

Levy e-method: Cognitive Reprogramming

Excerpted from

The Happiness Sutra: How to Lead a Heroic Life, Free of Stress

By Dr. Rick Levy

Chapter Ten

Think Straight, Feel Great

In this chapter we jump into a quick, practical, easy method that delivers freedom from distress. The method is brief. After you learn how to do it you can use it anytime, anywhere, and if you use it correctly, you'll feel dramatically better in just three weeks. Use of this method will quickly make it obvious to you just how much power you can exert over your own wellbeing.

Before you start the method, remember a very important principle from earlier chapters: your thinking (perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and expectations) is driving your distress, not your circumstances. The method in this chapter will let you master your thinking, at which point you will be able to convert your distress (a harmful, intense biological and emotional stress reaction) into eustress (a manageable challenge that will help you become stronger and happier).

AS YOU THINK, SO SHALL YOU BE

The method I teach here comes from Cognitive Therapy, a branch of traditional psychotherapy that is responsible for most of the advances in the field of psychology over the last thirty years. Aaron Beck, M.D., first introduced cognitive therapy to the field of psychology in the 1960s. Beck discovered that the way people perceive and interpret their experiences (known as *cognition*) will determine their emotional states. Their emotional states, in turn, will determine whether they feel distress or eustress.

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We discussed the mental process that gives rise to stress in Chapters One and Four. The thrust of those discussions is summarized in the following table. The important thing to remember is the order of the mental events that lead to stress: on encounter with a stressor, you conduct a cognitive analysis to determine whether the stressor constitutes great risk of harm, is a challenge you can manage and overcome, contains opportunity, or is simply a non-issue. This analysis usually takes place in a matter of moments, and part of it is hidden from your awareness, secreted away in your subconscious mind. The cognitive analysis then triggers an emotional response, and the nature of the emotional response will determine whether we experience distress or eustress.

Step	Event			
1 Stressor Occurs	A disparity between your expectations and your actual experience occurs.			
2 Cognitive Analysis	Your subconscious and conscious minds analyze the situation to see if it constitutes a threat of harm, is a challenge you can undertake and overcome, if you can benefit from it, or whether it is simply a non-issue. Note: distorted thoughts, perceptions, beliefs and expectations in the subconscious and conscious minds come into play during this step			
3 Decision	It's a threat of great harm and I am powerless to do anything about it	It's a challenge, maybe even life-threatening, but I can overcome it	It's an opportunity	It's a non-issue
4 Resulting Emotions	Fear, terror, shame, guilt, grief, anger, rage, resentment, frustration, self-loathing, without heroic attitudes present	Challenged by negative emotion, but also faithful, hopeful, determined, and courageous	Mildly challenged, but intrigued and excited	Relief
5 Biological & Mental Response	Distress	Eustress	Eustress	None

Distress occurs when your cognitive analysis indicates you are at risk of great harm and powerless to do anything about it. The emotions that result are intensely negative, and the

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heroic attitudes you need to surmount the stressor (courage, faith, hope and love) are absent or nearly absent. This scenario will typically trigger maximal distress: an acute, chronic biological “fight or flight” response accompanied by significant mental anguish. Eustress will result under one of two alternative scenarios. In the first case, your cognitive analysis results in an assumption of harm and strong negative emotions arise, but the heroic attitudes and feelings needed to surmount the stressor are strong too. You end up with a sense of being challenged, anxious and fearful, but willing to endure and confident everything will be alright in the end. Eustress will also result in cases where we determine that the stressor, while challenging, constitutes an opportunity. In such cases, negative emotion is milder and the heroic qualities needed to surmount the challenge are powerfully present.

The bottom line here is simple: what you think about the stressor will determine your emotional response, and your emotional response will determine the type of stress you experience. So, if your thinking is distorted in some way, you may conclude that the stressor constitutes a real and immediate threat to your wellbeing, one you are powerless to do anything about, when in fact this is simply not true. Distorted thinking drives unrelenting, strongly negative emotion – the thing that leads to distress. Distorted thinking will also prevent you from maintaining the heroic attitudes you need to triumph over negative emotion – triumph over negative emotion and you will effectively convert your distress to eustress.

It is unfortunate but true that *everyone* suffers from distortions in their thinking. Errors in thought arise from numerous sources: unresolved, stressful experiences you had in your family of origin, social milieu, school, and personal relationships. The attitudes and expectations of your family and culture have also introduced some level of distortion in your perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and expectations. There are also distorted tendencies of thought that you brought with you into this world as a function of your experience in past incarnations.

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Dr. Beck developed cognitive therapy as a means to discover the distorted, or “unrealistic” thinking that drive a person’s negative emotions. Discover the distortions in your thinking and remove them, and negative emotion cannot rise to the level required to trigger and maintain distress in your mind and body. Remove distortions in your thinking, and the heroic attitudes of courage, faith, hope and love will come to the forefront of your awareness. Free yourself from distorted thoughts and the vicious cycle of negative emotion they create, and you can free yourself from repetitive, stress-building tendencies of behavior. The key to finding freedom from distress is therefore to discover and re-program the distortions in your thinking. It’s that simple.

Hear me loud and clear: if your thinking is accurate at all levels of mind, there is no stressor on earth that can throw you into a state of distress or keep you locked in despair. Every stressor, no matter what its nature or magnitude, has limitless potential for self-growth and understanding.

Cognitive therapy has evolved a lot over the four decades since Beck’s groundbreaking research. The core notion behind it remains the same however: stress follows feeling, and feeling follows thought. People who suffer from chronic distress suffer from chronically negative emotions (fear, anger, shame, resentment, guilt, powerlessness, poor self-esteem, etc.), driven by a distorted thought process. The good news is, if you can discover and correct the distortions in your thinking, the negative emotions (and the distress they cause) will disappear.

This concept is liberating and should inspire a great deal of optimism about yourself and the human species. If you think accurately in any situation you find yourself, even if it’s a difficult situation, strong negative emotions will not overwhelm you, your heroic qualities will prevail, and you will not experience distress.

When I introduce my clients to this concept, many agree with it. However, some say “No way, Doc. When I’m swamped by bad feelings, I’m not thinking at all – the feelings just

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rise up out of nowhere. I'm not thinking, I'm just feeling." Certainly, that's how it seems when powerful emotion arises, but the research is abundantly clear: thought is the governor of your emotions. Remember that you are always "thinking" at multiple levels: most of what you are "thinking" is hidden from your awareness, secreted away in the subconscious mind. When you feel smothered by powerful emotion, it's usually because distorted thinking in the subconscious has been churning away in secret. You are only aware of the negative emotion that follows and the degree to which it is stressing you out.

There are many cognitive therapy methods, several of which are quite helpful. The method I teach here differs from the majority of approaches in one important way: it allows you to *drill down into the subconscious mind* to reprogram the distorted thought process there. In other words, this method will allow you to free yourself from the effects of historical stress.

The healing effects of this approach are rapid and extraordinary. A few years ago, a successful middle-aged businessman came to see me for help. This man constantly suffered from colds, flu, and viral infections of every sort. No sooner would he recover from one when another would assail him. His doctor could find no physical cause for it and referred him to me on the hunch that a psychological problem was fueling his chronic illness. When I met with the man, I found him to be extremely anxious and driven. For his entire adult life, he had worked a seventy-hour workweek. When most people would be on the brink of exhaustion, my client would find a burst of energy and stay at a task until completed, no matter what it took out of him. He didn't realize it, but he was literally working himself to death.

This man's father, a colonel in the army, had raised him under the strictest military expectations for performance in the face of adversity. His history made it clear that the focus of our work was to find and dismantle the distortions in his thought that compelled him to sacrifice his own essential need for rest. I taught him the cognitive reprogramming

approach I describe in this chapter, which he used (not surprisingly) with military consistency.

Shortly after we began our work together, he arrived one day in my office to say, “I’ve found the distortion in my thinking. The last time we were together, I told you I thought the cause for my anxiety was my work ethic and too much responsibility. You said ‘those thoughts are accurate’ and told me to look a little deeper. So I applied the cognitive reprogramming method again and found the distortion in my thinking that makes me feel like I’m going to explode if I don’t keep working: I thought that I would be punished if I didn’t make the grade.”

It turned out that when my client was a boy, his father placed high demands on him and punished him severely if he failed to perform. As a boy, my client’s experience created a distortion in his thinking: “If I don’t perform at the top-flight level *all* the time, I’ll be punished.” So he drove himself to be a superman. After he found this distortion and reprogrammed it, he eased back and moved into a phase of life that was self-loving, self-compassionate, and a whole lot healthier and happier - interestingly, with no loss in performance.

THE METHOD

The following simple cognitive reprogramming method will change the way you think at both the conscious and subconscious levels. In doing so, it will allow you to shift your negative feelings into peace and a sense of personal potency. It will also allow you to free yourself from stress-building beliefs and behaviors driven by unresolved conflict and distress from your past. The focus of this process is to target distortion in your thought process as it arises in response to specific events and challenges. You can and should use it any time you feel strong emotional distress.

The process has seven simple steps. As you gain familiarity with its use, you will be able to complete it in a couple of minutes. Near the end of this chapter, I summarize the steps in a seven-bullet “cheat sheet” you should carry in your pocket or purse for future reference.

Step 1: Be aware of what you’re feeling in the moment

This method works best if you use it at the very point when you start to feel bad. If you have your antenna up, you’ll catch negative emotion as it actually happens, but a lot of us move through the day without realizing how we actually feel until someone or something draws our attention to it. The first crucial step in this process therefore, is to stay aware and notice when you are starting to feel bad emotionally. If you aren’t aware of it, you’ll miss the opportunity to reprogram it altogether.

Step 2: Label the emotion(s) you’re feeling

At the point when you realize you’re feeling bad, take a few seconds to put a label on what you’re feeling. Is it anger, fear, sadness, frustration, shame, guilt, or some other emotion? At this point, you are only trying to understand what you’re feeling, not what you’re thinking. Some people have trouble distinguishing between the two and it is important for you to discern the difference. If your boss takes you down a peg in a meeting with your colleagues because you failed to get a job done, you might feel anxious, fearful, shamed, guilty, or angry. You might *think*, “I don’t deserve this” or “He’s being an ass,” but that’s not how you feel. As best you can, take note of how you’re feeling. Early on, you might even want to write this down. It will allow you to see that you possess patterns of emotional response to similar situations – as do we all. This will deepen your self-awareness and your success with the method.

Step 3: Look at the thoughts behind the feeling

Now ask yourself, “What are my thoughts related to this feeling?” This step is usually as simple as looking at the thoughts moving in the back of your mind at that moment. Let’s say the boss *has* embarrassed you publicly and you’re feeling very anxious, angry and

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fearful. You start looking at the “thoughts” related to these feelings and you find several. In addition to, “I don’t deserve this” or “He’s being an ass,” you also may think, “My boss doesn’t like me and wants to get rid of me.” Whatever you think, make a mental note of it, or if circumstances allow, write it down.

Step 4: Ask yourself “Where’s the distortion?”

At this stage, you’re concerned with finding the distortion in your thinking. If you’re feeling strong negative emotion moving through you, *assume* your thinking is distorted. Sometimes, you have to look hard for the distortion. Consider our example: your boss has publicly embarrassed you, and you become very anxious, angry and fearful. You are immediately aware of three thoughts related to your feelings (“I don’t deserve this,” “My boss is an ass,” and “My boss doesn’t like me and wants to get rid of me”). Now you have to ask yourself, “Where is the distortion?” You may review your thoughts and conclude they are entirely accurate: you didn’t deserve the harsh treatment (you are dedicated to your work and a productive employee overall), your boss *is* being an ass (only an angry, selfish boss takes down a subordinate in front of his or her colleagues), and based on your boss’s historical pattern of antagonism toward you, you conclude your boss really *does* want to see you fired. All three of your initial thoughts on the matter appear to be accurate and free of distortion. In this case, you have to look deeper. Only a distorted thought will drive chronic emotional distress. Accurate thoughts, even if they point to a significant challenge on your horizon (“My boss wants to fire me”) will not create chronic ill feeling.

Sometimes finding the thought distortion can be a little tricky. I remember a man who came to me a number of years ago. He was a brilliant young doctor and research scientist who was suffering from depression. He’d gotten into trouble by standing up to a very powerful superior who had unfairly criticized him. After that, he experienced continuous difficulty at work. When I asked him to identify the thought behind his depression, he exclaimed, “I’m depressed because this powerful man is ruining my career!” I pushed him, saying, “Well, that thought is accurate. To find the source of your depression you

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have to go deeper.” He pushed and pushed and finally found it. Dropping his head into his hands and beginning to weep, he said, “I’ve ruined my career just like my father ruined his.”

It ended up that at a similar age, his father had crossed his own boss, and his father’s boss went on a crusade to damage the father’s reputation. The father’s career eventually plummeted, leaving the family on the verge of bankruptcy. In the back of my client’s mind was the distorted thought that his problems with his boss were going to ruin his future in the same way. When he realized the distortion, he let it go. He came to understand that he was a different person from his father – there was no basis in fact to assume his career was going to be ruined. The corrected distortion in his thinking freed him of his depression. He went on to make amends with his boss and subsequently achieved extraordinary levels of success in his field. Like my client, you may have to dig a little to discover the source of the distortion in your thinking.

Step 5: Correct the distortion

Once you’ve found the distortion, correct it with a simple “counter-claim” of undistorted truth. In the example I gave, my client corrected his distortion by thinking, “I am not my father. I can make things right with my boss. My career will be fine.” That correction freed my client from depression and unleashed the mental power he needed to remake his destiny. As you get good with this process, you will discover related patterns of distortion in your thinking and develop a series of “counter-claims,” or “affirmations of truth” that directly reverse these patterns. You might want to write out these affirmations and use them whenever you discover a familiar distortion at work in your thinking.

Step 6: How would you feel if you believed the correction?

Now, begin to imagine how you’d feel if you believed the correction in your distorted thinking. This step will facilitate a shift in your feelings. You may still feel challenged, but now hopeful, optimistic, confident, and open to other possibilities for your future. You might even be happy and become aware of precisely what you should do to move

forward to achieve your goals. Write down or make a mental note of these feelings and any details that arise in relation to them.

Some people have trouble with this step because they don't actually "believe" the corrected thought. The old distorted thought might tug at you, and you may want to cling to it out of habit. You are at a crossroads at this point. If you find yourself in a tug-of-war between an old distortion in your thinking and a new distortion-free idea, throw some good old-fashioned willpower into adopting the change. Realize you are attached to the old thought pattern because you've been brainwashed by the effects of memory and conditioning. Do you really want to remain attached to your conditioned, distorted thoughts or would you rather adopt the new way of thinking and take control of your life? The old thought pattern needs to go if you are going to restore your freedom, dignity, and self-efficacy. Remind yourself you deserve this newfound freedom and power and stick with the process. The benefits will far outweigh the effort required to jettison the old way of thinking.

Step 7: Imagine the new feelings for sixty seconds

Whatever these new more positive feelings might be (optimism, confidence, happiness, and so on), repeat them in your imagination with a strong sense of conviction for sixty seconds. Revel in the release of the old emotions and the delight and freedom associated with the new feelings and distortion-free thinking. Give it a full sixty seconds. You do not want to cut this step short. During this step, you are broadcasting an advertisement to your subconscious mind – a new way of thinking and feeling that penetrates into the subconscious and reprograms the distorted thought that is lurking there. Remember that the "language" of the subconscious mind is imagery, symbol and metaphor, so imagine yourself liberated by this new sense of who you are.

Some people have trouble with this step because they think imagination is for sissies. It is true that when imagination is delusional it isn't helpful and can sometimes be destructive. However, when we imagine something that is true, it has the effect of calling the

imagined existence into being. So for this step, give everything you've got to imagining how you'd feel if you believed the corrected thought. You will in fact cause it to manifest.

YOUR PLAN FOR DEVELOPING SKILL WITH COGNITIVE REPROGRAMMING

Here is a brief summary of the cognitive reprogramming method:

- ✧ Be aware of what you're feeling.
- ✧ Label your feelings.
- ✧ Look at the thoughts behind your feelings.
- ✧ Ask yourself, "Where's the distortion?"
- ✧ Correct the distortion.
- ✧ Ask yourself how you'd feel if you believed the correction.
- ✧ Run the new feeling in your imagination for sixty seconds.

This seven-step summary is your cheat-sheet for the cognitive reprogramming process. Copy it down and put it in your pocket or purse for future reference. If you follow this method, you'll get amazing results.

If you implement this method just one-third of the time you find yourself gripped by a negative stressful emotion and follow the method closely (no missed steps), you will find that negative emotions and the stress associated with them are noticeably better in just three weeks. Stay aware of your negative emotional states and you'll get the results you're looking for.

When you're first starting to use the method, until you get good at it, you'll want to dwell on the steps in depth and write down your observations. Life doesn't always allow for an intermission of this sort, but do what you can. If you're an attendant at your sister's wedding and feel intensely negative emotion and distress in the middle of the ceremony, you aren't going to whip out a pad of paper and a pen. For situations like this, I suggest

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you apply a simple, universal affirmation that will staunch any form of emotional distress: repeat to yourself and imagine “I am infinite, eternal, ever-new joy.” You will feel somewhat better immediately. However, when you get home from the ceremony, you might want to write down a few notes about the thoughts that were behind your emotional distress at the wedding, and work the cognitive reprogramming process while the experience is fresh on your mind.

Working the cognitive reprogramming process is a little challenging for some people at first, but if you stay with it, it will become second nature and it will work for you rapidly and powerfully. You will quickly be able to identify patterns of distortion in your thinking and quickly evolve a set of counter-claims (undistorted thoughts or affirmations) designed to reprogram them. In a matter of moments, you will be able to identify how you feel, know what you’re thinking, find the distortion, counteract it with an affirmation of truth, understand how the new idea would make you feel, and imaginatively revel in the new feelings for sixty seconds. People who get good at this method can work it in two minutes without creating any disruption in the flow of circumstances around them.

This hands-on method will deliver dramatic results that build your self-confidence. You’ll be able to experience newfound freedom from stressful emotion quickly and know that you achieved it through your own will and effort. It will demonstrate to you beyond a shadow of a doubt that you have the power to control your mind, your distress, and your future.