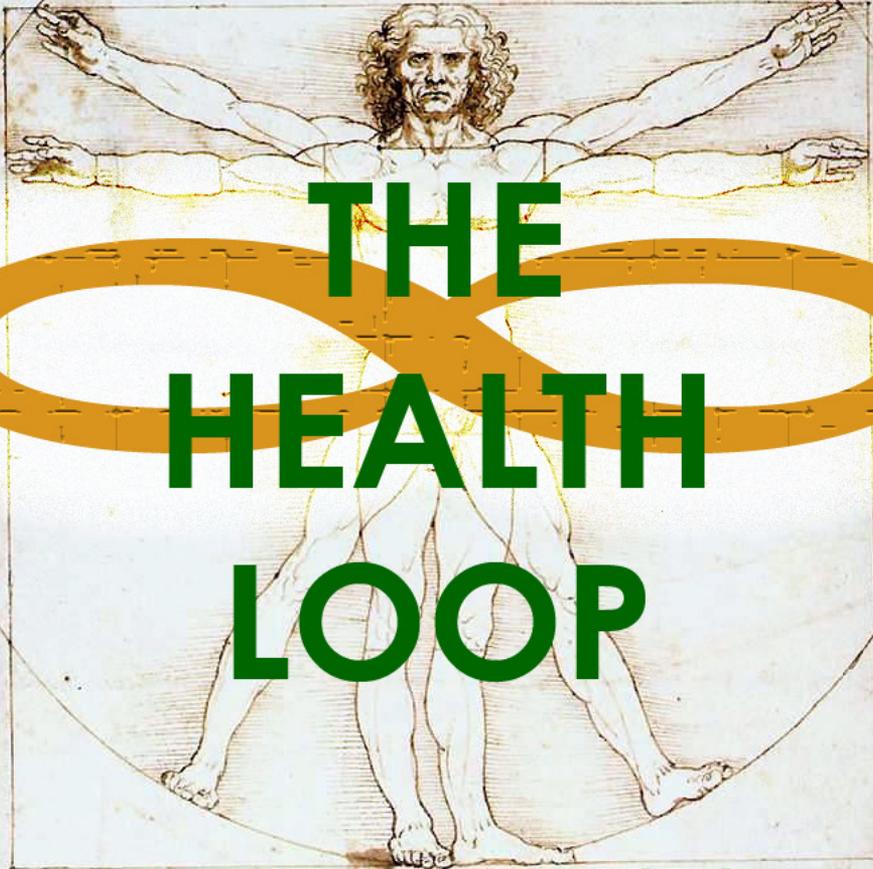


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THE HEALTH LOOP

Dr. Matthew Hertert

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What Is The Health Loop, and Why Is It Important?

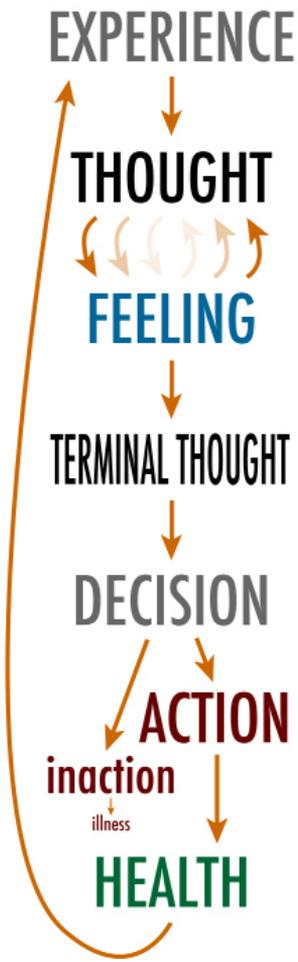
We all want radiant health. We want to be healthy, energetic, engaged, happy, successful, and loved. We want to feel safe and secure, help those we love, and leave the world a better place. The details are different for everyone, but we all want to feel good, have fun, and live a life that makes a difference.

Most of us are challenged in having everything we want, the way we want it - *especially* health. This is not just true for diabetics; the health industry is the largest market in the world. From sports equipment, gym memberships, supplements, diet books, and health food to drugs, surgeries, and visits to health care practitioners, the money spent is a powerful reflection of how deeply we all value feeling good.

Our challenges come in many different forms, varying from person to person. So in your individual search for health, it is essential to identify what your personal struggles are and learn to respond to them specifically.

Sometimes we don't know *what* to do to improve our health and feel vital. Sometimes we have some information, but we can't figure out *how* to implement it. Sometimes we can apply it but are *overwhelmed* by variations in routine, temptation,

and bad habits. implement it. Sometimes we can apply it but are overwhelmed by variations in routine, temptation, and bad habits. While people with diabetes suffer from all of these challenges, our biggest issue is that we make *lousy decisions*. We make decisions from a highly emotional place, or we choose short-term pleasure over long-term benefits.



The Health Loop is my representation of our decision making process - a flow chart that shows how we move from experiences through actions and into results. It's a simple, visual tool that will help you understand how you make choices, where you let conditioned reactions or emotions control your decisions, what your particular challenges, habits and patterns are, and where you can make key strategic changes in your thinking and behavior.

These pieces of information can give you significant control over changing our limiting reactions, patterns, and habits into healthy behaviors. They

empower you to make positive changes through better decisions and actions. Instead of *reacting* in a *conditioned* way to experiences, you can start to make *conscious* decisions about how to *respond* that really serve your health.

This understanding is important for anyone to reach goals and thrive in life. It is essential to staying alive, whole, and functional as diabetics.

Reverse Engineering

I created The Health Loop from a "reverse engineering" process, a useful tool for pursuing any goal in any area of life. Engineering is essentially the process of figuring out how to combine resources into a cool or useful product. In reverse engineering, you start with the cool or useful product - in this case radiant health - and work your way backwards through the process to create a path, understand the challenges, and determine what resources are needed.



So, let's work backwards. In order to reach any *goal*, we need to take the right series of *actions*. Each *action* arises from *decisions* we make about the best next step towards our goal. Our *decisions* arise from *thoughts* and *feelings* about our situation - such as what we want to happen, what we are afraid could happen, and what seems doable. These *thoughts* and *feelings* are triggered by some current *experience* that makes us want to take action, however they are the result of things that happened in the past.

Now we've engineered a process for excellent health: we *experience* something that stimulates a cascade of *thoughts* and *feelings* which continue until, at some point, we arrive at a "terminal thought," one that ends the cascade. That terminal thought drives a *decision* about what *action* to take next, which hopefully leads to our *goal*.

I call it a *loop* because every action we take leads to new experiences, each of which restarts the process. This loop is series of leverage points because, if you take the right steps towards your goal - such as feeling more energetic because you've managed your sugar better, then you *experience* what it's like to feel better, which makes taking the right steps easier next time through the loop. It becomes a positive upward spiral. It's also a *loop* because we have to go through this process many times to achieve most goals, especially the most meaningful ones.

With mundane decisions, like whether to shower before or after breakfast, these loops are of little consequence. However, with goal-related decisions that relate to emotionally complex past experiences or fears about the future, this loop allows you to take an active, positive, conscious step towards your goal instead of forming or reinforcing a negative, unconscious habit.

Now that we understand a process to improve

our health, we can clarify where you may face challenges or need more resources. Let's explore The Health Loop one step at a time.

Experiences

Problems

We face two main problems with the things we experience. The first problem is that **we judge them as good or as bad**. Labeling an experience as "bad" usually causes negative feelings such as fear, shame, embarrassment, and guilt, which are unhealthy and immobilizing. The second problem is that **we often lose opportunities because we over-identify current experiences with past experiences**.

Despite the way most of us think about experiences, they are not a problem in and of themselves. Experiences are neutral; they have no inherent meaning or value. What gives them meaning is the interpretation we place on them, and then how we act on that interpretation. Even in trying to come up with a dramatic situation to challenge this statement, we see that our *reaction to events* is the problem - the way people respond

EXPERIENCE

THOUGHT

FEELING

TERMINAL THOUGHT

DECISION

ACTION

inaction
↓
illness

HEALTH

to a fire in a crowded theater is what ends up killing them. Experiences that catch our attention don't *seem* neutral to us at all. They stimulate some thought or feeling which triggers a survival or defense response. How could they possibly be neutral if they get our defenses up?

The answer is because we feel some level of fear. Even a simple, mild concern that we're not going to get something we want, or lose something we have, is enough to grab our attention and start the thought-emotion cascade. It doesn't have to be getting admitted to the hospital with a kidney problem (although even this experience is totally neutral); even something as benign as fear that a loved one might catch us eating something we shouldn't can launch the cascade.

As soon as we experience something attention-getting we try to categorize it, usually as "good" (this will benefit me) or "bad" (this will hurt me). This categorization is *always* based on past experiences. In either case, but especially with experiences that we decide are "bad," we move into defensive mode in an attempt to control the outcome to protect ourselves both physically and emotionally. At this point, we're reacting to a fantasy situation, so we waste energy and lose opportunities.

Sometimes past experiences do prepare us perfectly

for one we're faced with at this moment, and the conditioned reaction is appropriate. But most of the time, we don't *calmly* and *rationally* consider the current situation and how it may differ from the past experience. In other words, it is frequently an unconscious reaction versus a conscious response to the current circumstances. It is always preferable to make a conscious, considered response to a situation.

Once we're in this defensive mindset, it becomes much harder to accurately evaluate the situation separately from the memories we're referencing to justify our defensiveness. We react, and suddenly we've developed an unconscious pattern or habit. For example, you may interpret a sincere question from your doctor about how your blood sugar has been as an accusation, because a doctor has been accusatory in the past, or because you've been off track and feel guilty. You move into guilt, defensiveness, and anger and are distracted from the important conversation at hand.

The Solution

Accepting that experiences have no inherent value is liberating, as is acknowledging that you put interpretations on them. **Taking responsibility for your interpretations and choosing to release them** is a *huge* step forward. You'll be relating to reality rather than the past, and you'll stop missing opportunities.

Harnessing your attention to become aware of experiences which always trigger fear, defensiveness or anxiety is a powerful first step and an easy one, because it's easier to notice intense emotions. Having intense negative feelings is a good sign that you're over-identifying with the past. As you practice this process, you'll notice less dramatic ones more easily. If you stop assuming the doctor is accusing you, you can dramatically improve the quality and potential of that relationship for your health. You won't be on the defensive, resisting her attempts to help.

The real key to being able to see experiences as neutral comes through the next step - unplugging our conditioned, reactionary thoughts and feelings. So let's move on to the interpretation.

Thoughts and Feelings

Within The Health Loop, there is a smaller loop of *thoughts* and *feelings*. When this cascade finally slows down enough for us to consciously notice one thought, that "terminal thought" leads us to a decision about what to do next. That thought is usually one that we *can* be more consciously aware of than the ones that preceded it. If we *choose* to be aware of it, we can consciously respond to the situation instead of just reacting.

Problems

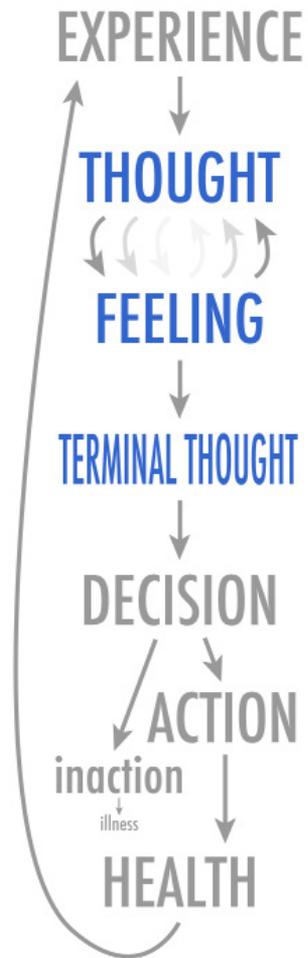
There are several problems with this thought-feeling loop. The first problem is that **our thoughts often aren't our own, they are conditioned**. The second problem is that sometimes **we let our feelings, instead of calm thoughts, run the show**. The third is that **when our reactions are conditioned instead of conscious, it is hard to interrupt them to make a conscious choice**.

A high percentage of the time, the thoughts that we hold about life-sometimes even our most deeply held values-aren't really our own ideas; they are ideas we picked up from our parents, teachers, churches, or the media. This doesn't mean that these ideas are bad or that they aren't true for you. But time and time again, I've seen people realize after years of suffering that their upset is based on

someone else's idea that they don't really believe such as "No one will want to marry me because I'm a diabetic."

Sometimes these ideas don't come from others, but from a "past us." At some point, we got hurt or lost something and learned a painful lesson to never let it happen again. We ingrained that decision on a deep, often unconscious level that makes it hard to see it for what it is. So when a situation comes up that seems like the old hurt, we stop ourselves from making a different decision by reacting unconsciously.

It doesn't really matter whether these ideas are from other people or another us - we are not currently running the show. Sometimes the fear is over repeating a past loss, and sometimes it's about not getting something we want in the future. Either way, we respond with a series of reactionary, manipulative behaviors, wasting time and energy combating an imaginary situation.



Sometimes we respond emotionally, which has the same result. Feelings, like experiences, are not bad in and of themselves. Many of us are raised in family or church cultures where emotion is considered weak or embarrassing. In some cases, we are taught that emotion is acceptable as long as it doesn't make anyone else uncomfortable, for example if we're happy or making people laugh.

Emotions are simply energy, driven by chemistry. An experience triggers the release of specific biochemicals in the body, which influence our feelings, which cause the release of other chemicals, which can then influence our thoughts, and so on. It is an enormously complex cascade. Emotion is a normal, healthy part of human life. In fact, the things we value most are emotional experiences - the excitement of love, the feeling of having been of service, the feeling we get when we receive praise. And in case you hadn't noticed, food and eating are very emotional experiences for most people - especially people with diabetes!

Learning to manage emotion can be challenging. It comes close to instinct and happens quickly inside of us, making it hard to intercede. Managing reactionary thoughts and wild emotions is a practice, just like any other. But it *is* possible, and if you're going to change your habits and patterns, if you're going to shift your Health Loop towards radiant health and away from sickness, you've *got*

to do it.

The Solution

Start to **pay attention to the thoughts that precede poor decisions**. Try to recall the first time you had a particular thought. Is it someone else's idea? If it is yours, is it an old one which doesn't relate to who you are or what you want now? If an idea doesn't align with your current values, **release it** in a way that is clear and memorable, like writing it on paper and burning it. Choose a new idea, and write it down.

It is easy to get caught up in emotions, but we can overcome this reaction with practice. Most of us are aware of a few things in our life that make us angry, and anger is an easy emotion to start practicing with because it's noticeable. **Pick a safe situation**, like a best friend's behavior that "makes" you feel angry, **and start to practice stopping yourself before you unconsciously act on those feelings**. Take a deep breath, count to ten, go to your happy place - whatever works for you. If this feels too difficult, you can start by imagining settings where you get angry, hurt, or embarrassed and stop yourself before your emotions carry you away. Practice over and over, *then* translate that practice to your daily life with safe situations. Visualization is a powerful tool, and your brain can't tell the difference between reality and well-envisioned imagination.

Learning to interrupt your thoughts and feelings before the cascade leads you into unconscious decisions and lousy actions takes practice. Tell loved ones what you are doing so you can practice in safe places with their support.

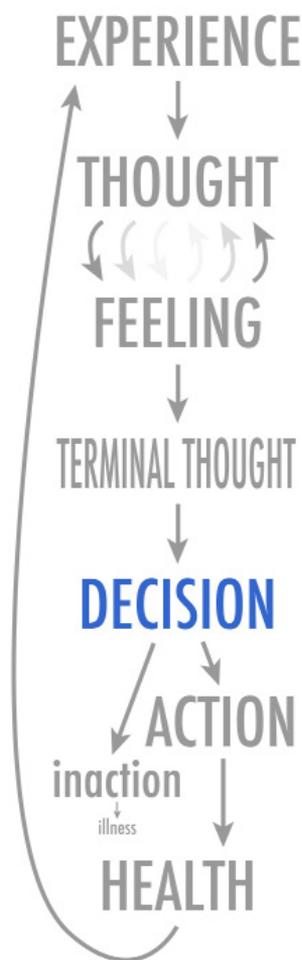
Decisions

In an ideal situation, we relate to an experience as a neutral, impersonal event, interrupt our negative thoughts and feelings, arrive at a logical, conscious terminal thought (*informed by but not driven by* emotion and thoughts about past experiences), and make a pragmatic decision, which empowers us to choose positive actions, resulting in positive outcomes.

Problems

There are two primary challenges in the decision-making process. First, decisions are so closely linked to the thought-emotion cycle that **it can be hard to recognize them as their own step** so we can make different choices. Second, **we are often afraid to make decisions** because we don't want to make the wrong choice. No one likes to make mistakes.

In my work, some clients have insisted that they



can't make different decisions because they happen so quickly. One man even talked about his decisions the way people with alcoholism talk about drinking - he would simply *consider* the idea of having some ice cream and suddenly it was 20 minutes later and he was on the couch with an empty pint container in his lap wondering what happened, as if he'd blacked out.

This happens because the terminal thought often *is* the decision. They are so closely linked that it can be hard to distinguish them. The more fear is involved, the more closely they will seem linked. If the terminal thought is, "I want a new kind of workout so I can quit jogging," we can research it for days before making a decision and taking action because there's little fear involved. If the terminal thought is, "She's going to be furious if she finds me eating apple pie," the decision to try to hide the pie may seem indistinguishable from the terminal thought.

It is also very common to be afraid of making decisions. We don't want to suffer the consequences for making a "wrong" decision, and we don't want to feel dumb or embarrassed. The bad news is that no one ever has, or ever will, live a mistake-free life. It is simply impossible to live without making mistakes.

The Solution

The good news is that there is no such thing as a

mistake. Mistakes are just course-corrective feedback. Mistakes are a natural part of life, just like breathing - and it doesn't make any more sense to get upset about making mistakes than it does to get upset about breathing. I'm not saying you should be thrilled about them, but you can choose to view them as *learning opportunities* that you can use to achieve your goals sooner. Mistakes are only a problem if you view them as bad or wrong. If you *choose to view mistakes as missteps that you can use to learn how to live life more effectively*, then you'll skip the hurt feelings and be able to move into effective action far more quickly.

Recognizing that there is a difference between your terminal thought and your decision is essential. In order to change things, it is also necessary to be emotionally mature and **take personal responsibility for making a decision and for its consequences.** In the example about the pint of ice cream, his turning point came when he acknowledged that, no matter how quickly it was happening, there was a *choice point* where he could make a different decision. It took time and practice to recognize it, to stop himself before he made a decision to eat, but after he had done it *one time* he knew that he *could* do it and had a sense of *how* to do it.

Actions (and Inaction)

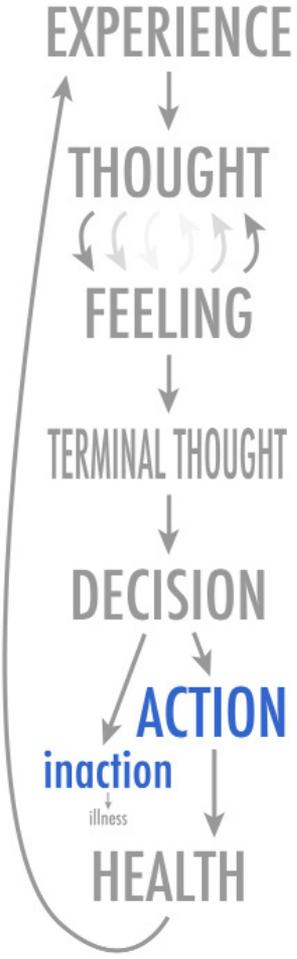
Actions *always* move us forward, because the progression of life, time, and change are inevitable. However, we can move forward in either a positive or a negative direction, and we can do it actively or passively. If we do not actively take responsibility for our life circumstances and our choices, we will tend to move forward passively through inertia, staying stuck in bad habits. This is negative progression that leaves no hope for our goals. We end up, years later, sick, tired, doing the same things we were doing decades ago, and wondering what happened to our life. The path to success is to take active, positive actions that arise from mature, rational decisions. Once a decision is made, there is still an interlude before we take action. This is yet another opportunity to evaluate our decision and how we arrived at it and to change course if needed.

Problems

There are a few potential problems at the action level. The first problem is **procrastinating or choosing not to take action** out of fear of the outcome. The second problem is **taking the wrong action**, which can come from lack of information, resources, practice, or experience. The third is having our actions not produce the desired result because of **external factors**.

Procrastinating is a normal part of human experience. For some people, it is an unhealthy habit that severely limits opportunities and prevents health or dreams from coming to fruition. Sometimes *laziness* causes procrastination. Far more often, it is fear of making a mistake, of having our attempts fail, or even fear of getting what we want. Part of us, often called *the ego*, doesn't know what a new reality will look like and is afraid we can't handle it - even when that reality is likely to be a good change. So we stay in the comfort of our pattern, even when it's a dangerous or unhealthy one. We decide on inaction. As Geddy Lee once sang, "If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice."

Sometimes, we fall short of our goal because we take the wrong actions or incomplete ones. This is a normal part of life and happens less as we practice and master a process such as managing our blood sugar. Sometimes we do everything right, but some outside factor



interferes with our excellent plan, such as a waiter serving regular soda instead of diet soda.

The Solution

Depending on the cause of procrastination, the solution varies. If laziness is the motive, you can change perspective to motivate yourself: **conscious, active, positive actions are far less work** than dealing with complications like hospitalization, blindness, amputations, wheelchairs, dialysis sessions, and the guilt and complexity of having others care for you. Taking care of yourself today, making healthy choices now, *is* the easier, softer way for those of us who are lazy!

Fear of failure, a common cause of procrastination, is 100% a matter of perspective. How you choose to talk to yourself about the experience makes it a failure or a success. **If you think of an unsuccessful attempt as a failure, then you've failed.** If you think of an unsuccessful attempt as a learning experience, you've succeeded. If you trust yourself and have a positive outlook, you will celebrate your efforts, look at what you learned about the process, and feel better prepared to succeed on the next attempt.

Taking the wrong action is usually due to a lack of information, commitment, or resources. The internet is a great resource for gathering information and finding support groups. It's incredibly easy to **use**

a forum like the one at ThrivingDiabetics.com to find information, compare your experiences with others', ask for help, or even to find a mentor who has a similar lifestyle but has managed diabetes much longer than you.

As for external factors, anyone who has said that you can control your life was kidding you - and him or herself. We have control over only one thing: our reactions to events. We do have *influence* over much in our lives, but the unexpected and the uncontrollable are unavoidable. **Coming to acceptance** about this - both conceptually *and* each time the unexpected happens, each day - will allow you to make calmer, more rational decisions about what actions to take when these things arise.

Putting It All Together

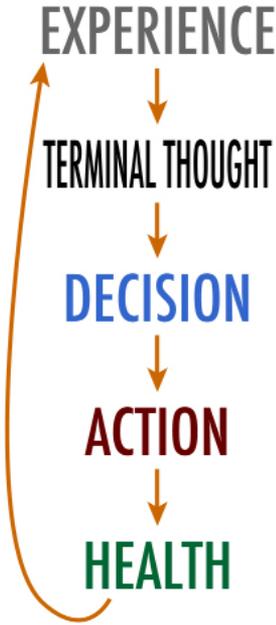
Start simply, and if it feels overwhelming in any way, ask for support. Ask a spouse or a parent or a friend, or join our forums at www.ThrivingDiabetics.com where we can connect with each other and you can meet hundreds of others with diabetes who have overcome the same things you're feeling and struggling with right now.

Start paying attention, and then pick one pattern to try to change. As you increase your awareness, you'll find that some of these patterns have unhealthy results that you don't like. These will be the easiest to start working on. Pick one that seems like you can handle it; *don't* pick the most challenging one. Even though you'll get more leverage with those, if you're new to this work, it's wiser to start with one a less "loaded" one.

Once you pick an unhealthy, unconscious pattern, look at what kinds of experiences get you into the pattern to see if you can avoid them. As is said to people with alcoholism, "If you don't take the first drink, you won't get drunk." If your unhealthy pattern is eating an entire pint of ice cream, avoid the experience by not buying it in the first place.

If the experiences aren't avoidable, then acknowledge that it isn't the *experience* that causes your problem: it's your *reaction* to it. The

experience is not good, and it is not bad. Notice that you're giving it meaning based on something that happened a long time ago which clouds your vision. The good news is you can change your reaction, and for good.



Begin to look at your irrational thoughts and negative emotions related to the experience or pattern, and try to identify a "terminal thought" that you can change. See if the thought is true for you, right here and now. Is this something a parent taught you to think? Is this something you decided fifteen years ago that was based in hurt and doesn't help you anymore? Renegotiate the thought, and commit to it.

Are the negative emotions a direct response to the irrational thought? If so, did changing your mind calm the emotional reactivity? If not, start to practice calming your reaction, either with a loved one or in your imagination. Visualize yourself in these experiences coming to a calm, emotionally-unburdened, rational terminal thought.

Make a clear mental transition to a *decision* that will support you in your goal of radiant health. Practice

acknowledging that space between your terminal thought and your decision, and really awakening to it. The more aware you are of that moment, the more empowered you'll be going forward. Commit to it fearlessly, knowing the worst that could happen is you'll learn something about how to be more successful in future attempts.

Consciously identify the active, positive actions you need to take - including gathering more information or support before taking action. Support is *all* around you in family, friends, dozens of support groups, and hundreds of self-actualization books. The internet can put you in touch with tens of thousands of people doing the same things who want to give and receive support.

Once you've caught yourself *before* the reaction *one time*, a whole new world will open to you. Once you've shifted that one pattern, then you'll know you can do it. You'll have a new reference point for how you can feel, about the freedom and power of choice in the moment. You'll have a new reference point for the fact that *you can do it*. Then come back to the forums and share your success with us. Support someone else who is just starting.

Achieve more energy, enthusiasm, and health. Feel great, then check the next steps towards your goal, knowing that the success you've just made (no matter how small you may *tell* yourself they are) are

a *huge step* and will make every step from here on *easier*, because you know this *works*, you feel *better*, and *you can do it!*

The key is to be aware in the present moment - *every* moment. The more you can practice this, the better able you'll be to see challenging experiences coming. You'll be able to avoid conditioned thought-emotion loops that lead you to reactionary decisions, inaction, negative actions, and lousy outcomes.

This kind of practice can be challenging for those who haven't done any work in self-development. Looking at yourself honestly can be uncomfortable, even scary. Admitting you're not perfect and acknowledging that you are reacting to things that happened years ago can both feel shameful.

The reality is everyone starts in the same place. You can overcome it. There is nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about. However, walking through the world this way - fearful, reactionary, and unconscious - costs us a lot. There is a healthier, happier, more honest and effective way of being.

I've spent twenty years learning about these mechanisms. I've been through every lousy and hurtful habit and have even cherished some for decades before I finally decided I wanted to be free of them because they were quite literally killing

me. I've gone from a place of shame, fear, hurt, and defensiveness, living a dark and depressing life with awful diabetic complications, to a place of hope, freedom, clarity, effectiveness, and health.

If I can do it, *anyone* can. *You* can. I *guarantee* it.

You can't imagine riding a bike without your training wheels until you get your balance. Once you do, you *know* how.

Soon you'll be riding with no hands....

Be well,

Matthew

My gratitude and special thanks to:
Greta and Jimmy for their love and service;
J-R, John, Ron and Mary for their example;
Susan and Carole for their faith;
and to my Lor for everything.

If you enjoyed this book or found the content helpful or
encouraging, please share it - others may need it...



For a free consultation or to share questions or
comments, please email Dr. Matthew at
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