

# What successful people really do: Part 1

Managing yourself for success

Ralph McKechnie Brown



Ralph Brown

# **What successful people *really* do**

Part 1: Managing yourself for success

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# Contents

	<b>Before you begin</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Liberating choices</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1	Become the captain of your ship	9
<b>2</b>	<b>One moment please!</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1	Get to know your prefrontal cortex	20
2.2	Ready for some training?	21
2.3	The harm of impulsiveness	22
<b>3</b>	<b>Optimism and staying on track</b>	<b>24</b>
3.1	How long and well do you want to live?	25
3.2	Getting specific about optimism	26
3.3	Check your explanatory style	28
3.4	Staying motivated	32
3.5	Motivating children	32
3.6	Staying on track to our goals	34



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<b>4</b>	<b>Manage your disruptive emotions</b>	<b>36</b>
4.1	Try some therapy	38
4.2	What to do	39
4.3	Manage depression	42
4.4	Manage anger	48
4.5	Manage anxiety	51
4.6	Stay cool under pressure	56
4.7	The everyday magic of positive emotions	59
4.8	Protect your immune system	60
4.9	The sexes and disruptive emotions	62
4.10	Reducing stress at work	62
4.11	Coaching children handling emotions	64
	<b>Notes</b>	<b>65</b>
	<b>About the author</b>	<b>72</b>

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# Before you begin

This is a 'how to' series in three parts. It will help you become a more successful businessperson, partner, coach, parent, colleague, student or friend. It will help you enjoy life more too.

It's about what the research says successful people really do, not what they might tell you they do to be successful. Even if their personal insights were accurate, what they do may not work for you.

The published research gives us a much more objective and reliable picture of how humans succeed than an autobiography or a magazine article profiling one person.

The research provides us with new insights and ideas we can use every waking moment. It confirms that some of what we've been told about such things as motivation, achieving goals and coping with stress checks out. But the research also shows that we've been fed myths and exaggerations about human behaviour.

Where it's relevant, I've added some observations and experience of my own and my colleagues. We've trained thousands of employees from large organisations for 30 years.

Here's a necessary question before we start: What do we mean by successful people?

Let's acknowledge that public recognition and wealth are narrow definitions of success.

Many highly successful people aspire to neither, but become the most valued members of their organisations and communities.

For others, their success may be largely confined to the family. They make inspirational parents, form close and enduring relationships with their partners and take pleasure in helping others succeed.

# 1 Liberating choices

*See choices where others don't*

Imagine this.

You are driving in the dark. Thoughts of work are slowly disappearing as your favourite music takes over. You are only a few minutes from home when suddenly a drunk driver crosses the centre line at high speed. You brake hard, but the crash is inevitable. You regain consciousness two days later in hospital. You can no longer walk and you are convinced that your life is over.

Is the drunk responsible?

Clearly, he's responsible for the accident. Would he be responsible for your failure to make the best of your new circumstances?

Let's look at what's useful. Blaming the drunk might give us some satisfaction, but it wouldn't help us develop a positive outlook or help us find new opportunities. Other people can help, but ultimately we must do it with or without them. It would surely take extraordinary willpower to do it, but it is the only positive choice.

Many people think it's superficial to suggest that being successful or not is mostly a matter of choice. The debate may go something like this.

A: 'What if I'm someone who has no confidence?'

B: 'That's a choice.'

A: 'No it's not, it's conditioning.'

B: 'Possibly it began that way, but does it matter now? Sitting in the corner at a party, or not speaking up at a meeting, not taking a study course, not taking risks in business are all choices. You would be choosing to give in to your fear of failure.'

A: 'It's like you're patronising people with a simplistic solution. The way they are is a result of their upbringing and their opportunities in life and the genes they inherited. You're making it sound like it's their fault.'

Even to dismiss 'choice' as too simplistic is a choice. And we have an inescapable fact: Seeing choices where others don't is an outstanding characteristic of successful people.

The rewards of knowing that we are in control and have choices are not just in motivation, but in better health, better relationships, more optimism, more resilience and less stress.<sup>1</sup>

Taking control means looking for choices in every situation. It means thinking carefully about our setbacks to see what we can learn, listing ways of recovering from them, choosing the best and putting them into action.

Let's take an extreme example. The Austrian psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl made a choice: to write a book about his observations as a prisoner in four concentration camps including Auschwitz – not on reflection, but while he experienced it. Other prisoners were, naturally, preoccupied with staying alive and enduring the hardship from day-to-day. Viktor Frankl chose to document human reactions to extreme suffering. He stuffed the manuscript into the lining of his coat and when one of the guards confiscated it, he started again. That was a choice too.

In a book he wrote just after his release, Viktor Frankl recalls the prisoners who chose to focus, not on their suffering, but comforting others – some of them giving away their last piece of bread. It's proof, he says that the guards could take from those prisoners every freedom but the last one – the freedom to choose their attitude, whatever the circumstances.

*Man's Search for Meaning* sold nine million copies and Viktor Frankl went on to write many more books and found a school of psychotherapy. He died in 1997 at the age of 93.

*Man's Search for Meaning* suggests the work of a thoughtful, detached observer, free of bitterness or anger. That's a choice too. I often think of Viktor Frankl and those men in the huts who chose to comfort others and give away their last piece of bread. They offer a new perspective to the stresses of a traffic jam, a delayed flight or forgetting to stop at the supermarket on the way home. We can't change the events, but we can choose our response.

Just knowing you have the freedom to choose can have far-reaching effects on your life and could even extend it. Two American researchers randomly selected a group of residents from a nursing home and gave them the opportunity to make small choices, including the movies they wanted to watch and where they put their pot plants in their rooms. Another group continued to have everything decided for them. In the next 18 months those who had the power of choice were stronger, healthier, more sociable – and twice as likely to be alive.<sup>2</sup>

Often we don't exercise our power to choose because we don't think we have any choices, but it can be an invigorating experience to seek them out, especially when we've encountered a setback or face a particularly testing challenge.

Of course, we all make choices every day, but let's divide choices into three categories.

The most basic choice is whether to do what's required to survive. It usually relies on needs so, for instance, we eat and sleep and avoid life-threatening situations, but we could choose not to.

The second level is broad. It ranges from the basic day-to-day choices: to go to work today, which breakfast cereal to buy, through to those that are more values-based, such as to hand in the money we found in the restaurant or to campaign for a noble cause.

Choices in the third category are also value-based, but their particular virtue is the power they give us to make the best use of our talents. I call them liberating choices. The most basic liberating choice is to take charge of our own lives.

## 1.1 Become the captain of your ship

Psychologists talk about our *locus of control*, meaning the extent to which we believe that our own behaviour influences events in our lives. It's a sliding scale and can vary from day-to-day and changes in our circumstances.

Choosing to take control of our own lives gives us an *internal* locus of control. We accept that success is up to us, that we have options and can overcome setbacks. It's just a matter of finding the best way. People with a mostly internal locus of control are the captains of their own ships.

People who have an external locus of control believe that their success depends on luck, fate, powerful other people or other factors beyond their control. *Externalizers* are the ships – tossed around by the sea.

An externalizer may tell you that his business is suffering because of the government's mis-handling of the economy, the exchange rate or bureaucracy, and simply sit and wait for something to change. An internaliser might be just as annoyed with the government, but would still believe that her success is up to her.

Our locus of control influences us throughout our lives. One review of 100 studies of students found that the internalisers significantly outperformed the others.<sup>3</sup>

Externalisers put their success down to having an effective teacher, or the teacher liking them or whether the tests of their achievement were easy or hard. One extensive American study found that children's locus of control was a more reliable way to predict their academic success than the standard measure of their need to achieve, the qualities of their school and its teaching styles or their parents' child-rearing practices.<sup>4</sup>

A move down the external end of the line between internal and external locus of control may simply reflect the reality of our changed circumstances. External locus of control increases in times of major social upheavals such as war or high unemployment.

Researchers have recognised for more than 25 years that the sense of control we have over our own lives has significant implications for our health. Andrew Steptoe and Jane Wardle from University College London collected data on the beliefs and behaviours of young adults in 18 countries. They found that those with an internal locus of control drank less alcohol, smoked less, exercised more, had a healthier diet and even brushed their teeth more often.<sup>5</sup> There's also strong evidence that because internalisers are less prone to *learned helplessness*, they are more optimistic, more persistent, less inclined to suffer depression and more resistant to stress and anxiety.

We develop our locus of control early. The research shows that parents who emphasise the value of effort, learning, responsibility and thinking about choices, encourage a healthy internal locus of control. They also tend to model internal beliefs and deliver on any rewards they have promised for achievement.

Let's call the decision to take charge of our own lives the Supreme Liberating Choice, because once we have made that choice, we can make others that liberate us to achieve more.

### 1.1.1 Choose to be courageous

Literally, courage is the ability to face and endure danger, even being immune from fear. For most of us, courage means overcoming fear. Maybe that's real courage – sensing or knowing the frightening possibilities and choosing to take action anyway.

It takes judgement to use courage effectively. Adopting a macho courage that drives us to strive for one unattainable goal after another suggests impaired judgement or slow learning. Even so, we'd have to acknowledge that some remarkable people persist long beyond the point where most of us would have decided the goal wasn't worth the effort.

The most common effect of losing our courage is stagnation. We create comfortable habits: the same job, the same fixed opinions and the same interests. There's something to be said for being resistant to change. It's not as if all changes are for the better. But sometimes we are simply choosing the apparent security of stagnation. I meet many people who complain that their co-workers are reluctant to learn new computer software, can't bear public speaking and resist new ideas with lofty cynicism or eloquent silence. The people complaining are usually in training workshops. They're ready to change and want to know how. Many of them find changing old habits and learning new skills daunting, but they're doing it. That's courage too.

### 1.1.2 Choose To Be Proactive

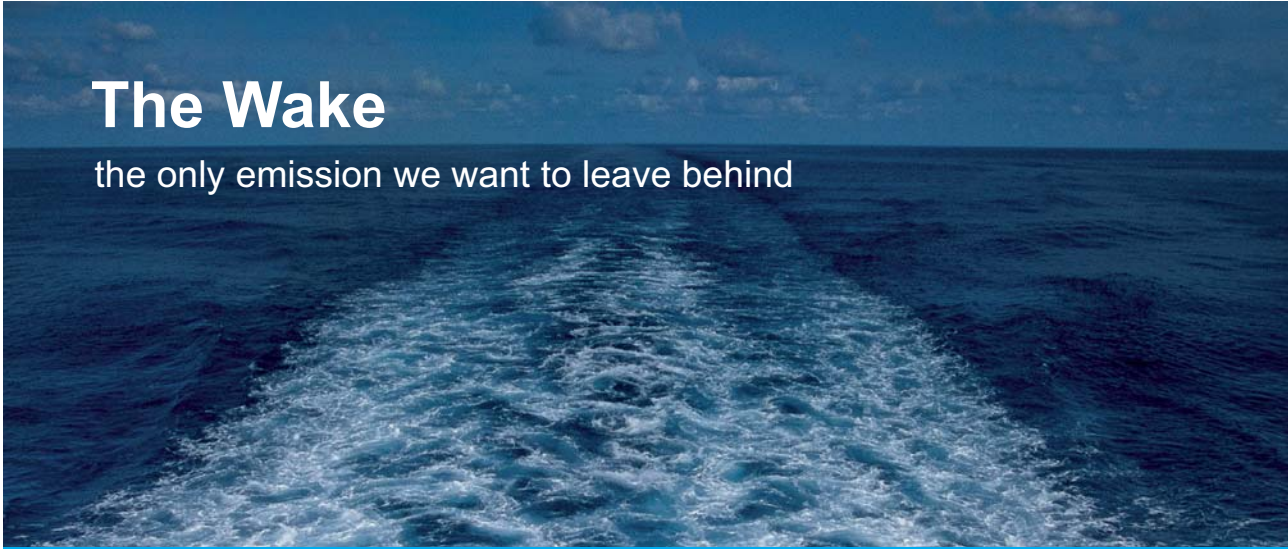
It sounds easy enough, but it's a demanding discipline to be constantly anticipating problems and acting before they develop. It can be as simple as preparing a wet weather and a dry weather plan for your picnic. It can be as complex as having plans to match all the 'what ifs' in a takeover battle – then acting on them appropriately.

Being proactive can take determination, energy and courage. If you sense that the share market is about to fall, or your teenager is becoming interested in illegal substances, it would be easy to wait to see what happens or deny the evidence.

As we'll see when we look at handling stressful situations, people who take control are much more likely to emerge better for the experience. They also build their resilience for the next crisis. Less resilient people are inclined, not only to passivity and denial, but less robust mental and physical health.

Being constantly proactive reminds us that we have choices – that we are in control of our own lives.

One caution with choosing to be proactive: We can overdo it. We can become constantly anxious as we search for threats. Choosing to be proactive should mean facing reality and taking action before problems escalate.




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### 1.1.3 Choose Your Attitude In Any Circumstances

We can choose our attitude – always.

Viktor Frankl reports a television interview with a Polish cardiologist who showed how far we can take the notion of choosing our attitude.<sup>6</sup> The cardiologist had helped organize the rebellion against the Nazis in the Warsaw ghetto and the television interviewer was clearly impressed by his heroism.

‘Listen,’ replied the doctor, ‘to take a gun and shoot is no great thing, but if the SS leads you to a gas chamber or to a mass grave to execute you on the spot and you can’t do anything about it – except for going your way with dignity – you see, this is what I would call heroism.’

We can always choose to be positive and look for solutions, or at least to accept our situation in a positive way.

Choosing our attitude frequently allows us to preserve our valuable relationships. Lashing out with angry, contemptuous words is only satisfying for a moment. Successful people choose their attitude and express their anger in more constructive ways that preserve their relationships.

### 1.1.4 Choose to be unembarrassable

Think about the last time you were embarrassed and ask yourself what was achieved by it. Does fear of embarrassment make you less inclined to speak up at a meeting, sing a song you enjoy or be outgoing at parties? What would it do to your life if you were to choose to be unembarrassable?

Most people I’ve worked with have never thought about being unembarrassable. They’ve thought that being embarrassed was something that happened to you. ‘Nice idea,’ some would say, but ‘I’d just go red and prickly. When you are landed in what other people might see as an embarrassing situation, being embarrassed won’t change your circumstances. It can only make you feel worse. It’s a choice to give in to it. Choose not to. Avoiding potentially embarrassing situations might ease your fears, but it’s a cop-out.

If fear of embarrassment is holding you back, prepare a strategy so that if the worst happens you’ll know you can handle it.

Let's say you are giving a presentation to 500 people. Your confidence is building to the point where you feel comfortable about leaving the lectern and your notes to step towards the audience a couple of metres. You are sensing the beginnings of a rapport. In the blur of faces you see people nodding, even smiling. They seem to be ignoring your nervousness, or even unaware of it. The words are flowing. You ad-lib a one-liner. They laugh. There's a pause. Suddenly, you've lost it. Five hundred people are waiting for your next point and your mind is blank. How embarrassing is that? Try this: Choose not to be embarrassed and say, as if in a conversation with a friend, 'Let me just check what I was going to mention next.' Go calmly to your notes, take a moment to find your place and come back with energy, 'Ah yes, I wanted to talk about the marketing strategy...' Embarrassment wouldn't have changed anything, just made you and your audience feel bad. Relaxing and recovering with energy will impress them with your confidence and enthusiasm for your message. Liberating isn't it?

What if you were to speak up at a meeting and not a single colleague agreed with you? You might plan to say in a relaxed way, perhaps even with a smile, 'I can see I'm not getting much support on this one, but I just want to make it clear where I stand.'

There is some research on embarrassment and it's reassuring. It suggests that we tend to overestimate the extent to which others even notice our embarrassing moments. If somebody makes unflattering comments about us in public or the security alarm in the library goes off because we forgot to check out a book, it's natural to assume that everybody is noticing and will remember. But a research team using both those scenarios found that observers are much less focused on the embarrassing event than the person it happens to. The observers tend to be charitable through empathy, or because they can imagine doing something similar themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Therapists encourage patients who have a high fear of embarrassment to try 'decentering' – which involves questioning whether other people really are evaluating them.<sup>8</sup> We can also choose not to need the whole world's acceptance or approval. We can choose not to be concerned if we don't perform perfectly on every occasion and after all, we're in control of our lives, not the people around us.

Some people tell me they are uncomfortable about the effect that unembarrassability might have on society generally. They fear that it will become a licence to embarrass other people simply to show how unembarrassable we are. Drunks do that at parties and it does nothing for their relationships. Being unembarrassable is simply about liberating ourselves from fear so that we can make the best use of our talents.

We can be unembarrassable and still say sorry – maybe often. If we say something hurtful or inconvenience other people, we can apologise, make amends if necessary and decide not to make the same mistake again. Even so, we can move on from any embarrassment, especially that crippling, guilty embarrassment that drags us down weeks and months later. How could that help anyone?

1.1.5 Choose to be happy

Here's a simple question. Which of these events, if they happened tomorrow, would make you happier a couple of years from now:

- winning a substantial prize in a lottery
- being disabled in an accident
- staying at home and reading a book?

It may seem a ridiculous question to ask, but the *average* outcome of those three events may surprise you. In 1978 Philip Brickman and his colleagues compared people who had won between \$50,000 and a million dollars in the Illinois state lottery, people who had been disabled in accidents and 'regular folks' who had not had either experience.

The only real difference was that on average the regular folks were a little happier than the people who had been injured.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, some lottery winners in that study were miserable and some accident victims happy. It is support for the notion that events are neutral and we choose our reaction to them.

There's evidence that many people are born with 'happiness genes'. It doesn't mean that they drift through life in a euphoric haze, only that they have a pre-disposition to be happy.

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Not having the genes doesn't stop the rest of us being happy. Researchers are able to list ways that happy people view life and cope with setbacks, and they are all attitudes or skills we can choose to learn.

Happy people think more positively about themselves and have a network of supportive relationships. They recover from setbacks more quickly and have better problem-solving skills. They have a sense of humour, even when the going gets tough. (There's more to come on that topic in Part Two of this series.)

Happy people are inclined to think of the positive side of negative events. Researchers report hearing, 'My break-up reminded me of a Seinfeld episode' and 'Things are less tense now my folks are apart'. Unhappy people dwell on the negative, even with events that we could easily see as positive: 'That holiday put me behind with my work'.<sup>10</sup>

### **Develop your happiness**

We can choose the Buddhist approach to happiness: to find it in everyday events as simple as a smile, our children's milestones, the first signs of spring, intimate moments with our partner or a calm sunny morning – rather than some pot of gold. You could say that all we would be doing is creating short-term pleasure from everyday things, and you would be right. It's when it becomes a way of life and we look back over perhaps years, that we can say we are happy or happier.

Want a long-term focus for building happiness? Try eudaimonia [you di mow nee a].

Aristotle used eudaimonia to describe the happiness that comes from living a virtuous life. These days, psychologists have dropped the moral baggage and use eudaimonia to describe the pleasures that come from adding meaning and purpose to our lives.

People with the most satisfying lives choose to focus on causes beyond themselves. For many, eudaimonia comes from volunteering in the community. For others, it's striving to be an excellent parent, friend, colleague or leader while living according to their values.

### **Let's be realistic**

Researchers have shown that happy people are able to appraise situations well and when the stakes are high, or their self-esteem is at stake they feel disappointment, sadness, anger, and frustration like everyone else.

Even if you make it to the top 10 percent on the happiness scale, it won't be all bliss. Although happy people can see more positives in negative events, they often need time to do it. Even so, their healthy reaction to negative events sets them apart from less happy people, more than anything else.<sup>11</sup>

Ed Diener from the University of Illinois and Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania, studied university students in that top happiness range and reasoned that their bad days and low moods were simply confirmation that their emotional systems were in working order. Happiness is a way of life rather than a permanent state of mind.<sup>12</sup>

#### 1.1.6 Choose to love unconditionally

Loving unconditionally makes love a gift, not a deal. We expect nothing in return. In reality, we benefit too, but that benefit may be no more than believing that we are better people. More likely the love will be returned over time. The research tells us that in strong relationships people express love partly by contributing to a reservoir of goodwill, whether the other person is contributing or not.<sup>13</sup>

Loving unconditionally doesn't mean tolerating unacceptable behaviour. We can question, even object vehemently, to rudeness, selfishness or idleness and demand changes, but the love is never in question. We choose to believe that people are lovable, despite their faults.

Many relationships suffer because the partners react to bad behaviour or criticism with contempt. They see the behaviour not as a lapse, but an ingrained characteristic of someone who is no longer worthy of love or even respect. The response becomes an attack, not on the behaviour, but the person: 'That's typical! You're always looking after number one. You're a loser! That's rich coming from someone who always...' Contempt is a key feature of relationships that fail early. Even if the bad behaviour really is ingrained, someone who loves unconditionally still sees it as separate from the person.

Let's acknowledge that we can't love everyone, but if we see love as more than romance or love for our family, we could extend it to our friends, even colleagues or team mates. You and I might have different views of how far we can extend unconditional love. We might express a general love of humanity, because we like most people we meet, but to give all of humanity unconditional love is to choose the demanding path to sainthood.

#### 1.1.7 Choose to think and act independently

Imagine you are sitting at a table with six other people. In front of you are two cards and a researcher is asking everyone in turn which of the three vertical lines on one card is the same height as the single vertical line on the other card. It's supposed to be an experiment in 'visual judgement'. At first, it seems a pointless exercise. The researcher keeps introducing new pairs of cards and everyone agrees which line in each card is the same height. The answers are obvious.

After the sixth pair of cards something odd happens. You are near the end of the line and everyone else has given the wrong answer. Would you go along with them, or stay with the answer you know to be right? What about the next time and the time after that?

Clearly, if you had made the choice to think and act independently, you would say what you believe, but when Solomon Asch tried that experiment in the 1950s, he found that more than one in three people would go along with the majority opinion. That figure was probably conservative because the participants were students in what he describes diplomatically as ‘institutions of higher learning’, where we would expect them to be learning to think independently. Some persisted in siding with the majority even when the difference between the lines was almost 18 centimetres.<sup>14</sup>

Solomon Asch’s experiment provides us with some interesting insights, particularly the reasons the students gave for caving in to the responses of the stooges who made up the rest of the panel. Some came to disbelieve their own eyes, ‘I am wrong. They are right.’ Others thought it best to go along with the majority because they didn’t want to spoil the researchers’ results. Some thought the others were behaving like sheep – that the first person made a mistake and the others simply followed. It seemed simpler to do the same.

Asch and his colleagues added another dimension, another stooge, but this one a ‘supporting partner’ briefed to give the correct answer when the majority was wrong. In the interviews later, the students talked about the inspiration and confidence their partners gave them to hold out and the warmth and closeness they felt towards them.

Let’s relate the experiment to the real world.

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We need to acknowledge that going along with the majority makes sense much of the time. Clearly, it pays to drive on the same side of the road as everyone else and it's essential to the democratic process that we accept a majority decision. There are conventions that seem reasonable to most of us. Dressing in your best for a wedding says, 'I'm taking this seriously. I'm respecting the occasion.'

There are some conventions that don't make much sense, but we might not think it worth the hassle of rebelling against them. Wearing a tie to work with our shirts buttoned to the throat makes little sense, beyond adding a little colour, and wearing the same outfit on a tractor, as some men do in Britain, makes no sense at all. We could dye our hair green, but it's an unusual statement of independence to do it.

Successful people choose to think and act independently when it liberates them to do more with their lives. They refuse to be controlled by what other people might think when it stops them achieving their goals and living their values. They can distinguish between conventional thinking and what they believe to be right, and they refuse to fulfill other people's expectations when they conflict with their own values or aspirations.

#### 1.1.8 Choosing to be released from the past

It's like driving by looking at the rear vision mirror, but very human. Past resentments, guilt, anger and destructive habits can be overwhelming. But releasing ourselves from the past is a choice we can make.

When Nelson Mandela emerged from prison after 26 years on South Africa's notorious Robben Island, he had every reason to be bitter. Instead, he chose and advocated forgiveness. In his autobiography he says, that when he left prison he made it his mission to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressors, '...for to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.'<sup>15</sup>

Letting go can be difficult, but a range of techniques can help. If it's guilt over something you have done or not done, you may be able to put things right with an apology, an offer to make amends, or simply talking it over. If it's anger or resentment holding you back, you may be able to resolve it with some assertiveness. If it's embarrassment, remind yourself that you are human and that you choose not to need the world's approval for everything you do.

If you can't do anything about the cause, it's time to put the events and the disruptive thoughts behind you because there is nothing to be gained by prolonging the guilt, anger or resentment.

Prepare a standard distraction you can use when you sense upsetting emotions welling up – perhaps a tune or favourite thoughts. Therapists who work with people with recurring disruptive thoughts recommend that they yell stop! or hit a desk or wall, the moment they sense the thoughts returning. That’s easy in a therapy room, but maybe at work or out shopping you’ll prefer their less public alternative – perhaps snapping a rubber band around your wrist. Whatever you choose, you’ll be interrupting the disruptive thought, which makes it easier to think about your favourite fishing spot or run the catchiest tune you can think of through your mind one more time.

Redefine your identity and tell yourself regularly. ‘I’m one of those people who never dwell in the past’ or ‘I’m the kind of person who never harbours a grudge’.

Do the same with your other choices. ‘I’m someone who knows there’s always a choice’ or ‘I’m not someone who’s easily embarrassed. I’m an optimist. I’m a happy person who finds pleasure in everyday events’.

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## 2 One moment please!

### *Train your brain's executive centre*

This chapter is about the most trainable part of your brain. It's vital in achieving your goals, managing your emotions, building your relationships, leading, negotiating and any other way you might define success.

My wife and I were on holiday in Vanuatu. One afternoon we discovered that our hotel golf course had an unusual feature: more than 18 holes. In fact there were more than we cared to count. The unofficial holes were on the fairways, all of them big enough to take a golf ball, but clearly not man-made.

We asked the hotel receptionist. 'Snakes make them', she said. 'They come out at night and move the stones.' We were both doubtful. We don't have snakes in New Zealand and we Kiwis find them particularly unnerving, so I could have lived with my doubts. My wife could not, so that night two very nervous New Zealanders ventured out, walking very close together, whispering between anxious silences.

Suddenly, a shape, just outside the beam of the torch. I leapt – an instant panic reaction. It was the length of a small snake, and convincing enough in peripheral vision – but only a long, thin leaf.

The pattern is probably familiar: an initial strong emotion, followed by the calming influence of new information or reason.

In its extreme form, the initial emotional response becomes an 'emotional hijacking'. The brain's limbic system takes over and any calming influence can be very slow coming.

Many people have difficulty reacting in any other way to emotionally-charged situations. I know a chief executive of a very large organisation who admits to striking another motorist in the middle of a city street. His anger had hijacked an intelligent brain, shutting out the possible consequences to his career and reputation.

### 2.1 Get to know your prefrontal cortex

Fortunately our brains have what we might call an executive centre that takes the raw emotion and says, 'Hold on a moment, maybe there's another way of interpreting and responding to this one.' Your executive centre is in the prefrontal cortex and if your hand is on your forehead as you are reading this, you're almost touching it.

Researchers have known about the link between the front of the brain and emotions and personality since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1848, Phineas Gage entered the history of medical science and psychology professors around the world still tell his story. Gage was on a railway construction project in Vermont. He was the contracting company's most able and efficient foreman, described as having a well-balanced mind and being a shrewd businessman.

September 14 was not his best day at work. As he was laying an explosive charge, it ignited and sent a tamping iron one metre long point-first into his left cheek bone, through the front of his skull and out again. It landed 10 metres away. It seems incredible, but he survived. The tamping iron had performed an accidental prefrontal lobotomy.

Months later Gage felt ready to return to work, but his personality had changed dramatically. The railway company described him as, 'fitful, irreverent and grossly profane, showing little deference for his fellows'. He was 'impatient and obstinate, yet capricious and vacillating', unable to settle on any of the plans he devised for his future action.<sup>16</sup> The tamping iron is now an exhibit at the Museum of the Medical College of Harvard University.

Typically, people with an impaired prefrontal cortex have difficulty forming strategies, even for simple tasks. They become irresponsible, lack emotion and have no concern for the present, let alone the future.<sup>17</sup>

It's clear that the brain's executive centre helps us make decisions, concentrate, plan and stick to our goals. It also gives us an emotional working memory which allows us to learn from our emotional experiences and anticipate how we might feel if the same thing happened again.<sup>18</sup>

The prefrontal cortex helps explain some significant differences in the way people respond to emotional events and the time it takes to recover from events that generate fear or anger.

Most of the key emotional skills depend on our ability to respond in emotionally and socially appropriate ways, rather than react impulsively to anger, fear or want.

Some people have highly developed executive centres. I've been with taxi drivers as other motorists have cut them off and shut them out and heard them say in an unruffled way things like, 'Well, I guess it takes all sorts to make a world'.

## 2.2 Ready for some training?

Kirk Brown and Richard Ryan from the University of Rochester have been researching a simple strategy that seems to develop the power of the prefrontal cortex.

*Mindfulness* has become popular in the last few years and taught in businesses. It involves training ourselves to focus on what is happening right now. It's a process with roots in Buddhism and other traditions.

When listening to our partner or child, we could increase our mindfulness by being particularly attentive to both the words and the subtle emotional content, without judgement. We could take a walk and pay attention to the range of sounds under our feet and around us. We could savour the taste of our morning coffee – perhaps identifying which parts of our tongue are affected most by the lingering flavour. We could focus on our emotions and put names to their subtle changes.

So, what's the pay-off for increasing our mindfulness? According to Brown and Ryan's research, better self-regulation, more positive emotions, less pre-occupation with negative emotions, less absorption with the past and fewer anxious fantasies about the future.

Socialising teaches most of us to resist impulsive behaviour, but the research suggests that impulsive behaviour is increasing.

### 2.3 The harm of impulsiveness

So how much damage does impulsiveness do to your life chances?

There are numerous examples in the research, but one from 2002 illustrates the point. Researchers at the State University of New York offered high school students a fee for taking part in an experiment and the fee came with a choice: \$7 now or \$10 a week from now. Half the students said, 'I'll take the money now'. Those students were found to be smoking more cigarettes and marijuana and more likely to be drinking to excess. They had lower self-esteem and were performing below their academic ability.<sup>19</sup> Other studies have produced similar results and also linked impulsive behaviour to poor relationships and violent, self-indulgent behaviour that persisted into adulthood.

Even those of us who generally cope well with life, battle with impulsiveness from time-to-time. A negotiator who reacts to a hostile comment with a single outburst of retaliation may ruin her chances of success. A leader who can't resist an impulsive putdown comment may destroy the trust he has built with his team. The consumer who wants, but doesn't need, a new car, house or suit may live to regret his tendency to buy on impulse.

Instead of acting on impulse, we can pause and focus on the long-term benefits of a considered response. At work, we might strive to be the consummate professional, at home, the model parent.

It sounds simple, but our ability to regulate our emotions, both positive and negative, and to learn from our experiences is at the heart of success in business, study, sport and relationships.

Training children to resist impulsive behaviour has enormous rewards in their later lives. Psychologists have developed a scale for measuring the ability to 'delay gratification', which tells them how well pre-schoolers, for instance, are able to wait before devouring a marshmallow, chocolate or pretzel.

The research is showing a particularly strong link between children waiting, and their ability in adulthood to delay angry reactions long enough to develop some cooling strategies.<sup>20</sup> Grabbing the chocolate bar is impulsive. So is the angry lashing out of the adult who feels frustrated or hurt by criticism in a meeting.

Psychologists have found that pre-schoolers can learn to delay gratification with ‘fun thoughts’ (for example, what it was like when we went to the beach) or *reframing* (perhaps, imagining the marshmallows are rubber). Adults who refuse to give in to children who ‘want it and want it now’ are laying the foundations for a range of vital emotional skills.

Taking time to consider our responses, rather than reacting to our initial emotion is a major theme of the rest of this book. That self-regulation is, of course, a choice and based on the supreme liberating choice – to take control of our own lives.

In the next chapters you’ll find many more ways of keeping your prefrontal cortex fully fit.



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# 3 Optimism and staying on track

*Including a special kind of optimism*

Use the simple method you'll see in a moment to develop your optimism in a focused way. Hang on to it. Make it a way of life. Optimistic people have enormous advantages.

The research is showing that optimism is strongly associated, not only with motivation and achievement, but more rewarding relationships and significantly better mental and physical health.

It's healthy optimism we need not: 'It can't happen to me' or 'Don't worry, be happy, *everything will be okay*' (and doing nothing). That's denial.

Unbridled optimism is as useful as striving to be relentlessly positive. They are related ideas and they're both exhausting and unrealistic. Despite what many of the motivational gurus say, the research shows that you'll be less resilient and achieve less.

Healthy optimism means facing the facts, but believing that we will cope, or succeed in the end.

Healthy optimism doesn't mean being totally realistic or objective about our ability to overcome our setbacks. The idea that to be mentally healthy we need an accurate picture of reality, isn't supported by the research. Depressed people have the most accurate view say, the probability that they will have a serious accident or a fatal disease. Their realism doesn't make them successful.

Researchers believe that our achievements and our mental and physical health depend on 'positive illusions' such as evaluating ourselves more positively than the facts justify and believing that we have more control and skill than we do. A flattering selection of facts and memories about ourselves is more healthy than objective reality because it gives us the confidence to continue facing challenges.

Positive illusions seem to be more common and perhaps more useful in western cultures.<sup>21</sup> In Asia, where belonging and relating to other people is valued more than independence, seeing ourselves as average could be more adaptive.

Think of healthy optimism as the zone between denial and the depressed person's view of reality.

Healthy optimism is a key to motivation and resilience. Take selling. Even if you've never made a living from selling, you can probably imagine the challenge of facing rejection every day – rejection that could vary from a polite, 'No, thank you,' to being chased off the premises.

In one of many studies showing the power of optimism, Martin Seligman and Peter Schulman tested insurance agents for optimism and found those at the top half of the scale outsold those in the bottom half by 37 per cent. The optimists were also much less likely to quit.<sup>22</sup> They believed that they would eventually be successful and that success was within their control. Notice how optimism is linked with seeing ourselves as the captain of our own ship.

### 3.1 How long and well do you want to live?

Optimists live longer, healthier lives – and not just a little longer or a little healthier.

Researchers checked the records of almost 100 men who had graduated from Harvard University between 1939 and 1944. The men had been interviewed and physically examined every five years and the researchers were able to conclude that their optimism or pessimism at 25 predicted their health at 65. By the time they reached just 45, the pessimists' health began to deteriorate more quickly.<sup>23</sup>

Researchers from the Mayo Clinic studied the health of 839 patients over 30 years. They found that the optimists decreased their chances of early death by 50 per cent. They were also happier, more peaceful, more relaxed and had less pain and suffered fewer physical and emotional problems.<sup>24</sup>

Some researchers have studied 'learned helplessness'. It's a product of conditioning that starts when we are very young, but we can learn to replace pessimism with optimism.<sup>25</sup>



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So how do we account for the repeated findings that positive people and optimists live longer? It could be that the real issue is avoiding negativity and the harmful effect it has on our autonomic nervous system which keeps our body aroused to handle threats.

Positive emotions have a healing effect. Pessimists' bodies have even more to cope with than constant arousal. They are more likely to believe that nothing they do makes any difference, so they drink and smoke more than other people, and exercise less. They are also less likely to visit their doctor for a check-up. They are significantly more depressed and depression is linked with early death. There's also evidence that a pessimistic outlook damages or inhibits the body's immune system.<sup>26</sup>

Research shows that pessimists suffer in their relationships throughout their lives. They have more relationship break-ups, have more family troubles, fail more often in their education and are more likely to be lonely – probably because all the doom and gloom talk turns off people with a more balanced view of life.

Longer, healthier, happier lives with more rewarding and enduring relationships. It puts the effort to train ourselves to be more optimistic into perspective, doesn't it?

If you think that your outlook is generally pessimistic, don't despair. You won't have to wait decades to see the benefits of retraining yourself.

This time you will have two very important advantages: You'll be focused on change and you'll be in charge of the training process.

## 3.2 Getting specific about optimism

Researchers think of optimism in two ways: a generally optimistic outlook (a trait) and an optimistic 'explanatory style'<sup>27</sup>. Explanatory style is the way we usually explain our successes and setbacks to ourselves.

### 3.2.1 Develop your optimistic explanatory style

You can develop your optimism by changing or enhancing your explanatory style. It can be a challenge to change old habits, but the process is simple.

The research reveals that the most successful people attribute their failures and setbacks to something other than their ability or potential.

When they succeed, it's the opposite – confirmation that they have ability or potential.

A student with an optimistic explanatory style would believe that her poor mark in an exam had a temporary cause, say, not studying hard enough. She would still believe in her potential.

A student with a pessimistic explanatory style would believe that the cause of her poor mark was lack of talent- something she couldn't change. The mark would be evidence that she had no potential and should abandon the subject.

If it seems easy to avoid that kind of pessimistic thinking, let's note what many people say about their setbacks. They tell themselves that it shows they have no talent: 'I'm just no good at this. I should stick to things I *can* do.' They will also see the barriers to success as permanent or inevitable: 'It's impossible.' They avoid challenges and give up easily because any setback is evidence that they were right about their talent or the barriers to success. They set easy goals to avoid being crushed by more failure. They may believe that success is a matter of luck or fate, not effort, persistence or choice.

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### 3.3 Check your explanatory style

What do you tell yourself when things go wrong?

#### **An optimistic explanatory style**

You tell yourself that it's an opportunity to learn. It's a setback, not a failure. You still believe in your potential to succeed. If the event is not something you can control, you recognise that you could not have done anything about it, that it will not always occur and has a limited effect on your life.

#### **A pessimistic explanatory style**

You tell yourself that it's a failure, all your fault and evidence that you don't have the potential to succeed. You may even tell yourself that you fail at everything you do and always will.

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In its most severe form, pessimism or learned helplessness is expressed in self-talk such as, 'I'm hopeless at this, and everything else and I always will be.' The researchers refer to those three elements as internal ('It's me. I failed because I don't have the ability.') stable, ('I'll always fail.') and global ('I'll fail in everything I do').

That pessimistic self-talk is also a characteristic of people who are depressed.<sup>28</sup>

Pessimists cannot win because when they do succeed, they dismiss it as just luck: 'I was just in the right place at the right time,' or, 'The boss must have been in a good mood,' or 'I should quit now before they find out I'm no good.' It's all very humble and there is a place for, 'I was lucky' when we are considering other people's feelings. What really matters is what we tell ourselves. Let's not miss out on the benefits of seeing each success as confirmation of our potential or ability.

Let's look at the process in a little more detail.

#### **1. Choose to be on your way to being a first-class leader, parent, sportsperson etc.**

There's research to support the choice to be *on your way*. It puts you in *growth mindset*, which is likely to make you more adaptive and focused on what you want to become and achieving your personal best each time.<sup>29</sup>

You may be worried that you would be avoiding reality by choosing to be on your way to being first-class, but we don't know the reality of your potential. Let's consider the alternatives. You could choose to say to yourself, 'I'm no good at this and never will be.' How real is that? It might be true, but more likely it's just the easy way out.

So how true is your belief that you are on your way to being a first-class leader, parent or golfer? We won't know until you've developed a pattern of healthy self-talk about your successes and setbacks and learned from them. Maybe, by the end of your life, you'll only be competent rather than excellent, but it surely beats quitting at the first hurdle.

Why shouldn't you be on your way to being a first-class almost-anything-you-like? If you are motivated and prepared to learn from experience why should you be limited by the way you and other people have seen your abilities up till now? Carol Dweck of Stanford University, has some strong views about the notion that our current performance dictates our long term potential. It's in her list of 'beliefs that make smart people dumb'.<sup>30</sup>

## **2. Strive to act the part.**

Once you have made your choice, strive to act the part of someone who is already first-class in that role.

A first-class speaker for instance would appear to the audience to be totally confident, not giving in to fear of embarrassment. A first-class parent would strive to be fair and consistent and create opportunities for his child to develop new skills – amongst many other things.

Striving to act the part of someone who is already first-class helps us focus on high performance, and because we are in a growth mindset, we can accept our setbacks as simply part of the process of learning.

Think of acting the part of an optimistic, confident, first-class performer as heroic. You'll feel the fear of trying something new, of being someone you're not yet, but you'll choose to do it anyway.

Does acting the part seem false or insincere? Maybe it is, but we have obligations to ourselves and other people that are far more important.

The opera singer who acts the part of a confident performer from the moment she sweeps on stage is setting herself and the audience up for a first-class performance. So are Olympic athletes, professional footballers, swimmers, business people and politicians around the world. The British prime minister Winston Churchill suffered deep depression, but chose to act the part of the confident, optimistic leader throughout the Second World War. There's no hint of pessimism in, 'We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall never surrender!'

## **3. Attribute any setback to something other than your potential.**

If you have an optimistic explanatory style and encounter a setback, it obviously won't be anything to do with your potential, because you're on your way to being first-class. It will be something you did or didn't *do*, probably something you can learn or improve next time. Maybe it'll be something about the circumstances that won't arise again.

It's the most challenging part of the process and not just a matter of cheering yourself up. You'll be actively separating your disappointment and any temptation to dismiss your potential from your need to look for ways of doing better next time.

You often need to become a sceptic as you examine your own reactions to setbacks. For instance, let's say you have just come away from a party you haven't enjoyed. Your natural inclination might be to think, 'I'm just no good at parties. I've always been shy and always will be.'

Imagine being a supportive friend who likes to ask sceptical questions. Your friend might ask, 'What about the party last Easter? You enjoyed that, and talked to Jane for an hour. Haven't you enjoyed parties when you've made the effort to start conversations? How many conversations did you start this time? What are you going to do next time?'

Your sceptical friend can help you see failures as simply setbacks and bad events as temporary and controllable. Even if the bad events are beyond your control, you can use your disputation to help you maintain your belief in your potential.

We could blame other people or find reasons or excuses and we would still be explaining our setbacks as nothing to do with our ability or potential. We could say that an exam wasn't a valid test of our ability, it's not a goal worth worrying about, or that it was someone else's fault.



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Reasons or excuses become particularly tempting when our failures are public.<sup>31</sup> Sometimes finding excuses we can live with is useful because it leaves our belief in ourselves intact. But if that's what we *usually* do, it becomes a way of avoiding reality and we miss opportunities to learn from the experience. It also suggests that we have not yet made the Supreme Liberating Choice – to take control of our own lives.

#### 4. Attribute your success to your potential or ability.

Top achievers see their success as evidence of their ability or potential. 'It shows that I'm on my way to being a first-class speaker,' or 'I always knew I had the potential.'

Okay, maybe you can't share your thoughts with the world, but you can, and should, tell yourself. You can say similar things out loud when your children succeed. Make it genuine. These days, even a ten-year-old recognizes flattery.

You might want to be more restrained with your colleagues, partners and friends. Overstating your explanation for their success makes it seem artificial – just a technique and even manipulative. Your affirmations should be credible and genuine. The conversations might go something like these.

You: 'How did the high dive go?'

Friend: 'I got gold.'

You: '*Thought you might*. Congratulations.'

'Thought you might' states your belief in your friend's ability or potential in a low-key way.

You (as team leader): 'The directors were impressed by your presentation.'

Team member: 'That's a relief. I was really worried.'

You: 'I wasn't. You were well prepared and you're a confident speaker.'

You could add a suggestion to help your team member do even better next time (provided it doesn't come across as a criticism and the real point of your comments).

It's important not to attribute your success entirely to what you *did*. It may be that specific, practical things you did helped you succeed and obviously it would be useful to note what worked, but the key issue is your ability or potential. If you were to say to yourself, 'I did well because I studied hard', it would encourage you to study hard next time, but its value in building your optimism would be temporary. The world's top achievers learn to believe in *themselves*, not simply what they do to succeed.

### 3.4 Staying motivated

#### 3.4.1 How's your mindset?

Do you believe that people are either intelligent or talented or not and can't change? That's evidence of a *fixed mindset*. It's unhealthy and the consequences are serious.

If you have a fixed mindset, it's likely that you will be less inclined to take on challenges and be less resilient. You will be less likely to be a top achiever and you'll probably focus your efforts on trying to impress other people, or at least avoid their criticism.

People with fixed mindsets are likely to see *themselves* as failures, not just their attempts to meet the standards they have set.<sup>32</sup> Their fear of failure makes them more inclined to take easy assignments rather than challenges. They lack resilience because even a setback is evidence that they don't have the talent or intelligence.

Fixed mindsetters avoid practising and learning skills. To be seen doing either would suggest they didn't already have what it takes.

Do you believe that people can develop their intelligence and talents? Do you see life as a series of opportunities to experiment and learn? You have a *growth mindset*.

Growth mindsetters enjoy the journey. They willingly take on challenges. Setbacks may be frustrating, but they are opportunities to learn. Growth mindsetters are resilient achievers.

### 3.5 Motivating children

Mindset and explanatory style have much in common and both are vital for raising healthy, resilient, motivated children.

You can help your children to motivate themselves by believing in their potential, no matter what mistakes they make or what setbacks they encounter.

Help them develop a growth mindset by seeing setbacks as learning opportunities and a natural part of working towards a goal. You might need to suggest that they should work harder or concentrate more, but that's healthy too, because that effort is within their control. Even suggesting that the effort is worth it, implies that you believe in their potential.

The effects of your belief can be dramatic. In one American study, a tutor gave nine-year-olds a set of word puzzles and responded to their failures by criticising their effort and implying that they should work harder – which suggested that he believed they could succeed. With another group he focused on how *wrong* they were – suggesting that they didn’t have much ability. Half the puzzles both groups were given were impossible.

Only 25 per cent of the children whose effort was criticised believed that they failed because they lacked the ability. In the group that had heard how wrong they were, 75 percent reported that they failed because they didn’t have the ability.<sup>33</sup> It took only one hour to create the difference in beliefs at the heart of motivation and health.

Encourage your children to be independent and set high standards for themselves. You are implying that you know they have the ability or potential to succeed.

Bernard Rosen and Roy D’Andrade tested 9 to 11 year old boys for motivation. Then they visited those at the top and bottom of the scale at home to watch what happened when they tackled challenging tasks such as building a tower from irregularly shaped blocks while blindfolded.

Both mothers and fathers of the highly motivated boys were very involved and set high standards for them to achieve on the frustrating tasks. They offered hints and were very ready to praise their sons’ success at each stage.

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The parents of the boys who had scored poorly on the motivation test were very different. The fathers, especially, didn't encourage independence or set high standards. They often told them how to do the task and became annoyed when their sons had any setbacks.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.6 Staying on track to our goals

Before we begin, we must make sure that the goals are our goals. Most of our goals are influenced by other people. It's almost inevitable that the people who raised us, the people we admire or with whom we have shared experiences, will have had some bearing on the goals we set for ourselves.

Researchers talk about *concordant* goals to describe 'healthy goal-striving'. Concordant goals are those that match our own long-term interests and values and which give us a sense of satisfaction as we make progress towards them.<sup>35</sup>

Being clear on what we want to achieve does check out as an effective motivator. That's hardly surprising, but even writing our goals and displaying them prominently isn't enough. Our goals are much more motivating if we think carefully about what our success will look like. Create a vivid mental picture and keep returning to it.

Here's a refinement. After you have imagined what success will look like, consider what you don't like about the way things are. Create a contrast between the way things are now and how life will be once you have achieved the goal. Write them – both of them. Review and revise them regularly.

German researchers have found that the stronger the contrast, the greater the motivation, and they talk about 'diligent and continuous attention' to the contrast. They found that the method worked well provided the participants believed the goals were attainable.<sup>36</sup>

Achievers focus on action, not optimism about their goals. There's some evidence that the most optimistic goal-setters are the least resilient. They are crushed by setbacks they didn't expect.

Focusing on action means setting short-term, maybe daily, goals that describe what you will do – and getting on with them.

It's important to make sure that your daily goals relate to your long-term goals. Day-to-day 'relatively-urgent-but-not-important' tasks can easily take over and our long-term goals become relegated to the status of something we must get around to sometime.

American researchers have found that there are significant mental health benefits when our goals are our own, we relate our daily goals to the big picture, make the striving fun and make an effort to work on all our goals.<sup>37</sup>

There is a trap in goal-setting. We can aim too low so that all we are doing is reassuring ourselves that we have a plan. An effective goal is a stretch.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.6.1 Take care with goals

Never link your sense of self-worth to your goals.

Deciding that you'll be a worthwhile person when you pass an exam, buy your dream home or find your life partner is unhealthy and unproductive. You are less likely to achieve those goals and may pay a significant price as you strive for them.<sup>39</sup>

Jennifer Crocker from the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research surveyed more than 600 students and found that more than 80 per cent based their sense of self-worth on their academic achievements.

The students who made that link did not receive higher grades, despite being highly motivated and studying more. They were more likely to feel stressed and more likely to be in conflict with the academic staff.<sup>40</sup> Linking their sense of self-worth to their grades made them more sensitive to failure.

There wasn't even an upside to compensate. When they did do well, they just moved the goal posts. Their sense of self-worth didn't increase any more than the other students who weren't depending on the outcome to feel good about themselves.

We can choose not to need to justify our existence to the world and feel worthless when we have setbacks. Researchers have found that people who agree with the statement, 'In order to be truly happy I must prove that I am thoroughly adequate and achieving in most things I attempt,' are not only dissatisfied and more sensitive to their failings, but much more inclined to be depressed.<sup>41</sup>

Achievers are more likely to find their self-esteem internally. The students in the University of Michigan survey, who based their self-esteem on internal sources such as being a virtuous person or adhering to their own moral standards, received higher grades.

Top achievers enjoy the journey, setting goals and giving their best effort certainly, but believing in themselves, not just in what they achieve along the way.

## 4 Manage your disruptive emotions

*Some easy ways from mainstream therapy*

Picture this.

You are at a party. You've been looking forward to this one. You've taken the trouble to dress up and the evening has been all you had hoped.

As you cross the room to thank your hosts, you pass a woman who has been talking loudly for the last hour. Suddenly, she lifts a wobbling hand with a full glass of what looks in your peripheral vision alarmingly like red wine. You react too late and the wine spills down the front of your jacket and her dress. She looks menacing and shouts, 'Why don't you watch where you're going? You're a disgrace. Who invited you? Get out of here!' Everyone turns to watch.

What's your reaction?



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Just as important, what are you thinking? If it's, 'This is humiliating,' your reaction might be embarrassment, perhaps followed by depression. If it's, 'She's asking for trouble, I have to show her that I'm not the kind of person to be treated like this,' your reaction may be anger. If you are thinking, 'She might attack me,' your reaction would probably be anxiety or even panic.

Those thoughts would reflect your beliefs and something about your personality, but each would probably be inaccurate and the reactions unhealthy.

There's another way of thinking about the same predicament. 'She's drunk. I'm not. I'll react calmly and everyone will know that she's the one behaving badly.' That kind of thinking reflects the belief, 'I'm a good and confident person,' and the action (reacting calmly) helps you to soothe yourself and the situation.

When we are at the centre of a public 'scene' or some other highly emotive event, we respond in ways that we've learned over the years and they are frequently automatic. But even if our immediate response is unhealthy, we can change it with some simple strategies.

Ideally, we should deal with our problems directly. If we are anxious about a business slump, we can prepare a plan and put it into action. If it's a family crisis we can sit down together and work our way through it.

Researchers have revealed that people who deal with their problems directly are the most adept at reducing their disruptive emotions and feelings of stress. Problem-focused coping also increased their sense of control in their lives and their self-esteem. It works even when we are already depressed, anxious or angry.<sup>42</sup>

It's important to define the problem first. Researchers working with hundreds of couples found that many partners who were unhappy were identifying the wrong cause. A partner who is under pressure at work might decide that his problem was that his wife doesn't support him in his career, so he would complain and make demands for more support. The real problem was stress at work.<sup>43</sup>

Dealing with the problem might be the best strategy, but clearly, it's not always possible. So much of life is like the spilled wine: It happens before we know it and there's nothing practical we can do about it. Instead, we need strategies to manage our emotional reactions so that, although whatever caused them continues, we preserve our own mental health and our valuable relationships.

Resilient people combine *reframing* with a commitment to finding a solution and they also see stressful events, especially change, as a challenge.<sup>44</sup> They see their successes or setbacks as things they can control, so they will agree with statements in research questionnaires such as, 'What happens is my own doing,' and 'Capable people who fail to achieve have not taken advantage of their own opportunities.'

Researchers find resilient people very effective at gathering information and reviewing a range of possible solutions. They may also ask friends, family or colleagues for practical help.<sup>45</sup> Notice how their attitudes reflect an internal locus of control – the belief that they are the captain of their own ship and that they have choices.

People who handle life's stresses least well blame themselves, indulge in wishful thinking or try to avoid facing their problems. One study found that men are more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs to avoid problems. Women are more likely to do passive (and less harmful) things such as watch television, drink coffee, eat, rest or go shopping.<sup>46</sup>

There's one outstanding characteristic of people who do better under stress and it's optimism. Optimists are not only more motivated, they're more confident, resilient, resourceful and problem-focused, both in a crisis and with everyday hassles.<sup>47</sup>

Optimists live less troubled and more rewarding lives. But it only works for those who are healthy optimists, who face reality – not those who dream, deny or avoid their way through life. As two Canadian researchers who studied people with HIV put it, 'Optimists emerge as individuals who follow the idea espoused in the well-known 'serenity prayer' – accepting those things that can not be changed and working to effect change where possible'.<sup>48</sup>

#### 4.1 Try some therapy

There's a whole branch of therapy specialising in the connection between our thoughts, emotions and behaviour. It's cognitive therapy and well-supported by the research. (It's often referred to as cognitive behavioural therapy, because counsellors add techniques to change behaviours stemming from *thinking errors* – the cognitive bit.)

Aaron T. Beck, an American psychiatrist, developed cognitive therapy in the 1970s and established the Beck Center for Cognitive Therapy in Philadelphia. Beck worked primarily with depression, but the method has since proved effective for anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, stress-related disorders and anger as well.

Cognitive therapy is not about lying on a couch and delving into our past to find a cause, but finding ways to make our negative emotions less disruptive today and tomorrow. It's based on the principle that the way we think determines our emotions.

Cognitive therapists are particularly interested in the thinking errors in the automatic thoughts that follow a stressful event, or trap us in continuing depression, anxiety or anger.

Since 1963 researchers studying both adults and children have written more than 6,700 reports confirming the value of changing self-defeating thinking errors.<sup>49</sup>

You might choose to work with a therapist, but the research shows that do-it-yourself therapy is effective. A review of 40 studies showed that it can work as well as seeing a counsellor for therapy.<sup>50</sup>

Do-it-yourself, cognitive therapy is useful even for people who are not particularly troubled by everyday negative emotions or irrational thoughts because it provides a focus for healthy thinking in times of stress.

The challenge of self-therapy is to stay on track. As with dieting, it's unrealistic to expect instant success. You'll have short-term successes, but the real value comes from being dedicated to retraining yourself long-term.

We will look more closely at how you might apply your self-therapy to depression, anxiety, anger and stress soon, but first, we need to note the essential steps in cognitive therapy.

## 4.2 What to do

The first step is to recognise the emotion and name it. Just being aware of which emotion is disrupting us is a valuable skill and researchers have found that people who are able to identify and name their disruptive emotions are able to recover from them more quickly.

Think about how your body is reacting. Is it flushed with anger, or heavy like a weight in the stomach? Think about what may have led to your disruptive mood and your usual way of reacting. Is this reaction similar? Many therapists encourage their clients to keep a diary to monitor their disruptive emotions and record the events that lead to them.

Sometimes the symptoms are mixed, but the therapists tell us that it's important to recognise the symptoms and name the emotions as best we can. Help your children do it early. My grandson was playing with his train set and I heard him call out, 'Frustrated! Help please!' He had recognised the emotion, named it and come up with a solution at the age of two-and-a-half.

### 4.2.1 Oops what am I saying?

You must recognize what you are telling yourself about the upsetting event. Think of it in two stages: 'Is this event really a threat?' and if it is, 'What can I do about it?' Slowing the process down and thinking deliberately and sceptically helps to break unhealthy thinking habits.

Cognitive therapists have a list of thinking errors that you may have noticed in yourself or people you know. Let's look at some examples.

Recognise any of these thinking errors?

<b>Description</b>	<b>Situation</b>	<b>Possible thinking error</b>
<b>Catastrophising</b> Expecting the worst without reason.	Business owner gets large bill from Inland Revenue.	Owner thinks: 'They'll bankrupt us once the penalty payments get added.'
	Student is prepared but anxious before an exam.	Student thinks: 'I'm going to fail and be thrown out of university!'
<b>Negative bias</b> Predisposed to seeing situations or people in negative ways.	Employee gets bonus.	Employee thinks: 'It must have been my turn.'
	Husband brings roses home.	Wife thinks: 'What's he been up to?'
<b>Negative selection</b> Picking out and dwelling on the negative while ignoring the positive.	Team leader praises worker's performance and motivation, but wants him to be more diplomatic.	Worker is preoccupied with belief that colleagues consider him rude or arrogant.
	Student gets four As in a row, then a C.	Student thinks: 'I'm only a C grade student.'

You can hear thinking errors every day, even from people who cope well with disruptive emotions, but don't give much thought to what they are saying. 'Wet days really depress me' or 'My cousin makes me so uptight,' suggests that our mood is controlled by the weather or another person. What about, 'Exams make me really nervous' or 'Mondays make me gloomy' or 'Parties always make me feel anxious'?

Those statements cannot be true. They refer to neutral events. Our reactions to them may have been influenced by our experiences throughout life, but today those reactions are a choice. Believing that events, or people or days of the week, or the stars, control our emotions suggests that we are not the captain of our own ship.

#### 4.2.2 That can't be right!

Apply some healthy scepticism. Give yourself time to look at the situation and be sceptical about the beliefs that have led you to your initial reaction. Thinking that the drunk with the wine glass is the one who is behaving badly and that everyone knows it stops you thinking that the situation is insulting, threatening or humiliating. You may still be annoyed, but it's healthier than responding with rage, panic or depression.

Scepticism helps us to be more objective and that's not easy when we are caught up in a depressive fog, or feeling anxious or angry. The emotional state distorts our perception of reality.

Depressed people are especially quick to spot any signs of strained friendship. They exaggerate the slightest criticism and are much more likely to interpret remarks as critical.<sup>51</sup>

Healthy scepticism can be a challenging discipline, but ask the direct questions, ‘Did she really mean to criticise? Isn’t he just a bit tired and grumpy this morning? We have a strong relationship don’t we? Is there any evidence that she really thought that? Would it matter? Wasn’t it just a passing comment?’

The pioneers of cognitive therapy assumed that their clients were distressed because they had irrational beliefs or were systematically misinterpreting information from the outside world. Since then Australian researchers have used it successfully with people whose distress seems perfectly rational and based on accurate information – patients with advanced cancer. Sarah Adelman and Anthony Kidman from the University of Technology in Sydney report that while the cause of the patients’ stress may have been real, they were still making the classic thinking errors. Those patients learned to *reframe* their thinking. ‘If I can’t do the things I used to life is not worth living’, became ‘I can’t do some of the things, but there are many things I can do to make my life worthwhile.’ ‘If there’s a chance that something bad might happen, I should focus on it now’, became ‘I will deal with it when the time comes’. They also encouraged the patients to work on problems they could solve, such as better medication for pain and resolving conflicts with other people.<sup>52</sup>



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### Reframing in action

‘There’s no such thing as bad weather – only the wrong clothes.’

- *Billy Connelly*

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#### 4.2.3 Useful comparisons

I was once late to catch a plane to London. The flight had already closed, but there was a delay, so the counter staff relented. I dashed through the various checks, along the traveller, panting, and came to a halt at the end of a long queue of passengers. After a few minutes I heard an American businessman complain about having to wait. ‘Ah well,’ grinned his companion, ‘It sure beats being an ant in a sand hill.’ It sure beats missing your flight too. It’s all a matter of perspective.

If you are distressed because your team lost an important game, try comparing your success with those teams that didn’t even make the quarter-finals. If your business is worrying you, try comparing yourself with someone who is bankrupt.

Even when the situation seems desperate, some people manage to find a useful comparison that makes them feel better. Researchers recall an AIDS patient who made a list of diseases he considered worse than AIDS and said, ‘You’ve got to get some perspective on this, and where you are in the Great Nasty Diseases List.’<sup>53</sup>

#### 4.2.4 Express emotions

There’s strong evidence in the research that expressing emotions does help us to recover more quickly, but as you’ll see, expressing them is not the same as acting them out or being pre-occupied with them.

If processing and expressing emotions helps us to understand more about an upsetting event and leads us to develop plans to move on or feel more positive, we benefit both mentally and physically. Numerous studies have shown that writing about traumatic events, especially a current trauma, can be a very effective healing process because it helps us assimilate and understand the event better. Putting the event into words seems to prevent intrusive, distressing memories.<sup>54</sup> It has worked for people in a variety of distressing situations, including post-traumatic stress disorder and breast cancer.<sup>55</sup>

Let’s look at the main disruptive emotions and some strategies in more detail.

### 4.3 Manage depression

Depression is the fourth most prevalent disease in the world.<sup>56</sup> It seriously damages the quality of life of millions of people and drains economies through the costs of mental health services and lost productivity.

We may have more freedoms, more wealth and more opportunities, but it seems that in the western world, the last one hundred years has brought more depression, not less. One study of 9,500 people showed that about one percent of people born before World War 1 suffered from depression throughout their lives. For the generation born in the 1950s the figure was seven percent.<sup>57</sup>

Are you dwelling on negative thoughts about yourself, or your future for prolonged periods? Depressed people tend to think in absolute terms about loss, hopelessness, worthlessness and fatigue, and they think they'll always feel that way.

Depression is common in adolescence, during pregnancy and after giving birth, but it is not the inevitable outcome of loss or failure or hormonal changes. It's perfectly normal to grieve, feel sad, feel rejected and go through life's transitions without the long-term suffering and distorted thinking psychologists associate with depression.

Most people recover from depression whether it is treated or not, but if you have had one depressive episode, your chances of having another are increased to about 50/50.<sup>58</sup> Depression can be a very serious disorder. You may be able to manage mild depression with cognitive therapy, but talk to your doctor if you think you have something more serious or managing it yourself doesn't work.



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First, as you sense you are heading towards an emotional slump, you must recognise the symptoms of depression and call it depression. You'll find that many of the suggestions for managing mild depression will help with sadness too.

Usually, the event that triggered your mood will be abundantly clear, but not always. Sometimes small things can set off a depressive reaction so that you lose track of the cause. If you do know the cause, you may be able to deal with it directly, but let's assume that you can't or that solving the problem hasn't been enough to take away the symptoms of depression.

#### 4.3.1 Stop the rumination

People who ruminate worry excessively about their depression. They often isolate themselves to think about their symptoms and ask researchers and therapists, 'What if I don't get over this?' It's a passive reaction to depression. Ruminators are not thinking about action they could take or reframing, they are simply stuck in a state that's easy to slip into and can be difficult to escape.

Susan Nolen-Hoeksema of Stanford University studied bereaved people and found that the more they ruminated, the longer their depression.<sup>59</sup> Ruminators are on a cycle of distorted thinking and unrewarding relationships. They need support from others, but believe they are getting less of it than they should have.<sup>60</sup> It may be just their perception, but because constant rumination is draining for friends, family and colleagues, it may be true. After a while, everyone else wants to see some action.

Women are about twice as likely as men to suffer major depression and the highest risk for them is in their mid-to-late 20s.<sup>61</sup> Researchers and therapists report that many more women than men ruminate. Rumination prolongs depression, but it's too easy to conclude that rumination accounts for the difference between men's and women's depression.

Researchers from the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands have come up with a strategy to help us avoid rumination.<sup>62</sup> To test it, they told students that they had scored low on a bogus intelligence test and found that those who had the opportunity to reinforce their belief in their self-worth in other ways were less inclined to ruminate about the results. (Yes, they did tell them later that the test results were worthless.) So, actively reviewing our achievements and the personal skills and qualities we are most proud of can be a useful reaction to the early symptoms of depression.

Help your family, friends and colleagues to do the same. It's okay to feel proud of what you've achieved. It's difficult, partly because depression distorts our thinking. It's odd, but although depressed people doubt themselves in many ways, they tend to be very confident about their depressed interpretation of the world and their setbacks. Forcing yourself to focus on your qualities may be difficult when you are feeling low, but that kind of rethinking is at the heart of cognitive therapy.

Depressive thinking tends to create a cycle and it's essential to break out of it as early as possible. It's not simply a matter of thinking happy thoughts. 'I'm going to be positive today,' does help if you are a little sad, but with depression the benefits don't last. The research shows that correcting your thinking errors is likely to be far more effective.

When your partner said you don't do your share around the house, was she really saying, 'Please help me, I'm tired'? Even if it's true that you never help around the house, why should you believe that you can't do *anything* right? Surely, that's a gross over-reaction?

While you are being sceptical you can also remind yourself that you are great with the kids and you often take them away to the park or on walks to give your partner a break. The scepticism is to help you think more positively and more accurately. It's not about finding excuses or dreaming up ways to show how wrong other people are. If the criticism is fair, you might want to put things right, but most of all, you need to correct the depressive thinking that put you into the depression cycle.

In Chapter Three we saw how resilient people explain their successes and setbacks. You can use the same technique to *reframe* depressive thinking.

Reframing should include recognising and dismissing the depressive thinking errors. It's not shallow 'positive thinking,' it's simply being sceptical. Is there really any evidence that you don't have the ability or potential? Surely, it's not true that you fail at everything you do? Talk about your setbacks as setbacks (so temporary) not failures.

Does explaining our successes and setbacks in pessimistic ways really *cause* depression? It's safer to say that pessimistic thinking and depression are *strongly associated*. As it happens, very strongly associated.

<b>Explanation for your setback</b>	<b>Depressed self-talk</b>
'It's my fault.' (Internal)	'I don't have the ability to be promoted.'
'It will always will be like this.' (Stable)	'I'll never get promoted now.'
'It's the same in everything I do.' (Global)	'I never succeed at anything.' 'I'll always be a loser.'

One group of researchers has confirmed the link between pessimistic thinking and depression after analysing 104 studies involving 15,000 participants.<sup>63</sup>

Try some brainstorming and talk to someone you trust about what you can do to improve a situation that leads to depressive thoughts. Depressed people often see only one solution.

Even one solution may seem impossible. It's partly because depressed people tend to see their situation in extreme terms. Watch out for these words: loser, never, always, impossible, disaster, failure, ruined, destroyed, useless, hopeless, clueless.

4.3.2 Exercise

Therapists, counsellors and researchers recommend finding ways to raise our energy and give ourselves some pleasant events to look forward to. Some recommend uplifting music, letting the sunlight in to help our bodies function better, and changing our routines so that every day has an element of novelty.

Depression is a low-arousal state so you should use a workout at the gym or a run in the park to pump your body up to a more normal level. More than 1,000 studies have shown the mental health benefits of regular aerobic exercise.<sup>64</sup> Every controlled study has found exercise to be effective for mild to moderate depression.<sup>65</sup> It may be effective, but it is difficult to begin if you're depressed. Find ways of exercising that you are more likely to enjoy and ensure that you have some variety.

4.3.3 Be sociable – with care

Being around others, and especially helping out, seems to work well. It helps to stop the ruminating. It also gives us a sense of achievement and helps us to feel appreciated.

There is a risk in socialising while depressed. The old saying, 'Misery loves company' checks out.

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William Swann from the University of Texas and his colleagues came up with a creative experiment that shows how far depressed people will go to use relationships to perpetuate their depression. They asked students to read the results of a personality test they had taken a few days before. The evaluations were supposedly written by clinical psychology students. The researchers had arranged that each student would read one negative evaluation, one neutral and one positive. They then asked them to say which of the evaluators they would most like to meet and get to know. The non-depressed students wanted to meet the evaluators who had made the most flattering comments, but the depressed students preferred to meet those who had found the most faults and would be most likely to dislike them – surely an effective way to remain depressed.<sup>66</sup>

That tendency to perpetuate depression shows up in other ways too. For instance, it would make sense for people feeling depressed to compare themselves with others who are worse off and feel better as a result. But it seems they don't. In 1992, two researchers discovered that depressed people are more likely to make themselves even more miserable by thinking of people who are better off. They described that behaviour as 'puzzling'.<sup>67</sup>

The inclination to find things to make you feel worse, illustrates the challenge of managing depression. It's not easy to snap out of it. You need to be very focused and determined to raise your energy level, find the right people to be around and make healthy comparisons.

#### 4.3.4 Believe it or not

It probably sounds too superficial to be true, but smiling does work. There's research evidence to support it. Try this simple experiment: hold a pen between your teeth lengthways so that you imitate a smile. Okay, it's a silly thing to do so you'll smile anyway, but keep the pen there for say 10 minutes and check how you are feeling at the end. A German study using the pen idea produced encouraging results. The same researchers found that it worked the other way too. Their subjects were less happy after holding their pens end-on with pursed lips.

Robert Zajonc from the University of Michigan, and a leading researcher in the effect of facial muscles on mood, says that as particular facial muscles relax or tighten they raise or lower the temperature of the blood supply to those brain centres that regulate our emotions.

Zajonc's explanation is not accepted universally, but many researchers agree that facial expressions don't just reflect moods, they can cause them. The effects are probably relatively minor compared with distressing thoughts or memories, but being willing to smile should be part of our depression-fighting repertoire.<sup>68</sup>

More recent research by Rene Brown has shown that a few minutes of power poses significantly reduces our body's production of the stress hormone cortisol. It's further evidence that the body influences the brain.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4.3.5 Plan your day

You can plan your day to help you break out of the cycle of depression. Making the plan tells you that you're in control. Sticking to the plan underlines the point.

Before you go to bed, prepare a list of treats and pleasurable events for the next day. Don't depend on thinking up your treats and events up as you go along or they probably won't happen.

Plan to set the alarm for the usual time and get up immediately. Prepare to go to work, do the shopping and walk the dog because doing normal things works against your inclination to withdraw and dwell on the causes of your depression. They also serve as a distraction.

Schedule contact with people who are not depressed. Even contact on the internet seems to produce good results but ideally, create opportunities to have cheerful people around you. If you can help someone out, arrange to do that too.

Make sure that your plan includes exercise to raise your energy to a more normal state. Use your list of treats or pleasurable events to provide highlights. Space them out so that you can savour them. Make sure that you include a few easy, but satisfying goals. A sense of accomplishment challenges your inclination to see everything negatively.

And, of course, commit yourself to breaking the cycle of depressive thinking with some healthy scepticism and reframing.

Once you've made the plan, stick to it. Apply 'choice therapy'. Giving in to self-talk such as, 'I can't be bothered' and 'I'm too depressed to do anything about it', is a choice.

### 4.4 Manage anger

Anger is a difficult disruptive emotion to manage because it can take over in an instant and escalate quickly. Even so, the research reveals some techniques that work. The key is to slow down your response. Give yourself time to examine your beliefs and correct your thinking errors.

Psychologists and counsellors around the world suggest a range of techniques which include these three simple steps. Stay focused on them when you feel angry.

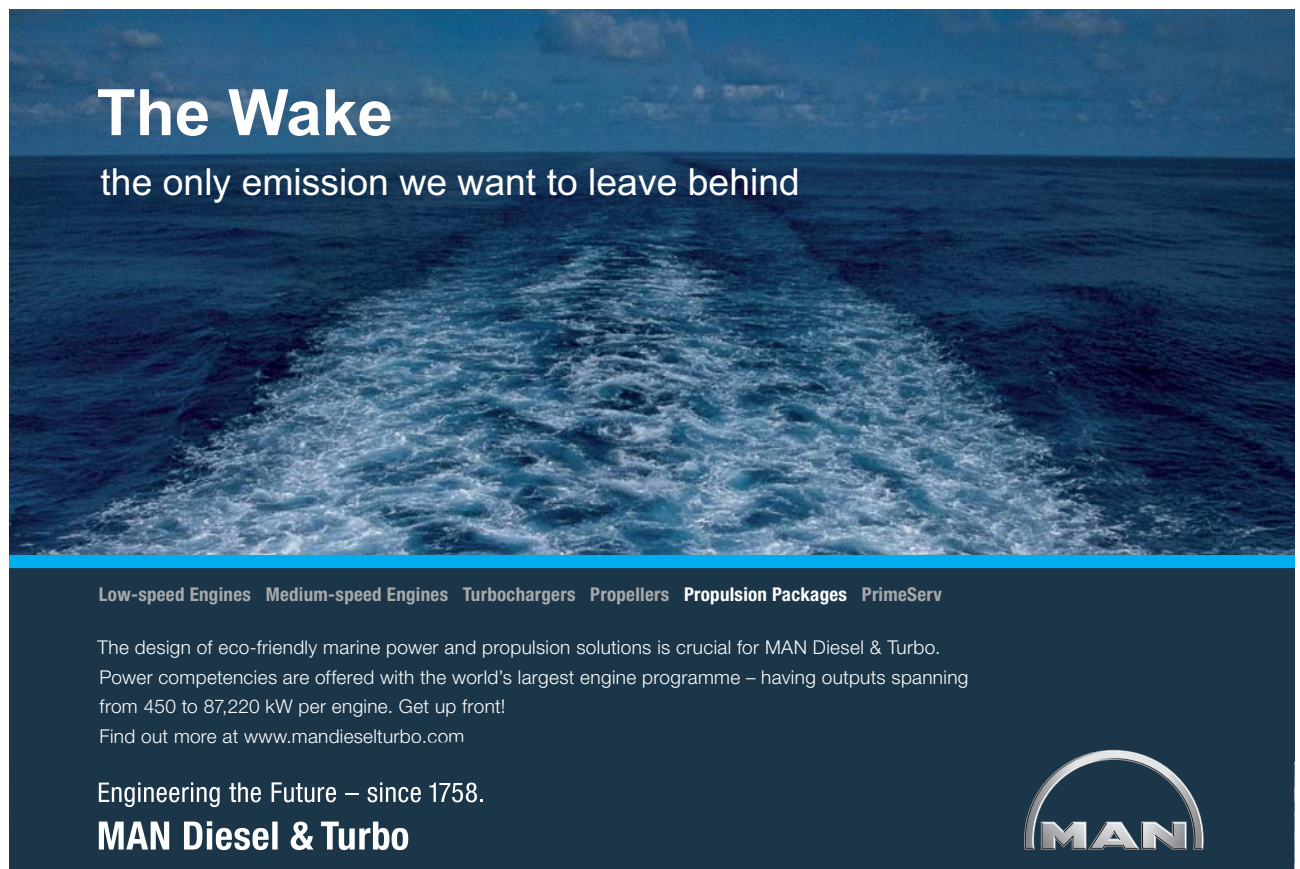
- Breathe deeply. Make sure that you imagine the breath going down to your abdomen. Short breaths to your chest won't help you relax.
- Repeat a calming word or sentences like a mantra. Try, 'Slow down' or 'Breathe easy. Relax'.
- Develop a strategy for handling the situation in a calm and reasoned way.

Get to know the symptoms and what sets off your anger. As you feel the symptoms coming on, focus on some healthy scepticism.

- Am I interpreting what the other person is doing or saying accurately?
- Is there another way of interpreting the same events or comments?
- Where's this person coming from? Why is she saying that? (Empathy is particularly difficult when you are angry, but a very effective way to calm down. It's worth the effort.)
- Ask the, 'So what?' question. So someone used the last of the milk? So what? So someone took my park at the supermarket? So what?
- What will happen if I lose my cool? What damage will it do to my relationship with this person?

The healthiest way to express anger is to be assertive. Recognize your symptoms as anger. Let's say a colleague has, again, forgotten to pass on an essential message. Try the cooling down process, relax if you can, maybe leave it a while, then say something like, 'When you forget to pass on messages, I get annoyed because it can have serious consequences for my clients, the company or me. Let's work out a system now to make sure that it doesn't happen again.'

Many people believe that being assertive is just the same as being aggressive, but it's not. It's a cool-headed way to express your needs and respect others, as well yourself. It also gets results.




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Taking time out can be productive, provided you're not using it as a way to avoid an argument. One of my trainees told me he and his wife used to get into big arguments that escalated until they both felt devastated.

Now they agree to put the issue on-hold for an hour to break the anger cycle. They have often come back together and wondered what all the fuss was about. Putting a time limit on the cooling down makes it clear that you are willing to talk, but you want to do it in a more productive frame of mind. Relaxation exercises should help you wind down even more.

Researchers at Colombia University have found some significant issues for intimate partners. Women who have a strong fear of rejection are more prone to anger and increased hostility. Men with rejection fears have a higher risk of becoming violent. The fear makes both sexes particularly sensitive and they tend to magnify negative or even ambiguous cues. That misreading and the angry reactions damage the relationship and set them up for more feelings of rejection.<sup>70</sup>

#### 4.4.1 Forget the punchbag

Let's dispel the myth. Punch bags don't relieve anger. They make it worse. The same goes for anything like a punch bag – including shouting, screaming or furious gardening or shopping. You begin with your body highly aroused and the punch bag or the shouting just winds it up even more. Venting, or *catharsis*, can be quite satisfying and eventually, after you have stopped, your anger will dissipate, but it would have dissipated much faster without all the activity.

The authors of one study say, 'Popular belief in the catharsis theory remains strong despite its dismal record in the research findings.'

The same team produced some worrying results when they did give people a punch bag. They found that many of those people were not just more aggressive at the end, but were directing that aggression towards other people who had nothing to do with their mood.<sup>71</sup>

People often say punching, shouting and the rest is like letting the steam out of the pot. Surely, it would be better to find some way to turn the element off.

Venting our anger at other people has another serious disadvantage: It leaves a battlefield of angry, resentful wounded, waiting for their chance to get back at us.

Incidentally, other researchers have shown that watching violence on television has no cathartic effect either. One says, the belief that observing violence gets rid of aggressive feelings 'has virtually never been supported by research.'<sup>72</sup>

#### 4.4.2 Self-pity and anger

Venting anger isn't always the issue. People who lock their anger in rather than find healthy, assertive ways of expressing it may be caught in the self-pity trap. Joachim Stober of Germany defines self-pity as a combination of feeling that we are not in control of our lives and envy. They tell themselves, he says, 'Bad things always happen to me' and ask, 'Why not them?'

Only aggression, withdrawing from contact with people and giving up rate as less-effective coping strategies.<sup>73</sup> Self-pity is strongly linked with depression.

Stober reports that women are more likely to react to stress with self-pity and believes it may have to do with the way we raise girls. Certainly, in most cultures, boys have more freedom to express their anger.

#### 4.5 Manage anxiety

Many researchers have shown that anxiety and depression are related and some of them are arguing over whether they are really two separate conditions. Even so, we can think of anxiety as dread, fear or tension about things that might happen, so it's about probability and the 'What if?' question.<sup>74</sup>

When does anxiety become unhealthy? When it disrupts your life. It's unhealthy when it's a series of false alarms that activate your sympathetic nervous system, which governs your body's response to danger. Once your brain senses the danger, it signals your adrenal glands to produce adrenalin, your blood pressure rises, blood shifts from your stomach and nervous system to your heart and muscles, your digestion stops and the liver provides reserves of sugar. You are ready for 'flight or fight'. It's useful in times of real danger, but being on a constant state of alert is very debilitating.<sup>75</sup> Prolonged anxiety is a contributing factor to serious depression.<sup>76</sup>

Here's a disturbing discovery: By the 1980s the average American child was more anxious than the average child psychiatric patient in the 1950s. There's strong evidence that young adult Americans also became significantly more anxious in the same period.<sup>77</sup>

There are good reasons to believe that anxiety is growing in other countries too. A study published in 2000 links anxiety with likely 'environmental' factors – particularly with crime rates, the number of AIDS cases and to a lesser extent the threat of nuclear war. (We can now add the threat of terrorist attack.) Surprisingly, economic conditions didn't seem to be strongly linked to anxiety. The real issues may be social rather than environmental. The same study also shows that we can also use measures of 'social connectedness' such as the divorce rates, the number of people living alone and lower ratings of trust to predict changing levels of anxiety.<sup>78</sup>

Beyond a certain point, being on alert doesn't improve our concentration; it makes it worse. A little nervousness when giving a speech helps us focus. Real anxiety makes it difficult to remember what we want to say and it's easy to be distracted by intrusive thoughts. Researchers at Cleveland State University believe that the intrusive, anxious thoughts reduce our brain's working memory and with it our ability to process information.<sup>79</sup>

Anxiety tends to feed on itself unless you can break the cycle of worry and catastrophic thoughts. Fortunately, anxiety is very treatable because there are so many effective ways to interrupt the cycle, but if your anxiety is seriously disruptive and prolonged, you should talk to a therapist or doctor.

Recognize the symptoms of anxiety and name it. You may have tensed muscles, elevated heart rate, abdominal cramps, light-headedness or chest pains. You may be overwhelmed by panic in response to particular events or you may have 'free-floating anxiety' where you can't find any cause for constant worry. Free-floating anxiety would be difficult to treat yourself.

Think about what caused your anxious response and apply some healthy scepticism. Do some 'decatastrophising'. How much evidence do you really have that your job is under threat? Is it reliable evidence? Is it possible that instead of being eliminated your role will simply change?

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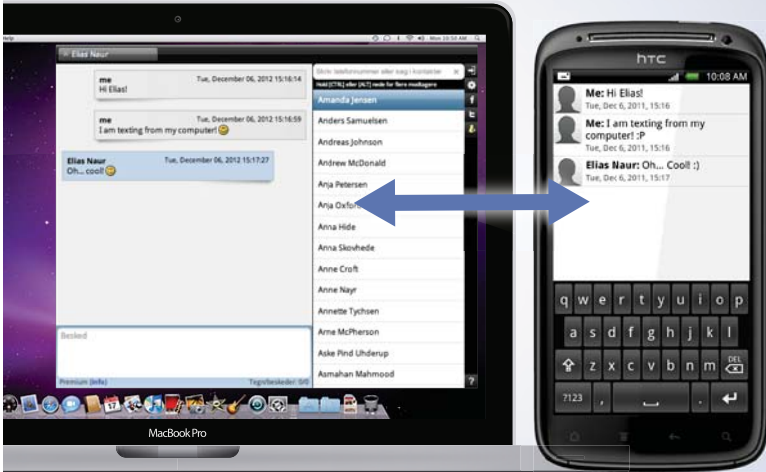
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If the cause of your worry is something you can deal with directly, do it. If it's not, develop realistic action plans to cope if your fears turn out to be justified.

Let's work through an example.

Worst case scenario: I lose my job soon.

**Possible good outcomes**

I find another job with a rival company.

Agency has some work to give me time to find a new job.

I use the severance money to start a business from home.

I use the severance money while I advance my qualifications.

**Action I can take now.**

Visit all the rival companies in the city.

Make appointments with all the temporary employment agencies.

Investigate how much I will need to set up business at home and draft a marketing plan.

Investigate the fees and the minimum income we would need while I am studying.

Maybe you'll choose to visit the rival firms and the agencies as your best action plans and keep the options of starting your own business or more study in reserve.

The problem-focused approach improves our confidence and the feeling that we are in control, but sometimes we are so swamped with anxiety that it's very difficult to focus on dealing with the problem. Choose to do it anyway because the research is showing that it's the most effective strategy of all.

You could also try some physical treatments for anxiety. 'Progressive muscle relaxation' involves tensing then relaxing all the controllable muscles from your head to your toes. Many people find visualising soothing experiences effective too. Focus on the experience, give it a storyline and embellish it with vivid detail. The breathing exercises work for anxiety as well as anger.

If your anxiety is based on a single fear, say of heights, birds or spiders, you could try *systematic desensitization*. The principle is to replace the fear with relaxation. You must learn how to relax first, then you compile a list of situations that would make you fearful and rank them.

Next, imagine the situations. You start with a very low level of exposure to your fear and work up, using the decatastrophising process and preferably the relaxation exercises as you go. You might begin by relaxing in a chair then imagining a small spider in a jungle, as you remind yourself of how far away it is and how it has no poison and couldn't possibly harm you.

When you can imagine the spider without your muscles tightening, it's time to move to the next level and imagine, say, a dead spider in a display in your museum as you continue to relax in the comfortable chair.

Maybe next it will be a live and non-poisonous spider in the museum. Take your time and stay focused on the process. Work your way up through experiencing, rather than just imagining, your fearful situations. Therapists have been having success with systematic desensitization for decades.

As you'd expect, many counsellors and therapists advocate deep breathing and other forms of relaxation. They also suggest keeping healthy with regular exercise, a balanced diet, not skipping meals and talking to supportive friends and family members about your stress. Finding interesting and absorbing hobbies to give some balance to our lives works too.

#### 4.5.1 Manage stressful situations

Let's put in a good word for stress. Climbing rock faces is stressful, but you'd be struggling to talk some people out of it. It's stressful competing at tennis or chess. Even watching your local football team in action can be very stressful. It's good stress, called *eustress*. Imagine how dull life would be without it. We also need to feel at least slightly stressed when we are in danger – our survival may depend on it.

We can learn to manage stress effectively and people who do are not only less anxious, but less depressed, have lower blood pressure and are much less prone to emotional and personality disorders.<sup>80</sup>

Believe it or not, it's usually not our reactions to crises that make us ill. The evidence suggests that our bodies cope with the big problems well. It's the on-going hassles, frustrations and the daily grind that do the damage. For instance, a study of police officers in a tough part of Florida found that they were much more stressed by day-to-day paperwork, irritations with the media and the slow pace of the justice system than the possibility of a shoot-out or intervening in domestic battles night after night.<sup>81</sup>

For the rest of us, the damage to our health comes from equivalent on-going events such as constant conflicts with teenagers, annoying neighbours day-after-day, and 'leave your-brain-at-the-door' jobs. We are especially stressed when we sense that we have no control over a stressful situation.

4.5.2 Attitudes and stress

When you are stressed it's too easy to exaggerate setbacks. Keep reminding yourself that setbacks are opportunities to learn and steps on the way to success. Ask some sceptical questions about the cause of your stress. What's the worst that could happen? Is that likely?

Create a vivid image of yourself calm and in complete control, then play that role of someone calm and in charge of the situation. Eventually, your body will believe it. Perhaps more important, in the meantime, you might have made some progress on finding a solution to your crisis.

If you are a leader, you'll have to pretend anyway as part of your obligation to everyone else. Embellish your pretence. Show off a bit. Use it as a chance to show how cool you can be when things get hot. It's a choice, after all. If you can combine the pretence with a clear plan and a few early successes as you put the plan into action, you'll begin to feel less stressed quite quickly.

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## 4.6 Stay cool under pressure

Suggestions from researchers, counsellors and therapists

### Focus on the problem

- Get organised. What do you need to do to attack this problem or diminish its effect?

### Focus on healthy emotions

- Pretend. Act the part of a super-cool, confident person.
- Correct your negative thoughts. Be sceptical about the cause of your stress. Is it really so serious?
- Reward your progress with positive feedback.

### Focus on stress-reducing activities

- Get physical. Keep fit with plenty of walking, swimming or sport.
  - Try relaxation exercises.
  - Eat well. Have a healthy diet and don't skip meals.
  - Get some balance. Find absorbing, relaxing activities.
  - Get enough rest. Most adults need 7–8 hours sleep a night.
- 
- 

If you are a perfectionist, put yourself into learning mode by striving for your current best rather than being perfect. Think of it this way: Striving to be perfect is an imperfect strategy. It will lead you into stress and decrease your performance.

If being less than perfect really worries you, think of perfection as a life-time goal, not something you have to achieve for this particular exam, presentation or game. Do your best today and be content with that. Develop your skills and strive for a new personal best next time.

#### 4.6.1 Control commitment challenge

Salvatore Maddi and his colleagues have studied people who handle stressful situations well and turn them into opportunities for growth. They have found that stress-hardy people show three characteristics: *the three Cs of hardiness* – control, commitment and challenge.<sup>82</sup> The research is showing that hardiness is a feature of vigorous mental health and that stress-hardy people 'have more fulfilling, satisfying, resilient and remarkable lives'.<sup>83</sup>

The three Cs give us a systematic approach to handling stress and disruptive emotions. You can use many of the skills we've discussed so far and it's essential to begin with the supreme liberating choice – to take charge of your own life.

**Control** means facing reality and striving to take control of the stressful situation. Hardy people know they can choose how they handle situations, and do. They see stressful situations in context, so they make sure they know why the threats are happening and how serious those threats really are. They also have a range of coping skills.

Let's take an example of control in action. Say you develop a life-threatening illness. You decide to reduce your workload and take more exercise (so you are making choices). You know that the survival rate for that illness gives you a good chance of living a normal life (seeing a context for the stress) and whenever you feel stressed you find ways of relaxing and keep reminding yourself of your odds of survival (using your coping skills).

Various studies of people in stressful situations have revealed the power of two particular coping skills that can give us a sense of control: optimism and goal-setting. It's a definition of hope.

People living with cancer, caring for schizophrenics and parents of boys with behaviour disorders who scored highest on a scale of hopefulness were the most resilient. The parents would agree with statements such as, 'I energetically pursue my goals. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam. Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.'<sup>84</sup>

**Commitment** means being committed to our goals and our belief that we are capable – even when the stress rises to precarious levels. It also means being committed to relationships with family, friends and colleagues. People who make those commitments have a sense of purpose and they know they can call on their relationships in times of stress.

Being committed to relationships may have life-saving benefits. Researchers in Montreal have found that women with breast cancer who had a supportive husband were 15 per cent more likely to be alive after seven years. A second confidante and a supportive doctor each added one more percentage point to their chance of survival.

Let's say that you are the coach of your sports team and the results for the first few games are so bad that there's talk of you being replaced mid-season. You remain committed to your team's goal of winning the national championships and exude confidence with the players and the supporters (committed to goals and the belief that you are capable). You also make sure that you don't compromise 'family time' (committed to relationships) and draw on the support of your partner, particularly after the team loses another game (calling on relationships).

**Challenge** means feeling challenged by stressful situations. Stress-hardy people tend to see change as normal and interesting, and an opportunity to learn. It's an attitude we should always be cultivating.

Perhaps your business is under attack from a large rival that has just moved into the market and is beginning to head-hunt your most valuable staff. You decide that you are going to enjoy the battle with your rival (feeling challenged). You remember how the last couple of times competitors threatened the firm, you made some very worthwhile changes and ended up with a much stronger, more efficient organisation (seeing stress as more of an opportunity than a threat).

Three American researchers have studied the coping strategies of refugees. All the refugees had endured some kind of trauma – death of close family members, serious injuries, separation from their families, assaults and the loss of their homes, possessions, homeland and security. The researchers' report includes some recommendations based on the strategies of the refugees who handled the trauma most successfully.

Organisations involved in relief work, the researchers said, should provide opportunities for refugees to have some control over their lives, make active efforts to reduce the stress and interact with other people. It's another way of saying that the relief agencies should help refugees use the first two Cs of hardiness – control and commitment.<sup>85</sup>

Researchers who have studied business executives, city bus drivers, family assistance workers involved in disasters and sports people facing the pressures of competition, sponsorship and media attention have found that being stress-hardy has other benefits – including better physical health and more confidence.<sup>86</sup>



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## 4.7 The everyday magic of positive emotions

Positive emotions and resilience are closely linked. Positive emotions help people recover from stressful situations more quickly and the research is showing that the effect is cumulative. When we use positive emotions to work our way through stressful situations, the experience makes us more resilient for next time, more optimistic and more tranquil.

Researchers at the University of Michigan have studied the way students reacted to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. They found among those who felt anger, fear and sadness were many who not only thrived in the weeks after the terrorist attacks, but became stronger as a result. Those resilient students also felt positive feelings particularly, being glad to be alive, more love for their family and friends and happiness that they were safe, and a greater interest in the political events in their country. ‘They were deeply moved by this national tragedy,’ the researchers say, ‘but not overwhelmed by it.’<sup>87</sup>

The students’ positive feelings were more than just distractions from the stress. Positive feelings, such as gratitude at being alive, increased love for others, humour, optimism and a greater interest in the world around us put our bodies at ease. We become more open to new ways of coping and more resilient next time. The Michigan study and others since then have shown that people who use positive emotions or feelings in stressful situations create an upward spiral.

Resilience is *everyday magic* because, as the researchers say, using positive emotions seems to be what we are programmed to do. Negative emotions are barriers to a natural human response to adapting to stress.

Research is also showing that even when there is no crisis, we can actively create positive emotions that protect us long-term. It’s as simple as counting our blessings, but it’s more than homespun wisdom. It checks out.

Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough asked students to complete daily and weekly diaries. Those who listed what they were grateful for in the last day or week came up with such things as, ‘Waking up this morning’, ‘The generosity of my friends’, ‘God giving me determination’ and ‘The Rolling Stones’.

The result? Those who counted their blessings each day were happier, slept better, were more optimistic and more involved in their relationships at the end of the study than those who were asked to record hassles or simply events.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the most important point of that study was the minimal way that the Emmons and McCullough *induced* gratitude. They were not selecting people who were naturally grateful. Just asking a range of ordinary people to list the things they were grateful about that day or that week was enough to create positive emotions and significant benefits. Perhaps it should be our first strategy when we are stressed or unhappy – if only because it is so easy.

Why not carry a list of ‘Things I am most grateful for’ in your head? Try making it a routine as you tuck your children into bed: ‘And what were the best things about today?’

## 4.8 Protect your immune system

The link between stress and ill-health is well established. Even everyday stressful events can impair our immune system, though normally we recover quickly. Researchers in psychoneuroimmunology, which explores the link between emotions and health, have monitored university students and found that small wounds take 40 per cent longer to heal at exam time than during the summer break.

In one study, men and women looking after a spouse with Alzheimer’s had damaged immune systems and those most distressed by their spouse’s erratic behaviour showed the most damage.<sup>89</sup> Even the chances of catching a cold are increased by the amount of stress you’ve been through in the previous year. People with fewer social ties, so less support and probably more stress, are more susceptible to respiratory viruses. Stressful relationships increase our chances of illness and early death by about the same as smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity and inactivity.<sup>90</sup>

Studies have shown that fit people’s bodies don’t react to stressful situations so readily.<sup>91</sup> A study at the University of Wisconsin Medical School showed that breast cancer patients on a fitness programme were less depressed and rated themselves as more positive and more able to manage their lives.<sup>92</sup>

Putting the effort in to manage our stress and disruptive emotions appears to have a physical payoff. Researchers have found that relaxation, exercises and meditation improved immune systems even for elderly people and people who already have cancer.<sup>93</sup> David Spiegel from the Stanford Brain Research Institute monitored women with advanced breast cancer who attended a therapy group once a week to learn how to handle the fear, anger and depression that you’d expect with a life-threatening disease. They lived twice as long as women who only had medical treatment.<sup>94</sup>

### 4.8.1 ‘Type A’ and stress

If you are constantly disrupted by stress, consider whether you might be ‘Type A’. You’ll often hear people talk of a *Type A personality* but it’s a way of behaving. If you are generally Type A, you are likely to feel that you are running out of time in your relentless struggle to achieve and you are easily annoyed if anyone or anything gets in your way.

Type A people tend to over-react. It's a stressful way to live, though there are some Type A people who cope better with stress than many of their Type B colleagues (and complain that they'd be even less stressed if it weren't for their Type B colleagues holding them up!).

Researchers believe that it's the hostility typical of Type A behavior that really does the damage. A 25 year study of lawyers found that those who were the most hostile were up to five times more likely to die before they were 50.<sup>95</sup>

Later research has revealed that it's a particular kind of *cool hostility* that can be fatal. People under 45 who are confronting, aggressive, rude, cynical, uncooperative and belittling are the candidates for heart disease. Occasional outbursts or being irritable don't count. Some researchers have reservations about the findings, but only about the specific link with heart disease. They still see a link between hostility and all other causes of premature death, including cancer.



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Here's the hopeful part. Type A people can change. One study of 1000 people showed that some simple retraining produces very good results. The retraining included assignments that you could give yourself. The researchers asked their trainees to apply some healthy scepticism to some of their beliefs about work – beliefs such as 'the more work we do, the more we succeed'. They asked the Type A people to stand in queues and instead of giving in to irritation, to consider how much time the waiting gave them to think about useful things or meet someone. The assignments helped them reduce their stress at home and at work and to change typical Type A habits such as losing their temper, eating too fast and interrupting other people. Four and a half years later, those Type A people who took the training were living healthier lives. Their heart attack rate was almost half that of the Type A people who hadn't done the training.<sup>96</sup> You can imagine the benefits for their relationships.

#### 4.9 The sexes and disruptive emotions

Generally speaking men and women do handle disruptive emotions in different ways. The conventional wisdom (Okay, mostly men's) might suggest that men are more practical and therefore better at fixing problems as they arise, but the research says the opposite.

An analysis of 50 studies showed that women used more coping strategies than men and were significantly more likely than men to ask for help.<sup>97</sup> It fits what women say about men refusing to ask directions. 'We found no evidence,' say the researchers, 'that men engage in more problem-focused coping.'

The same study of studies revealed that women are more likely to seek emotional support, use positive self-talk and reframe. All of them are powerful coping strategies.

Researchers have found that many more women suffer what they call 'chronic strain,' by which they mean they have more pressure from parenting, housework, less social power and feel less appreciated than men. The researchers reason that it may be the chronic strain that increases the possibility of depression. Many women find ways of coping with chronic strain by finding support from others or shifting their attention to those parts of their lives they can control.<sup>98</sup>

#### 4.10 Reducing stress at work

Researchers are reporting that it's not the managers but the managed, who are most stressed by their work. It's the employees in reception, the warehouse or the factory floor who have least control in a bureaucratic workplace and the least opportunity to develop more healthy conditions.

It would be easy to say that we should give everyone more control over their work, but we can't assume that everyone will benefit from having more control. People who don't have the confidence or skills to make use of the new freedom to control their work and who blame themselves when things go wrong become more stressed. Those *self-blamers* are healthier when they have less control because, when things go wrong, they are able to tell themselves that they couldn't have done anything about it.<sup>99</sup>

If you lead a business or team, consider whether your team members, individually, have the skills and confidence to handle empowerment. Are they ready for more control? Would they benefit from some training to develop some strategies for coping with the new problems you want them to handle? Consider too, how they explain setbacks. If they blame themselves, consider some retraining and support to help them view setbacks in a more useful way.

If you have team members who have the confidence and skills to handle more control over their work, you may be causing them unnecessary stress and illness by not giving them more autonomy.<sup>100</sup> You are also missing out on the opportunity to develop their skills and motivate them to achieve more.



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## 4.11 Coaching children handling emotions

John Gottman, and his colleagues at the Gottman Institute have studied parenting for many years and discovered the value of coaching to help children identify their own emotions and express them. Their observations have revealed that children who were coached in their emotions were more skilled at self-regulation, more able to focus their attention and more successful at relating to other children, even in difficult situations like being teased. They could calm themselves quickly when they were upset and their heart rates dropped faster too. There were long-term benefits: more success in their studies and fewer infectious diseases.<sup>101</sup>

The parents of those children were doing what any parent could do. They monitored their children's emotions and treated emotional moments as opportunities for support and learning. They listened, validated their children's feelings, summed up the emotion in words that children understand, then helped them find a solution. It takes some dedication if your two-year old is throwing toys around the room in a tantrum, but I've seen skilled parents take the child aside and say quietly, 'You're angry, because he won't let you have the blocks. (Pause, waiting for confirmation.) What about playing with the rocking horse until he's finished with them?' Those skilled parents identify emotions regularly: angry, annoyed, frustrated, sad, disappointed, proud, curious, happy, delighted.

A research team at the George Mason University has studied parents and their pre-school children and reports that emotion coaching is more effective when children are four or older. They found that parents who were positive themselves, who accepted emotions and helped their children find solutions to upsetting events, had children who were more sociable and more skilled in empathy.

Parents who shouted things like, 'Stop that crying!' not only closed off emotions, but as the researchers put it, provided a 'powerful deterrent to self-reflection and knowledge'.<sup>102</sup> As we've seen, knowing about emotions, being able to name them and having the ability to reflect, rather than act on impulse, are major skills in managing disruptive emotions and stress.

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His series 'What successful people really do' and 'The village that could' are in Bookboon's Premium collection. He has written three other books, academic papers on psychology and more than a hundred blogs and articles.

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Ralph founded what is now Skillset New Zealand more than 30 years ago and remains its managing director. Skillset's clients are amongst New Zealand's largest organisations.