

Twelve Rational Principles

An evidence-based philosophy for effective living

by Wayne Froggatt

Please note: this article has been adapted from the book *Taking Control* (see details on the last page).
References made in this article to 'other chapters' and 'pages' refer, mostly, to that book.

The twelve principles outlined in this article will help you achieve success at stress management in two ways. First, they will help you counter the self-defeating beliefs that create distress. Second, they will help you overcome a number of common blocks to using the practical strategies that are a standard part of stress management training.

Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge appears as the first principle, because most of the others build on it. It involves knowing your capabilities and your limits, your personal temperament and typical coping style, and your values and goals.

Aspects of self-knowledge

Are you what Hans Selye calls a 'racehorse', or are you a 'turtle'?¹ *Racehorses* thrive on stress and are only happy with a vigorous, fast-paced lifestyle. *Turtles* require peace, quiet, and a generally tranquil environment. These are of course extremes—people are usually somewhere in between.

What are your values, what matters to you? Though many aspects will be shared with others in your social group, every person has a unique system of values and goals.

Everyone has certain abilities—and limits. Do you recognise your abilities and make the most of them? Do you also acknowledge your limits and know when to stop?

Why knowing yourself is important

You may feel comfortable with some of your characteristics, less happy with others. In either case, to effectively manage stress you need to be aware of your own optimum stress level and coping style, as well as the goals and values that guide your reactions.

Everyone has their own temperament, style of managing stress, and value system. You need to develop strategies relevant to your personal style and

compatible with your personal values, otherwise you are not likely to use them.

Developing self-knowledge

How can you become more aware of your coping style and optimum stress level? Here are some suggestions.

- Identify your typical stress triggers. What situations do you typically react to? You could use the list in Chapter Three as a prompt. Better still, keep a log for a few weeks.
- You are the best intuitive judge of your optimum stress level. Observe what your body is doing—note your typical stress signs. See the list in Chapter Two—which of these can you identify with? Include these symptoms in your log.
- Observe how you typically cope with problems. What works for you? What do you tend to do that is unhelpful?
- There are some strategies to help you identify your values and goals in Chapter Nine. Use these to check out your preferences, values and standards. Are they realistic and appropriate? Have you thought them through for yourself?
- Completing *rational self-analyses* will help you identify the underlying values that guide your reactions to specific events and circumstances.

Further reading

Asbell, Bernard. (1991). *What They Know About You*. New York: Random House.

McCutcheon, Marc. (1989). *The Compass in Your Nose and Other Astonishing Facts About Humans*. Melbourne: Schwartz and Wilkinson.,.

Self-acceptance and confidence

Self-acceptance and confidence are closely related concepts. One builds on the other. Being able to accept yourself as you are, free of any demand that you be different, provides the basis for confidence in your abilities. Confidence, in turn, will enable you to take risks, try new things, and direct your own life.

Accepting yourself

To accept yourself is to acknowledge three things: (1) you exist, (2) there is no reason why you *should* be any different from how you are, and (3) you are neither worthy nor unworthy.

- Acknowledgment that you exist is probably straightforward. It is the other two parts that most people find hard to grasp.
- Self-acceptance involves rejection of any *demand* that you be different. You may sensibly prefer to be different. You may decide it is in your interests to change some things. But keep the desire to change as a *preference*. Instead of believing that you *have* to change, see change as a *choice*.
- Do not attempt to measure your 'self' or set some kind of 'value' on yourself. Self-acceptance is radically different to self-esteem. *Self-esteem* is based on the idea that you are a 'good' or 'worthwhile' person. Worthwhileness requires some criteria, like how well you perform, or the idea that you are worthwhile simply because you exist. *Self-acceptance*, on the other hand, is based on the idea that you don't have to be 'good' or 'worthwhile'. In fact, there is no need to evaluate *yourself* at all! Instead of evaluating your 'self', you use your energy and time to evaluate (1) your *behaviour*, and (2) the quality of your *existence*.

Evaluating your behaviour is a good idea. You can check whether it helps you enjoy your life and achieve your goals. It is also a good idea to evaluate the quality of your existence. Your enjoyment of life is surely important—more important than worrying about whether you are a 'worthwhile' person.

Having confidence in your abilities

Self-knowledge and self-acceptance are preconditions for confidence. To have confidence in your abilities involves three things. First, you know what you can and can't do. Second, you are prepared to try things to the limit of your ability. And third, you regularly work at extending your capabilities.

Having confidence in your *abilities* is different to having confidence in your *self*. 'Self'-confidence implies perfection—that you, as a *total* person, are able to do everything well. This is unrealistic and grandiose.

Having confidence in your *abilities* is more realistic. Instead of talking about self-confidence, follow the advice of Paul Hauck² and talk about social confidence, work confidence, driving confidence, house-care confidence, examination confidence, relationship confidence, and so on. In other words, develop confidence in specific abilities rather than in your total 'self'.

In practice, *ability*-confidence would involve behaviours like the following:

- Doing things without demanding you succeed, and viewing mistakes as opportunities for learning. Confidence grows out of the *attempt*, the doing, rather than from the *result*.
- Evaluating your actions and performances in terms of how they help you reach your goals—not what they 'prove' about you as a person.
- Taking calculated risks with important activities such as choosing a career, changing jobs, or starting a new relationship.
- Persevering—not giving up when you do less well than you want; rejecting any belief that 'everything should come easy'; and accepting that many good things involve overcoming obstacles, setbacks, and persisting over a period of time.
- Learning from your experiences—trying something, analysing your experience, seeing where you went wrong and working out what you can do to improve your abilities.

Why these are important

If you are prone to rating your total self, you may want to avoid looking closely at your actions because to do so may lead to self-downing. Paradoxically, self-acceptance is more likely than self-evaluation to lead to constructive change. Confidence in your abilities will free you to take risks, try new experiences and learn new lessons.

If you can accept yourself with your unique characteristics and preferences, you will be less likely to live your life to suit other people.

As Martin Seligman has pointed out, there are limits to how much we can change ourselves³. Human beings are not perfectible. If you can accept imperfection in yourself, you are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviour striving for the unattainable.

Developing self-acceptance and confidence

Self-acceptance as an alternative to self-evaluation is not an easy concept to grasp. The tendency to self-evaluation seems to be built in to human beings, and the 'self-esteem' concept is pervasive in our thinking and culture.

- Think through the philosophy of self-acceptance. Read about it. Write down your thoughts on it. Talk about it with others (many people will argue against the concept, which will give you the opportunity to hone your thinking!).

- Finally, and most important, *behave* like a self-accepting and confident person. As far as possible, *practice* living in accordance with your preferences, values and standards. Say what you believe, be open and honest as to who you are (but do this appropriately with people significant to you, and take into account their preferences and feelings). Treat yourself to things you used to think you did not ‘deserve’. Try things you used to be afraid to do—without any demand that you succeed.

Further reading

Hauck, P.A (1992). (Overcoming the Rating Game: Beyond self-love—beyond self-esteem. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox.

Dalrymple, Theodore. (1995). Letting the Steam out of Self-Esteem. *Psychology Today*, 28:5, Pp.24–26.

Enlightened self-interest

The ability to act in your own interests follows on from self-acceptance and confidence. As we shall see, it is also important to take into account the interests of others. The principle of enlightened self-interest takes into account both parts:

1. You place your own interests first; however ...
2. You keep in mind that your own interests will be best served if you take into account the interests of others.

Human beings are fundamentally self-interested

Notwithstanding any precepts that say we ‘should’ be otherwise, human beings appear to be intrinsically concerned first with their own welfare.

Hans Selye has argued that the desire to maintain oneself and stay happy is the most ancient—and one of the most important—impulses that motivates living beings. All living beings protect their own interests first of all. Selye points out that this begins with our basic biological make-up, in that the various cells in our bodies only cooperate with each other to ensure their own survival.

Human beings are also motivated by social interest

Selye has pointed out, though, that we are also strongly motivated by altruistic feelings. As well as *self-interest*, we also possess *social interest*—the wish to ensure that the social system as a whole survives and develops.

How is that two apparently contradictory tendencies can co-exist? The answer is that we help others in order to help ourselves. In other words, our self-interest is *enlightened*.

It appears that like self-interest, social interest is also inherent within human beings—both have biological roots. Collaboration between body cells promotes the survival of each individual cell and enables the total organism to function.

In effect, *individual* interests are best served by *mutual* cooperation. Accordingly, self-interest without social interest is misguided. So is social interest without self-interest. Always putting others first leads to resentment or a martyr attitude. People who believe they are acting purely in the interests of others are dangerous. By denying (to themselves) that their own self-interest is involved, such people may justify all types of manipulative and controlling behaviour toward others.

You are both self-interested and socially-interested. This dual tendency is built in to your very being and begins with your basic biology. By accepting this about yourself, you will be able to do a better job of acting in your own interests—in an enlightened manner.

What is it to be ‘enlightened’?

The word ‘enlightened’ has several related meanings. It is *humanitarian*—charitable, liberal, and idealistic; and at the same time *utilitarian*—useful, beneficial, and practical.

Can you see how merging an enlightened attitude with innate self-interest can apply at all levels—to yourself, to your family, to your town or city, to your country, and to the world as a whole? Consider the effect on this planet if every person acknowledged their self-interest and then practiced it in an enlightened manner. What if every country based its external and foreign policies on the humanitarian and practical principle of enlightened self-interest?

Why enlightened self-interest is important

If human beings did not have an inherent will to protect themselves and further their own interests, they would not survive. If you don’t attend to your own interests, who will? Knowing what is in your interests will help you get what is best for you and avoid what is harmful. It will keep you moving toward your goals—and ensure that your goals are the right ones for you.

But you had better simultaneously take into account the interests of others. Getting people to have positive feelings toward you is a good idea. They will be more likely to treat you well and less likely to harm you. Contributing to their welfare will encourage them to contribute to yours. And contributing to the development and survival of the society in which you live will mean a better environment in which to pursue your interests.

If you acknowledge that self-interest is inherent in your nature, you will feel less guilty about looking after yourself. If you acknowledge that altruistic be-

behaviour is in your interests, you will be more likely to cooperate with others. If you do both, everyone gains.

Developing enlightened self-interest

Begin by practicing enlightened behaviours. When you have trouble deciding what is in your interests, use the *benefits calculation* technique. Here are some ideas to get you started now:

- Go out of your way to show positive feelings towards others—gratitude, respect, trust—which in turn will arouse goodwill from them.
- Choose some new activities in various life areas—work, family, leisure—that will bring goodwill.
- At the same time, act assertively. Ask for what you want, say ‘No’ to what you don’t, and tell others (when appropriate) what you think and how you feel.
- Make a point of doing something just for yourself each day for a while.

Until enlightened self-interest becomes part of you, *consciously* seek to get more of what you want while facilitating the interests of the other people in your world.

Further reading

Selye, Hans. (1974). *Stress Without Distress*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Tolerance for frustration and discomfort

The ability to tolerate frustration and discomfort is central to stress management. High tolerance will keep you from overreacting to things you dislike. It will help you tackle problems and issues rather than avoid them. It will enable you to take risks and try new experiences.

What is high tolerance?

As we saw in Chapter Four, low tolerance for frustration and discomfort is a key cause of unnecessary distress. It arises from beliefs like: ‘Life should not be hard, it is awful and I can’t stand it when it is hard; +so I must avoid pain, difficulties and frustrations.’

‘High tolerance’, on the other hand, means accepting the reality of frustration and discomfort, and keeping their badness in perspective.

To accept frustration and discomfort is to acknowledge that, while you may dislike them, they are realities. They exist, and there is no Law of the Universe says they ‘should’ not exist (though you may *prefer* they not). You expect to experience appropriate ‘negative emotions like concern, remorse, regret, sadness, annoyance, and disappointment. But

you avoid exaggerating these emotions (by telling yourself you can’t stand them) into anxiety, guilt, shame, depression, hostile anger, hurt, or self-pity.

To keep frustration and discomfort in perspective is to regard them as unpleasant rather than ‘awful’. You dislike rejection, pain, bad health, financial insecurity and other unwanted circumstances—but you believe that you can cope with the discomfort when they happen to you.

Why is high tolerance important?

Low tolerance creates distress by causing you to overreact to discomfort. It may lead to *secondary emotional disturbances* (‘having a problem about having a problem’) where you react to your own symptoms and end up with additional symptoms. You might for example, get angry and then feel guilty, or become depressed because you feel anxious. Low tolerance also gets in the way of using stress management strategies like changing your diet, exercising, managing your time or acting assertively.

High tolerance, on the other hand, will help you in many ways. You will be:

- Less likely to create secondary emotional disturbances by overreacting to unwanted events and circumstances.
- More willing to experience present discomfort to achieve long-term goals and enjoyment.
- Prepared to take reasonable risks.
- More able to assert yourself appropriately with other people.
- Less likely to put off difficult tasks and issues, including personal change.

How to raise your tolerance for discomfort and frustration

- Know when you are engaging in low-tolerance behaviour designed to avoid discomfort or frustration. Keep a log of such behaviour for several weeks or longer. Watch for things like:
 - avoiding uncomfortable situations;
 - overusing drugs or alcohol;
 - compulsive gambling, shopping, exercising, or bingeing on food;
 - losing your temper;
 - putting off difficult tasks.
- The technique of *exposure* is the best way to increase your tolerance. Make a list of things you typically avoid—situations, events, thoughts, risks and so on. Commit yourself to face at least one of these each day. Actively confront discomfort by going into uncomfortable situations. Instead of trying to get away from the frustration or discomfort as you normally would, *stay with* the discomfort until it diminishes of its own accord.

- You can prepare yourself to cope with the discomfort by using *rational self-analysis*, *imagery*, and the *blow-up* technique. Afterwards, do a *catastrophe scale* to get your reaction to the discomfort into perspective. (You will find these techniques on pages 43–46).

Further reading

Dryden, Windy and Gordon, Jack. (1993). *Beating the Comfort Trap*. London: Sheldon Press.

Hauck, Paul. (1974). *Overcoming Frustration and Anger*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

Long-range enjoyment

Like most people, you probably want to enjoy life. As well as avoid distress, you want to experience pleasure. And you probably want to get your pleasure now, not tomorrow. As Alice said in *Through the Looking Glass*: ‘It must come sometimes to ‘jam today’’⁴. But there are times when it is in our interests to forgo immediate pleasure—in order to have greater enjoyment in the longer term.

What is long-range enjoyment?

There are two parts to this principle. You seek to get enjoyment from each of your present moments, rather than always putting off pleasure till ‘tomorrow’, or dwelling on things that have happened in the past.

However, to keep on enjoying your present moments you will sometimes choose to postpone pleasure. You may wish to drink more alcohol—but you restrict your intake now so your body will still let you drink in ten years time. Or you wish to buy a new stereo, but instead you save the money for an overseas trip. This is the ‘long-term’ part.

The principle can be summed up as follows: *live for the present with an eye to the future*. In other words, seek to get as much pleasure and enjoyment as you can in the present—while taking into account the desirability of enjoying your life in the long term.

The concept is not new

The underlying thinking behind long-range enjoyment has been around for a long time. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC) proposed the idea that pleasure is the supreme good and main goal of life—and that only through self-restraint and moderation can people achieve true happiness.

John Stuart Mill, British philosopher and economist, argued that an act is right if it brings pleasure, and wrong if it brings pain. But he introduced the caveat that the ultimate value is the good of society, and the guiding principle of individual conduct is the welfare of the greatest number of people.

Developing long-range enjoyment

- Learn to calculate gains and losses. Weigh the short-term pleasurable effects of an action against its possible longer-term negative effects. Make sure that immediate gain doesn’t set you up for future pain—as with overindulgence in alcohol. If in doubt, do a *benefits calculation*.
- Weigh short-term discomfort and frustration against the prospect of greater and more enduring comfort in the long term. To start exercising will be more uncomfortable than watching television—but later you will not only feel the health benefits, you will even begin to enjoy the exercise itself.
- The strategy of *paradoxical behaviour* will help you put the philosophical change into action. Practice deliberately postponing gratification in order to increase your tolerance for frustration. List a few things you could go without and earmark the money you save for something you would really like. Reduce your intake of alcohol, caffeine or fatty foods, and reward yourself with an occasional special treat you would otherwise see as an indulgence. Be creative—what other ideas for practicing long-range enjoyment can you come up with?

By now you will probably see that many of the twelve principles are interdependent. To delay gratification involves tolerating frustration. Sensible long-range enjoyment involves enlightened self-interest and moderation.

To sum up ...

If you *always* postponed your enjoyment till ‘tomorrow’, you would never enjoy yourself. But, if you *always* lived just for the present moment, your happiness and stress management in the future would eventually be compromised. Live your life with the goal of getting as much enjoyment as possible both now *and* in the future.

Further reading

Dryden, Windy and Gordon, Jack. (1993). *Beating the Comfort Trap*. London; Sheldon Press.

Risk-taking

Human beings, by nature, seek safety, predictability, and freedom from fear. But humans also pursue risk. A totally secure life would be a boring one. To grow as a person and improve your quality of life means being prepared to take some chances.

The principle

What we are talking about is a willingness to take sensible risks in order to get more out of life and

avoid the distress of boredom, listlessness and dissatisfaction. Here are some important areas of risk-taking that relate to stress management:

- Learning new things which may challenge existing beliefs.
- Tackling tasks which have no guarantee of success.
- Trying new relationships.
- Doing things that risk the disapproval of other people.

How is risk-taking relevant to emotional health?

Risk-taking is necessary for self-knowledge. To discover your limits, you need to take some risks and try yourself out. You can open up fresh opportunities to increase pleasure and avoid boredom.

Problem-solving means risking solutions that may backfire. To act assertively is to risk disapproval or rejection. Maintaining a support system involves trusting and opening up to other people.

Finally, experimenting with different activities to discover what you like and dislike will increase your self-knowledge and help you clarify your goals and values.

Increasing your willingness to take risks

- Exposure is a key technique for practicing risk-taking. Develop a list of things you would like to try, such as:
 - Asking someone for something—like a date or favour—where there is a chance of rejection.
 - Doing something where there is a chance others will disapprove—for example, speaking up and telling a group of people what you think.
 - Trying something where there is no guarantee of success.

Put one item a day into practice. As you do so, remind yourself that the discomfort involved is not intolerable, and that staying with it will gradually increase your tolerance.

- The *benefits calculation* can help you make rational decisions about the usefulness of risks you are considering.
- You can prepare yourself for taking risks and cope with the discomfort involved using *rational self-analysis*, *coping*, the *blow-up* technique, and *role-playing*.

Further reading

Roberts, Paul. (1994). Risk. *Psychology Today*, Nov/Dec, 27:6, Pp.50–84.

Moderation

Sensible risk-taking recognises the innate human desire for safety and security. The principle of moderation will help you avoid extremes in thinking, feeling, and behaving.

Why moderation is important

Extreme expectations—too high or too low, will set you up for either constant failure or a life of boredom.

Addictive or obsessional behaviour can take control of you, creating new distress. Unrestrained eating, drinking or exercising will stress your body and lead to long term health complications.

Obsessive habits in areas as diverse as your work or your sexual behaviour can damage relationships as well as stress your body.

The principle of moderation

Taking a moderate approach to your life starts with your ultimate goals and ranges through to your daily activities.

You need to develop long-term goals, short-term objectives, and tasks that will challenge and move you on. But it is equally important they are potentially achievable and do not set you up for failure and disillusionment.

If your goal, for example, is to maintain your weight at a certain level, ensure you set that level appropriate for your age and other personal factors. Avoid any tasks and activities that are extreme—like a diet that provides massive weight loss in a short time. Otherwise, not only will you damage your health, but eventually the weight is likely to go back on (probably worse than it was before), leaving you with a feeling of hopelessness. The best way to keep to an appropriate weight without stressing the body is not to go on a radical diet, but rather to moderate eating and drinking in the long-term.

This applies in most areas of life. Throw yourself into your work, play, exercise and sexual life—but avoid the stress of over-involvement. Moderate, too, your self-help work—commit yourself to personal change, but without obsessiveness.

Note that moderation does not exclude risk-taking. In fact, moderation will help you avoid taking security too far. But you can take risks without being foolhardy.

Developing a moderate approach to life

- Identify any areas of your life where you tend to behave excessively—eating, exercising, sexual activity, using your computer, and so on. Note when you are demanding full satisfaction of your urges, or catastrophising about the frustration involved in restraint. Keeping a *log* will help you do this.
- Use the strategies of *exposure* and *paradoxical behaviour* to get into action. Set up a list of tasks, sorted according to difficulty, which will give you practice in behaving moderately. In advance, set limits in each of these areas, and commit yourself to keeping within those limits.
- Handle your frustration using *rational self-analysis*. The *benefits calculation* will help you decide what areas of your life you are best to moderate. Finally, if you are unable to change behaviour which has become addictive, seek professional help.

Further reading

Kishline, Audrey. (1996). A Toast to Moderation. *Psychology Today*, 29:1, Pp.53–56, (Jan/Feb),.

Birkedahl, Nonie. (1990). *The Habit Control Workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Emotional and behavioural responsibility

As we saw in Part One, people who see their emotions and behaviours as under their control are less prone to distress than people who see themselves as controlled by external forces. The principle of responsibility can help you take charge of your emotions, your actions, and in turn your life. It involves taking responsibility for (1) what you feel, and (2) how you act.

To be *emotionally responsible* is to believe that you create your own feelings in reaction to what life throws at you. You avoid blaming other people—your parents, partner, boss, or anyone else—for how you feel.

Behavioural responsibility means accepting that you cause your own actions and behaviours, and are not compelled to behave in any particular way.

The inner-controlled person

An ‘inner-controlled’ person can be identified by characteristics like the following:

- *Uses ‘I’ language*—‘I think that ...’ or ‘I would like you to ...’ rather than ‘Everyone knows that ...’ or ‘You should ...’.
- *Tends to be assertive* when relating to other people, rather than passive or aggressive.

- *Gets on with life now*—rather than dwelling in the past or dreaming about the future but doing nothing.
- *Takes setbacks in their stride*—rather than catastrophising or bemoaning fate.
- *Has a problem-solving approach*—when things go wrong, looks for possible solutions.
- *Does not believe in ‘luck’*—believes that action and the application of skill is what makes things happen, rather than luck or fate.

Limits to emotional and behavioural responsibility

While your emotions are mainly caused by what you believe, there are some exceptions. Biochemical changes, for example, can lead to emotional changes. (How you react to biochemical changes, though, will still depend on how you *view* what is happening in your body).

While you can, largely, control your thoughts, it is unlikely that anyone could do so *perfectly*. Expecting flawlessness will only lead to discouragement and self-downing.

While you are largely responsible for the consequences of your actions, some outcomes will be outside your control. If, for example, you say ‘No’ to a request, the other person may be disappointed—an appropriate reaction. You would be somewhat responsible, in that your ‘No’ was the trigger. But what if they became clinically depressed—an inappropriate over-reaction? That would be their responsibility, not yours. You have no control over whether people choose to view your actions in ways that are rational or self-defeating.

Finally, an important point. Don’t fall into the trap of blaming yourself because you are responsible for what you feel and do. Blame and responsibility are not the same thing. ‘Blame’ is *moralistic*. It seeks not only to identify who may be the cause of a problem, but also to damn and condemn them.

Responsibility, on the other hand, is *practical*. It seeks either to identify a cause so it can be dealt with; or to identify who needs to take action for the problem to get solved—irrespective of who or what ‘caused’ it. Responsibility is concerned not with moralising, but with finding solutions.

Why responsibility is important

Suzanne Kobasa⁵ has conducted research on, as she calls them, ‘hardy’ people—people who thrive on stress rather than become sick. A key characteristic of such people is their belief that they are in control of their lives. Hardy people generally have better physical and mental health—they are less affected by the ageing process, recover faster from medical episodes such as a heart attack or surgery, and are less likely to suffer from depression and anxiety.

If you take responsibility for your feelings and behaviours, you will avoid making yourself a victim or over-reacting to what other people say or do. You will be able to change your own feelings even though the world does not change to suit you. Finally, you will have confidence in your ability to handle your feelings, whatever happens—freeing you to take risks and try new experiences.

Developing responsibility

- Use *rational self-analysis* to identify and dispute any irresponsible thinking.
- Make a list of things you do that show irresponsibility—unassertiveness, dwelling in the past, catastrophising, drifting with problems hoping something will ‘come along’. Use the technique of *paradoxical behaviour* to act differently in these areas, taking responsibility for how you feel and behave.

Further reading

Bernard, Michael E. (1986). *Staying Rational In An Irrational World: Albert Ellis and Rational-Emotive Therapy*. New York: Lyle Stuart.

Ellis, Albert. (1988). *To Stubbornly Refuse To Make Yourself Miserable About How Anything*. Secaucus, New Jersey: Lyle Stuart.

Self-direction and commitment

Emotional and behavioural responsibility lay the basis for taking control over your life and committing yourself to action and involvement.

Self-direction

Taking responsibility for the direction of your life involves:

- Choosing your goals, making sure they are your own.
- Actively pursuing your goals, rather than waiting and dreaming.
- Making your own decisions, even though you may seek opinions from others.
- Choosing to work at managing stress, developing your potential, and changing things you dislike, rather than just drifting along or expecting a miracle to occur.
- Not condemning any *person* (including yourself) when things go wrong in your life, even though you or someone else may be responsible; but rather identifying any *causes* and looking for *solutions*.

Self-direction does not mean open opposition and non-cooperation with others. You can keep your self-direction on the right track by balancing it with other principles such as enlightened self-interest, long-range enjoyment, moderation, and flexibility.

There are several prerequisites for self-direction. First, you need to see what happens to you as *influenced* (though not totally controlled) by what you do. As we saw earlier, *inner-controlled* people tend to be assertive, get on with life, and do not see themselves as victims. Second, to direct your own life you need to know what you want to do with it. Have you clarified your goals and values? Chapter Nine will show you how to do this.

Commitment

Commitment follows on from self-direction. There are two elements:

1. *Perseverance*. The ability to bind yourself emotionally and intellectually to courses of action. This involves a willingness to do the necessary work (and tolerate the discomfort involved) in personal change and goal-achievement.
2. *Deep involvement*. The ability to enjoy and become absorbed in (but not addicted to) other people, activities and interests as ends in themselves—where you get pleasure from the doing, irrespective of the final result. This may include such areas as work, sports, hobbies, creative activities, and the world of ideas.

Limits to self-direction and commitment

Some of what happens to you will be out of your control, and this will place limits on how much you can influence them. Remember, though, that how you *react* is your responsibility.

Further, while self-direction implies independence, it recognises some limits in the interests of mutual support and cooperation with others.

If carried too far, commitment can become obsession. Don't get so involved with one or a few things that other areas of your life suffer. Avoid, for example, allowing work to stop you from any recreational activity, or recreation to leave no time for relationships.

Why self-direction and commitment are important

Avoiding decisions or action creates tension and leaves problems unsolved. Action and persistence are needed to break unwanted patterns of behaviour and achieve personal change. A life of superficial involvements would lead to boredom and dissatisfaction.

Commitment is required for confidence to develop. You don't, for example, develop confidence in playing a musical instrument unless you commit yourself to practicing with it.

Self-direction can affect your health. Salvatore Maddi, from the University of Chicago, ran courses for men and women in management aimed at increasing their sense of control. These led to lower anxiety, depression, obsessiveness, headaches, insomnia, and blood

pressure, as well as more job satisfaction—results which lasted well beyond the end of the courses⁶.

Aiming for your own goals rather than having others direct your life will affect how you implement many of the strategies in Part Three. It will determine how you manage your time. It will help you assert yourself. You will also maintain more stimulation and variety in your life by doing the things you want.

Developing self-direction and commitment

- Make a list of things you do that indicate lack of self-direction. Watch for behaviours like asking for permission, avoidance due to fear of disapproval, unnecessarily seeking other people's opinions, and the like. Select one item each week and deliberately act differently, in line with what you would rather be doing.
- Use *rational self-analysis* and *imagery* to cope with the discomfort involved.
- Make a decision now to develop one new interest in your life in which you will get absorbed. Commit yourself to taking some steps toward it over the next week or so. See Chapter Fifteen for suggestions on this.

Further reading

Ellis, Albert and Lange, Arthur. (1994). *How to Keep People From Pushing Your Buttons*. New York: Citadel Press.

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Flexibility

Flexible people can bend with the storm rather than be broken by it. They know how to *adapt* and adjust to new circumstances that call for new ways of thinking and behaving. They have *resilience*—the ability to bounce back from adversity.

The principle of flexibility

To be flexible is to be open to change in yourself and in the world. As circumstances alter, you are able to modify your plans and behaviours. You are able to adopt new ways of thinking that help you cope with a changing world. You are able to let others hold their own beliefs and do things in ways appropriate to them—while you do what is right for you.

Flexibility in *thinking* means:

- Your values are preferences rather than rigid, unvarying rules.
- You are open to changing ways of thinking in the light of new information and evidence.
- You view change as a challenge rather than a threat.

Flexibility in *behaviour* means:

- You are able to change direction when it is in your interests.
- You are willing to try new ways of dealing with problems and frustrations.
- You can let others do things their way.
- You avoid distressing yourself when others think or act in ways you dislike.

Why flexibility is important

Flexibility aids survival in a changing world. The world, as it always has, continues to change—but the pace of change is increasing. If there is not a corresponding change in attitudes there will be distress. We see this in the so-called 'generation gap'. Parents who are inflexible find it harder to cope when their children behave in ways unthinkable in their generation. We can cope better when we see change as a *challenge* rather than a threat. As Suzanne Kubosa has found, this attitude is one of the characteristics of 'hardiness'⁵.

Flexibility leads to better problem-solving. As Roger Von Oech states, there are times we need to step outside what we know or usually do and look at a problem from new angles in order to find new solutions⁷. Even negative events—like being made redundant—can create opportunities to 'step outside'.

Flexibility will make it easier to change your goals to suit new circumstances. Getting older or sustaining a disability, for example, usually requires one to adapt to significant lifestyle changes.

Flexibility will help you break out of boring routines and maintain stimulation and variety in your life. It will also help you manage your time better, by enabling you to change your plans to suit changing situations.

Developing flexibility

- Use *rational self-analysis* to identify and change inflexible thinking. Watch especially for any demanding 'shoulds' and 'musts'.
- Expose yourself to new ways of looking at things. Read books that adopt positions other than yours, talk to people with differing views, watch movies you would normally not bother with.
- Practice flexibility by rearranging your office or home furniture, hanging some new pictures, visiting places you have never been.
- Get into the problem habit of pausing before you take action on a and look at ways of solving it different to what you would normally do. In other words, attempt to act out of character on a regular basis.

Further reading

Ingham, Christine. *Life Without Work: A time for change, growth and personal transformation*. (1994). London: HarperCollins Publishers.77

Toffler, Alvin. (1990). *Powershift: Knowledge, wealth and violence at the edge of the 21st Century*. New York: Bantam Books.

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Objective thinking

Flexibility and openness, as well as the other principles, require freedom from ways of thinking that are narrow-minded, sectarian, bigoted and fanatical; or that rely on uncritical acceptance of dogmatic beliefs or ‘magical’ explanations for the world and what happens in it.

Objective thinking is scientific in nature. There are four aspects—it is (1) empirical, (2) logical, (3) pragmatic, and (4) flexible.

Objective thinking is empirical

It is based on evidence gained from observation and experience rather than on subjective feelings or uncritical belief. It seeks to avoid distortions of reality—like the seven common but self-defeating ways of thinking described by Psychiatrist Aaron Beck.

Objective thinking is logical

It reaches conclusions that validly follow from the evidence. It is possible, as the example below demonstrates, to have the right *evidence* but draw the wrong *conclusions*:

Evidence: i. My supervisor has criticised me
ii. I don’t like being criticised

Conclusion: I can’t stand this, it shouldn’t happen to me, and it shows that my supervisor is a rotten person.

Even though the two pieces of evidence are correct, this does not make the conclusion correct. It does not logically follow that because I have been criticised and I don’t like this (both of which are true), that my supervisor is ‘rotten’, I ‘can’t stand’ it, and it ‘shouldn’t’ happen (beliefs which go beyond the evidence).

More logical conclusions could be: ‘My supervisor has done something I dislike’; ‘This is unpleasant’; and ‘I prefer this not to happen to me’.

Illogical beliefs are often overgeneralisations, like, for example:

- Something that is *unpleasant* becomes *terrifying* (awfulising);
- Something that is *hard* to bear, becomes *intolerable* (discomfort intolerance);
- Because I *prefer* to avoid discomfort, therefore I *absolutely must* avoid it (demandingness);
- Because I *behaved* stupidly, therefore I *as a person* am stupid (self-rating).

To check the logical validity of your conclusions, ask yourself questions like:

- Do my conclusions logically ‘follow’ from the evidence?.
- What other conclusions may be possible?
- Am I catastrophising, demanding, or self/other-rating?

Objective thinking is pragmatic

Science evaluates an idea not just on its evidence or logical validity, but also on its usefulness to human beings. In other words, we need to be concerned with the effects, both short- and long-term, of what we believe. Questions to ask might be:

- What effect does believing this have on how I feel and behave?
- Does this belief help or hinder me in achieving my goals?

Objective thinking is open-minded and flexible

Nothing is seen as absolute or the last word. Beliefs are seen as theories that are subject to change as new evidence comes along and existing ideas are proved false. Objectivity encourages us to continually search for explanations that are more accurate and useful than the ones we have now.

Why objective thinking is important

Objective thinking

is a necessary component of the other attitudes. For example, increasing your tolerance for frustration and discomfort means keeping their badness in perspective, rather than overgeneralising them into ‘awful’ or ‘intolerable’.

Unscientific thinking can itself create distress. This can happen when you view criticism as unbearable, demand that you succeed, or rate yourself as a total person because you fail at something.

Believing you are controlled by outside forces, like ‘fate’ or ‘luck’, can lead to feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and hopelessness; and cause you to take a passive approach to life and its problems.

Erroneous thinking, as we shall see later, can also make it hard to practice the coping strategies in Part Three.

Developing objective thinking

- Use *rational self-analysis* to challenge erroneous thinking
- Use *essays* to critically examine magical thinking.
- Read up on rational thinking.
- Developing many of the other principles will also move you toward more objective ways of thinking (especially emotional and behavioural responsibility, self-direction, and flexibility).

Further reading

Thouless R.H. (1939). *Straight and Crooked Thinking*. Suffolk: Richard Clay.

Acceptance of reality

It makes sense, wherever possible, to change things you dislike. But there will be some things you will not be able to change. You then have two choices—you can rail against fate and stay distressed; or you can accept reality and move on.

The principle of acceptance

To accept something is to (1) *acknowledge* that it exists, (2) believe that while you may *prefer* it not to be, there is no reason why this particular reality should or must not exist, and (3) see it as *undesirable* – not unbearable.

. Let's examine these three aspects of acceptance in more detail:

1. *Acknowledgment of reality*. This involves admitting that reality—including unpleasant reality—exists. You see it as inevitable that many things will not be to your liking. You view uncertainty, frustration and disappointment as aspects of normal life.
2. *Absence of any demand that reality not exist*. This means that although you may *prefer* yourself, other people, things, or circumstances to be different from how they are (and you may even work at changing them), you know there is no Law of the Universe which says they *should* or *must* be different.
3. *Keeping unwanted realities in perspective*. You dislike some things, and find them unpleasant—but you avoid catastrophising them into 'horrible' or 'unbearable'.

Acceptance of reality includes many things

There are many realities people are called upon to accept. Here are some that are especially relevant to stress management:

Uncertainty. In the real world there are no certainties. The outcomes of our actions can never be guaranteed. It is helpful to anticipate the future, but we can never know for sure what it holds.

Utopia is unlikely. You and I will almost certainly never get everything we want. This includes total happiness or personal perfection. We will probably always experience some pain, anxiety, or depression.

There are limitations to personal change. There are many things we can change, like anxiety and depression. But there are some things that will not change no matter how much we try, as Martin Seligman points out in his book *What You Can Change and What You Can't*.⁸ Accepting this reality can help people avoid much unnecessary distress.

We cannot change others. One thing we can never change is other people. Only they can change themselves. Accepting this reality may save a lot of pain.

What acceptance is not

Many people have trouble with the idea of acceptance. They think that to accept something means they have to like it, agree with it, justify it, be indifferent to it, or resign themselves to it.

Acceptance is none of these things. You can dislike something, see it as unjustified and continue to prefer that it not exist. You can be concerned about it. You can take action to change it, if change is possible. But you can still accept it by rejecting the idea that it *should* not exist and that it absolutely *must* be changed.

Why acceptance is important

Hurting yourself does not change what you dislike, and will only take away energy better used to confront and solve problems. By reducing the intensity of your bad feelings, you will be less disabled by them. Acceptance can, paradoxically, increase your chances of changing what you dislike!

Acceptance will help you tolerate what you cannot change, and avoid adding unnecessary emotional pain to the unpleasantness of the situation itself.

Acceptance, finally, will help you avoid wasting time and energy and risking your emotional or physical health by striving for what is unattainable.

Developing acceptance of reality

- Take note of non-accepting thoughts and behaviour. Watch out for:
 - Believing that people or things should be different to how they are; that it is awful and intolerable when things are not as they should be; that the world should be a fair place; that one should always be treated fairly.
 - Feeling angry but unable to do anything.
 - 'Needing' to get other people to admit they are wrong, or avoiding acceptance because it might mean giving away a sense of self-rightness.
- *Keep reality in perspective*. When facing an unpleasant development in your life:
 - Use the 'time-projection' technique.
 - Ask 'Is this situation, event or possibility really so bad for me?'
 - Develop a 'catastrophe scale'.
 - Query yourself: 'How much do I really need to upset myself over this?'
- *Challenge your demands* that reality not be as it is. Ask yourself:
 - 'Can I really change ... (this person, this situation, etc.)?'

- ‘Though I would prefer that ...` be different to how it is, where is it written that it *should* be?’
- ‘Why *must* this not happen?’
- ‘Is demanding that this person change going to make them change—or would I be better to try and understand how they see things and then attempt to talk with them?’
- *Practice* acceptance:
 - Regularly remind yourself that human beings are fallible and not perfectible.
 - Don’t retaliate when people do things you dislike.
 - See the world for what it really is (and always has been)—imperfect.
 - Practice being satisfied with compromises and less than perfect solutions to problems.

To sum up

We can sum up our discussion of acceptance—and in fact all the rational principles—with a paraphrase of a well-known saying. It suggests that to achieve happiness, there are three things to strive for: the courage to change the things we can, the serenity to accept the things we can’t—and the wisdom to know the difference.⁹

One last thing. Don’t make these principles into demands. They are ideals. Probably no-one could practice them all consistently. Rather than see them as absolute ‘musts’ for managing your stress, use them as *guidelines* to a better life.

Further reading

Seligman, Martin E.P. (1994). *What You Can Change and What You Can’t: The complete guide to successful self-improvement*. Sydney: Random House.

Notes:

1. Cherry, L. (1978). On The Real Benefits of Eustress: Interview with Hans Selye. *Psychology Today*, March, Pp.60–70.
2. Hauck, P.A. (1992). *Overcoming the Rating Game: Beyond Self-Love—Beyond Self-Esteem*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox.
3. Seligman, Martin E.P. (1994). *What You Can Change and What You Can’t*. Sydney: Random House.
4. Carroll, Lewis. (1872). *Through the looking glass*. London: Macmillan.
5. Kobasa, Suzanne C. (1979). Stressful Life Events, Personality, and Health: An Inquiry into Hardiness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37:1, Pp.1–11.
6. Reported in Asbell, Bernard. (1991). *What They Know About You*. (p.261). New York: Random House.
7. Von Oech, Roger. (1984). *A Whack on the Side of the Head*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson Publishers.
8. Seligman, Martin E.P. (1994). *What You Can Change and What You Can’t*. Sydney: Random House.
9. A saying originally coined by a Taoist monk, popularised by Reinhold Niebuhr, adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, paraphrased by Gunars Neiders in *The Conquest of Happiness: A rational approach* (found on the Internet at <http://www.halcyon.com/neiders/conquest/conquest.htm>), and further paraphrased by this author.

Did you find this article helpful? You may wish to read the book from which it was adapted:
Taking Control: Manage stress to get the most out of life by Wayne Froggatt
 (HarperCollins, Auckland 1997)

Also, by the same author:

Choose To Be Happy: Your step-by-step guide - 2nd Edition
 (HarperCollins, Auckland 2003)

FearLess: Your guide to overcoming anxiety
 (HarperCollins, Auckland 2003)

For more extracts from all books & information on how to obtain them, go to:

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