A large, vibrant teal watercolor splash dominates the upper half of the page, with numerous smaller splatters radiating outwards. A white circle is centered within the splash, containing the title text.

*the*  
**WISE  
BRAIN**  
*bulletin*

**NEWS AND TOOLS FOR  
HAPPINESS, LOVE, AND WISDOM**

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*Volume 15,5 • October 2021*

# FROM STRIVING TO THRIVING

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In graduate school, I had a sticker on my water bottle that said, "My thighs carry me up the mountain." I was researching Dialectical Behavior Therapy for eating disorders at the time, and spent most of my days with young women who were doing everything society had told them to do to be successful. Yet, they were coming to treatment because their lives were miserable. These women were Olympians of unhealthy striving. Often, I would point to the sticker and ask clients, "I wonder what would happen if you harnessed the energy you put into battling your body, and turned it toward what you really care about? What mountains would you want to climb if you were free to choose?"

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, many of us are contemplating our own mountains. What seemed vital two years ago can feel less important in the context of current times. With growth mindsets, we might ask ourselves, what are we striving for and where do we want to place our precious energy?

As a woman in eating disorder recovery myself, I have had a long-term, ambivalent



relationship with striving. Striving has served me well (you don't get a Ph.D. without a healthy dose of persistence). However, when used in an unhealthy way, it leads me to become self-focused, psychologically rigid and stuck in cycles of doing more while never feeling like I am doing enough.

When we strive to avoid uncomfortable emotions, follow our minds' inflexible rules, or base our self-worth on external achievements, we get caught in a modern-day samsara of meaningless drive.

As the pandemic pounds on, I've been wondering how we harness our steadfastness and "gumption", as [Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith](#) would say, without getting caught in the unhealthy aspects of striving? How can we flexibly turn our efforts toward cultivating purpose-driven goals that benefit the greater whole? In other words, how can we move [from striving to thriving?](#)

I've turned to [third wave psychology](#) and personal experience for some answers.

## The Striving Brain

Striving is neither inherently good nor bad. I liked Rick Hanson's definition of striving as, "sustained effort, typically in the face of resistance" when we discussed the topic. To survive as a species, we need to strive at times.

Evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote a 1973 essay called "Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution." Not a whole lot in psychology makes sense either except in the light of evolution. According to Paul Gilbert, founder of Compassion Focused Therapy, every human being has evolved to accomplish three tasks: (1) to seek out resources, (2) to avoid threats, and (3) to rest and recuperate. We are the ancestors of those who were successful at finding food and a mate, avoiding the saber-toothed tiger, and resting in safety with others.

But there's an evolutionary mismatch between our old brain and our modern times that makes this trickier today. Our drive and threat systems are overstimulated

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every time we pick up our phones. Additionally, deep restoration and safety in community is difficult for many of us in the face of racial oppression, pandemic stress, climate change, and deep political divide.



Striving is perpetuated when our brain's reward system is stimulated with positive and negative reinforcers. When we achieve "likes" on Facebook or praise for a better body, dopamine is released into the Nucleus Accumbens to signal reward. This also signals us to remember what we did so we will do it again (positive reinforcement). Neuroscientist Matt Johnson spoke with me on the Psychologists Off the Clock podcast about his book [Blindsight](#) on the neuroscience of marketing. He explained that Dopamine is a "wanting" neurohormone, not a "having" one. Dopamine creates craving-for-more. In [The Craving Mind](#), Jud Brewer argues this type of reward-based learning can lead us to become addicted to pretty much anything, including ourselves.

The same brain areas that light up with pleasurable stimuli are activated when we successfully avoid discomfort. When striving helps us sidestep uncomfortable feelings like anxiety, not fitting in, or not measuring up, our reward pathways are activated again. This negatively reinforces us to keep at it, even if it makes these feelings worse in the long run.

The human mind complicates things with language. As language evolved, so too did the mind which solves problems, mentally forecasts, simulates, compares, and creates "shoulds" and expectations for ourselves and others. Inflexible rules like "I should be *married...done with school...retired by now*" or "I have to do it *perfectly...have enough time...be ready to start a project*" become blocks to being effective. Steve Hayes, ACT co-founder, describes in [A Liberated Mind](#): "Our remarkable allegiance to verbal rules is a major contributor to psychological inflexibility. We follow them so strictly that we never deviate even when they are making our problems worse—sometimes horribly worse" (p. 84). Many of our belief systems around striving and achievement developed while in education systems that rewarded outcome over process, and families who used criticizing, shaming and pointing out mistakes to motivate.

Battling our unhelpful rules and “shoulds” is one option. But trying to control thoughts can also make them worse. The paradox of control is: the more you try and control what you don't want to feel and think, the more likely you are to feel and think it. Research on this paradox of thought control dates back to the 80s with Daniel Wegner's classic White Bear study demonstrating the “ironic process theory”. Try to not think about a white bear and your mind starts monitoring for it. Try to not think about one of your *shoulds*, and the more likely it will harass you.

The reward pathways associated with striving are old and powerful. Our mind's rules and shoulds can be well-worn and convincing. A mismatched mind can lead us to avoid uncomfortable feelings, pursue goals that lack meaning, or keep us stuck in rules, shoulds and unrelenting standards. It's not our fault that our “tricky” brains get hooked in these unhelpful loops.

But it is our responsibility to train our minds to chart a different path—one that is more satisfying and purpose-driven in the long run.



## Creative Hopelessness

Early in the pandemic when the stress of working motherhood and being a therapist was taking its toll, I noticed my unhealthy striving cycle rearing its head. Despite exhaustion, I found myself working more, comparing myself to others, and becoming increasingly rigid.

**My frenemy was back.** So, I sat down and wrote a list of signs of stressful striving I was seeing in myself and my clients.

- Doing more but never feeling like I do enough
- Competing with people who don't have the same goals as I do
- Neglecting important domains of my life to get ahead
- Listening to my mind like it's a drill sergeant
- Being exhausted and burnt out
- Reaching achievements and goals but still feeling dissatisfied
- Meeting others obligations instead of meeting my own
- Neglecting my body's needs
- Living out of alignment with my deepest values

When clients come to therapy stuck in behaviors not working for them, I often start with *creative hopelessness*.

It may sound like an unusual way to launch therapy, but creative hopelessness is a powerful tool in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) that opens the door to change. With creative hopelessness you take an honest look at your attempts to control and avoid your inner experiences and the costs of that avoidance. You make contact with the unworkability of your behavior (that's the hopelessness part) and consider the possibility of living differently (let's get creative!).

In ACT, creative hopelessness exposes our roundabouts of attachment and avoidance, and cultivates willingness to take the exit ramp.

The first step in creative hopelessness is to get curious about your striving cycle. [Curiosity just may be our superpower](#), according to Dr. Jud. Curiosity helps us approach unworkable habits with an open, non-judgmental mind so that we can see our cycles clearly enough to step out of them.

Like most behaviors, stressful striving often follows a predictable pattern of trigger→behavior→result. For example:

- *Triggers:* uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, or sensations such as thoughts that you aren't doing enough, feelings of anxiety, or craving for status, perfection, certainty, or control
- *Behaviors:* avoid these thoughts and feelings by staying busy, fixing yourself, procrastinating or striving to get ahead
- *Results:* in the short-term feel relief from uncomfortable thoughts and feelings and feel in control; in the long-term feel regret, burned out, and disconnected from your values.

Our brains tend to pay more attention to short-term rewards over long-term consequences. Creative hopelessness highlights the negative long-term costs of our avoidance behavior so that our brains learn it is not what we truly want. We become aware of the point of diminishing returns of our avoidance so we can freely choose a different route.

To cultivate creative hopelessness ask yourself these questions:

1. What inner experience am I trying to control/fix/avoid in my unhealthy striving?
2. What are the short and long-term costs of my avoidance and control?
3. If I harness the energy I put towards unhealthy striving and turn it toward what I care about, what would I choose?



## The Righting Reflex

Often when we feel ready to change a behavior, we approach it with a “fixing” mindset. We see something is wrong and we want to set things right. I remember a conversation I had with Stephan Rollnick, the co-developer of Motivational Interviewing (MI) about how the “righting reflex” often backfires. MI is a widely used, evidence-based treatment for motivating change, that is effective for substance use, athletes, even hostage negotiation. Dr. Rollnick told a story about trying to convince his 8 year old not to wear muddy shoes. The more convincing he did, the more his child argued the other side. Even he gets caught in the paradox of control sometimes! Co-founder of ACT, Kelly Wilson, reminds therapists this in [Mindfulness for Two](#), when he suggests that people are not problems to be solved, but sunsets to be appreciated.



Humans can be ambivalent about making change, and we often have a part of ourselves that wants to change and a part that doesn't. When we feel pushed to change, we inevitably argue against it. This resistance to change can also happen in our relationship with ourselves.

Seeing ourselves as broken and needing fixing, can send us onto a whole other striving cycle of self-improvement, undermining our own intrinsic motivation and learning. The “subtle aggression of self-improvement,” as meditation teacher Bob Sharpley has termed it, tends to cause more harm than good.



We can learn a lot from Motivational Interviewing about how to approach change in ourselves. The spirit of MI is grounded in partnership, compassion, acceptance, and freedom to choose, and the counselor uses a communication style of affirmation, reflection, and collaborative exchange. Shifting from an aggressive relationship with ourselves, towards a more accepting, compassionate, patient, and encouraging one is the secret to motivating ourselves. Accepting that we are ambivalent about change and affirming the goodness of our intentions, supports us in letting go of the rope when we are in a tug of war within.

## Letting Go

If you have been gripping something for a long time, it's uncomfortable to let go. Sometimes I have clients hold a pen in their fist as tightly as they can for about a minute and then slowly let it go. At first, their hand feels crampy and curled, and it takes a while for it to unfurl again. Choosing to let go of attachment and avoidance as our coping strategies and accepting our inner experience can feel a little crampy at first. But eventually it is liberating to find that with your hand freed up, it can do a lot more things you care about.



I learned this firsthand during my second year of graduate school when, once again, I was in the samsara of striving. Only 1% of applicants are accepted into Clinical Psychology programs, and like many high achieving institutions, they are a breeding ground for unhealthy strivers. It didn't take long for me to slip into old patterns of control, perfectionism, and overdoing. Although I didn't have words for it yet, I intuitively knew I was "hooked" like a fish swimming in a stream getting caught and pulled in the wrong direction. I made a bold choice to withdraw from my program. I still remember the courage I needed to call my advisor and tell her I had to leave graduate school to support my own recovery. Freed from unhealthy striving, I chose to study yoga at the Eldorado Mountain Yoga ashram in Boulder, Colorado. It was there that I learned about Aparigraha—the last yama in Patanjali's Eight Limbs of Yoga.

The yamas are ethical guidelines by which to live in relationship to yourself and others. Patanjali's yamas include:

- Ahimsa: non-violence
- Satya: honesty
- Asteya: non-stealing
- Brahmacharya: right use of energy
- Aparigraha: letting go of attachment

Shifting unhealthy striving takes *satya* to notice when we are hooked, and *aparigraha* to surrender our attachment to control. It was only through letting go that I was able to return the following year to graduate school and redirect my research towards mindfulness and acceptance-based interventions for eating disorders. I sought mentorship with Debra Safer at Stanford University, and began finding my way toward a more skillful form of striving—striving to help others who, like me, were stuck in a hole and digging themselves deeper.

Letting go of unhealthy striving often involves making contact with the discomfort that has been driving our doing. Acceptance does not mean you have to like something, approve of it, allow for harm, or resign. Acceptance is the willingness to turn toward your current experience, and make space for it. When we let go of trying to control our inner experience through striving, we make room to choose our values instead.

Practicing acceptance requires turning towards unwanted thoughts and feelings with courage - a "handshake with beautiful monsters," as Tsokny Rinpoche teaches. When we gently turn toward and open ourselves to our full experience, as opposed to trying to fix it, we may find that acceptance offers us gifts, such as freedom, peace, understanding and deeper meaning.

### **Choosing Values**

When you look back on your life so far, what has mattered most to you? If you could meet your future self, looking at your life right now, what would they say matters now? What does it mean to you to have a rich and meaningful life? What if you strove for what you really care about, instead of avoiding discomfort or pursuing pleasure, status or unimportant goals? These are some of the questions I grapple with in therapy and in my own life.

Values are the glue cementing our daily actions to something greater than ourselves and our struggles. When talking with clients about values, they often say, "I value my health" or "I value

my family."Your health, your family, your career are domains in which you *live* your values. Values are the qualities of action you bring to those domains that create meaning; qualities like kindness, inclusivity, and responsibility. What type of mother, friend, employee do you want to be? What would you say brought you the most meaning at the end of your day? Values are not goals with ends. Instead, values provide a direction to guide you and are deeply personal.

Living your values is a lot like playing a guitar. The strings are the domains of your life, and your values are how you play them. Like a guitar, our values frequently get out of tune. Similar to a musician tuning a guitar, tuning your values is a never-ending life process. Tuning-up takes awareness—listening in and noticing feelings of regret or discrepancy. Are you acting in ways that don't line up with the type of person you want to be in the world?

Choosing to strive toward values is also intrinsically motivating. According to Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's self-determination theory, you are more likely to be motivated to change and grow when you have autonomy, competence, and connection. Freedom to choose your values, as opposed to them being chosen for you, is central to motivation and change.

Values inspire us to stay committed to what we care about even when life challenges us. Unlike rules, values are flexible and are actions you can take in the here and now, not something we achieve in the future.

We are often caught in the trap of saying "I'll feel better when...".



Clients will frequently tell me, “I’ll feel better when...”:

- School is over
- I find my life’s partner
- I’m less anxious
- I lose weight
- Life gets back to normal
- My kids sleep through the night

Values are not about waiting for a future point when you feel better. In fact, as Steve Hayes shared with me on *Psychologists Off the Clock*, the goal isn’t necessarily to “feel better” but to “get better at feeling”. Discomfort and uncertainty are part of being human, and you are even more likely to experience discomfort when you pursue things that are meaningful to you such as parenting, intimate relationships or playing big.

Happiness researchers Oishi and Westgate (2020) have explored the question: What does it mean to have a good life? They outlined three dimensions of happiness:

1. Hedonic well-being: pleasantness, comfort, safety and stability
2. Eudaemonic well-being: purpose, meaning and devotion
3. Psychological Richness: interest, variety of perspectives, and novelty

All three dimensions of happiness contribute to a well-lived life. And although research shows having more money may correlate with the first type of happiness (comfort and pleasure), it is less associated with happiness that comes from having purpose, meaning and curiosity. Living your values, stepping outside of your comfort zone, and embracing vulnerability are uncomfortable at times. However, by doing so you can cultivate a more meaningful and psychologically-rich life.

### **Committed Action**

In the summer of 2020, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Helen Neville, an author on the [APA's Guidelines on Race and Ethnicity in Psychology](#) and founder of the [Psychology of Radical Healing Collective](#). That interview changed my perspective on what it means to strive. In preparation for the interview, I poured over the APA Guidelines only to find that many of them started with the word “strive.” Some examples of the guidelines are “Psychologists strive to recognize and engage the influence of race and ethnicity in all aspects of professional activities as an ongoing process” and “Psychologists strive for awareness of their own positionality in relation to ethnicity and race.”

These guidelines are aspirational in nature and demonstrate the “good kind of striving.” When I asked Dr. Neville to be interviewed, she asked me if she could bring other members from the Radical Healing Collective with her as a whole group interview. Dr. Neville described how they work collectively with no one member at the helm—writing papers, generating ideas. As a whole, they have a common ambition of radical hope and healing for people of color. When our aspirations and efforts turn toward a collective good, such as striving for social justice, to end climate change, for housing the unhoused, for mentally healthy kids, for our own recovery from addiction, for kindness and compassion, these are different kinds of striving.

During the same summer in which I wrote my signs of unhealthy striving, I began a list of what it looks like to move from striving to thriving. Here are a few items on my list:

- Setting goals based on your values
- Prioritizing important domains of your life
- Pausing to take perspective on yourself and others
- Being present and working hard
- Balancing effort with surrender
- Having wholesome purposes
- Taking time off, even if you feel guilty
- Setting clear boundaries
- Using effort to benefit the greater whole
- Choosing cooperation over competition
- Enjoying your life



In ACT, committed action is taking action, toward your values, even in the face of obstacles. Committed action is also about compassion toward yourself as you make mistakes, get out of tune, and tune-up over and over again. Committed action takes our striving habit loop and turns it into a values-rich one. The triggers may remain the same (anxiety, unhelpful thoughts, urges) but we respond to them differently, by pausing, getting present, and choosing our values. The long-term consequence is a life that has meaning and richness. It's a life we can feel proud of at the end of the day.

## Thriving with Psychological Flexibility

Putting it all together, to shift from *striving* to *thriving*, requires psychological flexibility: the ability to open up and allow for your inner experience, to choose what matters most in the present moment, and to act on that choice. Psychological flexibility is associated with better mental health, persistence in maintaining health goals, family cohesion, and work and athletic performance. During the pandemic, psychological flexibility has been associated with less spillover effects of stress on kids, less marital discord, and lower depression and anxiety associated with pandemic stress.

Moving from *striving* to *thriving* is a collective venture. Much like bees who link legs and “festoon” to move toward hard-to-reach places as they build their honeycomb, we are being challenged as a species to tackle what seem like impossible tasks. If we can harness our striving for the good, put our efforts where our values are, and practice compassion with ourselves and each other in the process, this will give us an opportunity to step into the realm of possibility.



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Diana Hill, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist and co-author of [\*ACT Daily Journal: Get unstuck and live fully with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy\*](#). She is a co-host of the popular podcast, *Psychologists Off the Clock* podcast and offers regular teachings in compassion and ACT through InsightLA and Mindful Heart Programs. Through her [online teachings](#), executive coaching, clinical supervision, and private therapy practice Diana encourages clients to build psychological flexibility so that they can live more meaningful and fulfilling lives. Diana practices

what she preaches in her daily life as a mom of two, homesteader, and yoga teacher. Follow her on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (@drdianahill) to get tools to build psychological flexibility into your daily life.

# TO THE MOON

For years I took you  
for granted. Too busy,  
I passed you by.

Now, I note  
each shape and shift  
and seek your presence.

Sheer morning moon,  
you are a translucent wafer  
I taste in communion.

When your comma  
punctuates the sky,  
I pause.

Your full splendor  
dissolves daily issues—  
melts me into the moment.

Spirit spotlight, your glow  
holds me. I stand, stare,  
and settle into silence.

You reflect my life,  
how I cycle and change,  
grow dark and then renew.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jeanie Greensfelder, a retired psychologist, volunteers as a bereavement counselor at Hospice of San Luis Obispo, CA. She served as the San Luis Obispo County poet laureate in 2017,18. Her books are [Biting the Apple](#), [Marriage and Other Leaps of Faith](#), and [I Got What I Came For](#). Her poem, "First Love," was featured on Garrison Keillor's Writers' Almanac. Other poems are at American Life in Poetry, in anthologies, and in journals. She seeks to understand herself and others on this shared journey. View more poems at [jeaniegreensfelder.com](http://jeaniegreensfelder.com).

# BECOMING EXPERTS ON EACH OTHER

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Adapted from [Baby Bomb: A Relationship Survival Guide for New Parents](#), by Kara Hoppe and Stan Tatkin (New Harbinger, 2021)

Have you ever had a moment where you watched your partner just spin out? You see them get triggered when you're not, and you have a split-second choice: am I going to help them calm down or am I going to get triggered too? Speaking about the relationship between my husband and me, Stan Tatkin (creator of the Psychobiological Approach to Couple Therapy) always said, "You and Charlie are in each other's care." In fact, when I first learned from Stan about how nervous-system regulation can be helpful for couples, he used a computer-generated picture of two stick figures, side by side, each composed entirely of a vast network of nerves. No bones or skin; just nerves. It was a nerdy image, but the point was clear: we humans relate to each other through our nervous systems. You and your partner are, in essence, two nervous systems interacting. That might sound funny, but it also gives rise to some tools I think you'll find useful.





Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the nervous system is how little attention we tend to pay to it. You might take stock of how you feel—how happy or sad or mad you are—but do you take stock of the state of your nervous system? In fact, the primary way you experience your emotions is through your nervous system. When you're happy, for example, your nervous system might have a pleasant balance for tranquil and excited energy. When you're angry at your partner, your nervous system is likely to be highly excited. However, it will also be highly excited when you are sexually aroused or when you see your partner after a week-long business trip. Similarly, your nervous system will be low energy when you are sad or depressed, as well as when you are cozy in bed and about to drop off to sleep. In short, although you experience emotions through your nervous system, there isn't a one-on-one correspondence between what you feel and the state of your nervous system. The nervous system is putting out data every second of every day, but those data are only as valuable as your ability to recognize and use them.

The nervous system is more intricate than we can—or need to—discuss here. For the purpose of learning to work with your partner, it is helpful to consider the functioning of the nervous system on a continuum. Picture a linear continuum that runs between calm on one end and excited on the other. Neither state is “wrong” or “bad.” There are moments to be calm and moments to be excited; moments to be low energy and moments to be high energy.

Where on this continuum would you place yourself right now? Yesterday? Most typically?

### **Sherlocking**

In *Wired for Dating*, Stan talks about *sherlocking* as a skill you can develop to vet a potential mate and then subsequently use as you build a long-lasting intimate partnership. Sherlocking—named for the expert detective work of Sherlock Holmes—is based on the nervous system “tells” through which we nonverbally communicate how we are doing at any given moment. These tells can provide clues about where we are on the nervous-system continuum at that moment and whether we might want to either raise or lower our energy level.



Being aware of your partner's tells is an important step to becoming experts on each other. There are probably as many tells as there are people in the world, but the tells most helpful for your work with your partner involve the face, eyes, mouth, voice, posture, and movements and gestures.



Charlie and I have compiled our own dictionary of tells. For example, when he is bummed out, he keeps his eyes down and resists eye contact. His face loses color and becomes less animated. He also becomes more quiet in general, and when he does speak, his voice is low and soft. I often cry when I'm sad, and my face can have a droopy expression, with my lower lip protruding. On my own, I might not have noticed that about myself; however, Charlie's observations ring true for me. He also says my voice is softer and childlike, and my posture becomes more hunched when I'm feeling down. Sharing our observations with each other makes it easier to be aware of our own nervous-system tells.

Over the next week, pay close attention to your partner's tells. Think of yourself as sherlocking—that is, playing detective with respect to your partner's tells. This will be most fun if your partner knows what you're doing and is on board with it, and even more fun if your partner is also playing detective with respect to your tells.

Here are some tips to make sure the exercise runs smoothly.

**Ease into it.** Start by focusing on observations of normal daily tells, rather than tells during times of high stress. You don't want to make your partner feel you're putting them under an unwanted microscope. So go slow. As you both get more comfortable with this process, add in times of stress or conflict.

**Resist interpretations.** This exercise can run off the rails quickly if either you or your partner make assumptions about the tells you are observing. For example, "You bit your lip; that must mean you're holding something back from me." Or "You're tapping your foot; that means you don't want to hear what I'm saying." Instead of making interpretations, check out what your partner is or was actually feeling.

**Accept what you observe.** At this stage, you and your partner are not trying to change or manage each other. We'll get into that later. For now, concentrate only on observing and checking out with each other what you have observed.

**Compile a dictionary of tells.** As you and your partner compare your sherlocking notes with one another, build a knowledge base together. Continue to observe and learn about each other. Get to the point where you can say, "When I do X, it means I'm probably feeling Y" or "When you see me do X, it probably means I need Y." In this way, you will become experts on each other.

### The Coregulation Game

Once you have spent a while learning each other's tells and growing your expertise on each other, you and your partner will be ready to move into the next stage and actively help each other. This involves using both your tells and your knowledge of where you fall on the nervous-system continuum. The beauty of the mercurial quality of the nervous system is that it invites us to change or modulate it—that is, to regulate it. You can learn to regulate your own nervous system, and you and your partner can learn to help coregulate each other. I



like to think of the latter as the “coregulation game.” The way you play this game is to play for two winners. Your goal is to help each other move to a place on the continuum that is more comfortable for both of you.

Here is a framework for the coregulation game.

**The coregulation game relies on teamwork.** Yes, you can and should know how to regulate your own nervous system, but having your partner on your team is an extra resource. If you’re feeling worked up or down in the dumps, your partner may become aware of aspects of your nervous system functioning that you are not, and they can help get you out of a rut that’s harder to get out of by yourself.

**Plan in advance how you and your partner will play the coregulation game.** You and your partner need to learn about, discuss, and plan in advance how you want to play the coregulation game with each other. Trying to coregulate each other in the heat of the moment, without having clarified what feels good to each of you, is likely to backfire. Use the exercises in this chapter to guide you in exploration and preplanning.



**Regulation needs can take different forms.** Our nervous system doesn’t always produce a giant explosion (as mine did!); sometimes it’s a more muted version of anger or excitement—for example, it might take the form of withdrawal, collapse, or shame. Most often, the coregulation game will involve one of you calming or soothing the other when they become agitated. However, there may be times when one of you has low energy, and the other can help activate that energy. **You are your partner’s ally at all times.** Regulating your partner’s nervous system should never involve opposing or ignoring your partner’s feelings. Meet your partner wherever they’re at, without criticizing or finding fault. You are your partner’s caretaker until they’re able to think clearly again.

**Calling a stop.** Your partner can call a stop at any point they feel unsafe or unsure, and you must *immediately* honor that stop.

## **Tending to Your Twosome**

Let me introduce you to a couple who could benefit from the ability to regulate each other's nervous systems during stressful times. You will see two scenarios. In the first scenario, the partners have no awareness of their own or each other's nervous system. In the second scenario, they are transforming themselves into experts on each other by reading their tells and managing their nervous systems. As you read, try to identify as many nervous-system tells as you can.

### **Alice and Brett**

"So ... I lost our baby," Alice says, after hanging up the phone with her doctor. Her face is pale, and her lower lip trembles as she sits on the couch and looks across the room at Brett, who is busy answering emails on his phone. "It was so hard to get pregnant in the first place. I don't think I have it in me to try again."

"Alice, you can't think that way. You have to stay strong. We'll give it another go in a couple of months." Brett looks at her briefly, then turns back to his emails. Inside, he's crushed too, but he doesn't think it would help Alice to know.

She begins to cry quietly, staring at her feet. It feels like her whole world is caving in. When she looks up and sees Brett still on his phone, she feels herself sinking even lower.

Brett senses Alice looking at him and glances up. He tells himself, *Now is not the time to be sad. I don't want to think about all the pregnancy losses we've had. I'm sick of it.*

Alice sees him looking at her and says, "What if we *never* become parents?"

That's just what Brett doesn't want to hear. "Stop it!" he snaps. "Don't even go there. We'll get pregnant again. We'll have our baby." He can feel his own distress building, so he says, "I'm going for a run. Be back in thirty or so." With that, he heads upstairs to get his running gear. His mind is racing as he laces his shoes. *I have to get out of here*, he thinks.

As he heads out the door, he gives Alice a peck on the cheek. "I love you. We'll find a way. Our baby is still out there."

Alice doesn't say anything. She sits motionless, feeling abandoned, her breathing shallow, streaks of tears on her cheeks.

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Pregnancy loss is hard and painful. Instead of noticing that Alice's nervous system has plummeted to the low-energy end of the continuum and that she isn't able to lift herself up, Brett focused on his own nervous system and his need to buoy himself. He forgot that she is in his care and that if her nervous system drops, their partnership tanks along with it. Let's see them try this again.

Alice's phone rings, and she sees it's her doctor. She calls out to Brett, "The doctor's calling."

He rushes over to Alice. They sit on the couch, side by side, and he reaches for her hand as she answers the phone. As Alice listens to the doctor, Brett keeps his eyes on her face. He notices her nodding, her face growing pale, and her eyes welling up with tears. He squeezes her hand to let her know he's right there with her.

"Okay. I understand," she says finally. "Thanks, doctor."

When Alice hangs up, she doesn't have to say anything, because Brett already realizes it's bad news. He turns Alice's body toward him and puts his arms around her. He knows this is what she wants him to do.

"I'm so sad," Alice says through tears.

"I know, baby. I right here with you."

They remain quietly holding each other. Brett can hear Alice crying and feel her jagged breathing. He gently rubs her back, soothing her. He feels his own anxiety and grief, but right now he's more focused on what Alice needs.

Alice feels the first big wave of emotion begin to recede. Brett's hand on her back is comforting, and she lets out a sigh as she pulls back from their embrace to look at him. She can see his eyebrows pinching, the way they do when he's holding in feelings. "I know this is hard for you too," she says.

He nods.

"Do you want to talk?" she offers.

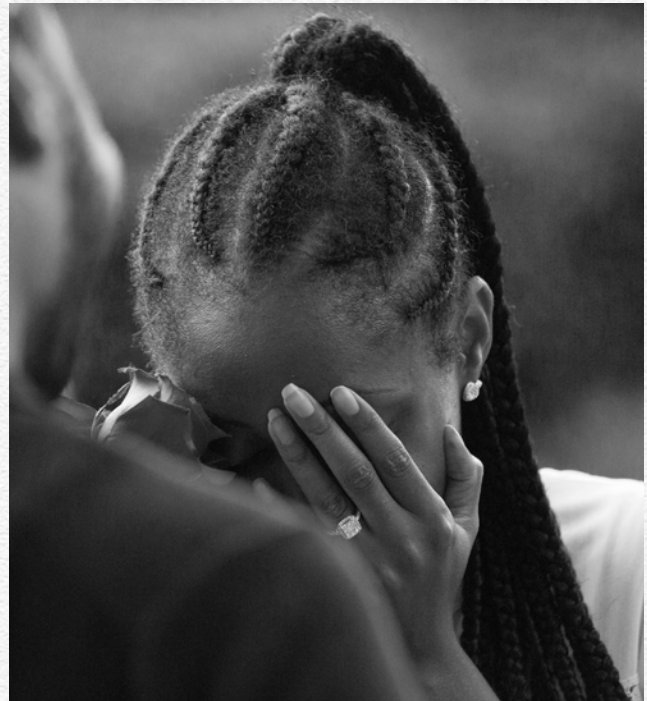
Brett wipes a couple of tears from Alice's face.

"Thanks. I'd like that. But I think I need to go for a little walk first."

"Do you want company?"

"No, thanks. I need to alone. That is, if you'll be okay for thirty minutes or so?"

"Absolutely. And if you change your mind, I'm just a text away."



In this scenario, Brett leaned in to Alice's discomfort from the beginning. He took note of her tells and tended to her nervous system, meeting her where she was, without letting his own worries about their ability to become pregnant and carry a baby to term get in the way. He understood her need was greater in that moment, and there would be time for his feelings as well. Brett's support allowed Alice's grief to move through her nervous system. By regulating her nervous system, Brett helped lift Alice's energy so she could in turn support him. Being experts on each other made all the difference during a time when they both needed each other deeply.



## Conclusion

I have covered some tools you can use with your partner as you become experts on each other—tools you just saw Alice and Brett model nicely in their do-over scenario. I suggest you and your partner begin by noticing where your respective nervous systems fall on the continuum between calm and excited. Practice this day to day, moment to moment, as it is continually fluctuating. Honing your sherlocking skills will help you identify and even learn to predict these fluctuations. Finally, get your coregulation game on. I presented it as an exercise, and that's a good way to start, but once you get going, see if you can integrate it into your daily lives so you can avoid having to watch each other get triggered and spin out, and can instead rest securely in each other's care.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Kara Hoppe, MA, MFT**, is a psychotherapist, teacher, feminist, and mother. She has spent more than a decade as an inclusive therapist working with individuals and couples toward healing and growing, and toward becoming grounded, integrated people with better access to their own instincts, wisdom, and creativity. Hoppe also offers workshops for parents and expectant couples, based on her book [\*Baby Bomb: A Relationship Survival Guide for New Parents\*](#). She lives with her husband and son in Pioneertown, CA, and sees clients in private practice via telehealth. You can learn more about her at [karahoppe.com](http://karahoppe.com).



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# SPANNING THE BRIDGE OF MINDFULNESS

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Refugees

Dragging their dark

Bodies, thin as fibrous

Roots, wearied as torn

Leaves, under the blade of

The reaper, they search

For sanctuary.

It was 1968. Bombs exploded all around, raining clods of dirt amidst the fire and smoke. Injured bodies writhed in the burning air. Those who still could were crawling and running underground through secret tunnels. My mother was in labor in one of these tunnels, being carried away hurriedly on an improvised stretcher by two farmers. In the midst of my mother's screams and the sound of conflict, I came to life, bloody and mute. My grandmother slapped my buttocks to make me cry. Thus, my life officially began, in suffering, yet nevertheless I was a fortunate survivor.

I was born in Central Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, the child of my Vietnamese mother and an American father whom I would never meet. There was heavy fighting in our area at the time. Soon after I was born, bombs dropped on our village and destroyed our home.

War brings chaos and the breakdown of boundaries. Human beings commit unspeakable atrocities, brothers fight brothers, and men violate women and girls. The pain and trauma of

war continues, even when conditions are quieter on the surface. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, my mother, my younger brother, and I moved into a big house there to live with my mother's lover, whom we called "the old dad," who was thirty years older than my mother, about the same age as my grandmother. He became our provider, and, thankfully, he was safe to be around.

My uncle moved into the big house to live with us about a year later. He was my mother's younger brother by only a few years, so he would have been in his late twenties. He looked as if he were half-French with his curly light brown hair, fair skin, and Roman nose. Young women blushed and became shy in his presence.

I do not remember the first time he abused me, nor how many times it happened, nor how it happened. I was nine years old. I just remember having this repetitive, haunting thought in my mind: I do not want to go with him again! I would see myself walking up the staircase to the third floor and dreading every step of it. I would see myself sitting in the small bathroom up there, on a cement floor so cold and coarse it nipped at my skin. I would see my uncle naked right in front of me, his legs opened wide apart like a pair of tongs. His hands would reach out to grab my hand and place it on his penis. Everything took place like in a silent movie, with me being mute and frozen. My body did not seem to exist, except for my camera-like eyes, flickering, taking occasional snapshots, then closing, shutting everything out.

My mother's dream was to go to America, and all she thought about was leaving. She was not aware of the sexual abuse that I was going through, and she herself was physically and verbally violent toward me. One day in May in 1980, my mother went out to the market as usual, but she never came back. A naked body wrapped inside plastic and coarse cloth was found floating on a river near our house, but my grandmother and my aunt could not determine whether it was my mother's body, since it



was severely swollen. She was thirty-six, and I was twelve. At first, I was secretly happy and relieved by her disappearance, because I would then no longer have to endure her kicks and blows. I remember thinking, “Good, from now on she will not abuse me anymore!”

My grandmother became the sole person to raise my brother, Sonny, and me. When she felt we were old enough, she sent us to the United States via an amnesty program for Amerasian children from the war. It was 1985. My grandmother said we were going to America for a better future. She insisted that I should take good care of my brother, get a higher education, and eventually become a Buddhist nun.

I did accomplish all those things. My brother and I remain close to this day, I earned not one but two bachelor’s degrees and then an MD, and at the time of this writing I have been a Buddhist nun for more than twenty years. Grandma passed away in 1986, a year after Sonny and I left Vietnam, but to this day I still feel her daily presence helping and protecting me in my spiritual life. Those of us with childhood trauma might have had parents who abused us or failed to protect us. If we are lucky, we may also have had at least one person in our lives—for me, it was my grandmother—who can transmit to us a sense of unconditional love, which can literally save our lives.

While growing up in the United States, I experienced so much hardship and despair that I often wanted to take my own life. Then the image of my grandmother would come back to me in my dreams, sitting still on her hard wooden bed and praying to the Buddha. I would wake up in the middle of the night to a feeling of restored peace. And in the morning, I would feel reinvigorated enough to get up, wash my face, change my clothes, and move forward in my day. Later, when I was in medical school, I wrote the following poem about her.



## GRANDMA

*Once I asked if you loved me. You laughed and questioned who would love my dog-born face. Then you turned away to cough, and I awkwardly reached for your back. Once I kissed your cheeks and tasted grooves of your skin between my lips. You hit my teenage pimple with your quivering fist. I laughed and dabbed my tears.*

*And the day I left you for America, you placed my hands in your spread-out palm. You spit chewed betel juice and circled it slowly on my hands, saying, "This is to help you not to miss Grandma too much." You refused to go to the airport.*

*I was sixteen and a half when I left Viet Nam with a five-dollar bill and a few English greeting phrases. From America, I wanted to send you newspapers and Smitty's plastic bags, so you could sell them by the gram; people threw them away here. I wanted to send you a waterbed, so you could float gently to your sleep; your seventy-five-year-old body would not have to strike against the wooden plank bed anymore. I worked the midnight shift at a post office to send you dollars, bars of soap, white laces, bottles of green oil.*

*I did not send you medicine, but prayers. Every night, I prayed for you, while I listened to the echo of your constant coughing, of the hard thumps against your aching body. The day I heard you died, I looked at my face, half belonging to my mother, half to an unknown man, and I cried with a fist, yours, in my mouth.*

An orphan carrying invisible wounds from my childhood, I arrived in the United States as a sixteen-year-old refugee, holding the hand of my twelve-year-old brother. We were sent to live in Tempe, Arizona. My younger brother and I bounced from one foster home to another, but I focused on my studies, taking refuge in academic achievement. (This, as we will see, is a common pattern with people with trauma: we keep ourselves busy to avoid our feelings.) I wrote poetry and journaled, and I was lucky to have teachers in my life who paid attention and supported me toward higher education. After working my way through a bachelor of

arts degree in creative writing and a bachelor of science degree in psychology, I left Arizona to train as a physician at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine (UCSF). I went into family practice. I volunteered as an intern in Kenya and in India. I was a true immigrant success story. I had a respected position in society, money, an apartment in San Francisco, and a loving relationship with an extraordinary, wonderful man, John.

Soon after I started working as a doctor, I attended a mindfulness retreat with Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, whom I would come to address as “Thay,” my “teacher” in Vietnamese. At the retreat, I woke up to the true state of my life. I had believed that after all the hardship I had been through, I would be happy if I had a good job and a beautiful, loving relationship. Like many survivors of trauma, I naively believed that working insanely hard and achieving success would make up for my past misfortunes. To my surprise, this was not the case. I had everything I wanted, but I was inexorably haunted by my past. I continued to behave as if I were still a little girl, wounded and confused. This discombobulated child manifested in my daily life through my thinking, my speech, and my behaviors, and it hurt my relationships, especially with John.



Suffering was alive and well in me. When we are children, many things happen to us, pleasant and unpleasant, and we don't have control over those conditions. Even when the original causes and conditions of our traumas are no longer present, we may still continue to suffer. As an educated young woman, I didn't have anyone treating me badly. Yet my way of thinking, speaking, and behaving caused me to perpetuate my own suffering in many ways. It was as if I subconsciously kept my trauma alive and fed it. I struggled with feelings of unworthiness, which affected my relationship with John. Despite going to medical school and absorbing the scientific approach to the mind through psychiatry and psychotherapy, I had no way of getting in touch with my suffering and the wounded child within me.

At this first retreat, I realized that the causes and conditions of my suffering were now no longer external, but internal. That was the first time I recognized that the way out of suffering was to turn my attention inward. "The way out is in," Thay liked to say. I needed to come back to myself and no longer point the finger outward looking for external causes. These insights were born from my first steps on the path of mindfulness.

Childhood trauma has the most severe impact, but even when we are adults, things that occur outside our control can still cause trauma. Three weeks after this first retreat, on the day before my birthday, my beloved John died. He had been seen at the beach in Half Moon Bay where he sometimes swam. He never came back to his car, and his clothes sat unclaimed on the beach until some people noticed and alerted the coast guard. I received the news at 2 a.m., while I was on call at the Oakland Children's Hospital.

John's sudden death seemed to wake up every single cell of my body. He had loved life so much and he had lived so fully, with such lightness and tenderness, that when he died I honestly believed that he had nothing to regret. My own spirit, however, was broken. I could not go back to my old life, because the suffering that had been filling me to the brim was now spilling over. I did not have the capacity to continue living as before. I faced two stark choices: one was to end my life and the other was to take refuge in the teachings of the Buddha and transform my suffering completely.

I saw clearly that if I ended my life by my own hand, all the good and beautiful things I knew to be true—all the seeds of hope and confidence that I had planted in my brother and the young people I knew—would never compensate for the pain and confusion my death would cause them. I thought about my brother, the only family I had. I thought about the patients and the incarcerated youth I had cared for during the six years of my medical training. This sense of responsibility to them somehow saved me.

The path of spiritual practice was my only real option. Within three months of John's death, I had joined Thich Nhat Hanh and his community in the Plum Village monastery in rural southwest France. First founded as a home for refugees by Thich Nhat Hanh and peace activist and social worker Sister Chan Khong, Plum Village is now a home for several hundred monks and nuns. It was the right environment for me to learn how to meditate, transform my suffering, and give time to my healing process.

## Interbeing

*“To be” is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Mindfulness practice rests on key teachings from Buddhist psychology about the mind, as well as the interconnectedness of experience and time. Everyone who undergoes severe trauma faces similar choices: to try to pick up the pieces of our lives and continue as before; or to stop and turn more intentionally toward healing, however that may appear in our lives. While we may not recognize it at the time of a traumatic event, life-changing suffering has a way of being an opening to a greater understanding of life.



The “mud” and mess of our most painful experiences can become the fertile ground for the blossoming of our understanding and self-compassion. This is a hard truth to accept if we are resolved to seeing a good life as consisting only of positive events. It is true that the cool waters of happiness are sweet and precious, but it is suffering that carves our cup.

The Buddha’s Four Noble Truths acknowledge that life contains suffering within it—but it is exactly this suffering that causes us to seek a way out. If the war in Vietnam had not happened, my father, an American soldier, would never have met my mother, and I would never have been born. Thich Nhat Hanh would never have gone into exile and never would have founded the Plum Village practice centers in France. Without the upheaval and violence of the war, Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings of peace and mindfulness would not have taken root in the West. Within the worst sorrows may lie the greatest joys, and the opposite may also be true. This happened because that happened; this is because that is; every event is interrelated in a web of causality, everything coming into being together. This is interbeing.

We cannot have the lotus without mud. We cannot have roses without the rain. This knowledge of interbeing helps us see the mud with new eyes. When there is trauma involving another person, we may try to cut off the pain by breaking off contact with them. This may be difficult if they are a family member, but it is possible. What is not possible is to separate ourselves from the perpetrator within us. We may change our outer circumstances and try to forget the people and situations that caused us to suffer, but they continue to live within us and disturb us, sometimes relentlessly.

Changing our perspective on our suffering helps us respond to it differently. Change is hard to put into practice, however. We are creatures of habit, after all. Meditation is a process of waking up from living on autopilot, so that we can choose a different approach to how we look at our world, and how we react to our perceptions. Changing our mind isn't only an intellectual or metaphysical exercise. Changing our mind about our trauma affects every aspect of ourselves, because as we now know, the mind and body inter-are. What happens to one affects the other. By meditating and following the path of mindfulness, we will experience moments of insight that open up space in our lives for healing. Similarly, because we are social beings, we find that what happens to one person in our community affects us all, in one way or another.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Sister Dang Nghiem, MD, (“Sister D”) was born in 1968 in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and an American soldier. She lost her mother at the age of twelve and immigrated to the United States at the age of seventeen with her brother. Living in various foster homes, she learned English and went on to earn a medical degree from the University of California, San Francisco. After suffering further tragedy and loss, she quit her practice as a doctor to travel to Plum Village

monastery in France, which was founded by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, where she was ordained a nun in 2000. She is the author of two books: a memoir, [Healing: A Woman's Journey from Doctor to Nun](#) (2010), and [Mindfulness as Medicine: A Story of Healing and Spirit](#) (2015).



# SKILLFUL MEANS

[Your Skillful Means](#), sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

## **Self-Advocacy**

### **Purpose/Effects**

Self-advocacy here means treating yourself (and demanding, albeit gently and reasonably, that others treat you) as if your worth is no less than any other being. We live in a culture that alternately promotes self-esteem and equality while promoting interests that are often destructive to individuals and groups. We often neglect our own needs and yearnings for the benefit of others. When this becomes pathological and crippling, it inhibits our true wills, and practice in self-advocacy is needed.

### **Method**

#### **Summary**

Learn compassion, advocacy, and lovingkindness for others, then apply it to yourself.

#### **Long Version**

If you are cramped for time, use GuideStar to find a charitable organization with goals you support that has a low maintenance overhead; that is, that most of the money it receives goes directly to the people it serves. Donate money to that organization when you really lack the time for active service; however, don't use it as a get-out-of-action-free card.

Invite friends and family to join you. By growing service, you grow the community and increase the lovingkindness in the whole world.

## Exercise #1: Basic Advocacy:


Sit in a comfortable meditative posture, relaxed and alert. While breathing gently and calmly, begin to think about something for which you have unequivocal good feeling. It could be a parent or a child, a pet or a friend, or even a place or a concept. Begin to wish that person or thing well. You might want to use the lovingkindness techniques detailed here. Consider fully this sensation of caring. Fill yourself with this feeling of support for something and explore it. Examine how advocacy of this sort makes you feel, how you think about the object of your advocacy, your emotions and attitudes. Perhaps slowly try to ramp up this feeling of goodwill. Love fiercely. Care strongly. Then, center your attention on the power of your caring and your commitment to this positive feeling. You might also try to weaken the feeling to see how your mind behaves under those circumstances. Then dial it back up. Notice how your advocacy is something you have control over, and how good it feels to be fierce and strong about love. Enjoy it; it is beautiful. This exercise reminds us of the warmth and pleasure that come from caring, especially caring strongly. It tells us about our own strength and determination. We also find in ourselves the capacity to love completely an imperfect thing. These skills will help us to then begin to self-advocate.

## Exercise #2: Self-Advocacy:

Settle into the same relaxed and alert posture as before. Now, bring to mind yourself as a child. Focus on your many qualities, how worthy of love you were and how vulnerable. Consider how, even as a child, you were imperfect but good enough. Have compassion for that young child. Then, gradually, move that compassion to yourself now as an adult. Have compassion for your foibles and mistrials as well as for the trauma, bad luck, and hard circumstances you've had to endure by virtue of your humanity. Settle into this compassion, allowing it to flow into you with each inhalation. Move on to lovingkindness, feeling it for the child you once were and moving it into adulthood. Feel lovingkindness for yourself now, expressing with your inner voice well-wishes and affection for the person you are, despite your flaws. Finally, move toward advocacy. Return to the child you were, and think about how, if you needed to, you would protect that child and would help that child just as you would any child. See if you can bring this same

## Perspectives on Self-Care

**Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.**



advocacy to your adult self, empowering you to protect and help yourself and to advocate for your own wellbeing. Consider how you will act in your best interest in the face of illness, bad luck, mistreatment, and suffering, just as you would for the interest of a child. Fill yourself with this powerful feeling of self-advocacy and enjoy it. Allow your mind to commit itself to advocating for you.

## HISTORY

Self-advocacy has its roots in 19th-century psychological and philosophical thought that questioned the self-sacrificing ideals of Western culture. The concept of will evolved from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (who often viewed it in rather bleak terms) into something positive and empowering with the movement toward self-esteem in the late 19th century.

## CAUTIONS

Do not confuse your selfish wants with things that must be advocated for. You, as a human being, have the right to advocate for equal treatment, freedom from abuse, the ability to follow your dreams, and respect from others. Self-advocacy does not mean that petty emotions and greedy desires are okay just because you think them.

## NOTES

Self-advocacy is also a term used in the disability rights movement expressing the right that people with disabilities (especially the developmentally disabled) have to control their own lives and to self-determine. The ability to speak up for oneself is crucial for human beings in order to feel empowered about their own lives.

## SEE ALSO

[Establishing Safety](#)

[Lovingkindness](#)

## EXTERNAL LINKS

[Developing assertiveness](#)

# *Fare Well*

*May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.*

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