

The enemy within:

Stressed out by our job, distressed by our intimate relationships, distraught over a break-up, laid low by a sense of failure, grief stricken by the suffering of those close to us, or consumed by negative thoughts, we sometimes get the feeling that life as a whole is 'doing us in'. There seems to be no relief or no escape hatch out at all. Sadness or general unhappiness can settle over the mind like a suffocating fog. Just another failure, and our world is emptied of life. Unable to imagine an end to the painful ache of unhappiness, we withdraw into our selves, into the strange security of our familiar negativity. The furniture of our depressiveness becomes comfortable. We find solace in being against the world. As one client said to me, "When I tried to think clearly about my life I felt my mind was anesthetized, that it could not move in any direction. I knew that the sun was rising and setting, but little of its light reached me."

Happiness is bound up with distress when we lack adequate resources to sustain the basic elements of life: to experience the joy of being alive; to carry the quiet conviction that we still have the ability to flourish and grow; to be at home in one's skin.

External stress, or big upheavals in life are not necessarily what distress us most. It has been observed that depression and suicide rates decline and considerably during war. During World War II it was noted that all of the psychiatric hospitals in France were empty. Natural disasters, too, somehow bring out the best in humankind in terms of courage, solidarity, and purpose. Most of the time it is not outward events but our own mind and negative emotions that make us unable to maintain our inner stability and drag us down.

The negative emotions tie knots in our chest that obstinately refuse to be unraveled - Guilt, despair, helplessness, fear, and worry. WE have only just gotten out from under them when, we imagine, when they erupt again with renewed vigour. On Thursday you feel that you have them defeated, only for them to rise up like a tide again on Friday. Your emotional unhappiness, anxiety, or depressiveness seems to resist all reassurance. What is going wrong, we ask.

It is our thoughts themselves that rise up as our enemies. Thoughts can be our best friends and our worst foes. When they make us feel that the entire world is against us, every perception, every encounter, and the world's very existence become sources of torment. Our thoughts stampede through our minds in droves. Each set of thoughts creates their own little inner drama of ever-increasing confusion. Nothing is right outside in our everyday life because nothing is right inside. And we know it!

When we get a close look at the monochrome of our everyday thoughts, we realize the extent to which they drain the colour from the everyday life that passes before us.

The worrier fears the least event – if her children are locked in their room she fears her children hate her; if her husband is silent it means he wants out of the marriage, if her adult son has to travel away he will have an accident; if she has put on some weight it means she is ugly. For a jealous husband, his wife's most innocuous social meetings are suspect, the smile directed elsewhere by his wife is a source of pain; her lateness in arriving home creates a sense of panic within. For these tow people, as for the

histrionic, the miserly, the obsessive, or the self-righteous, thoughts swell into daily tempests that cast a shadow over life that destroys natural *joie de vivre*.

Yet this knot in the chest was tied not by our unfaithful partner, our cranky boss, our unsuccessful attempts, but by our own mind. It is the result of mental obsessiveness and years of repetition that creates the illusion that our perceptions of our world are real. Our negative thoughts and patterns of attention become an internal myth that we believe about ourselves.

The inability to manage our inner thoughts and attitudes proves to be the principal cause of suffering. If you were to transpose someone else directly into the conditions of your unhappy life they would experience and react to it in an entirely different way than you.

Learning to tone down the ceaseless racket of our disturbing thoughts is a decisive stage on the road to inner peace. It takes great discipline to re-condition the inner mind. Like physical fitness, our mental fitness is achieved through routine, practice, discipline, and repetition. Developing good mental habits is like learning the piano. It starts out with tedious practice - over and over again. It ends up with melodic and natural chord sequences. So if you are chronically unhappy, don't believe the myth you have created about yourself and your life. You are a story that is waiting to be rewritten.