

The CHOICES Model provides a way to take back control away from feeling overwhelmed by identifying seven areas about which we already make decisions every single day. The more we do this consciously, the greater our sense of wellbeing.

C.H.O.I.C.E.S. Model: Choosing Love Instead of Fear

By John L. Stone

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C.H.O.I.C.E.S. Model

Choosing Love Instead of Fear



John L. Stone

The CHOICES Model: Choosing Love Instead of Fear

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CHAPTER 1: ORIGIN

CHOICES: Choosing Love Instead of Fear has four parts.

Part One: This first chapter is intended to define terminology, which is often too vague and/or confusing. Also included in this chapter is an explanation of how Locus of Control (LOC) is the key determining factor for how we might feel more empowered, mitigate negative experiences, and improve our overall well-being. This key finding will launch the rest of this book.

Part Two: Chapter two presents an overview of the CHOICES Model. Seven domains of personal power will be introduced to identify the areas where each of us has control and how they build upon one another to lead a more rewarding life.

Part Three: Chapters three through nine spell out each of the seven domains of personal power, identifies what each domain includes, and teaches how to employ various techniques to succeed at breaking old habits and making healthier ones.

Part Four: Chapter ten puts all the lessons of the CHOICES Model together and suggests a practical guide and daily regimen.

PART 1

In spite of being blamed for so much, stress is not the enemy. It is not the reason for humanity's woes and is not what this book is about. As a matter of fact, stress is a natural response. In an emergency that threatens one's very survival, stress can be a life saver by triggering one to be hyper alert and redirect internal resources toward strength and stamina. To be clear though, there is an enemy. It is the ill effects of distress. These are very real and harmful. There are ways to mitigate all of that and this is the true intent of what is to follow.

While these pages do not focus on stress per se, what science has learned to better understand the stress response is our starting point. This book is really about the choices we make and the ripple effects they have in our and others' lives. Stress management was the topic of my master's paper 37 years ago as I pursued a master's degree while attending the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. That research was an eye-opening experience which led to this project.

The inability to adapt to the bombardment of stressors in our lives has been called the number one health problem in the United States.

“We know that the inability to cope with stress plays a major role in heart attacks, hypertension, peptic ulcers and a host of other illnesses from herpes to cancer. “

~Dr. Paul Roschⁱⁱ

Besides these negative health effects there is also a tremendous negative impact on business. It costs American business an estimated \$300 billion a year in health care costs, absenteeism, and poor performance.ⁱⁱⁱ

Living with an untreated chronic stress response is a silent killer. It often takes years to exhibit its harmful effects. Therefore, it is easy to ignore its existence and to deny the consequences.

Despite an absence of obvious symptoms within the individual, especially when young and robust, a variety of harmful responses may be going on inside each person which may only be understood later in life. The inability to cope with stressors can lower the body's resistance to infection or malignancy. This can occur due to the wearing away effects on the immune system or because of the release of chemicals and hormones that can damage the heart, stomach, and other organs.

While the problem is pervasive, costly, and important to each of us, the stress response is not well understood. There is a great deal of confusion about the subject. At the same time, it is a widely discussed topic, both professionally and popularly.

Much of the literature about stress focuses on determining its cause-and-effect relationship. Many studies attempt to weigh distinct types of human life changes and then compare that weighting with observed behavioral, physical, or mental consequences.^{iv}

Unfortunately, the terminology used is inconsistent from one study to the next. It seems that causal links have been studied without first establishing a clear model and without defining the model's component parts. Therefore, research materials have not consistently served to establish the common ground necessary for communicating clearly between disciplines or to the general public what exactly is stress, the stress response, or what can be done to mitigate its negative results. By the time the popular media reports on stress, most people receive diluted mixed messages. This book is an attempt to clarify terminology and to offer a model which encourages further research and a practical guide for self-empowerment.

Additionally, since stress has been so poorly defined, it also remains unclear as to what should be done about it. This book's model

offers a seven-faceted approach. One or all can be attended to every single day.

TERMINOLOGY

Stress

Hans Selye, considered the modern founder of stress research and the first scientist to identify the causal relationship between the stress response and illness, carried out his study over 80 years ago. He defined stress as follows:

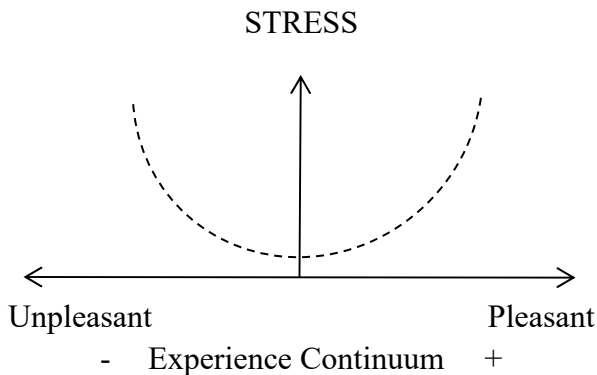
“(Stress is)...the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it. In order to understand this definition, we must first comprehend what is meant by nonspecific. Each demand made upon our body is in a sense unique, that is specific. When exposed to cold, we shiver to produce more heat and the blood vessels in our skin contract. When exposed to heat, we sweat. ... all these agents have one thing in common: they also make an increased demand upon the body to readjust itself. This demand is nonspecific; it requires adaptation to a problem, regardless of what that problem may be. This nonspecific demand for activity, as such, is the essence of stress...Stress is defined as the consequence of any demand made upon the body...””

Stressor

The demand made upon the body is caused by what is known as a stressor. A stressor is the cause or precursor to experiencing stress. Stress is the necessary adaptation, says Selye, to maintaining homeostasis. To maintain a healthy life, nothing within the human body must be allowed to deviate far from the norm. If anything does, we become sick or even die. ***Therefore, stress is not only inevitable, it is essential for survival.***

Dr. Selye makes an important and useful distinction between the terms stress and distress. "Stress may be pleasant or unpleasant; distress is always disagreeable."

A model from Selye's book is represented below as a graphic explanation of this distinction. Dr. Selye essentially defines distress as unpleasant stress.



The amount of stress is represented by its vertical position. However, stress can be either pleasant or unpleasant. The degree of pleasantness or unpleasantness is represented by its horizontal placement.

Stressors are all around and in us. And they do not just come at us one at a time as we wear multiple hats and live in multiple spheres. Just to name a few of the big stressors they include work; school; friends; family; and community of faith. More specifically they can include having parents or children with special needs; experiencing a death of someone close to us; or coping with an addiction.

Then there are the everyday stressors including: sleeping through an alarm; waking up with a headache; dealing with traffic; spilling coffee; coping with severe weather; forgetting someone’s birthday; or having heartburn from the fast food you had for lunch; and so on.

As I wrote about the stressors in the section above, it started to sound very hollow. It could rightly be said that most of the world's population, when considering Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, is struggling with basic physiological needs - just trying to survive from day to day.

This is a very human condition for half of the people on this planet, a fact we should not forget.

“Economic advances around the world mean that while fewer people live in extreme poverty, almost half the world's population - 3.4 billion people - still struggles to meet basic needs.”^{vi}

In the preface I wrote about my father having broken his back as a teenager in the 1930's, on his family's North Dakota farm. He recovered by lying flat on his back for months on the family's kitchen table. I remind you of this story as just a reminder that it was not so many years ago that all of our families dealt with basic survival and desperate times. Sadly, for too many of our brothers and sisters, that situation continues to this day.

Whether you are in America or in a Third World Country, just surviving can be a daily struggle.

“The official poverty rate is 11.6 percent, based on the U.S. Census Bureau's estimates for 2021. That year, an estimated 37.9 million Americans lived in poverty according to the official measure.”^{vii}

“Nearly half of Americans say their expenses are equal to or greater than their income...And for those 18 to 25 the percentage is over half, up to 54%.”^{viii}

Distress

As was stated previously, stress is not the enemy. In fact, it is a necessary function for life to be sustained. Harm occurs when the stress responses impact is negative or chronic. A repetitive negative or chronic stress response is the true enemy to our wellbeing. This distress is experienced in one of three ways: 1) when the stressor(s) is/are perceived as unpleasant and imposed; 2) When the stressor(s) is/are pleasant but are overwhelming by themselves or added to other negative stressors. [This second way is my input to the discussion. See the adapted model below]; or 3) When there is no time or opportunity to recuperate between these stressors making them a chronically felt experience until energy reserves are depleted. The curved dashed line, in Dr. Selye’s model above, represents various amounts of stress whether positive or negative resulting from experiencing a stressor. Obviously the greater the stress level, the greater the distress. This is especially true when the stressor is unpleasant, but it is also true when stressors are pleasant but have reached a certain threshold level [again, my adaptation, represented by the shaded area in the figure below]. Life is complicated...meaning, both positive and negative stressors are happening all at once. The combination of stressors, when added together can cause a cumulative negative effect.

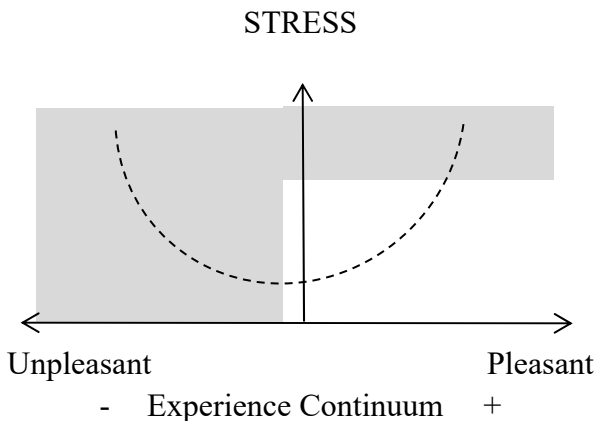
Note that the dashed line is not anchored at a zero amount of stress. This indicates that there is always a certain amount of stress even at rest. As Selye put it,

“... the physiological stress level is lowest during indifference but never goes down to zero. That would be death. While stress is

essential for survival, distress is that part of stress which is damaging or unpleasant.”^{ix}

Much of the remainder of this section will focus on distress and whether it can be mitigated.

In my adapted model below, I suggest that there is a threshold of accumulated stress, whether a combination of unpleasant and pleasant or even pleasant stress alone, if it surpasses one’s ability to cope it becomes distress (everything in the shaded area).



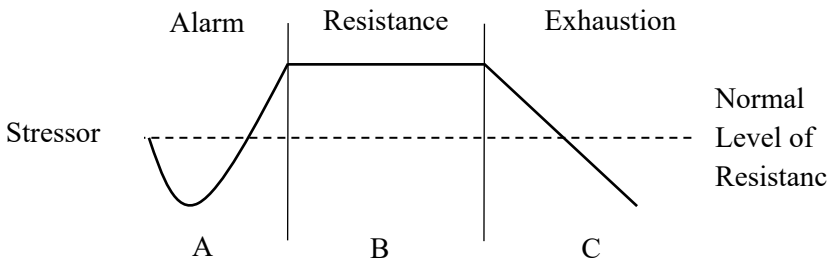
~Adapted Dr. Selye Distress Model by John Stone 2023.

General Adaptation Syndrome

Before narrowing the focus to distress it is necessary to examine the three stages of the stress response known as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), also known as the Selye Syndrome: the alarm reaction; the resistance state; and exhaustion. The stress response moves the body toward regaining stability or homeostasis.

This internal thermostat regulates various physiological functions including body temperature, heart rate, and respiration. According to

Dr. Selye, the body is initially surprised by a stressor (alarm reaction); then adjusts it (resistance state); and finally becomes fatigued to its residual effects through any number of physical or physiological symptoms (exhaustion). Dr. Selye's graphic model of GAS is depicted below.



According to this theory, energy for adaptation is finite. We can make this valuable resource last longer by using it wisely and sparingly - only for those things that are worthwhile and cause the least distress - or we can squander our adaptability recklessly, becoming exhausted.

Rejuvenation

A good night's sleep, in many cases, can restore our resistance and adaptability close to its previous level. The danger according to Dr. Selye is a prolonged state of distress. In this case, the finite reserve of adaptation energy becomes depleted. Looking back at the figure, once superficial (renewable) adaptation energy is exhausted then deep (finite) adaptation energy is called upon. If this supply is exhausted as well, then we die.

Taking Dr. Selye's theory into the intended direction of this book's focus, we move to his discussion of the transition from the laws which regulate the involuntary biochemical responses within our body during

stress to the laws governing voluntary interpersonal behavior. He states:

“Presumably, in the course of evolution living beings have learned to defend themselves against all kinds of assaults whether arising in the body or coming from its environment through two basic mechanisms which helped us put up with aggressors (syntoxic) or destroy them (catatoxic.)”^x

Assaults (or stressors) can be noxious agents introduced on a cellular biochemical level, but they can also be, according to Dr. Selye, a clash of interpersonal interests.

“...[W]hen it comes to interpersonal defense reactions, three possibilities exist: 1) the syntoxic, which ignores the enemy and puts up with them without trying to attack; 2) the catatoxic, which results in a fight; and 3) flight, an attempt to escape from the enemy without either putting up with them or trying to destroy them.”^{xi}

The problem with distress becomes, according to Dr. Selye, learning which option to choose and what technique of adaptation is helpful or harmful.

Chronic Distress

A problem occurs when the stress response becomes chronic. Our bodies were never meant to sustain high stress levels over a long period of time. When this happens a whole host of maladies present themselves. The mind and body become fatigued; the immune system is lowered; the heart is overworked; high blood pressure may cause damage to blood vessels; homeostasis can become difficult to achieve and may cause a constant imbalance of hormones; and the list goes on.

Chronic high alert wears away at the human body attacking the weakest link in our personal genetic makeup.

Considering the number of stressors in modern life there's little wonder heightened chronic stress response has become a problem both within us individually and for our society at large. The question becomes not whether you are overstressed but determining how stressed you are and what can be done about it to both reduce the number of stressors and how to mitigate their negative impact.

The more complicated life becomes, the more negative impacts heap upon one another until there are no breaks, no relief, and no rejuvenation. Accumulating stressors and the non-stop string of distress all too often becomes chronic. This takes a toll and can lead to exhaustion, the weakening of the immune system, sickness, and even death.

Blood pressure and pulse rate is a quick medical evaluation for determining the impact of stress. And there are pencil and paper or online tests you can take to measure how stress affects you personally. The Perceived Stress Scale^{xii} is the most widely used psychological self-assessment instrument for measuring perceived stress. There is also the Ardell Wellness Stress Test^{xiii} which attempts to be a more holistic assessment. And the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale^{xiv} is a helpful self-assessment instrument which asks if you have experienced any of forty-three life events in the previous two years. One's score, they suggest, predicts the likelihood of becoming ill.

Stress Hormones: Released & Intended to Restore Bodily Functions ... for Good or Ill

Our bodies have the capability of accessing stores of energy to save our lives when threatened. In that event hormones, primarily adrenaline, kick in and our blood pressure and pulse rate spikes because that will help provide a lifesaving burst of energy. This state of high energy readiness comes at a cost to our digestion and other

systems but honestly who cares if you are in a desperate state if you're in a situation where you're needing just to survive.

The best explanation for why we need a stress response was written by Robert Sapolsky from Stanford University.

“A hallmark of the metabolic stress response is to mobilize energy and divert it from storage sites to exercising muscle. Empty your bank account and turn it into cash in the bloodstream – glucose and fatty acids. The next thing you need to do is deliver that energy as rapidly as possible. Increase your cardiovascular tone, increase your heart rate, your blood pressure, and your breathing rate to get the glucose and the oxygen to those muscles...If that happens, you are more likely to survive...” (in a life-threatening situation.)^{xv}

Unfortunately, our bodies do not differentiate between physical and psychological stress. Our bodies may continually secrete stress hormones because we are experiencing chronic psychological, social, and cognitive stress. If the stress response is left on too long, then there is an increased chance that a chronic disease will develop. Being in a constant state of stress response may lead to chronic increases in blood pressure “inhibition of digestion, growth, reproduction and immune” capability. Profound consequences result including staving off diseases, many of which are always present and need to be fought off.

“...distress not only weakens the body's immune system. It can serve as a trigger for autoimmune diseases.”^{xvi}

Literature Review of Stress: Business vs Education Models

When I was working on the Stress Management paper for my master's degree I started with a literature review where I found something remarkably interesting. The study of stress management was approached from two quite different perspectives. The business

community wanted to determine the impact of stress on worker productivity and safety. The public education community, on the other hand, wanted to understand the impact of stress on student academic performance. While the business community focused primarily on the individual's internal ability to reduce stress in their lives; the education community focused on external factors and how these made a difference in academic performance within different populations of students.

The research brought to bear by these quite disparate perspectives led to interesting and different conclusions. But more interesting is what they shared: Whether the individuals believed they were the ones making the choices or the choices were being made outside of their control made a tremendous difference in their felt stress level. In other words, the number, severity, and the perception of negative or positive impact of stressors may be the same but if the individual believed they were in control, it meant their perceived stress as well as their potentially harmful effects was felt to be less.

When I first started write this book I thought my focus would be how to better manage stress, but I have come to understand, *Stress is NOT the culprit. Rather, feeling powerless and out of control is the problem.* And that leads us to the topic of Locus of Control.

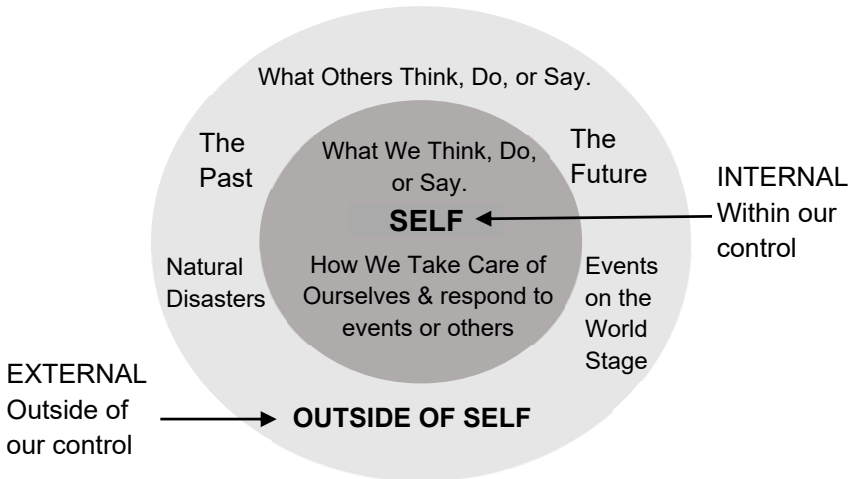
Locus of Control: External vs Internal

Locus of Control (LOC) amounts to felt power. Internal LOC is felt to be personal power; and external LOC is power felt outside of oneself. One's LOC has both a real and a perceived dynamic. There are life experiences which are objectively not in our control and others which are clearly within our control. However, our perception of what we control can be skewed due to the experiences of our lives.

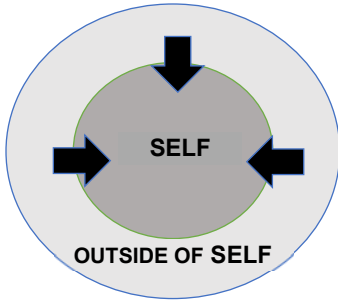
We clearly do not have control over the DNA material which we inherited from our parents. Nor do we have control over what occurred in our family's past or for that matter, occurrences in the past in

general. We can't control what other people think, feel, say, or do. In fact, beyond our tiny sphere of influence, there is very little which we have true control over.

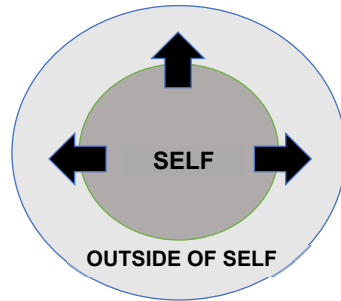
While it's true that our sphere of influence is small, there are domains which are ours and ours alone. Given a certain amount of freedom and autonomy, we choose how well we take care of ourselves, what to think, what to believe, who to trust, and how we dedicate whatever discretionary resources we have. The illustration below objectively delineates which is within the domain of the self and that which is not.



If only our perceptions were this simple. Instead, each of us leans a bit toward either having Internal or External Locus of Control where we either believe we have more or less control than we actually have. The illustrations below demonstrate the difference. People having Internal LOC believe power and responsibility is largely within one's own control. Whereas people having External LOC believe power is largely outside of one's control.



Internal LOC (Power from Within)



External LOC (Power from Without)

The overwhelming case suggesting External LOC leads to fatigue and exhaustion.

Whether real or perceived, lack of control or lack of personal power are at the core of what many of us felt living through the pandemic and is commonly felt at all times by those not in the majority culture. We feel loss of control and power when facing a raging virus. And it is difficult to feel empowered when you are not White and when there is prejudice and hatred being directed at you just because of the color of your skin.

Feeling out of control is also at the core of being a police officer who is trained and reminded to see every encounter with the public as a potential threat. And it is also at the core of those who see any and all regulations as a loss of rights.

Anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one can tell you about the illusion of control. Those who have come out the other side of grief to finally experience joy of any kind can tell you what an arduous journey that is.

Then there are the victims of abuse who have had their personal power stripped from them and worse, to go through that only to be told they were partly or entirely to blame.

The hard truth is that control is an illusion for all of us. This idea was astutely portrayed in the pivotal scene of the 1999 movie, *Instinct*. The relevant script is transcribed below:

The following scene takes place in prison. Ethan Powell, a former anthropologist (played by Anthony Hopkins) is in prison for murder. He is visited by psychiatrist, Dr. Ethan Caulder (played by Cuba Gooding Jr). To teach Dr. Caulder a lesson and as a challenge, Powell puts Dr. Caulder in a headlock, threatening him with his life unless he can answer one question correctly.

- Powell:** ***“What did I take from you”*** [Forces Dr. Caulder to reply with crayon and paper.]
- Dr. Caulder:** ***“MY CONTROL”*** [Dr. Caulder writes.]
- Powell:** ***“You never had control. You only thought you had it. What have you lost?”***
- Dr. Caulder:** ***“MY FREEDOM”*** [Dr. Caulder tries again.]
- Powell:** ***“Did you think you were free? Okay, one last chance...Get it right. What have you lost? What did I take from you?”***
- Dr. Caulder:** ***“MY ILLUSIONS.”*** [Dr. Caulder concludes.]
- Powell:** ***“Yeah. Congratulations.”*** [Releases Dr. Caulder] ***“You’re a student after all.”***^{xvii}

There is a tension between feeling tossed around like a pawn versus believing we control all the pieces. Neil deGrasse Tyson articulates from a scientific perspective what is undoubtedly true.

“I learned in biology class that more bacteria live and work in one centimeter of my colon than the number of people who have ever

existed in the world. That kind of information makes you think twice about who - or what - is actually in charge.”

~Neil deGrasse Tyson

Yearning for Internal LOC (or Personal Power)

Despite all the forces (both imposed and self-inflicted), we yearn to feel we are in control and have the power to do what we want with our lives. This is dramatically expressed by a poet who expressed this despite his own personal agony. William Ernest Henley’s *Invictus* (Latin, for *unconquerable or undefeated*) is a testament to proclaiming personal power. He wrote this as a man anguishing from Pott’s disease and shortly after having had his leg amputated to save his life.

INVICTUS

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,*

***I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.***

~William Ernest Henley

Tension Between Internal and External LOC

I had a front row seat watching the contest of these tensions (between external LOC vs yearning for personal power) within my own father as he sedated the depths of his emotional pain with alcohol, declaring when confronted with the possibility he was an alcoholic, "I don't have a problem. I can quit anytime I want." But he never quit. He believed he was in control despite his being utterly addicted.

(Note - If anyone reading this struggle, as I did growing up, going back and forth between "Is he/she an addict? Or Am I the one with the problem and making this overly important?" ...this morbid joke will help...)

***"Q: What's the difference between a drunk and an alcoholic?
A: Drunks don't have to go to those pesky meetings."***

~Writer Unknown

To be fair to my father's memory, he had plenty of negative life experiences which caused him understandable grief: from having an accident resulting in a broken back as a child which caused him to have chronic pain the rest of his life; to losing his father at age 16; struggling through the Great Depression; caring for his mother while also farming the land alone until she died; walking away from his inheritance after being accused by his own brothers and sisters of staying on the farm with his mother only to steal the estate; fighting hand-to-hand combat in the Philippines during WWII; receiving a letter during that time from one of his sisters asking him to name her as beneficiary for his life insurance policy "because you're going to die anyway;" making one last effort to work a farm of his own, but needing to give up his

dream due to poor health; and finally, nearly dying at age 50 from a perforated ulcer. Yes, he had plenty of real pain, anguish, and heartache for me to be sympathetic to his being an alcoholic. And even though he struck gold by marrying my mother who loved him until the day he died, at 90; his self-doubt and alcoholism was already well entrenched before they ever met. Plus, he was one of seventeen children, most of whom were alcoholics. So, genetics certainly played a role.

Regarding my quandary wondering if I was the problem, until the age of thirty, it was my belief that his drinking problem never impacted me. Somehow, remarkably, I thought, I was unscathed. The truth was, I had shut down my emotional life and was blind to the fact that I was filled with self-loathing; had OCD; and was codependent.

Just Like Drugs & Alcohol, OCD and Codependency Give the Illusion of Being in Control

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (or OCD) is a mystery for those who do not have it. In 1997, Jack Nicholson portrayed someone with OCD in the movie, *As Good As It Gets*. And, between 2002 and 2009, Tony Shalhoub brought OCD to tv audiences as he portrayed Adrian Monk in the program's title role. The compulsive component is easy to understand. In both cases, these two actors portrayed, often with comedy, the Compulsive (C) part of the equation convincingly because that is the observable behavior portion. For the role of Melvin Udall, Jack Nicholson portrayed the Obsessive (O) part as someone who disliked and found other people annoying. Again, that is easier to portray because it is more observable with grimaces and words directed outward.

But for those who live with OCD, the Obsessive (O) part is much more diabolic and tragic. We all have competing inner voices. For someone with OCD, like me, the loudest voice, therefore the dominant one, can be self-defeating and can take command, defining who we

are. Part of the healing process for self-berating obsessive thinkers is to identify that voice, stop it in its tracks before it leads to a downward spiral into depression, and then to raise the volume of another voice which is more forgiving, supportive, and comforting.

For thirty years, every time I experienced a failure, no matter how small or insignificant, I would ungenerously and derogatorily call myself a “f-ing” idiot. It was not until I encountered John Bradshaw’s book, *Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child* that I realized just how much I was harming myself (and those around me) every time I indulged in negative self-talk. Then began the lengthy process of refraining from name calling and instead, forgiving and loving myself.

The voice from one’s higher self is always present. Listen for it; once heard; heed it.

Internal LOC remains a choice, *even if it is based entirely on wishing it were so.*

I personally conclude we must ground ourselves in science while also not accepting imposed limitations, especially when those forces are intended to subjugate. Focus on what we can control and on the choices made every day.

I have long held this attitude. Fifty-two years ago, I gave one of the commencement speeches at my high school graduation ceremony. I used as my central thesis, the defense for choosing to live a life of hopes and dreams given by the main character in the *Man of La Mancha* musical adaptation of Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*:

“I have lived nearly fifty years, and I have seen life as it is. Pain, misery, hunger ... cruelty beyond belief. I have heard the singing from taverns and the moans from bundles of filth on the streets. I have been a soldier and seen my comrades fall in battle ... or die more slowly under the lash in Africa. I have held them in my arms at the

final moment. These were men who saw life as it is, yet they died despairing. No glory, no gallant last words ... only their eyes filled with confusion, whimpering the question, "Why?"

I do not think they asked why they were dying, but why they had lived. When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams — this may be madness. To seek treasure where there is only trash. Too much sanity may be madness — and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!”^{xviii}

In addition to Cervantes, all my heroes encourage us to imagine a better world. Mahatma Gandhi lived a life of nonviolent activism and went on hunger strikes to stand up for freedom, justice and advocate for people who were oppressed.

“Change yourself – you are in control.”

~Mahatma Gandhi

Martin Luther King Jr. responded to hate, injustice, and homicide with love. His “Dream” was all about imagining a better world where we could live in peace and unity.

“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

~Martin Luther King Jr.

External LOC forces

Why everything we think we know might be wrong & the impetus for this book.

One of the modern challenges for humanity is how fast life is changing. The more things change the less control we feel, and the more LOC becomes externalized. To be clear, external LOC equates to feeling powerless.

In 1972, Buckminster Fuller coined the term, the “Knowledge Doubling Curve,” as a way of articulating his observation that until the year 1900, human knowledge was doubling every century. By the end of World War II, knowledge sped up to doubling every 25 years. Now it is believed, knowledge is doubling every year and it is conjectured that the doubling will eventually occur daily.

Starting in the 1970’s and continuing to this day, we are smack in the middle of the Information (digital, computer, or media - take your pick) revolution. Knowledge, science, mathematics, physics, medicine, technology, have advanced more quickly than human understanding, morality, or wisdom.

The information explosion is too much, too fast, & too overwhelming. Nuclear weaponry, vaccines, robotics, computerization, social media to name just a few fields is so unknowable to so many that it feels magical and even unreal.

It has left everyone (including experts trying to keep up even in their own fields of expertise) feeling inadequate and out of control. One of the great challenges of our time is figuring out how to cope with a tidal wave of data which surpasses our ability to consume, process, and place the information in context with what we already know, especially when some of it contradicts long held beliefs. We are all faced with needing to go about our daily lives and make the best decisions we can, knowing there may be information out there which, if we only knew it, would completely alter our thinking. Looking for information online is like trying to drink from a fire hydrant. Due to the lack of oversight on the internet, the metaphor only works if we add to the drinking challenge that the water source is often contaminated.

My parents were born in the decade just after Henry Ford introduced the Model T automobile and the Wright brothers had their successful flight at Kitty Hawk. They grew up in the north central

region states of North Dakota and Iowa through the Great Depression, WWII, and the second phase of the Industrial Revolution which was marked by the engine replacing animal power for agriculture and the production of things.

My father worked as a punch press operator, fabricating metal parts; and my mother transitioned from teaching in a rural one-room schoolhouse to managing a typing department for a multinational insurance company. The technology I grew up with was the combustion car engine (before everything became replaceable modular units); the agitator washing machine with clothes wringer; the television with tubes and rabbit ears antenna; the hard-wired dial telephone; and the pedal sewing machine.

I remember watching the moon landing and recording the audio on my, newly purchased for the occasion, reel-to-reel tape recorder. There was no other way for a private citizen to record that event unless you owned a home movie camera (which we did not) and pointed it at the television.

I have often thought about the everyday changes my parents witnessed, from horse drawn wood hauling sleds to jet airliners, NASA rocket ships, and satellites. While my father was wonderfully comfortable recalibrating the automobile carburetor and I tested the television's filament glass tubes to see which ones needed to be replaced, we weren't prepared for what was coming next.

So, I understand first-hand how mystified and unbelieving people are when presented with the concepts of black holes, Higgs Boson, dark matter, dark energy, artificial intelligence, quantum physics, laser surgery, and astrophysics. Let's face it, most of us still do not really understand how the internet or cell phones connect us around the world in near real time.

But before discussing the best ways to navigate life through the Information Revolution I will first discuss the forces, both internal and

external, which distort our understanding of the world and our place in it.

Some choices are ones made primarily out of survival. It is important to be aware that globally we should be doing so much more as many, if not most, people are caught in the struggle just to survive and have very few options to improve their lives.

- Around the world, 821 million people do not have enough of the food they need to live an active, healthy life. One in every nine people goes to bed hungry each night. ^{xix}
- 2 billion people lack access to safely managed drinking water at home. ^{xx}
- An estimated 27% of women and girls older than 15 years have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence globally. ^{xxi}

In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs ^{xxii}, he listed basic physiological needs as essential. Maslow reasoned that if food, water, clothing, and shelter are absent due to poverty, disaster, or atrocity, other needs like safety, shelter, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization will not likely be pursued. I would suggest at the very least, if these needs are not met, it is very difficult for them, in these circumstance, to feel they are in control of their lives.

Similarly, if an individual or group is subject to the forces of oppression, they too will find it difficult to feel they are in control of their lives. The pandemic felt in 2020-2022 laid bare ugly undeniable oppressive attitudes. Hopefully, the public, who previously may have not believed these to even exist, have had their eyes opened. One or more of these shared the lead news stories along with the advance of Covid19 infections and deaths every single day.

- Racism
- Sexism
- Ageism
- Nativism/Nationalism
- Homophobia
- Classism

- Ableism
- Sizeism
- Sanism
- Religious Imperialism

Self-Sabotage: External LOC Forces from Within

How we interpret external forces is a mind game which takes place within each of us. These forces may lead us to believe we have less personal power than may actually be the case. This can further diminish our self-confidence and lead us in a downward spiral with every stressor encountered. Here are some of the mind game traps that so easily trip us up: (This is also a list of the ways we give away personal responsibility.)

(Too Overwhelmed)

“Given the information explosion happening in every field, I’m not capable of understanding the barrage or the complex data raining in on me, much less being able to make informed decisions.”

(Big events must have big causes)

“Nothing can be that simple. It doesn’t matter what the experts or journalists say. When there is a big event that changes lives, there must be something big, complicated, and planned to have caused it. Take Covid19, it was either a biological weapon or just a big hoax. Either way, there’s nothing I can do to change it.”

(Nothing ever changes)

“The way things are is the way they will remain. It does not matter who is in charge. ‘Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.’ Even if I were the boss, the *powers that be* wouldn’t let me change anything either.”

“The more things change, the more they are the same.”

~Alphonse Karr

(Fate)

“The world is inherently evil; or conversely, the world is inherently good. Either way, nothing I do can ultimately alter the way the universe runs.”

(Lucky/Privileged)

“I was born under a lucky star. I don’t understand it but if I examine it too closely, I may lose my advantage.”

(Victim)

“I was born unlucky. I have never won anything, and no one has ever given me a break. I see no reason to expect that will ever change.”

(Hell in a Handbasket)

“Just look at the evening news. No matter how hard we try, society is crumbling.”

(Nationalism)

“My community is stronger, good looking, and above average. Whereas (apologies to Garrison Keillor, who never intended the converse meaning) People of other communities are weaker, ugly, and below average.”

(Denial - is not just one of the stages of grief. It is also a shield to put off responsibility.)

“It’s too awful to be true.”

"I won't think about it now, I'll think about it tomorrow, when I can stand it."

~Margaret Mitchell, Gone with the Wind - Scarlett O'Hara

(Blame the Leader - Someone else will correct the problem.)

“What’s wrong with our leaders? They need to do something to make our lives better. All of this will be better once we have a decent leader in charge. I’ll contribute to their campaign fund and hope for the best.”

(Magic/Faith)

“In my experience, things just have a way of working out. All our problems will just go away. It’s magical, some would say it’s just how God works.”

(Problems are Temporary)

“Time heals all wounds. Just give it some time and try not to think about it so much.”

(Misplaced Trust)

“People with power and authority are in charge; they know more than us; God ordained them to be our leaders.”

(Rationalization of atrocities)

“People who are suffering must have done something to deserve their plight/punishment.”

(I am just one person)

“There’s nothing I can do that will change anything.”

Where We Are on the LOC Continuum

To reiterate, external locus of control (LOC) is where the individual believes the stressors in their life come from outside of their control. Internal LOC, on the other hand, is the opposite. Internal LOC exists when the individual believes stressors in their life occur primarily by their own choosing.

There is nothing judgmental intended in this discussion. Each of us perceives the stressors in our life to come from somewhere on the spectrum between completely external to completely internal.

We lie somewhere between these two poles but most often lean in one or the other direction. Events occurring in our lives can impact our perception and help to determine where we fall on this spectrum. This means our perception can change several times during our lifetime. After an important accomplishment or positive event in our life we tend toward having Internal LOC. On the other hand, a catastrophic loss, death in the family, being in a traffic accident, losing a job, being

a victim of a crime, or suffering through a terrible storm will often cause us to move toward having External LOC. Positive outcomes, like graduation or getting married, leave us feeling like we made all the choices. Whereas negative experiences may cause us to feel like life choices were out of our control.

Some would say that despite what we experience, good or bad, we have little control over the outcomes in our lives; while others believe we have the responsibility for all of our actions. Philosophically, I would suggest there is a case to be made for both sides. In fact, the older I get the more complicated this has become to distinguish. Nothing is as black and white as I once believed.

Can we expect the individual who has just been assaulted to believe they have Internal LOC? Someone else just caused them harm. Should we expect them to feel in control? Certainly, life seems out of control to them until they can heal from the experience.

Complicating this situation is an entire philosophy [popularized by the film, *The Secret* and] interpreted by Esther Hicks which purports that “people create their own reality through their attention and focus.” (Abraham-Hicks.com) This supports the extreme Internal end of the LOC spectrum.

Also supporting the extreme Internal end of the LOC spectrum is the national ethos of the American Dream. James Adams stated, The American Dream is

“...that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” regardless of social class or circumstance of birth. ^{xxiii}

And while I grew up with this belief, now I would caution that this is a lot easier to believe if you are, as I am, a white American male. The American Dream is built upon the Declaration of Independence

which was more about protecting the rights of white landowners than the more inclusive sentiment later found on the Statue of Liberty. We strive for the American Dream, but it is naïve to suggest everyone has the same access to its liberties and potential prosperous outcomes.

This is what I do know: the harmful effects of stress are lessened when LOC is perceived as internal.

Four Seemingly Overwhelming Challenges to Internal LOC (or Self-Empowerment)

There are some forces within us which seem insurmountable. While these are all part of the human experience, for many these enter the realm of mental illness and disease. This book is intended to help anyone and especially those struggling with these issues, BUT it is important to seek therapy if it is at all an affordable option. At the very least it is important to talk about these forces with a loving friend or relative, someone that, like a trained counselor, would offer a safe place to share without judgment, trite idioms, or quick fix solutions. (It occurs to me the reason this book fell upon me to write it is not because of my credentials but because I have personally struggled with each of these areas. These have been my personal karmic hurdles.)

1. Suppressed and/or Repressed Emotions

Humans are complex beings requiring an outlet for all the feelings we experience. The vast array of emotions was not something I was familiar with from childhood through my twenties. I remember vividly, when a spiritual advisor, and later as a dear friend, asked me how I felt about a significant death in my family. The best I could come up with at the time was, “bad.” He challenged me to be more specific. I grew uncomfortable with his pressing and asked him to provide a multiple-choice question. I thought if he could offer some emotions, I might recognize one of them.

This was in 1973, decades prior to the publications of *Emotional Intelligence* (1995) by Daniel Goleman; *The Language of Emotions*

(2010) by Karla McLaren; and *Permission to Feel* (2019); by Marc Brackett. I also did not have the benefit of emotion thought leader Robert Plutchik, Ph.D., (who developed a “*Psychoevolutionary Theory of Emotion*” and author of *Theories of Emotion* (1977). Multiple spin-offs of Dr. Plutchik’s “Wheel of Emotion”^{xxiv} are now popular and available. Perhaps if there had been an Emotion Wheel, with the current list of twenty-seven emotions, I would have been able to identify one of them that stirred inside of me.

(To be fair, emotions have been in the public domain for centuries. Just to name two, see Charles Darwin’s *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) and Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* from the fourth century BCE.)

Growing up in a Scandinavian household in the 1960’s where my father was 100% Norwegian assumed a set of attitudes and rules of conduct. This was best exemplified by the tenets of *Jante Law*. Aksel Sandemose included these tenets in his novel, *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*, (1933) as a satirical commentary on the people from his hometown and region of Norway. However, people from all over Scandinavia (as well as those who claim this as their ancestry) embrace this law. These tenets perfectly exemplify the ethics of my parents.

The tenets of Jante Law are:

- You shall not think you are special.
- You shall not believe you are smarter than others.
- You shall not believe you are wiser than others.
- You shall not behave as if you are better than others.
- You shall not believe that you know more than others.
- You shall not believe you can fix things better than others.
- You shall not laugh at others.
- You shall not believe that others care about you.
- You shall not believe that you can teach others anything.

In addition to these tenets, my parents joined a church which embraced German stoicism. As I pursued that church's pre-seminary education, I concluded that this theology was not a fit for me. My college professors emphasized the theology of law and justice and de-emphasized the importance of grace and the gift of unmerited and unconditional love.

All this is to say, emotions in the house I grew up in were not dwelt upon. But I also was the child of an alcoholic. My codependency coping mechanism had the effect of utterly shutting down any connection with my emotional life. So, when my Episcopal Church Priest, spiritual advisor, and friend asked me how I felt, I had no frame of reference and even if I had, there was simply a void where the emotion should have been.

As in the case with most behaviors and understandings, we find ourselves someplace on a continuum. In this case the range runs from total lack of emotional intelligence to being totally in touch with and having the ability to express emotions. I was on the far end of this spectrum. (For anyone reading this, if you find yourself identifying with my situation - or even if you just want to increase your emotional health, I strongly encourage you to start with Plutchik's *Emotion Wheel* and follow up with Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*.)

Emotional Intelligence Continuum

Low Emotional Intelligence

High Emotional Intelligence



No Awareness of Emotions *Able to Identify and Express Emotions*

This did not change for me until I turned thirty when I sought therapeutic help. My therapist, toward the end of a particularly grueling counseling session, asked me the question, "What do you want to see happen in your life?" The question startled me. No one had ever asked me this before. In fact, I had never asked the question of

myself. I had made every major decision in my life based on what I thought others wanted from me. She gave me reading material including a self-test on codependency. As I took the test at home, question after question drove the point home. As an adult child of an alcoholic, I was not left unscathed after all. I fit the textbook description of being codependent.

2. Anxiety

Anxiety is different from Stress or Distress. Contrary to popular understanding, there is a distinct difference between stress and anxiety. Stress comes from the pressures we feel in life, as we are pushed by work or any other task that puts undue pressure on our minds and body, adrenaline is released, extended stay of the hormone causes depression, a rise in the blood pressure and other negative changes and effects.

With anxiety, fear overcomes all emotions accompanied by worry and apprehension, making a person a recluse and a bagful of jitters. Other symptoms include chest pains, dizziness, shortness of breath, and panic attacks.

To reiterate:

Stress is a natural reaction to any change (called a stressor) attempting to adapt and return to normal or homeostasis. Stressors can be either pleasant or not.

Distress is the inability to adapt normally to the stressor leading to a chronic sustained stress reaction resulting in exhaustion. Both stress and distress are reactions felt after experiencing a stressor or stressors.

Anxiety is fear based and can occur often before a stressor is even experienced. It is fear of future stressors or a fear that a past stressor will reoccur. Anxiety can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, or even a spiral of negative outcomes and ever-growing fear.

“Stress responses are normal reactions to environmental or internal perturbations and can be considered adaptive in nature. Distress occurs when stress is severe, prolonged, or both.”

~NCBI, NLM, NIH. ^{xxv}

Stress is the way our bodies and minds react to something which upsets our normal balance in life; an example of stress is the response we feel when we are frightened or threatened. During stressful events our adrenal glands release adrenaline, a hormone which activates our body's defense mechanisms causing our hearts to pound, blood pressure to rise, muscles to tense, and the pupils of our eyes to dilate.

A principal indication of increased stress is an escalation in pulse rate; however, a normal pulse rate does not necessarily mean stress is absent. Constant aches and pains, palpitations, anxiety, chronic fatigue, crying, over- or under-eating, frequent infections, feelings of frustration or anger, and a decrease in sexual desire are signs of being under stress.

Stress does not always cause an extreme reaction, duress, or fear. Some people are more susceptible than others to stress; yet for others, even ordinary daily decisions seem insurmountable. Deciding what to have for dinner or what to buy at the store may be a monumental dilemma for them. On the other hand, there are those people, who seem to thrive under stress by becoming highly productive; driven by the force of pressure.

Research shows women with children have higher levels of stress related hormones in their blood than women without children. Does this mean women without children do not experience stress? Of course not! (And I would dare say, the presence of hormones notwithstanding, that the same is true for men with children having higher levels of stress than men without children. The focus by researchers when it comes to gender differences is often suspect.)

Anxiety is the feeling of apprehension or fear and is often accompanied by feelings of impending doom. The source of this uneasiness is not always known or recognized, which can add to felt distress. Anxiety is a feeling of unease. Everybody experiences it when faced with a highly stressful situation with increased uncertainty as to the outcome, for example before an exam or an interview, or during a worrying time such as an illness. It is normal to feel anxious when facing something difficult or dangerous and there are times when mild anxiety can be a positive and useful experience.

However, for many people, anxiety interferes with normal life. Excessive anxiety is often associated with other psychiatric conditions, such as depression. Anxiety is considered abnormal when it is very prolonged; or severe; or when it interferes with everyday activities such as going to work.

The physical symptoms of anxiety are caused by the brain sending messages to parts of the body to prepare for the “fight or flight” response. The heart, lungs, and other parts of the body work faster. The brain also releases stress hormones, including adrenaline. Common indicators of excessive anxiety include:

- Diarrhea
- Insomnia
- Irritability or anger
- Fear of being “crazy”
- Dry mouth
- Rapid heartbeat/palpitations
- Inability to concentrate
- Depersonalization

Anxiety can be brought on in many ways. Obviously, the presence of distress in can result in having anxious thoughts. Many people who suffer from anxiety disorders occupy their minds with excessive worry. This can be anything from health matters to job problems to world issues.

Certain drugs, both recreational and medicinal, can lead to symptoms of anxiety due to either side effects or withdrawal from the drug. Such drugs include caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, cold remedies, decongestants, bronchodilators for asthma, tricyclic antidepressants, cocaine, amphetamines, diet pills, ADHD medications, and thyroid medications.

A poor diet can contribute to stress or anxiety — for example, low levels of vitamin B12, food allergies, processed food, additives, and even sugar.

Performance anxiety is related to specific situations, like taking a test or making a presentation in public. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops after a traumatic event like war, physical or sexual assault, or a natural disaster.

In exceedingly rare cases, a tumor of the adrenal gland (pheochromocytoma) may be the cause of anxiety. This happens because of an overproduction of hormones responsible for the feelings and symptoms of anxiety.

Testing for Anxiety

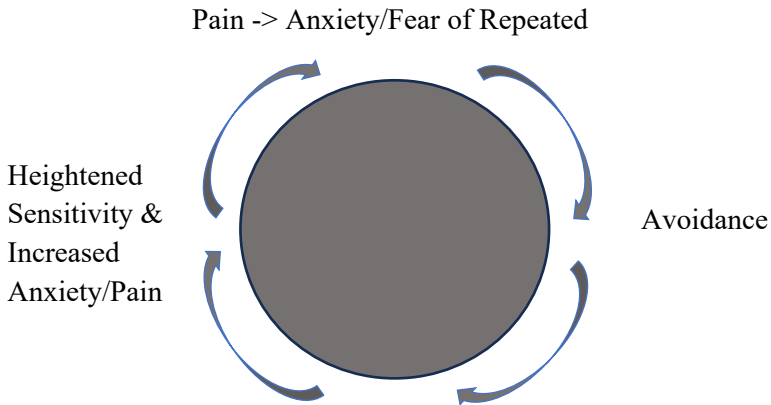
The Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale^{xxvi} (or HAM-A) is a widely used and well-validated tool for measuring the severity of a person's anxiety level. It should be administered by an experienced clinician. The major value of HAM-A is to assess the individual's response to a course of treatment, rather than as a diagnostic or screening tool. By administering the scale serially, a clinician can document the results of drug treatment or psychotherapy over time. The HAM-A probes fourteen parameters and takes 15-20 minutes to complete the interview and score the results.

“Fear is the most difficult emotion to handle. You cry the pain, you scream the anger, but fear is docked silently in your heart.”

~David Fischman

Anxiety (or Avoidance) Cycle

Any painful experience, whether physical, psychological, or emotional can be so traumatic that coping mechanisms are used to avoid this pain in the future. Pain triggers fear or anxiety; fear triggers avoidance coping mechanisms; resulting in satisfying yet temporary relief; which, inexorably, results in greater sensitivity and hyper vigilance which increases anxiety; greater anxiety makes pain more intense. The point is if fear is not faced, avoidance builds a house of cards which will ultimately come crashing down.



If left unchecked, the anxiety/avoidance cycle will become out of control until the origin of the anxiety producing pain increases, and anxiety on its own grows into a full-blown panic attack. The tactic of avoidance betrays us in the long term. Bobby McFerrin was right:

“...In every life we have some trouble, but when you worry you make it double...”

~Bobby McFerrin ^{xxvii}

(At the time of its release, a lot of people thought “Don’t Worry Be Happy” was just a silly song. But I will always be grateful. It calmed my overactive mind and provided much needed comfort at a time when I was consumed with worry.)

The most poignant quote I have ever encountered about fear taking on a life of its own was from President Franklin Roosevelt’s inaugural speech. He was attempting to calm the nation, which was still reeling from the Dust Bowl, the stock market crash, the Great depression, and an unemployment rate of 25%.

So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

~Franklin Delano Roosevelt ^{xxviii}

His words were authentic and informed. He knew from very personal experience the sheer grit it takes to face fear and pain, as twelve years earlier he battled back from paralysis caused by polio.

Gate Control Pain Theory

Published in *Science*, 1965, Ronald Melzack and Patrick D Wall, *Pain Mechanisms: A New Theory* introduced the *Gate Control Pain Theory*.^{xxix} They postulated that pain is modulated by the person’s mood, experience, environment, or context which, like an open or closed gate, either allows the pain in or shuts it out of the brain where the electrical signal is recognized and where the intensity is determined. Since then, other researchers have demonstrated that activity messages gain entry through the gate at the exclusion of pain messages. This has lent credence to the idea that exercise like walking will physiologically lessen or alleviate pain.

This allows someone with chronic or even phantom pain to find relief not through an avoidance coping mechanism but by doing something healthy like walking, swimming, or other types of physical activity. (Parenthetically, it was in the swimming pools at Warm Springs, Georgia where FDR exercised for his convalescence.)

Fear dissolves with conscious action and physical activity...by focusing on the now. Action keeps us in the present. This, along with regularly checking in with your innermost self, will not only eliminate accumulated stress but prepare you for future stress before it arises.

Thanatophobia: The Fear of Impending Doom

Every moment* is precious. Since childhood, I have been fearful of my moment of death. My vivid imagination has often placed me in the future...to my death moment. But the pandemic has given me a new kind of clarity: Do I sacrifice the moment I have right now to imagine and fear my future death moment? Or do I treasure each moment now and allow the future death moment to have its own experience; its own feeling; its own fulfillment. I am no longer a victim of this kind of thinking. Rather, it is a choice.

This choice is and has been a very real one for me. I have feared death so much, I have been obsessed with it to the point of morose and depressed distraction. But facing my mortality - in a healthier way, thanks to the pandemic, I choose to focus on the moment right now over a future death moment. I reject the fear that has distracted me so often before. And it occurs to me, as a result, I not only live more fully now; I also gain thousands, if not millions, of fully lived moments to reflect upon when my moment of death finally comes to be.

*[A moment (momentum) was a medieval unit of time. The movement of a shadow on a sundial covered 40 moments in a solar hour, a twelfth of the period between sunrise and sunset. The length of a solar hour depended on the length of the day, which, in turn, varied with the season. Although the length of a moment in modern seconds

was therefore not fixed, on average, a moment corresponded to 90 seconds. So historically, one moment equates to 90 seconds; which means there are 350,400 moments in one year; 3,504,000 moments in one decade; or 7,008,000 moments in 20 years.]

3. Depression

From someone's own perspective, no one, in my opinion, has described clinical depression better than the poet, Sylvia Plath. In *The Bell Jar* she explains the distortion of reality as everything is seen through the frame of having an inescapable negative self-image.

“...it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat - on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok - I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air.”

~Sylvia Plath ^{xxx}

Depression is not just feeling sad, although feeling sad is a symptom of depression. Allow me to use migraine headaches as a comparison. As someone who has been plagued with migraine headaches his entire life, it irks me when someone complains that an infrequent but painful headache is a migraine. I do not argue that their pain is not real, just that migraines, again like depression, are serious neurologic maladies requiring diagnosis and professional treatment. Just as it is true that not all bad headaches are migraines; it is also true that when someone occasionally feels sad, that limited experience does not define clinical depression. In the case of both migraines and depression, a combination of genetics, diet, sleep patterns, substantial changes in one's life, and psychological triggers can play a role.

In addition to debilitating and chronic sadness, depression also may include symptoms such as planning one's suicide, pain, foggy thinking, weight change, and remorse, among others.

Complicating depression, it is often accompanied by anxiety. A useful way of understanding their co-morbidity is to see the overlap of their symptoms.

“85% of patients with depression also experience significant symptoms of anxiety”^{xxvi}

4. Addiction

Dopamine is at the core of all addictions, whether that addiction is what we normally think of, such as addiction like alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, or new technologic addictions like social media, or video games. (To be clear, technologic addictions are not inevitable results of being avid participants in the same way social drinking does not inevitable result in alcoholism.)

Addictions are patterns of actions and thoughts we do out of habit which are less chosen as much as they are reinforced behaviors and supported biochemically and psychologically.

I am also including anything which is a nearly automatic response, many of which are typically recognized as positive behaviors. So, our morning routine; breakfast; coffee; who we interact with; how we interact; the work we do; the learning we undertake; the food we consume; our exercise regimen; meal preparation; and our evening routine may all be habits many of us repeat without much thought.

When it comes to repetitive behavior the question arises: “What are you getting out of this behavior or thought”? This is not always obvious, especially when either the action or the result is self-defeating or in some way harmful to the individual doing it. But it may be a little clearer today that we know more about the way the brain works. Now it is known that all addictive behaviors are reinforced with pleasure hormones including endorphins. Our brains manufacture pharmaceuticals when it comes to these pleasure hormones. We now

know, for example, that many runners, at a certain point in their workout get a boost in their feeling of pleasure about their running experience. These runners look for and experience this same pleasure with every run.

Interjection regarding the assumptions built into this discussion...

Start with a simple question: Is internal locus of control even possible? Is choice itself within our biological makeup? Within the field of *conscious will* there is a famous experiment put forth by Benjamin Libet, ^{xxxii} an American neuroscientist, in the 1980s which called into question whether we are capable of making choices at all. Libet demonstrated, by measuring the electrical change in the brain prior to the subject becoming aware of their urge to move a finger or wrist, that there was a moment of time preceding conscious awareness of the action which was about to happen when the choice had already been made unconsciously. His work, which has by now been largely called into question, ^{xxxiii} challenged the whole notion of free will.

Without free will, the ability to pick and choose from the options at one's disposal and without agency, the knowledge that the decisions made are one's own there is no opportunity to make a choice.

I mention in Chapter 10 that I had my own personal anecdotal unplanned experiment during the writing of this book. In May 2021, I had an episode of global transient amnesia where my memories and agency were stripped from me for a period of 24 hours. However, as witnessed by my family, while not being able to remember, I yet remained myself, authoring of my own choices, and made decisions freely between the options provided.

(As an aside, whether it's the lack of memory or if I was cut off from the sensations, it was the first time having an MRI that it wasn't a problem with regard to my having mild claustrophobia. It was a disconcerting experience but only after the fact.)

Internal LOC may be an illusion, but...

I wholeheartedly believe in having a sense of agency as well as free will but even if all the evidence suggests otherwise, there are some incredibly good reasons to *act as if* we are in control. This approach is to be in the moment and choose to reframe the events by seeing whatever choices one has and own the experience.

“Assume a virtue, if you have it not.”

~Shakespeare xxxiv

“Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.”

~William James xxxv

Illusion, Absurdity, or Paradox, and whether it matters.

Regarding being overwhelmed with information and how to navigate despite this, I am reminded of what a friend told his son when explaining how to best maneuver the family car as a new driver, “It’s impossible to process all the stimuli and variables coming at you when driving fast in heavy traffic. What you must do instead is focus on what you can control and block out everything else.”

When it comes down to how we live our lives it is best to “act as if” we are in control. I have a hypothesis: It’s true that we feel better if we (at least believe we) are in control. A few quite simple examples make my point...

...When my daughters were young, to get them to eat their vegetables, we presented them with this question: “Which would you rather use, your fork or your spoon?” There was no power struggle as a result. They were in control...they got to choose how they were going to eat their vegetables.

...When my father was blind in one eye due to glaucoma and was having near accidents with his car, for that and other reasons, we presented him with an opportunity, knowing how much he dearly

loved his grandchildren: “Dad, your granddaughter needs a car and neither she nor we (her parents) can afford to buy her one. If I promised to be your chauffeur at a moment’s notice for any trips to the store, doctor’s appointments, or any other trips you wanted, would you be willing to give her your car?” He never hesitated to hand over his keys thereby avoiding the whole issue of the danger his driving was presenting and without challenging his skill or ability. He saved face, stayed in control, and did something very generous.

...When my fear of flying was becoming a bigger and bigger issue when needing to travel for work I began to (discreetly) shake my legs, telling myself that it was I that was causing the vibrations felt and not the turbulence of the aircraft hurtling us through microbursts and wind shears. The only thing that really changed was reframing the cause.

In each case, my children, my father, and I framed the otherwise unpleasant experience in a way that made us at least feel more in control and more empowered.

Internal LOC or Self-Empowerment is a Conscious Choice

"Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right."^{xxxvi}

~Henry Ford

"Do... or do not. There is no try."

~George Lucas ^{xxxvii}

The affirmation quotes attributed to Ford and Lucas were helpful as I faced the daunting challenge of authoring this book. Retired and with only self-imposed deadlines, I once again faced self-doubts. I woke up one day, as I was immersed in this book, from a dream which incorporated what I had said to countless clients’ years before encouraging them to see themselves not as unemployed but already successful. "It was important in the job interview," I told them “To not

only state their interest in wanting the job but to proclaim they were the productive employee the employer was seeking." In most cases this was an "act as if" belief. It was important to squelch self-doubt to convince the interviewer (and just as importantly, themselves) to land the job and be successful.

I awoke from the dream with the words, "Don't say, 'You'll try;' say 'You're doing it.'" While in the dream I was talking to a former client but was really talking to myself.

By Choosing to “Act As If” we claim Control – and that Leads to Genuine Control

Here, let me introduce the value of a specific mindset which has helped many people achieve lofty goals. Sometimes it is a valuable approach to bolster oneself in order to build the confidence necessary to realize one's dream. It is the opposite of second guessing or having self-doubt. It is a kind of illusion; some would say delusion. It is self-deception. As demonstrated below, people who make it to the top of their profession or field first believe in themselves to the nth degree and then “act as if” or pretend they are in complete control well before they actually achieve their goal.

From Radiolab Podcast, Hosts Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, November 6, 2017 - *Lying to Ourselves...*

"We found a bizarre relationship. The fastest and most successful swimmers were the very same ones, on the (self-deception questionnaire ^{xxxviii} developed by Ruben Gur and Harold Sackeim), who lied to themselves.

~Joanna Starek ^{xxxix}

Krulwich goes on to say (many) successful athletes in a variety of sports share this self-deception ability.

The Olympic Athlete who is convinced they are invincible is the living embodiment of Yoda's and Henry Ford's quotes about achievement.

Ruben Gur and Harold Sackeim took their work a step further to suggest people who were happy were lying to themselves more than their contemporaries.

"Time and time again, researchers have found that depressed people lie less."

~Robert Krulwich

But lying to ourselves is not the only way to be empowered. There is plenty of evidence to suggest we have been on a steady path of improving our society....

How Distorted Reality Contributes to Mass External LOC

It is possible to follow the daily news to the point that you lose your objectivity. Headlines are usually not measured against historical statistics. That is not to say we should remain unaware or become desensitized to the pain and plight of others. Instead, I am suggesting we need to be vigilant about our news stories and to put these stories into their historical perspective.

"Doomscrolling and doomsurfing are new terms referring to the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing. Many people are finding themselves reading continuously bad news about COVID-19 without the ability to stop or step back."

~Merriam Webster

I've observed during the pandemic, people feeling less and less empowered. LOC is impacted when we only focus on the worst stories

of the day. And in this time of information explosion, we need filters: primary sources; fact checked news; & an historical perspective.

Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker makes this case brilliantly in his book, *Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism, and progress*. He builds the case that despite what one might glean from the news media, life is improving according to every measure.

As a society, we are guilty of making the same short conclusions we make as individuals, without context or perspective. As individuals, when we lose our job, we conclude this is the worst moment in our life and fear we will never find another. Similarly, when there is a spike in unemployment, we conclude there has never been a more devastating blow to the work force and fear as a society, we are headed toward breadlines worse than anything previously felt.

Pinker makes the case that despite horrible setbacks, civilization continues to experience a net improvement. In fact, in an interview he gave in 2018 he made a prescient comment which might help those fearing the worst as we redefine reality coming out the other end of the Covid19 pandemic,

“Progress is not the same as magic. There are always blips and setbacks, and sometimes horrific lurches, like the Spanish flu pandemic, World War II and the post-1960s crime boom. Progress takes place when the setbacks are fewer, less severe or stop altogether. ... Of course, life is bad for those people with the worst possible lives, and that will be true until the rates of war, crime, disease and poverty are exactly zero. The point is that there are far fewer people living in nightmares of war and disease.”^{x1}

~Steven Pinker

He suggests the sensationalism of news reporting, just by its improved ability to put its readers/viewers at the scene and even from the best of sources, has a blaring negativity bias. Comparing today with anything in the past, a nostalgic preference makes the news of the day come up short. In his Ted Talk from April 2018, he references the quote,

“Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory.”

~Franklin Pierce Adams ^{xli}

Consequently, without objective measures, we are left believing that the events and headlines have us on a downward spiral. He makes the case in his Ted Talk with three sets of statistics which, I would guess, surprise most people, including those who are regular news consumers. First he compares USA measures from 30 years ago to today.

	30 Years Ago	Today
Homicide Rate	8.5/100,000	5.3/100,000
Poverty Rate	12%	7%
Pollution Emission	35 m tons of particulate Matter & 20 tons of SO ₂	21 m tons of particulate Matter & 4 tons of SO ₂

He then compares world measures, again from 30 years ago to today.

	30 Years Ago	Today
Wars	23	12
Dictators	85	60
Extreme Poverty	37%	10%
Nuclear Arms	60,780	10,325

~Steven Pinker ^{xlii}

When we are in the middle of a terrible experience, it feels horrible, so horrible in fact that it is understandable that we lose all perspective. Considering this negativity bias, we begin to appreciate the historian's job of explaining events in context.

Challenge Exercise: Reality Check

This book is intended to challenge conventional wisdom and offer many suggestions on how to claim self-power. Interesting to me is what a tough pill Pinker's message is for many of my closest friends. These are like-minded and good-hearted people, but the idea that conditions are improving for the world's eight billion people seems a complete anathema.

So, here's the book's first suggested exercise: The next morning on a day you will be away from home, even if that will be for a walk in your neighborhood, first watch, listen, or read the day's news. Then before you leave home, take a reading of your view of the human. Ask yourself, "What is my expectation for my country, state, or community in the next year or five years?" I fully expect the prediction will not be an optimistic one. Then, after the news and after you ask yourself that question, leave the house and

put yourself out there...take a chance and greet a friendly stranger. You may not succeed the first time. Keep trying. When the greeting is returned, take another reading. Did your prediction change even a little?

So, which was the reality check: Watching the news?; or having a small meaningful connection?

This book is all about making choices. Our choices determine who we are. And I propose that every choice we make from the ones we make daily like, what we choose to eat; whether or not we exercise; or how much sleep we get...to the choices we make more long term like, who we spend our lives with, how we cope with our fears; what occupation we commit ourselves to....really has an existential quality. Each of these choices represents our saying yes or saying no to the life we have right in front of us.

Choices may be made arbitrarily but even that nebulous attitude is a choice. If a choice is not made deliberately then that too is a choice.

Limits are another dimension of choice. It is a fact of life that there are so many facets to our lives that we need to choose how much time to invest in each area. There are only so many hours in a day. The demands of family, vocation, self-care, friends, education, etc. make it difficult to excel at everything. So, prioritizing becomes one of the tools necessary to not become completely overwhelmed. When faced

with a primary goal we can become so distracted that our priorities get short changed. Carve out specific time to focus on each goal and do not allow anything to interfere with its accomplishment. I know, easier said than done. But sometimes we accomplish setting aside the time only to still feel overwhelmed by how big the task is. This gets to the heart of the message of this book.

CHOOSING

***Now or Later,
Past or Present;***

***Right or Wrong,
Lawful or Criminal;***

***Righteous or Sinful,
Ethical or Immoral;***

***Safe or Risky,
Peace or War;***

***Acquiescence or Resistance,
Rules or Anarchy;***

***Risk or Security,
One or Many;***

***Pleasure or Pain,
Healthy or Sick;***

***This or That,
All or Nothing;***

***Life or Death,
Yes or No.***

~JLS 1/16/2021

A Cold Hard Look at Mortality

There is nothing that will wake you up more to the harsh realities of life than a slap in the face. That is what the Covid-19 pandemic was for a great many of us, a cosmic slap. Initially, I felt the fight or flight response, which, in my case meant pouring excessive hours into work, house cleaning, meal planning and exercising. This was done to busy myself and to focus my attention away from the virus threat. This first response was exhausting. But this was not the unexpected part.

Once my adrenaline and stamina wore thin, I got over the urge of needing to be in constant motion. The threat did not feel any less dangerous but as I wore down, I began to think more deeply about my mortality.

When I think back to the beginning of 2020, life seemed unlimited and full of potential for a fresh new decade. It is funny how easy it is to make plans, have expectations, and forget that we all have an expiration date. I am now at that age when I think the following joke is more sound practical advice than a punchline:

“You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoelaces and wonder what else you could do while you're down there.”

~George Burns

Aside from heart disease and cancer, which are the leading causes of death in the United States, accidental deaths are also at the top (falls, traffic accidents and unintended poisoning). While that is a morbid thought, it is the reality we live with. But Covid19 awakened me to this fact even though I knew it was there all along. For me, it intensified because the danger now felt closer with constant reminders in my community and from the media.

When danger is felt, human survival instincts kick in, like how I initially experienced fight or flight in my need to be in constant

motion, but what is left afterward is the fear of loss: loss of past consistent comforts and normalcy we once knew; loss of innocent people we did not know and those we did; loss of loved ones; and loss even of ourselves. It is easy to feel panic, anger, and sadness when experiencing or fearing loss, but there is also power behind this fear, and we can pivot with it to reap an incredible benefit.

What if we leaned into fear and faced our mortality head on, allowing for something to unlock within us to be the greatest versions of ourselves? If the pandemic gave you this ongoing ephemeral awareness, like it has for me, this is our opportunity to begin feeling more alive, to live more fully not someday, but today.

Today you can love deeper; say more meaningful things you don't want to leave unsaid; take better care of yourself so you have more energy to thrive; stand up for yourself and others; be brave to stand confidently in your skin; be kind to others in your life; be generous with your time and resources to help those in need; help others when you're able; be accountable when life asks you to take care of your responsibilities; learn something new; appreciate and respect nature; laugh so hard you snort or cry; put your heart into the things you aim to achieve; love yourself for who you are; and feel thankful for the life you are experiencing.

We may not be able to control the threats we face, but we can live deeper in spite or even because of it. You have the will to be your best, why not use today's fear as the motivation to be the wind in your sails, to add positive balance to your life, and to live more fully?

Small Tasks/Small Successes

You have heard the adages before: “A trip of a thousand miles begins with the first step;” or “To eat an elephant, you start by eating the tail.” While these truths may seem obvious and even trite, there’s great practicality and wisdom in these sayings. Here is why.

First, just where do you start when faced with a huge task - after getting over the feeling of being completely and utterly overwhelmed? You start with the simplest, fastest, or smallest component. For instance, when building a house, you start by surveying the land you are building on; making sure there is access to power and water; determining which way the house should face; figuring out how much square footage you want; how much money you have to work with; drawing up the plans; and so on. In other words, there are actually many tasks for any large project. Break down the gigantic goal into its smaller components; put them into some sort of order; and then pick out one of the starter tasks that is doable in the short term.

Second, once an initial single task is completed you gain a sense of accomplishment; the feeling of being on track; having momentum; and gain the confidence which spurs you on to the next task and then the next. The greatest predictor of future behavior is past behavior. And the greatest motivator for success is previous success.

Understanding these two suppositions are the bedrock of this book. Everything is built upon this, and research backs it up.

Values & Important Issues

While speaking of the building blocks upon which the rest of this book rests, I need to interject a few personal biases.

Ethics

We need a foundation of dos and don'ts which describe values to stay on a morality-based track. It is not enough to decide on goals and the strategies to achieve them. I suggest we must do so ethically.

Following seminary training and while taking business management master's level classes in accounting, economics, and statistics at the University of Minnesota in the 1980's, I asked my professor the following question, "Where does the topic of business ethics enter into this class?" The answer I was given was, "It doesn't." Alarmed, I consulted a different trusted professor who encouraged me

to survey the leading CEOs within the Twin Cities Fortune 500 companies on the importance of ethics in their business practices. One by one, I sat down with these business leaders, who generously and eagerly shared the challenge they each faced - to somehow communicate to their managers the need to run their organizations with the same honor and integrity they had when they had founded or began their enterprise.

Gratefully, there is a satisfying end to this story. Years later, when I chanced to meet with one of the CEOs in my new capacity as Executive Director for a nonprofit, I mentioned that we had met before when I interviewed him for my survey. He not only remembered me, but he also provided me with an update of which I was not aware. After our conversation years earlier he, unbeknownst to me, he used his influence and implemented a much-needed correction at the University. Business Ethics is now properly a part of the University of Minnesota's business management curriculum.

All this is to say, the tools we use must be learned within the context of real-world morality to better ensure that we and the organizations we serve are good citizens.

Personal Integrity

Developing one's identity requires confronting fundamental questions: "Who am I?;" and "Who are you?;" and equally fundamental affirmations: "You matter!;" and "What you do matters!"

Our time on this planet is brief. So, our opportunity to make a difference is precious. Far too often our actions and words are inconsistent and disconnected. We need a North Star to guide our thinking. We require a moral compass to be consistent and to have integrity.

The best example I am aware of as a moral compass developed out of a life of self-reflection is, Albert Schweitzer's life motto, "Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben" or "Reverence for Life."

“The ethics of reverence for life, therefore, includes within itself all that can be called love, devotion, compassion, joy, and endeavor.”

xlili

~Albert Schweitzer

This was developed as an ethical maxim for all life at every age and in every circumstance. This held Dr. Schweitzer to a code of higher thinking, speaking and conduct. His life was a model of personal integrity.

I’ve taken the liberty to list a few dos and don’ts to better explain “Reverence for Life.”

Do not commit acts of:

- Violence or Abuse
- Corruption or Dishonesty
- Racism and Oppression
- Destruction and Waste

Do commit your life to:

- Liberty
- Freedom
- Assistance for Poverty & Homelessness
- Local and World Peace
- Universal access to Education
- Universal access to Clean Water
- Justice
- Climate Protection
- Human Rights & Civil Justice
- Fair Housing
- Universal access to Nutrition
- Universal access to Health Care

Newfound Commitment - a side effect of the 2020 pandemic and the injustices it laid bare.

For many, 2020 was a wake-up call. Complacency was not an option. Our very survival depended on becoming more aware of our individual and community health and well-being. While the poem, *The Birthday of the World* by Marge Piercy was written fourteen years

prior to the pandemic and the death of George Floyd, its message seems perfectly suited and expresses a newfound commitment to be better citizens.

The Birthday of the World

**On the birthday of the world
I begin to contemplate
what I have done and left
undone, but this year
not so much rebuilding**

**of my perennially damaged
psyche, shoring up eroding
friendships, digging out
stumps of old resentments
that refuse to rot on their own.**

**No, this year I want to call
myself to task for what
I have done and not done
for peace. How much have
I dared in opposition?**

**How much have I put
on the line for freedom?
For mine and others?
As these freedoms are pared,
sliced and diced, where**

**have I spoken out? Who
have I tried to move? In**

**this holy season, I stand
self-convicted of sloth
in a time when lies choke**

**the mind and rhetoric
bends reason to slithering
choking pythons. Here
I stand before the gates
opening, the fire dazzling**

**my eyes, and as I approach
what judges me, I judge
myself. Give me weapons
of minute destruction. Let
my words turn into sparks.**

~Marge Piercy^{xliv}

Changing Behavior

Among the toughest of personal challenges is changing habits and mindsets. Just ask anyone who has tried to quit smoking or lose weight. Conventional wisdom has suggested it is necessary to replace old patterns with new ones for a month. As it happens, neuroscience backs that up.^{xlv}

Once a neural pathway is repeated over and over you create a powerful reward system for the new habit. According to Reinforcement Theory (or Operant Conditioning) a newly learned behavior which becomes a habit is achieved relative to its recurrent reward (or consequence). So, sustained, and reinforced behaviors will successfully extinguish and replace the old ones, resulting in the desired change.

To change any unwanted conduct, one needs first to determine the behavior which is no longer wanted; then decide to alter the

[antecedent + behavior = consequence] pattern; provide a substitute behavior; and then commit to repeating that behavior methodically every day for a month to create a new neural pathway pattern.

Challenge Exercise: Add a Healthy New Habit

A suggested second exercise: Add one of these tasks upon waking every day for seven days:

(I've offered a number of options in case you're already doing one or more already.)

Take three deep breaths with eyes closed; Think of three things for which you are grateful;

Stretch and touch your toes three times; or assume the superhero position for 30 seconds.

After one week, decide whether this habit was worth continuing?

Were you surprised at how such a simple addition could signal a more positive attitude?

Was this a success; and if so, did it leave you feeling empowered?

Changing our mindset to be happy

To be clear, there are multiple strata of happiness including: hedonistic immediate gratification; ego satisfying recognition; meaningful or purposeful contributions; and profound connection and devotion to a higher power. All of these have their place with the final two being the most enduring and substantive. We can choose happiness...but it takes a concerted effort.

“It appears that the way people perceive the world is much more important to happiness than objective circumstances.”

~Ed Diener, Ph.D. ^{xlvi}

At the 2008 Association for Psychological Science (APS) 20th Annual Convention Diener identified five factors that contribute to happiness: social relationships, temperament/ adaptation, money, society and culture, and positive thinking styles. The recipe for happiness requires a combination of measured ingredients. While my recipe is slightly different, these pantry staples and more is what follows.

Some would challenge the idea of happiness as being pollyannaish, unrealistically optimistic. But I suggest it is a necessary survival skill and one that empowers even when the world seems to be crashing all around. The song which best articulates this is *Smile*, which asks the listener to believe better times are ahead.

SMILE

Smile, though your heart is aching

Smile, even though it's breaking

When there are clouds in the sky you'll get by

If you smile through your fear and sorrow

Smile and maybe tomorrow

You'll see the sun come shining through for you

Light up your face with gladness

Hide every trace of sadness

Although a tear may be ever so near

That's the time you must keep on trying

Smile what's the use of crying

You'll find that life is still worthwhile, If you'll just Smile

~Charles Chaplin; John Turner; & Geoffrey Parsons. ^{xlvii}

Logotherapy

More sobering, Viktor Frankl developed an entire psychotherapy theory known as logotherapy which survived one of the hardest real-life tests, his and his fellow prisoners' experience surviving Nazi concentration camps. At the heart of his therapeutic model is his observation that we are motivated by life's meaning and purpose even amid misery. For him and others, meaning could be found in the moment of suffering itself if it fortified one's spirit; in their past experiences of communion and joy; or in their hope for a better future.

"Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how.'

"...In some ways suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice."

~Viktor E. Frankl

Compare the three Viennese Schools of Psychotherapy: Frankl's "Will to Meaning," suggesting humans strive to find meaning in life; Freud's "Will to Pleasure," suggesting humans strive to fulfill our most primitive urges; and Adler's "Will to Power," suggesting humans (and in particular, men) strive to control and rule over others. I agree with Frankl's statement...

"Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning.

~Viktor E. Frankl

Milliseconds

Events and their emotional response can play havoc in our decision making. Worse yet is when we habitually train ourselves to make bad decisions to avoid painful feelings and in the process cause harm to ourselves and others.

A good friend of mine ran an organization which provided divergent options for violent offenders in the court systems of Minnesota and Wisconsin. Instead of being sentenced to jail-time these convicted offenders could elect to go through specialized anger management treatment. This included class-time as well as group and individual therapy. A key lesson had to do with what happens directly following an upsetting trigger (or stimulus). Most of these people had trained their minds to rapidly move through unpleasant feelings directly to rage. The anger management training and counseling utilized the plasticity of the brain to help clients interrupt their past pattern and provide options other than rage and its resulting violence.

The process went something like this...the therapist would remind the participant of an upsetting trigger and then present them with tools to interrupt the “jump to violence” response. First, they were reminded of the actual consequences of their previous rage experience. Consequential memories included the sound of police sirens; being constrained by handcuffs; having their fingers inked and printed; the sound of the jail door slam shut; seeing the bars on the door and windows; the taste and smell of the food they received; and the cold touch of the prison bars or locked doors. These negative sensory experiences were heightened and associated with their last bout of rage and now these memories serve as a stop sign to dissuade them from moving so quickly to rage and violence in the future.

Additionally, the participants were encouraged to more fully experience the emotions which they had previously jumped past. For example, after they were reminded of an upsetting trigger like being

insulted by a relative; instead of immediately becoming aggressively angry; they allowed themselves to feel the resulting embarrassment and hurt. Previously, they had learned to block painful emotions by moving to an offensive posture. Now, they allowed these feelings to wash over them until they calmed down.

Practicing these choices in the classroom and in therapy allowed them to be better prepared when faced with real world triggers. We have only milliseconds to keep emotions from making our decisions for us.

The organization's recidivism rate averaged 20% versus the national average of 80%. The pattern interrupt tools along with 1:1 counseling was hugely successful for this population. Note: To be fair, it is also true that this group of men were self-selected and had the financial resources to pay for their treatment. The court ordered the offenders to pay for their own treatment partly to increase the participant's ownership of their therapy. ^{xlviii}

Thankfully, most of us are wired to handle stressful situations without jumping directly to rage or becoming violent. That was possible for most of the violent offenders referred to above as well. But in their case, they just needed to be coaxed into reframing their situation and expanding their behavioral responses. However, there are some people who are more prone to aggression and violence due to a dysfunction in their neural circuitry of emotion regulation. They are capable of being helped by the training offered by organizations like my friend's but there is no emotional safety net to be built upon. ^{xlix}

The CHOICES Model - Before we get down to business...

“Everything can be taken from a man (sic) but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

~Viktor E. Frankl

Going forward, the premise is that each of us, even if we are greatly limited, has the personal power to choose how we will utilize our time, resources, and strengths.

Yes, it is true we cannot use what we do not have at our disposal. But it is also true that what we do possess is ours to do with as we please.

I can already hear some objections, “I have responsibilities - Some choices have already been made for me. As a parent, for example, going to work and/or caring for my family already occupies most of my time. Exactly when am I supposed to be free to make choices? They have already been made. I’m lucky just to manage my daily life.”

Whoever you are, I maintain that there are small choices you are already making every day. Start with those. Make the absolute best ones for yourself and for your family. I observe my oldest daughter who is now a mother of three children who have or are about to reach adulthood and see the good choices she’s made and compare those to the ones I made as a father when she was small. Order and discipline seemed important to me when I was a young father. I observe she and my son-in-law had better priorities. I chose to have an orderly house and butted heads with my daughters too often. They, on the other hand, chose to share cooking and play time. This, to my younger self, would have looked like chaos. But to them it is quality family time with fewer contests of wills.

The point is that given the same family obligations with the same constrictions of time, the choices we make - just in this one example - can be qualitatively different.



Deep roots provide a source for sustenance, strength, and structure.

Quality of Life [QoL] (Definition)

“Overall enjoyment of life : general well-being”

~Merriam Webster

Quote about QoL

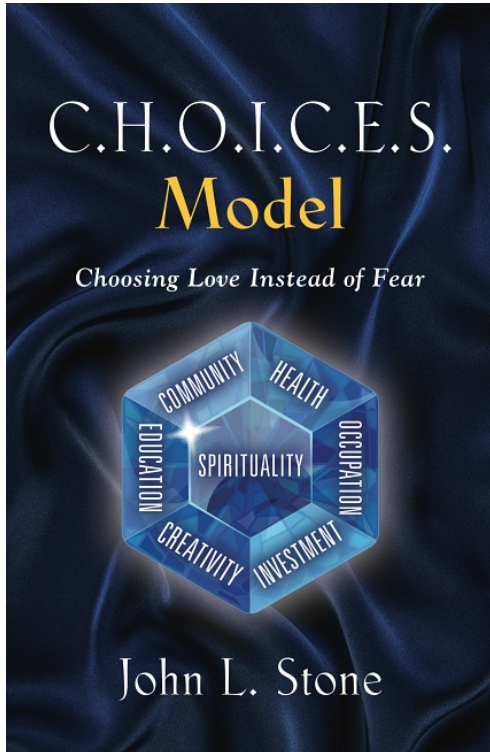
“Our job is improving the quality of life, not just delaying death.”

~Robin Williams

“The quality of life is determined by its activities.”

“[The hu]man is a goal-seeking animal. [Their] life only has meaning if [s/]he is reaching out and striving for [their] goals.”

~Aristotle



The CHOICES Model provides a way to take back control away from feeling overwhelmed by identifying seven areas about which we already make decisions every single day. The more we do this consciously, the greater our sense of wellbeing.

C.H.O.I.C.E.S. Model: Choosing Love Instead of Fear

By John L. Stone

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