

# **Eliciting the Best: Questions and Answers**

## **What are thoughts, feelings and choices?**

Thoughts, feelings and choices are activities of our conscious mind. Most of us experience thoughts as an “inner voice” speaking in our head. We can also have thoughts in the form of images. Feelings are usually experienced as physical manifestations on our bodies. How do you experience such feelings as excitement, anger, fear or sadness? Choices are a third separate part of our consciousness. We are capable of making choices that are separate and distinct from our thoughts and feelings.

A good analogy is to think of choice as like a muscle. When our “choice muscle” is strong, we are able to make hard choices. Moreover, as with any muscle, we strengthen our choice muscle by exercising it against resistance. With a strong choice muscle we can “lift” heavy choices. Many of the choices we make are made from unconscious habits and patterns. Most of the time we are no more conscious of making choices than we are of walking or talking. We gain control in our lives when we bring our unconscious choices into consciousness where we can evaluate their utility and make new choices if necessary.

## **To what extent do we control our thoughts and feelings?**

Thoughts feelings, and behavioral impulses originate in our unconscious minds, through what is called primary process thinking—a loose, associative process of digesting and integrating our conscious experience. We have a glimpse of our primary process thinking when we are able to recall our dreams. In order to manage our uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and impulses, we develop a variety of defense mechanisms. Although these defense mechanisms sometimes allow us to inhibit our thoughts, feelings or impulses, they generally have side-effects that we may or may not be aware of. As an example, Freud observed that repressed thoughts and feelings are often expressed through our humor and through slips of the tongue.

Even if we are unable to block unwanted or unacceptable thoughts, feelings and impulses from entering our conscious awareness, we still have choices of what we do or how we act on them. We can assume that our spontaneous thoughts, feelings and impulses reveal the truth about who we really are, or we can simply observe them from a detached place in our conscious mind and learn what we can from them.

Finally, while the conscious mind is the screen onto which images from the unconscious are projected, it is also the gateway in to the unconscious. For the most part, the unconscious mind only has access to the outside world through the conscious mind. In one experiment subjects who visualized successfully sinking foul shots in basketball for a fixed amount of time each day improved about the same amount as another group that actually practiced for that amount of time. Both groups showed improvements relative to a control group which neither practiced nor visualized. Because the conscious mind is the gatekeeper for the unconscious mind, we can exert some control over what comes out of our unconscious mind by exerting control over what we put into it.

## **What is self-esteem?**

Self-esteem is literally how much you like or esteem yourself. It refers to the experience or sense of one's self as deserving of love, respect, or positive regard. This is distinct from self-efficacy, which refers to a sense of competence or a judgment of one's self as being capable, either in some specific area or in general.

There are two models for self esteem. In the first model, we base our self-esteem on our self-efficacy or on our usefulness or our value. For many of us, our value rests on the things we have—a nice home, an attractive mate, children; on the things we do—important work, youthful sports, taking care of others; on the things we are—attractive, intelligent, outgoing, altruistic, or some combination of these. The term value paradigm will be used to describe this model for self-esteem. In the value paradigm, self-esteem is a result to be “earned” by meeting our own or other people's standards for value.

In the second model for self-esteem, we exercise our choice muscle and choose to regard ourselves, and all others, as deserving of love, respect and positive regard simply because we choose to. In this model, we hypothesize that human beings are innately capable of love, creativity, and joy and that these capacities alone deserve such regard. Because the word “worth” refers to intrinsic rather than utilitarian qualities and because the qualities described above are intrinsic to human beings, we use the term worth paradigm to describe this world view.

## **Tell me more about the value paradigm.**

The value paradigm can often be recognized by its inner voice, the “inner critic”. The inner critic is the voice which tells us what we (or others) should or shouldn't do. It is the voice which is constantly judging and evaluating, putting ourselves up and others down (or vice versa). It makes us believe that it has our best interests at heart—that if only we achieve what our inner critic tells us to, we will at last find happiness or, at least, peace. It is the voice of perfection and perfectionism. The problem is that our inner critic is never satisfied. This is because it is incapable of being satisfied. It doesn't even know how. All it knows is how to criticize. Perhaps it would stop if we were finally able to reach perfection—maybe this is even the definition of perfection—but, for most of us mortals, perfection is just not in the cards. And yet we keep striving for it. When we live in the value paradigm, we create a kind of emotional cycle in our life which is called the “vicious circle”

## **What is the “Vicious Circle”?**

The vicious circle is a description of an intellectual and emotional cycle we experience when we live in the value paradigm. It starts when we have a success at something. The success creates a good feeling which we enjoy. This good feeling is like the good feeling we might get when we drink alcohol—it numbs us to our own internal experience. It can keep us from feeling other less comfortable feelings including our own feelings of unlovability or unacceptability. (We all have such feelings.)

Just like rats in a cage, we become conditioned to continue doing what we were doing as long as we keep getting that reinforcement of success. Behaviorists have discovered that the strongest conditioning comes from intermittent rather than continuous reinforcement so, if we don't achieve successes every time, we keep coming back. Like an addiction, when the "high" fades, we go back for more. As we ignore our inner experience our inner needs get louder and louder and we need more and more success and good feelings to drown them out. We listen to our inner critic which continues to tell us what we should be doing and how important it is for us to keep doing it. Failure to obey the inner critic means loss of self esteem. We reach the point where our relationships with other people are affected (and eventually run) by our compulsion. Ultimately, we become machines, instruments of our inner critics, ignoring our own needs in order to fulfill our critic's demands.

We are only able to do this for so long before all our unmet needs build up to the point where they overwhelm us. We resent having to work so hard and we resent other people when they are not suffering the way that we are. We grow angry at others or at ourselves and we express this anger by rebelling against our inner critics. We tell ourselves that we have done enough or that now other people should be doing their share. We might resign or quit what we were doing. We might rest on our laurels. We might somaticize our anger by getting sick. One way or another, we throw off the inner critic and, in a frenzy of pent-up demand, we seek to quench our unmet needs. We may decide that we deserve to enjoy ourselves or we may decide that we are defective or incapable of meeting our inner critic's demands. In either case, we decide that we can feel good right now. We become self-indulgent.

But, we can only do this for so long before a certain kind of fear begins to emerge. We realize that we are still not getting our needs met we start to worry that there is no bottom to the slippery slope that we are going down. we look around and see that other people are getting their needs met while we am stuck. We decide that if we are to get out of this spot, we had better start listening to our inner critic again. we start trying and, sooner or later, we succeed and the whole cycle starts again.

We may have many vicious circles operating in our life at the same time and we may be in different parts of the cycle in each one. We may have one vicious circle operating in our job and another in our relationships with friends and still another operating in our own expectations for ourselves. Almost always, we will have one where we are at or near the top to make up for those in which we are at or near the bottom. Like jugglers, we must manage our life to keep one vicious circle in the air at all times.

## **I can live with the roller coasters and I like the highs... so what's wrong with the value paradigm?**

The real problem with the value paradigm is the loss of our freedom and ultimately, of our humanity. As long as our behavior is driven by shoulds and musts, we lose the ability to make new choices or even to recognize when there are choices to be made all. For example, I may hate my job but I must have the income, the lifestyle and the security it provides for me.

We become locked in patterns of behavior which replay this vicious circle and, in doing so, we increasingly lose awareness of our own feelings. Since our feelings provide the energy and juice for living, our life becomes flat, dull, and mechanical. Moreover we create a society of people who are driven by compulsion and unable to experience empathy or compassion. We can see the consequences of such a society all around us.

When we live in the value paradigm, we change the stakes in the game of life. Suddenly in everything we do, our self-esteem is on the line. Just how relaxed can we be? How creative can we be when we know that everything is riding on the “product” that we create? Finally, since we learn by trial-and-error, how can we ever learn new things?

### **How do I escape from the value paradigm and its vicious circles?**

We escape from the value paradigm when we make the decision to treat ourselves and all human beings with love, respect, and positive regard, no matter what. The choice to move into the worth paradigm is available to us at any moment. In making this choice it helps to recognize that our thoughts and feelings are very likely to linger in their old patterns but our choice can be independent of those thoughts and feelings. Our decision entails acting as though the assumption of intrinsic worth is true no matter what we might think and feel.

The shift to the worth paradigm converts our inner critic into a benign “inner witness” that makes no judgments whatsoever. It just sits outside of our immediate experience and notices. It accepts any and all thoughts and feelings that emerge from the unconscious mind and lets them flow into consciousness. It may or may not choose to act on those thoughts and feelings, but it allows them into awareness. Often the fastest path into the worth paradigm is the phrase, “I notice my inner critic”.

### **If I am in the worth paradigm, what keeps me from just sitting around and doing nothing at all?**

Nothing keeps us from doing nothing at all... except our own innate creative nature. Our unconscious mind is constantly operating on goals and intentions that it has acquired at our conscious behest or not. When we live in the value paradigm we may create some pretty good results, but we also create a lot of fear and anxiety. In the worth paradigm we have much more freedom to explore new ideas, intentions, and goals. Because mistakes aren't damaging to self-esteem, we are more free to make them. More importantly, we are more free to recognize them when we make them and, in doing so, learn from them. How many events are there in your life that you could learn from if only you could acknowledge that you made a mistake?

Success is the result of good judgment.

Good judgment is the result of experience.

Experience is the result of bad judgment.

This is not to say that we will not feel pain or experience consequences when we make mistakes. It only says that we have the best opportunity to rescue some good from the pain or consequences we experience. Indeed, as we noted earlier, one purpose of the

value paradigm is to suppress unpleasant or disturbing feelings. Moving to worth paradigm may mean that we may start experiencing some of those feelings for the first time. But such feelings pass through and do not represent the reality of who we are. Initially the shift to worth paradigm may entail feelings of grief, loss or sadness for the lost time or for the lost dreams of perfection. When we experience such feelings, however, we can allow them into our awareness, always knowing that we are deserving of love, respect, and positive regard in spite of them.

## **Key Points**

At any moment I can choose to do something different from what I am doing.

Choice is separate and different from feelings or thoughts.

I may notice my thoughts, feelings and sensations... then make a choice. The choice can be independent of those thoughts, feelings and sensations.

Being in the worth paradigm allows me notice my thoughts and feelings non-judgmentally. When I notice them, I can consciously choose whether or not to pay attention to them.

I may experience my unconscious attachment to my old ways. I may choose to act on my attachment or I may choose to notice it and then not act on it.

I can choose to be in the worth paradigm at any moment in time.

I am already worthy. Nothing I do or have earns it or takes it away. I have only to choose to acknowledge it.

Acknowledging and accepting my feelings, both positive and negative, is an expression of my self-esteem.

I may enjoy the things that I have and feel pride for the things I can do without basing my self-esteem on them.

I can more readily take the risks necessary to learn new things when I first acknowledge my intrinsic worth, rather than making it conditional on my success.

I elicit the best from myself and others when I choose to act from the knowledge that each person (including myself) is, at their center, a joyful, creative, loving being; that is, when I choose to attribute worth to myself and others.