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Re-evaluating Happiness: Why the Quality of Our Lives Depend upon It

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Re-evaluating Happiness: Why the quality of our lives depend upon it

by

Suzanne Lang Baetz

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

“We are straddling two worlds, the one from which we have emerged and the one towards which we are heading. That is the deepest meaning of the word “human,” that we are a link, a bridge, a promise. It is in us that the life process is being carried to fulfillment. We have a tremendous responsibility, and it is the gravity of that which awakens our fears...We carry Heaven and Hell within us...We have choice—and all creation is our range.”

—Henry Miller, Sexus

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle proposed that the ultimate goal of life is happiness because “we choose it for itself and never for any other reason” (Thomson, 1953, p. 73). Today, happiness is still a fundamental concern for people all around the globe. In an international survey with over 10,000 respondents from 48 nations, Oishi, Diener, & Lucas (2007) found that happiness ranked highest in importance of a group of 12 options, including success, intelligence/knowledge, and material wealth.

So how are we doing? Are we happy? Studies in the U.S. show we report that, yes, we are satisfied with our lives. One of the most common measures of happiness is subjective well-being (SWB), which is defined as overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with one’s work, health, relationships etc., and prevalence of positive affect and low levels of negative affect (moods, and emotions) (Diener, 1984). Subjective well-being is considered sufficiently close to happiness by many psychologists who recognize the difficulty in defining happiness to everyone’s satisfaction (Kesibir & Diener, 2008). In a study entitled, “Most People Are Happy,” Diener and Diener (1996) report that a large majority of Americans fall in the positive range of the subjective well-being scale, including people with apparent disadvantages, such as quadriplegics or those in the lowest income groups. A recent opinion
poll corroborates this finding by revealing that 84% of Americans see themselves as either “very happy” or “pretty happy (Taylor, Funk, & Craighill, 2006).

In the last 50 years we’ve experienced unprecedented increases in material goods, comforts and technology, along with higher life expectancy. Yet, The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty, David Myers (2001) points out that since 1960, the divorce rate has doubled, the teen suicide rate has tripled, the violent crime rate has quadrupled, and the prison population has quintupled. In addition, depression is ten times higher today than it was 50 years ago, and the average age for the onset of depression is 14 ½, compared to 29 ½. Robert Lane (2000), in The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies, argued that the price of increased affluence and increased freedom is a decrease in the quality and quantity of social relationships. More than one out of four Americans report being lonely due to lack of intimacy.

We struggle with stress, anger, anxiety, depression, divorce, violence, alcoholism, and obesity. These are clearly not the signs of a happy society. So although survey respondents report that they are happy, these other markers tell a different story – that perhaps we are not as happy as we profess. There appears to be a very real discrepancy between the way that we are actually living our lives, and our perception of our happiness. In light of this discrepancy, we need to take a closer look at what we mean by happiness.

A quick roadmap of our journey to re-evaluate happiness: in section two I will present a brief history of happiness to review how happiness has been defined in the past; in section three I will introduce a few key biological, psychological, and cultural factors that impact our experience of happiness; in section four I will explore some important findings from positive psychology and introduce a working model of happiness; in sections five through seven I will
introduce three important determinants of happiness: meaning, optimal experiences and decision-making; and in section eight I will conclude with some final thoughts on re-evaluating happiness.
SECTION 2: THE HAPPINESS HYPOTHESES

*He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth.* – Goethe

Happiness is considered by many to be the ultimate goal in life because most goals seem to be driven by the desire to be happy. Yet, if you ask ten different people to define happiness, you may get ten different answers. This lack of consensus on the definition of happiness is a bit troubling. How can we create happiness if we don’t know what it is?

We are certainly not the first people in history to seek a definition of happiness; philosophers and theologians have been wrestling with what it means to be happy for thousands of years. Let’s see how the concept of happiness has evolved throughout history.

2.1. The Greco-Roman Period

*Happiness was reserved for the happy ‘god-like few’ who with their god-like perfection of “outstanding virtue and exceptional favor ... had achieved a form of transcendence --the majority, however, were at the mercy of the gods.* – McMahon.

In early Greek life during the Homeric period, happiness was considered a matter of luck. At that time life was more about enduring the suffering of living in a warring world that was ruled by the gods. A happy person was one who “negotiated life’s perils while they lived, and then died with honor at the moment of their greatest glory” (McMahon, 2006, p. 5). Circumstances and fate were the primary determinants of a happy life. This perspective was reflected in the ancient Greek word for happiness, eudaimonia. The term combines the roots eu (good) with daimon (demon, god, spirit), and was translated as having a good guiding spirit on your side. Having eudaimonia was considered to be lucky and the highest human good (McMahon, 2006). In order to maximize one’s chance to achieve eudaimonia, it was important to respect the gods, since they had the ultimate power to give the gift of happiness. If one did not assert self-control and moderation, but instead showed lack of
restraint, greed, and hubris, then one would fall out of favor with the gods, and be punished with unhappiness (Lauriola, 2009). So although happiness was a matter of luck, unhappiness resulted from a lack of virtue and a lack of character.

Later in classical Greece, hedonism emerged with the concept of happiness as feeling good and having a pleasant life (McMahon, 2006). Aristippus (435-366 BCE) proposed that happiness is maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Thus, immediate sensory gratification and feeling good is not just a modern phenomenon. In a blending of the Homeric version of happiness and Aristippus’ concept of hedonism, Epicurus (342-270 BCE) introduced the concept of ethical hedonism by proposing that virtues were necessary for the cultivation of pleasure. He believed that we are ethically obliged to maximize our pleasure, and since pleasure is experienced by fulfilling our desires, the goal then was to reduce our desires to a bare minimum so that the remaining desires can be more easily fulfilled (and so that we can minimize unfulfilled desires, which were a potential source of pain) (Schoch, 2006). Epicurus believed that the secret to happiness is to attain a state of tranquility in which we no longer need to satisfy any desire and no longer need to pursue any pleasure (Schoch, 2006). This means that our decisions need to take into account the goodness of our life as a whole. Thus, Epicureans recognized that sometimes we need to reject pleasure and accept pain in order to secure a greater, more lasting pleasure.

Plato and Socrates saw happiness in abstract, objective, and absolute terms (Marar, 2003). For Plato, happiness was sought in the good and the beautiful and was seen as synonymous with virtue. This ideal of the good and the beautiful could only be achieved through the attainment of a harmony between reason, physical appetites and spiritual needs for honor or success under the rule of a philosopher king.
Aristotle (384-322 BCE) had a more practical view of happiness. Unlike the earlier Homeric definition, Aristotle defined eudaimonia as a life that is well-lived, or the good life (Marar, 2003). Aristotle connected happiness with doing good and being good over the course of one’s entire life. He explained that by achieving goals that are directed beyond the fulfillment of pleasure and toward the outcome of noble conduct, one can attain happiness. Happiness is the reward of a life of virtue, learning, and excellence of character but was not complete unless it included external factors such as wealth, beauty, fame and money.

The Stoics (AD 1-130) also advocated that living virtuously was the key to happiness. They believed that they should focus on the things they could control (determinism) and dismissing the things that were beyond their control. The Stoic ascetic limited his desires to those that are “in line with virtue rather than short-term temptations” (Marar, 2003, p. 19) and dismissed things that were out of his control by claiming that “as part of the greater cosmos, whatever happens is for the best” (Marar, 2003, p. 19).

2.2. The Middle Ages and Renaissance

Early Christianity denounced earthly pleasures as sinful and looked to heaven and eternity for happiness, thus, a virtuous life was elevated to the “perfect goodness” sanctified by God (Marar, 2003). Experiencing pleasure would induce guilt and true happiness would not be experienced until ascension into heaven. It was not until the 13th Century that Thomas Aquinas introduced the theological possibility that one could be happy while alive. In the fifteenth and sixteenth century, Renaissance humanism began to explore the possibility that happiness and pleasure could be enjoyed on earth without divine guidance (McMahon, 2006).
The modern words for happiness emerged toward the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance (McMahon, 2006). What is of significance is that in most of the Indo-European languages the modern terms for happiness have their roots in the word “luck” or “chance” (Schumaker, 2007). For example, the English word “happiness” has its root in the Middle English and Old Norse word *happ* which means chance or fortune. *Glück* is the German word for both happiness and luck. The French word for happiness, “bonheur” derives from *bon* (good) and *heur* (fortune or luck). *Felix*, the Latin word for luck (and sometimes fate) is found as a root in the Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese words for happiness: *felicità*, *felicidad*, and *felicidade*, respectively. As with the Greek word eudaimonia, the Latin word for happiness unites good fortune with god (McMahon, 2006).

Happiness being a result of luck harkens back to Homeric Greece. In both eras, the common man was not well off and was at the mercy of forces that were out of his control. Thus, it is not surprising that to the average person, happiness seemed to be a matter of luck.

### 2.3. The Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution

In the 18th Century, the “age of enlightenment” ushered in a new era of reason and the rise of science. In a departure from Christianity, the new perspective was that “human nature was not flawed by the Fall; desire was desirable, society improvable, knowledge progressive and good would emerge from …man’s endless cravings” (Marar, 2003, p. 21). Rather than virtue, happiness was now synonymous with pleasure. Happiness was redefined from an objective state (in the classic and medieval times) recognizable by virtuous conduct, developing good character, a reverence for God, and good fortune to a subjective ideal characterized by a focus on individual desires and emotions. Instead of focusing on how to live, the quest instead became finding the best way to meet individual wants and needs. It
was a more individualistic approach rather than a common approach downloaded from culture. This shift toward more freedom also meant that the individual had more responsibility in creating happiness.

It was during this time that the Declaration of Independence was written, and happiness was given the cultural status of being a right, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness.”

In the late 18th century, the workforce began a transition from the rural farms to the urban manufacturing centers. During this “industrial revolution”, the Protestant work ethic emerged in the United States and the Protestant countries of Western Europe. The Protestant work ethic made the assumption that success based on hard work was a sign of God’s grace and that God’s elect were those who reaped their deserving rewards in this lifetime for their hard work and godly efforts (Weber, 2008). Thus, hard work became an obligation that was linked to divine favor. This contrasted with the Enlightenment view that happiness was based on pursuing individual wants and needs. This conflict between the obligation to work and wanting to do what makes us happy without constraints still reverberates in American culture today.

The utilitarian philosophy of the early 19th century captures the Age of Enlightenment’s regard for pleasure over pain. Utilitarianism, which was based on the doctrine of hedonism, equates happiness with utility, whereby utility is determined by maximum pleasure and minimum pain (Schoch, 2006). For individuals and society alike it was considered a moral standard to strive for maximum pleasure – “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Kesebir & Diener, 2008, p. 119).
2.4. An Eastern Perspective

“Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Ancient eastern philosophies such as Yoga Science are having a significant impact on American culture today. Many people in western societies are engaged in regular practices of yoga, mindfulness and meditation. Yoga Science recognizes that human beings are citizens of two worlds: the finite material world that is seen and known and the Divine Reality, which is the infinite non-material world of consciousness that is unseen and usually unknown (Perlmutter, 2005). In the transient, ever-changing material world, our bodies are our vehicles for action. In the non-material world of consciousness and possibility, we have access to this divine intelligence.

The aim of Yoga Science is to align our outer actions with our inner wisdom (Perlmutter, 2005). The way we access this intuitive wisdom is through our conscience, known as the buddhi. The problem is that the conscience can be biased by our selfish desires, unnecessary emotions, and unhealthy habits. Instead we can transcend them by sacrificing the indulgence of our selfish desires, unnecessary emotions and unhealthy habits and thereby transform them into resources of energy, willpower and creativity. If we ignore the Divine Reality, (which is our Essential Nature and Eternal Witness), and continue to habitually follow the senses, the ego and the unconscious mind, we will be lead to pain and discontent. Yoga Science recognizes that there are necessities and pleasures that come with having a body and that enjoying the pleasures of the senses and a healthy ego is an important part of life. The key is to not be enslaved by them. This is an ongoing process that is based on the conscious use of both our power of attention to our inner wisdom and our power of resolve to “surrender every thought, word, and action to the will of the Divine Reality.”
(Eternal Witness). When this becomes our practice, Yoga Science says that we will be led to “our highest and greatest good” (Perlmutter, 2005, p. 53). Happiness does not come from an external source. Happiness lies within and is a matter of trusting our Eternal Witness as our best friend and allowing our discriminating conscience to guide our mind, speech and action to the correct choice that leads to our happiness.

2.5. Positive Psychology

“Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” --Abraham Lincoln

In the 20th Century, psychology focused primarily on the study of pathology and mental illness. In the last decade, a new discipline within psychology has made a concerted effort to focus on the determinants of mental wellness. This scientific study of optimal human functioning that fosters the flourishing of individuals and communities is called positive psychology. Peterson (2006) identifies two positive psychology approaches that have emerged that mirror the ancient traditions of hedonism and eudaimonia.

The first approach is called hedonic psychology, which focuses on the pursuit of pleasure to achieve satisfaction. The most common measure of happiness used in hedonic psychology is subjective well-being (Diener, 1984). The subjective well-being construct is composed of cognitive and affective components (Kesibir & Diener, 2008). The cognitive component measures overall life satisfaction (how I think about my life in general) and satisfaction with specific aspects of life (how satisfied I am with work, health, marriage, etc.). The affective component measures the levels of positive affect and levels of negative affect. In this definition, happiness is high life satisfaction (overall and domain-specific), high levels of positive affect and low levels of negative affect.
The second approach is less concerned with the hedonic sense of feeling good, and more concerned with whether one has a eudaimonistic sense of leading an objectively evaluated good life. This approach focuses on the pursuit of meaning in order to achieve life satisfaction. Peterson (2006) quotes Aristotle, who believed that happiness is found in the “identifying one’s virtues, cultivating them and living in accordance with them” (p. 78). Psychologists in this group focus on achievements such as autonomy, self-acceptance, and mastery (Ryff and Singer, 1998; Ryan and Deci, 2001). Some psychologists have shown that eudaimonia is a greater predictor of life satisfaction than hedonic pleasure (Peterson, 2006). However, there are also psychologists who recognize the value of both meaning and pleasure as contributors to life satisfaction (Peterson, 2006; Ben-Shar, 2007).

2.6. The Happiness Paradox

As seen in the historical review above, the definition of happiness has altered considerably over time. This can be explained in part by the historical context within which the definition of happiness operated because the rules for what make us happy are strongly influenced by culture. For example, if it isn’t possible to control one’s external world due to wars, famine, natural disaster, crazy emperors or social hierarchies, then it makes sense that happiness seems to be a matter of luck or of divine favor. On the other hand, a flourishing culture provides expectations for its people to flourish as well. Thus, with stability in the culture and predictability in external outcomes one can productively look for happiness externally.

Taking these diverse social contexts into account, it is not surprising that throughout history the assumptions and definitions about happiness have been in conflict with one another. Perhaps this diversity of the happiness concept is what contributes to why happiness
has always been so elusive, because the basic concept of happiness is comprised of different
elements that can conflict with each other.

There is a school of thought that identifies the pre-civilized hunter-gatherer lifestyle
as the golden age of our ancestors (before the population boom and a shift to agriculture
which occurred 15,000 -10,000 years ago - a time some historians refer to as the Fall)
(Schumaker, 1949). Schumaker states that these Paleolithic groups consisted of bands of
between fifty and one hundred people who “were almost entirely social and spiritual, well
adapted to their environments”… shared close bonds, and a “strong network of cooperation
and social support” (p.43). The Paleolithic mind was mostly unconscious and so it had no
need for the concept of happiness. “The idea of harmony with nature as a primary
foundation for happiness had become largely extinct by the time early Greek civilization was
reaching its peak (Schumacher, 1949, p.95).” The idea of a simple harmony with one’s
nature and with the natural world and with a close network of fellow-life-travelers stands out
in juxtaposition from our much conflicted review of Western Civilization’s history of
happiness.

Some of the “civilized” conflicts that stand out are the tension between:

• Feeling good and doing good
• Short-term hedonic pleasures and the long-term fulfillment of a meaningful life
• Individual freedom and cultural norms/traditions
• Happiness within our control and happiness outside of our control
• Happiness coming from sources outside ourselves and happiness coming from within

But what really motivates our actions? Psychologist David Bakan (1966) says human
motivation falls into two major categories. He states that the motivations of “agency” and
“communion” help to organize a great number of our wants, needs, desires and goals (McAdams, 1988). Bakan (1966) defines the agency as the desire to separate from others and to express our self, to make things happen, to interact with and master the environment, and become a powerful self-governing agent. He defines communion as the opposing desire of transcending our individual self, and integrating ourselves into something greater than ourselves.

The distinction between agency and communion is similar to the distinction made by psychologist Otto Rank (see Becker 1973) between the ontological desires of Eros and Agape. Eros is the expression of individual desires and the urge to create and Agape is the desire to transcend and merge with something greater than oneself. Jonathan Haidt (2006) also makes a similar distinction which he refers to as the ethic of autonomy and the ethic of divinity. The ethic of autonomy is concerned with self-enhancement, the desire for power, and achievement. The ethic of divinity is about self-transcendence, benevolence, compassion, and universalism.

These competing desires can go by many names, but the essential qualities of these desires are “the urge to separate” and “the urge to merge.” Since agency and communion are both central to human motivation, but are often in conflict with each other, managing this tension could very well constitute a “happiness paradox.” This paradox involves a constant dialogue between our desire for self-interest and our desire for communion and transcendence. David Bohm (2004) suggests that one should be aware of the distinction between a paradox and a problem that needs to be solved. He states that a paradox does not require a solution but rather it requires focused and “sustained attention to the paradoxical pattern that has come to dominate one’s thinking and feeling” (p. 75). Encouraging a
dialogue between the two can help to find a healthy balance between them. Neither side can eclipse the other without peril. Both are complementary to the other and both are absolutely necessary.

So, how are we doing balancing our agency concerns of feeling good, focusing on the short-term, meeting individual needs, being in control, and getting happiness from sources outside ourselves with our communion concerns of doing good, focusing on the long-term, meeting cultural norms, surrendering control, and getting happiness from within ourselves?

The next section will shed some light on how well we are navigating the balance between agency and communion. We will take a look at important biological, psychological and cultural factors that contribute to the confusion and lack of clarity surrounding happiness.
SECTION 3: OBSTACLES TO HAPPINESS

We inhabit ourselves without valuing ourselves, unable to see that here, now, this very moment is sacred; but once it's gone –its value is incontestable. –Joyce Carol Oates

In this section, I examine key biological, psychological, and cultural forces that can be obstacles to happiness.

3.1. Biological Biases: Battle of the brains

Our brains are a kind of archeological dig site, with a series of settlements stacked one on top of the other. The deeper you dig, the farther you go back in time. – Sigmund Freud

A. The Evolution of the Brain

Although people tend to view the brain as a single entity, distinct sections of it have evolved over time. As the human brain developed, newer components were added to (rather than replaced) previously existing parts of the brain. Paul MacLean’s (1990) “triune model”, was based on a similarity between three brain structures and three animal groups of evolution: reptilian, paleo-mammalian, and new mammalian (Pearce, 2002).

In this model, the reptilian brain evolved first to control the body’s automatic sensory-motor and metabolic functions, like heart rate and breathing. This part of the brain is unconscious, instinctive and reflexive. The paleo-mammalian brain (or the limbic system) is the home of our primary emotions: love, fear, anger, sadness, joy. The new mammalian brain, also called the neocortex, is the top layer of the brain and is the most recent addition. Cortex is the Latin word for ‘bark’ and, like the bark of a tree; the cortex is spread across the surface of the brain. This part of the brain is comprised of four lobes, including the frontal lobe, which makes it possible to plan for the future and engage in abstract symbolic thought. The layers of the brain are connected to each other in many complex ways, but the frontal
lobe in the cortex has the most connections to every other part of the brain. Neurons in the frontal lobe excite or inhibit activity in other parts of the brain.

Ideally, perhaps, the brain would have been redesigned at each stage of evolution to better integrate emerging brain functions. However, in Kluge, Gary Marcus (2008) states that evolution is not about perfection, but rather about getting outcomes that are “good enough.” Because evolution must work with what already exists, and is driven by the immediate demands of the environment, our brain has evolved haphazardly and in layers. He refers to the three layers of the brain as the hindbrain, the midbrain and the forebrain, which correspond to reptilian, paleo-mammalian, and new mammalian sections of the triune model. Because of the brain’s haphazard construction, the different layers of the brain can conflict with each other. This can often result in emotions and behaviors that are at odds with each other in ways that can undermine happiness.

B. The low road to survival and the high road to happiness

Oh! Ye’ll take the high road and I’ll take the low road, and I’ll be in Scotland afore ye.

–Bonnie Banks O’Loch Lomond

An example of such conflict can be seen in the brain’s response to an unexpected appearance of a person on a dark street. The brain responds to this stimulus in two ways, a physiological response from the midbrain and a cognitive reflection on the meaning of the stimulus in the forebrain (Myers, 2007). The midbrain, which is focused on animal survival (fighting, fleeing, feeding, and reproduction), very quickly processes this unexpected occurrence as a potential threat and prepares the body’s biological systems for fight or flight. It will trigger the release of body chemicals, such as adrenaline and cortisol, to prepare the body for imminent action to respond to the threat, and will also generate an emotional response of fear and/or anger. The forebrain provides a cognitive evaluation of the potential
threat to determine if it is an actual threat. In addition, the forebrain also evaluates to
physiological and emotional response from the midbrain. Because of the survival need to
prepare the body quickly to respond to a threat, the threat signal travels to the midbrain faster
than the signal does to the forebrain. So even if the unexpected person in the alley turns out
to be a friend, this recognition by the forebrain occurs after the midbrain has already sent its
alarm to the brain stem to prepare the body for fight or flight. So the fight or flight chemicals
are released in the body regardless of whether the stimulus on that dark street turns out to be
a friend or foe. As a further complication, the visceral emotions communicated from the
midbrain to the forebrain travel much faster than the thoughts communicated from the
forebrain to the midbrain. This means that the fearful, angry emotions generated in the
midbrain are more likely to color the cognitive perception of the forebrain than the forebrain
will be able to bring reason to the emotional response.

In Steven Johnson’s (2004) Mind Wide Open: Your Brain and the Neuroscience of
Everyday Life, neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux labeled the more primitive, automatic,
unconscious, faster route as the “low road,” and the more sophisticated, deliberate, rational
route as the “high road.” Having two brain responses to a threat is a result of our
evolutionary process. The forebrain developed later than the midbrain, and developed its
own response to a threat.

Biologically we are wired for survival, which means that scared and alive always
trumps happy and dead. The speedy low road is an adaptive response that helped our
ancestors react quickly and survive in the Savannah. Indeed, in true life or death situations
where we need to react quickly, the low road can save our lives. However, the low road is
set to trigger for any threat, real or imagined, life threatening or not. We only need to
imagine a stressful or threatening situation, and we can trigger a fearful response. Once triggered, the low road automatically shifts, without our awareness, our focus to the emotion of fear and our most primitive drive to survive (Punset, 2007).

In our modern world, we still react with the same anxiety, fear, and anger to much less dangerous threats (e.g., feeling disrespected) than our ancestors did to actual life-or-death situations. Within an instant, our emotions can be at odds with our thoughts and our beliefs. We release stress chemicals into our body for reasons other than the life-saving motive for which it is intended (Sapolsky, 2004). Our wiring to constantly scan and react to environmental threats can too often create anxiety without a productive way to release it. Such unnecessary anxiety has a negative impact on quality of life and happiness.

In addition, our body is used to dealing with stress that lasts less than a minute at a time (enough time for us to run away or fight the threat). We’re not wired for chronic stress. Yet since we respond to a steady stream of perceived threats, we are in an environment of perpetual stress, and the fight-or-flight chemicals are being released continually into our bodies. Over time, a chronic stress response can take its tolls on our bodies and brains, and the physical health of the body begins to deteriorate. When this occurs, people “have more difficulty regulating their emotions, soothing themselves, and focusing their attention on others. They are powerless to stop the conflict and the loss of control is emotionally crippling” (Medina, 2008, p. 183). The same wiring that is crucial and life-saving in a state of emergency often is at cross purposes with being happy.

3.2. Mental Biases: Cognitive confusion

*Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit.* —William James
Humans have an information processing challenge when engaged with their surroundings. We are bombarded by billions of bits of sensory data, and our mind can only take in and process a miniscule fraction of it (Miller, 1956; Lehrer, 2009). So our senses can only form a general picture of a situation and our mind needs to fill in the details.

Psychologist Dan Gilbert states, “Perceptions are portraits, not photographs, and their form reveals the artist’s hand every bit as much as it reflects the things portrayed (Gilbert, 2007, p. 94).” In addition to sensory boundaries, the mind also has a limited temporal and spatial capacity in working memory, as well as in the cognitive resources available for cognitive functions (Marcus, 2008). As an example, a classic psychological study conducted by George Miller (1956) determined that, at any one time, our working memory can only hold between five and nine separate items.

Our cognitive limitations foster the use of mental shortcuts (heuristics) that are generally highly adaptive but can also result in cognitive biases (Schwartz, 2004) that can reduce happiness. Gilbert uses the metaphor of a psychological immune system to convey the idea of a mental system that “defends the mind against unhappiness” in much the same way that the physical immune system defends the body against illness (Gilbert, 2007, p. 177). He argues that the purpose of an immune system is to find a balance between destroying harmful threats and preserving the body’s own healthy cells. The problem occurs when either the immune system doesn’t work to defend the body against foreign invaders or the system works “too well” and attacks its own body. Gilbert proposes that a psychological immune system works in much the same way: it can be under-active and not protect against psychological threats (“I’m a loser and I ought to be dead.”), it can be over-active and defend too well (“I’m perfect and everyone is against me”), or it can find a healthy balance between
the two extremes (“I feel good enough to cope with the situation, but bad enough to do something about it”) (Gilbert, 2007, p.177). Defenses that have gone awry can sometimes provide “short-term solutions” to psychological threats that in the long run can diminish happiness.

A. Negativity Bias

*Fear is that little dark room where negatives are developed.* —Michael Pritchard

Just as we have a biological bias toward anxiety, we have a cognitive bias toward negativity. Bad news, bad thoughts, and bad experiences all have a stronger impact on us than their “good” equivalents (Lehrer, 2009). Anxious thoughts command our attention more than happy thoughts. That our brain is wired for us to take strong notice of anything negative is a very good thing since our survival depends upon it. Positive events are not as important to our survival as negative situations, so we have evolved to pay close attention to failure (Reivich & Shatte, 2003). However it can be troublesome as well because this differential sensitivity to negativity pervades every aspect of our lives. For example, because of our negativity bias, Fredrickson & Losada (2005) found that business teams who were flourishing (measured by customer satisfaction, profitability and internal review) experienced three positive to every negative feedback in their team meetings. Similarly, Gottman (1994) found that successful marriages need to have a ratio of at least five positive interactions (e.g., kind comments) to compensate for every negative interaction (e.g., complaints or critical comments). In addition, brain scientist, Jill Bolte Taylor claims “paying attention to our self-talk is vitally important for our mental health (Taylor, 2008, p.153).” In other words, the quality of our self-talk can either enhance or detract from our well-being.

B. Hedonic Adaptation

*I can’t get no satisfaction.* —Mick Jagger
Another cognitive bias is called “hedonic adaptation,” which means that we adapt psychologically to whatever makes us happy. In *Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz (2004) explains that in the process of adaptation “we get used to things and then we start to take them for granted” (p. 167). This can be very helpful in difficult situations, such as a physical injury. Through adaptation, we can adjust to the difficult situation and move forward.

Adaptation is no, however, as helpful when we are experiencing life’s joys. Because of adaptation, a new situation that increases our happiness (e.g., getting a raise), becomes our new norm. For example, the hedonic pleasure we felt when we first received the raise dissipates over time as we become accustomed to it. Thus, we find ourselves on a hedonic treadmill where, once we get what we want, we quickly adapt to it and we need even more to get the same hedonic pleasure as before. So if we want the same happiness high, we have to keep ramping up the expectations, however, much like running on a treadmill we can run faster and harder and yet still not get any further ahead than where we were when we began.

Additionally, adaptation plays a significant role in affective forecasting. Most people are unable to predict their future feeling states; consequently we can’t accurately estimate what will or won’t make us happy (Gilbert, 2006). People almost always overestimate the intensity and lasting power of the happiness (or unhappiness) that they will receive from a future good (or bad) event. This perception can bias our decision making process and thus we may choose to overinvest our energy into pursuits that won’t make us as happy as we think they will.

C. Confirmation Bias

*We see the world as we are, not as the world is.* —Anais Nin

I will look at any additional evidence to confirm the opinion to which I have already come.
Another mental distortion arises because we tend to ignore information that doesn’t confirm our existing beliefs, and seek out information that does, a process called the confirmation bias (Marcus, 2008). The confirmation bias was demonstrated by Westen, Kilts, Blagov, Harenski, & Hamann (2006), who measured the brain responses of participants given statements supposed to have been made by George Bush and John Kerry during the 2004 presidential campaign. They found that while people were trying to process information that was threatening toward their preferred candidate, the reasoning areas of the brain would shut down, and when information was presented that supported their candidate; the emotional circuits of the brain would light up. Gilbert (2006) citing numerous studies where Democrats and Republicans watching the same presidential debate both maintain that their candidate won the debate, wryly observed that: “The brain and the eye may have a contractual relationship in which the brain has agreed to believe what the eye sees, but in return the eye has agreed to look for what the brain wants” (p.183).

We don’t like uncertainty so we pay more attention to information that supports our beliefs than information that challenges them (Marcus, 2008). Reivich and Shatte (2003) call the confirmation bias the “Velcro-Teflon effect” which means that confirming information that supports our beliefs will stick to us like Velcro and contradicting information that contradicts our beliefs will slide away like Teflon. This process can fortify our beliefs and values. However, it can also diminish creativity, increase antagonism towards others, and can keep us rigidly devoted to unproductive beliefs, values, and behaviors.

D. Cognitive Dissonance
Although we try to focus on data that confirms our expectations, we sometimes are forced to face information at odds with our expectations, beliefs, identity or worldviews. Cognitive dissonance, proposed by Leon Festinger (1956), posits that whenever people voluntarily engage in a counter-attitudinal behavior they will experience an uncomfortable state of physiological arousal that they are motivated to reduce either by changing behavior, changing attitudes (easier than changing behavior) or adding additional cognitions to minimize the original discrepancy between attitude and behavior.

Festinger and Carlsmith (1956) classic psychological study showed how people will alter their attitude about a task they really didn’t like (specifically, to like it more) in order to reduce cognitive dissonance. Researchers asked subjects to perform a boring task and paid some of the subjects $1 and other subjects $20. Once the task was completed, the researchers asked the subjects to tell others that the task was interesting. So there was a discrepancy between the subject’s experience of the task and what they were telling others. The researchers found that subjects that were paid $1 found the task to be more interesting than subjects who were paid $20. They concluded that the subjects that were paid $20 could justify the discrepancy because they were being paid well to do the task. However the subjects that were being paid $1 had to reduce the discrepancy by convincing themselves that the task was interesting.

For example, someone who smokes two packs of cigarettes a day who is confronted with the mortality rate of smokers, will experience cognitive dissonance in that their behavior (smoking) is inconsistent with the knowledge that smoking causes cancer and early death (presuming that the smoker enjoys being alive). In order to reduce the dissonance, they can choose one of two ways to resolve the problem: they can change their behavior and choose to
quit smoking or they can change their attitude which is easier than changing behavior. If they don’t want to try or have already tried quitting and failed, then they may reduce the dissonance by convincing themselves that smoking isn’t so harmful or that smoking is worth the risk because it helps them relax, or helps them prevent weight gain or they can add additional cognitions, like the world is probably going to end pretty soon anyway—with global warming and economic depression so lung cancer is the least of my problems.

Cognitive dissonance provides a possible explanation as to why people say that they are happy when there are many indications that they are not. Perhaps people are saying that they are happy because it is easier to convince themselves that they are happy than it is to change the behaviors that are making them unhappy. This approach may work to shield a person from unhappiness in the short term; however it isn’t a good recipe for building long-term happiness. Over time it takes quite a bit of energy to rationalize and distract oneself in order to reduce dissonance without changing behavior. In addition, the inability to face the underlying issues can create a lack of coherence between beliefs, emotions, and behaviors.

E. Bias Blind Spot

_It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so._ —Mark Twain

Perhaps the trickiest bias of them all is our lack of awareness that we have cognitive biases. In the face of uncertainty, humans have evolved to use mental shortcuts that simplify decisions and save cognitive effort. The problem is not that we have cognitive limitations, but rather that we are not aware of them, and therefore we tend to confuse our biased perceptions with objective reality. This can lead to errors in judgment that can remain unchallenged. Lacking awareness of our cognitive biases can result in a lack of clarity and flexibility in our thoughts, feelings and actions. On the other hand, simply being aware of
these biases does not mean they will magically disappear. What makes mental biases so challenging to overcome is that they do not happen on a conscious level (Reivich & Shatte, 2003).

3.3. Cultural Biases: Mesmerizing memes

The gross national product does not allow for the growth of our children...their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither wit nor courage; neither our wisdom nor our teaching; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes our life worthwhile. --Robert F. Kennedy 1968

As humans became self-aware symbolic creatures who used language to describe themselves and the world around them they started constructing models of reality and what it means to be alive, which anthropologists today would call culture. Culture can be defined as “humanly created and transmitted beliefs about the nature of reality manifested through uniquely human institutions such as religion, art, and science” (Solomon, Greenberg, Schimel, Arndt, & Pyszczynski, 2004, p.16). Culture helps shape our self-concept and provides social norms that identify what is important, what we value, and what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Self-esteem is acquired by perceiving oneself to meet or exceed the standards of value embraced by one’s culture.

In the Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman (1959) declares that “the world is like a wedding, in that it is made up of ceremonial performances that affirm and uphold our idealized social selves and our idealized social values and institutions” (p.36). We suppress our own personal needs in favor of our public persona by editing our own behavior to fit the social situation. In turn we monitor other’s behavior closely to make sure
According to Goffman, our interactions with one another are focused on upholding social order and creating and maintaining public persona (i.e., face) in the service of successfully completing the business of everyday life. There is great value in upholding and maintaining the social order of a culture, however, in order to belong and fit in to our culture, we may need to present ourselves as something that we are not. This may be one possible explanation for why so many people report being happy while behavioral outcomes say they are not.

Another important function of culture is to help people cope with the uniquely human fear of death. Terror management theory argues that cultural worldviews (i.e., the way you see, interpret, and experience the world around you) are created and shared by groups of people in order to manage the terror of mortality (Solomon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, 1998). Cultural worldviews offer promises of immortality, whether it is symbolically through children, legacies of work, art, wealth or fame, or literally through religion in a promised afterlife.

**Impact of American Culture**

*Shared Meaning is really the cement that holds society together, and you could say that the present society has very poor quality cement.*  
--David Bohm (Dialogue, ix)

*If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse gift will find a fitting place.*  
--Margaret Mead

In *The Selfish Gene* Richard Dawkins (1989) argues that just as genetic information gets passed down biologically from generation to generation so too does cultural information (beliefs, ideas, ways of doing things, norms) get transmitted through generations. He refers to the unit of cultural transmission or imitation as a meme—the cultural equivalent to the
gene. What is more important to a meme’s survival and lasting power is not whether a meme is true or false but whether a meme is self-perpetuating. A meme can be like the air we breathe and as we are often unaware of the air we breathe, we are also often unaware of the beliefs we believe.

In the United States, there is a cultural imperative to be happy. Indeed, this is codified in the Declaration of Independence, the guiding document of the creation of the United States, which states that every American is entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” America’s consumer culture offers a variety of easy ways to pursue happiness. To get happy: you can buy an endless number of “feel-good” products, entertain yourself by watching your favorite television shows or Hollywood films, play the latest video game, or pop a pill. Because of our historically unparalleled prosperity, Americans have had the luxury of being able to devote considerable time and resources to the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, the gold standard seems to be achieving pleasure without any pain (or even without any discomfort). We are constantly on the look-out for short-cuts to happiness.

You can learn a lot about a culture by what they say yes and no to. American culture values action, creativity, instant gratification, and consumption; and avoids emotions, fears aging and death, denies reality, and is unwilling to think long-term. Using lessons from human psychology and messages from our cultural norms, advertising has been designed to exploit our fears and cultural values. Indeed, advertising has gone one step further by seeking to create new cultural norms in order to make it easier to sell their products, and by using the power of social comparison to create a sense of perpetual dissatisfaction. John Schumaker states, “Media advertising operates as a subtle form of emotional terrorism that instills doubts, fears, and inadequacy. It creates an intense yearning for solutions to the
unrest that it creates” (Schumaker, 2007, p.142). This industry of discontent creates both the problem of dissatisfaction as well as the corresponding solution of commercial satiation. We are conditioned to want certain products and lifestyles, and to believe that the more options we have to choose from the better our chance of getting the “best” product out there. We are taught to constantly compare ourselves with others to make sure that we are doing better than them. This creates a situation where happiness becomes relative, thus we have to rely on cultural norms and social comparison for our evaluation of happiness. We are trained to believe, both consciously and subconsciously, that purchasing a product will make us happy, however we easily, and quickly, adapt to the hedonic pleasure of the product, and thus have to search for the next product in order to be happy again. This “hedonic treadmill,” discussed earlier, keeps us looking to satisfy our insatiable desire for new forms of pleasure. Even more damaging to happiness than the hedonic treadmill is the relentless focus on social ideals of beauty, body type, wealth, and other externally focused areas that can create unrealistic expectations that many Americans can never achieve (and even those who do achieve these social ideals are not necessarily happier as a result of their achievement). All in all, a culture that is pre-occupied with “material” memes can leave us surprisingly stressed and unhappy.

Our biological, psychological and cultural biases have resulted in some habits and behaviors that can undermine our happiness. We have misused our threat detection system by constantly looking for non-life threatening social and emotional threats, resulting in unnecessary anxiety. Our mind can get trapped in its own cognitive loops, which can result in a lack of clarity and an inability to make important distinctions. In addition, by being so caught up in satisfying our short-term desires, we’ve been blinded to our long-term needs and higher values; by being so caught up in feeling good we’ve lost sight of doing good; by being
so focused on satisfying immediate pleasures we’ve sacrificed meaning in our lives. We have been culturally conditioned to look for happiness outside ourselves. By spending our valuable and limited time looking for happiness in products, possessions and status symbols, we miss the lasting happiness that comes from personal awareness, understanding what is important to us, and choosing meaningful experiences that connect us to others and something greater than ourselves.

From a yogic perspective, all unhappiness and insecurity stems from a feeling of lack. Investing in a perception of lack is a self-perpetuating cycle. Looking outside ourselves for happiness is an impossible solution to the problem of unhappiness. From this perspective, starting from a place of lack cannot end in fulfillment. If we start with a perception of lack and want something outside ourselves and are thwarted from getting it, we will likely experience anger from not getting what we want. On the other hand, if we get what we want we will likely fear losing it. In either case the output, much like the input, is a sense of lack or deficiency. Yoga science identifies our perception as both the problem as well as the solution. The key is to recognize that we are a citizen of two worlds (matter and spirit) and so it is imperative to distinguish the inherent fullness within our essential nature from our socially induced sense of lack. Aligning our outer actions with our inner wisdom is the yogic path to happiness.

In the next section I will explore some important findings from positive psychology and introduce a working model of happiness that proposes to remedy these obstacles.
SECTION 4: THE HAPPINESS CHALLENGE

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. – Reinhold Niebuhr

4.1. A Definition of a Happy Life

Martin Seligman (2002), the father of positive psychology, proposes that leading a full life incorporates three domains of life which he calls the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life. The pleasant life involves pursuing positive pleasures and positive emotional experiences. Because pleasures are subject to adaptation, it is important for pleasures to be savored, varied, and enjoyed in moderation (Haidt, 2006). Savoring is the process of “anticipating positive events in the future, relishing them in the moment, and reminiscing about them in the past” (Peterson, 2006, p. 70). Peterson (2006) notes that people who incorporate savoring into their lives are generally happier and more satisfied with their lives than people who don’t.

The engaged life involves challenging yourself to use your strengths in the important areas of your life. This is achieved by creating “flow” experiences that leverage our strengths and skills to meet intrinsically enjoyable challenges (Peterson, 2006). The meaningful life involves offering your strengths in service to something greater than yourself, “to forward knowledge, power or goodness” while contributing to the benefit of society (Peterson, 2006, p. 260).

In developing my own working definition of a happy life, I would build on Seligman’s domains of pleasure, engagement, and meaning, and add one more important dimension, which is stillness. To me, the still life is one of inner peace, awareness,
acceptance, and non-judgment (with oneself as well as with others). This is an open, receptive way of being that is an important complement to our lives of action.

4.2. The Importance of Positive Emotions

As mentioned earlier, most psychological research conducted in the 20th Century was focused on maladaptive behavior and negative emotions. Positive psychology shifted the focus to the study of well-being and positive emotions. Barbara Fredrickson (2002) defines emotions as a conscious or unconscious appraisal of the personal meaning of some event that triggers physiological changes and a subjective experience. She indicates that the best way to induce and increase positive emotions is to “shape people’s appraisals of situations” (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 128).

In her broaden-and-build theory, Fredrickson proposes that experiencing positive emotions such as joy, contentment, and love “broadens habitual modes of thinking or acting,” (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 123), which in turn builds “enduring intellectual, psychological, social, and physical resources over time” (Kesibir & Diener, 2008, p. 119). Thus, positive emotions are not simply an end unto themselves; they in turn create additional desirable outcomes. In particular, positive emotions help to build creativity and lasting social bonds, as well as producing self-insight and expanding worldviews. Fredrickson notes that positive emotions help to transform people by creating an upward spiral in which the positive emotions create thoughts and actions that in turn create more positive emotions. For example, joy creates the urge to play; playing builds enduring social bonds, which in turn creates more joy (Lee, 1983; Simons, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Papini, 1986).

In contrast, a depressed mood and pessimistic thinking can create a downward spiral (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Fredrickson points out, however, that the positive emotion of contentment “has the ability to undo the lingering cardiovascular aftereffects of negative
emotions” (Fredrickson, 2002, p. 128). In other words, while negative emotions can create a negative cardiovascular reaction (e.g., fight-or-flight) and increased gut motility, the positive emotion of contentment can accelerate cardiovascular recovery and decrease the gut motility (Pert, 1997). Thus, positive emotions can undo the effect of negative emotions, which is a very important finding. Fredrickson (2002) says that contentment creates the urge to savor one’s life, which can lead to new insights of oneself and one’s world. This new perspective can ease the discontent created by our consumer culture, and can help us reduce the number of perceived threats that trigger our fight-or-flight response.

4.3. Creating the Conditions for Happiness

Perhaps the most important research finding in positive psychology is that only 10% of our happiness is due to what most people think are the most important contributors to happiness, such as material wealth, possessions, beauty, where we live, occupation, age, and other life circumstances (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Equally important, the same research found that 40% of happiness is created by intentional activities, such as expressing gratitude, cultivating optimism, kindness, nurturing relationships, forgiveness, engagement, savoring, commitment to meaningful goals, physical activity, practicing religion/spirituality and meditation, and avoiding social comparison. Although the other 50% of happiness is attributable to genetics, the main point is that we still have a tremendous amount of control over our happiness.

Neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor states, “The focused human mind is the most powerful instrument in the universe” (Taylor, 2008, p. 157). So the real question is where can we best focus our attention and energy in order to create the conditions for a happy life? I propose that there are three major areas that we can focus on to help us create a happy life –
meaning, optimal experiences, and decision-making. I will explore each of these areas in more detail in the next three sections, however before I do I want to highlight how each of these three factors can positively impact happiness and help to overcome the biological, cognitive, and cultural biases introduced earlier.

Meaning is important to happiness because it is one of the dimensions of Seligman’s definition of a happy life. Fredrickson notes that the meanings we make when we interpret our world are the key determinants of our emotions (both positive and negative). The creation of positive emotions is an integral part of Seligman’s pleasant life described above. I will focus on two particular aspects of meaning: life narrative (the stories we tell ourselves) and paradigms (our cognitive frames). By bringing conscious attention to our paradigms and limiting beliefs, we can reduce mental biases such as negativity, confirmation and blind spot biases. Cognitive reframing can also help us reduce the number of perceived threats which can minimize the number of times we experience the fight-or-flight response and its associated negative effects. Gratitude and awareness of what is meaningful to us can lessen the impact of hedonic adaptation and help cultivate longer lasting happiness. More important than what actually happens to us is the story we tell ourselves (Loehr, 2007). Thus, creating an empowering life narrative can shape the direction of our life and help make life choices that can lead to long-lasting happiness.

I define optimal experiences as experiences that are highly engaging, meaningful incidents in life that create a sense of joy, awe, peace, and/or a sense of flow. Optimal experiences are important to happiness because they encompass the “flow” experiences in Seligman’s engaged life and the stillness experiences in my definition of the still life. Through the stillness practices of meditation, mindfulness and compassion, the mind can
regain perspective and can access higher states of consciousness. With a broader perspective we are able to face the contradictions between our thoughts and behaviors which can make it possible to reduce dissonance by finding congruence (between our thoughts, emotions and actions) rather than simply changing our attitude. This could help to resolve the discrepancy between people saying that they are happy and their behaviors telling a different story.

Deepening our insight and broadening our perspective can also make it possible to recognize and lessen the impact of the cultural memes that reduce happiness.

Finally, the quality of the decisions we make is an important contributor to happiness because it is how we translate our values and priorities into action. Meaning and decision making are inextricably connected. Effective decision making can focus our attention on personal values and thus reduce the negative impact of cultural norms and avoid the wasted energy of the hedonic treadmill. In addition, through making decisions using a satisficing approach (i.e., choosing the first option that meets our standards rather than searching for the best option), we can reduce the effect of our limited cognitive resources on making decisions.
SECTION 5: MAKING MEANING:

The world as we know it is a construction, a finished product, almost—one might say—a manufactured article, to which the mind contributes as much by its moulding forms as the thing contributes by its stimuli. —Will Durant

A traveler came upon a group of three hard-at-work stonemasons, and asked each in turn what he was doing. The first said, “I am sanding down this block of marble.” The second said, “I am preparing a foundation.” The third said, “I am building a cathedral.” —Rules of St. Benedict (530AD)

“When we create meaning we must challenge those beliefs that hold us back as well as harness those impulses to connect to things that are bigger than us” —Reivich & Shatte

I recently spoke with a friend of mine who had interviewed hospice workers for an article she was writing. She said that what struck her most from the interviews was that each hospice worker shared that, regardless of whether the dying person was cheerful or cranky, at the end of their lives they all wanted to know that their life made a difference, that their life had meaning. As our society has moved beyond basic survival needs to reach unprecedented prosperity, a meaningful life has become perhaps more important than in the past, but harder to attain. This sentiment is echoed by Viktor Frankl (1978): “Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for” (p. 21).

5.1. Two Frameworks for Perceiving Reality

“The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers.” —Erich Fromm

Before I explore meaning and how we can go about organizing our lives in a meaningful way, it’s important to look at what we currently know about how the universe is organized. Adherents of the Newtonian physics of the seventeenth century comprehended the world by focusing on what could be known and measured in physical form through our physical senses. The Newtonian view proposes that there is an objective reality that behaves
in deterministic ways and is therefore predictable (Wheatley, 1999). Proponents of this view focus on breaking processes down into measurable individual components, and this has proven to be an excellent approach to fuel the growth of science and engineering, and made the Industrial Revolution possible. Wheatley (1999, p. 19) points out that this Newtonian worldview was:

“imagined as an exquisite machine set in motion by God...who then left the shop and the concept of entropy entered our collective consciousness...This is a universe, we feel, that cannot be trusted with its own processes for growth and rejuvenation. If we want to progress then we must provide the energy to reverse decay. By sheer force of will...we will make the world work. We will resist death. What a fearful posture this has been!”

In contrast, quantum physics, the new science of the subatomic level, depicts a dynamic, self-organizing, inter-connected, whole-systems worldview where there is no objective reality. Instead reality is made up of relationships, participation, potentiality and probability. In Wheatley’s (1999) words, “reality is co-created by our process of observation, from decisions we, the observers, make about what we choose to notice” (p. 68).

Unlike the mechanistic worldview of Newtonian physics, astronomer James Jeans stated, “The universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine” (Capra, 1983, p. 86). In contrast to the Newtonian approach, which seeks to measure objective reality, the quantum physics approach assumes the experimenter cannot help but influence the outcome of the experiment.

5.2. Narratives and Paradigms
Psychologist Jerome Bruner proposed a similar distinction for the two ways that people comprehend their world (McAdams, 1997). Our perspective and how we choose to look at a situation help to form the meaning that we make of the situation. The “paradigmatic mode” of thought seeks to understand experiences analytically, logically, and through empirical observation. This mode of thought hypothesizes an objective truth that can be tested and proven either valid or invalid. The “narrative mode” of thought seeks to explain human desires, needs, intentions and goals in terms of stories. Good stories reflect people’s beliefs and assumptions, they offer various ideas and views, and they “give birth” to different meanings. Both modes help us organize our thoughts.

In this section, I will explore how each mode can help us make sense of our lives and ourselves. I will first talk about how a life narrative and religion can provide us with an overall sense of purpose and meaning. Then in the paradigmatic section I will talk about how we create meaning on an ongoing basis through our worldviews and cognitive framing. I will explore the use of a cognitive reframing approach and the value of gratitude in helping to create ongoing meaning that is empowering and productive.

5.3. Making Meaning: The Narrative Approach

*For success, like happiness cannot be pursued, it must ensue... as the unintended side-effect of one’s personal dedication to a course greater than oneself.* –Viktor Frankl

*He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How.* –Nietzsche

Human beings cannot “not” tell stories. We have a fundamental need to make sense of the world around us. According to Jim Loehr (2007), “a story is the creation of a reality; indeed our story matters more than what actually happens” (p. 5). He also notes that the story of our life, our life narrative, is the most important story we can tell ourselves because it has the power to shape the reality we experience. The power of a meaningful life narrative
was quantified when Danner, Snowden and Friesen (2001) studied the autobiographical essays of 180 nuns from the American School Sisters of Notre Dame, for the number of positive emotional words and the number of negative emotional words that the essays contained. The essays were written for their Mother Superior in 1930 when the nuns first arrived. By the 1990’s 40% of the nuns had died. What they found was the “happier nuns” (whose essays ranked in the upper 25% in terms of positivity) lived an average of ten years longer than the “less-happy nuns” (whose essays ranked in the bottom 25%).

Dan McAdams (2001) proposes that life narratives can help us to organize a coherent life story out of fragmented parts, and can make it possible to bring together different aspects of one’s identity into a larger meaningful purpose. Erik Erikson also saw the integrative value that identity serves in our lives. Erikson (1982) devised a theory of psychosocial stages with specific developmental social challenges at different stages throughout one’s lifespan. Erickson believed that one needed to successfully complete a stage before moving on to the next stage. McAdams refers to these psychosocial stages as the building blocks needed to develop a life narrative (McAdams, 1997). Erickson’s stages begin at infancy with the challenge of building trust, and progresses through stages of childhood by building autonomy, initiative, and competence. The crucial task in adolescence is to create a personal ideology, which consists of personal values and a set of personal identities that span across important areas of life (e.g., social, spiritual, etc.). The choices made at this stage help to create an individual’s overall sense of identity, which forms an important part of a life narrative. These choices can be made consciously or unconsciously. In adulthood, the first challenge is to build intimacy, which Erickson says can’t be done without the successful individuation created from the previous stages. The next stage in adulthood is building
generativity, which is a concern with helping others in the world and developing the next generation. This stage deepens the ability to create communion and a broader sense of social support. Erickson’s last stage is building ego integrity, a sense that one’s life was well-lived. Ultimately, this last stage becomes the most important part of a life narrative because it is the overall evaluation of one’s life.

Many psychologists disagree with Erikson’s rigid stages, suggesting that they can occur in a different order, but they agree with his general idea of expanding social relatedness as a function of an authentic identity (Peterson & Stewart, 1993). As an example, although Erickson saw adolescence as the time that personal identity was formed, other theorists (e.g., McAdams, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) have proposed that identity formation and refinement is a process that continues throughout one’s life.

Csikszentmihalyi (1991) details a sequence of four steps in the development of one’s identity that is less linear than Erickson and more representative of what most psychologists believe is possible. Each individual begins at the first stage, which is the need for self-preservation. At this stage, life is about survival, safety, comfort and pleasure. Once these physical needs are met, the individual can then move toward the second stage, which is the need for belonging to a community (e.g., family, friends, neighborhood, religion, ethnic group, country). At this stage, the individual adopts the conventional norms, standards, and values of the community. The next stage involves a focus on building the agency of the individual. At this stage, the individual develops “reflective individualism,” building an autonomous conscience as they learn to see their own value and learn to trust themselves. This level of reflection is necessary to distinguish between our actual identity and how we present ourselves to the world. The main goal at this stage is to challenge one’s limits to
grow, improve, experiment, and actualize potential. In the final stage, one transcends the self and moves towards unity, embracing universal values and integration with others. “Having discovered what one can and, more importantly, cannot do alone,” the autonomous person willingly merges with a system larger than the person - a cause, an idea, a transcendental entity” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 222).

Csikszentmihalyi (1991) notes that some people have not developed past the first stage of survival, where meaning is all about self-interest, while most people are probably at the second level, where meaning is focused on family, business, community, and country. There are less people at the third stage of reflective individualism, and even fewer at the fourth stage of forming a union with universal values.

The model shows a progression of an ever deepening need for agency and communion, which Csikszentmihalyi refers to as differentiation and integration. There is an ongoing tension between what I want and what I need to do to maintain the relationship with others. Csikszentmihalyi views life as a series of different games with different goals and challenges at different times of a person’s life. The object is to navigate the dialectic tension between agency and communion by developing our skills to become autonomous and self-reliant, while at the same time recognizing and adapting to “the forces beyond the boundaries of our own individuality” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, 223).

A. Creating a Coherent Life Narrative

*She is a friend of mine. She gathers me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.* —Toni Morrison

In the formation of a life narrative, McAdams (1994) focuses on the tension between the need to individuate and the need to transcend. What McAdams (1994) means by a life
narrative is an “evolving story that integrates a reconstructed past, a perceived present and an anticipated future into a coherent and vitalizing life myth” (p. 306). It can be challenging to attain unity and purpose in our fragmented contemporary society, but that is exactly what McAdams asserts is possible to achieve through an internalized and evolving life narrative.

So how does one begin to integrate one’s past, present and future into a coherent narrative? McAdams (1997) suggests that the personality has three levels. At the first level are individual basic traits (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion, openness to new experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness). The second level includes personal values, goals, beliefs, coping mechanisms, and defense mechanisms. The third level includes one’s life story. Haidt (2006) argues that if you experience coherence across these three levels, then your personality is considered to be well integrated and you experience meaningfulness; but if there are inconsistencies across the three levels, then you will be challenged by “internal contradictions and neurotic conflicts” (p. 226). Haidt also talks about the importance of coherence across the physical, psychological, and socio-cultural aspects of life, in other words, one’s personality is coherent within the larger context of one’s culture.

It is important to uncover our existing life narrative, whether we are consciously aware of it or not, because how we approach life and how we experience life is a direct result of the assumptions and beliefs that underlie our life narrative. Once uncovered, we need to appraise our life narrative to determine whether we will keep it, and if not, modify it or construct a new one. Life narratives should be reviewed and can be reconstructed at various stages of your life as developmental issues or life circumstances warrant. The process of reviewing and revising a life narrative (McAdams, 1997) is (1) identify the narrative’s tone; (2) identify the narrative’s theme; (3) create an empowering personal myth.
B. Identifying your Narrative’s Tone: Optimistic or Pessimistic

The first step in reviewing your life narrative is to determine if the overall tone of your life narrative is positive or negative. McAdams (1997) states that the narrative tone is developed during the pre-rational and pre-logical period of childhood, so an individual is often not aware of their narrative tone. He describes an optimistic narrative as one that holds the hopeful belief that one’s intentions are attainable and the world is trustworthy and predictable. The unconscious assumption is that attempts made in the world will be successful. A pessimistic narrative, on the other hand, is one that expects their intentions to be thwarted and views the world as unsafe and unpredictable. The unconscious assumption is that attempts made in the world will lead to failure. McAdams (1997) asserts that an optimistic tone is reinforced by an infant’s secure attachment to her/his caretaker and a pessimistic tone is reinforced by an insecure attachment with her/his mother. The optimistic tone is usually found in the mythic story form of a comedy or romance while the pessimistic tone is usually found in the story form of tragedy or irony. McAdams (1997) points out that a benefit of identifying one’s tone is “making conscious a personal predilection for viewing the world, which may previously have seemed part of the nature of the world and not of the self” (p. 53).

C. Identify your Theme: Agency or Communion

McAdams (1997) defines a story theme as “a recurrent pattern of human intention” (p. 67). The theme explores what we want in life and how we go about pursuing it. As I discussed earlier, agency and communion (power and love) are the twin motivating psychological desires in our lives, and so it comes as no surprise that they represent the two central themes of narrative and story. McAdams indicates that preference for either agency...
or communion emerges during the elementary school years; however, it isn’t translated into a central theme until the child is ready to tackle the issues of identity and ideology in adolescence. Children who prefer being motivated by power and achievement tend to be drawn to leadership roles, dominating their social groups and friendships; they value competence, prestige, status and success. Children who prefer being motivated by communion prefer human connections; they are viewed by others to be sincere, affectionate and friendly with few enemies. Although either agency or communion becomes the dominating theme in an individual’s life, the theme can be changed over the course of a lifetime.

According to Jean Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), by the time many people reach adolescence they’re able to reason abstractly and hypothetically, which makes it possible to explore beyond the concrete world of what is to the more abstract idea of possible selves and possible worlds. It is usually at this time that identity and ideology take center stage in a young person’s life. Through the making of our myth we begin to determine who we are, who we were, and who we may become in the future (McAdams, 2001). This process can make an important difference between an ignored, denied or inevitable future, and a future that has many real possibilities.

Roy Baumeister (1987) points out that because of limited social mobility and strong, stable authoritative institutions (like the church and state), understanding one’s identity was not an issue in Western culture prior to 1800, because identities were fixed from birth. However, in modern society, with the lack of consensus on important values, a high degree of social mobility, and a rapidly changing world, we are left to develop our identities on our own. McAdams (1997) quotes scholar R. Langbaum when he points out that identity is not
only an issue in Western society in this 21st century; it is perhaps “the spiritual problem of our time” (p. 84). It seems, therefore, to be a worthwhile endeavor to consciously engage the questions of who we are, who we were and who we may become.

D. Uncover/Discover/Create an Empowering Personal Narrative

“To undo old stories, then, we must move forward within a positive framework, yet maintain a capacity to confront our stories with dispassionate eyes and ears: to detect lies and manipulations; to recognize our tendency to make assumptions, and often false ones, at that, to appreciate our predilection for optimism or pessimism, which may skew the tone of our stories.” —Jim Loehr

Uncovering one’s life narrative can be an invaluable discovery process. In this section, I will touch on some of the highlights needed to create a life-narrative. The first step is to create a timeline of your life that chronicles key events and people throughout your life. Using the timeline as a graphic organizer, structure the timeline into three sections: childhood, adolescence and adulthood (from 21 years onward). One approach is to start by capturing the key events and significant people throughout your life: including peak experiences (high points), nadir experiences (low points), and turning points. McAdams (1997) points out the importance of providing as much detail as possible by recalling particular concrete episodes in one’s life, as opposed to abstract ideas and trends.

In the second step, you can start to capture your earliest memories whether positive or negative. Then continue the process by progressing (in a linear fashion or not) to later childhood, adolescence, and into your adult years by capturing important memories, whether positive or negative. After exploring significant episodes and people in one’s life, McAdams suggests describing in greater detail the impact of four of the most important people in your life story, with at least one of those being someone unrelated to you. Follow this description with any heroes or heroines you might have as well.
The third step includes looking for patterns and themes in your timeline and writings. One way to do this is to focus on your need for agency and communion (power and love) and notice how you’ve expressed these needs in your life story. What does your timeline say about your dreams and aspirations, what do you really want in your life? McAdams (1997) identifies four common types of characters. There are characters that focus on agency: “the warrior, who forcefully engages others; the traveler, who progresses swiftly over terrain; the sage, whose effort is to understand the world; and the maker, who moves body and soul in order to create” (p. 134) and four common types of communal characters: the lover, the caregiver, the friend, and the ritualist. He also points out some common characters that are a combination of both agency and communion and they are: the healer; the teacher; the counselor; the humanist; and the arbiter. McAdams notes two common characters that are low in both agency and communion and they are: the escapist and the survivor.

The fourth step moves from the past to what McAdams refers to as the future script. Here he points out the questions to explore are, “Where is the story going?”; “How will it get there from here?”; “How do you envision your life narrative extending into the future?”; “What is your plan or dream for what happens next in your life?” and “How will it enable you to be creative and make a contribution to others?” Here it is helpful to notice the tone of your approach. Do you move forward with a pessimistic approach, where a bad past leads to a bad future? Or do you move forward with what McAdams calls a redemptive strategy, where a bad past leads to a good future? Do you move forward with McAdam’s dynastic strategy, where a good past leads to a good future? Or do you move forward with McAdam’s contamination strategy, where a good past leads to a bad future?
The fifth step is to consider two stressors, problems or challenges that are currently in your life. McAdams recommends describing in some detail the source of the issues, a bit of the history of its development and your plan for dealing with it in the future.

Before looking over your entire life in the sixth step, it’s important to address your personal ideology by asking yourself the question, “What are my fundamental beliefs and values about my life and the world?” How my beliefs and values are like those of others and how are they different? Finally, taking it all in, what is the major theme of your life? McAdams (1997) says that at this point people are able to capture the “essence or central meaning of their personal life story or myth in a phrase or expression” (p. 264). He reminds us that identifying a life narrative is a life process, where your narrative may need to change over time. It’s also important for your life narrative to have internal coherence whereby your purpose and your actions are aligned (Loehr, 2007).

Loehr (2007) indicates that each repetition of your new story can deepen the neural pathways so that it becomes a stronger more automatic part of you. Your new story metaphorically goes from being an unpaved road to becoming a superhighway. And the neural pathway of your old story, deprived of energy and attention, loses its appeal.

E. Religion and Spirituality

There is only one religion, though there are a hundred versions of it. – George Bernard Shaw

God is dead. –Nietzsche... Nietzsche is dead. --God

There are numerous ways to answer the fundamental questions of the human condition, just as there are numerous ways to write the narrative of the human drama of life (birth, growth, maturity and death). Various spiritual and religious traditions aim to address the human dilemma within each of their own culturally-specific contexts. There is a great
variety of world religions in terms of belief systems and rituals; however, there is a shared common ground in the profoundly human search for happiness, peace, and the need for security in the face of inevitable death. Regardless of whether one is religious, spiritual, agnostic or atheist, “meaning must come from within ourselves and through our own actions… lest we find ourselves living hypocritically and in bad faith” (McAdams, 1997, p. 165).

In our common desire to find meaning and purpose in our lives, religion holds a significant place in most people’s life narrative and life paradigms. There is a distinct advantage to religion and spirituality occupying such a major role in our narratives and paradigms. As mentioned earlier, terror management theory (Solomon, et al., 1991) recognizes that religion, and its promise of immortality, offers a protection against the fear of death. Religion can also provide a strong sense of belonging within a community, and its rituals can provide important context and can add important meaning to life.

However, religion can have a negative influence when we lose sight of our common humanity and want to annihilate others who are not of our faith. We do this in order to protect our belief that our faith is “the truth,” which according to terror management theory is necessary in order to preserve our sense of immortality (Solomon, et al., 1991). Ironically, there is an inherent inability of the finite to capture the infinite (transcendent being, God), so no one spiritual perspective can be “the truth.” Transcendence is too infinite to be contained by any one conceptual version, unless it is a perspective that is inclusive of all and exclusive to none. It is understandable that we may want to draw a firm boundary around our religious or spiritual beliefs, it makes the sense of belonging to the group that much stronger, and thus makes group membership more meaningful. Yet, in our ever flattening world where
different worldviews and spiritual traditions collide, it would be wiser for the human
condition if we could become more inclusive and learn to accept each other’s perspective.
Arguing about transcendence can be similar to what Mark Twain says about dissecting
happiness and frogs; they both die in the process!

5.4. Making Meaning: The Paradigmatic Approach

“The only true voyage...would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes.” --
Marcel Proust

Our paradigms are worldviews or cognitive frames that are the lenses that we
perceive the world through. The meaning and purpose that we create in our lives is directly
influenced by our worldviews, and our worldviews are impacted by our cultural norms, our
personal experiences, and our biology. As discussed earlier, we construct our reality from
only a small percentage of sensory data, and the data we focus on, as well as how we analyze
the data, is heavily influenced by our cognitive biases. By acting on the subjective reality we
have constructed, we can cause self-fulfilling prophecies. Because we believe something to
be true, we act as if it is true, and thereby work to make it true, all the while looking for proof
that we are right and lo and behold, it is true after all. The beliefs that we have are often an
inaccurate or incomplete picture of ourselves and the world around us. Since we construct
our beliefs, the question to ask is, “Are the assumptions and thought patterns that I live by
aligned with my values and helpful to me or not?” If they are not, then we can experiment
with challenging our assumptions to see if another possibility could be more constructive and
better aligned with our values. In particular, we want to challenge any beliefs, habits or
patterns that may interfere with our needs for agency and communion.

A. Developing Awareness
The aim is to become aware of our beliefs and thought patterns, since they typically operate outside of our conscious awareness. One way to become aware of them is to explore the reasons why we behaved irrationally or why we were experiencing an intense emotion out of proportion to the situation. The paradigmatic approach offers the possibility of change through the scientific/empirical method of inquiry (McAdams, 1997). We can examine our beliefs and assumptions just as we would any other hypothesis by testing for evidence of “objective truth.” Objective truth means that there are observable facts and data that either prove or disprove the validity of the hypothesis/belief. Since our actions and emotions reflect our underlying beliefs, examining our actions and emotions will lead us back to the thought patterns and then to the underlying beliefs.

Cognitive reframing helps us to be more flexible and accurate in our thinking, which can help to better align our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Flexible and accurate thinking are two key components of optimal functioning, and one of the most important ways to overcome mental biases, such as the blind spot bias and the confirmation bias (Marcus, 2008). Cognitive reframing can help us make more realistic appraisals of threat-inducing situations, thus reducing the number of perceived threats, which can lessen the number of times we experience the fight-or-flight response and its associated negative effects.

B. Explanatory Styles

As mentioned in the narrative section, a positive perspective can have a significant impact on quality of life and happiness. A key element to developing a positive perspective is an individual’s explanatory style. Seligman (2006) identified three causal dimensions that helped to explain why people have different interpretations in response to experiencing the same event (the event can be either positive or negative): (1) I am the cause of the event (personal) or it is the fault of something in the external environment (non-personal); (2) the
event will always happen (permanent) or it just happened in this specific situation (specific); and (3) the negative event is indicative of what happens in all aspects of my life (pervasive) or it only happened in this one aspect of my life (temporary). Just as a life narrative can have an optimistic or pessimistic tone, an individual’s explanatory style can tend toward being more optimistic or pessimistic. The explanatory styles of optimists are different than pessimists. Pessimists tend to view adversity as “being my fault” (personal), “it is never going to change” (permanent), and “my life is a failure” (pervasive). Pessimists will also tend to minimize positive events and attribute them to things like “I was lucky” and “it was a fluke”. Optimists, on the other hand, take the opposite approach. They will tend to minimize negative events by calling them a fluke and attributing them to forces outside of their control. Optimists will view positive events as being a result of their effort, and as having positive outcomes in the future, and as being indicative of positive things that will happen in other areas of their lives.

An example of how explanatory styles can influence a cognitive frame is in Seligman’s concept of learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Seligman determined that when people experienced adversities that were out of their control, they would then transfer that “learned helplessness” to other situations, including those that were very much within their control. What is significant to note is that the type of adversity was irrelevant. The distinguishing factor between those who became helpless after adversity and those who became resilient was “how the person explained the adversity” (Reivich & Shatte, 2003, p. 158). In other words, the story we tell ourselves is more important than what actually happened. Those who became resilient had an optimistic explanatory style and framed the original adversity as a learning experience or rehearsal for a future success.
Those who became helpless had a pessimistic explanatory style and focused on an explanation that made the adversity mean personal failure, with negative consequences that were pervasive and permanent.

Our cognitive frame and how we interpret the world and our place in the world can have a large impact on both our happiness as well as our ability to get things done. If an individual has a generally pessimistic perspective, then it is important to use the three explanatory dimensions as a guide to generating alternative perspectives (Reivich & Shatte, 2003). Then over time a more optimistic perspective can emerge. That being said, although an optimistic perspective has many advantages over a pessimistic perspective, it is important to note that an overly optimistic perspective can be dangerous. We have to be careful that we don’t develop unrealistic expectations and illusions, and deny our responsibility for our actions. Decisions made out of overconfidence can limit the ability to respond effectively and can weaken an individuals’ agency. The key is to look at other contributing factors to both positive and negative outcomes. This allows a more realistic and balanced optimism.

C. Changing the Cognitive Frame

Seligman developed an approach to recognizing, challenging, and reframing unwanted thoughts and negative perspectives that he calls the “ABCDE” model (Seligman, 2002; Reivich & Shatte, 2003). If used on a regular basis, this approach provides a simple structure that can surface limiting beliefs and cognitive biases, and allow for the development of more empowering, accurate beliefs and worldviews.

As seen below, the ABCDE model has five steps. The first three steps help to identify how the individual can react negatively to adversity or success, and the final two steps identifies how to reframe the perspective and respond productively to the situation:
1. Adversity – the adverse event, which can be setbacks, challenges, new experiences, or even success.

2. Beliefs – the automatic beliefs you have about the situation.

3. Consequences – the emotional and/or behavioral consequences of the beliefs.

4. Disputation – disputing your habitual beliefs.

5. Energization – the energy that results from successfully disputing and reframing a previously held belief.

Step 1 involves clearly identifying the adverse event. Although, often negative, it is possible for the event to be positive, for example winning a competition. However, if the individual has a pessimistic worldview and attributes the success to luck, and the individual’s skills contributed to the success, then it is important to challenge the belief of incompetence.

Step 2 involves exploring the beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews regarding the situation. This process starts with describing the adverse event objectively. Simply ask, “What happened?” The goal is to make a distinction between the facts and the belief or opinion about the facts. This is a “just the facts ma’am” moment. The description of the event should answer the “who, what, where, when” questions only. It’s important to practice separating feelings and opinions from the facts. It’s helpful to remind ourselves that our feelings and opinions don’t always reflect the facts of a situation.

Step 3 involves determining the consequences of the event. The consequences refer to your emotional reaction and behaviors that followed the adverse event. At this stage, keep the questions focused on “what were you feeling and how did you react?” “Emotions cause motion; they provide a motive that drives our action” (Ben-Shahar, 2007, p.35). Our emotions can embody our most important values, therefore if we want to know ourselves it is
vital that we get to know our emotional selves (Oatley, 2004). Emotions are caused by our
appraisal of an event as beneficial or harmful to our well-being, whether we are aware that
we are making the appraisal or not (Lazarus, 1991). In *Molecules of Emotion*, Candace Pert
(1997) points out that “all emotions are healthy, because emotions are what unite the mind
and the body” (p. 192). She believes that simply focusing on being happy while repressing
negative emotions (e.g., fear and anger) creates a lack of emotional integrity, and is an
unhealthy approach. Instead it is important to acknowledge all emotions and explore what is
caus ing the emotions.

Emotions are the mediator between the mind and body in a bi-directional way
whereby each can influence the other (Pert, 1997). Some emotions arise from an
unconscious automatic response while others are the result of our conscious thoughts. In the
ABCDE model, we are focusing on the emotions that result from our thinking. In particular,
our expectations are important determinants of happiness. It’s not necessarily the actual
result that matters, but rather it is how the result measures up to our expectations that can
determine if we are happy. The stock market is a good example of the power of
expectations. When a company reports a quarterly statement that shows that the company
lost money during the quarter, not typically good news, it is possible for the stock price to
rise because the reported loss was lower than expected. In other words, the actual result was
a loss, but stock analysts are happy because the earnings statement exceeded expectations!
So the emotional reaction often needs to be analyzed in the context of the expectations
regarding the situation. It is important to note that this is a traditionally western approach, which can be contrasted with the eastern philosophical approach, which advocates non-
attachment to outcomes (thus not meeting expectations would not trigger an emotional response).

It is very important to understand the beliefs that we hold. Our feelings, reactions and actions follow from our beliefs, thoughts and judgments, so we can usually trace our feelings and our behaviors (C) right back to our beliefs (B). As mentioned earlier, our beliefs are formed according to our personal and cultural experiences. Since our beliefs are subjective, we can question our beliefs and see if they make sense to us. If our beliefs don’t make sense to us, we can explore their meaning more fully, evaluate them and if necessary change them. It’s helpful to ask yourself, “What did I actually say to myself in the moment that caused the emotions I felt and the actions I took?” Look specifically for either causal beliefs such as “Why did this happen” beliefs referring back to the dimensions of the explanatory styles (e.g., personal, pervasive, permanent) or the implication for the future beliefs such as “What will happen next” beliefs. Some common B-C connections that Reivich and Shatte (2003) identify are “anger is a consequence of the violation of your rights; sadness and depression are real-world loss or loss of self-worth; guilt is a consequence of the violation of another’s rights; anxiety and fear are the consequence of a future threat; embarrassment is the consequence of negative comparison to others” (p. 75).

If your emotions (C’s) match up with your beliefs (B’s) as mentioned above and if they are in proportion to one another then you shift to Step 4, which involves looking for patterns in your ABC’s. Once you are aware of your patterns you can challenge the accuracy of your beliefs. Do you see a recurrent theme in your life such as “the violation of your rights” or “comparing yourself to others?” Once you have identified and reviewed your beliefs you can decide if you want to challenge them. If you decide to challenge your beliefs,
you can dispute them by “ACE-ing” them with tools that can broaden your perspective by exploring Alternative beliefs, Contrary beliefs, and Evidence against your beliefs.

Reivich and Shatte (2003) offer ways to simplify the process of disputation. An alternative belief can be explored by saying, “Another way to see this is...” or “A more accurate way of seeing this is...” A contrary view can be entertained by saying, “The opposite of my belief is...” And to find evidence against a belief, we can simply state, “That can’t be true because...” To further explore the point of view, we can ask, “What is a fair assessment of the entire situation?”

If you want to dispute your explanatory style, Seligman recommends simply challenging your style with the opposite style (Seligman, 2006). For example, if you find that you are personalizing with such statements as, “It’s all me,” then learn to look outward. Did anyone or anything else contribute to this situation? Or if you find yourself externalizing the cause with, “It’s not me, it’s you,” then hold yourself accountable. Ask yourself, “What did I do to contribute to this situation?”

When a belief cannot be disputed, it’s helpful to accurately appraise the realistic implications of the circumstances. Even if a belief is true, is there something you can do to change the situation. Reivich and Shatte (2003) say that it is important to de-catastrophize if you are prone to catastrophizing. And if you tend to overgeneralize in a negative way you can ask yourself if there were any good things that happened. And if you are overgeneralizing in a positive way you can ask yourself if you are overlooking any problems.

If a belief you uncover does not explain the intensity of your behavior, then you may also be dealing with what Reivich and Shatte (2003) call iceberg beliefs. Iceberg beliefs are deeper beliefs that lie underneath the surface of your consciousness and describe the way you
believe the world should be and how you should be acting within it. Reivich and Shatte (2003) say that you may be dealing with an iceberg belief if your emotions (C’s) are out of proportion with your beliefs (B’s), if your beliefs (B’s) don’t seem to make sense with your emotions (C’s), or if you are struggling to make a simple decision. Many iceberg beliefs fall into the following categories of “shoulds” regarding achievement, acceptance and control (Beck, Emery & Greenberg, 1985). To help bring these deeper beliefs to the surface, Reivich and Shatte (2003) propose using “inquiry skills” which involve probing questions such as: “What does the adverse event mean to me? What is the most upsetting part of that for me? What is the worst part of that for me? What does that say about me? What’s so bad about that?” (p. 139). Detecting iceberg beliefs can help to bring awareness, understanding and clarity to some of our most confusing behaviors.

D. Reinforcing the Change

_The thought manifests as the word; the word manifests as the deed; the deed develops into habit; and habit hardens into character._ — _The Dhammapada_

With limited deliberative resources, and fast, automatic, and mostly unconscious behavior aiming to preserve the status quo, it can be difficult to make the paradigmatic changes. Rock (2006) found that cultivating moments of insight and deliberately hardwiring the insight with repeated attention are two requirements for facilitating this type of change. Rock explains that the power of an insight is in the individual making the connection themselves through self-observation. When an individual is given a solution or command by another person it is perceived as a threat and the fear response is triggered. He indicates that when you tell the human brain what to do it reflexively pushes back as if it were a two year old child. In studying insight, it was discovered that at moments of insight new connections are made across many parts of the brain. What is much more valuable than lectures and
persuasions is an authentic inquiry that encourages an individual to work out a solution on their own. And then in order to hardwire the new supporting connections it becomes crucial to focus conscious repeated attention on the new insight and associated behaviors with positive feedback.

E. Gratitude

*When one is filled with gratitude, life becomes a sort of prayer.* —John Schumaker

Perhaps the most direct route to a life of meaning and happiness is cultivating gratitude. Emmons & Shelton (2002) propose that “gratitude provides life meaning, by encapsulating life itself as a gift (468).” Life as a gift may very well be the ultimate meaning we can make. Emmons & Shelton (2002) state that gratitude is perhaps one of the most common virtues that religions cultivate and so for many, “gratitude is at the core of spiritual and religious experience” (p. 460). Streng (1989) develops this quality of gratitude further with the following, “In this attitude people recognize that they are connected to each other in a mysterious and miraculous way that is not fully determined by physical forces, but is part of a wider or transcendent context” (p. 5).

Abraham Maslow (1970) recognized the disparity between people who counted their blessings and those who took their blessings for granted. The former, self-actualizers, found awe and wonder in the “basic goods of life” that others found lacking. Maslow (1970) was certain that “taking one’s blessing for granted was a primary cause of suffering and misery” (p. 460). Gratitude can certainly be seen to help neutralize the effects of adaptation, negativity bias and social comparisons. The negative effects of materialism such as envy, disappointment, resentment and bitterness can be counter balanced with a spiritual practice of gratitude (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Schimmel, 1997). Many have said that the shortest spiritual prayer is, “Thank you.”
Several different research groups have found that counting one’s blessings regularly results in greater happiness and contentment with life (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). There are many approaches to cultivating gratitude from Shelton’s (2000) daily moral inventory (reminiscent of St. Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises) to Seligman’s (2002) “Three Blessings.” The first two steps of Shelton’s four step approach are recognizing that, “I have a conscience” and secondly, that gratitude makes employing the conscience toward self-examination worthwhile. The third step is self-examination of the events of the day with the intention of nurturing “personal moral growth.” The fourth step is making the all-important resolve to carry out the behavioral change that is necessary to counter any of the negative emotions or biases that might undermines one’s self-honesty. Seligman’s (2002) “Three Blessings” involves appreciating three things that went well at the end of each day. Peterson builds on this approach by suggesting another step to explain the reasons why these good things happened. This step can deepen the experience of gratitude beyond that of a potentially superficial checklist (Peterson, 2006).

The real challenge is to make gratitude an integral part of one’s life, through one’s life narrative and through one’s paradigm. How do we live the biblical maxim to, “be thankful in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18, RSV)? The ability to find the blessing in life, especially in adversity, is a magnificent human strength. Emmons and Shelton (2002) say that perhaps we can focus our gratitude not so much on the circumstances, but rather on the skills that come from dealing with the adversity. Gratitude, like well-being, may require a degree of contrast or deprivation (as opposed to entitlement) much like an appreciation of life
as a gift may require an awareness and acceptance (as opposed to denial) of our inevitable
death.

**F. Expanding our Worldviews**

*On this shrunken globe men and women can no longer live as strangers.*  -Adlai E. Stevenson

In today’s “flat world”, it is almost impossible to stay secluded in one’s own culture and corresponding worldview. As Americans, we are interacting with other, often conflicting cultural worldviews. As a counterbalance to the individualism and materialism of American culture, there has been a lot of interest in the philosophical, religious, and holistic health aspects of eastern cultures, such as India, China, and Japan. Religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism and philosophies such as Yoga Science and Taoism have introduced new worldviews and practices (such as yoga and meditation) that are becoming more readily adopted into American culture.

An important distinction between eastern and western culture is the role of the individual within the culture. Western cultures, like the U.S., tend to value individualism and the distinctiveness of the individual. Competition and creativity are highly valued in order to provide opportunities to stand out. This is supported by a growth paradigm that values as few constraints as possible. While encouraging productivity, the western approach can also encourage narcissism and inequitable distribution of resources. Eastern cultures, in general, are more communal and tend to value the collective. In this type of culture, individuals seek to fit in and avoid trying to differentiate themselves. Cooperation is highly valued in order to bring harmony to the culture. While encouraging synergy, the eastern approach can feel oppressively constraining to individuals.
Csikszentmihalyi (1991) asserts that the eastern culture focuses on the mastery of self-control and the ability to “direct the control of consciousness” and the western culture focuses on the mastery of the material world and the ability to direct the control of material energy. This is not a surprise since the eastern view of the world focuses on principles of contradiction, relationship, holism, and an emphasis on context, while the western view of the world focuses on laws of identity, non-contradiction and emphasis on objects (Nisbett, 176). Csikszentmihalyi (1991) is quick to point out, however, that since neither approach on its own is perfect, a society that aimed to find a balance between the two could come close to reaching a good model for a healthy society. At any rate, our lives in the west can certainly be enriched by an eastern approach to life, especially in regards to gaining control over our consciousness.

According to Ernest Becker (1971, 1973) we not only have a responsibility to evaluate our worldviews, but we also have a responsibility to develop and implement our worldviews consciously. He suggests maximizing the physical and psychological development of as many individuals in a culture as possible and to “accomplish these two goals without undue harm to others inside or outside of the culture” (Solomon, et al., 1998, p. 40). It seems that a pre-requisite to consciously developing a constructive worldview would be willingness to dialogue with other worldviews. Becker realizes that this kind of responsibility requires courage and humility.
SECTION 6: OPTIMAL EXPERIENCES

The mountaineer does not climb in order to reach the top of the mountain. The mountaineer
tries to reach the summit in order to climb. -- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Life experiences can range from ordinary to life-changing, from mundane to transcendent. Experiences are an important source of happiness. Relationships are often defined and strengthened through shared experiences. Unlike the acquisition of material possessions, experiences are much more resistant to the process of adaptation, and can remain a source of happiness well after the experience is over. When we think back across our life (e.g., in developing a life narrative), it is usually memorable experiences that we remember as the important defining and transition points in our life. In this section I will explore optimal experiences, which I define as experiences that are highly engaging, meaningful incidents in life that create a sense of joy, awe, peace, and/or a sense of flow. Optimal experiences are high quality experiences that allow us to be present and to fully feel a connection to something that is meaningful to us. Optimal experiences are often significant to a life narrative and often involve a sense of transcendence. In this section, I will explore different types of optimal experiences.

6.1. Flow Experiences

Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play.

---Heraclitus

Csikszentmihalyi (1991) defines an optimal experience as those experiences that “we make happen… that stretch our limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (p. 3). According to Csikszentmihalyi, happiness doesn’t depend on external events, but it does depend on how we interpret those events. Because happiness is
an elusive goal, Csikszentmihalyi says it can only be attained indirectly by increasing the quality of one’s life. And the most important thing someone can do to increase the quality of their life is to control their inner experience. The most important tool we have to shape the quality of our experience is attention. In other words, what we allow into our awareness determines the quality of our life. We know that much of our awareness is determined by our automatic biological, psychological and cultural scripts and habits. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) says that we don’t inhabit our lives in any meaningful way, unless we take ownership and learn to direct our attention according to our intentions.

Csikszentmihalyi (1991) started his investigation of optimal experiences by studying a group of artists who painted because they enjoyed painting, rather than for any external reward or goal. He expanded his research to include a variety of activities such as amateur athletes, dancers and music composers. His goal was to explore what in the quality of a subjective experience made that experience intrinsically rewarding. In his research, Csikszentmihalyi (1991) identified a number of conditions he felt are important to create a flow experience. As mentioned above, the experience should involve one-pointed focused concentration on what needs to be done, and engaging in it moment by moment such that there is a merging of the action and awareness. The individual is too involved in the activity to think about failure or to think about things unrelated to the task. By connecting to something larger than oneself, unnecessary self-monitoring and self-consciousness disappear, “the ‘me’ disappears, and the ‘I’ takes over” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992b, p. 33).

While in the flow, there is a distortion of time that makes time seem to slow down while in the flow state. The activity that helps create the flow state should be done for its own sake and not for external rewards. It should be intrinsically rewarding to the individual
and require a good balance between challenge and skill. This balance is important, if the activity is too easy, then instead of a state of flow, the individual could be bored. On the other hand, if the challenge is too hard relative to the skill set of the individual, then the result can be anxiety, failure to perform successfully, and an inability to merge into the moment. You want the challenge to stretch the person, but not overwhelm them. The individual should have a subjective sense of control and belief in being able to perform the activity successfully. The activity should also involve a clear purpose, clear goals to focus the effort, and immediate feedback on performance and progress while performing the activity.

Creating flow experiences can be a difficult challenge for many people. It is not uncommon for individuals to not be clear about their own strengths and skills, and thus not know where to focus their energy. In addition, creating flow experiences requires a willingness to stretch outside one’s comfort zone, and requires sufficient willpower, focus, and energy to be persistent while striving to meet the challenge. Developing a life narrative and getting clear about our values, life goals, and our strengths can provide the direction and the commitment needed to engage in flow experiences.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to creating flow is being too focused on extrinsic motivational factors, such as acclaim and external rewards. Research shows that when an individual receives extrinsic rewards for doing something that they enjoy intrinsically, as a result of the reward, they lose intrinsic interest in the same action that use to be intrinsically motivating (Kohn, 1999). In our competitive culture, we are taught early to have a performance orientation, such that the primary motivation to perform a task is to win and thus to garner the extrinsic rewards that are contingent on performance (Phillips & Gully, 1997). Performance outcomes are often linked to the individual’s sense of identity, and
failure to perform the task may represent a failure in identity. Individuals with a performance orientation often experience cognitive difficulty, negative affect, low persistence, ineffective strategies, and negative attributions of ability when performance waivers (Dweck, 1989), which is bound to happen at least occasionally when striving to meet a challenging goal. A performance orientation makes it difficult to achieve flow due to the continual anxiety over performance and the focus on external rewards, both which pull the individual out of engaging in the task.

To achieve flow, it is important to adopt a learning orientation. In a learning orientation, an individual approaches tasks with the intention of developing their skills and abilities, thus is more likely to interpret a mistake as a potential learning experience (Phillips & Gully, 1997). With a learning orientation, the individual tends to demonstrate increased persistence, effective strategies and positive attributions of ability, even in the face of failure (Hofmann, 1993). This open-minded approach makes full task engagement more likely and helps build intrinsic motivation to do the task, two important conditions to create flow.

It is important to make a distinction between the full engagement of flow and obsession or addiction. Addiction can create an imbalance in one’s life and the experience becomes more about soothing the addictive craving (an extrinsic motivator) than about achieving flow. When obsessed, the individual becomes more focused on controlling the process rather than letting the experience develop naturally. Csikszentmihalyi also cautions that “faux flow” is not the same thing as flow. He defines faux flow as passive or less rewarding experiences, such as watching television, playing video games or idle gossip.

In addition to asking people to reflect on their experiences, Csikszentmihalyi (1991) also used an experience sampling technique in his research to measure what people were
experiencing in the moment. This approach used a beeper that would go off randomly eight times a day. The individual would then write down what they were doing and thinking about at the time the beeper went off. He found that there were basically two types of enjoyment – one type was physical or bodily pleasures such as eating (especially when shared with others) and sex. An interesting note, the highest levels of happiness on average were reported at meal times (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The other type of enjoyment identified was flow experiences. He found that flow experiences often occurred during physical movement such as athletics (individual or team sports), solitary creative pursuits such as writing and painting, and during times that either music or other people are involved.

In further studies, Csikszentmihalyi (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001) found that incorporating experiences of flow within a meaningful framework (“subjective significance”) can result in the “vital engagement” of one’s whole life. And when that vital engagement in one’s calling produces something of quality and value in the world which is matched by society’s esteem, then that person receives the additional benefit of being in alignment in a healthy field of work. This finding relates flow experiences to our earlier discussion of meaning. Thus, when optimal experiences are consciously linked to our life narrative, they become even more meaningful and reinforce our sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation.

6.2. Stillness Experiences

Be still and you will move forward on the tide of the spirit. –Taoist Contemplation

The majority of men live without being thoroughly conscious that they are spiritual beings. – Soren Kierkegaard

Csikszentmihalyi (1992a) points out that flow experiences in western culture tend to be biased toward action, competition, and goals. Most non-psychologists probably associate
“being in the flow” with athletics, although as the concept has become more widespread, flow is generally thought of as being fully engaged in an activity. Another type of optimal experience that is equally as important for happiness can be thought of as stillness. Similar to the ebb and flow of the rhythm of the ocean, we need to balance our activity with stillness. Unlike flow experiences, stillness is not focused on goal-directed behavior. It doesn’t want to focus the mind on a task; it wants to quiet the chatter of the mind. Through meditation and mindfulness, the mind can regain perspective and can access higher states of consciousness. Like flow experiences, an important outcome of stillness is to learn to control attention.

“Meditation refers to a family of techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a non-analytical way, and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ruminating thought” (Shapiro, 1980, p.14). The word meditation means “to heal by seeing, by consciously directing one’s attention” (Perlmutter, 2005, p. 11). Since the 1970’s, western scientists have been scientifically measuring the benefits of meditation, although outside of its spiritual context. There is a great deal of empirical evidence building toward what yogis have known for thousands of years, that meditation is valuable (Shapiro, et al., 2002; Davidson et al., 2003). When Western scientists first started studying meditation in the 1970’s, the focus was on the benefits of pain and symptom reduction. Today there is greater focus on how meditation helps to cultivate one’s potential to access positive experiences, and meditation’s impact on personal growth and development.

According to Richard Davidson, meditation changes our relationship to our thoughts and emotions (Davidson et al., 2003). As described in the book Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama (Goleman, 2003), in 2000 the Dali Lama sent monks to the University of Wisconsin so that the brains of advanced meditation practitioners
could be studied using the Hubble telescope of the brain, the fMRI. What they expected to find was relaxation in the brains of the meditation practitioners, but what they found instead was a heightened activation in their brains. Specifically, there was considerable activity in the left prefrontal cortex which is a part of the brain that registers positive emotions (Vaillant, 2008). Some of the many other benefits attributed to the practice of meditation include inducing mindfulness, increasing physical relaxation, reducing heart rate, balancing holistic thinking, increasing positive emotions, empathy and self-actualization and greater equality between left and right brain thinking (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre, 2002). Meditation and mindfulness are effective ways to reduce the negative impact of the low road by facilitating the soothing of our fight-or-flight responses.

A. Meditation and Mindfulness

* Meditation re-engineers the topography of the unconscious portion of the mind. – Eknath Easwaran

Shapiro, et al. (2002) grouped the many meditation techniques into two categories, concentration meditation and mindfulness meditation. The purpose of concentration meditation is to quiet the mind and focus attention solely on a single object to the exclusion of all other internal and external stimuli. When the mind wanders, the meditative practice is to bring the mental focus back to the object (Benson, 1996). The most common examples of concentrative objects in meditation are the physical repetitive sensation of the breath, a sound, or a word or phrase (often called a mantra). The word mantra literally means “place to rest your mind” (Taylor, 2006, p. 169) which captures the essence of what it means to focus the mind. Concentration meditation cultivates the skills of intention and focus. From a Yoga Science perspective “with the regular practice of seated meditation, the buddhi (the conscience) increasingly reflects the intuitive library of knowledge of the superconscious
mind” (Perlmutter, 2005, p. 280). Meditation and mindfulness help to cultivate an ongoing dialogue of guidance with our internal wisdom.

Mindfulness meditation is an attempt to be present, without judgment, to all internal and external stimuli such as sensations, thoughts, feelings, images, and sounds. Mindfulness meditation opens one’s attention as a witness or observer, rather than as a participant. Bishop, et al (2004) define mindfulness as, “a kind of non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is” (p. 232). They identify the two components of mindfulness as the self-regulation of attention (e.g., focus) and adopting an orientation of openness, acceptance, and curiosity. Since the process of mindfulness includes witnessing thoughts, mindfulness is often thought of as a metacognitive process, however it is not. Brown & Ryan (2004) propose that metacognition is a thought process itself (thinking about thinking) and since mindfulness involves the awareness of thinking, then mindfulness can’t be metacognition. This is important because it suggests that mindfulness is “not subject to the distortion and biases inherent in cognition” (Brown & Ryan, 2004, p. 243). This detachment from mental biases is an important outcome of mindfulness.

There are many forms of mindfulness meditation. A simple form of mindfulness meditation involves a person focusing on their breathing and allows other emerging stimuli, such as thoughts and feelings, to enter into their awareness, and simply acknowledging them without judging them as right or wrong, simply seeing what is. If the person starts to get carried away in their thoughts, they simply come back to the breath, using it as an anchor. An important benefit of mindfulness meditation is that when it’s cultivated as a daily
practice, a nonjudgmental “way of being” carries over into one’s thoughts, feelings, actions and experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 1996).

Shapiro et al. (2002) suggest that there can be great value in making our intention explicit in meditation practice and research (and I would add in daily life as well). They define intention in two parts. The first is “how we attend” and is focused on mindfulness qualities such as non-striving, non-judging, acceptance, patience, trust, openness, and letting go, gratitude, gentleness, generosity, empathy and loving-kindness. Remembering to keep an intention on mindfulness qualities while meditating can expand the benefits to the meditator on multiple levels. The second is “why we attend” which can help the individual expand from the micro (individual) to the macro (social, global and universal) perspective and thereby create a closer connection to the original purpose of meditation which includes self-actualization and greater meaning in life.

B. Cultivating Compassion

*The capacity to be happy depends on our ability to feel things other than happiness.* —John Schumaker

“Meditation is a process of lightening up, of trusting the basic goodness of what we have and who we are and of realizing that any wisdom that exists, exists in what we already have. Our wisdom is all mixed up with what we call our neurosis. Our brilliance, our juiciness, our spiciness is all mixed up with our craziness and our confusion, and therefore it doesn’t do any good to try to get rid of our so-called negative aspects, because in that process we also get rid of our basic wonderfulness. We can lead our life so as to become more awake to who we are, or what we’re doing. The key is to wake up, to become more alert, more inquisitive and curious about ourselves.” —Pema Chodron

Buddhist monk Pema Chodron (1991) says that a mindfulness practice provides a practical way to cultivate compassion, within you as well as towards others. The process of cultivating compassion begins with witnessing our own blaming, justifying, and egoistic
ways. We tend to think of ourselves as kind and loving individuals so facing the negative and cruel side of our own nature can invoke considerable cognitive dissonance. This can be very difficult and painful, thus we typically resolve the dissonance by avoiding the thoughts and feelings altogether. Yet facing the pain of our “dark side” without criticizing ourselves is necessary to broaden our perspective and make it possible to have compassion for ourselves in this moment of pain. The next step is to drop your story line. In other words, instead of repressing or acting out really feel the wound under the addiction, the self-loathing or the anger or the fear and in that process make friends with yourself (Chodron, 1998). It’s almost counterintuitive, like driving into the skid to find our way out. One must simply stay with the hurt, pain and negativity without judgment in order to come out on the other side lighter, with less concern about ourselves, our worries, fears, and unfulfilled desires.

By coming to know ourselves so completely, we come to know others. Chodron (1991) sees our inability to compassionately sit with our negative feelings as the source of a lot of the pain and destructive behavior we see in the world. Our inability to tolerate our own fear and pain can lead to hurtful behaviors toward ourselves and others. Whereas widening our perspective to see that our own viewpoint can imprison us or set us free can have the opposite effect and cause a chain reaction toward compassion and empathy for ourselves and others. Chodron (1991) states that, “your own experience of pleasure and pain becomes the way that you recognize your kinship with all sentient beings (p.63).

6.3. Other Optimal Experiences

I have explored two types of optimal experiences – goal-directed flow experiences and stillness experiences that quiet the mind and increase awareness and attention. Because they involve opposite approaches to creating optimal experiences (engaging the mind
through flow and quieting the mind through stillness), they are in a sense the yin and yang of optimal experiences. There are other types of optimal experiences outside of either flow or stillness experiences. The awe generated by a beautiful sunset, the wonder of a performance of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, and the joy created by a laughing baby are all highly engaging, meaningful experiences, and yet are not created by either quieting the mind or engaging in goal directed activities. These optimal experiences can come from interactions with loved ones, social play, being in nature, and an appreciation of the arts.

Another conception of optimal experiences was identified by Abraham Maslow (1998). He founded humanistic psychology in part to bring attention and understanding to the significance of what he called “peak experiences.” He was interested in the distinction between process and product, and wanted to understand the intrinsic motivation connected to peak experiences. He proposed that intrinsic motivation came from an innate “desire for ‘self-actualization’ – the need to discover one’s potentialities and limitations through intense activity and experience” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992a). A peak experience according to Maslow is:

“The universe is perceived as a unified whole where everything is accepted and nothing is judged or ranked; egocentrism and goal-striving disappear as a person feels merged with the universe (and often with God); perceptions of time and space are altered; and the person is flooded with feelings of wonder, awe, joy, love, and gratitude.” (Haidt, 295)

In his development of flow experiences, Csikszentmihalyi was inspired by Maslow’s work on peak experiences. Based on Maslow’s definition, peak experiences can be a product of flow, stillness, or other optimal experiences. It seems that peak experiences are defined by
their strong intensity, and have an ecstatic quality to them. My sense is that only a small number of optimal experiences have the intensity of a peak experience, and that a peak experience can appear unexpectedly as an intense by-product of an optimal experience.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) noted that “in many ways, the secret to a happy life is to learn to get flow from as many of the things we have to do as possible” (p. 113). I echo that sentiment and propose that we seek to create optimal experiences in all areas of our life by building healthy relationships; by leveraging our strengths in activities that are important in our life narrative; by taking the time to quiet our minds and listen; by choosing experiences that are highly meaningful and by appreciating them.
SECTION 7: MAKING DECISIONS

True successful decision-making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking. –Malcolm Gladwell

When making a decision of minor importance, I have always found it advantageous to consider all the pros and cons. In vital matters, however, such as the choice of a mate or a profession, the decision should come from the unconscious, from somewhere within ourselves. –Sigmund Freud

Decisions are a part of life. We make thousands of decisions a day ranging from the mundane (what’s for dinner) to the meaningful (how to talk to my daughter who is angry with me). As our decisions accumulate over time, they determine our life trajectory, leading us towards, or away from, our goals and dreams. Thus, the quality of our lives is dependent on the quality of the decisions we make, and is an important contributor to happiness. Each decision we make takes us down one path, and closes off all others. As Barry Schwartz (2004) says “we make the most of our freedoms by learning to make good choices about the things that matter, while at the same time unburdening ourselves from too much concern about the things that don’t” (p. 5). As discussed in detail in the Meaning section, the key is being clear about what is important, what we value, and who we are. It can be very difficult to make effective decisions when we are operating from a lack of self-knowledge and self-awareness. It can also be difficult to make good decisions because of the biological, cognitive, and cultural biases discussed earlier in this paper.

Decision-making as a science is certainly still in its infancy. However there is a great deal of research being done on what happens in the brain when we make decisions. In How We Decide, Jonah Lehrer (2009) describes some of the current research that supports the
theory that the quality of your decisions is a function of the quality of the arguments in your brain – meaning how we reconcile the diverse and often conflicting processes that take place in our brain has the potential to make us better or worse at predictions and decisions. In this section, I will explore best practices on making good decisions and how we can integrate them into our daily lives. The section will be structured around four key elements of effective decision making: (1) limiting the number of choices (2) making a “good” decision rather than the “best” decision (3) balancing the short and long-term consequences of our decisions and (4) balancing conscious thinking with the intelligence of our unconscious.

7.1. Limiting the Number of Choices

In our modern world, our decisions often involve a choice of many different options. A simple walk down the cereal aisle of a grocery store will show the overwhelming number of brands and types of breakfast cereals that we can choose from. This number has exploded in the last thirty years, and is representative of the proliferation of different options across most consumer products (Schwartz, 2004). At first blush, this seems to be a positive development, having more choices can improve the odds that you will find exactly what you want. However, recent studies have shown when faced with more options, choice makers show lower subsequent satisfaction with their choices than when faced with fewer choices (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). In addition, as discussed earlier, there are limits to the cognitive processing capabilities of the rational deliberative mind.

Earlier I mentioned that our working memory (short-term memory) can only hold between five and nine separate items at any one time. So when comparing products that have multiple features, we can quickly outstrip the processing capacity of our rational mind. This limitation in processing can also hurt our ability to make a decision in a couple of other ways.
With information overload, we can accidentally filter out data relevant to our decision. In addition, the willpower we need to sort through the options can be easily compromised. This can be seen in a Stanford study described by Lehrer (2009) that showed the effect on willpower when the mind is focusing on two things at the same time. Research subjects were given either a two digit or a seven digit number to remember and while they were holding the number in their memory, they were asked if they wanted a snack, either fruit salad or a piece of chocolate cake. A significant difference was found between the conditions for choosing the two options. With short term memory holding the higher number of digits, subjects were nearly twice as likely to choose chocolate cake as the fruit salad. The researcher proposed that the “cognitive load” of holding the extra five digits in memory made it much more likely to give in to the emotional choice of the chocolate cake.

With the complexities of our modern world, it is very common for us to be multi-tasking. Too many choices, or as Schwartz (2004) calls it “choice overload” can lead to distress and bad decisions. This should come as no surprise in light of what we know about the way our brains are wired. Gary Marcus (2008) divides our thinking into two major systems: the ancestral or reflexive system and the deliberative system. The reflexive system (the low road) is emotional, short-sighted and makes quick decisions automatically, either with or without conscious awareness. Marcus points out that the ancestral system seems to be our default mode and focuses on meeting short term needs and desires. The deliberative system (the high road) takes longer to make a decision because it consciously tries to take into account the logic of our goals and choices. Yoga Science refers to these two major functions as synthesis and analysis, respectively (Iyengar, 2005).
An interesting analogy for these two systems was proposed by Jonathan Haidt (2006). He refers to the reflexive system as an elephant and to the deliberative system as the rider of the elephant. In the analogy, the elephant is much bigger than the rider, and the rider has limited control in guiding the elephant. The elephant is so strong, impulsive, and automatic that even though the rider is very sophisticated, it can take quite a bit of willpower for the rider to gain control of the elephant in this battle. So when the rider is distracted, the already powerful elephant gets what it wants.

One way that Schwartz (2004) offers to ease the “burden” of choice that the “freedom” of choice imposes is to consciously constrain ourselves by limiting the decisions we make by using rules, presumptions, standards and routines. In effect, we consciously choose to integrate into the unconscious mind pre-programmed choices so that it will automatically make decisions we want to make, but that we can’t always count on making consciously due to the fluctuations in our willpower. Schwartz suggests that this approach allows us to condense a host of stress-inducing decisions into one rule to follow, such as “never cheat on your partner” (p. 113).

By creating decision rules, our preferred choices can be internalized into our reflexive system and become our default mode. For example, if my default mode for breakfast is oatmeal then I don’t have to put energy into deciding what I’ll have for breakfast every morning. So making another choice will require conscious attention, which is fine on those occasions where I may choose to have something different. Another voluntary constraint is using standards to narrow our options. Schwartz (2004) uses the example of friendships as a way to demonstrate how we use standards and routines (habits) to limit the choices we have to make. We are attracted to friends who meet our standards of kindness, character and wit
and we use the constraint of routine (habit) to limit the decisions we have to make about how we spend our time.

One decision rule that Schwartz (2004) recommends using to outwit the “tyranny of choice” is to make decisions nonreversible. The idea of a nonreversible decision can seem counterintuitive to what we think is desirable. The flexibility in being able to change our mind seems preferable to the rigidity of no escape. Schwartz (2005), however, says that, “what we don’t realize is that the very option of being allowed to change our minds seems to increase the chances that we will change our minds” (p.228). Studies show that simply having the ability to change our mind can lead to second-guessing and less satisfaction over a decision (Gilbert, & Ebert, 2002). Our psychological immune system (e.g. cognitive dissonance) and reframing to make the best of a situation tend to kick in once we’ve made a decision that cannot be reversed.

The downside of voluntary constraints is that the possibility always exists that we could be missing better opportunities. However, as seen in the section below, we are better off narrowing our options and choosing the first “good” option we find rather than spending too much time searching for the “best” choice. The way that we approach our decisions and how we experience our life is more important than the actual decision we make. The benefit of voluntary limits is that we are free to focus on enriching the quality of our manageable choices and the opportunities and experiences they provide.

7.2. Making a “Good” Decision Instead of the “Best” Decision

Traditional decision making theory has used the concept of “rational man” or “economic man” to explain how we should make decisions (Kirzner, 2000; Simon, 1957). In this conception, the human mind is a computer that dispassionately looks at all of the
possible options and mathematically weighs the data against the relative importance of the
different decision criteria. Using a formula that incorporates the decision rules, the mind
then chooses the option that has the highest score according to the formula. Even though the
option chosen may not score the highest across all of the criteria, it was the best overall
choice based on the algorithm. This process of searching for the best solution is called
maximizing. The “rational man” approach makes some important assumptions – that we
have access to all of the relevant data, that the data itself is accurate, and most importantly,
that we can construct a complex mathematical formula in our mind and perform the
necessary calculations to find the best solution.

These assumptions, however, aren’t realizable in real life. We typically don’t have all
of the data when we need to make a decision, and the data we do have has to pass through
our cognitive biases, so the data isn’t necessarily accurate. In addition, as discussed earlier,
our rational mind isn’t a computer, and can’t handle the cognitive load of complex
calculations considering multiple options. Finally, as I will discuss below, we can’t make
decisions without our emotions; they are crucial for rational thought. Our emotions can
introduce their own biases into the decision making process. So, although the “rational man”
may seem compelling to some, it just doesn’t work in most real life decisions that have any
degree of complexity.

Yet we are encouraged to invest considerable time and energy in maximizing, seeking
out all of the alternatives in order to find the best solution. One motivator for this approach
is the fear of the regret we may feel by making the wrong choice. This fear of regret is
reinforced due to the tendency to compare the outcome of a decision, (especially if the
outcome didn’t meet our expectations), with the perceived advantages of the other options
while disregarding the perceived disadvantages of the options not taken (Schwartz, 2004). So we tend to be more prone to potential regret if we have more options (and thus have more to negatively compare to our outcome). And as seen in the previous section, more options can be an impediment to a good decision. An important remedy to this tendency is to look at options holistically, with a balanced view towards both the positive and negative elements of each option.

There are two additional, often unconsidered, downsides for using a maximizing approach to make decisions. The often considerable time necessary to rigorously research all of the options to make a decision could be used productively for other meaningful pursuits. This opportunity cost is usually not considered when thinking about the “cost” of trying to make the best decision. We also don’t anticipate the effect of the psychological processes of adaptation and cognitive dissonance that we discussed earlier. The hedonic pleasure that we gain by choosing the best option can dissipate fairly quickly as we adapt to it (Haidt, 2006). Therefore, when making decisions, it is useful to remind ourselves about adaptation, cognitive dissonance and reframing and refrain from using a maximizing approach.

In 1978 Herbert Simon (1957) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics for proposing an alternative to the maximizing approach that represents a more realistic way of making decisions. He coined this method “satisficing.” The satisficing approach involves establishing a clear standard for a satisfactory decision, and then choosing the first option encountered that meets the standard for satisfaction, rather than searching for the best option. Satisficing reduces the amount of time needed to make a good decision, thus freeing time for other pursuits. And since the pleasure derived from the decision outcome is subject to adaptation, it makes sense to choose an option that is good enough rather than spending even
more time searching for more options. The key to using satisficing is ensuring that the standard of satisfaction is appropriately set. If the standard is set too low, then the decision outcome may not be satisfactory in the long run, and if it is set too high, then the process becomes a maximizing process.

As was described in more detail in the Meaning section, gratitude can be a powerful source of happiness. Schwartz (2004) points out that gratitude can also be very helpful in slowing down or stopping the process of adaptation. Being grateful for the outcome of a decision and for the blessings in one’s life can stop the process of taking the outcome for granted, and the joy one experiences with it can stay fresh and tangible.

In order to deal with the fear of regret over making a bad decision, it is important to keep in mind outcome bias, a tendency to judge a decision by its eventual outcome instead of based on the quality of the decision at the time it was made (Baron & Hershey, 1988). An outcome can be a result of unanticipated events or factors outside of our control. Instead, we need to focus on having a good process of making decisions and an understanding that we made a good decision based on the information we had on hand when the decision was made. Having an undesirable outcome or finding out new information after the fact that would have changed our decision does not mean that it was a bad decision.

7.3. Balancing the Short and Long-term Consequences of our Decisions

Passing pleasure or perennial joy? This is the choice one is to make always.

--Katha Upanishad

In our instant gratification culture, we have been encouraged and conditioned to make decisions for instant gratification. Individually, this can be seen with credit card balances out of control, obesity on the rise, and the myriad of addictions due to the need for a quick fix.
Culturally, this can be seen in environmental and fiscal policies that are short-sighted and that mortgage our future for our culture’s short term gratification.

We are strongly wired to seek pleasure or avoid pain in the present moment, so we tend to be impulsive, short-term oriented in our choices, and we have a biological bias for immediate gratification. In addition, as mentioned earlier, if the person is experiencing any kind of cognitive load, the willpower needed to delay gratification to make a better long-term choice can be compromised. If we are overwhelmed, we default to our automatic decision process. So the reflexive system (the elephant) can make quick decisions quickly and automatically before the deliberative system (the rider) can catch up, because the deliberate system consciously tries to take into account the logic of our goals and choices prior to making a decision (Marcus, 2008).

If the immediate payoff is very compelling, the path of least resistance is for our cognitive dissonance to distort and ignore data that would make a case for delaying gratification (e.g., I know that smoking isn’t good for me, but I really need cigarettes to help me through the stress of my job right now).

As we discussed earlier, our brain is set up so that “NOW” takes precedence over later. Unless we recognize our propensity to prioritize the immediate moment over future considerations and develop strategies that can help us delay gratification for a higher value, we will be tempted to make irrational choices that do not ultimately benefit our long-term goals. Mischel’s (1960) clever longitudinal study shows a strong correlation between a four year old child’s ability to delay gratification and their success many years later in college. In the study, a child was offered a single marshmallow immediately or two marshmallows if the child waited 10 minutes. Many children succumbed to the temptation of wanting to eat the
marshmallow immediately and couldn’t wait. However, the other children, with the longer-term option in mind, chose to wait for the two marshmallows. It wasn’t easy, but they used some creative strategies to distract themselves from the temptation of eating the one marshmallow. The strategies included closing their eyes, sitting on their hands, singing, and pretending the marshmallow was a picture of a marshmallow and not a real marshmallow!

Learning from the four year olds, since we tend to favor an emphasis on the short-term, it is important to be able to effectively consider long-term needs and consequences in our decision making. Another way to do this is by getting clear about our priorities through developing a life narrative, long-term goals, important values, and strong sense of who we want to be. This will help us to make good decisions not influenced by unhealthy cultural norms and the bad habits of those around us. It is important to note that making a decision that is aligned with who you are and who you most want to be in the world doesn’t mean you will like the outcome or consequences. The outcome is out of your control.

Yoga Science also promotes non-attachment to the outcome (to the “fruits of our labors”). What Leonard Perlmutter (2005) says we are detaching from is the tyranny of the ego and the belief that we can only be happy if we get what we want. The result is that this non-attachment makes it possible to “enjoy the delights of the world, with discrimination and without the bondage of attachment and its painful consequences” (Perlmutter, 2005, p. 408).

Another way of identifying what is important in a decision is the distinction of preya and shreya from Yoga Science (Perlmutter, 2005). In Yoga science, the conscience (buddhi) is what makes the decisions. When the conscience reflects the Divine Reality, it chooses shreya, which is the path toward the highest and greatest good. When the conscience reflects selfish desires and ego/sense gratifications, then it chooses preya, which is the path of least
resistance and is typically the pleasant, easy, comfortable, attractive and familiar choice. Shreya may not necessarily be the pleasant, attractive or comfortable choice but it is the choice that leads to lasting joy. Sometimes the pleasant and the good are one and the same but not always. So for example, doing something in moderation, like eating one piece of chocolate (which can be delightful) is shreya, yet overindulging by eating a whole box of chocolates would be preya.

Perlmutter (2005) points out that when the conscience is discriminating, it sacrifices the preya in order to serve the shreya. Unlike the common assumption that there is always the “right” choice, the shreya in one situation can become the preya in another situation, so it is important for the conscience to stay connected to the Divine Reality so to make the decision that best reflects the Divine Reality. For example, you’re on your way to work with a charity organization (which is shreya) and your friend calls, is ill and needs a ride to the hospital. “What was a shreya has become a preya to be surrendered and a previously unforeseen circumstance suddenly has become the shreya you must serve” (Perlmutter, 2005, p.42). The shreya/preya distinction is important because it illustrates the need to make a decision according to one’s highest values rather than defaulting to what one wants in the moment or what one has chosen previously.

As mentioned earlier, it is also very helpful to create habits and rituals that automatically make important decisions for us that support our values. For example, an athlete can create a ritual where he works out first thing in the morning every day. By deciding in advance, he doesn’t have to make the decision; he simply does it because it is a habit. This approach will tap into the power of the reflexive system and help our default decisions to prioritize our values and long-term benefits.
In order to strengthen willpower and stay focused on long-term priorities, it is helpful to develop advance contingency plans to make decision rules in advance for certain situations. For example, if I am cutting back on desserts, I can have a contingency plan for when I go to a social gathering and I am offered dessert (“If I am offered dessert, then I will decline and drink fruit juice instead”). Since I have thought about the decision in advance, I don’t have to rely upon my willpower to help me avoid the temptation of having dessert.

When consciously making a decision, a simple cognitive frame that is helpful in considering the long-term consequences of a decision is to ask what are the consequences of my decisions in 10 minutes? 10 days? 10 months? Ten years? This series of questions help to place the decision into a larger context.

7.4. Balancing Conscious Thinking with the Intelligence of Our Unconscious

Go to your bosom; knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know. --Shakespeare

It was his intuition which was preeminently extraordinary. So happy in his conjectures that he seemed to know more than he could have possibly any hope of proving. The proofs were dressed up afterwards; they were not the instrument of discovery.

–John Maynard Keynes on Isaac Newton

As a legacy of the rational man approach, we tend to think of decision making as a rational, conscious process; yet recent research has confirmed that there is intelligence and decision making capability outside of our conscious awareness (Lehrer, 2009), which is important since the conscious process is a more limited process than the well-developed automatic, multi-tasking reflexive system.

In our science-driven culture of rational empiricism, we are taught to distrust gut feelings, hunches, and intuition. We find them difficult to substantiate. Philip Goldberg (1998) asserts that such “insistence on evidence and rigorous verification… are imperative in
a secular, pluralistic society... and as such has made unprecedented affluence, comfort and health” possible (p.197). Goldberg also notes that an unintended consequence of the scientific dogma, however, is that it discredited the intuitive approach that helped launch the whole scientific discovery process in the first place. In trying to minimize the imperfections of subjectivity we have neglected to try to elevate the knower’s subjective ability to know.

There is wisdom and knowing that comes from outside of our rational, conscious mind. We can make a distinction between the wisdom of the body, often called gut feelings, and the wisdom of the Universe, often called intuition. The terminology can be confusing, since terms are often used interchangeably. I will use the term “gut feelings” to represent the knowledge and experience that have been internalized into the reflexive system (e.g., the knowledge and unconscious expertise of firefighters, nurses, and athletes) and the associated visceral response. I will use the term “intuition” to represent the higher wisdom outside of our conscious awareness.

A. Gut Feelings

The experience internalized into the reflexive system as gut intelligence can be seen clearly in experts as they perform their tasks. Whether it be driving a car or throwing a football under pressure, experts have internalized experience and expertise in the form of decision rules that operate unconsciously and reflexively, which allows them to make decisions and act quickly during performance (Gigerenzer, 2007). The gut intelligence allows an expert to have a baseline of competence that frees up limited cognitive resources to focus conscious attention on other tasks. In addition, the gut intelligence can sense when something is wrong in the environment (Gigerenzer, 2007). As discussed earlier, we have highly tuned automatic processes that scan the environment for threats. When something
happens that is unexpected, even at a very subtle level, our error detection circuitry is engaged, and we get a gut feeling that something is amiss, even if we can’t consciously tell what it is. The gut feeling is the visceral response triggered by the gut intelligence, and is a signal to pay attention.

**B. Emotions**

Emotions have been shown to be a necessary component of making decisions. In *Descartes Error*, Antonio Damasio (2005) has found that a brain that cannot feel cannot make up its mind. Reason cannot exist without emotions. Research has shown that emotions play an important role in narrowing down the number of options. For example, in one Damasio (2005) study, the Iowa gambling task experiment, participants are presented with four decks of cards; two of the decks had higher risk cards than the other two decks. When a card is chosen from the stack, the participants either wins money or loses money. The researcher didn’t tell the participants which stacks are higher risk, which means they contain cards that had greater payouts but also had cards with higher punishments. The purpose of the game is to make as much money as possible. To simulate the game of life, very little instruction is given up front to the participants. They are forced to learn the ground rules from experience, and discover through trial and error what’s good and what’s bad in the game. What the participants would eventually discover is that drawing cards from the low risk decks would make more money than from the high risk decks. What is interesting about this study is while there were a total of 100 opportunities to draw a card; most players had to turn over about 80 cards before they could consciously explain which of the stacks of cards the better choice was. Interestingly, through the use of skin conduction tests (measuring nervousness and sweaty palms), the researchers discovered that the participants’ emotions
had identified the better decks of cards within the first 10 cards they turned over. The participants who were aware of and trusted the nerves and sweaty palms made more money.

We are simply unable to make decisions without emotions. Damasio (2005) discovered this while working with Eliot, a patient that had a damaged orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), which is responsible for integrating emotion into the decision making process. On the surface, Eliot appeared normal with his intellect intact. Upon closer look, he was devoid of emotion and incapable of making decisions. He was a stranger to his family since the “wants and desires that defined him as an individual” were gone (Lehrer, 2009, p.16).

Jonah Lehrer (2009) points out the significance of these findings are that emotions and reason depend on each other. The previous belief that emotion needed to be suppressed in order to make a good, rational decision was proven wrong. Instead the decision making process is as follows: (1) alternative choices are assessed, outside of consciousness, by the primitive, automatic, reflexive brain areas; (2) that assessment is then converted into an emotion; and (3) the OFC connects the emotion and integrates it into the decision making process.

We need to think and feel. Although emotions are essential, having too much emotion (e.g. being angry, depressed, or craving) is not conducive to good decision making because the emotion becomes the priority over the decision (Horney, 1991). Ideally we need to use both the conscious deliberation and automatic reflexive systems in their proper contexts: reason and emotion need to be in dialogue with each other. In other words, the elephant and the rider need to work together. Lehrer (2009) points out that the best investors and poker players are able to find a balance and use one brain system to improve the performance of the other.
C. Intuition

Deikman (1998) refers to the connection to the wisdom of the Universe as higher-order intuition, which he defines as “a direct knowing of non-dual realities that extends perception beyond the boundaries of time and place”. This concept of deeper wisdom that we can tap into outside of our conscious mind and our gut feelings has long been a cornerstone of spirituality and religion. In Yoga Science, this deep wisdom can be accessed when we quiet the mind and look within (Perlmutter, 2005). Perlmutter (2005) refers to this intuitive library of knowledge and wisdom within as the superconscious mind. One example of tapping into this source of wisdom and knowledge includes Paul McCartney’s composition of the song *Yesterday*, which he said was revealed to him in its entirety when he awoke from a dream.

Having the awareness that there are sources of wisdom and ways that we make decisions that are outside our conscious, rational thinking is an important step towards achieving a balance between deliberative thinking, gut feeling and intuition. One tip that can help this integration is to get quiet prior to making an important decision, and pay attention to your body. Are you relaxed and at peace when you think of an option or are you anxious? Which option produces a visceral feeling? Are you drawn to an option even though your rational mind is trying to talk you out of it? Another tip would be to tap into intuition through meditation. Once the mind is quiet, see if any images, thoughts, or sensations arise from the quiet mind that seems to indicate a choice of one option over another. A third approach is to think about the decision prior to going to bed, and see if anything comes up in your dreams or is simply available to you upon waking in the morning.
The challenge is to discern the difference between wishful thinking and gut feelings or intuition. You can learn to do this if you test your gut feelings and intuition over time, and pay attention to the outcomes of your decisions. With experience, you will be able to detect the difference between the visceral sensation of a gut feeling and that of an emotional bias, as well as the difference between intuition and prejudice or a cognitive bias.

7.5. Making Good Decisions

We want our decisions to reinforce what is important to us and lead us in the right direction based on our life narrative and our values. The big decisions we make are important, but so are the thousands of small decisions we make, because each time we make the same decision, we deepen neural pathways and reinforce our habits. Since our reflexive system is so powerful, it is important that our habits and unconscious decision rules help us make good decisions. We can’t rely too heavily on our limited supply of willpower to motivate us, so building healthy habits can be very useful to making better decisions.

Mental flexibility is crucial because different situations require different modes of thought; both thinking and feeling are necessary for good decision making. It is imperative that we find a crucial balance between them because too little or too much of either emotion or rational thought is problematic. The best way to do that is by thinking about how we’re thinking which is known in psychology as meta-cognition and in eastern thought as the witness state. Through our willingness to observe ourselves empirically we can learn the way that the brain learns “by accumulating wisdom through error” (Lehrer, 2009, p. 249).

Lehrer (2009) suggests that we set out to become “students of error” as we courageously and humbly assess our strengths and shortcomings. His research-based strategies are counter-intuitive and go against conventional wisdom. He suggests (1) think
about your thinking. Be aware of the kind of decision you are making and the thought process it requires. Really listen to the argument in your head. (2) Embrace uncertainty. Always consider what’s my blind spot, what don’t I know, and what am I missing? As best as we can, and with the help of others, we need to consider alternative possibilities and entertain competing hypotheses. (3) Simple problems require logical reason. They won’t overwhelm the limitations of the prefrontal cortex. Easy decisions that can be “accurately summarized in numerical terms” are best suited to the conscious brain. (4) Novel problems also require reason. If your past experience can’t help you solve the problem then it’s a sign that you need the creative insights which is a specialty of the energy intensive prefrontal cortex. (5) Complex problems require the wisdom of our emotions. Dijksterhuis et al (2006) recommend delegating thinking about complex matters to the unconscious which they refer to as deliberation-without-attention. Because emotions can offer valuable input, it’s important to notice why you’re feeling what you’re feeling. Sometimes emotions cannot be trusted because they are impulsive and short-sighted. It’s essential to distinguish between a short-sighted desire and your heart’s greatest desire (inner knowing). “Mysteries are broken down into manageable chunks, which are then translated into practical feelings...Emotions are windows into the unconscious, visceral representations of all the information we process but don’t perceive” (Lehrer, 2009, pp. 248-249). (6) In regards to decisions, the most important point of all is to be mindful of the kind of decision you are making as it can guide you to the kind of decision making process that can be most beneficial in helping you to make the decision.
SECTION 8: CONCLUSION

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security. --Albert Einstein

Our Re-evaluation of Happiness

I started the re-evaluation of happiness journey with the news that Americans say that they are happy, and yet a closer look at our lifestyle choices and outcomes indicate that we may not be as happy as we profess. Our American culture is an individualistic culture that can foster discontent, competition, and greed. We have been taught to look for happiness outside of ourselves. Reinforcing our “now-oriented” biological biases, we have been conditioned to build habitual patterns that seek immediate gratification of our desires and impulses. As seen earlier, our focus on self-centered, hedonistic, material gains does not contribute to lasting happiness. This pursuit can actually cause unhappiness because it prevents us from focusing our attention on what truly matters, such as congruence between our deeper values, emotions, and actions; our connection to others and to something greater than ourselves.

As seen earlier, our cognitive frames determine what we pay attention to and how we view the world around us. Attention matters. Our expectations and what we focus on can have a direct impact on our happiness. Because of our biological, cognitive, and cultural
biases, “our customary placement of attention prevents us from noticing the very aspects of life that can make it more meaningful and worth living, and we simply do not notice the extent of our own impoverishment” (Simpkinson, 1998, p. xiv). We have a tendency to see what we are looking for, and therefore the quality of our lives depends upon the quality of our attention.

The focus of our habitual attention can be changed by challenging the accuracy of our perceptions, and reshaping our worldviews through cognitive re-structuring. The quality of our lives depends on the quality of the questions we ask ourselves. Whether we are aware of it or not, we all have a life narrative. Our challenge is to consciously develop a coherent, empowering life narrative that provides us an overall purpose, vision, and passion for our lives. The quality of our lives depends on the quality of the stories we tell ourselves. Our life narrative has the potential to focus our conscious energy on our values, natural strengths, and intrinsic interests. With that awareness, we can create ongoing flow experiences that engage and energize us and reinforce our passion for life. The quality of our lives depends on our ability to be present in the moment. It is also important to quiet the mind through mindfulness and meditation practice in order to gain much needed perspective. A consistent meditation and mindfulness practice can help us listen to the guidance of our inner wisdom and intuition. The quality of our lives depends on our ability to quiet our minds.

We have limited will power to be able to create important changes in our life, so it is important that we create healthy habits and rituals that utilize the power of the unconscious to automatically drive healthy behaviors. When making decisions, it’s vital that we employ all our resources and aspire to balance our conscious attention with our gut feelings and our intuition. The quality of our lives depends on the quality of our decision criteria.
Although the quality of our attention (what we focus on) helps determine our happiness, the sustainability of our happiness is based on our intention (why we are focusing on it). Are we pursuing happiness as protection from our fears, or are we pursuing happiness as an expression of our essence? The difference in intention is important. For example we can perform an action out of insecurity because we want approval from others or we can perform the same action because we intrinsically enjoy it (agency) or because we want to help others (communion).

Our culture is structured to reinforce a fear-based response by generating a continual sense of lack, insecurity, and discontent. Underlying our market-based economy is a desperate pursuit of happiness that seems to be motivated by a chronic sense of fear that we’re going to miss out on the happy life. Happiness as a protection from our fears is similar to what Ben-Sahar (2007) calls negative happiness, which is really an experience of relief from all the preceding stress and anxiety that one has suffered in order to reach a performance (rather than learning) oriented goal. The happiness that comes only upon goal attainment is a temporary relief from fear and is not sustainable. The journey and the destination are inextricably linked together.

Perhaps the pursuit of happiness begins with being a little braver, a little less driven by one’s fears, and having a willingness to face and live in the truth of those fears. Through the cultivation of compassion, we can become more and more aware of our deep fears and pain, and by embracing them with loving kindness, we can accept those parts of our self that we have actively avoided and marginalized. Through this process, our fears begin to loosen, and thus there is less need to inoculate ourselves from fear through happiness-seeking actions. This frees us to seek happiness that is a true expression of our essence which creates
a ripple effect; the kindness that we have learned to extend to ourselves can be extended lovingly to others, helping us to create stronger, more genuine, long-lasting relationships, which can then ripple out to our ever-widening and eventually intersecting circles of compassion.
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