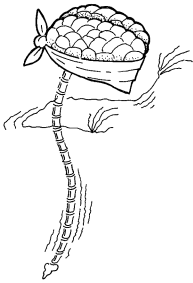


HEALTHY SEMANTICS - handout

*an excerpt from the book You and Your Emotions
by Mariusz Wirga, MD and Michael De Bernardi, PsyD*

"Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind." – Rudyard Kipling

In this chapter we will focus on the words that we use to describe ourselves and the events around us. As you read the next few pages, you may begin to think that the arguments are “just semantics.” They are indeed, but that is the point. Dr. Maultsby wrote, “as far as emotional control is concerned, there is nothing but semantics.” One of the pioneers who observed semantic influence on human behavior was a Polish engineer who immigrated to the United States, Alfred Korzybski. His groundbreaking work became the basis of general semantics theory and continues to attract followers who study and apply his theories in therapy.



The brain, as we stated earlier, is a blind organ. It will obey any sincere thought that you may have and will respond with an appropriate emotional reaction to that sincere thought. What is significant to consider here is that all of these mental processes are mediated by words. This means that the brain interprets your words literally, and then uses them to direct mental, emotional, physiological, and behavioral responses. Remember the example from Chapter One of how people might respond emotionally and behaviorally to the word “burglar,” and how this experience dramatically shifts as soon as they replace the word “burglar” with “friend.” This changes not only the label, but also the meaning of the stimulus. This type of semantic transition occurs constantly in our everyday lives, and the words we use both internally and externally have the power to change the way we experience our world in dramatic ways.

We talk to ourselves constantly, on many different levels. Most of the time we are only aware of the most obvious self-talk, like “burglar” or “friend”. This type of labeling helps us categorize and make sense of the world around us, but most of us would be surprised to discover the degree to which these labels have a significant impact on our emotions. With repeated use, these labels become habits.

Unfortunately, we all develop many unhealthy semantic habits, both in the things we say to others and the things we say to ourselves. We acquire these habits unwittingly, without even knowing that this process is occurring. Therefore, we have most likely never been aware of these habits, and never thought to challenge them. As you read on, you will learn to identify those most frequent unhealthy semantic patterns that you and everyone else around you probably use many times a day without even noticing. Whether you notice them or not, they still affect you and those around you. By learning to improve your semantics, you will discover one of the easiest and quickest ways of improving your emotional health.

Think back to a time when you were reading a fascinating book or listening to an engaging story. You may have felt it as if you were participating in that story, swept away from the world around you. You felt as if you were transported in time and space to another reality, totally

immersed in the tale. A well written or spoken story can make the reader experience the world of the characters, engaging all of the senses and creating physiological responses like increased heart rate, sweating, and tears. This is the power of words.

Yet, while the words of a story may affect you profoundly, no words are more powerful than those that you say to yourself. No one can impress or persuade you as well as you can do it for yourself. You cannot escape the continuous flow of words through your mind, or the impact they have on you. The words you tell yourself color and give depth to your all of your experiences, as they affect your thoughts, feelings, actions that you take or don't take, and even your physiological processes. Language changes your brain chemistry, which in turn affects you on many levels, from your systems and organs down to your cells and genes.

As you can see, words are not just semantics. They are tangible stimuli that your brain interprets literally to create your perceived reality at any given moment. The words that you most often tell yourself are the foundations of your habits, your personality, and your eventual destiny, so learning to use them to your advantage is one of the easiest and healthiest things you can do to improve your emotional health. The next section will discuss several of the most frequent unhealthy semantic habits that all of us practice.

IT, HE, SHE, THEY



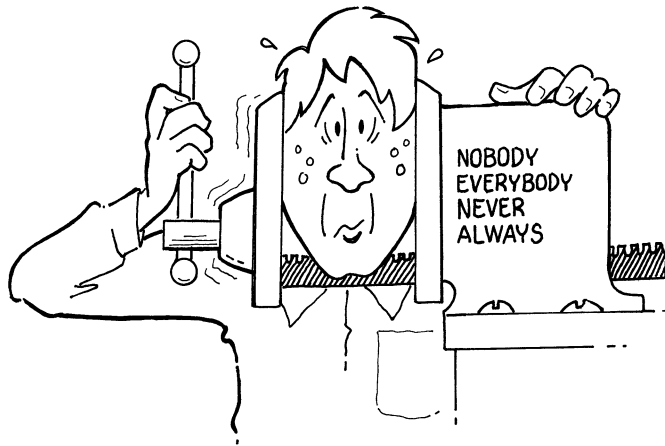
so are you." (Proverbs 23:7) Stoic philosophy taught us thousands of years ago that people do not get upset by things, but by the view that they take of them.

We all at times make statements like "it makes me angry," "it upsets me," "he pissed me off," "they frighten me," "she makes me laugh," etc. to explain the feelings that we are experiencing. Yet, you know from the first chapter that according to the ABCDs of emotions, we have the power to create, maintain and eliminate all our emotional feelings with our thoughts. "It," "they," "he," or "she" is not causing you to feel anything, you are creating those experiences yourself. This idea may seem strange, but it is certainly not new. In the Bible it states, "as you think it in your heart

It is important to remember that all of our feelings are elicited by our own thoughts and beliefs. There is no point in blaming others for how you feel. Although initially this idea may "feel wrong", actually it is a good thing because it gives you the power to take charge of your emotions. If this were not the case, then in those instances when other people or situations were "upsetting

you" or "making you" depressed, in order to ever feel better, you would have to be able to control all of those people and situations around you. You would have to change every "it," "them," "she," and "he" in order to feel better, which, as you know, would be impossible. Fortunately, the ABCDs of emotions show us that, in order to feel better, you only need to change your beliefs about "it", "him," "her," or "them".

ALWAYS AND NEVER



Korzybski's collaborator and biographer, M. Kendig, advised that we always remember never to use "always" and "never". This is a clever way of suggesting that it's best to avoid the use of gross overgeneralizations in our language, despite how difficult that may seem. Words such as "always" and "never," in addition to other generalizations like "everything," "nothing," "everybody," and "nobody," are absolutist and very rarely, if ever, reflect the reality of a situation. We often make

statements such as "she's always nagging me about everything," or "I never get what I want." However, these are obviously exaggerations that do not obey at least three of the Five Rules Of Healthy Thinking. Even if it seems that the world is continuously conspiring against you, it is very unlikely that there is you have never got a single thing that you ever wanted, or that your wife is nagging you 86,400 seconds a day, everyday. Unfortunately, many people become so attached to this type of language that after a while it becomes a habit, they begin to believe it, and their emotions and actions stem from the literal meanings of those words. This usually happens without even realizing it, and soon the external world begins to reflect this unhealthy internal dialogue. If you walk around saying that "nobody" likes you, and acting accordingly, eventually you will be right. As Stuart Smalley might say, at the very least you can still like yourself, and because you are somebody, there will be somebody who likes you.

FAILURE



There is no such thing as failure, it is rather just an outcome or result that you did not desire. Yet, without recognizing this, we often tell ourselves that we "failed" or, even worse, that we are a "failure." The concept of failure is so loaded with negative associations that whenever we use it to describe ourselves or our actions, we automatically feel the conditioned negative emotions. Calling yourself a failure, or viewing yourself as a victim, simply does not help you, as it leaves you feeling miserable, kills any motivation to be different, and eventually becomes a habitual excuse for not even trying. Moreover, calling yourself a failure inaccurately defines your entire being, your nature, as one who fails, rather than one who did not achieve a desired outcome in a specific situation.

If, on the other hand, you simply recognize the problem as an undesirable outcome, you will more accurately reflect the reality that the situation may not have turned out as you hoped or expected, but you are not labeling yourself in a pejorative way. When you free yourself from the negative emotions that arise from judgmental attitudes toward yourself and your actions, you will then be able to make associations between the causes and the effects of your actions, and by learning from the results, you free yourself to be more successful in the future. This way we can most quickly and effectively learn from our mistakes.

To illuminate this point, let us consider the invention of the lightbulb. Thomas Edison once stated that it took him 10,000 experiments to invent a working lightbulb. Halfway through Edison's work, a journalist once teased him in an interview that 5,000 *failures* should be enough to see that creating a light bulb was impossible. Edison replied that he had not failed at all, but rather was successful at discovering 5,000 different ways of not building a light bulb! He also added that he would eventually run out of ways not to build a light bulb, which would make success inevitable. Fortunately for all of us, Edison did not label himself a "failure" and give up his pursuit, otherwise you would be reading this book by the light of a kerosene lamp.

Facing an undesirable result does not mean that you are a failure. It only means that all the necessary steps to achieve the desirable outcome were not accomplished. Similarly, making stupid mistakes does not mean you are stupid, it only confirms that, like everybody, you are a fallible human being. All humans are fallible and that is why they make mistakes. It is your birthright as a human being, so you may as well accept it. If you stop calling yourself a failure and instead use the word "fallible," you will avoid the negative emotions that often contribute to making more

mistakes. Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and one of the wealthiest persons in the world, makes it his personal policy to not employ anyone in his company who has not experienced a very serious "failure" in the past. This is because persons who are able to pull themselves together after a serious mistake are those who eventually achieve the most success.

I CAN'T



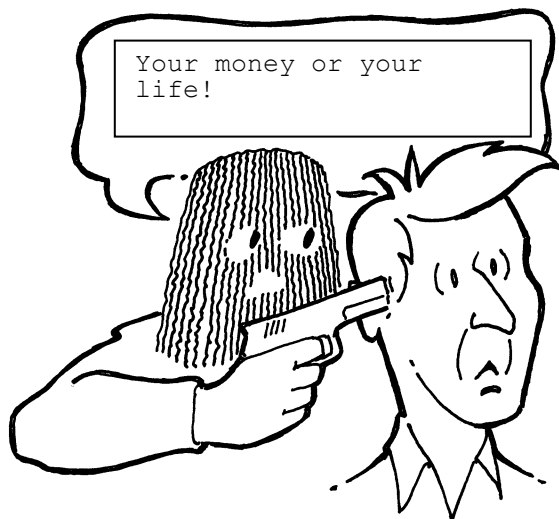
Can you think of a situation in which both a statement and its opposite are true? If you can think of one, or if you can't, you just did. In other words, saying that you can or can't do something is just such an example of this paradox. Henry Ford once said that the moment you tell yourself, "I can't do that," you are right. However, you can be just as right when you tell yourself, "I can do that." Both statements are correct because your brain takes things literally.

As soon as you create an internal virtual reality for yourself, your brain begins to selectively gather evidence to confirm that belief and makes sure that your behavior follows suit. The brain obediently generates your internal reality based on your sincere beliefs, and your emotions and behavior are a response to that internal reality. Therefore, if you say that you cannot do something, your brain will make a list of all the reasons why you can't, in an attempt to talk you out of it. This list will most definitely include memories of all the related things that you tried but were unable to achieve, further strengthening your conviction that you "can't." Telling yourself that you cannot do something kills your motivation by triggering an attitude that the task is impossible and that you do not "have what it takes" to achieve it. Once you reach this point, changing pessimistic beliefs becomes even more difficult and the chances that you will succeed decline even further.

To illustrate this point, imagine that a close friend invites you postpone draining your septic tank to spend the weekend windsurfing at a nearby lake. Although you have never tried it before, this friend assures you that with his instruction, and your general level of physical fitness, you will master the basics of the sport within three hours. In that split second before you respond to that request, your first thought is, "I can't windsurf, and I can't ever learn," as many images flash through your mind in a seeming effort to talk you out of it. You recall when you first tried skiing and ended up on crutches for two months. Then you remember watching a beginning windsurfer at that same lake struggle for six hours just to get the sail out of the water, without ever succeeding. Not to mention that you forgot to mail your health insurance payment last week. With all of this in mind, spending your weekend knee-deep in sewage suddenly doesn't sound that bad. So, you politely decline your friend's offer without even realizing how, by simply using the word "can't", you prompted your brain to talk you out of it.

On the other hand the opposite happens when you sincerely believe that you can do something. When you tell yourself that “I can” do something, your brain immediately sees ways of resolving the problem. You will quickly recall those times when, despite obstacles, you were able to achieve what you wanted. You may also notice increased flow of energy and you feel much more motivated to take the first steps in the desirable directions. So, just as our emotions and actions in real life are the result of those thoughts in the virtual reality of our minds, different realities can unfold around the words that we use. Therefore, you can either deny or allow yourself potentially life-changing experiences by telling yourself that you can or you can’t.

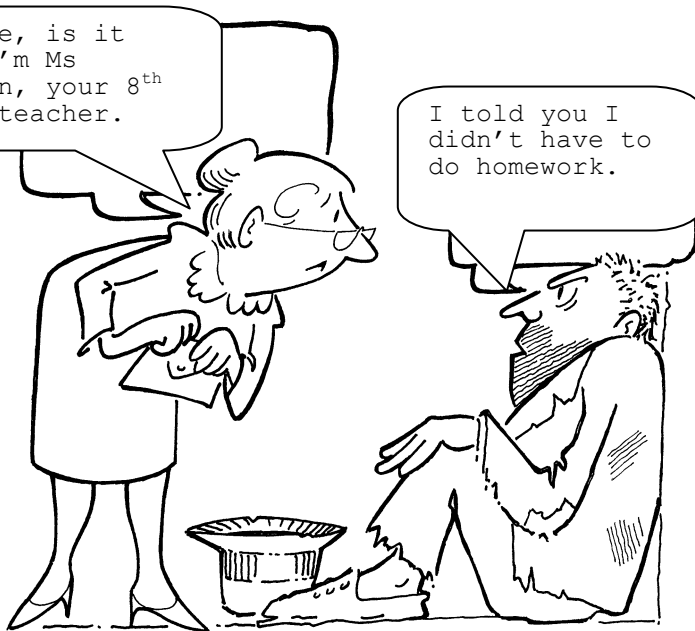
I HAVE TO...



Statements like “I have to,” “I must,” “I need to,” and others are examples of confusion between having a choice and being forced. There is absolutely nothing that you truly “have to” do or can be forced to do. Even death and taxes are optional. Paying your taxes is a decision that may have undesirable consequences either way you go, but it is still a choice. Death, of course, is inevitable, but you don’t *have to* do anything to die; it is a process that works just fine without input from you.

The only healthy use of the words “I have to,” “I need to,” or “I must,” is in a conditional form. For example, “If I want to stay alive then I *have to/need to/must* eat, drink, and have shelter.”

These are necessary conditions to maintain life, but deciding to maintain life is still a choice. If somebody puts a gun to your head and says, “Your money or your life!”, you still have a choice, even if neither option is particularly attractive. As long as you think healthy, you will be able to consider the pros and cons of your choices. Then, knowing that you strategically and mindfully approached your decision, it will be easier to bear the consequences, even when making a choice between very undesirable options.



Unfortunately, from an early age we are taught to motivate ourselves by statements such as “I have to clean my room or I will not get an ice cream” or “I have to do my homework so I don’t get an F.” Yet, in reality, we don’t have to clean our rooms or do homework. It may be desirable or in our best interest to do it, but that doesn’t mean it is a necessity. If you can accept the likelihood of not getting an ice cream or getting an F, choosing to skip your chores is not a big deal.

Instead of using words that decrease motivation, we can inspire ourselves in healthier and more effective ways by, for example, asking ourselves, “What will I gain by doing that?” Instead

of using visions of undesirable consequences to intimidate yourself into doing something you don’t like, you can tell yourself, “I don’t like that chore, but I prefer to do it now to achieve what I want and avoid what I like even less.”

UNFAIR/UNJUST



Once again, what we are going to present here may feel wrong to you, particularly as our culture considers it such a virtue to strive for fairness and justice for all. We have all seen people who upset themselves and annoy others with demands of ideal everlasting fairness and justice, but how often do those people actually seem happy or satisfied? While fairness and justice are healthy values to pursue, when these pursuits become demands that we place on others instead of ourselves, they may become unhealthy excuses for, and a continuing source of, emotional distress and misery.

In working with patients and trainees over the years, we have adopted three major ways of explaining the concept of fairness and justice: 1) Agnostic; 2) Spiritual; and 3) Scientific – based on

linear reasoning (nonlinear conceptualizations are presented in our advanced workshops, “From Chaos to Self-Organization”). We will discuss each of these in more detail below, and we encourage you to choose the explanation that feels the most right (or the least wrong) at the present time. Remember, there is nothing wrong with changing your mind based on where you are in the future.

From the Agnostic perspective, it is unreasonable to expect for life to be fair and just, so just accept things as they are. It may appear that life is unfair at times because some people are randomly born with wealth, health, and beauty, with all the resources they will ever need to be successful, while others are born into poverty, with any number of social and biological disadvantages. Even within our own country, children may not have the opportunities for nurturing and education, may be severely abused or neglected, or deprived of their most basic needs. How can this be fair? Particularly when faced with the suffering of children, you may say it's “not their fault,” it's “unfair that innocent children suffer,” they “do not deserve it,” etc. The Agnostic stance would be that it's neither fair nor unfair. It is just another random, meaningless occurrence. From this perspective, upsetting oneself over issues of justice or fairness is like worrying about gravity or the orbit of the moon. These are facts of life, laws of nature, beyond our control.

At the basis of most, if not all spiritual perspectives, is the call for Faith that all events, good or bad, have a deeper meaning that may not be understandable to us at a given moment. Religion and spiritual practice have allowed us for centuries to make sense of many undesirable events by placing our faith in the notion that everything is part of the Master Plan. Victor Frankl, the Austrian Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, observed in his fellow concentration camp detainees that those who were able to find some meaning in their situations and the activities they performed in their lives, despite witnessing and experiencing immense amounts of suffering, were those who were most likely to survive. Dr. Frankl's conclusion was that, "Man is ready and willing to shoulder any suffering as long as he can see a meaning in it."

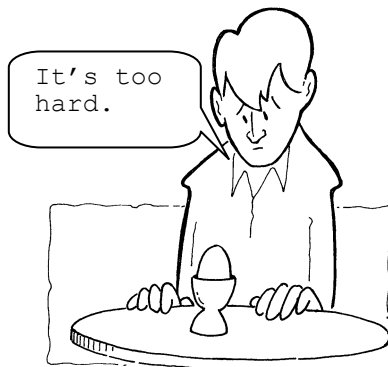
Eastern perspectives on fairness and justice are framed through the concept of Karma, which, simply stated, means “what goes around, comes around.” Buddhists believe that choices we made in the past affect our present life experience. So, from that perspective, the suffering (unfairness and injustice) we are experiencing now is fair, just, and deserved. Furthermore, Buddhists see suffering as an inevitable and necessary part of life, and spiritual growth involves accepting and overcoming it. Accepting does not mean supporting, condoning, or agreeing with it, it simply means that suffering is an unavoidable fact of life that we are better off recognizing.

On the other hand, for those who reject the above arguments, perhaps a scientific approach will help. Simply, if something is happening right now, it's happening because it is the effect of all the causes that preceded it. Linear logic tells us that the universe operates within a cause-effect principle. We cannot change the past, but we can change what we do now in order to have different results or effects in the future. Therefore, upsetting yourself over how just or fair something seems is not productive, because numerous causes have led to the present effect. This chain can be

broken, however, by altering the here-and-now so that future effects can be different and more desirable.

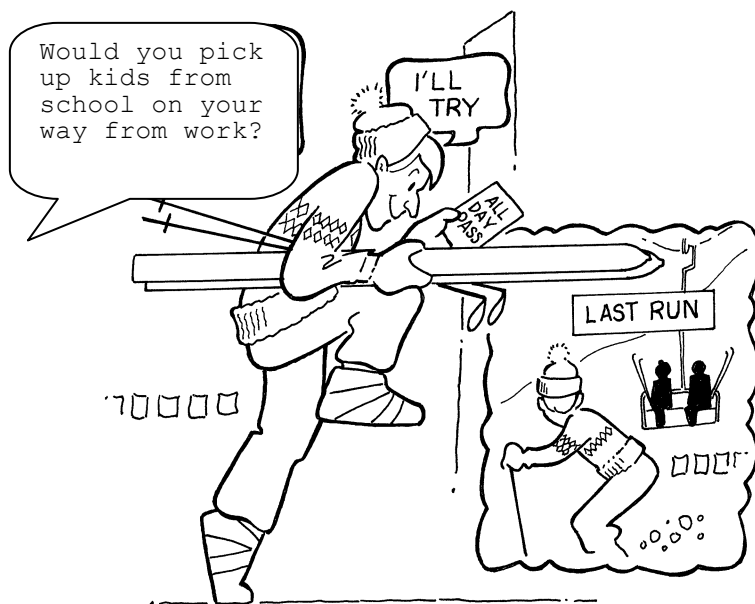
Whichever viewpoint most appeals to you, it is important that we strive to make choices that are fair and just in our own lives. We cannot change others, but asserting our own strongly-held values may influence those around us. Life will offer us many opportunities to perceive unfairness and injustice, and experience the resulting suffering. However, if we can approach these challenges with healthy attitudes, we can still find and appreciate moments of happiness in even the most difficult times.

IT'S TOO HARD



Telling yourself that a task is “too hard” is a sure way to kill any motivation that you may have had to do it in the first place. All that a statement like this provides is an excuse for avoiding the task or a way out of meeting the challenges that life has to offer. In reality, anything that is important or worthwhile in life requires time and effort to achieve and maintain. Love, friendship, and work all require commitment and energy, and the same is true about changing yourself. Changing an old habit is not “hard” but it does require conscious attention, effort, and practice. And “hard” only means in this context difficult, not miserable. Sometimes hard experiences are the source of the fondest memories.

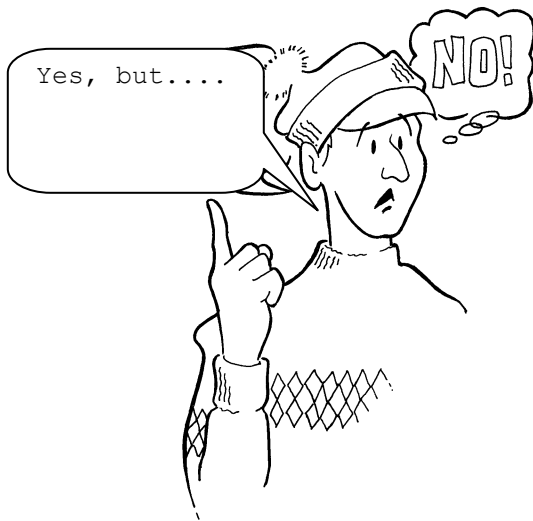
TRY



This is another famous motivation killer. Asking others to “try” is just setting up the opportunity for them to hesitate or change their mind. An example of this can be seen when we lecture to students. At the beginning of the workshop we frequently ask the students to “please get up,” and find that everyone in the room is on their feet almost instantaneously. After about twenty minutes, just when we are getting ready to talk about healthy semantics, we might then ask that they “please *try* to get up.” This time it usually takes about three times as long before the group is standing, and the level of resistance is quite obvious. So,

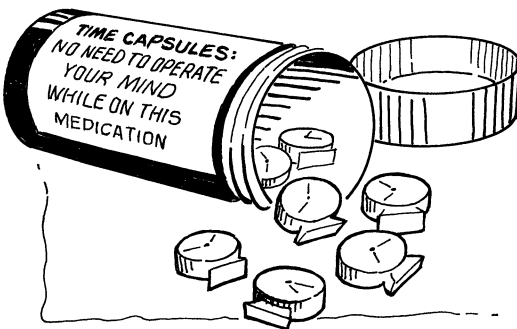
as you can see, asking others "to try" does not help you to meet your goals in a quick or effective manner. It is only by directly requesting what you want that brings results and fosters healthy communication. The case is the same when talking to yourself. By telling yourself that you will "try" to do something, you are actually preparing yourself for not achieving what you are "trying" to do. "Try" provides a convenient excuse if you are not successful, because you can always say "Oh well, I tried." So, do not try; just do it.

YES, BUT...



This is just an indirect way of saying "no". When we say "yes, but", we may think that we are validating what someone is saying, but in reality we are not being honest or assertive enough to say what we really believe. Remember, say what you mean and mean what you say. If you indeed agree with the person, then say so. If, agreeing with someone, you still find yourself using "but", it suggests that you are more invested in maintaining your own position than changing your mind. Saying "yes, but..." is a particularly deceptive practice because we are fooling ourselves that we are accepting a different point of view, while, in fact, we are only justifying keeping our old self-defeating habits.

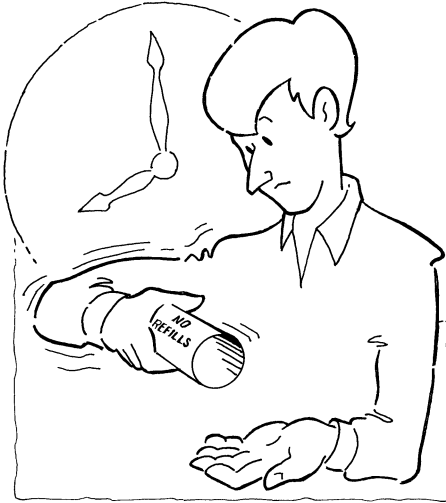
TIME HEALS...



Time does nothing but pass. If our feelings about something change, it is simply due to the fact that we changed the way we think about that experience. Think back, for example, to your first romantic crush and the likely breakup that followed. Most of us probably felt that our hearts had literally broken and life was no fun any more. However, it is very unlikely that you still have those feelings after many years have past. Contrary to popular belief, it was not *time* that healed these wounds, but a change in

your thinking about that person or life situation that allowed you to recover. You can take all the credit for overcoming emotional crises in your life, because you changed your beliefs into healthier ones. The passing of time only provided the opportunity to practice more adaptive beliefs.

"I DIDN'T HAVE TIME" OR "I COULDN'T FIND TIME"



Time passes at a constant speed regardless of our perceptions. We do not possess time, so we cannot *have it* or *not have it*. Moreover, time is never lost, so it cannot be found. We all have the same amount of time available to us. Therefore, in order to accomplish something extra, you will need to replace some activity on your schedule and dedicate that time to a new activity. In order to succeed, prioritize those activities that are more compatible with your goals and have the greatest potential to bring you satisfaction. Maintaining a healthy balance between goals related to work, family, personal growth, etc., will help you achieve the most joy, purpose, and deep fulfillment in your life. We are all given a finite amount of time, so it is important for us to focus on what you can do now that will help you achieve your goals for the future.

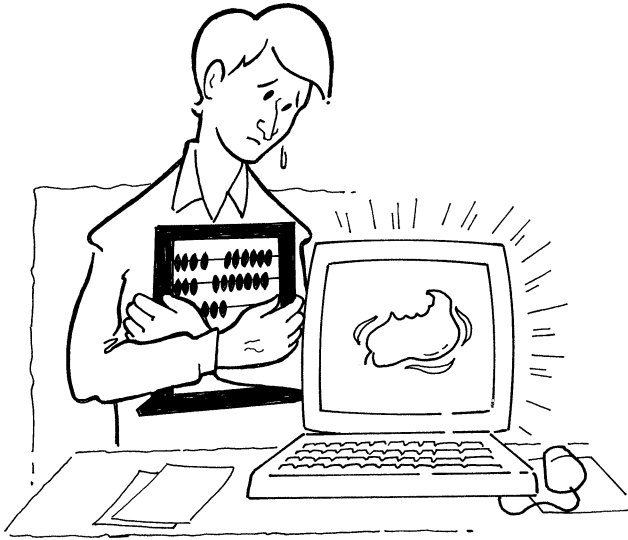
Lack of time is an excuse for distracting ourselves with little things from the larger purpose in our lives.

"I DIDN'T HAVE A CHANCE TO DO IT"



As above, this is simply an excuse for having not completed the goals that we previously set for ourselves (or, perhaps more frequently, for those tasks that others assigned us). For example, in a workshop or classroom setting, we often observe that while an entire group can be given a homework assignment, some of the participants do not complete it, with the above statement being the most commonly given excuse. This occurs despite the fact that participants have similar skill levels, are given the same assignment and same instructions, and have the same time frame within which to complete it. In other words, everyone had the same *chance* to do the assignment, some just chose not to. Avoiding our wrath as presenters may be a significant motivator to come up with an excuse, but the bottom line is that it is an excuse. If you make

an assignment a priority, it usually gets done. If not, it often does not. So, do not lie to yourself. Do not use unhealthy semantics to excuse procrastination, when in reality you have full control over the situation. Simply dedicate the time and energy, and do it. Save your excuses for when you really might need them.

“IT WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN”

This phrase, or some variation of it (with “it” being life, a relationship, beauty, stamina, things, etc.), is very commonly used as an expression of extreme distress over a current situation and longing for an idealized past. The underlying sentiment here is often one of sadness, disappointment, or even hopelessness, but the result is ending up in a victim posture, blaming others for your problems, and avoiding responsibility for your own emotions. While these feelings may be very understandable in the face of being let down or even betrayed, lamenting about “paradise lost” is an unhealthy waste of time.

When we say something like this, we are setting ourselves up unhappiness unless things return to the way they “used to be”. We are creating conditions for personal happiness that cannot possibly be achieved because we cannot go back in time. Even if we could, things would still never “be the same”. Life is a process, not a static thing. Moment to moment, everything changes around us, from the weather to our emotions to relationships. Trying to keep things from changing can be the source of significant disappointment and unhealthy interactions, while trying to force the present into some past ideal is guaranteed to leave you wanting. Moreover, if you really think about the way things “used to be”, you are going to realize that things weren’t perfect then either.

Making your happiness contingent on meeting this impossible demand perpetuates the misery that you are trying to escape. Going backwards is not a way to find happiness and satisfaction, but learning to change your circumstances in the present is the only way to move forward in the way that you want. You do have the power to change your future, but the tools to do so are those that are available to you right now. Learn how to use them to build a happier future for yourself and stop wasting your energy trying to recreate the past.

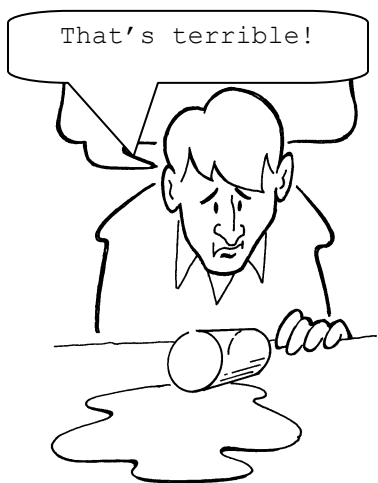
“I CAN’T STAND IT! I CAN’T ACCEPT IT”

I cannot stand my mother-in-law’s nagging.



First of all, it is not based on fact because my mother-in-law has been living with us for five years and even if I don’t like many of her behaviors, I am standing her presence and nagging. The fact is that I am standing (accepting) that miserably, but I can learn how to stand it less miserably and with appropriate practice I can begin standing it neutrally and with additional effort and practice I can do it even happily. In any situation I always have three emotional choices: Negative feelings, neutral feelings or positive feelings. I will work on neutral feelings. First of all, I will eliminate from my internal dialogue about my mother-in-law those words that trigger habitual negative emotions. Therefore, I will stop using the word “nagging” and instead I will say to myself “statements of older

frustrated woman about everything that she does not like in her environment”. Second, I will talk with my husband about how we can change the situation. Until I can change it I will calmly accept and stand it (not as miserably as so far).

“IT IS TERRIBLE! IT IS AWFUL!”

Example: “It is **terrible** to be without a job, to live with an **awful** mother-in-law and an **always** busy husband.” The fact is that I don’t like the situation. But the statement that the situation is terrible does not contain any more information than the statement that it is very “undesirable”. In addition, words like “terrible”, “awful”, “disgusting”, etc., in reference to my own life situation are for my brain very strong stimuli to habitually feel bad. Therefore, instead of using those words I will say “very undesirable” that with the same information does not cause habitual negative feelings. I can even say “very, very undesirable” if I want to. As far as my husband is concerned, the fact is that he is busy, but he is not **always** busy in literal meaning. My brain understands each word literally and, therefore, I feel as if my husband were **always busy**,

but he is coming home every night for dinner and always has time for family on Sundays. I will ask him to spend more time with the family.

“I SHOULDN’T HAVE DONE IT”

Examples: “I am here to be blamed and deserve that suffering. I should not have gotten pregnant or dropped out from college.” or “I should have waited to start a family until I finished college so that now I would have a very good profession and no problems with employment.” or “I shouldn’t have cheated on my wife”.

The fact is that starting a family brings a lot of responsibility and new duties. But I love my husband and my kids and I do not imagine life without them. I am happy with them when I am not troubling my brain with unhappy thoughts. In addition, a lot of friends who graduated in my major are also without a job or changed their professions and, first of all, I did what I thought at that time was the most appropriate.



(but very frequent) form of unconscious self-abuse. Having current knowledge do not fall prey of that.

All of us in all situations act the best we can - that means the best as we believe is most appropriate at the moment. For example, when you write a letter to somebody, do you consciously write slower, less legibly or make more mistakes? No, usually you try to write this letter the best as you can at that moment and believe it is the most appropriate. Of course, you can still make mistakes that you notice later. But, blaming yourself and stating “I should not have done...” or “I could have done...” then, in the past, what I now believe is appropriate is ignoring the basic rules of neurophysiology. Namely, we can act and make decisions only on the basis of thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, goals and aspirations that we have in the given moment in the past and not in that moment in the future. Therefore, demanding from yourself, to act in the past on the basis of your current knowledge and feeling of guilt that you have not done that, is nonsensical and very unhealthy

“NOT ENOUGH”

The belief that something or someone is “not good or firm or competent **enough**” is another frequent form of self-abuse. As long as we do not have clear criteria what is **enough** for us, we will never be good or firm or competent enough, or we can accuse ourselves of not being good or firm or competent enough. In addition, I should not confuse my actions and my behaviors with myself. If I think “I am not firm enough” then our brain draws an automatic conclusion that in order to be more firm I should be another person, which is unhealthy. I might have not acted firmly but it does not mean that I am not a firm person. Therefore, it would be healthier for me to say that, “Sometimes I am not acting as firmly as I would like to act”. With that new thought, I immediately see the solution. If I want to choose to act more firmly, I can always do so.

Of course, all of this sounds really easy when you are reading it in a book, but you probably are having a hard time believing that you can change your language this easily. You are right. You may even be skeptical of everything you have read so far, and again, your hesitation to simply accept our word for it is natural. The next chapter will explain why this happens and how you can overcome it.