How to 'do' a good day

By Rod Matthews

Part 3 – The courage to change your behaviours

List three words

Have you ever walked away from a person or situation only to think to yourself later, 'If only I'd said …' or 'If only I'd done that …?'

There are times in our lives when we feel as though who we are is not sufficient to cope with what our surroundings asks of us. Yet there are many amazing examples of ordinary people behaving in extraordinary ways in extraordinary circumstances. So it would be fair to suggest that most of us are capable of more than we achieve.

It would also be true to say that sometimes we don't *want* to achieve more … but there is another four-part article in that.

For the sake of this article lets assume that you are interested in being more of who you are. Let's assume that you are interested in increasing your flexibility. Let's assume that you want to improve the results you are getting.

What we have done in the previous two articles is to identify the difference between triggers and attitudes. The difference between what happens and our internal dialogue and the effect it has on our resilience.

In this article we will be looking at how to:

- Increase your behavioural flexibility.
- Increase the number of times your responses to situations and people are ideal.
- Reduce the number of times you think to yourself 'If only I'd said …' or 'If only I'd done that …'
- Reduce the stress and frustration associated with 'I could never do that.'
- Maintain a *sense of self*.

But first, in the space provided below, I'm going to ask you to write down three words that you would like others to use when describing you. There are a couple of things that will help you do this.

Firstly, imagine that it is your funeral! You have died and somehow you are able to hear the eulogies. Your are able to hear the people who know you the best describe you and your life. What adjectives would you most like them to use?

Secondly, here are a few examples that you might like to choose from …

- Decisive
- Driven
- Creative
- Extraverted
- Calm
- Friendly
- Empathetic
- Supportive
- Firm but fair
- Optimistic

- Strong sense of justice
- Persistent
- Accurate
- Fun / Funny
- Enthusiastic
- Family orientated
- Helpful
- Engaging
- Successful

- Happy
- Relaxed
- Motivated
- Strategic
- Centred
- Always present
- Deep
- Smart
- Quick

So, what are your three words …?

1.

2.

3.

The power of association and mental rehearsal

Let's just put those words to the side for one moment. We will revisit them later in the light of the following information.

There is a friend of mine who used to teach children at a local high school. On occasions she would find herself looking after the detention group, the group of kids that had gotten into trouble at school during the week and had to stay behind after school as punishment.

She tells a story about one kid who was always on detention. He was a little creepy and often in trouble. This friend of mine often found herself alone in the detention class with this kid. So to pass the time she would ask him questions to try and find out how his brain worked.

One day she asked him, 'So what type of films do you watch?'

He replied, 'I like horror films.'

'Like what?' she dug.

He proceeded to list some very scary films: '*Friday the 13th, Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Child's Play*.'

'How do you watch those films? When I watch them I get scared.'

'Well you're an idiot then.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, who are you being in the film?'

When most of us watch a horror film we associate with the victim. In our mind we are saying things like, 'No! Don't go in there. Just leave and call the police.' It turns out that what this kid was doing was associating with the perpetrator of the horrific acts. Inside his head he is thinking to himself things like, 'Ok. Don't start the chainsaw up yet. They are nearly in the house. Wait … wait … NOW!'

Frightening isn't it!

The point being, when we read a book or when we see a film we associate with one of the characters. A great way to highlight this is to watch a film that has multiple story lines. Films like *Pulp Fiction*, *Crash* or *Love Actually*. As you watch these you will notice an increased level of association and interest when a certain story line comes back on screen. We often think something like 'AH! Good. This person again. I was wondering what was happening with them.'

This association is a very powerful thing. Monkey see monkey do: we learn from watching others. We needed to be able to do this on an evolutionary level because if we were to survive as a cooperative species we needed to be able to read other's responses and know what these meant for us. If someone looking over your shoulder shows shock and runs away, the message is clear.

Recent research into neuropsychology shows us how this works in the brain. When we observe someone doing something our brain fires the same neurons that would be required to carry out the task ourselves. So, for example, when we watch someone grab hold of a cup our brain fires the same neurons we would have to fire if it were us grabbing hold of the cup.

This principle has been used in sports psychology for many years. An integral part of becoming an elite athlete is to mentally rehearse.

There are a couple of famous studies to highlight this. In one study, gymnasts who were to learn a new move were divided into two groups. One group was instructed to visualise themselves being able to do a particular move, while the other group was given no instructions. A couple of weeks later, when the time came for them to do this particular move, without the benefit of any previous physical practise, the group who visualized had a 50%-60% success rate, whereas the group that had not visualized had only about 10% success initially.

In another study, a basketball team was split into two groups in order to practice free throws. One group physically practised making the shots. The other group was instructed to mentally practise by visualising that they were making the shots. When the two groups competed with each other to see who performed better, those players who visualised actually made more shots successfully than the group who had actually practised.

The challenge for us mere mortals is to notice what we are mentally rehearsing. When we are asked to perform something that we perceive to be outside of our competence we often imagine the worst and then mentally rehearse that. If we asked someone speak at a conference many people would imagine themselves stuffing the speech up, making mistakes or being asked lots of curly questions. Then they would run this film over and over in their head, mentally rehearsing ways to fire all the neurons that will not help. This is how to do worry. Think of a situation in the future, imagine it being the worst possible outcome just so we can feel sick about it now. Very human and very ridiculous.

Elite athletes don't do this. Elite athletes do not line up at the beginning of the 100 sprint thinking to themselves, 'I'm going to come last. I'm going to pull a hamstring, I'm going to fall over and embarrass myself.' Elite athletes have been schooled in the art of imagining the best possible outcome for them and mentally rehearsing that. They are thinking: 'I'm going to get my start right, I'm going to get on my toes from step 1, I'm going to keep my head up and I will beat my best time.'

Imagine how well your day would go if you could apply the principles we have just discussed to it!

In order to do this we need to find a role model. Someone who does those three words you wrote down at the beginning of this article really well. We need to observe them doing those words and we need to ask ourselves some questions as we are watching them so we can identify how to behave in order increase the likelihood that others will describe us in the same way.

Micro Behaviours

Let's work on one example. Say for the sake of argument that you would like others to describe you as *decisive*. The fact of the matter is that you cannot 'do' decisive. It doesn't even make grammatical sense to say 'do decisive.' What you can do, however, is a series of micro behaviours that when someone observes you using those micro behaviours they would describe you as decisive. It is these micro behaviours that we are looking to list.

To do this we need to ask ourselves a couple of questions:

1. What would you see someone do or hear someone say that would lead you to describe them that way?
2. How exactly do you do that? What would you see someone do or hear someone say that would lead you to describe them that way?

Yes, I know I have repeated the question. I have done so for a reason. When we try to answer the first question it is easy to come up with labels and not micro behaviours. For example, if I asked the question, 'What would you see someone do or hear someone say that would lead you to describe them as decisive?' chances are I would get responses like 'they would be quick thinkers, they would know the answer.' These are useless to us, as we cannot copy these. So we need to ask ourselves again 'How exactly do you do that? What would you *see someone do* or *hear someone say* that would lead you to describe them that way?'

The answers to these questions will need to fall into one of the following categories to qualify as micro behaviours:

- *Language*: Choice of specific words over other possible words.
- *Tone of voice*: The combination and movement of volume, pitch and speed in what you say.
- *Gestures*: How you move your hands, body and face.

Using these three pointers and drilling down with the question, 'What would you *see someone do* or *hear someone say* that would lead you to describe them that way?' we will find the micro behaviours of 'decisiveness.' For example:

- Language:

  o Use definitive words like: must, have to, can't, 3, 7.
  o Avoid possibility words like: might, could, possibly, perhaps, couple, several.

- Tone of voice (the combination and movement of volume pitch and speed in what you say):

  o Talk slower to avoid the use of 'um' and 'ah' and other gap-fillers.
  o Use a downward inflexion at the end of your sentence.

- Gestures:

  o Count points of on your fingers as you explain each one.
  o Turn your palms down as you gesture.
  o Avoid gesturing too much. Avoid visual noise.
  o Use a non-specific pointing gesture.

Individually these micro behaviours are trivial and meaningless. Used together they form a pattern and that pattern would lead me to describe you as decisive.

There are a couple of tools that will help us develop other examples. These are:

- Satir Categories.
- Vocal Variety.

Satir Categories

Virginia Satir, the great American family therapist, identified five different "body language" patterns used under stress.

What she noticed from years of observation is that there are some classic body gestures that are often combined with a certain language, and that these send a very clear message to other people about what is being said.

We can use these gestures as a basis for building our micro behaviours, communicating with greater congruence and increasing the likelihood that people will describe us a certain way.

Every gesture has a place and a time. There is no one gesture that is good or bad. All gestures can be used appropriately and inappropriately. The skill is to know when and how much to use each one.
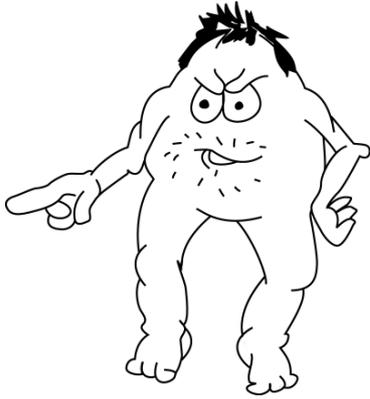
The 'Blamer'

Often gesticulating with one hand or a pointing finger ('pointing the finger'), the Blamer can be used to make a strong point. Overused (especially when combined with a 'blaming' tonality), the Blamer posture can provoke audiences, or make them feel as if they are 'wrong'. Very useful in increasing assertiveness.

The 'Placator'

Seen using an apologetic, palms up gesture, the Placator allows the communication to be more humble and non-threatening. Useful in highly emotional situations, or to demonstrate an 'obvious' fact, the Placator can also be used to avoid conflict. Overused, the audience may feel as if the presenter is being weak or overly apologetic.
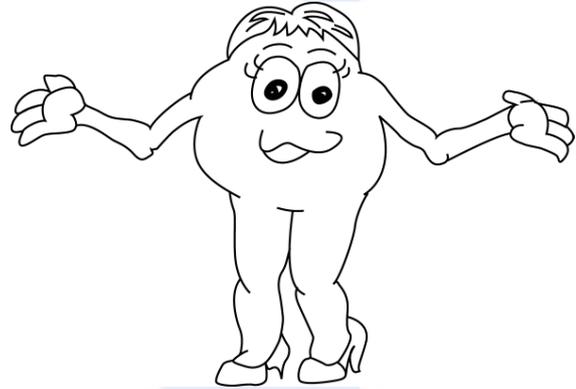
The 'Super Reasonable'

Using a 'thinking' posture, with one hand under the chin, the other folded across the chest, the 'Super Reasonable' category is useful for communicating logic or facts, or when wanting to prompt thought in you or your audience. It can also be used to suggest that you are listening and taking in what the other person is saying. Also handy for giving the impression of being very reasonable! Overused, the presenter can come across as cold and unemotional.
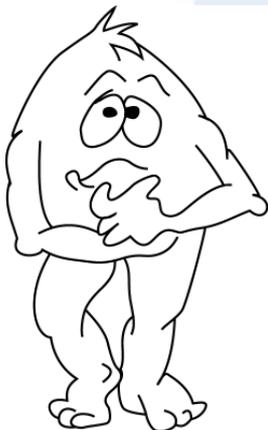
- **The 'Distracter'**

The Distracter is not typified by anyone posture, rather by many different postures at nearly the same time! Often categorised as a dizzy or a confusing character, the Distracter is very useful for humour, breaking or changing a state quickly and for livening up a your audience. Overused, the presenter can seem unpredictable and difficult to follow.
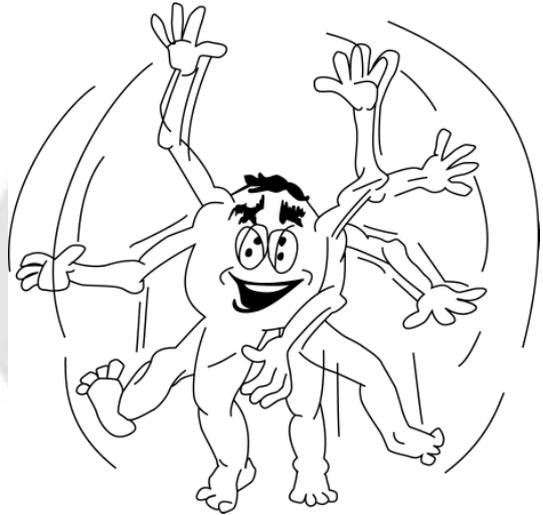
- **The 'Leveller'**

The Leveller is characterised by a palms down, even stance, 'fair' posture. Often giving the impression of fairness and 'cutting to the quick', the Leveller is terrific for making a strong point without the blaming effect. The Leveller is also useful for dissolving any emotional issues. Overdone, the Leveller can lead to the audience perceiving the presenter as only interested in *the bottom line* and *what's real*.

So, to continue with our example (of being seen to be decisive), we could say that the Blamer and the Leveller would be the most useful. Certainly the Distracter and the placatory will not help us come across as decisive .

This is a tool that helps with what we *do*; now we need to look at a tool that will help with how we *say*.

Vocal variety

Vocal variety asks you to consider the 'tone' of your voice. Tone is often seen as a difficult thing to quantify and yet there are quantifiable aspects to tone. These are:

- **Speed.**

  Some people have a preference for talking fast. Some people have a preference for talking slowly, and there are all the shades of grey in between.

- **Volume**.

  Some people have a preference for talking loudly. Some people have a preference for talking softly, and there are all the shades of grey in between.

- **Pitch**.

  Some people have a preference for talking high. Some people have a preference for talking low, and there are all the shades of grey in between.

Vocal variety is about noticing the combinations and movements of these quantifiable aspects of tone to generate a certain response in other people.

So let's continue our example of being seen to be more decisive. As an Australian, many of us have the tendency to have an upward movement or inflexion at the end of our sentences. You use an upward inflexion when you want to ask a question. So we associate an upward inflexion with uncertainty. Therefore a downward inflexion would send a message of certainty of decisiveness.

We could say that a decisive tone would be one where there is a downward movement of pitch at the end of the sentence.

To complete our example, we can see that if we combine the words we use (must, have to, can't, 3, 7), with the gestures we use (Leveller, Blamer), the tone of voice (downward inflexion at the end of the sentence), then we can create a powerfully decisive message.

Try saying the following using the micro behaviours identified above to see how decisive you come across: "There are 3 things we must consider before we are able to make the final decision. These are: *Language, tone of voice and gesture.*"

Micro behaviour dictionary

Below I have built a *Micro behaviour dictionary*. Please feel free to use it as you see fit. All I ask is that if you copy it or re-use it in any way that you include the following:

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I have also included a group of micro behaviours called 'other.' These are either a combination of language, tone of voice and gestures or it is a suggestion on how to think in a way that will help increase the likelihood that you are described in the desired way.

Calm/ Centred/ Relaxed/ Deep	
Language: • Speak less. • Allow others to talk first. • Avoid emotionally packed words like: 'Wow,' 'fantastic,' 'amazing,' 'horrific,' 'dreadful' etc. • Use phrases that understate rather than overstate. 'We seem to be having a little difficulty at the moment' rather than 'Oh @#*>@$ We are stuffed!' • Use measured words like 'Lets consider …,' 'We might do well to think about …,' 'first lets regain our composure …,'	Tone of voice: • When you do speak, do so with a slower speed, a lower pitch and a softer volume.
Gestures: • Use Leveller type gestures. • Use fewer gestures. • Maintain a small relaxed smile on your face. • Do not react to external stimulus immediately.	Other: • Consider the stimulus and the possible responses to the stimulus before responding. • Notice what you are feeling and label that feeling in your mind (not out loud).

Creative/ Inspirational/ Imaginative

Language:	Tone of voice:
• Use phrases like 'What about …,' 'What would happen if …,' 'Imagine if …,' 'Hypothetically speaking …,' 'Shooting from the hip …' • Use possibility words like: might, could, possibly, perhaps, couple, several. • Avoid definitive words like: must, have to, can't, 3, 7. • Accept others ideas and add to the by using phrases like 'What I love about what you said was … and imagine if …,' and 'What I think is great about that is … and what would it be like if we added …'	• Use a faster, slightly louder and slightly higher pitched tone of voice.
Gestures:	Other:
• Show enthusiasm for others ideas by having your eyes wide open, lean forward, nod as others are talking. • Show enthusiasm for your ideas by using a visual aid (whiteboard, flip chart) to explain you idea. • Use Distracter type gestures.	Prepare to be creative. Before the meeting or time when you would like to be creative, think about the current problem and reword the problem into a statement of what you need. For example: a statement of problem might be 'We have a problem with decreasing profit.' Turning this into a statement that identified what you want might be: 'To increase profit.' Then imagine that there are over 50 ways to increase profit and build a list of as many ways as you can think of. For more information on how to do this go to the members section at www.impacthpt.com.au and download the article entitled *Try Thinking Creatively for a Change*.

Friendly/ Engaging/ Sociable

Language:	Tone of voice:
• Ask people questions about themselves. • Encourage them to keep talking by saying things like 'Mmm,' 'Uhuh,' 'Ohh,' 'Alright,' etc. • Ask people questions that are linked to what they just said. • Use polite words like: 'Please', 'Thank you' and 'Excuse me'.	• Use a slightly higher pitch and a faster speed.
Gestures:	Other:
• Show that you are interested by maintaining eye contact about 60-70% of the time. • Reflect the appropriate emotion clearly on your face. If the person is talking about something that is exciting, show excitement. If the person is talking about something that is sad, show sadness. • When you hear something that you have in common show enthusiasm for what they are saying by widening your eyes, showing a surprised expression of your face and saying something like 'Me too!' • Use Distracter and Placator. • Avoid Blamer and Leveller.	• Listen for areas that you have in common. • Ignore or avoid areas of significant difference between you and them. • Do not talk until it is your turn to talk. Watch for the signal that the other person will give that indicates that they have finished. Then talk about what you have in common on the topic, what you can agree with, what you can understand. Avoid talking about what you disagree with, with you thought was wrong.

Empathetic/ Supportive/ Compassionate

Language:	Tone of voice:
- Use feeling words that reflect the other persons emotions. Words like: Annoying, fantastic, horrible, great!, frustrating, disappointed etc. - Avoid words judge the other person. Words like: No, yes but, you're wrong, you're being silly etc. - Use phrases that validate what they are feeling. Phrases like: 'No wonder you felt …,' 'That is perfectly understandable,' 'If that happened to me I would be …'	- Use a slower speed of voice with a lower pitch and a softer volume. - Increase the variety of pitch in your voice.
Gestures:	Other:
- Reflect the appropriate emotion clearly on your face. If the person is talking about something that is exciting, show excitement. If the person is talking about something that is sad, show sadness. - Use 'Placator'. - Avoid 'Blamer'.	- Look and listen for cues of emotion in what the other person is saying. - Think about when you have felt that way and label the feeling. Then reflect that label to the other person using a sentence like 'That would be so annoying,' or 'That must have been fantastic.' - Do not talk until it is your turn to talk. Watch for the signal that the other person will give that indicates that they have finished. Then talk about what you have in common on the topic, what you can agree with, what you can understand. Avoid talking about what you disagree with, with you thought was wrong.

Persistent	
Language: • Use words like: Finish, complete, finalise, conclude, end, focus, concentrate, apply. • Avoid distracter type phrases like: 'What about …,' 'What would happen if …,' 'Imagine if …,' 'Hypothetically speaking …,' 'Shooting from the hip …' • Use definitive words like: must, have to, can't, 3, 7. • Avoid options based words like might, could, couple or several. • Use the assertiveness technique called 'broken record.' When people ask you what you are doing have a 1 sentence response that you repeat.	Tone of voice: • Use a slower, softer and lower tone of voice.
Gestures: • The posture that you use when you are working. • Keep you eyes focused on the task and reduce eye contact with other people. • Frown in a way that looks as though you are concentrating. • Use Blamer, Leveller and Super Reasonable. • Avoid Distracter and Placator.	Other: • Identify what triggers distraction. Remove or reduce these triggers. When the triggers still happen notice that it would normally distract you and then get back to what you want to persist with. • Identify the triggers that lead to the skill you would like to persist with. When those triggers happen remind yourself that this is an opportunity to practice persistence and get on with it.

Accurate	
Language: • Use exact words like precise, specific, exact, particular, defined, detailed or definite. • Avoid ambiguous words like: generally, largely, many, most, often. • Use phrases like: 'It's not that simple,' 'The complexity here is …,' 'what we need to know is …'	Tone of voice: • Use less variety in your pitch. • Speak slightly slower.
Gestures: • Use an emotionless expression – A poker face. • Avoid Distracter and Placator. • Use Blamer to point at things not people.	Other: • In you mind take the topic you wish to be accurate on and divide it into as many subgroups and sub-subgroups as you can. For example, food has the subgroups: meat, vegetables, fruit, legumes, dairy, processed, organic. Just looking at the subgroup of meat, we could build the sub-subgroups of 'domestic meats' and 'wild meats'. Then taking the sub-subgroup of domestic meats we could build another subgroup including beef, chicken, lamb, pork. *Then* we could take the sub group of beef and divide it into Angus, Shorthorn, Kobe, Hereford - I think you probably get the idea by now.

Fun/ Funny/ Witty	
Language: • Use understatement or overstatement. • Increase your use of description, adjectives and adverbs. Words and phrases like: wiggled, popped, elephant sized, ridiculous looking. • Increase your use of senses based language. Words that describe things in different senses. It sounded like …, I looked like …, It smelt like …, It felt like …, (Don't step in it!)	**Tone of voice:** • Talk a little faster and a little louder. • Use a wide variety of pitch. • Emphasise the unusual words. • Toy with a single sentence and find all the different tones, inflexion and emphasis that you could use to say the words in that sentence.
Gestures: • Exaggerate your gestures and facial expressions. • Use Distracter.	**Other:** • Use simile and metaphor to explain things. • Toy with the context of what you are saying. For example the following statement 'The boy threw the stone' could be true in many different contexts: In a schoolyard, at a window, across a lake, at a snake, at his mate Jake, at a drake. Each time we change the context it provides a totally different meaning and generates a different response in the audience. Toy with this until you find a humorous one.

Strategic/ Visionary/ Leader

Language:

- Use global words and phrases like: most, all, every, never, the pattern here is …
- Use a future based language: 'In the future we will …' 'In 2 to 5 years …' 'Where we need to be …' 'outlook' 'potential' 'opportunity'.
- Avoid a past based language: 'In the past' 'In my experience' 'The way we have …'
- Use definitive words: must, have to, can't, 3, 7.
- Avoid possibility words: might, could, possibly, perhaps, couple, several.

Tone of voice:

- Talk more slowly to avoid the use of 'um' and 'ah' and other gap fillers.
- Use a downward inflexion at the end of your sentence.
- Use a moderate variety of pitch.
- Use a slightly louder volume.

Gestures:

- Use Placator and Leveller.
- Avoid Distracter.
- Use fewer gestures.

Other:
- Read articles in the press that talk about the future and the direction of the economy, politics, the arts, society, your industry etc. Talk about what you have read.
- Look for patterns and cycles in statistics. Talk about what you have noticed.
- Extend the direction of the patterns you have noticed to suggest what the future holds.

Helpful/ Cooperative	
Language: • Use words and phrases like: 'Yes.' 'I can …' 'I will …' 'What I can do is …' 'What can I do to help?' 'What else needs to be done?' 'How are you going today?' 'How are you going with …?' 'What I can do is …' 'How about if I …?' 'Would you like me to …?' 'No problems' 'Easy done.' • Avoid words and phrases like: 'No.' 'I'm unable to …' 'Sorry.'	Tone of voice: • Increase the variety of pitch. • Talk a little louder and a little slower.
Gestures: • Use Placator. • Avoid Blamer. • Smile as you talk. • Lean forward. • Look people in the eye.	

This is by no means intended to be a definitive list, and I'm not suggesting that just because you do the listed micro behaviours once that you will suddenly become a totally different person. Like learning anything worthwhile, two things are true for these micro behaviours:

• There is no *one thing* that you can do to become good at anything. What there is, is lots of little things that you need to be able to put together in order to be considered skilful. No one of these micro behaviours will result in you being labelled anything useful. You will need to string several micro behaviours together.

• Practice and persist. You will only practice and persist if it is important enough to you. No amount of information from an article like this can substitute for practice and persistence.

Your Three Words

Which brings us to the three words you identified at the beginning of this article that you would like others to use when describing you. Your task now is to use the tools above to build a list of micro behaviours that you could do that would lead others to describe you that way.

- **Word 1:**

Language:

Tone of voice:

Gestures:

Other:

- **Word 2:**

Language:

Tone of voice:

Gestures:

Other:

- **Word 3:**

Language:

Tone of voice:

Gestures:

Other:

The story so far …

To return to the original quote…

Grant me the courage to change what I can, the serenity to live with what I can't and the wisdom to know the difference.

In *Part 1* we identified that we can change our attitudes and behaviours and found that we cannot change the triggers or the results.

In *Part 2* we found that Dr. Martin Seligman's tools of dialogue, disputation, distancing and distraction enable us to change our attitude.

Now in *Part 3* we have a technique to help us change our behaviours, to increase the likelihood that people will see us in the way we would like to be seen.

In *How to do a good day – Part 4* we will talk about how to develop the 'serenity to live with what we can't change': the triggers and the results.

If you liked the content of this article, find more of the same at www.impacthpt.com.au or contact the author Rod Matthews at info@impacthpt.com.au