

Life Lessons

“Lessons You Won’t Learn in School” by Jena Pincott in *Psychology Today*, May/June 2018, no e-link available

In this article in *Psychology Today*, science writer Jena Pincott lists correctives for some common cognitive biases (inborn and acquired):

- *Understand that not everything that happens to you is about you.* “At the very least, the egocentric bias causes us to misread others,” says Pincott. “It undermines empathy and tolerance. It also traps us in a bubble; we waste vast amounts of psychic energy recovering from insults that were never targeted at us in the first place. To live a life that is less reactive, more directed, it is necessary to put the ego in its place.”

- *Worry less about what others think of you.* It turns out that people are much less aware of our competence, awkwardness, verbal flubs, facial expressions, even what we wear, than we imagine. “When we care less about our curated self-image, we open the door to interacting more genuinely,” says Pincott. “We can let down our guard. Others may respond in kind, focusing less on their own self-image and opening up.”

- *Realize that you don’t have to act the way you feel.* Pincott advises “self-distancing” to keep disappointments and negative emotions from spilling into everyday interactions. This involves processing our feelings from an outsider’s point of view, addressing ourselves in the third person to normalize and make meaning of disturbing experiences. This makes it possible to preserve our dignity, privacy, and self-respect when we’re not at our best.

- *Reframe and manage disappointment and adversity.* “There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” said Hamlet. Social psychologists have confirmed Shakespeare’s wisdom, showing that although there are differences in people’s innate ability to handle stressful events, mental fortitude can be acquired. This means learning how not to jump to conclusions, overgeneralize, catastrophize, personalize, and engage in black-or-white thinking. “Resilient people do not define themselves by their adversity,” says Pincott. “They understand that bad times are temporary affairs.”

- *Solicit honest feedback.* It’s possible to be internally self-aware (in touch with our own values and passions) and not externally self-aware (knowing how others see us). “External self-awareness allows us to be more in sync with others,” says Pincott. “It makes us more effective leaders because we have more empathy, which comes from understanding other people’s perspectives.” She advises identifying several “critical friends” and periodically asking them questions like, *What am I doing that I should keep doing? What should I stop doing? What about me annoys you?*

- *Stay true to your own values despite what others expect.* There’s sometimes a tug-of-war between what we want and what others expect – parents, teachers, love partners. “People high in both internal and external self-awareness can navigate competing expectations,” says organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich. They value

authenticity and integrity, knowing what they want to do and illuminating it with other perspectives.

- *Be open to revising your thinking.* “The world doesn’t stand still,” says Pincott. “Situations change. Available information changes. However much we get emotionally attached to our own decisions, however much our opinions and perspectives may have once served us, there comes a point at which constancy can curdle into rigidity.” Studies show that we’re most open to change when we’re feeling good about ourselves, most resistant to change when we feel threatened and uncertain. Hanging out with a four-year-old is a good way to see what cognitive flexibility looks like.

- *Find ways to tackle tasks you want to avoid.* Pincott suggests several approaches: write down how the drudgery will end with a success; gamify the activity, introducing an element of competition; use second-person self-talk (*You can crush this, Ted!*); bite off a small piece to get started (*Just 20 minutes on this and I’ll do something else*); and get into a routine (for example, rising at six to exercise).

- *Zone in on your purpose in a zoned-out world.* “The two most important days in life are the day you are born and the day you discover the reason why,” said Mark Twain. But a sense of big-picture purpose depends on focus and self-regulation, and that’s undermined by the current obsession with checking social media every few minutes, driven by the fear of missing out on something. “You may want big ideas,” says author Larry Rosen, “but if your attention is jerked away constantly, they won’t come. There’s no time to process anything on a deeper level.” There isn’t even time for the overstimulated brain to daydream. Rosen strongly recommends 30-minute tech breaks. Turning away from the small screen, he says, can reorient us to the big picture.

- *Tolerate ambiguity.* Uncertainty is a “sure-fire fuel of anxiety,” says Pincott, but it’s part of modern life, and dealing with it has many rewards. “We’re more able to shift gears, experiment, be more flexible, take in new information that we’d otherwise reject, and let a situation develop before pulling the proverbial trigger,” she says. “We’re better able to handle risk and to make decisions without deluding ourselves into thinking we know everything there is to know. In the end, we’re less anxious.” Studies have shown that one way to make yourself more flexible in uncertain situations is to read fiction. “When nothing is sure,” says novelist Margaret Drabble, “everything is possible.”