled, as if I had sprayed her with a water gun.

"I done toll'd you, mister," the man said. He stood and ushered his wife to the door. "We thank you for your time. We wish you a fine day."

I learned that day that REBT is easy to practice poorly.

\* \* \* \*

Working in eastern Kentucky presented me with many REBT learning opportunities, especially where language was concerned, and its extraordinary potential to offer so many unexpected twists and turns. I learned primarily that we should never assume we are being understood or that we understand. For instance, in



addition to my job as a therapist, I was also tasked with investigating allegations of maltreatment of children. Our office regularly received anonymous calls from concerned citizens who, ostensibly, hoped to report occurrences of abuse and neglect they had either heard about, saw firsthand, or simply imagined. In truth, a majority of the callers were unhappy with their neighbors for one reason or another and used our office to settle the score. In one particular case, the caller reported a mother of two children who wasn't feeding them.

“She never feeds them?” I asked.

“Nope,” the caller said, “Never!”

When I arrived, I was met at the door by a rotund eight-year-old boy and his equally-well-fed sister. I came inside and discussed the allegations of neglect with the children's mother.

She invited me to inspect the food in her kitchen. “C’mon in. Have a look around. See for yourself.”

I found the cabinets well—stocked and a thirty pound turkey, frozen solid, sitting in the freezer. I reached up and took a can of soup off the shelf. “I like this soup,” I said. “I buy it all the time.” Upon picking it up, I realized immediately that the can was empty, staged to look as if the contents were still inside. The bottom had been removed, the contents emptied and the can placed back in the cabinet. I reached for a box of cereal, a can of beans, a can of ravioli. Each of the containers was empty. “I don’t get it,” I said, looking into an empty can of Spaghettios.

“Well,” the mother said, “we eat hot meals at the corner grocery twiced a day. They take our stamps down there. They cook better than

I do.”

“Why do you put these empty containers in your cabinet?”

“For people like you comin’ around snoopin’ and passin’ judgment. Makin’ me think I’m a bad momma and a bad person. Takes me a week to get over how bad you people make me feel.”

Hearing that the woman believed that I was responsible for how she felt, and obviously didn’t know it was her thinking that made her feel that way, I felt my therapist antennae rise up through the back of my head and I launched right into my role as an REBT therapist.

“What do you tell yourself when people like me come snoopin’ around? Do you tell yourself that if I think you are a bad mother that you truly are a bad mother? Do you tell yourself that

my opinion of you outweighs your own opinion of yourself? Aren't you responsible for your own thoughts and emotions?"

The mother pulled her children close to her hips. "What in hell are you talking about?" The three of them looked at me as if I were speaking French.

"If you think about it, you will quickly realize that I don't make you feel. You make yourself feel by what you tell yourself about me and what I'm doing."

"Are we done? You're scaring the children."

"I guess you don't get it?"

"No. Do I have to? Is that another one of your tricks?"

"HMMMMMMMM . . . so, anyway, why do

you think someone would call social services and report you for not feeding your children?”

“They’re jealous of my suit case.”

“Your suitcase?”

“Yeah, I got a suit case down at the courthouse and they’re just jealous of it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not following.”

“I got a suit case. Ain’t you never heard of a suit case? From a car wreck. I could get \$5,000.00 from my neck. They’re just jealous.”

“Oh, you have a lawsuit.”

“No, honey, I got a suit case.”

It will be important to remember, as we progress toward improved emotional intelligence (EI), that language plays such an important role in how we understand one another, and how we interpret the actions we take and

observe other people taking, that the slightest change in inflection, twist of meaning or misunderstanding in pronunciation can present a number of unexpected emotional and behavioral challenges. We should never expect that anyone will immediately make the connection between their thoughts and their feelings without first committing to a great deal more explanation than I was, so far, used to providing.

It would take me the force of will to change that.



# Chapter Two

## Self-Talk

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING is a process for acquiring life skills, primarily skills in cooperation, collaboration (and, at some point, copulation) in a manner familiar to others, to achieve a personal or group goal. Unfortunately, most social and emotional learning takes place within the confines of a single culture, making the acquisition of a broader appreciation of social skills more difficult to attain, prior to adult independence.

Like most of us, my own social-emotional education began at birth; and, like most of us, seemed to pick up steam in elementary



school, where I learned that burping loudly in the lunchroom, eating chalk, throwing burrs onto woolen hats, clowning and teasing could set people ablaze with emotional color merely by fine-tuning my skills at needling, nettling, nudging, peeving, perturbing, pestering, plaguing, provoking, riding, riling, teasing, ruffling feathers and, notably, pushing buttons!

“You really know how to push my buttons!”

“Stop doing that! You’re making me nervous.”

“You’re a bad boy!”

At the doctor’s office, for example, I watched as children waited for their vaccinations, bee stings, they were euphemistically called. These bee stings seemed to have a unique,

distinctive effect on each child. Some children were stunned with fear, crying and pleading. Some bargained; some implored. Some played with toys, while others slept. Always on the lookout for evidence of my sister's weaknesses, and making a careful accounting of her fears, I was delighted to watch as she bolted upright, eyes bulging from her head, frozen with fear simply at the sound of her own name coming from the nurse. (To this day I cannot imagine why anyone would tell a child something felt only like a bee sting, to calm them before an injection. As if the similarity between an injection and a bee sting would somehow help reduce or even eliminate a child's anxiety.)

The House of Horrors at Nantasket Beach was an opportunity for me to be on the receiving end of the needling, nettling, nudging,

peevish, perturbing, pestering, plaguing,  
provoking, riding, riling, ruffling feathers, teasing  
and button pushing.

*Come on, it will be fun.*

The clown's big, plastic left eye was  
hanging over its laughing rouged cheek, bobbing  
back and forth, keeping time with its pink, slick  
tongue.

*I don't wanna.*

I noticed very keenly how boys my  
same age went willingly inside, not even  
hesitating, grinning at me as they ran up the metal  
ramp and into the dark black hole that served as  
both the clown's mouth and the entrance to evil.  
Why couldn't I go inside and have as much fun as  
everyone else, welcoming this fear-filled event  
like my friends did, enjoying the experience rather

than being terrorized by it?

*You're just a scaredy cat.*

I particularly remember baseball. By no stretch of the imagination should I have ever been allowed (by anyone concerned with my safety) to play any game involving distance and a ball. I was so near-sighted I couldn't distinguish a ball that was heading for my face from one a mile above my head. Each time I took my turn at bat, already having convinced myself that I would never hit the ball anyway, I watched as the Killian brothers sat on the bench and, as if synchronized, put their arms over each other's shoulders and began to cry, while my father watched it all from the sidelines.

REBT proposes that emotion is the language of the mind, a language learned through

exposure and repeated experience, shaped by thought and expressed through behavior. Each of the social-emotional learning experiences I've described from my own life, therefore, contributed bit-by-bit to my knowledge of myself and the world in which I lived, up until that point. Upon reaching my teenage years, I had assimilated to believing that:

- Fear is a weakness and should be denied, especially in boys.
- Boys behaved differently than girls. (Unlike girls, behaving fairly, considerately, apologetically or gently was viewed as a serious, shameful oversight of my masculine accountability.)
- My grades, I learned, were a true and accurate reflection of my intelligence and,

by default, my human worth.

- Athletic ability, it turns out, was the only true measure of a man.
- Being popular among my peers was the only way to measure the value of friendship. If I wasn't popular, I wasn't valuable.
- Praise meant I was good.
- Disapproval meant I was bad.
- If you are different, keep it a secret. If anyone knows you are different, you will be scorned and disliked and you wouldn't be able to stand that.
- To be perceived as normal, remind yourself of the statements above. Improve upon them and make those beliefs stronger and more enduring.

None of it, true; all of it very true to

me, nonetheless. Truth, of course, had nothing to do with how I was growing, developing and learning how to navigate the world in which I lived. After all, I was on track to becoming an All-American boy. To survive, to live happily, however, I would need to learn something truer.

\* \* \* \*

That weekend in Chicago with Al, I learned that social-emotional learning was a process of acquiring and assimilating to a set of absolute musts, rules acquired through experience, and that most absolute musts were not only unconditional but were also self-defeating, likely to lead to unhealthy emotions. By absolute and unconditional, Al meant that we didn't allow any freedom in the rules we applied to ourselves and others in our daily living.

Things must be this way as a condition of my happiness. If they are not, then I cannot be happy. Al asked everyone to list their most emotionally damaging absolute and unconditional musts. I came to refer to my absolute, unconditional musts as my ten essential demands:

- People must never disagree with me.
- To be content in life, I must be approved of by all people at all times.
- I must be involved in an intimate relationship to be viewed as lovable.
- I must be loved to be of any value.
- I must succeed to be viewed as good; if I fail, I must be bad.
- People must cooperate with me at all times under all conditions.
- People who refuse to cooperate with me



must be ridiculed and damned.

- I must get what I want immediately and when I don't I can't stand it.
- I can't stand it when I cannot stand it; and, so, I must not stand what I cannot stand; and, finally,
- If it were true then, it must always be true.

Needless to say, after uncovering these insane thoughts, along with the ones I already knew about, these thoughts I carried around in my head, thoughts that influenced my ability to reason and to live contentedly among others, I set in my mind, immediately after leaving Chicago, to go to counseling.

\* \* \* \*

Conveniently, part of my clinical training in psychology required that I actually be a

client seeking help from a therapist. My program's expectation for my complete education was that a better-informed therapist would be one who knew what it was like to sit in the client's seat, to have a real-life educational experience. The experience was, as well, expected to result in providing me with some level of personal insight. I sought out a therapist to fulfill my 10-hour/10 session obligation, one who could also build on my experiences with AI and compel me to develop my rational, emotional problem solving skills. I began by registering with the student counseling center and getting a therapist assigned to me.

“Do you have a preference?” the girl asked, seated comfortably behind the desk.

“A preference?”

“Oh, most folks have a preference for a

male or a female therapist,” the girl replied. “Do you have a preference?”

“Can you recommend one?”

“Not sure I’m allowed. I think they’re all pretty much the same. Wouldn’t want to make anyone mad.” She winked and turned the pages of the appointment ledger. “Let me see who’s available. Have a seat, please. We’ll just go with the luck of the draw.”

The counseling center was as one might expect, a former Victorian style, single family home with a zillion painted-over fireplaces, retro-fitted cubby-spaces that nicely transformed the building into awkwardly meandering faculty cubes and therapy offices. Paint peeled from the ceiling and hung like stalactites. A faint, musty odor hung in the air. A bulky staircase

covered in dusty, aged yellow shag carpet hulked behind the over-sized double front doors. Posters of kittens and rainbows were stapled to the waiting room walls, imprinted with slogans like *Even if happiness forgets you a little bit; never completely forget about happiness* and *The best way to cheer yourself up is to try to cheer up someone else*. Of course, there was the old standby (the emergency poster) detailing how some ethereal being carried some guy across the beach and turned two sets of footprints into one. The coffee table was strewn with old *Cosmopolitan* magazines: *Is your Boyfriend Right for You? Find out in 5 minutes! Take the Test!* A box of Kleenex was set precisely beside each chair.

The therapist began by asking me how she could help me. Her body language was

somewhat animated, spirited, as if she were preparing to open a surprise Christmas present on her lap. “I’m not really sure,” I said, “I have this class assignment to speak with a counselor for ten hours, so here I am. Not at the same time, though. Like over ten weeks.” I handed her my assignment sheet.

“Oh, yes! How nice,” she said, handing back my form with the enthusiasm one would show when giving a dog a new toy. I moved back in my chair. “We get these all the time. I’m a student too. I’m sure we can find something to discuss. Do you have anything in mind?”

I thought for a moment, literally placing my finger on my temple. I imagined telling her about my biases, my nutty beliefs and my experiences with AI that weekend in Chicago; but

surely she already knew about Al. She was, after all, a therapist. I thought I'd just cut to the chase. "Well, I don't like it that I am losing my hair. Is that worth talking about?"

The therapist kept her eyes on me, while reaching for a nearby box of Kleenex, "That is something," she said and cleared her throat, "How does that make you feel?" She handed me the box. I thought, 'What happened to Al's ideas about how people make themselves feel? Why was this therapist asking me how my hair made me feel? Shouldn't I be focusing on my thoughts and what I was telling myself about my hair? Like, isn't it truer that I was telling myself I need approval and that having a bald head subjected me to disapproval? Wasn't I telling myself that I couldn't stand that? Isn't it truer that my problems were a

result of me telling myself that I cannot live happily unless people approve of me? I wanted a therapist like Al, someone who could help me take responsibility for my own thoughts and feelings. Someone who would say to me, “It’s not your hair that makes you feel, it’s the view you take of people who disapprove of you. If you want to change of your feelings about disapproval, you will have to change your thoughts about your need for approval. If you think you need approval, you will act like a nut when you don’t get it.”

This person was talking like a nut! This therapist was trying to tell me that my emotions came from how people appraised and appreciated me. I remembered that Al said, just before leaving that weekend in Chicago, that the saner I got the more I would realize that most

people were nuts. Did he mean therapists, too? Was there nothing sacred? Regardless, I fell for the therapist's questions. "I feel like an old guy," I said, "Like, I'm only 23, but I feel like I look 53."

"You look wonderful." She leaned forward and grasped my hand, "You're a very handsome man . . . boy. Have you thought of wearing a cap?"

"Not really. I sweat a lot."

She lowered her voice to a whisper, "How about a nice hairpiece? I hear Hair Club for Men performs miracles."

"Yeah, but I'm 23."

She leaned forward, as if preparing to tell me I had twelve minutes to live. She looked around, then back at me and spoke even more softly. "You have a self-esteem problem. The first



thing we have to do is get you to a place where you don't care what people think of your hair . . . lack of hair."

"Where is that place?"

"Well, silly, we have to make a list of all your positive qualities and focus more on those things than on your weaker qualities." She wrote the words GOOD and BAD at the top of her tablet and underlined them, twice. "Do you have any positive qualities?"

"I already feel pretty good about my positive qualities."

She peered at me over her glasses, troubled with my answer. "Sounds to me like you're in denial."

"Goodness, really?"

"Yes! It sounds like you might be

splitting or maybe you have like . . . a personality disorder. Sort of like maybe a dissociative identity. It's called DID. It's nothing to worry about, really." She patted my knee. "I've read about this sort of thing. I will have to consult with my clinical supervisor, but you might need more than 10 sessions. Do they let you do that?"

I remember sitting in the waiting room of the counseling center, eating my lunch, several weeks after my first session with the therapist and waiting to start my fifth or sixth session. I was reading a book on DID, astonished at the uncanny similarities between myself and the diagnosis. (Later in my education, I recognized myself in nearly any diagnosis I read about, schizophrenia, borderline personality, oppositional defiance, bipolar and, of course, attention deficit hyperactivity

disorder. You name it; I had it.) I listened to the two women sitting beside me, talking about their feelings and what one of them was doing to get over her depression.

“So what’s up now? I thought you were getting better,” one of them asked.

“No, I’m still getting depressed.”

“Again?”

“Yeah,” the other responded, evidently dejected and unhappy.

“What happened to your therapist?”

“He broke up with me,” she said, reaching for something in her purse. She offered her friend a mint. “He said I made him feel anxious.”

“That’s OK. You’re cute. They’ll assign you a new one.” She accepted the mint and

popped it into her mouth.

“Yeah, I hope they assign me that new one, the young guy with the great hair.”

They both looked in my direction and smiled, simultaneously.

Just as Al had predicted, the saner I wanted to become, the less sanity, it seemed, I was seeing in the people around me. I suddenly realized I was alone in my journey! I cancelled my appointment.

\* \* \* \*

That weekend in Chicago with Al, he talked a lot about how we use our inner language, with limited variability, to determine how we will feel, from the death of a loved one to lying, being ridiculed, being bald, stealing, being in love, getting a failing grade, cheating and social

injustice. And we have emotional expectations of each other, because most of us speak a similar emotional language. The key to improvement in EI, however, is the development of new and improved self-talk, which is very much like learning a new language.

My first day of high-school French, for example, was like being kicked in the throat with a Louis Vuitton.

“Bonjour classe!”

“Comment allez-vous aujourd'hui, madam?”

“D'accord. On y va!”

French was an indecipherable code; a landscape of rolling Rs, simply noise. My first reaction to the French language was to protect myself from it. To stay happily within my

American English comfort zone. I was taught through emersion, something like being dipped in French. I was expected to speak French all the time, even when I couldn't speak any French at all. When the odd occasion arose, and I was allowed to speak English, I was noticeably relieved, as if being released from confinement.

“Do you have any questions?” my French professeur would ask, after meeting with me concerning my failing grade.

“No,” I said.

“Voila! C'est finis!” she would say, placing her hands on the desk and standing, “On y va!”

I could feel the hand of the Language of Love reach over and cover my mouth. “But I'm not finished!”

“En Français,” she would immediately say, “Maintenant, en Français.”

“Ummmmmm . . . J'ai besoin de plus de temps. J'ai beaucoup plus pour parler!”

“Très bon! Mais je n'ai plus le temps. Nous pouvons parler demain. OK?”

“D'accord . . . but I don't like it.”

“En Français!”

For many of us, language brings comfort and provides safety. Language can be used to lash out at our enemies and to woo our lovers. Language can initiate war and negotiate peace. French, however, did not offer me comfort or safety. It provided confusion. I couldn't convey my emotions or express my thoughts or desires without frustration. Prior to learning to speak French, I took language entirely for granted. But learning to

speaking another language became a source of considerable frustration. I couldn't beg for a better grade, go to the boys' room, sharpen my pencil or explain my tardiness without first laboring through the rules of the French language.

“Non! Si vous plait! Je ne peux le faire plus!”

French was a challenge not only to my intellectual development, but it also impacted my social and personal growth. Trying to maintain my status as a gloomy, sullen teenager, while speaking French, was out of the question. Speaking French meant making mistakes in front of my peers; being ridiculed. If that weren't enough, I was being graded on my willingness to stand and, through trial and error, systematically make a fool of myself. All of this at a time when self-



consciousness and insecurity was the central force in my evolving development. I made no attempt to use an accent or show any level of enthusiasm. I slouched and pronounced every consonant in exactly the same way it would be pronounced by a rebellious, English-speaking young man with a troubled future.

\* \* \* \*

If you've ever tried to learn anything new at all, especially things that are intended to replace something you've been doing for a long, long time (like the language you speak); you know that it takes time, dedication and a certain amount of devotion to practice. Learning something new also takes a clear level of passion, something I intentionally removed from my French language education. I didn't want to learn to speak French. I

was happy speaking English. Everyone I knew spoke English (except for Jacques Cousteau, but at least he tried). I knew my way around English. It fit. And it didn't hurt every time I wanted to say something. Acquiring a new language of emotion, to change the way we talk to ourselves, can present many of the same challenges.

The similarities between learning to speak a foreign language and learning to hear and change your own inner language, your own self-talk will become clearer as you progress toward improving your EI. Suffice it to say, you will meet the same language barriers I described above, when you try to change your inner language and replace it with something new. The new language of your mind will all seem very foreign, but it will eventually make sense. For example you might, at

some point, hear yourself saying, “She doesn’t make me feel; I make myself feel. I can live contentedly in spite of her choice to behave badly. I can be disappointed that she has made that choice. I can be sad and I can forgive her for her choices.”

If you can train your mind to speak this way, instead of the nutty way it used to think, then you will know you’re making progress in improving your EI. In fact, if you think about it, people really have every right to behave any way they choose to behave, rightly or wrongly, goodly or badly. People don’t have to behave according to your rules and standards. They can choose their behavior and they can make poor choices. You behave the way you choose; why can’t everyone else do that?

Improvement in EI might be realized when the language of our minds, our self-talk, includes such rational thinking as, “She isn’t choosing to be very friendly, which is her right to choose. I don’t need her to be friendly. She can choose to make poor choices, and I can still be happy in my own life even though she does.”

Your emotional language dictates how you make interpretations of behavior, your own and other’s. Your interpretation is repeatedly decidedly skewed on the side of selfishness. You believe that because you want someone to behave a certain generally accepted way, it must be that way, regardless of what the other person might think. The fact of the matter is there is a point at which your emotional life ends and where another person’s emotional life begins. As a first step

toward improved EI, it might be best to recognize and appreciate that distinction.

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Your emotional language, your self-talk, ordains your emotional reaction. We regularly mistake our own rules as law, truth and fact when, in reality, they are simply our preference turned into demands and needs.

You are capable of expressing boundless emotion, nearly all of which is intentional and nearly all of it drawn from the language of your mind. There is nothing natural about fearing failure, for example. People fail, and they respond to failure from the perspective they hold about failing. Likewise, there is no evidence for feeling guilt when you make a mistake. Your feelings about mistake-making are a product of

your thinking. If you craft your emotional language in such a way as to make failure and guilt your only emotional options, these emotions will likely be your only options. You may, as well, limit your potential for living your life to its fullest. If you were raised in an environment filled with expectations of perfection, for instance, you might avoid new experiences, because new experiences require some level of risk-taking. Risk-taking increases the possibility of failure. If you believe failure is awful and horrible and that you couldn't stand it, you are likely to avoid taking risk and exploring options.

Your emotional language might guide you to equate failure with evidence of your own worthlessness: If I fail at something it can only mean one thing; I am a failure. Who would take a

risk if failure meant being labeled useless and worthless? On the other hand, if you were encouraged as a child to try new things and not to be overly concerned if things don't go as planned, you might think differently: If I fail at something it means I have learned from the experience and that I could do better next time I try it, if I choose to try it again.

If you change your emotional language, you will change your emotional response to nearly anything. That process takes time, dedication and a certain amount of devotion to practicing a new language, a new way of thinking, resulting in new and improved self-talk.

When I started challenging my own inner language, I wanted to give up, to return to what I already knew. I wasn't always as happy as I

could have been, but at least I knew my way around my old self-talk. And it didn't hurt every time I wanted to think or say something. Just like giving up your native tongue, you will cling to your learned emotional language, your self-talk, because you know it so well. You rely on your self-talk to help you through life. Your self-talk is comfortable and you will hold on to it until you are convinced that the benefit of changing it outweighs the benefit of maintaining it. You don't have a choice in how others react to you. You almost always have a choice in how you respond or don't respond to others. Your response, however, is linked strongly to your self-talk.

Although my early education in life revealed a world filled to the brim with a wide assortment of nuts, fruitcakes and people who were



bat-shit crazy, Albert Ellis taught me more durable, lasting and life-enhancing way of cooperating and collaborating with others and with myself. Al told me that if I truly wanted to improve my EI, I had to actively change the way I communicated with myself about myself and my relationships with others. I had to tell myself something different, something more fact-based, something true-er. If I really wanted to improve my EI, I had to overcome years of self-defeating thinking by taking responsibility for the emotions I produced from my own thoughts. I had to defeat the idea that any amount of needling, nettling, nudging, peeving, perturbing, pestering, plaguing, provoking, riding, riling, ruffling feathers, teasing and button pushing could have a crushing impact on my emotional state. I had to realize that I am the

principle architect of how I make myself feel. Most importantly, I had to accept reality for exactly what it was, even when reality is not pleasant, if I wanted to remain emotionally healthy.

And I learned that it would take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Three

## The Rules of Engagement

MANY OF US HAVE FALLEN INTO AN EMOTIONAL RUT. After years of living and learning, our emotional lives have become quite foreseeable, predictable, a knee-jerk reaction. We simply do what we've always done. If I am treated this way, I will act that way. And if I am treated that way, I will act this way. In fact, the repetitive nature of doing the same thing with our thinking and emoting every day strengthens those connections between how we will respond the next time something similar happens. Our response doesn't have to make sense or bring good results. It just has to have a familiar corollary to what we've

done in the past. Not only that, but our emotional responses are frequently reinforced by those around us, because, quite frankly, people tend to respond to adversity and misfortune in much the same way. There is, apparently, a language of emotion that we share not only within ourselves (our self-talk), but also between ourselves. We not only support and reinforce our own responses to hardship, but we teach each other how to respond to adversity and we strengthen each other through continuous reinforcement.

“I can’t believe he said that to me.”

“Me neither!”

“What would you have done?”

“I would have done exactly what you did.”

“Good, now I don’t feel so bad about having to do that.”

“It was the only thing you could have done.”

As we previously discussed, improvement in EI may be related to how we learn to hear our own inner language, our self-talk; but improvement may also be found in how we interpret what others tell us about what we experience and how we use that information to develop our emotional range in relation to the things we experience.

“Do you think it’s OK to feel so depressed?”

“Of course! What happened to you was awful. I don’t know how you can stand it.”

“Yes, it is awful.”

“Your feelings are very appropriate to the circumstances.”

“Yes, I thought so too. How long do you think I should feel this way?”

“No telling. You’ll have to heal and recover.”

As a therapist who speaks about the influence of self-talk on emotional health nearly every day, I have come to rely on my own self-talk to help me understand my own emotions. In my own life, I regularly try to develop more manageable ways of addressing my emotional problems, without the help and influence of others, especially if what I normally do and feel brings a lot more emotional hardship than is truly necessary. Exploring my own self-talk helps me

weigh and decide on my emotional options. If I am successful at asking myself the kinds of questions that help me get to the root of my crooked thinking, and develop my choices for overcoming my crooked thinking, I can help my clients by asking them the kinds of questions I asked myself to help me resolve my own problems. Simply, I have to live the way I hope my clients will someday live.

“What are you telling yourself? What is your self-talk?” I normally ask.

“I’m telling myself that she shouldn’t have treated me that way.”

“How do you know that? How do you know she shouldn’t have treated you that way?”

“Everyone tells me that she shouldn’t have said that to me.”

“And that makes it true?”



“Yes.”

“Is there some other way you can view this situation?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“Can you tell yourself that your friend made a poor choice in how she spoke to you? Can you tell yourself that she is a fallible human being and might make mistakes from time to time? Can you tell yourself that you can live contentedly, even when people don’t speak to you the way your prefer?”

“I guess I could.”

“What prevents you from challenging your self-talk?”

“I guess I do.”

I have found, as well, emotional disturbance can have a relationship to how we talk

to ourselves about our past.

“You are telling yourself that you should not have been treated that way?”

“Yes, it was wrong and I just can’t seem to get over it.”

“It happened ten years ago.”

“I know, but it’s just like it happened yesterday.”

“What makes it so fresh in your mind?”

“I guess I tell myself the same things about it every day and I feel the same way about it every day.”

EI theory posits that if your happiness depends on changing the past, you will remain as unchanged as your past is fated to remain. Our emotional options are just that, options. If we can explore alternatives to the emotional responses we

always use, and replace them with responses that would bring us better results, we will be improving our EI. The same goes for how we process the past through our emotional minds. It is not necessary to explain the past to understand the present. We cannot even be sure that our memories of our past are even accurate or dependable. EI can be improved when we recognize that the past only influences our present through the way we think about the past in the present. It is what we say to ourselves today that influences how we think and behave today.

“I can’t move on until I make sense of the past.”

“How will knowing the past help you?”

“I will have some answers.”

“How will finding answers in the past help

you today?”

“I won’t feel so bad about what happened to me.”

“Can you feel better without having those answers?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What if you never get the answers you are looking for?”

“I guess I’ll just have to stay miserable.”

We can only escape from our past by rejecting the messages we repeat over and over inside our own heads today. Knowing what happened in the past, knowing more about the events that brought past misfortune, will only provide unclear, undependable additional details. Knowing the motives, the particulars and the minutiae of the past will not, however, alter it in

any way. The past will remain the past, no matter how well you understand it. Not to mention that the more you know about the past, the more questions you will have about the past that you will believe you will need answered, as well.

Understanding the past is never simple.

The past has passed.

We may, instead, understand our emotional problems in the present, here-and-now. What do we tell ourselves about the past today? What can we change about what we tell ourselves today about the past?

“I’m not successful with men because my father was abusive when I was a child.”

“Is your father still abusive toward you today?”

“No, I’m 43 years old. And he died six

years ago.”

“How is your father involved in your relationships now?”

“I think about him when I’m on dates.”

“What do you say to yourself?”

“I say if he hadn’t been abusive, I wouldn’t be single. I would have more dates. I may even be married and have children.”

“Does telling yourself that story about your past help you enjoy the dates you have, today?”

“Not really. Actually, what I tell myself makes my dates pretty miserable.”

Self-talk is most often all we have to work with when attempting to resolve our emotional problems. Our self-talk is the source of our emotions. Change it, learn a new language, and you will change your emotional response to nearly

anything. We can listen to how we talk to ourselves and question the rationality of our beliefs as they exist in our thinking, now. We must learn to accept or overturn our thoughts, based on the rationality of our self-talk. And we must explore logic and reason as a sound, balanced emotional option.

“If you tell yourself you cannot be happy until you reconcile and understand your past, how likely is it that you will ever be happy?”

“Probably never, using that kind of self-talk.”

“Can you tell yourself that you can be happy, in spite of your past and the unfortunate things you experienced?”

“It will be hard.”

“Will it be as hard as living unhappily for the rest of your life?”

As you will learn later, the easiest way to reveal your damaging self-talk is to pay close attention to how you use absolute demands to describe your expectations of yourself and others. Identifying your use of the words should, ought, must, have to and need in your self-talk will go a long way to helping you identify the kind of self-talk that is in immediate need of revision. Without conscious awareness of what these words imply, and the inherent inflexibility in how we use them, our emotional options will be quite limited. Turning our inflexible demands into flexible options may result in more opportunity for change and, as a result, happiness in our lives.

Less demanding, more flexible beliefs can help improve EI by assisting you in achieving a more competent, rational method of processing



your thoughts. In addition, EI can be cultivated if you work forcefully, persuasively and vigorously against your tendency to think irrationally, using a system of logical, pragmatic evaluation of your self-talk.

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Our self-talk is frequently an expression of our beliefs. Beliefs always have the words should, ought, must, have to and need entwined within our thoughts about the events we experience. Our beliefs are habitually confused with facts. If we believe something is a fact, we will behave as if it were a fact. You should treat me with respect. You're not and that is awful is an example of a belief confused as a fact. Words like should indicate that the statement is somehow a law designed by you and that it must be upheld by

everyone with whom you come into contact. A more accurate statement may be I would prefer that you treat me with respect; but you're not and that is unfortunate. I don't like it that you're not treating me respectfully, but I can live contentedly in my life, even if I don't get your cooperation.

Removing the absolute demand from the statement (the should) and recognizing that people will behave any way they choose, even when you believe they shouldn't, will result in some lesser degree of discomfort when you don't get what you prefer, in place of what you demand.

Often our beliefs are entrenched in how we use absolute demands, the words should, ought, must, have to and need in relation to ourselves and others. She should change her behavior so that I can be happy, is yet another example of a belief

confused as fact. The reality is, she can behave any way she chooses, and I can still be content in my life. That new belief is only possible, however, if we have the skill to challenge the previous belief with a more skillful judgment of the facts. I can be happy in my life, if she behaves badly. It's not likely that I will be as happy as I could be when I am with her, but I can be tolerant and forgiving, anyway. If I think that way, instead, I will likely be sad that she behaves badly, sometimes, but I won't likely be angry.

Thinking, believing and emoting are all interrelated, joined to one another so inextricably that it is often quite difficult to tell them apart. Improved EI will include the ability to identify these corollaries and challenge their rationality and their contribution to creating the emotions we

express.

Society teaches us very early in life the rules of engagement with others within a particular culture. She won't share her toys with me. My mommy said people should share, is an example not of fact, but of social-emotional learning. She won't share her toys with me. My mommy says it is nice to share, but I can still be happy when people don't share with me is an example of more flexible rules of engagement. (Yes, we can teach these rules to children.)

We also learn early in life to describe the source of our unhappiness in terms of how other people make us feel when they break the established rules of engagement. She broke the rules and she has made me mad. I think I will pull her hair, to make her mad and then she will

cooperate with me is an example of an external focus for the source of emotions. She broke the rules and I made myself mad by telling myself that she should behave the way I demand is an example of an internal focus for the source of emotion.

To begin the process of improving your EI, you might first consider reviewing your self-talk, identifying your use of absolute demands, and becoming aware that it is not the events we experience that make us feel. It is how we process events through our brains using our self-talk and, ultimately, how willing we are to take responsibility for our emotions because, frankly, they come from our own thoughts.

Our emotions do not come from how we are treated or from other people to us. Our emotions come from how we talk to ourselves

inside our own heads, making access to more manageable emotions well within our grasp.

\* \* \* \*

Previous to my weekend in Chicago with Al, no one had ever asked me to locate the source of my emotions. It certainly never occurred to me that my emotions were almost entirely a product of my own thinking. I was under the impression that my emotions were just there, like berries on a bush, fungus on a rock, sand on the beach. They weren't exactly physical things that could be located and described through science. Emotions were instinct, hidden in the code of my DNA. My emotions came from my gut, from my heart, somewhere below my head. Al was quick to point out that my emotions came only from my thoughts and how I processed my beliefs about myself and

how I imagined I should, ought, must, have to and needed to be treated by others. If people don't drive according to the laws, I will be unhappy until they do. I will be consumed with hatred and I will be unhappy all the time. That will show them!

My emotions were not in my stomach or in my ass or in my neck. My emotions were in my head, in my thinking. My thoughts may be fleeting, or hard to pin down, but my emotions are related to my thoughts, nonetheless.

Beliefs are like viruses.

They influence nearly every emotion we have, making one irrational connection to another until our decisions are made from connecting one foolish self-statement to the next. Beliefs guide our behaviors and can impact our physical and emotional health. Like a virus, beliefs can spread,

bolstering the strength of our other beliefs. Like any virus, its potential for life depends on feeding it the right nutrients to keep it alive. Challenging irrational, unhealthy self-talk is what is needed to attack the virus, swooping in to destroy the unhealthy belief, helping us regain emotional equilibrium and health.

What would it mean to give up some of your beliefs?

As a culture, we may share many of the same dogmatic, unalterable beliefs. He should apologize! She should thank you! We must be respectful! Never fart or cuss in front of anyone! In fact, never fart or cuss in private! Just be as close to perfect as possible, all the time, and never admit that you are wrong or weak! Although we may continue to have the same expectations of one



another, within a particular social structure, to a large extent, our brain has been prewired to receive information related to social-emotional learning, how we learn to recognize the social traditions within a particular group, as a way of ensuring the survival of our species. Social rules were once the things that ensured that humans would pass on the most useful traditions for cooperation, collaboration and copulation as members of a unique society. It has been many, many centuries since these rules were so explicitly necessary that to defy them would threaten the survival of humankind. We still, however, tell ourselves such things as:

- I should be treated with respect. If I am not, it is awful and I couldn't stand it. I must force that person to show me respect, or I

will be ridiculed and lose my place within the social structure.

- I need affection. If I don't get it, it is awful and I couldn't stand it. If I don't get affection, it will threaten my ability to reproduce and I will live alone and lonely.
- I must never be criticized. If I am, it is awful and I couldn't stand it. If I am criticized, I will appear weak and I can be taken advantage of by others in my group.
- I ought to never fail when I try my best. If I do, it is awful and I couldn't stand it. If I fail after trying my best, then I am weak and I will not be respected and I will lose my place within the group.
- I need to be valued by others. If I am not, it is awful and I couldn't stand it. If I am not

valued, I will be devalued. If I am devalued, I will lose all privilege as a member of this group.

These beliefs are still widely held, although they are not nearly as necessary to hold as they may have once been. They have been, instead, rendered irrational and harmful through time. Applied to our modern world, these standards will likely bring emotional discomfort whenever the standards implicit in them are not met. It is now possible, however, to live more individually, less fearful of breaking a social rule and, thereby, forfeiting one's potential to procreate and flourish as a member of a small group or tribe. We are now capable of more rational thought in relation to how we interact with each other.

- I prefer to be treated with respect. If I am

not, I can still live contentedly. I don't need your cooperation.

- I enjoy affection. If I don't get it, I can still be a valued human being. I don't need your cooperation.
- I appreciate not being criticized. If I am, I can stand it. I don't need your cooperation.
- I like to succeed when I try my best; but it isn't a condition of my happiness. I don't need your cooperation.
- I would rather be valued by others; but I can live happily when I'm not. I don't need your cooperation.

These beliefs are not as widely held, but they are rational, not harmful and will likely bring emotional comfort because the standards implicit in them are under the individual's control. We, as a

species, are more likely to survive without the cooperation of others, so we can broaden our thinking to include our individual freedom for choosing our emotions, without threatening our place in the hierarchy of humankind.

\* \* \* \*

When we are asked to give up our inner language, our beliefs in ourselves and how the world should revolve around us, we are being asked to give up a well-established, time-honored belief. Giving up a belief is something like giving up a part of ourselves.

Many of your beliefs are warnings, personal messages, morals and ideas conveyed to you by someone you respected or something you experienced that proved important to you. Don't let anyone roll over you! Don't take anything from

anyone. You are perfect. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Think of one belief you hold that doesn't work especially well and give it up! How about your belief that people should treat you with respect?

That is a belief ripe for the picking.

Sacrifice it!

If you're hesitating, join the club. People can be counted on to hold on to and defend their beliefs until they have some other belief, something better with which to replace it. You cannot simply point out the errors in your thinking and expect to surrender them without a fight. You must first accept that your belief is harmful and then you must be willing to replace it with a new belief. So let's replace your belief that you should be respected with a different belief related to respect. For

example, I have very little power over how people choose to behave. People will treat me any way they choose. I don't have to like how people treat me, but I do have to accept that people possess the free will to choose their own behavior and I possess the free will to live contentedly, even when they make poor choices.

It's like trying to replace a bad habit with a good one.

It takes time.

Everyone knows cigarette smoking is dangerous, but until a suitable alternative is developed to replace smoking cigarettes, something acceptable to that individual smoker, they will continue to smoke. (The one exception I have found is the smoking patch. It works well if you glue it directly over the smoker's mouth.) The

same goes for our crooked, irresponsible and irrational beliefs. Until you can replace your operational beliefs, the notions you use to make judgments, with more suitable alternatives, ones you're willing to accept, you will hold on to your harmful, irrational beliefs for the rest of your life.

“Is it true that no one will ever love you again, now that your girlfriend dumped you?”

“Looks that way.”

“If no one ever loves you again, what will that mean?”

“It would mean that my girlfriend was right about me. I deserve to be alone.”

“If you were alone, what would that mean?”

“It would mean that I wasn't loveable.”

“What does it mean to not be lovable?”



“It means I am not worthy of anyone’s love.”

“Do you really think that you are unworthy of anyone’s love, simply because your girlfriend broke up with you?”

“Sort of.”

“Were you lovable before you had your girlfriend?”

“Yeah, I had a girlfriend before this last one. She loved me, so I guess I was lovable.”

“Now you are entirely unlovable because you got dumped by your girlfriend?”

“I see where you’re going.”

“Can you be loveable and be single?”

“I guess so.”

“What do you have to do to change your feelings about being alone?”

“Change my belief about what it means to get dumped? Change the idea that I have to have a girlfriend to be loveable. To change my belief that to be viewed as lovable is so important that if I’m not viewed that way that I am useless and worthless.”

“Yes, you could do that.”

\* \* \* \*

It has been suggested that less demanding, more flexible beliefs can help improve EI. The development of a belief may include any number of contributions from a large number of sources. A single belief can be composed of past experiences, your grandmother’s hopes, world disasters, social customs you picked up and adopted as your own. If this is true and your beliefs are a collection of experiences, before you would be willing to give

up a belief, you would have to weigh the consequences against the benefits. It's as if I were offering you \$50,000.00 for your rusted '62 Plymouth Valiant. You would be intrigued, interested and highly motivated. You know you would be better off if you made the trade, but you would still want to know more. You would hold on to your car until you understood the offer more fully.

Are there any strings attached?

Are you trying to trick me?

Are you crazy?

People seem to instinctively hold on to what they already know, if to give up a belief means that they will be left with a belief they don't accept. In the case of the '62 Plymouth Valiant, the concern may be a matter of overall well-being:

Will what I have to endure by selling this car outweigh the cost? Am I being hoodwinked? Is my car somehow more valuable than I thought? Will I be hurt by this deal?

The surrendering of beliefs is reasoned in much the same way. The decisions to give up what you already believe, what you depend upon to get through each day, includes issues of psychological safety, protection and wellbeing. Exchanging one belief for another seemingly exposes an individual to vulnerability. Even the slightest threat to one's psychological safety can be perceived as a threat to the individual's very existence. So, to give up a belief, you will have to have a new belief, one you can trust and count on for safety, to replace the one you are forfeiting.

Flexibility in your beliefs may help you

achieve a higher emotional competency. In addition, EI can be cultivated if you work forcefully, persuasively and vigorously against your tendency to think irrationally, using a system of logical, pragmatic evaluation of thought in relation to the noxious events that occur in your life.

“So you actually can live with being disrespected?”

“Sure I can. I wouldn’t be at all happy about it, but I could live happily.”

“But would you be angry?”

“Yes, but not as much.”

“How would you reduce the anger you would feel?”

“I would change my belief. I would remind myself that people act foolishly sometimes and I

can still live and be content with my own life, when they do. Besides, I don't get to dictate to everyone how they should behave. People behave and, well, I just have to accept that fact."

"You can't do anything?"

"Well, I can. I can tell people how I would prefer they behave. But if I'm in a frame of mind where I have accepted that they have a choice to behave the way they choose, I will be in a better frame of mind when I am asking them to change. People don't listen when people are shouting and demanding things of them. Besides, I always have a right to ask for what I want. The hard part is remembering that I don't have any right to get what I want."

Our daily lives are regularly filled with a number of challenges to our emotional state. In that

frame of mind, it may seem impossible to exchange one belief for another. After all, when you are in conflict with yourself or others, your rational mind is disengaged and it is unlikely that you will be considering a variety of emotional options.

Practice is the best way to prepare. It is best to confront and dismantle your dysfunctional beliefs and replace them with more practical beliefs, before you have to draw on them for support.

It will take the force of will to do that.





# Chapter Four

## Buttons Bells and Chains

I AM REMINDED OF WHEN I STARTED MY CAREER as a New–England–born therapist in eastern Kentucky. My accent made me the focus of attention. Whenever I opened my mouth and my accent was detected, I immediately became dubious, a dangerous outsider. The particular area of Massachusetts from which I come didn't help to deflect that stereotype. I pronounce many of my words with a somewhat British flair. For example, half is pronounced (haAHf); path (paAHth), bath (baAHth), can't (caHHn't) and, the old stand-by car is pronounced (CaAHH). One afternoon, I was working with a very unhappy woman, discussing

her continuing relationship with her boyfriend.

“He makes me so mad,” she said. “I wish I wasn’t so mad, but I can’t help the way he makes me feel.”

It seems that she was so overwrought on this particular day, with how he boyfriend was making her feel she wanted to spend some extra time with me. My policy was to spend forty-five minutes in actual therapy and fifteen minutes talking about what the client heard during the session. “I’m going to have to stay a few more minutes. I’m a mess,” the woman said with a sigh.

“No, you caHHn’t,” I said, “I have another client. You know our agreement.” The woman drew back in horror.

“Is something wrong?”

“You don’t have to call me names. I don’t

know what they do where you come from, but we don't talk to folks like that around here."

"Names?"

"You been doing that since I met you. I'm sick of it. You Yankees are just plain mean."

"What!? I didn't say anything. I said you caHHn't."

"See! You said it again!"

"CaHHn't?"

"I've had it. You really know how to push my buttons!"

It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "He really knows how to push my buttons," or "I'm just yanking your chain." The implication being that we actually have buttons and chains and they are available for others to push, pull and yank. What exactly do people mean when they say that

they are pushing our buttons? How does believing that you have buttons and chains, on any level, interfere with improving your EI?

For the benefit of moving your EI into a more manageable realm, let's begin by declaring: You have no buttons or chains or bells or whistles! (If you do, you should see a general contractor rather than a therapist.) Of course if you believe you have chains and buttons, you will behave as if you do. Even more compromising is that once people find out that you believe (on some basic level) you have bells, horns, buttons, whistles and chains, they will be forever grabbing for them and you will be forever behaving as if they have ahold of them. The reality is if you believe you are covered in buttons, you will behave as if it were true. You can believe you have

bells and whistles, too. Anything is possible within the confines of your own skull. This imaginative process of picturing yourself with buttons and chains (which is precisely what it is) alone is enough to inhibit or even prohibit the improvement of your EI. For that reason, we will have to dismantle these dangerous buttons, bells and whistles to make improvements.

First we have to find these buttons and chains.

Locating your buttons will be tough, because they don't exist. You already know that; but let's imagine that you actually do have a button or two.

What would it look like?

What would be inside of it?

What would make it work?

I think we can all agree, at minimum, that the button would be red. Of course you can't have your button hanging from your shirt pocket. You might drop it, lose it or someone may actually push it too hard and break it. So we will place it snugly inside your skull, for safekeeping.

Imagine that.

When your button is in a resting state, it blinks the words DO NOT TOUCH in large white letters, across its face. When it is pushed, pulled or yanked, it makes a SNAPPING sound, much like the sound of a twig that snaps in the distant forest and scares a deer. Once it is pushed, it will pulse and swirl, like a police beacon.

Now that we know what your button might look and sound like, let's discuss its other features. The most misunderstood characteristic of your

button is that other people can actually push it.

This is where nearly everyone gets it wrong.

Your button, being sealed deep inside your own skull, makes it impossible for others to push it or to even see its flashing and whirling. In the absence of any other logical button pusher, we will have to settle on YOU as the pusher of your own button. After all, your thoughts are the only truly identifiable elements that can reach deep inside your skull and initiate an emotional response (without surgery, of course).

Why?

Because your emotions are a product of your thoughts and no one but you can create your thoughts. You will have to rely on your perceptions and the electrical impulses generated from your

own thinking, to reach your button and to push it.

SNAP!

So, apparently, your own thinking pushes your button and sends blood to your face, makes your heart beat faster and your palms and hands sweat and shake. You can't seem to control your facial expressions. The tone of your voice rises:

He has no right to talk to me like that –

SNAP!

She should be more respectful of me –

SNAP!

She doesn't know how important I am –

SNAP!

I worked hard and he should recognize that  
– SNAP!

People seem to impulsively place the  
power of their button on things outside of



themselves. They seem to do the same thing with their emotions. Emotion is regularly believed to come from some external source, outside of ourselves:

“You make me so angry.”

“He made me sick to my stomach.”

“They are so irritating.”

Your button is simply another manifestation of this phenomenon.

If you could take your button apart, you would find it jam packed with the rules, laws, expectations, directives, decrees, beliefs, shoulds, oughts, musts, have tos and needs about yourself and the world you live in and you placed all of them there, yourself, over time and through repeated experience. These imperatives (absolute rights and wrongs) are the life force of your button.

These are the thoughts that give emotion substance and keep it alive:

My husband should always kiss me when he gets home from work. If he doesn't – SNAP!

My boss should always praise me for my hard work. If she doesn't – SNAP!

I should never be misjudged or treated unfairly. If I am – SNAP!

When the world within you is going the way you want, when all the absolute imperatives that float around inside your head are being respected by others, you are in balance. People will do nearly anything to regain emotional balance. You may lash out at those who ridicule you, to regain inner balance, to scare away their critical opinion of you. There are methods for improving the odds that you can maintain balance,

even when you are ridiculed, criticized and generally don't get what you think you should have.

If you truly want to improve your EI, you will first have to get rid of the idea that you have buttons. To start the dismantling process, you will have to review your imperatives, the demands you place on others and yourself, and turn them into preferences, desires and wants. You will have to start by establishing a new inner language:

- I would like it if people didn't ridicule me. If they do, I can adjust and I can continue to live happily.
- I would like it if people understood my failures. If they don't, I won't like it, but I can still be happy in my life.
- I would like it if people were supportive of me. If they aren't, I can still be happy in my

life.

- If people are not understanding and supportive, I certainly can stand it. I can stand most things I don't like.
- I can be happy if people are not understanding and caring of me. Maybe not as happy as I would be if they were understanding and caring of me; but happy nonetheless.

So let's be clear before we move ahead with improving our EI. You have no buttons, chains, horns, bells or whistles. You only have your thoughts; and it is through the management of your thoughts that you will achieve improved EI.

Your emotions are made according to your specifications.

You create them; so you can un-create

them.

I recall hearing a story about a man on an elevator. It seems the man, facing a packed lift, entered, turned his back to the other passengers and innocently watched as the floor numbers rolled past, overhead. As the man stood, waiting to arrive at his floor, he felt a sharp object stabbing into his shoulder blade. He was disturbed, grumbled and moved a bit to the right to escape the jabbing object. The object, however, found its way back under his shoulder blade, and the man grew angrier, placing himself off balance, pumping adrenaline into his bloodstream, preparing him for hostility: People are so inconsiderate. People should be more considerate. Inconsiderate people must be told that they are worthless, because they are inconsiderate!

As the elevator approached his floor, he told himself that when the elevator door opened he would turn and give the perpetrator a piece of his mind. How dare he stick his umbrella in my back! The bastard is going to get a piece of my mind, for sure.

The door opened to the man's floor and he was about to step out, but he was determined to address what he thought was the injustice of the man behind him, poking him with his umbrella. Preparing his words, he turned and stood face-to-face with a blind woman, holding a cardboard box, a ruler protruding from its corner. In an instant, his feelings of anger turned to sadness and guilt, "HMMMM . . . have a nice day," he heard himself say. He hung his head and backed out of the elevator.

Of course, the man's emotions were a product of his thinking and imagining. There was nothing factual or true about what he was telling himself. The minute he changed his thoughts, however, he also changed his emotional reaction to the very same event. This skill can be used in any number of other circumstances, from being treated disrespectfully to grief to rejection. We simply have to change how we perceive a situation and apply different meaning to it; and we have to recognize that we have free will to change the way we think, perceive and apply meaning to any situation we are facing.

If the condition for your happiness is based on how others behave, you are likely to be unhappy quite often. People are liable to do just about anything, without any notice at all. You can evolve

your emotion from anger to any number of other more manageable emotions simply by thinking and perceiving differently. And you can be happy, even when people make emotional and behavioral choices that are contrary to your own.

Your emotional response to any event is dependent on how you perceive it. To begin to improve your EI, you will have to own your own emotions, know that they come from you and your own thinking, rather than placing their origin on others. I made myself mad by what I told myself. I pissed myself off when I didn't get my own way. I can tell myself something more reasonable, if I want to feel differently.

There is an element of selfishness in considering only your own perspective in any disagreement.



- He shouldn't talk to me that way!
- She looked at me with that look and she should watch her face!
- She needs to stop doing that or I am going to kill her!

Recognizing and accepting that people have a perfect, inalienable right to choose to act foolishly and irresponsibly will go a long way to improving EI. All day long, people make poor emotional and behavioral choices. Remember, laws don't prevent foolishness; laws establish the consequences of breaking the law. You have a right to make foolish decisions, and you exercise that right from time to time. Not to allow others their perfect right to make poor choices is, well, selfish. You make yourself angry by perceiving selfishly, interpreting selfishly and emoting selfishly. It is

quite selfish to demand that people act not according their own standard but, instead, your ideal standard.

Take a fuller perspective.

Apply a different meaning.

Consider your own human potential for making poor choices. Try applying the consequences you hope for from others when you make a poor choice. You've been thinking and behaving the same way for most of your life. You are inclined to place people and things that do not fit your ideal standard of their behavior into a category of bad, simply because their choice didn't meet with your approval. You always have more than one option available to you for how you can respond to the choices people make.

You will be more likely to improve your EI

the moment you realize that you have no buttons, bells, chains or whistles. You will have to learn to think twice, to review your first thought and, if you find that it isn't your most beneficial alternative, seek other, more satisfying substitutes. There are multiple emotional options available to you if you practice more efficient and fact-based thinking.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Five

## Mano Po Must Never Die

I AM HYPER-AWARE . . . ALWAYS HAVE BEEN. People are forever telling me I should stop analyzing everyone and everything and just relax, unwind, ease up, chill out (fuck off).

*You think too much.*

*Stop analyzing me!*

*You shouldn't think so much.*

*Let it go.*

I am frequently left thinking what one would do in place of thinking.

Is there such a state of mind as not-thinking?

Coma perhaps?

I'm a watcher . . .  
an observer . . .  
a mental note-taker.

Unlike birding in an aviary, where the brightest colors often get the most attention, I regularly focus on the simplest people.

They have the most to say to me.

Starbucks is ideal for watching people. I stood in line, watching and listening as an Asian boy and girl ordered two large Starbucks. They moved to the side and waited to receive their coffees from the barista. The boy was dressed in all the latest gear, white tank top, hat to the back, jewelry, pants hanging down past his butt, blue Joe Boxers, utterly visible, chains, the works. The girl wore equally trendy clothing, pink Converse

sneakers, skinny jeans, a tribal arm tattoo and various facial piercings. I was more taken by the contrast between the cool, rough-neck, hip-hop look the boy was desperately trying to preserve as he delicately sprinkled cinnamon onto his Grande coffee in a Venti cup with two pumps hazelnut, two pumps vanilla, two pumps caramel, two Equals and four Sweet’N Low, filled to the top with cream, extra cream on the side, double cupped with no sleeve, a stir stick and stopper in the top. I carried my plain, black coffee to an empty table in the food court, sat down and reminisced on my own life as a teen. Over the rim of my cup I spied an Asian man sitting pensively at a table nearby, his black-gray hair neatly combed and flipped like an ocean wave in the front. He was dressed in traditional, Western clothing, but was also wearing

a barong. We locked eyes, but quickly looked away, recovering smoothly from our accidental encounter.

He was with a young girl who I imagined was his daughter. The two sat together, not talking. The girl was a bit jumpy, anticipatory, looking from side to side and checking her phone for texts, the sleeves of her shirt half-covering the palms of her hands. Before long the man reached around and took out his billfold and carefully removed some paper money; he handed it to the girl, and she bolted toward Starbucks, taking her place at the back of the line. She gave two small, excited jumps, outwardly energized by some inner thought she was having. Her movements were quick, rapid, unlike her father who seemed to move in slow motion, as if performing tai chi, adjusting



his chair, settling in contentedly, folding his arms over his chest and crossing one leg over the other.

It wasn't long before the girl recognized the boy and girl I had been observing earlier. The jumpy girl apparently knew the pink Converse girl because, when they saw one another, they initiated an animated, dance-like greeting, gripping each other's forearms. The boy stood apathetic, sipping his coffee, focused on maintaining his emotional distance.

The jumpy girl pointed in the direction of her father.

Both girls waved.

The man smiled back.

Not long after, the girl, followed by her friends, carried two coffees to the table where her father sat. The hip-hop boy put down his coffee

and approached the man. His young-and-free-to-be-me demeanor suddenly changed and he was, instead, solemn, deferent. There wasn't a trace of the youthful self-indulgent overconfidence he was showing only minutes before. The boy moved toward the older man, greeted him and called him Uncle. The boy reached for the man's hand and raised the man's fingers to his own forehead. The boy bent his knees ever so slightly, as if genuflecting. The Converse girl waited her turn and did the same.

The boy and the girl stood quietly with their hands folded over their midsections, listening while the older man spoke softly to them. When he had finished talking, the teens stepped backward and resumed their conversation with the jumpy girl.

I imagined that I must be in the presence of royalty, or at least someone who was very wealthy or possibly famous, someone who deserved this level of respect. I looked at his ring finger, expecting to see a wide, ostentatious red ruby. He wore only a simple watch and a gold band on his left ring finger.

The boy and his friend chatted with the jumpy girl, but soon left, bowing their heads once more in the man's direction.

Who was this person?

Was he a holy man?

A superstar perhaps?

Should I ask for his autograph?

. . . I decided to keep an eye on him.

\* \* \* \* \*

My own father wasn't quite as composed

and patient as the man in the barong. Neither did he have a whimsical hair flip. Instead he had a severe military-style crew cut. He never hit or spanked me, but he could bark out orders so rapidly I would freeze, not hearing a single word he was saying, for fear of missing something. I can still remember how he taught me to tell time or to solve a math problem, aggressively asking me if I understood . . . yet. I have no memory of anything he said; just a clear picture of his flaring nostrils and the sharp texture of his spiky hair.

Like most of us, my social-emotional learning began with my parents, my father's threatening nostrils, my mother's Catholic guilt; but later, the number of my social-emotional learning trainers grew to include my teachers, relatives, other adults, peers and the media, a broader

selection of people from a wider spectrum of life, each of whom helped to shape what would become my worldview and my emotional range.

Social emotional learning seems to be a fundamental human ambition, an innate human drive to discover and practice the rules for fitting in, for being more like others, for being viewed as normal, one of the crowd. Social emotional norms dictate how much and under what circumstances emotional behavior is acceptable. Schizophrenia, for example, is a mental health condition that is believed to be an extreme deviation from the social-emotional norm. On an island where everyone has schizophrenia, however, visitors without the condition would be viewed as abnormal and in need of medication.

As most of us know, Rudolph the Red

Nosed Reindeer had a very shiny nose, a nose that deviated quite a bit from the social norm. Because of this condition, he was excluded by all the other reindeer from all the reindeer games. Feeling dejected and unloved, Rudolph wandered about, telling himself he was no good, seeking a place where he could just live out his life, in isolation, free of ridicule.

He found himself on the Island of Misfit Toys.

*Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer and the Island of Misfit Toys* is a story intended to provide people, particularly children, with hope by suggesting that social norms are not fixed but, instead, can be improved upon if we could all just agree to broaden the definition of what is deemed normal. To make the point, Rudolph uses his

handicapping condition, his nose, to guide Santa's sleigh through the fog. Likewise, his new friends, the misfits, begin to reveal their individual value by demonstrating their unique talents, in spite of their differences. The Abominable Snowman proves his worth by placing the star on the Christmas tree and the dentist-elf is elevated to sainthood after fixing a toothache. Each of the characters, after proving their worth, finds someone normal who is actually willing to play with them, in spite of their imperfections.

Similarly, these same norms can impact social-emotional learning and emotional health by regulating such things as access, freedom and gender roles. It is repeatedly said that males don't cry. Females, on the other hand, have traditionally been viewed as the more emotional, sensitive sex.

In the past, females were habitually portrayed in media as easily distraught, fainting into the arms of a strong, more resilient male. Even today, women are shown as having little control of their emotions, frequently striking people, particularly males, without repercussion, ostensibly because they are far too undisciplined, silly and arbitrary to know better. Television and film often show disciplined males keeping order and giving clear and competent direction, while women seek support and approval from them. These portrayals, we may assume, are assimilated into the developing characters of growing young women.

Although there is widespread belief that women are more emotive, passionate and weepy, a 1998 study at Vanderbilt University found that men and women possessed equal potentials for



emotional expression, equally sensitive, equally distant, equally impersonal and equally passionate. Emotion, it appears, is essentially sexless, a tool whose contour, dexterity and acuity are shaped over time by the unique experiences each of us has within a given culture. Social emotional learning is a trial and error process of behaving, reviewing and assessing results, a sharpening of the skills we are always drawing upon for effectively cooperating and collaborating (and eventually copulating) with others.

One's competence in emulating emotional custom, ritual and ceremony has an impact on how well we fair as members of a society. Rudeness, for example, can be intentional or unintentional, depending on one's awareness of or appreciation for the social custom in which the behavior is

observed. Behaviors that are considered polite or rude frequently vary from place to place. The Russian language, for instance, does not include the same civilities, courtesies and considerations as the English language; so when Russian is translated directly from Russian to English, it can sound rather rude to an English speaker and listener. In China, few people if any line up and take turns as we do in Western cultures. Most Chinese choose, instead, to push and shove their way to the front, showing very little if any courtesy or emotional constraint recognizable by people in the West. Ticket booths and train stations that cater to tourists have begun constructing metal fences, similar to stockyard panels, to force people to line up in front of the money-taker/ticket-seller; but, short of these accommodations, there are few

native Chinese willing to stand in line, and it is not considered rude in China not to do so.

\* \* \* \*

Social emotional learning, custom and ritual have always fascinated me, making my experience at Starbucks with the Asian man and his daughter all the more enjoyable. Seconds after the two teens left the food court, the man and the girl stood to leave. The girl was still quite excitable. I watched as the older man rose confidently and pushed his chair neatly under the table. He looked at his daughter in a manner that prompted her to push in her own chair. The man collected the trash from the tabletop and handed the girl her own empty cup to throw away. She accepted it without protest and dropped it into the bin. Once on their way out, the older man placed his hand lightly on

the young girl's shoulder and the bounce in her step seemed to slow a bit, while her father's own step slightly quickened. The two found a balanced cadence, a tempo with which they could both walk comfortably together.

They disappeared into the crowd.

Later that day I searched Google for some information on what I had seen happen between the man and the trendy teens at Starbucks when they touched the man's fingers to their foreheads and genuflected. I discovered what I had witnessed was a Filipino greeting called *mano po*, *mano* meaning hand; *po* is placed at the end of a sentence when addressing elders. I learned that Filipino children and young people greet or say goodbye to their elders by taking the right hand of the elder with their own right hand and touching the back the

elder's hand lightly on their forehead. It is a Filipino custom for showing respect to elders and receiving their blessing. This gesture of deference is not, as I had supposed, reserved for the wealthy, the famous or the politically connected. *Mano po* is performed as a sign of respect with all elders by Filipino youth, regardless of their status or social class.

In Filipino culture, aging people evoke sincere and reverential emotions and behaviors from younger, less experienced people. How magnificent to live long enough to be honored for enduring this short, yet chaotic journey called life? To be prized for one's experience and knowledge, to have achieved an even higher degree of personal value and social significance as a consequence of normal aging.

In my lifetime, older people have never been greeted with any particular degree of enthusiasm. It seems, instead, after a certain age, older people become more or less invisible, incidental, imaginary and tedious, much like the appreciation we show when cleaning the underside of a toilet bowl. We know the underside is there and we know it needs attention, so we pay attention to it now—and—then, just to keep up appearances. The aging person, placed under these harmful psychological pressures, can, instead of the gift of *mano po*, expect aging to be a frightening period, more likely a time for dread, even terror and less an opportunity for experiencing a sense of achievement and self-acceptance.

It is my best judgment that the gesture of *mano po* exists to ensure that there will always be

a wealth of social-emotional knowledge passed from one generation of Filipinos to another to ensure the survival of our species, making the essential acts of collaboration, cooperation and copulation between members of this civilization a real and lasting possibility.

Mano po is a gesture that represents hope, symbolizing a striking contrast to the people with whom I have become accustomed to knowing in my own culture, people who shout orders and demands at one another, swear, discuss intimate and private matters on national television, people who celebrate their fortieth birthdays surrounded by black crape and Styrofoam grave markers, people who cough into the open air, shoot one another over a parking space, push, pull, grab and generally behave selfishly and inconsiderately.

People who I believed, before discovering the clues to EI, made me feel angry and anxious.

I know better now.





# Chapter Six

## Who's In Control?

WHY IS IT THAT SOME OF US GROW INTO EMOTIONALLY competent adults, supporting intimate and social relationships, while some struggle in their connections with others? Could the secret be in our genetic makeup? Culture? Some irregularity in our social-emotional learning? The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) theory and its role in our ability to live contentedly with ourselves and others has emerged as one potential answer.

EI refers to our individual capacity to perceive, control, evaluate and monitor our own feelings and emotions and those of others.

Improvement in EI, therefore, must start with an assessment of those attributes that are believed to contribute to EI, perception and meaning, locus of control, skills for self- and other-evaluation and self-monitoring. Discovering your attribution style in these areas can provide invaluable insight into how much or how little time you want to invest in improving your present level of EI.

How do you evaluate your successes?

What do you tell yourself when you fail?

What does it mean about you when you're criticized?

How is it a problem for you when you are treated disrespectfully, harshly or dismissively?

Clearly identifying responsibility for what makes you feel can have a significant impact on your perception and meaning, locus of control,

skills for self– and other–evaluation and self–monitoring.

\* \* \* \*

The term locus of control was first introduced in the 1950s by psychologist Julian Rotter and refers, generally, to the extent to which an individual believes s/he is in control of the events that influence h/her life.

- What forces are responsible for your successes and failures?
- Who or what controls your emotional response to the events that occur in your life?

There are believed to be two classifications of thought using Rotter's theory: Internal and External Locus of Control.

Gauging our own locus of control from the

perspective of EI may be as simple as asking and answering these questions:

- Are my emotions a product of what happens to me? (External)
- Or am I responsible for creating my own emotions? (Internal)

People with an internal locus of control tend to be self-reliant and believe that they are responsible for outcomes, including the emotions they express in relation to the events they experience, both good and bad. People with an internal locus of control tend to view their emotions as a result of their own efforts:

- My emotions are a product of my perception of events.
- I make myself feel by applying meaning to what happens to me.

- I am responsible for my thoughts and, therefore, responsible for my emotional state.

It is believed that the most emotionally intelligent people tend to have an internal locus of control, while those with an external locus of control tend to be more negative about others, themselves and their place in the world. Those with an external locus of control believe that forces outside of themselves affect their emotions and their ability to succeed. They tend to stake their futures on things such as fate, luck, god or society. People with an external locus of control (and those in most need of improvement in EI) tend to view events and other people as the source of their emotional state:

- She makes me so mad.

- He treats me like a dog and I can't stand it.
- They really piss everyone off!

Improvement in EI is frequently gauged by the level of accountability we take for our own emotional lives, beginning with taking responsibility for producing our own emotions. Emotionally intelligent people express a clear and obvious internal locus of control in how they encounter others. Emotionally intelligent people seek to improve, even if they fail at achieving their goals; but they don't seek to be perfect. They accept their fallibility and very-human potential for success and failure.

Emotionally intelligent people may tell themselves:

- I can live contentedly, even when I fail.
- People do not have to approve of me for me

to live happily.

- My life is valuable, even if I am told that it isn't.

Unlike the story of Rudolph and the Island of Misfit Toys discussed in the previous chapter, improved EI is not a process of proving to others that one is worthy of acceptance and approval, rendering the story of Rudolph and his friends the antithesis of what improved EI is expected to represent. We can accept ourselves even if we are not accepted by others. Emotionally intelligent people do not seek to demonstrate their goodness by displaying their talents and skills, hoping for applause and approval. Emotionally intelligent people seek to build self-acceptance in place of approval from others. When we're self-accepting, we accept all facets of ourselves, strengths and



weakness, not just the positive, more esteem-able parts.

\* \* \* \*

EI theory stresses that true self-worth is not a product of how we are treated by others. On the contrary, our idea of human dignity cannot rely solely on how consistently and reliably others show us respect or express approval of our behavior. *Mano po*, for instance, the Filipino custom previously discussed, although extraordinarily uplifting, should never be viewed as a replacement for self-acceptance. In its magnificent simplicity, *mano po* makes experience and strength a dynamic of our dreams for the future; but it cannot become a replacement for our own ability to form our own judgments about ourselves. Instead we must seek to improve our EI by

strengthening our dependence on our own logic, reason and, above all, ourselves for a truer measure of our own self-worth. We can never forget that we hold intrinsic value, because we are human and will likely fail throughout our lives. We must never forget that we can live contentedly with that knowledge.

\* \* \* \*

We've discussed the idea that people have a tendency to externalize the source of their emotions and expect emotional and behavioral change from others, rarely from themselves. People have the tendency, as well, to make negative and critical whole person evaluations of others who do not cooperate with their expectations. I once had a client who was unhappy most of the time when he went into a store to buy

something. He told himself: You should greet me when I come into your store. You didn't and that makes you a bad person. You should be kind and courteous when I place my food order. You weren't, so that makes you an asshole. You should thank me after I pay you. You didn't, so you are bad and should be fired and live a miserable and thankless existence. This level of evaluation is too critical and fuels the process of expressing anger, preventing the expression of more balanced, life-sustaining emotion. This method of emotional problem-solving also denies the existence of human imperfection. Essentially, if someone does something we don't like, we believe that they are entirely bad for having behaved that way. Anger is frequently generated from focusing on the negative aspects of an experience and forming negative

expectations of similar, future experiences. Very little in life works out perfectly or meets the ideal standard you set for it. If we expect perfection, we will be disappointed each time that standard is not met. Self-talk, as we discussed in previous chapters, can create an expectancy of something negative or positive.

My client, the one with the counter—people—problems, decided to do something about it. He was tired of being angry. He chose to practice on the counter person at his physician's office. He imagined that the counter woman would not greet him, as she normally didn't. Even worse, she would call him by his first name (something he abhorred and considered disrespectful) and ask him questions about his personal medical condition by shouting them across the waiting area. His first

step was to change his self-talk: I cannot predict who will assist me at the counter. I can plan my own behavior, though. Instead of going in telling myself she will be rude, I could go in telling myself I won't be angry if she is, instead. I will tell myself that she is emotionally handicapped. I can't be mad at an emotionally handicapped person. They often don't know better. I can be the person I want others to be!

Self-talk is the language we use to communicate with ourselves about everything within our perception. Self-talk is part of our thinking process made into behavior. As we are presented with problems, or decisions, we draw on our familiarity with them and tell ourselves how we solved the problem in the past. Negative self-talk prevents us from rationally, effectively solving

our problems.

Self-talk is repetitive, words and phrases we grow accustomed to telling ourselves. They can be positive or negative. They are automatic and are not the result of any real analysis or problem-solving. They are essentially our knee-jerk reactions. We don't search for evidence that contradicts our self-talk. Improving one's EI requires that specific activity. We have to become aware of what we tell ourselves and we have to be ready to challenge what we tell ourselves using a more rational perspective.

Changing our self-talk is a time-consuming task, requiring a lot of effort and cognitive vigilance. Even those who have spent a lifetime trying to establish a fact-based process for improving EI cling to some of their old, faulty

beliefs. Ideally, people's beliefs should evolve as they gain new experiences. But that isn't always the case. You have to keep in mind that you spent your entire life building the beliefs you now hold. Dismantling them today will not be possible. It will take a great deal of time and effort.

We might start that process today, however.

\* \* \* \*

What does it mean to give up an established belief for a new one? Simply, no new belief will ever be accepted without first wrestling, to some degree, with an already-established belief. And established beliefs prevail, even when the beliefs act against our own self-interests. Beliefs, for example, are our personal laws, our expectations of others, our worldview. Our beliefs guide our decision-making and give us

a sense of justice. To improve our EI, however, we must break our own internal laws and discover new ideas, establish more flexible beliefs.

“She is such an ass. She should be caring of me!”

“What evidence do you have for that belief?”

“Evidence? I don’t have any evidence. I just believe it. It’s not a bad belief. It’s a good thing to care about people.”

“She obviously doesn’t hold that belief. She doesn’t have to. Besides, you don’t even behave according to your own belief.” “If you thought people should care about people, you would be caring of her now, rather than ridiculing her for not behaving the way you demand.”

Your current emotional life is guided by



your experiences, reinforced over time by repetitive, cyclical thinking. Your early encounters with your family, friends, teachers and neighbors contributed to how you now face the world. The stories you were told and the customs you were trained to embrace each supplied you with what you believe is an emotional and behavioral norm. You are now left with having to preserve your current way of thinking, the way you've been trained, or to challenge some of things you were taught and to do something new.

It won't be easy to change the way you think and behave, but it is possible. Straddling the chasm between your current beliefs and building and reinforcing new, more productive ones will present you with your most arduous challenge for improving your EI.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Seven

## Magical Thinking

SO FAR WE'VE CHATTED AROUND THE PERIPHERY OF EI. We will soon embark on a more finite tour of its interior. First, though, I want to talk about the more specific topics of wishfulness, fairytales and magical thinking, particularly the confidence some of us have in communicating with gods and deities to help solve our emotional problems. We discussed these ideas in a previous chapter, the idea that our feelings come from how people treat us, as if we are somehow under a spell that not only provokes us to feel, but sustains our emotional state.

Our discussion in this chapter will focus on

clarifying our dependence on spirits, ghosts and other fantastic beings that we have come to believe influence our destiny and our emotional life. You should know beforehand, however, that this is not a discussion of the truth or untruth in the existence of god. It is a discussion of how we use and misuse the idea of god to resolve our emotional problems.

Wishful-ness and magical thinking rely on finding causal relationships between events, particularly in nature, even when scientific information says there are none. Wishing and magic are the stuff of great fiction and, unto themselves, are quite harmless. In fact, magical thought and wishful-ness are responsible for multiples of millions of smiles, tears and joys and holds an important place in the world of entertainment. The exclusive use of wishful-ness

and magical thinking, however, as they relate to the expectation of benefit, recompense or relief from pain and suffering can inhibit our reliance on our own skills and abilities to overcome our own hardships, resulting in a weakening of our EI.

Many religious people rely on prayer in hopes of conjuring a miracle when they experience significant problems in their lives. Others will pray for less immediate reasons, asking divine intervention for such things as winning the lottery or hitting a homerun. While prayer and meditation have shown to play an important role in calming the body's response to stress, these activities cannot be confidently relied upon to pay the rent, improve your Internet speed or help you get that job, nor can they be trusted to bring harm or bad luck to your enemies.

“His troubles are his karma.”

“Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.”

“Pray! God will take it all away.”

“Allah will settle the score.”

“Leave it in the hands of god.”

Emotionally intelligent people appreciate the fact that regardless of who or what we choose to attribute our actions, goals and purpose, we are each responsible for everything we do, including the choice to be helpless and always in the hands of fate to achieve our emotional goals. It is up to each of us to give meaning to our own lives. Meaning and personal responsibility are imbedded in the choices we make. Some of us choose to be powerless; but even then we remain responsible for that choice. In the long run, we shape ourselves

and, thereby, shape our lives. That process can only end at the moment of our death; but the choices we make before that mystical day are ultimately our own responsibility.

\* \* \* \*

EI theory does not reject the existence of gods and deities, nor does it support or reject atheism or agnosticism. EI theory, in fact, comfortably accommodates all concepts of god and godlessness. EI theory, however, does reject the idea that our emotional health can be influenced by luck, gods, curses, karmic retribution or devil's play. EI theory supports the idea that EI is achieved by accepting that the unfortunate circumstances of one's life are normal, natural and explainable events, all manageable and nearly all time limited.



Magical thinking can hinder the true potentials of the human mind and may actually impede improvement in EI. EI theory posits that our mental state is influenced by perception and the meaning we give to the events we experience. Perception and meaning are not products of gods and deities but, instead, are products of thought. For thought to be life-enhancing, it must be subject to reality testing, revision and clarification. Fixed, dogmatic beliefs are not matters open to revision, leading those who choose to maintain these beliefs with an over-reliance on magical thought to resolve their emotional issues.

Not every magical thought, mind you, should be subject to scientific scrutiny. On the contrary, some magical thinking is useful, doesn't result in hardship and is rather manageable. What,

for example, would love, film and Christmas be without a little magical thinking and wishful-ness? There may, in fact, be a bit of magical thinking in my belief that I am conscious; that a mouse is smarter than an elephant; or that improved EI improves the potential for emotional well-being. These beliefs are all quite manageable without the use of science to prove them. Conceivably, at some point, however, additional knowledge or a change in context may render these beliefs false; but I currently have no need to examine them.

\* \* \* \*

Although I am quite fond of EI theory, especially as it relates to how science can help to improve perception, I must admit that, even today, I maintain some magical thoughts that may not exactly improve my life. After all, I have been a

member of the human race a lot longer than I have been practicing EI theory. (You will later learn that the influence of repetition on neural coding requires a bit of time and effort to undo.) I sometimes give magical evidence to support my belief in an afterlife, for example, and attribute, to some degree, my successes to god's favor. Thank God for that! While I'm at it, I will admit that when I find myself alone, I wonder what my mother and other dead relatives are up to at that particular moment in time, all pretty much harmless; but all worthy of reflection, nonetheless.

Death appears to be one human experience to which many of us apply some kind of magical thought. My own beliefs in an afterlife seem to contribute to my motivation to achieve my goals and heighten my awareness of others, particularly

in the matchlessness of what each person I meet has to teach me. Magical beliefs in god and an afterlife, however, can produce a much different result.

I once met a woman whose husband suddenly died. “When my husband went to be with God,” she said, “this bluebird came and sat on my porch rail. There is no explanation for it. It was late fall, when all the birds had flown south and this bluebird just appeared out of nowhere. So, anyway, it sat there for a moment and then it looked me straight in the eye and I could tell it was Jesus trying to tell me something. So I opened my heart and I listened. You know what Jesus said? He said that my husband still loved me and that he was waiting for me in Heaven. Jesus said that my husband was thinking about me and was watching

over me. That's why I collect blue birds. They remind me that my husband truly loves me and that he will come back. God works in such mysterious ways."

The woman's entire house was filled with statuettes of bluebirds. Stuffed animals, light fixtures, plates, rugs and stained glass windows, all ordered over the telephone from the Home Shopping Network, were piled everywhere, each resembling a bluebird. She spent her days sitting in a La-Z-Boy recliner, because there was hardly a place to sit or sleep elsewhere. She did not leave the house and had lost contact with her friends and relatives. With her limited income, she tithed to a television church ministry, because the minister said he knew someone in the audience was grieving for their lost husband and she knew it had

to be her. “My husband is here. He is all I need, until I’m called home to be with him,” she said.

Her husband had been dead for fifteen years.

My magical beliefs in an afterlife contributed to my understanding of this woman and actually helped me hear and learn from her. Her magical beliefs, by contrast, however, contributed very little to improving her human condition and may have resulted in shortening her life.

\* \* \* \*

I am comfortable using the word spiritual to identify my belief in what may be termed the orchestration of human existence. My spirituality, however, lacks a finite, absolute definition. For me, spirituality contains core beliefs in the values of social justice, fairness, honesty and human

understanding. These core beliefs do not conflict with science, but are, instead, consistent with the principles of effective human cooperation, collaboration and copulation. I rely on the flexibility of my mind to think and reason beyond a fixed doctrine, two key features of improved EI.

I like to imagine that there is meaning and purpose in human existence. I believe that meaning cannot be prescribed but is, instead, a product of being present when life provides me with potential clues. Unlike the barriers to free thinking that are often found in organized religion, spirituality provides me with an opportunity to evolve and even change what I think and believe. Above all, spirituality encourages me to believe in myself and my own potential, replacing dependency on religion with the possibility of ideas, notions,

philosophies and viewpoints that will remain as alive, growing and vibrant as I allow myself to be.

The concept of spirituality helps me imagine how I might fit into some greater cosmic scheme of things. Of course there is no science to support my questions about why I am here or what happens after I die; but seeking answers to those questions from the perspective of open-mindedness and being in harmony with others, actually improves my life and the lives of the people with whom I come into contact. I may or may not discover the meaning of my life; but it will be my spirituality, not religion, that will make meaning more imaginable. While I search for answers to this and other unanswerable questions, spirituality will continue to influence my appreciation of beauty, love and creativity, things



that seem to reveal some level of influence beyond the observable world.

In the final scene of the story *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy learns an unexpected truth from Glinda the Good Witch, that the power to return home had always been in her control. She simply had to click together the heels of her shoes, an act symbolizing her freedom and independence to act on her own behalf. When the Scarecrow angrily asked why this critical information had not been revealed to Dorothy sooner, the wise witch laughed and said, “Because she wouldn’t have believed me; she had to learn it for herself.” Glinda goes on to explain that the power to get home, like the courage, wisdom and heart her friends were seeking, had always been within her. She simply had to believe in herself. By the same

measure, your mind is capable of more than you know. You simply have to step outside your comfort zone and acknowledge that potential.

Our goal in EI theory is to provide all people, regardless of their belief in a higher power, a sturdier foundation for the development of a functional reality, one that encourages the use of personal judgment, reasoning and rational thought to resolve emotional problems. If, however, we resign ourselves to the whim and will of mystical powers, we are not likely to take full advantage of our own, innate power to achieve our human potential. EI theory seeks an integrated, non-contradictory, reality-based system of emotional problem solving, one that includes a whimsical degree of magical thought and wishfulness for good measure.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Eight

## Intelligence

WHEN MY SISTER WAS BORN, SHE WAS CLEARLY UNUSUAL. Her appearance, her distinctive facial and physical features were a curious, unexplainable phenomenon. I remember thinking, as a very young child myself, “Where did this baby come from? Whose baby is this?”

As an infant, my sister had dark, almost black, upturned eyes, a flat nose, a small mouth and a large tongue. Her ears were curved inward. She had a single crease across both palms of her hands, short stubby fingers, tiny feet with a larger than normal space between the big toes and the rest of them. She was extraordinarily double-jointed,

almost as if she had no bones at all.

I didn't know that the features that gave my sister her unique appearance were the physical elements that made people with Down syndrome recognizable. Overhearing the adults who stood around observing her, commenting on her uniqueness, I learned that she was generally believed by most adults to be unintelligent.

I peered in at her, gripping the bars on her crib, she, staring into space, her dark eyes, like the black buttons that closed my winter coat, fixed on the musical mobile dangling above her head. I don't remember her ever crying, laughing or making any sound, really. She was always silent, lying on her back, occasionally moving her feet and hands.

For the first three years of her life, my

sister couldn't roll over, sit-up or stand; and she couldn't talk. She shifted her position only minimally, with help. Around three years, she started to roll over, maneuver herself onto all fours and sit in a chair without slumping into a bunch. She experienced some level of independence at around four years, scooting across the floor, propelling herself by thrusting her legs and feet forward, moving herself ever onward. My sister grew and developed in her own way, along her own timeline. She remained, however, unintelligent.

“I hate it,” she told me one day as we prepared to go to her job at McDonald's. She cleared and wiped down tables and was overjoyed to do that. She was around twenty-two at the time. “I hate it.” She looked down at her lap, seemingly

talking to herself.

I reached to pull her seatbelt over her ever-expanding waistline. “Why?” I asked. “You like working there.”

“They make fun’ a me.”

“Who?”

“The kids . . . the kids . . . make fun’ a me.”

Her eyes magnified behind her thick glasses, smudged and always in need of a good cleaning, searched for answers in my face that, even if I could explain, would never really ring true for her. “I stupid,” she said. “Stupid.” She hit her hand against her knee.

My sister spent the rest of that year trying to reconcile the ridicule she received from those who encountered her in her work at McDonald’s. One day, after work, she pointed out one young girl



who was particularly unfriendly toward her. “She make ‘fun of me,” she said. “She pretty.”

“She’s pretty?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said.

“I think she’s a jerk,” I said.

“Oh, go on,” she said, gently pushing my shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

Intelligence is most frequently defined as the ability to learn or understand; what may also be referred to as intellect, an essential factor for working through new or difficult situations. An assessment of intelligence might include the capacity to apply knowledge gained from experience to manipulate one's environment through predictive and abstract thought.

General intelligence is believed (in the

absence of disease or trauma) to be fixed, stable, unchanging over a lifetime. Some believe we are born with all the intellectual potential we will ever possess. There is, however, increasing discussion over the role desire and tenacity have on improving intellectual competence. Can we improve our intelligence through diligence and hard work? Alas, because intelligence seems to be an arbitrary concept, made up of a number of unstable, evolving factors and ideas, most definitions of intelligence seem, ultimately, to alienate someone.

\* \* \* \*

Today, my sister lives her life believing that people are essentially good. Although she knows that there are those who do bad things, she maintains a view that people are redeemable, even

when they choose to behave badly. Each time she experiences the recklessness of others, her emotions are a mix of deep sadness and regret mingled with an unfathomable ability to forgive and to ask to be forgiven.

All people with Down syndrome have some degree of intellectual disadvantage. They are, however, far from being incapable of learning, especially to the degree that emotional expression, social expectation and the ways in which we interact with others influences behavior.

People with Down syndrome are often sensitive to being a part of the social group. I know I am well outside the boundaries of making a gross generalization, but it is my best judgment that people with Down syndrome, because of their experiences with others without Down syndrome,

are quite emotionally adept at communicating with nearly anyone, geniuses at expressing affection toward others, for seeking forgiveness and for offering it. The intellectual capacity of people with Down syndrome cannot be reliably predicted in infancy and early childhood, but the intelligence used for expressing love and caring toward others is evident from a very early age.

My sister entered school at around the same age as other children, only she spent her days in a room where the window in the door was covered with construction paper. I never saw her at recess, and we never sat together at lunch. Knowing her as I did, I could only imagine that she was content among her friends and teachers, never questioning the good intentions of those who were responsible for her care and education.

My sister went from elementary, to junior and on to senior high school seated behind a window covered in expressionless, white paper. When she was twenty, she graduated from high school; and for all her efforts, she was mailed a diploma and a copy of her yearbook. Inside were an empty oval where her picture should have been and a barren, blank square where her biography might have been printed, if anyone had taken the time to gather the information from her.

Of course, when she got the book in the mail, she gleefully leafed through it. She had no idea, no expectation that her picture should be there, alongside the other members of her graduating class. I can only imagine, however, that if she had an awareness that she should have been included, she would have said, “Oh, stop. Chill

out. It's okay," and simply be content to look over the familiar faces she remembered from school, the lunch lady, pictures of the swim team, the abandoned hallways, the quad and, of course, the familiar faces she remembered from the hallways and bus stops.

My mother, much less content, contacted the school and demanded that my sister's picture be duplicated and sent by mail to everyone who had purchased a yearbook. Not only should there be a picture, but my mother strongly suggested that my sister's favorite color, her favorite song, her most commonly spoken phrase and her most cherished memory accompany the photo in exactly the same proportions as the oval and blank spaces that were provided for her. My mother was quite sensitive, like my sister, but far less forgiving.

My sister was proud when she pointed out her own picture in the yearbook, after discovering it one day, glued perfectly within the previously blank spaces, as if it had always been there. She looked up at me, through those damnable, fingerprint-covered glasses, kissed her hand and brought it down on top of her own picture. “S’mee,” she said, “S’mee.” She laughed, extending her long tongue as she drew in more air to feed the chuckle that came directly from her belly.

My sister has never been like anyone else, really. She is my cherished and pure spirit, someone who is never truly unhappy for long or without a friend. Her life has been a hearty handshake, a warm and sincere hug and a promise for unconditional positive regard toward everyone she meets, no matter who they are or how they may

have treated her in the past. I can never imagine comparing myself to my sister's strength of character and her dedication to the idea that everyone possesses inherent goodness, if we just take the time to see it.

\* \* \* \*

The customary definition of intelligence may include such things as our capacity for reading, writing and making basic, simple scientific predictions about our environment. These types of intelligences are what we use to maintain some level of control over the worlds in which we live. Intelligence, when described this way, may actually enhance our lives by contributing to our overall health, safety and life-expectancy. Possessing a superior intellect, knowing how to solve complex algorithms,



completing byzantine puzzles and resolving intricate problems, however, may not be enough to ensure a longer, more prosperous emotional life. Cultivating an appreciation for how emotion impacts the quality of our physical health must be included in any plan for achieving optimal well-being. In fact, improved skills at emotional problem-solving can have an even greater impact on our longevity and result in an improved quality of life that intellectual skill alone can never achieve.

EI may be the ability to identify, assess and control our own emotions, resulting in optimal mental health and overall physical well-being. EI may be a self-perceived measure, far more flexible and a lot more under our own control than general intelligence. For example, if you find that

you're losing friends, jobs and family members, a decision to do something else, to explore other emotional options, is very much in the realm of possibilities. Unlike intellectual capacity, desire, effort and tenacity actually CAN play a role in improving EI. EI, in fact, doesn't appear to have an overly strong relationship to intellect. Some of the most skilled thinkers in the world can have little or no skill at emotional problem-solving, while people with Down syndrome can express genius in that same area.

EI is flexible, plastic and can be improved throughout life, depending on one's desire to improve. One simply needs to identify weakness in h/er emotional problem-solving skills and endeavor to improve upon them.

\* \* \* \*

My sister's medical and cognitive impairments have increased over the years; they unravel the mystery of her human condition more and more each day; but from the day she came home from the hospital, wrapped in a yellow, satin edged blanket, she was the most wonderful gift I could ever have imagined receiving. She was introduced to me as flawed, unintelligent, having little potential. But, from the day she was assimilated into our family and our neighborhood, complete with her own unique personality, her own strengths and her own weaknesses, she has taken every opportunity to become the strong-willed, sensitive and tremendously good-humored and forgiving woman she is today. My sister is resilient, having overcome many of the limitations placed on her at birth. She survives to this day,

content with herself and her human condition, through sheer determination and the benefit of her EI.

\* \* \* \*

The fabric of our emotional lives is an elaborate quilting of experiences. From the time of our birth, each square, each life experience, is stitched to the next to create the individuals we are today. A keen awareness of our genetics and how our parents, relatives, friends and neighbors solved their own emotional issues, however successful, will provide insight into the fabric from which our own EI is woven.

- How do you make judgments about the obstacles you face in your life?
- How do you overcome them?
- Each time you settle an emotional issue, are

you choosing the quickest and most familiar option?

Or do you put some effort into choosing from your emotional range?

- Do you forgive when you're not forgiven?
- Do you pardon when you're unfairly judged?

You've built your current level of EI through a series of personal observations, trials and errors, punishments and rewards. And each time you apply your own unique emotional resolution to the same or a similar emotional event, you add strength to it. The more you repeat your current behaviors, the stronger and more predictable they become. Doing away with harmful, destructive and life-damaging behaviors takes the strength of a wrecking ball. Improvement

in your EI may require you to swing a wrecking ball at the voluntary contributions you make to your own unhealthy thinking and take them down, one by one.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Nine

## Murderers' Row

### WHY EXACTLY DO WE EXPRESS EMOTION?

What purpose does emotion serve? Emotion is believed to be a necessary element of communication for members of a particular culture or group. Naturalist Charles Darwin imagined that emotions are adaptations that allow both humans and animals to survive and reproduce. EI theory endorses this view. Without some emotional frame of reference, we would not be capable of establishing trust with one another, an elemental component for building the rules for collaboration, cooperation and copulation among most species of animals, particularly humans.



There are hundreds of theories related to the number of emotions humans have the capacity to express. Paul Eckman suggests that the human face is capable of articulating more than 7,000 unique and distinctive expressions. Robert Plutchik's wheel of emotions identifies only eight basic feelings: joy, sadness, trust, disgust, fear, anger, surprise and anticipation.

EI theory, in contrast, proposes that there are only two dominant human emotional potentials, fear and attachment, and that these two emotional potentials are used to regain, maintain or restore psychological and physical balance. Variations in these two emotions, i.e., sadness, joy, elation and anger are simply modulations, degrees in how we communicate fear and attachment. We might imagine two thermostats, one labeled fear and the

other labeled attachment. The degrees of fear may include sadness, depression and dread, while the degrees of attachment may include such derivatives of attachments as joy, illation, happiness and love.

According to EI theory, only the expression of fear and attachment are natural, human emotional potentials. All other emotions are culture- and experience-specific, derivatives of fear and attachment and correlated with one's skill at operationally behaving as a member of a specific group.

The expression of fear and attachment can significantly change the body's chemistry, depending on the degree of expression, providing for the release of corresponding neurotransmitters, chemical messengers in the brain that modulate signals across gaps or synapses of brain cells and

between other cells in the body. These chemical messengers provide us with the energy we will need to regain balance. For example, some of us will respond with fear if we are ridiculed. (It is unlikely that being ridiculed will provoke the expression of attachment.) We may believe that being ridiculed is potentially dangerous. To protect ourselves from this perceived danger and to regain balance, we automatically activate our endocrine system (using thought alone) to release the stress hormones that will help sustain the fight-flight-or-freeze response. Stress hormones act by mobilizing energy from storage to muscles, increasing heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate and shutting down metabolic processes such as digestion, reproduction, growth and immunity. That's why, when you are disrespected, teased,

mocked or belittled you will feel a quick jolt of heat go up the back of your neck and your heart will begin to race. Your body is preparing itself to fight, flee or freeze and it only does that when it believes it is danger.

Most neurotransmitters are made from protein or its sub-units, amino acids. Serotonin, dopamine and GABA, for example, are neurotransmitters that are released when humans are feeling attachment, a positive, calm, happy frame of mind, where there is a strong sense of well-being. Imbalance is often associated with a sense of fear. When the neurotransmitters that produce a sense of calm are instead being overpowered by such stress hormones as cortisol and epinephrine, these messengers will have a significant impact on mood and behavior.

Suffice it to say, you were programmed at birth to absorb emotional cues, particularly emotional information related to fear and attachment, from the people with whom you were expected to come into contact and with whom you were intended to live. Nature included that capacity in your human emotional development as a means of surviving as a member of a group.

Emotion appears to vary from one culture to the next, from the family unit to the largest city, state and country. When we communicate to others that we are feeling happy, sad, excited or frightened, we are giving them important information that they can then use to perceive our emotional state and to take action in relation to those culturally-defined emotional cues. Just as our own emotions provide valuable information to

others, the emotional expressions of those around us gives us a wealth of social information, as well.

Social emotional learning relies on a system of emotional turn-taking, a protocol for learning the consequences of one's behaviors as a member of a culture and storing that information away for when it's needed. How our behavior is normalized or rejected has a great deal to do with social-emotional learning. My earliest and most powerful memory of social-emotional learning was of a little girl I met in elementary school. She was always dressed so well, little socks with tatted edges, hair in curls. She stood with the other little girls on the playground of the South Elementary school. She seemed to glow, the sun shining through her hair as she hung from the monkey bars, upside down, careful to keep her

dress in place and her undies from showing. She would reach up to grip the bar, roll her knees and flip herself around, only to land perfectly on her two, immaculate patent leather shoes.

My first reaction to girls back then was to throw things at them, a rock, a burr, a cat. The burr I threw at this particular little girl is frozen forever in my mind. I pitched the burr at her, but it somehow travelled in slow motion and then clung to the fur ball that sat atop her woolen cap. We looked directly into one another's eyes, searching for some unspoken information, some sign of what to do next, drawing from our previous social-emotional learning experiences.

Getting nothing, we simply stared, anticipating one another. I was sure she would begin to cry and run to the teacher who stood

checking her watch at the corner of the playground. She didn't. I began making up excuses in my head that I would never have to use. The little girl changed the game plan. Astonishingly, she simply removed her hat, inspected my handiwork, pulled off the burr, smiled at it and handed it back to me. She wasn't happy about what had happened, nor was she angry. She was apparently content, smiling a simple yet mysterious smile.

. . . I kept an eye on her.

As the school year progressed, I noticed that no matter what was happening around the little girl, she kept a smile on her face. Of course the other girls liked her, and the boys left her alone. There was nothing to be gained by needling, nettling, nudging, peeving, perturbing, pestering, plaguing, provoking, riding, riling, teasing, ruffling



feathers or, notably, pushing her buttons. I was convinced that she was an alien, or a doll on a shelf that never changed its expression. I was most surprised that she wasn't afraid of me or my mischievousness. She treated me no differently than she treated anyone else. She didn't, it appeared, think I was bad.

I spent much of sixth grade sitting across from the little girl. I sat on Murderers' Row, a special place for active (bad) children, always boys; a row of chairs and desks set aside especially, it seemed, for me. They didn't have anything like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) when I was a kid. At least no one knew about it if they did. There was no therapy or drugs or individual education plans. We didn't live in a culture where children were given

diagnoses and subscriptions to medications like Ritalin. I was just viewed by my teachers and most adults as an active, vigorous albeit bad boy who needed reining in. I remember, on my second grade report card I am described as full of zip! and the class clown. In the absence of drugs to keep me in my chair, my teachers relied instead on old-fashioned ingenuity, patience and improved frustration tolerance; and, in the case of Murderers' Row, some misguided creativity.

The girl with the chronic smile sat nearby, always well-pressed, intelligent and content. I was in awe of her, never creating a disturbance, always a good girl. The teachers doted on her, and she always had a star, or a turkey, or an orange pumpkin on her forehead. I, on the other hand, when I wasn't sitting in Murderers' Row, spent the

day slumped on a stool behind the piano, (occasionally not even worthy of sitting on Murderers' Row) wondering what sense it made for boys to have eyelids if they couldn't turn them inside out now and then.

Sitting behind the piano, while others were learning to read and write and solve arithmetic problems, it dawned on me that if I gave up headlocks, shooting spitballs and turning my eyelids inside out and smiled like the little girl, instead, I could improve my lot in life and the teachers (and maybe even the janitor) would like me and I would finally be a good boy. What I didn't realize is that I was about to add a new dimension to my previously established emotional and social-emotional learning customs. I started smiling. All the time. I thought, "People are going

to view me as good if it kills me.”

My new smile was endearing me to no one. The lunch lady winced when she served me French fries, reaching her tongs toward me as if forking over a rattlesnake. At first, Mr. Travis, my teacher and the originator of Murderers’ Row, did a double take and smiled back at me, confusedly. He checked his tie for gravy stains. If he had to turn his back and write on the board, he looked over his shoulder and checked on me, just in case.

As the days progressed, Mr. Travis seemed to become more suspicious, even edgy, as if I were aiming something at him. Finally, one afternoon, he shouted over at me, “What! What! What’s up? Wipe that grin off your face! You’re making me nervous.”

The little girl smiled at me over her

shoulder.

I made up my mind then and there that I was destined to be forever bad. There was no hope. Once you were viewed as bad, there was just no amount of work that you could do to overcome that label.

How would I ever be good if no one would let me be good?

I settled in for a lifetime on Murderers' Row.

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Social emotional learning might be defined as a product of the unique experiences we have with others within our environment. Although the term turn-taking is most often used to describe the rules in game-playing, it is also the model we might rely upon to cooperate with one another in

our daily, social lives. Turn-taking, in a social context, consists of scripts, subtle signals, facial expressions, voice intonations and pragmatic rules learned over time, shaping our complex social rules and customs. We take turns expressing our thoughts and clarifying our meaning. We impose a level of cooperation and an expectation of collaboration between speakers and listeners. Just as in game-playing, when a player breaks the rules or goes out of turn, the game is disrupted and the other players rebel, calling for a review of the rules to regain balance in the game:

“You aren’t supposed to do that!”

“Yes, but I want to.”

“That is totally against the rules. Stop it!”

“I do it all the time.”

“Where did you learn that? Where were

you raised?”

Throughout life we establish, through experience, the general principles for the expression of fear and attachment, resulting in a set of social constructs (rules) that start their development at birth and become the frame of reference we use to address most social situations. Social constructs represent meaning, a process of establishing a system for perception and cognitive/social verification. We internalize these rules of engagement, practice them and produce a system of social navigation:

- When I do this, you say ‘Thank you.’
- When I do that, you express anger.
- When this happens, you say, ‘Excuse me,’
- This is what boys do.
- This is what girls do.

- You are a bad boy!
- I will let you know when you're a good boy.
- You are a good girl, but don't make a mistake because then you will be a bad girl.

Voila! the creation of our personal, social-emotional learning handbook.

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Even today, when I walk through my old neighborhood and I pass that little girl's house sitting at the head of King Road, the one who smiled all the time and captured my attention for nearly four decades, I wonder why her smile could energize a room, while my own smile sent people seeking cover.

One morning, just as I stepped off the bus, I nearly ran straight into the little girl, standing there in her red coat with the black tooling and buttons,



matching red beret sitting atop her ginger hair. We didn't speak. We only stared at one another, as had become our preferred way of communicating.

She handed me a note, folded into a small, tight square.

I was a little stunned.

Sure, I got notes from my friends that read, Eat shit, or I'll buy your bike, or David wants to fight you after school, but never a note from a girl.

What could this note say?

I didn't dare read it where anyone could see me. I slipped it into my back pocket and waited for school to be over.

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Our personal, social-emotional learning handbook is an internal structure built from the dialogue we have with ourselves that consists of

experience, a complex inner wisdom made up of words, phrases, body movements and gestures, meaning and perspective-taking.

Most of us were trained in an environment of right and wrong, where few alterations were allowed from what should and shouldn't be. It would have been a rare occasion for our social educators (parent, neighbors, relatives, teachers) to say, "Let's talk about the parts of your behavior that were right and the parts that were not right. Then we will compromise based on how they behave in France." Our social educators trained us to behave properly in our own social environment. Our emotional educators were the sole determiners of the appropriateness of our behavior. They were also, by default, the sole determiners of our human worth, often referring to us as good or bad,

depending on how well we adhered to their social-emotional instruction. We learned that our human worth was not something we determined on our own, but was, instead, determined from somewhere outside ourselves; and we came away from it all believing that emotional and social balance depended on receiving approval from others.

Disapproval, of course, became our enemy.

If you're like most of us, your early social emotion learning was a push toward getting it perfect; and you struggle to maintain that standard even today. When things are the way they should be, you believe you have balance. You believe you're living in a serene world where everything within your perception happens as it ought to. If your expectations are frustrated, when things are

the way you believe they shouldn't be, you feel some level of imbalance and you quickly go from balance to imbalance. Trying to maintain perfect balance in an imperfect world requires a steady state of caution and never-ending vigilance, resulting in nothing more than uninterrupted, continuous stress.

Weakened EI can be detected in how regularly we rate ourselves and others as perfectly bad or perfectly good and things as magnificently awful for not meeting the ideal standard you set for how you believe the world must be. Your search for perfection and the ideal standard represents the emotional struggle within you, your neurotic attempt to hold yourself and others to a benchmark of perfect rightness and perfect wrongness.

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EI theory speculates that to more fully appreciate how emotion is evolved in humans, we must also appreciate the cultural context in which social-emotional learning took place, the influence of the fight-or-flight-or-freeze response and the thoughts we produce in the moment to ensure the entire system of social-emotional evaluation remains unchanged.

Our early social-emotional learning experiences, although very much a part of how we view ourselves and others at the moment, can evolve and change. As we experience life and broaden our exposure to a wider selection of people and ideas, we will likely encounter an assortment of contradictions to what we believed to be true and untrue, good and bad about ourselves and others. Nature has seen to that

inevitability, providing humans with an abundance of potential for adapting to social and emotional variation.

We just have to make ourselves available to Nature's gifts.

Your human mind is quite malleable, plastic and available for new information at any moment you choose to supply it. Reinventing your self-talk will go a long way to making that a real possibility. Each of us can, if we choose, break free from our own Murderers' Row, where we sit supporting the criticisms we receive from others, denying our uniqueness and validating our inadequacy and overall wickedness. Ultimately choosing to become someone we are not, to please the sensibilities of the people around us.

We can free ourselves from the idea that

we must be perfect to be redeemable and, instead, seek to accept the unfixed inevitability of our future successes and failures.

Listen to your thoughts and become aware of your body.

If you can feel your bloodstream flooding with stress hormones, and you are not being chased by a bear, then you are likely living on Murderers' Row and may seek, instead, to improve your EI.

It will take the force of will to do that that.





# Chapter Ten

## Perfectly Imperfect

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS, MUCH LIKE THE CONCEPT OF EI, can be described as a self-determined appraisal of one's own psychological well-being.

How mentally healthy do you think you are?

How much more mentally healthy would you like to be?

How will you know when you're sane enough?

When it is an on-going practice, self-appraisal is believed to lead to heightened self-awareness. Self-appraisal, when it is done from a

fair and rational perspective, inspires us to confirm or deny the foundation on which our own identity rests. Self-appraisal can be a thorny process indeed, as it prompts us to question the myths and fictions that often hold together the framework of our self-concept.

Are you who you believe yourself to be?

Many of us struggle to enjoy our day-to-day lives, partly because a large measure of our human value is supported by such things as what we do, what we have, what we look like and who notices. We compare ourselves to the archetypes we find all around us of good and bad, success and failure.

Are you good enough?

How do you know?

Our human value, it seems, is often an

appraisal of ourselves in relation to others. After all, how would we know if our perceived talents and limitations were, in fact, positive or negative, good or bad without some comparison to other people? Is there some meaning in nature that describes such things as beauty, heroism, thoughtlessness, cowardice, wealth, success, ambition, intelligence and failure? These subjective notions cannot be verified in science and rely, instead, on how society defines them and how you, yourself, measure up against them.

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Our idea of ourselves may be described as a set of schemas, organized patterns of thought that represent the relationships we have with ourselves and others. Schema means shape, or more generally, plan. Many of our schemas represent the

shape of our self-image and embody our plan for ensuring that no contradictory information is ever allowed to interfere with that shape. Schemata are believed to be grounded in the present, but have a strong connection to our memories of our past. Our recollections of ourselves are generally biased in ways that tend to validate our self-schema while vigorously rejecting any information that conflicts with our affirming self-image. You might imagine a self-schema to be something like a puzzle representing a person's concept of what makes h/er both distinct and similar when compared to others. Of course the self cannot be physically or scientifically detected. Instead, the self is a product of thought, convenient fictions that place each individual in the starring role in a world s/he has invented for h/erself.

If the schema you use to establish your human value is weighted in how well you measure up to others, it can be said that your self-perception is externalized, meaning that you've lost control over your own ability to judge your own behavior and forfeited it to something or someone outside of your control, something like holding up a mirror to our own face and seeing the reflection of someone you don't know.

If your image of yourself is weighted so much in how you are perceived by others, it is likely that you are playing a role that does not truly reflect authenticity or the efficient use of your human emotional potential. You may, instead, possess a fragile, imaginary concept of yourself, susceptible to being quite aggressive, deflecting guilt and shame, when your weaknesses are

brought to your attention. If you find yourself behaving defensively when you are criticized, your response may indicate, instead, insecurity, fragility and less-than-optimal intrapersonal, psychosocial functioning.

I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with people who want to feel good about themselves. What I am saying is that feeling good about yourself, when it is your prime directive, can result in excessive defensiveness and unsupported self-promotion. If you find yourself somewhere in this description, your idea of self-esteem is likely quite fragile and may not provide you with any real psychological benefit.

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When the imaginative concept of self-esteem was first introduced to the world in the

early to mid-1960s, people seemed to benefit from it. After all, the notion of self-esteem was intended to celebrate the revolutionary idea that humans are an amalgamation of flawed, less flawed and nearly flawless characteristics. According to the original concept of self-esteem, people are works in progress, neither good nor bad, wholly un-ratable. Prior to the concept of self-esteem, society limited its personal rating system to a strict, puritanical, singular standard of success and failure, perfect and imperfect. The self-esteem movement offered an alternative to labeling oneself the sum totals of h/er most recent failings or victories. The idea of self-esteem posited that we could be a combination of traits, good and not-so-good, all at the same time!

Unfortunately, the theory of self-esteem

proposed by Morris Rosenberg and other social-learning theorists has changed dramatically since the mid-1960s. Many of us have come to rely on the concept of self-esteem to compensate for our learned dependence on others for our personal value.

Building self-esteem now is the practice of esteeming or prizing an image of ourselves, real or imagined, and vigorously protecting that image, even in the face of contradictory evidence. This twisted, unexpected use of the concept of self-esteem encourages us to rate ourselves in terms of our goodness and our acceptability in relation to other people. The idea of self-esteem, however originally noble, is now more harmful than it is of any real value, simply because a truer accounting of ourselves must always include a reflection on



both our positive and our negative traits and qualities, and then establishing some functional method for living comfortably with the sum total of that information.

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Most of us vacillate between being a good person and a bad person. We believe we are only as valuable as our last success. If we fail, we are a failure. If we win, we are a winner, but only until we lose again; at which time we will be, once again, a failure; and, by our own actions, we teach our children to be just like us.

J.M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, illustrates this point: “Tink was not all bad: or, rather, she was all bad just now, but, on the other hand, sometimes she was all good. Fairies have to be one thing or the other, because being so small

they unfortunately have room for one feeling only at a time. They are, however, allowed to change; only it must be a complete change.”

Fortunately, people, unlike fairies, if they try, can live quite peacefully with their human potential for expressing both strengths and weaknesses, even when those traits are on full display for others to evaluate. To achieve this goal, however, we must first accept that, because we can be neither good nor bad, we are rendered, by default, wholly un-ratable. We can fail and we can still live joyfully throughout our lives.

The all-good-or-all-bad rating system we now use is no more than a system of opinions. Opinions, however, are not often under our control, unless they are our own. In fact, if you base your human value on how you perform in relation to

others, your value will always be a product of capricious and arbitrary opinion. The secret to self-appraisal, therefore, is to harmoniously coexist with all sorts of opinions, your own and those that are contrary to your own. Opinions can serve to give you information; but they cannot serve the purpose of defining your value.

Only you can do that.

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It seems the quickest way to defend against criticism is to invoke the protective shield of self-esteem to confidently deny that imperfection is or could ever be possible in one self. To maintain that grand illusion, we might resort to self-talk like, “I am beautiful and intelligent and no one can tell me different. If anyone does, they are wrong and should be damned. Not only that, but they are also

quite jealous of me.”

Aside from the fact that beauty and intelligence require that we compare ourselves to others to make those assessments, criticism doesn't necessarily have to be true or accurate. In fact, criticism doesn't even require the participation of another person. People often criticize themselves. The only requirement of criticism is that it hold some meaning and some value, a judgment of good or bad, in the mind of the person being criticized.

For example, someone may say that you behave like a melon or a pomegranate, and that evaluation would have little or no impact on your sense of yourself and your own goodness. You would not be compelled to defend against these assessments. You might shrug it off as so much blabbering. On the other hand, you could be

described as a big, fat pig and have an altogether different reaction based on the meaning you apply to that phrase. The point being that most people have not learned that being called a melon or a pomegranate is inappropriate or disagreeable and, therefore, would have limited potential for applying real or useful meaning to these words. While people cannot be pomegranates or melons, neither can they be big, fat pigs; but we have learned that to be called a big fat pig holds a great deal more meaning than to be called a pomegranate. We must first apply meaning to what we hear, before we can have an opinion of it, before we can express an emotion in relation to it.

No event holds intrinsic meaning. All events hold the precise meaning we apply to them. In fact, nothing happens that can be understood in

only one way. There are always many, many options for the meaning we apply to the events we experience or that are within our perception. Being criticized is not a toxic event unto itself, unless we believe it is. It is how we view the act of criticism that will dictate how we will respond to it.

We all have weaknesses in our character, fallibility in our choices, flaws in our behavior and imperfections in our appearances. When these very-human blemishes are made more salient, we will respond, in some way, emotionally. Our response to being negatively evaluated has a direct relationship to how clear we are about our own weaknesses and how much we depend on others for our intrinsic value. Are we truly conscious of our weaknesses, imperfections, limitations, faults and defects as integral parts of our natural human

condition? Or do we pretend that we only behave ideally, precisely and are the model of perfection, the epitome of good choice, always worthy of emulation?

To adjust to criticism, and other opportunities for improvement, we must begin by recognizing our own propensity for being quite imperfect. We must start to recognize that to achieve a more reasonable standard of happiness for ourselves we must first find true bliss in our imperfect images.

It is in our nature as human beings to fail, succeed, win, lose, come off well and behave badly. In that frame of mind, it should be no surprise to any of us when we experience this mixture of outcomes in how we encounter life.

To develop a more accurate measure of

yourself, you must first change how you think about yourself and your potential for imperfection. If you are postponing your happiness, waiting for criticism to go extinct, you will likely live unhappily for the rest of your days. You will likely not live as fully either, never taking a chance and risking disapproval.

Take control of your thinking and you will make definite strides in how you address nearly any type of emotional adversity. You may start with your self-talk by repeating, until it overcomes what you tell yourself now, “I am not perfect and neither are you. I will never be perfect, and neither will you be. It is foolish for me to think I have no flaws or weaknesses. I have my share. You can be the judge of your own flaws and weaknesses, and you can be the judge of mine. Your judgment, however,



will serve only the purpose for which I choose to use it. I will never be the most beautiful, the thinnest, the smartest or even the most imperfect person on earth. I can, however, strive for better on my own terms. If I don't succeed, I can still be happy and I can still enjoy my life. If someone points out my flaws for me, I can thank them for noticing me. If their criticism is meant to create disturbance, I can forgive them and their behavior. I can pardon them and I can only hope that one day I will be pardoned. Even if I'm not pardoned, I can be happy. You and I share this world together. We are both bound in that way. We can only be fully evaluated when we're gone. Until then, we're all just works in progress."

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Most theories that purport to explain

emotion make a great deal out of self-esteem, ego-strength and similar concepts. After all, we are naturally-evaluating creatures, perpetually seeking to understand ourselves and our environment by placing things, including ourselves and others, into categories, good and bad, success and failure, triumph or defeat. When we go from evaluating our traits to equating that assessment to our view of ourselves and others, we go too far. There is more hope in maintaining a balanced self-image, one that recognizes our human potential for fallibility and our inability to be rated, using only one standard.

We may simply abandon the wilting concept of self-esteem and replace it with the idea of unconditional self-acceptance. While a self-concept is believed to be vital for psychological

health, self-acceptance may hold the potential of being a more stable personality trait. People who practice self-acceptance over self-esteem may begin to link their self-awareness to what they are rather than what they do. I am human and my weaknesses do not surprise me. I can live contentedly with myself and my flaws. I can live contentedly with your flaws, as well.

*Perfect* is a 2010 song by Pink, an American singer-songwriter. The song follows the footsteps of *Raise Your Glass*, in terms of lyrical content and themes, purporting to encourage youth to seek a higher level of self-esteem, to view themselves as perfect, even if they fail in some way. Pink sings:

Pretty, pretty please

Don't you ever, ever feel

Like you're less than

Less than perfect

Unlike when I was a child, when adults freely and regularly criticized children and focused on making good boys and good girls of us, placing us in Murderers' Row and hiding us behind pianos (two very unlikely responses to bad behavior in our schools today), the pendulum has swung away. We now find every opportunity to praise our children, avoiding any suggestion that the child may not have succeeded, believing instead that the avoidance of critique and criticism is essential to healthy child development. Both approaches are extremes and inherently flawed. Neither approach represents the real world.

A more balanced approach would be one where the potential for failure and success are

expectations of life. We all succeed and we all fail at various points in our lives, but we are never failures or successes. Even an Olympic gold medalist fails at something. Likely even on the same day s/he received h/er gold medal. We must train our children to make this fair and balanced self-evaluation for themselves, helping them to grow into more self-accepting, un-ratable, neither-good-nor-bad, adults.

As unfortunate as it may seem, you are not perfect. You were never intended to be perfect. You are, instead, perfectly imperfect. Perfection is a potential that humans cannot achieve. You are imperfect and un-ratable, neither good nor bad, neither a success nor a failure. Once you come to accept the perfect truth of your human imperfection, you will be closer to improving your

EI.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Eleven

## The Chemicals Between Us

OUR EMOTIONS ARE COMPOSED OF A SUBJECTIVE COMPONENT (how we think about our experiences), a physiological component (how our bodies respond to our thoughts) and an expressive component (how we behave in relation to our thinking). These three elements play an important role in how we achieve physical and psychological balance.

We all experience personal difficulties at some stage in our lives, events that can impact our ability to cope. When we are not in balance, stress, fatigue, emotional disturbance and interpersonal conflict may result. Balance is the



sense of being in control of one's life, one's responsibilities and one's destiny. When a person's existing schemas are capable of explaining and accommodating what is being perceived, s/he is believed to be in balance.

Of course, as we've already discovered, unless you are being chased by a hungry lion or hanging from a twig over the edge of a cliff, a majority of your psychological imbalance is a result of your thinking, the perception and the meaning you use to understand and address the unpleasant events you experience in your life.

Although the body responds to both real and imagined threats in much the same way, regardless of the legitimacy of the threat, I will invite you to stop reading now and assess the threats you face. If you truly are being chased by a

black bear, I would recommend that you protect yourself, straightaway. If your threats are, instead, a product of your thinking, an invention of your mind, read on.

It should be easy to tell the difference.

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We don't often think of blood, glands, neurochemicals, hormones and electricity when we think of emotional health. Emotional well-being, however, is a delicate interplay of biological, psychological and social/environmental factors working independently and in partnership to produce our overall mental and physical health profile.

EI theory may be best understood as a multidimensional system encompassing not only thinking but also the body's physical response to

thought. We call this whole-person view the bio–psycho–social (BPS) model. You might simply keep in mind, as you read through this section, that a person cannot have only one disease. Emotional problems interact with the body’s functioning and often compromise the individual’s physical health problems. Likewise, physical health problems can easily complicate emotional health. To treat only the physical problems, without recognizing the psychological corollaries, leaves the individual only partially treated and vulnerable to chronic disorder. This biopsychosocial (BPS) theory of whole-person functioning may be described as follows:

- The biological (bio) element of our emotional intelligence (EI)/BPS awareness is allied with the oft–overlooked anatomical

influence on emotion, e.g., the limbic system (the emotional neighborhood), sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, major organs, neurons and hormones.

- The psychological (psycho) factor of our EI/BPS awareness is derived from rational emotive behavior theory (REBT) which endorses the application of rationality in personal decision-making, often citing Epictetus as its maxim: What disturbs peoples' minds is not events but their judgments on events. The term irrational may be defined as dysfunctional thought processing that includes exaggeration, oversimplification, overgeneralization, illogic, unproven assumptions, faulty deductions and absolutistic notions.

- The social (social/environmental) of our EI/BPS awareness is related to the unique environments in which we are reared, i.e., family, community, state, country and so on, environments that greatly influence thought and encourage conformity in emotional behavior.

Rather than focusing only on thinking as the sole source of our emotional expression, EI theory highlights the interchange between our thinking, our human anatomy and our social environment on the development and expression of our emotional behavior. Developing a keen insight into how our bodies interact with our minds may result in an efficient, flexible, open-minded and self-directed method for addressing our goal of improving our EI.

In today's healthcare environment there exists a hierarchically arranged system of care that is more focused on medical diagnosis, medical procedures and medications. This focus on the human organism, the physical body, as the primary target of treatment has both subordinated and weakened the need for what are believed to be less complex helping strategies, i.e., counseling, social work and psychosocial evaluations.

Somehow we have come to consider medical procedures to be superior to the types of care provided by practitioners of social and psychological interventions. Our emphasis on medical treatment over psychological and social services has resulted in a professional hierarchy favoring medical practitioners that leaves patients

only partially treated. In that case, we may, as a primary skill for improving EI, begin to view our own emotional and physical health in terms of having a strong relationship to one another, a combination of biological, psychological and social factors, rather than from a purely biological or purely psychological perspective.

Psycho-social conditions can instigate biological complications by predisposing the patient to unpredicted risk factors. Cancer, schizophrenia, diabetes, depression, anxiety or even a broken ankle are each best treated from a whole person perspective. For example, depression, by itself may not actually cause liver problems; but a depressed person may turn to alcohol and develop an addiction and suffer liver damage. Furthermore, it has been shown that type—

2 diabetes has a correlation to lifestyle choices, particularly food selections and physical inactivity. Without a complete assessment of a patient's way of life, medical and pharmaceutical interventions would only help to alleviate the biological component of the patient's illness and neglect to recognize or treat the contributing psychological factors resulting from every-day life.

People cannot have just one disease.

Human biology and psychology do not exist separately. They are intimately engaged with one another, to the extent that one cannot be treated without exacerbating the other. Where a biological (physical) illness exists, there will likely always be a psychological and environmental corollary. Likewise, where there is a psychological illness,



there will be a related biological response.

\* \* \* \*

Most of us prefer to be in balance, a time when the biological, psychological and social components of ourselves are all working in harmony with one another, equilibrium, where our BPS system is stable, composed and neutral.

We might imagine balance as a deer grazing in a field, a layer of mist hovering over a still, tranquil pond, ducks flying overhead. Suddenly there comes a distant SNAP! of a twig. The deer freezes, pricks up its ears and tries to make sense of every sight and sound within its perception.

The deer receives signals to its senses from all directions.

Its pupils dilate.

Its sense of smell becomes more acute.

Its hair stands on end.

The intense strength that may or may not be needed to fight or flee begins to gear up. Like fuel into a fuel tank, the animal's natural response to danger, its sympathetic nervous response, takes over and its bloodstream is suddenly flooded with adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine, the three essential hormones necessary to propel the animal to safety, if need be.

The fight-or-flight-or-freeze (FF&F) response is a physiological reaction that occurs in response to a perceived or imagined harmful event, attack or threat to survival. Animals react to threats with a general discharge to the sympathetic nervous system, priming the animal for fighting, fleeing or freezing. More specifically, the adrenal medulla produces a hormonal cascade that results

in the secretion of catecholamines. This response is recognized as the first stage of a general adaptation syndrome that regulates stress responses among vertebrates and other organisms.

The FF&F response is also observed in humans.

The human FF&F response, like the deer, is intended to protect us from all types of peril, threats of peril or anticipated peril. Only, with humans, those threats are not limited to threats of physical harm. Humans process what might be termed psychological harm through the same system of self-preservation and protection. Essentially, you might talk badly to a deer and not make any impression at all, while humans will respond to ridicule, criticism, judgment and disrespect in much the same way as a deer

responds to the SNAP! of a twig in the wood.

To a far greater extent than in other animals, human social behavior has evolved significantly over time. The FF&F response, however, has remained virtually unchanged and continues to resemble that of our most primitive human relatives.

Where thousands of years ago the FF&F response was essential to our human survival, we now use it primarily for an entirely different purpose. What worked for humans at the dawn of time to protect us from being eaten by a threatening predator may not be as helpful for that purpose, today. The threats to our safety have significantly decreased over time, and our need to protect ourselves against predators has become less and less necessary. Our FF&F response (what we now

refer to as our stress response) has never completely forgotten its evolutionary roots. Time has not altered our human blueprint for self-preservation, leaving us with little skill for distinguishing between threats to our lives and emotional threats to our ego and our self-image.

It appears that modern humankind often confuses a rude, uncooperative person with a hungry black bear. To our primitive, un-evolved stress response, criticism and black bears are identical. Our minds only have to perceive danger or imbalance, to activate the stress response.

Ideally, considering the numbers of years humans have roamed the planet, it seems we would have, by now, when confronted with an emotional issue, evolved some system that relied on our intellect to recognize that emotional confrontation

is not the same as a physical threat to our very lives. But humans have not evolved in this sense and are programmed in much the same way as their oldest ancestors to fight, run or freeze when they perceive danger, emotional, physical or otherwise. Like hearing a twig SNAP! our thoughts over a disagreement with another person will prepare our bodies automatically for hostility, menace and danger.

“I have to disagree with you. I think you are wrong.”

“Well, if I’m wrong, you’re stupid.”

“You can’t say that to me.”

“Sure I can. I just did.”

“Why you! I’ll show you!”

The threats we encounter in our daily lives are menaces to our minds. Much like being chased

by a lion (or a wild and wooly, groundhog) judgments of our character, assaults on our values, morals, principles and standards, slights to our appearance, snubs about our child's school performance, a slur about our mothers are all emotional threats, our twig SNAPS! each setting off an alarm to protect us from a perceived danger.

“May I help you?”

“I need to return this cleaver.”

“Do you have a receipt?”

“No, I lost it.”

“We don't take returns without a receipt.”

“It's the wrong size.”

“I'm sorry I can't help you.”

“You're not really sorry.”

“Yes I am.”

“What do you expect me to do with it?!”

“That’s your option. We cannot take it back without a receipt.”

“It’s my option? Are you getting smart with me?”

(Staring at each other.)

(Silence)

“How about I shove it up your ass? Is that one of my options?”

“Security!”

Stress is a merged, finely-tuned BPS response, activated by thought more often when we encounter something we determine to be a threat, real or imagined. Stressful thoughts can result from such things as taking an examination, divorce, death of loved one, moving or losing a job. Often, if we tell ourselves certain activating thoughts, we can expect an increased heart rate, shallow



breathing, a decrease in digestive activity and a release of glucose for energy. We can also expect a sudden rush of catecholamines into our bloodstream. The decision to activate the stress response is made by the brain and is directly influenced by the input it receives from our thinking. Depending on our perception and the meaning we apply to the events we experience, we can expect a corresponding release of stress hormones to sustain our attempt to fight or flee the thing we believe will harm us.

“You’re rude.”

“That’s your opinion.”

“You’re an asshole!”

“Prove it!”

\* \* \* \*

Often you don’t realize you’re in the

middle of stress until you're in the middle of stress. By then, the stress hormones that power the stress response are in your bloodstream and are influencing your thinking and your judgment. If your body is flooded with stress hormones, as a result of your thinking, it will respond to those hormones, leaving you nearly powerless to the strength of the body's own drive to survive.

Thought is the brain's way of accessing experience (perception) as a tool for understanding one's environment, how one is trained to respond to h/er own particular culture. Thought activates a part of the brain (the limbic system) and does one of two things: maintains homeostasis (balance) or activates a protective response (fight/flight/freeze).

Our own innate warning system triggered

much like the deer in the meadow that hears the sound a distant SNAP! can be triggered through thought, imagination, memory and perception.

Thought can initiate a sudden burst of neurochemicals and hormones intended to sustain our efforts to survive, priming us for fighting, fleeing or freezing. For instance, imagine that you're on the phone with your doctor's office. You have been placed on hold and forgotten. You wait and wait and wait. Finally, the receptionist returns to your call and asks if she can help. "I've been waiting for fifteen minutes," you say. Your heart is beating rapidly. You feel yourself beginning to sweat.

You hear, "How can I help you?"

You feel yourself beginning to shake  
(adrenaline and norepinephrine are entering your

bloodstream and circulating through your viscera. Your heart is responding). Your voice rises. “I already told you I wanted to make an appointment to see the doctor,” you hear yourself saying. (Sustaining the thoughts that prompted the stress response continues to pump more and more adrenaline and norepinephrine through your body.)

You hear, “No need to get angry. Name?”

The hair on the back of your neck seems to stand on end. (This is Nature’s way of preparing you to cool your skin as you progress toward your ultimate decision to fight or flee.) You say, “My name? I already gave you my name! Fifteen minutes ago, I gave you my name!”

You hear, “Ma’am, you will have to give me your name again, if you want me to help you.” You feel your whole body shaking (adrenaline with

nowhere to go) as you slam the phone into its holder. For a few minutes you cannot think clearly or stop shaking. (Nature doesn't give the human organism the freedom to think rationally when the body believes it is being attacked by a wild animal.) After a few minutes, however, the chemicals you produced to fight the imaginary threat to your life have begun to dissipate. You call your sister and tell her what happened, "What would you have done? How would you have responded? Was I right?"

"Yes, you were damn right!"

You suddenly feel relieved, another chemical process. Safe and approved of, your body releases an endorphin called dopamine, a comforting reward from Nature for having survived the threat that never really was a threat at

all.

As previously mentioned, perception and thought activate the very same stress response used by our oldest ancestors to protect them from real physical harm. Today, however, our primary threats are emotional in nature, not often physical. You might get chased by a dog, or have a bird land on your head, but actual physical threats in nature are not common. The threats you are more likely to encounter include fear of the unknown, inconsiderate people, trying to control destiny, traffic jams, the loss of friends and family and hopelessness.

\* \* \* \*

The body's stress-response system is usually self-limiting. Once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels return to normal. As

adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities. But when stressors are always present and you constantly feel under attack, also known as chronic stress, that stress reaction stays turned on. The long-term activation of the stress-response, and the subsequent overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones, can disrupt almost all your body's processes, placing you at increased risk of numerous health problems, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Heart disease
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain

- Memory and concentration impairment

If we want to improve our EI and, thereby, reduce the number of occasions we rely on our stress response to reconcile the adversity we encounter in our lives, we will have to learn to control the switch that activates the entire process, our thinking. Of course, if you really are being chased by a wild, hungry and aggressive goat, you should do your best to use every bit of your FF&F response to escape to safety. But the events in our lives that we perceive as threats, those that are not truly threats at all but are, instead, inconveniences, hassles and annoyances must be reconciled differently, if we want to remain balanced, physically and emotionally healthy.

Emotionally intelligent people know that thinking and perception (and, therefore, the stress



response) can, with practice, be more under our own personal control. To believe that we are under the control of others is to believe in magic. If we want to emote differently, and take control of our stress response, it may be logical to assume that we have to think differently. Surrendering personal control over our own thoughts is to make us vulnerable to an overreliance on the stress response to reconcile social and emotional problems. That idea can only lead to unhappiness and physical disease.

Intellectual insight or the ability to understand the concepts we discussed may be the easier challenge to improvement in your EI. Behavior change, on the other hand, in relation to what you are coming to know and believe, is an altogether different and more time-consuming

goal. Simply, it isn't enough to know, we must also do.

\* \* \* \*

The amount of time it will take to realize some level of improvement in our EI is proportionate to how willing we are to commit to behavior change. There is also a correlation to improved EI and how long we have trained our minds to believe our emotions are under the magical control of other people.

Infants, children and young adults, on up to twenty-five years of age, are likely to make quicker gains in achieving improvement in EI. Their brains are more receptive to changes and new ideas. For the rest of us, we might begin to consider how skilled we are at recognizing self-defeating thought; how well we can accept the idea

that we are responsible for our own emotional health and, finally, how well we can merge our new thinking with novel, more self-enhancing behaviors.

We must become aware that we feel negative, self-defeating emotion, for example, because we think in terms of how awful, horrible and ghastly we are being treated by others or how our life is progressing. It's not surprising that, in response to these thoughts, one can expect that stress hormones will not be far behind. To change one's emotions, to return the body to its primary objective which is to be in balance, we must change the way we perceive and think about events and, to the best of our ability, through better thinking, prevent the flow of stress hormones into our bodies.

It is not uncommon to hear the phrase, “She pisses me off!” If we believe that we are being pissed off by something outside our control, we will automatically relinquish our responsibility to ourselves to control how we perceive what we experience and, instead, initiate our stress response in an effort to protect ourselves from the perceived dangers we associate with being pissed off.

Emotionally intelligent people must, to make headway in achieving a personally defined measure of emotional wellness, commit to living in a world where, although most people believe they can be pissed off by someone else, refuse to buy in to the idea that others are responsible for our feelings. “You don’t piss me off. I own my own emotions, because they are a product of my own

thinking. I piss myself off because I am telling myself that you must behave the way I demand you behave. That is foolish because you can behave any way you choose, and I can live happily in my life, regardless of how you choose to behave.”

\* \* \* \*

If we believe our emotions are the product of how we are being treated, we relinquish control of our feelings to something external of us. If we do that, we will likely have to postpone our own happiness until people begin to behave the way we demand that they behave. That can take a lifetime or, more likely, never at all.

We must not lose sight of the contributions we make to our own state of mind through our own thinking. By doing so, we will maintain our authority over our own contentment. We can be

content, even while living in a world where people behave as goodly or badly as they choose.

Each of us has within us a deep longing for everything to be put right, to be in balance. So our minds and our bodies will actively attempt to cope with emotional challenges, expending the energy necessary to meet that demand. Once the threat to our balance is overcome, we are expected to resume our lives in peace, until the next short-term challenge to our balance presents itself. A steady diet of long-term stress, however, without the requisite period of relaxation, places an unusual burden on our capacity to rebound. Nature never intended the stress response to last as long as we sustain it in modern times.

We have only one system for responding to threat, and it has not adapted well to our

contemporary demands. This is the cycle in which most of us engage the world.

It will take the force of will to overcome it.





# Chapter Twelve

## Come On, Get Happy

YOUR EI MAY IMPROVE THE MORE YOU PRACTICE new ways of thinking. Only you, however, will know if you've achieved your goal. There is no standard method for gauging success. If you're seeking to just tweak your EI, or if you are planning a complete overhaul, it may be a tough slog. There are often years upon years, layers of self-defeating thinking and perceiving to wade through to accommodate a more self-enhancing frame of mind. If that were not enough, the world is jam-packed with those who would have you return to your former way of thinking. People have grown accustomed to believing that

you make them feel, and they will not likely give up those ideas overnight, if ever.

“You made me so angry!”

“I did nothing of the kind.”

“You are obstinate.”

“How is that a problem for you?”

“You should take responsibility for how you make me feel.”

“It’s hard enough for me to take responsibility for how I make myself feel.”

“I think you’re insane.”

“I think I can live contentedly with your opinion.”

If you’re serious about your EI, you will have to commit to starting fresh and then to never surrendering to the insanity that surrounds you. To begin your journey to improved EI, you will first

have to establish a frame of reference from which you can visualize, evaluate and define your present level of EI, and stop depending so heavily on others for that definition.

According to Eckhart Tolle (1948 –) “your conscious mind loves to create your world for you” and delivers to you the emotional world you imagine. Your personal definition of EI, therefore, should always remain independent of the influence of others. To establish your own standards, you may have to first define your own idea of happiness.

Your definition of happiness might include reconciling yourself with your strengths and weaknesses and committing to living happily with that estimation. You might become more emotionally and physically aware of yourself in the

here and now. You might stop looking to the past to define who you are today. You might plan for how you wish (or hope to) behave; how you think and how you aspire to express emotion based entirely on your own inner reference point for making those judgments. These reference points may help you define your own goals for improving your EI.

Just imagine yourself traveling through your day, free of the opinions, assessments, judgments, criticisms and evaluations that you tend to attribute to your current definition of who you are and where you fit into the world. Imagine that you can, instead of making yourself upset, thank people for seeing you and all of your obvious imperfections. To do that, you will have to begin to imagine that the here-and-now is more important than the past

or the future.

This is all very possible.

I try not to seek out others to dictate the parameters of my emotional options, although I still occasionally do. I have slowly come to realize that too much outside opinion on who I should be and how I should behave to please others can create a dependence on others for my personal value and my emotional state. Outside opinion, I have found, can make emotional struggle even more of a struggle.

“Can you believe she did that?”

“Not really!

“What would you do?”

“I would be very angry. I would want to slap her.”

“Goodness, was it really that bad?”

“It was the worst thing possible! I can’t believe you don’t see that! You are being way too patient and tolerant of this.”

“So you think I should slap her?”

“I would.”

I am not always successful at achieving my emotional goals, and neither will you be. To my credit, if I have accomplished anything, I have improved my skill at differentiating between rational and irrational thought. I believe I have achieved an inner frame of reference that helps me tell the difference between which of my emotional encounters are manageable and which are unmanageable. I often dedicate myself to addressing my unmanageable emotions using constructive, well-thought-out and rational solutions.

Although I sometimes fail at this ambition, I have at least come up with my own method for changing the things I can change and not trying to change the things I cannot change. And I have learned to forgive myself when I don't succeed. My confidence in myself for drawing conclusions and relying on my own considered opinion for what I am willing to call managed emotion often results in my improved potential for emotional independence. I am, however, not and likely will never be, completely independent of others. I like people (except some of them) and I like to share my ideas, thoughts and opinions with them. I, alone, however, construct my own emotional environment, my own emotional life, and try, most often, for the emotional solution that will bring about or maintain my own definition of happiness.

My acquired skills have certainly worked for me, most of the time. You might begin your own journey toward emotional independence (while remaining connected to others) by concluding that your emotional wellness will depend on the definition of happiness you establish for yourself.

Have you thought of how you define happiness?

Do you have a written definition?

If you wrote one out, would it reveal something about you and how you address the problems you face?

Does your definition of happiness depend on everything being in balance?

Is your personal definition of happiness even possible?

Definitions of the happiness that are linear,



strict and perfect are often subject to failure. If I think that the only time in my life I can be happy is when everything is going perfectly and people are treating me well, I will have a limited opportunity for happiness. I would be at the whim and will of a world that is likely to provide me with any number of challenges, most of which are quite unpredictable.

Happiness, for me, must include the point that misfortune is a fact of every-day life and must be met with grace. I hold a definition of happiness that includes an expectation of some measure of misfortune and that misfortune is likely to surface at any given moment in time. Happiness means to me that even when misfortune occurs, I can still be happy in my life, maybe not as happy as I would be without misfortune and hardship; but happy

nonetheless. I strive every day to be in touch with my emotions and how I influence them through my thinking and rethinking. I have made a conscious commitment to take an active role in my own emotional life and how I define happiness for myself.

As I've previously said, I often hear people say, "You think too much. You shouldn't think so much. You should just leave things the way they are. You'll drive yourself crazy thinking all the time." If I didn't try to maintain a level-headed awareness of how I reconcile my emotional life, all the time, I would be, instead of a thinking person, a rather random, indiscriminate and uncertain person, out of touch with my own emotional destiny.

I am not at ease with that level of

uncertainty.

Uncertainty leads to impulsivity.

It is not so much that impulsivity is always a harmful behavior. On the contrary, impulsivity has a place in my life. I like to get in my car and just drive, winding up somewhere I hadn't planned to go. I don't believe, however, that that kind of impulsivity would work well to maintain my emotional health. I should always be steering toward my own, personal, well-defined definition of happiness. My emotional frame of reference includes aspects of me that are best guarded against foreseeable harm.

I guess I am a believer in premeditated impulsivity.

\* \* \* \*

Happiness is a subjective concept, having

little meaning except that which we give to it. Many of us live by a recipe of happiness (a definition) that was either handed down to us from our early caregivers, one built from someone else's dreams and ambitions for us, or constructed from a perspective of linking ourselves to others and how we measure up to their successes. In any event, happiness derived from any of these standards may not be possible or conducive to leading an emotionally intelligent life.

Few people are encouraged to take an honest and true accounting of their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual strengths and weaknesses. Instead, we set out to achieve goals that are designed not around our capabilities, but, instead, to validate our worth as human beings. Each time we flop, we believe we are worthless;

each time we win we are a winner. Our sense of contentment and happiness, thereby, is only as enduring as our last achievement. We have somehow tied our concept of happiness to our human worth and how others perform in relation to us. As an alternative to viewing ourselves fairly and objectively, we seek to achieve a kind of happiness derived from the full use of our psychological weaknesses.

“If you graduate from college, you will be successful and live your life happily. If you don’t, well, you will not be happy.”

“If you are gay, you will never be happy. You couldn’t possibly be happy living with that much ridicule and shame.”

“If you make thousands upon thousands of dollars, you will be happy. If you make less than

that, well, you will be less successful than others and, by that, you wouldn't be happy."

"If you fail, you will be a failure and no one will ever view you as a serious person. You couldn't possibly ever be happy."

It seems, using these measures of success and failure, we can never really be happy at all.

We may begin to build our new definition of happiness by truly and honestly assessing our strengths and weaknesses and establishing an optimistic view of our own true, human potential. You are not perfect and you were never intended to be perfect. You have weaknesses and you have strengths. We may remove from our definition of happiness such things as material wealth, power and parade floats. If you are not enough without these three very common inhibitions to happiness,

you will not be enough if or when you achieve them.

It will not be easy to develop a new definition of happiness. Like everything related to improved EI, you will have to work at it. You might begin by developing the optimistic attitude that if you fail, you can accept that inevitability without translating failure into a global evaluation of your human worth. You can stop comparing yourself to others and you can accept that your life is better lived when it is your life. You will never be your successes and you will never be your failures; and you are certainly not the product of how you measure up to the successes and failures of others.

It will take the force of will to believe that.





# Chapter Thirteen

## Honorable Beliefs

PEOPLE TYPICALLY ACQUIRE THEIR EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR through what we might call emotional programming, repetitive exposure to the affective and behavioral traditions appropriate to the society in which they were raised. To a large extent, just as we learn to speak language, choose certain foods over others, commit to memory the rules of driving and the practice of religion, our emotional choices are developed through coaching and repetition, forming the framework of our present emotional range. Simply said, people within the same family, neighborhood, community, city, town and state teach each other how to

encounter emotional events. Very little is random; nearly all of your emotional routine is learned.

That being the case, nearly of it can also be unlearned.

At some point, however, without some motivating reason to do something different, people eventually leave their homes and go off into the world, expressing emotion similar to those with whom you socialized throughout your early life, free to teach their children the same emotional customs they were taught. Problems often arise when we meet people who were raised from a different emotional and behavioral custom, sometimes making compromise quite difficult.

Emotional conflict often results.

As I mentioned in previous chapters, shit happens and you do the same things you've always

done when you encounter the world, especially when you encounter adversity and resistance to your demands. Improvement in EI means that we recognize the source of our emotions and the weaknesses we've acquired over time in our thinking and behaving and we commit to doing something else.

Children can be a powerful source for witnessing social-emotional education in action. Children are wired for learning and their everyday behavior can be a means of discovering how we establish the framework for resolving emotional issues later in life. For instance, a young child, new to a grocery store, is suddenly immersed in a wonderland of novel colors, smells and sounds. The child may believe s/he has entered Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory,

surrounded by lollipops, chocolate bars, cakes and cookies. Of course, before the child even entered the grocery store, s/he already possessed a number of skills for getting what s/he wants. For the sake of making this explanation simpler and easier to follow, however, we will pretend s/he hasn't prepared in any way for the experience.

The child begins by reaching for the colorful treats. If the child doesn't get what s/he wants, s/he will reach again and possibly add a disturbing grunt or whine. If that doesn't work, the child may reach, whine and scream. After a few unsuccessful attempts at using these behaviors, the child may escalate the behaviors and create a unique combination of reaching, whining, kicking, hitting and screaming fashioned in a way to more forcefully get the caregiver's attention and to gain

h/er cooperation at meeting h/er demands. The caregiver at this point has one of two choices, to give in to the child's demands or to allow the child's behavior to escalate and then to go extinct.

If the child is rewarded with the treat after perfecting h/er collection of cohesive behaviors, s/he will likely begin at that precise point next time s/he wants something, having learned that other, less volatile behaviors don't work. Why not just cut to the chase and start where s/he knows h/er behaviors do work in achieving h/er goals? On the other hand, if the child, instead of getting what s/he is reaching for, gets no response at all, the child will realize, at some point, that no behavior will get h/er what s/he is seeking and that when the caregiver says, No, s/he really does means No.

The simple fact is all behavior has to have

a purpose. People will not behave in ways that do not bring them some kind of reward. If behavior does not bring a desired result, behavior will go extinct.

Extinction is a process of ignoring behavior, forcing it to die away, encouraging alternative activities that are more along the line of acquiring an increased aptitude for frustration tolerance. It is best, therefore, not to allow the process to get underway, to begin with.

Once it is started, it is much more difficult to reverse.

The acquisition of social skill is so important to human survival Nature leaves the initial process of acquiring emotional custom on-going for the first 25—or-so years of human life. It is not unusual to see a seventeen-year-old behaving

as if s/he were a five-year-old. The seventeen-year-old is still in a stage of neural development where testing behaviors and logging information related to experience is still an active process. As we grow older, we don't just suddenly stop behaving like a child to get what we want. If we were allowed to behave inconsiderately, explosively, and thoughtlessly in childhood and into early adulthood, we can expect that as we mature we will just perfect these goal-seeking behaviors and become whiny, demanding, self-centered and needy adults.

After twenty-five years of logging social-emotional information our brains seem to settle in on a routine for encountering the world, and we are not so welcoming of changing what we have grown accustomed to thinking and doing. As the years

progress, people will actually react forcefully against change that requires even the slightest modification in thinking and behaving. In fact, people will defend their premise for expressing a particular thought and emotion at a particular time with a great deal of fervor, even if they know it isn't bringing good results. Fortunately we can change our behavior, with effort, regardless of our age, and we can be successful. It just becomes more and more difficult as the years progress.

Even you, as an adult, may be still reaching, whining, kicking and hitting to get what you want, especially when you encounter people who refuse to cooperate and are resistant to your demands. Your demandingness of yourself and others may be what prompted you to improve your emotional intelligence in the first place. Do you



find yourself seeking perfection in your own behavior? Do you find yourself making yourself angry and depressed because others resist your demands and expectations of them? Do you find yourself making yourself unhappy when people don't act perfectly?

Adults, like children, will have to be encouraged to give up their self-defeating thinking and behaving and replace it with something that brings a more rewarding result. The reward you may be seeking at this point is a stable, more manageable emotional life. In that case, there may be many years of learning to overcome.

Emotional change requires a mixture of new thinking and new actions the individual is willing to practice in place of h/er undesired behavior. For example, if you want to quit

smoking, you are not likely to replace smoking with peeling potatoes. In order to change behavior, you must be willing to replace the undesired behavior with one that you believe is a compelling substitute.

People have to like the alternative to what they want to stop doing. The same can be said for emotional change. We have to want to be less stressed, more composed and saner than we are at the moment, to be motivated to seek to improve our emotional intelligence. You will have to want emotional well-being more than you want to live with emotional instability.

\* \* \* \*

Thought and behavior change require us to challenge long-established beliefs, customs and rituals of thinking and behaving that are passed on

to us by those who raised us. We might call these social-emotional customs our honorable beliefs. For example, ideas about patriotism, religion, politeness, gender roles, sexual behavior and even what we eat and drink can make up a portion of our honorable beliefs, passed down to us through our encounters with others. To question the validity of holding some of the ideas we hold may be perceived as a compromise in our relationships with our parents, grandparents, neighbors, church leaders, heroes and mentors. People will seek a great deal of evidence to defy the ideas that were given to them by such an esteemed and honorable group of educators.

Our honorable beliefs are made up of such things as what we believe should, ought, must, has to and needs to happen in order for us to be happy

in our lives. What we will call our absolute musts. Improving your EI will depend on your application of the very best definition and purpose you can establish for using absolute musts to navigate your emotional life.

Absolute musts are the beliefs we hold, the emotional customs, rituals and traditions related to how we learned to interact with others, as we were growing and developing. We learned that in relation to our absolute musts, there is simply no wiggle room, no chance for mistake or free will. For instance:

- You (and everyone else) should be polite.
- You (and everyone else) ought to be helpful.
- You (and everyone else) need to be respected.
- You (and everyone else) must never lie or

be lied to.

- You (and everyone else) have to conform.

People often believe, on some level, that they should have absolute control over themselves and their environments. When we don't, we will likely be frustrated and experience fear and tension. The use of absolute musts in how we encounter the world contributes to a large extent to how we resolve our emotional problems. The following describes this frustration-disturbance process:

- We perceive that when we can't have what we want when we want it, and we believe we should, ought, must, have to and need to have it when we want it, we make ourselves frustrated and anxious.
- We tell ourselves that we can't stand it when we don't get what we believe we should,

ought, must, have to and need to have and begin a process of self-talk that includes those words, thereby decreasing, rather than improving, our frustration-tolerance.

- We repeat these messages over and over in our heads and become fixated on the idea that we not experience frustration and that we should, ought, must, have to and need to be free of discomfort in our lives in order to be happy.
- We preoccupy ourselves with these thoughts and limit our opportunities to consider more life-enhancing alternatives, impeding improvement in our emotional intelligence.

I encourage my reader to be very familiar with how you use these terms and how they can have a great deal of potential to interfere with

emotional problem-solving. When we use these words, we are declaring our unalterable demand for perfection and our intolerance of variation from ourselves and others.

Absolute musts are inflexible models of behavior that most of us respect, but often fall short of achieving ourselves. No one, including you, can live their entire lives in an ideal state. Make a lot of room for imperfection by curbing or even eliminating the words should, ought, must, have to and need from your vocabulary and your EI may likely grow by leaps and bounds.

It may be best to develop new ways of expressing our ideals (our honorable beliefs) possibly by making inflexible declarations more into statements of personal preference. “You should not behave that way and I can’t stand it

when you do,” can become, “I would prefer that you behave differently, but I can stand it when you behave badly.” In addition, “I need you to treat me respectfully,” can become, “I would like you to treat me more respectfully, but I can live my life without your cooperation.”

Using absolute musts not only denies the possibility for fallibility in yourself and others, but also denies the fact that others often make unintentional mistakes or simply exercise their free will to behave any way they choose.

If you would like to make an immediate improvement in your EI, you may begin by replacing your absolute musts with the terms prefer, want or would like; words that make your demand for how others must behave more flexible, realistic and less stress-provoking.



- We can perceive that when we can't have what we want that we would like to have what we want and that it is not essential to our happiness to get it. In this way, we make ourselves, at most, sad that we don't get what we want, but it is not the end of the world.
- We can tell ourselves that we can stand it when we don't get what we want and begin, instead, a process of self-talk that includes such words and phrases as would like, want and prefer, thereby increasing, rather than decreasing, our frustration-tolerance.
- We can change our self-defeating self-talk by repeating these rational messages over and over in our heads and become fixed, instead, on the idea that we will likely

experience frustration in our lives and that our lives will never be entirely free of discomfort. Discomfort is a likelihood of human life and it is best to develop strategies for acknowledging and remembering that.

- We can begin to practice these new thoughts and, thereby, improve our opportunities for more life-enhancing thinking and behaving, resulting in an improvement in our emotional intelligence.

\* \* \* \*

I often find my clients saying they are happy with their absolute musts and choose to hold on to them. It's likely because they consider their beliefs in how people should behave to be quite moral, decent and fair.

There is something to that.

The key, however, is that absolute musts are inflexible, dogmatic and not useful to fallible human beings. The absolute musts we declare for how everyone should behave in relation to us are not even possible for ourselves, all of the time. So, by that standard, when we demand (rather than hope) that others behave according to our absolute musts, we go too far. We cannot hold others to an unalterable standard of behavior if we do not always meet that standard ourselves.

Our honorable beliefs are the standards we will use one day to judge the merits of our culture. But, in the meantime, to improve your EI, you will have to modify your strictly held beliefs so that they both honor the best potentials of human behavior, but also recognize the reality that people

will not always live by or even accept your beliefs, no matter how much you think they should. You might begin to change yourself talk. You might say, “I like it when people treat each other with respect, but when they don’t, I can still live with it. I will never like it, but it is not awful or horrible and I certainly can stand it.” You might also say, “I can be sad that people are disrespectful. I will never like it, but I can remain content when it happens. I can treat others with respect, regardless of the way people choose to behave toward me. It will be hard to do, but so is improving my EI.”

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Fourteen

$$A + B = C / D > E$$

- Special Note to Audiobook Listeners: The lessons in this chapter will be greatly enhanced if you listen in a place and at a time when you can write down the concepts that are being discussed. Of course you can listen only; but to gain the fullest advantage from the material presented in this chapter, the listener may choose to make notes, complete the lessons and practice the skills on paper. The ABC process, you will find, is simple to use, once you get the hang of it.

\* \* \* \*

EI THEORY INCORPORATES  
BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL PHILOSOPHIES of  
emotional and physical wellness, in addition to  
emotive and behavioral measures to encourage the

learner to independently act against irrational thoughts and behaviors. By expressing a more internally-focused base of control, and staying well-focused during the process of problem identification and resolution, improvement in EI is believed to be more likely.

I use the ABCs to understand my thoughts and emotions and to take action against those emotional problems that are producing undue stress and hardship. (Remember, not all emotional problems rise to the occasion of using this model. There will likely be any number of inconveniences, setbacks and manageable disruptions in your day that simple time and patience will handle. Those issues you believe are unmanageable, problems that interfere with living a healthy emotional life, will be suitable for this

level of evaluation and intervention. Of course you can use this model of problem-solving for any emotional issue you experience. Sometimes, however, shit happens and we just move along.)

The ABCs come from Albert Ellis' rational emotive behavior theory and rely on the idea that human beings derive emotion from thought. Ellis' paradigm for emotional problem-solving provides us with a method for charting how we came to our unmanageable emotional consequence and how to change it. Ellis' ABCs give us a way of visualizing our thinking, thereby providing a method for overcoming our self-defeating thoughts and the emotions they produce, achieving an informed, evolved and more self-enhancing emotional consequence.

The equation for solving emotional



problems using Ellis' model is  $A + B = C/D > E$ , where an (A)ctivating event plus a (B)elief equals an emotional (C)onsequence which can be divided by (D)isputation to equal a greater (E)motional outcome. The system is much easier than it looks and sounds. We will learn to use it, but first we will more clearly identify the ABCs and what they represent:

- A: Activating Event
- B: Belief
- C: Emotional Consequence
- D: Disputation
- E: Emotional Evolution

We refer to the A as the activating event because it is the circumstance that instigated the thoughts and emotions you are experiencing. Simply said, something happened and it caught

your attention and you want to manage your emotional reaction to it better. You might describe the activating event (A) in simple, verifiable terms. Some examples of activating events (A) may be:

- A: My boss criticized me.
- A: The cashier was rude to me.
- A: My husband doesn't love me.
- A: I failed my test.

The B is the belief you apply to the event you are attempting to understand and manage. The B will represent your self-talk and include your absolute demands, your shoulds, oughts, musts, have tos and needs. You will have to listen to what you tell yourself about the activating event (A) in order to capture your self-talk and chart your beliefs (B). Some examples of beliefs (B) may be:

- B: People should never criticize me.
- B: People should show me respect when they talk to me.
- B: I need respect to be happy in my life.
- B: People must never make errors when judging me.
- B: I have to have my husband's love to be lovable.
- B: Waitresses must never behave badly when they serve me.

These are all fairly common beliefs that often lead to quite unfortunate emotional consequences. Let's explore these two factors in understanding and improving your emotional problem-solving skills by charting an activating event from its origin to its conclusion.

1. My boss criticized me.

2. My boss was harsh with me and he shouldn't have been. I need my boss to approve of me. My boss must always treat me with respect. I ought to be treated better than I am being treated.

1. The cashier is rude to me.

2. Cashiers should always be friendly. Cashiers must be attentive to me. Cashiers ought to never make mistakes when they are serving customers. Cashiers need to be pleasant and helpful.

1. My husband criticized me.

2. Husbands should never criticize their wives. I need my husband to show me respect all the time. My husband must never behave badly

with me. My husband ought to please me at all times, no matter what he is experiencing.

1. I failed my test.
  2. I shouldn't fail tests. I need to pass all tests to be viewed as intelligent. I must be above-average intelligence to be intelligent at all. I ought to pass all the tests I take because I studied.
- Before proceeding, write out your own activating event (A) and the beliefs (B) you have about the activating event, just for practice. Pay special attention to your self-talk and your use of the words should, ought, must, have to and need to identify your beliefs.

The C in this paradigm represents the emotional consequence (the emotion you have as a result of experiencing the A and B). The emotional consequence may be described as sadness, anger, anxiety, depression, disgust, angst and worry. We will contribute to our diagram by identifying the C:

1. My boss criticized me.
  2. My boss was harsh with me and he shouldn't have been. I need my boss to approve of me. My boss must always treat me with respect. I ought to be treated better than I am being treated.
  3. I am angry, afraid and repulsed.
- 
1. The cashier is rude to me.

2. Cashiers should always be friendly. Cashiers must be attentive to me. Cashiers ought to never make mistakes when they are serving customers. Cashiers need to be pleasant and helpful.

3. I am outraged and angry.

1. My husband criticized me.

2. Husbands should never criticize their wives. I need my husband to show me respect all the time. My husband must never behave badly toward me. My husband ought to care about me at all times, no matter what he is experiencing.

3. I am afraid and angry.

1. I failed my test.

2. I shouldn't fail tests. I need to pass all tests to

be viewed as intelligent. I must be above-average intelligence to be intelligent at all. I ought to pass all the tests I take because I studied.

3. I am depressed.

- Before proceeding, add an emotional consequence (C) to the activating event (A), beliefs (B) you previously identified.

Remember, you will not have an emotional consequence (C) unless you have a belief (B) about the activating event (A). For example, if you believe you should, at all times, be treated well by your boss, you are likely to make yourself angry when s/he doesn't treat you the way you tell yourself you need to be treated. People do not



become upset because something happens. People make themselves upset because they tell themselves something about what happened:  $A + B = C$ .

\* \* \* \*

We've talked about the similarity between learning a foreign language and learning a new emotional language. When we speak to ourselves in terms of what should, ought, must, has to and needs to be for us to be happy in our lives, we are imposing the inevitability of unmanageable, self-defeating and destructive emotional consequences on ourselves, because things don't always work out the way we demand they should. Your goal is to change your personal beliefs, demands and needs to more manageable wants and flexible and constructive preferences.

Now that we've come this far using the ABCs, you may want to run out and start using them. It may be helpful to practice the ABCs until you can move the process through your mind, at will. There are still, however, the D (disputation) and E (emotional evolution) to learn.

The D in the ABC paradigm represents the essential process of disputing your irrational, self-defeating beliefs. The D provides us with a method for identifying the irrationalities in our thinking and offers an opportunity to subject these irrationalities to a higher level of scrutiny. The D allows us to pinpoint our logic (or illogic) for maintaining our views. The D provides us with an opportunity for testing what we tell ourselves, for locating the rationale of continuing to think the way we do

about ourselves and others. The D represents the active process of asking ourselves the right questions to get at the right answers to evolve our thoughts and emotions to something more manageable.

At D you will ask yourself if your beliefs are actually true, or are they some ideal you are demanding that others hold.

- Do I really need cooperation from others to be happy in my life?
- Can I live with it when people act against my wishes?
- Is it really so unbearable when I don't get what I expect?
- Is this something I want or something I think I need?
- Where is the evidence for this belief?

- Can I prove that this belief is true?

Disputing (D) your beliefs (B) is a learned technique that, like using the ABCs, is an acquired skill that takes practice. Disputation (D) provides an opportunity to make new judgments about unfamiliar and familiar dilemmas. By challenging your customary self-talk, your roles and scripts (B), you can actually see how you create your own emotions (C) and, by disputing (D) the thoughts that lead to the emotional consequence (C), impede the generation of unhealthy, unproductive emotion.

Disputing (D) requires you to challenge your firmly-held beliefs. You might ask yourself to provide evidence, a factual basis for your beliefs (B). Ask yourself to prove, for example, that people should be respectful of you (B). Prove that your wife shouldn't divorce you (B). Prove that

your children should not forget your birthday (B). The only possible evidence for any of these beliefs (B) is that you don't like it or you would rather have it your way. That is hardly enough evidence to expect others to change their behavior.

Building your skill at disputing (D) will require that you become an expert in how you use the words should, ought, must, have to and need and acknowledge the dangers implicit in using these words. These words give support to the notion that you are the guardian of truth, right and wrong, good and bad. These words represent your standard of excellence; your standards of perfection, the ideal behavior that you impose on yourself and others. These words represent your limitations in improvement in your EI.

Let's add the D to our running diagram:

1. My boss criticized me.
2. My boss was harsh with me and he shouldn't have been. I need my boss to approve of me. My boss must always treat me with respect. I ought to be treated better than I am being treated.
3. I am angry, afraid and repulsed.
4. Is it true that I need my boss' respect to be happy in my life? Where is the evidence that my boss must always treat me well? How have I come to believe that I should never be treated badly or disrespectfully? How have I determined that my boss' respect plays a role in my overall happiness?

1. The cashier is rude to me.

2. Cashiers should always be friendly. Cashiers must be attentive to me. Cashiers ought to never make mistakes when they are serving customers. Cashiers need to be pleasant and helpful.
3. I am outraged and angry.
4. Is it true that people must always be friendly to me? Is it true that I have to always be treated well to find happiness in my own life? Is it true that when people behave against my belief that they are entirely bad and must be damned? Where is the proof for all this stuff I am telling myself?

1. My husband criticized me.
2. Husbands should never criticize their wives. I need my husband to show me respect all the

time. My husband must never behave badly with me. My husband ought to please me at all times, no matter what he is experiencing.

3. I am afraid and angry.
4. Where is the evidence that my husband must always behave the way I demand? Is it true that even when I behave badly that my husband must always treat me nicely? Where is the evidence that my husband must always be perfect to be married to me?

1. I failed my test.
2. I shouldn't fail tests. I need to pass all tests to be viewed as intelligent. I must be above-average intelligence to be intelligent at all. I ought to pass all the tests I take because I studied.



3. I am depressed.
4. How have I determined that failing is a clear sign that I entirely a failure? Is it true that if I am not good at everything I do that I am not good? Is it true that when I fail I should be damned? Is it true that I should always succeed at everything I do?

The D helps you challenge the veracity of your beliefs and to hold them to a rational standard. You may find that you have quite a few more beliefs (B) and a lot more disputing (D) to do before you fully understand what you are telling yourself. Feel free to explore this possibility. Spend time with this diagram. It will become the source of improvement in your EI.

- Before proceeding, add a disputation (D) or two to the activating event (A), beliefs (B) and emotional consequence (C) for you previously identified problem.

\* \* \* \*

Improving your EI depends on your ability to turn anger into a variety of other, less unmanageable emotions such as sadness, frustration, tolerance, hopefulness or forgiveness. You can evolve to any number of emotional reactions that are more suitable for happiness, simply by disputing (D) and evolving your thinking (E).

The E in the ABC paradigm is simply the end result of using the ABCs to manage your emotional consequences. The E represents everyone's ability to have an emotional evolution,

to change, through more rational thinking, the emotional response we have to nearly anything simply by challenging our self-talk. If you were successful at disputing (D) your irrational thoughts at B, you will likely be capable of exchanging your emotional response (C) for something less burdensome (E). The E represents your improved, more manageable emotional response!

1. My boss criticized me.
2. My boss was harsh with me and he shouldn't have been. I need my boss to approve of me. My boss must always treat me with respect. I ought to be treated better than I am being treated.
3. I am angry, afraid and repulsed.
4. Is it true that I need my boss' respect to be happy in my life? Where is the evidence that

my boss must always treat me well? How have I come to believe that I should never be treated badly or disrespectfully? How have I determined that my boss' respect plays a role in my overall happiness?

5. None of what I am telling myself is true. It is true that I can live contentedly in my life, even if my boss chooses to behave badly. I can get a new job. I can tell him what I think and what I would like. I have many options available to me. That in mind, I believe I am no longer afraid or repulsed. I am sad that my boss doesn't have the skill to communicate in a friendlier way. He is apparently emotionally handicapped, and I can accommodate that weakness in him. I was feeling anger, but now I am feeling less anger. I am also flirting with

the idea that I can feel forgiveness for him. He seems like he is a sad person.

1. The cashier is rude to me.
2. Cashiers should always be friendly. Cashiers must be attentive to me. Cashiers ought to never make mistakes when they are checking out customers. Cashiers need to be pleasant and helpful.
3. I am outraged and angry.
4. Is it true that people must always be friendly to me? Is it true that I have to always be treated well to find happiness in my own life? Is it true that when people behave against my belief that they are entirely bad and must be damned? Where is the proof for all this stuff I am telling myself?

5. It is not true that everyone must be friendly to me at all times. People can actually do as they please. I can live with how people behave and I don't have to think that it is the end of the world simply because people are rude. I can be sad and unhappy that people choose to behave this way. I don't have to be angry. I can live peacefully even though people act poorly and against my expectations of them. I am no longer angry. I am sad that people choose to behave poorly toward one another. I was feeling anger, but now that I think of it, the cashier doesn't really have any real control over how I value myself. I'm not really angry anymore. I guess I'm just content that I am me and I'm not her.

1. My husband criticized me.
2. Husbands should never criticize their wives. I need my husband to show me respect all the time. My husband must never behave badly with me. My husband ought to please me at all times, no matter what he is experiencing.
3. I am afraid and angry.
4. Where is the evidence that my husband must always behave the way I demand? Is it true that even when I behave badly that my husband must always treat me nicely? Where is the evidence that my husband must always be perfect to be married to me?
5. If I am going to stay married, it may be a better idea to understand that my husband is imperfect and makes mistakes. I make mistakes too. If we are going to be happy in our lives

together, we will both benefit from remembering that we are both imperfect. I can be more forgiving of his imperfectness and he may be more forgiving of mine. I am not longer afraid. I am forgiving. I was feeling anger, but now I feel forgiveness. He is my husband and he is flawed. I can live with that, and I can tell him what I want. I just can't expect to get it sometimes.

1. I failed my test.
2. I shouldn't fail tests. I need to pass all tests to be viewed as intelligent. I must be above-average intelligence to be intelligent at all. I ought to pass all the tests I take because I studied.
3. I am depressed.



4. How have I determined that failing is a clear sign that I entirely a failure? Is it true that if I am not good at everything I do that I am not good? Is it true that when I fail I should be damned? Is it true that I should always succeed at everything I do?
5. If I fail a test, that does not mean I am a failure. I succeed at a number of things that would defy that logic. It really means I failed the test. I can study harder next time. I can ask for extra help. I can resolve that I am not very talented in this area. I don't have to be talented in everything I attempt. I can be happy in my life if I fail. It would be more fun if I succeeded. But people do fail and I am probably likely to fail at something again in the future. It doesn't help for me to berate myself every time I do that. I

think I can be more realistic about what failure means. I am no longer afraid. I am motivated! I was depressed, but now that I have a better sense of what I'm telling myself, I am glad for the opportunity to not succeed. I can live contentedly with myself when I fail. I can only do my best at getting better grades and studying. Maybe I can look for help from those who passed, so I will do better on my tests next time.

\* \* \* \*

We should keep in mind that a complete evolution of our emotional state is not always possible. For example, a reduction in anger is best understood by gauging it on a scale from 1-10. When you designate your feeling at (C) you may write Anger x 8. If your attempt at managing your

anger begins at eight, but is reduced to a five after examining it using this diagram, you may view that reduction as an indication of success. It is also quite possible to go from anger to sadness, anger to forgiveness, anger to less anger. The emotional evolution (E) will depend on how well you use your disputation (D) to make rational sense of your self-talk (B).

Your potential to create your own emotional consequence through better, more rational self-talk is the gold standard for improving your EI. This skill will come as you build your talents at identifying and confronting your irrational beliefs (B) and replacing them with rational ones (D).

\* Now add an emotional evolution (E) to

your disputation (D), emotional consequence (C), activating event (A) and belief (B) for the problem you previously identified.

\* \* \* \*

I remember a student in one of my lectures.

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“Well, let’s say you tell yourself you need to have \$5.00 in your pocket every day before leaving the house. Let’s say you tell yourself not only that you need the money in your pocket, but you have to, you must have \$5.00 in your pocket every day when you leave the house. How will you make yourself feel if you get to work and find that you’ve forgotten your needed \$5.00?”

“I guess I would feel anxious and afraid.”

“Let’s say you tell yourself that you would like to have \$5.00 in your pocket every day when

you leave the house. Let's say you tell yourself you would prefer to have \$5.00. You tell yourself that you hope to have \$5.00. What do you make yourself feel when you get to work and you find that you don't have \$5.00 in your pocket?"

The girl thought for a moment and said, "Letdown?"

"Yes! Would you rather be anxious and afraid or let down?"

"Let down?"

"So you changed your emotion through thinking, by changing one word in your self-talk! Tell me how that happened."

"Well, if I tell myself things must be a certain way in order for me to be happy in my life, when they're not, I will make myself depressed, anxious, fearful and angry. If I tell myself I would

like things to be a certain way, if I would prefer them or hope for that outcome, and it doesn't happen, I can be sad or something like that, nothing near as bad as angry and anxious.”

“Yes, and by simply making your self-talk more rational and reasonable.”

Your thoughts are the birthplace of your emotions. Beliefs that are self-defeating tend not to stand up to scrutiny. Self-defeating thoughts ignore the positive, exaggerate the negative, distort reality and over-generalize. Pay close attention to how you apply the words should, ought, must, have to and need in your daily life. These words are demanding of a perfect and ideal standard. You might not be best served by expecting the perfect and ideal behavior from anyone – including yourself. If you get what you want, be thankful for

it. If you don't get what you want, you can always use the ABCs to better understand the outcome and adjust your frame of mind to achieve balance and a higher likelihood of contentment.

It will take the force of will to do this.





# Chapter Fifteen

## Rules of the Road

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A CLASSROOM, somewhere to practice your ABCs, to have an in vivo (in life) learning adventure, look no further than your own windshield. People who drive cars are not always following anything more than their own rules for driving; much like the way we live our lives. Through the windshield of your car, you can be alone with your thoughts and breathe in the challenges to the emotional imbalance unfolding before you.

Most of us have an emotional response to people who travel the highway in the passing lane, the left lane, oblivious to those behind them who

want to pass.

You're not supposed to be in this lane!

Don't you know the rules?

You should be damned for traveling in the passing lane! Everyone knows the rules. Why don't you?

I'll show you. I'll tailgate you until you submit to my superior driving intellect and my authority! I know tailgating is against the rules; but this is different. You must be trained in how to behave! And I must train you!

With a clear path to pass on the right, many of us will stay firmly affixed to the bumper of the guy in front of us, determined to teach him to follow the rules. If the car moves to the right and allows us to pass, we feel vindicated for being treated in such an ill-mannered fashion, although

we might give a scolding glance as we pass (or a firm hand gesture).

If the car doesn't move, we will continue to tell ourselves that the ruthless villain (idiot, asshole) should behave more courteously, lawfully, considerately and thoughtfully. This emotional mess will continue for a while, until someone gets bored and makes a move to resolve it. Often it is you who will simply decide to pass on the right.

What an idiot!

What a complete asshole!

He's not following the rules.

I hope he crashes into a tree!

That'll teach 'em!

This analogy can be easily applied to your daily, non-driving emotional challenges. When you have a difference of opinion, when people treat

you poorly or with disrespect, when others won't cooperate with what you believe they should be doing, you have a choice. You can tailgate them until they change their view, making yourself miserable in the process, making yourself intent on being inflexible and stubborn; or you can just pass on the right. You can smile and wave on your way by, and you can thank them for the lesson they provided you.

You—hoo! Thank you for the learning opportunity!

It's all up to you.

I try to relate the experiences in my own personal life to how I explain EI theory. Most days, I set off in my car and I don't bother wearing a seat belt. In fact, I am quite intent against seat belts. I don't like how they feel. I find them

confining. Instead, I freely arrange myself in my seat, turn on NPR, take a deep breath and embark on my commute. I am well-prepared for anyone who would intentionally or unintentionally interfere with me. I almost never use a turn signal and I only half-yield at yield signs and only half-stop at stop signs. (I can tell if the coast is clear when I am approaching these signs, so there is really no need to stop or yield, completely.)

If I stop to turn right on red, I normally stop in the cross walk, or in the middle of an intersection when the traffic is heavy. When I am well-merged and soaring toward my destination, I make telephone calls, drive over the speed limit and check what's left of my hair in the visor mirror. For the record, I never shout at pedestrians or other motorists (like my sister does) and I most

certainly would never use hand gestures to emphasize or articulate my position on an issue with another driver.

Most of the time, in fact, I don't really believe the rules of driving apply to me at all. I am a smart person, and a very safe driver, without having to pay strict attention to the rules. Unlike those for whom the rules were correctly and most competently written, it is my burden, instead, to endure the idiocy of other motorists, each of whom would most assuredly benefit from a driving lesson from me.

To cope with it all, I talk to myself.

You idiot! What in hell are you doing! How dare you do that to me! You are rude and I cannot have that! You will pay for that move, my friend.

Only when I am provoked, and my fight—

or-flight (stress) response is activated, will my mind override my limbs and I suddenly find myself assertively posturing my shiny ego car against the recklessness and stupidity of others, maneuvering in such a way as to register my displeasure. In all fairness, I wouldn't dream of using my horn for anything except to provide a little nudge when someone in front of me is too slow to respond to a green light. A toot, if you will, a matter of doing my part to maintain the even flow of traffic.

Driving here and there, up and down, to and fro, is all a straightforward matter of collaboration and cooperation. (There is an element of copulation as well; but we won't go there.) Knowing the basic ABCs is where driver-awareness might result in improved EI.

Identifying self-defeating thoughts (self-

talk) that are rigid, extreme, unrealistic, illogical and absolutist, while in the safety of our cars, is a grand opportunity for improving our EI while, at the same time, refining your driving skills.

While driving, when you find yourself in a traffic problem with another driver, or in a jam or simply when there is an obstruction to your course, if you are able to identify your self-talk (beliefs) and chart it within the ABC paradigm (in your mind of course), you will have a starting point for forcefully and actively questioning and disputing your self-talk, replacing it with a new emotional language; a language that is more adaptive to more stable mental health and safer driving.

Try it!

The road will provide you with more challenges to your emotional problem solving



skills than you can imagine.

\* \* \* \*

It took a while for me to apply the ABCs to my own life, to the point where it made only a modicum of difference. Today it's how I try to live my life and encounter emotional challenges.

Remember, in the beginning I knew what the ABCs were meant to represent. I just met an array of unexpected challenges when I tried to use them. The following strategies are imparted from my early experience using the ABCs to improve my EI and may help reduce the amount of time you spend learning, using and understanding the paradigm:

- STRATEGY ONE: Not every human emotion is self-defeating and worth examining with the ABCs. Just because it's

uncomfortable does not mean it has to be run through the ABCs. Sometimes it is easier and more efficient to live with the inconvenience than to exhaust yourself trying to eliminate all forms of bother. Instead, you might just want to try to improve your frustration tolerance. Endure it. You cannot live in a hassle-free world. Be a candidate for the change you hope for in others.

- **STRATEGY TWO:** An emotion must be unmanageable to process it through the ABCs. Anger can take on unmanageable proportions, but not all anger is a candidate for the ABCs. Some anger is very manageable, somewhat motivating and often quickly dissipates. Some forms of love are

unmanageable. If you are expressing obsessive love, it may be time to work through that issue. It can easily become unmanageable anger. Regardless, it is important to know that when we use the ABCs, we focus on the unmanageability of emotion, not the elimination of emotion from our lives.

- **STRATEGY THREE:** It is not your goal to become emotionless. Emotion is an essential part of your human existence. It might be your goal, instead, to celebrate your unique character and the array of emotional experiences you can have with others. We can and should celebrate all that we are, emotionally, if we are to achieve a fulfilling

and complete life. Ridding ourselves of emotion is not our goal. Nor is it possible, without surgery or trauma. And even then it is a precarious operation. Managing unmanageable emotions is your goal. Celebrate your emotional beauty! Try not to make your emotional sameness with others the standard by which you judge yourself. Enjoy yourself and learn to forgive yourself.

- **STRATEGY FOUR:** It takes dedication to get the most out of the ABC system. The paradigm will make sense at face value if you look it over, it doesn't take a long time to conceptualize it. The practice of the ABCs, however, is the tough part. Think about the years upon years you've spent

developing your roles and scripts. You've spent many, many years learning to play roles and to recite scripts for nearly any emotional situation you encounter. You have to rid yourself of those roles and scripts that are harmful, unhealthy and self-defeating. You can replace them with more manageable, rational and flexible thoughts and behaviors.

- **STRATEGY FIVE:** It's as if there are containers of dusty roles and scripts floating round in your head. You can imagine throwing a match on them and watching them go up in flames. That can be your sign that you have to start to build new ones. If you don't practice, if you fall back into your old

emotional language, you won't achieve your desired results. Changing the way you think and behave will be the most important thing you can do to build your emotional strength. The more you practice, the more energy you dedicate to delivering healthier emotional information to your brain, the closer you will get to your preferred result.

- **STRATEGY SIX:** It takes patience to achieve your new emotional milestones. Don't beat yourself up when you fail at achieving your improved EI. Your skills with the ABCs cannot be developed quickly or immediately. You have to commit to achieving results over the long haul. Quick fixes never work, so don't expect any. It

takes a plan, dedication, and proper attitude to get the results that you are looking for.

Without the personal commitment to the task, you'll give up before you reach your goal.

Be diligent, focused and patient. With the proper dedication and the right attitude, which is the best way to build your EI, you will make steady recognizable progress to reaching your mental health goals.

\* \* \* \*

I am not a big fan of measuring EI with anything but one's own individual desire to improve and the awareness that one has or has not improved. The concept of EI, however, appears to be acquiring a commercial edge.

You can be tested for your level of EI for a price.

Your EI, however, is really up to you to decide. If you think you could profit from examining your EI, so be it. Our previous discussion of driving and its value in gauging your level of EI may come in handy as you determine your own personal level of improvement without the use of testing instruments. What does your driving personality tell you about yourself? You might pay close attention to your thoughts and behaviors while behind the wheel and make a judgment of how much improvement you might need in your EI by way of that experience, alone.

That's just one way of making an assessment of your EI.

You may also find yourself arguing more than you would like. You may find that your stress response is in overdrive and won't seem to allow



you to relax. In fact, there are a number of signs and signals that improvement in your EI may be necessary to sustain not only your emotional health but your physical health, as well.

- How do you reconcile a disagreement with a coworker?
- How do you accommodate people who you believe are being discourteous?
- How well do you follow the rules that you think everyone else should follow?
- How are you at conforming to impediments to your goals?
- Has your thinking and behaving become a pattern where people must cooperate with you for you to have continued happiness?

You may find that your answers to these questions will closely approximate how well you

regulate your thinking and your behavior in your waking and walking life. Are you willing to express patience, tolerance or pity for those you encounter who disagree with you, impede your way or behave counter to your expectations? When people make errors that affect you, are you quick to label them bad, wicked, evil or depraved? Do you provide yourself with enough evidence to determine that someone is inferior, purely on the basis of one or more of the poor choices they've made? When people act objectionably, do you reconcile yourself by conjuring in your own mind their true intention? Do you ask?

- Go for a drive.
- Find a congested area.
- If you like how you behave, so be it.
- If you don't, you can change it.

- Imagine greater.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Sixteen

## Who's Betty?

I OFTEN TELL MY STUDENTS THAT THE TOUGHEST feature of trying to live sanely and rationally is that most people believe that they and others make everyone feel emotion. As if we lived in a culture of magicians and sorcerers. The fact is, people perceive what others do and say and they make judgments about those behaviors. They think about them, and they generate an emotion that they believe is supportive of their judgment.

If we choose to forgive or pardon people for their poor choices, rather than ranting and raving about the injustice of it all, we will not express unmanaged anger and be more likely to

express managed displeasure, discomfort and unhappiness. In that frame of mind, we are more likely to express our disapproval and be heard.

Generation after generation we teach our children that their emotions come from the way other people treat them. They learn from the start to attribute their feelings to things outside of themselves. Under these circumstances, launching a new mindset, after years of training, is made so much more difficult. Changing the shape of the human mind is less painful when it is fresh and more impressionable. If you have children, you might begin to use the lessons in this book to start your child's emotional training. You might begin by helping them learn to take ownership of their emotions.

I remember working with a woman,

employing the skills we are discussing. She had a very young son, and started teaching him her new-found philosophy very early.

Mommy didn't make you unhappy. You made yourself unhappy. You can't always get your own way. You can be patient instead. You can make a better choice. What better choice could you have made?

You may be thinking, "How can a child understand these concepts?" Well, it's easy. Children have to hear the concepts and they will begin to assimilate them into the way they think and feel. Just like they hear the nutty ideas we teach them now. Over time, this philosophy can become the framework from which children understand their world.

Once my friend's child started first grade,

all was well; until his teacher said, “You shouldn’t do that! You are a bad boy! Bad!” to which the child replied, “I am not a bad boy. I made a poor choice. I will try to make a better choice next time.”

We are wired to adapt to emotional challenges, at any age. Nature makes it inevitable that we cooperate, if not simply for survival. Your goal to improve your EI, however, is not to adapt to society’s prevailing opinion.

It is to act against it.

Your challenge then will be to improve your EI while living in a world where most people reject the idea that they create their own feelings. As you try to change and maintain your new internal logic, you will still have to go to work, shop, interact with people at the movie theatre and



drive a car, making the process bewildering and often lonely. I am reminded of a time when I was leaving a meeting and a woman stopped me to tell me how I made her so angry. “Goodness, how?” I asked.

“You disagreed with me,” she said, “On that issue about healthcare.”

“That made you angry?”

“Of course it did. I think my position was very clear. How would you feel?”

As I listened to her, I imagined myself unmaking her anger. I imagined waving a magic wand over her head and making her happy. For, wouldn't it be logical to think that if I could make her angry, I could also make her happy? “I guess I could have agreed with you, instead,” I said. “

“Yes, that would have been a whole lot

better. You also embarrassed me.”

“The extent of my power over you is unsettling.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

“OK, that’s better.”

We must interact with misinformed people, people who think we make them feel, and we must talk like them, if we want to get along. But, once you begin to make improvement in your EI, never again think like them!

Sadly, the more you improve your EI, and the saner you become, you still have to live in close quarters with the misinformed. They own most everything, they are often the objects of our affection and they are decidedly in control of much of the world’s food supply. So you should learn to

appease them, at every turn, to survive. Here is the social survival script you may want to learn, but never believe: I'm sorry to make you unhappy. I'm sorry to make you angry. I'm sorry to make you feel anything but happiness. Your emotions are my burden in life. Your emotions are my responsibility. I promise to handle your emotions more delicately in the future and provide you with ample opportunity for happiness, even if it means I will have to be unhappy forever.

\* \* \* \*

It's hard to say how many magical, externally focused concepts have been allowed to flourish within our culture, our language and ostensibly, our species. It could be that our ancestors needed a certain level of illogical thinking and behaving to achieve cooperation

within a tribe. Regardless of the reason, we speak to one another, live with one another and cooperate with one another in a way that accommodates insanity.

Yesterday, while in the men's room, I noticed a lot of dried mud on the floor. It appeared that whoever had previously used the commode had obviously ridden motocross and then cleaned his shoes where I was sitting. I contemplated the dirt, myself. The redness of the clay-like quality interested me. (One of the pieces of muck looked a lot like Abraham Lincoln.) On my way back to my office, I saw one of the janitors lingering in a corner by the stairwell. I told her of the dirt on the floor.

After returning to my office, I soon forgot about it, losing myself in my work. That afternoon,

one of the secretaries in my department came to my cube.

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“Yes, come in,” I said, motioning her to sit.

The woman stood before me, hands clasped. She said, “Would you please apologize to Betty?”

“Who's Betty?”

“She's one of the ladies who cleans up.  
The janitor—lady.”

“Why on earth would I apologize to  
Betty?”

“For the mess you made in the bathroom.”

I stared for a moment, “I didn't make the  
mess. I reported it,” said.

“She's all torn up about the mess. She had  
to sweep it up and mop the floor. She had to take

an emergency smoke break. She's as mad as a bee. You really made her mad."

"Did I?"

"Why won't you just apologize? You'd make her feel a lot better if you did."

Later that day, I found myself staring into Betty's tear-filled eyes. I hesitated a bit, but I was determined to use my new social survival script and just make it all go away.

The words started flowing.

It took the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Seventeen

## Go Suck a Lemon

VISUALIZE YOURSELF STANDING IN A GROVE OF LEMON trees, thick branches lined with thorns and smooth, green, shiny leaves.

Hanging from the branches are clusters of perfectly shaped lemons, yellow ovals filled with seeds, juice and pulp. Focus your attention on the most wonderful lemon of them all, grouped among the smaller, less developed ones.

Standing beneath the tree, you reach your hand up and pluck the lemon from its place on the branch. As you pull it free, the limb snaps back and regains its original position. You gaze at the lemon, sitting in the palm of your hand and you can feel its



weight. Toss it in the air and let it land back in your palm. Roll your hand over its skin and feel its texture, the way it slides over your fingers. Raise the lemon to your nose and inhale its aroma, its scent, its freshness.

Breathe in deeply.

When you're finished, place the lemon on a nearby rock and slice it in half with your pocket knife. Notice as the juice rolls out, puddles beneath it and runs down the contour of the rock. Cut the lemon into wedges and arrange them in the shape of a star. Raise one of the wedges to your mouth. Draw your tongue across its flesh. Bite into it and suck the juice from it. As you do this, you contort your mouth, cheeks and forehead to accommodate the bitter, sour flavor.

\* \* \* \*

It is possible to experience the taste of a tart, sour lemon simply by imagining it. Your potential for recalling tastes, odors, sensations and feelings lies within the strength of your imagination. You might recollect the taste of mint, bacon, Cheerios, a McDonald's cheeseburger, even water. The human brain is a remarkable organ, capable of extracting sensory information from thought, allowing us to go beyond the classical five senses into another realm. This taste experience depends on recall to replicate the sensory signals that simulate the actual corporeal event.

Your brain may first recall an experience you may have had with a lemon; then recall its taste; then recall how your mouth reacted and finally how your body shook, your face convulsed

and your mouth and cheeks squeezed together. Each of these pockets of sensory memory, combined, create your response to the thoughts of an imagined lemon. If you've never tasted a lemon, or lemon flavoring, you are unlikely to simulate its taste with your mind alone.

In very much the same way as we imagine taste, we can imagine emotion and feeling (and stimulate with our minds a biochemical reaction). For example, a convincing actor must recreate fear, anger, sadness and any number of other emotions found among humans simply by recalling experiences with those emotions. The more convincing the actor, the more his emotion resembles real life. Just imagine when you were unhappy. Like an actor playing in a scene on stage, your emotions can be recalled and replicated. To

express emotion, you must recall an experience with it. Then you must assume the role and recall your lines.

Your boss criticized you; you take on the role of the worthless employee and begin the script (the self-talk). Your partner doesn't love you anymore; you take on the role and begin the script (the self-talk); you break up with your loved one; you take on the role of the entirely unlovable person and begin the script (the self-talk). You receive poor service; you take on the role of the dissatisfied customer and begin the script (the self-talk).

The mind can initiate a chemical response to thought, just as if an event were actually taking place. So, if you think you're being treated intolerably, you will take on the role, repeat the

script and your body will respond as if you were in an intolerable situation, sending chemical messages throughout your body to help you fight the source of your discomfort.

Imagine that!

Your mind and body work together to protect you. If you tell yourself that you are in danger, your body will prepare you for that. Just as the thought of the lemon instigated your taste buds to pucker and your mouth to salivate, assuming the role and recalling the script of a person facing disrespect, impatience, ridicule, harsh judgment or bigotry will release hormones like adrenalin and cortisol into your bloodstream and bring you to a hyper-aroused state, ready to fight, flee or freeze.

\* \* \* \*

Now imagine a bowl of brightly colored

jellybeans; yellow, green, red. Let the colors and flavors flood your imagination.

Which one will you choose?

Dipping your fingers into the middle of the bowl, you feel their shiny surfaces pass over your fingernails. You study them, scanning the colors for flavors you don't care for and those you prefer. Heaven forbid you should get a hot cinnamon-flavored jellybean.

You pop a few into your mouth.

The beads of sugarcoated flavor begin to melt, as your saliva washes over them. You bite into the hard shells and allow the sweet flavors to run together. Cherry, tangerine, lemon, green apple, grape and licorice wash over your tongue and down your throat.

Cinnamon!

A suggestion of cinnamon begins to invade your mouth, first by nipping at the tip and sides of your tongue, distorting the taste of the other jellybeans. Your tongue sizzles as the flavor starts to overwhelm your senses, searing your tongue and cheeks with a bite only red hot cinnamon can induce.

The flavor is inescapable.

The red bean is seemingly toxic, mouth-burning, incapacitating to your taste buds. You chew quickly, the sugar granules grating your teeth like particles of sand.

\* \* \* \*

At a time in the distant past, humans depended on a nature-given, automatic response to help reconcile very real menaces to life and limb. Nature allowed for the use of fact and the fictions

of perception to maximize our response time to threat. We don't actually make an agreement with our bodies to respond to real or imagined hostility. Our stressful thoughts are sufficient to initiate that response. Much like our imagination can conjure the taste and sensation of sucking the juice from a lemon or crunching into a cinnamon jellybean, our perception of other imagined stimuli initiates a sequence of chemical events that depend on thought to activate our protective stress response, our fight-or-flight-or-freeze response.

Perceiving danger (much like perceiving the taste of a lemon or a fire-hot jellybean), even when no real danger exists anywhere but in our minds, activates a neurochemical, hormonal response that allows us to run faster, jump higher and fight harder than we had ever expected.



In today's world, threats from attacking bears and lions have been replaced by rude and unfriendly people, the culture of employment, money and family stress. Those kinds of hazards are ever-present in the lives of most people, resulting in what was once a life-saving response, intended to take seconds, now lasting the length of a full day, a week and even years. The extended secretion of stress hormones that can be initiated through thought alone can have an impact on the integrity of your major organs. Increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiration can result, among other things, in hypertension, obesity and heart disease. It appears that Nature's intention to protect man from harm using perception alone may now be inhibiting our survival.

Our brains are the precious containers of

our emotional lives. The fundamental use of emotion may be to help us avoid danger and maximize safety and reward. Your brain facilitates emotion often using perception (thinking) alone, regulating hormones, neurochemicals, the pituitary gland, body temperature, the adrenal glands and many other vital activities to accommodate your perception. Much like perceiving the taste of a lemon and a cinnamon jellybean activates a chemical response in your mouth, perceiving threat activates a chemical response in your body.

Perception is guided by experience.

Emotions are guided by thought.

Without experience, perception and thought, you would not express emotion. Explaining love, attachment and belonging may not be as much fun as getting a Valentine's Day card,

giving a hug or getting a kiss. Suffice it to say, however, we can exist in a world where both interpretations can be accommodated.

\* \* \* \*

Now let's return to the lemon, yellow, plump with juice. Let us imagine that the lemon, this time, is sitting in the refrigerator, cool and ready to be squeezed. You take the lemon from the refrigerator, feeling the coolness of its skin on your fingers. At the sink, you turn on the faucet and run water over the lemon, gently washing it with your fingers. The water beads up on the lemon's skin. You place the lemon on the wooden cutting board and watch as the water from the kitchen faucet settles beneath it. You take a stainless steel knife and draw the sharp edge over the lemon, slicing it precisely through its middle. The juice seeps out

and mixes with the water beneath each half. You can see the seeds sitting on the surface of the fruit.

Raise one of the wedges to your mouth.

Draw your tongue across its flesh.

Bite into it and chew.

You are chewing a lemon, but the suggestion of cinnamon begins to invade your mouth. Your tongue sizzles as the flavor starts to overwhelm your senses, searing your tongue and cheeks with a bite only red hot cinnamon can induce. The flavor is inescapable. You take the lemon out of your mouth and look at it.

Is this a lemon or a jellybean?

It sure looks like a lemon, but it tastes like a cinnamon jellybean. You return the wedge to your mouth. The red bean is seemingly toxic, mouth-burning, incapacitating to your taste buds.

Exchanging the taste of the lemon with the taste of cinnamon is similar to exchanging one emotional response for another. It is tough to imagine two independent tastes simultaneously. Your old beliefs are the lemons. Your new ones are the jellybeans. Getting your old beliefs to taste less like lemon and more like jellybeans will present you with a number of sensory challenges.

It is likely that you have not developed a pathway in your brain between the taste of a lemon and the taste of a cinnamon jellybean. It is also likely that you have not developed a pathway from the act of being insulted (A) to the emotional consequence (C) of forgiveness. There is, however, a well-worn path, instead, to anger and frustration (C). Building a new pathway, one that

provides more opportunity for emotional balance, will likely result in improved EI. Doing that will be like sucking a lemon and tasting a cinnamon jellybean. If you are angry, you are not likely to express forgiveness or sadness, without first stopping and making an effort to change your thinking.

“You are an idiot!”

“Why you!”

“I should kick you in the throat!”

“Bring it.”

“But I won’t, because I am going to feel sad for you instead.”

“What?”

“Yeah, you apparently have some sort of emotional handicap. I can’t be mad at emotionally handicapped people. I’d rather forgive you and

feel sad for you.”

Your emotions are a result of your perceptions. No event has inherent meaning. An event only has the meaning we apply to it. Your brain is the storage center for your emotional memory; and with a little effort, you could probably conjure anger, sadness, fear and disrespect on cue.

You depend on organized patterns of thought to engage with the world and to guide you in your emotional decision making. Your mind consists of structured clusters of experiences and ideas, embedded through time and familiarity. So you are likely to reject emotional information that contradicts your existing beliefs. I am reminded of a couple I met with several years ago.

“I hate it when she takes a sip of my Coke.”

“What about that concerns you?”

“It’s nasty. It leaves germs.”

“Aren’t you married?”

“Yes, fifteen years.”

“Do you kiss? Do you have sex?”

“Yes, but I was raised not to let people sip from my Coke can.”

People are capable of immense growth, but have a tendency to remain unchanged, even in the face of contradictory information. Unless provoked, people will normally rely on automatic thought processing, rather than careful thinking, to make sense of the world around them. Essentially, people do what they did last time if it worked, inhibiting the influence of new information, giving rise to biased preconception.

It is unlikely that you have an area of your



brain dedicated to biting into a lemon and tasting a cinnamon jellybean or feeling anger and expressing sadness. To accomplish that task, you will have to build a working, mental model of that experience. Growing emotionally means doing something different.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Chapter Eighteen

## Emotional Distance

MY THIRD AND FINAL THERAPIST, A PSYCHOLOGIST, was in his late fifties, bald, casually dressed. Walking into his office was like waking up in the lower drawer of a dusty filing cabinet. There were books, magazines and yellowed paper scattered everywhere.

“You’re looking for an REBT therapist, eh?” he responded to my question about my preference. “Have a seat.” He moved a pile of newspapers off the chair, across from the couch where he would sit. He took a half-eaten apple off the coffee table and tossed it by its withered stem into the wastebasket, “Here, sit.” A Brussels

griffon jumped into my seat and began licking its paws. I looked at the therapist and, ever so faintly, smiled. “Just shoo him off. Shoo,” he said. He fanned his yellow legal pad at him. The Brussels jumped down and ran behind the gray, metal desk. “How can I help you?” He looked at his watch. “Two—thirty,” he said.

“I am a student and I have to do 10, I mean 8 hours of therapy as a client. I’ve already finished two of them.” I reached out my therapy log for him to initial, “I wanted to work with someone who knows REBT.”

He took the tattered therapy log and tossed it onto his disordered desk, “OK, then. What’s on your mind?”

“I’m bald.”

“How is that a problem for you?”

“I look old?”

“What does it mean about you to look old?”

“It means I’m ugly.” I paused, waiting for him to take exception with that assessment.

He didn’t. He just trotted ahead, “And if you’re viewed as ugly, what does that mean about you?”

“It means no one will think I am attractive.”

“And if no one thinks you’re attractive?”

“Well, no one will care about me.”

“It’s quite unlikely that would happen, but what would it mean if no one cared about you?”

“It would mean I don’t deserve to be loved. It would mean I was unlovable.”

Suddenly he slammed his hands on the arms of the tattered couch, “All of this from being bald? Are you nuts?”

“I guess,” I said, actually interested in what had just happened.

“Well, at least we can agree on one thing.” He leaned in toward me. “Do you want to stop being nuts?” He then proceeded to tell me that my emotional reaction to going bald was really a matter of the value I placed on other people’s opinions of me. My emotional reaction to my hair loss had little to do with baldness and had everything to do with what I was telling myself about it.

“What do you tell yourself about losing your hair?”

“Well that no one will want to date me if I’m bald.”

“And what would that mean about you?”

“That I am worthless, I guess.”

“Kid, if it weren’t your baldness, it would be something else. If you all of a sudden sprouted a new head of hair, you would find something else to condemn yourself about. It isn’t your hair that you’re worrying yourself about. It is ridicule, plain and simple. You’re afraid of being viewed as flawed and imperfect. Let’s work on that and leave this foolishness with your hair out of it.”

My new therapist told me, in so many words, if I continued to depend on other people for my personal value, I would never view myself as suitable for anyone’s affection. “People might complain about your eye color, your education, your weight, your breath, the shape of your ass. You would never be satisfied until you were perfect.” The Brussels jumped into his lap and he petted its caramel-colored fur. I cupped my hand

over my mouth and blew into it, trying to smell my own breath. “It will all end when you understand that you can have value as a human being without hair. Hell, you could lose both of your ears and still retain your intrinsic human value. We have to help you change the thoughts you have about not being perfect.”

Here was another person telling me that my emotions originated in my thinking. All of a sudden, I was back in Chicago with Al. There was no escaping it. My emotions come from how I view the way people interact with me; how they speak to me; how they behave toward me. My interpretation of what they do, what they say is the thing that causes me to feel an emotion. To get better, I would have to pay less attention to what people thought of me and more to what I thought



about myself.

\* \* \* \*

Frequently, when people experience psychological hardship, they find themselves trying to solve their emotional problems inside their own head. Thinking, endlessly reviewing the same information, looping into the same emotionally charged result, never really resolving anything. Just like using thought only to find a solution to a complicated math problem, trying to solve a complicated emotional problem within the confines of your own mind may be just as elusive. Staying focused is often a challenge, and complex problems are better understood by drawing on our total competencies.

Many of us are at a loss when we find there is no one to talk with about what is concerning us.

When something happens, and we have thoughts that disrupt our emotional stability, our balance, we might call a friend, a family member or, if things are really out of control, we might make an appointment with a therapist. While we wait for the return phone call, we sit and think, summoning the problem to mind, rolling it over and over in our own minds, and waiting for someone to reach out to us.

To talk.

Something you might think of doing to improve your EI is to change who you turn to for help. Add a new dimension to your thinking and behaving. Turn to yourself. You can become an active part of your own emotional life. We can talk to ourselves, using the ABCs, especially the disputation phase of the paradigm.

We don't ordinarily think about ourselves as a mental health resource, when we have a problem. As a matter of fact, discussing your emotional issues with yourself would probably rank last in the list of potential collaborators, rivaling the discussions we have with our dogs. After all, isn't talking to oneself a sign of mental illness? We allow ourselves the comfort of speaking to ourselves when we want to remember a series of numbers, the directions to the main road or a list of items we need from the grocery store. We sing to the radio, and hope no one hears us making up the words. We can have elaborate discussions with our deceased relatives, but we can never experience ourselves in that same manner. Somehow we learn that we must keep an emotional distance from ourselves.

We seem to be in contempt of our own guidance.

To achieve the highest benefit from this program, it's time to start depending on yourself and your own best advice. Risk is a good thing in behavior change. Nothing changes without some level of risk. You have to take risk to escape the status quo. After all, it is your embrace of the status quo that has prevented you from achieving improved EI. Begin a relationship with yourself by saying out loud: Hello! I have been with you my entire life and I have never once introduced myself to you. I am pleased to know you and I can't wait to share my thoughts and ideas with you. We know each other pretty well, already. Just by sharing experiences. You are really the only one I can truly trust and who knows me. Let's make a plan to talk

every day. Maybe on the way home from work, in the car. That way we can be alone, and we won't have to think about anything else.

Listen to your own voice.

Talk to yourself about the ABCs.

Learn how to dispute out loud.

Learn the voice of your teacher.

The voice of your true best friend.

\* \* \* \*

This book has offered no magical elixirs or ethereal philosophy that will resolve your issues with your mother or overeating or tell you why people treat you badly. It does contain good, practical solutions and easy-to-learn methods that, if you choose, will bring about immense change in your life. You were introduced to emotional problem-solving skills that will come in handy if

you find yourself relapsing, reverting back to your old ways of thinking and behaving.

People who are treated for emotional concerns, after a period of wellness, think they are cured for life. Consequently, when they slip back into old habits, and discover their old problems are still present to some degree, they are likely to despair and give up working on themselves altogether. Oftentimes, when relapse is likely, people will return to therapy. This book, however, promotes not only self-efficacy, but also a new way of living. I believe that people are better prepared for life when they learn to take greater responsibility for their own personal growth and change. Not when they develop a dependency on pills and therapists to help resolve their emotional issues. So, you will be expected to practice your

new-found skills independently for the rest of your life! At times, the statements I've made and the solutions I have suggested may be hard to incorporate into your daily life. After all, you have been living your life a certain way using your own thinking and reasoning skills for, well, your whole life. Changing the way you think, behave and, ultimately, live your life will take a great deal of courage and strength. You will have to commit to that goal.

\* \* \* \*

The little girl from my elementary school just may have been responsible for me spending much of my academic life trying to understand the substance of emotion. I write this book with her smile fixed in mind.

I carried her note in my back pocket,

untouched, until after school. When the bell rang, I took off across the ball field. The dugout was the most private place I could find. The note was folded into some sort of box shape, and I was careful not to tear it, treating it as if it were a map to a secret pirate treasure. I finally got it unraveled and I remember smirking at her good penmanship. The note read: Do your homework. She had drawn little smiley faces into each of the Os.

Of course, we were in love from that point on. We never spoke a word to each other, but each time I turned in my homework, and each time it was returned with a passing grade, I looked at her and she at me and we both smiled.

Life changed for me after that.

I was paroled from Murderers' Row and allowed to roam among the living. The rest is



history. So, for the little girl at South Elementary School, this book promotes the use of homework as a vital part of the process of improving EI. Your homework should consist of one or more self-directed activities, designed to encourage you to independently act against how you traditionally respond to adversity. Your homework should result in some level of change to your thoughts and behaviors. For instance, if you fear a certain social activity, you might intentionally place yourself in the feared social situation. While immersed in the activity, you will be ready to address your thoughts in relation to that situation. That way, you will be aware, in real-time, of what you tell yourself, how you thwart your own ambitions and how to work through them.

I can only say that the suggestions I have

made to help improve your EI will work if you let them. I cannot promise you that there will never come a time in your emotional life that you won't ever make yourself feel miserable again, no matter how much you take away from your reading. On the contrary, you will feel every single emotion you ever felt before reading this book. Only now you will celebrate anger, sadness, irritability, resentment and annoyance. You will view these as opportunities for learning, rather than setbacks. With practice and patience you can develop alternative methods for overcoming emotional hardship by reaching an emotional resolution that suits your personal goal of happiness and, of course, by sucking a lemon and tasting a cinnamon jellybean.

It will take the force of will to do that.



# Case Studies

## The Case of Elliott

Background: Elliot is a white, English-speaking, unmarried 17-year-old high school student. Elliot is an only child. He lives with his father, who is an air force chief master sergeant, and his stepmother, who works at the Base Exchange. Elliot is attending therapy at the request of his stepmother. Elliot recently told his father he is gay, and his father responded by shouting at him, slapping him in the face and telling him he was no longer his son. Elliot's father also told him he was filthy, an abomination, disgusting, a drug addict, a sex fiend and a pedophile. He ordered him out of the house and forbade his wife to ever speak with him again. Elliot went to his room and his father left the home.

His father has been away from home for three days. His stepmother is worries the family is collapsing.

## Session One

- Therapist: How can I help you?
- Elliot: I told my father I was gay and he slapped me and disowned me.
- Therapist: How is that a problem for you?
- Elliot: How is it a problem? What do you mean, how is it a problem for me? Jesus, how would it be a problem for anyone?
- Therapist: I mean just that. How is your father's rejection of you a problem for you?
- Elliot: I wasn't expecting that question.
- Therapist: Then we are off to a good start. How is it a problem for you?

- Elliot: I guess it's a problem for me because I want him to accept me.
- Therapist: What does it mean when your father doesn't accept you?
- Elliot: This is getting even more confusing.
- Therapist: If your father doesn't care for you, what does it mean?
- Elliot: It means he doesn't love me.
- Therapist: Does it mean anything else?
- Elliot: It means he doesn't respect me.
- Therapist: Anything else?
- Elliot: It means I don't live up to his expectations of me.
- Therapist: Anything else?
- Elliot: I think that's about it.
- Therapist: Let's arrange all this information. You told your father you were gay and he

rejected you. You took that to mean he doesn't love you; he doesn't respect you and you are not living up to his expectations. Is that correct?

- Elliot: Yes. That's about the size of it.
- Therapist: That is what you think.
- Elliot: Yes, that is what I think.
- Therapist: What are you feeling?
- Elliot: I'm pissed. I'm angry.
- Therapist: Sometimes when we are feeling anger, we are also feeling fear. What are you afraid of?
- Elliot: I'm afraid my father thinks I am a piece of shit.
- Therapist: Yes, I can see that. What would it mean if he did?
- Elliot: What would it mean? It would mean

that I am a piece of shit.

- Therapist: Can it mean anything else?
- Elliot: No.
- Therapist: Your father's opinion seems to have the power to turn you into a piece of shit. Yes, I can understand your fear. You don't look like a piece of shit, but I'll take your word for it.

## Session Two

- Elliot: You're making fun of me.
- Therapist: Of course not. But what would it mean if I were?
- Elliot: It would mean you don't take me seriously.
- Therapist: Of course I do. But what would it mean if I didn't.
- Elliot: This is getting like exercise.



- Therapist: It is like exercise. It's exercising your mind. Play along. What would it mean if I were not taking you seriously, aside from the waste of my time and your money?
- Elliot: I guess it would mean that you think I'm a clown.
- Therapist: What if I did think that? What would that mean?
- Elliot: I suppose it would mean that I am a joke.
- Therapist: You give me a great deal of power.
- Elliot: How so?
- Therapist: If I decide to not take you seriously, that would make you into a clown?
- Elliot: I never thought of it that way. I'm not

sure I want to agree with you now that you put it that way.

- Therapist: You don't look like a clown, but I can take your word for it.
- Elliot: I'm not a clown.
- Therapist: OK, you are not a clown, but you are a piece of shit?
- Elliot: I guess.

### Session Three

- Therapist: So, you are not a clown, but you are a piece of shit?
- Elliot: I don't want to be either.
- Therapist: What are we going to do, then?
- Elliot: Isn't that your job?
- Therapist: I'm not sure. What do you think my job is?
- Elliot: To fix me. To tell me what to think.

- Therapist: You seem to be doing fine telling yourself what to think.
- Elliot: I think I'm dizzy.
- Therapist: Let's get back to your father. He doesn't like you to be gay. He has disowned you and shown you disrespect. You believe these events have turned you into a piece of shit. Is that where we are?
- Elliot: Yes, I guess.
- Therapist: What does a piece of shit feel like?
- Elliot: Oh boy. A piece of shit feels like really depressed and really sad and really scared.
- Therapist: That doesn't sound at all like how I imagined a piece of shit to feel.
- Elliot: I'm not really a piece of shit. It is a

figure of speech.

- Therapist: Oh, that makes things easier. I was thinking I was going to have to call a plumber.
- Elliot: Very funny.
- Therapist: So what we really have with us today is Elliot, a 24-year-old male who is homosexual and who has been rejected by his father and now feels depressed, sad and scared?
- Elliot: That about sums it up.
- Therapist: Now we're talking.

## Session Four

- Elliot: I wish I didn't have to be gay. It would make things a lot easier.
- Therapist: What about being gay concerns you?

- Elliot: Everything.
- Therapist: Goodness, what motivates you? I mean, if things would have been a lot easier, what compelled you to tell your father you were gay?
- Elliot: I wanted to be honest with him and I wanted him to accept me.
- Therapist: What did you imagine being honest and seeking acceptance would bring?
- Elliot: Probably exactly what I got.
- Therapist: Then why do it?
- Elliot: I think it's best to be honest.
- Therapist: And accepted?
- Elliot: Yes, most of all acceptance. People need acceptance.
- Therapist: Do they?
- Elliot: Of course they do.

- Therapist: What would it mean if people didn't accept you?
- Elliot: It means that I am not acceptable, that there is something wrong with me.
- Therapist: All that from someone not accepting you?
- Elliot: Pretty much.
- Therapist: Let me get all this straight. Your father rejects you, and you are a piece of shit? Someone doesn't accept you, and you are unacceptable? That is a lot of power to give to other people. It seems whenever someone thinks something about you, you immediately believe it's true. It's like someone put a spell on you and you become whatever they want you to be. You cannot have happiness in your life unless everyone

you meet loves and accepts you?

- Elliot: Yes, I suck and you are just telling me how much.
- Therapist: So I have that same kind of control over you?
- Elliot: Obviously.

## Session Five

- Therapist: It must be tough having to go back and forth between being a piece of shit and being unacceptable. What do you suppose we can do about that?
- Elliott: You can make me straight.
- Therapist: How do you suppose that would help?
- Elliot: People would like me.
- Therapist: Goodness, is that all it takes?
- Elliot: Yes. If I were straight, I wouldn't

have these particular problems.

- Therapist: Do you think all of your problems would be solved?
- Elliot: Not all of them, but most of them.
- Therapist: What about the problems you still have?
- Elliot: I could work on those.
- Therapist: You would still have problems?
- Elliot: Yes, but not these problems.
- Therapist: Being straight wouldn't solve all your problems?
- Elliot: No, I would just have different problems.
- Therapist: How do you suppose we can help you get to the point where you didn't have any problems?
- Elliot: I would have to be perfect.



- Therapist: If that's the only way you can be happy with yourself, shall we set that as your goal? To be perfect?
- Elliot: Not really. I don't think I will ever be perfect. No one's perfect.
- Therapist: How do you know that?
- Elliot: The odds are you will have some problems or that someone won't like you for some reason that isn't under your control. That's just the way things are. No one's perfect. Straight people don't have the same problems as gay people, though.
- Therapist: What kind of problems do straight people have?
- Elliot: They don't have to worry about being ridiculed, taunted, rejected and laughed at all the time. People wouldn't be pushing my

buttons all the time.

- Therapist: Really? What about a straight person who is obese? How about a straight person who is covered in planters warts? How about a straight person with two heads?
- Elliot: That's an extreme example, but I see what you're saying.
- Therapist: I don't think it's a matter of being straight or gay. I think it's what you think about being gay and what you are telling yourself about yourself. When you think about being ridiculed, what are you telling yourself?
- Elliot: When my dad ridiculed me, I thought, 'You don't care about me and I can't stand that.'

- Therapist: Anything else?
- Elliot: It's funny, but it was like I was looking for him to forgive me for being gay. I said I was looking for acceptance, but I was really looking for forgiveness. I was sort of saying, 'I know this is bad and that I am not perfect, but I want you to forgive me for turning out this way.'

## Session Six

- Therapist: What do you tell yourself about being gay? I mean, if someone said, 'Elliot, you are a big faggot,' what would you tell yourself?
- Elliot: I don't know.
- Therapist: Close your eyes and pay attention to your thoughts. Listen to your self-talk. What are you saying to yourself about that

statement?

- Elliot: I don't like it. That's for sure.
- Therapist: What about it don't you like?
- Elliot: My God, where do I begin?
- Therapist: Listen for words like should, ought, must, have to and need. Look for self-talk that contains those words. Just say whatever comes to your mind.
- Elliot: People shouldn't talk to me that way. People should be more courteous. I should be less obvious and not appear to be gay. I should learn to act straight. I thought I had, but I must not be doing a good job. If I act gay, I am a piece of shit. If I act straight I am good. It's my fault that people are making fun of me. Acting gay is bad. If people know I'm gay that means I am not like other

people and that is really bad. If someone calls me a faggot, I will have to stand up for myself and fight them. I really don't want to fight people. But if I don't fight them, that makes me a faggot. I don't want to be a faggot or fight. So I am just standing there. I'm not fighting and I am not running. But I look like a coward and a faggot and there's nothing I can do about it.

- Therapist: That's a lot to think about.
- Elliot: You asked for it.
- Therapist: Yes, I did.
- Elliot: I never have just listened to my own thoughts, but I am surprised at what I am thinking about. To be honest with you, I think a lot of the fear I have of being viewed as a gay person is that people will confront me

and I will have to do something back to them. That really is my big problem. Of course I still think I am a piece of shit anyway. But my biggest problem is that I feel like I have to do something if people make fun of me. I am not really a good fighter. If I say something back, it might cause a fight. It's pretty much a problem with standing up for myself. If I didn't think people would fight me, it would be a different thing altogether.

- Therapist: Is that your only option? Fight or be a coward?
- Elliot: I suppose:
- Therapist: Could you do anything else?
- Elliot: You can always do something else.
- Therapist: What thoughts would you have to

give up, to do something differently, something that you would be happy with doing? If you had one wish that would help handle this situation, what would it be?

- Elliot: That they would burst into flames?
- Therapist: That's one option. How about something that is more related to you and your thinking.
- Elliot: I'm not sure what to do. That's why I came here. This is sort of the same thing my dad did. He didn't say I was a faggot, but he might as well have.

## Session Seven

- Therapist: Can you ever be just one thing?
- Elliot: I guess not.
- Therapist: You may very well be a combination of a lot of things, both good and

not so good.

- Elliot: Yes, that's true.
- Therapist: It's one thing to say it's true. It's another thing to believe that it's true.
- Elliot: I understand, sort of.
- Therapist: It looks to me like if someone insults you, you make yourself entirely bad. Like when your father rejected you and you became a piece of shit. You all of a sudden became unacceptable. Then our imaginary person called you a faggot, and you became that thing. It's like there is a magic wand that makes you bad. Is there one that makes you good?
- Elliot: Yeah, when people praise me. Then I think I'm good.
- Therapist: Until someone tells you you're



not?

- Elliot: Yes.
- Therapist: You may want to get hold of that. From where I'm sitting, it seems like it would be very exhausting.
- Elliot: What do you suggest?
- Therapist: I would suggest that you, first, begin to realize that you are neither good nor bad. You are a number of things, unequal in value and significance. You are too many things to be called by just one name. You can begin to view the things people say to you, both good and not so good, as suggestions. No more than suggestions.
- Elliot: So, if someone tells me I am a no good, stinking rotten person. That is a suggestion?

- Therapist: Of course. And it is a suggestion you can either accept or reject. Simply because someone believes this about you is not proof enough that it's true. If someone doesn't like you, is that enough evidence that you are unlikeable? It would be insane for you to believe it anyway. There is overwhelming evidence that it isn't true. It would be insanity to give this statement much more than that, an insane suggestion from a person who appears to have a very little grasp on reality.
- Elliot: It's like they're crazy and they are ranting about crazy shit.
- Therapist: That's another way of looking at it. And if you join in with it, you are acting insanely by accepting their insane reality.

## Session Eight

- Elliot: It's sort of like arguing with a crazy person.
- Therapist: Yes, and would you want to fight a crazy person for saying crazy things to you?
- Elliot: No. I would probably feel sorry for them.
- Therapist: Let's use that same imagery to understand your father's response to you when you told him you are gay. Is there any connection you can make?
- Elliot: My father isn't crazy. He is pretty sane, actually.
- Therapist: Great! But was he saying some crazy stuff to you?
- Elliot: Yes.                      He was saying that gay

people are filthy, an abomination, disgusting, drug addicts, sex fiends and pedophiles.

- Therapist: And what is sane about that?
- Elliot: Nothing . . . unless I think it's sane to think that.
- Therapist: Is it sane to think you are an abomination filthy, drug addicted, disgusting pedophile?
- Elliot: It's pretty insane for someone to think that. I still don't like it.
- Therapist: I'm glad you don't like it. I wouldn't expect you to like it.
- Elliot: Well, how do I get rid of my anger?
- Therapist: You can change your thoughts.
- Elliot: Like thinking what he's saying is insane?

- Therapist: How would you respond to an insane person who said these things to you?
- Elliot: I get it.
- Therapist: Good, but how would you respond? What would you tell yourself?
- Elliot: I would tell myself that he doesn't know how to behave. He is hallucinating about something. He is saying things that are crazy and he can't help it.
- Therapist: What emotion would you feel then?
- Elliot: I guess I would feel sad. Maybe I would think it was funny.
- Therapist: Shame on you.
- Elliot: Is that a suggestion?
- Therapist: Very funny.

Session Nine

- Therapist: We're coming to the end of our session. This is where I like to get some feedback, just to make sure we are on the same page. Tell me what we talked about today. Or, better yet, tell me what you remember most about our session.
- Elliot: Most? I think when you said, 'You cannot have happiness in your life unless you are loved and respected by everyone you meet?'
- Therapist: What about that interests you?
- Elliot: Sometimes I think I cannot be as happy as I'd like to be unless people appreciate me and respect me. Like it's the end of the world if someone doesn't like me. I just wish I could do more about that.
- Therapist: It isn't easy, but you can.

- Elliot: If you could help me with that, I would really appreciate it.
- Therapist: What do you tell yourself, say, when someone thinks you behaved badly?
- Elliot: Tell myself?
- Therapist: Yes, listen to your mind. It will tell you your beliefs. It will tell you what you think of certain things. Let's say someone treated you rudely, say at the convenient store. Say the cashier talked on her cell phone and didn't treat you very well, as a customer. What would you tell yourself about that?
- Elliot: I would tell myself she was rude.
- Therapist: And . . . ?
- Elliot: She shouldn't be?
- Therapist: And . . . ?

- Elliot: She should change.
- Therapist: Why?
- Elliot: Because I want her to?
- Therapist: What if she doesn't change?
- Elliot: She would be a horrible person and I couldn't stand that.
- Therapist: So you couldn't live happily while she was in the world acting rudely?
- Elliot: Now I get it.
- Therapist: If your happiness depends on how well people cooperate with your wishes, you are likely to be unhappy a lot of the time.
- Elliot: I get that part, but what can I do instead.
- Therapist: Remember how we talked about viewing the situation differently?



- Elliot: About seeing people who act strangely as insane?
- Therapist: Sure. If the cashier were viewed as crazy, what kind of behavior would you expect from her?
- Elliot: Crazy?
- Therapist: Should crazy people act any differently?
- Elliot: I guess not.
- Therapist: Put that in your own words.
- Elliot: I can still be happy in my life, even if people are acting crazy and saying crazy things. I don't have to fight anyone or yell back at them. I can think, 'Boy, this person is really making a lot of poor choices. They are saying all sorts of crazy shit and behaving strangely. I think I should just

move away from them.’

- Therapist: What about your thoughts concerning being gay?
- Elliot: I guess I still feel like it would be better to be straight.
- Therapist: Can you be happy in your life if you're not like other people?
- Elliot: Sure I can. I just have to stop thinking that just because someone thinks something bad about me that it's true. I have to give myself my own value, rather than taking everyone's random suggestions of my value. I am in charge of the way I feel because I am in charge of the way I think. If I think differently, I will feel differently. I will never like it that people don't like me because I'm gay, or any other reason. But I

certainly can live my life and be happy. Yes, I it will take the force of will; but I think I can do that.

### Sandy's Case Study

- Therapist: How can I help you?
- Sandy: I hate being fat.
- Therapist: How is being fat a problem for you?
- Sandy: Nobody likes fat people. I am always afraid that someone will make fun of me in public.
- Therapist: Is there anything else about being fat that you don't like?
- Sandy: I hate pretending all the time that I am happy being fat.
- Therapist: Anything else?

- Sandy: I just hate having to lie all the time and pretend people don't notice how fat I am.
- Therapist: OK . . . anything else?
- Sandy: That's about it. I want to be different. I don't want to be this way.
- Therapist: Any of these things more important to you than any other?
- Sandy: I guess that everyone hates fat people.
- Therapist: Wow! That's really terrible. How do you know that everyone hates fat people?
- Sandy: Because I'm fat and I know. I live through it every day.
- Therapist: Do I hate you?
- Sandy: I don't know. Do you?
- Therapist: No.

- Sandy: How do I know that?
- Therapist: You'll just have to take my word for it.
- Sandy: I'm lost.
- Therapist: Yes, let's re-focus. I'm wondering if people generally liked fat people, how you would feel about that.
- Sandy: I would be a lot happier.
- Therapist: Would you want to be fat then?
- Sandy: Yes. I wouldn't have any problems then.
- Therapist: Would everyone like you then?
- Sandy: I guess not. Someone wouldn't like me for some other reason.
- Therapist: I don't think we are talking about you being fat at all.
- Sandy: What are we talking about?

- Therapist: Maybe we are talking about how well you accommodate not being liked.
- Sandy: Maybe, but I can change myself if people don't like me for other reasons. I mean if people don't like what I'm wearing or what I'm driving, I can change it. I can't change being fat. At least it wouldn't be very easy to do. It would take a lot of something I don't have. I don't want to lose weight. I just want to be liked for who I am.
- Therapist: So if I didn't like your shirt, you would change it?
- Sandy: I wouldn't change it, but I wouldn't wear it here again.
- Therapist: What would it mean if I didn't like your shirt?
- Sandy: I guess it means you don't like me.

- Therapist: What if I didn't like you?
- Sandy: I would feel like I was bad.
- Therapist: Simply because I didn't like your shirt?
- Sandy: I guess.
- Therapist: Again, I don't think we're talking about you being fat at all.
- Sandy: Goodness. What are we talking about now?
- Therapist: We are talking about you and how much you dislike yourself for any reason anyone can hand to you. We can actually do something about that. Do you want to do something about that?
- Sandy: I never really looked at it like that.
- Therapist: What would it mean if someone told you they didn't like you because you

were fat?

- Sandy: It would mean I couldn't make them like me right away.
- Therapist: And what would it mean to you not to be able to make someone like you right away?
- Sandy: I guess I would feel . . . like . . . powerless. Like I would be really off balance until they saw past my fat and liked me.
- Therapist: Is it true that if someone didn't like you because you are fat that you are entirely bad?
- Sandy: To them I would be.
- Therapist: That may be. Is it true that you are entirely bad because someone doesn't like your shirt? Your car? Your weight?



- Sandy: Not really. I mean it isn't true unless I think it's true.
- Therapist: How do you know it's not true?
- Sandy: Because they might not like me, but I have some friends who like me and don't care that I'm fat.
- Therapist: I thought you said EVERYONE hates fat people.
- Sandy: I guess I was exaggerating.
- Therapist: It may not be such a good idea to exaggerate when you're in emotional turmoil.
- Sandy: True.
- Therapist: So what's so special about the person we are talking about? The one who doesn't like you?
- Sandy: I guess I want everyone to like me.

- Therapist: Is it your goal to have everyone like you?
- Sandy: I guess.
- Therapist: We may want to work on that goal.