

How to 'do' a good day

Part 4 – The serenity to live with the triggers and the results

The story so far ...

So far in this series of articles we have examined the question 'how do you do a good day?' In the process, we have identified that perhaps a good day is when we change what we can, live with what we cannot and have the wisdom to tell the difference.

We recognise that it is possible to change our attitudes and behaviours, but not the triggers or the results. We have also found some practical tools to help change our attitudes and behaviours.

What is left is to identify how to develop the serenity to accept what we can't change: to accept the triggers and the results.

We have already covered a number of tips, tools and techniques to help increase your serenity.

Let's review them:

What we can and cannot change: just knowing the difference

You may have been to a lecture or presentation, and walked out at the end, thinking to yourself, *what a waste of my time. I already knew all that...*

In this example, the presenter only talked about the known.

You may have been to a lecture or presentation, and walked at the end, thinking to yourself *were they speaking English? I didn't understand any of that...*

In this example, the presenter only talked about the unknown.

A good lecture or presentation is when the presenter is able to link the known to the unknown. This is how we make meaning. We can understand something when we are able to link it to something we already know.

When this happens, we experience a 'Eureka!' type moment. It is easier to feel comfortable with something we know and understand than something that is totally foreign to us.

With this in mind, just knowing the difference between what we can and cannot change will help increase our levels of comfort and serenity.

What we *can* change: using Dr. Seligman's tools

In *part 2* of this series of articles, we discussed the tools that Dr. Martin Seligman has identified as being able to assist us with changing our attitudes. These tools will also help us increase our level of serenity as they enable us to shape our own thoughts and responses to things that happen.

The four tools that Seligman identifies are:

- **Dialogue:** The ability to recognise our own self-talk and reword it in a way that will increase our serenity.
- **Disputation:** The ability to question and test the accuracy of negative self-talk will also increase our level of serenity.
- **Distancing:** Some of the most relaxed, satisfied and centred people I know have developed the ability to put what is happening into perspective.
- **Distraction:** Being able to significantly shift your mood, by distracting yourself in the moment, will also increase your serenity. This by reduces the amount of time and energy you spend in on negative responses.

What we *can* change: using the behaviours of serenity

In *part 3* of this series of articles, we looked at the idea that we can 'be *as if* until we *are*'. You can behave in a serene manner until you actually become serene.

The behaviours of the serenity you can follow include:

- Language:
 - Speak less.
 - Allow others to talk first.
 - Avoid emotionally packed words like: 'wow,' 'fantastic,' 'amazing,' 'horrific' or 'dreadful'.

- Use phrases that understate rather than overstate: 'We seem to be having a little difficulty at the moment' rather than 'Oh @#*>@\$ we're stuffed!'
- Use measured phrases like: 'Lets consider ...,' 'We might do well to think about ...' or '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.
- Other:
 - Do not react immediately. 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).

These are the behaviours of acceptance and serenity, and they will help you come across to others in that way. Sometimes this is not enough, however. Sometimes we would like to actually be serene and feel acceptance as well. How do you 'do' that? Well, perhaps the question is best answered by first looking at why acceptance is difficult.

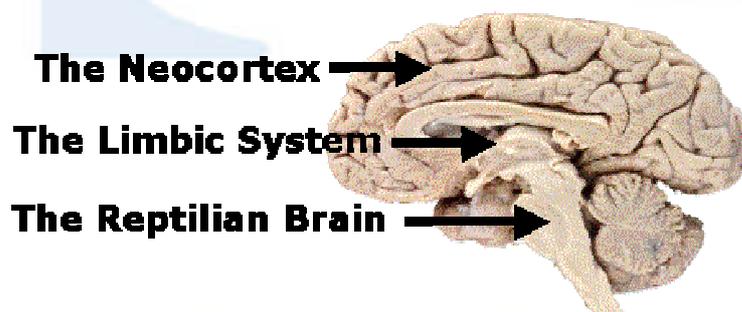
Why is practising serenity and acceptance so difficult?

We can answer this question by looking at it from two angles:

- Our individual mind – the brain
- Our collective mind – society

Our individual mind – the brain

In order to understand why practising serenity and acceptance is not easy, we need a quick lesson in the anatomy of the brain. The *Triune brain* is a model proposed by Paul D. McLean, where components and functions of the brain are grouped into three key areas.



The Reptilian Brain is responsible for the survival functions of fight, flight or freeze. It also controls our muscles, our balance and our automatic functions like breathing and heartbeat.

The Limbic System looks after the slightly more advanced functions of long term memory, smell, attachment and emotions. It includes the Amygdala, which performs a primary role in the processing and memory of emotional reactions and fight, flight and freeze responses.

The Neocortex is involved in the higher functions of vision and processing of sound. It generates motor commands, and does most of our spatial reasoning, conscious thought and language processing.

Fortunately, you have a model of the brain on the end of your arm. A good way to remember most of this is to make a fist with your hand. Your arm is the brain stem that carries all the information to and from the brain, your thumb is the reptilian brain, your palm is the Limbic system and your fingers are the neocortex.

So that is the anatomy lesson, now, how does this work in relation to triggers, attitudes, behaviours and results?

When your boss walks toward you with that look, when your partner raises their voice, when the kids are testing the outer limits of your patience, when there is a trigger that we would class as negative, the reptilian brain and amygdala take over, flooding the body with chemicals that prepare us for fight, flight or to freeze.

This is fantastic if we are in a life-threatening situation. Most of the time, however, your boss walking towards you with that look, your partner raising their voice and the kids testing the outer limits of your patience is not a life-threatening situation. It is our chemistry that often leads us to overreaction or later wishing we'd said or done something different in the situation. Often we wished we had stayed calm.

So, one reason why serenity and acceptance is difficult is because we are automatically using survival chemistry for non life-threatening situations.

Another reason why it is difficult to achieve serenity and acceptance is because of the context we find ourselves in... our society.

Our collective mind – society

In western society, we mostly find ourselves in a 'meritocracy'. A meritocracy is a society that rewards those who have demonstrated talent and competence through past actions or by competition. We reward these

talented and competent people with wealth, position and social status. The society that we live in, therefore, sends us a message about merit, telling us that if we have influence (wealth, position and social status), we are of higher value to our society.

One of the principles behind the types of activities that are rewarded is that being in control is preferable to relinquishing control, and that taking action is preferable to acceptance.

For instance, for issues such as security, the environment, politics, famine, acquisition, ownership, justice and education, society suggests that choosing to accept (rather than to change) the current situation means that there is something wrong with you. You should want to take control and take action; we are bombarded with this message on a daily basis. Advertisements, movies, books, magazines, news reports, television shows, political decisions and promotions in organisations: much of the subtext to these reinforces a preference for taking control.

This relentless messaging creates a context in which we live. We pick up these context messages (consciously and unconsciously) and they influence our behaviours and our values, no matter how 'strong minded' we like to think we are.

There is an excellent book called 'The Tipping Point' by Malcolm Gladwell. In it, he explains the power of context. He suggests that we are not consciously aware of the context in which we find ourselves, and yet this has a dramatic effect on our behaviours. To illustrate this, he talks about the 'Broken Windows' theory.

Gladwell writes that the 'Broken Windows' theory;

...was the brainchild of criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. Wilson and Kelling argue that crime is an inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken and a sense of anarchy will spread from the building to the street on which it faces, sending a signal that anything goes.

Gladwell then goes on to recount how in the mid 1980's Kelling was hired by the New York Transit Authority to make the subway a safe place for commuters and increase the number of people who used the service. Kelling enacted his Broken Windows theory by introducing a zero tolerance for broken windows, slashed seats and graffiti on train carriages. If a train carriage was damaged in some way the policy was to have it repaired straight away and to have only the best carriages in

operation. The clean-up took from 1984 to 1990, after which crime on the New York subway has declined dramatically.

So, the context in which we find ourselves sends a message that influences our behaviours. If we are surrounded by the message that society will reward us if we successfully take control and achieve, this makes it even more difficult to practice acceptance. Acceptance and serenity, in this respect, are the opposite to control and achievement.

Who are the experts at serenity and acceptance?

So, if serenity and acceptance is difficult because of our individual and our collective mind, what hope have we got? Is it ever possible to be serene and accepting? The answer is, of course, most definitely yes! There are serenity and acceptance experts out there, people who could represent their country at the next 'serenity and acceptance Olympics'... these are Buddhist monks, with over 2,500 years of investigating the workings of the mind and how to live with that which we cannot control. Western scientists are beginning to take an interest in the practices of Buddhist monks and, in particular, the practice of meditation.

Dr Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Paul Ekman of the University of California and Dr Dan Siegel of Harvard University are just a few of the growing group of neuroscientists, neurologists, psychologists and psychiatrists that have amassed an impressive amount of research in this field.

Chances are that we can all build an image of a Buddhist monk being very centred, serene and accepting, able to keep their cool while all others around them are losing control.

Experiments have been carried out that show some meditation practitioners can achieve a state of inner peace, even when facing extremely disturbing circumstances. For example Dr. Paul Ekman tells the story that jarring noises (one as loud as a gunshot) failed to startle the meditating Buddhist monk he was testing. Dr. Ekman said he had never seen anyone stay so calm in the presence of such a disturbance.

Other studies use imaging devices to show what happens in the brain during meditation. Using these, we have been able to study the effects of Buddhist practices for cultivating compassion, equanimity or mindfulness.

For centuries Buddhists have believed that pursuing such practices seems to make people calmer, happier and more loving. At the same time they are less prone to destructive emotions. It turns out that we can now

explain what practicing Buddhists have known for centuries, using western scientific language.

The science of meditation

To understand the benefits of what is happening in the brain while meditating or practicing mindfulness, we need to add a little more to our earlier lesson on anatomy. So bear with me as I explain this, and I will translate the explanation into English afterwards!

There is a smaller part of the neocortex called the medial pre frontal cortex. This is located just behind your forehead. For the sake of space and ease we will call it the mPFC (medial pre frontal cortex). According to Dr Daniel Siegel, this part of the brain is essential for serenity and acceptance. Research on mice and humans reveals that the mPFC produces a chemical called GABBAa that floods the amygdala and counters the chemicals produced in the fight, flight or freeze response.

In plain English, what this means is that we can effectively deal with the brain chemistry that puts us into fight, flight or freeze mode using our own brain chemistry, which comes from another part of the brain, the mPFC. This brain chemistry extinguishes the flight, fight or freeze response and allows us to respond in a more measured and considered way.

Using imaging devices, we are able to see that when people meditate regularly they are exercising the mPFC and have a greater ability to produce (GABBAa) the chemical that allows them to extinguish the fight, flight or freeze response.

How to meditate

Now I must be honest with you. I have only recently started my meditation and mindfulness journey. So there are probably many people, books, CD's, DVD's etc out there that would provide you with a step by step approach to meditation and mindfulness. There are even websites!!! For instance, check out www.how-to-meditate.org.

At the same time, I would caution against becoming a guru, book and DVD junkie, as meditation is a skill and like any skill it requires far more practice and persistence than instruction. With this in mind, in the short time I have been practicing, I can offer the following tips from my own experience.

Some meditation principles

When first starting to meditate you might find that your mind doesn't want to cooperate. It still has things to do, things to remember, things to think or things to imagine. You then tell yourself 'Stop it! I'm trying to meditate.' So your mind quiets down for all of 10 seconds, before another thought, image or memory makes itself known to you.

After this happens for a while you start to think to yourself something like 'I'm no good at this. It's not working.' This thought starts to get you a little agitated. Next thing you know you've decided that this meditation thing is all too difficult, it seems to be the opposite to relaxing, so you decide to go and do the stuff you thought about when you were trying to meditate.

A couple of principles might help here:

1. Stable not empty

Meditation is about making your mind stable and calm, not about trying to empty your mind. It is about the *focus* of your intention and attention, not the *content* of your intention and attention.

So when pictures and thoughts enter your mind, notice what you are doing first and then label this softly and slowly in your mind. Say things like 'thinking, thinking', 'remembering, remembering', 'judging, judging'. By the time you have finished the label, the thought will have been stabilised and calmed, perhaps even gone.

2. It's not what you expect, it's what it is

I'm not sure exactly what I expected when I first started meditating, but I know I was expecting something! Expectations on a macro and a micro level reduce the quality of the meditation experience.

Macro expectations are expectations about meditation itself, its benefits, its ease and its after-effects.

Micro expectations involve thinking things like *I should, they should I'm not, they're not, I am or they are*. During meditation, these micro expectations manifest themselves in the form of '*I shouldn't be distracted*', '*I shouldn't have any pain there*' or '*I'm not relaxed*'.

Separating the expectation (what you expect) from what you are experiencing (what is), will allow the meditation to be what it is without your judgement. Label what *is* gently in your mind without

the expectation. For example: 'thinking, thinking', 'discomfort, discomfort' or 'relax, relax'.

Practicing this in meditation increases our ability to do the same outside of meditation. This is a key serenity and acceptance technique that we will revisit in more detail later.

Now that we have these principles ready to go, let's look at a meditation process.

A meditation process

Find a quiet room, where you will not be disturbed. You can sit cross-legged if you want, and I prefer to sit in a chair, do whatever is comfortable for you. I recommend that you avoid lying down as meditation is not sleeping. If you feel you are becoming sleepy during the meditation open your eyes just a little to let in some light and take a slightly deeper breath.

There are many paths to meditation. I'm currently working on the following five. I will present them in the order that I practice them. Some days I only do level 1 and 2 in the 10 to 15 minutes I had allocated. Other days I'm able to visit all 5. Remember... it is what it is. Don't rush it though. Meditation is about the practice, not the achievement.

1. Focusing on the breath

This is often the introductory level meditation. As the name suggests, this is about focusing on your breathing. Either by putting your attention on the sensation of air as it passes through the nostrils, or by focusing on the filling and emptying of the lungs or the movement of the belly.

2. The body scan

This involves moving your attention around the body. Pause on parts of your body that you choose and just hold your attention there. You might seek out pain or tension and hold your attention over that area. When you have felt the feeling from that area, label the feeling in your mind and then let it release. This is fantastic for relaxation and healing.

3. Awareness of awareness

This is where you focus your attention and intention on the process that regulates the flow of energy and information. In other words,

you become aware of what you are aware of. The sound of the car passing, the sound of people outside, the memory in your head, the thought, the judgement... notice what you are noticing, and perhaps label what you are noticing.

4. *The spaces between*

After practicing awareness of awareness for a while, you might start to find that there are gaps in between the thoughts, memories and images. The aim now is to try and focus your intention and attention on these gaps.

5. *Your choice*

Before you start your meditation, chose something that you would like to meditate on. For example: serenity, acceptance, compassion, forgiveness, love, happiness, achievement, completion and appreciation, or whatever you like. Give these things icons, images, feelings, sounds, sentences, words or thoughts - whatever you can - and focus your intention and attention on these.

There is a large volume of research out there to suggest that there is an inverse correlation between the size of a person's vocabulary and their propensity for violence. The suggestion is that the more difficulty a person has at expressing themselves, the more likely they are to become violent.

Meditation asks us to practice sitting with our feelings and observing them or labelling them. This increases our ability to recognise and express the feelings that we have. So if people with a low ability to recognise and label their feelings are more likely to react violently, then it only stands to reason that a person who is emotionally literate will be more able to calmly observe and respond rather than react.

If meditation is not your bag, there are some other, slightly more active alternatives. For example:

- Yoga
- Tai Chi
- Qi Gong

Either way, in a world that encourages people to focus their attention in their head or external to themselves, some sort of meditative, mindful, introspective practice is strongly recommended. The only caveat to that statement would be that if you are suffering from depression, introspection without professional assistance is not recommended.

A final word

There is a story about two Buddhist monks walking along a river:

They come to a bridge that has been washed-out by flooding water. A small piece of the bridge is left standing in the middle of the river, completely cut off from the river banks. On this remaining piece of bridge is a woman, who quite distressed. The river is still rising and she can not swim to the river bank as the current will wash her away.

Without even thinking one of the monks strips down to his undergarments (do monks wear undergarments? we will assume that they do - it's a family show!), dives into the swirling river and swims across to the woman. He grabs hold of the woman and swims her back to shore. She tearfully thanks the monk for saving her life.

The second monk is horrified by this. Part of becoming a monk is about denouncing the earthly, so that one can move closer to the heavenly. In order to become a monk they had taken a vow to (amongst other things) never touch the opposite sex. His friend has just broken his vow.

All the time that the first monk is drying himself and getting dressed the second monk is trying to contain his shock at the fact that his friend touched a woman. Worse than that he touched her while he was semi-naked!

Both monks continued walking along the river for a number of kilometres. All the time the second monk is thinking about the broken vow: the touching, the woman, the nakedness and the implications.

Eventually it becomes too much for the second monk. Consumed with shock and horror he turns to the first monk and says, 'You have broken your vow. You vowed to not touch a woman and yet you have now broken your vow and you touched her while only partially clothed. This is serious. What do you have to say for yourself?'

To which the first monk replies: 'are you still carrying that woman?'

So now that you know the difference between what you can change and what you cannot change, I wish you the courage to live as you know you can, and the serenity to accept when you don't.

Reading list

Listed below are the texts that I have drawn this article from. Some were quoted directly, some were discussed and some were used for inspiration. We all stand on the shoulders of others, and I heartily recommend that you read the following books:

Learned Optimism

Martin E.P. Seligman, PH.D.
2002 Random House. ISBN 1400078393

Yes. Optimism is a skill and it can be learned. In this book there is a questionnaire to test your level of optimism and the results will probably shock you, even if you like to think you are already a pretty optimistic person. There are also some clear principles that optimists use for you to learn.

Status Anxiety

Alain De Botton
2004 Penguin. ISBN 0 241 14238 5

Alain De Botton is a modern-day philosopher who has the amazing knack of making his philosophy understandable and applicable. In *Status Anxiety*, he talks about how we are almost hardwired as a species to want more, to want to climb the social ladder and to want to keep up. An excellent book if you are interested in more about why acceptance can be difficult in our society.

The Consolations of Philosophy

Alain De Botton
2001 Penguin. ISBN 0 14 027661 0

This book makes philosophy accessible. Alain De Botton examines the work of some of the world's greatest philosophers by starting with very human issues: being unpopular, not having enough money, frustration, inadequacy, a broken heart and all the various difficulties we face. It is a great read.

***What to Ask When You Don't Know What to Say:
555 Powerful Questions to Use for Getting Your Way at
Work***

Sam Deep & Lyle Sussman
1993 Prentice Hall. ISBN 0 13 953985 9

Very practical and very specific. Provides example situations and lists possible questions to ask and how the receiver could respond. Unfortunately, it misses the opportunity to identify the principles of a designing a good question. This means it is of most value if your specific situation is in the book.

***Influencing with Integrity:
Management Skills for Communication & Negotiation***

Genie z. Laborde
1987 Syntony Publishing. ISBN 0 933347 10 3

An incredibly detailed, insightful and skilful book. Genie's expertise is astonishing!

***Flow:
The Psychology of Optimal Human Experience***

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
1991 Harper Perennial. ISBN 0 06 092043 2

This book is awesome. It looks at how people can get themselves into 'the zone', the flow state. It is the culmination of years of research by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Yes! that is the author's name). It is not easy going but very rewarding.

Edward de Bono's Textbook of Wisdom

Edward de Bono
1996 Viking. ISBN 0 670 87011 0

An arrogant title... and it delivers! More about thinking and how to approach issues from a 'lateral logical' aspect. A little light on the interpersonal/emotional side, still, a fascinating read.

Right & Wrong
How to Decide for Yourself

Hugh Mackay
2004 Hodder. ISBN 0 7336 1549 X

This book does not preach morals, instead it provides some tools to analyse some of the big questions around relationships, how we should live and (of course) business ethics.
An easy-to-read philosophy book.



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.