

UnTherapy challenges the premise of self-improvement by questioning the notion that painful experiences inevitably result in emotional crippling. Reflective exercises enable readers to take responsibility for how they create their own suffering so they can reverse old patterns of self-neglect.

**UnTherapy: A Positive Psychology for Enlightened Living**

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# UnTherapy

A Positive Psychology for Enlightened Living



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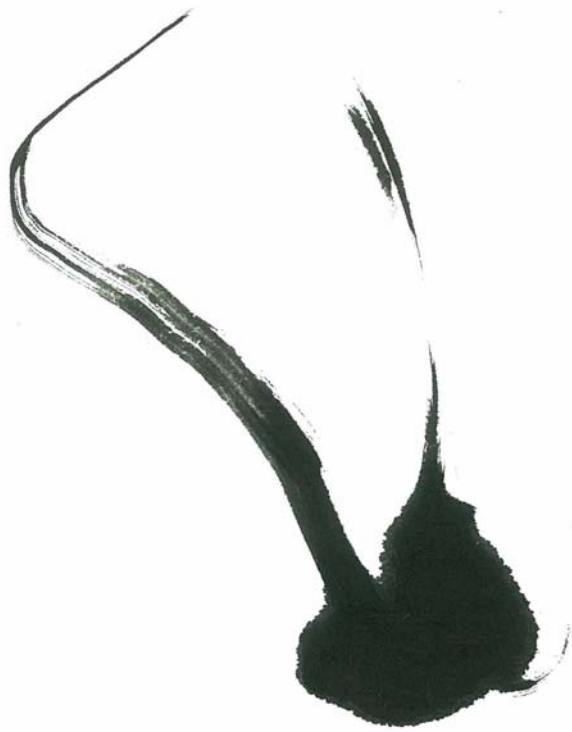
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Chapter 1  
Resilience of the Human Spirit



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***You cannot fix yourself because you are not broken.  
The more you try to fix, the more you find to fix.  
Only wholeness heals.***

Alan Cohen

## UnTherapy

As a synthesis of Asian philosophies and Western psychologies, *UnTherapy* proposes that a more objective awareness exists than the normal waking conscious state and that this objective awareness, by its very nature, is the source of character and virtue. The transformation of a person's behavior, then, is dependent upon clarity; that clarity that arises from self-reflection, from silence, and from objective awareness of one's own unconscious patterns. Such clarity allows the boundaries of "self" to expand to include the unity of all things, thereby restoring a sense of primal security and well-being, which is your natural state. The means for accessing it are within your grasp.

Western psychology has adopted a linear concept of life in which improvement and progress are perceived as end goals. A visual representation might look something like this:

<u>Past</u>	<u>Present</u>	<u>Golden Future</u>
Mistakes	Not quite Good Enough	Finally Free

But in the East, the wheel of life is a symbol of circular motion. Change occurs on the wheel like seasons change from year to year. Although people have their preferences, winter is not in actuality better than or an improvement upon summer. Each

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season of life brings aspects that contribute to the perfect balance and harmony of nature. There is no question of improvement or progress. In the same way that fruit or leaves might fall from a tree in the autumn, providing nourishment for the roots of that tree, so, too, do the experiences of each season of one's life provide lessons that, when learned, inspire growth.

Western psychology has, until recently, predominantly focused on the contents of the mind. The emerging branches of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have begun to return psychology to the original meaning of the word, which translates as a "study of the soul." Westerners often perceive "peace of mind" to be an oxymoron, having rarely, if ever experienced moments devoid of inner conflict. *UnTherapy* is an inclusive model that combines the latest discoveries of consciousness studies with the most recent findings relating to cognitive psychology. The distinction from traditional models is that it calls for a shift in perception rather than an attempt to directly adjust beliefs and behaviors. I believe that a prudent combination of clarity, intention, curiosity, humor, and self-care will naturally result in initiative and creativity.

Transpersonal psychologists contend that an individual must develop a healthy and strong ego before successfully attaining to heightened states of awareness. Osho suggested that the first thirty five years or so of life should be devoted to strengthening the ego and then, once a strong sense of identification with the "self" is felt, attention can be transferred to the expansion of awareness that lies beyond the mortal experience of "me."

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*The traditional view of therapy as building up the ego simply does not do justice to what people's needs actually are. Most of us have developed our egos enough; what we suffer from is the accumulated tension of that development.*

Mark Epstein, M.D.

## The Therapeutic Relationship

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 26.2 percent of Americans ages 18 and older—about one in four adults—suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year. In fact, you may unknowingly be classed among the 48 million Americans who are considered by the American Psychiatric Association to be mentally ill. This does not mean that one in four adults actually has what you or I might consider a mental disorder. It simply means that the one in four Americans who turn to therapists for help in coping with life's challenges end up with a label that implies that they have a mental disorder.

Because health insurance often covers the majority of mental health costs, more and more people seek out counselors to serve as mentors and confidants. Others are seeking spiritual guides who can help them delve into existential issues relating to life's meaning and purpose. But most people do not realize that in order for their insurance to cover the cost of treatment, their counselor must designate a diagnosis in accordance with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) to justify their visit.

The ever-expanding number of disorder categories in the DSM pathologizes what some people might consider normal

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experiences, like existential anxieties, for example, which are labeled as “Anxiety Disorder,” shyness, diagnosed as “Social Phobia,” or lasting grief, which bears the diagnostic label of “Complicated Grief Reaction.” Even a strong-willed or high-spirited child is prone to be diagnosed with “Oppositional Disorder.” Fortunately, there are branches of psychology that embrace a more holistic and less pathological approach to wellness, but if the practitioners want to bill your insurance company for their services, they, too, have to commit you to a diagnosis.

Psychologists and psychiatrists alike are educated to help their patients develop personality strength in areas of their lives that are otherwise underdeveloped or compromised, sometimes as the result of a traumatic experience. Clinical psychologists are trained to assist such people to build stronger, healthier, better-functioning egos so as to become more adaptive and thus, more productive members of society.

Many people are unaware that until recently, psychiatrists, who, unlike psychologists, are able to dispense medication to their patients, receive very little counseling training. Because their education is focused on pharmacological intervention, this can often mean that when a person books an appointment to see a psychiatrist, they will more often than not leave with a prescription for a medication that will help to relieve their symptoms. Many patients, however, are unaware that the reason why they are prescribed medication is because that is what psychiatrists are trained to do. Likewise, if you go to see a surgeon about a knee injury, the surgeon will assess your knee according to whether or not she believes that surgery would remedy your problem. She would not necessarily

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consider other methods of treatment that are not within the parameters of her expertise.

While there is a movement within the mental health field toward a more holistic approach, the present system is laden with specialists who are trained to diagnose and treat from their specific paradigm. Nevertheless, it is the system that most people contend with so as to get the most out of their high insurance premiums. This is not to say that psychiatrists and clinical psychologists do not do a great service for the populations they are trained to serve. The advancements made in regards to psychiatric and psychoactive medications over the past fifty years have exponentially improved the quality of life of millions of people.

But people seeking help with the ordinary challenges of life, and especially those who consider themselves to be on a spiritual path, may find that “getting in touch with feelings,” “rehashing the stories of the past,” or taking medication to treat symptoms can be more of a hindrance than a help. In fact, the types of people who seek out my services are generally not suited to the standard therapeutic approaches available to them through their health insurance companies. Many are looking for a more direct approach that will resolve the root issues of their present dissatisfactions. Others report failing to notice substantial changes in the way they feel about themselves or the manner in which they interact with the world around them despite years of therapy.

If you choose to work with a coach or a counselor as a way to move yourself out of a life of mediocrity, consider finding one who will help you to investigate the causal connections of your experience rather than merely focusing on symptoms. It is all too common to diagnose and treat a patient with clinical

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depression. There is a standard protocol that generally includes pharmaceutical intervention. But nontraditional counselors will, before referring you to a licensed practitioner if, indeed, you are clinically depressed, work with you in a very different way. They were not trained to work within the model of pathology that tends to look at symptoms as they relate to diagnosable conditions. So if you are a healthy, well-functioning person who enjoys a periodic “tune up” and you feel worse when you leave your therapist’s office than you did when you arrived, consider finding a counselor or coach who works outside of the DSM model of mental health. A wellness-oriented counselor might be better equipped to serve seekers and other such individuals who do not require, and, indeed might even feel impaired by, the more traditional therapeutic interventions.

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***What we call 'normal' is really a psychopathology of the average, so undramatic and so widely spread that we don't even notice it.***

Abraham Maslow

## Options for Change

Western psychological culture adheres to the notion that painful early life experiences can result in damaging emotional aftereffects, sometimes for the rest of one's life. While this can certainly be true in cases of severe psychological trauma, the concept of "woundism" has indoctrinated the greater culture and resulted in a society that is quick to blame. Yet studies show that people who were deeply hurt as children are capable of tremendous resilience. Once they learn how to reframe the pain of their past, they generally flow more easily with change, often possess excellent crisis management skills, and tend to work well under pressure.

There is a point at which telling one's story can be therapeutic: during the period of grief that follows a death, for example. In other, more normal circumstances, however, repeating a story again and again can keep an otherwise healthy person continuously identified with the drama that is connected to that story. The more the story gets told, whether in a therapeutic or social situation, the more it is kept alive. Chronic grief about one's life story can even degenerate into self-pity, so dwelling on tales of personal tragedy past the necessary amount of time it takes to process an event can result in re-injury over and over again.

If you are a human being, you will experience pain no matter who your parents were or how your siblings, teachers,

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or peers may have behaved towards you. And unless there were exceptionally traumatic experiences that caused you deep, irreversible anguish, analyzing your past will not necessarily help you to feel better. In fact, dredging up painful memories may actually perpetuate your inability to enjoy the present. When you stop dividing life into good and bad, right and wrong, sick and healthy, life is just life, with seasons and cycles, like changes in the weather.

When therapy feels more like whining than anything else, when you recognize that painful experiences have provided profound lessons and insights that you might not have had without them, and when you outgrow the defenses you developed as survival strategies to cope with your childhood, the pains of the past will effortlessly fall away in the same way that ripe fruit falls from a tree. Once you come to realize that your negative attitudes and resentments no longer serve you, advance to the “Yes, it sucked, and I’m ready to move on” phase. This is the point at which it is important to seek out a counselor who is solution-oriented rather than a therapist who begins with some version of the question “What seems to be the problem?” Negative questions generate negative answers which inevitably will lead you right back into identification with your saga. Once you are no longer identified with your own history, it is then that you might become inclined to lend a hand to others who suffer in ways that you once did.

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***Those things that hurt, instruct.***

Benjamin Franklin

## Wounds

You do not, in actuality, have to remain feeling broken or irreversibly damaged by the heartbreaking events of your past. You are human and human beings are built to survive. *UnTherapy* recognizes and celebrates the resilience of the human spirit. That is not to say that repressed or unresolved issues or feelings relating to devastating experiences cannot prolong one's mental anguish or cause the heart to shut down. But carrying stories of guilt, shame or blame into the present only serves to keep that past alive.

Many people do, indeed, feel scarred by old wounds, partly because our culture supports the idea of "woundism" and partly because most people don't know how to release themselves from the grief of their own life history. *UnTherapy* imparts an opportunity to resolve feelings about the past so that you can step more fully into the present, secure in the knowledge that you have survived.

Regardless of how deeply you may have been hurt, those scars from the past can not only heal, they can serve as essential markers to arouse you to move forward; out of the shadow and into the light. There may no longer be any trace of the physical scars that marked the triumph of learning to ride your first bicycle. Each spill taught you what not to do the next time you got back up on that bike. The same principle applies to emotional scarring. When the lessons of painful experiences are recognized, hurt and resentments will begin to lift.

***There are two educations.  
One should teach us how to make a living  
and the other how to live.***

John Adams

## Vulnerability

At your birth, when the umbilical cord was cut and you began to breathe on your own, you most likely cried for the first time. Regardless of how soft the blankets might have been, how dim the lights, or how warm the room, compared to the first nine months of floating in warm amniotic fluid, comforted by your mother's ever-present heartbeat and the safety and comfort of her womb, the birth experience must have been a frightening first adventure. Perceiving the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds of a foreign world resulted in a sense of being separate, dependent and vulnerable. If someone had not taken care of you at that time, you would not have survived. Of all the mammals, human beings are the most immature at birth and require the longest period of development before becoming self-sufficient.

Fear of not surviving is an appropriate response to the helplessness experienced during those first years of life. That fear arose from the fragile, finite, temporary nature of living in a separate mortal body that was utterly dependent upon the care of others. Such vulnerability causes children to look to the external to get their basic needs for safety and comfort met. It is also true that how you presently cope with existential issues like fear and loneliness continue to shape the course of your life.

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Imagine how different your life would be today if you had been taught how to calm your mind when worried, how to cope with emotional pain, how to communicate when you feel threatened, and even how to fall asleep at night when your mind won't quiet down. As these skills are generally not taught by parents, teachers or clergy, it is no wonder that both children and adults suffer from feelings of inadequacy about how to cope with life's most basic stressors.

In more primitive cultures it is customary to initiate adolescents into adulthood with a rite of passage. Such rituals stimulate young people to recognize that they have internal resources that they have spent a lifetime developing and can continue to draw upon. They no longer need to depend on others for their emotional survival. This insight produces confidence and trust in one's own ability to endure. Young adults can then enjoy a give-and-take relationship with friends, family, and lovers instead of feeling scared and needy. But children raised in Western cultures do not generally have such a ritual. As a result, many young adults look to others to provide them with a sense of safety and comfort. How could they do otherwise? If they were not taught how to be physically or emotionally self-sufficient, or, if they did not have access to healthy role models, they simply may not have ever learned how to tap into their own sense of well-being.

***What is necessary to change a person  
is to change his awareness of himself.***

Abraham Maslow

## Self-Image

As a vulnerable infant, with physical and emotional needs that could only be met by someone else, a separate sense of self was bound to develop. Although you were most likely aware that you were a part of a family, a community, and perhaps even the natural order of the world around you, unconsciously the primordial fears of being separate, alone, and vulnerable could not help but to inform your outlook on life.

As the ego develops, small children generally lose awareness of the vast reality beyond their subjective sense of self and begin to believe that their individual ego is a distinct entity, separate from others and from the environment. This is how the first feelings of alienation arise. When you were afraid and alone, you had to rely on the generosity of others to meet your every need. The “separate self,” or ego, is merely a reflection of how your caregivers treated you. If you were neglected or abused, the perception that you were unlovable most likely became a part of your self-concept. If you were treated with love and care, the feeling of being valued may have more positively shaped your self-image.

As you grew older, you had no choice but to act in accordance with the self-image that reflected the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of each important person with whom you interacted. And now, as an adult, you are probably subjected to a constant stream of judgments, ideas, criticisms,

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plans, regrets, and opinions of your own. Of the apparently 80,000 thoughts that psychologists say the mind generates in a day, many are endlessly repetitive.

Buddhists have another perspective. They have contended for over five thousand years that there is no actual mind and therefore the ego is simply a mental construct that is not much more than a succession of thoughts. The ego, from this perspective, is a verb. Whenever you identify with thought, or, more precisely, whenever you believe that you *are* your thoughts, and that the content of your thoughts is absolute, and therefore true, that identification with your mind can cause you to perceive your “self” as a separate entity, unrelated to the rest of creation.

Liberation from the ego’s perception of being separate requires access to a broader awareness that includes a separate sense of self that is part of the larger whole. The Tibetans refer to this larger whole as *rigpa*: a primordial intelligence, perpetually radiant and awake, that permeates all living things.

***Just trust yourself,  
then you will know how to live.***

Goethe

## Conditioning

An aspect unique to Western culture is that almost all experiences are understood through the rational mind and its layers of accumulated knowledge. Whether this preoccupation with the rational mind is the upshot of the seductive rewards of science and technology or the fear that a contemplative life may prove to be an unproductive one, is open to speculation. But there is no question that the predominant identification with the mind is related to a general uneasiness, dissatisfaction and even despair about the physical and emotional aspects of the “self.”

*UnTherapy* explores dimensions of mind, action, and personality that go beyond, and transcend the general concepts of ego and personal identity common to Western theories of personality adjustment. The fundamental premise is that life is a process of discovery. Rather than focusing on perfecting aspects of the “self” that are less than virtuous, awareness opens to “waking up” from unconscious patterns that cause suffering.

The root of your  
dissatisfactions  
is not to be found  
in problems  
themselves,  
but rather in  
the way that  
you think  
about them.

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Deprogramming unwanted beliefs and behaviors requires incredible awareness, but becoming conscious of the thinking/feeling mechanism helps create distance from an outdated or undesirable self-image. How deeply has your early life conditioning influenced the way you react to the world around you? Habitual programming that is rooted in an unexamined past can sabotage clarity and thus prevent appropriate responses to present situations.

Most people are totally unaware that they are the creators of their life experience. They don't see the connection between perception and experience. But the root of a person's suffering is not so much found in difficult people or circumstances as in the meaning that is attributed to those people or circumstances. In the absence of subjective opinion, life is neutral; it is simply the way it is.

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*How rarely are we able to let anyone see us as we are,  
without donning a mask of some kind.*

John Welwood

## Ego

The egoic mind has its own agenda: it wants to appear “okay.” But the ego is a fear-based mechanism. It is always uncertain and, therefore, often conflicted. Although our culture generally considers fear to be a sign of weakness, unrecognized and unaccepted fear is at the root of most “negative” feelings. Many people attempt to hide their fears because of a belief that being afraid implies cowardice. And when insecurity, the basis of low self-esteem, is expressed as self-doubt, the ego may practice self-deception by attempts to hide feelings of inadequacy.

This unawareness, or denial of fear, can result in a spiral of escapism. Most distressing of all, the layer of protection built to shelter a person from the fear of getting hurt can even prevent love from entering a life. But fear itself is not what causes problems. Rather, it is the unawareness of fear that does so.

Listen carefully to how others speak and you will become aware of how they scare themselves. “What if the plane goes down? What if I can’t earn enough money to keep up with my debts? What if I’m depressed for the rest of my life?” Such questions can sabotage your own trust and confidence. The only way out is to train the mind to take refuge in the present.

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## Self-Reflection

**Identify a few of your own most common “What ifs?”**

Example: What if I lose my source of income?

**Now reassure yourself with facts about the present.**

Right now, there IS no problem except my own indulgence in worrying. If it happens, I can handle it. I always land on my feet.

***The more you try to fix, the more you find to fix.  
Only wholeness heals.***

Alan Cohen

## Judgment

What people generally assume to be reality is actually only their interpretation of it. Cognitive biases continuously shape our selective attention, perceptions, and interpretation of past and present experiences. Perceived opposites are actually unifying complementaries that create a balanced whole. Unfortunately, the mind divides life into “good” and “bad.” It is good to be happy and bad to be sad, or even worse, to be angry. It is good to be healthy but bad to be sick. It is good to be alive but “bad” to be dead. Each of us has a different list of preferences. Some common ones might include a list that looks something like this:

### **GOOD**

wealth and abundance  
strength  
love  
peace  
health  
happiness  
comfort  
life

### **BAD**

poverty and debt  
weakness  
fear  
conflict  
sickness  
sadness  
discomfort  
death

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To have preferences is to be human. There is no problem there. But when experiences perceived as undesirable are resisted or pushed away, stress may arise because life often presents experiences that do not fit into a desired agenda about how life “should” be.

As much as you might prefer health, vitality, and peace you will nonetheless at some point be subjected to illness, exhaustion, and inevitable moments of conflict. It is perfectly reasonable to prefer life over death, wealth over poverty, success over failure, heaven over hell, health over sickness, and youth over aging. Obviously, if you hold life-affirming values, you will probably not be drawn toward the idea of dying any time soon. But the perception that there is something wrong when aging begins to deteriorate the body or mind, or when times of sickness or scarcity arise, is the source of much psychological suffering.

Criticism and judgment often stem from feelings of insecurity. When you begin to accept your own weaknesses and mistakes, you will find it much easier to accept the “flaws” in others. Watch the next time you feel judgmental about someone. How much of that judgment is driven by a desire to feel better about yourself?

Although resistance will keep you in a state of tension and anxiety, accepting “what is,” does not necessarily mean that you should not aspire to create a comfortable future, or that you should lie down and play dead when life hands you unwanted circumstances! In fact, only when you embrace the paradoxes of reality can you effectively respond to them. Suffering ensues when the mind’s view of existence is polarized to such an extent that the inherent contradictions of life become unacceptable. Liberation occurs when clear

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perception informs one's view of reality without biases, preferences, and other distortions.

So in what circumstances might it be inappropriate, dangerous or unethical to accept "what is?" Obviously, it would be unconscionable to take a passive stance when basic human needs, whether your own or someone else's, are unmet or violated. Standing up for what is right indicates a deep reverence and respect for life. If your judgment is based on objective perception, then allow it to serve as your conscience, directing your energy to find and implement solutions.

Liberation does not result from being free of the "negatives" of life. Liberation occurs as a consequence of being free from the perception that half of existence is positive and half is negative, half is "good" and half is "bad." Imagine how different the world would be if death were universally accepted as an inevitable and natural culmination of life, pain as a necessary communication from the body, and sadness as a necessary emotion of the heart.

Choosing acceptance over resistance is a profoundly liberating formula that promotes a drama-free life. Regardless of the ups and downs of life, peace occurs when you stop exclusively operating from projected ideals about how you and others and life itself "should" be. A deep serenity emerges when you learn to say "yes" to the moment. Some people habitually "awfulize" or indulge in negative thoughts about situations that are outside of their control. But you have the freedom and power to determine how to think about each event and how you think about it has a direct effect on how you feel and behave.

Getting a flat tire is always an abrupt and unexpected interruption. But the way in which you think about remedying

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the situation affects whether or not you prolong the painful event into a full day of suffering. If you tell yourself, "This is a drag, it's going to be such a hassle to deal with, why does this always have to happen to me?," you are bound to psych yourself into a tizzy. If you appease yourself with sensible thoughts like, "Tires go flat sometimes. I'll just roll with it and get on with the day," odds are that the flat tire event will feel like nothing more than a nuisance.

***Needing approval is tantamount to saying, 'Your view of me is more important than my own opinion of myself.'***

Wayne Dyer

## Acceptance

An important part of accepting reality *just as it is* requires accepting yourself *just as you are*. Self-Acceptance does not imply a lowering of standards. On the contrary, acceptance in this context requires taking responsibility for how you may have participated in putting yourself in the creation of your present circumstances.

Putting effort into fixing or adjusting parts of yourself that you do not like may seem like a reasonable way to accelerate your own evolution. But such efforts are based on the fundamental premise that self-improvement is necessary, and that it takes “work” to transform. Both struggle and indulgence crystallize the egoic identity. In fact, many people create and perpetuate problems to escape feelings of emptiness and substantiate a strong sense of self. The ego thrives on judgment because that allows it to feel separate. Judgments then create feelings of stress, fear, and hostility, and round and round it goes. If you are tired of struggle and the drama that comes along with it, notice how much you resist and say “no” to the present. That part that wants to control, that defends its conviction to always be right, (which it very well may be, by the way), creates a tension between what you want and what is.

The desire to be “fixed,” “free,” or even “enlightened” stems from the belief that where you are right now is not good

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enough. While it is perfectly natural and healthy to have a longing to improve, incessantly chasing after desires can rob you of the opportunity to be at peace in the here and now. Granted, it is not always easy to strike a healthy balance between an aspiration to evolve and an unconditional acceptance of yourself and your life as it is. But incessant tail-chasing can cause the ego to begin to exclusively focus on its inadequacies.

It is perfectly healthy to look forward to a positive future. But dependence on the future, without acceptance of one's present state, can cause happiness and satisfaction to elude you. Unless you are deeply grounded in the present, endless pursuits may have a tendency to distract you from appreciating the precise point of the journey that you are on right now.

An essential function of the mind is obviously to solve problems. Consequently, if you don't have a problem, the mind will tend to create one. Remember when you were a kid and a sibling or bully teased you? As long as he got a reaction, he continued to badger relentlessly. Awareness of the futility and artificiality of the mind's proclivity to continuously generate problems can ultimately produce a desire to stop engaging with them. Once you do, you will accept yourself as you actually are rather than judging yourself for not yet being the way you wish that you were. Ironically, once you accept yourself as you actually are, a metamorphosis begins.

If you want an orchid to bloom, you nourish and nurture it. As you give it what it needs, it begins to blossom. The "improvement" naturally occurs as a result of creating the proper conditions in which it can thrive. Likewise, self-acceptance is the preliminary condition in which human beings

*UnTherapy: A Positive Psychology for Enlightened Living*

begin to blossom. Once you accept your present condition, you can identify what needs to happen to create even better circumstances in which you can flourish. If an orchid has aphids, you don't spend a lot of time figuring out how they got there. You accept the plight and adjust the conditions in such a way that the aphids will no longer thrive on the orchid.

UnTherapy challenges the premise of self-improvement by questioning the notion that painful experiences inevitably result in emotional crippling. Reflective exercises enable readers to take responsibility for how they create their own suffering so they can reverse old patterns of self-neglect.

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