

## **Freedom of Thought and Joy of Living**<sup>1</sup>

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This chapter is about how people solve problems and how they experience themselves and the world. I'll begin by explaining "freedom of thought and joy in living" as ways of interrupting an unfortunate social norm that has become a significant way of life for almost all of our clients and, for that matter, most of us. I will describe this way of life from freedom of thought and joy, the harm it does, and very basic interventions to transcend into joy.

The most basic interventions deal with ways of disrupting negative thought, clearing the mind of "busy" or pointless thought, stopping thought entirely, and inputting preferred thought. In addition, each of us must develop a personal recognition of the need, build the skills to freely choose what we think, and be able to pass it on to our clients in a way that is relevant for them.

Finally, the chapter details the experience of joy in living. Simply put, joy can be both the by-product of chosen thought and one of the most appropriate things to experience instead of common thought. Most of all, as therapists, we ought to directly address this with ourselves and our clients. And if we are effective, we must do it in a way that reduces conventional therapy to brief therapy and reduces brief therapy to conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Lankton, S. "Freedom of Thought and Joy in Living." In J. Zeig (Ed.) *Brief therapy: Lasting impressions*, pp. 18-40. Phoenix: The Milton H. Erickson Foundation Press.

## THE PROBLEM STATE

Most clients I see are victims of a crime. They are the perpetrators of it as well. It is the crime of not knowing. They don't know themselves. They don't know how to use their own minds for solving problems of living, and they don't know how to experience joy. I think it a kind of crime, or perhaps a sin, that they have not been trained in this skill. It is frightening sometimes to realize how far we have *not* come in education, family teaching, and the art of psychotherapy. It is evidenced by the almost total lack of awareness by people who get lost in repetitious thought and mazes of experience while under the impression that they are solving their problems. But there is no dominant socializing institution that teaches otherwise.

The famous sociologist, Lewis Yablonsky (1972) referred to this trend as:

"...the growing dehumanization of people to the point where they have become the walking dead. This dehumanized level of existence places people in roles where they are actors mouthing irrelevant platitudes, experiencing programmed emotions with little or no compassion or sympathy for other people. People with this condition suffer from the existential disease of robopathology" (p. 6).

This rather awkward term never caught on. More unfortunate, however, is that the ideas behind the concept were not widely recorded either. For Yablonsky, robopaths differ from psychopaths in two distinct ways. They are highly predictable and non-deviant.

People generally don't think about the sort of freedom I am talking about or Yablonsky feared they were losing. They think they have freedom when some extremely mundane criteria are met.

In today's America, it seems that the definition of free thought is the right to have uncensored opportunity to shout obscenity or publish a book of nude photos. It seems

that the experience of joy has become confused with the experience of thrill. People who have thrilling surges of adrenaline do, most certainly, report they are happy, joyful, and higher than usual at those moments. This should not be confused with happiness.

Happiness is a hard term to define since it is often attached to the consequences of success reached by means of hard work or by acquiring the symbols of that success by any means available. It is very idiosyncratic and elusive. Happiness for some might be spending a day together with their family quietly fishing and for others it might be winning a lucrative employment contact.

Joy, however, refers less to the cognitive and social element than it does to the experiential and even spiritual element of private life. Joy is associated with pleasure and an agreeable sensation or emotion – it need not have an antecedent, consequence, or thought. Nevertheless, I am using the term happiness to mean the habitual mental state that gives rise to the feeling of joy.

### **FREEDOM FROM WHICH THOUGHTS?**

I've implied that something about conventional thought is undesirable. But, I haven't yet been clear about which type of mental activity this involves. Undesirable thoughts are those that come from social programming and replace and limit experience and awareness.

Most individuals have only a few favored states of consciousness. some of these states there is conscious awareness of cognitive activity with combinations of visual and auditory images. These are images of the past, imagined past, and imagined futures.

Whereas the content varies greatly between individuals, the process of experiencing cognition probably varies less. People differ in consciousness for

combinations of these images, mixtures of auditory and visual qualities, chunk sizes, and degree of lucidness for each. There will also be different quality and intensity in bodily components associated with these cognitions. In fact, a few people are more conscious of their bodily component rather than their associated cognition. Despite individual variations, limitation on thought affects both the *content* of thought and, to a different degree, the *process*.

Before discussing these two logical levels of change (content and process) it is important to make the problem more explicit. The thoughts about which people do not have choice can be characterized in several distinct layers.

### **The Most Common Layer: Referents To Reality**

The most tenacious limits on thinking are those imposed by the world view we unconsciously absorb. I have spoken at length, elsewhere, about the history of scientific thought and the logical positivism, reductionism, chauvinism, upon which it is formed (Lankton, 1995). The by product of chopping up the world this way is immensely important for both therapists and even common household conversation.

In The Revolution of Hope, Erich Fromm (1986) writes:

“In the search of scientific truth, man came across knowledge that he could use for the domination of nature. He had tremendous success. But in the one-sided emphasis on technique and material consumption, man lost touch with himself, with life. Having lost religious faith and the human values bound up with it, he concentrated on technical and material values and lost the capacity for deep emotional experiences, for the joy and sadness that accompany them. The machine he built became so powerful that it developed its own program, which now determines man’s own thinking” (p. 2).

This pervasive machine that Fromm writes about is a layer of mindless, or even thoughtful conformity to reality defined by out socializing processes. From the continual

propaganda of well meaning education we learn that the world consists of things and processes. We learn nouns and verbs. A chair, a table, and even a personality, are labeled with nouns and denote things that basically don't change. Processes, labeled with verbs, consist of actions like sitting, standing, digesting, and so on. Presumably, the nouns are never events.

This rule is satisfying enough for the young and the simple, but the problem is that everything should be a verb. Everything is in the process of change. Nothing is solid. This distinction becomes especially problematic when we try to make sense of non-ordinary reality events like atoms, electrons, photons, stars, gravity. Thinking as we do, that photons and electrons are wave-particles, results in seeking answers for questions that don't make sense. Like, what holds the energy to the electron what makes the wave become a particle, how do energy and matter interact?

While these problems of physical science are interesting, they probably don't effect joy, well being, or freedom of our thoughts. Right? Wrong. Over the last few centuries we have come to think about the existence of love, courage, forgiveness, happiness, and the like, as nouns. As such we think that they are caused by other nouns. Our explanations attest to this. Consider these examples: "He has so much anger in him," "I don't have enough love," and "I don't feel like I have any forgiveness." People don't think of love as a process (outside of the thought that it is somehow the same as the sexual act). Our culture doesn't provide info about how to facilitate achieving or experiencing love.

At the same time, we are expected to feel love and tell our partners about it. This results in a bind: how to say we feel love when we were never sure we felt "it" as a thing

within ourselves. But the bind is easily escaped: all we need to do is acquiesce and say we feel it. Then we must ourselves a bit and believe what we have said.

This scenario does not apply to all of us at all times. Occasionally, a sense of compassion and pride mixed with excitement and awe fills our experience and we know that the label “love” is truly the best word for what we feel. Then we say, “I love you,” and we mean it. Indeed, at these times we feel love as a verb. Memory of these moments may give rise to a comment like “I have a lot of love for you.” Yet we still use “love” as a noun.

But more typically the term is used in a thoughtless conformity to what one ought to say or mean. This is terribly well expressed by R.D. Laing (1967) in The Politics of Experience when he wrote about why this happens:

“...we...take action on the world through behavior itself. Specifically this devastation is largely the work of *violence* that has been perpetrated on each of us, and by each of us on ourselves. The usual name that much of this violence goes under is *love*” (p.59).

Laing uses the word *violence* in a manner that is shockingly liberal. He means that mindless conformity to labels that are based in experience further obfuscates our understanding of our experience and this is a betrayal of (or violence to) the self. As a result of the world view, people live in a fantasy created by the label given to them by others.

Other examples of thinking of our experience as a thing can go something like this: “When my relationship broke up it gave me heartache and depression,” “there is no way that I can trust women,” “it’s just like a man to drop a bomb on you when you tell him you love him,” and “I’m never going to show my feelings again.” People accept

such self-thoughts and communications as accurate. They accept them without question when they hear them spoken by others. These sorts of meanings are not challenged and the validity of the underlying labels are taken to be useful communications.

But the worst aspect of this arrangement is that such thoughts are not ever questioned by the user. The validity of the underlying “substance” is not questioned and the thoughts are constructed from a social reality due to the apparent fit of the meaning. Rational thinking about these nouns is limited and solutions to personal or relational problems are inhibited.

But this “fit” is not generated from the person’s own introspection and effort – it is not “true” in their experience. It is as if the person’s own experience is mashed this way and that way in an effort to use conventional language to express it. After all, one might say, “everyone else is satisfied with conventional language, why shouldn’t I be too?” But without the freedom to think and come to know our own experience, how can we expect to benefit by mindlessly manipulating the labels and thoughts given to us by the impersonal other that society represents.

### **The Second Layer of Thought Control is More Personal: Families**

The family teaches us that much of our experience is not real. It informs us inaccurately that joy, happiness, and satisfaction is just around the corner (or never available to us at all) and all we need do to reach it is to labor a bit more, study a bit longer, work more efficiently, exercise a new way, and so on. The largest category of thought limitation comes from the accepted values of the socializing forces from the family.

Our capacity to think, except in the service of what we are dangerously deluded in supposing is our self-interest and in conformity with

common sense, is pitifully limited: our capacity even to see, hear, touch, taste and smell is so shrouded in veils of mystification that an intensive discipline of unlearning is necessary for anyone before one can begin to experience the world afresh, with innocence, truth and love” (Laing, 1967, p. 27).

Here is an example. I recently had a client who brought in his six-year old daughter. She was in first grade presumably was having nightmares in which she screamed. The parents had tape recorded the child’s utterances and brought them to me. This was not a child screaming in fear. This was a child who was whimpering to attract attention. Her crying would bring her parents to her room. Then they would leave and she would do it again and they would return.

I wasn’t at all alarmed when her heard her cries and I am a parent who can get alarmed when children make sounds that aren’t normal. These were manipulative little whines to which the best response would probably be: “Go on to sleep and we will see you in the morning” or “Please close your door while you make that sound so we can talk without hearing you.”

Upon discussion, it became clear that concern for the child was actually a displaced bit of fighting with the wife’s ex-husband, the child’s father. The daughter visited her father from time to time and the mother was fearful of and angry at him. So the mother hovered around the daughter and looked for signs that might indicate the ex-husband’s meanness. But there was none here and, the mother was fairly easily satisfied about that.

The case would have been closed except that with the stepfather in the office, I took the opportunity to ask how things were going in this newly constructed family. I inquired about the daughter’s school, family member’s health, work, and so on. He

volunteered that her school grades were terrible and that she had an attention problem. She just couldn't put her mind to anything and if she thought about something, within a second she'd think about something else. And in this way, he added, she was just another stupid woman like her mother. That, he insisted was what was effecting her school work. He added that he'd be happy if I would try to help her.

He said all this in the presence of his daughter and wife. Not only was it untrue but it was extremely damaging to a self-image, of course. But such beliefs become true and inhibit freedom of thought. It's the hypnosis of the family. It's the way socializing institutions train each of us to limit our range of thought and problem solving. We are taught labels, concepts, causal relations between them, and how to behave toward all of them. As Eric Berne (1972) wrote, "The child is, in effect, hypnotized by his parents into carrying out a certain life pattern (p. 343).

Each person learns with a different degree of emotional tolerance so that some people can question and some don't even dare to. Thinking back to the family with the school girl, consider the difference it would have made if the father had said, " She has been improving her ability to pay attention little by little. Sometimes she doesn't even know that she's improving, but we know she is. She'll see." If he had followed that line of thinking, his family hypnosis would have been positive instead of negative – expansive instead of limiting.

### **The Third Layer of Thought Control**

This layer includes therapists, physicians, and other change professionals. The layers of thought control I've suggested are like skin on an onion. You can peel from the most removed outer shell of world view to the deeper shell of the historical family to the

individual's most immediate and intimate shell. This layer concerns the personal re-examination that goes on in therapy.

### *Specialists*

Eric Berne used an anecdote about a make believe client who had a pebble in his shoe to highlight the absurdity of specialists obfuscating the simple and obvious. The story explained that because of the pebble, the man walked oddly. Because of that, he threw his hip out and that caused stress on his back which caused tension in his neck and gave him headaches. He went to see a specialist about the headaches, who prescribed medication for the headaches. But Berne's point was that someone should have simply taken the pebble out of the man's shoe.

Simple efficiency is often lost as specialized helping professionals inadvertently overlook solutions that looking at the whole person in context might reveal. The majority of my clients are being medicated by more than one physician, each a different specialist. In every case, the client has been lead to believe that the medical doctor can do no more at this time but prescribe medication. The clients continue to visit each physician to complain about the effects or lack of effects of the medication. None of these clients has reported that any of the doctors has taken a holistic or system-wide approach to their problems. Each doctor has labeled a problem and most problems are to then be "solved" with prescription drugs. The most distressing for me are clients with pain.

The clients may be impressed, in awe, confused, frustrated, or angry with their diagnosis. But, they either resign themselves to living with these diagnosed "diseases" or ask how they can get rid of them. How can I live with my lupus, myalgea, myasthenia, arthritis, degenerative bone disease, cluster headaches, acid reflux, pinched nerve, slow metabolism? Oddly, the presence of seemingly obvious factors such as excess weight,

smoking, lack of proper diet and exercise, self-criticism, and neglectful or aggressive others in the clients life, may not even be addressed. This is often true even in blatant cases where pain would most certainly be decreased if the client were to lose weight. In other cases, sleep problems related to medication quantities go uncorrected except for a referral to a sleep clinic! The general well-being of the client, in my view, is not considered and the often unhelpful labels create further mind control. It doesn't matter whether clients accept or challenge the label. In either case, its reality guides their behavior and experience.

### *Observable Truth*

Alan Watts (1972) provided an interesting illustration about a cat crossing behind a fence from which a board was missing. An observer first saw a cat's head, then a cat's body, then a cat's tail. The cat turned around and walked back and again the observer saw the cat's head, cat's body, and cat's tail. Upon subsequent passes that seemed to be exactly the same, the observer concluded that the cat's head caused the cat's tail since this event comes and then that event comes. Never did the cat's tail occur without the cat's head. The cat's head always lead to the cat's tail. "Thereupon he reasons that the event 'head' is the invariable and necessary cause of the event 'tail,' which is the head's effect. This absurd and confusing gobbledygook comes from his failure to see that head and tail go together: they are all one cat" (p. 27).

That illustration is similar to what we do in this world when we look at it through filters and assume that we see relationships of cause and effect where there are none. We have been under an illusion that events are able to be broken down into small pieces. We are, in this reductionistic way, led to believe that one piece causes the next piece and that

any piece had some antecedents that caused it to happen and some consequences and conclusions that it will reach.

As care givers, it is important to be comfortable not knowing any truth. It is easy to say this but harder to do. Many people have not learned to be comfortable with ambiguity and no truth to hold on to. But remember how misinformed we believed science to be only 100 years ago. If we must insist on a truth, let it be the truth that our clients can change, improve, and enjoy.

### *More Labels*

Reductionistic science, with its proclivity toward assuming it can know a truth about reality, has given rise to reductionistic subcategories. It is often unnecessarily difficult to see a client who, in previous therapy, has been labeled and accepted the label. For instance, at a therapy workshop, the person in charge of organizing a demonstration for me asked if I was willing to work with a manic depressive woman. I asked on what problem the woman wanted to work. The organizer replied, “she’s manic depressive.”

The problem with this conversation is that I don’t treat labels, I work with people. Even though the organizer is trying to be helpful by sharing this label, the client (and I) was further alienated from direct experience. For every minute of talk time given to considering aspects of that label, the client is missing out on creative problem solving.

Erickson emphasized the importance of treating each person as an individual. That means finding the uniqueness of the person. Diagnostic categories (labels) are all about finding the similarities between people. Sharing these labels in word, or even in deed, are ways to help clients become more conforming, past-oriented, self-conscious, and alienated.

Therapists who foster thinking processes that further limit clients constitute a problematic category of their own. Beyond issues of iatrogenic problems and counter transference in therapy, another, broader problem arises when therapists inadvertently limit thinking by labeling and attribution. Introducing a concept to a client focuses awareness on that concept. To continue communicating, a client has no choice but to agree with or dispute the concept. In both cases, the client's thinking is subsequently bound to that concept.

As a result of these three major layers of worldview socialization, family propaganda, and professional jargon, people think about what they have been told to think about. They ruminate on concepts that are not of their own choosing. They attempt to answer questions with cause and effect thinking that can never resolve the concerns. They fret, worry, wonder, puzzle, obsess, muse, fume about ideas, concepts, topics, relationships, duties, faults, and plans. They even seek professional help to get answers to questions that should not ever have been asked. For example, the person presents a goal that: "I just want you to help me find out whose fault it was." "Can you tell me why my wife left me?" And one of my favorites, "if I could just understand why I do such stupid things, I'd be happy." These kinds of distractions limit mature and appropriate decision making. However, people don't know anything else to think or any other way to think.

### **PRACTICAL AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC POINTS OF VIEW**

From a practical point of view, everyone would agree with the basic idea of gaining control of their own mental activity. Believing it is possible, knowing how, and putting that knowledge into consistent action are often another matter. For example, long

ago, before my son grew to be six feet tall, he was bullied by a particular child at school. And he would come home and talk about it for ten or twenty minutes or more. Later, he would bring it up again. Finally, after this had gone on for almost of a month, I said, “You know, there is something that I really dislike about all of this talk. You are really smart and you’ve got a great brain, but your brain time is limited and you can only entertain a finite number of thoughts and ideas between now and the time you become an old man. And you’re using a lot of your brain time on problems that are somebody else’s. You shouldn’t have to think about what’s wrong with Billy, what Billy does, what Billy did, what Billy’s going to do, and what Billy said. You shouldn’t let Billy use *your* brain and fill it up with what he’d have you think about. You should have a choice about what you let occupy your brain.” Although Shawn no doubt recognized the wisdom of that advice, he was not immediately able fully to implement it and apply it to the disruption of those thoughts that were stealing his brain time. But the point was not lost.

From the psychotherapeutic viewpoint, most of our clients don’t know how to disengage their attention from those things about which they think redundantly, whether self-image, an alleged inability to concentrate, manic depression, multiple personality, or depression. They don’t know how to step behind that thought process and let it go by without them, to be free of those thoughts, and then to think the thoughts they want to think.

We may tell them they should do it, but we rarely show them how, because we probably don’t know how ourselves. We don’t have role models for it. For example, the role models of communicators we see when we turn on television to watch ‘Crossfire’ don’t even demonstrate people who can discuss things and reach a useful conclusion.

They just argue. Now and then, you can get a sophisticated argument on ‘Crossfire,’ more often you get several experts trying to interrupt someone. But where do we turn for models of people who can use words to solve problems? It’s increasingly unlikely that our clients will come to us thinking they can use discussion to solve a problem.

## **STOPPING THOUGHT**

### **Education**

Despite the scarcity of models and well known guidelines for achieving freedom of thought, we can identify specific steps that facilitate this goal. The first step is education. I find it useful to discuss the goal and the reasons that clients have not even thought of it before. Generally, this is a matter of summarizing what has been stated here in more personal terms. The goal of being in a state of freedom from thought will require that clients are ready to experience joy. The educational process is especially important to underscore that the way of life the client needs to follow has to be discerned. The education process must include the understanding that obvious models will be scarce. The journey is not lonely, but the traveler will be alone.

### **Evaluation**

Evaluation and awareness is the next step. Clients can inspect their thoughts at some point and recognize those that obviously are limiting. Self-critical thoughts, pessimistic thoughts, thoughts about their pain, worries about their performance, rehashing the past, all are targets for censorship. And to do that, a client has to notice and evaluate thought. Initially, this may require the aid of relaxation. Sometimes it is helpful for clients to talk to themselves in a fashion similar to the double-chair technique of Gestalt Therapy: The limiting thoughts are easily revealed when a conversation is

created between the client who wishes to feel joy and the part of the client that will explain why “it” supposedly can’t do so.

### **Stop Thought**

The third step is actually stopping thought. After the initial target thoughts are identified, the more immediately rewarding part of therapy can begin. Introspection reveals that thoughts arise from memories or from sense perception. The sensory-motor mind is very susceptible to changing input. For training purposes, it is best to begin by reducing outside influence, closing the eyes, relaxing the body. Past experience provides a storehouse of experience from which thoughts arise. There are a number of ways to stop thought. We can engage incompatible thoughts, such as reciting mantras or concentrating on objects of meditation. We can slow thought by shifting to the tonal sub-modality of the thought and syncing it to a slow exhale. For example, one can imagine the voice tone that one accompany the self-talk or “thought.” Upon identifying it, let the tone of the self-talk become lower in lock-step with a slowing of breathing. We can dissociate thought by observing it as something that is not a part of the self. I prefer to this method as it can be integrated easily with the use of hypnosis and other visual and auditory dissociation practices that I teach.

### **Choose Thought**

Selecting preferred thoughts is the fourth step. There is an old Hindu saying that a nightingale in a golden cage is no freer than one in a cage of iron. Some might interpret that to mean that the positive thoughts one creates of self-nurturing and positive affirmation are likely to be as much of a trap as the interrupted negative thoughts. In practice, however, it is sometimes a necessary and valuable intermediary step for clients

to achieve this degree of control. Thought structures like that of Self Image Thinking training (Lankton and Lankton, 1983) are an excellent way to facilitate desired experience and create associations for those experiences to be available in future situations. These associations, like most, operate as post hypnotic suggestions and self-programming.

### **Experience**

Initiating, that is, recognizing, experience is the next step. Certainly, one does not lose consciousness when the mind is quiet. More than at any other time, this is the time when one ought to focus awareness on those natural experiences that bring joy and pleasure. These are as simple as inhalation and exhalation experiences, the feeling of the pulse in your limbs, the awareness of your heart beat, the feeling of warm and relaxed muscles. They quietly convey a powerful foundation for joy. The pleasure and sense of well-being that come from these experiences should not be underrated. In fact, it should be elaborated!

### **Practice**

Practice is the inevitable last step. The mind learns rapidly, but leaning to stop thought and replace it with joy once is hardly enough for most people. After all, they have practiced the opposite internal behavior thousands of times a day for decades. Clients need to be encouraged to continue the self-hypnosis and self-control activity until they can achieve the state with a minimal willful effort or until it becomes an expectation and a habit to be happy. There will be no one else to encourages them to practice finding joy, so it is essential that we provide this expectation.

## **RESISTANCE TO JOY AND FREEDOM OF THOUGHT**

Why would anyone resist the practice of routinely knowing joy and freedom of thought? I can best illustrate this by asking you to imagine and compare two scenarios. In the first, imagine two people walking along a beach and see that both heads are filled with images of checkbooks, calendars, child care chores, past quarrels, anticipated meetings, lost key chains, and so on. Now imagine the people again, but this time have them walk along the beach with only the reflection of the immediate environment in their minds. They would see ever-changing waves, sand, and sky. In comparing these scenarios, most would agree that the first scene depicts tension, worry, self-torture, obsession, and anxiety. These people would be robbed of their joy. In many ways, it is correct to say that this is crazy. It may be the norm, but it is crazy. It is living outside the moment and feeling inappropriate experience.

We may think that the scenario of being oriented to the here and now is the path to joy, peace, and sanity, but we often encounter objections to actually taking it. One reason for objecting is that we are not accustomed to preceding this way, we don't know how to, and we are afraid to because, upon examination, it is scare and leads to insecurity and loss of control.

### **Loss of Control**

“What the Chinese describe as a gentle standing out of the way ... or an emptying of the mind, is probably what the more egocentric personality of Western man sees as the violent death of the ego...” (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1973, p. 25).

But one need not be fearful. The possibility of experiencing the here and now is known in those brief times when we allow ourselves to be and to feel. But the possibility of maintaining that state of consciousness for extended periods is considered inappropriate for our culture. That argument is based on the belief that we can not plan for the future if we simply go about living in the present moment without those “out of context thoughts.” Such arguing is based on a lack of trust in peoples’ intelligence. It is based on the failure to notice how much we have learned and stored in our vast set of unconscious patterns of living.

### **Being Practical**

Another possible basis for resistance is simply the idea that experiencing joy and freedom of thought would be impractical. However, there are clients for whom achieving this outcome is highly practical. Here are some examples. One of my clients was vague and confused when he came to therapy. He wanted to find out how victimized he had been and hadn’t expecting therapy to be more than an opportunity to vent his feelings and publicly clarify why his life was hard. However, he terminated after five sessions, declaring (to my delight and surprise) that coming to see me had been the best thing that had happened to him.

Another client was an overweight woman who complained of multiple medical problems. She said she wanted to die because of her inability to overcome her pain and her historical sense of helplessness in the face of a neglectful, and sometimes abusive, environment. “I have no reason to live,” she proclaimed almost proudly. Within a few weeks, she had discovered joy and an ability to let go of the thoughts that reinforced her view of herself, her past, and her future. She announced that she had a sense of well-

being and that that experience was reason enough to live. As a result, she could control her pain and begin to lose weight. She has now lost over 40 pounds and has reduced all medication by half, with her doctors' approval.

Most clients could achieve similar benefit from such a shift. In fact, this approach to problems is highly applicable to the majority of clients I see. Establishing freedom of thought and a sense of joy does not change the reality of the world. When divorce is necessary, one must divorce. When changing employment, going to college, losing weight, or whatever, is necessary, then those goals must be pursued. But the state of mind that one is in during these times is negotiable. This is exactly where the education and training to have freedom of thought and joy become important.

Ask your clients what they intend to do to become happy and you will find a confusion unlikely or inappropriate plans. The plans may be interesting, even wise, but they are not needed in order for the person to attain happiness and joy because we all have these available within us. After a person learns to experience joy, his or her other goals can be pursued for their own material pay off or their intrinsic value.

### **JOY AND HAPPINESS**

Isn't it ironic that so many people are less than happy? They do not have much comfort, and even less joy. A simple experiment of asking people if they are happy will yield interesting results. I have done this on numerous occasions and typically get three types of answers: "Yes," and "I would be happy if "X" would happen," and "No, I'm never happy.

The individuals who answer "yes" usually don't actually seem happy. They usually aren't exhibiting any of the signs we associate with happiness, like smiling,

gracefulness, and good health. When the person responds sharply, "yes, I'm happy, what's it to you," the answer means something other than what we have in mind when we ask if a person feels joy and happiness. It is as if a large number of people have learned that they are expected to say "Yes" to such a question unless they are, at that moment, actively involved in conflict. But happiness does not mean the absence of conflict or the inability to articulate one's inner state.

Those who report they would feel happiness "if" something else would happen they are at least seekers. Unfortunately, the life of continual seeking only insures that they will be seeking something new in the future when the joy, happiness, and comfort of a recent conquest wear off. Many believe that they will be happy when they earn more money, graduated, get a faster modem, get that snazzy car, are accepted into this or that group, or just spend a pleasant Sunday with the family. Of course, people do feel better for a short time when a particular goal is reached, and disappointed or depressed when it is not. But soon they find themselves looking for something else. This attitude makes for a lot of difficulty in life and either fully motivates or in large part supports a mass of problems including jealousy, possessiveness, competition, false pride, deception, intimidation, theft, anxiety, frustration, inadequacy, and hopelessness.

Initially, it seems to many that achieving what one seeks is the true way to confidence, competence, and the accompanying feelings of happiness and joy. So, a bit of clarification is needed about this issue. People do get happiness and joy by living through a process or sequence of events with the following three steps.

- 1) Devise a desire, ideal, or goal state that differs from the current state,

- 2) Identify resources, organize a plan (no matter how casual), and implement the perceptions, behaviors, thoughts, skills, and so on, to reach the goal.
- 3) Discover that the strategies, skills, planning, ideas, resources, actions, and so on, led to fulfillment of the goal, ideal, or desire state.

However, this sequence which is the protocol of building a feeling of competence, is mostly useful to help people *discover* the happiness within them and *provide a memory for recovering the experience* at a later time. It is really essential to realize that the feelings of happiness and joy, especially, are available to people independent of these or any other accomplishment. Once these feelings, or any feelings, are learned, they are available through direct recall of the feeling. The extent to which one loses sight of *that* fact is the extent to which one continually seeks to achieve more. And as people seek an awareness of happiness in this manner, through achievement and competency or gain rather than through the *retrieving* of the learned experience, they will hold on to their successful feelings and their joy for a very short time. The result is the continued need to seek “more.”

*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* defines happiness as "the enjoyment of pleasure without pain; felicity; blessedness; satisfaction." It is listed as synonymous with felicity, blessedness, bliss, and aptness. No part of the definition suggests that one must work for it by the sorts of efforts people commonly report.

I am suggesting that it is a state that can be experienced almost continually. What is happiness? Joy and happiness are words that I'm using in a very general way to describe not just some state of bliss which most people don't attain, but very low levels

of happiness, all the way through extreme happiness and, for that matter, religious experiences, as well.

“If his mind is truly involved in his action, the bliss of the meditation state is a joy beyond pleasure and pain, a sense of attunement with the holy that follows upon surrender of personal preferences” (Naranjo & Ornstein, 1973, p. 26)

For most people, just happiness would be okay. They would never expect a spiritual high and they would not really expect to be even moderately happy all the time. Oddly, not many therapists have ever had clients come to an intake session saying that they wanted to be happy. Most of the time, we have clients come to us saying that they want to stop fighting with their spouses, stop being depressed, stop overeating, stop being afraid of elevators, snakes, or urinating in public restrooms, and so on. Even when we ask them what it is that would make them happy, those few who say they want to be happy generally restate it in terms of removal of some negative thing. For instance, “I would be happy if only my son stopped getting failing grades in school.”

But when that negative thing is removed, they aren't actually happy. Many people don't have a sense that their life is meaningful or worthwhile. A few fortunate ones don't even ask that question, but others do, especially depressed people. They ask how one can find anything worth living for. And sometimes therapists take this to be a question of spirituality needing development. I agree that it is. I think that all joy, all psychotherapy, all personal growth, joy included, is part of some developing spirituality.

There are deep cultural and historical influences effecting our perception of and expectation for happiness. Throughout the Judeo-Christian world, we are alerted to the God of Abraham who was an ever-present spirit of love and comfort, the invitation to

"good tidings of great joy" and the covenants of grace and peace offered by the blessings of religions. The U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to the "pursuit of happiness." We are told daily, in one way or another, that it is permissible, even preferable, to be happy. And too, the majority of parents would want this not only for themselves, but also for their children. In short, our philosophical, religious, political, and social structures seem to grant a permission to seek joy and freedom.

So why are people not happy? The answer ultimately lies in our lack of training and attention to the feeling, our lack of trust or faith in keeping it when we have it, and the willingness of our environment to rely upon misleading myths about happiness. These reasons include lack of careful examination, ignorance about the alternative, a sometimes outright deception for profit, and overall, a historical failure to develop language, awareness, and tools for our own and other peoples phenomenological experience.

It seems like the words to a country-western song I recently heard are all too true for most of us. The singer laments: "Everyone knows what to do about my misery, everybody but me!" Isn't it true that if you ask anyone about how to be happy, you end up with some vague generalities that don't really fit for your situation. Often, it seems the person giving the advice really does hope you will get happy (even when the person giving the advice is not). It appears that the reason most advice is less than successful is that over many centuries we have developed a society based on some myths about happiness.

- That happiness is only in your head

Happiness is a total-body phenomenon. When we are joyful, we know there are changes in several physical, chemical, cognitive, and digestive functions. These include feelings of comfort, well-being, compassion, peace, increased circulation and respiration, sense of energy, better immune system functioning, pain reduction, increased behavioral congruity, and intuitive sense of a reason for living.

- The people automatically know how to feel good

Left to their own devices, people certainly learn to avoid pain and to seek pleasure. That is, they maximize their positive experience within learned limits. However, people aren't left to their own devices. They are constrained by the world view, economics, geography, political oppression, and limitations imposed by social learning, family training, and professional help.

We believe that children are happy or know how to be happy. This seems to be true enough for children who have a sufficiently nurturing atmosphere and are left to their own devices to discover what brings them pleasure. But too soon children compromise their pleasure so they will not be exhibiting joy that is beyond the norm for their families' apparent limit. This sort of compromising leads to defensive adaptations to hide the threatening experiences of joy from the prying eyes of parents and siblings. The entire range of defense mechanisms from ego psychology has to do with hiding experiences that are perceived to be a threat. These include anxiety, fear, anger, and, of course, tenderness and joy, the well known components of the Oedipal drama. So, it is not wise to assume that unaided children are "out there having fun." Nor is it wise to assume that everyone,

by virtue of having once been a child, knows how to attain joy and happiness, blessedness, and felicity.

- That an atmosphere of nurturing support is not required

Has a relative or friend ever reprimanded you: “Why don’t you just stop doing that and be happy?” Not only does this suggest that one already knows how to become happy, but it shows a non-tolerance of the acquisition of happiness and the supporting atmosphere in which it must be learned.

Once happiness/joy/comfort is learned, it becomes a strong personal resource that can be relied upon to bolster an individual in performing courageous acts and to sustain him or her through times of trouble. Before it is well learned, however, it requires a delicate focus of attention in order to be recognized and an atmosphere of support in order for it to be learned and reused.

Because few people really understand happiness and joy, there are pitifully few times when transactions are designed to focus on it and support it, and few situations that are structured to initiate those types of transactions. When people come to know of it, their sense of compassion helps build that nurturing environment for others.

- That happiness comes from outside oneself

People often fail to realize how they repeatedly construct whatever feelings they have. They may feel frustrated that they do not “achieve” happiness. They may feel depressed that they are never understood, never happy, never successful. They may feel anxious that others will not like their behavior or pretenses. But no matter what the case, this redundant feeling, whether it be frustration, anxiety, depression, jealousy, anger,

helplessness, or whatever, is being created by their own thinking and acting again and again.

Ironically, the mental machinations used to create these undesirable feelings would also create happiness or joy. The undesirable feelings are often the by-product of some so-called problem solving tactics. For instance, there are people who worry that some calamity will strike their child or family. As a result, they may mentally rehearse the problem and anticipate their possible solutions. They think they are helping to prevent the problem, but the by-products of that attempting are anxiety and worry. The familiar feeling of worry and fear, in this case, will surely reduce the joy. Ironically, many become depressed and angry and inadequate attempting to achieve and helping their children achieve, joy or happiness! They continue the practice as a never ending loop because they think it is the most appropriate way to proceed. This self-inflicted unpleasantness is not seen as self-inflicted or as optional. Nevertheless, they realize that happiness and joy are not to be found within and they go to external sources. In many cases, this accounts for their seeking destructive distractions and people as a diversion from their self-inflicted pain.

- That you can have happiness regardless of how you treat others

It is not so much that others are needed for happiness, but that the emotions and tensions that result from anger, bitterness, and hostility will derail the awareness of happiness. Joy and happiness will produce compassion. As such, the way one treats another can be a type of voltmeter to measure how much happiness, freedom, joy and peace they are 'charged' with.

- That it's hard to be happy when you have problems

Many postpone their joy until something happens to improve their problems. They consider joy as a dessert. It is something of which you partake after the meal is over or a reward you receive after a job is completed. However, joy is not like a "just reward," but is available at most all times. In fact, the point of this chapter is that one ought to establish a state of mind in which joy and freedom of thought is a continual components.

This is especially true considering the fact that life is, in some manner of observing, a steady stream of problems with which one must deal. This manner of observing, by the way, is how life appears when one does not maintain joy and freedom of thought. It is a catch-22 that if one waits for the problems to go away in order to have full time happiness and joy, one will never achieve them. However, if you achieve happiness, your problems will significantly reduce.

- That you don't need to practice to have happiness

So, do people not want to be happy? Why do they do the wrong things if these acts will not lead to happiness? The answer is that people will rely upon old learning, habits, and attitudes until they learn alternatives. Once they succeed at feeling happiness and retaining it they will rely less and less on their previous ways of filling time. Our difficulty in training ourselves for happiness is attributed to several factors. We have no idea how to begin no personal or lifestyle model is provided, it violates the customary sense of what is normal, there is no social support from the mass of people who feel differently, there is no commercial appeal for joy or freedom, and it is not thrilling or dramatic enough.

Perhaps the most important of these factors is that we have few (or no) models to follow, no support if we succeed. We do have so called models given to us from certain areas of entertainment. That is, we are expected to believe that what we see in the media, that some film star or athlete is happy. At least, they are happy for the moment when they are in a romance, when they have conquered an opponent, or shock us by performing some outrageous deed. We are also expected to believe that we can become happy if we purchase certain products touted in television commercials and magazine advertisements. One wonders who these commercials are aimed since we presume that everyone can recognize their idiocy. But perhaps repetition dulls us to the idiocy because the “Madison Avenue” pitch continues. And as it does, it only further obfuscates the path to happiness and joy.

### **CONCLUSION**

Many of these myths about happiness that we have come to embrace are the result of thoughtlessly accepting the logic, labels, and limits on experience to which we are socialized. Indeed, socialization seems to be the midwife of thought control and experiential slavery. Alternatively, the achievement of joy requires nothing less than a revolution, just as it has for centuries. And, the way to accomplish this revolution is to put back into the hands of therapists those skills and perceptions that have been the province of medicine men, shamans, mystics, and change agents since civilization began.

As therapists, we must teach our clients to seek freedom of thought and joy of living and orient them toward these objectives. We can help people stop limiting their thinking and problem solving. We can help them stop “external seeking” and to find the simple joys within. We can help people to expect to achieve joy and happiness, to trust

the experience when they have it, and react spontaneously and creatively when they find it. We must help them integrate it into a new lifestyle and generalize it and apply it to heal anxiety, depression, pain, bitterness, mind/body splits, helplessness, hopelessness, and immorality.

Ironically, the terms ‘mindful’ and ‘mindless’ mean almost the opposite of their usual connotations in this new context. A mind full of unconsciously accepted garbage is not the caring and “mindful” person the term suggests. Conversely, a person who has consciously made an effort to avoid mental clutter is probably correctly considered mindless in a certain way, but this does not mean that the person is ignorant. In fact, this “mindless” person may be ignoring far less about the self, and the social and physical environments than other, “mindful” people do. It is the state of mind of great joy, as R.

D. Laing (1967) said:

“The experience of being the actual medium for a continual process of creation takes one past all depression or persecution of vain glory, past even, chaos or emptiness, into the very mystery of that continual flip of nonbeing into being, and can be the occasion of that great liberation when one makes the transition from being afraid of nothing to the realization that there is nothing to fear” (p. 42).

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