

WHAT I BELIEVE: AN IDEALIST DEALS WITH REALITY **Christopher Ebbe, Ph.D., ABPP (www.livewiselydeeply.com)**

My goal as a person and a psychologist is to provide people with the means to perceive reality reasonably accurately, to have pleasant feelings and emotions as much of the time as is reasonable, to feel good about themselves much of the time and have a good relationship with themselves, to have some gratifying relationships with others, and to function effectively, so that they can reach their goals. Growing up as an idealist, I have had to work to accept all of the realities of being human, but it has resulted in a more balanced and useful conception of who we are. (The areas that are crucial for your life are reality relations (what is real and what is true), your emotions, your relationship with yourself, and your relationships with others.)

In order to achieve the goals above, you must have sufficient accurate knowledge, you must be able to accept yourself and your feelings, you must be able to manage your feelings and control your behavior, and you must know what is truly best for yourself (which is not necessarily what you "feel like" doing, and which is sometimes quite different from what our parents and our society have taught us).

I have used the word "believe" in the title to bring our attention to how little we really know with certainty. For the most part what we say we know is what has proven to be reliable (the sun comes up every morning) and what we have accepted as "true" because someone we believe said it (the Bible says it, so that's that!). Both of these are beliefs rather than true knowledge, although if something is almost certainly true, then we include that in "knowledge" (the sun comes up every morning). I am quite certain about most of what I write in this essay, from experience and because it fits without question into a larger, reasonable view of human nature and existence, and some parts of it I would call knowledge in the sense of knowing it with certainty (e.g., every behavior is motivated; in general, you will get the most out of life if you consistently (1) make decisions based on objective evaluations of all foreseeable consequences of your behavior and (2) take your impact on others into account). It may be useful as you read to ask yourself what you really believe about these various topics and assertions, and whether you really "know" things or just believe them.

As human beings we have limited understanding of ourselves, other people, and the world around us. Most people allow themselves to be aware of only some of their feelings, and they admit as facts only things that they are willing to believe (or cannot deny). The resulting limited and often inaccurate understanding leads to planning and decisions that often turn out badly and to troubled and frequently conflictful relationships with others. Our unwillingness to see the truth and our refusal to feel and manage our unpleasant feelings (instead denying them and hiding from them) results inevitably in less joy, satisfaction, contentment, and fulfillment than we

could have in life, but we cannot see this because we are so oriented to getting rid of every pain and so used to making decisions on short-term bases only. Therefore, if we become able to see the truth and have a good understanding of ourselves, others, and the world, become able to tolerate our feelings about the truth, and become able to be aware of all that goes on inside us (in order to have a good understanding of ourselves), we will have the best chance possible to make good decisions and take advantage of all opportunities, and therefore to have a relatively successful, joyful, satisfying, contented, and fulfilling life.

In making decisions, people tend to ignore predictable consequences they don't like to think about, and this often leads to making faulty decisions. Therefore, taking into account all of the consequences of our actions, particularly the effects of our actions on others and all possible consequences far in the future, will allow us to make better decisions and to be more successful in life.

Emotions are signals to ourselves about what is good for us and bad for us, but they arise from a relatively primitive part of our brains, are not concerned with truth or accuracy, and may give us false guidance if we believe all that they seem to be telling us. Emotions have evolved in human beings to provide a (crude) learning opportunity that with experience comes to warn us of what is going wrong or may go wrong (fear, terror, frustration, horror) and to provide us with a test of when things have gone right (our positive feelings). The human being without emotions (and needs) would be totally adrift and have no idea of what to do. Unfortunately, the crude and often over-generalizing nature of emotional conditioning often results in inaccurate warnings. Fortunately, upon becoming aware of our emotional signals, we can add our accurate and realistic thinking to the decision process as we choose what to do. We learn many of our emotional reactions to things from how others react, so we often learn unnecessary negative signals about things that we would otherwise not be burdened with—things that were overlearned through trauma, or emotional conditioning that was based on an inaccurate understanding of reality.

Another, self-generated source of distortion is the result of our unconscious effort as children to find little tricks in our brains that will reduce or even turn off unpleasant emotions, which to us at that stage of life often seem too much to bear. (These are called “defenses” in mental health terminology.) Even though they may reduce our unpleasant emotional experiences to some extent, if these avoidance mechanisms distort the genetically intended emotional messages too much, they actually reduce our coping capacities as adults, because we have wrong information, or we are missing important information contained in our emotions, and this leads to unpleasant experiences of failure and deprivation. For the sake of optimal functioning, the goal is to feel all of our emotions and then, after we have evaluated the potential benefit of their information, to have ways of handling them that reduce them, make them tolerable, or heal them.

The most important relationship we have is with ourselves, and this relationship is often neglected and often more painful than it needs to be

(poor self-esteem, feeling bad about yourself, frequent self-criticism, etc.). Knowing yourself completely, accepting everything about yourself, loving yourself, respecting yourself, having humane and reasonable standards and expectations for yourself, and treating yourself well are essential to having a positive relationship with yourself. These, together with a clear knowledge about the likely outcomes of your actions, will allow you to always do what is truly best for yourself, and by doing this you can achieve your goals, avoid future problems, and nurture good relationships with others!

To have good relationships with others, we must treat them well, which involves choosing our actions so that both we and they can benefit over the long haul from our actions, and it requires that we stop trying to take advantage of them (lie to them, get the better of them, "win" over them, be "better than" them, etc.) in our (misguided) efforts to get what we want.

We are trained in this society to believe that pleasure is the greatest good and that consumption is the route to pleasure. While there is nothing "wrong" with pleasure per se, there is much more to life and to being fully human. We can find much more joy, satisfaction, contentment, and fulfillment through honoring longer-term values than through seeking pleasure at all times. The greatest joy in life is found in secure and enduring closeness with others and in being fully oneself while fully engaged in life. Reliably getting what we need in life and building secure and enduring closeness with certain others requires seeing reality accurately and dealing adaptively with our often painful emotions.

A great amount of understanding and predictive power regarding ourselves and others can be achieved simply by analyzing all behavior in terms of how it affects our feelings about ourselves and our sense of security in the world.

It is also helpful to understand that in order to be in a positive emotional state, to feel sufficiently secure, and in response to the competition with others that everyone feels from very early in life, most human beings seek to please certain others (parents, teachers, other gang members), to be "special" to some others, and to ensure that things are "fair" between self and others. Much of our behavior is aimed at these purposes.

Every behavior is motivated by an effort to alter the internal environment (how we "feel" inside) in a desired direction. Behaviors may appear to be motivated by something outside the self (desire for a car, desire for a friend, etc.), but this is only because these actions will affect something inside the self. There is nothing that we "just do," which means that we are responsible for everything we do.

My system of ideas, then, stresses—

- knowing everything that is going on within yourself and outside yourself (including all of your thoughts, feelings, and motives);
- striving to know "the truth" (an accurate understanding of what goes on inside and outside of you), as much as human beings can know the truth (including finding and correcting factual inaccuracies and emotional conditioning inaccuracies);

- being able to tolerate your negative emotions, so that you can have the benefit of the information they have for you and so that you can experience and therefore empathize with the full range of human experience;
- learning to have (and to deserve) largely positive feelings about yourself, to accept, respect, love, and have humane and reasonable standards and expectations for yourself, and to take good care of yourself;
- using your knowledge of yourself, others, and the world to know what is best for yourself;
- using all of your relatively accurate information about yourself, others, and the world to make decisions that are most likely to get you what you want (including taking into account all possible future consequences of your actions, as well as the impact of your actions on others);
- using your knowledge about yourself and your empathic appreciation for the experience of others to fashion positive and fulfilling relationships with others by treating them well and finding rewarding closeness with some of them;
- finding an enduring set of values that will result in the best chance of having joy, satisfaction, contentment, and fulfillment in your life.

A REALISTIC VIEW OF OURSELVES AND OTHERS

Most of us have an unrealistic view of ourselves and of others. We have a strong tendency to idealize ourselves and human beings in general (even though we can always find something wrong with every person besides ourselves), and we reliably rate ourselves higher in psychological research than is realistic. The truth is that human beings are basically self-centered, except for our inborn tendencies to nurture children, to attach to sex partners, to stay attached to parents, to form emotional alliances with a few other people, and to protect and defend our primary groups (family, town, nation).

The issues we must face with regard to ourselves and other human beings are--

- All human beings that are paying attention are at some level afraid of each other and realize that others form the greatest threat of harm.
- Human beings are all potentially violent.
- Human beings all act basically out of self-interest (what they believe will be in their own best interest).
- Human beings have much greater potential for tolerating and getting along with those they define as being "in" their groups (which usually excludes at least everyone outside of one's nation).
- Human beings have an evolutionary tendency to fight to protect their groups (family, town, nation).
- Human beings generally care about only those with whom they have direct family or activity connection.
- Many people are quite willing to harm and take advantage of others in order to get what they want.

- Human beings are much less likely to engage in violence if they feel that their basic needs for survival, security, and self-esteem are met.
- Political, governmental, and religious leaders all have special incentives to assert their dominance with those of other groups, which increases the risks of violence between groups.
- People inherently tend to "line up" with those around them and adopt the emotions and beliefs of those around them, without considering the meaning, value, or truth of those emotions and beliefs.
- People in groups are more willing to act violently as a group than they are individually.
- People are motivated first to meet survival needs and attain a sense of security, and they will act aggressively to accomplish these things if necessary. (Next in priority is the desire to be in a positive subjective state--to be feeling some pleasant emotion or feeling and not to be feeling pain or painful feelings, and this includes feeling positively about oneself.) Accomplishment of all of these needs and desires is often sought through attachments and alliances with others.
- People come to associate their contexts (customs, culture, place, associates, form of government, etc.) with their need satisfaction and goal attainment, and they resist changes in these aspects of their lives, violently if necessary, because those changes seem to them to threaten their continued goal attainment and need satisfaction.
- A prominent way that people seek self-esteem is to find or imagine ways that they are "better than" others and then claim superiority over those others based on these "reasons." This creates conflicts with those who are defined as inferior, and these conflicts can lead to violence.
- Ignorance (including ignorance due to avoidance of thinking or simply failure to think) contributes greatly to most justifications that people use to harm others or feel superior to others.

As you may note, facing up to the somewhat negative realities about ourselves gives us a challenge if we are to have a balanced and net positive view of ourselves and others!

Now for the good news!

- Human beings are endowed with great capacity for joy and satisfaction.
- Most people are capable of loving well.
- We can form attachments with others that are lifelong and which we will defend to the death.
- We have marvelous cognitive capacities for coping with our existential situation (although our capacities are definitely limited compared to the information in the universe that could be known).
- We have a great deal of evolutionarily-developed "wisdom" (if we would only pay attention to it).
- If we are treated well in childhood, we automatically have good self-esteem.
- Our bodies are marvelous entities, very well adapted to our environment.

- We can be flexible in our thinking, as long as we are not overly attached to “the way things are” or “the way things were.”
- We have considerable empathy capacities, which can make relations with others positive and comfortable.

All human interactional or human relations problems result from dishonesty, rejection of being responsible, failures in empathy, lack of concern about others, the desire to be superior to others, insistence that life be fair, insistence that others be like us, failure to control behavior, and rejection of the principle of reciprocity. Human relationships will improve as these problems and tendencies are improved.

FUNDAMENTAL LIFE GOALS OF ALL HUMAN BEINGS

The following are the most basic goals that all of us have by virtue of being human. Everything we do (get a job, buy a car, find a spouse, eat chocolate) is motivated by our desire to fulfill these goals, regardless of whether we understand it that way. It is also posited that fulfillment of these goals is sufficient for any human being to have “a good life.” Sometimes reflecting on why we are doing what we do can help us to realize what we are really trying to do, which can allow us to think about better ways to achieve what we want.

- 1-life maintenance and support (sufficient capacities and goal attainment to enable one to take care of oneself and those legitimately dependent on one, and meeting one's basic needs at least adequately)
- 2-having no more than a minimal or at least no more than a tolerable level of physical pain and bodily damage (recognizing that some amount of physical and emotional pain are normal aspects of human life and the human adaptation)
- 3-having some pleasure and pleasant emotion in one's life (including feeling some amounts of happiness and hope, and ultimately some (for many people, small) amounts of satisfaction, contentment, and fulfillment)
 - (This is accomplished mainly by--
 - 3a-having a good relationship with and good feelings toward oneself (which may include loving oneself, respecting oneself, accepting oneself, having humane and reasonable standards and expectations for oneself, and treating oneself well, and which in large measure arises from being loved, respected, and accepted by others and from creating good outcomes for oneself)
 - 3b-having minimal or at least a tolerable level of emotional pain and internal conflict (though recognizing that some degree of conflict and pain is inherent in being human)
 - 3c-feeling an adequate level of security)
- 4-having some and to some degree gratifying relationships with others, including most importantly, a secure place in one's family

and basic acceptance in one's community

CHANGE (DOING "BETTER")

We change through incorporating accurate interpretations of our experience into what we already know and allowing those to change our habits and beliefs. By doing this daily, we can become as happy and wise as human beings can be.

To improve our relationships with others, the principle that must be learned and believed is that we can all get more out of life in the long run by viewing others as equals and treating them fairly at all times--i.e., not taking advantage of them or trying to unfairly gain more than they have. Efforts to improve human relations, between individuals and between groups, must address and take into account these factors. The factors and skills that can help us to accomplish improvement are--

- self-awareness
- acceptance of self
- acceptance of responsibility for self (particularly for how we treat ourselves and others and for what we believe to be true)
- increased empathy for others' needs and feelings
- increased caring for others (both more caring for those we already care about and more caring for those for whom we currently do not care)
- improved skills in activities that promote peaceful coexistence, such as cooperation, self-control, being fair, viewing others as equals, being honest, and being trustworthy
- education regarding others and regarding differences
- exposure to other cultures and differences, through travel, movies, exchange experiences, structured encounters, etc.
- providing order, safety, and security for all people
- education regarding principles of understanding others, adapting to difference, carrying out fair and equitable interactions, resolving conflicts, and changing conflict-related negative feelings toward others to positive feelings

The sources of personal change are—

- gaining (accurate) knowledge from our experience (to allow understanding, and therefore to allow more adaptive response)
- changing perception (which often results from changed attitudes and/or allowing ourselves to experience fully)
- changing attitude (redefining, acceptance) (which usually requires cognitive reorientation, but which sometimes results from allowing oneself to fully experience)
- gaining skill (to maximize gratifications and manage emotions)

The solutions to all psychological problems are to be found in-

- a positive, healthy relationship with self (particularly total acceptance of self and having appropriate expectations of self)

- acknowledging and accepting reality (particularly doing what one wants to do to change reality to one's liking and then accepting it)
- finding adaptive ways to be oneself joyfully and to be at peace with oneself and one's life
- managing one's feelings adaptively (particularly accepting and allowing one's feelings, and achieving an adaptive emotional response to reality)
- cooperative solutions in relationships, rather than trying to get what one wants regardless of the consequences to others (including accepting others as they are)
- allowing oneself to feel genuine contact pleasure (and therefore closeness)

Finally, a simplified list of key skills for doing well in life follows. If you sincerely strive to live these values and skills every day, you will have a good life.

self-awareness
honesty
figuring out the truth
responsibility
acceptance
love
self-control
dealing with emotions
autonomy
empathy
equality
cooperation
fairness

(You may find further elaboration of all of the ideas above in various essays on my website www.livewiselydeeply.com. Best wishes for having a good life!)