

Your Key to PERSONAL HAPPINESS



By Bob Wiley MA, LPC

**What you were never
taught in school**

Your Key to Personal Happiness:
What You Were Never Taught in School

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What people have said about the author

The belief exploration process is something that has changed my life, allowing me to look at the truth behind my false pain and giving me a new perspective within which to live my life. Now I have a process that allows choice. Thank you Bob!

—E. L., Healing Arts Professional

When I came to Bob, I was so mired in my own misery, shame and self-doubt that I had convinced myself that I had no choice in life. I believed that I deserved to feel terrible and allowed others to “make me feel bad”. I was sure that I was a lost cause. I was wrong. The belief exploration process showed me that I always have a choice. It is up to me how I respond to the stimuli in my life and that doesn’t make me a doormat; it empowers me! Bob has been my guide, my mentor, in the process of rediscovering my life. He has helped me to see that what happens in life isn’t good or bad, it just is. It is up to me to give it meaning. How powerful is that? Nothing can have power over me unless I allow it. I can never repay Bob for the gift he has given me. I can’t put into words what his presence has, and continues to, mean in my life. No matter what happens to me I now understand that I have the power to meet it head on. This is truly the best time of my life.

—D. M., Teacher

I have been in counseling most of my adult life and I would like to say that no other approach has been as profound in my life as what I have learned working with Bob. The “belief exploration process” that I have acquired in my experience with working with Bob has changed my life dramatically. Today I am a much healthier individual due to exploration of myself and my beliefs though the process that Bob helped me implement in my life. I am forever grateful that I am a healthier and happier me. Thank you.

—K. L., Homemaker

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Introduction

As I write this, I realize that I have been on a personal quest nearly all of my life.

I, like most people, have been searching for happiness and self-confidence. This journey has been one of endless hours of reading and reflection, involvement in religious and spiritual practices, as well as years of participation in personal-growth seminars. I believe that my desire to learn and practice counseling was born out of this passion to grow, to develop inner peace, and to find personal happiness.

I am still on that journey but I am clearly not where I used to be. I have moved past many of the fears and insecurities that left me a passive victim to the events of my life. With the insight and clarity I have now, I know that there are decisions that I made that I would not make again and at the same time I can accept me and move on. I am walking on a path...I have not arrived. I have developed a sense of inner strength that I can trust when facing difficulties in my life.

Sustained happiness and personal empowerment appears elusive in these modern times. News of economic trouble, war, and crime leave us fearful, depressed and uncertain about our future. People all around us are struggling with anxiety, depression and anger. Addictions of all kinds are taking over the lives of family and friends. We see the effects of stress on our physical health and in our intimate relationships. We desperately try to maintain a sense of balance when our lives, both internally and externally, appear to be spinning out of control.

What would it be like to maintain personal peace, confidence, and happiness in this chaotic, uncertain world? Imagine a sense of inner peace and confidence radiating from within you as you face the unpredictable events of your life. You can move through loss with grace, handle conflict with power and clarity, and know with certainty that you can handle any challenge.

Is it possible to have inner peace and happiness in the face of personal and global uncertainty? I map out a model that will allow you to firmly state, “yes.” We do not have to be victims of the events in our world. We can take charge in a way that provides the inner ease and comfort that allows us to face all challenges with confidence and clarity.

I, too, have struggled with issues of insecurity, self-doubt, anxiety, anger, and depression. If it were not for the teachings of Barry Neil Kaufman and the staff at the Option Institute, I would still be struggling my way through life. I am incredibly grateful for the personal insights I have gained as well as the precious tools and concepts I will outline here. I realize that even as I am constantly

growing and actively utilizing these tools, I am moving mountains in my life. I am grateful to have a clearer vision of who I am, where I am going and how to move forward in my life.

The following are my representations of key insights and tools I have gained through my experiences with the Option Institute. This is not about truth. What follows are beliefs and perspectives that I have found helpful in my life. Because of this, I wish to share them with you.

The concepts that follow may seem simple, yet, when pondered, they can open your mind to incredibly profound insights and life-transforming tools. As you read this material, it may seem like common sense. You might even think, “Yeah, I’ve heard this before.” What I find, however, is people may say they understand the principles and concepts, but then they do not apply their understanding to their own lives.

I share this because I have witnessed first-hand the power of these ideas. I use these very simple yet powerful ideas as a road map to go where I want to go in my life...to create and maintain personal happiness, clarity, and empowerment. It is something that I use moment to moment in my life and it has become a way of being. Hopefully, this will not be something that you read and think, “That was nice.” As you read, understand, and utilize these concepts, your way of operating and looking at the world around you will be transformed. You will dramatically change the way you deal with everyday events and situations. You will increase your ability to move more effectively in your life and create more happiness, inner ease, comfort and empowerment for yourself.

Stimulus → Belief → Response (SBR)

A way of understanding and conceptualizing how we function

Stimulus

A Stimulus is defined as anything we become aware of or focus on. A stimulus can be anything that is sensory. It can be something we see, hear, taste, touch or smell. It could be a siren, a letter from an old friend, the smell of pie baking, the taste of medicine, or the awareness of someone bumping into us.

We are bombarded with stimuli all the time. We connect to our outside world through our senses. Stimulus is the “data” input that we receive through our bodily senses. Even as you read this you see the words on the paper or screen, hear the noises around you, and smell the odors outdoors or in the room, taste the drink or flavor in your mouth, and feel the texture of whatever your body is touching at this moment. The stimuli that we are aware of can be as subtle as a soft breeze or as obvious as screeching tires.

In addition to external input, a stimulus can also be internal. Stimuli include thoughts as well as the awareness of internal states of being such as pain. A thought or image could be one of a past traumatic event such as a personal loss. You could be focused on or thinking about a past conflict with a coworker or a special event such as a birthday party or even remembering what you accomplished the day before. It could also be future oriented in terms of thinking about a possible coming event. You could be thinking about a meeting that you might have in a couple of days or anticipating a check in the mail or even thinking about contact you will have with a family member or neighbor.

If there is an event somewhere in the world that you are not aware of, it is not a stimulus for you until you become aware of it. A clear example for me was when attending a music festival with my family. We were in a small group with my brother’s family and all of a sudden it became clear to me that my daughter, who was 2 years old at the time, was not with our group. I am sure she had wandered off several minutes before that moment, but it wasn’t a stimulus for me until I had the awareness that she was somewhere in the mass of people all by herself. (To our relief, she was found by a kind stranger about 20 minutes later.)

Often a stimulus is subtle and we, although aware on some level, are not consciously tuned in. We can increase our ability to take charge of our lives when we increase our ability to tune in to the stimuli in and around us.

Response

Response, in this model, are the emotions and behaviors that we experience in our lives. Our response to a stimulus can be in the form of **feelings** (i.e. anger, hurt, sadness, happiness, excitement). Responses can also be in the form of **behaviors** – the choices we make and the actions we take. Both emotions and behaviors can be subtle or intense. Our response to a situation could include shaking a fist in someone’s face or giving a simple nod of our head to a friend. It could also be rage at an injustice or a quiet, warm feeling of contentment and satisfaction at a job well done. Our responses include all of the range of emotions and behaviors that we might experience and display.

We are all trying to create personal happiness in our lives....We all want to be happy. We want to feel or experience inner ease, peace of mind, contentment, excitement, joy, etc., as well as connection with nature, community and/or God. We are also trying to avoid “unhappy” feelings such as insecurity, fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, guilt, depression, etc.

The main problem with our being able to create and maintain personal happiness is the fact that we have bought into a Stimulus → Response perspective of how we operate in the world.

Stimulus → Response

A common way of viewing the world

We have been systematically taught to think and act in terms of Stimulus causing Response. Our culture supports a cause-effect way of looking at the world. Because of this we say things like “You made me angry,” “That really upset me,” “Wow, that made me so happy,” or even, “S/he made me do it.” We blame the stimuli for causing our emotional and behavioral responses. It is common to hear people talk about how stressful their work is, as if the work environment has the power to cause them to feel stressed.

In the Stimulus → Response view of the world we are either trying to control or manipulate the stimulus or we are busy trying to influence or cope with our response. When we try to control the stimulus, we become “control freaks.” We try to influence people, situations, and events in our lives with the ultimate goal of being relaxed, content and happy. We think to ourselves, ‘If I can just get that person to behave differently, then I can be happy’ or ‘If I can just get that promotion then I can relax’ or “If I can just have that car, that house, or that relationship, then I’ll be less anxious or stressed.’

If I could only control the stimulus, then I could be happy.

If we are not trying to control the stimulus, then we are trying to control our response. We are busy trying to manipulate or control our emotional states and behavioral responses to the events in our lives in order to be okay. So, we vent to our friends about the frustrations and stress we feel concerning our job in order to cope with the emotions that build up inside us. We also use techniques like counting to 10 in order to stop ourselves from expressing behavior such as yelling.

We may also use food, sex, television, alcohol, drugs, etc., to try to alter our awareness of the stimulus or our experience of our response. We may drink alcohol to block out thoughts and awareness of such stimuli as bills that are due, a pending divorce, or a past abuse, loss or trauma we have experienced. Even though these “mood altering” strategies can be aimed at the stimulus, more often, we attempt to obliterate our feelings or control our response with them.

We try to stop ourselves from feeling certain feelings such as fear or anxiety by engaging in self-soothing behaviors or introducing chemicals into our bodies. We ultimately try to avoid the feelings that we feel or try to create an inner state of euphoria, contentment, or even numbness. In the limited Stimulus → Response perspective that we have bought in to, we try to control or manipulate our

responses to situations or we try to control or manipulate the unwanted stimulus in our lives.

The problem with trying to live the Stimulus → Response perspective is that although we might have some influence over the people, situations, and events in our life, we do not have total control over stimuli. We may be able to influence how some people treat us or even some of the events that occur in our life. It is clear, however, in other situations we have absolutely no control over the stimuli (e.g. someone dying or gas prices).

Sometimes we can influence and change our emotions and behaviors, but we do not have total control over our response. We can use techniques to help ourselves calm down such as counting to 10, deep breathing, or talking to friends, but we cannot turn off our emotions like a switch. And we find ourselves in an internal battle when we try to redirect our impulses and behaviors. We might, for example, walk in and out of the kitchen trying to stop ourselves from opening up the freezer and pulling out the ice cream when trying to lose weight.

Stimulus → Response is the game that most of us learn to play. We have locked in to this as our main way of operating. We run around being victims to the events in our lives and what other people do and say. We blame the stimulus for our emotions and behavior and ultimately we make ourselves miserable.

Stimulus → Belief → Response

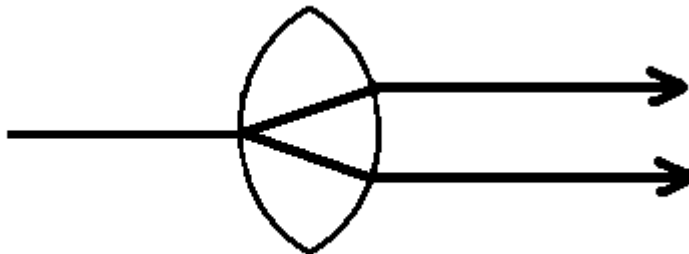
A major perspective change

If Stimulus truly caused Response, it would make sense that everyone would have the same response given the same stimulus. This clearly is just not true. Different people have different responses given the very same stimulus. For example, two people might be fired from the same job. One person might feel hopeful and excited about the possibility of a new job opportunity while another person might feel angry and afraid and ultimately sink into a paralyzing depression. Two very different responses to the very same stimulus.

Something else must be happening. There must be something occurring that accounts for how two different people can have two different responses to the same stimulus.

What accounts for this is that, whether we realize it or not, all Stimulus is being filtered through and processed by our Beliefs to create our Response. Beliefs are the lens through which we see and interpret the world. Beliefs are the thinking or meaning we place on the stimulus. It is our “spin” and our “judgment” of the stimulus that creates our response.

Stimulus → Belief → Response



So what is this belief system, this lens through which we see the world?

Beliefs are the set of understandings, conclusions, and rules that we adopt or create to make sense of how things work. We tend to think that we are merely products of our environment and programmed by the people and events in our lives. We think, “I am this way because I grew up in that environment,” or “People treated me this way and that is why I am the way I am.” Because we are so Stimulus → Response oriented, we tend to think that our beliefs are written in

stone and not in our control. If we hold the belief that we are programmed by the stimuli we encounter, then we revert back to putting all of our energy into trying to manipulate and control the stimulus or our response. This leaves us feeling like victims to what happens to us in the world. We are **not** victims and we **do** have control over the beliefs we hold.

We created and adopted our beliefs to take care of ourselves. We are the ones who put our systems of understandings and interpretations together in order to help ourselves function to the best of our ability in the world. *Because we are the ones who put them in place, we can change them.* Belief is the area we have the most control over and yet it is the area over which we tend to believe we have the least control. It is the most ignored area of our lives. We actually change beliefs and give ourselves different experiences all the time without actually realizing it.

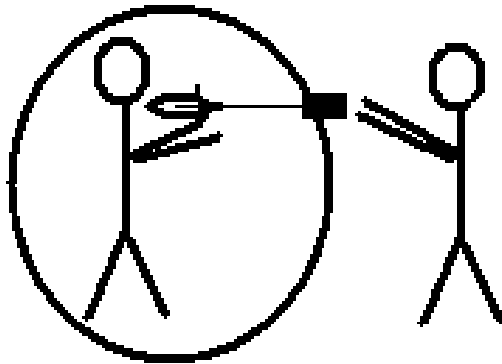
Example:

When I was first speaking in front of groups I had the experience of people correcting my spelling when I was writing on the board. I would feel very uncomfortable and embarrassed and it would often distract me from the focus of my presentation. Later, I read an article about the fact that research could not correlate spelling ability and intelligence. Basically, the article stated that people who were intelligent were not necessarily good spellers and visa versa. I thought to myself, “Oh, you mean I could be smart and a poor speller?” At that moment my perspective changed and from that point on I no longer felt the same kind of embarrassed, uncomfortable, and distracted feelings when I misspelled a word on the board. My interpretation changed the conclusion I drew about my intellectual ability, and this changed my emotional and behavioral responses.

We are not stuck with our beliefs. If a child was told repeatedly, “You’re dumb” or “You’re stupid,” at some point that child might buy into and accept that perspective. That child might think to herself, “If the adults and peers in my life say it is true, then it must be true – I am stupid.” Although she adopted or bought into the belief, she can look at that belief and ask, “Do I still buy it?” If she no longer buys it, she will draw a different conclusion and create a different experience for herself. When she changes or discards the belief by thinking that the perspective is no longer true for her, then she will give herself a much more comfortable and relaxed experience in the face of other people’s judgments.

By changing our beliefs we change the “buttons” that trigger our responses. We hear people talking about “pushing buttons.” Our children push our buttons or we push our partner’s buttons. It is like the following diagram where a person is inside his own space holding a dagger with a string going to a button (we have many buttons). Another person, standing in front, is pushing the button by saying “You are worthless” or “I reject you,” and thus the person with the dagger is stabbing him or herself. The person with the dagger is pointing and shouting, “Stop! You’re hurting me!” He is thinking that if he could just get the other person to stop treating him that way then he could stop feeling hurt. The person

inside the bubble is feeling wounded in this instance because of the interpretation he or she is placing on what is being said – i.e. the stimulus.



We are in charge of the button mechanism. We create and maintain the buttons in our lives. We want to stop the person from saying and doing the things that hurt us, when we are actually the ones who are holding onto the way of looking at the situation that creates our pain. If someone were to reject you and you felt hurt, that feeling of hurt comes from the interpretation of what being rejected means to you. You already had that interpretation in place. It was just activated by the event of someone rejecting you. This represents the Stimulus → Belief → Response model.

We make ourselves happy or unhappy.

There is a big difference between a Stimulus → Response way of looking at the world and a Stimulus → Belief → Response (SBR) view of the world. The shift is demonstrated in our language. Instead of saying, “You make me angry when you say that,” we would think and say, “I am making myself angry over what you are saying.”

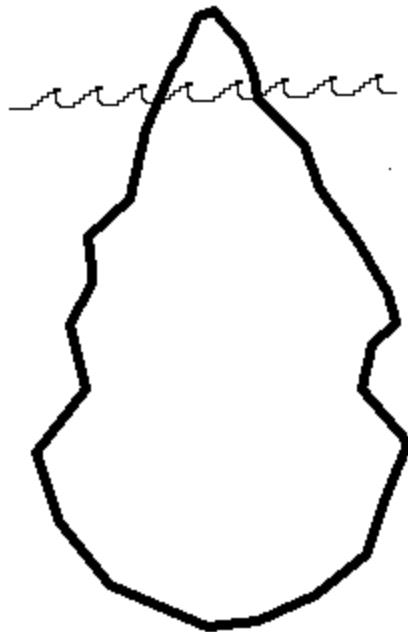
This shift is great news and a powerful gift that we can give to ourselves. When we can look at what is happening and own our experience of the situation, we can change how we interpret the situation and ultimately give ourselves a different experience. We want to be happy and we go around trying to control situations to make ourselves happy, when actually our happiness lies in our own hands ...and we don't even realize it.

Beliefs: The pivotal point of power

How do Beliefs work?

Beliefs are the understandings, perceptions and conclusions we create or adopt while being exposed to different events in our life in order to help ourselves operate in the world. We constantly activate these beliefs when faced with stimuli. We don't have to think about or consciously be aware of all the beliefs we have in order to utilize them.

Our system of beliefs is like an iceberg. Just like an iceberg typically has only a small portion showing and the rest submerged under water, so also are the beliefs and thinking with which we operate. We may be aware of some of the reasons and meanings that we place on stimuli but most of the beliefs are below the surface and are not directly in our conscious awareness.



Just because our beliefs are under the surface does not mean that they are not operating.

It is impossible to jump from Stimulus to Response. All the Stimuli are being filtered through Beliefs to create Responses. We hear people say, "I just reacted without thinking." This is impossible, because if we did not have a way of

understanding or interpreting the situation, we would not have that particular reaction. It just seems like it is happening this way because we can process information extremely fast.

Throughout our lives we develop and put in place biases, conclusions, and ways of thinking about the world that we do not have to consciously think about in order to utilize at lightning speed. It is a wonderful process that we use to take care of ourselves. If we had to consciously think about everything we knew it would be overwhelming and time consuming to function in the world. Just think about all the things you do such as drive a car, read, and interact with people that would be very difficult if you had to consciously process your understandings step by step. We put these interpretations and understandings in place and yet we do very little to consciously go back and change or refine them.

Become a student of your Beliefs.

The goal, then, is to actually bring the beliefs into our conscious awareness so that we can examine and question them. In doing this we might then become aware of a belief like, “If someone doesn’t like me or rejects me then there must be something wrong with me.” We might then say, “Wow, look what I’m doing here...I am basing my value or worth on whether or not that person likes me or rejects me.” We can then question this by asking ourselves, “Do I really believe that there is something wrong with me if that specific person does not like me?” Thus, we might conclude that the other person’s rejection of us is really saying something about that person’s biases, opinions and beliefs and very little about our value as a person.

Just being able to acknowledge and question our beliefs allows us the opportunity to change our perspective and thus give ourselves a different response or experience in that situation.

We are constantly attempting to assess situations in our lives by internally asking the question, “Is this good for me or is this bad for me?” The emotions we feel and the behavior we display (our responses) will be dependent on how we answer this question.

For example: Many of the clients I have worked with have been court ordered to counseling. Some might have mentally approached the counseling (the stimulus) with the belief, “This is a waste of time and money.” Because they thought of the counseling in this way, they created for themselves emotions such as irritation or boredom, and they created behaviors such as limiting their participation in the session or even avoiding the counseling altogether. Another court-ordered person might have mentally approached the counseling with a belief of, “This could be really good for me. This could be an opportunity for me to grow.” This person would have created a whole different set of emotional and behavioral responses. They might have felt eager and excited about the counseling sessions. They also

would have demonstrated behaviors such as talking openly and attending the counseling sessions consistently.

Our responses are not based on the stimulus, they are based on the beliefs that each of us choose to hold. Most people in the world don't understand this concept, or if they do, they don't tend to apply it in their lives. We have been raised to think and act in terms of Stimulus causing Response. Because we operate in this way we generally appear to be unhappy, insecure, and self-doubting. We give ourselves comfort by blaming others for our feelings and behavior. By doing this we maintain our position as helpless victims in the world.

The Attitude: Opening the door to possibility

This Stimulus → Belief → Response concept is not new and it can be found in cognitive psychology theories and approaches.

When I was first learning about this psychological theory and trying to apply it in my own life, I found it difficult to work with because of the judgmental context. Judgments such as good and bad emotions, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, as well as rational and irrational beliefs made it very difficult for me. All of the black/white and good/bad ways of thinking left me insecure and tied up in emotional knots. I remember trying to work with these cognitive concepts that seemed to make a lot of sense, but found it difficult because the judgmental context left me feeling insecure and thinking that something was truly wrong with me.

The attitude that makes all the difference.

Through my exposure to the staff and teachings as presented through the material at the Option Institute in Sheffield, Massachusetts, I am able to view the S-B-R model and the world in general in a different context. The transformative power comes clearly through the change in attitude with which we can approach ourselves and the world. It is our judgments and our good/bad spin that we place on ourselves and situations that create our discomfort. When we let go of judgments, we give ourselves a more comfortable experience. This change in attitude is based on approaching ourselves, and ultimately other people, with love, acceptance and nonjudgment.

When we view the world and ourselves from a perspective of love, acceptance, and nonjudgment, we truly open the doors to personal happiness and powerful growth.

What would it mean to plug this attitude into the SBR model?

Response

To view our Responses without judgment would be to see our emotions and behavior as Neutral --- not good or bad. Some of you might be thinking, “Wait, we can’t look at emotions and behaviors as neutral, because if we didn’t judge them as bad then we would never change them. You have to look at it as good or bad, right or wrong.”

What I have found is that when I am busy judging myself, my emotions, and my behaviors, I am actually trying to control the Response. I am saying, “Oh, this is bad... I need to not do this.” I am back to the Stimulus → Response way of viewing the world and I am busy trying to change something that is actually a product of my belief. It is focusing on the symptom rather than the source and we are missing the mark when we do this. What this ultimately does is leave us feeling bad about ourselves and it tends to increase our self-doubt and insecurities. When we are continuously calling our emotions and behaviors bad, we are calling ourselves bad.

We resist judgment. If you were around someone who was very critical of you, always saying, “That’s a terrible thing to do,” etc., then you would probably want to push him or her out of your life. That is the same thing we do within our own selves. When we are busy judging ourselves, we push our awareness of the judgment and the bad or inappropriate feeling and behavior away. We don’t want to acknowledge what we are feeling and doing and we try to separate ourselves from that awareness. This really doesn’t serve us with regard to optimally taking care of ourselves and creating more inner ease, personal happiness and positive change.

When we can see our responses as neutral, not good or bad, we can approach ourselves differently. We might instead think, “Wow, I felt very hurt or uncomfortable when that person talked down to me,” or “Hmm, I clearly yelled at that person when she rejected me.” By not being critical or judgmental toward ourselves we can more clearly look at, acknowledge, and own our emotions and our behavior. Then, by asking ourselves (from a loving and nonjudgmental space), “Why did I feel that way?” or “Why did I behave that way?” we ultimately point ourselves back to the reasons or underlying beliefs that are the cause of the feelings and behaviors.

In our culture we tend to see feelings as the end result. We say things like, “I just want to share my feelings.” Because we see feelings in this way, we tend to accept them – as is. “That is just the way I feel about that.” Because we tend to view ourselves as not having much control over our feelings, we spend much of our time trying to cope with them. We do not see ourselves as the source of our feelings. We blame other people and events for making us feel the way we feel.

The Emotion Bottle

Approaching our feelings from a victim perspective leaves us trying to cope with the feelings we continuously create for ourselves. We carry around our “emotion bottle” and constantly stuff our feelings such as hurt, pain, and anger into it so as not to affect anyone else. When the bottle gets too full of emotions, however, we open the top and spew them out (sometimes all over other people), again, in order to take care of ourselves. The problem is that rather than look at why we are creating the feelings in the first place, we just put the top back on the bottle and

quietly go back to filling the bottle until next time the pressure gets to be too much.

Belief

Our beliefs are just the perspectives and understandings we created and/or adopted to take care of ourselves. If a young boy buys into the belief, “Big boys don’t cry,” he actually buys into it to take care of himself. He might think, “I want to be a man and be socially accepted as a man so, in order to be a true man I must not show my emotions.” The belief is not written in stone and it is changeable. This belief he holds is just a way of perceiving what it means to be a man. Yes, there are responses attached to that belief, but the belief he holds is not right or wrong...it is just a belief.

There are no good or bad or right or wrong beliefs, just beliefs and responses to beliefs. Beliefs are just ways of understanding, of interpreting, and of putting meaning to the events in our lives. Beliefs are just our attempt to make sense of what is going on in our world. By viewing beliefs in this way, we don’t tie ourselves in knots judging ourselves for the beliefs we have accumulated along the way. We also allow ourselves the freedom to choose whatever beliefs we want to hold, change, or discard.

Judging ourselves does not help us get what we want. If we judge ourselves and say that we are terrible people for thinking what we think or believing what we believe, it is like pouring tar in our mental machine and then trying to make it work. Yet, we tend to operate in our world through this judgmental self-critical attitude that leaves us feeling anxious, insecure, and weak. Just like the resistance we get when we approach other people from a judgmental point of view, we create resistance within ourselves when we judge ourselves. By letting go of judgments we are more effective in promoting positive personal change.

We are all bombarded with different perspectives and beliefs all the time through media, politics, school, parents, friends, etc. In addition to buying or not buying into beliefs from outside sources, we are busy trying to sell our beliefs and perspectives to others. We believe that if we can get others to believe what we believe, then that will support and validate our own perspective. This then reinforces our stance and locks in our beliefs.

By understanding the nature of beliefs as the central point of our experience, we actually become better and more conscious belief consumers.

Rather than just buying into a belief, we might question the perspective and ask, “Do I believe this?” or “What would happen if I didn’t believe that?” The end result is that we would ultimately create and develop beliefs that better serve us. As you examine and question your attitudes and beliefs, you create beliefs that help you feel more confident, empowered and happy. That truly is the ultimate goal of this awareness and process. When we allow ourselves the

experience of inner ease, peace of mind, and sustainable personal happiness, we are clearly more effective in facing the challenges of life.

Another way of anchoring the nonjudgmental attitude is to consider the following belief:

Everyone is doing the best they can given the beliefs they hold.

This is not a “cop out” or a way of making an excuse for ourselves and our feelings and behaviors. It is **not** saying, “Hey man, I was doing the best I can, leave me alone.” It is actually saying “Hey, at any point in my life, I was doing the best I could given the beliefs I was holding at that time. Now that I am aware of the situation I can examine those beliefs and then possibly change them so that they serve me better.” By allowing ourselves to freely look at and examine our beliefs, we allow ourselves to grow and change toward becoming more centered, empowered and emotionally healthy.

Stimulus

When we apply the attitude of love, acceptance, and nonjudgment to the stimulus we see that a stimulus is Neutral --- not good or bad.

This is a hard thing to grasp for our culture, because we are so Stimulus-Response oriented. We think that if we are upset then the stimulus must be bad and if we are happy then the stimulus must be good. We also take comfort in getting agreement from others with regard to categorizing stimulus as good or bad. It is common to gain agreement and support from our friends when we go through a relationship break-up. They might say, “She is terrible for doing that,” or “He is such a jerk for treating you that way.”

The goodness and badness are not in the stimulus, the goodness and badness are in our beliefs.

A simple example: Say you’re waiting in line for some event and you’re bumped very roughly from behind. Immediately you’re upset and turn to confront the person. Upon turning around, however, you realize that the person who bumped into you has a cane and is blind. Immediately the emotion of anger evaporates because you now see the situation from a different perspective. You believe the bumping is not intentional and you’re no longer upset. By shifting your belief about the stimulus (intentional or careless versus unintentional bumping), you change your response to it.

The stimulus does not hold the charge or spin. We put the good / bad spin on the stimulus. Stimulus just is. So, an accident is an accident, losing your house is losing your house, getting fired is getting fired...whatever it is, **it just is**.

Shakespeare wrote, “For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

We make the judgment and we decide the intensity of the “spin.” The more intense the judgment or the spin, the more intense the feeling and behavior we create for ourselves. I have worked with people in prison. Most people would automatically think that prison is bad and terrible. However, I have heard many inmates say that prison has been a blessing for them. They have described being in prison as life-changing in a positive way. Inmates have specifically talked to me about the opportunity to slow down and review where their lives were going and to learn positive ways of dealing with life...an opportunity that they would never have given themselves on the outside. One person in particular said that when he saw the lights of the police car in his rearview mirror as he was being pulled over, he felt relaxed and said to himself, “Thank God, it’s over.” He stated that even in that moment he knew was going to prison but that also knew that he would be in a place where he would be safe from his lifestyle of crime and drug use.

The stimulus does not hold the charge – it is neutral. It is our interpretation that really creates our responses, not the situation or event. Years ago I attended a workshop where the presenter was talking about being a foster parent. He had an adolescent girl in his home that had been bounced from foster home to foster home. The family decided to adopt her and make her placement with them permanent. What they decided to do was to create a surprise party for her to announce their decision. They were all waiting with a cake to surprise her when she came home. When she arrived they jumped out yelling, “Surprise! We’re going to adopt you!” ...and she freaked out. She got so upset that she ended up flipping over the table with the cake on it and storming off. Clearly, the family thought, “This is going to be a wonderful event (stimulus) and she will love it.” She obviously interpreted it differently. She may have had beliefs around being hurt again, being expected to open up as well as an expectation of possible future pain if she trusted and invested in this family who might be torn from her like everyone else in her life had been. It was her interpretation that the event was “bad for her” that created the emotional response of anger and the behavioral response of flipping over the table with the cake.

Understanding this concept at a deep level has been very important to my own growth process. When I want to point my finger at events or people that I might initially judge as bad, I quickly point back at myself asking the question, “Why am I upset about this?” I know that whatever is happening in my life is neutral and that I am holding perspectives that are creating my discomfort. I see these as opportunities for me to uncover my beliefs and possibly grow stronger. I find it valuable to explore why I’m basing my happiness and my good feelings on the events and the people in my life.

During my youngest son’s birth, there were complications and he was born very “lifeless.” He wasn’t breathing and he was a grayish blue color. I remember in that

moment staring at him and thinking to myself “Well, if this is it (that he doesn't live) can I be ok with this?” My internal response was, “Yes, I can” and I also believed that we as a family would be ok... but I also realized that I wanted more. I wanted him to live. I experienced a peace in that moment that ultimately served me as we faced further hospitalization of our little guy.

I interpret being “happy” as more than just feeling good or excited, or even warm about something. I was able to see that being happy included feeling at peace, centered, and having inner strength. When I was no longer afraid of the outcome, I experienced inner peace.

We can truly change only when we realize that we hold the power.

Just because we don't judge something as bad, that doesn't mean we wouldn't want to influence the situation or ultimately take care of ourselves. When some people hear this idea of nonjudgment, they say, “Wait, if I saw everything as neutral then I would become some kind of doormat because I would just be happy with whatever is happening and never try to change anything.”

I find that this is just not true. We certainly can and do try to influence and change situations and events in our lives so they work to our advantage with or without judgment. The difference is, when we don't judge, we give ourselves a more peaceful experience when we attempt to influence the situation. But I also learned that we often don't take care of ourselves or try to influence situations because we're afraid of how that might create someone else's unhappiness. We might not speak up to a spouse or boss for fear of causing them to be upset with us. If we did not judge the other person's response as “bad” then we might be able to be more direct and thus move toward our wants with ease and comfort.

No person or situation can make us happy or unhappy unless we allow it. We are responsible for our emotions and behaviors and ultimately so are everyone else. We are totally responsible because we create our emotions and behaviors based on how we interpret our world. We give the stimulus permission to affect our emotions and behavior through the beliefs we hold and the way we interpret or understand it.

If you truly own that you are in charge of your personal happiness then you can create a sense of personal power and inner ease in the face of any stimuli.

By understanding that we are in charge of our feelings, we actually step out of the game of ‘you are responsible for my feelings and I am responsible for your feelings.’ Someone might say, “If you do that then you will hurt my feelings.” What they are actually saying is, “I'm going to make myself unhappy if you do that and I'm going to blame you for making me unhappy.”

Being responsible for other people's happiness or unhappiness is a very difficult way to approach the world. If you approach the world in this manner

you are at the mercy of the people in your life who try to use their unhappiness to manipulate you and you will blame other people for your feelings. You are also constantly looking for validation from other people to help you feel good about yourself. You will find some people who will “make you” feel good (happy), but you will also find people who will “make you” feel bad (unhappy).

Reflect back on the two people in the dagger / button diagram. If the person with the button were really comfortable, confident, and loving toward himself, he wouldn't have very many buttons and he would not base his “good” feelings about himself on others or situations. Those are the people we tend to look at and think, “Wow, how successful, how strong, and how confident.” You can also look at the person pushing the button. If this person were really comfortable, confident, and loving toward himself, he wouldn't actively and maliciously be pushing other people's buttons. If he was truly comfortable, he wouldn't be trying to cause someone else's unhappiness in order to make himself happy. He would not be intentionally trying to make the other person feel “less” so that he could feel “more.”

Using Unhappiness to Create Happiness

We have learned to use unhappiness as a main way of creating happiness.

Even though we have culturally learned to operate in this way, using unhappiness to create personal happiness is not very effective and ultimately has costs. One obvious cost is that we end up spending much of our time unhappy in order to create moments of happiness. Another cost is that when we use unhappiness with the people in our lives they either use it back at us or withdraw from us.

We use unhappiness in three major ways.

1) We use unhappiness to move or motivate ourselves and others.

Our unhappiness has a purpose and a goal even when we are not consciously aware of what it is. We get angry with a friend who is late in order to motivate that person to be on time and thus we feel happy and content when that person is on time in the future.

Not only do we direct our unhappiness at other people but we aim it at ourselves in order to motivate ourselves into change or action. A woman might get upset with herself for cheating on a diet so that she stays on the diet. She does this so that ultimately she will be happy about the results. What she is doing is focusing on and judging her behavior (response) in order to make herself change. Directing our unhappiness at ourselves in order to move ourselves often leaves us feeling uncomfortable and “bad” about ourselves and this is the ultimate self-esteem killer.

We have learned to use unhappiness as a way to influence ourselves and others ...and then we wonder why there is so much anger, anxiety, and depression in the world.

2) We use unhappiness to show that we care.

We have learned that if we don't get unhappy about something then it means we don't care. We have learned to link our happiness and our caring. We specifically determine how much we care about something or someone by how unhappy we get when we no longer have that in our life. If someone broke up with us and we didn't get emotionally distressed or hurt, it would mean that we didn't care. If we lost some material possession, such as a house, it would mean that we didn't care about it if we weren't feeling devastated.

Do we really have to be unhappy in order to show others or ourselves that we care?

We set ourselves up for unhappiness when we approach life with this perspective of unhappiness equals caring.

I have seen this with people who have dealt with loved ones who have had terminal illness. At the end of the journey when the loved one dies, the person might feel a sense of relief because of the intensity of the experience and the pain their loved one endured. This person then might question himself for feeling relief, thinking, “There must be something wrong with me because I felt relief instead of sadness and pain... Did I really love the other person?” This could then become very difficult and confusing. Just because he felt relief does not mean that he didn’t care...we have learned otherwise.

3) We use unhappiness to show that we are sensitive, intelligent people.

This means if we didn’t get unhappy about the situation we didn’t get it. We hear things like, “Any normal person would be upset and outraged by the level of pollution in our world today.” If we didn’t get upset or outraged about pollution then we are not sensitive, intelligent people and something is wrong with us.

Is this really true? Can we be aware of events in our life and in the world and understand them without having to create anger, disappointment, or outrage in order to know and show that we are intelligent and sensitive human beings? Do we have to generate outrage within ourselves in order to take action and make positive changes in ourselves and in the world?

Empowered, centered, self-trusting people take dynamic action in personal change as well as in affecting the world around them.

Need versus Want / Prefer

When we say or think “need,” we are creating an expectation or an attachment toward the situation we are “needing.” Essentially, we are hooking our happiness to that “thing” we say we need. We might say, “I need that job” or “I need this relationship.” I won’t be happy unless or until I have what I say I need. Use of the word “need” can be as subtle as “needing” a report by a certain time or “needing” a vacation soon.

What do we need? If we want to survive, then we could say we need air, water, food, and shelter. Beyond this list is there anything we really “need”?

Be aware of the word “need” and ask yourself, “Do I really need it?”

What would happen if we thought more in terms of “want” or “prefer”?

If we thought in terms of “want” or “prefer” then we would not base our happiness on the situations and events in our life. We would be able to unhook from those situations. We could be happy regardless of what is happening in our lives. When we are happy we are more effective in going for what we want. Take for instance, if you were trying to influence a coworker who disagrees with your ideas on a project. If you approach him with anger and unhappiness, he would most likely get defensive and resistant. If, however, you approach him with a sense of calm and peacefulness, he would probably be more open and receptive to your ideas.

By emphasizing “prefer” we can even more clearly unhook our happiness from the outcomes of events. Even though “want” shifts us away from needing, I find that we can still manipulate the word “want” into being very close to a “need,” whereas we cannot do this with the word “prefer.” We might “hook in” to an outcome by thinking “I really, really want that...” But, if we attempted to do this with “prefer,” it just doesn’t have the same power. Even if we thought, “I really, really prefer that ...,” we still do not find ourselves attaching to the outcome in the same way as if we say “want” and “need.”

We have lots of preferences. Given the choice between chocolate ice cream and vanilla ice cream you might prefer vanilla ice cream. You would not be unhappy if you didn’t get the vanilla ice cream.

Begin to see more and more aspects of your life in terms of “prefer.” I prefer this job over that job or this relationship over another relationship. You could even begin to think in terms of preferring that certain events did or did not happen in your life.

The problem with making the shift toward want / prefer is we tend to think that if we don't "need" something then we are not going to go for it. This goes back to the idea of using unhappiness to motivate ourselves. We believe that we have to create anxiety and frustration in order to motivate ourselves to take action. This actually works against going for and getting what we want / prefer. We might go into a job interview with an attitude of, "I need this job" and then feel so anxious and worried about getting the job that we stumble all over ourselves and perform poorly in the interview. Conversely, we could go into the job interview with an attitude of "I prefer to have this job but I will be happy even if I don't get the job" and feel very relaxed and present in the interview. Because we are not invested in the outcome, we are more confident and often perform better.

We can truly ease tension, hurt, anger and anxiety in our lives if we begin changing our "needs" into "preferences." Approaching relationships from this perspective can dramatically impact our ability to be authentic and open. When I no longer need you in my life in order for me to be "ok" then I can be myself and more loving to you. Because my loving you does not depend on you loving me back. When I need you in my life then I will do whatever it takes to keep you in my life even if it means lying, hiding, or acting in ways I think you want me to act.

Conclusion

When we step back and look at this Stimulus → Belief → Response model in the context of love, acceptance, and nonjudgment, we see this incredible map that helps us journey toward personal clarity and happiness. This is a bridge that helps us get to the other side where it *is* possible to maintain personal happiness. It is a way of being with ourselves that allows us to "step by step" create a sense of inner ease, peace of mind, confidence, clarity, empowerment, and self-trust. From that space we are able to take care of ourselves more effectively. We can ask for what we want / prefer, stand up for ourselves with confidence, make positive decisions for ourselves, and be more loving to ourselves and the people in our lives.

Where do we go from here?

"Now that I understand this model, how do I apply it in my life?"

Just understanding this model gives you a way of being with yourself and a way of dealing with life events that is more effective than the way most people operate. You will find yourself perceiving situations in ways that truly gives you an attitudinal advantage. The real change, however, comes when you begin to unravel and challenge the beliefs that are not serving you.

By being a student of yourself and lovingly questioning the beliefs behind your responses to stimuli in your life, you give yourself the opportunity to recreate yourself. As you do this you will become more centered, confident, and sustainably happy.

About the Author



Bob Wiley is a personal empowerment coach. He works with professionals who want to increase their level of success at work and at home.

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Are you a professional ready to start living your best life? I offer a free, no-obligation consultation to discuss your personal empowerment goals and how I might help. Send a request to bob@bobwileycoaching.com.

I look forward to hearing from you!