Constructive Living
Outgrow shyness, depression, fear, stress, grief, chronic pain. Achieve the goal of Constructive Living—to do everything well.
BY DAVID K. REYNOLDS · UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII FREE PRESS © 1984 · 120 PAGES

“There are no neurotics or geniuses or failures or fools. There are only neurotic moments, flashes of brilliance, failed opportunities, and stupid mistakes. But these moments, pleasant or unpleasant, can never fix us into rigid, immutable characters. We cannot help but change. This book is about choosing the direction of your changingness and acting upon your choice.”

~ David K. Reynolds from Constructive Living

Constructive Living

It’s a book a friend and favorite author of mine, Dan Millman (The Way of the Peaceful Warrior, Everyday Enlightenment, etc.), recommended to me. I’ve always admired Dan and his work for his ability to blend East and West with an ultimate focus on ACTION. And, now I know why he recommended this book to me: it’s an incredible manual on how to master ourselves and learn to take consistent, impeccably action.

Constructive Living is based on the fundamental notion that, although we can’t control our feelings, we CAN control our behaviors.

And, as a result, craft our ideal life. Or, as Reynolds says so poetically: “Our behavior is controllable in a way that our feelings are not. There is a very special satisfaction for the Artist of Living who works within life’s limits to produce a fine self-portrait. The more control we develop over our actions, the more chance we have of producing a self we can be proud of.”

That, in a nutshell, is what Constructive Living is all about.

I have no doubt you’ll enjoy this book. It’s a quick read—only 120 pages—and I’m excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas with you now!

THE GOAL: SELF-MASTERY

“One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself.”

~ Leonardo da Vinci

“The mature human being goes about doing what needs to be done regardless of whether that person feels great or terrible. Knowing that you are the kind of person with that kind of self-control brings all the satisfaction and confidence you will ever need. Even on days when the satisfaction and confidence just aren’t there, you can get the job done anyway.”

Amen.

It’s amazing to me to look back at my own life and see the swings of productivity—up and down... up and down—dependent on what was going on outside of me. To watch my own maturity into the kind of person who can more and more consistently show up regardless of what’s going on has, as Reynolds so powerful articulates, given me an incredible amount of satisfaction and confidence.

How about you?

My hunch is that you’ve experienced the same thing.

So, how can we celebrate the victories in our own self-mastery while looking deeper within to see
the (pesky little!) habits we still have that don’t serve us—the times when we’re still too buffeted by our circumstances or mood?

What’s one thing you know you need to be doing in your life that you’re not currently doing?

(Mine: quit checking my email and/or ESPN when I get stuck in a project! :)

You?

“That’s the ultimate goal of Constructive Living—to help you *do everything well*, with full attention.”

**THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF CONSTRUCTIVE LIVING**

1. “Feelings are uncontrollable directly by the will.

2. Feelings must be recognized and accepted as they are.

3. Every feeling, however unpleasant, has its uses.

4. Feelings fade in time unless they are restimulated.

5. Feelings can be directly influenced by behavior.”

Ah. Love it.

So, let’s start with Principle #1: “Feelings are uncontrollable directly by the will.”

Whether we choose to admit it or not, we cannot directly control our feelings with our will. (You’ll notice, however, in Principle #5, that we can INFLUENCE our feelings through our BEHAVIOR. Important distinction we’ll discuss in a moment.)

So, we can’t directly control our feelings by our will. The fact is that feelings come and they go—kinda like clouds in the sky and weather patterns in our daily lives. Try as we may to control them, we’ll have waves of anger or erotic thoughts or other such emotions. That’s just how it is.

With Principle #1 in place, Reynolds brings us to Principle #2: “Feelings must be recognized and accepted as they are.”

Simple point here: if you can’t control it, just accept it.

Which leads us to #3: “Every feeling, however unpleasant, has its uses.”

This one’s really cool. Let’s say you’re feeling pain or anger or frustration. See if you can step outside the immediate experience of that emotion and see how that feeling might be able to help you understand yourself better.

Your pain—whether it’s your headache or your relationship turmoil—is pointing to an area of your life that needs an adjustment. That’s useful. To ignore the feeling or be upset with it is kinda like being upset with your fire alarm going off because you have a fire. It’s a GOOD thing the alarm is going off so you can take ACTION! (Right??!) Same with all your feelings. They ALL have their uses. Trick is to step back and see them rather than getting caught up in wishing you weren’t experiencing them.

Alright. Now to #4: “Feelings fade in time unless they are restimulated.”

Think about it: if we’d just quit recalling our negative feelings and re-telling our painful stories to everyone we meet, those feelings would fade. So, quit restimulating them every moment of your life and let them fade already!! :)

Spotlight’s on you: Can you think of an area of your life where the feeling would fade if you’d just stop restimulating it??

OK. We’re on a roll now. Time for #5: “Feelings can be directly influenced by behavior.”
Aha! So, although feelings CANNOT be directly controlled by our will, they CAN be INFLUENCED by our behavior. So, what’s that mean?

In short, it means when you take action consistent with your highest self, you’ll experience feelings of confidence and satisfaction consistent with the knowing that you’re being your highest self. Make sense?

I like to think of negative emotions like anxiety and depression and frustration as God’s way of politely slapping us into shape. It’s basically a gift—giving us a reminder that we’re off.

Juxtapose that with the gift we get when we help people for example.

Did you know that when you do something kind for someone, serotonin—the drug pharmaceuticals make billions from by pumping into those little pills so many take like candy these days!!—is released in your brain—giving you the wonderful feeling of calm happiness. Ahhh... Not only that, but the person receiving your act of kindness also has serotonin released. Ahhh... AND (!) anyone watching you perform your kind act also has serotonin released. Amazing.

THAT may just be the coolest example of action influencing feelings that I can think of. Good stuff.

So, to re-cap: feelings come and they go (if we let them... and we should definitely let them!). Although we can’t directly control our feelings through our will (that is, we can’t MAKE ourselves feel blissful ALL the time), we CAN influence our feelings by taking positive action.

Powerful stuff.

As we said before, “Our behavior is controllable in a way that our feelings are not. There is a very special satisfaction for the Artist of Living who works within life’s limits to produce a fine self-portrait. The more control we develop over our actions, the more chance we have of producing a self we can be proud of.”

Now, let’s move on to:

**COPERNICUS & YOU**

You remember Copernicus, right?

He’s the brilliant guy who pointed out the fact that the Earth was not, after all, in the center of the universe. D’oh.

Well, guess what? Same thing with our lives.

“The most peaceful people I know have given themselves away... On the other hand, the most miserably people I have known have been self-focused. They worry about getting their share; they evaluate everyone’s acts in terms of how they themselves are affected.”

The moment we realize that we ARE NOT the center of the universe, remarkable things happen.

“The Japanese language uses a single word for self-centered and selfish. The word is ‘jiko-chushin.’ It means, literally, the self in the middle of the heart—the ego in the center of the mind. It means putting Old Number One first.”

What a powerful image for selfishness: the self in the middle of the heart.

So, back to our astronomy lesson. The Earth is NOT in the center of the universe. And, neither are we.

I think the important question to ask is: How can we open up more to the world today and give ourselves a little more to our families, to our colleagues, to our communities, to our countries, to our world?

And, as we do that, let’s take:
THE FIRST STEP

“The first step in changing reality is to recognize it as it is now. There is no need to wish it were otherwise. It simply is. Pleasant or not, it is. Then comes the behavior that acts on the present reality. Behavior can change what is. We may have visions of what will be. We cannot (and need not) prevent these dreams. But the visions won’t change the future. Action—in the present—changes the future. A trip of ten thousand miles starts out with one step, not with a fantasy about travel.”

That’s brilliant.

I don’t know about you, but I’m a big dreamer. I love setting big goals and going for them.

I’ve noticed, however, that I used to spend waaaayyyy too much time in the visioning/goal setting phase and, when things weren’t going quite as planned, I’d find myself stressed, spending more time planning, and less time ACTING. Not so effective.

Robert Fritz, in his brilliant book The Path of Least Resistance (see Notes) calls this “structural conflict”—where we oscillate between big dreams and fears we won’t be able to manifest them. His solution is similar to Reynolds’ wisdom: We can resolve the tension by taking an honest look at current reality, accepting that current reality (rather than sugar-coating it, ignoring it, etc.), and then taking the next baby step.


These days, I’m MUCH more focused on showing up, doing my best and taking the next step, and then the next step and then the next... It’s quite remarkable to see the joy and flow and ease that comes when I have less attachment to outcomes and spend most of my time doing what this moment demands.

So, although that trip of ten thousand miles needs to be imagined and planned, ultimately, we need to remember that we won’t get there unless we learn to take the first step, and the next step, and the...

And, remember throughout the process to ask:

NOW WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

“Now what needs to be done?”

I didn’t count how many times Reynolds wrote those words in his book. But it was a lot. :)

Alright. Let’s say you’re experiencing a challenging moment. Things aren’t going as planned. You’re nervous, disappointed, anxious, shy, afraid, frustrated, angry, disappointed, tired, depressed, stressed, annoyed, jealous, hurt, sad, ..., whatever!

“Now what needs to be done?”

If there ever was a panacea for living optimally and sustaining a high level of happiness, THAT question may just be at the core of it.

Reminds me of Byron Katie’s idea of “doing the dishes.”

She likes to say that in any given moment we have a little voice in our head that’s telling us what we need to do next—whether it’s pick to up the kids’ socks from the floor, writing an email to a colleague, having a conversation with your partner, meditating, going for a hike, doing the dishes... there’s always SOMETHING that needs to be done and, you pretty much always know what that something is.

Follow it and you’re in good shape. Ignore it at your own risk.
If you create the habit of NOT taking the next step and doing the next thing and washing the
next dish then it’s like your mind turns into a combat zone and you’ll suffer from combat fatigue
as you know you’re not living anywhere near your highest potential.

But all that’s part of a longer conversation.

For now, the question is: “Now what needs to be done?” :)

...

So, WHAT IS IT?!?

What in your life is currently “undone.” Is now a good time to do it? :)

...

And, of course, the next time you find yourself experiencing any particular emotion, ask yourself
what needs to get done next. And, (important “and”!) do it!

**DOING DEPRESSION**

“Depression can be created by sitting slouched in a chair, shoulders hunched, head hanging
down. Repeat these words over and over: ‘There’s nothing anybody can do. No one can help me.
I’m helpless. I give up.’ Shake your head, sigh, cry. In general, act depressed and the genuine
feeling will follow in time... Feelings follow behavior.”

“Feelings follow behavior.”

You want to feel depressed? Follow the prescription outlined above.

You want to feel better? Get active!

Seriously.

If you’re feeling funky, make SURE you’re exercising. That alone can have significant effects.

Of course, when we’re feeling the funk, getting up and moving our bodies is one of the last
things we want to do. And also one of the most important.

So, the next time you’re starting to feel a little off, take a moment to check in on how you’re
holding yourself. Odds are your breath is compromised from a slouching posture. Your
shoulders are rolled over a bit. Your energy, in general, is down kinda like a wilted flower. (We’ve
all mastered that posture at times.) Or, maybe you’re flat on your back eating bon-bons in bed.

In any case, get up! BREATHE. Stretch yourself out. Shake yourself up. Bounce up and down a
bit. SMILE. And get to work. :)

Know that, as Reynolds says: “Behavior wags the tail of feelings... We do, then we feel.”

And while you’re doing that, remember:

**FEAR & STRESS**

“Anyone who says he isn’t afraid of anything is both stupid and lying.”

Hehe. I love that.

As Reynolds continues: “Fear is a healthy emotion. It produces caution, and caution helps keep
us alive. Fear, like pain, is unpleasant for anyone, but the discomfort is an alarm that calls our
attention to some problem facing us. It is good to be afraid at times.”

As Aristotle teaches us in his lessons on the “Virtuous Mean,” it’s not about being fearless.
It’s about having the proper amount of fear and the COURAGE to face that fear. In Aristotle’s
words, this is the virtuous mean between the “vice of excess” of fear (cowardice) and the “vice of
deficiency” of fear (rashness).

Are you feeling fear around something right now? Start by honoring that. It’s serving you in an important way. Once you’ve done that, a Constructive question to ask is: “Now what needs to be done?” :)

MASTERY OF LIFE

“Constructive Living offers a lifestyle of worth and dignity. But this mastery of life grows slowly, painfully, and only with effort. It requires attention, patience, self-discipline, honesty. It asks you to face your feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, to check out your purposes, large and small, to guide your own behavior, whatever the pain, in constructive directions. It advises you that when you fail, in that strain toward impeccability, that the suffering self is lost and a triumphant self is gained.”

Wow. Beautiful.

I hope that you enjoyed this quick look at some of the Big Ideas of Constructive Living. Although it’s a short book and a quick read, it’s packed with an incredible amount of wisdom. I highly recommend you add it to your book shelves and enjoy the exercises and further wisdom Reynolds provides to help us in our pursuit of creating our ideal lives!

To Constructive Living, my friend,

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note, you'll probably like...

Everyday Enlightenment
Body Mind Mastery
Mastery
The Path of Least Resistance
Loving What Is
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People
Man's Search for Meaning
Learned Optimism

About the Author of “Constructive Living”
DAVID K. REYNOLDS

David K. Reynolds is recognized as the leading Western authority on Japanese psychotherapies. He is a former faculty member of the UCLA School of Public Health, the USC School of Medicine, and the University of Houston. His books have been published by university presses (California, Chicago, Hawaii, and New York) and popular presses in the U.S., Japan, China, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere. In 1988 the World Health Organization sent Dr. Reynolds to China to train psychiatrists there in Constructive Living. He currently lectures and conducts workshops around the Pacific, including approximately three months in spring and three months in fall in Japan lecturing and consulting in Japanese. He is the only Westerner to receive the Kora Prize and the Morita Prize by the Morita Therapy Association of Japan. (from his site where you can learn more: http://constructiveliving.org/)

About the Author of This Note
BRIAN JOHNSON

Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.