

Positive
Conversations 

THE GUIDE

Face your biggest challenges
and succeed anyway

David Williams



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Introduction

There are times when a positive conversation is something we all need and it can help if the conversation stays focussed on helping us to find a way forward.

The Guide is a two-part process written as a prompt for such a positive conversation.

It brings together insights and practices, structured to help mature and young adults facing significant challenges.

We all know that if we take the heat out of difficult situations, the benefit is a calmer mind.

The objective of the insights offered in *The Guide* is to help where possible bring perspective and, through perspective, a calmer mind.

The objective of the practices offered in *The Guide* is to help build a conscious appreciation of the mechanics of a solution – the key word being conscious.

Having a conscious appreciation of the mechanics of a solution and how solutions unfold provides an opportunity to establish a method – a method that can be applied, practised and returned to whenever needed.

This combination of a calmer mind and a tried and trusted approach to finding solutions is the ideal place to start.

The contents of *The Guide* provide a foundation. It requires reflection and does not pretend to be a panacea. It requires that participants reflect and actively engage.

Playing the cards we are dealt

I guarantee that you know people who are looking for grounded solutions to some very big questions. Maybe you are?

People setting out in life, people looking for inspiration, people who have reached a crossroads in life, people who are looking to maximise their potential.

We are all a mixture. Good at some things, not so good at others. Successful in some areas not so successful in others. We make good decisions and we make decisions we wish we hadn't.

When we set out in life, we each experience a unique set of circumstances. Some of us come from stable, succeeding families. Some of us from less successful

and less stable families. Some of us come from high-achieving, high-IQ parents. Some of us less so. Some of us are first born, some of us have older siblings and some of us are an only child. Some of us are academic. Some of us struggle at school. Some of us are separated from our families as children. Some of us never leave home. Some of us follow our parents into the careers they had. Some of us have no obvious route. Some of us grow up in very poor housing. Some of us grow up in comfortable homes. Some of us are exposed to a poor diet every day. Some of us have access to a healthy diet every day. Some of us suffer life-shaping tragedy. Some of us do not experience any obviously negative life-changing event until much later in life.

Mixed in with this, each of us is exposed to emotional intelligence in our own unique way. We witness the people around us and how they treat each other and we experience how they treat us. We experience their version of normality and what they expect our version of normality to be. They may be incredibly self-aware, whilst many may not understand their own emotions and may themselves have been exposed to less than ideal circumstance.

The variables are endless and nobody gets to choose how it begins. And then, we each have our own genetic predisposition, in which, again, we have no choice.



The raw package that is us sets us out in life to live as effectively and successfully as possible.

For the most part, the vast majority of us learn as we go along, to the degree we want to.

Many of us leave school and never return to formal education. Many of us go through adult life and never read a book. And in many cases, these choices are not detrimental.

As we move forward we receive feedback from the world around us. It lets us know what it thinks and we moderate and shape our behaviour dependent on that feedback. But only to the degree we feel that change will help us.

If we don't feel capable of change or we feel that change won't help, we resist it.

The people around us may suggest that certain aspects of our behaviour are less than pleasing, but we may believe these behaviours contribute to our success.

We have all experienced seemingly successful people who are difficult to be around.

And then, we have those moments when we have no choice.

Those moments when we are forced to change.

Life may be settled and heading in the direction we want, when out of the blue comes a self-esteem shattering blow. A blow that turns life on its head.

Serious Illness, loss of employment or income, relationship breakdown, bereavement, the failure of a project - all of these events can lead to a re-evaluation of life as we know it.

In any given moment, we each must play the cards we are dealt.

What do you believe to be true?

Words can change your life. One sentence can change your life.

As a 25 year old, the manager of the company I worked for said something to me and I remember it as though it were yesterday.

The business wasn't profitable and I remember him saying, "David, the first thing we have to do is stop the haemorrhaging".

He loved a metaphor.

Stem the losses.

What he meant was, “David, before we make any changes, the first thing we have to do is stop making the mistakes we are already making”.

Let's stop making the mistakes we are already making.

I don't think anybody gave me better advice in my whole life.

What do you believe to be true?
What do you know?

Do you know what will happen in the next five minutes?

The only thing I know of life is what occurs in nature.

I know that night follows day because the earth spins on its axis. I know that mathematics and physics dominate life because I see it all around me. The geometry of the places we live, the physics and chemistry of the food we eat.

These things are irrefutable. These things are truths. They are not predictions or opinions.

We know that mathematics is behind the engineering that determines how we travel, how we cook, how we share information and the clothes we



wear. We know that gravity exists because the earth would fall out of its orbit otherwise. We know that electromagnetism exists because we experience heat and electricity. We cut food up to eat it and we know that if we keep cutting, we end up with a single piece.

These things are real.

As an exercise, spend some time listening to people and the things they say. Listen for opinions and predictions presented as facts.

Listen to the conviction with which some people say what they say, and then ask yourself is that an irrefutable truth?

One of the first and most obvious objectives of coaching is to establish a sustainably positive mind set. And before we make any changes, the first thing we have to do is stop making the mistakes we are already making.

Stop pretending you know more than you do. Stop pretending you know what can be achieved and what cannot be achieved. Stop making negative predictions about yourself, about the world, about anything. Stop sharing or passing on hearsay and gossip.

Do not engage in it. Do not contribute to the spreading of subjective opinion.

What you will find is you have less to say.

The problem with prediction and opinion is that a lot of it is negative.

If you can stop yourself making negative predictions and sharing negative opinions, you will have achieved what my old manager helped me to see was so important. You will have stopped the haemorrhaging.

This is the equivalent of reaching coaching basecamp.

It's an old story but a good one.

Socrates is considered to be the father of philosophy, but he never wrote anything down. What we know about him was written down by Plato.

He was born in 469 BC and, as we understand it, he was the son of a midwife and a sculptor.

One of the things that stands out about Socrates is that he seemed to spend a lot of time annoying people. He seemed to spend a lot of time engaging people in discussion that pretty much always ended



with him asking the same question: What do you know to be true?

Socrates lived at a time the Greeks believed in gods such as Zeus and Athena and this went some way to causing his downfall.

He wanted people to question the solidity of their beliefs and would wait until he heard a statement that he felt was open to discussion and then he would ask to explore it.

This was at a time when the Greek state was at war with Sparta and many believed they needed the gods on their side.

The last thing the Greek state needed was someone of influence asking the people of Athens to question their belief in the gods.

Socrates was by this time 70 years old and a well-known soldier.

“The gods are on our side.”

“Are they ... how do you know that?”

In 399 BC Socrates was charged as an enemy of the state – it was felt that he undermined Greek culture. All he had to do to have the charges dropped was

publically acknowledge that his behaviour had been wrong and to stop it.

He refused.

He understood authenticity.

He was found guilty and sentenced to death. He died in good spirits, drinking poison.

Socrates wanted everyone to question their beliefs and he famously made the point that in his view, “the unexamined life isn’t worth living”.

His standpoint was that every man and woman had a duty to work out for themselves what was real and what was true.

For Socrates, nobody could escape the obligation of examining themselves and their lives.

Those things you believe to be true ... on what basis are they true?

What do you really want?

“You don’t get what you want ... you get what you really want.”

Another pithy saying someone I worked with had a penchant for. And for the most part, I have to admit, I agree with it.

When is enough, enough?

Materially, emotionally, physically, at what point do we decide we are satisfied?

We only need to look around to see that we each have different thresholds for everything. What is important for some is of no significance to others.

How many of us genuinely want to be what could be described as rich? How many of us is willing to

do what it takes to become rich? It seems that most of us do not need to be rich to be content with life.

How many of us want to maximise our potential and see where that takes us? How many of us are willing to do what it takes?

The problem with the phrase 'maximising one's potential' is that it is generic, it's a catch-all amorphous concept. But coaching needs direction, coaching must have a purpose.

So what do you really want?

Consciously and unconsciously, what we really want may be different. Consciously we may have an idea of what we want. Unconsciously the evidence may be that our motivation eases off before we achieve it.

A good measure of how important something is, is the length of time it stays important having achieved it. Have you noticed how some things suddenly lose their lustre once you have them? Whilst other things never lose their sense of importance?

It's a big question and something to learn to be honest with ourselves about.



It is important to give due consideration to this because it will form the backbone of any coaching activity.

What do you really want and what do you really want to change? Make a list.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying the central portion of the page. It is intended for the user to write a list of their goals and desired changes.

What you are going to do

However much you agonise over it, life will happen anyway. What you are going to do, you will do.

If we were able to be rational, there is no point agonising over anything.

You will put in whatever effort you are going to and you will perceive the solutions you do and you will decide which to follow.

The fact you are engaged in this process illustrates as much.

You will experience serendipity when wonderful unplanned things happen, and you will experience the other side of the coin: “You have a tumour between your inner ear and your brain”; “You need two new heart valves”.

Life will happen anyway.

Constructivism

Give yourself a minute and make two simple lists. They don't have to be exhaustive, just enough to illustrate the point:

Consider those things that occur in nature and make a list of them.

Consider those things that do not occur in nature and make a list of them.

I'll start you off:

<i>People</i> <i>Animals</i> <i>Water</i>	<i>Cars</i> <i>Buildings</i> <i>Clothes</i>
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Now ask yourself, those things that do not occur naturally, where do they originate?

Everything that does not occur in nature begins as an idea.

Everything that does not occur in nature begins in the mind of a human being.

We invent them. Or, as psychologists say, we construct them.

We know everything that exists naturally is evolving. It changes or it dies out and this is evidence that nothing is fixed or permanent.

Everything is open to change and those things we can change begin as ideas.

What kind of life would you like to construct for yourself?

Behaviour is everything

It's Sunday morning and I am just back from a walk in the countryside. I set out early, the roads were quiet. About 3 miles in I got to a small village near to where I live and there in the middle of the road was a 10-inch pizza box.

I don't know why but when I think about behaviour the first thing I think about is litter.

The way we behave says everything about us.

Opportunities, food, learning, alcohol, setbacks, other people, money, knowledge, risk, the law, success, failure ... in every waking moment, we are faced with situations and choices.

The choices we make bring us into contact with the world.

You hear of an opportunity, you like the sound of it and can pursue it ... what do you do?

You've had lunch and somebody offers you a snack ... what do you do?

You have access to knowledge that will help you, but you have to put some effort in ... what do you do?

You've been to the pub and on your way home you buy a pizza. You eat it and are left with the box ... what do you do?

Behaviour is granular, it can be broken down into the smallest, seemingly most insignificant thing. But nothing is insignificant. The best version of you is available through your behaviour.

Stand back and watch how other people behave. The good stuff and the flaws.

Would it help if they could change their behaviour?

What does the best version of you look like?

Can you delay your gratification?
Is expedience something you choose as a norm?

Taking the strategic view of who we are and where we want to be demands that, wherever possible,



we learn to control and determine our behaviour. And learning to control our behaviour can be the challenge of a lifetime.

What is it that makes taking a pizza box home and putting it in the bin so difficult?

Motivation

Here's a question for you - where does motivation begin?

Does motivation begin on the outside of human beings and work its way in or does it begin on the inside and work its way out?

Maybe you don't like sport, but even if you don't, you will have witnessed the classic example of a coach standing at the side of a pitch watching a game.

I enjoy sport and watch a reasonable amount of it. Typically my perception is that coaches stand at the side of pitches to make tactical tweaks, offer encouragement, but also to send an implied message to those they coach.

"I'm encouraging you, but I am watching you," and implicit in that is an element of leverage.



For want of a better word, and to a greater or lesser degree, it is intimidation. The coach wants to trigger a degree of fear.

The evidence is that fear is a motivating factor and in this situation the motivation is external. It starts on the outside and works its way in.

But fear like any other emotion is experienced internally and manifests itself in our behaviour externally. Our fight or flight mechanism.

As I write, the news is about the daily arrival of asylum seekers at the beaches and ports of Kent. Often they cross the 20-mile expanse of the English Channel at night in rubber dinghies. There are images of some of them using garden shovels as oars.

Often the dinghies carry babies and very young children as passengers.

What motivates these families to take such risks? Nobody makes them row across the Channel and they go as far as to pay smugglers for help.

France is every bit as safe as the UK ... so why bother?

Something internal is motivating these people.

These people have a mental picture of what they

expect when they arrive in the UK. They have an objective and are willing to do what it takes to achieve it. Including risking their lives, the lives of their children and breaking the law.

Sustainable motivation is always internal. The environment is always the trigger. If we are content with what we have, why bother to change it?

Your behavioural balance sheet

Give yourself thinking time and make two lists. List the behaviours you admire in yourself and the behaviours you would like to change:

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Affirmations – keeping your mind in the future

Hopefully you are beginning to think about the things you really want to achieve and the behaviours you would really like to change.

This is the beginning.

Your mental picture of yourself in the future is beginning to build.

Now you need to give yourself direction. You need to make a commitment to yourself.

You need to write down what it is you plan to achieve and you need to write it in a certain way. It must be written in the first person and timed.



Example:

- i. By the end of the year I will have researched and enrolled on a professional project management course.
- ii. By October I will no longer eat white bread and I will begin to wean myself off it from today.
- iii. By the end of the year I will be walking 10 miles each week for exercise.
- iv. By the end of November the maximum amount of wine I will drink each week will be one bottle.

Affirmations act as a mirror, reflecting back the future version of you.

You can see the commitment you have made to yourself – a commitment you can keep reminding yourself of by reading it back on a daily basis.

This is a journey.

I have been writing affirmations for more than 25 years and will continue to do so until I cannot. For me, writing affirmations is a way of life.

It is about consciously choosing how to live and

how to avoid wasting precious time. And most importantly, it is a way to stop finding reasons not to do things.

Of course you will make mistakes and take wrong turns, but writing affirmations is the equivalent of sailing a boat and using the feedback to help you tack and adjust as required.

If you choose affirmations you will begin to see beyond the difficulties you face and focus on outcomes. You will begin to see beyond reasons not to do things and just get on with them.

Keeping your mind in the future does not mean you don't enjoy the here and now. It means being conscious of the future that lies ahead of you. The future you will turn into a reality.

Acting on positive prompts

When you write an affirmation, you will notice something. You will notice that your mind begins to search for answers.

Often you will wake up with ideas.

You will be prompted.

Your mind will trawl your memory for solutions and it will prompt you to act.

Imagine you had an affirmation to give up white bread.

Something will come to you, such as, “let’s cut down to two slices per day from today”.

Imagine you write an affirmation confirming your objective to become a project manager.

Who do you know that is a project manager and what did they study?

Contact them.

What does your search engine throw up if you search 'project manager' in your area?

Contact them.

Act on these positive prompts. Do not let them pass.

Always act on the positive prompts your mind sends to you.

Even if unsuccessful, they will lead you to the next step or option until you find the solution you need.

I cannot emphasise how important this is.

So many people fall down at this point; they procrastinate, they find reasons not to act.

Your behaviour is everything. It says everything about you.

Your mind will search for answers and your mind stores more information than you could ever imagine. We experience memories out of the blue,



memories we are amazed to have. Your mind will trawl your memory for solutions, just like a search engine.

And you must act on the solutions it offers.

When you act, you move forward.

Words

Do you want to be a positive person?

Are you a positive person?

Not positivist, not someone for whom everything is positive, because, clearly, some things are not positive.

Someone with a grounded sense of positivity?

Have you ever thought about the words you use?

Casually, daily, on a normal basis?

Often throw away?

Have you ever thought about the effect your words have on you and the people around you?



Your words reflect you and your behaviour.

The only reason that words work is that they trigger emotions. Words and the appropriate response to words are conditioned into us.

Broadly speaking, words are either negative, positive or neutral.

Every word is broadly negative, positive or neutral.

The word idiot is negative and there is always a better way to say what we want to say without using such words.

Why waste time being negative, pejorative, cynical or judgemental, or whatever you want to call it, when it is just as easy to say what we want to say neutrally or positively?

Why use derogatory phrases to describe anything or anyone when we can say what we want to say neutrally?

How we choose to say what we want illustrates how much self-control and self-awareness we enjoy.

Of course some events are dreadful and we would do whatever we could to avoid them. Some actions

and behaviours are abhorrent and deserve to be called out.

The opportunity for most of us is our casual, unnecessary use of negative language.

Language we hear every day that serves no purpose.

Are you are serious about being positive?

Your use of language is the first place to start.

Social identity theory

A more enlightened insight into human behaviour I have yet to find.

What kind of people do you feel most at ease with?

What is it about them that puts you at ease?

What kind of people do you feel least at ease with?

What is it about them that makes you feel that way?

Consciously and unconsciously we gravitate toward people we feel comfortable with and away from people we feel uncomfortable with.

This can be positive and negative.

Staying within the social circles you feel comfortable with may keep you happy your whole life. I have friends who are amongst the most contented people I know and they live within minutes of where they grew up.

Equally, it may inhibit you.

We have all heard the phrase 'comfort zone'.

The study of behaviour is core to coaching. This is the point at which psychology and philosophy merge. Psychologists such as B.F. Skinner demonstrated that behaviour can be and is conditioned into entities by influential others.

Being part of a social group is important for our physical and mental wellbeing. It is where we gain our sense of belonging, our sense of acceptance, our sense of security and fitting in.

We each grow up in unique circumstances and as we grow we have impressed upon us what is right and wrong, good and bad. What we should and shouldn't do, what is normal and what isn't.

We learn to fit in with those around us. We are taught how to fit in. We are conditioned to fit in.

But fitting in may be at odds with who we really are.



If we can be conditioned to fit into one environment, we can be conditioned to fit in or we can condition ourselves to fit in elsewhere.

Our external conditioning may be at odds with who we are internally.

Our sense of belonging may keep us in our comfort zone and deprive of us of life-enhancing and mind-opening experiences.

Often our internal drives overwhelm our desire to stay where we are and we follow them anyway. But not always, and if we do follow them, it can be painful as we move away from the people and things we know.

Albert Bandura's Personal Efficacy Theory and the existentialist school of philosophy emphasise personal internal drives and individual responsibility, in contrast to the external conditioning of Skinner.

Psychologist Julian Rotter sums it up perfectly with his 'locus of control' argument – the degree to which an individual feels they have control of their life.

Social identity theory illustrates how muddied the water is and the contradictions we each must face.

That sense of where we feel we belong, where we feel at ease and where perhaps we would like to go.

If you follow the positive prompts triggered by affirmations, you will be taken out of your comfort zone on a regular basis. It will become normal for you. You will condition yourself to become more comfortable with the discomfort of change.

The people who care about you want you to be happy.

In that sense, social identity is not necessarily inhibiting but we should be mindful of it. Mindful of our behaviour and our willingness to be different.

Ultimately the choice is ours.

Reconstructed or unreconstructed

I am nearer 60 than 50 years of age and a few years ago I met someone I hadn't seen for nearly 40 years. It was as though time had stood still.

The way we looked had changed. But what hadn't changed was the world view of my friend. The opinions, the language and words, where they lived, the lifestyle, the pubs and the diet.

Essentially they are who they were as teenagers and young adults.

Unreconstructed.

A fundamentally lovely person, settled with life. They smile and laugh a lot, and who can argue with that?

It is not a matter of right or wrong.

It is for each individual to decide how to live, what they believe and what is right for them.

My old friends look at me and see a different person. The sport obsessed, book avoiding, non-reflective scallywag is a different person.

Reconstructed.

I am not who I was.

Thankfully my friends and I still share enough to keep us bonded. But I am not sure we would have been as close as youngsters had I been the person I am today.

Moving towards who we really are is all about following positive prompts. Learning how to live with the discomfort of change as we move forward.

Existentialism and locus of control in practice.

Self-esteem and self-worth

What challenges are you willing to accept and what are you capable of?

What are you willing to accept for yourself both materially and emotionally?

Our self-esteem and self-worth germinate in childhood and the particular set of circumstances we inherit ... our environment and our personal capabilities.

Finding something we are good at and experiencing the positive feedback and the encouragement of others who recognise and acknowledge our talent is vital.

As is the experience of overcoming setbacks.

People who don't feel capable suffer with low self-esteem.

They stop pursuing opportunities in an effort to avoid the negative experience of failure.

They get into the habit of predicting the future negatively. They decide they cannot succeed.

What do you believe to be true?

What do you really want?

How can you find the things you are good at if you don't follow the positive prompts that come to you?
How can you work through a process of elimination if you don't set out on your journey?

Failure is too important for some people. It looms too large in their lives. Of course, none of us wants to make failure a habit, but taking a calculated risk is something everyone should be able to do.

Everything is relative.

Unfortunately for some, the fear of failure is debilitating.

Self-esteem is fluid, and because of that fluidity, we can lose or gain confidence at any time.



One factor that can be significant is the mistakes we make as young people.

Rash decisions can lead to long-term guilt and an exaggerated negative internal response that can take years to overcome.

Following positive prompts is the key to fighting back.

Guilt can be replaced with higher self-esteem if we can find and enjoy and build on small successes.

Conversely, too much success and an inflated sense of self-esteem brings its own challenges.

A sense of invincibility.

Coaching is about 'knocking the edges off'. Keeping and developing what is good and encouraging change for what can be self-defeating.

For seemingly successful people, behavioural change can be difficult. Especially if the individual sees their behaviour as a contributor to their success. A feeling of invincibility may work very well for some. Particularly in business.

Those around them may see an inflated personality, but the individual may be okay with that.

What they find is that the environment always provides feedback.

Self-worth is slightly different.

Why do some people stay in situations where they feel undervalued?

The reasons can be many.

Commitment and responsibility to others who are more vulnerable, perhaps?

In these circumstances, this behaviour is admirable. So long as nobody is getting hurt.

Having nowhere to go and a feeling of being trapped or fear of repercussions may be another.

In the context of work, a person's value will almost certainly find 'market' level if they are willing to test the market. But again, security of tenure may outweigh a few thousand pounds on an annual salary.

Unlike self-esteem which can change for the positive at any time, maximising self-worth may be something that demands delayed gratification.



Patience and resilience to wait for the opportune moment may be required.

Self-esteem and self-worth automatically feature in any coaching context.

One thing to flag is our vulnerability to significant external events. Anyone can be blown off their feet at any time.

Life can feel like something we've succeeded at. But in a heartbeat, all of that can change.

Keeping your mind on what you want and not on what you don't want is in these moments the key to the kingdom.

The sooner you can steady yourself the better.

Cognitive dissonance and existential angst

What's it all about?

Why go through the discomfort of trying to be the best you can be?

I have no idea what it's all about. The big questions remain unanswered for me. But I do know the benefit of making life a little bit difficult for myself.

Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort we experience in many forms when faced with challenges and is part of everyday life.

Something we can learn to live with. And when we become better practiced, something we can embrace as positive and recognition of our search for progress and success.



Butterflies in the stomach, occasional sleepless nights ... these are examples of low-level transient dissonance that reflect our search for answers.

This is not to be confused with chronic debilitating anxiety which is a medical condition.

We are talking about normal levels of discomfort that may in themselves be something we prefer to avoid but are nothing more than indicators of our mind working overtime.

If you write affirmations, be prepared for cognitive dissonance.

Making sense of life is an altogether bigger question, but the symptoms of dissonance when asking such questions can be indistinguishable from those experienced when faced with 'everyday' challenges. It falls under the same umbrella in the emotional experience of coaching.

If it isn't challenging, you are probably not doing it properly.

The ego, the self and the middle way

Sigmund Freud introduced a theory of drives and energy. A trade-off between our need for social acceptance and our urges.

Many years ago I remember a cartoon featuring a character with a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. In the middle was the angst-ridden cartoon character deciding whether to pursue a particular choice.

The devil was prompting the central character, saying “Go on, do it”. The devil symbolises the ‘self’ or, as Freud called it, the ‘id’. The angel encouraged a more circumspect approach. Freud called this the ‘super ego’.



In the middle, the central character represents the 'ego'.

The 'self' is who we really are. Our private thoughts, our wants, needs and urges. Conscious and unconscious.

The 'ego' is the face we present to the world and where our decision-making is played out.

The 'super ego' looks to control the impulses of the 'self'.

You might have an idea to become an artist. Deep down it may be all you want.

That is the 'self'.

Alongside that, you may be thinking, if I become an artist I could fail. That is the 'super ego'.

The 'front' we present to the world is the 'ego'.

Getting past our 'ego' or overcoming our fear is considered an achievement. Should we care what others think?

Dharma

Nobody can take our life journey for us and nobody can learn our life lessons.

Nobody can go through your struggle or suffering. You are the one who must struggle until you find the path of least resistance to whatever it is you want.

You may want to be a head teacher or to build your own business – and good for you.

You may just want a quiet life.

How easy or difficult you make your life is in many respects up to you.

It depends how well you listen to feedback.

Do you ignore feedback or defy it?



Do you prefer to stay in conflict with yourself and others or do you get the message?

If bread leaves you feeling bloated and uncomfortable, do you carry on eating bread?

If only life were so simple.

This is what the Indian philosophies such as Buddhism call Dharma.

The essence of Dharma is that we each must learn the lessons that will make our lives as frictionless and free of pain as possible.

Have you noticed how some people are always in conflict?

Your struggle is your teacher and the opportunity is to listen to life's feedback and adjust accordingly.

The focus of Dharma is inner peace, and freedom from discomfort.

A Buddhist would say you are experiencing Dharma now. The question is, are you listening?

The rest of us might say we are on our life journey.

Our acknowledgement that nobody can do it for us is the moment a Buddhist would hope we quieten down and begin the search for answers within ourselves.

Belief systems

Attempting to make sense of life is perfectly normal.

In no particular order, these are the main belief systems in our society :

Jainism
Zoroastrianism
Shintoism
Islam
Buddhism
Christianity
Hinduism
Judaism
Daoism
Confucianism
Sikhism
Humanism
Atheism
Agnosticism

My apologies for any missed and any derivations not mentioned.

The thing is, there are a lot of them and, on that basis, they cannot all be right or true.

But they can all be wrong.

It goes without saying that much of what we believe is culturally specific, and it isn't too strong to say that we are told what to believe. As children we are blank canvasses and our culture fills the canvass in.

To belong to any culture, we must be prepared to live by a set of norms or rules.

The difficulty comes in adulthood when, if we are lucky, we get to reflect and make our own choices.

If personal change is rooted in anything it is the admission to ourselves that we are wrong.

Accepting that the way we have been living is wrong.

From the silliest thing like eating bread when it doesn't agree with us or something as big as believing that the earth is the centre of the universe. What a huge challenge it is, admitting to oneself that perhaps we have been living a lie. And in many cases, for our whole lives.



That is reconstruction in practice.

That moment of self-awareness and honesty when we see ourselves as a construction. We see that we are the result of someone else's imagination. Someone else's idea about what is right and wrong, good and bad and how a good life should be lived.

Self-awareness and emotional intelligence

Self-awareness is to be conscious of oneself in the here and now.

In the moment.

To be aware of one's reactions to the world and what it is we project of ourselves out into the world.

To see ourselves as others see us.

Those of us who live unconsciously live with great freedom.

Psychologists have a term for those periods when human beings are at their most efficient. Those times we don't seem to think about what we do and everything seems so easy.



The term is 'flow'.

Flow is the opposite of self-awareness.

In flow, life is spontaneous. We are spontaneous. Great artists, whatever their field, do what they do before any conscious thought could be put into practice. As though action takes place at the moment of thought. There is no time between thought and action.

Where to put the mark on a canvass? The artist looks at what they have and makes the mark without agonising over it. The great footballer sees the situation and the trick happens before they know about it.

It would be impossible to be a fine musician without flow.

In flow we are at our most efficient and at the same time least reflective and least self-aware. Actions seem automatic.

In flow, we do not predict the outcome of our actions. And sometimes our unthinking actions do not go the way we wanted.

Emotional intelligence is what takes place in the period between thought and action.

Flow is wonderful when it works. Less so when it gets us into difficulty.

It's as though some people wake up one day and say to themselves, enough is enough. I need to make life easier for myself, I need to make life smoother for myself. I need to stop making so many avoidable mistakes and stop getting into avoidable conflict with others.

Emotional intelligence is about making fewer self-inflicted mistakes.

But just as important, emotional intelligence is about understanding that risk and personal fulfilment go hand in hand.

Self-awareness and emotional intelligence are inhibiting.

Self-aware people see themselves in the world almost with a sense of detachment. They see the impact of their words and actions on others and manage their behaviour accordingly.

Self-aware people are circumspect.



Emotional intelligence recognises that life is not a zero sum game. We take calculated risks on a daily basis. The opportunity is to minimise the consequences.

Emotionally intelligent people manage the impact they have on others. They pre-empt difficulty, they mitigate against it wherever possible and they engage those potentially affected in any process.

Call it wisdom, call it whatever you want.

Acceptance

I had an appointment today for radiotherapy. Unfortunately the driver was late and I missed an important conversation I hoped to have with someone who shares my condition.

I was disappointed but got over it quickly enough. The world never stopped spinning.

Who are we to expect the world to fit in with us?

The planet is 4.5 billion years old; the oldest fossil of a modern human was found in Morocco and is carbon dated circa 300,000 years old. In 2020 the population of the planet is some 7 billion and it is estimated that some 107 billion human beings have already lived.

Our place in the scheme of things requires perspective.



Letting go does not mean giving up or ceasing to strive. Giving the best of oneself is for me a prerequisite. What a terrible waste not to. But driving my own blood pressure up in response to an event that is out of my control.

Accepting what life throws out whilst still maintaining our own direction is as emotionally intelligent as anyone could be. Keep calm and carry on.

Attachment

May 8th 1971. It is FA Cup Final day and I am sitting on the floor in my grandparents' living room. The game is on TV and the score is 1-1.

It is late in the game when Charlie George, the Arsenal legend, heads toward the Liverpool goal, ball at his feet. Just outside the penalty area he hits a shot that travels waist height that beats Ray Clemence, the world-class Liverpool goalkeeper, to score one of the great FA Cup goals. Arsenal 2, Liverpool 1.

Cue a flood of tears from yours truly.

Eight years of age and it is all too much for the young Liverpool fan.



Charlie George, posing with his long 1970s' hair, lying on his back, arms reaching out to his team mates. An image etched in my memory.

Living vicariously can be painful.

Giving up control of one's emotions. Attaching one's emotions to external entities or events like football teams. Or anything else.

Imagine you were one of the 100,000 people at Wembley Stadium that day. Everyone witnessing the same event.

Arsenal score and 50,000 people are jumping up and down in ecstasy whilst the other 50,000 are slumped in their seats.

Some people are happy and some are sad: yet everyone witnessed the same event.

It has to be that on some psychological level the people at Wembley have chosen to give up control of what makes them happy or sad.

Our attachment and the norms we ascribe in response to events relating to our social identity and our attachments determine what we experience, how we feel and respond.

Life is neutral not personal.

You missing your train is not part of some grand cosmic conspiracy.

The behaviour of some people may not be neutral, but life is neutral.

You are the one that ascribes meaning to experiences.

Some things are worth getting upset for. Some things are worth attaching your emotions to. But many are not.

It is still possible to enjoy a game of football if your team loses.

Self-awareness and emotional intelligence are about being conscious of your emotions. It's about seeing yourself in the world and choosing your response to any given event so as best to help you keep moving forward.

Not everything is positive. There is a time for distress and a time for anger, but much of that behaviour illustrates a lack of emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

Life is neutral.



If you write affirmations, they will keep you moving forward despite setbacks. Affirmations will keep your mind on the outcomes you want.

How to be still

Are you serious, do you really want inner stillness?

Are you prepared to do what it takes?

This is not a recommendation, but this poem might highlight areas in your life where progress can be made.



How to be still ... if you want to

No wine

No caffeine

No nicotine

Go to bed when you're tired

Not when the TV expired

If you can, read, walk and talk

But don't engage in predicting the next fork

Do yoga

Don't moan

Wake with the light

Understand that life is a privilege not a right

Don't fight

And always keep in sight

That a butterfly can flap its wings

And you unknowing

Involved in all that planning

Can be blown from your feet

Learn to be still

Learn that life can be gentle

Learn to bend

Learn to be a friend

To the person you most need

Are you listening to what your body and mind are telling you?

We all know that this is one of life's great challenges.

Going to bed when you feel tired, stop eating foods that bloat or block your system, not drinking alcohol every evening, avoiding caffeine, not spending money you don't have.

Does it feel like being asked to live like a monk?

And don't mention the social pressure.
Everything is relative. Any progress is progress.

Start slowly. Don't expect too much. Start with one objective and make it an affirmation.

Intractable problems

There is no panacea. There is no cure for all. Some things must be accepted and lived with.

There is no other way.

The challenge is to keep moving forward and to take pleasure where we can.

Stoicism is one answer. To recognise that our biggest opportunity is the way we think.

Gain a degree of control over what we think and we gain a degree of control of how we experience the world.

Essentially we have two broad choices. To look for answers within ourselves or to look outside of ourselves.

Perhaps the big question is emphasis. Where is your focus? Do you primarily take responsibility and look within yourself for answers?

And whilst working on yourself, do you look for additional external support? The best of both perhaps?

Or is your emphasis external? Is your focus on those things external to you that quieten your mind or distract you?

Resilience

“You have a brain tumour, thankfully it’s benign.”

For the first time in my life I could not imagine a future for myself. And for the first time in my life aged 57, I understood how central being able to imagine a future is to a normal life.

Daoism takes the metaphor of a reed to illustrate resilience. Life blows us around and that is a simple truth.

When this happens, if we stay rigid, we can break or get blown over. Reeds stay where they are despite the elements and they do it by being flexible and by being surrounded by other reeds.

Support matters, feeling connected matters and so does having your mind in the future.

When it comes to keeping your mind in the future, affirmations are the perfect tool. If you decide to set out to achieve something and you commit to it in writing. All you have to do is read it back to yourself. If you read the affirmation it will keep you on track. It will keep you moving forward. You will know if you are being true to yourself.

Losing your way

Many of us do it. There is nothing unusual in it. Some people seem to sail through life unencumbered by failure or sadness. The good stuff just seems to happen for them. The business, the house, the family, the partner, the job all just seem to happen.

For others, life can be one struggle after the next and it is easy to lose direction and heart. But with the right tools, you will be dusting yourself down pretty quickly.

Acceptance and perspective don't ease the pain, but along with a couple of other rules for living, you can re-orientate yourself at your own pace and set off again to wherever it is you are going.

IQ is a given – ignorance is a choice

We don't get to choose our IQ, our 'intelligence quotient', but we do get to choose how much effort we put in trying to understand the world around us.

We pass through childhood where knowledge is imparted on us by adults.

Parents, teachers and other well-meaning socially responsible adults tell us what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what isn't and what we should and shouldn't do.

As young adults we enter the stage where we have choice.



We can stay as that construction of beliefs and insights conditioned to accept those 'truths' that others shared. Or we can start to look for ourselves.

What sources of news and current affairs do you make use of? Which areas of life have you started to explore following your own motivation?

I have friends who have not read a book in their adult lives. People who happily make their way through life. People who are non-reflective.

Often these people are materially successful.

Equally I have friends whose adult life has been centred on what they can learn for themselves. People whose search for meaning and insight never stops.

What they tend to conclude is that the more they look, the less they know and the less they assume.

They tend to be less opinionated and less certain. But that doesn't mean they don't take risks, start businesses and relationships. It just means they are more circumspect.

There is no short cut. You must put in the hard yards. You must have the motivation to learn for yourself and to reconstruct yourself as your life progresses.

Finding meaning

Why are we here, why are we sentient and why is it so painful?

Relationships, children, religion, family, friends, charity, work, good deeds, following our dreams. We have to find meaning where we can.

Meaning is subjective and I have no idea.

Actualisation

For most of us, there is a gap between the people we are and the people we feel we could be.

Actualisation is a construct. It is not absolute, it can take a lifetime and may never be achieved. It is a word used to describe the state we achieve if we feel we have succeeded in life in becoming the person we feel we should be.

The measure is dissonance. The internal distress or discomfort we feel or we don't. The more at ease we are with ourselves, the less dissonance we feel.

Are you moving toward actualisation?

Are you at ease with yourself, your life and the world around you?

It's a huge question, perhaps the biggest.

About the Author

David graduated with a Master's Degree in coaching and mentoring in 2007. The qualification added insight from the different schools of psychology to his business experience and helped him to understand the mechanics of significant mental challenges and provided the tools and practices to help overcome them.

He has worked in sales and marketing management, coaching, supporting, training and consultancy specialising in behaviour and motivation.

After 12 hours of open heart surgery for two mechanical heart valves in 2012, and a divorce from his 30 year relationship in 2015, David left his career behind him and decided to give himself a break at the age of 52.

Then in 2019 he was diagnosed with a benign brain tumour called an Acoustic Neuroma. The diagnosis proved to be a reawakening.

It was time to put his coaching knowledge back to work and help others in their search for answers through difficult times.

David Williams



Learning how to manage and direct our thinking when life gets tough can be the most valuable lesson we ever learn.

The Guide introduces the core psychological and philosophical subjects 'in play' whenever we face challenges.

It considers the foundation knowledge necessary for coaching. Subjects such as our behaviour, our confidence, our imagination, our social identity, the self, the ego, our self-esteem, our self-worth, our belief systems and more.

Having established a foundation, coaching can focus on the specific challenges of the individual.

Equally important, **The Guide** provides a reference to return to, as time moves forward.

Coaching helps individuals to build a conscious appreciation of what is happening within them when things get difficult and how to choose a path out of that difficulty.