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mentalligence

[men-tell-a-jence]

1. A new psychology of thinking model that teaches ways to launch UPward spirals through a process of unlearning and pivoting away from social conditioning and indoctrination that damage human progress.
2. A collection of reflective, mindful, universal, and imagineering lenses to overcome blind spots and primitive instincts that lead to ignorance, mindlessness, insularity, and stagnation.

Terry is the ultimate embodiment of mentalligence—always such an agile and mindful thinker who brings social impact and can connect with anyone, anywhere.

STUCK

An Introduction

*I thought how unpleasant it is to be
locked out; and I thought how it is worse,
perhaps, to be locked in.*

—Virginia Woolf

It was 10:10 a.m. and I was in full sprint mode, running down Boylston Street, the historic site of the Boston Marathon finish.

Not that it was official race day—just my own variation: à la pencil skirt, sneakers, beat-up tote bag brimming with long to-do lists, a now-too-heavy laptop I'd wished I'd left back at the office, and remnants of half-eaten Scooby snacks for those *just-in-case* but *all-the-time* moments when there wasn't time to stop for a proper meal.

I managed to blend in with my fellow harried travelers even as I broke into a massive sweat, while internally defaulting to a slew of self-criticisms for finding myself in yet another time pickle. My plan had been to arrive a little early. Today was important.

Between my poor sense of direction and chronic propensity to pack too much in, here I was on the verge of missing my first appointment and sending my system into complete anxiety overdrive once again. Plus, I had a meeting back at work at the top of the hour and hadn't told anyone I had left or where I was going.

Heart pounding, I finally made it to the office of Lyla, my new therapist.

"So, you're here because you want to manage the pressures of your new job, right?"

Right on cue, I was totally out of breath.

Even with all the efficiency and productivity strategies I'd cobbled together, the eighty-hour workweek was putting me on the brink of adrenal overload.

I presented the sanitized story, for starters: the polished, carefully edited version to give her context so that she wouldn't think I was a total mess. The bullet points spilled out: *Age thirty-eight. Fast growth trajectory. Seasoned human behavior expert. New faculty position. Two teenagers. Book about to be released. Chronically sick mom. Crazy travel schedule. My family, students, colleagues, and patients show lots of affinity. I love them, too. I handle it all pretty well . . . most days.*

I wanted her to see my best side: that I was relatively smart and capable, that I had it together. Not that I was a lot like Dory from *Finding Nemo*—forgetting everything else I'd previously learned about not overloading my plate.

I downplayed my Dory moments and true anxiety levels. I was simply a seasoned behavioral health clinician practicing what I preach. My harried arrival into her therapy

office signaled a proactive approach. Everyone should take advantage of the free EAP sessions, after all. I left out the footnotes about the constant knots in my stomach, middle-of-the-night panic jolts, endless time spent ruminating over everything, and the alienation and loneliness I often felt, even within my closest relationships.

Lyla didn't appear convinced that my workaholic ways were just for the love of the sport, or just because I'm from Boston.

"You seem to take a lot of pride in your work and family. But it seems you're stuck in constant overdrive. . . ."

It was only eleven minutes into the session.

"It sounds to me like you're a bit of a perfectionist."

I instinctively nodded and smiled politely, as only a true seasoned perfectionist can.

Inside, I fumed. *Did she miss how conscientious I am? How challenging working in a university was? How much my family and patients needed me? Isn't my session time up? Maybe this therapy thing was a huge mistake. I need some peanut butter cheesecake and wine, now!* My impulse was to run, so I scrambled for clever rationalizations.

Luckily, she didn't budge. She masterfully connected the dots between my gluttony for work and the extreme performance obsession embedded in my fabric. She saw I was working myself to the bone. My perpetual yes was costing me a lot. My definitions of working hard and worthiness had collided.

The anxiety I was marinating in, she felt, was evidence of me living in extreme overcompensation mode to please everyone. She saw how much I relished my identity as someone who does it all, in true heroic fashion. *Great, I'm a superhero wannabe.* Lyla knew that the ridiculous messages lambasting us at every turn were dumping gasoline on my fire.

You've got to have the Kardashian ass. Be a goal-setting machine. Start your own nonprofit by the time you're twelve. Answer every ding within milliseconds. Parent like Jolie, joke like Schumer, shake like Shakira. Don't let anyone see you sweat—unless it's to show off the insanely hard hot yoga class you managed to sneak in between all the deadlines, meetings, and time spent triaging the latest disaster.

There's even pressure to be Zen. Mindfulness has become the new kale. We're supposed to be fully present every minute of our day—from the boardroom to the bedroom, even when our brains have been violently sucked into the vortex of perpetual chaos. *We're expected to meditate like the Buddha, eat our five almonds a day, swoop down, save the day, land on our feet like ninjas, have a good hair day, and pretend it's all easy and normal, as if there are such things.*

Clearly, this wasn't working for me. My pursuit of the good life wasn't turning out so well. Like a doctor who smokes, my hypocrisy was incredibly difficult for me to admit. Here I was, the go-to person at work and home—twenty-two years under my belt in behavioral sciences, hooked into being puppeteered to act perfect, while behind the curtain I was crumbling. The words to one of my favorite Alanis Morissette songs

flooded my mind:

Isn't it ironic?

Don't you think?

A little too ironic.

Yeah, I really do think. . . .

I don't blame Lyla for thinking I was a bit of a mess. My attempts to disguise my disarray were no match for her clinical eye. My *frenetic, always-in-my-head life* was not without cost. She was right. I had some changing to do. And she reminded me this didn't mean peanut butter cheesecake and wine interventions, slugging down more power smoothies, or finding ways to barrel through my list more efficiently. I swore at myself on the way out of her office. She must have heard me; she smiled and gave me the proverbial therapist head nod. We exchanged knowing looks. This was going to be a lot of work.

I would need to start thinking and behaving differently. I had fallen for the delusions of our culture, telling me to be pretty, bootstrap, suck it up, and calmly carry on so that I could achieve "success" in this world. If I kept on making the textbook mistake of confusing *doing* with *being*, I was destined for even more trouble.

This wasn't new behavior for me. And it was more than the stereotypical plight of being an overworked high achiever that was pinning me down. My strict religious-brownie-points upbringing had trained me to hustle for acceptance.

For a while, I stewed in resentment at the church, bitterly shutting down my spiritual side. In many ways science rescued me, but my new obsession with measurability wasn't bringing relief. I was living entirely in my head, disassociating from my whole self. I didn't know who I was, what I believed, or how to make the million-mile march from my brain to my heart. I craved certainty, not the messy and uncomfortable state in which I found myself. Something was missing.

The same mind that had gotten me stuck was (hopefully) the same one that could set me free. I started to realize that indoctrination wasn't limited to religion. It was everywhere: work, school, and society. It was time to rip up the script, breathe deep, and reclaim a healthy definition of success that wasn't compartmentalizing my mind, body, and soul. I needed a new organizing framework that allowed more flexibility and moral grounding—one that lets *science + emotion + spiritual* to fuse—not to bicker with each other on who's superior or, worse, dismiss the other's credibility and value.

When I arrived back at my desk, a mound of data greeted me from questions I'd asked my high-performing graduate students, gathered over years of teaching. Here in front of me were the stories of hundreds of incredible people, with their own ups and downs. As graduate students of all ages, they were the classic heady, overachieving, cape-always-on types who wanted to bring impact, and sometimes got a little stuck hustling for brownie points. They were weary, too.

I wanted to know what was happening behind the scenes for them. Were they reeling

from the forms of indoctrination they underwent? What types of strategies were they drawing upon to avoid compartmentalizing? What helped them find their way, without losing their way?

The analysis seemed daunting, but just a few minutes in, I couldn't put it down. I could see they also were struggling with disintegration. They had their own wounds from being prescribed a formula for life that just didn't serve them well. But they'd also found ways to wriggle their way out of it. Soon, the discoveries would help me unlock important truths. I'd been given a major gift, as I began to realize my students were just as much my teachers as I was theirs.

A few months later, I had broken new ground and developed a framework that allows us to build mental agility, so that we can work to not only accelerate progress for ourselves but for all—the real good life that we all want.

The mentalligence (mental intelligence) model—born out of my grounded theory research, the latest behavioral science, and all my years as a clinician, educator, and parent—isn't a magic wand or linear process. It has limits, too. We should be skeptical of any advice that makes big promises or overgeneralizes life's complexity to a simple 1-2-3 solution. There's no quick-fix, one-size-fits-all formula to crack life's code. But Mentalligence is an inclusive framework, grounded in new neuro-science, that consciously integrates the many sides of human essence while embodying our global context. Mentalligence guides us to become agile thinkers who:

- Rethink and unlearn behaviors that leave us stuck.
- Refuse to be held hostage by prescriptive, socially indoctrinated norms and rules.
- Prioritize human progress and collective success.
- Open the mind, integrate, and spiral upward toward social impact.

Or, put Twitter style: Rethink. Unlearn. Sleepwalking through life is dangerous. #SpiralUP #Agility #MI #Learn4eva #Consciousness #Onlywe #GoodLife.

After months of immersion in the data, and all the moments of painstaking learning, unlearning, and relearning, I couldn't wait to share my new mentalligence model with Lyla, my students across the world, and especially now with you.



Boston, Massachusetts
February 6, 2018

PART I

The Waking UP Sessions

Find Your Reflective Lens

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Rethink the 5 Forms of Indoctrination That Lead to Unconsciousness:

- From Fake It 'til You Make It to Agile Thinking
- From Me, Myself, and I to Do-It-Together Thinking
- From Performance to Meta-Awareness Thinking
- From Hiding to Healing Thinking
- From False Truth to Evidence-Based Thinking

The Waking UP Sessions will help you unlearn five forms of indoctrination that lead to unconscious behavior. You will pivot to become more expansive in your thinking, stay woke, and learn how to develop five thinking practices to find and strengthen your reflective lens. The sessions will help you stay alert, not lulled to sleep by the lies of our culture. They help combat inauthenticity, insecurity, unhealthy behaviors, avoidance, and wrong conclusions. This is our new psychology of thinking: becoming an agile twenty-first-century citizen. *Sounds good right about now, doesn't it?*

agility

noun | [e'jɪlɪdʒ]

1. The power of moving quickly and easily; nimbleness.
2. The ability to think and adapt; intellectual acuity.

Hayden works hard to be the embodiment of agility—always on toes and ready to

make needed shifts to avoid being rigid or being subject to society's many forms of indoctrination.

Indoctrination

noun | [in,däktərə'näSHən]

1. The process of teaching (someone) to fully accept the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of a particular group and not consider those of other persuasions.
2. To imbue with a usually partisan or sectarian opinion, point of view, or principle.

Camelia works hard to make sure students don't accept an entire set of beliefs uncritically, without a second blink.

Session One



The Physics of Mental Intelligence

Objective:

*Unlearn fake-it-'til-you-make-it indoctrination
that breeds inauthenticity.*

Pivot toward agility.

*The quality of your life depends on
the quality of your thinking.*

—Richard Paul and Linda Elder

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When you're a human behavior analyst, you're like a people watcher on steroids. In the twenty-two years I've been doing this work, I've seen it all. Human beings act in mysterious and interesting ways. There's never a shortage of material—from toxic to bizarre—proving that fact is, indeed, often stranger than fiction.

You have your own material, too. Personality quirks. Family drama. Relationships. Hard-to-shake habits. Emotional baggage. Unexpected twists. The seasons of life. Plus, someone at work is bound to be simultaneously entertaining and annoying. And if you're stuck in a cube, *Fuggedaboutit*.

When first asked to teach a new graduate class to help students make their way through all of this, I was excited. Then it started to smell bad. The name hit a nerve—Personal Branding. *Am I going to have the students develop their very own creepy all-about-me sales pitch so that they can climb the ladder? Not into that. No thanks.*

My colleague Barry convinced me otherwise. He gave me license to approach it creatively—code for he was too busy to contribute. I immediately interjected the word *authentic* into the title. In a culture that primps and primes us to show up as airbrushed, caricatured versions of ourselves, authentic was becoming elusive. I wanted my students to stop drooling over society's narrow prescriptions for success and start living more agilely, mindfully, and purposefully.

Before the teaching assignment, I'd been thinking about authenticity for a long time. As a therapist, I've seen a lot of airbrushing tendencies. We expend a lot of time and energy covering up because the worry about what people think is so ingrained in us. *No, no, no. I'm not a hot mess. Everything's fine, really.* This can only take us so far.

My patients, students, and colleagues were telling me how hard *authentic* was. They were afraid to really be themselves. Ditto for friends and family. Everywhere—at work,

home, church—it was easier to fake it 'til you made it.

As great as is the desire to be yourself, the pressures to conform and perform are also intense. Even play-by-play social media displays reveal just how paradoxical this situation is. We put it all out there, while saying little beyond the superficial. *Did we really need to know you just got flipped off on your way to the market, or that you just found your very best selfie angle?*

Watch Out for the ASSIE Trap

If we're not careful, authenticity becomes rhetoric. It's a popular buzzword, permeating our work and home conversations: authentic leadership, authentic parenting, authentic living. Its overuse can make it start to feel trite and inauthentic in its own way.

One of the biggest roadblocks to authenticity is rigidity about who we think we're supposed to be. I refer to this trap as Asinine Societal and Self-Imposed Expectations (ASSIEs). The term may not seem very scientific, but it captures the consistent theme running through my research, teaching, clinical work, and own self-flagellating moments.

We're afraid to cry uncle and say what everyone else is thinking. Like characters in the Andersen tale, we're caught in a culture of emperors, salivating for success and scrambling for status, to the point we're not willing to admit there's a foolish naked guy in the room.

Our legacy can be so much more. In the grand scheme of the universe, we won't be remembered by how fast we responded to emails or how many letters we have after our names. Most people aren't going to sit at our funeral and carry on about the length of our resume, the car we drove, or how well we took a photo.

ASSIEs metastasize into an airbrushed you, and although kinda cute, the real you is waaaay better. When our emperors go unchallenged, we're held hostage, forgoing the mental agility to rethink what we've first been sold and break free.

Like millions of people, we simultaneously buy into and resent the ideas of our culture. Instead of calling the absurdity out on the carpet, we force a smile and nod politely because we're afraid people will shun us if we go against the grain. We cover up, rehearse, and isolate. We get so caught up in our own agendas that we miss chances to bring our full presence and impact to our roles and relationships. It's a *nice-knowin'-ya* form of authenticity.

A lot of books teach ways to neatly resolve the whole authenticity dilemma. Most of them present a prescriptive path with a certain number of easy steps based on a set-in-stone organizing framework that's supposed to help you instantly find deep purpose and work your magic. I've read dozens of such books, and maybe you have, too. And like Bono, you still haven't found what you're looking for.

ASSIEs are rooted within a deeper issue most of us know all too well: self-serving perfectionism. If you're the kind of person who is sick of ASSIEs and want to escape

them—along with the many ridiculous traps society sets for us—prepare to unlearn most of what you’ve been taught and pivot toward a new direction. It’s time to accept the airbrushed you’s resignation before the cancer spreads.

What Is Mentalligence, and How Can It Help Me?

Mentalligence (pronounced “MEN-tell-a-jence”) is a new psychology of thinking model that launches us into UPward spirals through a process of Unlearning and Pivoting away from indoctrination that damages human progress. We then become more agile, mindful, and connected thinkers who bring social impact. Mentalligence helps us rethink our way to the *real* good life, not the one that’s being sold writ large.

You’ve probably already noticed that mentalligence is a fusion of the words *mental* and *intelligence*. It might remind you of the term *emotional intelligence*, coined by Daniel Goleman. As you’ll soon see, many popular terms and theories need some rethinking.

Mentalligence helps you rethink your way to the good life. It’s a pretty tall order, but worth the investment. Throughout this book, you will learn how to unlearn and pivot, or “spiral UP,” through four sets of sessions that teach how to use specific lenses to help undo damaging indoctrination. You’ll get the backstory of how these lenses emerged from my research findings, clinical practice, and the latest neuroscience.

Certain key words and concepts can change the way you engage with the world: *agile*, *mentally intelligent*, *forever learner*, *ethics of reciprocity mind-set*, *impact-driven living*, *imposter syndrome*, and *collective efficacy*. Academic and more common definitions throughout will help you put your learning into action. For now, here’s the short list of the driving principles behind Mentalligence.

Agile beats strong.

Since the beginning of time, being strong has been hyped up. Despite the overemphasis on mental strength, IQ, and bootstrapping, agility is what really matters. With change as life’s only constant, it isn’t brute force, will, or sheer genius, but the ability to pivot and adapt to life’s twists that make us mentally intelligent.

Everything is learning, learning is everything.

The desire to be right can trip us up. None of us have all the answers; everything has contradictions. When we commit to becoming *forever learners*, we seek opportunities for constant growth and discovery, not alleged certainty or fake truth. We unleash creativity and curiosity, finding out just how many lenses are available to help us see better. The true marker of learning is turning up more questions than answers.

Sleepwalking through life is a waste.

We can’t afford to snuggle up with blind comfort and compliance. We need a dose of smelling salts to awaken us to the possibility of finding the path to the good life as

conscious, reflective thinkers who refuse to approach life with eyes closed. None of us want to experience regret, but a lack of thinking and the resulting behaviors can leave us stewing in it, if we don't pay attention. *Ethics of reciprocity mind-sets*, those focused on the Golden Rule, can help us upgrade individual purpose to *impact-driven* living.

It's okay to be messy.

Check your pretenses. "Control" and "neat" are illusions. None of us can hold it together every second. We're always spiraling up and down. Chaos and homeostasis are always at odds. Life isn't linear; it might be a little boring if it were. Spirals are everywhere in nature—sunflowers, galaxies, our fingerprints, ears, thoughts, and even our behavioral patterns. Your wrinkles, bumps, and bruises show the world you are truly a force of nature. Messy is authentic—and orderly in its own unique way.

Being judgmental leads to trouble.

When we're our own worst critics, we bind up and fall prey to *imposter syndrome*. Perfectionistic thoughts hold us hostage and are the birthplace of self-loathing. We salivate at the thought of becoming a better version of ourselves but don't stop to celebrate who we are now. The airbrushed you always wants to make a return. We downgrade ourselves, thinking we're imposters about to be exposed. Self-compassion needs to be a daily practice to fight off ASSIE tendencies, so that we can have an integrated view of ourselves based on our mindful presence, not a performance.

Unlearning has to happen.

The greatest gift we can give to ourselves and one another is to be open to rethinking and unlearning what we first believed. Some call this flip-flopping; my research shows that mental flexibility is a key to progress. When we avoid succumbing to blind spots that impede our ability to see beyond primitive instincts, indoctrination, hierarchies, and social pressures, we can strip down and rebuild in ways beyond our imagination.

Fusion takes the cake.

We don't have to subscribe to myopic ways of seeing the world. Centric beliefs and behaviors hinder progress. We need to stop bickering about who's the boss and instead find spaces for all voices to contribute. When we unbind ourselves from prescriptive formulas and egocentric tendencies, we find intersections where we can break new ground to accelerate progress. Cliques, silos, and the ignorance they breed bring us all down. Fusion is the gateway to *collective efficacy*, one of the key findings from my research: the idea that we do well when we all do well.

These guiding principles of mentalligence help us avoid the four most common mindless behavioral traps: shutting down, numbing out, binding up, and staying stuck. These traps, caused by sleepwalking, perfectionism, groupthink, and stagnation blind

spots, don't have to trip us up indefinitely. There's a way to see beyond them.

The Sessions

Through a process of behavioral change, mentalligence teaches you to drive your brain through a series of waking up, tuning in, breaking out, and going beyond sessions. You will develop reflective, mindful, universal, and imagineering lenses to overcome blind spots caused by indoctrination and primitive instincts, and you will learn to Spiral UP (unlearn and pivot).

When we approach life with this new psychology of thinking, we awaken to endless possibilities for growth and progress. We build meta-awareness, the capacity to *think about thinking*. This helps us deliberately refine behavior, moving toward better cognitive habits, skills, and mind-sets that support individual and collective success.

Mentalligence helps us overcome rigid mental inertia. It helps us become more conscious, focused, connected, and resilient. Without it, we become trapped in the devices of the downward spiral—oblivion, frenetic energy, ignorance, and stale chronic behavior patterns. With mentalligence, we move from being

- Sleepwalkers to reflectors—those who are meta-aware and able to actively improve life for themselves and others.
- Perfectionists to mindful thinkers—those who are self-compassionate and value presence over performance.
- Centrists to conscious contributors—those who work toward the good life by connecting and contributing as universal, global citizens.
- Stagnates to imagineers—those who defy convention and beat the odds by imaginatively engineering a path for better living.

Mentalligence helps us use new lenses to reduce blind spots based on raw, fear-based emotions, groupthink, bias, and the breakneck speed we contend with. We learn to be open, agile thinkers, and ultimately wield our greatest resource—our capacity to use our minds purposively to contribute as awake, tuned in, connected, imaginative citizens.

These sessions didn't appear in the air out of sheer magic. They emerged from over twenty-two years of working with thousands of patients and students who were trying to undo their own types of indoctrination. As the book unfolds, I'll share their stories with you to help you rethink your own.

WAKING UP is our strength.
TUNING IN is our way back to center.
BREAKING OUT is our birthright.
GOING BEYOND is our dance.

Session One Worksheet: The Physics of Mentalligence

*Unlearn fake-it-'til-you-make indoctrination
that breeds inauthenticity.*

Pivot toward agility.

Rethink Your ASSIEs

Societal norms are so engrained in us; it can be difficult to get to a place of true authenticity. We're afraid of exposure, so we dress according to society's one-size-fits-all standards. As with fashion trends, we need to recognize what works for us and what doesn't. Instead of being forced to layer up based on someone's definition of "acceptable," we need to evaluate our wardrobe and make sure it's the right fit. When we strip down to find our own signature style, the one that we're truly comfortable with, proud to display, and that reflects the real us, it helps us worry less about being judged, and we work toward a place of full presence, connection, and social impact—the *real* good life we want to have.

Authenticity Check

- Is the image I portray consistent with my true self?
- What's the one word or phrase I want people to use to describe me?
- Would people be surprised to know my true thoughts and feelings?
- Do I tend to go along just to get along?
- How many people know the "real me"?
- Do my values align with the things I do every day?
- How often do I compare myself with others, or even try to be more like them?
- Am I holding back from doing things I really want to do or say out of fear of being judged?
- Is my image or personal agenda interfering with my ability to bring impact within my circles or on a broader level?
- What is my current definition of the good life?

Action Step: Assess Your Mental Agility and Potential for Getting to the Good Life

Test yourself. Visit www.kristenlee.com to take a mentalligence quiz. Throughout the book, you'll have a chance to build off your strengths and work on areas you want to keep developing that will help you become more agile and able to bring your potential for impact to scale.

Session Two



Changing Directions

Objective:

Unlearn me-myself-and-I indoctrination that breeds insecurity.

Pivot toward do-it-together living.

The way you live your days is the way you live your life.

—Annie Dillard

I’s kinda not really about you. It’s more than that.”

Clearly, this wasn’t one of my most eloquent teaching moments, but I was trying to deliver the truth as plainly as possible. My nerves were a little frayed after a trying conversation with one of my students, and it was all I could muster up.

Usually, things go smoother with my graduate students. You should see them on the first night of class. Straight out of the gate, they hit the ground running, eager to start overachieving.

To break the ice, some guy asks whether I know where the professor is. Where *he* is, to be precise. It’s *me*. *She*. The room gets noticeably quiet. He blushes. Apologies fly. *Well, you just made first impressions a little easier on the rest of us, no? Have a seat, please.*

That wasn’t what flustered me. It would take time for me to unravel. We were off to a good start overall. Besides the where’s-the-professor guy, everyone else put their best foot forward. They were in classic thirsty-for-points-mode, fighting to hold their “Will work for A” signs highest.

Grad students are their own breed. They come early, stay late, and make sport of answering questions. And on the first night, there’s always a full-fledged make-the-best-impression competition that unfolds before my very eyes. It’s slightly entertaining, but mostly concerning.

One student thought our opening introductions, intended to be simple bios and proverbial hellos, offered the right moment to test out his very own elevator pitch. Even what was supposed to be a little blurb in the online group board revealed he had revised his anthology over seventy times. *Can’t wait to see his papers. He’s gonna be one that takes constructive criticism really well.*

Unsurprisingly, he turned out to be the ultimate humble bragger, minus the humble. In every class, he peppered us with details from his resume like we were a panel of

judges during his audition for CEO of the universe. His classmates rolled their eyes but still took the bait, chirping back with their own five-star comebacks.

Why are you trying to make Ryan Seacrest seem lazy, Mother Teresa selfish, and Bill Nye the Science Guy look stupid? Enough already. Nobody cares about all the companies you've started or the trophies you've amassed. We know you're smart. That's why you're here. We like you already. But the incessant self-patting isn't pretty. Just stop. Nobody's that friggin' perfect. Except Beyoncé, but we can't all be a boss like that. Your inflated ego is just a decoy. Let's work to repair this together, please.

As the weeks unfold, behaviors intensify. The students egg each other on, upping the ante at every turn. Grades and money do this to us. The moment that either factors into a situation, people start going a little cray-cray. You know this already if you've ever tried to divide a dinner bill with a group. There's always *that person* who eats and drinks like it's their last day on earth, then goes on to suggest the even split to "make it easier." *Yeah, those four mai tais you guzzled made life sooo much easier on all of us. Really?*

After many attempts to bring the collective anxiety down, we seemed to be making some progress. This was until one of my 4.0 diehards called me from her hospital bed. She was riding her bike; the driver was texting, disaster struck. As she relayed the sequence, I found myself side-eyeing the phone. *Why me?* You'd think she would've called her priest, sister, life coach, significant other—or even her cute little dog first. I think at that point, she had all her professors on speed dial.

Her biggest worry after her near brush with death was that it'd jeopardize all the points she'd chocked up. I tried to assure her that arrangements could be made, since she'd officially cleared the bar the syllabus set for "extenuating circumstance" and "emergency situation."

Despite my pinky swear she wouldn't be penalized, she signed herself out of the hospital, going both *AMA and APA—Against Medical Advice and Against Professor's Advice*. She even arrived early as usual to class, this time concussed, black-eyed, and limping toward her holy grail. I scanned the classroom for hidden cameras. *Is this a What Would You Do spoof? Why bother listening to mere doctors when there's an A to earn?*

You'd think she would've been glad to be breathing. She was miffed when I suggested she was getting carried away. Last I'd checked, being run over by a car constituted at least a few hours in bed. Beyond the shock of the condition in which she showed up, I was worried about the underlying insecurities behind her behavior. I was starting to feel more like a weird mix of *Survivor* meets *Wheel of Fortune* game-show host, not graduate professor.

She wasn't the only one. Many of my students had been on the losing side of the game throughout their educational careers. They'd felt the painful sting of being voted off the island. The drill-and-kill academic treadmill had left them mentally drained and emotionally bankrupt. To them, it was redemption time.

Find a New Point

As I worked with my students, I worried that, despite good intentions, they were missing the whole point. Learning can help us become conscious citizens who connect to live out an impact-driven life—one that moves beyond me-myself-and-I indoctrination. It helps us get to what positive psychologists define as the *good life*—one marked by wholeness, well-being, and deeper levels of satisfaction than the typical superficial “good life” that’s equated with making money and chalking up letters after our names. Hence, my “kinda not really about you” remark at the beginning of the session. I admit I needed to find a better way to put this. My mind swirled with questions:

- What if “fake it ’til we make it” behaviors are creating a big mess for everyone?
- How can we replace desperate “Will work for A” mind-sets with something more constructive?
- What’s the point of having personal success if it’s not doing any good for anyone else?
- What does it mean to find the good life?

The gravity of the situation wasn’t lost on me. I knew we’d have to get to the root of the behavior to understand how it could be changed for the better. If my experience had taught me anything, it’s that unless you get to the underlying reasons behind behavior, you end up going in circles, with no real improvement. We need to find the point of what we’re even after.

Move Beyond Wit and Grit

When school, the place that’s supposed to help us flourish, becomes a source of dread and despair, you know something is wrong. Ideally, education should teach us how to be positive, contributing members of society. Instead, schools cheer students on to individual achievement and looking good rather than doing good.

This is why educational expert Howard Gardner, the father of the theory of multiple intelligences, advocates that we move “beyond wit and grit.” He and his colleagues at Harvard’s Project Zero’s Good Project want everyone to know that when we emphasize “goodness” in students—qualities that spur on engaged citizenry—it leads to positive social impact. This isn’t just touchy-feely stuff: they’ve found over decades of research that excellence, engagement, and ethics are the keys to helping learners become good citizens, those who contribute to the overall well-being of society.

Know the Science and Roots Behind the Good Life

Positive psychology is the scientific study of what makes life worth living. The late

Christopher Peterson, University of Michigan professor, one of the founders of the discipline, explains that psychological science and practice call us to rethink our typical ways of framing life. It calls us to zoom in on strengths and demonstrate interest in building the best things in life, rather than focusing on weakness or pursuits that bring fleeting pleasure.

Because positive psychology is a science, it requires checking theories against evidence, and should not be confused with untested self-help or affirmations that make us feel good. He emphasizes that the good life is genuine—it doesn't deny there are problems. Decades of research are now demonstrating that despite the street fight that life can be, there is hope. The science reveals that

- Most people are happy and resilient.
- People satisfied with life are able to build momentum toward desirable outcomes at school and work, and in relationships.
- Happiness, strengths of character, and positive social relationships all serve as vital buffers against effects of setbacks and disappointment.
- Money isn't what contributes to well-being—except when it is spent on other people.
- Our hearts matter: Unconditional caring is a vital skill to be taught alongside critical thinking skills. Both can be taught.
- Our best days when we shine the brightest involve feelings of autonomy, competency, and connection.

Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology explains that rather than simplifying human well-being as “happiness,” that “eudaimonia” or “human flourishing” can be fostered through habits that bring us to the highest human good.

Eudaimonia translates as “good spirit,” originating from Aristotelian ethics emphasizing being virtuous and loved, and having good friends. Daimons were seen as guardian spirits that point us toward a positive and divine state of humanity. Scholars like Paul Woodruff and Luc Ferry call the good life a “rational and practical humanism with an appreciation of transcendence.” Gary Chapman from the University of Texas calls it “living the change you want.” He emphasizes the good life is not antitechnological or antiritual but allows for those who hope for a better world to find a shared vision for it; one that is flexible enough for “innumerable individual circumstances, but comprehensive enough to unite people in optimism, and deliberate progressive social change.”

Unfortunately, this type of conscious citizenry gets drowned out in the face of school climates that push for individual and institutional advancement. That we overemphasize personal success, rather than working for the greater good, may be one of the saddest realities of modern-day society.

Luckily, not all my students were humble bragging, breaking out of their hospital beds, or salivating for letters after their names. They had found ways to break away

from me-myself-and-I indoctrination, the kind that teaches us to be hyperindividualized and self-absorbed. Yes, they were goal driven and hungry to accomplish, but their interest in doing so was for deeper reasons. While they cared about excellence, they were less obsessed with performance than they were with bringing impact. As Vanessa, an aspiring CEO, put it:

I hate the “he who dies with the most toys” mind-set of today. I think we’re missing the point when we selfishly focus on ourselves and we don’t see our true responsibility to one another. I’m not saying it’s easy for me—sometimes I can barely keep my own head above water. But when I catch myself putting my “what” over my “why,” then I know I’m going in the wrong direction.

Ben, a first-generation student, explained how he could shift his thinking from what to why:

My family never looked out for me, so I’ve had to do a lot on my own since I was a kid. They worked against me, not for me—they are the most critical and narcissistic people I know. I’ve always had a huge chip on my shoulder because of it. I had to grow up fast, and was bitter for a long time. I eventually started to rethink my situation and realized that maybe everything happened so I could be more motivated to help people who’ve gone through the same kind of stuff. I used to be so embarrassed and held on to a lot of rage. But with the help of a lot of people, I’ve worked hard to let go and take the good that came out of it. I realized it wasn’t all about me and the pain, and there was a bigger world to influence. I think what helped me the most was seeing that even negative experiences can turn into positive energy.

This type of rethinking exerted by many of my students was multifaceted. It wasn’t that there wasn’t, or hadn’t been, plenty of drama unfolding in their lives. More often, the students who demonstrated the most concern for bringing impact were the ones who had experienced a powerful combination of deep pain, along with the intervention of someone helping them find their way through it.

With this help, and even in the face of chaos, the students took the energy that was generated through their struggles and used it as forward momentum. The lessons learned anchored them in a deep desire to give back. Even when ongoing setbacks happened, they could see them as chances to learn something that would eventually drive progress. It wasn’t that they gave up their own personal interests, but such pursuits were no longer the center of their existence. Along the way, they increased their ability to be more self-compassionate, which translated into greater empathy toward their fellow human beings.

The momentum was so powerful; I started to call their behaviors “upward spirals.” It became an official research code that would eventually fill notebooks with remarkable patterns. My students were harnessing the energy generated from even tough

circumstances to pivot toward a positive direction. Documenting their journeys was powerful, leading me into my own process of spiraling to make sense of what I was learning and unlearning right along with them.

At first I started to think that social psychologist Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy was the bull's-eye explanation for what they were revealing. He asserts that our beliefs in our abilities to reach goals dictate behavior. Basically, if we believe we can reach a goal, we are more likely to set it and reach it. This is called a "sense of agency" or "self-efficacy." It seemed like he'd nailed a commonsense way of explaining the determination, grit, and resulting practices of my students.

It also seemed like the rock-story theory of our time. Emotional intelligence (EI), popularized by Daniel Goleman, was another bull's-eye. Most people in leadership, business, and behavioral science fields can recite the short list of skills EI teaches: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

We were talking a lot about EI in class, but it just wasn't sitting right, especially with my international students and those who identified themselves as globally conscious. Many of my students saw what a lot of critics have also questioned about the theory: that it's too me-focused and doesn't resonate across cultures, especially those that are collectivist.

My introverts didn't love it either. They squirmed since they thought that they'd have to manufacture a whole lot of charisma to compete with their extravert counterparts. We worried together that EI had the potential to teach us to hide emotions or use them to manipulate people, instead of being genuine.

My students weren't only interested in their own ability to set and reach goals, or to present themselves better. They were more focused on how greater self-awareness would translate into their being able to bring clear impact. Time after time, my students told me that their shift from "me" to "we" enabled them to upgrade their sense of self-efficacy to get to the good life.

Like any solid research method, this led to more questions, some answers, and again, more questions. Eventually, my theory of mentalligence was emerging, starting with a concept I began calling "collective efficacy." My students didn't think that all the emotional intelligence, or success in the world, would make them happy if they weren't applying it to make a difference. As Dawn put it:

"I wouldn't dream of doing all this work if I thought it was just about me. I think too many times we are encouraged to be jealous, and all about ourselves. I'm happiest when I see people succeed. I hate to see suffering, and if I can do anything about it, I do. I think that's what we're here for."

While Bandura's theory of self-efficacy helps us set and reach goals, and Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence helps us develop needed skills, we knew we needed to take it further. Collective efficacy helped us fill in another corner of the human behavior puzzle. It helped us take our thinking to the next level, to translate purposeful goals into actual impact.

Move from Me to We

Collective efficacy embodies social and emotional consciousness. Inherently, it recognizes that an injury to one is an injury to all. It allows us to see that human struggle negatively affects all of us—not just those directly on the receiving end. It boils down to the idea that we do well when we all do well. *When you hurt, I hurt, and when you are on top of the world, then just call me Karen Carpenter, too.*

Collective Efficacy

Academic Definition

A belief system that holds advancement of the human condition, through conscious solidarity, empathy, curiosity, and unconditional regard for one another, as its primary objective. It espouses confidence in human potential and works to leverage it through a deliberate process of ethical reciprocity—a moral code that spurs us to treat one other well.

Street Definition

When you believe that the only way out of this big mess is to get out of your own head and become obsessed with making a difference. It's about loving your neighbor, even when they don't look like or agree with you. If you have privilege, don't be a prick about it. Use it for good. Work together. It's all we have time for. #onlywe #impact

Collective efficacy emphasizes mutuality, solidarity, and pluralism as avenues for human progress. It rejects insularity, bias, and centric behaviors. It widens the lens of “success” often propagated in individualistic frameworks. It views progress as transcending beyond an individual or specific group outcome. Collective efficacy can help translate me into we, working to get *everyone* to the good life. Collective efficacy relies on keeping an open mind instead of wasting time hating on everyone. It helps us avoid othering people and to see through the BS of social constructions that teach us to focus on ourselves to the point we don't realize our potential for impact.

This way of living shouldn't be that difficult, given that these teachings are embedded across every moral and religious code out there. There's no shortage of “ethics of reciprocity” rules—ones that nudge us to think about how something would feel to us—to regulate our own behavior. Most of us can recite the Golden Rule on cue. *Or, if you're creative like Confucius, you call it a silver rule: do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.* Gold or silver, these teachings all generate momentum toward empathy, a cornerstone of collective efficacy.

Know the Difference Between Empathy and Sympathy

It's easy to confuse empathy and sympathy—since they sound and seem so alike. Most commonly, sympathy is defined as involving feeling a sense of sadness or pity for someone going through hard times. Empathy is explained as the ability to put oneself in the shoes of someone else. Empathy requires shared perspective or emotions that serve as a pathway to compassion. It often calls us to suspend our own positions of privilege to every extent possible to imagine someone's plight and point of view.

Collective efficacy also helps us pivot away from thinking traps and blind spots that keep us hungry for validation and embroiled in an unhealthy level of competition with ourselves, and each other. It helps us balk at individual perfection for the sake of success, or crushing our opponents, and instead adopt an approach focused on the greater good that prioritizes making life better for all.

My students told me time and time again that their way out of the downward spiraling associated with me-myself-and-I thinking started when they began to reject modern notions of self and success that teach us to step on anyone who gets in our way, or to gorge ourselves with the earth's treasures without stopping to give a care whether people are barely surviving. It didn't feel right in their guts, and they knew there was a better way.

An interesting plot twist to collective efficacy started to unfold. I and we didn't have to be an either/or proposition; it was both/and. When we advance ourselves, we become better equipped to advance one another, and vice versa. You don't have to go completely me, myself, and I to end up happy. Tremendous energy comes from both processes. Reciprocity was in full force.

Ethics of Reciprocity

Academic Definition

Reciprocity involves a cooperative exchange of privileges with the implication of mutual benefit. It allows us to see ourselves in a state of relationship with all living beings, not that our actions and influence are entirely independent of one another. Ethics are moral principles that govern behavior, based on virtues.

Street Definition

You look out for people. When you have something beneficial, you don't hoard it, and you expect the same courtesy to be returned. Be generous. Do the right thing. What goes around comes around. Be the domino that tips positive reactions. #goldenrule #karma

Ethics of reciprocity rules are principles for treating people according to how you'd want to be treated. These principles are found across many moral frameworks and religious and cultural traditions. An ethics of reciprocity helps us become more willing to give and receive in abundance. It gives empathy traction. Because you get what it feels like to have bad done to you, you don't do it to someone else.

For my students, the less me-focused they became, the better they could enjoy the fruits of their hard work. They didn't have to give up their dreams and goals to be forces for good. They also didn't have to have picture-perfect stories. Sometimes, chaos fueled them with the most potent energy that catapulted them in a positive direction.

The upward spirals I was observing across my students were so novel and impressive, I launched an institutional review board (IRB) application, the permission needed to conduct human research. Too many important discoveries were unfolding to keep them a secret.

CONNECTION is our way out of the **SELF-PROTECTION** anthem of our **ME-MYSELF-AND-I WORLD**. Ironically, the scrambling, competing, and clawing to find our way gets us quite **LOST**. We salivate at the idea that we can **HACK** our fears by **ISOLATING** or **RUNNING** away from them. Hiding almost **NEVER** turns out to be the behavior that sets us toward individual or collective **PROGRESS**. The way **FORWARD** is to **PAY IT FORWARD**.

Session Two Worksheet: Changing Directions

Objective:

Unlearn me-myself-and-I indoctrination that breeds insecurity.

Pivot toward do-it-together living.

Rethink It: Move from Me to We

Society teaches us to focus on personal success, sometimes to the point where we overlook opportunities for social impact. We are often taught to worry more about looking good than doing good. This blocks us from getting to the good life. An ethics of reciprocity often falls low on our priority lists, and we struggle to find empathy when so much of our attention is focused on self-protection. This calls us to reflect on our values and whether they are aligned with our actions. Often, the first step involves checking our day-to-day activities and seeing whether there's room to tweak our behaviors and beef up our efforts toward impact.

Collective Efficacy and Ethics of Reciprocity Check

- Do I regularly try to imagine myself in someone else's shoes?
- How do I define my "why," the reasons behind what I do?
- What do I want my legacy to be?
- Is there a way to reorganize my schedule to reduce wasted time and increase impact-driven activities?
- Have I been able to share my backstory openly?
- What are the most salient lessons in the challenges I've faced?
- Am I actively harnessing even chaotic energy to spiral toward improving life for myself and those in my reach?

Action Steps: Identify Your Signature Brand to Bring Impact

Who do you want to be? To understand one another better, we first need to raise our self-awareness and clarify our own goals and values. Once we've done so, we are better positioned to live the good life that emphasizes do-it-together living versus superficial selfish gains.

1. Pinpoint your values. Take fifteen minutes to complete a Values in Action (VIA) Inventory via www.viacharacter.org. This tool, designed by leading authorities in positive psychology, is scientifically validated (and free) and provides an analysis of your character strengths.
2. Get a second opinion. Enlist the support of an established mentor or look for one to discuss your VIA findings and how they align with your actions and pursuits.
3. Map your life. Jot down a brief overview of the major influences in your life. Highlight at least three key people who impacted or inspired you. Pick the format that works the best for you: a short story, timeline, bullet points, and so on.
4. Define your brand. Write out a short statement defining your unique personal brand. It should reflect your true essence—the things that best describe your strengths, values, roles, and personal goals, and your desire to bring impact.
5. Make a quick list. Sketch out three do-it-together life hacks that you could start now that reflect your VIA findings. For example, if you are creative, can you make something for someone? Or can you start something positive at work or in your community that would bring impact? If you have a strong love of learning, can you join forces in a book club or think tank or make sure you're in regular conversation with interesting people? Are there needs that you see around you that you feel compelled to address? Small things can make

a big difference. Start somewhere and keep building.

CONNECTION is our way out of the **SELF-PROTECTION** anthem of our **ME-MYSELF-AND-I WORLD**. Ironically, the scrambling, competing, and clawing to find our way gets us quite **LOST**. We salivate at the idea that we can **HACK** our fears by **ISOLATING** or **RUNNING** away from them. Hiding almost **NEVER** turns out to be the behavior that sets us toward individual or collective **PROGRESS**. The way **FORWARD** is to **PAY IT FORWARD**.

Session Three



Cutting Strings

Objective:

*Unlearn performance indoctrination
that breeds unhealthy behaviors.*

Pivot toward meta-awareness.

*The illiterate of the twenty-first century
will not be those who cannot read and write,
but those who cannot learn,
unlearn, and relearn.*

—Alvin Toffler

It's August 2010. A user identifying himself as sociallyinferior¹ posted his plight, "my life is taking a downward spiral" on a forum on SocialAnxietySupport.com:

sociallyinferior: I recently never paid any mind to how my life was heading but now that I take a closer look at it, it seems I am going nowhere in life. I have yet to finish college and I am 23 years old, my brother on the other hand is going to graduate next year and he is only 20 years of age. He wants to move out which I think is going to be hard on me. . . . I feel like I really am alone and hopeless and nowhere to go. I feel like I will be a failure in life. I have a job but that doesn't pay enough for me to move out. . . . I don't want to end up like a loser, I want to have a career and a life. I just don't know where to start. I've lost most of my younger years doing nothing but working trying to pay off a car that seems like forever. And not even paying attention to my studies. And now is when I am actually giving more thought to my future.

Within eighteen minutes, his screen lights up with lots of advice:

littlemissy: I'm sorry it's not going well for you. But don't think life is not going to go anywhere for you. With life you really do need to "take it by the horns" (so to speak). I know you probably don't want to listen to someone as old as I am . . . but personally speaking, I left home at 16 years with nothing (no money, no family support) and just had to push myself to finish school, get a job etc. It has paid off at the end, though I've been to hell and back on the way here.

kos: You can start by doing the best you can in school. . . . You should be looking forward to this stage in your life. It can be very exciting.

pinkpurplepink: sounds so quarter life crisis. that is something we have to go

reflection to take us past basic, limiting ways of seeing to become more meta-aware.

Metacognition

Academic Definition

Metacognition, the ability to think about thinking, is an amazing feature of the brain unique to the human species. It helps us to avoid falling prey to blind spots that jeopardize our engagement in an active process of conscious cognitive behavioral monitoring and refinement.

Street Definition

Metacognition gives us needed reality checks. We are the only creatures on the planet cool enough to be able to think about our thinking. Metacognition helps us find missing pieces to the puzzle. It gives us the right tools for the job so that we don't get yanked around.

#thinkaboutthinking #sowoke

Use Metacognition to Avoid Downward-Spiral Thinking Types

Since our minds can quickly spin out of control and we can accidentally mistake puppet strings as necessary tools to keep us in check, we first need to understand the common types that send us into disarray:[2](#)

Downward-Spiral Thinking Types

The Preemptive 911 Caller. Something happens, and you see it as a total emergency. When your amygdala is in full force, it's likely you are only able to see red and hear alarm bells going off. You spin into a place where you see reality as being nothing but a full-out crisis. Panic sets in, and everything gets blown way out of proportion.

The Saboteur. Difficulty strikes, and you automatically engage in self-sabotage, taking everything personally and blaming yourself for occurrence of events, even those over which you have no control. Your thoughts interfere with reasoning, and instead you beat yourself up incessantly, diminishing your sense of value and worth.

The Zero-Shades-of-Gray Thinker. When looking at a situation, you only see extremes or absolutes. You define things in black-and-white, all-or-nothing terms. Your view is that something is either this way or that, and it's hard to see the possibility that it could also be a both/and situation.

The Labeler. You look at behavior and label it in negative terms. Even though hard to deal with, you believe it is a universal defining trait versus a behavior or situation that needs modification. This trap can lead to self-labeling as well as judging other people.

The Tunnel Visioner. When evaluating what's at hand, you only zoom in on the negative details, ignoring anything that is positive and worth appreciating. When something goes wrong, you have trouble identifying the things that have also gone right. Downward-spiraling tunnel vision focuses on deficits and injuries rather than lessons and strengths.

The Broad Brusher. You paint a very broad picture, make loose connections between past or present instances, and make sweeping overgeneralizations to describe what's at hand. You use phrases like "I never," "This always," and "Everyone" to make big assertions of what you see happening.