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The Destructive Power of Negative Thinking (And How to Defeat it)

-or - Defeating the Destructive Power of Negative Thinking

Ever wonder what's really causing your unhappiness?

Clinical and forensic psychologist Ernest Mastria knows . . .

and he can help you overcome it.

Belmar, New Jersey (February 2002)—Chronic depression. Anxiety attacks.

Troublesome, unwanted behaviors. Many, many people suffer from these debilitating conditions. Still others—perhaps even most of us—regularly experience excessive worrying and a vague sense of unhappiness. Such problems often seem insurmountable, either because they are so severe or, paradoxically, because they've become such a familiar part of our lives. Either way, we have no idea where psychic pain is coming from . . . and we certainly don't know how to cure it. Currently, not only is there no accepted single cause for psychological symptoms, but the profession differs on what is assumed to be the cause for these symptoms. (There is wide disagreement within the psychology profession concerning causes of these symptoms, and up to now, no accepted single cause for all, or most of them.)

According to Ernest Mastria, Psy.D. — author of *The Habit of Living: A Way To Calm Your Symptoms And To Feel Happy* (Ocean Publishing Company, 2000, ISBN: 0-9714037-0-8, \$14.95)—there is one surprisingly simple cause for all psychological discomfort, mild or severe. The technique doesn't require personal information (history) and works for anyone, regardless of individual differences. He calls it Reflexive Attention Diversion, or RAD, a bad habit usually developed in childhood that distracts a person from the “here and now” so that expression of personal taste cannot occur.

In layman's terms, negative thoughts keep us from enjoying the present (the 'here and now' we live in.). To combat these thoughts and their attendant pain, we must form a new, pleasure-based habit that keeps our awareness focused on the present.

"It sounds so simple, and it really is," says Dr. Mastria. "In fact, it's so simple that people have a hard time believing it works. People often think they need medication or years of psychotherapy to 'get to the root of their problem.' I say it doesn't matter what happened in the past! What matters is now, and replacing those negative thoughts with positive sensations. Once a person can do that, he or she can overcome even severe symptoms like hallucinations or obsessive/compulsive behaviors."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Before we can understand how to defeat the negative thoughts that cause psychological pain, we must first understand where they come from. Dr. Mastria offers the following scenario:

* In order to teach three-year-old Sarah cooperation, her parents make her feel guilty for hurting others and fearful of the consequences of breaking rules. This is proper parenting. Unfortunately, they sometimes (possibly inadvertently) criticize Sarah for having an opinion that differs from theirs. →

→ Because of her young age, Sarah feels guilt and fear for having a difference of opinion. She believes that she may not be loved and cared for as a consequence of this difference. Because this situation happens frequently, she learns to anticipate what opinion may be "wrong" or "bad" and to hold back expressions of personal taste. →

→ Over time, this behavior becomes internalized in the body as a habit or reflex, much like breathing or a knee jerk. Now, when Sarah is in a position to express herself, fear (anxiety) is generated. She believes that her expression of personal taste is inherently offensive, that it breaks rules that actually don't exist. This condition follows her throughout life. →

→ Because the mere fact of existence warrants expression, fear is constantly being triggered in Sarah. Her thoughts automatically attempt to "problem solve" or justify her discomfort. Because discomfort is negative, these thoughts will also be negative. These thoughts may not have words or pictures attached to them, most of them are simply a sense that "something bad is going to happen." →

→ These negative thoughts serve to distract Sarah from the present so that she cannot witness events fully, cannot express her personal taste, and cannot experience optimal pleasure. *

As you can see, Sarah's negative thoughts are preventing her from living her life to its fullest. She may develop a severe psychological disorder or she may simply go on missing out on the richness, color, and beauty of the world.

Either scenario is tragic when you consider that Sarah can overcome (take out *her*) RAD and go on to live a happy, fulfilling life—and she can do it by learning one simple technique.

Mastria calls it *Attention Training*, and it's a systematic and intentional process of pairing increased attention toward the environment with pleasure. The idea is quite simple. If a person is not distracted, but instead fully focused toward the 'here and now,' then attention cannot be converted to the negative thoughts that in turn trigger symptoms. The tools used in Attention Training are called "The Four Points" and are meant to be performed consciously and deliberately throughout the day, moment to moment. Here's how they work:

1. **Be oriented:** Consciously and deliberately be aware of the time, your surroundings and what's going on around you.
2. **Use any or all of the five senses.** Consciously see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. Sense your surroundings. Seeing, feeling and touching are the easiest senses to employ in directing your attention toward the environment.
3. **Be active.** Don't allow yourself to drift. Activity may be any voluntary behavior. Going for a walk, phoning a friend or relative, watching a video, baking a cake, anything. Activity may be the single most important aid to help you stay focused on your surroundings.
4. **If you can't see it, don't think it.** All that you should have on your mind is what's happening in the present. In other words, if you can't see, hear, smell, touch, or taste it, don't think it; it will probably be an out-of-control thought from the bad habit.

When you are focused using the Four Points—i.e., when your attention is directed toward your environment—you can't help but feel better. And when you practice the Four Points often enough, something simple yet powerful happens. Your body builds a *new* habit based on maintaining contact with your environment. This new habit competes with the old one for dominance, and since it's based on pleasure, the body naturally gravitates toward it rather than toward the old, painful habit.

Of course, *The Habit of Living* explains the process in much more detail. If you are suffering from a milder case of psychological discomfort, the book itself will provide relief.

Others may need or prefer in-person education, and for them, Mastria's Attention Training Institute offers seminars, workshops and training groups.

"Just knowing where their out-of-control thoughts are coming from gives people a powerful advantage," says Mastria. "If they can buy into RAD, they can also buy into Attention Training. And believe me, it works. I have seen these simple techniques transform (many) people's lives in dramatic ways. I've seen people who have been plagued by serious emotional pain—people who have been on the verge of suicide—find happiness for the first time ever. It's hard to put into words how rewarding that is."

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About The Author:

Ernest Mastria, Psy.D., is a New Jersey clinical and forensic psychologist with private practices in Jersey City and Belmar. Dr. Mastria learned about people on the multicultural streets of Jersey City where he was raised. His first-generation Italian parents taught him the value of hard work, empathy for others and the importance of expressing his opinion while accepting differences from others.

With a parochial grammar school and high school education, Dr. Mastria decided to follow his older sister to Spokane, Washington to attend Eastern Washington University, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree and a Master of Science degree in clinical psychology.

After returning to New Jersey from Washington, Dr. Mastria attended Rutgers University and was awarded a Doctor of Psychology degree in 1977. He opened private practices in Jersey City and in Belmar.

Dr. Mastria gained a favorable reputation by treating difficult patients referred to him by other doctors and agencies. It was during his years of private practice that he developed his theory of *Reflexive Attention Diversion* and his method of *Attention Training*.

In a field riddled with a multitude of complex theories and procedures, Dr. Mastria has created a singular, remarkably simple, highly effective, and standardized technique for eliminating psychological symptoms. This new and revolutionary approach is rapidly earning him the reputation as a "Thought Leader" in psychology.

Dr. Mastria is currently working on his second book, *The Habit of Childhood*, which converts the Four Points into an innovative program aimed at alleviating difficulties experienced by youngsters. His third book, *The Habit of Relationships*, will add to the better understanding of human behavior and to the enjoyment of life.

About the Book:

The Habit of Living: A Way To Calm Your Symptoms And To Feel Happy is available at www.AttentionTrainingInst.com and www.drmastria.com, by calling (732) 681-5200, or by e-mail at OceanPublishing@aol.com or ATIorg@aol.com.

About Attention Training Programs:

Dr. Mastria's Attention Training Institute offers a variety of programs designed to help people learn and implement the techniques described in *The Habit of Living*. One-day seminars and two-and-a-half-day workshops are available for people with milder psychological symptoms. Intensive 10-week training groups—consisting of twelve sessions over a period of ten weeks—are available for people experiencing severe discomfort. All of these Attention Training Programs are aimed at helping participants learn to live richer, fuller, more enjoyable lives. For more information, visit www.AttentionTrainingInst.com or call (732) 681-5200.