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## Transforming Your Life

*by*

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**Y**OUR life is like a soap opera. You, as the star, appear in the show twenty-four hours a day. The other people in your life are supporting players or "extras." Some are more important than others -- but you're the star! Your extras are stars in their own soap operas with you being an "extra" in each of their dramas.

**S**OME people pretend they don't star in their own soap operas. Such a person might say, "I'm Mr. Smith's wife, and he's an attorney." Even though she may claim no personal identity, Mrs. Smith is still the star, since she exists in her drama all the time.

**O**THER people try to star in everyone

else's soap opera. They think their ideas are absolute truth and advise others how to live their lives. What they fail to understand is that they are the center of their own universe -- but not the center of the total universe. Just as no one can star in anyone else's soap opera either.

**N**OT only are we the centers of our own drama, but we also each create the world differently. What one person considers exciting, another might see as boring. What you perceive as true is the material out of which you create your personal story. Thus, it is your awareness of a situation that becomes your experience of the event. You choose what you will focus your attention

on and what memories you will store of the occasion.

**F**OR instance, suppose you and I attend the opera *Madame Butterfly*. Would we have exactly the same experience of the opera? Of course not. You might think the opera is magnificent, while I might be bored. We have different expectations, as well as different preferences and responses. Whose experience would be right? Both of us would be right, and yet many people invalidate someone else's experience because it is different from their own.

**I**N an interaction with others, you also can choose your responses, which then affect how

they respond back to you. This is an additional way you can affect the experiences in your life.

**Y**OUR expectations, perceptions, and responses form your experience of the world. Your sequence of experiences becomes your soap opera. You have the ability to alter your expectations, perceptions, and responses as an event occurs. Additionally, you can alter your stored perceptions of past events. You thus create your own reality of the past, present, and future. What an exciting power!

**T**HEREFORE, you can write and direct your own script to be exciting and fulfilling. You can hold realistic expect-

tations, as well as learn to respond in an optimum way to the events of your life.

**G**LEN agreed to pick you up at 7:00 p.m. He is now twenty minutes late. You're getting angry. If you don't calm down before he gets there, the evening may be ruined.

**B**UT can you calm down, even if Glen is late? Yes, you can! I will describe how to respond calmly, rather than to become intensely upset about unpleasant events.

**F**IRST, it is important to understand your own responsibility for the development of your emotions. You become angry because you allow anger to develop. Is that hard to accept?

**T**AKING responsibility for creating your own emotion is usually difficult. When you get upset, you want to blame others and wait for them to change, so you can feel better. Our language supports this: "You make me mad when you leave the towels on the bathroom floor." "You frustrate me when you don't call to say you're going to be

late." "You drive me crazy when you play your stereo so loud."

**I**T is not true that others can force you to be upset. Rather, you allow yourself to get upset. You also can prevent yourself from staying upset. Of course, people and circumstances influence your responses, which make it more difficult to remain calm and happy.

**I**T is certainly typical for people to respond similarly by upsetting themselves in certain situations. For example, if Glen comes late to pick you up for a movie, it is common to become at least irritated if not angry. The difference in peoples' responses is in the intensity and the duration of the anger. Some people become so angry that they won't enjoy anything that evening, while other people quickly shift their attention to figuring out something else to do. What makes the difference?

**Y**OU have a choice about the intensity with which you experience an emotion, as well as your responses. Instead of getting extremely upset over an event, you can view the aspects

differently, and change your attitudes, so that you have a less intense emotional response. You will then be able to think of more alternative actions and can thus choose a more effective behavior.

**I**f you anger over Glen's tardiness leads to a headache, which prevents you from enjoying the evening, ironically, who has been punished? What a waste of a headache!

**L**ET'S go through a six-step process of becoming upset (based on the ideas of Dr. Albert Ellis).

**T**HE first step is the development of a desire, preference, or goal. In this example, you wanted to go to a movie with Glen.

**T**HE second step is the occurrence of an undesirable event. In the case given, the situation is that it is past time to leave for a movie, and Glen has not arrived. It therefore appears you will be unable to reach your goal.

**I**N the third step, you label the event as you view it and make as-

sumptions about it. This is your perception of the situation. You might assume that in addition to his not being on time, Glen is rude and inconsiderate. This, of course, is not necessarily true, and it increases the likelihood that you will become upset.

**I**N the fourth step, an attitude or belief emerges about the event. In this case, the attitude is most likely a demand that Glen "should" (or "must") be on time. Even though you know that no one must show up on time, your mind acts at this demand level as if it is true. Other demands which are equally as unrealistic include: "I must be perfect;" "You must love me;" "Things must be easy;" or, "The world must be fair." Just as unrealistic is "I'm worthless when I don't live up to my expectations." In all these statements, the demand and the lack of acceptance of reality lead toward getting inappropriately upset.

**I**N the fifth step, you experience an intense emotion. In our example it was anger. Other intense emotions include depression, guilt, anxiety, and fear.

**T**HE sixth and final step is your behavior when you are upset. In the example, you might develop a headache. You might also yell at Glen or refuse to talk to him. In an extreme situation, you might even throw something. These behaviors, of course, do not result in Glen's arriving on time. Nor do they enhance your relationship with him or lead to more happiness.

**T**HE behavior you choose usually indicates how upset you are. If it is ineffective at producing desired action toward your goal, then the emotion is most likely more intense than would be helpful, and therefore inappropriate. Ineffective actions include the development of physical symptoms, including headaches, stomachaches, hives, shoulder tension, and intestinal or heart problems.

**A**NOTHER ineffective behavior includes aggression or striking out in a violent or hostile manner. This may release your pressure; but it is at the expense of someone else. It may be healthier for you, but not healthy for a relationship.

**N**ON-ASSERTIVE-NESS, (which is also ineffective), happens when you don't say anything, but rather bottle up your emotions. This may lead to a friendlier relationship, but it may also cause harm to your body. A person who usually responds this way may get sick, and even age more quickly. After resentment collects, it may be dumped at a later time on someone else, or it may be expressed in an inappropriate eruption. Another inactive and ineffectual behavior is copping out or not following through with what needs to be done in a given situation.

**A**LSO ineffective is seeing only one solution, or responding in only one way, even when this response does not work. For example, you might think that the only options you have when you get angry are to hold your anger in, to strike out, or to run away. Or perhaps you try to manipulate someone into changing his/her actions when you are angry. These responses sometimes temporarily work but usually don't produce permanent changes. Sometimes they even make the situation worse. Suppose

you responded to a flat tire by kicking the car and breaking your toe. That would not meet the goal of getting you to your destination!

**B**EFORE explaining how you can create a better alternative set of responses, I want to emphasize the taking charge of your emotional reactions neither implies learning to cover up an emotion nor pretending that something did not happen. Both of these responses can cause headaches, and they don't resolve problems.

**I**T is also important to acknowledge that other people or happenings influence the occurrence of the event to which you then determine your responses. The following experience emphasizes this influence: Several mornings after a presentation of these ideas to a high-school class, an irate mother phoned and said, "What did you tell Susan? She came in at two o'clock this morning, and I was furious! She had the gall to calmly say, 'Mother, I am not making you angry. Doctor Miller said that you are causing yourself to be angry.' What have you been teaching my daughter?" Susan was

correct that her mother had caused herself to become angry, but it was also true that Susan had been an influence in the situation. Susan had failed to take responsibility for her influence.

**T**HUS, other people of objects influence the formation of an event; but it is you who creates your emotion by the way you view what happened and by the beliefs that you hold. You have the power to change your perceptions and attitudes so that the emotion will be less intense and more appropriate. You will then have more choices, and your behavior will therefore be more effective. Thus, when you become upset, your task is to calm down, rather than to stay miserable.

**F**OR example, Carol is walking down the street after it has rained. A car swerves and splashes water over her. She becomes angry because she assumes that the driver was stupid and careless. She starts to mutter at the driver when she sees that he swerved to miss a small child in the middle of the street. Her anger immediately disappears, as her perception and assumptions

change. She doesn't pretend not to be angry. She doesn't have to scream to release the anger. She doesn't have to brood. The feeling changes as quickly as the thoughts change.

**G**OING back to the late-FOR-the-movie example, let's see how you can feel less upset. You can start with a focus on the more general goal to have a pleasant evening, rather than a specific goal that is dependent on external happenings. Next, when you realize Glen is not on time, you describe the event rather than assume what happened. You can think, It is past time to leave to see the beginning of the movie. This is a fact, rather than the assumption that Glen is rude and inconsiderate. This change in perception alone might lead to feeling less upset.

**Y**OU can next modify your attitude by restating the belief that Glen "should" (must) be on time. The meaning of "should" can be translated in three ways. It can be viewed as a demand or a must. When a demand is not met, it leads to anger. "Should" can also be translated as a desire, as in "I wish Glen were on time." When a desire is not fulfilled, it leads to disappointment or frustration, which is a less intense and more appropriate emotion than anger. "Should" can

also refer to what is true or predictable, as in "a ball should fall to the ground if you drop it." Glen behaves in the way he does or predictably will behave. That is, if he isn't there on time, he predictably is late. By holding the last two meanings of "should," you can then become more accepting of the reality of certain behaviors, even if you don't like them. More importantly, you won't punish yourself with an anger headache and ruin your life over incidents that will continue to happen.

**Y**OU can thus give up your demand, and yet keep your desire for your friend to be on time; and, simultaneously, you can accept the reality of the situation. You'll then feel less upset and enjoy yourself more. The attitude, therefore, can be: I don't like it that Glen is late. I wish he were here right now. The reality is that we can't see the beginning of the movie, and I wish we could.

**D**ON'T make up an excuse such as, "There must be a good reason," because there may not be a good reason for his lateness. It also doesn't help to get anxious by thinking, "He must have been in an accident." Both are wasted thoughts. It would be more constructive to focus your energy on generating a list

of alternative activities for the evening.

**W**HEN you change your attitude about the lateness, rather than feeling angry, you feel merely disappointed and frustrated, and you are more able to accept reality. You'll then be able to talk with Glen when he arrives about alternatives for the evening. The choice of action will depend on what time it is, how both of you are feeling, and what activities are possible. You might decide to stay home. You might choose to go out to dinner instead. You might go to the movie late, or to a different theater, or to a later show. What action you take is not as important as how you feel.

**I**F Glen is always late, you may, at some other time, discuss how you feel about his being consistently tardy and work toward a solution that is acceptable to both of you. This could include going only to those things that do not require being on time. It could mean setting the meeting time earlier, or perhaps requesting a phone call if he is running late. It might even lead to his deciding to be on time. It is neither advisable to ignore late behavior, nor to convince yourself that it doesn't matter. However, it is also useless to spend your life upset at a world that doesn't be-

have your way. Remember, many things in life will never change.

**Y**OU will notice that when you are less upset, the actions you choose will be more effective. These include: having fewer physical symptoms; being more assertive; being able to see more options -- as well as being more accepting of the world as it is.

**T**HE example of becoming angry illustrates the development of just one emotion. You can also become anxious, guilty, and depressed. The following examples demonstrate the development of these emotions, with alternative choices for responding to the same situation.

**B**ARBARA never has enjoyed being the center of attention. It was now an hour before she would make a new product presentation before the sales force of her company. She viewed it as threatening. She believed she had to perform calmly and professionally. If anyone knew she was nervous, it would be embarrassing, and she certainly would be fired! As her tension mounted, she felt herself shaking and wanted to cry.

**H**OW could Barbara change her emo-

tions? She could formulate a goal to expand her abilities to include speaking in front of people. She could then view the situation as a challenge and an opportunity. She could believe that, although it would be great if she did well, she could live through being less than perfect. There was also no evidence she would be fired. She would then feel genuine concern and appropriate excitement at the new adventure. She could take some deep breaths, relax, and focus her attention on organizing her thoughts, as well as in experiencing confidence in her ability to communicate information regarding the product about which she knows so much.

**S**AM forgot Sally's birthday. She didn't say anything. He remembered it a month

later. He viewed himself as stupid. He was sure she could never forgive him. He believed that he must be perfect, and if he made a mistake, he was worthless. He felt guilty.

**S**AM could modify his emotions and choose a more appropriate behavior by first seeing his action as an unfortunate oversight. He could admit he forgot Sally's birthday and feel legitimately sorry. He could acknowledge that he was a fallible human, like everyone else. He could then make plans to celebrate with her, even if it was past the actual day. He could additionally set up a reminder system for special dates to prevent future oversights.

**E**VER since Tom died suddenly of a stroke last year, Martha was depressed. She

viewed her husband's death as a catastrophe. She felt worthless and thought she couldn't exist without him. Life seemed hopeless and looked bleak.

**M**ARTHA doesn't think she has a choice about how she creates her world, but she does. She can admit that her husband's untimely death was most unfortunate, and yet she can continue to live without him. She can realize that no one can take away her experience with him. His impact on her life continues on. She can learn to find her own power and become involved again with activities and other people. Punishing herself does not bring him back to life.

**I**N calming yourself down and creating more happiness, it is important to realize you

don't have the power to change anyone else. You can influence people to change, but you can't do the changing for them. The only person you can change is yourself.

**I**N conclusion, when undesirable events happen, you can change your perceptions and attitudes to prevent yourself from getting overly upset. As you practice setting more realistic goals and making fewer demands, you can experience your own power to transform your life!

(The above is excerpted and modified from the book, *Headaches: The Answer Book*, written by Joan Miller, Ph.D., and published by Fleming H. Revell Company.)