

WELLNESS INVENTORY

LEARNING AND PROTECTING MODES

Bobbie Burdett

Arguably, the most important wellness skill is the ability to recognize when our attitudinal focus is unhealthy and then to consciously shift it to one that is more life-enhancing.

Since the 1950's, the field of psychology has steadily moved toward a cognitive perspective that says that a primary cause of dysfunctional behavior is dysfunctional thinking, and that thinking processes are shaped by underlying beliefs. It speaks more to the cognitive choices we make, rather than to unconscious drives or external punishments and rewards. The scientific supporting evidence for this perspective is mounting. In the last few years, the field of positive psychology is standing on the solid ground of cognitive research as it endeavors to explore human psychological and emotional health, as opposed to the study of pathology — i.e. looking at what works instead of what doesn't.

Barbara Frederickson, from the University of Michigan, has been studying for many years the effects of positive emotions as the result of positive outlook. It's led her to what she calls the "broaden and build theory of positive emotions." She says,

"...positive emotions have a complementary function and broaden people's momentary thought action repertoires. For instance, joy creates the urge to play, push the limits, be creative. Interest creates the urge to explore, take in new ideas and learn.... positive emotions can literally transform [broaden] people into more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated versions of themselves... and these various resources that positive emotions build can in turn function as reserves that people can draw on later in other circumstances, even in dire circumstances, and those reserves can improve coping and odds of survival."

A positive outlook helps us to live longer, healthier, and more successfully.

"That's all well and good," you might say, "but not so easy to do when you're facing personal failure, chronic or acute illness, or family tragedy."

We totally agree!

That's why it's a good idea to form a practice during ordinary times that will help us to survive, and perhaps even thrive, during extraordinary times. When we engage a new way of thinking or acting, we are literally forming new neural maps in our brains that, with practice, become well-traveled internal byways when we need them most. That translates into a potentially easier transition from distress and ineffective reactivity to either courage to act with intelligence or wisdom to accept, as the circumstance requires. So when bad things happen, we might be able to make a leap from feeling overwhelmed, victimized, angry, and blaming to an outlook of inquiry, curiosity, and intention to learn. The latter state gives us a calmer mind, more creativity in finding solutions to problems, and renders us better able to garner support.

There are many disciplines or practices that effectively teach the skill of changing one's emotional state from disabling distress to effective action: In Cognitive Therapy (www.beckinstitute.org) and Rational Emotive Therapy (www.rebt.org), you are taught to effectively refute negative thoughts and beliefs that cause distress. The Sedona Method (www.sedona.com) is an elegant system that teaches simple and powerful methods for releasing thoughts and feelings. The Institute of HeartMath (www.heartmath.org) teaches you to

use your heart energy, your breath, and the power of gratitude and appreciation to bring your mind and body into a peaceful coherence. Byron Katie (www.thework.org) teaches you to ask four simple questions about thoughts and beliefs that cause you stress, which, when explored, bring about profound changes. Eugene Gendlin, in his Focusing method (www.focusing.org), teaches you to make friends with the distressing felt sense and allow it to take you to a transformative insight or new level of awareness. There are many forms of meditation, prayer, and spiritual practices that likewise help you to be more mindful, open, and resilient.

All of these are extremely useful and we encourage you to explore them, if you are so inclined.

There is another simple way we like to use to bring awareness to the thoughts and beliefs that cause us stress. It comes with the awareness that we live in essentially two modes of being which lie along a continuum. We identify them as “learning and protecting.”

In **learning mode**, we are curious, open to what is, as it is, and we are able to relate to the person or situation. We are in what is known as “beginner mind.” We feel spacious, curious, interested, and flexible. The movement is expansive and it feels good. We experience more of the positive emotions of empathy, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, joy, and playfulness. We’re able to be in the present. We are able to think laterally (brainstorm) and creatively look at many possible solutions to problems and then make the best choice from many options. We are able to investigate our stressful thoughts in pursuit of peace, understanding, and being in the world more effectively.

In **protecting mode**, we are defensive and judgmental. We’re attached to our thoughts that only our perspective is correct. We’re invested in controlling the situation, which can often wind up repelling others. The movement is contraction and it feels bad. We tend to feel negative emotions of fear, anger, anxiety, and shame. Our bodies feel heavy and tight. We’re limited in our thinking. Our discourse and thoughts tend to run in repetitive circles that only make us more stressed and alienate others. Our effectiveness is hampered, perhaps to the point that we are our own worst enemies.

To be clear, we’re not suggesting that you not protect yourself when you need to. There are many circumstances when protecting is, without question, the healthy course of action. We are talking about those times when we are automatically running on a primal protecting habit that is not in our best interest, physically, emotionally, or relationally. It’s when our thinking is causing problems rather than solving them.

In the normal course of things, we live our lives on a learning/protecting continuum—dancing from learning to protecting, protecting to learning in myriad ways—each mode containing the seed of the other. It’s not a case of either/or, black/white. Like most things in wellness, it’s a process. It’s all in degrees. We can be mostly in learning mode, until we uncover that little edge of protecting that is holding us back from a greater degree of freedom, peace, and creativity. As we become more familiar with the terrain, we are aware that learning mode just feels better. In time we become motivated to spend more time there. Often the simple awareness that we are in protecting mode, and recognition that it feels bad, is all it takes to shift.

Usually our transition out of any habitual protecting pattern happens slowly in little ways, starting with the awareness after a protective event has passed. Hopefully with compassionate awareness, we learn retroactively. Then before long, we are aware of our protecting reaction while the event is in process. With practice and clear intention, we become aware of it just as we start to slide into protecting mode and are able to quickly shift to learning mode. Over and over, practicing with “small moves,” insight by insight, throughout our daily lives, we learn and form the learning habit. What we are doing is actually forming new neural mappings in our brains. Then when we need it most, we are able to surprise ourselves by staying in learning mode in a situation where before we surely would have slid self-righteously into protecting mode and made everything much worse. That’s a time for celebration!

Here's another way to look at the transition from protecting to learning modes. When you first see an ugly bug, your response may be repulsion. You want to get away from it or get it away from you. If you are cultivating learning mode, you may be able to stretch your attention just enough to notice one little thing about the bug. You notice it has wings. Then you stretch just a little more and notice that the wings have an iridescent blue tinge to them. That awareness leads you to notice that there are also some green and purple shades that interweave with the blue forming a subtle and pleasing pattern. Pretty soon you are quite interested in the bug as you watch it cleaning itself in the sunshine. And before you know it, the ugly bug has transformed into a beautiful bug. You have made the journey from aversive distress to interested peace and you have another friend in this amazingly diverse world.

May all our ugly bugs become beautiful!

Here are some questions that may help on your journey:

- What are your physical cues when you enter into protecting mode? What subtle or not-so-subtle sensory shift happens? How can you use this information as an early warning system?
- What other ways can you find to view the story or situation?
- What's the result of protecting in regard to your connections with others and your own peace of mind and relaxation of body?
- What happens to your awareness if you state the situation in very simple terms that a third grader could understand?
- Last but certainly not least, try asking yourself the question, "What can I learn here?" Just that simple question can often help you to make the shift to a more effective and peaceful experience.