

through the book, routinely ask yourself: What am I learning in this section or chapter that I can actively incorporate into daily practice?

If you are like most people, you can discover some practical starting points. The challenge will be in following through on any that you find. This is the challenge in most areas of skill development: People do not usually follow through. They do not establish habits of regular practice. They are discouraged by the strain and awkwardness of early attempts to perform well.

To develop as a thinker, you must work out a plan that will work for you, one you can live with, one that won't burn you out or overwhelm you. Ultimately, success comes to those who are persistent and who figure out strategies for themselves.

Still, at this stage, you probably don't know for sure what will work for you, only what seems like it *might*. You have to field-test your ideas. To be realistic, you should expect to experiment with a variety of plans before you find one that moves you forward as a thinker.

Guard against discouragement. You can best avoid discouragement by recognizing from the outset that you are engaged in a process of trial and error. Prepare yourself for temporary failure. Understand success as the willingness to work through a variety of relative failures. The logic is analogous to trying on clothes. Many that you try might not fit or look good on you, but you plod on anyway with the confidence that eventually you will find something that fits and looks good on you.

Consider another analogy: If you want to become skilled at tennis, you improve not by expecting yourself to begin as an expert player, to win every game you play, or by mastering new strokes with little practice. Rather, you improve when you develop a plan you can modify as you see what improves your game. Today, you might decide to work on keeping your eye on the ball. Tomorrow, you might coordinate watching the ball with following through as you swing. Every day, you rethink your strategies for improvement. Development of the human mind is parallel to the development of the human body. Good theory, good practice, and good feedback are essential.

## A "GAME PLAN" FOR IMPROVEMENT

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As you begin to take your thinking seriously, think about what you can do consistently to improve your thinking. Because excellence in thinking requires a variety of independent skills and traits that work together, you can choose to work on a range of critical thinking skills at any given point in time. The key is to focus on fundamentals and make sure you don't try to do too much. Choose your point of attack, but limit it. If you overdo it, you probably will give up entirely, but if you don't focus on fundamentals, you will never have them as a foundation in your thought.

Start slowly and emphasize fundamentals. The race is won by the tortoise, not by the hare. Be a wise turtle. The solid, steady steps you take every day will determine where you ultimately end up.

## A GAME PLAN FOR DEVISING A GAME PLAN

**W**e have put together a few ideas to stimulate your thought about a game plan. There is nothing magical about our ideas; no one of them is essential. Nevertheless, each represents a plausible point of attack, one way to begin to do something plausible to improve thinking in a regular way. Although you probably can't do all of these at the same time, we recommend an approach in which you experiment with all of them. You can add any others you find in this book or come up with yourself. After you familiarize yourself with some of the options, we explain how this game plan works.

**1. Use "wasted" time.** All humans waste some time. No one uses all of his or her time productively or even pleasurably. Sometimes we jump from one diversion to another without enjoying any of them or become irritated about matters beyond our control. Sometimes we fail to plan well, causing negative consequences that we easily could have avoided such as spending time unnecessarily trapped in traffic although we could have left a half hour earlier and avoided the rush. Sometimes we worry unproductively, spend time regretting what is past, or just stare blankly into space.

The key is that the time is "spent," and if we had thought about it and considered our options, we would not have deliberately spent our time in that way. So our idea is this: Take advantage of the time you normally waste by practicing good thinking during that interval. For example, instead of sitting in front of the TV at the end of the day, flicking from channel to channel in a vain search for a program worth watching, spend that time, or at least part of it, thinking back over your day and evaluating your strengths and weaknesses. You might ask yourself questions like these:

- When did I do my worst thinking today?
- When did I do my best thinking?
- What did I actually think about today?
- Did I figure out anything?
- Did I allow any negative thinking to frustrate me unnecessarily?
- If I had to repeat today, what would I do differently? Why?
- Did I do anything today to further my long-term goals?
- Did I act in accordance with my own expressed values?
- If I were to spend every day this way for 10 years, would I, at the end, have accomplished something worthy of that time?

Taking a little time with each question is important. It would be useful to review these questions periodically, perhaps weekly, to write your answers in a journal and, in so doing, keep a record of how your thinking is developing.

**2. Handle a problem a day.** At the beginning of each day (perhaps driving to work or going to school), choose a problem to work on when you have free moments. Figure out the logic of the problem by identifying its elements. Systematically think

through the questions: What exactly is the problem? How can I put it into the form of a question? (See Chapter 10 for a template you might use.)

**3. Internalize intellectual standards.** Each week, study and actively bring into your thinking *one* of the universal intellectual standards presented in Chapter 5. Focus one week on clarity, the next on accuracy, and so on. For example, if you are focusing on *clarity* for the week, try to notice when you are being unclear in communicating with others. Notice when others are unclear in what they are saying. When you read, notice whether you are clear about what you are reading. When you write a paragraph for class, ask yourself whether you are clear about what you are trying to say and in conveying your thoughts in writing.

In doing this, you will practice four techniques of clarification: (1) stating what you are saying with some consideration given to your choice of words, (2) elaborating on your meaning in other words, (3) giving examples of what you mean from experiences you have had, and (4) using analogies, metaphors, pictures, or diagrams to illustrate what you mean. In clarifying thinking, you should state, elaborate, illustrate, and exemplify your points, and you will regularly ask others to do the same.

**4. Keep an intellectual journal.** Each week, write out a certain number of journal entries. Use the following format for each important event you write about:

- Describe only situations that are emotionally significant to you (situations you care deeply about).
- Describe only one situation at a time.
- Describe (and keep this separate) how you behaved in the situation, being specific and exact. (What did you say? What did you do? How did you react?)
- Analyze, in the light of what you have written, what precisely was going on in the situation; dig beneath the surface.
- Assess the implications of your analysis. (What did you learn about yourself? What would you do differently if you could relive the situation?)

**5. Practice intellectual strategies.** Choose a strategy from Chapter 16 on strategic thinking. While using that strategy, record your observations in a journal, including what you are learning about yourself and how you can use the strategy to improve your thinking.

**6. Reshape your character.** Each month, choose one intellectual trait to strive for, focusing on how you can develop that trait in yourself. For example, if concentrating on intellectual humility, begin to notice when you admit you are wrong. Notice when you refuse to admit you are wrong, even in the face of glaring evidence that you are truly wrong. Notice when you become defensive when another person tries to point out a deficiency in your work or your thinking. Notice when your arrogance keeps you from learning, when you say to yourself, for example, "I already know everything I need to know about this subject," or "I know as much as he does. Who does he think he is, forcing his opinions onto me?"

**7. Deal with your ego.** Daily, begin to observe your egocentric thinking in action by contemplating questions like these: As I reflect upon my behavior today, did I ever become irritable over small things? Did I do or say anything irrational to get my way? Did I try to impose my will upon others? Did I ever fail to speak my mind when I felt strongly about something and then later feel resentment?

Once you identify egocentric thinking in operation, you can work to replace it with more rational thought through systematic reflection. What would a rational person feel in this or that situation? What would a rational person do? How does that compare with what you did? (Hint: If you find that you continually conclude that a rational person would behave just as you behaved, you probably are engaging in self-deception.) (See Chapter 11 for more ways to identify egocentric thinking.)

**8. Redefine the way you see things.** We live in a world, both personal and social, in which every situation is defined; it is given a fundamental meaning. How a situation is defined determines how we feel about it, how we act in it, and what implications it has for us. Virtually every situation, however, can be defined in more than one way. This fact carries with it tremendous opportunities for all of us to make our life more of what we want it to be. In principle, it lies within your power to make your life much happier and more fulfilling than it is.

Many of the negative definitions we apply to situations in our lives could, in principle, be transformed into positive definitions. As a result, we can gain when otherwise we would have lost. We can be happy when otherwise we would have been sad. We can be fulfilled when otherwise we would have been frustrated. In this game plan, we practice redefining the way we see things, turning negatives into positives, dead-ends into new beginnings, mistakes into opportunities to learn. To make this game plan practical, we should create some specific guidelines for ourselves. For example, we might make ourselves a list of five to ten recurring negative situations in which we feel frustrated, angry, unhappy, or worried. We then could identify the definition in each case that is at the root of the negative emotion. Next, we would choose a plausible alternative definition for each and plan for our new responses as well as our new emotions.

Suppose you have a roommate who gets on your nerves by continually telling you about all the insignificant events in his or her life. Your present definition of the situation is, "What a bore! How am I going to last a whole semester listening to that brainless soap opera?" Your response might be: "Since I have to do a required research project for my introduction to psychology class, I will focus my project on the psychology of my roommate." Now, instead of passively listening to the daily blow-by-blow description of your roommate's day, you actively question him or her to gather information you can use in your psychology paper. Because you are now directing the conversation, your roommate is not able to bore you with the details of his or her day, and you transform your interactions into a learning experience.

Another possibility is to redefine an "impossibly difficult class" into a "challenge to figure out new fundamental concepts and a new way of thinking." For example: You redefine your initial approach to a member of the other sex not in terms of the definition, "His/her response will determine whether I am an attractive

person," but, instead, in terms of the definition, "Let me test to see if this person is initially drawn to me, given the way he or she perceives me."

With the first definition in mind, you feel personally put down if the person is not interested in you. With the second definition, you explicitly recognize that people initially respond not to the way a stranger *is* but, rather, to the way the person subjectively *looks* to the other. You therefore do not perceive someone's failure to show interest in you as a defect in you.

**9. Get in touch with your emotions.** Whenever you feel some negative emotion, systematically ask yourself, "What, exactly, is the thinking that leads to this emotion? How might this thinking be flawed? What am I assuming? Should I be making these assumptions? What information is my thinking based on? Is that information reliable?" and so on. (See Chapters 3 and 16.)

**10. Analyze group influences on your life.** Closely analyze the behavior that is encouraged and discouraged in the groups to which you belong. For a given group, what are you required or expected to believe? What are you "forbidden" to do? If you conclude that your group does not require you to believe anything or has no taboos, you can conclude that you have not deeply analyzed that group. To gain insight into the process of socialization and group membership, review an introductory text in sociology. (See Chapter 11.)

## Integrating Strategies One by One

When designing strategies, the key point is to engage in an experiment. You are testing strategies in your personal life, integrating them, and building on them in light of your actual experience. All strategies have advantages and disadvantages. One plausible way to do this is to work with all the strategies on the following list in any order.

1. Use "wasted" time.
2. Handle a problem a day.
3. Internalize intellectual standards.
4. Keep an intellectual journal.
5. Practice intellectual strategies.
6. Reshape your character.
7. Deal with your ego.
8. Redefine the way you see things.
9. Get in touch with your emotions.
10. Analyze group influences on your life.

As you design strategies to improve the quality of your life, suppose you find the strategy "Redefine the way you see things" to be intuitive to you. Therefore, it's a good strategy to begin with. As you focus intently on this idea and apply it in your life, you begin to notice social definitions within groups. You begin to recognize

how your behavior is shaped and controlled by group definitions. You begin to see how you and others uncritically accept group definitions rather than creating your own definitions. Notice the definitions embedded in the following statements.

1. "I'm giving a *party*."
2. "We're going to have a *meeting*."
3. "Why don't you run for *election*?"
4. "The *funeral* is Tuesday."
5. "Jack is an *acquaintance*, not really a *friend*."

When you internalize this idea, you begin to see how important and pervasive social definitions are. When you more insightful about social definitions, you can redefine situations in ways that run contrary to commonly accepted social definitions. You then see how redefining situations and relationships enables you to "get in touch with your emotions." You recognize that the way you define things generates the emotions you feel. When you *think* you are threatened (you define a situation as "threatening"), you feel *fear*. On the one hand, if you define a situation as a "failure," you might feel depressed. On the other hand, if you define that same situation as "a lesson or an opportunity to learn," you feel empowered to learn. When you recognize the control you are capable of exercising, the two strategies begin to work together and reinforce each other.

You then might begin to integrate Strategy 10 ("Analyze group influences on your life") with the two strategies you have already internalized. One of the main ways in which groups control us is by controlling the definitions they allow us to use. When a group defines some things as "cool" and some as "dumb," members of the group try to appear "cool" and not "dumb." When the boss of a business says, "That makes a lot of sense," his subordinates know they are not to say, "No, it is ridiculous." They know this because defining someone as the "boss" gives him or her special privileges to define situations and relationships. As a developing thinker, you begin to decide which groups you allow to influence your thinking and which group influences you reject.

You now have three interwoven strategies: You "redefine the way you see things," "get in touch with your emotions," and "analyze group influences on your life." The three strategies are integrated into one. At this point, you can experiment with any of the other strategies (which follow), looking for opportunities to integrate them into your thinking and your life.

- Use wasted time.
- Handle a problem a day.
- Internalize intellectual standards.
- Keep an intellectual journal.
- Practice intellectual strategies.
- Reshape your character.
- Deal with your ego.