Channeling Your Inner Therapist

Techniques for Self Care and Fulfillment

By
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There are two books that have had a profound impact on my thinking, that I've never read. That's because their titles are so good, they say it all. The first is James Hillman and Michael Ventura's 1993 collaboration, *We've Had 100 Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*. It now been 125 years and things haven't gotten much better, at least not in the realm of what psychotherapy, psychology, and psychiatry work to address—which I'll summarize as, peace of mind, or contentment. We all want to be happy with our lives, with ourselves, with the way things are, but many of us seldom are. Although it's a relative term, Hillman and Ventura say things are *worse* than ever, from which they infer psychotherapy isn't working.

In the more recent book, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (which I urge everyone to read), Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff confirm that rates of suicide, depression, and anxiety are greater than ever among today's newest generation, referred to as iGen, those born in the internet age starting around 1995. Here in the U.S., their data indicates the percentage of iGen college students describing themselves as having a mental disorder, mostly anxiety and depression, has "increased from 2.7 to 6.1 for male college students between 2012 and 2016 (that's an increase of 126%). For female college students, it rose even more, from 5.8 to 14.5 (an increase of 150%)."[1] Anxiety is now the "leading problem for which college students seek treatment," they say, further pointing out that during this same period there have been "substantial increases in rates of self-injury and suicide among college students."[2] So, according to this data, at least when it comes to peace of mind, things really do seem to be *worse* than ever.

But *worse* is a relative term. There's also lots of data indicating the world is much better today than ever before, *better* being another relative term. According to numerous sources—the books, *Abundance* and *Bold*, coauthored by Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler, *The Rational Optimist* by Matt Ridley, the anthology, *What Are You Optimistic About*, edited by John Brockman, *Factfulness* by Hans Rosling, and numerous reports you can get right off the United Nation's website—things are better than many of us think. Take the most recent of these, Rosling's 2018 bestseller, *Factfulness*.[3] According to the data, Rosling points out that during the last 20 years alone, the number of people in the world living in extreme poverty has been cut in half; the majority of the world's people now live in middle-income countries; 60 percent of girls living in low-income countries complete primary education; the number

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[1] Haidt, Jonathan, & Lukianoff, Greg, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 156.
[2] Ibid., p. 157.
[3] Rosling, Hans, *Factfulness*, Flatiron Books, New York, NY, 2018.

of people being born in the world has leveled off, and the number of children today is expected to be the same number of children in 2100; the global population will continue to rise until then, by another 4 billion people, before leveling off, mostly because people are living longer; the average life expectancy round the world is 70 years; during the past century the number of us killed in natural disasters has been halved; 80 percent of the world's children have been vaccinated against common childhood diseases; by age 30 men have spent an average of 10 years in school, compared to 9 years for women the same age.

Rosling, and the other sources I've mentioned, leave us with lots of verifiable statistics like these. Yet his book, in particular, also includes surveys about what most people think is true about these areas. In all categories, most people think things are far worse than they are. In fact, Rosling points out that only 10 percent of the 12,000 people he tested from 14 countries scored as well as a group of chimpanzees would have at random, who would have at least gotten it right about 33 percent of the time. Most people got only 2 out of 12 questions right.

Part of the problem, from the standpoint of evolutionary psychology, may be that humans aren't wired to think positively about the future. As Matt Ridley says in, *The Rational Optimist*, "a million years of natural selection shaped human nature to be ambitious to rear successful children, not to settle for contentment: people are programmed to desire, not to appreciate."[4] Citing Ridley in their book, *Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think*, Diamandis and Kotler state more succinctly, "We might be gloomy because gloomy people managed to avoid getting eaten by lions in the Pleistocene."[5] Happy people, in short, didn't survive evolution.

If this is so, if we are "gloomy" by nature, because of natural selection, it may explain why, after 125 years of studying how the human psyche works, psychotherapy hasn't helped us improve much. How can we cure discontentment if we have evolved to be discontent? Or maybe Hillman and Ventura themselves are glumly looking at the glass half empty. Maybe more of us are happier today than we think. Or maybe things are better than ever today because so many of us have been worrying about things to begin with. How would we ever progress if we were all content with the status quo, with how things are, with good enough? Maybe a little unhappiness in the world isn't such a bad thing.

I have personally studied psychology, as a means of personal growth and wellbeing, more than most novices, and even wrote my doctoral dissertation on the subject. Yet I agree, psychotherapy hasn't solved all our problems, nor should we ever have expected it to. Since it's advent 125 years ago now, the world has gotten worse in some ways and better in others. But this isn't reason to infer things have gotten better or worse because of it. Psychotherapy is one tool in our tool box that can help us with certain matters, but it isn't a tool than can fix everything in our lives or in the world. The word *therapy* means, "to assist," and that's all it's

[4] Ridley, Matt, *The Rational Optimist*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2010, p. 27.
[5] Diamandis, Peter, & Kotler, Steven, *Abundance,* Free Press, New York, NY, 2012, p. 39.

meant to do, to assist us in our own work as individuals. But we still have to take responsibility for our own lives, growth, and wellbeing.

The other book I've never read that's transformed my outlook on life is, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road Kill Him! The Pilgrimage of Psychotherapy Patients*, by Sheldon B. Kopp. The full cover actually says, "No meaning that comes from outside ourselves is real. The Buddhahood of each of us has already been obtained. We need only recognize it. Thus the Zen Master warns his disciple: If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!"[6] As a psychotherapist himself, which he views as a type of modern guru, Kopp isn't advising animosity toward therapists, only that each of us must take responsibility for our own growth and wellbeing. A good therapist can, again, assist us in this effort by helping to point us in the right direction, or, even better, helping us discover the right direction for ourselves; but the journey, with its unexpected turns, up and downs, and rough going, is ours to take.

I would also add, as an empiricist, I don't agree, "no meaning that comes from outside ourselves is real." I think one of the problems with our world today is far too many of us are unwilling to integrate factual data and hard evidence into our worldviews, whether conservatives denying global warming, or liberals obsessed with their right to believe whatever they want without challenge, we'd all be better off if more of us embraced the realities outside ourselves. But I do like the part about killing the Buddha, which serves to remind me I must become my own guru, the person, that is, who is responsible for my own unfolding and health.

So this, in short, is the theory of psychotherapy I've adopted in my life, based on the titles of these two books; that things can become better or worse with or without psychotherapy, which should be seen only as a tool for aiding us in our own interpersonal work; and that we must each ultimately take personal responsibility for our own growth, fulfillment, and happiness. My guess is most the psychotherapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists in the room would agree with me.

This means, in addition to professional therapy, there are other things we can do in pursuit of our peace of mind. There are a few practices I've found helpful, the first of which is, attitude. As I mentioned, evolutionary psychology suggests we may naturally be inclined toward a pessimistic outlook, even if things aren't as bad as we think. This really hit home for me when I was studying the psychology of fundamentalism while working on my dissertation, and learned one of its earmarks is *apocalypticism*, the unfounded fear that things are so bad—that my problems are so great—the whole world is ending. It's an exaggeration of our fear instinct, which, under normal circumstances, can keep us safe, but should subside once we've assessed a situation and determined there aren't any real threats. For some people, however, the state of hypervigilance our amygdala is prone toward is

[6] Kopp, Sheldon B., *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*, Science and Behavior, Palo Alto, CA, 1972, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1976.

always on alert, leading to a life of unwarranted anxiety, paranoia, conspiracy theories, and the general belief or feeling that things are terrible.

But you don't have to be a Conservative, let alone a Fundamentalist, for this to be so. In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Haidt and Lukianoff point out it's often progressives who succumb to what they call, *catastrophizing*, which they define as, "Focusing on the worst possible outcome and seeing it as most likely."[7] I realized, several years ago, this had been true of my own thinking and outlook, that I was prone to seeing and fearing the worst. Becoming aware of this tendency, however, has changed my life and my outlook. I now have a much more positive view of the world, hope for our future, and far fewer dragons to slay or windmills to tilt my lance toward. By simply becoming aware of this cognitive distortion in my own life, I've been able to keep it in check and be a happier person.

This leads to the second practice, researching and accepting the facts. In days past this was a lot harder to do. It took a lot of time to find and learn the facts, and those who did were considered experts in their fields. Today the Internet has made it easy for most of us to find reliable data driven reports from reputable sources. Looking at the real numbers can help us reevaluate our unsubstantiated presumptions. Of course, the research is easy these days, but finding the will to challenge our own beliefs is no easier than it's ever been. Many would prefer to simply get their information from Fox News, or MSNBC, or base it upon the scrutiny and acceptance of one's own peers, but to be healthy happy individuals, it's necessary to be honest with ourselves and to embrace the world on its own terms. As Haidt and Lukianoff explain, "If you can get people to examine these beliefs and consider counterevidence, it gives them at least some moments of relief from negative emotions, and if you release them from negative emotions, they become more open to questioning their negative beliefs."[8]

A third practice is logically evaluating what we hear. This isn't as easy as using the Internet because most of us have never learned to reason, though most of us like to think of ourselves as perfectly reasonable. Reason is a discipline that must be learned and practiced, just like trigonometry or playing the saxophone, neither of which comes naturally. What does come naturally is emotional thinking, thinking that justifies our emotions, that justifies what we desire to be true. These "Rationalizations," Erich Fromm says, "are essentially lacking this quality of discovering and uncovering; they only confirm the emotional prejudice existing in oneself."[9] So this is another technique your inner therapist can use—getting in the habit of asking if your thinking is helping you learn something new, or if it's only confirming what you already believe is true. If our own minds are mostly in agreement with us, we're probably not as reasonable as we think.

[7] Haidt and Lukianoff, ibid., p. 38.
[8] Ibid., p. 37.
[9] Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965) p. 219.

Learn logic if you can, but if you can't, there's something much easier you can do to make yourself a better thinker. Get back in the habit of asking *why?* I say, "get back in the habit," because we begin our lives by incessantly asking *why* about everything, until we hear, "because I said so," or, "don't ask questions," or, "never question the authorities," one too many times. But logic is the study of what follows, of making inferences, of figuring out *why* something is said to be true. So train yourself to let the question start coming naturally again. Anytime somebody asserts something is true, or you catch yourself believing something is true, ask yourself *why*, and then consider if the *why* makes sense.

You'll notice all these practices so far are about adjusting our mindset, and that's what self-therapy is about, having a more positive mindset, or, at least, a more realistic one, by expanding our awareness, recognizing our tendency—the human tendency—to expect the worst, looking at empirical data, learning logic, and asking *why?* This is because self-therapy is more about changing our minds than our circumstances. Though not always, we often have to accept the way things are, then do our best to cope.

It's with this in mind that I also recommend bibliotherapy, a technique I learned from philosopher, Lou Marinoff, author of, *Plato, Not Prozac*, and founder of The American Philosophical Practitioners Association. In discussing philosophy with his clients, in the hope of providing them with a new perspective, Marinoff finds it helpful to prescribe books to those wanting to learn more about a helpful idea. Quoting Thoreau, he says, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book."[10] Of course the bookstores are filled with shelves of self-help books, some of which are better than others, but when it comes to evidence based info, the science shelves might be just as helpful, or, my favorite, the philosophy shelves, a discipline that requires us to question our own mindsets, the ones we're trying to change. If you're looking for a recommendation, *Plato Not Prozac* is a good start.

These days I'd also recommend learning about the specific philosophy of *Stoicism*, which has been around 2,300 years but is making a comeback. Stoicism is about maintaining our peace of mind regardless of what's going on, by distinguishing between what we can't and can control, then focusing on the latter. I'd also suggest studying Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and putting it into practice. CBT can especially help with the rising rate of anxiety disorders because, rather than avoiding the things we're anxious about, it helps us face our fears, and, in doing so, to become aware of the many cognitive distortions that cause us to see the world wrongly, like always expecting the worst. Interestingly, if you read modern books about Stoicism, their authors often compare it to CBT. And if you read books about CBT, their authors compare it to ancient Stoicism. So, I'd recommend putting William Irvine's, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, and the aforementioned, *The Coddling of the American Mind* on your bibliotherapeutic book list.

[10] Marinoff, Lou, *Plato Not Prozac!* HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1999, p. 165.

Another practice is making time to just relax and enjoy life, without worrying about doing anything to fix yourself or the world. Let it all go and just have fun. Sweet, sweet surrender. Let yourself be imperfect, incomplete, and unfinished. Just be. Just take a few moments to appreciate the rare gift of being a sentient, somewhat self-aware being in the Universe. Take in your guilty pleasures with some abandon, before it's too late, because life is short. As the poet Rumi said, "Drink all your passions and be a disgrace."

Finally, your inner-therapist needs to be someone you can trust. I don't mean you should trust your feelings, or blindly trust your own beliefs. For these can be generated from the very cognitive distortions and faulty thinking we're trying to recover from. By trusting yourself, I mean becoming a person you know does your best to see the world on its own terms by looking at empirical facts, reasoning well, asking *why*, studying, facing your fears, and taking time to rest and recreate. In short, become a person you trust by striving not to deceive yourself. Be honest with yourself.

This requires us to allow ourselves permission to be wrong. I don't mean just being ideologically wrong but being *ideally* wrong. It means recognizing we don't have to be perfect, and that part of being human, as we've seen, is discontentment, a state that's always pushing us forward, to become more than we are, to make the world better, no matter how good it gets. The reason James Hillman thinks the world has gotten worse despite a century of psychotherapy is because psychotherapy is not about fixing the world. It's good to focus on ourselves and to strive for contentment, but if we're always content, why would we ever want to make things better? To make things better we have to accept the responsibility we have to others, to what's beyond ourselves, and to do what we can and must, even in our brokenness, to be a helpful, productive, loving presence in the world.