

# PSYCHOTHERAPY UPDATE

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CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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## TWEAKING YOUR LIFE

When we consider changing some habit, some behavior, or even the direction of our life, we often come up with some grand plan for doing so. We think big. It's the American way. If we want to lose weight, we establish a goal of, for example, 20 lbs. We decide to go to the gym four or five days each week for an hour each day. Of course, for most people this plan lasts for about a week, if that much. When we want to cut back in our spending, we decide to give up buying clothes for the next year. When it comes to our spiritual life, we say we will begin going to our place of worship every week. In each instance our resolve lasts for a very short time, leaving us feeling guilty, down on ourselves, and disappointed. We accuse ourselves of being failures, lazy, lacking in discipline, and generally as losers. Our self-esteem drops and we feel worse about ourselves than before we made the resolution. We add one more self-recrimination to the long list of past unfulfilled promises to ourselves.

Each time we fail, we feel just a little bit worse about ourselves. Our disappointment in ourselves grows to the point where we may either give up trying to change or we begin to accept ourselves as born losers - failures. We begin to look at ourselves as incompetent. We become depressed and feel hopeless. In order to avoid falling into despair, we may simply give up. We say, "this is the way things are, I am doomed to living my life this way, so I might as well just accept it." What we don't realize is that it may not be that change is not possible, but rather it is our approach to change that may not be working.

### INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Most Americans have a penchant for instant gratification. We want immediate results. We also have a tendency to think, "more is better." I have gone to the gym to work out and watched very out of shape men go over to the weight machine for the first time and try to bench press their body weight! Finding they cannot lift this amount of weight, they give up and go off to some other machine. I have heard people say that they are going to lose 50 pounds in three weeks. These folks are setting themselves up to fail.

Many health clubs and diet plans count on the tendency of people to bite off more than they can chew in order to stay in business. They offer big discounts to people to

sign up for a year or more in advance knowing that the vast majority will go for a few weeks and then quit. If those who signed up attended every day, there would be no room to accommodate everyone. The same is true for diet centers. They count on people's desire for immediate results. Yet we all know, in the intelligent part of our brains, that weight loss, body building, and as in learning any other activities takes patience, persistence, and time, in order to achieve lasting results. But our desire for immediate gratification takes over and we set ourselves up for instant failure.

### TWEAKING

This is where the concept of "tweaking" comes into play. Literally, "tweaking" means to gently pinch or jerk something or someone. Colloquially speaking we use the term to refer to slightly improving or changing a situation. We say, "we tweaked our offer a bit and were able to make the deal," or "we tweaked the volume on the audio just a bit for better acoustics." The same concept of "tweaking" can be applied to aspects of our lives. We can tweak our lives in small ways. Over time these tweaks add up to significant shifts and changes. In each instance, we can make a slight alteration in what we were doing in order to get a better result. They don't have to be big changes, but minor adjustments. This concept tweaking, or making minor adjustments to situations or

areas of our life, can have a significant impact on the overall direction of our life. A series of tweaks can, over time, have the same overall effect as one significant change without the pain of a large sudden shift.

Consider trying to straighten one's teeth. We go to the orthodontist to have braces put onto our teeth. The orthodontist doesn't try to straighten our teeth all at once because the pain would be too great and damage might be done to our teeth and gums. If the pain is too great we will want to quit the process before the job is done. However, through a series of tweaks – gradually tightening the braces -- over a period of many months or years we see our teeth straighten and remain straight even after the braces are removed. The same is true when we want to straighten a tree that has been growing crooked. We tweak it gradually over time, each week tightening the brace that pulls the tree into position. If we were to do it suddenly, the tree might break. A series of tweaks does the job of straightening the tree, almost imperceptibly over time.

We can apply a similar principle for straightening our life. Change normally does not occur suddenly, overnight. It occurs by degrees, often without our awareness. When it does occur suddenly, it usually is precipitated by circumstance or necessity. We may be forced to change when confronted with trauma, precipitous occurrences such as sudden economic reversal, earthquake, and so forth. For the most part, however, lasting change occurs gradually over time.

Let's examine four areas of our life: relationships, occupation, physical and mental health, and spirituality, to see how the concept of tweaking might apply.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships, especially in a marriage, often get stale. Couples fall into habitual styles of relating. Sometimes relationships becomes dysfunctional, while at other times the relationship may simply lose its sparkle. In both case, the couple may think that there is no way of revitalizing the relationship without a massive overhaul. If they think in terms of a complete overhaul, they may get overwhelmed and simply either accept the status quo, or think that they ought to divorce. In my opinion, many relationships can be salvaged or spruced up if each party makes a commitment to seeking ways that each party can tweak the relationship. Below I will list a number of ways couples have found to tweak their relationship. It is not necessary that all of these suggestions be followed. Rather, you could do one of them for a month or two, and then when the mood strikes you could add a second, then a third, and so on. Each of these

tweaks, when added together over time, adds up to significant movement. As with losing weight, it happens one pound at time.

### *Tweaks for your relationship.*

- ❑ Set aside one hour per week at a specific time and place for an uninterrupted conversation with your mate to discuss anything that is on your mind. Each party takes a half-hour just to talk with no interruptions by the other party. The listening party is there just to listen for a half-hour. Then the roles are reversed.
- ❑ Set aside one night a week for a "date night," an evening consisting of at least two hours alternately planned by each partner each week. The date night could be something as simple as going out to a coffee-house for espresso or a local pub for a glass of wine. Or an evening picnic, such as Chinese food or a hoagie sandwich at the beach or local park. Just getting out of the house during the week can be refreshing.
- ❑ Take an "in town" mini-vacation by spending the night in a local hotel or motel. Leave from there to go to work the next morning. Or spend the weekend at a local hotel. It does not have to be a major, planned event to be fun or relaxing.
- ❑ Go with your partner for a massage at a local spa or health club. Or even bring one to your house. The cost is not that great compared to the payoff.
- ❑ Set aside time in the evening for a relaxing ritual, such as preparing tea and cookies before retiring.
- ❑ Take a bath or shower together at least once a week.
- ❑ Do something risqué that you might have done when you were dating. Think of the fun you will have talking about it and remembering it afterwards.

## YOUR OCCUPATION

At first blush it may seem that only those who are self-employed would have the freedom to tweak their job. To be sure, it is easier to tweak when it is your own business, but this does not mean that it is impossible to tweak when you are working for someone else. You just have to be more creative. The chances are that you have never given it much thought. You have never thought of the ways you can make your work more pleasurable. Let's take a look at some of the ways you might tweak your work experience beginning with the commute to work.

### *Tweaks for work.*

- ❑ Listen to a book on tape while driving to the office. Or learn a language on tape. You often complain that you don't have the time to read a novel or those motivational tapes you hear about. Well the morning and evening commute would be an ideal time to do so.

Rather than complaining about the traffic, you will look forward to finding out what happens next in that novel you are listening to.

- ❑ Take a ten-minute break in the morning and again in the afternoon to leave the building and take a walk around the block.
- ❑ At least once a week have your lunch in a park rather than either in the office or in a restaurant.
- ❑ Have your wife or husband, friend, or child meet you for lunch once a month or more.
- ❑ Bring your child to the office once a month.
- ❑ Put pictures of your family and other personal items on your desk or around your office.
- ❑ Take a personal mental health half-day (or full day if you can) off several times a year. Don't wait until you become ill. And take yourself to a movie or hit some golf balls during that time off.
- ❑ Practice deep breathing exercises or meditation often during the day.
- ❑ Develop a relaxing ritual that you can look forward to each day while at your place of employment, e.g., a tea break.

#### YOUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

**I**t is in this area that we set ourselves up for the biggest failures. One would think that we would do whatever we could to build our self-esteem and to enhance our self-image. Yet, by virtue of our desire for immediate results, we achieve just the opposite. We resolve to be a totally new and improved version of ourselves, fail, and end up feeling worse about ourselves than when we started.

The trick once again is in tweaking. Rather than promising to be a totally new you, think tweak. Think about one area you could spruce up just a bit. Below are only a few suggestions; they should not be done all at once. Choose just one of them, or any other of your choosing, and do it consistently until it become as much a part of your life as brushing your teeth. Then add another one, and another, and so forth. Take your time. Gradually, by virtue of here a tweak, there a tweak, you will end up with that new and improved version of you. But it will not come upon you suddenly. Rather it will happen gradually, almost imperceptibly.

*Tweaking your physical and mental health.*

- ❑ When it comes to the commitment to increase your reading, rather than committing to read the entirety of "War and Peace," think about reading one article a day from a magazine of your choice.
- ❑ Rather than saying that you are going to learn how to meditate, take 10 minutes a day just to sit quietly and focus on your breathing. Increase at no more than

five minutes every two weeks until you are 20 minutes a day.

- ❑ Instead of promising to powerwalk for 45 minutes a day, commit to walking around the block either in the morning before getting dressed for work or in the evening either before or after dinner. Make it at least a ten-minute walk. When that becomes comfortable, add five minutes. Add only five minutes, and not more often than one addition a week, until, over a several month period you are at 30 minutes a day. It could take you months to get there.
- ❑ Give yourself a treat by having a professional massage once a month. Start with a half-hour session. If you like it, increase it to an hour over time.
- ❑ Spend ten minutes each morning stretching before you take your shower.
- ❑ Take a warm bath by candlelight before retiring, while listening to your favorite soothing music and enjoying a cup of tea. If you find it pleasant and relaxing, increase the frequency.

Imagine how you might feel about your life next year at this time if several of these ideas were a regular part of it. For example, how would it feel to know that you were reading an article (chapter of a book) every week, walking for 30 minutes a day, having a monthly massage, and enjoying a warm bath by candlelight several times a week. Then imagine how it would feel if you were also tweaking your approach to work as discussed earlier.

#### SPIRITUALITY

**I** think it was Charles Darwin who said that what differentiates humans from animals is that only human beings can blush. Human beings can reflect upon their own behavior. They can experience a sense of something beyond themselves and can feel connected to one another. They have a higher consciousness. Human beings are conscious of right and wrong, good and bad; they are conscious of their own finitude. As such, we can say that human beings have a spiritual awareness as part of their existential makeup.

Most of us enjoy a beautiful sunrise or sunset, appreciate a mountain view, feel calmed by the ocean, and feel peaceful when star-gazing on a clear night. At these moments, we feel connected with the universe, a part of something larger than ourselves. We feel moved by the good works of others, and feel a sense of awe at the birth of a child. We feel blessed when someone we love recovers from an illness.

We often vow that we will stop to smell the flowers more often. We promise to attend our place of worship more frequently. We tell ourselves that we will make a contribution of time and energy to make this world a better

place. Though we are sincere in these desires, somehow we seldom find the time to follow through. We want to feel connected to others and to our world, yet the time eludes us.

Again, we believe that in order to be connected to our spiritual self, we have to make a significant change. We believe that we have to have a big impact. Overwhelmed, we gradually slip into our routine, everyday life, feeling just a bit disappointed in ourselves for not being the person we would like to be.

As with the other aspects of our life discussed thus far, we can tweak our lives spiritually as well. The following suggestions might serve to stimulate your own thinking about creative ways to bring spirituality into your life.

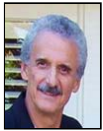
*Spiritual tweaking.*

- ❑ Each day when you awaken, before getting out of bed, spend a moment reflecting on the miracle of just being alive.
- ❑ Before starting your day, think about your blessings and how you might make a difference in someone else's life.
- ❑ Once a week put a coin in an expired parking meter to prevent someone from getting a ticket.
- ❑ Several times a week, pay someone a compliment.

- ❑ Make it a practice to say “thank you” to someone for taking the time to criticize you.
- ❑ Create a picture in your mind of the self you would like to be. Each day pause in the middle of the day to reflect on that higher self.
- ❑ Tell someone you care about that he/she is important to you.
- ❑ Periodically contact a friend whom you have often thought about but have not taken the time to call.
- ❑ Once a month spend an hour volunteering at a local community agency or shelter.

**CONCLUSION**

We all have the power to improve the quality of our life by making slight adjustments – tweaks – to the way we do things. These tweaks add up over time, with the same net effect as major adjustments without the pain of sudden, drastic change. The traditional wisdom of “no pain, no gain” does not apply when it comes to making significant life changes. People often think that they have to wait until the children grow up, or that they have to divorce, in order to lead the life they would like. They then become overwhelmed with the enormity of the task. My contention is that we should think small. You do not have to wait, you can start tweaking today. Remember, don't put off until tomorrow what you can tweak today.



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