Running your mind and life effectively when there is no life instruction manual

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We have no operating manual
The problem with humans is that no life operating manual is issued at birth, leaving individuals to work out the rules for themselves. This acquisition of life skills takes time and a lot of trial and error, and many never figure it out. The following article attempts to provide the manual you should have been given at birth.

The brain lacks a delete button
I first heard this comment at an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) conference in Wellington in 2015 when one of the founders, Professor Steve Hayes, stood in front of the audience and noted that there is no delete button in the human mind, so we need to hold our negative cognitions lightly. He then held his hands in a cupped form by his waist to demonstrate how we can hold things lightly. I consider this to be one of the most profound ideas that I have come across. If the central role of the human brain is to keep you alive, then it makes sense that it won’t let you forget “dangerous” things that have happened to you in the past, so that you are forewarned and forearmed to deal with them should you be in that situation again. This applies to physical dangers, such as driving a car and crossing a street, and psychological dangers, such as having difficulties with a family member or work colleague.

This is all explained by a theory of language called Relational Frame Theory. The human mind can pull together a series of negative experiences from the past, culminating in a disproportionate response to an otherwise benign trigger. For example: you failed a maths exam when you were eight, had a distressing argument with your mother when you were 16, and crashed the family car when you were 21 years old; then your boss is grumpy with you at work, and you spiral downwards. Pulling together seemingly unrelated events is a uniquely human ability, as we do not think other animals can do this, and is a function of our skills at using language. Our human language can enable our minds to bring back the past into the present and cause us grief. It can also do wonderful things for us, such as develop good friendships with other humans. In a sense, our human language is both our best friend and worst enemy when operating this way.

How to hold things lightly
There are several ways of holding things lightly. One is to cup your hands by your waist and physically hold the thoughts lightly as described above. Another is the “mindful anchor”, which is a more formal way of doing this. Another suggestion is that when a belief such as “I am not good enough” arises, say to yourself, “I am having a thought that I am not good enough.” Then, “I notice that I am having a thought that I am not good enough.” These are all steps to enable us to get a perspective on the situation, and create an acceptance mode as opposed to a struggle mode when dealing with such issues. The idea is not to make the thoughts go away, but to allow the mind to be present and accepting of such thoughts. Accepting a thought is not the same as condoning the action that may have caused it, but instead allowing it to be present.

Self-compassion
Difficulties with being able to be kind to oneself are commonly behind people with persisting distress issues. There are ways of determining this. The third step in the mindful anchor process is to show yourself some self-compassion or self-kindness. One way I do this in my therapy sessions is to ask the person to think of someone they love with all their heart and then imagine they are looking into that person’s eyes. I then ask, “How do you feel about that person? What would you give that person? What things would you do with that person?” Then, I ask the more difficult task: “Imagine that person is you.”

If the person stalls at that point and says that they cannot do that, you know they have an issue with self-compassion. I then ask, “What is the emotional tone of the conversations you have with your mind?” In many distressed patients, it can be very negative and harmful. I ask if it is a sergeant major or a personal trainer in their mind; if it is the first, would they prefer to have a personal trainer doing the talking? For those who acknowledge they have self-compassion issues, I refer them to Dr Kristen Neff’s website, which has an assessment tool and many useful resources. I also ask them to consider cultivating the voice of self-kindness in their minds when thinking more negative thoughts. I have personally found this to be very helpful in my own life. The example I like to give is the motorway scene when someone cuts in front of me and I am contemplating engaging in some road rage. I now say to myself, “Bruce, cultivate the voice of self-kindness in your mind,” and I find myself instantly feeling relaxed.

Experiential avoidance
Experiential avoidance is broadly defined as attempts to avoid thoughts, feelings, memories, physical sensations, and other internal experiences. The ACT theory suggests that we can fuse with a negative thought, and our minds try to avoid such thoughts. This sets off our sympathetic nervous system and gets us ready to fight or flee. If this persists, we can become behaviourally avoidant, which means we start avoiding people and places. Kirk Strosahl, one of the co-founders of ACT, states that “life constriction precedes (or accompanies) mental health issues.” This is a very profound and important point, and I find that reversing this (with behavioural activation – see below) generally is accompanied by an improvement in patients’ mental health. Avoidance is considered the key to mental health problems. The solution to this is behavioural activation.

Behavioural activation
Behavioural activation (BA) is a treatment or action that encourages patients with depression or distress to approach activities they
may have been avoiding. With a therapist, patients define goals and “activity schedules”. The rationale is that depression or distress is a consequence of avoiding particular activities or situations. There are many ways of doing this, and it has been shown that low scores on contact with friends and low scores on recreation are associated with low mood. My approach is to get patients who are distressed to make contact with their friends and start doing physical activity. The majority of distressed patients I see are somewhat or significantly better one week later. There is evidence that two weeks after the initiation of BA, 42% of “depressed” patients’ depressive symptoms are resolved. BA and exposure therapy are two of the most effective psychological treatments that are available.

Trust your experience and not what your mind is saying
Humans are exquisitely designed to avoid physical pain, and because we are very successful at this, we trust the problem-solving function of our brains. Unfortunately, the problem-solving capacity is not so good for personal pain, such as having a demanding boss or work colleague, or a difficult personal relationship. For many things in our lives, learning not to trust our minds is a compelling way to learn to live with ease. For example, when we don’t feel like doing anything and would rather watch TV and have a drink of alcohol, we need to remember how we felt when we last went out or when we last did exercise. In most cases that would be a more enriching experience than drinking alcohol and watching TV. For personal pain, we need a different approach. We need to approach issues rather than avoid them, and hold negative thoughts lightly.

Values and living with ease
In the ACT model, we are not trying to make our negative feelings go away. Instead, we need to be pursuing our values (those things that are important to us in the long term). By attempting to approach our values (they are directions and not destinations), we can aim to live with ease. This is not the same as avoiding suffering, as we need to accept that suffering is expected and okay and not to fight it.

Knowing your life dashboard warning light
Getting to know your life dashboard light can be essential to recognise when you are starting to experience distress. In my own life, I usually like to go to the gym for a workout. When I start feeling stressed, one of the first signs is that I do not want to go to the gym (remember: life constriction accompanies mental health issues). I have learnt that when the dashboard light starts flashing, I now go straight to the gym and generally feel a lot better afterwards.

In summary
Recognise there is no delete button in the brain. Its role is to keep you alive and not forget negative things that have happened to you. Avoidance is the source of much of our human suffering. For personal pain, we need an approach modality and to learn to hold uncomfortable feelings lightly. When we get stressed, we need to keep our worlds expanded, keep in contact with our support people, and keep doing our recreational activities (including some form of exercise). Learning to trust your experience, not what your mind is saying, is a powerful skill to develop. Cultivating the voice of self-compassion in your mind is a skill worth learning. Speak to your mind with the tone of the personal trainer, not the sergeant major. Finally, please get to know your life dashboard warning light, and take action when it comes on.

References

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