

Meeting Our Needs

What We're Doing Here

We are alive. Somehow life arose from the nonliving universe, and life's desire is to continue. This is the basis of every living creature's functioning. It's all about survival. And because life hasn't yet figured out how to keep its individual expressions functioning indefinitely, it's all about procreation, so that life itself never ceases.

We are each part of an extraordinary fundamental development in the universe. That activity of the universe, the emergence of life from nonliving matter, underlies what any living thing does. The universe has to change its nature to become alive. And that change must constantly be asserted lest life regress back into nonliving matter. Through each and all of its manifestations, life strives to persist.

How does life endeavor to continue? In each species, the answer is the same: procreate, but is different in how that is accomplished. In higher animals and especially humans, the survival and procreation strategy also varies somewhat from individual to individual. But we can always ask, about any behavior, including thinking, "Why are we or they doing this?" The answer will always be, "Because we have learned it will help us survive and, thereby, life to endure."

The question then becomes, "Is our survival strategy working? If not, how can we improve it?"

What We Need

In human beings, there are four primary needs that emerge from the requirement to continue living. They are health and safety; pleasure; selfhood; and connection.

First, we need food and water. We need clothing and shelter. We need protection from harm. These are the body's immediate needs to maintain its integrity. When these are lacking, we are impelled to find them, and our thoughts and actions will express this motivation. My term for these bottom line concerns is health and safety.

Second, we need pleasure. Why pleasure so primarily? Because in nature what is pleasant is so because it is life-promoting. A one-celled paramecium will swim toward food and away from toxins. It "likes" the food and "dislikes" the poison. It has evolved to prefer what strengthens its life and to avoid what weakens it. In nature, pleasure is an indication that something is good for you and will make you more alive. I say "in nature" because humans beings have invented some pleasures that do not serve life. Apart from these things, pleasure is a reliable indicator that we are doing ourselves good, and we are motivated to seek it, and to avoid displeasure. Pleasure leads to greater aliveness; we grow by experiencing pleasure.

Third, we need selfhood: identity, autonomy, and ability. We need to know who we are, and we need others to acknowledge our existence, individuality, and freedom to choose what is best

for us. And we must be able to obtain it. I call these interrelated characteristics the “strong self” factors. If we are clear about who we are, we can accurately assess what we require and go after it. If other people see us as individuals like themselves, they afford us the same opportunity to make our own decisions that they hold dear. And if we are capable of functioning effectively, we can thrive.

Fourth, we need connection. We are a band species, and have evolved to live in familial groups. Living in such groups, we are more likely to survive and to help children to survive. We take care of one another in the service of life. As our species evolves, our groups increase in size and our definition of family broadens. It becomes clear that life is promoted to a greater extent by the feeling of connection with larger communities of people and other living things. People with the most connection are most likely to thrive, and people with the least connection are least likely to do so. Connection is life-enhancing.

You may recognize these four basic needs as similar to Abraham Maslow’s well-known hierarchy of motives. I combine his physiological and safety needs, and add pleasure (which he included in safety but I identify separately due to its importance). I also combine, as selfhood, his esteem and self-actualization needs. Except for those variations, our formulations agree.

Even more affirming is the parallel between the ancient Hindu chakra system and my ideas. The four basic needs I have identified correspond exactly to the first four chakras, and in the

same order. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chakras are, in my view, higher octaves and combinations of the lower four.

At this point, the question becomes: how are the strategies we have evolved, through what we have inherited and what we have learned, functioning in meeting our needs? If we're not getting some of our needs met, it's time to revise the strategies so they are more effective at present.

What Needs to Change?

When a person is suffering mentally (I include thoughts and feelings in this term), it is because they are not getting what they need. Unless there is something physically wrong with them that is the primary cause of their distress, they are not "sick," but rather unfulfilled and unhappy. This is the case for the vast majority of mental disorders, including most instances of anxiety and depression, which are simply terms for the symptoms people are experiencing. While the brain is generating these symptoms, it is not the primary cause of them. It just reacts. To what? To the circumstances of a person's life, or the way a person looks at those circumstances.

To be clear: unless there is something physically wrong with you at a causal level, your experience of life – good, bad, or indifferent – is determined by the way you are living your life and the way you are regarding it. Therefore, to feel better, you need to either change your life or the way you look at your life, or both. This is true whether you are feeling truly distressed or simply not optimal.

There is no fundamental difference between the wish to feel better and the desire to feel especially well. That is, there is no basic distinction between treating most psychopathologies and achieving personal growth. They are parts of the same continuum of functioning, from feeling awful to feeling wonderful, and are best achieved by the same basic strategies: change your life circumstances and/or change how you regard your life circumstances.

The latter of these strategies, changing our view, has typically been the approach taken by psychotherapists in treating mental suffering, as well as by self-help gurus in promoting personal growth. For example, cognitive restructuring - reprogramming what we say to ourselves - is effective in treating anxiety and depression, as well as in motivating us to achieve our goals. It is clear that, at all points on the continuum of personal functioning, how you think greatly affects how you feel and act, and what happens as a result.

However, the strategy of making actual changes in how we are living is much less frequently employed. Behavior therapy does focus on specific actions that we can change, and self-help books tell us to take specific steps toward our goals. But there is an underappreciation of the role of the total life milieu - the life situation in toto - in creating one's life experience. Perhaps because advocating that people make major changes in how they are living is seen as unrealistic, we are not often told that, to feel fundamentally better or to find real fulfillment, we need to do a major life revision. But this, and nothing less, may be required.

Should We Open or Close, Approach or Avoid?

Regarding each of the events and situations in our lives, we are either open or closed. We are motivated to either approach or avoid various things and people. This is evident in our thoughts and feelings, and in our actions. For example, we close off to people who hurt us, and try to avoid them. When we have to interact with them, we do so very guardedly. By keeping ourselves protected, we lessen the hurt we sustain.

Unfortunately, when those hurtful people are family members, we may not be able to avoid them, and so have to remain permanently closed for self-preservation. But there is a price: while closing off occasionally is natural and not harmful, remaining closed always brings distress.

We close both physically and mentally, with negative consequences for chronic closure in both realms. Physically, we contract to harden and shield ourselves and prevent further harm. If someone hits us in the stomach, we tighten our gut and curl up so we won't be vulnerable again. But if our gut stays clenched, we prevent its proper functioning.

More often, the ongoing insults we suffer are social rather than physical. While someone with whom we are familiar may not actually strike us, they may often say things that feel like we're being socked in the stomach. Our reaction will be just the same as if we were physically punched repeatedly: a chronically tightened gut.

We typically close our minds as well as our bodies. When we interact with, or even think about interacting with, someone who hurts us regularly, our thoughts become negative, not only about that person and the interactions, but often about life as a whole. Pervasive negative thinking can lead to depression, which is closure to life in general.

Our feelings typically parallel our thoughts and can become similarly dark. Feelings are simply our preparation for what we expect to happen in any situation, based on our history in that and similar situations. This preparation happens automatically and continuously, and, along with how it influences what we're thinking, we feel it in our body, which is constantly adjusting itself. If we have had a great time talking with someone in the past, when we are presented with the opportunity to do so again, our heart leaps. We feel good about what we expect to happen, and we open to the interaction.

In any situation in life, based on what's happening and has happened in the past, we either open mentally and physically, or close. When we open, we enjoy, heal, and grow. When we close and remain closed, we suffer and sicken.

In attempting to get our needs met, we adopt various strategies, based on our inherited tendencies and past experience. These strategies involve either opening or closing. When we use a strategy that mandates staying closed, we fail in fully meeting our needs. By hardening body and mind and backing away, the best we can do is remain safe. But there's no forward motion

toward health and whatever else we need. If we don't seek what we require, we don't find it.

Behind every unmet need is an avoidance strategy. That strategy may preserve us in the moment, and may have protected us in the past, but it will not succeed in satisfying us now and in the future. After the contraction has done its work of getting us out of or shielded from a bad situation, it must be replaced by an approach strategy that can fulfill us. Approaching and opening is how we better our lives.

Meeting Our Needs

To feel well, we must meet our basic needs on a continuing basis. If we are not feeling entirely well, we can ask ourselves which of our four basic needs is, or are, not being met. We can feel the closures that result in our lack of full well-being. And we can ask how we will open: do we need to change our life circumstances, or our view of them, or both?

In theory, this is very simple. The actual accomplishment may be a little more challenging. For example, let's say that we're working very hard and getting ahead financially. We're working pretty much all the time. We don't love our work but it's tolerable. When we look at our bank balance, we think we should be happy. But we feel more and more unhappy as time passes. What's going on? What need or needs are not being met?

Regarding health and safety, we're good, at least for now. We're physically okay and have money put away for emergencies. So, no obvious adjustment needs to be made here.

How about pleasure? Well, what pleasure? We work all the time. Every day, we get up, work all day, watch a little TV, and go to sleep. The only pleasure we feel is a brief satisfaction when we check our bank balance. Real enjoyment is nowhere to be found. So there's some work to be done in this respect.

Identity, autonomy, and ability? We are well acknowledged in the work arena. We are seen as highly competent, work steadily flows to and from us, and we can choose what work to accept and how to accomplish it. We rarely talk with anyone face-to-face, but our digital communications are good. So we have a satisfactory work identity. But other people only think of us in this way, and we, too, increasingly regard ourselves only as a producer. There's a partial closure in this domain. Our sense of identity and autonomy is greatly restricted; we are only existing through our work.

Connection? Forget it! We haven't time. Our work takes all our time. Plus, to be honest, we were never very good at being social, and the few intimate relationships in our life have turned out to be disasters. So there's a nearly complete closure in the connection realm.

This example may seem a little extreme, and I have deliberately simplified and overstated the case for didactic reasons. But there certainly are an increasing number of people who are

workaholics and whose lives are severely restricted as a result. Many of them, though successful, become depressed.

Using our theoretical understanding, let's see what we can do to help our illustrative self regain full well-being. Even though health and safety seem to be satisfactorily taken care of, we need to address two things. First, what's behind the perception that we must work all the time? Is it really true that work has to be all-or-nothing, and that if we don't work constantly we'll not have enough money to live securely? Fear indicates closure and avoidance, and there's clearly a fear lurking behind our compulsive behavior. This needs to be examined and dispelled. Second, our health may begin to suffer if we don't take the time to eat well and get some exercise. We need to change our fast-food diet and leave our chair occasionally. As it stands (or, more accurately, sits) now, we're closed off from our body, and need to open to the messages that it is sending to us about what it takes to stay healthy.

Our lack of pleasure is an obvious problem. We are entirely closed down in this way. While we may have learned that pleasure is peripheral and that play takes time away from the real business of life, we need to examine the consequences of the absence of pleasure on our mood and outlook. We need to change both our view of what pleasure is and does, and our activities, so that our world opens beyond our computer screen. Otherwise, our view of that screen and life in general will grow increasingly dim.

Identity, autonomy, and ability are similarly severely attenuated. We have reduced our identity so that we exist in only one

realm, work, and that's all we do. Because of this closure, we are not seen by others or ourselves for the fullness of our nature. This makes us uninteresting in others' and even our own eyes. We cease to celebrate or even understand ourselves. Where there should be a complex and wonderful flesh-and-blood creature, there is only a cardboard cutout. This is a great impoverishment. Therefore, in this realm we need to change both our view and our lives. We need to begin again, as we did in childhood, to appreciate ourselves for the richness and complexity of who we are, and we need to stop limiting how we choose to spend our time, so that the many unexercised aspects of ourselves can emerge in our activities and social interactions.

And it's in our interactions, or current lack of them, that a crucial closure is at work. We have no connection to others beyond the simulacrum of real connection that emails involve. Yes, we respond to many digital communications, but they're all about work, not anything personal, and they don't involve being in the actual presence of anyone else. Here, too, we need to change both our view and our world. We need to learn to regard interaction with other people not as threatening - how did we learn that? - but as enriching, and we need to enter into social activities in order to build friendships. This change from isolation to interaction and connectedness, perhaps more than any other single factor, will make the difference between being lonely and depressed, and feeling happy and alive.

So, in this illustrative case, there's much work to be done. Some of it can be accomplished alone as a consequence of greater awareness. But much of it requires the participation of

other people, both because they can bring expertise to bear when needed, as it will certainly sometimes be, and because much of what we're learning about is relationship itself. The good news is that our efforts, considerable as they will have to be, are in the service of feeling better and growing in aliveness, and that each change that is accomplished brings immediate reward and encouragement to continue. It's the road of increased happiness and well-being upon which we travel. Each closure we encounter, whether in our viewpoint or our life circumstances, once it is opened, brings a growing sense of joy and fulfillment.

In Sum

It's all about being alive. Our lives depend upon satisfying basic needs. Doing so insures well-being. Not doing so causes distress. To meet unmet needs, we must change our life circumstances, or our view of them, or both. Change involves opening what is closed. The reward is greater aliveness.

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