

# *Twelve Rational Principles*

*Developing a new philosophy that works for you*

*by Wayne Froggatt*

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The twelve principles outlined below will help you to both counter self-defeating beliefs that create distress, and overcome the blocks to using other coping strategies.

## **Self-knowledge**

Self-knowledge – on which the other principles build – involves knowing your capabilities and your limits, your personal temperament and typical coping style, and your values and goals.

What are your values, what matters to you? Though you may share many ideals with others in your social group, every person has a unique system of values and goals.

Everyone has certain abilities – and limits. Do you recognise your abilities and make the most of them? Do you also acknowledge your limits and know when to stop?

Everyone has their own temperament, style of managing stress, and value system. You need to develop coping strategies relevant to your personal style and compatible with your personal values, otherwise you are not likely to use them.

## **Self-acceptance and confidence**

To accept yourself is to acknowledge three things: (1) you exist, (2) there is no reason why you *should* be any different from how you are, and (3) you are neither worthy nor unworthy.

Self-acceptance involves rejection of any *demand* that you be different. You may sensibly *prefer* to be different and decide to change some things. But keep the desire to change as a preference – you don't *have* to change, it is a *choice*.

Further, instead of evaluating your *'self'*, use your energy and time to evaluate (1) your *behaviour*, and (2) the quality of your *existence*.

Evaluating your behaviour is a good idea. You can check whether it helps you enjoy your

life and achieve your goals. It is also a good idea to evaluate the quality of your existence. Your enjoyment of life is surely important – more important than worrying about whether you are a 'worthwhile' person.

To have confidence in your abilities involves three things. First, you know what you can and can't do. Second, you are prepared to try things to the limit of your ability. And third, you regularly work at extending your capabilities.

Having confidence in your *abilities* is different to having confidence in your *self*. 'Self'-confidence implies perfection – that you, as a *total* person, are able to do everything well. Confidence in your *abilities* is more realistic. Instead of talking about *self*-confidence, aim for *ability*-confidence<sup>1</sup> and talk about social confidence, work confidence, driving confidence, house-care confidence, examination confidence, relationship confidence, and so on.

## **Enlightened self-interest**

It is important to your survival and happiness that you are able to act in your own interests. It is also important to take into account the interests of others. The principle of enlightened self-interest takes into account both: (1) You place your own interests first; while (2) keeping in mind that your own interests will be best served if you take into account the interests of others.

In other words, ensure that your self-interest is *enlightened*. *Individual* interests are best served by *mutual* cooperation. Self-interest without social interest is misguided – so is social interest without self-interest. Knowing what is in your interests will help you get what is best for you and avoid what is harmful, and keep you moving toward your goals. But you had better also take into account the interests of others. Treat other people well and they are more likely to reciprocate. Contribute to their welfare and they will be encouraged to

contribute to yours. And contributing to the society in which you live will mean a better environment in which to pursue your interests.

### **Tolerance for frustration and discomfort**

High tolerance will keep you from overreacting to things you dislike. It will help you tackle problems and issues rather than avoid them. It will enable you to take risks and try new experiences. 'High tolerance' means accepting the reality of frustration and discomfort, and keeping the badness of events and circumstances in perspective.

To accept frustration and discomfort is to acknowledge that, while you may dislike them, they are realities. They exist, and there is no Law of the Universe says they 'should' not exist (though you may *prefer* they not). You expect to experience *appropriate* negative emotions like concern, remorse, regret, sadness, annoyance, and disappointment. But you avoid exaggerating these emotions (by telling yourself you can't stand them) into anxiety, guilt, shame, depression, hostile anger, hurt, or self-pity.

### **Long-range enjoyment**

Like most people, you probably want to enjoy life. As well as avoid distress, you want to experience pleasure. And you probably want to get your pleasure now, not tomorrow. But there are times when it is in our interests to forgo immediate pleasure, in order to have greater enjoyment in the longer term.

Seek to get enjoyment from each of your present moments, rather than always putting off pleasure till 'tomorrow', or dwelling on things that have happened in the past. However, to keep on enjoying your present moments, choose to postpone pleasure at times. You may wish to drink more alcohol – but if you restrict your intake now your body will still let you drink in ten years time. Or you may wish to buy a new stereo, but instead choose to save the money for an overseas trip.

To sum up: *live for the present with an eye to the future*. Seek to get maximum pleasure and enjoyment in the present – while ensuring you will be able to enjoy life in the long term.

### **Risk-taking**

Human beings, by nature, seek safety, predictability, and freedom from fear. But

humans also pursue risk. A totally secure life would be a boring one. To grow as a person and improve your quality of life means being prepared to take some chances.

Be willing to take sensible risks in order to get more out of life and avoid the distress of boredom, listlessness and dissatisfaction. Learn new things that may challenge existing beliefs; tackle tasks that have no guarantee of success; try new relationships; do things even though there is a risk that others may disapprove.

### **Moderation**

*Sensible* risk-taking recognises that human beings also desire safety and security. The principle of moderation will help you avoid extremes in thinking, feeling, and behaving.

Extreme expectations that are too high or too low will set you up for either constant failure or a life of boredom. Addictive or obsessional behaviour can take control of you. Unrestrained eating, drinking or exercising will stress your body and lead to long term health complications. Obsessive habits can damage relationships as well as your body.

Take a moderate approach to your whole life – from your ultimate goals through to your daily activities. Develop long-term goals, short-term objectives, and tasks that will challenge and move you on – but ensure they are achievable and do not set you up for disillusionment.

Moderation does not exclude risk-taking – in fact, it will help you avoid taking security too far. But you can take risks without being foolhardy.

### **Emotional and behavioural responsibility**

People who see their emotions and behaviours as under their control are less prone to distress than people who see themselves as controlled by external forces.<sup>ii</sup> To be *emotionally responsible* is to believe that you create your own feelings: you avoid blaming other people for how you feel. *Behavioural responsibility* involves accepting that you cause your own actions and behaviours, and are not compelled to behave in any particular way.

Note that responsibility is not the same thing as blame. 'Blame' is *moralistic* – it seeks to damn and condemn. Responsibility, on the other hand, is *practical*. It seeks either to identify a cause so it can be dealt with; or to identify who

needs to take action for the problem to get solved. It is concerned not with moralising, but with finding solutions.

### **Self-direction and commitment**

*Self-direction* involves (1) choosing your goals, making sure they are your own; and (2) making your own decisions, even though you may seek opinions from others. Self-direction does not mean non-cooperation with others: you keep it on the right track by balancing it with enlightened self-interest, moderation, and flexibility.

*Commitment* has two elements:

1. *Perseverance* is the ability to bind yourself emotionally and intellectually to courses of action, willing to do the necessary work (and tolerate the discomfort involved) in personal change and goal-achievement.
2. *Deep involvement* is the ability to enjoy and become absorbed in (but not addicted to) other people, activities and interests – work, sports, hobbies, creative activities, and the world of ideas – as ends in themselves, where you get pleasure from the doing, irrespective of the final result.

### **Flexibility**

Flexible people can bend with the storm rather than be broken by it. They know how to *adapt* and adjust to new circumstances that call for new ways of thinking and behaving. They have *resilience* - the ability to bounce back from adversity.

Be open to change in yourself and in the world. As circumstances alter, modify your plans and behaviours. Adopt new ways of thinking that help you cope with a changing world. Let others hold their own beliefs and do things in ways appropriate to them - while you do what is right for you.

Be flexible in your *thinking*. Ensure your values are preferences rather than demands. Be open to changing ways of thinking in the light of new information and evidence. View change as a challenge rather than a threat.

Be flexible in your *behaviour*. Be able to change direction when it is in your interests, willing to try new ways of dealing with problems and frustrations. Let others do things their way, and avoid distressing yourself when they think or act in ways you dislike.

### **Objective thinking**

All of the other principles require freedom from ways of thinking that are narrow-minded, sectarian, bigoted and fanatical; or that rely on uncritical acceptance of dogmatic beliefs or 'magical' explanations for the world and what happens in it.

Objective thinking is scientific in nature. It is based on evidence gained from observation and experience rather than on subjective feelings or uncritical belief. It reaches conclusions that validly follow from the evidence. It is pragmatic: it encourages us to assess whether what we believe is *functional* in terms of creating appropriate emotions and behaviours that lead us toward our goals.

Nothing is seen as absolute or the last word. Beliefs are seen as theories that are subject to change as new evidence comes to hand. Objectivity encourages us to continually search for explanations that are more accurate and useful than the ones we have now.

### **Acceptance of reality**

It makes sense, wherever possible, to change things you dislike. But there will be some things you will not be able to change. You then have two choices - you can rail against fate and stay distressed; or you can accept reality and move on. To accept something is to do three things:

1. *Admit that reality - including unpleasant reality - exists.* You see it as inevitable that many things will not be to your liking. You view uncertainty, frustration and disappointment as aspects of normal life.
2. *Avoid any demand that reality not exist.* This means that although you may *prefer* yourself, other people, things, or circumstances to be different from how they are (and you may even work at changing them), you know there is no Law of the Universe which says they *should* or *must* be different.
3. *Keep unwanted realities in perspective.* You dislike some things, and find them unpleasant - but you avoid catastrophising them into 'horrible' or 'unbearable'.

Many people have trouble with the idea of acceptance. They think that to accept something means they have to like it, agree with it, justify it, be indifferent to it, or resign themselves to it. Acceptance is none of these things. You can dislike something, see it as unjustified and continue to prefer that it not exist. You can be

concerned about it. You can take action to change it, if change is possible. But you can still accept it by rejecting the idea that it *should* not exist and that it absolutely *must* be changed. To paraphrase a well-known saying: to achieve happiness, strive for (1) the courage to change the things you can, (2) the serenity to accept the

things you can't, and (3) the wisdom to know the difference<sup>iii</sup>.

One last thing. Don't make these principles into demands. They are ideals. Probably no-one could practice them all consistently. Rather than see them as absolute 'musts' for managing your stress, use them as *guidelines* to a better life.

NOTES:

<sup>i</sup> Hauck, P.A. *Overcoming the Rating Game: Beyond Self-Love - Beyond Self-Esteem*. Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1992.

<sup>ii</sup> Kobasa, Suzanne C. *Stressful Life Events, Personality, and Health: An Inquiry into Hardiness*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37:1, 1-11, 1979.

<sup>iii</sup> A saying originally coined by a Taoist monk, popularised by Reinhold Niebuhr, adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, paraphrased by Gunars Neiders in *The Conquest of Happiness: A rational approach* (found on the Internet at <http://www.halcyon.com/neiders/conquest/conquest.htm>), and further paraphrased by this author.

Did you find this article helpful? You may wish to read the book from which it was adapted:

***Taking Control: Manage stress to get the most out of life***

by

**Wayne Froggatt**

(HarperCollins, Auckland 2006)

Also, by the same author:

***Choose To Be Happy: Your step-by-step guide (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)***

***FearLess: Your guide to overcoming anxiety***

(HarperCollins, Auckland - both 2003)

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