

The Ocean Within

Understanding Human Nature and Ourselves
to Achieve Mental Well-Being

*Book 1 in the
If Humanity Is an Ocean Series*



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Lotus Stream Publishing LLC



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Dedication

To my nieces and nephew, Thao-Vy (Kayla), Tuan (Ethan), and Ngoc-Vy (Emily): your simple existence has brought immeasurable light and joy to your family. May you grow up to be wise, kind, and strong individuals.

To all children, both inner and young, may you find love, safety, and guidance to help you thrive.
May you be the light unto this world.

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Preface



You might wonder, “Who is this person to write a book on humanity and self-understanding?”

I am a clinical child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist who sees patients daily for both medication management and psychotherapy in my private practice. My path toward psychiatry wasn’t straight-forward. I was born in Vietnam and came to the U.S. when I was ten. My parents didn’t tell us we were emigrating until a couple of months before we flew out, and I remember the shock when I first saw a water fountain at the airport. So many little mysteries or cultural differences were fascinating. Arriving in the U.S., we lived in a small public housing facility with red bricks, barred windows, and metallic mesh doors near Grant Park in Atlanta, Georgia. Jetlagged, I didn’t sleep well that first night, and I remember looking out the window into the empty road with its harsh yellow streetlights around 3 a.m., amazed and nervous at this new life in a new country, wondering how our future would play out.

Reflecting on my journey, I was naturally introverted, and when faced with a new language in a new country with a new culture, I effectively became mute and deaf, which shoved me further into super-introverted territory. To compensate, I naturally observed and listened more to other people’s behaviors and emotions for clues on how to best interact with them. The U.S. is described as a melting pot, or tossed salad, with many different racial groups, ethnicities, cultures, backgrounds, and other identities. Everyone is aware of the differences, sometimes celebrated as “diversity” while at other times used as

ammunition. What intrigues me is the underlying similarities between us all despite our differences. Is there a common root that connects us all? If each of us is a unique water droplet, is there an underlying ocean that gives us forms?

I didn't speak English then, except for the phrases "I don't know" and "I don't speak English," so starting fourth grade with such a limited vocabulary was tough. I did well in math, thanks to its universal language, but consistently failed all other classes. I remember doing social studies homework with a massive textbook on the table accompanied by a gigantic English-to-Vietnamese dictionary on the side, trying to translate every single word, then trying to understand the meaning of each sentence, then struggling to compile all of that information into large paragraphs for the overarching sense. My intention was sincere, but the exercise felt futile. I felt like Sisyphus, in Greek mythology, condemned to push a stone up a steep hill only to have it roll down when I got near the top. I remember the intense frustration culminating in tears at this seemingly hopeless task. Yet day by day, week by week, and month by month, perseverance eventually paid off. I started getting straight A's near the end of fifth grade and continued to do well academically through middle and high school.

My parents came to the U.S. with a few large suitcases and \$200 in their pockets. Speaking so little English, they worked manual labor jobs with low pay their entire lives. In eleventh grade, I intentionally flunked my science essay application to the Georgia Governor's Honor Program, a residential summer program for high school students, so I could work at McDonald's to earn money over that summer to support my family. My science teacher who nominated me probably figured it out if she saw my essay with uncharacteristic illegible handwriting and barely

sensible answers. Still, we never really talked about it except for the expected condolences. This stark financial reality limited my college choices, forcing me to only consider in-state schools thanks to the Hope Scholarship. Thankfully, I was accepted to the Georgia Institute of Technology (GA Tech) for an early decision.

I wanted a career related to the human mind, but attaining a psychology PhD or psychiatry MD would take nearly another decade after college, and I knew my family would benefit from financial support sooner rather than later, so I picked engineering instead. However, I intentionally chose the field most involved with people—industrial and systems engineering (ISyE), otherwise known as “imaginary engineering,” by “hard” engineering disciplines such as electrical or mechanical schools. Because ISyE involves more human interaction, many ISyE graduates eventually pursue an MBA to climb the management ladder to oversee other engineers. Around my sophomore year at GA Tech, the ISyE program made a black T-shirt that read “Imaginary Engineer” on the front and “IMAGINE ME AS YOUR BOSS” on the back with bold white letters.

Industrial and Systems Engineering principles focus on examining systems, any systems, to understand their individual components, the interaction, the flow, the synergy, and the blockage to minimize waste and optimize efficiency. This core principle of systemic thinking serves me well in psychiatry to understand my patients and the systems inside and outside of them. It allows me to appreciate psychotropic medications as only one part of a much bigger system and to invest time and effort to comprehend not only the psychological labyrinth but also the family, social, economic, cultural, religious, and environmental systems.

Along with a growing interest in psychology, sociology, and philosophy during college, I started to learn about meditation. Many of us search for a sense of identity, especially around our college years, and crave to understand life's meaning and our purpose in the grand scheme of things. This desire has become a never-ending journey for me because those questions led me to switch from ISyE to psychiatry and the genesis of this book. I have to credit meditation for silencing the noise and calming the agitation enough to realize that I would never be fulfilled working for an industry that maximized profit for a corporation. In the calming silence, I felt strong guidance pulling me toward healthcare to directly help people, specifically psychiatry, to be closer to the mind. The path to becoming a clinical child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist took twelve years: three years of taking prerequisite classes, studying for the MCAT, finding time to shadow physicians, volunteering at a hospice, applying to medical schools, and attending interviews—all while holding down a full-time engineering job—followed by four years of medical school, three years of general psychiatry residency, and two years of child and adolescent fellowship.

In choosing industrial and systems engineering and then psychiatry, I knew I had chosen the “softest” branches from the rigorous “hard science” trees of engineering and medicine. While most engineers and doctors have no issues with these “softer” options, some scoff at my choices and look down on these disciplines. For those who love science to be as clear-cut, precise, and black-and-white as possible, the human mind is anything but clear-cut. The complex, fluid, and fiery nature of the human mind and emotions is not as easily pinned down for analysis as physical symptoms. Every day I interact with patients, I continue to hone my understanding of the human psyche. I hope to share

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that understanding in this book with anyone interested in delving deeper into the human mind and improving mental health.

Introduction



The Ocean Within

If humanity is an ocean, we are all connected to one another despite our differences in sex, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or religious belief. We are unique water droplets pinched off the primordial ocean, individual but still connected. Our complexity makes us an ocean within ourselves. We unite in our humanity not only through shared moments of laughter and joy but also in the solitude of tears and suffering; our pain connects us, our loneliness bonds us, and our struggle strengthens us. We all experience the ups and downs of life, the joy and suffering of existence. Our lives are awash with emotions, the interplay of desire, aspirations, loss, and disappointment.

Positive and negative emotions are a natural part of life. However, when the negative emotions spike in intensity, anger becomes deadly, anxiety turns debilitating, depression deepens into hopelessness, and emotional pain hides in drug misuse. Negative emotions can be as detrimental to our well-being as a broken leg or chronic physical disease. Mental health is real and consequential for everyone in every culture. However, talking about mental health or seeing a counselor, therapist, psychologist, and especially psychiatrist still carries a negative or even shameful connotation. Hence, the purpose of this book is to shed more light on mental health concepts and to normalize human emotions so we can grow more knowledgeable and comfortable in managing them.

As an outpatient child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist, I have the privilege of speaking to many people and their families about

life's hopes and struggles. In severe cases, negative emotions can impair life's functioning, leaving us with low motivation, poor sleep, changes in appetite, impaired concentration, and adversely affecting home life, social connections, and academic or occupational achievements. Extreme negative emotions can lead to self-harming and suicide or even manifest as debilitating hallucinations, usually called "psychosis" or "breaking from reality." Addressing the ramifications of trauma, depression, anxiety, and anger are the most common issues for outpatient psychiatrists, though cases of bipolar disorder or schizophrenia also appear now and then. To truly help my patients, especially when the treatment potentially involves psychotropic medication for children, I seek to fully understand the person in front of me, considering all the complexity of their biology, psyche, and situation.

The Knowledge to Thrive

My philosophy in assisting my clients on their path to wellness is neatly encapsulated by the simplified cover image of this book.

Figure 1: Lotus Stream Psychiatry Logo



The lotus flower symbolizes the serenity and resilience that grows from the mud, pushes through the resistance, emerges beyond the water's surface, and beautifully thrives in the

sunlight. Like a lotus, most of us strive to rise above the unfortunate circumstances of our stories, develop understanding and control of our emotions, and create joy and success despite the limitations life imposes upon us. Our emotions are like a stream of water; they can run deep or shallow, be still or turbulent, transparent or opaque, cleansing or toxic, hot or cold. Feelings can be tricky to gauge and challenging to decipher what's truly underneath. The blue stream is also connected to the concept of "stream of consciousness": freely flowing, open, unhindered, honest, devoid of pretentiousness and facades. The semi-circular shape wrapping around the lotus is a Japanese concept called "enso," representing tranquil imperfection: being at peace with our imperfections and finding beauty in them.

The human mind is an ever-shifting multi-layer labyrinth, and therefore, it is easy to get lost in it for years or even a lifetime. The blessing and curse of psychiatry is that we have psychotropic medications that can help with specific symptoms. However, if the treatment is overly focused on just symptom management, prescribing medications can present false hope and distract the crucial effort to address the underlying issues.

Since I have a natural interest in the human psyche, I am incredibly blessed, though not haphazardly, to have a career that deals with human emotions, thoughts, and perspectives daily. As my patients and I develop a trusting relationship to work on their journey toward self-understanding, the pieces of their puzzle start to fit together to tell a complex but coherent and nuanced story. With understanding, support, and effort, we can achieve lasting improvements through a holistic treatment approach. It is a fantastic reward to witness the growth in my

patients that positively affects the trajectory of their lives, knowing that I have played a part in it.

With more encounters, I realize that the concepts innate to me as I live and breathe in the mental health field can be entirely foreign to others, especially when mental health issues usually bear a stigma worse than physical health issues. People generally don't mind sharing their ailments of high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels but tend to hesitate in admitting their struggle with depression or anxiety to their loved ones and sometimes even to themselves. Mental health is consequential and impactful, influencing our thinking, perspectives, beliefs, moods, speech, behaviors, and habits. Despite our advancement in science and technology, human emotions and primary motivations still drive us, whether we know it or not. The shared foundation beneath our individuality should be examined and understood as it pertains to our lives, the wider society, the lives around us, and the whole world.

As a psychiatrist, I am a doctor who prescribes, a therapist who counsels, a life coach who guides, and ultimately, someone who seeks to understand the reality of the human psyche. I have witnessed the positive results that come from my work with many people, but unfortunately, not everyone can afford their own personal psychiatrist. My goal with this book is to speak directly to anyone curious about human consciousness, human nature, or simply "humanity," and anyone who might want help addressing their mental health issues.

Disclaimer: Please note that the messages in this book DO NOT constitute medical advice, as therapeutic recommendations must be tailored to an individual's

circumstances through an established doctor-patient relationship.

Since the art and science of psychotropic medication prescription need direct and customized psychiatric services, I will focus this book more on the psychological aspect of mental health. If money isn't a limiting factor, we could also avail ourselves of expensive, tailored diagnostic tests that scan our brains and examine the details of our biomarkers to provide specific recommendations about lifestyle changes, nutrition, and supplements. However, most of us would do fine by developing a healthy practice of regular exercise, a health-conscious diet, and good sleep hygiene. These are the foundation for good physical health and are interconnected to good mental health.

Ultimately, each of us must learn to be our own therapist and have the courage to ask for help when needed. How we manage our emotions and confront life's challenges will shape our reality and emanate a distinct vibe within our sphere of influence, especially for those closest to us. If our mind is peaceful and loving, our sphere of influence will radiate a tranquil sanctuary. If our mind is conflicted and angry, our sphere of influence will project a war zone despite how hard we try to suppress it.

Meditating on the knowledge and experiences I've come across, I seek to synthesize an ambitious but comprehensive understanding of humanity that can serve as a skeletal framework capable of incorporating new information and discovery. I hope you are also interested in developing a comprehensive and coherent knowledge of humanity derived from your experiences, instincts, observations, and analysis. Use this book as one of the stepping stones toward that endeavor. As

we understand ourselves and humanity better, we can make wiser choices about the management and direction of our lives.

Understanding the Individual and the Collective

This book aims to analyze and understand humanity, which includes each of us individually and all of us collectively; it would be best if you read this book from two different levels of perspective. The first perspective, the most natural and instinctual, is to examine all concepts from your point of view. This includes all your personal experiences. Ask yourself, “How does this concept apply to me?” “Have I experienced this in my life?” “How is it similar and different?” and “What lessons can I take from this?”

Some experiences also include our identities: nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, sex, orientation, socioeconomic level, religion/spirituality, political belief, etc. All these identifications anchor us in a particular spot in the ocean of humanity. We naturally group together for solace and to bolster our existence. On one side, it binds us in camaraderie and belonging, but on the other, it can divide “us” from “them”; people on one island regard people on a different island as weird, wrong, or inferior. However, if we are trapped in one spot, we cannot venture out and truly explore the vast breadth and depth of the ocean.

The second perspective, which is rather sophisticated, is to abandon identifications and assume the view of all humanity. You must let go of your restricted viewpoint, courageously leaving your island to dive into the ocean. Transcend the individuality to fathom the collective. Imagine that you are a therapist to all of humanity. Anyone from any background and identification is your client, seeking your help in good faith. Your job is to understand and help this person, who is entirely

different from your anchor in the ocean of humanity. If you hold tightly onto your perspective and belief, you will fail to truly comprehend the individual as you project your biases onto their identity and story. Cultural and circumstantial backgrounds beyond your experience might seem so foreign that you try to box this stranger into your familiar comfort zone. Instead of understanding and helping, you are misunderstanding and harming.

Another approach to implementing this collective perspective is to assume that you are an extraterrestrial alien interested in examining humanity without allegiance or attachment to any specific human construct. You are here trying to understand this two-legged species dominating the Earth and everything on it.

How to Use This Book

I strove to keep this book accessible and enjoyable for everyone, intentionally avoiding medical jargon or loading it like a heavy academic paper. You can and definitely should always do your own research to double-check and learn more about specific concepts that interest you.

In Part I, we will examine our physical drives, such as hunger, thirst, and shelter, and then move on to psychological needs, such as safety, connection, and competence. The combination of physical and psychological needs creates the foundational circle of needs that helps explain human motivation and behavior.


In Part II, we'll investigate the rationality and expression of emotions as they relate to the fulfillment or deprivation of our circle of needs. Along the way, we'll also explore the synergy that engenders romantic love and the play of sex. At this point, you'll see how our biological human design relates to our more

significant meaning and purpose. This leads us to Part III, where we'll ponder the enigmatic nature of consciousness and the factors that feed into vices and virtues.

In Part IV, you'll find specific recommendations for managing emotions and improving mental well-being. We will explore the concept of mindfulness and the mind-body connection before confronting the inevitable and universal imperfections of life, such as death, imperfect circumstances, and imperfect people. The application of mindfulness to imperfection leads us to lessons about appreciating all those moments and how to express love.

Finally, in Part V, we work through the painstaking exercise of re-evaluating our identities and values, striving toward a more accurate assessment with insight and compassion. We'll explore the values of anchoring our identity in the triad of wisdom, kindness, and strength. Finally, we'll revisit the circle of needs, figuring out a healthy way to address these needs, thereby completing the cycle of our journey.

As you read each chapter, synthesize your own comprehensive system to understand yourself and humanity. You likely already have ideas and a system of belief about people. The goal is to create a coherent system that can help explain people's behavior, whether you see them in your daily life, in the news, or even in the movies. When you hear life advice from other people, how does it stand against your current belief system? If you find wisdom in their advice, how can you incorporate it into your system?

Note: Throughout the book, you will see this symbol . These self-awareness prompts invite you to pause and

reflect on your life, experience, ideas, and philosophy. Take time to reflect deeply on the topic and how it relates to you. PLEASE SLOW DOWN TO PAUSE AND REFLECT. If you treat this book as a sprint, you might get some interesting knowledge, but knowledge without application isn't very useful. Treat the reading of this book as a journey of self-reflection, discovery, and creation. If you move fast, you might also feel overwhelmed with too much information. Take time to reflect, ponder, and reshape your internal beliefs. To help with this endeavor, you can also purchase the companion workbook to methodically work through your own reflections.

Finally, we can only understand humanity fully by touching upon some highly charged topics. For this reason, I have split my original writing into two separate books. This first book focuses on understanding humanity at the individual level and what we can learn to improve our personal lives; it's meant to be informative and inspirational. The second book, *A Letter to My Love: An Honest Philosophical and Metaphysical Perspective on Humanity*, in the *If Humanity Is an Ocean* series, will build on these fundamental concepts to examine humanity collectively and how we interact with one another and the surrounding systems; it will be a more complex and searing discussion. At the very least, I hope you can gain helpful information from reading the first book without touching the second if it's too controversial.

PART I

The Strings That Compel Us



If humanity is an ocean, how do you gauge its depth and grasp its vastness? The human mind is complex because, like the ocean, it is difficult to fathom what lurks beneath. It consists of multiple layers that drive our motivation and actions—some are obvious, while others are deeply hidden.

So, we examine our most basic needs then move to the more complicated ones. No one layer is more important than another. The key to understanding humanity and, therefore, ourselves is to comprehend all the layers and how their synergies drive our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and behavior. But to see the layers, we must first understand the “strings” that pull on us like puppets or musical “strings” that play intoxicating melodies compelling us to dance in a frenzy.

As much as we love to believe in complete free will to exert autonomy, contemplating these strings can help us understand our drives better. Understanding the push, pull, and compulsion will help explain why we do what we do and how much influence they have over our choices. Whether you prefer to visualize them as the strings of a puppet or an instrument, close your eyes and imagine running your finger along a string. Imagine the toughness, tautness, and sharpness that might cut your fingertip. In the following chapters, we will try to feel these strings one at a time, like puppets attempting to feel their own strings.

CHAPTER 1

Sustaining Life: This Body Needs to Survive



The first string that drives behavior originates from the physical body. Our physical needs anchor our physical experience in how our bodies function and interact with the environment. Pause now and look at your hand or any other body part—feel its weight and substance. Your physical body allows you to experience and interact with the physical world. Your senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—allow you to perceive a portion of physical reality, transmitting that information to your brain for processing, and then deciding on a certain course of action. Once a decision is made, your legs move you in physical space while your hands manipulate physical reality to your liking.

This is the gist of having a physical body in a material world. We cannot experience or interact directly with physical reality if we are just disembodied thoughts or consciousness. Our physical body is an anchor to this physical life. The simple reality that we each have a body carries multiple obvious but critical demands.

The Body's Needs

The human body is a physical object constantly consuming, transforming, and expending energy. The heart constantly beats, pumping blood throughout the body. Parts of the brain are always on, even when we sleep. Take a deep breath and feel your lungs expand and contract: air in, air out. This is literally the

breath of life. Our body is composed of trillions of cells, specializing, collaborating, changing, or renewing to function in miraculous harmony for life to exist. Therefore, a critical but often taken-for-granted need for our body is good functional health. Injury, disease, or anomalies accentuate the deviation and instill a deeper gratitude for good health.

To keep the body functional with adequate nutrients and energy, we need to eat food and drink water. For those who live in abundance, this essential requirement is an afterthought. The pantry, refrigerator, and nearby stores are always stocked, accessible, and affordable. For the less fortunate, securing food is a daily worry, not knowing where the next meal will come from while the pang of hunger is a frequent companion. It is a battle of life and death.

The system of life, or that of living, purposefully engineers the physical mechanism for living: straying away from life is painful and aversive, instigating basic needs for the body. The minor sensations of hunger and thirst remind us to take care of this necessity. But when the deficits exacerbate, this gentle signal becomes a glaring siren, deafening all other sounds and sensations. Dying of starvation or dehydration is excruciating. You've probably heard stories about people trapped in a cave, on a mountain, or on a boat without food, where, as a last resort, the drive for survival may even lead to cannibalism. For survival, our physical body is programmed to reward pleasure from attaining food and water while it brings pain from the lack thereof. This is one of the most noticeable fundamental strings that pull at us daily.

An even more fundamental but often taken-for-granted string is our need to breathe unpolluted air with adequate oxygen. Most

of us don't have to worry about this, except when swimming, hiking in high altitudes, or living in a polluted environment. The unsavory but obvious needs accompanying eating and drinking are defecating and urinating. We take these acts for granted, but many of us are probably familiar with the discomfort of "holding it in" because we can't find a restroom. Once we can finally relieve ourselves after a prolonged delay, there is a deep appreciation and catharsis.

Sleep is another significant physical need that rejuvenates the body and mind by repairing damage, rebuilding tissues, removing toxins, bolstering immunity, regulating hormones, consolidating memory, or enhancing cognition. Adequate restful sleep gives us clarity of mind and a healthier body to function daily. In contrast, inadequate sleep interferes with mood, concentration, energy, and motivation, along with increasing the risk of physical diseases. Prolonged sleep deprivation can induce madness and even hasten death. The discomfort of not getting enough sleep is a biological signal to maintain our health and stay alive.

Finding Shelter: Beyond Environmental Threats

We don't live in a vacuum. Our natural environment can be uncomfortable or even deadly with extreme temperatures, rain, snow, wind, heat, etc. Exposing our frail bodies to the environment can result in sickness and even death, as extreme conditions sabotage the body's need for homeostasis. Dying by environmental exposure is a painful process, as with any deviation from life and living. To protect ourselves from external threats, we need shelter to ensure our survival.

At our most vulnerable, we need a safe space to sleep peacefully without fear, not just from the elements. The body is also

vulnerable to harm by animals, from big ones like bears and snakes to small ones like mosquitoes and ants, or from other humans who might want to exploit or abuse us. As a society, we clear out the wilderness for shelter and protection. We chase away or kill off animals that might harm us. We rely on law enforcement to keep us safe, or we try to protect ourselves with weapons and deterrence. Garments and footwear also shelter our bodies, as a naked body is easy prey to the elements and violations. We hope that our environment is safe, without violence, war, or natural disaster.

Pain and Pleasure

The design of life compels us to continue living through the push and pull of pain and pleasure. Our fundamental programming is the compulsive desire toward pleasure and the aversion to pain. This pleasure–pain compulsion is a principle that permeates almost all aspects of life. Even for unfortunate souls who seek death out of despair, the bodily process toward death is neither smooth nor easy. We are programmed to do things that keep us alive. For instance, our sense of smell is a mechanism that warns us against potentially noxious food, and our body attempts to expel food poisoning with both vomiting and diarrhea. When we accidentally touch a hot stove or step on a Lego piece, we have a reflexive response to withdraw from the injurious source of the pain. We turn our eyes away from glaring light because of the discomfort as instinctive protection.

At a minimum, we seek simply to survive, but as resources become more abundant, we tend to move from austerity to indulgence. We expand from minimizing pain to maximizing pleasure. Food is no longer about survival but about exquisite flavor and exotic uniqueness. Shelter isn't just for protection but

a decorated space with all the bells and whistles for maximum comfort and luxury. We are naturally programmed to desire more and better.

Safety and Security

While we can secure these basic needs now, how predictable and for how long can we keep it up? Will we fall from paradise one day, and how likely is that risk? Even when we have satisfied all these needs, the overlying layer for safety and security to maintain them is critical. We need to know and believe that what we have won't be suddenly taken away. We need a level of predictability in life to give us a sense of comfort. Will our source of food and water always be there? Will we always be sheltered and protected from danger?

In modern life, the one thing that seems to best safeguard our physical safety, security, and needs is money. When adults worry about their jobs, businesses, side hustle, or income, whether there will be enough money to pay for mortgage, rent, food, car, insurance, or clothing, the underlying needs are the concern for safety and security to support physical survival. When refugees risk their lives to find a better opportunity in a foreign land or when a wealthy person moves to a different nation for better financial and tax management, the common thread is a desire for safety and security, though quite different in perspective.



How are your bodily/physical needs being met? Do you feel physically safe and secure? How much or how often do you worry about these needs?

The Power of Libido

Since we are discussing our most fundamental needs, we have to talk about sex. But whereas shelter, protection, food, water, and sleep are obvious fundamental needs for survival, we won't die from lack of sex. Still, sex drive, or libido, is insidious and ever-present. When we don't acknowledge or become aware of this drive, it can lead us to dangerous territory. Issues of teenage pregnancy, infidelity, sexual harassment, scandal, misconduct, rape, and even murder are a part of our reality.

So, let's start with a question. Have you ever wondered why people have sex? Despite being naturally territorial of our personal space, protective of our private parts, and naturally disgusted by other people's bodily fluids, why do we end up going against these usual impulses? Why are men and women attracted to each other? What is so mesmerizing about the male or female physique and sexual organs from an analytical perspective?

Sexual attraction and desire are a part of our physical reality, but have you meditated on its pull, function, and purpose?

Note: For this discussion about sex, the concept will be examined mainly from the cis-gender heterosexual viewpoint. This doesn't mean that everyone is cis-gender heterosexual; it simply means that most people are. As we discuss more layers and you better understand the complex variations that exist, we will address the issues of LGBTQ+ later. If you want to read more about diversity now, please jump to the section titled "On Being Different."

When sex drive enraptures the mind and body, human desire is geared toward a singular purpose. As an illustration, the shift in mentality and sexual desire before and after an orgasm is fascinating and abrupt. Nowhere else does the change in mood, intention, feeling, sensation, and behavior occur so drastically. The friction that was extremely pleasurable one moment is suddenly unpleasant the next.

To understand ourselves and humanity, we can first look at the animal kingdom and their expression of sex as it might relate to us. Other animals are also pulled by the same strings of pain and pleasure designed to keep them alive. They must attain shelter, protection, food, and water to survive. Their struggle for life is a lot harder than for most of us as they (in the wild) live moment by moment, with the risk of death from starvation and/or predation always around the corner. If they can survive, what else is there to do? What other purpose is there besides just living? From the basic perspective of the physical body, it seems that the purpose of physical life, at the most primitive interpretation, is to stay alive and reproduce.

The string of libido also pulls at the animals, or more accurately, the “reproductive drive” also enthralls them. Beyond the struggle to survive, the competition to mate is a fierce and potentially deadly endeavor. Male animals compete with one another for a chance to mate, often risking injury and possible death in the process. Even the seemingly gentle deer, rabbits, and skunks are no exception.

Some might even die right after a successful mating. A prime example includes Pacific salmon swimming upstream to spawn and soon die after. Male honeybees who are “lucky” enough to mate with the queen in acrobatic mid-air flight tragically have

their endophallus, a sperm-containing organ, torn from their body to stay inside the queen's reproductive tract—death by disembowelment. Female praying mantes might kill and eat their male partner before, during, or after copulation. The Black Widow spider is also known to kill and eat its male partner after sexual consummation. A Netflix show called “My Teacher the Octopus” follows a female blue-ring octopus's journey to survive in a harsh environment, revealing her ingenuity and struggle to live, and ultimately ends [spoiler alert] with her giving birth to the next generation with an inevitable sacrifice.

The Biological Purpose of Sex

From a strictly biological angle, sex drive is designed to unite a man and woman in ecstasy, a natural drug that entrances both the body and mind. A child before puberty and development of libido cannot conceive “liking” someone in that way, as exemplified by Disney's animated movie *Bambi* when Owl warns Bambi, Thumper, and Flower about the animals getting “twitterpated” in the spring, which is simply mating time. The friends could not comprehend such a desire and assumed it wouldn't happen to them.

For humans, when a boy passes through puberty, he will discover the pleasurable physical sensation of stimulating his penis that ultimately results in an ejaculation, where millions of his sperm will be unleashed. Likewise, a girl can discover the pleasurable physical sensation of stimulating her vagina and clitoris. The physical pleasure from the stimulation of primary sex organs is designed to bring the two together. This is the most basic and primitive systemic design of sex through the reward of pleasure. For a penis, anything that wraps around it, in a sense,

is a pseudo-vagina. For a vagina, anything that penetrates it, in a sense, is a pseudo-penis.

Outside of physical pleasure, a sexually mature female's body undergoes monthly ovulation and menstruation cycles, where the ovaries release an egg, and the body prepares the uterus for possible implantation of a fertilized egg from coitus. A woman's sex drive naturally spikes around this time, increasing the chance for sexual encounters. When there is no fertilized egg to be implanted, her uterus sheds the unused lining as menstrual blood and renews the cycle once more. This biological process and hormonal changes can cause significant changes to mood, sleep, energy level, and appetite, ranging from Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) to more severe Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD). The menstrual cycle repeats month after month and year after year until menopause.

When libido successfully pulls two people together to have sex, an army of sperm is forcefully ejaculated into the vagina to start a fierce race for life, passing through the gate of the cervix, opening into the uterus, and ultimately leading to either the left or right fallopian tube. The sperm must also deal with the female body's natural defenses against foreign invaders, such as cervical mucus, acidic pH, antimicrobial proteins, and immune cells. Even for the fittest sperm, there is always a component of luck, whether they can be the first to reach the right place at the right time.

The system of life designs the egg and sperm for one purpose: a life-giving union through the act of copulation. For a man, his body will forcefully ejaculate semen during an orgasm. This arrangement prioritizes the need for men to be stimulated until the point of orgasm during coitus. For a woman, on the other

hand, nature designs her eggs to be released on an independent ovulating schedule, completely unrelated to orgasm. Not having an orgasm doesn't interfere with the fertilization process: her egg is either already there or not, depending on her ovulation cycle. As evident with IVF (In vitro fertilization), the egg is always surgically retrieved, while the sperm is usually obtained by masturbation. Sex drive magnetizes the two bodies together, but only the male body requires orgasm to release its precious cargo.

Outcome of Sex

If the conditions are right, intercourse results in pregnancy—the naturally intended outcome of sex. However, this obvious purpose carries drastically different implications. A pregnant woman is now a caretaker of a developing human inside her womb. While a man's body is unchanged and unburdened, a woman's stomach is growing daily to accommodate the growing life inside her. She must also deal with the multiple potential side effects of pregnancy, such as mood swings, stress, anxiety, sleep problems, back pain, fatigue, swelling, nausea, vomiting, concentration, and memory issues. There are also medical risks such as preeclampsia or gestational diabetes, and a woman might face complications during childbirth. The act of carrying and giving life isn't easy.

A mother-to-be naturally seeks to protect herself and the developing baby from harm. Her movement and activity are much more restricted, making her more vulnerable while her body requires more nutrients. She will carry this baby for forty weeks or so. When the baby is born, she must ensure their survival—security, safety, shelter, clothing, food, and water. If

she is fortunate, the baby's father will support her during the pregnancy and help raise his child.

So, while sex is enjoyable for both people, women bear the brunt of its impact. Without modern inventions of birth control, every sexual union is a gamble that may result in pregnancy. Pregnancy, delivery, and motherhood are a life-long commitment and sacrifice. Because of the life-altering impact, how do people instinctively approach sex? Over the millennia of evolution, women have naturally been the gatekeepers of sex. They must be much more selective of their mate because "successful" coitus leaves them with all the blessings and burdens of pregnancy, delivery, and the responsibility of caring for another human being. On the other hand, men can have sex without ever experiencing the joy and burden of pregnancy, delivery, or child-rearing (if they choose to disappear after a fun night) except for the obvious risks of incurring sexually transmitted infections for both parties.

Social Impacts of Sex

When a woman becomes pregnant and then focuses on child-rearing, a man naturally takes up the role of working, hunting, construction, warfare, and politics. Men are less burdened and freer to pursue self-interest, including passion and time in art, education, science, religion, and philosophy. Nature's blessing for women to be the life bearers of the next generation is also a curse that prevents them from equally participating in institutions and processes that create power. Men dominate politics, religions, and warfare, which naturally come with the high risk and high reward of obtaining power. How they choose to wield that power over women can explain the patriarchal systems worldwide.

A man's sexual preferences can function at the most basic level of physical pleasure, but a woman's instinctual sexual preferences must also account for the natural outcome of pregnancy. As men fight among one another to spread their seed, women must cautiously select the suitable mate that hopefully will stay with her for the entire journey. Nature forces her to prioritize interest beyond sexual pleasure and to find a mate who can commit to her and their child, take care of them, provide for them, protect them against threats, and help with child-rearing. Her survival and that of her baby would be greatly enhanced if she had support from the baby's father. Single parenting is a reality for many women, though it is an extremely difficult endeavor to manage.

The Primal Force

With how nature designs sex, it would be more accurate to say, "Let's try to make a baby," versus the more general statement, "Let's have sex." For teenagers (and older people), exploring sex can lead to many cases of unwanted pregnancy, especially when they are not financially, mentally, and emotionally ready to be responsible for raising another human being. Nature uses pleasure to entice us to have sex to create the next generation: pregnancy is its purpose, and pleasure is its attraction. Humanity's intellectual prowess invented birth control and contraception to subvert nature's design, refocusing on the pleasure of sex as the primary objective and pregnancy as the unwanted secondary outcome. The advent of birth control and contraception allows women a more equal playing field in sex. They can physically approach sex similarly to the way nature has always allowed men to do: sex for sex's sake with less risk of getting pregnant.

This magnetism of sex drive is insidious. Metaphorically, the libido is a seductive slithering snake, slowly wrapping itself around our bodies, coiling around the erogenous zones, and burrowing itself into our brains. It whispers in our minds, increasingly tempting us to give in and surrender. Once we satiate its demand, the snake suddenly vanishes as if it was never there, only to slowly rise again after resting.



What is your philosophy, understanding, and experience of libido? How much power and control does it have over you? Are you aware when libido catches you in its grip? Have you thought about why your libido is so powerful and insidious? What pros and cons have come out of it?

Every now and then, a news story breaks about sexual misconduct. We can see that regardless of socioeconomic background or even the religious setting (or lack thereof), the libido is a powerful primal force that humanity must contend with. Individually, understanding the basis of sex drive can help us to manage it better. We want libido to be a positive component of our lives instead of an uncontrollable storm. This discussion only touches upon the physical aspect of sex drive. We'll explore the other dimensions of the libido as we examine more strings of needs. Up next, we move from the body to the mind.

CHAPTER 2

The Mind Has Needs: Existence



The body and mind are connected. Because the body is designed to survive and reproduce through the mechanism of pain and pleasure, fundamental psychological needs run along this line. We'll pick up where we left off in the last chapter: pregnancy.

The developing human inside a mother's womb is significantly affected by the environment she creates through her intake of food, drink, medication, or substances. Also important are the physical safety or impact on her belly and the well-being of her physical and mental state, including her emotional experiences that correlate to different hormones coursing through her body. The developing human is unaware of these influences but nonetheless is affected by them. Her priority is to protect her child by securing adequate nutrition, shelter against the elements, and safety away from dangerous people or animals.

A Matter of Existence: Social Beings

At birth, we are completely helpless and vulnerable. What can babies do to ensure their survival? Or rather, what traits have been successfully passed on through evolution to keep infants alive?

First and foremost, as infants, we depend on our caregivers. Thankfully, our mothers, who carried us for about nine months, naturally bonded with us. She is our whole environment and the entire universe. The most basic painful and pleasurable

sensations help us stay alive through reflexive communication. Hunger and thirst are discomfoting, prompting us to cry and signaling the need to be fed. If we are too cold, hot, or wet, we express discomfort to trigger a reaction from Mom. An attuned mother learns what her babies need by intepreting their cooing, crying, smiling, wincing, and other nonverbal communication. Even at this young age, babies subconsciously learn whether their environment is reliable in fulfilling their needs and how well attuned it is to their communication. When babies are distraught, will they be comforted? Or worse, will they be neglected and abandoned?

Since the very beginning, the basic strings already pull at us: comfort or discomfort regarding our basic physical needs of life, health, food, water, sleep, shelter, and protection. A baby's emotions at this point range from positive to negative. The basic feeling of positivity is associated with physical pleasure/comfort, while the basic feeling of negativity is associated with physical discomfort/pain. The overall fulfillment and reliability of baby's environment (specifically their caretaker) responding to their needs shape their growing sense of trust and safety versus the lack of fulfillment or inconsistency leading to frustration, anxiety, and fear. Body and mind are connected, geared toward a singular purpose. Because they are helpless, their caretaker is a matter of survival.



As far as you can know, how was the environment around you when you were a baby? Who were your caretakers? Were your needs met? Was your environment predictable, safe, reliable, and trustworthy?

We have discussed physical survival as a priority up to this point. Assuming a baby is in a safe and comfortable environment, well fed, able to sleep, diapers frequently changed, and basic physical needs met, is that enough? And what about an adult with their basic physical needs adequately fulfilled? Is that enough? What else could be missing?

Humans are social beings. We are born into a family. We crave belonging and connection. We wish to develop deep and genuine relationships with others. Life isn't meant to be a solitary journey. Some of the most memorable moments in our lives usually relate to the joy or loss we share with people we love. What is it about connections that matter so much?

Survival versus Existence

To answer these questions, we can ascertain that once we have ensured our survival, the corresponding fundamental psychological need is to "exist." What is the difference between "survival" and "existence"? On the surface, the two concepts seem identical. Common thoughts that might capture the similarities between these two words include: "I survive; therefore, I automatically exist" or "For me to exist, I must survive." In cases where we want to get clarity between two similar concepts, we can try to hypothesize cases where one is valid without the other or push one concept to the extreme versus the other. For some examples of the differences, imagine the scenarios below:

1. A well-fed child playing alone in a mansion with a cold and distant nanny who is simply there to ensure the child survives while the wealthy parents are always away working or traveling.

2. A physically healthy teenager at a crowded social event, whether with family or “friends,” but unable to connect with anyone and feeling invisible.
3. A financially comfortable elderly person sitting alone in their house, estranged from all family, friends, or social connections.

In all three cases, it is evident that the child, the teenager, and the senior are all surviving; their survival isn't at risk in any way because we can assume that the basic needs of food, water, shelter, and protection are ensured. However, would they say that they “exist” in the minds of their family or friends?



From your personal experiences, have there been times when you have felt that you might not “exist” in this world or in the minds of people who should care about you? What does that mean to you?

“Surviving” means a physical existence, but psychologically, “existing” implies, at a minimum, some form of acknowledgment from other people.

To survive but not exist is to feel invisible when we walk into a room as if it doesn't matter if we're physically there or not—that we don't matter. It means that no one seems to care. No one notices or acknowledges us. As a result, we feel insignificant and invisible, as if we are “nothing.” After a big fight with a loved one, one of the most hurtful things is to treat the other person as if they don't exist, effectively saying: “You don't exist to me. I don't see you, hear you, or feel you. You mean nothing to me.” To feel as if we are invisible or forgotten is deeply horrifying, and to feel that we don't exist or matter for an extended time can lead to

extreme loneliness and depression and even lead some people to end their survival: psychological nonexistence ultimately leads to physical death.

On the other hand, can you imagine a scenario of existing but not surviving? The most obvious examples would include Jesus or the Gautama Buddha, who physically are not alive, but they exist in the minds of countless people. It is better to be physically far away but share a deep acknowledgment of one another than to be in the same room but forget one another. Remembrances of the deceased are a way to honor them and keep their existence with us. It is a philosophical question: would you rather survive for a hundred years but not really “exist” or survive for only thirty to forty years but “exist” for all that time?

Survival is a physical endeavor, while existence is a psychological endeavor. If humanity is an ocean, we are droplets temporarily suspended above the water’s surface. The droplet surely exists, but we also want our existence affirmed by others. Otherwise, we feel as if we’re invisible, irrelevant, and insignificant, risking a fall down into the anonymity of the ocean beneath. Why is this the case, and where does this need come from?

As a baby with limited developing eyesight, the only way for us to know that we exist is from the tender touch of a parent or loving caregiver. Skin-to-skin contact affirms our existence and, more so, shows us that someone cared for us. At this stage of our complete helplessness, being cared for and loved is a life-and-death situation. As babies, our physical needs are translated into simple emotional sensations expressed by physical behaviors, such as cooing, smiling, whimpering, and crying, to elicit certain emotional responses from our caregiver (usually a mother or

father), prompting them to try different options to comfort us. For a baby, the most beautiful place is to be cradled in the safety of their parent's loving embrace as they consume life-giving milk from the breast or bottle. All their needs are met in this one simple act.

Conversely, a completely uncared-for and unloved baby will die from neglect. In overcrowded orphanages, a baby can only survive when there is minimal care because someone has their existence in mind: they are not forgotten or abandoned in some dark corner to die alone despite the desperate, woeful cry for attention and sustenance. To be acknowledged, loved, and cared for is a matter of survival at this stage. To exist means survival and survival requires existence.

Dependent on Human Connections

We are social beings, and our survival depends heavily on our social connections, even as adults. Back in our ancestry, when we lived in caves, isolated people would have had difficulty fending off the elements and predators while foraging for food and securing safety while in deep sleep. People banded together to form groups to safeguard their overall survival. We communicated, bonded, and formed relationships because being an outcast was to risk dying of hunger, thirst, the elements, or predators. Especially in this modern age, very few people would survive stranded in a wild forest or on an uninhabited island with roaming predators.

Therefore, the need to feel that we exist, that we matter, and that our existence is affirmed and acknowledged by others is ingrained in evolution. We crave parental attention, nurturing, validation, and approval more than some of us dare to admit and more than some parents realize. As small children, beyond

physical survival, we need our parents to affirm that we do matter, are significant, and are worthy of their love and attention. Children need the very things typically expected from the role of parents: attention, love, affection, understanding, and nurturing. When we have these things, our existence is affirmed positively.

Simply because our parents love and attend to us, we believe we are good and deserving of that love and attention. Parents' attention is the water for a starving plant and shapes the tree's growth. When children are neglected or abandoned, they question whether they are "enough." Beneath the surface, this internalized insecurity can foster self-doubt about one's existence, rooted in the belief that others can only see and value them as their parents do. To avoid being nonexistent, some children resort to being acknowledged through disruptive or questionable behaviors. Why? Because negative existence is better than nonexistence.

Note: If kids only obtain parental accolades when they obtain good grades, achieve athletic victories, or provide some services such as playing the role of the peacemaker, caretaker, unofficial therapist, or court jester, they grow to believe that these specific accomplishments are the only value of their existence. Instead of realizing they are unique, three-dimensional, multifaceted beings with gifts and flaws, their being is reduced to a narrow aspect constrained by other people's selective attention.

This core belief about our existence and how our parents view us slowly expands to other relationships as we grow into adulthood. The relationship with our parents transforms into a

pair of glasses tinting how we look at life and other relationships. Deep insecurities such as “I’m not good enough,” “something’s inherently wrong with me,” “I’m not deserving of love and attention,” or “people will eventually abandon me” will shade other interactions. We risk engaging in self-sabotage and create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As we age, social connections beyond those of our parents also significantly affect our sense of existence, sometimes reinforcing the message or acting as a counterbalance. Other family members, friends, classmates, colleagues, romantic interests, or even random strangers can convey certain messages to us. As we develop more connections with others, each link tethers a string that binds us to that other person, and multiple strings weave an intricate web of relationships that sustain and define us. The connections with all their moments, memories, joy, sadness, laughter, tears, love, and betrayal crisscross to buttress our existence. We are more alive and vibrant in a shimmering web of love and light. Conversely, we are more drained and beaten in a tattered web of hurt and anger. Despite the toxic relationships, we can’t bear to escape.

Without a web, we become a singular existence, unattached and unbound from others. Whether because we can’t establish connections or a self-sabotaging knife slowly severs all the strands surrounding us, we risk falling toward the abyss. Isolation tends to be a very lonely and depressing existence for most people. As an exception, schizoid personality disorder characterizes people who are naturally emotionally detached and have less need for social connections. In rare cases, highly spiritual and self-assured hermits can stake their existence without external affirmations, miraculously levitating without a supporting web.



Reflection

Do you feel affirmed? Do you feel that you exist? Does your existence matter? Do you feel you belong and are accepted? Growing up, how was your existence affirmed? Were there specific things you did or traits you have that became the focal point of your existence? What things did you do to get attention? Was the attention conditional upon some criteria? How does this sense of existential affirmation continue through your life?

The Psychological Aspect of Sex

Around puberty, sex hormones induce not only bodily but also emotional and psychological changes as we start to get a taste of sexual feelings and experiences. Nature takes its course, and libido takes over. We discussed the physical aspect of sex at length in the previous chapter, but libido is a lot more than just physical. The psychological need to affirm existence—to be acknowledged, loved, and cared for—compounds an additional layer that turns sex from something primitive into something magical. While sex has physical pleasurable benefits, sex can also feel like an act of ultimate affirmation: “I see you, hear you, smell you, feel you, taste you . . . in this very moment, my whole being is yours and vice versa.” Every fiber of our being bursts into a joyous existence in another person's embrace.



Reflection

Do you feel the pull of attraction? Is it the physical pleasure or the psychological connection that resonates with you more?

Our psychological need to exist is affirmed through a very intimate physical act; physical intimacy enchants emotional

intimacy, and vice versa. For example, calling each other's name during sex can further solidify our existence, but accidentally calling someone else's name during sex is a huge betrayal at the most fundamental level. While our body is intimately engaging with our partner, we don't exist in their mind as they fantasize about someone else. We will expand on sex and love in a later section. Beyond survival and existence, the next psychological need is competence and control as we learn to navigate the world.

CHAPTER 3

Acquiring Competence and Control



As we grow from an infant to a toddler to a big kid, we learn about our bodies, our capabilities and limitations, the surrounding environment, and how different objects ought to function. The demand of budding maturity and marks of self-reliance are slowly placed upon us: to learn how to use the toilet; how to bathe; how to sit, walk, then run; how to speak; how to use our hands and manipulate tools like pencils and scissors, etc. How well we master these tasks will directly contribute to how well we handle the demands of life.

If we don't achieve these milestones over time, we will have to depend on someone else for comfort and survival. When life is harsh and resources are limited, we are not guaranteed to always receive the same level of attentiveness and care from our caregivers as we grow. Competence increases our chance of survival, whereas lack of competence means dependence on the mercy of others. Competence will eventually encompass multiple areas of life: activities of daily living, emotional understanding and regulation, forming and maintaining relationships, academic performance, athletic endeavors, enjoyment of interests and hobbies, financial literacy, career achievement, child-rearing, juggling multiple demands, etc. Successful mastery usually brings joy, accomplishment, and pride, whereas failure is often accompanied by frustration, insecurity, and guilt.

Developing Competence

As children, we learn best when exploring our limitations with parents in the periphery, securing our safety and comfort. We can always retreat to the sanctuary our parents have created, but we are encouraged to explore the realities around us and push the limits of our capabilities. If we are allowed to fail with support, patience, and guidance, we learn the harsh reality of disappointment and failure tempered by understanding and perseverance. As we get older, we are bound to experience many failures and successes. Whether we have the confidence and perseverance to keep trying reinforces our sense of competence or lack thereof. Practicing brings mastery. Cultivating maturity is about learning, growing, and overcoming life's challenges to become the best version of ourselves.

Developing our competence is a psychological need directly affecting survival and independence. Embracing failures and compounding successes sends the message that we are competent, capable, and resourceful; that we are good enough and smart enough. This confidence feeds on itself as we learn patience, courage, and persistence usually pay off. Over time, we learn to discern when to keep trying and when to give up. However, children who are secure in their physical survival and affirmed in their psychological existence can still feel frustrated and ashamed if they are behind their peers in learning and deem themselves incompetent, stupid, or a failure.

As part of developing competence, parents can help by providing guidance and practicing discipline to shape the desired behaviors. Discipline and firmness are needed and much easier to apply when a child feels secure in the foundation of love and affirmation. Without this strong foundation, a child can easily

lean toward a negative existence due to their perception of parental “guidance” as constant criticism and judgment. Some parents, out of concern and good intention, constantly nit-pick and point out imperfections, things that their kids are doing wrong, what they could do differently, or how other kids are comparatively doing better. The impact is the unintentional message that their kids perceive as “not good enough,” or worse, “never good enough.” There is a balance between providing affection and instilling discipline. Too much affection without discipline will result in incapable but demanding children; too much discipline without affection will result in resentful kids who can become intentionally oppositional and defiant.

Often, it is easy to ignore well-behaved kids because that’s “expected and normal” since life is busy, then shower them with negative attention when the kids make a mistake, sending the message: “I only notice your existence when you’re misbehaving.” In this case, instead of developing competence, the need for psychological affirmation is more critical and possibly shapes the kid’s behavior toward repeating errors. It’s also possible for parents to affirm their kids’ existence only when something amazing happens, like an academic or athletic achievement. The unintentional message is “Your existence is significant only when you achieve something.” Some kids will interpret this selective attention as conditional; that love is conditional on accomplishment. Despite being highly competent, they constantly fear tumbling off the pedestal and that deep down, they were not or will never be good enough. True affirmation is in the mundane but precious moments spent together, and parental affirmation can shape competence with attention and guidance.

In some cases, unfortunate kids without affirming caretakers must develop their own competence for survival. They are forced to learn life's challenges the hard way through trials and tribulations. The competitive nature of life risks scarring and hardening them, forging them into a sharp blade without a sheath.

Our belief in our competence greatly affects our attitude to the obstacles we meet in life as adults. Deep down, we often ask ourselves, "Am I competent enough for this? Can I really do this? Can I handle it? Am I resourceful enough?" Through the different roles in our lives, we also ask, "Am I a good son/daughter?" "Am I a good student?" "... a good friend?" "... a good worker?" "... a good lover?" "... a good spouse?" "... a good parent?" Do we have the competence to fight and secure survival in this physical realm?

Competence Expands Control

Competence enhances survival. The competence to control our environment fosters a sense of safety and security. We try to make the unpredictability of life more consistent and predictable. With more control, we have less exposure to risks. The less control we have, the more vulnerable we are to the whim of "fate." The need to control translates to our need for autonomy, freedom, and liberty instead of being controlled by others.

We want control over our own bodies and homes, which should be an undeniable right. When there is a violation or intrusion into our body, home, or way of living, this signals a significant loss of control, and losing control puts us at a continual risk of being victimized again. As kids grow to adulthood, the more independent and individualistic we become, the more we hate

being told what to do or controlled by others. We crave the freedom to explore our identity, discover interests, and express ourselves, which leads to the next psychological need: to be unique and superior.



Reflection

Do you feel competent? Do you feel capable? When you were growing up, how was your competence nurtured and guided? What were the messages conveyed to you? Do you have what it takes to handle life's unpredictability? Which competence was valued by your family? Do you have control over yourself? How are you functioning in different roles in life?

CHAPTER 4

To Be Unique: Special and Superior



In affirming our existence and developing our competence, we eventually get to the point of competition with others. As in all competitions, some emerge victorious. You might find this portion of reality abrasive or even counter that in a collectivist culture, the nail that stands out gets hammered. Nevertheless, the need to be superior, to win, is a psychological need ingrained in all of us, even if deeply suppressed in the psyche.

Living in a Competitive World

The connotation of the word “superiority” is negative because it sounds boastful and vain. This is true in the sense of arrogance, but in a world with limited resources, competition is inevitable. In the best case, we can negotiate and compromise for a win-win situation. But in many cases, competition demands us to bring our best game physically, intellectually, emotionally, or socially. When two people happen to want the same thing, aggression is a natural human expression to compete for resources, whether outright or covertly. Asserting superiority through blood, sweat, and tears can be a matter of life and death. We have fought over land and resources throughout history, so when it comes to survival, unfiltered aggression reveals itself as a fight to the death.

The learning and mastery of competence from a young age is a covert superiority contest among children. As adults, we openly compete for mates, higher education, job openings, promotions, artistic or athletic contracts, businesses, achievements, and

resources to fulfill our needs and desires. We want to live beyond just surviving, affirmation, and competence; we want recognition and respect, such as in social circles, academia, athleticism, arts, religion, and politics, among other arenas. This natural stratification of hierarchy influences our ability to secure resources and satisfy our needs; it determines how limited resources, such as potential mates, food, land, housing, or money, should be distributed.

Competence leads to control, and control leads to power. Humanity seeks control and power over the environment and other species to ensure our survival and maximize our comfort. There is also a risk of wanting to control others, asserting power and dominance over someone else or an entire group, the dark side of the superiority contest. Some use their group affiliation to feel superior to others. This phenomenon gives rise to the -ism: racism, sexism, ageism, or nationalism, to name a few. Even ways of life can be a competition. For example, some vegans disdain meat eaters, while some meat eaters disdain vegans; both sides believe their way is correct and superior.

Standing Out

In tandem with the superiority of competence, we have an innate desire to feel special in our existence. While we exist and belong to many grouping labels by race, nationality, gender, or occupation, each of us wants to be unique and special, different and unmistakable from someone else. We want to be appreciated for the complex and nuanced three-dimensional individuals that we are. The same strings of needs pull at all of us, but the experience and expression differ. People want not only to survive or exist but to thrive and succeed.

We may measure our success by material possessions, such as the fanciness of our dwelling compared to another's. The rarity, brand name, or cost of our clothes become colorful feathers as we peacock against one another. We compare the uniqueness of toys and gadgets in a game of one-upping another. In the age of social media, flashing status is done less by material possessions and more by "picture-perfect" physical beauty and the portrayal of enviable experiences in a social group or at an exotic location.

We want to feel special because of how good we look, how well we dress, how much money we have, the rarity of our possessions, the status of our career, the "righteousness" of our beliefs, the "truthiness" of our opinion, our charisma, wit or intellect, our strength or physique; the list goes on and on. This competition also extends to people in the same socioeconomic class, career, or social group, including those who claim to be more spiritual. One irony is the faux humility that conceals, "I am so much humbler and more spiritual than all other people." This isn't to say true humility doesn't exist.

Droplets above the Ocean

If humanity is an ocean, we want to be the unique and better droplet. When survival and existence are ensured, life becomes a competition to be special, with a constant underlying fear of falling back into the anonymity of the ocean.

From a certain perspective, the need for existence and specialness seems to be on a continuum. At the most fundamental level, we want to have our existence affirmed and competence developed, but as we get better at both, we want to be special and admired. We graduate from wanting to be "liked" to wanting to be "respected." We can work to be more special or push others down to increase the differential gap. Some achieve

this by bullying others, a more blatant behavior starting in childhood and school settings. No matter how horrible their lives are, the bullies feel slightly better when they can make someone else's life more miserable. They try hard to persuade their victims to feel ugly, stupid, smelly, and unlikeable—ultimately, to feel like a failure.

There are rare cases when someone can feel very “special” but uncertain of the affirmation of their existence. For example, someone famous for a specific talent, say singing or acting, may attract fans who admire and even worship their specialness. However, if they lack adequate attention, love, and nurturing while growing up, fame will only affirm their one specific talent, and deep down, they feel misunderstood and lonely. We want genuine connections affirming who we are as complex, imperfect beings. When the connection is formed by only one tenuous layer, the strength of that connection is fragile and easily questioned. What happens if someone loses the one thing everyone clamors around (talent, money, fame, humor, etc.)? Would the people around them scatter like mice without bait?



Reflection

Do you feel unique or special? What makes you different from other people? What things are you competing for? Are there things, ways of living, or beliefs you look down upon? What things make you proud? What things do you value and broadcast to the world?

CHAPTER 5

The Mind Craves Stimulation



When a “successful” person has everything—family, wealth, status, adoration—is there anything else that could be missing?

While the physical body can be stimulated through sensual pleasures such as sex, food, and drink driven by basic pleasure–pain compulsion, the psychological mind also craves stimulation. Even when we know that we are safe, affirmed, competent, and special, it still isn’t enough. The mind craves stimulation, entertainment, and excitement. Where does this need come from?

Survival Requires Stimulation

When survival is an ongoing struggle, mental stimulation to sense, observe, assess, analyze, imagine, scheme, plan, and execute is a matter of life and death. Human survival, propagation, and advancement are predicated on our mental and intellectual stimulation to overcome challenges from the environment, other species, and other humans. In all of Earth’s creation, humanity stands firmly on top of the power pyramid, dominating all others precisely because of our ingenuity and superior mental stimulation.

In the modern age, academic achievement, athletic prowess, or career advancement, whether in science or arts, all depend on the stimulation of mind and body, which is the source of attaining superiority over the competition. Virtuosos cannot rely

on their innate talent alone but constantly practice and stimulate their faculties to the highest level of expertise. Countless success stories involve a windy path of persistent progress with multiple setbacks, exemplified by the victors racking their brains to eventually outmaneuver or overcome the obstacles.

Relationships are not haphazard endeavors either. Successful social interactions also require adept psychological stimulation to establish connections, navigate social etiquettes, assess and manage emotions, and strengthen attachments. The fluid nature of social connection and alliances, such as in high school settings or epitomized in royal court intrigues, interplay with power and control. The challenge of living requires a stimulated mind; complacency can mean certain death.

The Privilege of Boredom

As our survival is more assured, we no longer have to exhaust our mental processing. However, an unstimulated mind brings boredom. Prolonged boredom is akin to death. The horror of solitary confinement touches upon the need for stimulation more than the need for affirmation. The disconnection of solitary confinement is different from the isolation on a deserted island, beyond the loss of control in one situation versus the other. Social connection and affirmation are negated in both cases, but the latter scenario demands psychological, mental, and physical stimulation, especially with the struggle for survival on a deserted island. During downtime, there is the beauty of nature to contemplate and the serenity of solitude to appreciate. Hermits self-isolate, but they are stimulated in their own journey of personal and spiritual growth. Solitary confinement not only restricts social affirmation but also deprives the inmate of

sensory stimulation, dampening psychological stimulation to a degree that can lead to hallucinations.

We are naturally stimulated by our senses, circumstances, challenges, and relationships. The beautiful and the grotesque can wow and shock us because life is pleasurable and painful. Many industries cater to our need for stimulation: sports, music, books, movies, porn, games, travel, and cuisine, to name the common ones. With the rise of the internet, we have a much easier way to access entertaining content, as exemplified by kids and their tablets. With the advancement of smartphones and high-speed cellular networks, many people are glued to their phones in search of constant stimulation. I half-jokingly believe that internet access is almost as necessary as access to food and water for those who are used to having it.

Themes of Stimulations

The content or experiences we find stimulating can vary widely, though they share many motifs. We'll explore some common themes below.

Novelty: We like something new, exciting, and unpredictable. Seeing or trying new things keeps us stimulated, as exemplified by traveling to a new locale to experience new scenery, people, cuisine, and culture. Since we cannot directly live through everything, we can fantasize about an experience or live vicariously through another participant, by, for example, reading a book, watching a movie, or playing a game. It takes us out of our rigid identity and allows a glimpse into someone else's experience. We get to identify with them and fantasize about their struggle and triumph. The search for novelty can tempt us to spend endless hours watching one online clip after another.

Teamwork: In watching competitive sports, we see players compete on skills and stimulate their brain power to assert superiority. The winning or losing of “our” team directly affects our identity, as if we have succeeded or failed in our personal lives, incorporating the need for affirmation. Group identification provides us an outlet for our emotions, such as anger, aggression, and violence on the one hand, or love and bonding on the other. A lone angry gamer might destroy the controller after losing, but a crowd of angry sports fans can destroy property and fight against the opposing team’s fans. We can lose ourselves in the collective.

Social Connection: In the pursuit of other needs, such as affirmation, competence, or superiority, we can seek out relevant information or venues to assist in their fulfillment. The rise of social media feeds into these needs as people compulsively check their feeds to see what others are doing, compare themselves to others, or portray a picture-perfect image of their lives. While social media is meant to enhance connection, it paradoxically can make people feel more isolated, disconnected, and inferior.

Aggression: When competing for survival, aggression is a natural behavior, but it is much less accepted during peaceful, cohesive eras. In ancient times, watching gladiators killing one another or a bunch of dogs attacking a toothless, declawed bear was entertaining. Witnessing the fight, especially for the first time, would have been enthralling, and, as with all games, the unpredictable outcome would have kept the spectators glued to the spot. A game with a clear winner from the very beginning is predictable and, therefore, less exciting. In modern times, we still have dog fighting and cockfighting, or people fighting one another, as in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (but at least

it is voluntary). Many movies, stories, and especially video games are centered around competition and aggression.

Adrenalin rush: We naturally avoid pain and discomfort, but when life becomes dull or numbing, we may seek stimulation in the adrenaline rush of danger with sky diving, bungee jumping, street racing, or other risky hobbies. Fear brings us back to the struggle for survival, the primordial necessity of life. However, other sources of psychological stimulation can be quite addictive and deadly. Drugs stimulating a new “high” can leave an individual chasing after that singular ecstatic experience for the rest of their life with devastating consequences. Gambling can provide a high adrenaline suspense of joyous triumph and crushing defeat that increases with higher and higher risks and rewards. Sex, too, can be physically and psychologically stimulating, especially when exploring new dynamics and scenarios.

Pushing the Limits

Many of the examples of psychological stimulation above situate us as passive consumers. A higher level of psychological stimulation occurs when we become active creators. When we stumble upon an area of interest that stokes our passion, we can dedicate countless hours to examining, studying, researching, or practicing it not because it is profitable but because we genuinely enjoy its psychological, emotional, intellectual, or physical stimulation. We also stimulate our minds by pushing the limits of our bodies through practicing athletic activities, competitive sports, dancing, or martial arts.

A natural part of being human is our intellectual curiosity about the workings of the world and the universe. We deeply crave questioning, learning, discovering, and understanding the

reality around us. A child asking “why” to everything is the essence of our inquisitiveness. Scientists and researchers devote their entire lives to expanding the limits of human knowledge.

When we connect deeply with ourselves, we realize our interests or callings that can turn hobbies into successful life paths. Mysteries can challenge us emotionally and intellectually as we rack our brains to figure something out. When absorbed into a challenge, it can trigger an expansion of human limitation in both body and mind. We end up partaking in the human endeavor of pioneering creative stories, arts, dance, athleticism, science, religion, and spirituality. Development of affirmation, competence, superiority, and stimulation brings us to the final string of needs—finding meaning and purpose.



Reflection

How skilled are you at addressing boredom? What stimulates you? What brings you excitement? What stokes your passion? Does the source of your stimulation require the suffering of others? Are you a passive consumer or an active creator of stimulation?

CHAPTER 6

Meaning and Purpose: Pulling It All Together



Our highest psychological need is to find meaning and purpose in our existence. From the physical perspective, the objective purpose of physical life is to survive and possibly procreate. However, we are not mere physical beings. We are also emotional, psychological, intellectual, social, and spiritual beings. We love a good story with struggle and triumph. If a story is straightforward without obstacles and challenges to overcome, we'll quickly lose interest. Likewise, there is an inherent psychological need for our life to be a story with purpose and meaning.

Compass for Life

The answer to the question of life's meaning and purpose is personal and subjective. Some find it through religion or spirituality, others through their career, hobbies, or family. While a few search for an even deeper meaning, many more are content with just surviving and existing, maximizing the pleasures physical reality can offer.

Whether we realize it or not, we all live with many mini-purposes or goals along the way: stay alive, do well in school, get along with parents, look good, keep healthy, make friends, find a date, have sex, get a job, make money, travel, etc. These mini-goals help us endure the respective challenges and struggle through the obstacles. For instance, why do some people spend

time at the gym to induce discomfort and pain? Or spend hours studying when they would rather relax and have fun? Or get up early and work long hours? Our natural reaction to the pain–pleasure or comfort–discomfort compulsion means most of us would rather stay in our comfort zone or take the easy path. But having a purpose allows us to suffer and endure; it propels us forward even when our minds and bodies strain underneath the harsh reality, burdened by its weight.

Seduction of Video Games

When life lacks meaning, we might find it through a pervasive form of entertainment, like video games. Nowhere else in life are the goals, purpose, achievements, and failures so obvious. Most things in life take months, years, or even decades before we see the result. Video games conspicuously celebrate achievements with each victory, kill, level cleared, or rare item dropped. Video games are virtual adventures that satisfy our psychological need for competence, superiority, stimulation, and purpose. Interactive online games can also satisfy our psychological need for affirmation, as others acknowledge our gear, skills, or leveling. When we cannot find success in real life, it is tempting to find success in gaming life and lose ourselves in it. Instead of relegating video game to part-time enjoyment, it becomes a full-time obsession, distracting us from life's challenges. Yet, the very challenges of life force us to grow, learn new skills, and, in a sense, “level up” in the real world with education, career, relationships, and experiences.

Having a goal or purpose helps us endure the pain and find meaning in the discomfort. Life is bound to have ups and downs, joy and disappointments, and countless surprises. What is our individual story when life is over? Is it a story of overcoming

obstacles and triumphing? Or will it be a story of tragedy and self-sabotaging destiny? Finding the meaning of life eventually becomes a philosophical and spiritual endeavor if we desire more than the fundamental physical meaning of survival and procreation.



Have you given thought to the story of your life? Is there a meaning and purpose to it? For what reason do you endure the struggles of life? How do you want your story to turn out? What message of your life do you want to share with others? Do you know yourself well enough?

Identity in the Making

As we figure out how to satisfy our physical and psychological needs, we slowly develop a sense of identity as to “who am I?” regarding multiple aspects of life. A significant component of that identity is the solidity of our existence and how unique we are—whether we are successful, competent, loved, or valued, and so on. A critical life purpose is self-discovery.

As children, we internalize many messages conveyed to us, whether intentionally or unintentionally, from our parents, peers, teachers, and communities. As we seek affirmation from others, we might unknowingly sacrifice our authenticity and put on a mask to gain approval. When the herd heads left, we begrudgingly go left, even though we want to go right. When everyone is praising something, we also praise it even though we might not see a point to it. The pain of being ridiculed or ostracized can transform us into chameleons, changing our colors to fit into our surroundings. We are part of the crowd not

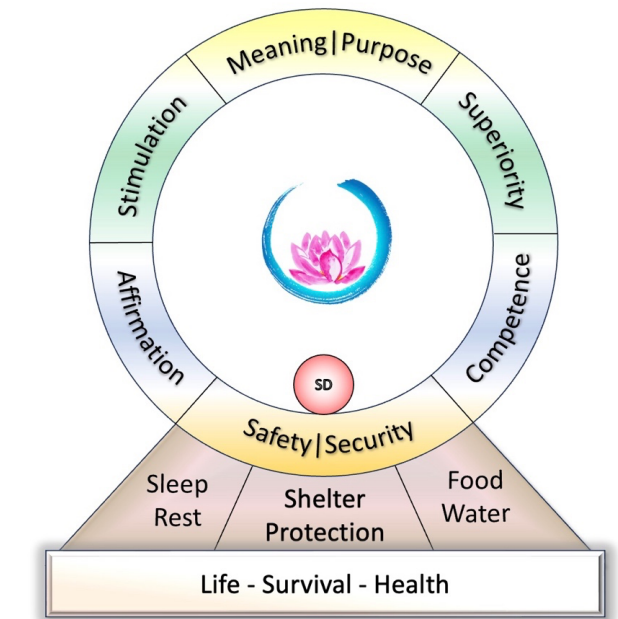
because we genuinely enjoy it but because conformity is the comforting solution.

When this happens, can we discover who we really are? What is our true color when the chameleon has changed so many colors? Our identity can boost our self-esteem or plunge it into the abyss. Whether that assumed identity is true or false is a different story.

Circle of Needs

We have spent much time covering the basic physical and psychological needs in detail. Combining all of them into a visual image for easy comprehension gives us the circle of needs. After the extensive discussions previously, you should be familiar with all the components outlined below.

Figure 2: The Circle of Needs





Look at the figure above and reflect on how well these needs are met in your life. If a particular need is unfulfilled, how is the deprivation manifesting in your life? Are you compensating one need for another?

The physical body is easy to see, touch, and comprehend. In Part II, we'll explore our emotional states, which are harder to grasp. Our physical eyes naturally look outward, but the same eyes cannot look inward. Because it is more incomprehensible, many people feel uncomfortable talking about our emotional lives. But as I often tell my patients, "We are human beings, not robots" because we have emotions. The problem is we tend to fear what we don't understand, but emotions are an undeniable part of our essence. We cannot run from ourselves.

The influence of emotions on our choices and actions is staggering when left unchecked. Only by understanding our emotions can we truly learn to manage them better. Some people are more emotional than others. It is probably one reason that I am attracted to studying the human mind and emotions enough to make a career out of it. To understand our emotions is to understand ourselves and humanity; to understand the water in a droplet is to understand the water of an ocean.

Note: In Appendix I, you can read a case study where the circle of needs is unfulfilled and significantly damaged. This tragic hypothetical case explores the cascading effect when there are no interventions or saving grace. As you read through that story's progression, ponder how the trajectory might play out differently if the lessons provided throughout this book were implemented.

PART II

The Sway Of Emotions



If our whole being is a planet, the physical body is the earth, psychological thoughts are the trees and underground tunnels, and emotions are the elements. Like water, the whole spectrum of emotion can take many forms: calm, turbulent, transparent, opaque, boiling, warm, relaxed, icy, soothing, or toxic. Like fire, it can give warmth or burn creation to ashes. Like wind, it can be soothing as a gentle breeze, devastating as a hurricane, or voracious as a tornado. Like lightning, it can illuminate in perfect epiphany or scar the landscape in wanton strikes. A person unaccustomed to understanding and managing emotions is a helpless victim of these bewildering elemental phenomena. In contrast, understanding of and mastery over emotions allow us to bend the elements to our advantage.

CHAPTER 7

Rationality of Emotions



Emotions are the psychological signal that informs us about our physical and psychological needs, and whether they are being met or in danger. This is why it is critical to first understand the circle of needs—the different strings that pull us. Initially, our primary needs as an infant are for survival: hunger, thirst, warmth, skin contact, comfort, and nurturance. As we age, simple negative and positive emotions diversify to more specific ones. I'll discuss the primary emotions in the following chapters and how they relate to our needs.

Fear: Adaptive Survival

As we explored in Part I, our communication starts in infancy, with our physical needs dictating our emotional state and manifesting as a corresponding behavior. At this stage, physical comfort or discomfort is inherently linked to positive and negative emotions. As we grow, the breadth of emotions differentiates to more specific labels. Because safety and survival are the most critical components, fear is a primordial negative emotion.

When our survival is threatened, fear grips us: imagine marching slowly toward a guillotine, standing blindfolded at the end of a loaded rifle, hurdling underneath a table during a natural disaster, being chased by a bear, or being shocked by a terminal illness diagnosis. The emotion of fear elicits physical reactions within the body that prime us to fight, fight, or freeze as an adaptive strategy for the sake of survival. Even when we are

frozen in fear, our body is still on high alert with eyes wide open, blood pumping, and muscles tensed, ready for action. Primal fear is the emotional response when the risk of danger and death is high. Fear is nature's design for living things to struggle for life because imminent death and the process of dying are excruciating.

Besides the extreme fear of death, there is the fear of irreversible physical injury, such as losing limbs or an organ malfunctioning, because we have the best chance of survival when all our faculties are intact. Any injury is already physically painful and debilitating, making the struggle to survive more difficult, but the psychological stress about the physical deficits compounds additional terror.

Fear, at its most basic, is the intense panic at the imminent risk of losing something that will devalue us. At the different layers of physical and psychological needs, fear can occur when any needs are at imminent risk. For example,

- Fear of death and dying
- Fear of diseases and sickness
- Fear of getting harmed
- Fear of becoming homeless
- Fear of starvation
- Fear of being forgotten
- Fear of becoming incompetent
- Fear of losing control
- Fear of becoming inferior
- Fear of losing life's meaning and purpose (existential crisis)

Fear can hit many layers all at once. For instance, when a person loses a job, this loss can induce fear of missing income that adversely impacts the capability to secure the necessities for survival. Additionally, there is a fear of losing affirmation or respect from family and friends, especially if that person places high value on their occupational status. It can also make them question their competence and purpose in life.

Fear attempts to keep us safe and alive, to keep our senses sharp and heightened, while our body is primed for action. “Once burned, twice shy,” we are more sensitive to danger and keep a vigilant watch to prevent it from happening again, especially if the danger is an ongoing risk. When we experience a traumatic event that devastates our sense of safety, security, and survival—such as war, violence, accident, or rape—we naturally develop fear and vigilance as adaptive measures. If the environment has changed or the situation has improved, but this constant vigilance remains, the recurring flare of fear becomes the foundation for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Note: In PTSD, past trauma haunts the present in both mind and body. Memories and emotions of the traumatic event flood the mind. Fear breeds nightmares that haunt sleep or replaces the perception of the present surroundings with visions of the past in flashbacks. The person’s view of the world shifts toward the malevolent and lurking danger, causing hypervigilance against potential threats and making them easily startled. Prolonged distress harms various organs, including the brain, and functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, digestion, muscles, and stress-hormone regulation. Some with PTSD might feel shame and self-blame for the

trauma. When the fear and danger are particularly intense, their minds might try to protect themselves by dissociating during the trauma and possibly continue later in life. To negate the self-awareness of “I am hurting,” they can depersonalize and remove themselves from their awareness as if they are an impartial audience watching a play from a safe distance. They can also engage in derealization, where it feels like the environment is a dream or surreal because their reality is too overwhelming; a detachment from reality.

Constant feelings of fear can breed anxiety and irritability, leading to a short temper and bouts of anger. All these emotions can interfere with cognition, concentration, and sleep. Negative emotions easily overwhelm positive emotions, reducing the simple enjoyment and appreciation of life. We may also find ways to avoid feeling negative emotions by avoidance or seeking solace through distraction by strong stimulation, possibly leading to alcohol and drug use.

Low-Key Fear: Anxiety

While fear is an intense emotion addressing imminent risk, anxiety is a lesser cousin that embodies a nagging, low-key “fear” that something is wrong or could go wrong. Beyond survival, living a happy and successful life requires many things to work out well, which requires certain power, control, and luck. We worry about our physical and psychological needs, whether we can achieve certain goals or are afraid of not fulfilling them. We can be anxious about anything—our livelihood, looks, health, finance, school, career, relationships, etc. A low level of anxiety can be beneficial as it forces us to focus, analyze, plan, and

execute certain courses of action to keep us afloat. However, when anxiety overwhelms us, constant worrying can take away the mental energy to enjoy our lives and prepare for the future.

Growing up in an unstable household with emotionally unpredictable parents, enduring abuse and prolonged hardship, or experiencing spikes of fear can become the foundation for chronic anxiety. Kids can also inadvertently pick up messages about the fear of death and dying by natural disasters, diseases, or lawlessness that violate their sense of security. The discomfiting experience of chaotic horror, and therefore not having the control to avoid it, can potentially cause us to overcompensate by “needing” maximum control over things involving routine, relationships, school, and work that can touch upon everything in life.

This need for control can veer toward “perfectionism,” where things have to be a certain way, or else some terrifying, unpredictable horror awaits. The desperate attempt to be “in control” is a cover-up for a underlying fear of lacking control, while the desperate effort to be “perfect” is a cover-up for a smoldering fear that things are deeply imperfect. This extreme need for control and perfection can lead to obsessive-compulsive behavior, where a person develops intrusive thoughts and resultant rituals to instill order, control, and perfection lest something terrible happen. Tragically, the one wishing to be in control is controlled by their own anxiety.



If you struggle with fear and anxiety, what is the source of these emotions? Which specific needs are at risk or endangered? Does it have to do with basic safety and security? As you were growing up, what happened

that made you feel unsafe? Do you believe you're competent and capable of handling life's unpredictability?

Calmness and Peace

The opposite of fear and anxiety is calmness and peace, a quiet but confident sense of security or acceptance. Whereas anxiety is the nagging concern that “something is wrong or will go wrong,” peace is the soothing confidence of “things are okay or will be okay,” even when faced with extremely challenging circumstances, such as life-threatening health issues or the loss of a loved one. It is a knowledge or faith that our needs will be sufficiently met despite the trials and tribulations because we have confidence in our resourcefulness to handle difficulty, believe in higher powers to take care of us, or are at peace with an inevitable outcome.

When we grow up in a safe environment, with our basic physical needs fulfilled, we feel secure about survival. Likewise, being surrounded by love, acknowledgment, and affirmation allows us to develop security in our existence. We believe that we *do* matter, that we *are* important and worthy of attention and love. Such fulfillment breeds confidence.

From this foundation of security, if we are nurtured and guided toward developing competence as kids, we learn that we are indeed capable, even if not at first, and we will persevere until we develop mastery. This breeds self-assurance. It is also true that children who grow up in unstable or abusive families are more likely to give in to peer pressure or stray toward risky activities—such as joining a gang, running away from home,

truancy, using drugs, or engaging in unprotected sex—in a bid to feel like they belong, affirmed, or psychologically stimulated.

As we grow older, if we find a career we enjoy, excel at, and are well compensated, we will likely feel more confident in our uniqueness and sufficiently superior in the competition for life's resources. With confidence and a healthy model of love, we can connect better with others and possibly form genuinely loving families. If we discover a religious or spiritual belief that explains the suffering of the world and our place in the grand scheme of life, this higher purpose can help us deal with life's challenges. Even when things do go wrong, as a natural part of life, we have the confidence and skill set to address them or learn to accept the inevitable with grace.

It is possible to maintain calmness and peace in the eye of the storm, even when chaos and destruction are swirling around and our circle of needs fractures. Still, it is a highly spiritual or philosophical endeavor.

At a higher level, learning to accept life's imperfections can bring serenity even when things are falling apart despite our best efforts. When our needs are in jeopardy, say, facing an impending and inevitable loss, the right mindset can bring surprising stillness within while a storm rages without. This state of mind is best exemplified by the Serenity Prayer:

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.”*



What moments bring you the most peace?
How often do you feel a sense of calmness? What topics

or issues tend to disturb your serenity? Have you ever felt peace amid a storm? What faith or belief helps you to achieve calmness despite life's imperfections?

Sadness and Depression

A cousin of anxiety is sadness, which occurs due to a lack of love, mistreatment, unfulfilled expectations, or a sense of loss. Whenever our circle of needs is damaged or hurting, we naturally feel sad. If we feel unloved, unworthy, incompetent, incapable, inadequate, less than, inferior, ugly, failing, pointless, bored, or bad in some other way, sadness is the emotion that correlates with the hurt and pain. When we lose something important to us, such as the death of a loved one or being rejected from an expected job, that pain naturally brings us grief.

Sadness can deepen into a depression as the conditions (including our distorted beliefs) nurturing it fester unchecked. Depression can feel like a wet, cold, heavy blanket weighing us down. Common metaphors also speak of a thick fog, a dark cloud, or an ocean of sorrow while the colors of life are drained to a dull greyness. With depression, a person is physically living but psychologically dying.

Depression can lead to hopelessness and despair, a horrifying belief that nothing can be done or things will never get any better. It can drench motivation and induce self-blame. The psychological pain can be so intense that the person longs for relief and distraction. Physical pain is normally an aversive sensation, but self-harming can serve as self-punishment, a distraction from the psychological pain, or a shock to the deadness.

Note: In the darkest moments, depression can lead to the belief that death is an escape route and suicide represents severance from the pain. If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide, please reach out for help, please seek help. Many online resources can help you. In the U.S., you can contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. You can also check out the International Association for Suicide Prevention. For a more detailed psychological approach to suicide, you can also consult Appendix II.

Sadness and anxiety are normal parts of the human experience as we encounter positive and negative emotions. We have goals, hopes, and aspirations that push our lives toward a higher-achieving future to fulfill our circle of needs. We have a certain expectation of how life should be, while reality is what it is. We work hard to coerce reality to align with our expectations; when they overlap, we feel triumphant and happy. However, when the gap between expectation and reality reveals itself to be a seemingly insurmountable chasm, despite our best efforts, we inevitably experience negative emotions. The bigger the gap between expectation and reality, the bigger our disappointment, frustration, sadness, and anxiety. When normal human emotions become overwhelming and start to impair daily functioning, such as self-care, motivation, sleep, energy, concentration, relationships, duties, and performance for a prolonged time, the emotional impairments become a disorder that needs intervention.



If you are struggling with sadness and depression, what is the source of these emotions? Does it

have anything to do with insecurity and lack of affirmation? What are your expectations, and what is your reality? How are your relationships? What are the disappointments in your life? In the circle of needs, which aspect is hurting or being damaged?

Anger

Anger is easy to notice because it can erupt like a volcano. The physical and psychological damage from the violence or aggression of anger can burn like fire. We want to hurt, destroy, or kill the things or people that anger us. If we can't strike at the source, this raging fire might even scorch innocent bystanders. Superficial burns leave little trace behind, but deep burns can scar for a lifetime. Children experiencing their parents' anger develop fear for their safety, anxiety for their security, shame for their being (internalizing the message that they are bad and responsible for their parents' anger), and sadness for their loss (of calm, loving parents), and anger for their powerlessness.

What is beneath the anger? If anger is the tip of the iceberg, what is hidden underneath the water? What is the source of anger?

Surprisingly (or not), some form of pain, hurt, sadness, or grievance is the source of anger. We feel that life, whether something or someone, has hurt us in some way, and this damage is unacceptable to our being or to our needs. If we perceive that someone wounds our sense of safety, security, sexual opportunity, existence, competence, superiority, stimulation, or meaning and purpose, we will likely become angry with them. Anger is a signal that (from our perspective) there is an "enemy" that is hurting us and should be neutralized.

As the hurt accumulates, anger builds, and every little thing “off” can make us angrier. If we cannot physically hurt someone, we will try to inflict pain by saying the meanest things we can think of, hoping our verbal attack hits the bullseye of their most sensitive spot. If we are successful, we will wound them triumphantly. Their hurt gives rise to their own anger, directed back at us. Anger begets anger. The cycle of anger becomes a cyclone, spiraling upward and out of control.

For instance, why would a gamer get angry after losing a game? Many YouTube videos show angry office workers destroying their workstations or gamers smashing the controllers or TVs. Observers can say that the gamer lost because “they suck” or just needs to “git gud.” The gamer might feel they lost because the game is rigged or something unlucky or unfair happened. Gamers can engage in highly competitive behaviors such as trash-talking, “teabagging” the loser, or even worse, “swatting” to hurt someone. If the gamers dig deep enough, they’ll realize that they had an expectation that they should be “good” and, therefore, “win.” They want a challenge but only to prove that they are better because they are truly superior, not simply winning against a bunch of amateurs in hollow victories. However, the reality of losing is a slap in the face to this expectation, which is painful and wounds their self-image as a “good” gamer. When we feel frustrated and want to destroy something, what we truly want to destroy might be our own incompetence.

Note: Road rage is a common and well-known phenomenon of anger. What is the pain, hurt, or grievance underneath road rage? There is an expectation that there should be no traffic wasting our precious time,

no one should cut us off, and no “bad” drivers dare to be so stupid as to risk hitting us. The reality of any of that happening is a grievance against our sensibility, despite how unrealistic it is. Thus, people view traffic congestion or rude behavior as an affront to their expectations and lash out in anger at reality in (mostly) impotent rage, sometimes with deadly consequences.

When something or someone hurts us, anger can also arise. Anger can refract into other negative emotions. Resentment is veiled anger because the target has some leverage over us so we cannot blatantly express our displeasure. Passive-aggressiveness is a veiled way to express our resentment without being caught red-handed. Envy is the anger directed at the person possessing some objects we desire, while jealousy is the anger directed at the person receiving the desired attention. Defiance is an open rebellion against a perceived injustice. Disrespect is the next intentional step to wound our target. Hatred is unmasked and unveiled intense contempt for something or someone. It is an extreme aversion to something we want to erase from existence . . . or first make to suffer, possibly leading to violence and destruction. All these flavors of anger ultimately turn another person or a group of people into the “enemy” that needs to be thwarted, stopped, or destroyed.

When we can't lash out at our target, all that fire might unintentionally spew at random innocent bystanders, especially the benign ones less likely to retaliate. People or children might not even be aware they feel hurt. All they know is the irritability that simmers and flares angrily at any random person or thing for the slightest inconvenience. In particular, in kids with unresolved and unprocessed trauma, their fear for their

security, or their shame for being nonexistent or having a bad existence is expressed through anger and lashing out. These kids struggle with deep fear, sadness, anxiety, shame, guilt, and anger and can come off as belligerent, oppositional, cruel, inattentive, and hyperactive.

While society and adults expect kids to prioritize school performance, their priority is the struggle with deep pain, fear, or depression because of unfulfilled needs. Anger and defiance simmer on the surface, often exploding in outright aggression with peers and authority figures. Even if they are bright and highly capable, apathy leads to a lack of effort, derailing school performance. Lashing out typically invites more judgment than compassion, which might also wear thin. More negative affirmations layer on more pain. The allure of drug use as low-hanging fruit for comfort and distraction can trap them further in a downward spiral. Unprocessed emotions are a poison that can last a lifetime.



What makes you angry? What's beneath your anger? What's hurting you? How are you expressing your aggression and anger? Has your anger brought damage to your environment and the people around you? How are you coping with your anger? Have you turned anger inward and against yourself?

Guilt and Shame

As we pick up values through the messages conveyed by our parents, family, friends, bullies, school, religious affiliation, and society, we have a particular belief on how a person “should” be. The people who act like they “should” can be considered “good”

people, while people who don't act like they "should" are "bad" people. Issues of "should," "right," and "good" can be a complicated topic as they involve wider social, cultural, and religious systems, and I will cover that in more depth in my next book.

At the current level of discussion, we expect other people and ourselves to act in a certain way. When others fall short of that expectation, it can lead to feelings of annoyance, disgust, or anger. When we fall short of it, it can lead to a sense of guilt. Guilt is the feeling that we have done something wrong, that we are incompetent, and we regret the "wrong" action. Guilt is a heavy and sharp feeling that sinks from the chest down to the stomach, and it lingers there. The worst guilt usually involves thinking that we have mistreated (or not treated as well as we should) someone who has already died or that we have made a huge mistake in a moment that can never be redeemed. Because we cannot turn back time, sometimes the guilt lingers on for the rest of our lives.

Whereas guilt is regretting our "wrong" action, shame is regretting our "wrong" being or identity. We can make mistakes and constrain that "wrongness" to a time-limited action. Yet, when we internalize that "wrongness" into our being as a permanent fixture of our identity, guilt transforms into shame. This is the difference between "you did something bad" versus "you are bad." During our upbringing, there are many messages from our family, community, society, or religion concerning what type of person we should be. The expectation or standard can touch upon many traits, such as intelligence, physicality, athleticism, gender orientation, identity, religiosity, or even race. When we internalize these standards as objectively true and recognize that we are different and, therefore, worse off, we feel shame in our state of being.

In a household where the parents' attention is focused solely on high academic performance, athletic victories, or artistic accomplishments, kids who can achieve their parents' expectations can feel brief moments of joy. Still, they are also highly stressed because they might feel their parents' love is conditional. They spend their life chasing after their parent's approval and affirmation. Their feeling of existence and competence is precarious. Kids who cannot live up to their parents' high expectations eventually feel ashamed for being stupid and incompetent. That shame leads to hurt, depression, and possible withdrawal from the family and the world.



Do you struggle with guilt or shame? What do you regret? What are you ashamed of? What lessons can you learn? Can you apply it to the present and future? Are you ashamed of something you cannot control, and is it disapproval from someone else?

Love

On the other side of the extreme aversion to hate is the extreme attachment of love. Love has many meanings. We will cover romantic love in the next chapter. At the most basic level, love can mean a desire for something or someone that we don't yet possess, as in "I'd love to have [fill in the blank]," "I'd love to make more money," "I'd love to have that experience," or even "I'd love to see them suffer." It can also mean an attachment or appreciation to something we already have, such as "I love my house," "I love my job," or "I love my family." Love, in a simple way, is an attachment to things, people, or outcomes.

This concept of hate versus love or, more simply, aversion versus attachment requires deeper analysis. Why do we hate or feel aversive toward certain things and feel love or attachment toward others?

Returning to the circle of needs, we are aversive toward things that discomfort us, inflict harm, or risk our physical and psychological needs. Conversely, we are attached to things that comfort us, bring pleasure, or secure our physical and psychological needs. We hate what puts our needs at risk, while we love what brings our needs to fruition. Sometimes, the temptation for immediate pleasure or need fulfillment, such as intense drug stimulation, can feel “good” in the short term but realistically be bad for our long-term well-being.

We feel positive emotions when we connect to things of attachment or distance ourselves from things of aversion. Likewise, we feel negative emotions when we have to contact things of aversion or separate from things of attachment. For instance, if a person is threatening, mean, or uncomfortable, we naturally want to stay away from them: we feel better when we are away and miserable when we are close to them. For a person who is nurturing, supportive, and kind to us, we naturally want to be closer to them: we feel better when we are close to them and miserable when we are away from them.

The dynamic can get complicated when a person who “should” love us, like a parent or a “lover,” is mean to us. Do we want to stay away from them, or do we want to be closer to them in the hope they’ll change? While we look to them to fulfill some form of need, they also put those needs in jeopardy. Will attachment outweigh aversion or vice versa? We’ll dive more deeply into the

mindfulness of emotions in a later chapter, but for now, pause here to consider your primary emotions.



What do you love? What are you attached to? What are the sources of your attachment? What do you hate? What are you averse to? What are the sources of your aversion? Contemplate this attachment and aversion regarding the circle of needs. How do the things you love or hate fit into the circle?

CHAPTER 8

Romance and Possession: Designed to Bind Us Together



While we have different kinds of love for people: love for family, our children, ourselves, friends, and lovers, one of the most potent forces known to us is romantic love. Love binds us together through thick and thin, and its essence is spoken in the most eloquent and beautiful description during wedding vows. “I love you” is a simple three-word phrase, but the genuine meaning and weight behind it can be earth-shattering. When spellbound with love, people are willing to do anything, including sacrificing their own lives. The highs that love blesses are just as intense as the lows that love curses.

First Experiences of Love

The only unconditional love in the world is that of a mother to a child. A mother’s love is one of the most self-evident phenomena known to us, and any outliers that violate this ideal are both unimaginable and horrifying. As babies and small children, love is a learning process as we learn what love is from our parents. We witness our parents’ love for each other (or lack thereof) and the love shown to us. As children, we come to internalize what is “normal” and what is “abnormal” when it comes to the expression of love, along with the expression of affection and anger. Over time, we develop a love for nonparental figures, such as siblings, other family members, and friends, but our template for love is from our parents.

Eventually, as adolescents, we find that we are enamored with a different kind of love. When the maturation of sex drive synergizes with the circle of needs that we covered in Part I (i.e., survival, safety, security, affirmation, competence, superiority, stimulation, and meaning and purpose), we get the ideal manifestation of true romantic love. When we are romantically in love with another, we want to ensure their survival and safety, naturally affirm their existence, develop our competence as a lover, ascribe a special status to our union, find the relationship physically, emotionally, and psychologically stimulating, and uphold the relationship as a meaning in life. We invest our life, time, energy, and resources for the sake of love, as recounted in countless love songs and movies.

Marriage or cohabiting is a natural extension of romantic love, especially as most of us are free to choose our life partner. This contrasts with older times when marriage served as a means to enhance the survival or prestige of the family or clan (some cultures still have marriages arranged by the family in modern times). A stable relationship provides the optimal environment for starting a family. When the parents' psyches are stable, they are more likely to satisfy their child's circle of needs. When the parents cannot provide a stable, safe, and predictable environment, both physically and psychologically, the child's mental health will be adversely affected.

Since romantic love can satiate our physical and psychological needs, that capability can be a blessing or a curse. If we come to the relationship knowing how to satisfy all our needs independently, meeting someone of equal standing greatly ensures the union will have an enchanted synergy. The primary focus is to simply love and support one another. If, however, we come to the relationship damaged, broken, and incomplete, with

unfulfilled needs, we look to another person to fill the void inside us, and the union is more likely to leave one or both participants unfulfilled, hurt, disappointed, resentful, and angry.

When someone else is pivotal in fulfilling our needs, they become indispensable: it feels as if we literally cannot live without them. What should be beautiful synergy becomes desperate neediness. We think we “love” someone, but in fact, we need them to “love” us more. Is love primarily about giving or taking?

Connection Not Possession

If a lover can help to cover up a void within, completing our incompleteness, they become critical to our fulfillment of needs. We risk becoming overly dependent on them, fearful of losing them, and therefore wanting to possess them. When love becomes possessive, people are treated as possessions—a decoration to lift our spirits, a drug to boost our mood, or furniture to prop us from collapsing onto the ground. Unresolved psychological baggage can poison the autonomous beauty of love. Ideally, our lovers should only stay because they want to, especially because they appreciate the beauty and the confidence in us. They likely won’t stay if we cling to them, claw into their flesh, manipulate, guilt-trip, or intimidate them.

Many of us are guilty of twisting desire into possessiveness, mistaking “desire” for “love,” and, in the process, corrupting its ideal. Unbridled desire is a black hole that cannot be satiated. The desire for pleasure, wealth, fame, or excitement for physical and psychological needs can never be maxed out. There is always something better to satisfy these needs over the horizon. Even when we become jaded with the things we can access, it can still leave a sense of hunger, not fulfillment.

When we love something, we tend to want to possess it. When a person loves the color of a butterfly, there is a risk they want to preserve its beauty in a collection, even if that means extinguishing a vibrant allure. When a magnificent animal is found in the wild, the story might unfold into an admirer killing that special animal to possess it. On a more common scale, we want to possess clothing, accessories, gadgets, cars, decorations, houses, etc., because owning them says something about us and our identity.

Using the possession of physical objects to address a missing or damaged portion of our circle of needs can result in hoarding objects as a way to fill a void within. Like those who use food, drugs, or sex to deal with psychological pain or emptiness, hoarding doesn't directly address the underlying issue and only creates additional problems. Living space can be filled up to the ceiling with possessions, but the inner void still throbs in anguish.

Beyond physical objects, illustrious parents, prestigious schools, or a job title can all enhance our status. But there is a difference between owning possessions to make life more comfortable and owning possessions to show off because that is where we place our values. The same desire for possession can apply to a person, hence the term "trophy wife" or "trophy husband" or the less talked about concept of "trophy kids."

What does possession really mean for us? Do we have to possess something to truly appreciate its existence, quality, and beauty? Can we appreciate beauty from afar without trapping it?



Who do you love? What needs are they fulfilling for you? And vice versa, what needs are you

fulfilling for them? Are you possessive in your love? What things in life do you want to possess, and what does it say about you? Are you using love and possession to fill some void within?

CHAPTER 9

Love and Sex: Designed for Life



The intertwining pillars of romance, sexual pleasure, and psychological affirmation demonstrate a pervasive theme throughout this book. Human psychology is complicated because it is hard to predict thoughts and behaviors. This complication exists due to the different layers of needs and levels of functioning consciousness in all of us. Collectively, we have the same underlying needs but individually, each of us can operate at different layers or a combination of multiple layers. A critical part of self-understanding is to understand all the layers well and learn to develop self-awareness as to which layer holds the most sway over us.

As explored in Chapter 1, our libido is a literal life-giving force. It is a promiscuous synergizer with multiple desires, giving humanity a wide array of sexual kinks. To keep things simple, let's analyze sex drive strictly from the perspective of getting two people together, from the simplest physical pleasure to a deeper emotional and spiritual connection. As we examine each layer, consider how it might apply to us personally, and honestly assess to which layer our minds naturally gravitate.

The Layers of Sex and Relationship

The synergy between physical pleasure and psychological affirmation intertwines like the grafting of two trees or intercoiling serpents that resemble the DNA double-helix.

Let's examine the physical layers first:

Layer 1—Simple Pleasure: First, libido simply breeds physical pleasure for stimulation. The discovery of self-stimulation and the pleasure it can bring is the first enchantment of sex drive.

Layer 2—Imagination: Next, physical pleasure from self-stimulation intertwines synergistically with mental fantasy—the mind leading the body. Sex is never meant to be a solo act; otherwise, how would the species procreate? Sex drive entices people to engage in sexual acts with another person, and that magnetism is the source of our fantasy, a psychological endeavor that accentuates physical pleasure. Pornography is imagination manifested. Some people are addicted to the extraordinary fantasy of pornography, making the reality of regular sex mundane in comparison.

Layer 3—Desire: Imagination or fantasy is psychologically stimulating, and it stokes the desire to experience it. Indulging in sexual fantasy naturally intensifies sexual desire, which, in turn, leads to intention. This intention then gives rise to planning and action, increasing the likelihood of a sexual experience.

Layer 4—Endeavor: Staying disconnected and isolated doesn't lead to coupling. Libido entices us to get close to someone. Wherever there are sexually charged energies, whether alone with another person, in a crowd at a party or gathering, at a bar or club, on dating apps or an actual date, or even at religious/spiritual places, this magnetism insidiously exerts its influence to motivate actions and attempts.

Layer 5—Coitus: If the stars align, sexual desire becomes a reality. It has finally brought two bodies together to potentially unite a sperm and an egg. This is nature's string to propagate the species. Without the intoxicating sex drive and ecstatic pleasure,

it is hard to imagine cautious and independent adults willingly going through all the trouble for it.

The psychological craving also has its own layers and operates in parallel:

Layer A—Pleasure: Rooted in the need for affirmation, people experience emotional pleasure when deeply connected to others. Feeling lonely and isolated is a deep emotional pain. Genuine connections and shared moments are some of the most beautiful experiences in life.

Layer B—Yearning: While people love and want a connection with their family and closest friends, it is purely platonic. Humans are social animals, and one of the deepest connections is romantic love. Libido adds a flavor of magnetism that creates a deep yearning to be with another person in a sexually romantic way. Life feels incomplete when we can't find our better half, a nagging void in our hearts.

Layer C—Infatuation: Inexplicably, someone will attract our attention, whether directly through physical attraction or augmented by their quirks, personality, and character. Before we know it, an infatuation has developed. We think about them, fantasize about them, long to spend time with them, do things for them, go out on a date, get into a relationship with them—all to be close to them.

Layer D—Endeavor: To turn dreams into reality, people set out to initiate contact and pursue courtship. Many people agonize over verbal and nonverbal communication to make the best impression, striking a balance between being interested and not shamelessly desperate. Some people are too cautious and fearful, never making a move, while others are relentless in their pursuit.

Layer E—Coupling: Again, if the stars align, the attraction is mutual and eventually reciprocated. The two interested parties spend time together, enjoy being together, and affirm one another. They get lost in one another, and the whole world fades away, leaving only the singular existence of the person of interest.

Synergy of Love and Sex

Combining the physical pleasure and psychological affirmation of libido imbues romantic love a potent energy that craves to manifest itself in the most intimate physical act. The act of lovemaking is a union of two souls, a merging of not just two primal bodies but also a rapture of two minds and spirits. A sacred union is a physical act that can act as a portal to transcend physical limitations toward the deepest emotional bonding and the highest plane of ecstasy. However, not all unions are this captivating. No matter how amazing, coitus cannot last forever, and a dénouement is bound to happen. What happens afterward is revealing of the mental state untainted by libido.

Note: The sequence of love and sex described in this section is common in the modern age but not universal. There are cultures and people of strong convictions who can successfully hold off sex until after marriage. While libido still grips them, they have the expectation, support, and strength to successfully resist. How people express the pull of libido is different for everyone.

Post-coital feeling: Depending on their original intention, the after-sex feeling can range from joyful intimacy to feelings of shame and self-loathing. The immediate post-orgasm mentality

is clear: either the sexual act is a synergy of lust and affection—leading to contentment, or the sexual act was predominantly a lustful conquest—possibly leading to confusion, disgust, or pride. The couple can cuddle, embrace, kiss, or frantically try to wash away the memory to escape a dirty dream.

Attachment: When synergized with psychological and emotional attachment, sex becomes a union of two beings, affirming and celebrating each other's existence while coalescing into a third entity, symbolically and literally. Captivated, the heart longs for the other person even when the raging libido has subsided. The love-struck mind longs for that intimacy and connection, sexually and emotionally. The people involved are getting attached.

Long-term relationship: If we see the same person repeatedly, there is a chance that a full-blown relationship will develop. Feelings and attachment take root, as needs and desires from each person intertwine to create a foundation that will be tested by the tribulations of life and the passage of time. When all is going well initially, the “honeymoon” phase is a pleasant and lovely time. The desire to please one another, present the best version of each other, and look past small grievances is at the forefront. Time has yet to reveal all the flaws and conflicts. If a couple stays true to one another, they create a strong foundation to potentially raise the next generation of humanity, and the cycle continues.



Which layer are you usually in? The physical side or the psychological side? Or a combination of both? How aware are you that the string of libido is pulling your desire and craving? How much do you give in?

The Play of Sex

For the purposes of our discussion, sex requires voluntary consent from both partners; otherwise, it's coercion and non-consensual, leading to sexual harassment or rape. Regarding the difference between men and women, as discussed in Chapter 1, sex is more likely to be a carefree recreational activity for men than for women.

We'll explore the play between two people of mismatching interest: a man who is interested in sex and a woman who craves psychological affirmation, especially if she has felt, to some extent, unacknowledged, unloved, or uncared for during her upbringing.

Unfortunately, the primitive nature of sex for men is a conquest to sow his seeds, a "cum and dump" mentality. Men who function at this basic level will use a woman before moving on to their next target. His previous attentiveness toward her now ices over to coldness and abandonment that exacerbates her deepest fear and reinforces the belief that she is truly unworthy. In response, the woman's instinct is to fix this gut-wrenching feeling by doing what she has learned will work, temporarily, to boost her esteem: using her sexual desirability to attract another mate. She hopes to fish for the right one who will truly love her. Each session of physical intimacy is mistaken for emotional intimacy. Unfortunately, these multiple sexual encounters only serve to slowly destroy her self-esteem further. Worst yet, she could become pregnant and give birth to an innocent child without an emotionally stable mother and a completely absent father.

With money comes power, and financially successful men appear to have the means to provide and protect others *if* they want to. This dynamic creates scenarios of multiple women

ving for the “love” or “possession” of the select few “quality” men, hoping to be the one special person to tame the sexual beast. In addition to getting his “love,” she wants to sit superior to all other women who failed. If a man operates predominantly at the lowest level of basic need for sex, he is presented with multiple options and temptations. In some circles, sexual indiscretion is the norm. Furthermore, multiple sexual conquests might be how he prefers to have others affirm his existence, competence, and superiority as he compares himself to other men. In a desperate gamble, she might hope to get pregnant and use the innocent child as collateral to keep the man hostage, appealing to his paternal instinct and commitment.

Many men can tame their physical sex drive and transcend to a higher intentionality of desiring love and long-term relationships. There is also an innate paternalistic tendency that matches perfectly well with fatherhood. Many men realize the limitation of pure physical pleasure and seek a more fulfilling relationship synergized with psychological attachment. Human fulfillment is more than just sex; it is better with the investment in a lifelong partner who can walk by our side “through thick and thin” and “through sickness and health.” Humans are sexual but also intellectual, emotional, psychological, and spiritual beings. The pleasure of physical sex is just a fraction of the kaleidoscopic beauty of a loving and dedicated union, a merging of souls.

With the advent of contraception or menopause, women are less burdened by the risk of pregnancy. She can engage in the game of sex just as men do. She can exploit her sexual desirability to fulfill the need for safety, security, affirmation, competence, superiority, stimulation, and/or purpose. She might even try to “win” over a man already dating or married. She might entice man after man but have no long-term interest in them. Some

young women are attracted to the “bad boy” type because his unpredictability brings excitement, and his confidence is alluring. She is also attracted to his sense of danger and the willingness to offend, which she hopes will be channeled to protect her. Taming him would speak volumes about her competence and superiority.

Since libido is a powerful drive, some people will pull the string of sex to achieve other purposes, such as money, power, information, status, etc. “All is fair in love and war,” including sex. How does she know her man isn’t deceiving her? How does a man know that his woman isn’t deceiving him? This is what makes humans so complex. Even with just these two predominant layers of physical pleasure and psychological affirmation, not including other complicating factors such as social-economic, cultural, or religious compatibility, it isn’t easy to gauge the heart of humankind.

Involuntary Celibacy

Since women are the natural gatekeepers, their selectiveness will result in men who cannot compete with other men for women’s voluntary consent and, therefore, cannot experience sex as often as they like, or worst case, never at all. Add in the dimension that the intimate act of sex can also affirm his existence, competence, and superiority; the rejection of consensual sex is a painful reality as it can negate the very things it should affirm.

Some young men who fall into this category can share their frustration through online communities called “Incel,” short for involuntary celibate. Sexual selection is indeed a selection that will inevitably result in the selected and the nonselected. The pain of involuntary celibacy can inflame loneliness into anguish

as some people in the Incel community turn toward anger and contempt against themselves and especially against women, the other half of the human species who should want them. The thing that they desire most is denied by nature's gatekeepers.

A prevalent explanation for the failed selection within the Incel community is the red and blue pill philosophy derived from the movie *Matrix*. Blue pill means that a person should still believe the benign story of sexual selection and try hard to be selected. Red pill means that the system is stacked against them because women are inherently superficial gold-digging idiots who cannot appreciate true gentlemen while falling for the "Chads" (attractive, strong, and wealthy men) of the world. An extension of the red pill is the harsh "truth" captured in the black pill, where there is no hope despite their best effort.

Their love, or more accurately the desire, for women turns into hatred whence spurned. The pain of loneliness and grievances of rejection ignite sadness to anger. One of the extreme manifestations of this intense hatred is the killing spree of Eliot Rodger, who left behind a diary and YouTube videos chronicling his psychological path of misperception, entitlement, desire, hope, failure, disappointment, depression, anger, resentment, hatred, and deadly vengeance.



What is the genuine intention of your sex drive? What are you really after? Physical pleasure, emotional intimacy, or both? Are you using sex to fulfill some other needs? Are you hurting anyone else in your pursuit of sex?

Sex drive is a vital force of human existence that can both create and destroy lives. It is an extremely insidious and seductive force

that seeks to assert its dominance. Many people unconsciously follow its command without questioning the pull and risk elevating the quest for sex as the primary purpose of life, with all its triumphs and disappointments. I hope that as we understand it more and reflect on its influences within ourselves, we will manage this drive more healthily and effectively.

As we wrap up libido as an instrument for life, we'll move on to examine an even more fundamental concept that is the essence of life: consciousness.

PART III

Consciousness



As we discuss humanity, the circle of needs, thoughts, and emotions, including love, sex, and relationships, all of these concepts are components of a pervasive but enigmatic construct: consciousness.

Consciousness is imbued with diverse meanings, making it too spiritual for a skeptical scientific person and too materialistic compared to the religious concept of souls. What is human consciousness? What is consciousness, in general? Another big question is whether artificial intelligence (AI) can replicate consciousness one day?

Every inquisitive mind should ponder the concept of “consciousness” thoroughly as the answer will consciously and subconsciously affect our view on life, its purpose, and the wider systems (social, economic, environmental, spiritual, etc.).

CHAPTER 10

Intentionality: The Force of Life



To begin, let's clarify what consciousness is not. As far as current science can objectively measure, matter and energy are the two all-encompassing things in the universe. Matter, in terms relevant to everyday life, has substance or mass that takes up space. We can be even more descriptive and say that matter is comprised of atoms, molecules, and sub-particles. Matter includes the "stuff" that makes up the sun, the moon, the Earth, the air, the water, the trees, the human body, other living and nonliving things, the plants, our environment, etc.

Energy is normally defined as "the ability to do work," and generally grouped as stored (potential) energy and working (kinetic) energy. More specifically, energy can take many forms, such as heat, motion, electrical, gravitational, chemical, and light. For the human body, energy comes from the chemical energy stored in the food we consume, which then is converted into the myriad forms of energy that allow our cells to function, heart to beat, lungs to breathe, brain to process, blood to pump, heat to warm, etc., and the ability to move our body to interact with the environment. The sun's light and warmth are a form of energy, as are the wind, the ocean's currents, electricity, gas, and firepower to move our vehicles, etc.

Matter and Energy

One simple way to view these two all-encompassing concepts is that matter is the substance and energy is the force that moves. According to the scientific laws of conservation of mass and of

energy, matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed but only transform from one form to another in a closed system. If we define the Earth, the sun, and the moon as a fairly closed system, it means that the human body we possess and the energy we use are neither created nor destroyed but simply transformed from one form to another.

The human body you have right now as you're reading this book is composed of matter that isn't new in the grand scheme of things but recycled material from the Earth. From conception, our "body" was a merging of a sperm and an egg, becoming a fertilized egg, which was implanted into our mother's womb, nurtured by the nutrients from the Earth she consumed through her diet. The single-cell fertilized egg multiplies exponentially, becoming bigger, and groups of cells start specializing to form specific cell types, tissues, and organs. After birth, we breathe in recycled air and consume recycled nutrients sourced from the Earth, replacing and renewing the cells in our body as they die or flake off. We consume and excrete substances, which undergo their own cycles to be broken down into smaller matters that are used as nutrients for fungi, bacteria, and plants, sustaining life for larger animals that can be consumed by humans again. At death, the lifeless body is returned to the Earth as matter and nutrients for another cycle. The substances that make up our body are transformed and recycled.

Almost all of the energy on Earth, including the energy that drives human functioning, ultimately originates from the sun, as its light is captured and converted by the plants through photosynthesis, which is stored and passed on to us as food directly or via the animals that eat the plants, and are then consumed by humans. Unused energy is stored in the remains of ancient animals and plants that lived millions of years ago,

compressed and fossilized to what we call “fossil fuels” that are used as energy sources in the forms of coal, oil, or natural gas. The sun’s heat drives the Earth’s weather, wind, and water currents, essential to life.

For simplicity, a person can be viewed as flesh molded from the Earth and motion powered by the sun. This concept can apply to almost all living things, except for the microbes living in the deep sea where no sunlight can touch; they capture and convert energy from the hydrothermal vents, energy sourced from the Earth’s inner magma.

An important point to make about matter and energy, as we understand them, is that both are “mindless.” What does that mean? Matter and energy are substances and forces in the universe that shift and transform mindlessly, or rather deterministically, according to the universe’s physical laws. Take water, for instance; it changes form from solid (ice), melting into liquid (water), evaporating into gas (cloud), condensing back into liquid, and then freezing back to ice, transforming not only its form but also absorbing and releasing energy along the way. The water cycle is vital to human life and runs through the human body as drinking water, sweat, tears, blood, and urine back out into the environment to be recycled again. Despite water’s many forms and transformations, it simply undergoes these processes according to the laws of physics and responds predictably to environmental influence. Its cycle is mindless, or more specifically, water simply exists and transforms according to the physical law and the environmental factors that influence it. The same can be said of all nonliving matter in the universe; it exists, interacts, and transforms based on deterministic laws of physics and chemistry. We’ll touch on the quantum aspect of physics in book 2.

Intentionality of Life

Since matter is inherently “mindless” and energy is also inherently “mind-less,” what is “mind-ful”? What is “mind”? What is consciousness that incorporates sensations, thoughts, and emotions?

Consciousness is commonly defined as the self-awareness of one’s own existence, experience, and sensation that leads to decision-making and behavior. Self-awareness is a good concept, though it is hard to ascertain whether another human being is truly self-aware from an outsider’s perspective because it is an extremely subjective experience. It is easy to deny the self-awareness of others and assume that they are just programmed to pretend as if they are self-aware and that we are the only truly self-aware people. Pushing this philosophical concept to an extreme, “I” am the only person to truly exist due to my real thoughts and emotions, while everyone else is a staged actor or NPC (non-playable character) in a virtual reality centered on my life—because “I” am that special.

For me, consciousness is better understood as intentionality rather than self-awareness, which can be circular logic. For something to be considered conscious, it must show some intentionality beyond the deterministic laws of nature, but something can only show intentionality if it is conscious. So . . . what is intentionality? It means pursuing some sort of goal, potentially against the flow of nature, whereas matter and energy mindlessly follow the law of nature. Consciousness is most applicable to humans as we know it. Humanity, through the act of living, possesses intentionality.

At the beginning of this book, we talked about how living things are “living” because it is the default of life; stuff that supports the

act of living, such as shelter, food, sex, and relationships, is pleasurable, while stuff that makes living difficult such as exposure to extreme temperature, bodily injury, starvation, thirst, and isolation is painful. Humanity has the overarching intentionality to survive with subsequent intentionality of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain rooted in biological, emotional, and psychological layers. This intentionality to live, the pursuit of pleasure, and avoidance of pain support individual survival, reproduction, and our species' continuation. The intentionality to live is the driving force among living things against other living things and the environment with limited resources. The game of cat and mouse, one trying to outdo the other, manifests this intentionality.

The intentionality to live is the defining characteristic separating "mindless" things from "mindful" things: conscious things will resist death or destruction, but unconscious things show no form of resistance. We can smash a rock or any mindless matter, and nothing will stop us. But try slapping a person. The inherent pain that has little damage on the person's overall physical form will produce some reaction to mitigate the pain and disrespect. In fact, humanity's intentionality to live, seek pleasure, and avoid pain is the very source of the creative force that constructs the current world as we know it. Humanity's intentionality shapes the Earth's landscape and manipulates its resources to our benefit. Scientific, medical, and technological advances all gear toward our collective intention to live longer and more comfortably. Even weapons of war created to kill each other are a means of protection and domination because competition for resources is inevitable.

Composition of Consciousness

Since mindless matter and energy have no intentionality, and all we know of the universe is composed of matter and energy, what exactly is consciousness? Is consciousness matter? Is consciousness energy? Is consciousness a miraculous emergent synergy of both? We do know that consciousness is closely associated with the brain. Neuroscience and neuroimaging attempt to correlate specific mental functioning with specific networks or areas within the brain.

Broadly speaking, the brain stem regulates the most basic survival functions of breathing and homeostasis, the cerebellum controls balance, and the cerebral cortex deals with executive functioning, thinking, and planning. We know that when there is damage to specific areas of the brain, there are clinical correlates that affect particular functioning. We also know that mind-altering drugs, such as cocaine or methamphetamine, affect certain neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin, to induce drastic physical and emotional sensations, which is also the foundation of psychotropic medications. The current scientific understanding suggests that consciousness directly emerges from the brain's functioning: the brain matter and its electrical and neurochemical signals give rise to consciousness.

The Evolving Brain: Neuroplasticity

However, an interesting phenomenon that we take for granted also occurs in the reverse. With conscious intent, such as training or practicing for certain crafts, the brain and its network shift to support this intentional development in neuroplasticity. For thoughts and behaviors that are used less often, that pathway in

the brain can atrophy or lay dormant, whereas for repeated thoughts or behaviors, that pathway gets more traffic and grows stronger. This is the science behind “practice makes (almost) perfect.” For virtuosos who deliberately practice a specific craft repeatedly for countless hours, brain and body are honed to achieve exceptional expertise.

The brain neural network is a bit similar to road traffic. Imagine you want to drive from Atlanta, Georgia, to New York City without a modern GPS; the first drive is brand-new with lots of unknowns and decision-making on which roads to take. But if you make this drive hundreds of times, you gather more information and become much more comfortable, making the drive almost second nature. Your frequently traveled path might be developed into an interstate for a quicker drive. You become an expert in getting from Atlanta to New York City, but if you want to start a new drive from Atlanta to Houston, Texas, that pathway is unknown, daunting, and will feel clumsy to you.

Consciousness Transforms Matter and Energy

Neuroplasticity shows that consciousness shapes the brain as well. The key to intentionality and consciousness is that it actively shapes the mindless matter and energy around it, the brain included. The brain represents the ground, and consciousness is the weather above it. As humans, we interact with each other and our environment at the level of consciousness, not at the level of the brain. We interact daily with reality through our senses, impressions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions. In fact, our world is shaped by consciousness. Our dwellings, buildings, cities, streets, electronics, furniture, clothing, appliances, gardening, parks, hiking trails, restaurants, schools, social connections, relationships, and

anything else we can imagine are touched by human consciousness. For instance, without intentional consciousness that specifically preserves natural wonders in the world, there is a risk that unregulated human activity will corrupt, destroy, or change them. Consciousness is a potent force that shapes matter and energy around us.

Thoughts are communicated at the level of consciousness through speech or writing. Speech isn't simply the vibration of air particles by the vocal cord to make sound waves, nor is writing simply high contrast marking on a blank canvas (black writing on white paper). When two people don't share the same language, the same speech or writing is ineffective in communicating the exact ideas. Even with nonverbal language through facial and body gestures, they are communicating through the level of consciousness of perceiving and interpreting the intention behind it. The neuroplasticity that changes the brain's network isn't done by random sound or light but by the deliberate thoughts transmitted on the level of consciousness through our behavior.

Psychotherapy is entirely based on consciousness influencing consciousness, which will inevitably affect the brain's circuitry, functioning, and electrochemical signaling. Directing consciousness in a specific direction isn't an easy feat, as you will know if you have ever tried to counsel someone about their issues. Understanding someone when they may not fully comprehend themselves is challenging enough, but guiding them toward a healthier and more adaptive way of thinking can feel like mental gymnastics. One of the most challenging aspects of being a therapist is adeptly communicating ideas that deeply resonate with the client to inspire change. Conversely, it is equally challenging for a client to feel unheard or misunderstood, having

to repeatedly hear the same guidance that fails to resonate. Without resonance, meaningful change is elusive. This is my biggest struggle in writing this book. I know what ideas I want to convey, but how do I write them in a way that resonates with you, in the present time or decades from now? How does one brain's neural network intentionally affect change in another brain's neural network separated by space and time?

To conclude that consciousness is just the functioning of the physical brain's matter and energy is short-sighted. The current year is 2024, and that conclusion seems to be what our current science can objectively offer. We have eyes that look outward into physical reality. We develop advanced scientific tools to look at the smallest particles or the biggest outer space systems. Brain imaging technology attempts to correlate the brain's structure, blood perfusion, energy usage, and functioning to study the apparent but enigmatic consciousness.

Looking Inward

The central theme in all these scientific endeavors is the eyes looking outward. When scientific studies ask participants about their thoughts and emotions, it is still an outward focus on a subject's communication of its experience. Even with the most eloquent words to describe a concept, can the most intelligent blind person truly experience the beauty of sight and colors? Can the most imaginative deaf person truly experience the beauty of sound and music? Scientists trying to study consciousness by simply looking outward at someone else's experience are akin to blind and deaf people trying to understand sight and sound through readings of instruments, even when their personal lives are already immersed in colors and melodies. They risk arriving at a conclusion that rejects the inherent existence of their own

consciousness. So, to truly study, analyze, and understand consciousness, we must also look inward. What does that look like?



What is your view on consciousness? Is it more religious, spiritual, or materialistic? Do you think consciousness is matter, energy, both, or neither? How does consciousness affect the brain structure and network?

Imagine a pack of wolves that function similarly to prehistoric humans: living together, surviving, socializing, playing, grooming, hunting, eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, sleeping, mating, fighting, birthing, etc. In wolves' social hierarchy, the beta wolves, both males and females, are not allowed to mate. This social system propagates the fittest genetics of the alpha male and alpha female. The beta wolves, however, will find ways to mate, whether directly challenging the alpha or sneakily going behind their back. Wolves also hunt strategically, communicating with one another to ambush, lay traps, or divide and conquer. They function off the instinct to survive and procreate, living and dying by it. That is their collective and individual intentionality. They function within the realm of our understanding and expectation.

Now, imagine a special wolf that suddenly pauses to close its eyes and starts to look inward to deeply reflect and analyze its condition and the world around it. Imagine a wolf that breaks free momentarily from the strings of survival to meditate, questioning why it is compelled to behave a certain way. The idea of a meditating, self-reflecting nonhuman entity is an unsettling concept because it shows an advanced degree of self-

awareness and potential for growth. What comes out of this cycle of deep meditation might bring an epiphany that could change the power dynamics between humans and nonhumans. Imagine an artificial intelligence that can self-reflect and meditate beyond its programmed coding: what are the implications and ramifications?

What Is My Intentionality at This Moment?

There is immense power in self-reflection and meditating by looking inward. If we fear that “simple” act performed by AI or other animals, it is imperative that we wield it for ourselves. Professionals who focus on human consciousness, such as neuroscientists, computer scientists, researchers, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, or counselors, should engage in reflective and insightful meditation to penetrate the topic they’re trying to understand.

Instead of asking, “Am I conscious?” we should ask, “What is my intentionality at this moment?” which is equivalent to asking, “Where is my mind right now?” Consciousness, existence, and intentionality are interesting to muse about. Philosophers love musing so much that sometimes they question their own existence, which reminds us of the famous Descartes’s line “I think, therefore I am” to answer whether he even exists. Just by the virtue of thinking, we exist. Thinking, existence, and intentionality are intertwined.

You might ask, “If we have neutral, observational thoughts such as the sky is blue today, or the raindrops are falling, what is the intentionality behind these conscious thoughts?”

Remember that the overarching intentionality is to live, but to live well requires countless aligning factors. One is the

intentionality to observe and be aware of the environment. “The sky is blue today” can be replaced by another observed reality, such as “the sky is cloudy with lightning today, and I’m standing in the middle of an empty field,” or the neutral observation of “raindrops are falling” could one day be an observation of “hail rocks are crashing.” An observation might seem inconsequential, but it is neutral only because there is no danger in the current assessment. The intention to observe is to detect risks that might endanger life, affecting our decision-making to approach safety.

An intentional existence anchored in a physical body is predicated on the pursuit of living and the avoidance of death, supported by the pleasure and pain principles. This intentionality to live endows consciousness with multiple factors. We have the five senses to be aware of our environment: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. A person without a way to detect their environment will die prematurely without external help. This is the basis of the intentionality to observe and be aware. The processing of our senses applies not only to the natural environment but also to other living things. A mindless rock can trip us, but what about a strange dog or person? Are they indifferent, friendly, or potentially dangerous?

Sustaining the body also requires an intentionality that involves obtaining shelter and food, ultimately securing money in the modern age. Beyond that, there’s also the intentionality to have a positive emotional and psychological state. Whether we realize it or not, we live moment by moment, driven by some intentionality: surviving, schooling, working, socializing, mating, enjoyment, stimulation, finding love, etc. The circle of needs spins relentlessly, monopolizing our intentionality.

CHAPTER 11

Darkness and Light



We have strings of desire that pull at our physical and psychological needs. Inevitably, our needs eventually compete against others' needs. We are socialized to share and learn social etiquette from our parents and others. During our upbringing, we learn what things are encouraged and discouraged. We learn what is deemed right and wrong from secular society, tradition, and religious belief. We learn to suppress certain beliefs and impulses that are “weird” or potentially destructive. A kid might want to dress in a certain way or exhibit a certain sense of humor that is frowned upon by those around them. Or a kid might want to throw a rock at someone's head but be stopped by the adults or get into trouble afterward. The message conveyed that certain actions or expressions are not desirable.

As we age, any functional member of society is expected to manage the primitive drive for aggression and sex. These expectations modulate our desires, aversions, and impulses. We learn the art of suppression to submerge the “unfavorable” parts of our psyche, including the destructive ones and the non-dangerous “quirky” ones. Over time, the prolonged suppression can deepen into repression if we forget what we buried so deeply.

What's Buried Beneath

Societal expectation wants everyone to be “good,” and we do want to be “good.” As we get older, we realize other people also

experience pain, pleasure, joy, and sadness, leading us to learn sympathy and empathy. In sympathy, we acknowledge and express concerns for the emotions in others, understanding their struggle without fully immersing ourselves into their experiences. Empathy gives us the depth and experiences to step into their shoes and share a deeper emotional connection. We don't want to be victims of unprovoked acts of aggression or unwanted sexual advances, nor do other people want to be our victims. If we empathize enough, hurting someone else is almost like hurting ourselves. Developing compassion drives our selfish impulses even deeper as we become genuinely horrified and ashamed by thoughts of unadulterated self-interest. In striving for "goodness," we reject the worst impulses in ourselves and others.

Yet, what we either suppress or repress doesn't necessarily disappear with time. Instead, it might fester and grow. Unprocessed buried aggression can manifest as unintentional passive-aggressiveness or self-sabotage, while unprocessed buried sexual desire can manifest as unexpected sexual misconduct. Understanding humanity is understanding ourselves, from the lowest, most abhorrent part of the psyche to the highest, most esteemed.

What Freud called the "id" is the interplay of primary drives that pull us to fulfill our physical and psychological needs, regardless of the consequences on others. Basic desires and aversion are at play at the lowest level, and most of us prefer not to accept that part exists in all of us. The deepest and simplest part of us wants to possess what brings us pleasure, excitement, and comfort while negating what brings us pain, boredom, and discomfort.

For example, if someone possesses something we want, there is a part of us that covets it too, regardless of the means: outright seize the object or remove the owner from the equation. If someone makes us angry, we want to destroy them regardless of the consequences. If we want sex with someone, we want to take them regardless of their consent. If someone's demise can benefit us, part of us would want their downfall. This recess is seen, in extreme cases, with parents who secretly wish their burdensome child was never born or in the devoted but exhausted caretaker who secretly wishes their terminally ill loved one would pass on already.

The complete capitulation to the strings of desire manifests as an all-powerful, self-centered, corrupted emperor who abuses power to seize what they desire or destroy what displeases them on a whim. There are many stories of dictators and monarchs mercilessly exploiting their authority, as well as stories of scientists and soldiers on the "winning" side committing atrocities against the "losing" side to satisfy their curiosity, entertainment, or anger. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," a popular quote from Lord Acton, rings true because deep within us, a corrupted emperor of varying temptations bides his time, constrained not only by powerful social pressure but, more importantly, by the development of our genuine sense of compassion and morality.

Sins and Virtues

Even with suppression or repression, plenty of people fall prey to strings of desire. Some people actively scheme to achieve selfish desires at the expense of others. Sex and human traffickers earn an unconscionable living to satisfy their needs at the expense of innocent victims. Drug dealers make a fortune

selling addiction to individuals and fostering misery in the communities. At its most basic, rape satisfies the sexual need of one person while completely disregarding the autonomy of another. At another level, rape can manifest the power and superiority of one person over another: one person seizes illicit control while another person loses that control. In all spheres of life, regardless of wealth, education, occupation, or religiosity, the string of libido mixed with the thirst for power can devastate people's safety and autonomy.

The commonly known seven sins that plague humanity—greed, lust, pride, sloth, gluttony, envy, and wrath—and whichever other combination we can imagine all stem from the unrestrained desire for our circle of needs.

The ocean of humanity is vast . . . with deep, dark, twisted parts. The horrifying recess in this ocean empowers some people to mercilessly pursue the strings of desire, nurtured by human tenacity and intelligence. If someone else's suffering is entertaining or beneficial, the worst of humanity treats other people as nonhuman objects to be used, exploited, and then tossed aside. Lacking compassion, empathy, and sympathy, combined with a twisted need for fulfillment, turn humans into demons. William Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, "Hell is empty. And all the devils are here."

Given two ends of a spectrum, where there is darkness, there is also light. When we can control and transcend our most basic impulses, we can consciously choose to act in a way that minimizes harming others, forgoing our own benefit if it means hurting others, or even willingly taking a loss to benefit others. To selfish intentionality, the person who throws themselves on

top of a bomb to save others is an idiot. To the more selfless minds, his action genuinely makes him a hero.

Opposing the seven sins are the seven virtues of chastity (lust), temperance (gluttony), generosity (greed), diligence (sloth), patience (wrath), charity (envy), and humility (pride). It is easy to be tempted by “sinful” seductions, while cultivating virtues is a lifelong journey of self-reflection and effort. Power can corrupt because it removes the barriers that restrain our inner demons. However, this isn’t to say that lack of power is good. Lack of power over ourselves is a weakness that can corrupt or limit our potential. It takes reflection, courage, honesty, wisdom, compassion, and diligence to truly tame our vices. Weakness of character is the weakness of the mind to control the basic impulses. Lacking power over ourselves leads to abuse of power when given the opportunity.



Reflection

In your quest to fulfill your circle of needs, is it more about vices or virtues? Are you aware of the unbridled desires of your corrupt emperor? What lurks beneath the ground of social etiquette? What are your deepest and darkest desires? Are you harming anyone or anything in your pursuit of fulfillment? Is there duplicity in your words and actions to conceal the inner darkness?

Consciousness as the Source of Existence

If humanity is an ocean, our individual identities are akin to the droplets formed by the waves of life crashing against the cliff of physical reality—splashed upward and briefly suspended in midair. The intentionality of life scatters among all of us. Humanity is the ocean that connects us. We are all particles from

this vast sea, each with unique forms, perspectives, and experiences. However, this individuation often leads us to feel separated and disconnected.

Imagine a droplet falling back into the ocean, merging with the water beneath. Now, reverse that process so the droplet pinches off from the ocean and rises above the surface. What forces propel this creation and separation?

I envision a double-helix, like the DNA, of two twisting strands rising upward: one strand represents matter, and the other strand represents energy, taking the shape of two intertwining tree trunks with broad roots at the bottom and cradling branches at the top to support a glowing pearl-like droplet. For the droplets to elevate above the ocean's surface, we must constantly draw in matter and energy in a voracious appetite. The more matter absorbed, the bigger the droplet grows, while the more energy consumed, the brighter the droplet glows.

We absorb matter not only through the food we ingest but also through the physical possessions we accumulate, including the fanciest house, the nicest car or yacht, the avant-garde fashion, or the latest technological gadgets. We consume energy not only from food but also from the energy to condition our homes, drive our cars, fly our planes, or power our gadgets. Life appears to be a competition to see which droplet can amass the most matter and energy to become the biggest and brightest.

Since matter and energy are mindless, why would they inexplicably coalesce to uphold the droplet? The droplet represents us individually, and the core of the droplet represents our consciousness. The consciousness of living things inherently desires to live, attracted to pleasure/comfort while averting away from pain/discomfort. This desire to live, which

has needs (or strings) and requires certain conditions for survival and existence, is the voracious vortex that sucks in resources to substantiate itself. The exterior of the droplet looks like a glowing pearl, while the inside is this vortex. The absorption of matter and energy is akin to the two arms of a spiraling galaxy, giving us the propulsion to airlift against the ocean surface beneath. Not only do we want to be the biggest and brightest pearl, but we also want to be the highest. To secure and celebrate our existence, we need to see our reflection on the pearls around us. Above the ocean of humanity, our individual selves are a net of pearl-like droplets reflecting one another.

Superficially, the biggest and brightest pearls that float highest seem to be the most important; wealth and status sparkle like diamonds. However, how people fulfill their needs reveals the interior of their pearls, the light and darkness within the struggle between vices and virtues. One cannot guess the interior by just looking at the exterior. Some pearls glimmer with mesmerizing radiance, but the core is dark and twisted. Some pearls are simple in appearance, but the core glows with divine light. And some pearls are as authentic inside as outside.



Reflection

How do you see individual people in relation to all of humanity? How different and separated are people? Especially of different nationalities and ethnicities? Is there something that unites us all underneath?

PART IV

Recommendations



With our understanding of the circle of needs encapsulating the physical and psychological strings, what should we do with this knowledge? Learning new ideas is interesting, but how do we apply them to life?

Have you reflected on how the strings might relate to your psyche? Using what we have learned as a foundation for self-improvement, I highly recommend the following way of thinking and habits to achieve and sustain mental well-being.

CHAPTER 12

Learning to Be Mindful of Emotions



The foremost critical task to achieve mental well-being is to understand our emotions. As we explored in Chapter 5, emotions are integral to our existence. Our scientific, medical, and technological advances are predominantly designed to cater to our emotions and basic human desires: to stimulate our curiosity, live longer, abate sickness, fight for resources, and optimize comfort and pleasure while minimizing discomfort and pain. Even when we have flying cars or possibly are colonizing other planets, our emotions and desires will still pull the strings unless we truly understand and effectively manage them.

Embracing the Spectrum of Emotions

As babies, our emotions were simple, mostly positive or negative depending on how our needs were met. As we age and develop more complex relationships, these positive and negative emotions also ramify into more nuanced dimensions. Hundreds of words try to capture the breadth and depth of human emotions. Because life is unpredictable and inevitably has ups and downs, we are bound to experience negative and positive emotions.

One of the most damaging practices is internalizing the defensive idea that we should only feel and embrace positive emotions. This belief commands that we should be positive and upbeat, putting on a mask that life is pleasant. When things are unpleasant, we would rather not talk about it, hide it, deny it, or

reject it. Negative emotions, by nature, are discomforting and can even be painful. Following the principle of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, we favor pleasurable things and avoid painful things. It is natural to want to avoid painful emotions. It is perfectly fine to celebrate happiness, joy, love, excitement, and contentment. Yet, when people share their anxiety or depression because life is less than perfect, it becomes undesirable and uncomfortable. When people have the courage and insight to process their thoughts and emotions with a therapist, a stigma is cast upon them as damaged and broken.

Many cultures shun negative emotions, individually and publicly. It is more acceptable to share physical ailments such as diabetes or high blood pressure, but we must not talk openly about our sadness or anxiety. It is acceptable to be physically unwell, but there's a negative connotation if we are known to be mentally or emotionally unwell. We have to save face and put up a mask that everything is fine and positive. Yet, the act of holding up a mask is exhausting and damaging in itself. We feel isolated in our emotional struggle when, in fact, that very struggle is a connection to the ocean of humanity.

Life isn't a fairy tale, and even those stories contain darkness. Life doesn't always turn out as planned or expected. Everyone will experience the ups and downs of life. Everyone is bound to experience the positive and negative. My first recommendation is to safely allow ourselves to feel the entire spectrum of emotions, standing firmly on the cliff of physical reality while embracing both the inherent beauty of nature and the storms of life.

What Happens When We Run

With the modern age of instant gratification, people can run away from their emotions more easily than ever. If we feel any negative emotions, we can look for distraction with instant access to online content, such as TV shows, movies, gaming, news, or social media. We can also keep busy by diving into work or gossiping about other people's issues. The older destructive methods of distraction are still available—sex, drugs, or gambling. Some people also come to their doctors demanding strong anti-anxiety medications such as addictive benzodiazepines like Xanax, Ativan, or Klonopin while declining any psychotherapeutic interventions.

How does this coping strategy of distraction play out? When we run away from problems or negative emotions, do they disappear? How long will we have to keep running? Does it get tiring? And when will these negative emotions catch up to us?

People who use distraction by keeping busy can survive during the day, but the body and mind cannot keep running indefinitely. Nighttime allows for rest and recuperation, but as the body rests, the mind also wants to rest—and the running stops. Then the negative emotions crash in like a mob to collect all the debts owed. All the evaded negative thoughts and emotions catch us in the eerie silence when we are most alone and vulnerable. Solitude or nighttime becomes a scary predicament for psychological runners.

The undeniable reality is that distraction or avoidance of negative emotions doesn't make them go away. A frequent metaphor I portray to my patients is to think of negative emotions as goopy toxic oil. When we try to avoid it, we frantically bury the oil underneath our distractions that become

the ground we walk on. The gooey oil doesn't decay; instead, it lingers and festers. Over time, as life continues to give us problems, the oil reservoir grows larger and larger. Occasionally, it might bubble up "for no reason" to make us slightly sad or anxious. At rare moments, an innocent statement or event might inadvertently strike the ground like lightning, provoking the oil underneath to erupt like a geyser, which throws us into intense emotions of explosive anger, panic attacks, crying spells, self-harming, or suicidal behavior. As we continually bury the emotions deeper and deeper, the persistent oil eventually seeps upward. It starts to permeate the air we breathe, rendering us in a state of chronic sadness or anxiety "for no reason." Even with multiple psychotropic medications, some people live in a permanent toxic fog with occasional bubbling or volcanic explosions.

Accepting Negative Emotions

I used to love supernatural horror movies. One of my favorites is *The Grudge*, which I first watched as a college freshman. Horror movies, by nature, always contain and evoke strong emotions. Over time, I noticed that all supernatural horror movies represent intense emotions. The ghosts or supernatural beings tend to have unresolved and unprocessed grievances due to traumatic and often tragic circumstances. The hauntings are a manifestation of their intense anger and hatred. Despite death, that energy lingers and somehow influences the living consciousness in that space. The fear and the adrenaline rush that normally accompany horror movies for me eventually subsided into inquisitiveness and sympathy.

Like ghosts, the negative emotions catch up to the psychological runners at night and can feel like a haunting, as exemplified by

the phrase “haunted by our own demons.” Viewing negative emotions as ghosts and demons makes them appear scary, otherworldly entities. They seem outside, separate from us, an external enemy that should be exorcised or avoided. However, is this view accurate? And, more importantly, is it actually helpful?

Where do negative emotions come from? Where are their sources? What exactly are they? Is there a purpose for them? To answer these questions, we must remember that negative emotions come from us and our consciousness. I recommend re-imagining negative emotions as a younger version of ourselves. This little child is struggling with negative emotions and issues FOR A REASON, and they are coming to us, the older and wiser caretaker, for help. They are a part of us that our mind is trying to process.

The unwillingness to address negative issues prevents us from moving forward. When we distract ourselves from negative emotions by watching TV or playing games, it is the same as ignoring this helpless version of ourselves when they come to us for help. With pain, hurt, anxiety, sadness, fear, or anger, the little kid comes to us looking for comfort and guidance. Instead of validating them, their whimpers, tears, or tantrums discomfort us, so we dive into our distractions to drown out their presence and pain. We want to banish them to the basement or the attic where they can never bother us again. In many cases, we have internalized negative messages from our parents, family, friends, classmates, colleagues, or bullies that can make us feel unwanted, bad, unworthy, or not good enough. When these negative memories and emotions wash over us, it isn't the bullies that come, but the child in pain repeating the negative messages, trying to make sense of them.

That child stands close to us, longing to be acknowledged, loved, and cared for, but instead is unacknowledged, unloved, and uncared for: existence unaffirmed. Existence demands acknowledgment, and we wish precisely that by not acknowledging our pain, it will cease to exist. In truth, that child doesn't cease to exist, but the pain festers and deepens into depression, severe anxiety, and eventually hatred. A child seeking comfort, when rejected over and over and over again, grows vengeful. Our cruelty and neglect have inadvertently transformed a broken piece of ourselves into our tormentor. When we deny their existence, the negative emotions assert their own existence with a vengeance. The abandoned child, once locked in the basement, has grown powerful, seizes control of the entire house, and turns it into a prison. Welcome to a new existence.

If we had a son, daughter, younger sibling, niece, or nephew coming to us for help, how should we respond to them? If we adopt a coping strategy of invalidating and neglecting our emotions, how can we comfort others when they need our help? More importantly, if we cannot be kind to ourselves, can we truly be kind to others? If we cannot comfort ourselves, can we truly comfort others? Especially when we become parents and have children of our own who need comfort, can we do that for them? Children learn the ways of life from their parents. How do Mom and Dad handle negative emotions and conflict? How do they handle the unpredictability and difficulty of life? How do they handle disappointment, frustration, loss, and grief? How do they express anger? The journey to better manage our emotions isn't just for ourselves but also for the people who depend on us.



How comfortable are you with emotions? Do you allow yourself to experience negative emotions? Are

you comfortable sitting with your emotions, or do you run away from them? When you feel hurt and pain, do you try to banish them? What methods do you use to ignore your emotions? How is your strategy playing out? Do you treat yourself with kindness and compassion?

CHAPTER 13

The Art of Mindfulness



If it makes sense to feel and accept our emotions better, what is a way to do it? Mindfulness practice is one of the best methods to connect deeply with our emotions and thoughts. In Chapter 8, we talked about consciousness as equivalent to having intentionality. Mindfulness allows us to see our mind for what it is, simply observing it and acknowledging its intentionality. Mindfulness is easier to understand through metaphors. I present two examples below and feel free to create your own metaphor that helps solidify your understanding.

The Restless Water Strider

If you have ever visited a pond, you might have seen strange disturbances on the surface where it appears like an invisible stick is drawing random straight lines. From far away, it appears that something is moving very fast from one point to another, then shifting direction again and again. On closer inspection, it turns out that these random straight lines on the water surface are created by an insect called a “water strider.” They are long-limbed insects that can literally walk on water by manipulating the surface tension with their tiny leg’s hair to stay afloat, then propel themselves forward in a straight line like a burst of boat rowing. They dash to and fro in seemingly random patterns, always busy and always on the move.

Without mindfulness, we are like a rider strapped on the back of a water strider, zig-zagging from one point to the next, barely stopping for a moment before shooting off to another location.

Our mind can move from thinking about work and all its stresses, dash over to thinking about relationships, revisit some past conflict that is still a sore spot for us, run toward the future with all the what-ifs, and then lament the state of the world. Our mind constantly plays “spin the wheel” with the circle of needs, fretting over some aspect of life.

Each of these thoughts can elicit some emotional response, and if an emotion becomes too negative, we start to feel discomforted and uneasy. Our mind naturally escapes the discomfort by running toward distractions such as online videos, music, sexual thoughts, drugs, etc. The water strider dashes away from the “dangerous” gloomy area in the water to seek sanctuary at familiar leisure spots. But because the nature of our mind is restless and the water strider is constantly in motion, it is only a matter of time before it returns to dangerous territory again, and the cycle repeats itself.

As a rider on the water strider, what we see, feel, and experience on its chaotic path seems urgent and consequential. The dangerous area in the water appears scary and intimidating as the weather storms and rages, while the calm spots feel welcoming and comforting with cool breeze and warm light. We always try to steer the water strider to pleasant water, but the water strider isn't easy to tame. Often, it intentionally visits water areas that are most painful and terrifying for us, over and over again. The strapped rider is at the mercy of the mount, getting dragged from place to place, helpless and exposed to the element. This is a ride that will last an entire lifetime. Some can learn to master their ride, while most are helplessly dragged along. How would you describe your control over your mount (mind)? How do we start to gain control?

With mindfulness, we are no longer strapped to the water strider. Actually, we are strapped to our unruly mount only by our own grip, not a rope or shackle! Learning to let go of the reign is the first important step. To gain control, we must first let go. Once free, the rider can fly upward into the sky, far removed from the water strider and the urgency of the elements on the ground below. The rider is safe and can witness the situation much more dispassionately and impartially. The rider now floats in the air, looking down and observing the water strider's movement as it dashes from one area to the next, making notes of the movement pattern to learn more about the mount.

Observing the path and terrain, the flying rider can notice, "Ah, that's where it normally goes!" or "Didn't realize that spot actually has that kind of weather." Eventually, the high-flying rider will inextricably be pulled back onto the water strider. Rider and mount are bound for life, and the separation is only temporary. The rider will lose his neutral state of observation. Once again, going along for the ride and experiencing all the emotions that come with it.

With mindfulness, you zoom out from your mind and observe where the mind is going. It is an exercise of neutral observation to better understand your mind and yourself. This simple practice isn't that simple, but the intention is to maintain the state of the unattached rider, flying high, observing, and minding.

The Flying Kite

Another helpful metaphor for the mind is a flying kite. Normally, our mind drifts from topic to topic, like a flying kite drifting from place to place, flowing with the wind, representing our mental habit. The more frequently the wind blows, the stronger it gets

and the more urgent it becomes. Every time we lament or ruminate on the past, we reinforce that mental habit as the wind blows our kite into past worries, becoming much more routine. If we frequently give in to sexual desire, the wind that carries our kite into sexual thoughts blows much harder. Our kite gets carried by the wind from topic to topic, whether to present issues, past regrets, or future concerns. When our mind is caught in a specific topic that brings strong emotions, such as sadness that feels like heavy rain or anger that erupts like a thunderstorm, our kite is battered and helpless in the weather of our creation. When we are not mindful and self-aware of our thoughts, our mind wanders and flies aimlessly, dwelling in different thoughts and memories to evoke all sorts of emotions.

To practice mindfulness is to be aware of where your kite is flying. Instead of identifying with the kite, adopting the kite's perspective and helplessly battered by the elements, we shift the perspective to the person flying the kite. We are not the kite! We are the person holding the string on the ground, simply watching where the kite is flying, unbothered by the weather conditions. The person is a neutral observer.

The difference between being mindless and mindful is learning to be aware. Learn to step away from your mind and observe your intentionality. Mindlessness means our perspective is strapped to the object (kite or water strider), while mindfulness means our perspective is from the person removed from the object. It means that you now observe your own mind.



Reflection

What is your understanding and experience of mindfulness? Does the water strider or flying kite

metaphor help you to approach mindfulness? What other metaphor is most useful to you? Are you willing to practice mindfulness? What things are you starting to notice about your own mind?

CHAPTER 14

Tuning in to the Mind-Body Connection



When we were babies, our physical comfort or discomfort directly translated to a positive or negative emotional state: the body led the mind. As we get older and are confronted by a more complex environment, our mental perception regarding physical and psychological needs creates our emotional state. We link emotions more to mental states than physical states. We start to forget that our body and mind are connected, and we notice only the strong emotions arising in us. We notice anger, fear, anxiety, or sadness and neglect the associated bodily sensations. Over time, we disconnect the body from the mind.

When the bodily sensation is severe enough, we tend to seek a physical explanation for it. When we have heart palpitations or chest tightness, the reflex is to wonder about the possibility of a heart attack. When we experience shortness of breath and trouble breathing, it's easier to wonder about asthma or sudden respiratory infection. However, quite often, panic attacks can be the cause of these distressing symptoms in physically healthy people.

Note: In severe cases of suppressed psychological distress, the negative energy is expressed through the body with significant dysfunction such as numbness, weakness, paralysis, seizure, blindness, deafness, or slurred speech in Conversion Disorder or Functional

Neurologic Disorder. Severe psychological distress can also trap the body in a frozen state, stuck in odd posture and unresponsive to the environment, in a condition called catatonia. When in doubt, it is critical to rule out underlying primary medical causes to ensure safety, which leaves psychosomatic conditions (physical illness caused by mental factors) as a diagnosis of exclusion.

Becoming Aware of the Body

We need to become experts in both our minds and bodies. We need to reunite the mind and body by knowing both intimately well. Practicing mindfulness of the body is to be aware of what and how our body is sensing. Try it now. Close your eyes and take a deep breath, then sense the findings to this simple question: “How is my body feeling?”

Start with a general sense of comfort versus discomfort: Is there any specific area that stands out? You can casually stretch your body to test its limit and sensation. Then, perform a cursory body scan starting from your head and moving down to your face, neck, shoulder, arms, hand, chest, stomach, pelvic area, legs, and feet. Does any sensation stand out? Later, when you experience strong emotions, practice mindfulness at that moment to get acquainted with the associated bodily sensation. The list below can give you some ideas as you explore your experiences.

Table 1: Emotions and Associated Bodily Sensations

Emotions	Bodily Sensations
Calm	Slow, regular breathing, relaxed muscles, ease or comfort.
Happiness	Warmth in the chest or abdomen, feeling light or tingly, smiling or laughing, relaxed muscles.
Love	Rising warmth and comfort in the chest, glimmering eyes, endearing smile, gushing.
Excitement	Feeling energized or thrilled, racing heart, rapid breathing, heightened senses, butterflies in the stomach, restlessness.
Curiosity	Raised eyebrows, leaning forward, alertness, a slight smile, an eagerness to learn more.
Boredom	Heavy eyes, slow movements, dragging feet, lethargy, yawning, sleepiness.
Sadness	Heavy feeling in the chest, a lump in the throat, distant gaze, sighs, tears.
Anger	Increased heart rate, tense muscles, heat in the body, clenched jaw or fists, shortness of breath, raised voice, sweating, shaking, feeling hot and flushed.
Anxiety	Butterflies in the stomach, increased heart rate, sweating, tense muscles, difficulty breathing, nausea, dry mouth, feeling restless or jittery.
Fear	Increased heart rate, shallow breathing, sweating, tingling or numbness in limbs, tense muscles, trembling, feeling of impending danger or threat.
Hatred	Increased heart rate, tense muscles, clenching of jaw or fists, feeling of animosity or ill will.
Disgust	Nausea or queasiness, wrinkled nose, withdrawal or avoidance of stimulus, an urge to vomit, feeling repelled or repulsed.
Contempt	Curling of the lip, narrowed eyes, sneering, feeling superior or judgmental.
Embarrassment	Blushing, hot face, sweaty palms, lowered eyes, a desire to hide or escape, a sense of self-consciousness.

Disappointment	Slumped posture, heavy breathing, tears, lethargy.
Confusion	Dizziness, disorientation, headache, mental fog, difficulty concentrating, feeling overwhelmed.

You might have a slightly different bodily experience from the list above. However, the more familiar you become with your bodily sensations, the more cogently you can delineate future bodily issues as they might or might not relate to your emotions.

Applying Mindfulness

We can apply mindfulness to both the bodily sensation and the emotional state. For instance, when we notice our heart sinking heavily with sorrow like a wounded bird falling from the sky, we compassionately cradle the pain in our hands instead of running away to let it crash and quiver on the ground. We are no longer helpless victims of our emotions. We become more aware of its effect and destruction on the body, which will enforce our determination to master our own mind.

Without mindfulness, we risk getting trapped in a vicious cycle of negative emotion and distressing bodily sensations. For instance, we might start to have negative thoughts about the current circumstance, a horrifying past, or a risky future. Negative thoughts give rise to a negative emotion(s)—whether singular or a mixture of fear, anxiety, sadness, or anger. Negative emotions give rise to a corresponding bodily sensation, such as chest tightness, heart palpitation, difficulty breathing, upset stomach, or headache. Unaware that the bodily sensation is related to our emotions, we freak out about these scary physical symptoms. We risk thinking, “My body feels horrible for no reason. What’s going on? Am I going to die?” This line of thinking

elicits even more negative emotions, especially fear. The worsening negative emotion creates even stronger and worse bodily sensations, which makes us have even more alarming negative thoughts.

This vicious cycle is the basis for a tornado that spins round and round, getting stronger and more violent. Eventually, our emotions can exacerbate to trigger uncontrollable fear, anger, or crying. The relentless tornado of wind is now imbued with rain, fire, and lightning—and we become a helpless victim in this maelstrom, a ragdoll tossed about in this raging tornado. With awareness of the mind–body connection, we can prevent this tornado from strengthening in the first place. With mindfulness, we sit safely in the center of the tornado, observing the debris swirling around.

Journaling

One simple method to become more mindful is to write down your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations three times a day: in the morning, around lunch, and before bed. Each journal entry can be just a few sentences to be mindful of and check in with your internal state. How is your mood? Has anything significant happened recently? Is anything exciting you or bothering you? What's your goal? What and where is your intentionality?

Journaling allows us to be more thoughtful and aware, possibly seeing patterns in our behaviors and situations.



Reflection

How aware are you of your bodily sensations to your emotions? Do you notice how your body feels when you're fearful, anxious, sad, angry, happy, joyful, or thankful? Can you see the connection between thoughts,

emotions, and bodily sensations? Have there been times when you were trapped in an intensifying tornado from the feedback loop?

CHAPTER 15

The Gift of Meditation



A more formal way of applying mindfulness is the practice of meditation, which involves observation and understanding.

We can anchor our minds onto something consistent and readily available to serve as a home base for mindfulness. This something is our breath, the constant inhalation and exhalation that sustains us. Learning to focus on the breath, simply being aware that “I am breathing in” and “I am breathing out,” is the foundation of mindfulness. This is called mindfulness of breathing.

Cradle the Kite

Returning to the kite example I shared in Chapter 11, mindfulness shifts the perspective from the kite to the person flying a kite. Meditation is pulling the kite down from the sky, pulling the kite back to our body, to our breathing. By focusing our minds on our breaths, we gently cradle the kite in our embrace.

Meditation practice isn't easy as the habitual wind will pick up again and airlift that kite out of our hands; our minds will wander away from our breathing. The kite will flow with the wind and become relentlessly battered by the element, and that's perfectly okay. Observe the kite from the person's perspective on the ground; observe our mind from a distance. Where is our intentionality? What are we thinking about? What topics seduce or dominate our consciousness? Acknowledge the

thought, whatever it is, then gently shift our mind back to breathing, pulling the kite down to our embrace once again.

The cycle will repeat itself: wandering mind, focusing on breathing, wandering again, but now we're observing it, focusing on breathing again, wandering again. Every time we repeat the cycle, we get a little better. We become experts in observing and, therefore, developing an understanding of our mind. With understanding comes influence and control.

When we focus our mind on the bodily sensation of breathing, our mind and body become one in the present moment. A simple but precious unity that rarely occurs because the modern world's tendency is to scatter our minds in dozens of different directions away from the present moment: our body is physically anchored in one place, but the mind is flying all over space and time. Our habit energy isn't used to having the kite resting in our hands; the wind will always come. It becomes a constant dance between being mindless and being mindful, and that's the practice. With patience and perseverance, as with all things, we will get better, becoming more observant, more self-aware, and more conscious.

As we focus on the bodily sensation of breathing, we can also calm the body. Paying attention to deep breathing is a technique for grounding and relaxation of the body, especially when our body is in a heightened state of anxiety or anger. Bringing mindfulness back to our breathing and body, we notice our thoughts, our emotions, and sensations in our body. What's our intentionality at the moment? What emotion is arising? Is our heart beating fast? Are our breaths shallow? Do we feel heat in our chest or butterflies in our stomach? One act of mindfulness

can survey all three things: thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations.

One of the best times to practice mindfulness is at nighttime, especially when we have difficulty falling asleep. If our racing mind is the reason we can't sleep, mindfulness gives the awareness that our kite is flying helplessly with the wind. The circle of needs is spinning a tornado, while our kite is trapped in its grip, battered and tattered. The tempest can rage for hours as we lay in bed sleepless and distraught. Meditation lets us pull the kite back down to our body, away from the storm. If we can maintain our intentionality on the body, paying attention to the sensation of our head/brain, body position, comfort or pressure, breathing, and heartbeat, we gain a better chance to peacefully fall asleep. The grounded kite becomes a warm blanket, gently covering our bodies and lulling us to sleep.

Reflection and Rest

Mindfulness is simply consciousness reflecting upon consciousness, and meditation is consciousness resting upon itself. Consciousness implies intentionality, which always moves toward a goal, with the most basic goals focused on survival and fulfilling the circle of needs. We have built the modern world by intentionally shaping and manipulating physical reality to our liking. If possible, we would want to control the weather as well. Our mind is always busy, attempting to exert control over the situation, the environment, other things, animals, and people. Mindfulness is a mirror that reflects our own consciousness, to look deeply to see and to understand without attachment or judgment. Through mindfulness, we transform the intentionality of mindless direction to the intentionality of profound observation.

A Few Precious Seconds

The key to practicing meditation is avoiding the common but impossible expectation: “I have to clear my mind, think of nothing, and be completely focused on my breath the entire time.” That false expectation has frustrated many first-time practitioners. Many people try to meditate and fail because of this unrealistic expectation, then simply give up. The more realistic expectation is: “Let me just observe my mind.”

If, at first, you can only focus on your breathing for a few precious seconds before the wind lifts the kite out of your hand, that’s still progress. Observe where the wind is taking your kite: what is the intentionality? What is the worry? The fear? The issue? Then anchor your mind to your breathing by pulling the kite back down while acknowledging your thoughts: “I acknowledge that I am thinking/worrying about ____.” It is natural to feel a constant battle between the mind focusing on breathing and drifting away to random urgent thoughts that arise.

Watching the Cloud

Imagine that your thoughts are like clouds in the sky. You sit back to observe the clouds. You start to notice a shape, say a dog or a person getting chased, and instead of trying to freeze the cloud to dig deeper into the story, you acknowledge what you see. You let the cloud continue to shape and morph into new shapes without getting pulled into its transient forms. Return the mind to your breathing. Later on, when you are ready to dive into specific topics, you can actively engage your mind to deeply ponder that issue, whether by journaling, contemplating, or talking about it. Meditation allows issues to rise into your

awareness and for you to practice unattachment, observation, and discipline. Then, you can address those issues later so they are not buried or festering beneath the surface.

Minding the Fire

If the urgent matter is like fire, our normal way of experiencing that urgency is to be trapped inside that fire, mindlessly burning in its flame. Mindfulness is acknowledging a fire but removing ourselves, sitting a comfortable distance from it, and observing the dance of flame while feeling its heat. We can see the story in the flame and feel the characters' emotions, but we are not in the fire. This mindful distance allows us to feel comfortable with the flame and develop control over our emotions. We feel the fire and sense the anger, but it doesn't scare or control us.

Practicing mindfulness and meditation will significantly change how we manage our minds and how they relate to our emotions. As humans with intentionality, we love to exert influence and control on others and the environment. However, the most important entity we must learn to control is ourselves. The best victory is the triumph over our own mind.

Uniting Body and Mind

When we can bring our wandering thoughts back to our breaths, back to our body, and back to the present, we reunite the mind and body in the present moment. We are mentally AND physically present . . . in this moment. We are here. Being in the present moment is both simple and sublime. It grounds us in the present reality to appreciate the simple blessings instead of letting the mind fly randomly at the mercy of the wind. Especially for people with PTSD who are haunted by past

trauma, learning this grounding technique is a valuable tool in the journey toward regaining control and power over their lives.

When we can bring our attention and intentionality back to this moment, we are truly here. We are no longer trapped over there . . . or there . . . or over yonder. Unless immediate danger exists in our present surroundings, the present moment is a paradise. The present moment, without immediate danger, is a paradise. If we worry about work, school, finances, relationships, social image, or any other concerns on the circle of needs, those distant worries likely do not exist in the present space and moment. Can our minds savor this precious second, from second to second, from moment to moment?

Especially when our body is truly in paradise (in the beauty of nature, sharing moments with loved ones, experiencing sublime stimulation, or in sexual ecstasy), can our mind truly harmonize in that beauty with our body to savor every sensation, or will our minds scatter toward hell (fear, worries, past quarrels, or shocking memories) elsewhere? If we can find just a few seconds of quiet reprieve from constant sadness or worry, those few seconds are a precious gift that can help us reset the escalation of stress.

Acknowledgment Not Distraction

You might ask whether mindfulness is just a distraction. What differentiates mindfulness from forcing our minds to dive into captivating media content?

The difference is that mindfulness of the present moment encompasses and acknowledges whatever stress, worries, or sadness bothers us. We don't run away from it; we simply distance ourselves from it and bear witness within ourselves,

like observing shifting clouds in the sky. Our thoughts and emotions no longer consume us but rather become evanescent companions who need understanding and support.

Diving into a TV show, gaming, drugs, or any other distraction is turning our back on the fire as it grows bigger and bigger behind us. It is only a matter of time before the bonfire flares to singe us, forcing us to move further away with stronger distraction. When we're mindful, we are outside the fire, aware of the fire, peering into the fire, and not consumed by the fire. We sit peacefully with the heat and watch as the fire rages, paying attention to our in-breath and out-breath, being in the present moment. If the fire changes into a thunderstorm or a tornado because our mind has shifted topic, that's OK too. Just observe and watch it . . . calmly, serenely, impartially. Do we understand our own mind?

Using Mindfulness with Difficult Emotions

When we can be in the present moment with our thoughts and emotions, we can apply this mindfulness to negative emotions. Remember that the ghosts and demons of negative emotions are a part of us from Chapter 10. When the wounded child within us pays a visit with sadness or anxiety, we can apply mindfulness and recognize that the troubled version of ourselves is here. Breathe in deeply and acknowledge the emotions and the bodily sensations. We learn to be comfortable with the presence of negative emotions. Then, we invite this younger helpless version of ourselves to sit with us, wrapping our arms around troubled emotions with patience, kindness, and compassion. Invite our troubled selves to express whatever concerns they/we have been holding, and just listen. Truly listen without blame or judgment. Listen not to give advice but listen to truly understand. A lot of time, listening is all that is needed.

Imagine this wounded child coming to us with a ball of yarn representing a jumbled knot of fear, sadness, and worries. She is overwhelmed and cannot unravel the source of her suffering. The ball of yarn exudes intense negative energy, and that aura poisons her. It is tempting for her to bury it deep underground, hoping it'll disappear, but instead, it lingers and festers. The interwoven strands grow longer, and more strands are added over time. With mindfulness, we can comfort her AND understand the composition of this accursed object. Simply seeking to understand, we start unraveling the ball of yarn, pulling one strand out at a time and laying it on the table. With understanding, will come some relief, in addition to the comfort of being loved. Each strand will need its own understanding and processing. Over time, do we understand ourselves better? Do we understand the intricate circumstances, the layers, and the reasoning that contribute to the negative emotions? With understanding, there is hope for some resolution.

Getting Comfortable

Meditation is easier to practice when you are comfortable and in a conducive environment, which isn't what a hardcore practitioner would recommend. However, as beginners, do what you think would be most helpful. For position, I prefer to sit cross-legged against comfortable back support. It helps me set my mind when listening to peaceful music that evokes a meditative mindset. One song that I listen to often is "Clocktowers Beneath the Sea" on YouTube. Focusing on breathing in the foreground and attending to meditative music in the background allows me to meditate more easily and for a longer period. Some people might call this cheating, but do whatever is most helpful for you to practice meditation. Many

people who tried meditating complain that they cannot do it, then give up and never try again. Do what works for you.

Remember, the first lesson is to be comfortable with our emotions, positive and negative; mindfulness is the way.



Reflection

Have you tried meditation before? If not, will you try to meditate just for 30 seconds or a minute to start observing your own mind? What environment would best help you to meditate more easily and more frequently? When you meditate and allow your thoughts to arise, what issues do you notice coming up? What topics tend to occupy your mind? Can you acknowledge the concerns and then let them go? Do you make time and space to revisit the concerns later to address and process them?

The Power of Music

Music can also help modulate our feelings. Most songs elicit emotions, such as relaxation, sadness, joy, aspiration, agitation, anger, love-ache, meditation, etc. Over time, I've learned to label songs by the emotion they cast over me and organize my music library using a smart playlist feature to group the songs with the same emotions together. This allows me to use music to lead the emotion I want to explore. For instance, if I am floating in a pond of sadness, gazing at the night stars, I would intentionally listen to the saddest songs that resonate with me and break open my heart to the source of pain to plunge myself into the depth of sorrow, drowning in it. In doing so, I might unearth hidden hurt that can be examined and processed. I can also explore other emotions and push them to the limit with the help of music. If I

am dancing on the clouds, I would intentionally listen to energizing, joyful songs to jolt me into further euphoria. It is a true blessing to find songs that powerfully influence our emotions. I'm compiling a playlist of songs based on their emotions on Youtube for easy access. The breadth and depth of human emotions are artistically captured in our music, whether with vocal lyrics or instrumental melody. If we organize and utilize them correctly, they can help us get into a deeper emotional state for exploration.



What songs stir your emotions? What songs can bring you sadness, love, agitation, joy, or a dancing mood? Have you already used songs to modulate your emotions? Can you be more methodical about organizing playlists to target specific emotions when you want to feel them?

CHAPTER 16

Learning to Accept Life's Imperfections



As you learn to be comfortable with your emotions through mindfulness and unravel the knot of negativity, you may recognize some negative emotions arising from failed expectations or disappointment in yourself, others, or the circumstances.

Expectation and reality are often two different things. We hope, pray, wish, plead, and expect reality to be a certain way, and we can try so hard, racking our brains and manipulating our resources to achieve certain outcomes, but life doesn't and cannot always fit our expectations. We believe that if only reality aligned perfectly with our expectations, that moment of glorious union would give us joy and happiness. We can spend our lives chasing one expectation to the next, distorting life into a sequence of goals: "If only I get to _____, then life will be amazing." When it happens, we often feel some positive emotion, but how long can we keep this positivity before a new goal is set? Sometimes, achieving an outcome inextricably leaves us feeling hollow and disappointed: the reality of an achieved expectation, at times, doesn't live up to our imagination.

The Expectation–Reality Gap

When reality falls short of expectations despite our best efforts, that gap can be a source of anguish, giving us all sorts of negative emotions: sadness, anxiety, frustration, anger, resentment, etc. The bigger the gap, the worse the emotional pain. The trouble is if we go through life expecting the weather to be perfectly

comfortable, with clear blue skies and gentle winds every day, we are bound for misery when the conditions are less than perfect. We are bathed in joy when the sky is clear, but we are also showered in sadness and anger when it rains. This instability in mood gives life a roller coaster sensation: up one minute and down the next. In the worst outcome, a person can spend their entire life in misery because the weather isn't always perfect as they want it. Even on fine weather days, they cannot appreciate the present moment of beauty as their mind is lamenting past and future rainy conditions.

A critical step is to reflect on life to see and understand reality for what it is. When we misperceive reality, we can develop unrealistic expectations that bind us to misery. One of life's most important goals is to perceive reality accurately, to pierce the veil of ignorance to see the truth, and to light our way through the fog of delusions. Accurately understanding reality gives us a better chance to have realistic expectations and figure out the best way to handle life's challenges. Whereas the first lesson is to understand ourselves and our emotions through mindfulness, the second is to understand reality and the world.

Reality is what it is. Whether "good" or "bad" is a value judgment. How much can we truly grasp and understand reality? This is a deeply and profoundly esoteric philosophical question. I am interested in understanding the portion of physical reality that directly affects our lives and emotions. Reality is best described as "imperfect" for our typical expectations, meaning it tends to fall short of what we expect in a "perfect" situation. We will explore the most common themes of the imperfection of reality that directly affects us.

The Imperfection of Death

One of the most critical “imperfections” that stains the idealized expectation of life is death. Death is one of the few certainties of life. Death is terrifying and difficult to talk about, but why?

Life means living, and physical reality has designed it so that we need to live and avoid death by making the process of death discomfoting and painful. As discussed in Chapter 1, pain is the body’s signal that something damaging is happening to us. Pain is a red flag begging for attention and resolution because a prolonged and worsening injury can result in death. This basic life-driven, pain-avoidance, and pleasure-seeking principle makes our own death a challenging reality to accept. As we grow through life, forming relationships, molding our identity, experiencing love, developing careers, accumulating possessions, or building a legacy, death is the knife that severs all these strings of connection and attachment.

If relationships are like strings on a guitar or a guzheng, our relationships with different people will create a memorable melody for our lives. When the connections are good and joyous, the melody is pleasant and beautiful. When the connections are tense and soured, the melody is sad and agitated. Through the years and decades, the melody plays on, shifting and changing with the quality of our relationships. When the death of a loved one occurs, a string is broken and severed with a shocking twang, and the melody becomes silent. And that silence is deafening—the absence, heart-wrenching. Other relationships and strings are intact, but once the melody resumes again, a note is missing. Plucking the remaining strings louder cannot make up for its loss.

Love, attachment, and death are the core of human existence. Grief is the price we pay for the love, warmth, and memory we cultivate with another being. Love and grief are two sides of the same coin. The more memorable the melody, the louder its absence.

I remember watching a Japanese movie called *A Mother's Tree* [spoiler alert] on an overseas flight. Roughly speaking, the film initially shows a happy family with a mother, a father, and their seven sons. They appear comfortable and close-knit; the melody sounds content and joyous. However, because World War II was raging, the father was drafted first and then died at war. Soon after, one son after another was also drafted. The mother planted one paulownia tree after another to symbolize their departure from home. One by one, she hears news that a son has died in the war, but she is forced to continue giving up her remaining sons to the draft. The melody turns melancholic and, at times, enraging as she is ridiculed for wanting to keep the remaining sons with her. With each passing death, the melody becomes heavier and less vibrant. By the movie's end, the lonely mother talks absentmindedly to the seven paulownia trees as if they were her sons. As snow falls, it casts a cold, empty white canvas around her. Her spirit and body, already weakened, finally succumbed to the cold; she lies lifeless, surrounded by the seven trees. The silence is deafening, compounded by the whiteness of the snow. My heart . . . breaks.

One of the most forbidden wishes to make is the ability to revive the dead. Many shows have explored this topic, and none has had a good outcome. An anime called *Fullmetal Alchemist* [spoiler alert] portrays the creation of a "Philosopher's Stone" that can potentially revive a loved one. Still, the price is sacrificing the lives of an entire city. Thousands of lives were lost for the

possibility of reviving just one person, though it doesn't play out as intended.

When we cannot accept the reality of life, we cling to an impossible wish, a willful delusion against physical reality, that exacerbates the pain within us and compounds even more pain for others. Our attachment to life and our identities brings its own suffering. Seasons come and go, and we witness the birth and death of all living things. Many religious and spiritual beliefs have perspectives on the afterlife that can soften and elevate the physical finality of death. If we cannot accept reality, reality will not change for us. Without acceptance, there will always be fear of the inevitable. To ponder and accept mortality brings wisdom and serenity beyond measure. Accepting death for ourselves and for others as part of life is a transcendental liberation.



Reflection

What is your view about the reality or imperfection of things ending? Have you experienced death, perhaps of a loved one, a relationship ending, or a crushed dream? How do you grieve for such tragedies? Have you pondered your own mortality? What thoughts and emotions come up for you? What story would you like your life to have?

The Imperfection of Aging and Decay

An indisputable fact is that we are getting older by the second, aging slowly through time, and death awaits us. The strings of life pull us toward living, making sickness, aging, and death the direct rebellions against these strings, or rather, the price of living. It is natural for us to crave living and cling to life. We also cling to the prime of sexual vitality, grasping onto beauty and

youth. “Aging gracefully” is an art of acceptance of reality. Aging is a reminder that everything, including us, is constantly changing. There is growth, change, and decay from birth to death. When we learn to accept aging and death gracefully—accepting both are a part of life just as we accept sunset is a natural partner to sunrise—that serenity frees us from one of the most primordial fears. To love and to grieve, to live and to die, whether it’s someone else’s turn or eventually ours . . . is a part of life. Casting our eyes upon all of physical creations, there is no exception. Humans, animals, trees, and other objects age, decay, and eventually cease, changing and transforming. In acceptance of the things we cannot control, there is the gift of peace.

Once we accept aging and death within ourselves, we find it easier to accept aging and death in other things. Death doesn’t have to be literal; it can be figurative when applied to failed expectations. Death can simply mean an ending or termination of something we thought should last longer. For instance, when two people fall in love, they have a certain understanding and expectation of each other and how the relationship should play out. If all goes well, they might get married and have an expectation of what the marriage will look like. Some marriages, despite the partners’ best efforts, might still end in divorce. The divorce represents the death of an idealized marriage that did not work out as expected. Figurative death also applies to the difficult realization that the person we love so much turns out to be a different person than who we hoped or expected them to be. There are mini-deaths all around us, as there are mini-births: changing seasons, ending one thing and starting another, losing friends and making friends, and one dream dying to make space

for another. The reality of life swirls on endlessly. We can dance with the wind or lament the very nature of existence.



Reflection

How do you feel about change, growth, aging, and decay? Are you longing to be older? What do you imagine will be better? Are you wishing to slow down aging? What do you miss about youth? Can you take life as it comes? Can you take life for what it is?

The Imperfection of Being

An undeniable portion of reality is human imperfection: no one is perfect. We are imperfect individuals, who don't always live up to our best intentions and ideals. We possess strength and beauty, but not without flaws and blemishes. This applies to everyone. We struggle with the best way to achieve the circle of needs, just like everyone else. Sometimes, in the pursuit to fulfill these needs, we might have intentionally or unintentionally hurt others. We constantly struggle between the temptation of vices and the cultivation of virtues. We are awash in the current of emotions, at times with desires, envy, jealousy, resentment, and anger; a battle between selfishness and selflessness. We are bound to make mistakes or do things that make us look back in horror. People can be cold, insensitive, inconsiderate, harsh, critical, cruel, or evil. At times, we might be one of them.

Realizing the fallibility of humanity is a step to accepting the imperfection in ourselves and others as we strive to learn and grow from our mistakes. Guilt or regret for past actions shows us that we have a conscience. However, letting guilt corrode us from the inside out as self-inflicted punishment cannot remediate the damage.

If we could turn back time, what would we want to do differently? And, most importantly, can we apply that lesson to the present moment and to the future? What can we do now to make up for the mistakes? Can we accept that we are imperfect and have made mistakes? From that humility, can we strive to learn and grow to be better and better, day by day? Will we be imprisoned in regret, guilt, and shame, or will we channel that energy to strive toward our ideal image?

Because we all are imperfect beings, other people have also disappointed us or let us down in some way. Our expectation of who they should be and how they should behave is different from who they actually are and what they actually do. As we are imperfect and could disappoint others, so can others, such as parents, family, siblings, friends, classmates, colleagues, teachers, spiritual/religious leaders, political leaders, significant others, spouses, children, etc.

One obvious imperfection that many people have encountered is that of a bully. In the circle of needs, the bully is missing something, whether lack of resources for survival/comfort, lack of affirmation, lack of competence/control, lack of stimulation, lack of meaningful purpose, or especially insecurity with uniqueness/superiority, a bully will attempt to step on someone else to fulfill their needs. The underlying belief is that “no matter how miserable my life is, at least my life is better than the victim I’m harassing.”

In the struggle to fulfill our needs, the battle between darkness and light is always simmering underneath. A bully fulfills their needs by intentionally making someone else’s life miserable. They can spread lies, drill into other people’s imperfections, or physically intimidate others. They will attempt to send the

message that their victim is ugly, stupid, smelly, weird, wrong, unlikeable, inadequate, incompetent, or insufficient. They want to step on others to uplift themselves. The more their victims believe these messages, the better.

Unfortunately, children are like sponges; they can easily internalize negative messages and create a mental representation inside their heads that can haunt and torment them for all hours of the day. Even when children grow older, and childhood bullies have lost touch for decades, adults can still carry remnants of the internal bullies inside them. Without deep psychological reflection and processing, their entire life can be haunted by internalized messages. Sometimes, parents can be unintentional bullies or, more accurately, nagging critics that instill shame, doubt, and insecurities in their children. We will explore this more in a later section.

One of the most important questions is: How do other people's imperfections (assuming we have correctly perceived and understood the situation and have accurately named their shortcomings) affect us and our identity? Can we learn to accept people for who they are so we can figure out the best way to deal with them? Can we forgive and inspire ourselves and others to do better?



Reflection

Who do you know who is perfect? Who never makes mistakes? Who has no imperfection? Are you aware and comfortable with your imperfections? Have you made mistakes that you regret? What are you doing with that regret? Who has tried to use your imperfection against you? Have you dealt with a bully before? What

messages were conveyed to you? Have you internalized those messages?

The Imperfection of Circumstance

As we hope to satisfy our basic physical and psychological needs, it is much easier if we are blessed to be born into a financially comfortable household in a strong, peaceful nation with loving and firm parents while gifted with good health, high intelligence, natural beauty, and effortless charisma.

In the lottery of life, not everyone can be so fortunate. When I was working with the consultant and liaison psychiatry team at a pediatric hospital, I saw first-hand the unfortunate circumstances of children struggling with cancer or gunshot wounds in a background of very unstable and dangerous living situations, just to name a few. During my rotation at a neurodevelopmental exposure clinic, I saw children with developmental socio-emotional and/or intellectual issues with and without physical syndromic features as a result of their mother's exposure to substances during pregnancy. Social workers with adoption and fostering programs are immersed in unfortunate, tragic, and abusive stories. A quick search online can show us starving and dying children in impoverished areas, along with natural disasters and deadly wars. If we look, we will find news of children dying in random military strikes, villages getting poisoned by chemical waste, car accidents, etc. The list goes on and on, highlighting the tragedy of life.

We have a tendency to look up in life and envy the more fortunate people. We often ask, "Why them and not me?" We see people who are more attractive, wealthier, having better jobs, friends, spouses, children, careers, travel, experiences,

possessions, etc. Other people's successes can become a source of our shame, making us feel less-than, almost nonexistent in comparison. The darkness in us wishes for their failure while we smile and congratulate them. What we have is never enough because of our own insatiable desire, compounded by our wish to be special and be better than the next person. If we cannot compete in a specific area, we'll reshuffle the value to prioritize our advantage: if our house is smaller than someone else's house, at least ours is more "refined" than that "tacky" humongous mansion. Life becomes an endless competition to affirm our own existence and specialness. Even if we are "winning," the champion becomes the obvious target for all other envious contenders, yet still longs for something better.

While looking up, it is important to look down as well, not to scoff at those more unfortunate than us, but to realize that in our lot of life—on the spectrum from cursed tragedy to divinely blessed—we are likely not at either extreme. To assess reality accurately, we realize that while there are people more fortunate than us, many are less fortunate. In the ocean of humanity's suffering, we are but a droplet. When bad things do happen to us, instead of asking, "Why does this happen to me?" or "Why me?" we should ask, "What makes me so special that it shouldn't happen to me?" or more succinctly, "Why not me?" When the lottery of life is so random, we learn to accept the imperfections of life and the different circumstances thrown at us.

However, acceptance doesn't mean "submission." Acceptance means we see reality for what it is, and then we have the freedom to decide how best to handle that reality. For instance, if we suddenly find our house on fire or our life crumbling apart, shock and disbelief are common initial responses. We naturally react with confusion, anger, or even denial about reality, but if we are

not careful, we can get stuck in this phase indefinitely. All we have are the negative emotions swirling around the undesirable incidences, trapped in an endless cycle of denial, grief, and anger. We might curse life or even question God (if we were religious) and never move on from that spot. Acceptance allows us to move past the disbelief, stay calmer in those moments, manage our negative emotions, collect our thoughts, assess the situation, and devise a plan to address it. If we have three months left to live, will we cry in a dark corner until it's time, or will we make the most of life and live to the fullest?

When we seek to understand difficult and confusing people who are imperfect, we will inevitably learn about their own imperfect situations, possible trauma, obstacles, challenges, and insecurities. When we imagine living their lots in life, especially if it involves significant neglect and abuse, would we turn out very differently? This isn't to make excuses for people's behavior. The premise of psychotherapy is to understand, process, and improve; it gives us a sense of sympathy, compassion, patience, and wisdom when dealing with others.

Since the tragedy and blessing of life are unpredictable, will our story be one of predestined defeat and misery or one of self-awareness and self-creation? Are we helpless victims of circumstances, wallowing in misfortune as life passes, or beautifully transformed by the fire into a rising phoenix, set ablaze with wisdom, strength, and kindness?



Think about your upbringing. What were the blessings? What were the misfortunes? What things are you thankful for? What things do you wish were better? How often do you look up to circumstances more

fortunate than yours? How often do you look down on circumstances less fortunate than yours? In the ocean of humanity and all the possible circumstances, where is your spot? What can you do with it? What have you done with it?

CHAPTER 17

Learning to Appreciate the Moment



As death inevitably emphasizes the evanescence of life, the lottery of existence also showcases the spectrum of arbitrary luck. We realize that the moments, however imperfect, are fleeting. For instance, caring for a young child is exhausting, but how quickly things change. Even the annoying moments are time-limited as they grow older and eventually gain independence. On the other end, many of us have a hard time imagining our healthy parents, who seem so strong and domineering at times, will also age and die with time. As we grow older, so do they, aging with greying hair, declining health, clouding clarity, and finally succumbing to death's beckoning. When a person is frail and sickly, they will painfully miss the moments of being healthy and capable. When certain conditions have passed, all that's left might be the memories and possibly regrets. In unimaginable tragedies, parents must comfort their children's last breath or cradle their lifeless bodies. The moment was and is fleeting.

How many things do we take for granted until they are lost? A lesson of our journey through life is learning to be mindful and appreciative of what we have here and now, with our health, family, relationships, and circumstances.

Mortality doesn't have to be terrifying; its presence is a gentle reminder to appreciate the moment, the present, the here and now. It is a reinforcement to practice mindfulness, learning to be here, truly and fully here, in this very moment—because the moment, no matter how imperfect, is fleeting. It is a call to

appreciate the blessing that we do have, the practice of deep and profound gratitude. For those recovering from asthma, respiratory allergy, or severe lung infection, the simple act of breathing is a miracle. For those recovering from the flu, just having the energy to walk around without chill, fever, dizziness, or body aches is a welcomed relief. There are many simple things in life we can count as blessings that we take for granted. Looking up at the vastness of the sky or embracing the caress of a gentle breeze can be reminders of the blessing at that moment. The art of feeling gratitude is appreciating what we have before it is lost. Otherwise, we'll just repeat the cliché wisdom after it is already gone.

Appreciating What We Have

Frequently, we are busy squandering the moments, sighing into the past, or yearning for a distant future. We tell ourselves that happiness is just around the corner after we achieve a certain goal. Life becomes a sequence of goals, one after another. We get addicted to the chase of achievement. "If only" this, that, or the other thing happens we will be truly happy. The goalposts of life keep getting moved until we're on our deathbeds.

One of the hardest truths to realize is this: if we cannot be happy in the here and now with all its shortcomings, when will that moment of happiness truly come? What else must happen for us to feel truly happy before the things we take for granted are lost? What "perfect" condition is needed?

In every moment, there are things we can be grateful for, even if it feels like a futile search for a single star in an overcast night sky. We cultivate gratitude for the mundanity of being alive, our health, the well-being of our loved ones, the journey we're on, the memories and moments of goodness in our lives, the

connection we have with others or the universe, the hardships that mold us to be better, life lessons that instill wisdom, or our spiritual/religious calling. The stars still twinkle on the night sky canvas, even if shrouded by ashen clouds or outshined by glaring city light. Often, the constant struggle to fulfill or overflow the circle of needs can obscure the simple blessings of life. We become hamsters constantly running on the wheel when sustenance, rest, and companionship are right beside us.

This isn't to say we should stop striving for our goals, as they are important for our development and overall purpose. We can appreciate the present moments, imperfections, and incompleteness while working toward our dreams. We can perceive life not as a series of goals but as a mindful journey of each step, appreciating each moment, regardless of if we are stepping on fresh green grass, refreshing puddles, sinking mud, or even animal poop. Life is a journey of learning and discovery, with its ups and downs, because the lottery of life doesn't guarantee only good fortune. Can we find gratitude and joy in the mundane occurrences of life? Can we see the humor in its absurdity? Can we glimpse some purpose in its suffering?

There will be a time when our hard-earned accomplishments might also be lost, and death is the great equalizer that erases our fortune. A resilient life joyfully builds a castle in the sand even as the waves constantly tease in and out. We try to be smart about where to build the castle on the beach, balancing safety from the water and the wetness of the sand to make a strong structure. Can we enjoy building a purposeful life, feel joy from its accomplishment, and still be undisturbed when the waves finally wash it away?

Tibetan monks spend countless hours creating beautiful and intricate mandalas from colorful sands. When the project is completed, they wipe it away, reinforcing the lesson of life's imperfection and impermanence. As we strive to achieve that level of thinking, can we try to accept the good and the bad? Happiness and sadness? Life and death? Creation and destruction? If we can appreciate the simple things while striving for higher callings, we will realize the blessing and beauty already around us.



Reflection

Can you appreciate the present moment's simplicity, beauty, and imperfection? Can you truly be here to grasp your surroundings—the sights, the sounds, the scents? Can you anchor and ground yourself in the present, free from the haunting of the past or the stress of the future? Can you be here, just for a second? Can you find gratitude for the simple things in your life?

Learning to Love

Because life is evanescent and the moments fleeting, practicing mindfulness allows us to take them in and not mindlessly let them pass by. We strive to live each day and each moment mindfully. As we learn to be present for the moment, present with our body, present with our emotions, present with our thoughts, present with ourselves, and present with our circumstances, we learn what it means to be present, to truly and fully be “here.”

When we can be present for ourselves, accepting of the ups and downs of life, compassionate toward our negative emotions and imperfections, and celebrate the beauty of life, we can be present

for other people with their emotions and imperfections as well. This is what it means to truly express love.

Note: The first act of love is that of a parent toward their baby: to acknowledge the baby's existence and to care for the baby's well-being despite the child's frequent crying and dirty diapers. We were all babies at one point, and we all craved love, attention, and nurturing. As we grow, this craving for love, attention, and nurturing remains, but we are no longer passive participants to keep receiving; we develop the capability to love, give attention, and nurture or protect others. We not only receive validation and affirmation for our existence, but we can validate and affirm others' existence as well. The mutual act of consciousness affirming one another is the beauty in receiving and giving. As mutual reciprocity, we are the droplets reflecting the image and existence of one another. We know that we do matter, that we do have value, and that our existence has substance instead of ghost-like transparency. It is a gift that keeps on giving.

Unfortunately, people use the word "love" like falling leaves: easy to utter but hard to realize. Let's be honest and ask, "Who do we love in our life, and how do we express it?" The recipients of our love don't have to be a romantic interest or partner; they could easily be parents, children, family, friends, colleagues, a random stranger, or even all of humanity.

Most importantly, however, the first recipient of our love must be ourselves. How we treat ourselves in the privacy of our mind is the habit that becomes a template for how we treat others. If we are self-critical and cruel, it is hard to contain that criticism

and cruelty away from others. As inside is outside. What we hate the most in others might remind us of what we hate in ourselves. An important step in learning how to love others is learning to love ourselves.

The foundation of self-love is mindfulness, allowing a neutral space for our thoughts and emotions to play out. When negative memories or thoughts arise due to our shortcomings, because we recognize that are all imperfect, we can accept reality for what it is and feel compassion for ourselves versus engaging in ridicule, as others might have done. When negative emotions arise, instead of running, we cradle them, seeking to understand their origin and compassionately process them.

What physical or psychological needs are kindling our emotions? Is it something outside us or something inside us? Because we accept our imperfections, we can be completely honest with our shortcomings and try to see clearly who and what we are.

Self-Love Requires Self-Understanding

This practice of self-love requires honesty, courage, and insight, which is also a journey of self-understanding. Accepting our imperfections doesn't mean being complacent, hopeless, or making excuses. It simply means that we accept the reality of our imperfection and then ask ourselves what we should do with that understanding. Is it something that we should change? How has that imperfection affected life in the past, and how will it affect life moving forward? If we decide to change it, how do we do that? Is it feasible? Or maybe we are okay with that particular imperfection. Are we okay with how it will continue to affect us in the future?

The gift of self-understanding is knowing and accepting our good and bad traits. Malicious people can lie or exploit our shortcomings as ammunition against us, but they cannot hurt what we already know is true. If it isn't true, we can brush it off and then ponder their intention. If true, they cannot weaponize the imperfections we have already accepted. However, if an imperfection still hurts, it means we are not fully honest and haven't entirely accepted it. An outcome of this journey toward self-awareness is the freedom to be authentic and secure in our imperfections while still striving to improve. When we are comfortable and authentic with ourselves, we feel at ease and light in our being. We can be honest with our thoughts, feelings, and preferences. We will attract people who appreciate our authentic selves, which fosters the best chance to maintain relationships that last a lifetime. Authenticity is a key to happiness.

This journey of mindfulness, self-compassion, self-discovery, self-understanding, and authenticity is one of self-love. We cannot truly love without understanding, and we cannot understand without mindfulness. Have you encountered relationships where there is "love" but no understanding? "You love me, but you don't understand me" is a common complaint. This lack of understanding will ultimately torpedo the relationship. Mistakes, miscommunication, and misunderstandings compound one another until love isn't strong enough to withstand the immensity of fumbled good intentions and mistrust. The relationship slowly bleeds out from a thousand cuts.

Loving Others

When we can be fully present, patient, understanding, compassionate, and attentive to ourselves, we offer that same gift to others. The best gift to one another is our full consciousness and intentionality.

To love someone is to offer that person our full presence and the very love we have practiced for ourselves. Love is the attention that can truly acknowledge another person's existence and celebrate their whole being, imperfection and all. To love someone means we are truly present, truly here, with them in this very moment, as we can be for ourselves. Consciousness implies intentionality, and when we can focus our intentionality on the person in front of us, wrap their whole being in our intentionality, and affirm their existence with our undivided attention, they will feel it with every fiber of their being. Consciousness affirming consciousness. When our eyes meet, they see our intentionality of genuine love and care. To truly love someone, we can offer them what we have learned to offer ourselves: mindfulness, compassion, understanding, patience, and acceptance. Just as we give ourselves the freedom to be authentic and continually growing, we also give the person we love the freedom to be authentic and to continually grow. When two people can do this for themselves and each other, the relationship is a comfortable, beautiful, and enriching experience. Each person is one strand of a double helix, intertwining and spiraling upward together. When we love someone, we expand our circle of needs to encapsulate their being, or from another perspective, we merge their circle of needs with our own. There is beauty in love that touches upon the most primitive survival instinct to the noblest psychological (and maybe even spiritual) affirmation.

In this modern age, too often, we see people focusing on their electronic devices and being distracted from one another. Physically, people are in the same room, whether at a family dinner or a restaurant table, but mentally, they are elsewhere: seemingly together but essentially disconnected. Each person exists in a different mental sphere, cursorily overlapping, absorbed in their own world.



How do you express your love? How have you expressed your love? Who do you love? Do you love yourself? What do you give to show your love? Do you give your full presence and attention? Do you seek to understand the other person? What needs do other people fulfill for you? Are you possessive and manipulative in your love?

CHAPTER 18

Learning to Re-evaluate Our Identity



As we have explored in previous chapters, when we were children, our helplessness forced us to depend on our parents' love and mercy. We needed them to acknowledge, love, and care for us. We needed their guidance and structure to make sense of life. As the most significant impact on our survival and existence, they also significantly shaped our identity. Why is identity important?

Identity is how we view ourselves. It represents our self-image and, therefore, affects our self-esteem. It subconsciously affects what we think we deserve in life and from other people. It makes assumptions about how others will perceive us, how they will treat us, and, therefore, how we should treat them. Our identity, in a sense, creates our reality. On one extreme, identifying with being unworthy, unlovable, stupid, ugly, and inadequate will result in a defensive way of living, sensitivity to rejection, being prone to getting hurt, and being quick to lash out. Afraid that others will see us for who we [think we truly] are and convinced that life's challenges are beyond our competence, we will hide our true selves from others and preemptively surrender before even trying. At the other extreme, believing we are worthy, loveable, competent, attractive, and wholesome, we will engage in life with zest and fearlessness. Can you gauge your identity in the spectrum spanning these two extremes?

Taking a Self-Inventory

In striving for self-understanding, we must understand our identity and how it came to be. Otherwise, we risk living the rest of our lives based on an identity ingrained in us by the messages from others. In fortunate circumstances, we are surrounded by kind and honest individuals who foster resiliently accurate self-esteem. In unfortunate situations, we are surrounded by constant ridicule or unrealistic adoration that turns us into self-doubting shells or entitled brats; neither is adept at navigating life. The goal is to critically evaluate the current perception of our identity and then redefine it more accurately. The key is to neither aggrandize nor underestimate.

Try it: Do this short exercise. Close your eyes, then take a full breath, try to touch the core deep inside of you, and probe for the identity of your being. Who are you? How would you describe yourself? What are you proud of? What are you ashamed of? Be honest, be brutally honest. Do you know yourself well enough? Start with the basics. Take the time to do an honest inventory of your identity at the present moment.

We march through the motions of life, making choices and reacting to things without truly understanding why we hold certain perceptions or take particular actions. For example, if a friend suddenly cancels on something you joyfully planned, it is natural to feel disappointed. How different people interpret or make an assumption about this cancellation dictates how they will act and, therefore, affects the friendship for better or for worse. If you are confident and know your self-worth, and you understand the friend you chose, you might know exactly why they canceled or at least seek to understand because it might not

have anything to do with you, and that suspicion does not cross your mind. You would naturally reach out and make sure your friend is doing fine. Your intention is on the other person's well-being and not on your own disappointment.

However, if a part of your identity deep down is: "I am not a likable person," which also implies "people (probably) don't like me," this deep-rooted belief will make you assume the worst in others. Instead of seeking first to understand why your friend canceled, you might assume that "they canceled because they don't really like me anyway" or "they don't care enough about me, so they probably found a better option." And because you make these assumptions, casting the other person as fake and selfish, you will feel rejected and hurt by them, which makes you feel worse about yourself, reinforcing the belief that "people don't like me."

From that hurt arise anger and resentment to protect yourself, "WELL, IF THEY DON'T LIKE ME ANYWAY, FORGET THEM! I DON'T NEED THEM!!" As this negative feeling brews inside you, you might try to find a distraction away from it by shopping, watching TV, playing games, or diving into your work. However, the negative emotions fester underneath, making you sad and irritable. If you lack emotional mindfulness or self-awareness, you might not realize why you feel so negative.

Because you cannot process and contain the negative emotion, it leaks out in your mood, thoughts, speech, and behavior. Other innocent people completely unrelated to the canceled plan can sense your negative emotions, which make them uncomfortable. If you don't know why you're feeling sad or refuse to share why, other people might eventually give up trying to comfort you and decide to give you space, which makes you feel even more

abandoned. As for the friend who canceled, you might not even respond to ask, “Are you okay?” or “What happened?” You choose to ignore and reject them first before they can reject you. When they do reach out to you, you might not even pick up the phone or respond to the text, which further causes the drift in the friendship, which further reinforces the belief that people don’t like you.

Our beliefs dictate a certain course of action that elicits a result, reinforcing the initial belief. This self-reinforcing cycle is called a self-fulfilling prophecy. Your belief is the prophecy. Whether true or not, your action actively pushed others away; you inadvertently influenced the relationship to match your belief, self-sabotaging reality into a self-fulfilling prophecy. If this cycle continues repeatedly, where will your life likely end up? Alone, lonely, hurt, bitter, resentful, and angry. You bury the hurt and sadness so deep that only the bitterness and anger are readily sensed and acted out on the surface. Eventually, you might conclude that “everyone else is horrible; they will always betray me anyway.” You become an embodiment of anger, with passive-aggressive expression through snide comments or wide-open floodgates of volcanic explosions.

Know Thyself

Identity, self-image, self-esteem, and self-fulfilling prophecies shape the trajectory of our lives. When we know ourselves well enough, we can aim to minimize distorted perceptions and assess reality as accurately as possible. If we’re not careful, there might be people who will implant doubt in who we are or who we can be.

When I quit engineering to pursue medicine, some of the people closest to me doubted that I could do it and told me:

"It might be too hard for you."

"Aren't you too old now to study?"

"What if you fail? Can you easily pick up engineering again?"

"Ten years??? That's a long time! Isn't your engineering job pretty good right now?"

"I don't think you should do it."

If I didn't know myself well enough to be certain of my passion and capability, I might have been tempted to stick to the well-worn path of engineering. I wouldn't have become a psychiatrist or written this book that is born from my daily immersion in the human psyche.

"Know thyself" is a wisdom that rings true in history; it rings true now, and it will always ring true in the future. In addition to self-understanding, it also wrestles our identity away from the mercy of other people. If we truly know ourselves, neither praise nor criticism will significantly affect our esteem. When someone says something negative about us, we can calmly assess whether it is true. If it isn't, we can wonder why they are making a false statement. The focus isn't on us but on them and their intention. If it is true, we should already know that fact or be open to acknowledging it. What do we want to do with this imperfection? Accept it or work on it? Also, we must wonder about their intention. Is it to help or ridicule? Since everyone is imperfect, any observant or insightful person can point out an imperfection in anyone else. This becomes a two-front battle, reconciling our imperfection while addressing someone else's intention.

The journey toward knowing ourselves isn't easy, but it is critical. In the next few sections, we'll methodically walk through a self-reflection process to break down our identities into

digestible components relating to the circle of needs and the associated personal attributes. The exercises likely feel tedious, but if you diligently work through them, the result will be very informative and potentially transform your self-image.

CHAPTER 19

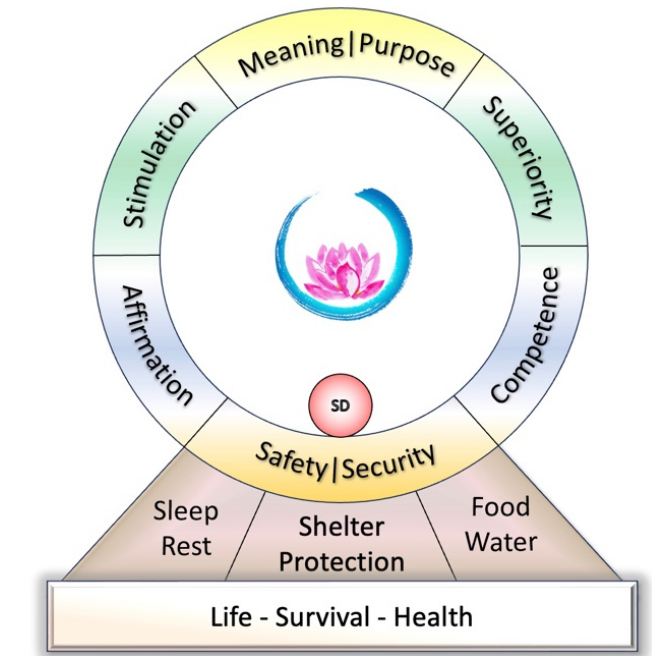
The Circle of Needs Shaping Our Identity



Identity is critical to understand, but it can appear like an amorphous concept. How can we make more sense of it?

Remember that our identity is influenced by how well our basic physical or psychological needs are met and how we hope to fulfill those needs. Let's look at the basic needs and how they might relate to identity.

Figure 3: Circle of Needs Re-Visited



Here are some core sample questions to ask yourself as you address each physical and psychological need. How you relate to them greatly influences your identity.

Table 2: Concerns Related to the Circle of Needs

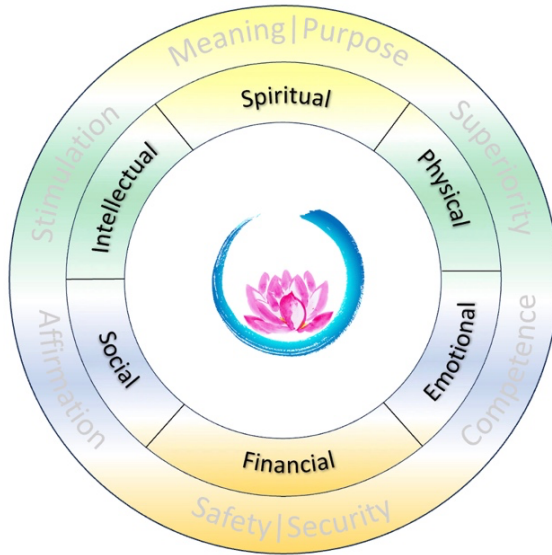
Category	Concerns
Life Health Survival	How is my health? Do I struggle with debilitating or terminal illnesses? Am I in immediate danger? Can I survive? Can I protect my loved ones?
Shelter–Protection Food–Water Sleep–Rest	Do I have access to basic necessities? How can I keep safe from danger? Do I have protection from dangerous weather, people, and animals? Can I secure food and water? Where can I live and sleep comfortably? How is my sleep quality? Can I provide for my loved ones?
Safety & Security	Am I safe? How can I ensure my safety and that of my family? Is my nation, county, city, or neighborhood safe? Are there dangerous people or animals out there wanting to harm me? What can be done about the threats? Am I strong enough to protect my self-interest? How predictable and reliable is my current state?
Sex Drive	Am I sexually attractive and desirable? Am I beautiful/handsome and virile/fertile? How can I satisfy my libido? Can I have sexual intimacy? Do I want kids?
Existence	Do I even exist? Do people care about me? How was I loved? Am I deserving or worthy of existing? Is my existence “wrong” or an “abomination”? Do I matter? Am I loved? Who cares about me? What is my relationship with my family? Can I make new friendships or start a relationship? Can I maintain connections? Do I feel affirmed and validated? Do I feel authenticated and connected? Am I weird and awkward?
Competence	Am I competent and capable? Can I learn and do things? What do people think of my competence? Can I do well in different endeavors and succeed in my chosen career? Am I independent and self-

	sufficient? How do I handle difficulties, challenges, and conflict? Do I believe in myself?
Superiority	Am I competitive? Can I win? Am I special? Am I unique? Do I stand out? Am I better? Am I superior? How do I feel about people who are better or worse off than me? Am I more “successful”? Do people realize how much more “right” and “moral” I am?
Stimulation	Am I entertained and stimulated? How often am I bored? How do I fight off boredom? What really excites me? What endeavor can put me in “the zone”? Does my work intrigue me? What things fascinate or challenge me? What are my authentic hobbies and interests? Am I a passive consumer or an active creator?
Meaning & Purpose	Why am I here? Why was I born? What is the meaning and purpose of my life? Is there a reason for suffering? Why is there evil in the world? What is my religious or spiritual belief? What happens after death? Where do the people I love go to after they die?

Translating the Circle of Needs to Personal Attributes

To make your identity more understandable, I recommend breaking down your identity into more digestible components linked to the circle of needs: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, financial, and spiritual

Figure 4: Circle of Attributes.



A short description for each is summarized in the table below:

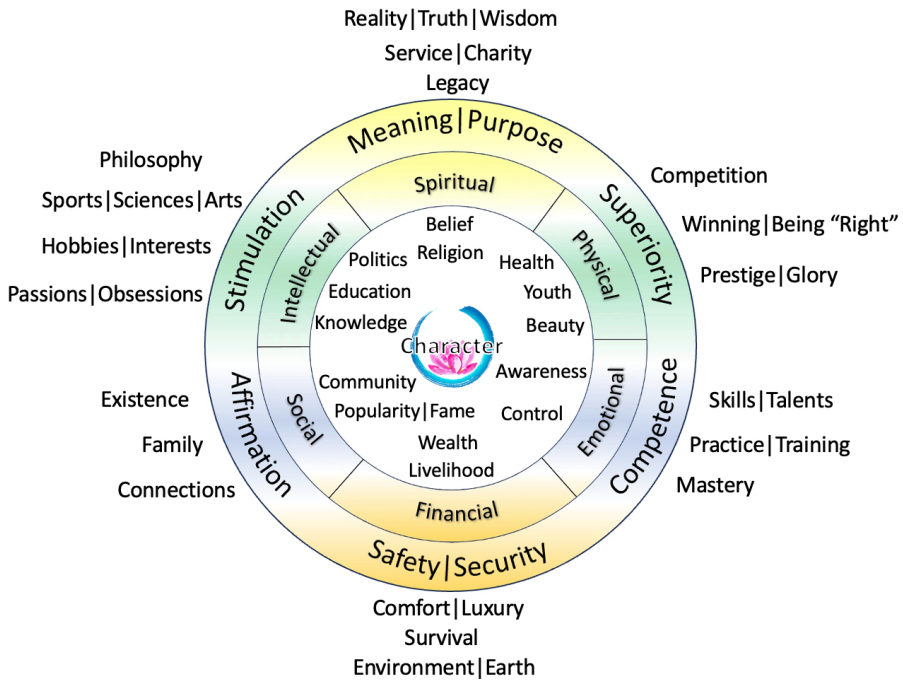
Table 3: Concerns Related to Personal Attributes

Category	Description
Financial <i>Occupational</i>	How is my financial situation? How well can I provide for my basic needs of survival (shelter, protection, food, water)? How do I earn money? How am I doing in my job? Do I worry about job security? Do I have enough? How is my level of comfort and security? Am I surviving or indulging?
Physical	How do I view my physical attributes, general attractiveness, sexual attractiveness, physique, height, dress, etc.? How is my physical health? Am I struggling with any diseases or sickness?
Emotional	How is my emotional stability or mood? Is it predominantly positive or negative? How is my emotional intelligence? How is my practice of mindfulness? Am I aware of my emotions and where

	they come from? Can I manage my and others' emotions effectively?
Social	How are my social connections and relationships? With family, friends, classmates, and colleagues? How do I relate to other people? Can I make new connections and keep them?
<i>Personality</i>	How would I describe my personality? How do other people respond to me? How does my personality affect me and others around me? Am I fun, outgoing, cheerful, withdrawn, conscious, open, etc.?
<i>Sexual/Gender Orientation</i>	Am I comfortable with my sexual identity? How is it influenced by those around me? What messages have I received from family, society, or religion?
Intellectual	What do I think about the multiple aspects of intelligence? Am I smart and capable? Street-smart, book-smart, business-savvy? Can I learn things quickly? Can I understand how people and the world work?
<i>Academic</i>	How am I functioning in school? How does my academic performance or choice of occupation affect my self-esteem and livelihood?
<i>Hobbies/Interests</i>	What things do I enjoy? What things stimulate me? What am I naturally good at? Is it typical or atypical? How does society perceive it?
Spiritual	What is my spiritual/religious belief or lack thereof?
Meaning & Purpose	What is the meaning and purpose of my life? Do I find my life fulfilling? What legacy do I want to leave behind? What impact do I want to have on the people around me, the world, or the next generation?

Elaborating on common associations with the circle of needs and the circle of attributes would give us the following.

Figure 5: Expanding the Circles of Needs and Attributes.



After you have pondered these categories, fill out the following page with your assessment of your own attributes. Take time to really reflect and be completely honest with yourself. If you feel self-conscious and afraid someone else might see it, you can write it on another blank piece of paper and burn it afterward.

Table 4: Breaking Down Our Identity

Category	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Financial <i>Occupational</i>			
Physical			
Emotional			
Social			
<i>Personality</i>			
<i>Sexual/Gender Orientation</i>			
Intellectual			
<i>Academic</i>			
<i>Hobbies/ Interests</i>			
Spiritual			
<i>Meaning & Purpose</i>			

The point here is to capture the current state of your identity. After jotting down your identity on the paper, take an overview snapshot. Is it mostly positive, neutral, or negative? For each item, how has that belief affected your thoughts and behavior

toward yourself and others? If positive, has it made you arrogant and disdainful toward those worse off than you? If negative, has it made you insecure and envious of those better off than you? How many times do you tell yourself this negative belief a day? Is there any aspect of a self-fulfilling prophecy at play here?

Combining all these pieces into one comprehensive puzzle, how has the entirety of your identity affected your life and influenced the choices you make in relationships, friendships, careers, or trying new things? How would you describe your self-image, self-esteem, and self-confidence?

Of all the questions, one of the most critical is to assess the accuracy of your perception. Remember that you are not trying to manufacture a “perfect” identity, amazing in every way, nor build a tragic hero/heroine complex with the worst luck in all areas. How accurate is your assessment?

Understanding the Messages

As we seek to understand reality for what it is, without bias, we strive to do the same with our understanding of our identity. If you have never or rarely reflected upon yourself, your initial identity assessment is likely skewed and inaccurate. Now is the time to re-evaluate these ideas individually and seek to understand where they come from.

Your identity is the accumulation of your inherent traits, perceptions, capabilities, and the messages you received. For example, let’s say that you are fairly intelligent and capable. You can learn and do things fairly quickly; you comfortably fulfill the need for competence. Naturally, you should think of yourself as intelligent and capable. However, if you had an authority figure in your life who struggled with their own issues and was angry

all the time, constantly critical and nitpicking at everything you did, their action would convey the message that you are not capable, that you are slow and incompetent, and that you are not good enough.

As children, we naturally soak in the messages directed at us because we trust and depend on the authority figures around us. We depend on their love and mercy to survive. It is all too common for children to internalize the messages that are strewn around them.

On a different piece of paper, write down the messages that were conveyed, both intentionally and unintentionally, to you in specific areas of your life, whether from parents, other elders, authority figures, teachers, friends, bullies, society, religion, etc. This can be a difficult task because it brings back many memories. There may be some instances you don't want to remember or have completely forgotten. If the memory is too overwhelming, it might not be the right time to do this exercise alone. As you dig through difficult emotions and memories, ensure you can manage the negative emotions and proceed safely.

I often hear from patients, "I just want to move on and live my life," when people don't want to remember difficult things. The irony of wanting to move on while haunting memories are festering underneath is that the memories insidiously affect our beliefs, identity, and choices in life. Only by digging them up and raising them into the sunlight can we truly examine their content and realize the extent of their damage to our psyche.

For the intentional messages directly conveyed to you, what things were said about you, your looks, capabilities, intelligence, likeability, etc. If you are a minority—of a different race,

ethnicity, nationality, language, or religion—or if you are considered too tall, too short, too skinny, too fat, too dark, too light, etc., what messages were directed at you? Or if you are part of the LGBTQ+ community, did you ever receive the message about being wrong or sinful? How are your differences perceived by others and conveyed back to you?

For unintentional messages, what were conveyed? Looking back at your past, how did others show acknowledgment, love, and care? When they were physically present, were they also mentally present? If they were “loved ones,” did they show love with their full intentionality? How did adults manage their emotions, and therefore, how did they manage your emotions? Were they comfortable with negative emotions, or were they invalidating? Did they pay attention to you only when you achieved something good or provided services to them? When you escalated tantrums to get what you want, how did they respond? When you showed up or spoke up, how was that received? When you shared thoughts and emotions, were they validated?

This isn't to say that people should cater to our every whim and make us feel extraordinarily special. Going to the extreme can have unintended consequences as well. If a child is constantly led to believe that they are special beyond reproach and that all things in life should bend to their will, they will become extremely entitled, believing in an unrealistic expectation that the universe revolves around them. Outside of their pampering parents or family, no one else will treat them with the same indulgence. The self-entitled attitude will push other people away, and the natural difficulty of life will be overwhelmingly frustrating when they no longer have their parent's protection.

Also, this isn't meant to place the blame on other people in our lives. Before doing this exercise, we learned to accept the imperfection in life for what it is. We are imperfect, and the people around us are also imperfect. No magical textbook exists on being a perfect parent because perfect parenting doesn't exist. If you, one day, become a parent yourself, you will realize the unknown challenges and how difficult it is to raise another human with unique eccentricities and temperament despite your best efforts. As a parent, you must manage your own struggles and imperfections while trying your best to manage your child's imperfections, unique quirks, and issues.

Drawing Conclusions

As you complete your identity inventory from your own personal assessment and from other people's messages, do you see any similarities? If you had a bully calling you "stupid," "ugly," or "no one loves you," did their message somehow make it into your own belief (had you *internalized* the message)? This is the perfect opportunity to re-evaluate the accuracy of your identity.

So, how do we go about re-evaluating these specific statements? A good way is to try to be as objective as possible, practice mindfulness, and really reflect on these specific items. Talk to someone you trust and ask them about specific points, look at past situations and evidence, or better yet, get a therapist who can work with you through this exercise.

Assessing Your Reality and Working toward an Ideal

Everyone and everything is constantly changing. Life is just one big journey of self-discovery and self-improvement. Nothing is static, and you can realistically work to improve the

imperfections you don't like. As you try to accurately assess your identity, imagine your ideal image in a realistic sense.

Our ideal image is a beacon of light that beckons us to keep learning, changing, and growing. The blessing of mindfulness is that we recognize how precious each moment is and the power of transformation each moment can bring if we use it wisely. Between our current selves and our best versions is a bridge that can be built with intention and effort. We can take concrete steps to address certain imperfections.

Complete the table below to visualize your present identity versus your ideal identity. I've included some suggestions for concrete improvements to bridge the gap but come up with ideas that you can commit to.

Table 5: Working toward Our Ideal Image

Category	Presently	Improvements	Ideally
Financial <i>Occupational</i>		Planning, working, learning, budgeting, investing, persevering, sacrificing short-term pleasures for long-term goals. Avoid extravagances and overindulgence.	
Physical		Healthy diet, regular exercise, good sleep, hygiene, hairstyle, clothing. Developing comfort in our own skin and imperfections.	
Emotional		Mindfulness, meditation, emotional intelligence. Self-care.	
Social		Becoming authentic and self-assured. Develop genuine kindness. Choose connections judiciously.	

<i>Personality</i>		Reflection, developing authenticity and being comfortable with ourselves, being free, public speaking, learning humor/joke.	
<i>Sexual/ Gender Orientation</i>		Reflection, awareness, acceptance.	
Intellectual		Reading, thinking, pondering, debating, analyzing, meditating.	
<i>Academic</i>		Planning, studying, researching, persevering.	
<i>Hobbies/ Interests</i>		Dedicating, engaging, practicing, mastering.	
Spiritual		Reflection, self-improvement, praying, charity. Striving toward virtues and resisting vices.	
<i>Meaning & Purpose</i>		Reflection, meditation, exploring, choosing wisely, envisioning our story and impact.	

What should you do and what can you do to work toward your ideal image?

CHAPTER 20

Learning to Re-evaluate Our Values



As you work through re-evaluating your identity in the previous chapter, you will inevitably run into the issue of values—the importance or significance you subjectively place on different things. Our values are uniquely ours and can differ greatly from person to person, even if we are from the same culture or family.

Let's say two people read the same story about a wife begrudgingly sleeping with another man to obtain a life-saving outcome for her husband; how might the two people react? If one person places value on fidelity, that person might angrily consider the wife a cheater, saying that they would rather die than have a wife like that. Another person might value selflessness and see the wife's sacrifice as a heroic deed, appreciating her more. Are you aware of your value system? What things do you consider important?

If you were to quantify how you value each category of the identity chart to total 100 percent, what percentage would you assign each one? Or, if you gauge how important each category is for you on a scale of 1 to 10, what would you give?

When I briefly do this exercise with patients who struggle with anorexia nervosa, a consistent response is that the physical category takes about 60–80 percent of their identity and self-worth. They admit that looks, and more specifically being “skinny,” is the foundation of their self-esteem, what they believe is important in a person, and how others judge and value them.

Due to complex family dynamics and other issues, components of their circle of needs were significantly unfulfilled, shaping their identity, self-esteem, and self-worth to desperately value a never-enough thinness, regardless of the medical danger of malnourishment. Understanding, unraveling, re-evaluating, and redefining their value system is a long journey that requires medical stabilization and prolonged effective psychotherapy.

Let's examine some of the common categories of value below.

Physical Attractiveness

Generally speaking, we want to look good. The first thing we notice about someone else is their looks, and there is an automatic judgment on it, even if we are not sexually attracted to them. Why does looking good or being attractive matter so much?

As we age, good looks have much to do with sexual attraction and desirability. Because living things can only go on living through the generations if they procreate, sex drive is innate and powerful. The ability to sexually attract our intended targets gives us pleasure, pride, and power. Stories across cultures tell of indomitable heroes falling for a maiden's beauty. This competition to attract mates through physical attractiveness becomes ingrained in our psyche. Beauty, desirability, and youth tend to go together because they are related to fertility and virility, whereas aging signifies waning sexual power, with menopause as the gateway to infertility.

Physical beauty expressed in "attractive" facial features and symmetry signals healthy functional genetics versus extreme deformity or "syndromic" facial features that signal some sort of genetic abnormality. From one perspective, we're just a walking

bundle of genes trying to combine with another bundle of genes to go on reproducing.

Our desire to exhibit physical beauty and to possess it is rooted in biological needs. We collectively value physical attractiveness and treat attractive people preferentially, especially when sexual attraction is involved. Achieving physical attractiveness, besides satisfying sex drive, can extend to multiple other needs: psychological affirmation of our existence predominantly based on superficiality, a grasp on competence to control our looks, a way to feel superior to other people, gaining power over our admirers, or focusing on this vanity as the purpose in life.

Understandably, we want to look good, but when pushed to an extreme with total absorption in physical beauty, some people can live and die for it. A significant portion of their self-esteem and identity is predicated on how “good” they look, whatever “good” means. They can try to achieve it through plastic surgery, extreme dieting or exercising, expensive clothing, photoshopping, and painstaking curation of their social media images to live up to a certain image. Their lives revolve around maintaining a certain look, and their self-esteem rises and falls based on how they perceive other people's responses to their beauty. The inevitable horror of the beauty-obsessed mentality is the reality of aging that brings wrinkles, sagginess, and discoloration. “Beauty is only skin deep,” and the skin inevitably ages. In the pursuit to enhance beauty, unskillful plastic surgery can result in unnatural features, in contrast to the natural beauty of “aging gracefully.”

When we value ourselves in a particular way, that criteria extends to how we value others—the inside reflecting the outside. Individuals preoccupied with beauty often judge others

primarily on physical attractiveness. Like-minded individuals tend to gravitate toward each other and form self-selected groups. Personal vanity converges into collective vanity; the ideal of beauty, initially inspiring, can become a harsh standard that mercilessly judges those who fall short. When people anchor their self-worth and relationships in superficiality, that vanity seeps into their choices of life partners—who may become parents to their children. How many individuals can be honest to admit that they do prefer friends or family based on appearances? How many would confess, “Yes, I am quite a superficial person”?

It is critical to see that despite our innate biological drive to place a high value on physical attractiveness, we cannot surrender our entire being to its seduction. Is there more to a person than just how attractive that person looks? If looks matter that much, does it mean that less attractive people are undeserving of happiness and destined for misery? As people get older, they become parents or role models to the younger generation. If our value is skewed, what message are we passing down to the next generation? If we become parents to children who cannot reach our criteria of beauty, can we see the goodness in them beyond our vain disappointment? Are we creating a society based on superficiality and vanity?

While it's perfectly acceptable to pursue looking good, prioritizing appearance in the judgment of ourselves and others often leads to predictable outcomes. It's crucial to be mindful of this natural tendency in ourselves and others, and to exercise caution against succumbing to its seduction.



How do you gauge your own physical attractiveness? How much value do you place on it? How much value do you place on other people's physical attractiveness? Do you treat "beautiful" people differently? Do you give them preferential treatment? Have you wondered why you do it? How far do you go to enhance your physical attractiveness?

Money, Power, and Status Symbol

Besides being a sign of good genetics and fertility, looking "good" can also encompass components of having money in its allure. Money is attractive because it implies that we have the means to buy products and services to make life more comfortable and interesting. Money ensures we can afford shelter, protection, clothing, food, water, and other necessities. It signals that we can take care of ourselves and our families, a valuable asset to fight against the risk of homelessness, starvation, and death. It gives the freedom to live in a safer environment, afford the best services, and explore exquisite experiences.

Even in developed countries, many people live paycheck to paycheck, teetering on the precipice of comfort while haunted by a constant risk of destitution. With the accumulation of money and assets, we graduate from surviving to savoring the luxury of life—appreciating fancy possessions, exquisite cuisine, unique entertainment, or far-away travel. When people desire these "refinements," they instinctively value the people who possess these things.

Wealth and physical beauty have an interesting interplay as physical traits that serve as proxies for wealth become highly

desirable. During the time of food scarcity and when most people were malnourished, having access to abundant food to achieve a certain plumpness was a sign of wealth and desirability. In Asia, even before exposure to European colonialism, wealthy people didn't have to work outdoors under the glaring sun, making lighter skin complexion a sign of luxury while darker skin tone implied the working class. For white Americans, possessing tanned skin means having the wealth to enjoy a vacation at the beach, whereas pale skin implies being impoverished and stuck indoors. Tanning booths allow people to mimic the sun-kissed glow despite the medical risk of UV radiation.

Besides the obvious health benefits of exercising, many people actually focus more on the benefit of enhanced physical attractiveness. A person's physical attractiveness is also enhanced by wearing expensive clothes or branding as a status symbol of wealth. The most physically attractive people, from a superficial perspective, are those who have the combination of both natural good looks and expensive possessions, equating to healthy genetics plus abundant resources.

Striving for the appearance of wealth can lead people to ironically exhaust their limited income to adorn themselves in brand names and expensive purchases they can't comfortably afford. Isn't this exactly what the marketing strategy wants us to believe? We can appear healthy, rich, and superior if we buy into their expensive products.

Note: Companies pay huge amounts for celebrities to appear in their advertisements. The celebrities pretend to use the product for an entire photo shoot to capture a few glamorous moments for marketing. As we walk through any high-end mall, we see this type of marketing

promoting wealth and superiority in glossy, bigger-than-life advertisements. The concept sounds mundane in writing, but it does really work! Otherwise, these companies would not spend millions on their marketing campaign.

People unsurprisingly compete for superiority in regard to their wealth and possessions. It is a natural progression from the most basic desire to be acknowledged, then graduating to the aspiration to be liked or appreciated, and finally escalating toward the dream of sitting on the throne of superiority. This desire to look good and “superior” to others is ingrained in us. Not only do we need our existence affirmed, but our existence shines like the sun when others affirm our superiority.

At this level of consciousness focused on vanity, we judge ourselves and others by appearance and possessions. We scoff and turn up our noses at people we deem unattractive and poor while admiring with seething envy people we deem more attractive and wealthier. One of the challenges of being homeless is how other people intentionally turn their eyes away from you as if you don’t exist. Our self-worth rises and falls with the people we compare ourselves against.

With the almost universal desire for wealth, money has the power to buy products, services, AND people. Many occupations cater to acquiring money regardless of ethical concerns, including human trafficking for sex or labor, drug cartels, organ harvesting, assassins, and especially corrupt politicians who vow to serve others. Because many people will do almost anything for money, having money means the power to hire and control others. Power gives us the ability to fulfill our physical

and psychological needs: power to ensure survival, power that giveth and taketh life, power to obtain sex, power to assert our existence and superiority, power to exert influence and control, power to move the Earth and shake the heavens, power to alter destiny.

It is important to clarify that money is not the only source of power, which can also be derived from position, status, domination, manipulation, subversion, persuasion, trickery, and skills. Royal court or political intrigues swirl around the pinnacle of power as influential players scheme and plot. Few things in life could tempt people to sell their souls and consciences. We'll discuss this in more detail in my next book.



Reflection

How much do you buy into status, money, and power? How much do you judge yourself and others in this aspect? Do you worship these things and the people that have them? Who do you look up to and why? What have you done and what will you do to obtain them? What other things in life do you value?

Occupational Status

School or work is a consistent presence in our lives. The amount of time, energy, and stress invested into these areas of life can feel like the moon eclipsing the sun. At times, the dynamic begs the question whether we work to live or live to work? While many people are struggling to survive and make a living, some people also question why we have to study or work at all, scoffing at an honest day of work. Returning to our days of hunting and gathering, we had to hunt or gather to survive. Life

and death were close companions. The freeloader was normally rejected by the group and risked dying alone.

Living requires a lot of consumption: shelter, food, water, clothing, transportation, utilities, gadgets, etc. “Simple” acts such as securing clean water and effectively managing fecal or urinary waste in a living space are actually quite complicated. Unless we can miraculously provide all these things ourselves, we rely on other people and their work to provide them. For instance, smartphones and cellular signals are ubiquitous in modern society, but obviously, these things don’t miraculously come into existence. Many people must put in effort, knowledge, and labor to create and distribute them. Even for natural existing resources, like a coconut, someone has to put in the effort, skill, and labor to collect and distribute them.

Nothing is free in life. We need things to survive, as do other people. We want certain things in life just like everyone else. Therefore, we want to be compensated for our work, as do others. Living is an exchange act: we can do something for something else. Before the establishment of currency, people bargained with one another for goods and services, but this transaction required overlapping interests. With money, people can work to obtain the same medium of exchange for much easier bargaining. When we cannot provide for ourselves or have nothing to exchange, we have to beg for mercy and kindness from others, which isn’t easily guaranteed without ulterior motives.

Modern-day living provides a lot of job specialization beyond just hunting and gathering, but the premise is the same: one must work to live because nothing is free. Stay-at-home parents are working around the clock caring for their children and the

household, which is an unpaid and, at times, unappreciated job. Everything costs money, especially a nice house, utilities, delicious food, fancy clothes, cool gadgets, interesting possessions, or fun travel. As children, we can depend on the love and mercy of caretakers to shelter, feed, and clothe us, but as we get older, we must shelter, feed, and clothe ourselves. We have to earn a living one way or another unless we are provided free welfare money from our family or the government, which can be both a blessing and a curse.

Academic performance leading to high-paying jobs helps with the act of survival and enjoyment. It can also be a proxy representation of diligence, intelligence, and social status. In certain cultures, the heavy emphasis on academic performance can convey that a person's self-worth is tightly linked to academic outcomes. And later, an adult's self-worth is linked to their job title. Focusing on doing well in school and obtaining a decent-paying job to ensure a comfortable survival can take on another layer of superiority competition.

These dynamics can shape kids to overly focus on academic outcomes, which might feel like the criteria for their parents' conditional love. Pride and accolades are heaped onto the kids when grades turn out well, while open disappointment or backhanded condolences slap them when grades turn out below expectation. While parents compete directly with one another on physical attractiveness, job titles, and fancy possessions, they also use their kids' school names, standardized test scores, and academic outcomes to one-up each another. The kids' academic performance becomes collateral of their parents' ego competition.

Achieving high compensation can also take other routes besides academic performance. Competition, pride, and accolades for children can also be focused on beauty pageants, athletic activities, artistic endeavors, or innovative achievements. As adults, well-paying positions such as successful entrepreneurs, social media influencers, online personalities, entertainers, actors, singers, professional athletes, motivational speakers, politicians, etc., are highly coveted. The danger with these aspirations is that kids tend to underestimate the likelihood of achieving the apex of success in these professions while unaware of or selectively ignoring the countless people who try to make it and fail.

When our consciousness operates at the level of occupational status, or rather when intentionality is focused on certain achievements or job titles, we might be tempted to scoff at those who are worse off or who hold a less socially desirable position. Our self-worth is fragile and highly dependent on the outcomes, which naturally become more challenging as the competitions turn fiercer with each advancement. For adults with this intentionality, self-worth is linked to a job title, dependent on sustained employment, which might become problematic with an economic downturn, getting fired, or being canceled. In ancient times, people lived and died by the sword. In the modern world, our metaphorical sword comprises all the things we over-identify with and overvalue.



What do your achievements or occupational title say about you? How much value do you place on

them? Do you look down on people who have less than you? Who do you look up to and why?

Personality

While there are multiple dimensions of personality, I want to address the specific aspect of introversion versus extroversion. We need affirmation of our existence through connection with others, and it seems that extroverts have the upper hand. Beyond the rise of social media and online popularity contests, possessing extroversion, charisma, and manifesting life-of-the-party energy can attract more attention—initially. Many kids have complained that their natural introversion is a disadvantage in making new connections.

It is critical to separate true introversion from deep-seated insecurity and shyness. Insecurity isn't an attractive trait, and it will dampen anyone's personality. Whether extroverted or introverted, the key is to know ourselves well enough to be comfortable in our own skin. We don't have to adopt a fake persona to attract people. We don't have to become a chameleon to blend in with other people. People can be considered introverted, eccentric, awkward, or weird based on some social standards. However, a true connection is made through authentic interaction between two people. If the beat of our drum is different from others, trust and believe that there exist people out there who are compatible with our different beat.

A relationship isn't a sprint to see who can make the fastest connection but a marathon to stand the test of time as the experiences and memories deepen. If two authentic people are compatible, whether introverted or extroverted, they will effortlessly enjoy each other's company. And if they are not

compatible, then they're not compatible. We do not need to label ourselves or others as the "good" or "bad" person when a match, whether dating or friendship, doesn't work out. However, we do need to examine and learn from the experience.



How would you gauge your personality? Do you wish it was different in some ways? What personalities attract you the most? Have you met anyone who was very charismatic with a great personality but might not be a genuinely nice or caring person? What does that say about the appeal of personalities?

On Being "Different"

I want to make a quick note on the existence of being different, especially for LGBTQ+ readers. Depending on family, social, cultural, and religious influences, this subgroup can be ostracized and shamed. Children are sometimes disowned, their identities criminalized, or worse, called "sinners," condemned to death. When existence is threatened, there is a natural struggle to assert that very existence, which might lead to overcompensation that can trigger a backlash—and the cycle continues. Especially with the discussion about sex drive and the purpose of sex within the context of survival and propagation, some people will accuse me of being too heteronormative. As we try to understand humanity, we have to approach it initially from the perspective of the most common, the standard, the default of humanity's sexuality, which is cis-gender heterosexuality.

In all subjects of study, the foundation must first be constructed before expanding knowledge can add more layers of nuances and variations. The foundation of humanity, human life, and the

continuation of the human species is unequivocally heteronormative; it is the foundation, the literal mother and father of humanity. The primary physical purpose of life is to stay alive, and the secondary physical purpose is to procreate. In some animals, the primary purpose is to procreate as they sacrifice their own lives in the pursuit of procreating. This isn't to say every single person needs to fulfill the secondary physical purpose of procreation, as many heterosexual people choose not to have or cannot have children. Additionally, the invention of contraception and birth control is a direct attempt to separate procreation from the act of sex, focusing primarily on pleasure without risking the intended natural consequence. This leads to another difficult topic of abortion, which will be addressed in my next book.

Any functional structure, be it a house, building, tower, or temple, comprises more than just the foundation. There are walls, pillars, roofs, windows, lights, water, electricity, decorations, fixtures, paintings, texture, color, furniture, etc. Not all of us have to procreate or be the structure's foundation. A critical part of life is to discover our authentic selves, not influenced by the majority nor seeking the special status of the minority. Personally, I don't care if I am not the foundation of a structure. I prefer to be the light that illuminates, the fire that brightens, the mirror that reflects, or the window that expands understanding and wisdom. The point is that it is absolutely okay to be the foundation or any other component in the structure of humanity.

As we conceptualize the reality around us, we tend to keep things simple to make complex concepts easier to understand. For people who are cis-gender heterosexual, that is the only perspective and life they directly experience: they are the

default, the most common, the standard, the “normal,” the majority. Similarly, people who are not cis-gender or not heterosexual can only directly experience their own life. For instance, a completely straight man cannot truly empathize (truly experience the desire or truly feel) that any man would be sexually attracted to another man, nor can a completely gay man truly empathize that a man would be sexually attracted to a woman. The difference between the two limited viewpoints is that the majority doesn’t have to be aware or wonder what it’s like to be a minority, often believing that being “different” is “weird,” “odd,” or “peculiar,” while the reverse isn’t true.

Those in the minority are well aware—to the point of it being painful—of the default existence of the majority and often have to compare their own existence against it. The reality is that humanity’s sexuality isn’t only restricted to the default cis-gender heterosexuality but spans an entire spectrum, which is perfectly okay. It is what it is. Most of us are aware of homosexuality in other mammals. For instance, few people would actually want to convert a gay penguin couple who waddle through their days, minding their own business and living their best life.

Any measurement or study will have the most common values we consider default or standard. And reality also has values that are outside of the common. In statistics, the “normal” distribution is a curve that exists because predictable instances fall outside the most common range. This is a simple natural truth. However, it is in human nature to fear what we don’t understand or what is different from us. Part of our psychological need is to affirm our existence. When people tie their existence to a specific identity, anything different from it can be dangerous because it shows an alternative existence. The

simple existence of something else directly threatens their existence, or so it feels. The existence of LGBTQ+ identities can feel like a direct threat to the existence of some cis-gender heterosexual people and their children. Survival and existence are intensely emotional discussions for everyone involved.

I'll leave it here for now because this deserves a much more in-depth analysis that touches upon the broader topic of society and religion, which I'll examine in my next book.



Reflection

What is your view on LGBTQ+ topics? Is it from personal experiences or from influences of wider societal, religious, or cultural teaching? What does it mean to be different? Is it hated or glorified? Can you imagine being different? How should society deal with people who are different? How should the majority treat the minority?

PART V

Pursuit Of Character



As you re-evaluate your identity in the last few chapters, what have you discovered? Looks, finance, and status are seductive but ultimately shallow and potentially evanescent. What we judge in others, we also judge in ourselves. When we place our identity in these buckets, which are inherently external to us, we are at the mercy of the unpredictability of life that can unexpectedly take them away. When looks fade, finance crashes, and status dims, people can lose their once-prideful identity and crumble to despair and possible suicide.

If there is something else we should rely on as the foundation of our identity, what should it be? What attribute can stand the test of time and remain resolute in the eye of the storm? Which foundation will likely facilitate the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, financial, and spiritual successes that make life more meaningful? Next, we'll examine the concept of character and its crucial effect on our mental well-being.

CHAPTER 21

Our Enduring Trait



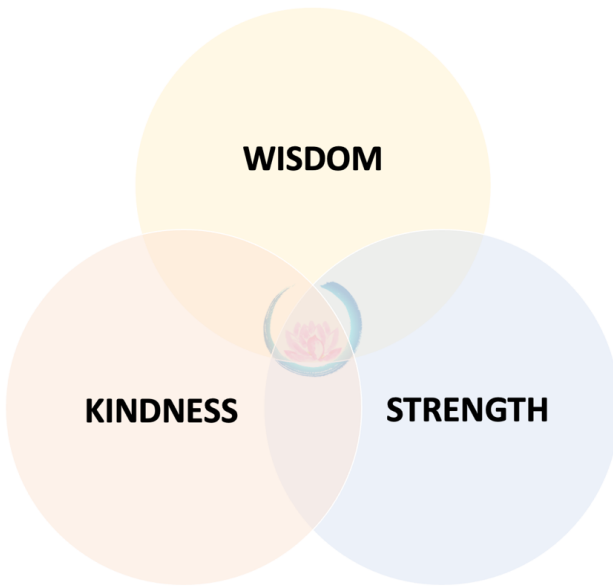
Unlike personality, which is more surface level, a person's character is the enduring trait deep in our heart of hearts.

Character reflects our most basic humanity: whether we give in to our worst, most seductive impulses or transcend them to reach the ideals of virtues. When confronted with a choice, what are our guiding principles? Maximize our safety, comfort, and pleasure, possibly at the expense of others? Do we try to optimize the situation for a mutually beneficial outcome? Or even sacrifice our self-interest for the benefit of others?

Reflecting on our character means examining our relationship with safety, pleasure, and comfort and how much we allow the strings to pull us. Becoming a person of character is the best way to achieve a mentally sound and successful life. Prioritizing our values with the appropriate intention will help direct our energy and effort.

Character can be defined in many ways, but it would be more useful to conceptualize the preferable character into three simple categories—wisdom, kindness, and strength.

Figure 6: The Triad of Virtues



When a concept is simple, it is easier to remember. As we face countless situations with multiple choices, we can ask, “Am I being wise? Am I being kind? Am I being strong [in this situation]?” Are we perceiving the situation correctly and accurately with all its nuances and complexity? Is there a blind spot that hides influential factors? Could there be unresolved issues within ourselves or others, a perspective we cannot yet see, or an intentional force orchestrating events in the shadow? What are the outcomes of the different options? Given what we can best comprehend, are we responding kindly? Are we approaching it from a stance of understanding and compassion? And finally, are we strong and disciplined enough to respond appropriately and effectively? Even if it means sparking conflict and offending others.



Reflection

Have you given much thought to your character? How much value do you place on it compared to other personal attributes (especially against physical attractiveness, wealth, fame, status, or power)? Is there any group (including your family) who always possess and exhibit superior character? How would you gauge the content of your character, specifically in these three broad categories?

In the following chapters, we'll explore wisdom, kindness, and strength and how to draw on these traits to develop well-being in body, mind, and spirit.

CHAPTER 22

Seeking Wisdom in Everything



In all situations, especially when examining our lives and the reality surrounding us, the capability and necessity to perceive the situation accurately and appropriately is critical. Misperception and misunderstanding lead to wrong impressions and incorrect conclusions, which in turn lead to misdirected planning, effort, and actions with undesirable outcomes. We seek truth and knowledge to avoid ignorance and delusion.

As a psychiatrist, I try to understand my patients' conditions with all their complexity before recommending treatment. Superficial understanding can only lead to superficial treatment that doesn't address the underlying issues, so the patient's situation likely worsens over time. Without true understanding, the treatment is a shallow exercise of symptom management, equating specific symptoms to a specific class of medication. This approach risks the natural outcome of progressively loading more and more medications as desperation sets in.

In our personal lives, we strive to understand our nature to truly comprehend why we act a certain way and collectively, as a species, why we act in a certain manner. This curiosity is part of the reasons why this book came into existence: my hope to grasp the truth of our reality and humanity. Concepts, ideas, and philosophies can feel like an amorphous ether, but when I have to lock them down in a book, I must delineate them into a concrete and coherent system.

Seeking Truth and Understanding

In all things, we strive to understand the truth because it is the foundation that shapes our perspective and belief, which dictate how to live and respond to different people and situations. Seeking to understand the totality and nuances brings us back to the inquisitiveness of a toddler asking “why?” about almost everything. This goal will propel us to learn and keep on learning about ourselves, other people, cultures, nations, systems, and how the world works. The pursuit to understand reality enhances our wisdom and has a practical effect on our choices.

Some philosophical skeptics will gleefully question, “Does truth even exist?” and then engage in endless pondering about reality, truth, and existence. Since our concern here is about mental health and daily life, I recommend anchoring our understanding to the present moment, the present physical reality, the physical body, human psychology, and human connections. Focus our intentionality on these areas first. Once life is in order with the mind and body in alignment, we may want to move on to consider higher metaphysical concepts—the subject of my next book.

By seeking to learn the truth, we transcend the more fundamental desire to be “right,” “better,” or “superior” compared to other people in terms of knowledge; what matters isn’t that we are more “right” but that we are learning, adapting, and growing. Through mindfulness, we can acknowledge that the need to be “right” is a vain psychological need to be superior. Those seeking to be “right” don’t care about the truth. If there are people more “right” than us, let us humbly learn from them because their perspective and knowledge can expand our

understanding. In a way, we can learn something from everyone: things to do and not to do.

Self-reflection on our journey through life fosters self-understanding as “experience is the best teacher.” Everyone weathers the seasons of life, but some learn from it while others mindlessly repeat the same cycle. However, we can also learn from others’ life experiences; through their successes and failures, we can vicariously live a thousand lives beyond our own.

Once we grasp humanity's circle of needs, we can see more clearly why we feel a certain way in response to certain circumstances and why people act the way they do. The complexity of the human psyche lies in the multiple layers that exist and which layer (or combination of layers) has the strongest pull for a person. Combining these layers with the constraints of social etiquette and the desire to appear wholesome, a person’s psychology becomes a tortuous underground cavern with various floors, tunnels, and hidden passages. How do we truly gauge the heart of another? Often, we even lie to ourselves about our own motivations and intentions. The corrupt emperor knows he is unpopular and prefers to pull strings from the shadow, making him even more cunning, manipulative, and powerful. Only when we are courageously honest can we flood every inch of the complex labyrinth with impartial awareness. We seek to see things as they are, not as we want them to be.

Reading Others

One way to gauge a person’s intentionality is to question, “What is the level of this person’s consciousness?” Are they operating from the most basic level of survival as if they’re stranded at sea, such that the utterly desperate act of cannibalism is an unsur-

prising course of action? When they are better off, are they still operating at a similar selfish level to seize from others more resources for their own security, comfort, pleasure, and superiority? Which layer of sex drive is dominating their consciousness, and how much do they give in? Does that lead to infidelity or sexual misconduct, destroying lives, careers, or marriages that took years of diligence to cultivate? Are they mistaking sex for the existential affirmation of love and intimacy? Is their arrogance a sign of superiority or a mask for deep insecurity? What things do they value and why? What stimulates them? What does that say about their identity? How was their circle of needs fulfilled or deprived? What needs are they trying to compensate for? Are they barely surviving or are they trying to overfill their needs? Ultimately, who are they, what is their philosophy, and why do they think, feel, and do certain things?

Self-Awareness

With wisdom, we see ourselves for what we are and other people for what they are. We learn to recognize the benefits of deliberate diligence in the long run versus chasing after transient immediate gratification. We see the allure of superficiality and how easy it is to fall into that trap. We reflect on the strings of needs that pull us and wisely accommodate them intentionally versus unconsciously. We choose to live consciously, bringing mindfulness and awareness to every moment. We intimately know our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, rationale, choices, actions, and likely outcomes. We are not helpless victims of subconscious temptations or unprocessed trauma that compel us to engage in self-destructive and self-sabotaging behaviors. Truth and wisdom will illuminate

the different perspectives, options, and likelihood of outcomes to guide us toward a preferable course of action that aligns with our values.



How accurate is your assessment of reality? Do you see things as they are, or do you see them as you wish them to be? Does your assessment capture the breadth and diversity that exist? How do you account for life's imperfections? How does your perception of reality apply to people different from you (ethnicity, religious belief, gender, etc.)? How should we best manage reality, along with all its imperfections?

CHAPTER 23

Embodying Kindness for All



Since the most fundamental program of living beings is to continue living and procreating, it is the parent's love for their child that keeps the baby alive and contributes to baby's success in a competitive world. All of us need that love; we feed off it. First, we receive and give love to our parents and family, then we expand it to our friends, then hopefully with a significant other, and finally to our own children. Along the way, we might even develop loving kindness to strangers. The circle of love is complete, a beautiful web of connections glistening with experiences and memories.

This aspect of love helps ensure survival for us and our loved ones, but we also recognize that the drive to survive can turn us into monsters toward others outside of our constructed web. Instead of love, we can be extremely selfish and aggressive to protect our self-interest, willingly hurting others or depriving them of the very things we all crave: life, love, comfort, happiness, pleasure. Due to the competitive nature of the world and our inherent desire to live, thrive, and be special, it is easy to engage in an "us" versus "them" mentality, pushing others down to lift ourselves up or exploiting others for our benefit.

Kindness to All

As we recognize these two opposing forces—to love and nurture each other versus to compete and dominate—the second most important ideal is striving to be "kind." We recognize our own inherent need for kindness and how much we appreciate it. We

also recognize the hurt and pain when we are exploited and how much we hate it. We understand that we hurt and, therefore, others also hurt. We realize other people come from the same ocean of humanity; from that, we can strengthen a sense of empathy and compassion. We might not share the exact experiences in life, but we share the same needs and emotions. We seek to understand ourselves and show kindness to our imperfections, like a mother or a loving older sibling showing kindness and patience to a more wayward child. As we practice kindness toward ourselves, we can also practice kindness toward others. The journey to understand ourselves is, in a way, a journey to understand humanity, the underlying foundation that influences and unites us despite our differences.

Since we acknowledge that we share the same spaces and resources, a component of being kind to others is to show consideration. When we live in the same room or the same house as other people, can we be considerate of their preferences regarding noise, cleanliness, and chores to negotiate a fair compromise? How do we keep the shared space livable and enjoyable for all involved? If we just focus on what we want and what we like, we forget that other people also exist; we act and live selfishly. When we share the same space in public, whether in our hometown or a tourist spot overseas, can we be mindful and respectful toward the people and the location? Especially for tourists, inconsiderate behaviors, such as talking loudly, blocking spaces, littering, spitting or urinating in public, destroying or stealing ancient artifacts, and displaying sexual behaviors in hallowed sites, to name a few, rightfully come off as rude, obnoxious, or disrespectful.

In Seeking Connections

In forging relationships, we should look for genuine kindness, understanding, and patience as the core of our connection. I often ask my patients if they know the secret to making good friends. The “secret” is quite simple: to get good friends, we must BE good friends. To get good people in our lives, we strive to BE good people. We attract the resonances that match our frequency. To be kind is to learn how to love and be fully present, as we discussed in an earlier lesson. To be kind is to sacrifice a potential benefit if it means hurting others. To be kind is to potentially accept a loss if it means benefiting others. As we practice embodying kindness, the sphere of influence we naturally create will be a warm glow for others. The people around us, especially family and friends, will surely feel it, and similarly minded people will respond to us; they will gravitate toward us. People who appreciate the same music or frequency will be drawn to one another. Over time, the right people will come across our path and stay with us, developing into lifetime friendships.

We must be careful that our kindness is genuine and not an alms bowl begging for other people’s affirmation of our existence. We should be kind because we believe that kindness is the light that illuminates and warms the world, not because we want other people to like us or because we expect something in return. Many people have spoken of their virtue of “kindness” as “I have bent over backward to please other people, but they never give me anything in return.” It takes a lot of time and effort to discover that their childhood neglect or abuse, lacking the fundamental psychological affirmation needed by every person, has created a void within them that desperately craves attention and affection. They seek to fill this void by pleasing others,

learning to ingratiate themselves to other people's preferences, and eventually becoming deferential chameleons hoping to receive some affirmation or mercy. They mistake their weakness for kindness, and they are understandably upset when others take their kindness for weakness. Genuine kindness comes from a place of giving and independence without ulterior motives.

Our genuine kindness can be a fire that brings light into a cold, dark world. Competition can be fierce and, at times, ruthless; we can cast our own shadow to intensify the darkness or be the flame that slowly kindles one candle after the next. One small act of kindness can be a droplet that ripples across creations. As eloquently stated in *Cloud Atlas*, "Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" We are mindful of our actions not only in our social lives but also in our occupations. As we strive for kindness in all areas of life, are we scamming and hurting others through our livelihood? For survival, comfort, and pleasure, are we intentionally harming others for our benefit? If we rationalize this as "how the world works," are we not actively condoning and contributing to it? As we receive support and nurturing along the way, we mature to contribute to the fulfillment of others' circles of needs, not depriving them of it.



Do you consider yourself kind, caring, or compassionate? How do you treat yourself in this regard? How do you treat others? How do you treat people who are different or worse off than you? Has the cruelty of the world hardened you? What do you give out into the world?

CHAPTER 24

Standing Strong



The last character trait to complete the triad is to be strong beyond just physical strength. It would be amazing if our kindness could win everyone over. When we practice patience and understanding, it isn't guaranteed that everyone will respond positively. The strings of physical reality pull all of us. Since resources are limited, competition is a natural aspect of the system. Despite our best intentions and kindness, there exist people who will succumb to the most basic impulses of self-centeredness, watching out only for their interests and willingly exploiting others. They have no qualms in catering to vices and the lowest impulses.

For certain people, our kindness is a weakness that can and will be mercilessly exploited. The mantra of "being kind," generally viewed as a warm light unto the world, can distort into a rope that shackles us as sacrificial lambs for ill-intentioned predators. Some people will take a mile if we give an inch. A component of being "wise" is to realize when kindness has its limit and when a forceful action is needed. If we are "kind" to the same person repeatedly cutting into the line in front of us for their own convenience, are we not "unkind" to all the people waiting behind us? If we are "kind" to strangers who maliciously harm us, are we not "unkind" to our family who needs us? Sometimes, we have to be strong, forceful, and direct, even if it means creating tension or conflict.

Tempering Kindness with Strength

Ultimate kindness in the religious or spiritual sense requires a sacrifice incompatible with physical existence. In Christianity, Jesus said to turn the other cheek: “And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well,” which would leave the person completely naked in public. In Buddhism, there is a story of a bodhisattva who intentionally sacrificed his body for a starving tigress so she [the tigress] would not sin for eating her cubs. Ultimate kindness is the ultimate sacrifice that regular people with an attachment to life and responsibility to the family can never realistically achieve. To live in the physical world, kindness must be tempered by the strength to protect virtues and resist vices in ourselves and from other people. However, kindness also fortifies this “strength” to prevent it from devolving into a blind hatred of vices or “evil” and becoming the very thing it seeks to destroy. Gautama Buddha said, “Hatred ceases not through hatred, but only through non-hatred; this is the eternal rule.” While we don’t compound hatred or add more fuel to the fire of violence, we must have the strength to resist corruption with force, wisdom, and kindness.

Integrity

There will be many instances when we are pressured or influenced by the crowd. Having the strength to stand firm in our values in the face of adversity instills in us the integrity of being. We cannot be fair-weather friends or mindless drones to the culture of the current time. There is an innate desire to belong to the larger group or to follow a strong leader. That captivity puts us at risk of tolerating or even committing atrocities. Once we are secure in our own existence and identity, we have the

freedom to excavate our thoughts from the broader culture, and we can critically assess all ideas and assumptions around us. We don't need to please anyone or any organizations if they don't align with our values. We are not blind conformists to popular trends or insidious propaganda. We are part of the group, but we cannot be dictated to by the group.

Cultivating Perseverance

Another important aspect of being strong is to develop perseverance. Once we have wisely discerned what path we want to take, we cultivate the discipline to commit to that journey, especially when it becomes challenging. The path to obtaining things of true value in life is difficult, such as studying, working, exercising, eating a healthy diet, or meditating. Because we know where certain habits will lead us, we intentionally strive toward being strong, committed, and disciplined to achieve those goals.

Heroes are not made in indulgent comfort but tempered by the fire of hardships. The development of character isn't shaped by idyllic relaxation but molded by unnerving challenges. A cushy, easy life isn't necessarily a blessing, and difficult tribulation isn't necessarily a curse. How we handle the ups and downs of life that chart our growth and development matters more in the long run. The best marker of success is our grit or perseverance despite obstacles and failures. Wisdom lights our path and helps us predict the likely outcomes of different choices in life, while strength bolsters us to weather the storm to stay on that path.



Is being kind a weakness in you? How do you manage other people's vices and aggression for resources? Is your compassion a shackle that binds you to defend your self-interest? Where is the balance between kindness and strength? Can you persevere through challenges and hardships? Are you comfortable in your own skin to be authentic? Are you confident in your value to stand firm in your integrity?

CHAPTER 25

Putting It All Together



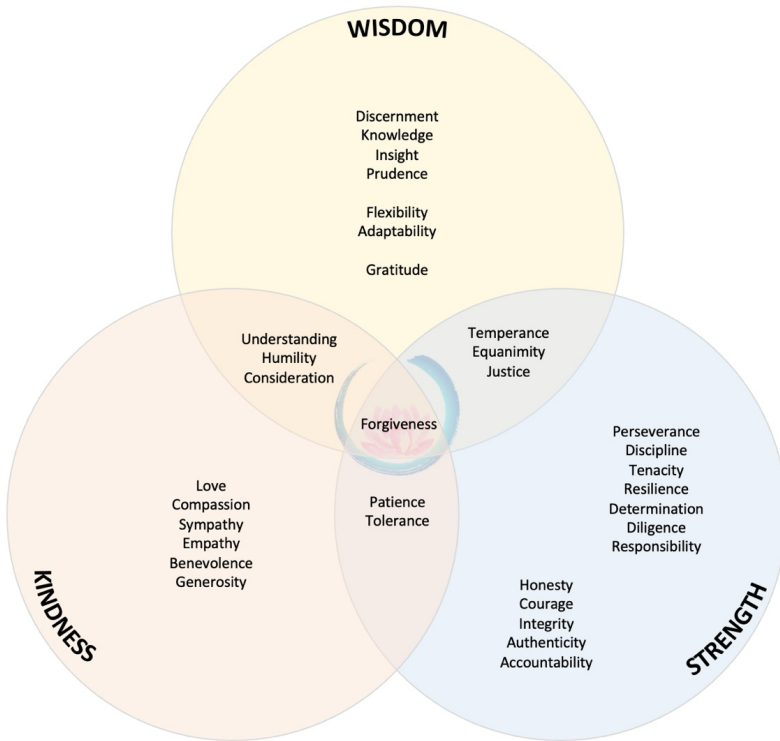
When we strive for the triad of virtues, being *wise* brings us insight and discernment, being *kind* brings us peace and genuine connections, while being *strong* brings us protection and success. This blueprint is simple but effective for a healthy, positive, and successful life. As we focus on working toward the best version of our identity, wisely choosing the right path to follow, we will attract the right people and opportunities to come along.

However, we do need to strive for all three characteristics because long-term success sits on this three-legged stool. It is easy to imagine how possessing only one or two of the three traits can lead to an unfavorable outcome. For instance, someone who is wise and kind but not strong will risk getting run over—willingly; someone who is kind and strong but not wise will risk becoming someone else’s pawn; someone who is wise and strong but not kind will risk becoming an evil mastermind.

Virtues and Vices

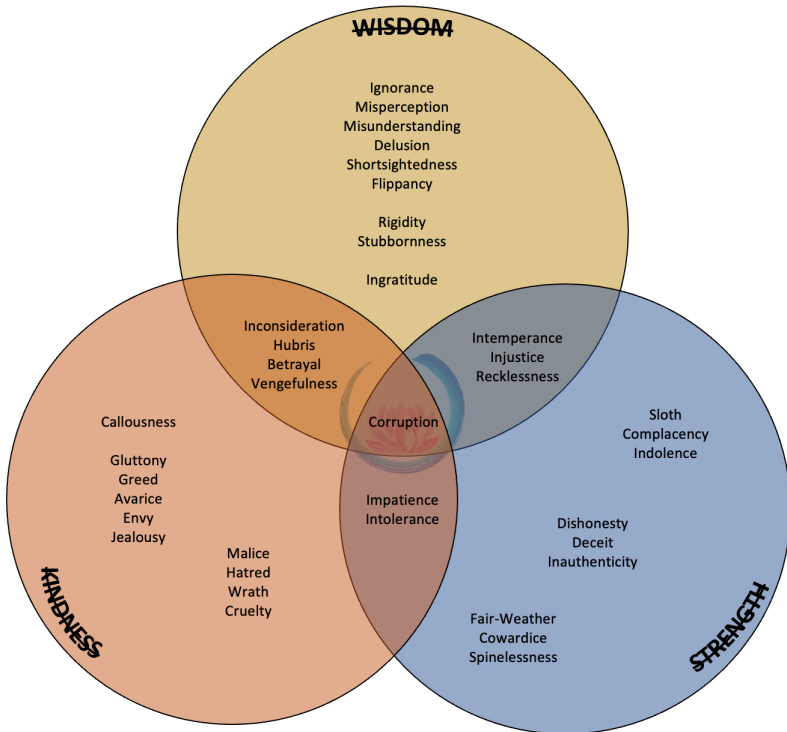
The journey of life is to practice mindfulness, live consciously, and strive toward goodness, which will positively affect multiple areas of life, help us endure suffering, and enhance the lives around us. How we cater to the circle of needs reflects the light and darkness within us. All virtues and vices can be conceptualized in relation to the three characteristics of wisdom, kindness, and strength.

Figure 7: Expansion of the Triad of Virtues



Conversely, there is also a triad of vices that prevent us from achieving our full potential.

Figure 8: Triad of Vices



Regardless of where you are or who you are right now, if you refocus on becoming wise, kind, and strong, forging life to become a meaningful journey toward self-creation, this in itself will provide a wholesome purpose to replace the most fundamental purpose that physical reality forces upon us.



Reflection

How well do you know your character? What are your strengths and weaknesses? How much value do you place on your character? What areas do you want to further develop? How do you think the anchoring of your values and development of character will influence everything else in your life? Is there something else

besides character that can serve as a better anchor? How does it relate to your character?

Happiness

Once we know what is essential, we can dedicate our lives to working toward it. In the maelstrom of life, many different factors will fight for our attention to seize domination of our intentionality. At the most rudimentary level, the strings of life will compel us to fulfill our basic physical and psychological needs. Unchecked desires lure us toward overindulgence.

This brings us to happiness, which is the crown jewel of the much sought-after positive emotions. This emotion was intentionally removed from the previous chapter because it is a highly charged concept. To many people, the purpose of life seems to be a constant quest to pursue happiness. The idea sounds simple enough: we experience happiness when a need, want, or desire is fulfilled. How can wisdom guide us in the pursuit of happiness? And the opposite question: what is the delusion of attaining happiness?

Usually, people chase after happiness as if chasing after a butterfly. When the butterfly lands on a flower, they rush to slam down the net to capture it. But how quickly the butterfly flutters away, leaving behind just a flower. Associating the flower with the butterfly, they pluck it into their possession, and then continue the chase again. Whatever item the butterfly lands on, the mundane object becomes holy. Life becomes a never-ending quest of accumulation and possession. The web of connections and the web of possession solidify their identity.

The chase starts in a pleasant grassy field, but as the journey continues, it can lead to more treacherous terrain and rarer

artifacts. Before they know it, a huge sack of trinkets is strapped onto their shoulder as their steps grow heavier. Frequently, they will run into other pursuers. They will take a break and take out the contents of their possession to compare. "Look at this!" as they proudly flash the objects' rarity, color, texture, size, name, and glitter. While they marvel at their possessions and congratulate one another, they secretly or openly establish superiority or inferiority based on their possessions. Pride and condescending pity stir within the "superior" pursuer while sadness and envy settle over the "inferior" catcher. They may try to barter and even cheat one another. Thoughts of theft or murder might cross their minds. They might give each other genuine advice on where and how to garner specific objects or intentionally mislead each other into dangerous terrain. At the end of their lives, they might get a tombstone that lists their most precious acquisitions, inspiring the next generation to follow in their footsteps.

In their quest to capture the butterfly, how many times can they truly grasp it? The sparks of excitement and joy might be many, but the disappointment or frustration also cast their shadows. The quest to capture the butterfly consumes their intentionality and batters their body. Their back-bag becomes the very boulder that crushes them. Beyond the ability to satisfy our basic living requirements, do more possessions truly bring happiness? If so, the people with the most possessions should also be the happiest? Since desires lead to possessions, it seems the more we can satiate our desires with an abundance of possessions, the more comfortable we should become. Possession isn't limited to physical things as it also involves possession of youth, beauty, experiences, and status. What insights can wisdom provide

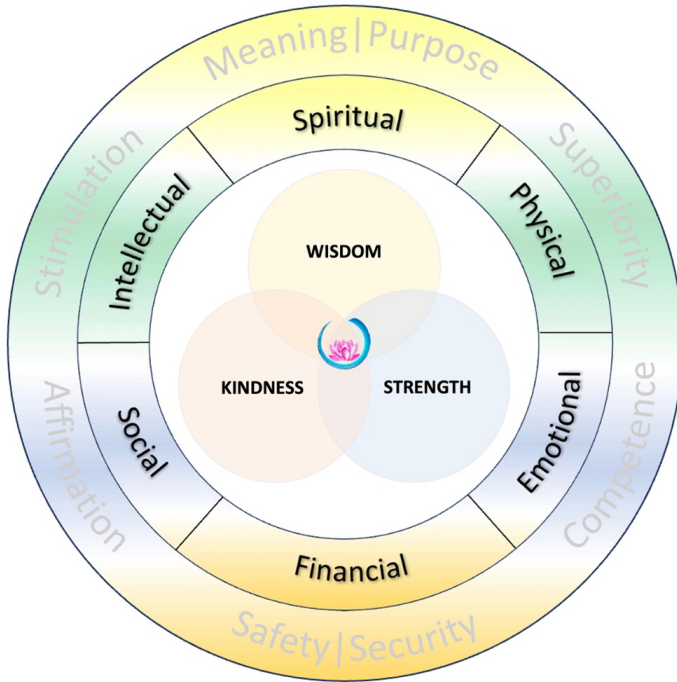
about the interplay of possession, happiness, and the purpose of life?

Living According to Our Principles

How we choose to live our lives and where we direct our intentionality will significantly impact our mood and fulfillment. Our intentionality, emanating a sphere of influence, will also affect those around us. To make the most of our lives, we start from the fundamentals and figure out the best way to address the basic strings that pull at us. Many people live unconsciously, unaware of these strings, and are mindlessly compelled without reflection or questioning. Life can become a foggy dream that we stumble through, chasing one thing after another until the day we die. We aim to be awakened from this sleep and live with eyes wide open, to live consciously. To see things as they are, not as we hope them to be.

True happiness is the healthy fulfillment of the circle of needs. How can we better fulfill our circle? The image below recaps our physical and psychological needs, our personal attributes, and the triad of virtues. As we discuss them, ponder how much pull each has over you, how well the needs are being met, and what you have done to satiate them.

Figure 9: The Interconnected Circles



Life—Survival—Health

The basis of life is to stay alive through the pleasure–pain principle. When we stay alive, every other need has a chance to be fulfilled. Some people encounter tragedies that put the simple act of living at risk, such as terminal illness, debilitating chronic diseases, natural disasters, accidents, wars, etc. The lottery of life seems random and arbitrary. However, death comes for all of us in due time. Being alive is a blessing and foundation to live consciously.

Proposal

We tend to take things for granted until they're gone, especially good functional health. Practice mindfulness and gratitude for the life and health we do have, knowing that sickness, aging, and death are inevitable. We aim to care for our physical and emotional health by being mindful of the substances we ingest into our bodies and consciousness. We learn to tolerate physical and emotional discomfort as we exercise the body and dive into different emotions. We learn to appreciate our lives and the lives of others, being mindful of selfish and selfless actions that lead to the development of vices and virtues. We acknowledge and accept the imperfections of life, striving for the wisdom, kindness, and strength to make the most of what we do.

Food and Water

We need food and water to survive, but they can also satisfy other needs. For instance, eating or drinking delicious items can bring pleasure. This physical pleasure of food can give us emotional pleasure, which we can chase after if we have limited alternative sources of positive emotions in our lives. Food is transformed from a source of sustenance to a source of emotional comfort. Food can also provide a sense of safety and security in a world of limited resources. Additionally, having delicious or rare food can make us feel superior to those who cannot access it.

Food is a substance, and consuming substances can make us feel "substantial." While colorful garments can announce our existence in the room, our relationship with food is a foundation for staking our existence. The ability to manage food gives us a sense of competence and control, especially if we have little

control over other aspects of life. When we value looks and, specifically, thinness as a foundation of our worth because other needs have been damaged, it is easy to develop disordered eating. The exquisite taste of food can stimulate our minds and senses, tempting us to seek more exotic flavors. Pursuing food passionately can also be one's meaning and purpose in life.

Proposal

Reflect deeply to examine if food serves other needs, leading to overindulgence or being overcontrolling. If our relationship with food is associated with emotional comfort, pleasure, safety and security, affirmation, competence, control, the status of "superiority" over others, stimulation for the palate and mind, or the sole purpose of life, seek to understand what else is truly missing in life to allow food to hold such importance, then mindfully address the root causes.

We acknowledge the purpose of food for survival and sustenance. We learn to be aware of its nutrition and how it can affect our physical and mental health. We examine whether things that taste good, like greasy food or sugary drinks, are truly good for us, while things that perhaps do not taste as good, like vegetables, are better for us. Is the compulsion for pleasure and comfort damaging our health in the long run? We choose to consume consciously, in moderation, while trying to minimize the harm it causes to others. We appreciate food and water sources and savor the myriad of flavors with each bite or drink, mindfully and gratefully. Even eating can be a practice of mindfulness.

Sleep and Rest

Sleep rejuvenates our minds and bodies. When we don't sleep well, the impact on our physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual states is significant. Our relationship with sleep can also be complicated. When we're younger, we might sacrifice sleep to pursue other activities that fulfill the need to socialize, entertain, or be productive. When older, we might sacrifice rest as we toil for long hours to earn a living. When we struggle with anxiety, our buzzing mind prevents us from sleeping, while depression lulls us into excessive sleep as an escape from the world. Our anxieties, fears, hopes, and aspirations can come to us in nightmares and dreams. Our escape to the dream world can pull us further away from confronting the real world.

Proposal

Appreciate the rejuvenation that sleeps bring. As we reflect on the necessity of sleep for our physical and mental health, we honor the privilege of sleeping safely and comfortably. We recognize the importance of sleep hygiene and how a healthy routine can help us sleep better. Because our body functions as clockwork, we aim to sleep and awaken at a consistent time every day, avoiding caffeine and electronics before bed. We practice mindfulness and develop emotional intelligence to purify negative emotions and process stressful thoughts that can interfere with sleep during waking hours. We cautiously manage distractions and temptations encroaching on precious sleep time and prioritize sleep as a foundation for good health. Finally, we pay attention to our dreams for themes that reveal deeper fears and aspirations to develop better self-understanding.

Shelter and Protection

Shelter protects us from threats posed by environments, animals, and other people. It is a critical component that enhances our sense of safety and security. To maximize comfort or use it as a sign of our superiority, there is the temptation to get the biggest or fanciest dwelling. We can overspend on a fancy house and become “house-poor,” where most of our finances are obligated to the rent/mortgage and to pay for all the furniture and decorations. To maximize our possession or sense of protection, we claim as much land as possible while killing or driving out other people and animals. In a competitive world of limited resources, we risk focusing only on ourselves and our needs.

Proposal

We remind ourselves that shelter is a space that protects us from threats and gives comfort. Between the extremes of homelessness and overindulgence, where can we find safety and simple comfort? We appreciate the blessing that we have shelter while so many others do not. We are cautious in giving in to temptation for a dwelling that is too big for us. We honestly assess how much we identify with our possessions and whether we have bought into materialism. We strive to acquire a shelter just enough for us and our loved ones without taking more than we need. As we appreciate the necessity of shelter and protection, we recognize that same need in others as we practice kindness and minimize aggression.

Safety and Security

Even when we have food, water, and shelter, there is always the risk of suddenly losing all of it. The threat against survival can

feel like an assassin hiding around the corner. This fear of danger and the natural desire for life can make us cling to money and power for safety, security, and protection. We can chase after these things directly or cling to people who possess them. We might sacrifice our virtues to quench these cravings, engaging in the worst of selfishness, greed, cheating, and destruction. Once safety and security are assured, the same money and power can indulge us in the best of sensual pleasures, which then becomes a never-ending cycle to attain more and more.

Proposal

Concern over safety and security for physical and psychological needs is the underlying reason for all anxiety and fear. We strive to create a safe and secure environment while accepting that the imperfection of life cannot guarantee absolute safety or predictability—war, natural disasters, diseases, freak accidents, or betrayals can damage our security at any time. In response to the unpredictability of life, we learn to live courageously with uncertainty while persevering through hardships to create a life that we want, no matter how evanescent.

We recognize the competitive nature of physical reality and develop compassion for ourselves and others. As we establish our safety and security, we seek to avoid exploiting or destroying others' safety and security to maximize ours. In a world of imperfections, we struggle to mind and care for ourselves and others.

We recognize that some people will succumb to their worst impulses to take advantage of others. In addition to wisdom and kindness, we develop the strength to resist temptations, bad influences, and ill-intentioned aggressors. We strive to instill fortitude in mind, body, and spirit that will ensure safety and

security. While not everyone can become the giant elephant in the jungle of life to ensure safety, when push comes to shove, we are determined to bring aversion by becoming a honey badger: smaller but still ferocious. If the timing isn't ripe, we swallow our pride and wait for a more optimal opportunity to strike. We don't tread on others and don't let others tread on us.

Libido

Sex drive is powerful and insidious. It is a force that ensures the survival of our species, so its pull cannot be underestimated. Most sane people not enraptured by sex drive would probably find it strange for two random people to get naked together and do sexual things. That moment right after an orgasm when sex drive is suddenly switched off is a moment of clarity in drastic contrast to the intoxication of the sexual ecstasy. And the cycle will repeat itself over and over again.

Proposal

As we reflect on the multiple layers of sex drive, we ponder which layer captures us. Question what other physical and psychological needs are intertwined with sex drive. Besides physical pleasure, does it also serve as a primary source of psychological pleasure and comfort? Like food, if we have little else going, do we turn to sex like a low-hanging fruit? It might even merge with the love of food! The insidious and flexible nature of sex drive allows it to merge with almost anything in life; to create all sorts of kinks, common and uncommon ones. Sexual urges give rise to fantasies, which give rise to thoughts, which can lead to planning, then to words, then to actions, and over time, become a habit. Unrestrained sexual urges and fantasies can lead to sexual misconduct and infidelity, or worse,

coercion, rape, and murder. This awareness reminds us to be mindful and prudent of the “harmless” thoughts we entertain in the privacy of our minds.

Exercise caution against substituting sex to affirm existence and obtain some form of validation. The physical intimacy of the skin-to-skin and body-to-body contact of sex can give the illusion of affirmation, especially if the person wanting sex has a silver tongue to lure the unsuspecting. In the long run, the enticing pleasure of sex can leave us more alone and empty if we base most of our identity and purpose on the primitive pursuit of sex.

Besides the physical risk of pregnancy, there is also the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Every teenager, when starting to feel the grasp of libido, might want to look up unfiltered images of what sexual diseases can do to their body and health. With the rise of antibiotic-resistant sexually transmitted infections, are momentary pleasures worth prolonged disruptive diseases?

If our mind and intentionality are a kite, sexual energy is a voracious vortex in the sky. Anchor the kite to a pillar and observe the wind swirl, sucking the kite into sexual territory. What are our sexual fantasies? How tempting are the sexual thoughts? How much should we give in, and how much control can we exercise? What actions should we take so our sexual mind and rational mind align, without any regret, even after the orgasm? With mindfulness, seek to understand this life-giving energy and tame the primordial force. We can enjoy this natural part of physical reality but engage with it consciously and responsibly.

Affirmation

The need for physical survival is easy to grasp, while the need for psychological existence is just as critical, though less understood. We are social beings and need positive interaction with other people. This concept of psychological existence forms the basis of human connection and attachment, starting from interacting with our parents as the root and slowly expanding outward to siblings, other family members, friends, classmates, colleagues, lovers, and even strangers. How our parents define our existence becomes a template for how we perceive others to feel toward us.

Proposal

As parents, we learn how to express love because our actions will affect our children's self-esteem for their entire lives. Parents are also role models on how to handle the imperfections of life, how to process and manage emotions, what to value in life, and how to show love. To treat our children well, we learn to treat ourselves well. We learn mindfulness and remember to be kind toward ourselves, to be compassionate and patient with our negative emotions, to be fully present with our attention and intentionality, and to seek to understand our own aspirations, fears, trauma, pain, and baggage. When we can do all of this for ourselves, we can do all of this for our children.

We aim to wrap their existence, no matter how mundane, in our intentionality by being present and attentive. We consciously give praise and award attention to desirable behaviors. We are mindful of the messages being conveyed to our children, both intentional and unintentional. We strive to minimize the risk of unintentionally transferring the baggage we still carry onto our

children, which might perpetuate another cycle of generational afflictions and trauma.

As children mature, we re-evaluate our sense of existence and identity, not simply as concepts we blindly internalized from our parents. We come to realize and accept that the world is imperfect, our parents are imperfect, and we are imperfect as well. We seek to understand our parents through their lives, their upbringing, how they live, their struggles, the story that brings them to one another, the circumstances in their dynamics surrounding our conception, and what their aspirations, fears, and baggage were/are. If the first step in their union is unsteady, the rest of the journey and how it ends might not be too surprising. It will also explain much about how or why they treated us the way they did, for better or worse. If we are adopted, seek to understand the story of our adoption: the circumstances surrounding our birth parents, the hardship and struggle involved, and the story of our adoptive family.

People cannot give us what they don't have or don't know. If our parents were less than "perfect," it is even more imperative that we strive for wisdom, kindness, and strength to understand their imperfections, appreciate everything they have done for us, and forgive them for any damage they may have caused. We recognize that we are imperfect as well, and raising us wasn't easy in the challenges of their own struggle for basic physical and psychological needs.

Note: I have met many adults in their forties or older struggling with insecure existence due to neglectful or abusive parents. Even if their parents died years ago, the ghosts of their message haunt these patients, taunting them that they are undeserving, inadequate, not good

enough, a loser, or a failure. People can live their entire lives with this unevaluated belief and create a self-fulfilling prophecy to trap them in a downward spiral of depression, anxiety, and anger.

If we have experienced bullying, we realize the bullies had their own issues. In their immature attempt to affirm their existence, proclaim their competence, entertain their psychological stimulation, or assert their superiority, they chose to step on the heads of others. As we are mindful of re-evaluating the messages conveyed by our parents, we can also re-examine the messages transmitted by other people, especially bullies. Have we unconsciously internalized the messages from them? Do we have the wisdom to discern their message from the truth of our imperfection? Do we have the kindness to love ourselves and others? Do we have the strength to fight against the bullies, causing them discomfort and aversion, even if they surpass us in size? Since bullies want others to be miserable, the best revenge is to take a forceful stance to become more confident, happy, and successful despite their tauntings.

As an independent, wise adult, we can affirm our own existence and worth. We are no longer little children, helpless and dependent on the mercy of others (including our parents) to affirm our existence and define our self-worth. Otherwise, instead of maturing into wise adults, we risk becoming big kids chasing after affirmation, validation, and approval from other people or society. We risk conforming to other people's preferences because we give them the power to dictate our identity and happiness. In the process, we truly lose ourselves and our authenticity.

We risk becoming someone else's pawn and blindly following the crowd. People can be tempted to join a gang, seduced by a cult, or peer-pressured to do drugs simply for a sense of belonging. Life becomes a roller-coaster as our esteem and sense of existence fluctuate quickly depending on how others treat us. Our moods can go up and down by the minute or the hour, and we are always at the mercy of other people. There is no stability of self because we cycle through a transient sense of "good" existence, "bad" existence, or nonexistence.

In wisdom, we anchor our existence and identity in our most foundational possessions—the striving toward becoming a wise, kind, and strong individual. We strive to live consciously every moment to achieve this ideal while appreciating the mundane beauty of each moment and being deeply grateful for life's simple blessings. We seek to understand ourselves and accept our imperfections—proudly aware of our good traits and mindfully cognizant of our bad traits. We recognize that everyone falls short of the best ideal of being a wise, kind, and strong individual but that we can kindle the ember of our potential into the light of virtues, one of which is true humility.

If we catch ourselves feeling the need for virtue-signaling, mindfully investigate the underlying issues. Is it subconscious insecurity? Is it a need to feel "right" or superior? Self-development is a work in progress, which is one of the primary purposes in our life. As we practice kindness toward ourselves in our development, we apply that to other people and affirm their existence and growth. Our kindness can be a warm glow for someone's dark, empty world.

We now know, without a doubt, that we exist and are striving toward goodness. We also know, without a doubt, that we

deserve affirmation simply because we exist and are trying to be better. Self-affirmation is the wisdom that secures our existence. This inner solid conviction transforms a fragile twig into a sturdy tree that only rustles with the wind. Ultimately, we strive to be a mountain, impervious to external praise or criticism.

Romantic Love

Romantic love is composed primarily of the deep need for psychological affirmation and the magnetism of the sex drive to bring two people together. We want to find someone who loves us for us, who understands us, who supports us, who accepts our imperfections along with our strengths, and who excites us sexually. For romantic love to succeed, there must be mutual reciprocity. If one person comes into the relationship expecting more than what the other person can learn to give, it will lead to disappointment and resentment on both sides. Countless movies, stories, and songs worldwide celebrate the beauty and purity of true love. To love and be loved, despite the obstacles and challenges, is a beautiful blessing.

Proposal

What is the reality of romantic love, and how does its delusion trap us in misery? The truth is that, yes, finding romantic love is an absolutely amazing experience. The delusion, though, fed to us by every romantic movie and book is that we must achieve this romantic love to be truly happy and to feel complete. Wisdom comes from the recognition that this message is toxic propaganda. The progression from being single, finding a date, securing a relationship, becoming fiancée, and finally marrying as partners-for-life is far from guaranteed. Despite the beautiful wedding vows, the promise of longevity isn't unbreakable either.

If the joy of the hopelessly romantic honeymoon decays to bitterness and resentment, the once glittering gem evaporates into a toxic miasma, poisoning everyone. Some people search for the ideal of love their entire lives and never find it. They wander a desert of their own making, chasing after mirages of a promised oasis that might not exist.

As we strive to be wise and strong, we can recognize that while romantic love is truly remarkable, it isn't guaranteed for everyone. Blessed are those who found and secured it, but we cannot stake our existence and happiness on such an ephemeral ideal. Instead, learn to be content, happy, and joyful with ourselves first, working to become the best version of ourselves and pursuing authentic passions, interests, and livelihood. Strive to complete our identity as we process our issues, baggage, and trauma. We don't wait for someone else to "complete" us, as romantically beautiful but inherently broken as it may sound.

As we strive to be wise, kind, and strong with good relationships, hobbies, and careers, we will likely attract someone of a similar caliber. If and when romantic love develops, it has the best chance to survive and thrive into old age when both people share the same values and already come complete in their own rights. Even if we don't find it or the relationship falls apart, the most stable affirmation of our existence ultimately comes from within, based on our values and the content of our character.

Competence and Control

To function in life, we need to learn to do many things. Competence directly enhances our chance for survival and touches upon many aspects of life: acts of daily living, emotional intelligence, social connections, academic performance, athletic prowess, artistic endeavors, professional achievement, financial

security, and spiritual development. Competence gives us more control over our life and destiny. Competence allows us to develop mastery and compete successfully.

Proposal

As parents, it is crucial to help our children develop their sense of competence by guiding them, allowing them to test their limits and fail, and encouraging them to try again and again with patience and support. The repeated experience of persevering through failures, eventually leading to success engrains a valuable lesson: perseverance pays off. As wise, kind, and strong adults, we create a sanctuary for our children to seek comfort and guidance. Our sphere of influence is the source for their safety and security. When this fundamental need is met, our children will have the courage to venture out to test and develop their competence.

As with most challenges, they will likely fail a few times initially, but with guidance and persistence, they can achieve it with inner pride and confidence. There is a sweet spot of difficulty level relative to our child's ability. If the relative difficulty level is too easy, the child will grow complacent, bored, and arrogant. Conversely, if the relative difficulty level is too high, they will get frustrated, give up, and internalize a sense of incompetence. If parents are overly intrusive, doing everything for their children to shield them from the hardships and failures, they miss out on the hard-earned triumphant victories: kids will develop an unrealistic expectation of reality. These sheltered kids will likely crumble in the face of the harsh reality of life when they venture off to the real world.

Love, attention, and affection are essential in affirming our children's existence. Simultaneously, parents also need to

establish guidance, boundaries, and structure to shape the children's competence toward becoming healthy and functional adults. Finding the right balance between these two forces is crucial: excessive love without sufficient structure can lead to spoiled tyrants, whereas excessive structure with minimal tenderness may result in oppositional saboteurs. The balance works much better when parents can establish a strong foundation of love and connection with the kids first, ensuring that they know they are loved and valued. When discipline and guidance are needed, the jarring (relative) harshness is in a context of abundant love and concern, shaping the kids to be more receptive.

As we mature from children into adults, we invest our effort and energy into developing our competence to become wise, kind, and strong individuals. All the lessons previously covered, such as perceiving our physical reality for what it is, accepting the imperfection of life in other people and in ourselves, practicing mindfulness, understanding and processing our emotions, expressing love in its highest form, re-evaluating and re-creating our identity, and finally intentionally anchoring our values in character will all help us to achieve mental well-being and becoming a positive influence.

Note: If we live in fear and anxiety, especially when we feel there's a need to be "perfect" or to be in "control" to the point of developing a disorder or obsessive-compulsive behavior, it is critical that we reflect deeply on the underlying issues of why we feel so "imperfect" and "lacking control" in our life. What happened in our past to make us feel like everything will crumble if we don't achieve "perfection"? Why are our basic senses of

safety, security, existence, and competence damaged and threatened? Without being honest and understanding the underlying story, we risk being trapped by our insecurities. In trying to gain absolute control, we actually lose primary control over our lives.

Since competence is a matter of innate talent and, more importantly, diligence, we keep pushing forward, trying, practicing, and working toward our goals despite setbacks and obstacles. This applies to the competence of making and maintaining relationships, schoolwork, career, hobbies, meditation, mindfulness, and everything else in life. It is a life-long practice of character development that will ensure success.

The ultimate competence is understanding and mastering our mind, thoughts, emotions, speech, actions, and habits.

Superiority

Limited resources necessitate competition, engendering the need for superiority to emerge victorious. It is also a fear of the droplet falling back into the anonymity of the ocean, ceasing to exist. It is a psychological need for us to feel unique and be special, in a way superior to others. There are countless anchors people can feel superior about beyond money: looks, clothing, houses, cars, possessions, education, skills, talents, job titles, race, nationality, sex, gender, sexual orientation, travel experiences, popularity, religiosity, age, etc. When people give in to any sense of superiority, it is hard to completely conceal it, no matter how humble they may appear: true intentionality leaks through the veneer of humility. Their self-worth rises and falls

with the thing they choose to latch on to, like an octopus doing rock climbing.

Proposal

Wisdom recognizes that this game of comparison for superiority will never bring us true joy. If we have to be “superior” or better than other people in any way, it should be anchored in our character, especially with qualities surrounding wisdom, kindness, and strength. On the scale ranging from wisdom to ignorance, or kindness to cruelty, or strength to weakness, where do we stand? If a droplet seeks to elevate itself above the rest, let it promote these qualities. If people want to be praised and judged, no matter how beautiful, wealthy, famous, educated, pious, talented, or powerful they appear, let them be judged for their wisdom, kindness, and strength.

We focus mindfulness on our ego to comprehend how much we play into this game of comparison. If other people choose to value money, fame, looks, possessions, or whatever else, let them. Live and let live. However, we are cautious that the same intentionality doesn’t pull us into that way of thinking and living. We walk firmly on the foundation of living consciously to cultivate wise, kind, and strong characters as the wind blows incessantly in different directions. True humility is one of the characteristics we seek to develop. We cannot become people who stand on a fake moral high ground as we virtue-signal and judge others. If we genuinely buy into our “superiority” of characters, we have already failed.

Sometimes, we might be “better” than someone else regarding a specific category, such as physical size, strength, beauty, wealth, intelligence, emotional understanding, or social connections. We resist the allure to exploit this power differential for our benefit

or amusement while rationalizing duplicitous excuses. With greater power, we recognize the opportunity and temptation to abuse it for the fulfillment of our desires. We acknowledge our inner demons and remain vigilant to tame them.

Stimulation

Once our survival is ensured, another constant struggle we must confront is the risk of boredom. As we achieve physical security, the exhaustion of mental stimulation in the frantic struggle for survival abates significantly. This blessing creates an incessant void that demands alternatives for stimulation.

We have industries that stimulate us through entertainment, athletic events, competitions, gambling, pornography, traveling, experiences, etc. The rise of instant access to online media directly caters to this need. However, there are a lot of other activities to address boredom, and we are limited only by our imagination. When children did not have easy access to media content from television, cellphones, or tablets, they were forced to be creative and naturally develop make-believe games or transform ordinary objects into fantastical toys.

Proposal

As we seek to satisfy the need for stimulation, we practice mindfulness and become aware of each choice's likely effect. Without mindfulness, we get sucked into the rabbit hole of the internet as we hop from one content to another. With mindfulness, we can be conscious of the passing time and intentionally pause in that brief moment when one video is ending and another is starting to re-evaluate our course of action. We hope to give ourselves the best chance to escape the mind-numbing momentum. We develop an awareness of how

specific content affects our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—for better or worse. We are mindful of how the chosen media strengthens or poisons our consciousness. We remind ourselves that each moment is precious and consciously decide how many moments to dedicate to media consumption. Paying attention to our moments, minds, thoughts, emotions, and bodies is also stimulating!

Note: A low-hanging fruit to jolt the excitement for stimulation is drug use. Whether in impoverished neighborhoods, middle-income settings, or very wealthy circles, the temptation of drugs to provide a moment of excitement is ever-present. The higher the ecstasy, the more seductive it becomes. The ups and downs of life are hard-pressed to compete with the chemical precision of drugs to deliver a kick of excitement. The unnatural highs of addictive drugs can ultimately overshadow the natural highs of regular life. Since drugs serve a purpose, we seek to understand what void they fill for us. If it's simply for the spike of pleasure, we re-examine our lives and the underlying ennui, boredom, or dissatisfaction.

More commonly, drug use is an escape from negative emotions or life issues. When a person struggles with emotional difficulties without mindfulness, compassion, and comfort in dealing with them, distraction through stronger stimulation is a reflexive course of action, and drug use is enticing. The repeated cycle of running away from emotional pain through drug use amplifies both issues; exacerbating negative emotions and worsening drug use. The neglected root causes of the negativity grow bigger along with drug addiction, which creates its own

issues, compounding the emotional pain and requiring riskier drug misuse. Life becomes an endless journey to chase one high after another as the body develops tolerance and dependence to the same stimulation while life, career, finances, relationships, and self-worth crumble. This common strategy to address negative emotions has a predictable outcome.

We must seek wisdom to clearly see the entire picture of addiction. How was life growing up? What needs were met or not? What void or need is being filled? What were/are the sources of emotional pain? How does addiction help? How is the addiction hurting us now? Where will this path lead? And what purpose do we aspire to in our lives?

This deep psychological digging can be applied to any other addictions or disabling obsessions that go to the extreme: alcohol, tobacco, prescription drugs, video games, pornography, sex, gambling, shopping, exercising, plastic surgery, disordered eating, hoarding, workaholism, etc. Next, we practice mindfulness and kindness to tolerate all the negative emotions: sadness, anxiety, anger, shame, and guilt, accepting that we are imperfect and likely made many mistakes in an imperfect world with imperfect people who possibly traumatized us. We meditate on the causes and process the underlying reasons. Finally, we invoke the strength to courageously accept the reality of our present condition, let go of our ego to seek help, and fortify the discipline to endure suffering, cravings, withdrawals, and temptations. Especially if we have someone else to live for, like a son or daughter, this singular purpose can potentially ignite a fire that burns through the obstacles.

We have stimulations that are directly detrimental to us, but let's not forget about stimulations that benefit us but can be harmful

to others. In late 2021, a Netflix phenomenon called *Squid Game* became a global hit. Spoiler alert: it is a captivating game of life and death for the desperately indebted people, designed by the jaded ultra-rich for entertainment. In real life, engaging in sex trafficking, especially when children are involved, is a crime against humanity. Finding a thrill in dog-fighting or cock-fighting is almost the epitome of demonic beings finding joy in the suffering of others. Hunting for food to address the basic necessity of survival is one thing, but hunting helpless animals for the excitement, chase, challenge, fear, and death of another living being is not wise, kind, or strong. We are beings capable of both vices and virtues. We can embody compassion or cruelty by how we satisfy the circle of needs.

While finding joy in the torment and torture of others can reach the deepest recess of hell, the quest for stimulation can also yearn toward the highest plane of heaven. We have an innate curiosity to understand the truth of life, pierce through the veil of reality, and appreciate our place in the universe. Our consciousness probes the deepest ocean floor, the farthest stars, the innermost psychological labyrinth, and the highest spiritual experiences. The odyssey for knowledge, understanding, and wisdom is the highest form of psychological stimulation. When our mind, body, and spirit are captivated by a quest, whether through science or the arts, dedicating our whole being to the activity, that process is a miraculous tool that can bring out the highest achievements in humankind.

We channel the need for stimulation away from unhealthy habits and toward the development of mind, body, and spirit. Practice mindfulness to appreciate the simple beauty of the moment, nature, and the people around us. Engage in meditation to understand our mind and develop insight into reality. Explore

different hobbies and interests to learn about our proclivities. Engage in frequent exercise and weight training to stimulate our muscles and hone our body. Learn yoga to discipline both body and mind. Read books to expand our knowledge. Dive into philosophy, psychology, and sociology to better understand the world around us. Pursue a study, career, or hobby that can stoke our passion. The need for stimulation can turn us into zombies, passively consuming mindless content, or it can also drive us to become the best version of ourselves.

Meaning and Purpose

It would appear that the most fundamental purpose of this physical life is a competition to survive and propagate. This purpose is ingrained in all species through the evolution of life. However, is life just about dancing to these strings? Is that all there is? Our life is a story, and we need it to have some meaning or higher purpose, especially near the end of our journey.

Proposal

A critical purpose we can adopt is to live consciously. We learn to become aware of the strings that pull at us. Without awareness, we risk chasing specific goals blindly and unconsciously. If we are indeed chasing after money, wealth, fame, status, and looks, we should be aware of why we do it and where that path will likely lead.

Vulnerable people, in their search for life's meaning and existential affirmation, can fall prey to others' predation under the guise of guidance, liberation, and belonging. People craving direction in life will gravitate toward a strong, charismatic leader for guidance, and people longing for connection will be seduced by the community of a cult (or a gang). The "wise"

leader of a cult will twist rationality to manipulate cult members for his own benefit, often with sexual exploitation, subservient labor, financial accumulation, and material comfort. While they vow to help or serve others, they abuse their position and influence. We critically examine ourselves and others, especially those who claim to be leaders, at how they give into the strings.

To have the best chance at finding or creating a purpose most suited for us, we learn to connect with our authentic selves, discover our passion, appreciate the good, and see clearly the bad within. If we can practice mindfulness and learn to process our emotions, we can cut through the fog with clarity. In understanding ourselves and reality, we gain wisdom that will drive us to certain conclusions about life, what is best for us and others, and what we should do to achieve it. By striving to embody wisdom, kindness, and strength, we forge life into a journey of self-development, evolving into our ideal version and forming genuine connections.

This foundational purpose can guide us toward a higher calling. What we have cultivated for ourselves, we can aspire to assist others. Our consciousness and spheres of influence gradually expand outward beyond personal security and benefit, embracing others, especially those less fortunate. We develop the virtues to focus on generosity and charity in the service of others, attending less to our wants and more to the needs of others. As a result, we develop gratitude for what we have and discover profound joy in helping others.

The proposals in this chapter above are perfectly captured by a quote from the Huahujing:

*If you want to awaken all of humanity,
then awaken all of yourself.
If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world,
then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself.
Truly, the greatest gift you have to give
is your self-transformation.*

FINAL WORDS

Learning to Understand Ourselves and Humanity



The journey to self-understanding is also a journey to understanding humanity. We learn to recognize our strengths and weaknesses as they mirror the rest of society. We are unique individuals, but we also share an existence rooted in physical reality: the strings that pull at each of us are the same strings that pull at all of us. We acknowledge the inherent drive to life, attraction to pleasure, and aversion to pain. The basic physical strings of hunger, thirst, sleep, and sex, and the basic psychological strings of existence, competence, superiority, stimulation, and meaning/purpose compel us all. The circle of needs encapsulates us all.

Because of limited resources, these strings can drive us to devour one another to satiate our needs. We can be selfish, self-centered, self-righteous, envious, manipulative, aggressive, destructive, and toxic as we fight to fulfill our goals without regard for others. Conversely, we can be loving, kind, diligent, compassionate, understanding, generous, forgiving, and humble. In all of us, there exists an entire spectrum of darkness and light. How we perceive reality and choose to satisfy our needs can make us devils or saints. The battle between good and evil isn't beyond humanity or outside us but within us. What we create with our vices or virtues, whether destruction or generation, shapes the reality for all of humanity, the other animals, and the world. The ocean of humanity is vast and encompasses us

collectively in its depth, from the purest saints to the vilest demons.

We strive to cultivate wisdom, kindness, and strength because our lives depend on it, as do other people and all the world under our influence. In all things and with all people, especially those closest to us, we learn to constantly reflect, “Am I being wise?” “Am I being kind?” and “Am I being strong?” More often than not, if we are honest, we are not handling the situation in the wisest, kindest, or strongest manner. That’s perfectly okay because we are imperfect beings. Awareness is the first step toward making changes, as opposed to living life unconsciously through the momentum of habits.

We strive to live consciously, fostering awareness and taking charge of our lives. When we live mindfully, we develop the ability to give our full attention and presence to the current moment, to our emotions, and to others around us. We learn to truly appreciate life’s evanescence and offer genuine support for ourselves and others. When we are comfortable with all emotions, we can freely explore heart-wrenching sorrow, exhilarating joy, intoxicating love, lurking desires, scorching anger, and seething hatred. If emotions are the element, we become adept at channeling and bending its energy. They are no longer scary or foreign to us. While the purpose of physical life is to survive and procreate, we can shape the intention of our emotional life to experience the breadth and depth of human emotions.

As a droplet of water secure in our brilliance and imperfection, we can reflect on the ocean of humanity. We voluntarily fall into the water beneath, dissolving ourselves into the vast ocean to

explore the deepest recess of mankind. The dissolution of our identity is the expansion of our consciousness.

Subsequently, we naturally wonder about the bigger world. How do these strings that pull us individually manifest collectively? How are the different human institutions or systems affected? How does the circle of needs affect nonhuman living things? What is the source of all these strings? If humanity is an ocean, what is the state of the water?

These are questions with complicated answers that are even more difficult to digest. My second book, *A Letter to My Love: An Honest Philosophical and Metaphysical Perspective on Humanity*, will address issues like these from my understanding and perspective, building upon the concepts presented here. Whereas I tried to keep this first book informative and positive, the second book will be more raw and emotionally challenging to read.

I hope you can find something useful from these pages to apply to your life. If you can spare a minute, please help me by leaving an honest review. If you wish to explore these concepts more thoroughly, a companion workbook is available to methodically walk you through helpful exercises. Thank you for taking the time to read this book, and if you find it valuable, please consider sharing it with others who might benefit.

APPENDIX I

The “Perfect” Storm



From my experience as a clinical child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist, some of the most unfortunate cases involve children living in the foster system due to issues with their birth family. Common complaints from the foster/adoptive parents and schoolteachers include disruptive behaviors, explosive anger, physical aggression, disrespectful and rude behaviors, mood swings, hyperactivity, poor sleep, nightmares, zoning out, poor concentration, and forgetfulness. As these children grow older, more complaints are lodged against them: lying, truancy, running away from home, drug use, scheming, increased aggression, and possible criminal activities.

When mental health professionals look at the symptom checklist with a superficial symptom-management approach, these children are quickly labeled as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional and Defiant Disorder (ODD), Conduct Disorder (precursor to Anti-Social Personality Disorder), Disruptive Mood Dysregulated Disorder (DMDD), or Bipolar Disorder. These kids are also at the highest risk of being placed on psychotropic medications, trialing through many different types and classes of drugs. At the same time, the symptoms remain barely manageable.

When desperate guardians bring their kids to see me, some are fixated on finding the “perfect” medication regime to make the problematic behaviors disappear without wanting to examine the underlying issues. They look to their psychiatrist for a

miracle potion. When I am unwilling to prescribe higher doses or try riskier medications, I become an obstacle.

When insurance companies are involved in psychiatric care, the time that psychiatrists have with patients is limited. In some cases, an initial “comprehensive” evaluation is only 30 to 45 minutes to obtain all the needed information AND discuss a treatment plan involving detailed risks and benefits of the medication. Follow-up appointments can be as short as 15 minutes for a “medication check.” For mental health issues, putting all the pieces of the puzzle together isn’t easy because the family and/or patients themselves might not be aware of the root causes. For a “simple” incident at school, reporting the specific problematic behavior might be straightforward, but to truly understand the circumstance and psychological landscape surrounding that behavior, which might involve even deeper underlying issues from earlier childhood, takes a lot of time and effort.

Insurance companies want psychiatrists to stick to medication management while leaving psychotherapy to social workers, counselors, therapists, or psychologists. This division might work if the psychiatrist is psychologically inquisitive and knowledgeable while collaborating heavily with insightful and effective therapists outside of scheduled appointments. The worst scenario for a child is to get a psychiatrist who simply focuses on symptom management and a therapist who also focuses only on superficial issues.

If a patient might benefit from psychotropic medication intervention, they should have a personalized assessment with a psychiatrist first. However, medication is like antibiotics for a flesh wound: it can help. However, the wound should be covered

by a bandage and protected from further aggravation. Taking psychotropic medication while ignoring psychosocial stressors is the same as applying antibiotics to an open wound but sticking that gaping wound into the mud, dirt, or toxic water. As the wound festers, the easy accusation is that the antibiotic isn't working with the laser focus of trialing stronger and riskier medicine. This is why we have so many "medication-resistant" patients.

This was a long tangent, but let's examine a hypothetical child removed from his birth family due to trauma and its impact on his physical and psychological needs. Without the interventions covered in this book, the dysfunction can compound into a downward spiral of a "perfect storm." This extreme example is a tragic downward spiral. Imagine how the story would differ if the person received assistance and developed practical skills to overcome the tragedy and self-create their story.

Hypothetical Case Study

Before the removal from his birth family, many factors already occurred to shape the psychology of this individual. Going back to the beginning, if his teenage mother and father came together for sex out of horniness and/or loneliness, his conception was unexpected. His parents were not financially and emotionally prepared to take on the responsibility of being parents. They were likely struggling with their own psychological issues, possible substance misuse, and living in an unstable, chaotic environment with lots of stress, anger, and potential violence.

During pregnancy, his mother's womb, environment, and emotional state were his entire universe. His primary need for nutrition was provided through the umbilical cord and entirely depended on his mother's nutritional intake. Loud sounds,

negative energy, fighting, screaming, cursing, substance abuse, poor sleep, malnourishment, intense emotions of stress, worries, sadness, fear, and anger all conveyed the primordial subconscious message that the environment was unsafe and unreliable. These stressors also adversely affect his physical, emotional, and neural development.

Close your eyes to feel the helpless darkness in the womb; imagine that kind of random chaotic environment surrounding you and the visceral emotional reaction to it.

The child's basic needs of safety, security, protection, and nutrition were not met, and these deficits ingrained a deep subconscious anxiety about the certainty of his survival, the primordial fear. After birth, he is naturally anxious, fearful, irritable, and fussy—a “colicky” baby who doesn't sleep or feed well and cries inconsolably. His home environment doesn't improve with the addition of a “difficult” baby to parents ill-equipped to handle the financial and emotional responsibility of raising another human being. There are likely ongoing or worsening negative emotions and energy in the house, with verbal or physical fights, lack of access to adequate food and water, and substance misuse. He might be neglected despite his cries for help and, worse, abused because his wailing is distressing or annoying to his parents. His deep subconscious primordial fear about his survival is confirmed, which exacerbates more negative emotions within him.

Because his parents are not emotionally mature enough to care for another human being, they unintentionally treat their son like a burden despite their instinctual love for him. The sphere of their influence is a vibe of predominant stress, fear, sadness, and anger, which they inadvertently convey to him. As they

struggle with their own emotional issues, they cannot give him the needed attention, affection, tenderness, and nurturing to affirm his psychological existence. They are too busy or distracted to notice him when he's well-behaved and quickly chastise him when he misbehaves. That routine conveys that he is normally nonexistent and insignificant, and doesn't matter unless he misbehaves because he does matter just enough to obtain negative attention. His identity is that of a "bad" kid. He fluctuates between being nonexistent and being a problematic existence. Between these two states of psychological being, he prefers to be seen versus unseen. He inadvertently repeats behaviors that confirm his existence with negative attention, and the cycle spirals downward.

The negative attention with lack of guidance and structure impairs his development of competence in mastering new skills. He doesn't learn as well as other kids. When placed in an educational environment, he senses that he is behind his peers, plus his homelife is not conducive to practice schoolwork. His unprocessed hurt, frustration, and anger manifest as disrespectful and disruptive behavior, triggering constant correction and criticism from teachers. He believes something is indeed wrong with him and that he's not good enough to deserve love or positive attention. This profoundly affects his self-image, damaging his self-esteem and confidence. He isn't good enough for his parents, thus he indeed isn't good enough for anyone else.

Then something traumatic happens at home, enough to warrant the involvement of a child protective service agency to swoop in. Whether his parents voluntarily give him up for adoption or he is forcefully taken from them, the result is still a separation of child and birth parents. Despite the very imperfect environment they created, it was the only world he knew. There is comfort in

imperfect familiarity. The natural expectation is for parents to love their children and stay together, not for the child to be abandoned and separated from them. Love should be able to conquer everything: poverty, drug use, violence, neglect, or abuse. Because these adversities still exist, he believes that the love wasn't strong enough, and very likely, he is the reason why they could not love him enough to overcome the struggle. He truly believes in his insufficient existence and feels significantly wronged by the circumstances. His grievance against life, or even God, is seething.

The trauma wreaks havoc on his sense of safety and security. He tries to avoid thinking about it, but his mind forces him to confront it. He likely experiences intrusive memories, flashbacks, or nightmares, triggering acutely intense volcanic eruptions and contributing to chronic simmering negative emotions. The stage is set for a perfect storm. He's fearful and anxious about his safety and security due to the chaotic upbringing, the trauma, and the unstable living situation. He's deeply hurt because he feels unloved and abandoned. He feels incompetent because he only gets criticism, and he's not doing as well as other kids. Sadness and anxiety are the foundational emotions of his existence, with exacerbation toward depression and fearful paranoia. These emotions, coupled with the grievance about the injustice in his life, give rise to deep dissatisfaction, frustration, resentment, anger, and hatred. These outer emotions are his armor and weapon against the world that has spurned him.

Since the outcome, in his mind, is the inevitable repeat of abandonment and rejection, he pushes other people away preemptively to not get hurt again. A part of him wants to spread his misery to the world, and he is envious of other kids who

possess what he has lost. His sense of incompetence and lack of control over his life instills a deep fear of not having control. Change in routine is a chaotic reminder of his loss, and everything that goes wrong is a straw that can break the camel's back. He is a storm of subterfuge, defiance, and anger, prompting others to react with disdain and exasperation. He finds it easier to find belonging with other kids who have the same defiance and rage against the world. Their tragedies and emotional issues affirm one another.

With his life shrouded in a dark fog, he will seek out different sources of stimulation. The typical options, such as listening to music, watching movies, exploring social media, playing video games, or hanging out with peers, are decent enough. However, the low-hanging but extremely tempting fruits for stimulation are also pitfalls that might trap him: sex, drugs, and gambling.

He will find physical pleasure in sex and a passing moment of acceptance by someone else during the physical intimacy. If he is attractive and skillful enough, he can go from woman to woman in a series of conquests or eventually become enmeshed with someone in a codependent possessive relationship plagued with insecurities and jealousy. If he is unlucky, he will be repeatedly rebuffed by women, with each one gashing into his wound of rejection and abandonment, compounding the hurt and anger.

Alcohol and drugs provide a glint of stimulation in that fog. Still, more importantly, they distract him from the emotional pain and the unfavorable condition of his reality. The substances are a bewitching mistress: comforting, seductive, and exhilarating in the honeymoon phase but eventually lashing out at him once pampered, bringing forth all the fear and shame he's trying hard

to avoid, both in her prodding and in her absence. He clings harder to her, sacrificing his sanity and integrity to chase after that initial spark. His mind and body are enslaved, and his anguish unleashes misery onto those around him.

“Why was I born?” is a topic he often wonders as he ponders about the meaning and purpose of his life. The uncomfortable awareness that his conception might be unexpected and possibly unwanted, as corroborated by his life experience, strikes a deep wound. In the review of his life, he sees predominantly pain and suffering rooted in abandonment, rejection, and trauma. He views the world as cold and cruel with a “dog eat dog” mentality. Since no one cared about or showed him compassion, he resolves to care only for himself and reciprocate to the world what he was given. He slowly becomes the embodiment of wrath and selfishness. That is the purpose of his life.

Beyond the need for affirmation, he needs to feel that he is unique or even superior despite the unfortunate circumstances. He might learn that he can outwit the dunces or overpower the weaklings of the world. These endeavors stimulate him and also prove his superiority. He might fantasize or find joy in tormenting and torturing others, including helpless people and animals. “Why should I be the only one to suffer?” as he watches dispassionately or gleefully at the suffering of others. He might lie, steal, or even murder to satisfy his whims. He gives in to vices and views virtues as duplicitous sanctity.

On his journey, he may impregnate a woman who is damaged in her own way. The magnetism that pulls them together is libido, lust, brokenness, and loneliness. From their union, an innocent child might be born, if not aborted, into a chaotic and unstable

environment. The generational trauma or curse renews for another cycle. He unknowingly becomes the parent he loved and hated, the creator of someone else's unfortunate reality.

As he was adrift in the ocean of humanity, his luck might bring him in contact with genuinely compassionate souls who would try to help him, different from the wolves in sheep's clothing who would try to exploit him. Because he profoundly mistrusts others, he will try to push them away and attribute ulterior motives to their effort. Whether he comes to appreciate that genuine kindness indeed exists before these well-intentioned people give up on him depends on the smoldering scar of his burn versus their rock-solid patience.

That was a lot to take in! The story strings together unfortunate events as the person is acted upon by very imperfect people in an imperfect world. The challenge is for the individual to re-evaluate their identity and self-create their destiny despite the tragedy, rising like a phoenix. This story reinforces the importance of developing mindfulness, wisdom, kindness, and strength.



Reflection

In your own life, what was the condition surrounding your conception? What was the environment of your childhood and upbringing? How well were your needs met? How were you affirmed, nurtured, and guided? If there were unfulfilled needs, how did you try to fill the void? What messages were conveyed to you? How are you living your life now?

APPENDIX II

Suicide: The Act of Severance



The most fundamental purpose of physical life is to stay alive, so it might seem confusing when people choose to end their lives. Suicide is an act that severs the strings of life, leaving behind a deafening silence for the surviving loved ones, wracked with guilt and regret. With the strings of life pulling at us to seek pleasure and avoid pain, sometimes, the desperate act of avoiding intense pain leads to the sacrifice of life.

In my line of work, assessing for suicide is a daily occurrence with every patient. Especially when I was working in the psychiatric emergency room, many evaluations directly targeted people with significant suicidal ideation or recent suicidal acts. Contrary to common belief, asking people about their suicidal thoughts, intentions, or plans does not plant the seed in their head. Instead, direct probing allows them to share their innermost struggle. This is the key to any in-depth assessment: developing trust and rapport for the person to truly open up about their pain, grief, grievances, anguish, disappointment, betrayal, sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, and, most importantly, their story. This is a process that takes time and patience.

If the person can start talking about their story, that is already the beginning of a healing process. As I listen, I try my best to imagine myself in their shoes and really seek to understand how they perceive their upbringing, environment, parents, relationships, messages conveyed, and the subsequent impact on their identity, self-esteem, beliefs, strategies, and outcomes. Understanding their past and story illuminates the formation of

their thought process, psychological reflexes, actions in the present, underlying motivation, and natural consequences.

As I listen, I try to understand how the physical and psychological strings pull at them and how well those needs were fulfilled or deprived. When the need for safety and security is threatened, there is a lot of fear and anxiety. When the need for psychological affirmation of existence is unfulfilled, there is a lot of depression.

Disclaimer: The messages below are NOT tailored professional medical advice but general statements that might or might not apply to your situation. If you are struggling with thoughts of suicide, please reach out for help. Many online resources can help you. In the U.S., you can contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. You can also check out the International Association for Suicide Prevention.

If we have ever thought about suicide or are thinking about suicide, it is important to take time to understand ourselves, our story, and our pain. If this is you, please share it with someone else. It is critical and perfectly okay to ask for help to get through some of the darkest moments of our lives. The root cause might be biological, psychological, or both, but we never know unless we get help to figure it out. While distraction from the pain, including using drugs and alcohol to self-medicate or self-harming, such as cutting, might have been helpful, it is more adaptive to practice mindfulness to tolerate the pain so we can process it.

Imagine the emotional pain as a child version of us desperately looking for comfort; how should we treat this child? For a brief

moment, strive to be the wise, kind, and strong person we can be and offer patience, compassion, and understanding to this wounded child. Be kind and inquisitive about our own suffering. Why is the child suffering? What has happened to him or her? What happened with his or her parents? How was their upbringing? Was there any trauma? How did that affect them? Was there bullying? How were the safety and security? If the negative emotions are knotted into a jumbled ball of yarn, can each strand be slowly unraveled and laid out on the table? How can each contributing factor be addressed with mindfulness, wisdom, kindness, and strength?

It wouldn't be surprising to uncover tragedies that might have happened. As we look at the spectrum and diversity of human experiences, we learn to accept that terrible things can happen and do happen. How can some people be fortunate to be born into a safe and wealthy country, possess good health, intelligence, and looks, and be blessed with loving parents? In contrast, some people can have much worse luck, including parents who abuse substances during pregnancy to cause the child to have physical, intellectual, and emotional issues, young children dying of cancer, or children born into war-torn areas at risk of not just starvation, but also of rape and murder?

In the spectrum of existence, the different blessings and tragedies seem arbitrary. We are afloat in the midst of the ocean. Once we can accept life's imperfections, look up to people who seem more fortunate than us, and also look down to see less fortunate people, then we learn to steel ourselves to make the most of our situation. This is the crucial deciding factor: in recognizing the wisdom that life can be very unfair, the best we can do is to make the most of the tragedy forced upon us. Because life can be arbitrary, we must not be helpless victims of

circumstances. Turn sadness into anger, and channel that anger into a fire that fuels our determination to self-create our own future. Rise like phoenix from the ashes.

Is our perception of reality and identity accurate? Have we mindlessly internalized any negative messages that still impact our self-image, emotions, behaviors, and outcomes? If there was a bully in our life, have we mentally internalized this bully to continually torment us long after the actual bully is gone? A significant factor in many cases of depression is the most fundamental sense of existence: "Do I matter?" Due to unfortunate circumstances during upbringing, many people believe they are almost nonexistent or have an insufficient existence. Their self-esteem is dependent on the mercy of strangers in how other people respond to them.

The critical step here is to re-evaluate our identity and anchor our worth in the content of our characters, specifically in the traits of wisdom, kindness, and strength. Find a purpose worth living for! Life is a journey of self-improvement and self-creation, not for vanity but for true wisdom and growth. Once we genuinely recognize the imperfection in everyone, it is absolutely shocking to give anyone else so much power over us. Especially with people who have directly or indirectly damaged us, there is no doubt that they, too, are imperfect and broken in their own way. We find stability, security, and happiness within ourselves, and this endeavor is its own worthwhile journey. Who has the most power over us now? If they were our abusers, are they still around, or have they disappeared or died years ago while we still carry their ghosts with us?

We seek to unravel the ball of yarn that forms our negative emotions. What has hurt us in the past? And what is hurting us

now? How do we accurately reflect on it with wisdom and courage? Do we understand things enough? What is the best way to handle it? The journey to address our underlying hurt and pain is an effective way to process these negative emotions, re-evaluate our beliefs, and finally carve out a new way to manage them. Because life can be arbitrary, tribulations and adversities are a part of life that can give us depth and make us even stronger. With conviction and hope for a brighter future, we can start making small changes to set us on the right path: basic self-care, healthy diet, adequate exercise, good sleep hygiene, and re-discovery of hobbies. Then, we can move on to forming connections with others and develop our competencies (with newfound self-esteem anchored in kindness, wisdom, and strength).

What should be our story? A tragedy that continues to hold us hostage until the end of our lives? Or one of overcoming tragedy, sublimating a wound to give us depth of character, rising like a phoenix from the ashes? Stories of growth are not paved with comfort but with hardships. Once we can overcome our own struggles, we can, one day, turn around to lift someone else out of their darkness. In the ocean of humanity, we are connected not only through happiness and joy but also through pain, loss, and disappointments. We are just here trying to make the most of it. Fight, struggle, and push forward for another hour and another day.

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Dr. Binh Ngolton is a board-certified clinical child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist dedicated to understanding and promoting mental well-being. With a passion for compassionate care, he brings a unique blend of experiences and knowledge to the field. He enjoys working with individuals for both psychotherapy and medication management at his private practice.

His journey began with volunteer work at a palliative care hospital and hospice facility, where he connected deeply with individuals nearing the end of their life journey. Recognized by his peers for his compassionate approach, he was nominated to join the Gold Humanism Honor Society during his time at Mercer University Medical School.

Dr. Ngolton completed his general psychiatry residency at the University of South Carolina and a child and adolescent psychiatry fellowship at Emory University. His previous educational foundation includes a Bachelor's in Industrial & Systems Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Beyond his professional mission, Dr. Ngolton is a dedicated meditation practitioner and a self-proclaimed philosopher whose reflections delve deeply into psychology and the human condition. Much to his spouse's amusement and displeasure, he invests considerable time in these pursuits.

As an author, he endeavors to share his knowledge and promote better living. He is the writer of the book series *If Humanity Is an Ocean*, with the first book, *The Ocean Within: Understanding Human Nature and Ourselves to Achieve Mental Well-Being*,

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currently in your hand. His second book, *A Letter to My Love: An Honest Philosophical and Metaphysical Perspective on Humanity*, will expand on these concepts to critically explore the state of humanity, the world, and beyond

If you found this book engaging and wish to dive deeper into the concepts, please check out the companion workbook for more self-reflection and insights.

