

# **The Science Behind "The Fine Print of Happiness"**

**Karen Heart, LCSW  
Chicago and Oak Park, Illinois**

October 17, 2009

## **My Purpose in Writing This Book**

Because I have kept the citing of sources to a minimum throughout the book, it would be understandable that one might infer that some, if not most, of the constructs I explain and suggestions I make were derived from the works of other social scientists and philosophers. Quite the contrary, my purpose in writing this book was not to digest the works of others, but rather to explain to the general public the concepts that I have learned from my research and clinical experience, and the advice that I have logically deduced therefrom. Furthermore, although a fair amount of the book appears to be philosophical in nature, I have not premised any of the concepts or advice I express on the works of philosophers, except for the two ancillary Buddhist quotations that I have cited.

In large part, of course, my core theory of self esteem is based on the works of others. I would have little understanding of how self esteem functions if it were not for the critical insights developed by Stanley Coopersmith, Roy Baumeister, and other researchers. Moreover, without the illuminating work of Jeremy Gray, Todd Braver, and other behavior researchers, I would have no meaningful understanding of how the brain functions. The understanding and reasoning I relate in the book are not merely my take on these works but they certainly are extensions of those works.

In this brief paper, I shall present the logic I used to synthesize my conclusions, as well as some the underlying brain theory upon which my theorizing is based. Also, to enrich the understanding of the evolution of my assertions, I shall present the material in roughly the same chronological order in which I experienced it.

## **Advent of the Better Communication Technique**

When I began social work graduate school, I was placed at a community mental health center as a psychotherapy intern. As was typically the practice at my school, I was thrown into my internship with almost no formal training or experience. Apparently, the psychological community regards psychotherapy as a sink or swim endeavor.

Initially, I sank like a stone. I began my work with couples and families who came into the office to resolve their problems ostensibly, but who were at each others' throats the moment we sat down to talk. I immediately realized that I had to find a way to teach people how to communicate effectively in order to turn their continual angry outbursts into productive sessions.

The first technique I tried was the "I" statement approach that I learned in graduate school. While attempting to counsel a young couple, I instructed them to say what they felt by starting statements with the words, "I feel." The woman then turned to me and stated, "I feel...that he is a jerk." At that

point, I realized that I would have to work more diligently on developing a teachable communication technique.

I then gave some thought to creating a technique. Although I had learned different ways to help people communicate, I did not feel confident using any particular technique that I had learned. Consequently, I decided to roll my own.

Years earlier, I had studied assertiveness by reading, "When I Say No, I Feel Guilty," by Manuel Smith. Although I felt unqualified at the time to teach Smith's method of assertive communication, I believed that teaching people how to communicate assertively would provide them with optimal skills for resolving their conflicts. I also recognized the benefit of Active Listening, which I had learned in social work school. I combined the act of summarizing from Active Listening with my own conceptual understanding of assertiveness and thereby cobbled together my own, yet unnamed, communication technique. Over a short period of time, I refined and formalized it. This is the technique that I would later refer to as the Better Communication Technique. Within a year, however, I stopped working at the community mental health center. Because my subsequent work seldom involved couples or families, I stopped using the Better Communication Technique.

## **Research in Graduate Social Work School**

During the time that I worked at the community mental health center and afterwards, I researched my own theory of self esteem. As explained in Chapter Three of the book, I theorized self esteem as a category rather than as a trait, or even a small set of traits, as others have advanced in psychology. The crux of my theory was that each person has dozens, if not hundreds, of distinct feelings about how well she or he measures up in terms of various instances of acceptance, performance, and autonomy. Moreover, the set of feelings that one has are a mixture of good feelings about one's self, known as good self esteem traits, and poor feelings about one's self, which I refer to as self esteem deficits. My empirical study included only twenty participants, yet the results were confirmatory of my theory. My clinical experiences have served only to reinforce this view, as well.

In my second year of graduate school, I also conducted a literature review of behavioral research. As part of this research, I learned about brain functioning. Although this research was fascinating, I did not see any explicit connection to my self esteem theory at the time. In the following section, I recapitulate pertinent information about brain functioning that I learned at that time.

## **Basics about the Brain**

The human brain is generally divided into two sides, the left brain and the right brain. The left brain and right brain differ in purpose (Gray, 2001). Generally, the left brain is known as the "approach" side. It controls intimacy, creativity, conflict resolution, and pleasure, among other functions that are correlated with positive emotion. The right is referred to as the "avoidance" side. It is responsible for coping with learned fears by activating our "fight or flight" responses. The right brain is where negative emotional states reside.

Within each hemisphere are specific regions of the brain devoted to carrying out these functions. Such areas include the general region referred to as the left prefrontal cortex and more specific structures such as the anterior cingulate cortex, the insula, and the amygdala. Although the specific activities of the brain, such as resolving conflicts, are controlled by these specific parts of the brain, it is superfluous, and perhaps tedious, to discuss brain functioning in such a fine level of detail for the purposes of explaining my theories. Therefore, I will refer to brain functioning in terms of the left brain and the right brain, except for certain references to the right amygdala, which is entrusted with the job of stimulating our fight or flight responses (Buck, 1999; Hare et al., 2005; Phelps, 2005).

Because there is a limited supply of blood to the brain, the two halves must share it. Thus, for example, when blood is being drawn to the left side for some purpose, there is less blood flow available for the right side; consequently, activity on the right side slows (Drevets & Raichle, 1998). It is because of this division of labor and sharing of blood supply that we typically experience strong emotions on only one side at a time. For example, when we feel happy and close to another person, a left brain activity, we do not experience much fear, which is a right brain response. Conversely, when we are afraid of the current situation, it is difficult for us to relax and experience joy and intimacy for the same reason-- predominant activity in the opposite side of the brain.

Emotions are not only produced in the moment by the brain as a result of stimuli but are also stored in memory. Although there are many theories about how memory works, recent research indicates that the brain stores neural representations of experiences, rather than simply disconnected concepts or representations of perceived objects (Niedenthal et al., 2005). As a consequence, emotions connected with experiences are also stored along with sensory information, such as sights and sounds, that comprise the experience.

### **The Mergenthaler Process**

In May of 2006, as I neared the end of my time in graduate social work school, I had the privilege of meeting Erhard Mergenthaler, a professor of psychology from Germany, at a conference in Los Angeles. Over a beer, Erhard explained how he had learned from conducting an empirical study that the brain follows a particular sequence when psychological change occurs. Erhard told me that he had listened to tape recordings of actual psychotherapy sessions and used software to analyze the words spoken by the clients for emotional content. He focused primarily on analyzing the emotional content of the words spoken when change appeared to have taken place during the psychotherapy session, in the way that Lenzi described the corrective emotional response. In essence, Erhard learned that the process of change was always consistent. First, the brain experienced a negative emotional state while the problem was being discussed with the therapist. While this negative emotion was present, the client would experience thoughts about resolving the issue at hand. When the client experienced insight about a viable resolution of the problem, a positive emotion would be experienced simultaneously. Finally, the negative emotion would dissipate, leaving only the positive emotional state.

For the next couple of years, I made efforts every time I engaged in using psychotherapeutic technique to induce this process of change to occur in my clients. Although my work did produce such

results from time to time, I was never able to figure out how to do so in a consistent, deliberate manner. Ultimately, I realized that psychotherapeutic techniques are not designed to directly induce this process of the brain, which I now refer to as the Mergenthaler Process. Although the purpose of psychotherapy certainly is to induce the client to experience resolution of an emotional problem, it works by more indirect means.

## **My Theoretical View of Brain Functioning**

Eventually, I began to see connections between my self esteem theory and brain research. Because I could see that assertiveness was critical to self esteem, I began using the Better Communication Technique myself on a consistent basis and teaching it to others for general use. As I continued doing so, I saw others and myself change longstanding patterns of thinking. I realized that the Better Communication Technique was altering brain functioning. This realization led me to contemplate brain functioning in new ways, borrowing additionally from my studies of computer science, including a class on artificial intelligence.

Based on my brain research, my research on self esteem, and my understanding of computing, I believe that memory is a sophisticated process that relies on relatively simple subprocesses. In essence, the process of storing information in memory involves the synthesis of indexes of perceptual experiences, and subsequently the proximal neuronal storage of those indexes along with the perceptual experiences. To be precise, perceptual experiences themselves, such as particular sights, sounds, or smells are not stored directly. What are stored are instructions for the recreation of those experiences by the associated neuronal sensory perception circuitry.

Each experience being stored is indexed in a multitude of ways. For example, a perceived visual image is indexed so that when a new, similar visual stimulus is perceived, an earlier memory of the same image can be located readily in memory and the associated semantic concepts retrieved for purposes of object identification. In other words, the visual index permits the brain to quickly retrieve connected conceptual, or semantic memory, so that one can readily recognize an image consisting of a unique pattern of red and white colors as a "stop sign," for example.

Thus, experiences are indexed with regard to all of the sensory stimuli, including sight, sound, smell, taste, and feel, that occur during the experience. Additionally, concepts relating to the experience are synthesized within the speech center and are also stored as indexes for that experience. Indeed, information about one's emotional state is also indexed and stored in connection with the rest of the memory of that experience. It is for this reason that the experiencing of a particular mood can reactivate the memory of an otherwise unrelated experience. For example, if one feels sad because of bad weather, one might be reminded of other sad experiences, such as when one got into an argument with a friend. It is because of this extensive storage of indexes that a current experience can trigger the memory of a great variety of past experiences, some of which may not be related to the current experience in any consciously discernible or obvious way, yet are related by the fact that their indexes match the current experience in at least one way.

All of this processing of stimuli, indexing, and memory reactivation is taxing on the brain. Too

much brain activity exhausts us, even if we have performed little physical activity. Moreover, excessive activity on one side of the brain depletes the other side of blood flow and thereby leaves it undernourished. Eventually, the body will tire from excessive activation and attempt to restore a resting state, known as homeostasis. Hence, resolving conflict is not only something we can fathom consciously and desire, but our brains are adapted to doing so to avoid dangerous levels of fatigue.

## **Memory Reactivation and Self Esteem**

Homeostasis, however, is not a desirable state when a decision is required. When our current experience requires a response on our part, our memory reactivation circuitry goes into action. Our brains search for salient past experiences that offer guidance on how to proceed in the present.

For example, when we experience a positive outcome, such as being invited to a party, our brains store this experience in memory along with that positive emotion. The next time we encounter the person who invited us, our brains will automatically retrieve that memory and restore that positive emotion, leading us to feel good about encountering that other person. Our positive feelings will then lead us to reengage with this person and thereby hopefully deepen our relationship. If we experience such positive regard from others more often than not, memory reactivation will lead us to feeling generally accepted by others, which I label as a good self esteem trait. In turn, this trait leads us to engage others, thereby further forming and deepening additional relationships.

Conversely, negative experiences lead us to the opposite result. When we experience a negative outcome, such as being rejected for a job, we record this experience in memory as well. The next time we consider a similar situation, such as sending a resume for a job, our brain naturally retrieves our past job rejection memory and then reactivates the emotional state associated with it. Once a negative emotional state is reestablished, the right brain will respond by trying to avoid the same negative outcome. One result might be that we experience negative thinking, such as the thought that we should not apply for this new job the same way we did before, fearing another bad outcome. Another reaction might be even more negative emotionally, fearing that our effort is pointless because we will likely just get rejected again. If we do apply and get rejected again, we reinforce these negative experiences and thereby form a negative belief about the futility of applying for jobs. Conceptually, I refer to the negative feeling about ourselves that is associated with these particular memories as a self esteem deficit.

In their conceptual view of self esteem, Baumeister and Tice concluded that the purpose of good self esteem is to motivate one to try to achieve goals, while the purpose of poor self esteem is to lead one to avoid risk (Baumeister & Tice, 1985; as cited by Di Paula & Campbell, 2002). Their view assumed that self esteem is a single trait, however, which my theory and small empirical study contradicts. Nonetheless, their conceptual view can easily be extrapolated to match the brain functioning theory that I use as the underlying basis for my book. Because our memory of our experiences is so vast, reactivation of memory must form at least dozens, and likely hundreds, of good feelings and poor feelings about one's self, which guide us as good self esteem traits and self esteem deficits, respectively, in accordance with Baumeister and Tice's pronouncement.

Given this use of memory reactivation for purposes of guidance, it is not surprising that extreme emotional states can occur that overwhelm us. When no solution to a problem is found, the right amygdala continues its attempts to activate the fight or flight response, to no avail. We experience this recurrent activation of the right brain as depression and general negative thinking. When our neural circuitry responsible for restoring balance in the brain becomes overwhelmed and we do not return to homeostasis, we experience strongly negative emotional states, which can manifest in the extreme as suicidal ideation (the ultimate "flight" strategy) or rage, often alternating between the two responses.

Conversely, when we experience recurrent left brain activation, we can enter an unbalanced positive emotional state. We label such experiences as euphoria, and at times, mania, depending on how the state manifests. To my knowledge, no one has ever truly "died laughing." Continual experience of pleasurable stimuli will eventually wear us out and drive the brain to seek homeostasis. I theorize that excessive left brain activity that manifests as mania does not result from pleasurable experiences at all; instead, it results from the complete exhaustion and attendant partial shutting down of the right brain. To put it humorously, someone who has been depressed or angry intensely for a long time suffers from "amygdalitis," which then results in the shutting down of the right amygdala for a brief time while repairs are made. Because of this partial shutting down during the repair period, blood flow that otherwise would have gone to the right brain is redirected to the left side. We label this mood swing phenomenon as bipolar disorder when it occurs consistently.

## **Mapping the Better Communication Technique to the Mergenthaler Process**

I contend that the Better Communication Technique induces the brain to experience emotional states in the same sequence as the Mergenthaler Process, thereby setting the stage for the same type of permanent, psychological improvements as effective psychotherapy produces. As I will also discuss though, facilitating this sequence of brain functioning does not always result in beneficial change. Because the Better Communication Technique is divided into Requesting and Responding sequences, I shall discuss each separately, beginning with Requesting.

By definition, Requesting involves an attempt to fulfill a need or a desire, or to resolve a conflict. When Requesting, the Better Communication Technique advises one to plainly state what one wants. In order to do so, the person must first contemplate the situation to assess her/his needs or the nature of the conflict. At this point in the process, the person will experience a negative emotion, whether because of the unmet desire or the conflict. The person then calculates an action that will fulfill the need or resolve the conflict and communicates it assertively. This second part of the process induces positive emotion resulting from the resolution of the issue associated with the negative emotion. Thus, Requesting pursuant to the Better Communication Technique follows a Mergenthaler sequence. If the response from the other person is agreement, then the person communicating the request has completed the Mergenthaler Process successfully and records a positive experience.

On the other hand, if the other person rejects the request, then the person making the request must then formulate a response to the other person's rejection. The Better Communication Technique advises the person to first summarize what the other person said. This action focuses the person on the area of

disagreement, thereby producing further negative emotion.

The Technique next instructs the person to state what she or he is willing to agree with that the other person said. It appears intuitive that the act of stating what one agrees with to the other person would produce a positive emotional state in the person speaking. What I believe happens in the brain, however, is counterintuitive. When we agree with another person, we give that person power. For example, if the other person suggests a certain movie to watch together and we agree, then we have given the other person the power to choose the movie. When conflict is present and a person is attempting to resolve it, that person is even more acutely aware that by agreeing with the other person, she or he is giving the other person power. Thus, the act of agreeing during a conflict activates a fear of the loss of power. This activation of fear, of course, is a right brain activity, producing negative emotion.

The final component of Responding in the Better Communication Technique is to tell the other person what one is unwilling to do or agree to. Again, one might suggest intuitively that the act of expressing disagreement is a fight or flight response that activates the right brain. Nonetheless, I believe that this act also has the opposite effect on brain functioning. By expressing clearly what one is unwilling to do or agree to, one is preserving power, thereby making one feel more secure and consequently inducing positive emotion.

Observations of how people commonly argue bolster this view. When people debate, they tend to say what they disagree with first, then follow with what they agree to. In my view, this stereotypical pattern reflects an attempt to maintain power. In other words, by saying what one disagrees with first and then saying what one is willing to agree to second, one is transmitting the implied message, "I will not capitulate to your point of view. I'm going to maintain my power to hold a contrary view, but I will agree to something you said so that you do not feel completely disregarded or invalidated." By using this approach, we are attempting to maintain as much control as possible while offending the other person the least. Thus, I believe that common notions of power, manifest in communication choices, support my theory that saying what you agree with gives rise to negative emotion, while saying what you are unwilling to agree to produces positive emotion.

Therefore, according to my counterintuitive reasoning, the Responding sequence outlined by the Better Communication Technique also follows the Mergenthaler Process. This scientific leap of faith, however, is not solely the result of my analysis of what emotions are likely produced from particular verbal activity. I have repeatedly observed sudden psychological change in individuals using the Better Communication Technique, in exactly the same way as I have seen individuals change when undergoing successful psychotherapy. Assuming that Mergenthaler is correct about the process of change in the brain, and that there were no other intervening factors, the presence of significant psychological change following use of the Better Communication Technique means that the brain underwent a Mergenthaler Process as a result of using the Technique.

The reaction of the other person makes a huge impact on this result, however. When the reaction is positive and compromise is reached, one feels satisfied. This positive emotion produces permanent psychological change if prior reactions were negative. For example, in the past I have had difficulty

resolving differences with others because of how I approached resolving disagreements. Once I learned how to resolve differences effectively, I experienced positive reactions from others and accordingly changed my feelings about acceptance. Feeling more acceptance from others, I felt more confident to continue my new pattern of resolving differences assertively, which in turn led to increased acceptance. In addition to a new good self esteem trait involving acceptance, I also developed another good self esteem trait-- feelings of empowerment around meeting my needs and resolving conflicts.

Conversely, if the other person rejects the compromise, one understandably feels less acceptance and less autonomy. The Better Communication Technique provides an optimum opportunity for building good self traits in accordance with the Mergenthaler Process, but this result is not guaranteed. Poor reactions by others, especially in the form of personal criticism or controlling behavior, can just as well induce the formation of self esteem deficits, depending on how one copes with such aggression. The Better Communication Technique alone cannot stop others from acting destructively, but it does offer the best chance for promoting one's personal growth. What I have learned anecdotally from my clients as well as my own experiences is that people more often than not respond well to the assertive communication prescribed by the Better Communication Technique. As a consequence, I believe that use of the Better Communication Technique produces a Mergenthaler Process in the brain more often than it results in a negative final emotion. On the whole then, the Better Communication Technique produces positive, permanent psychological change.

Common notions of relational issues are consistent with this explanation, too. A person who does not make excessive requests continually and who offers to compromise will experience positive responses and thereby improve relationships and boost self esteem. To the contrary, the person who is demanding and who refuses to compromise will remain in conflict with others and develop self esteem deficits. This understanding of the common human experience mirrors my neuronal correlate theory of self esteem and predicts that the assertive behavior produced through application of the Better Communication Technique will result in better relationships and self esteem.

In this regard, one would expect that any reasonable method of conflict resolution would produce compromises, thereby improving relationships and self esteem to some extent. Certainly, assertive communication is not a new idea and it is vitally important in any conflict resolution process. Nonetheless, the rapid improvements resulting from the Better Communication Technique are striking rather than modest and incremental. My contention is that the Better Communication Technique differs from other techniques in two essential ways. First, it is a complete form of communication, thereby directing people to leave out communication that might otherwise interfere with resolution. More importantly though, the Better Communication Technique provides a strict order in which things are said. I believe that this feature of imposing an order on the parts of the conversation, thereby mapping communication to the Mergenthaler Process, is what makes the Better Communication Technique stand apart from all other techniques and gives it a unique advantage.

## **Reaction in the Other Person**

Although use of the Better Communication Technique by a person speaking does not produce a

Mergenthaler Process in the person listening, it does produce a vital effect in the listener. When hearing a summary by the speaker, the listener senses that the speaker has been attentive and, consequently, the listener feels positive regard, stimulating the left brain. The left brain stimulation continues while hearing what the other person agrees to. Finally, the listener hears what the other person is unwilling to agree to, which produces a negative emotion in the right brain. Because the left brain was primed for activity before the right brain was activated though, it is much easier for the listener to then contemplate a compromise and resolve the conflict. In contrast, if the responder began by disagreeing, thereby activating the right brain in the other person first, the listener would not be primed for left brain activity. To the contrary, the listener would be primed to engage in a fight or flight response and may do so before giving the responder a chance to state what she or he agrees with. The order in which these two parts of the response are uttered is essential to the conflict resolution process. Hence, use of the Better Communication Technique maximizes the opportunity for conflict resolution by insuring the optimal sequence of brain functioning in both parties.

### **Effect of the Better Communication Technique on Self Esteem**

By maximizing the opportunity for conflict resolution, the Better Communication Technique maximizes the opportunity for positive outcomes. This increase in positive outcomes leaves the people involved feeling better about their autonomy, as well as acceptance by others. Moreover, they feel an increase in their ability to resolve conflicts, which is a form of task self esteem. Thus, the positive experiences of getting more of what one wants and less of what one does not want through use of the Better Communication Technique creates feelings of empowerment, more positive feelings of self regard, and diminishes insecurities. In terms of brain functioning, the experiences created by use of the Better Communication Technique become memories that, when reactivated, stimulate the left brain rather than the right. **In sum, my theory holds that consistent use of the Better Communication Technique creates memory reactivations that we experience as good self esteem traits and eliminates memory reactivations that I label as self esteem deficits.** What remains to be seen is direct, substantial proof of my assertions through empirical study, rather than simply theoretical reflections pieced together from related studies and anecdotal evidence.

### **Logical Consequences of My Theories**

A number of logical consequences follow from my theories. I have explained in the book the ones that I felt were necessary for people to know in order to promote the development of good self esteem traits and reduce self esteem deficits. In this section, I relate the logic that I used to derive each concept.

### ***Contingent Self Esteem***

I learned this concept originally from my literature review on self esteem. It is a simple concept that one can hardly argue against. Yet, I base my use of it on my neuronal view rather than the works of my predecessors.

According to my theory on self esteem, the more good self esteem traits you have, the better you will feel about yourself in the three areas of self esteem-- acceptance, task performance, and autonomy. The more self esteem deficits you have, the worse you will feel in these areas. In this sense, self esteem is a numbers game. For this reason, I advocate in Chapter Four that one diversify one's self esteem portfolio.

Hypothetically, if one could find a single trait that results in a high degree of acceptance by others, good task performance, and enough power to always meets one's needs, then adopting this hypothetical trait and ignoring all other potential self esteem traits and deficits would presumably achieve a highly desirable state of self esteem. Although this idea is not flawed logically, it is impractical. No single trait can consistently produce sufficient levels of acceptance, performance, and power across all situations. Moreover, developing and maintaining a particular trait is a difficult process, over which we have no direct control, only indirect. Thus, I do not caution against contingent self esteem as being counterproductive theoretically, I advise against it as being impractical.

### ***Existence as Your Purpose in Life***

The proof of this concept is deceptively simple. If one adopts any particular purpose for one's life, then one of two situations will result. In one case, the person never meets expectations by failing to achieve the adopted purpose. Thus, this person will develop a self esteem deficit relating to that failure. In the other case, the person actually achieves the desired purpose. For example, some women believe their purpose in life is to get married, have children, and maintain a good home. When they find themselves having achieved these goals, they then wonder whether there is anything more to life. Similarly, some men believe their purpose is to get married, have children, and become good providers. Again, these men often find themselves succeeding in this purpose and then feeling a sense of emptiness. Thus, achieving one's explicit purpose in life can also lead to a self esteem deficit. Logically then, the only situation in which the purpose of one's life cannot lead to a self esteem deficit is when the purpose of life is one that is always achievable, yet never completed. The single solution to this quandary is existence. Hence, existence must be assumed to be the purpose of one's life in order to prevent unnecessary self esteem deficits.

### ***Power Struggles***

Fighting is a right brain activity, thereby reducing pleasure. It leaves both persons feeling worse about their relationship, thereby contributing to a loss of acceptance. To maximize self esteem then, one must attempt to reduce conflict by ways that do not involve power struggles. It is for this reason that I recommend in Chapter Five that people live in the World of Power, in which they assert their own power, rather than the World of Persuasion, in which they battle over power.

### ***Power Model***

My metaphor for power, swimming in an ocean, was my own invention. The components of the

model-- swimming towards or away from others, and the waves that impede our progress-- reflect the reality of the limits of our own autonomy. Given how easily waves in the ocean overpower us, it is not surprising that others before me have made their own references to power using a similar metaphor coincidentally.

### ***Undermining Self Esteem By Trying to Be Liked***

Frankly, any situation in which one self esteem trait is undermined in furtherance of bolstering another presents a dangerous tradeoff. As I mentioned in the book, I do not act completely autonomously; I alter my behavior at times to suit others. When we are not mindful of the impact of such tradeoffs though, we can easily create self esteem deficits. It is therefore vital that people understand their tradeoffs, particularly when seeking acceptance from others, which is one of the most common, hastily-chosen tradeoffs made by people in general.

### ***Insecurities and Spite***

Our insecurities are actually manifestations of self esteem deficits, which produce right brain activity. Given enough right brain activity because of these insecurities, people act out against others in highly destructive ways. We label this type of action spite. Thus, I make explicit the connections between brain functioning, self esteem, and spiteful behavior.

### ***Emotional Decision-Making***

Long ago, I drew the conclusion from my behaviorism literature reviews that all decision-making was emotional. The theory that self esteem traits and deficits guide us in making decisions is an elaboration on this concept, inspired by the insights of Baumeister and Tice, cited above.

### ***Inner Critic***

This common notion resonates with people widely. I have reframed it using my self esteem theory to demonstrate that it has important uses rather than merely being a detriment to self confidence. Essentially, I view the popular idea of the inner critic as a simple explanation for one particular aspect of self esteem functioning. I reiterate it in order to clarify and refine it in a way that harmonizes with my self esteem theory and thereby makes it more useful.

### ***Misattribution of Pain***

The bold experiment of Schachter and Singer (1962), involving the clandestine administration of adrenaline to unknowing test subjects, revealed precisely how discomfort can so easily be misattributed to unrelated events. Realizing that the principle of cause and effect is essential to forming good self esteem traits, I provided a simple example in the book that dramatized the deleterious impact of what Schachter and Singer had demonstrated, a principle that I refer to as misattribution of pain.

Unfortunately, neither Schachter and Singer nor others found a successful method for averting this phenomenon. Eventually, researchers did discover, however, the principle of mood dissipation, referring to the phenomenon that a particular mood is dissipated when the person experiencing the mood learns of the mood's precise cause (Forgas, 2002). Nonetheless, the Mergenthaler Process, my self esteem theory, and my clinical experience all predict that the effect of mood dissipation is ephemeral. Put simply, mood dissipation may work well the first time one learns of the cause of a particular mood, but thereafter the law of diminishing returns takes over. Understanding the reason why one is sad or happy becomes increasingly less likely to affect the mood, particularly when the cause is an established thought pattern. Permanent change requires more than simply knowledge of causation.

By responding to life events assertively, one addresses issues as they arise and therefore becomes more acutely aware of the causes of feelings. More importantly though, acting assertively resolves the problems that cause negative moods or interfere with positive moods. Thus, I offer the Better Communication Technique as the first line of defense against problems arising from the misattribution of pain. Additionally, I reiterate the practical advice of others, which includes distraction and building one's tolerance to pain. This brief section of practical advice is clearly one where I recapitulate general principles learned from others, despite the fact that I do not cite any particular sources. The reason why I selected these specific recommendations, however, is because they conform to my theories of brain functioning. Effective distraction causes an activation of the left brain and contends for blood flow with the right brain, thereby dampening any bad mood. Building up a tolerance to pain is a form of exposure therapy, which attenuates the activation of the right brain that is caused by perceiving pain.

### ***Acceptance of Relational Flaws***

In accordance with my self esteem theory, relationships are essential. Abandonment of relationships at the first sign of trouble, rather than expending effort to repair them, results in the wholesale loss of good self esteem traits. It is therefore vital that people consider the flaws in relationships as one aspect to be addressed, rather than simply as a determinant for whether the relationship should be continued.

### ***Courage to Try***

Courage is a good self esteem trait. Precisely, the courage to try a particular action constitutes a particular good self esteem trait. Having the courage to try lots of things indicates that one has a multitude of good self esteem traits.

In one sense, advocating that someone muster the courage to attempt things is futile. Either the person has a good self esteem trait with regard to the particular activity in question or not. Even if the activity is one that the person has never attempted before, which implies that the person has neither a good self esteem trait nor a self esteem deficit associated with it yet, that person's brain will likely retrieve memories that are similar in some pertinent way in order to guide the decision of whether to attempt the action. Thus, the person will likely have some internal motivation to either try the action or refrain from it, and encouraging the person will not directly alter that motivation.

Encouraging others, however, is a supportive action, which constitutes a form of acceptance. Thus, people who are encouraged by others feel accepted to some extent by those who are encouraging them. This positive regard drives positive emotion and can, at times, override internal motivation to resist making an attempt. We already know that encouraging others is generally a sound practice that will achieve good results, but I also have reason to include it in the book because my self esteem theory predicts that it will induce a left brain response and accordingly improve the chances that people will try the Better Communication Technique and achieve the desired outcomes-- experiencing stronger relationships, better self esteem, and lasting happiness.

## Conclusion

Part of "The Fine Print of Happiness" is research, part is clinical experience, and the rest is theory. I have seen the Better Communication Technique work wonders-- restore relationships that were previously considered unsalvageable, bring feelings of self worth to those who had given up hope, end lifelong anxieties, etc. My scientific understanding of how the mind works and how the Better Communication Technique improves its functioning is admittedly rough. Beyond the brash confidence I have in my conclusions, however, I have even more faith that the scientific process of submitting my assertions to rigorous experimentation will reveal answers that will advance our understanding of relationships, self esteem, and happiness.

## References

- Buck, R. (1999). The biological affects: A typology. *Psychological Review*, 106(2): 301-336.
- Di Paula, A. & Campbell, J. D. (2002). Self-Esteem and Persistence in the Face of Failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(3): 711-724. Retrieved on February 2, 2005, from the Ovid Databases.
- Drevets, W. C. & Raichle, M. E. (1998). Reciprocal suppression of regional cerebral blood flow during emotional versus higher cognitive processes: Implications for interactions between emotion and cognition. *Cognition & Emotion*, 12(3): 353-385.
- Forgas, J. P. (2002). Feeling and doing: Affective influences on interpersonal behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13(1): 1-28.
- Gray, J. R. (2001). Emotional modulation of cognitive control: Approach-Withdrawal states double-dissociate spatial from verbal two-back task performance. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 130(3): 436-452.
- Hare, T. A.; Tottenham, N.; Davidson, M. C.; Glover, G. H.; & Casey, B. J. (2005). Contributions of amygdala and striatal activity in emotion regulation. *Biological Psychiatry*, 57(6): 624-632.
- Niedenthal, P. M.; Barsalou, L. W.; Ric, F. & Krauth-Gruber, S. (2005). Embodiment in the acquisition and use of emotion knowledge. In Barrett, L. F.; Niedenthal, P. M. & Winkielman, P. (Eds.), *Emotion and Consciousness* (pp. 21-50). New York: Guilford.
- Phelps, E. A. (2005). The interaction of emotion and cognition: Insights from studies of the human

amygdala. In Barrett, L. F.; Niedenthal, P. M. & Winkielman, P. (Eds.), *Emotion and Consciousness* (pp. 51-66). New York: Guilford.

Schachter, S. & Singer, J. E. (1962). Cognitive, social and physiological determinants of emotional state. *Psychological Review*, 69(5): 379-399.