

Rules for life: Running your mind and life effectively when there is no life instruction manual v3

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We have no operating manual for our lives

The problem with humans is that no life operating manual is issued at birth, leaving individuals to work out the rules for themselves. 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 (NZ) in 2015 when one of the founders, Professor Steve Hayes, stood in front of the audience and said: "There is no delete button in the human mind, so what do we do with our negative cognitions? We need to hold them lightly."¹ He then held his hands in a cupped form by his waist to demonstrate how we can hold things lightly. I consider this 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 that situation happen again. This applies to physical dangers, such as driving a car and crossing a street, and psychological hazards, such as having difficulties with a family member or work colleague.

All this is explained by a theory of language called the Relational Frame Theory.² 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, 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. As described above, one is to cup your hands by your waist and physically hold the thoughts lightly. Another is the "mindful anchor", which is a more formal way.³ 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 instead of 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 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. I do this in my therapy sessions and 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 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 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 (self-compassion.org), which has an assessment tool and many valuable resources.⁴ 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 contemplate 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 avoiding 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 prepares us 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."⁵ 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 as 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 (personal communication with Professor Bruce Arroll, 2019). My approach is to get distressed patients to make contact with their friends and start doing physical activity. Most distressed patients I see are somewhat or significantly better one week later. There is evidence that one week after the initiation of BA, 46% of "depressed" patients' depressive symptoms are resolved compared with a control group of 21%.⁶ BA and exposure therapy are two of the most effective psychological treatments 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 complex, intimate relationship. Learning not to trust our minds is a compelling way to learn to live with ease for many things in our lives. For example, when we don't feel like doing anything and would rather watch TV and drink alcohol, we need to remember how we felt when we last went out or did exercise. That would be a more enriching experience than drinking alcohol and watching TV in most cases. 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 disappear our negative feelings. 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 attempt 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 fight it.

Being in the present moment (adapted from Eckhart Tolle and his book the Power of Now)

Being in the present moment is a crucial component of living with ease. Eckhart Tolle has a question "where are you in the present moment?" We find this a valuable way to bring us back to the present moment. Tolle talks about "clock time" and "psychological time". You would think avoiding clock time would be best for mental health, but in this model, it is clock time i.e. the present moment. Psychological time is the past or the future. When you are feeling distressed, you are not in the present moment. You are either in the past ruminating, feeling angry, resentful or in the future being fearful of what may happen to you.

Knowing your life dashboard warning light©2020

Getting to know your life dashboard light can be essential in recognising when you experience distress. I usually like to go to the gym for a workout in my own life. 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). When the dashboard light starts flashing, I have learned that 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. We need an approach modality for personal pain and learning to hold uncomfortable feelings lightly. When we get stressed, we need to keep our worlds expanded, contact 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.

More resources at www.brucearroll.com

Or www.calm.auckland.ac.nz

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