

[Transcript] Huberman Lab / GUEST SERIES | Dr. Paul Conti: How to Understand & Assess Your Mental Health

Welcome to the Huberman Lab guest series where I and an expert guest discuss science and science-based tools for everyday life.

I'm Andrew Huberman and I'm a professor of neurobiology and ophthalmology at Stanford School of Medicine.

Today's episode marks the first in a four-episode series all about mental health.

The expert guest for this series is Dr. Paul Conti.

Dr. Paul Conti is a medical doctor and psychiatrist who completed his medical training at Stanford University School of Medicine

and then went on to become chief resident of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

He then went on to found the Pacific Premier Group, which is a collection of psychiatrists and therapists

who are expert in treating all types of psychiatric disorders and life stressors.

Across the four episodes of this series on mental health, Dr. Conti teaches us about the structure of our own minds

and how to think about our own minds as a way to enhance our mental health.

He explains how our subconscious mind and our conscious mind interact to drive our emotions, our decision-making and our behavior.

And while any series about mental health requires that from time to time we discuss personality disorders and psychiatric challenges,

the main discussion in today's episode and in fact all four episodes in this series are about what it means to be mentally healthy

and how to build one's mental health through specific practices, either done alone or with a therapist.

Today's episode addresses several key questions as well as provides protocols for you to address questions about your own mental health.

For instance, you will learn what constitutes the most mentally healthy version of yourself.

You will learn to assess and indeed you will learn protocols for addressing levels of anxiety, levels of your confidence,

how to think about your beliefs and internal narratives, how to think about your self-talk and restructure your self-talk.

We discuss common challenges such as overthinking.

We talk about the role of defense mechanisms and other aspects of the conscious and unconscious mind interactions

that can lead us toward or away from the healthiest versions of ourselves.

You'll notice that during the first five minutes or so of today's discussion,

Dr. Conti describes a framework of what he refers to as the structure of self and the function of self and he describes several pillars for understanding what those are.

I'd like to highlight that while that short portion of our discussion does bring up a number of terms that are likely to be novel to you.

They certainly were novel to me.

That as our conversation proceeds, you will really come to appreciate just how simple and yet powerful that framework is.

It will help you understand, for instance, the relationship between your conscious mind and your

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subconscious mind

in ways that you can really apply toward enhancing your mental health.

In addition to that, Dr. Conti has generously provided a few PDFs which illustrate that framework for you

and that are available completely zero cost by going to the links in the show note captions.

So you have the option to download those PDFs and to look them over either prior to or during or perhaps after you listen to these four podcast episodes.

As a final note before beginning today's discussion, I just want to emphasize my sentiment, which I'm confident will soon be your sentiment as well,

which is that Dr. Paul Conti shares with us immensely powerful tools for enhancing mental health that at least to my knowledge have never been shared publicly before.

In fact, as somebody who has done more than three decades of therapy,

I've never before been exposed to a conversation about the structure of the mind and the subconscious mind

as well as tools and protocols for enhancing mental health as powerful as these.

For me, the information was absolutely transformative in terms of reshaping my thought patterns, my emotional patterns

and indeed several of my behavioral patterns.

And I'm confident that the information that you'll glean from today's episode and throughout the series will be positively transformative for you as well.

Before we begin, I'd like to emphasize that this podcast is separate from my teaching and research roles at Stanford.

It is, however, part of my desire and effort to bring zero cost to consumer information about science and science related tools to the general public.

In keeping with that theme, I'd like to thank the sponsors of today's podcast.

Our first sponsor is BetterHelp.

BetterHelp offers professional therapy with a licensed therapist carried out online.

I personally have been doing weekly therapy for more than 30 years.

And while that weekly therapy was initiated, not by my own request,

it was in fact a requirement for me to remain in high school.

Over time, I really came to appreciate just how valuable doing quality therapy is.

In fact, I look at doing quality therapy much in the same way that I look at going to the gym or doing cardiovascular training such as running as ways to enhance my physical health.

I see therapy as a vital way to enhance one's mental health.

The beauty of BetterHelp is that they make it very easy to find an excellent therapist.

An excellent therapist can be defined as somebody who is going to be very supportive of you in an objective way,

with whom you have excellent rapport with and who can help you arrive at key insights that you wouldn't have otherwise been able to find.

And because BetterHelp therapy is conducted entirely online,

it's extremely convenient and easy to incorporate into the rest of your life.

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That's BetterHelp spelled H-E-L-P.com.huberman.

Today's episode is also brought to us by Waking Up.

Waking Up is a meditation app that offers dozens of guided meditation sessions, mindfulness trainings, yoga-nidra sessions, and more.

By now, there's an abundance of data showing that even short daily meditations can greatly improve our mood, reduce anxiety,

improve our ability to focus, and can improve our memory.

And while there are many different forms of meditation, most people find it difficult to find and stick to a meditation practice

in a way that is most beneficial for them.

The Waking Up app makes it extremely easy to learn how to meditate and to carry out your daily meditation practice

in a way that's going to be most effective and efficient for you.

It includes a variety of different types of meditations of different duration,

as well as things like yoga-nidra, which place the brain and body into a sort of pseudo-sleep that allows you to emerge feeling incredibly mentally refreshed.

In fact, the science around yoga-nidra is really impressive, showing that after a yoga-nidra session,

levels of dopamine in certain areas of the brain are enhanced by up to 60%,

which places the brain and body into a state of enhanced readiness for mental work and for physical work.

Another thing I really like about the Waking Up app is that it provides a 30-day introduction course.

So for those of you that have not meditated before or are getting back to a meditation practice, that's fantastic.

Or if you're somebody who's already a skilled and regular meditator,

Waking Up has more advanced meditations and yoga-nidra sessions for you as well.

If you'd like to try the Waking Up app, you can go to [WakingUp.com](https://wakingup.com) slash Huberman and access a free 30-day trial.

Again, that's [WakingUp.com](https://wakingup.com) slash Huberman.

And now for my discussion about how to understand and assess your level of mental health with Dr. Paul Conti.

Dr. Paul Conti, welcome.

Thank you.

I'm very excited for today's episode and for this series because I, like so many other people out there,

have a lot of questions about myself and themselves and not just about ourselves, but how the different personality types out there, the healthy types, the narcissist,

all the things that we hear about these days, gaslighting, all these sorts of things.

What all of that really is?

Perhaps we can dispel some of the myths that exist during the course of this series.

I'm sure we will.

I'm sure you will.

Thank you.

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And also raise certain important questions that we should all ask ourselves in terms of trying to understand who we are and how we can be the best versions of ourselves, how we can experience the most happiness, also the most richness in life, because of course life isn't just all about being happy.

So to start off this question, I want to raise a parallel with something I think for most people is more concrete, which is physical health.

Well, there isn't an ideal physical self that's been defined by the medical community. We know, for instance, that there is a range of blood pressures that are considered healthy. There's a range of body mass index that's considered healthy, although that's a little controversial because it depends on how much muscle, how lean people are, etc.

But I think it's reasonable to say that the healthy individual is not going to get exhausted walking up a flight of stairs. They could bend down and lift an object without hurting themselves. They might even have some additional strength or endurance, etc. Within the physical health domain, all of that is fairly well scripted. And there are protocols that people can follow to improve their physical health. We've covered many of them on this podcast before.

When it comes to mental health and it comes to concepts of the self, things become much more abstract for people. In fact, I think most people, including myself, are kind of wandering around in the dark, wondering whether or not we are the best versions of ourselves, whether or not we're thinking about ourselves and the world around us in the best ways. So to start things off, you tell us, what is the healthy version of self? What should we all be aspiring to?

You've worked with people who presumably are healthy and people who have severe pathologies of different psychiatric types, bipolar, narcissistic, sociopathic, and everything in between. So for me and for the listeners, what is a healthy self? What should we be striving for?

A healthy self approaches life through the lens of agency and gratitude. If you look at happy people, people who like their lives, no matter what stage of life they're at, no matter what their socioeconomic status is, race, religion, there's so many things that we think matters. And they matter to a lot of things. Do they matter to someone happy or not? They are not factors. The factors that tell us, is this person enjoying life? Are they going to take care of themselves? Are they happy they're here? Are they engaged productively in the world? Is agency and gratitude?

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And if we have those two things, then it's interesting you almost never see someone go wrong, right? And even if there are difficulties, even if there are, if things happen in life that can make some unhappiness, right?

It doesn't take away the person's engagement in life, the person's enthusiasm for life.

And I think if you look at even traditions of understanding how are people happy, whether it's in psychiatry or it's through literature or through a religious lens, it is always people who approach life through the lens of agency and gratitude.

Could we go a little bit deeper on agency and gratitude?

Sure.

When I hear the words agency and gratitude, I think agency and ability to affect the world around me in the ways that I want.

And I think gratitude being thankful.

And we did an entire episode all about gratitude practices.

Some of the neuroscience and neuroimaging and neurochemical changes that occur in the brain and body when people exert a gratitude practice.

But I have a feeling that when you talk about agency and gratitude, you might be talking about something slightly or maybe even quite a bit different than the way that I'm defining it.

Yeah.

I would say agency and gratitude are these amazing rewards, right?

That sit on top of the highly complex brain function inside of us and the highly complex psychology in all of us.

So if we think about a self, right?

That I identify a self, right?

I'm an I, right?

If I'm going to approach the world with agency and gratitude, that's sitting on top of a lot of healthy things, right?

And the idea that, okay, there are ways in which we can be mentally unhealthy, right?

But to start with, like, what is going on inside of us, right?

And what does it look like when we're healthy?

So there's a structure of the self, right?

There's a function of the self.

And if we look at the structure and the function and the parts, the components of structure and function,

we can come to understand, okay, what is going on in us?

What might we change for the better?

How do we build empowerment, right?

Because empowerment is the ability to navigate the world around us and to bring myself to bear in ways that are effective.

And from empowerment arises the sense of agency, right?

I have agency because I am empowered, right?

And also from a healthy structure of self and function of self.

We end up with humility, right?

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We come through that with a sense of our place in the world and our power in the world to navigate as we choose, but also a sense of the world around us that's far more complicated than just we are, extends beyond us to other people, to the climate around us, to the health of the whole planet, right?

We feel a sense of humility that I'm here and I can do good things.

I'm fortunate to be here and I'm part of this bigger ecosystem, right?

All the way up to the scale of the ecosystem of Earth, right?

And if we feel that humility, then we approach the world through the lens of gratitude.

So the idea that a healthy structure of self and a healthy function of self

leads to empowerment and humility, and then upon that,

we are sort of imbued with agency and gratitude,

and that leads us forth to happy lives.

Okay, so it's clear to me why having agency and gratitude would be wonderful,

perhaps even the goal state that we should all be seeking to achieve.

And it also makes sense to me as to why empowerment and humility

are important components that feed into our ability to have agency and gratitude, right?

Yes.

Because all of that, at least to my mind, sums to a very clear statement about having agency and gratitude is the best way to approach life.

That all makes perfect sense to me, and yet I've never really thought about it that way, and I think most people haven't ever been told this, right?

I mean, what should we be seeking, agency and gratitude?

Yes.

We've heard endless number of podcasts, including this podcast, about physical health, and we've been told by physicians and everybody else

that we should seek to have a relatively low blood pressure,

we should seek to have a relatively low heart rate

that our cholesterol should be at a certain level, et cetera.

So within the physical health domain, there are strong, clear messages about what we should all be striving toward.

And in a similar way to how we're discussing the self and psychology,

I don't think anyone seeks to have low blood pressure or low heart rate

because that's what they want per se.

They want those things along with some capacity for endurance,

the ability to lift an object, so some strength, et cetera,

because of the way that those metrics of health allow them to move through the world in the best possible way.

In other words, having some degree of endurance allows you to walk down the block

maybe a lot further, or to walk up several flights of stairs,

or to have some strength allows you to pick up objects and effectively move through life.

Right.

You're telling us that having a sense of agency and gratitude

and that agency and gratitude are undergirded by empowerment and humility,

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and that's the best way to move through life, the most effective, happiest, if you will, way to move through life.

Well, then I think we have to ask ourselves the same thing we would ask about physical fitness, which is what goes into creating a sense of agency and gratitude, empowerment and humility?

You know, what are the action steps?

Because if I want more endurance, I know to get on an exercise bike or a treadmill or go out for a run a few times a week or more.

If I want to get stronger, I'm going to lift objects that are difficult to lift until they're easier to lift.

I mean, it's all pretty straightforward in the physical domain, but in the mental health domain, in the psychological domain, it does become a bit more abstract.

I think in part because no one's ever told us, certainly no one's ever told me, what you really need is agency and gratitude in order to have the best possible life.

So I very much appreciate that you're telling us this,

and I'd love for you to tell us what are the action steps that go into creating these things that we're calling agency, gratitude, empowerment and humility?

There's actually quite a strong parallel between the physical health dimension and the mental health dimension.

So as you're saying, why do you put in the time, the energy, the learning to be physically healthy?

It's a lot of effort and we put so much of ourselves towards it if we decide that we value that.

Why do we do it?

Because as you said, it's the best way to approach life.

Like there may be something that I want to do.

I want to run a race, or I want to climb a mountain,

but ultimately we take care of ourselves physically because we don't know what's coming next in life and we want to be prepared for it good, bad and otherwise.

And the same thing is true of mental health.

So I can feel grateful for something.

I can feel grateful that I'm still breathing right now.

I can exercise agency.

I can pick up that cup and take a drink, right?

But that doesn't mean that I'm living life through the lens of agency and gratitude, which is consistent with every opinion.

If you look psychologically through the lens of literature,

through the lens of sociology and psychology,

agency and gratitude make happiness, right?

They're ways of approaching life.

And just like physical health is undergirded by cardiovascular health, heart health, muscle strength, right?

There's an undergirding of agency and gratitude and empowerment and humility are ways of describing,

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okay, what arises from understanding ourselves, taking care of ourselves, that then gives us the agency and gratitude.

We have empowerment, we have humility, but where does it all come from, right?

So just like we have to understand the physical body and what to do to it in order to be healthy, right?

We also have to understand the mind, right?

The self that wants to be healthier.

And that comes through understanding the structure of the self and we have enough science through the lens of neurobiology and psychiatry to understand the structure of self and then the function of self, right?

How we work, right?

How we interface with the world.

So it's actually not more complicated than physical health.

It's just that we don't spell it out that way, right?

We come at it through the lens of pathology of what's wrong and who has some diagnosis and, you know, we're looking for the problematic instead of saying like, what do we look like when we're happy, right?

And then going and digging down into the mechanics of it all, right?

And if we're not in that state, right, to go and look at that and to make changes just as if you were very, very physically healthy, right?

But, you know, your heart rate couldn't go up that much without you feeling very, very fatigued.

We'd say, well, look, you're doing a lot of the right things, right?

But let's work more on your heart, right?

We would go look at the specifics of it because that's how we understand it.

And we just don't apply the same science, logic, common sense to mental health as we do to physical health.

But it's time for that to change because we have the knowledge and ability to do just that.

When we had Dr. Andy Galpin on this podcast to do a series on physical health and fitness, essentially,

he said something that really stuck with me, which was that the number of different workouts that people can do out there, body weight workouts, work with weights, with machines.

You can run far.

You can run shorter distances more quickly.

You can do planks, you know, sit-ups, so many variations on exercise routines.

But what he very clearly stated was that there are only a few core adaptations that the body can undergo

that lead to these byproducts that we call lower blood pressure, enhanced endurance, improved strength,

improved neuromuscular function, improved brain function for that matter.

It sounds to me like there are a lot of parallels in creating the healthy psychological self.

So what are the core components that I and others should think about in terms of understanding, if you describe them as the structure of the self and the functions of the self?

Again, just to draw a parallel, if we were talking about physical health, we'd say,

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okay, there's connections between nerves and muscle that allows us to move our limbs. If you apply a certain amount of resistance, you get a certain adaptation, which is the neuromuscular connection gets stronger, the muscle might get bigger or just stronger, et cetera.

Flexibility, you know, you just push your range of motion just a little bit into discomfort. You do that.

It so happens to be the case that you do that for just a couple of minutes each day over the course of about a week or so, you get a significant increase in flexibility.

Okay, so it's all very clear in the physical domain.

In the psychological domain, I hear you telling us that the action steps that we all should be taking in order to be the happiest version of ourselves by achieving agency and gratitude is to explore the structure of self and the function of self.

So if you could tell us about what is the structure of self, like what goes into Andrew being Andrew and Paul being Paul and whoever the listener is into being who they are.

What is that?

And what is the function of self?

How does a psychiatrist think about that?

How should we think about that?

Okay, if I could start maybe to set the stage for that by pointing out that as we go up the hierarchy of health, everything should get simpler, not more complicated.

If you think about physical health, there's so much complexity on the initial levels.

So we think about your physical health status versus mine.

It's going to be different.

We're going to have different cardiac function and muscle function and pulmonary function.

And if we're going to be healthy, we could do a lot of different things.

There might be a whole set of choices that would work well for you, different choices that would work for me, and we can gauge intensity, timing, frequency.

It's very complicated when we're on the lower levels of the hierarchy.

As we get higher up, let's say you and I both do the right things.

Then what happens?

We both have endurance.

We both have some strength.

We're both robust.

Things are getting simpler because we're approaching the unique idiosyncrasies in all of us, and we have to look at that and look at that in a very specific way.

But what we're trying to get to is something that's common for all of us.

So stamina, for example, in physical health and endurance, and agency and gratitude in mental health.

So then if we go and we look and we look at the structure of the self and the function of self, we find that there's more complexity, but that it is also understandable.

I mean, there's tremendous complexity in the body,

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just as there's tremendous complexity in the mind,
and we can understand what is the structure of self, what is the function of self,
and we can look at that and assess that in the same way we would physical health parameters
so that we arrive at the place we want to be, be it endurance or agency or gratitude.

So structure of self.

We all have an unconscious mind, and we pay so little attention to this part of us
that really is the biological supercomputer.

So millions of things are going on all the time, like in every split second.

So for example, I can say these words, and you can listen to the words,
and you can say things back, and I can listen.

There are millions and millions of things going on under the surface,
much of which comes from either biological predispositions or habits over time,
thought processes, patterns.

So this unconscious mind, this supercomputer is doing all of these things,
at the speed of light, there are electrical and chemical signals,
and multiple pathways as complicated as superhighway systems
that then get consolidated and communicate with others.

And then what comes up from all of that is the conscious mind.

So imagine an iceberg, and it's a really, really big iceberg,
and we see the part above the surface, that's the conscious mind.

But there's a huge part of this iceberg, maybe 95% of it that's underneath the water.

There's this hulking mass that we don't see, that's the unconscious mind.

And it's feeding up to the conscious mind, which is a much smaller part of our brain function,
but it's the part that we're aware of.

It's sitting on top of all the unconscious things, which are extremely important,
but then we become aware so that we can engage in the real world.

In order for us to have this conversation,

the millions of things per second have to be going on underneath the surface
so that you and I, as conscious eyes, as conscious selves, can ride along on top of it.

So that's the part of the iceberg that's above the water, it's the conscious self.

Then imagine that the conscious self is girded by a set of long tendrils that come out from under the
water.

There are defense mechanisms that are unconscious to us that sort of gird the conscious mind.

So do we rationalize automatically? Do we avoid automatically? Do we act out automatically?

Are these things in us in ways that we can observe and change,

but that are there to try and protect the conscious mind from the slings and arrows of the world
around us?

So if you imagine, there's the big part of the iceberg under the water, the unconscious mind.

The conscious mind is riding on top of it,

but the conscious mind, that part sticking out of the water, is vulnerable.

So imagine that there's a defensive structure that arises from the part of the iceberg that's
underwater

that is there to defend and protect the conscious mind.

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So when you say to defend and protect, when you say that the conscious mind is vulnerable, what do you mean? Do you mean that it's vulnerable to physical attack or that it's vulnerable to us realizing that we're just a bunch of neurons that are clicking away underneath?

In other words, where does the vulnerability of the conscious mind really reside?

Not physically where does it reside, but what am I so worried about in terms of my safety?

I mean, right now we're in a room, I feel pretty safe.

I don't think you're going to attack me verbally or physically.

I suppose it's possible that could happen, but it seems like a very distant possibility.

Maybe that these defenses are there to protect us from some sort of awareness.

What awareness are we trying to avoid?

So the vulnerability of the conscious mind is to fear, confusion, despair.

There's so many things that we can fear.

Some people are afraid of snakes or spiders.

Some people are afraid of death.

Some people are afraid of health issues that could come to them or to people they love.

We can get confused and not know what decisions to make and how to navigate the world and how to be who we want to be to ourselves and to others.

We can feel tremendously vulnerable and despairing if we lose others

or we start to see things happening in the world around us that we don't like.

We start to feel like, what will happen to the planet we live on?

Will there be war where I live?

Will my children be safe?

There's so much that we need to protect ourselves again.

So that vulnerable part of us, the part of the iceberg sticking out above the water needs a defensive structure around it to protect it against the vulnerability of fear, confusion, despair.

And because the conscious mind is sticking out of the water with a defensive structure around it, it is the raw material from which we create our character structure.

So the character structure is all of that, the part under the water, the part above the water, the defensive structure.

So imagine a nest around all of that.

And that's the character structure that we utilize to interface with the world.

So the character structure is the thing that I'm using.

If you're driving somewhere in a car, the car is the thing that you're using to go there.

The character structure is the thing that we're using to interface with the world.

So for example, how trusting am I versus suspicious?

How readily do I come to make friends with people?

How much do I act out if I'm frustrated?

How much do I exclaim something negative as opposed to holding it inside of me?

How much do I rationalize if something isn't going well?

Do I want to look at it and maybe see that it is so that I don't have to face it?

How much do I avoid problems in the world around me?

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How much do I exercise altruism?

These are all the ways in which we're engaging with the world around us.

And this determines the self.

Imagine that the self then grows out of this nest from the character structure that we use to interface with the world and the decisions that we make.

So if our character structure is the thing through which we engage with the world, then we're enacting what is inside of us,

what we've determined through our unconscious mind, our conscious mind, our defense mechanism.

There's a certain us that comes at the world in a certain way.

And if we're more or less trusting, more or less avoidant, we rationalize more or less.

These are the factors that determine where do our lives go?

Because on top of all of this, imagine that the nest of the character structure around all of this grows from the self.

The product of the feelings inside, the things that we know about ourselves and don't know about ourselves, the decisions that all of it leads to.

So I may choose to be, for example, more trusting and that may bring an opportunity to me that I wouldn't have otherwise had.

I may choose to be more trusting and it may bring risk to me that I wouldn't otherwise have had.

So we want to be as healthy as we can, as knowledgeable of ourselves and the world around us, so that it's safe for us to have a healthy character structure through which we can engage in the world around us with a sense of prudence, right?

Taking reasonable risks, right?

Not too little so that we shut ourselves down and maybe end up despairing.

Not so much that scary things can happen to us and we end up fearful, right?

But the idea that if we know ourselves well, the character structure is healthy, right?

Because it's built upon a structure of self and a function of self that are healthy and out of it is coming empowerment, right?

And empowerment and humility, right, that then lead us to agency and gratitude, right?

The idea here is that this is the character structure that we create that can then interface with the world in a way that's good for us

and good for the world around us that leads us to be able to live in much more harmony inside of ourselves and outside of ourselves.

So if I understand correctly, defense mechanisms that grow up out of this portion of the iceberg that we're calling the unconscious mind,

they protect our conscious self in ways that can be adaptive or that can be maladaptive.

In other words, defenses can be healthier, they can be unhealthy.

And perhaps in a few minutes we can get into what a healthy versus an unhealthy defense looks like.

But the way you describe character structure sounds to me like an array of contextual dispositions.

I don't want to add unnecessarily complex language, but it sounds to me like a bunch of dispositions. Like if I'm walking into the office where I know everybody and I see familiar faces, there's no reason for me to be on guard if I trust those people.

But if I'm walking down a street at night that I'm not familiar with and I'm starting to get the sense that this neighborhood might not be the best,

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it makes sense for me to be on relatively high alert.

So different dispositions depending on different conditions.

I can't help but mention my bulldog Costello who had basically three dispositions.

It was a sleep, but in all seriousness, the second one was kind of bored.

The bulldog faces kind of bored or if something was given to him that he liked or if we were doing something he liked, delight.

He basically had three dispositions as far as I could tell.

I think one of the reasons we like dogs so much or that many of us like dogs so much is that their decisions are very predictable.

Take him to the park, he's happy unless he happened to be ill that day, which was rare.

Feed him, he's happy.

There wasn't a lot of, I don't like this particular meal or I don't like this particular park or this Bijon Frise doesn't smell so good to me.

It was so simple and yet people are very complex.

I can look at myself and say, okay, what is my character structure?

Character structure is certain things I like, certain things I dislike, certain things really irritate me, certain environments and people I just delight in.

So is the definition of a healthy character structure one in which the dispositions match the context perfectly?

I mean, I don't know how any of us could be like that, but is that sort of the ideal much in the same way that we could probably arrive at an ideal degree of stamina that one could have?

I mean, some people run ultra marathons, 100 miles or more, some people want to run a marathon, some people don't really desire to run a marathon, but I want to be able to run a mile if I need to without being completely exhausted and injured.

So when we ask ourselves about character structure, are we asking ourselves about context driven dispositions and how do we start to evaluate that for ourselves?

I think because we're more complicated, I think it's not dispositions as much as it's predispositions.

So in the example that you gave, you have a certain predisposition to be either trusting or wary, and that's healthy in you.

So when you come into a setting where there's not a good reason to feel mistrustful, to feel anxious, to feel vulnerable, then you feel at ease.

So you walk into the work setting, there are people you know, there are people you like, everything is okay.

You have a different predisposition when the context is different, right?

So if the context could bring a lack of safety, then you respond accordingly with a lack of safety, right?

But it's possible certainly those predispositions can be in unhealthy places, right?

So for example, you might have been traumatized in a certain way or you might approach the world in a certain way because of prior experience that you may not register as trauma, but it may be that within you is a predisposition to be mistrustful.

So you could walk into a room of people that you know of people who've never met you any harm and still feel unsafe, right?

Now this happens most often after trauma, but there are other ways people can get to that where

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the predisposition isn't so healthy.

The converse is true too, right?

There are people who can have too much of what's called an omnipotence defense and then they don't recognize danger when danger is around them.

So the idea, the character structure, that nest, right?

That's built around the defensive structure and the conscious mind that's sitting on top of the part of the iceberg, the unconscious mind underwater, right?

It's that nest that is interfacing with the world through a whole set of predispositions.

I'd like to take a brief break and acknowledge one of our sponsors, AG1.

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I think most of us are familiar with assessing and assigning names to the character structures of others.

And at least for most of us, we do that with no professional training or authority.

We say, that person is great. They're super nice. The person's a jerk. They're like weird, you know, et cetera, et cetera.

I think very few of us are familiar with assessing our own character structure.

And I have to presume that some of what happens when somebody comes to you as a psychiatrist or to a psychologist is that certain questions are asked and certain narratives are told that start to reveal to the clinician the character structure.

And perhaps from there, some of the possible defense mechanisms and, you know, structure of the person's unconscious mind and conscious mind that obviously are unaware to them, but would be clear to the clinician.

Much in the same way that if somebody goes into the doctor and says, you know, I don't feel well, they're going to start probing with questions or they're going to put, you know, take a listen to their

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breathing, listen to their heart.

Right.

Help the stethoscope and figure it out.

These are the probes, whereas the psychiatrist or psychologist uses words and language to probe.

Yes.

So what are the sorts of aspects of character structure that we can be aware of in ourselves?

You know, in other words, should we be asking what type of character do I have, dependent on one circumstance or another?

Should we ask ourselves what sorts of defenses we have?

And maybe this would be a good opportunity to address this issue of what are healthy versus unhealthy defenses.

Because it sounds to me, if I understand correctly, that the defense mechanisms are a very strong component in determining what our character structure is.

The defense mechanisms are unconscious.

The character structure that nest around the defenses in the conscious mind through which we interface with the world is very, very complicated.

So there are as many character structures as there are human beings.

So it's very, very complicated.

But there are factors that are consistently relevant across people and get identified as such.

So one example would be isolation versus affiliation.

Right.

So does a person tend to group with others, right?

Or does the person tend to avoid grouping, right?

And go about thoughts, tasks, approaches to life in a more singular manner, right?

So it's just one element.

I'm making value judgment about it because it can be good or bad on either end of the spectrum, right?

So we're just saying, what are the factors?

So am I more affiliative or do I tend to isolate and be more singular?

That's just one example, right?

Another example could be things like, for example, use of humor, right?

Does a person use humor and in what way, right?

Does a person use humor to deflect discomfort in negative situations?

Does a person use humor in order to be little others or to be little themselves?

Or does a person not use humor, right?

So these aspects of character structure and so much research has been done on this over the years to determine what is most salient, right?

In this thing that we use in order to interface with the world around us, out of which grows our self. That makes good sense.

And it makes me want to revise a little bit what I asked about before, which is I said that when it comes to an exam of physical health, measure blood pressure, measure breathing, et cetera, maybe even a blood test, look at some biomarkers.

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But what you're describing is a little bit more analogous to the physician addressing a patient who's having some physical discomfort or malaise and saying, tell me about your day.

What do you do when you get up in the morning?

If the person says, well, I drink a quarter pint of vodka.

It's a very different answer than I go outside and get sunlight in my eyes, drink a glass of water and maybe have a cup of coffee, right?

Or if somebody says, I have six espresso.

If I understand correctly, the character structure is better revealed by exploring the action states that somebody is in.

It comes to life.

Isolation versus engagement as opposed to a read of one specific biomarker.

Yes.

It's character structure brought to life, right?

Yes.

I immediately am thinking about movies and books where we learn so much about somebody through observing the way that they interact with people in very, very potent ways.

So for instance, I can think of countless movies where you learn a ton about somebody in the first scene simply because of the way they react to somebody who cuts them off in traffic.

They just explode.

Okay.

Well, then we think of that person as reactive from that point on, unless there's a significant amount of material to revise that.

But it's in the action of getting explosive and cursing, et cetera, as opposed to if they just kind of laugh it off or laugh at themselves or blame someone within their own vehicle or something like that. So are those the sorts of things that a clinician like yourself is listening for when somebody says, you know, I don't feel well.

So we'll tell me about what's going on lately and they start describing what's going on in their life.

And are you listening for those places where the defense mechanisms can start to reveal themselves, the character structure starts to reveal itself through these action steps that the person seems to be taking?

Yeah.

Yeah.

Maybe one way of looking at character structure is that it's potentialities and predispositions, right?

There's so much that's latent that then interfaces with events like a person stuck in traffic.

How does that person respond?

If that person weren't stuck in traffic, there wouldn't be a response to it, right?

So there are potentialities, there are predispositions, and then we live through enacting them as we're moving then through life, right?

And the attempts to understand, so using the physical health parallel, right?

If you came in and you said, I don't feel well, right?

We might run a lot of tests, right?

We might get an MRI or a CAT scan or even putting the stethoscope and listening to what's inside of

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you.

Those we could say are unconscious things.

Like, you know, you're not aware of what the imaging may show or the blood test may show or how your lungs may sound when someone puts a stethoscope on them, right?

So a clinician, if you're trying to understand and help someone, then you do want to look for those things, right?

You want to look for the things that are underneath the surface, but that can be very, very important, right?

You also want to look at everything that's on the surface, right?

So if you're engaging with someone, you're engaging with the self, right?

The self that grows out of the character structure nest, right?

So by engaging with and doing one's best to understand the self, then you learn about what is underneath of it, right?

So I may then learn, well, how do you respond in certain situations, right?

Just like I could ask you questions, or, well, when do you not feel well, right?

So you're asking a person questions because the idea is to understand elements of the character structure.

So how do you respond in certain situations?

What's going on inside of you, right?

What do you understand about yourself and what do you not understand about yourself, right?

How do you bring yourself to bear in the world around you?

So there's a similar process going on.

But here we're trying to understand the self, and the understanding of the self can help us understand the components underneath of the self,

because that's where we're going to go to make things better, right?

The idea is there shouldn't have to be mystery, or certainly not mystery anymore than there is in physical health.

I mean, you know, rarely someone comes in and they're really not feeling well,

and a whole set of everything that should be done is done, right?

Labs, physical examination, history, imaging, right?

And you still just don't know, right?

I mean, sometimes that can happen, but it's very rare.

And the same should apply here, that if we're examining a self, right,

and we're looking for the components out of which that self comes, right,

then we should be able to understand well enough to go back to the components of self and to make change

so that the self is in a better place, right?

And that self can then be empowered, can feel humility, right?

Can then come at life through the altruism and gratitude that we seek,

because again, you show me someone who's coming at life through altruism and gratitude

and is not happy with their life, and you'll be showing me something I've never seen before, something entirely new.

So if we want to get there, we want to know how to get there,

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and there are ways, as there should be, that parallel physical health that aren't mysterious that we can come at to make understanding and change. I'm wondering about the role of anxiety in all of this. The reason I ask about anxiety is that you said that so much of character structure is determined by a set of predispositions and potentialities. And earlier we were talking about example of either being afraid or unafraid in particular environments or feeling like we can walk into a classroom and learn or whether or not we're overly concerned about what people think about us or both, right? It could be a mix. Whether or not we can embrace novel environments in safe and adaptive ways. Whether or not we can grow from them as opposed to whether or not we can be overtaken by them or perhaps even injured, harmed psychologically, physically, or both. Anxiety to me is a very basic function, I think, about it in terms of the autonomic nervous system and degrees of excitability and et cetera. An ability to sleep at night, an ability to wake up feeling reasonably good but not have a panic attack. But anxiety to me does seem like a key node in all of this. Meaning, you know, most people, including myself, I don't walk around thinking about my character structure. I don't walk around thinking about how I'm going to behave in a bunch of hypothetical environments. I think about the fact that most mornings I wake up and I feel pretty good. To be quite honest, not as good as I would like to feel, and then absolutely because anything's wrong, but because I think I'm wired to be a little bit more on the anxious side and to predict what's going to happen next and what needs to be done. And so until I'm actually engaging in certain behaviors, that anxiety hums a little bit high for me. The gears turn a little bit faster perhaps than I would like when I wake up in the morning. But once I engage, I feel like the speed of that gear turning matches the demands of life pretty well. I feel agency. So if you don't mind, could we explore this feeling of anxiety or lack of anxiety that I think people are pretty familiar with within themselves at different times of day and under different conditions? Because to me it seems like an interesting lens to explore this notion of character structure and defenses. Is anxiety a healthy defense or an unhealthy defense or does it simply depend on the circumstances? Well, we all have some degree of anxiety in us. We all have some awareness that we're navigating the world and not everything is perfect. This is not nirvana, so there's some anxiety within us. And the thought is that that anxiety can keep us vigilant about the things we should be vigilant about, you know, health and safety, right? But that too much anxiety then becomes counterproductive.

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And we can look at this in a very regimented way, right?

So some anxiety makes sense, right?

It keeps us being careful.

It keeps you, because you're being careful as you're pulling out of a driveway, for example, right?

So okay, it can be absolutely fine.

But let's say you bring something to clinical attention that isn't absolutely fine, right?

Let's say I didn't know you and you come in, we have the example that you used before, where you walk into work and there's a group of people that you know well and like, right?

Let's say you told me, when I walk in there, I feel very anxious, right?

I don't feel like things are okay, right?

So then we would go through, we said, that's not good, right?

Maybe it's impacting your professional life, things are not going well, like you really want this to change

because it's impacting your life in a negative way.

And we say, okay, let's look at that from the perspective of structure of self, right?

So first, unconscious, right?

Is it that just genetically are you built with just higher levels of anxiety, right?

So we could learn, okay, have you always been anxious like this?

Is this always been in your life since you were a little kid, no matter what?

So we're looking for biological nature, so to speak, variables.

We might also look for things that have happened to you that are lodged in your unconscious mind, right?

Is there trauma that you haven't processed, right?

That now is underneath the surface but is spinning off more anxiety, right?

Let's say you tell me, oh, it wasn't that long ago you started being anxious.

Ah, like, did something happen?

Did you walk into a group of people and I don't know, you tripped and you felt bad about something, right?

And then you get more anxious, right?

So are there things going on underneath the surface that are impacting you?

Like, let's look into that, right?

Because that's the biggest part of the iceberg, right?

Then your conscious mind, we could start thinking about, okay, what's going on?

What are you actively thinking about, right?

So this is where sometimes cognitive behavioral techniques can come into mind.

Like, are you thinking like, oh no, I'm scared, it isn't going to go well, right?

Like, are you having thoughts or the thoughts that are making you more anxious, right?

What's going on in your conscious mind, right?

I would also be very interested in the defenses around you.

For example, do you tend to avoid, right?

Has this been getting worse for three months, but you just, your mind wouldn't acknowledge it, right?

And by the time you have to acknowledge it, now it's really bad, right?

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Or do you not avoid and like this started, just started happening and you want to nip it in the bud, right?

So I would be interested in the defense mechanisms, right, that are girding your conscious self. And I would be interested in the character structure.

What decisions are you then making?

Like, are you going anyway, right?

Are you having trouble so sometimes you avoid?

Are you then making decisions that make you late and that causes problems?

How does it impact you once you're there?

Are you engaging differently with people, doing your work differently?

So I want to understand the character structure and ultimately you understand all of this by probing the self that's riding along on top of it.

And then what is the experience of that self?

Like, do you see that, okay, this is a problem and I want to address it, but like, look, I know that I'm good at what I do.

And, you know, I mean, this isn't some like awful thing about me.

I just have to deal with it, right?

Or is yourself impacted where you started thinking, maybe I can't do this anymore.

I'm not good enough for, you know, we want to understand what's the experience of the self, right?

And if we do all of that, how is it that we don't get to a place where we can understand that anxiety, right?

And we can make things better.

So just like in physical health, okay, maybe we can't, but that is a dramatic outlier.

If we bring ourselves to bear, we would say, you should not have to have this in you, right?

Because it is something negative.

It is making unhappiness for you.

It is taking away from empowerment, right?

And it's also taking away from humility, right?

Because if someone's beating up on themselves, you're beating up on yourself about it, then that's not humility, right?

Then that's being sort of falsely persecutory, right?

This is not an honest humility to that.

It leads us away from health.

So it's like, we don't want it to be this way, right?

Because that is working against agency and gratitude so we can understand it and we can go after it and make it better.

One of the most common questions I get on the internet and I get a lot of questions is what can be done to improve confidence?

And I've thought a lot about that question and what is confidence?

In the context of what we're talking about now is one reasonable definition of confidence, our ability to trust our predispositions and our potentialities.

Enough that were we to encounter scenarios A through Z, we feel pretty good that we would respond the right way in a way that wouldn't threaten our conscious mind at a core level.

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I used to use the term and joke a lot in my laboratory with the phrase, dissolve into a puddle of our own tears.

It's kind of this hyperbolic explanation of what I think many people fear.

They're going to be called upon to answer a question publicly or give a speech or they're going to be at a critical moment in a relationship or something.

Everything is just going to go so badly wrong that it's just going to dissolve them as a person.

It's impossible, right? Dissolving a puddle of our own tears is impossible but I think that's a fear that a lot of people live with because we can get into this a little bit later and we will.

I'm sure this notion of protecting one's ego seems really vital to being a human being at some level like we don't want to dissolve into a puddle of our own tears.

Is confidence the ability to trust ourselves in a bunch of different contexts?

At the same time, I do have to raise this notion of narcissism.

I think this word gets thrown around a lot lately but it seems to me that any truly psychologically healthy person would also not want to be the idiot that thinks that they're better than they actually are.

What are your thoughts on this?

I agree with the things that you said about confidence except I would add two factors that I think are really big factors.

One being state dependence and the other being phenomenology.

Think about the state dependence first.

When we're talking about confidence, it's not uniform or it's not automatically uniform.

If you were to tell me, oh, I lack confidence, then I want to understand is that across the board?

Is that a way that you feel about yourself?

I'm not good enough at anything, for example.

Or do you lack confidence in a specific area?

This is often the case and it's a huge difference.

That person has the machinery of confidence, so to speak.

They have the potentialities and the predispositions for confidence when that character structure, the self-built upon it is engaging with the world.

But they're not able to bring it to bear in a certain special situation, so to speak.

For some people, for example, the way we most often see this is the carve out of romance.

Because it's so emotionally laden, and rejection can feel so bad,

that we can see people who are very confident in many, many aspects of life, but they are very different about romance.

They'll say, oh, it never works out for me or no one will ever like me.

That's not how that person actually feels about themselves as a whole human being.

Then we are coming at how to make that better in a way that's very robust.

We might say something like, hey, here's the good news.

You have the tools and the machinery that you need.

You're confident in so many ways.

In fact, maybe in all ways, except this one.

So let's go take a look at why is that special?

And where are we?

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We're back to, is it something in the unconscious mind?
Is it something in the conscious mind about how that person is engaging?
So we have to understand what the state is,
and if the lack of confidence is state dependent.
If the person is not confident across the board,
then again, we go back to the same,
we always go back to the same places to look.
But then you might more think,
is there an impact of childhood trauma or early life trauma
that took away from that person their ability to gain confidence?
Because if you have no confidence across the board,
there's a deeper problem, right?
Because there would be something anyone can be good about
and feel confident in, right?
So the state dependence is very important as is phenomenology.
So what is your experience of being confident?
If you tell me, well, let's say in a different version of this example,
you say, you know, actually, I'm quite,
I feel quite confident when I walk into a room of people.
I say, okay, I want to understand more about that too, right?
Because if I ask questions about that and you say,
well, I feel confident because, you know,
look, I'm a pretty smart person.
I can think on my feet.
I can deal well with people.
If something doesn't go right, I can recover from it.
Like I've got, you know, I feel confident, you know?
And say, okay, that sounds pretty good.
If you say, well, I feel confident because I know
that I'm better than everybody, right?
Now we have a problem, right?
Like that's not going to go well in other, you know,
in other aspects of life and engagement.
Like there's, you know,
it's not going to lead to humility and gratitude.
So where's that coming from?
And again, maybe there's a deeper problem, right?
There's sort of narcissism, right?
Which can be a reaction, right?
Which is a reaction to vulnerability, right?
So then there's a reaction formation
and now the person is actually deeply diffident, right?
But presents as very, very confident

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and with a sense of superiority.
And that's not a recipe for happiness, right?
So in approaching it,
we do want to understand all the things that you said.
What are the factors and the set of predispositions
and the set of potentialities?
But then what's the real world experience of that
across situations?
And what is the person's experience of that inside?
Which is why if we're going to understand and help people,
like that's the understand part, right?
You know, it's why the conveyor belt medicine, you know,
it doesn't work, right?
In situations where we're dealing with human beings,
like mental health, right?
We have to understand something about people
to understand whatever they're telling us means.
Otherwise you have no context, so you have no knowledge.
Another very common set of questions that I get,
that I believe is very directly related to this,
is about beliefs and internal narratives.
You know, people ask me all the time,
how can I change what I believe about myself?
And they also ask, how can I change the script in my head?
Typically it's how do I shut down a particular narrative in my head?
This seems to fit very well in thinking about structure of self,
because as you pointed out, you know, the self,
where the structure of self includes the unconscious mind,
you know, what's going on below the surface of the water
in this iceberg model, what's going on in the conscious mind,
the unconscious mind is protected by these defense mechanisms
that grow up from the unconscious mind,
from that character structure,
and then this thing that we call the self.
But when it comes to beliefs and internal narratives,
those seem to me things that people are pretty well aware of.
In fact, the very example that people are asking me this all the time,
how to change beliefs and internal narratives,
means they are aware of them.
It also suggests that for many people out there,
their beliefs about themselves and their internal narratives
are not healthy, or at least they don't feel are serving them well,
or that they are intrusive.

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I don't know how open people are about their beliefs and internal narratives when they come to you in your clinical practice, but if you could tell us a little bit about beliefs and internal narratives and whether or not they are important to rewire and reset. This part is extremely important, right? So imagine, for example, that I'm saying to myself over and over again that I'm a loser, right, or I'm not good enough, right? I mean, imagine trying to go through life and someone else were saying that to you all the time, right? I mean, it's worse when it's inside your own head, right? So what's going on inside of us, our internal dialogue, our internal narratives are extremely important. And here's where we run into a very big problem, is that we live in an era and in a culture that is very attuned to rapid gratification, right? And all of this that we're talking about can change, but it does not change quickly. And it's amazing to me when you'll see under insurance paradigms often, right? No matter what's going on with someone, they can have 10 sessions of cognitive behavioral treatment, right? If there's something like we're trying to change beliefs, it's a guarantee of failure, right? Because beliefs don't change that fast, right? So imagine, for example, that you and I chose a word, a random word, and we decided to say it 500 times, right? We'd each be saying it tonight, right? It's not going to be out of our minds by tonight because we took a random word and said it 500 times, right? So imagine that there's something that's highly emotionally laden, and we've said it thousands and thousands and thousands of times, right? That's not going to go away quickly, right? But it can go away, and during the process of it atrophying, right? Our lives can get better, right? This is the opposite of hopeless, right? It's actually very, very encouraging, but in a world that's rapid gratification, right? Like, how do we fix this? How do we fix this now that doesn't acknowledge this? We hear all the time that a person has failed therapy, right? Like, this is said all the time, that person failed therapy. What does failed therapy mean, right? I mean, I think therapy failed that person, right? But we label like, oh, a person isn't better, right?

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But there are things going on inside of us that could take months and months or years to make better.

Now, again, that's okay if we're aware of what's going on.

Just the very fact that we understand and we're making change, right?

It helps us feel better about ourselves and more confident, right?

That we can change all of this, but we have to approach it in the right way.

So let's say that I'm telling myself over and over again, you're not going to get there, right?

And let's say a place I want to go professionally, right?

Or no one's ever going to really want you, right?

I'm looking for a romantic partner, right?

So imagine these things are going on,

and they're going on over and over again.

And you can imagine now that it's intruded into the unconscious mind, it's going on in my conscious mind,

my defensive structure is shifting in negative ways,

becoming more avoidant, like nothing about this is good.

And I want it to change.

And I want it to change to something that says, like, you can do it, right?

Or you're lovable, right?

You can be a good partner to someone.

So I want to change it, right?

So imagine now when I start to make that change,

I'm blazing a path, right?

And I'm blazing a path where there wasn't a path before, right?

And I can blaze a path and I can go through that path,

but that path is going to be nothing like maybe the four-lane highway, right?

Adjacent to me, where the thing that I've been telling myself

for years and years and years, born of trauma, right,

is, you know, is going back and forth, right?

I mean, it's got a four-lane highway, I'm cutting a path, right?

But over time, you cut that path more and more,

you tread that path more and more,

you take energy towards that path, it becomes better.

Now let's imagine like the path is well lit and it's 12 feet wide

and maybe we can pave the path so more traffic, so to speak, goes down it

and we're taking energy away from that four-lane highway

and maybe it starts to be overgrown a little bit

and there are cracks in the road.

Like we can change all of that,

but we have to understand what's going on and identify it.

Like what is going on inside of me?

What do I make of it, right?

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How do I understand the process of change?

How do I increase my empowerment during the process of change?

If we come at it the right way, all of this can be changed.

It's not hardwired in us, it's just very, very strongly reinforced.

The same way our brains are built this way,

so we don't forget our own names, right?

You know, we don't forget where we live, you know,

back when we were hunting and gathering,

we don't forget, you know, where the good fruits are, right?

I mean, this goes on in human life now, like we have to remember things.

It's important if something has high emotional valence

and we've thought it a lot that we don't forget it,

but that mechanism gets hijacked by things that are not good for us

and we can take it back, but not if we don't understand.

What are the tools or the questions that you give or ask of patients

in order to help them along that pathway?

Because I totally agree that changing beliefs in internal narratives is very, very hard.

Just one quick example that meshes with the physical health realm.

I have a friend and colleague,

he's a very accomplished scientist who was very overweight for a long period of time.

He finally made some behavioral changes that allowed him to lose.

I think he was in upwards of 80 pounds,

a significant amount of weight, felt much better, looked much better.

He just delighted in his ability to do that,

but then started to reveal to me that he was deathly afraid

that he was going to lose control and start eating the way he was before

and stop exercising in a way that would return him to his previous weight

and feelings of malaise.

I said, well, all the things you're doing are in the direction of health.

None of what you're doing speaks to the possibility of this all crumbling.

This was the dissolve into a puddle of my own tears kind of narrative,

but at this point coming from him and he just said,

I know, but despite doing all the right things,

I'm still incredibly afraid that it's going to happen.

It was as if the beliefs and the internal narratives hadn't changed

despite the fact that he was engaging in the world differently and more positively.

I haven't checked in with him recently to find out where he's at with this now several years later.

He has kept off most of the weight, not all,

they gained a little bit back, but he's still far healthier than he ever was.

He's experienced some relief.

What do you tell a patient who is saying,

I've got this loop in my head that tells me I'm not good enough

or that even when things are going well, they're going to return to that state

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that I fear so much once again.

This lack of agency, lack of empowerment.

What sorts of practical tools can one give themselves or that you would provide to somebody?

No matter what is behind what's going on in that person's mind, it's addressable, but you don't know what it is and how to address it until we ask the question of what's going on inside.

If he's afraid that he's going to gain all that weight back and he has a history that if significant negative things happen, he throws self-care to the wind.

Then we'd come at it through that pattern

because he would have a good reason to be worried

because this pattern of something bad happens and I don't take care of myself for six months,

and maybe someone in his life is ill or he's fearing a death,

and if it's just something that would say,

that's a very legitimate fear to have, let's talk about that.

Let's look at where that comes from,

what got that person into that pattern in the first place

by understanding the pattern and by working together,

can we stave that off?

But it could be different, the person might say,

well, I'm having a lot of food cravings,

and we're like, okay, what does that mean?

Where's that coming from?

Or maybe he's depressed and he's getting depressed

and when he's depressed, he can't stop eating more.

You would look or it might just be plain old fear,

this is so good that I'm worried it will go away.

Then we might want to reinforce,

you're a person who's able to use circumspection

and perseverance and preserve goodness,

so you do that and you do that really well,

so let's make sure we're doing that here.

A lot of times a person is worried,

but that worry is coming through the lens of health,

like they're healthy, so then we look at,

okay, can we soothe that worry?

Where's that coming from?

We can come at it and reinforce the positive,

but if there is something negative,

there's a trauma-driven cycle, there's depression,

there's cravings, we can understand that too.

I come back to this idea that there's answers

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to just about everything and in a very regimented, scientific way, it's not that hard to come to them, just like in physical medicine, we have the tools that we need to bring to bear, but you have to understand the person. Again, if you come in and say, I'm not feeling good and someone else comes in and says, I'm not feeling good, the doctor better not do the same things. How are you not feeling good? Let me understand that and then let me map that also to you. Whatever underlying state of health you may have or diagnoses you may have, the same is true in mental health. If we just apply that, then it's remarkable the good that we do, which I've seen very consistently across 20 years of doing this, not only in my own practice, but like, who are the people who do really, really well trying to understand and take care of people, including sometimes not doing too much and realizing like, hey, this person is okay, there's a state of health here, but this person is worried. How do we reassure them? How do we help someone living a good life, live a better life? If we're going to do all of this, we have to approach people as individuals. I mean, the science tells us that and common sense tells us that too, but if we do that, a person can get to the place they want to be. I'd like to address a different person as an example, a hypothetical person, and I'm certain there are many, many of these people out there. These are the sorts of people that think, okay, there's a self and a mind and an unconscious mind, et cetera, but at some level, why not just do what needs to be done in life? Like the people that don't want to explore the self, because to me, it seems so absolutely clear that just as it's important to have a certain level of endurance, strength, flexibility so that one can extract the most joy and agency and gratitude and empowerment

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and humility from life,
that it makes sense to explore the self,
to ask where am I internally strong,
where am I internally weak?
Where might I perceive myself as strong
as I'm actually weak?
These seem like very important,
if not crucial questions to ask,
but I know that there are a certain number of people
in the world think all of that
is just kind of a waste of time.
It's all about doing stuff.
Why explore the self?
And I think the rest of us
are looking at that person often and thinking,
well, you're exactly the kind of person that needs to do this
because of the way that you grate on other people,
but not always, right?
Sometimes these people just appear to be just very effective.
They're all about the outward expression
of what they're doing.
And I certainly don't know how other people feel
waking up in the morning and going to sleep at night
and throughout the day,
but to the person that feels like introspection
and exploring, maybe even excavating
for trauma that they haven't been in touch with
or haven't dealt with yet.
But the person that feels that all of that
is kind of not really worth the effort
and that's all about action.
What can we say to that person or those people?
Put differently, does one need to change
and need to believe in the power
of these sorts of approaches
in order for them to work?
We often hear that people don't change
until they want to change.
And could we also say perhaps
that even for the people that feel like
they're functioning extremely well
in all domains of life,
I know no such people.

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And I know some very high-achieving people as you do too.

I know no such people.

The only people who seem to exist in that sphere are the clear narcissists.

To them, just seem like they're doing great, but everyone else can't stand them.

By the way, narcissists, no one else can stand you.

What do we say to those individuals?

Because I think it's a big swath of humanity.

And I think it accounts for a lot of suffering in the world, including their own suffering.

I would make an appeal to common sense.

So imagine you take someone who doesn't know anything about health.

They don't know how to exercise.

They don't know how to eat well.

They just don't know and they're really, really unhealthy.

They're overweight. They have low energy.

They have sleep apnea.

They don't need to have any.

And why not just say to them,

well, just go be different?

In fact, be different now.

Why aren't you different right now?

Of course, we would never do that because it's absurd.

And by the way, also would be cruel.

So it's absurd and it's cruel.

So we would never do that.

Let's say now,

let's say we fast-forward some period of months.

Make it up.

And we see that person and wow,

they are much healthier.

They have much more energy.

They've lost weight. They're physically fit.

A lot will have gone on

in between those two snapshots of that person.

That person has to learn a lot.

How does one take care of oneself?

Then more specifically, how do I take care of myself?

What healthy foods will I like?

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What healthy foods will I eat?
How will I put that on the table?
What kind of exercises can work for me?
How will they work for me?
How do I strengthen muscle?
How do I strengthen the heart?
How do I increase lung capacity?
There's learning. There's diligence.
There's stick-to-itiveness.
There's resilience.
That's how the person gets there.
It is no different
in its mental health.
If we say, well, you feel different
across the board or you feel superior
across the board or whatever it is.
Life isn't going well and you don't have
to worry about it.
It's remarkable that
people will say that at times.
Not just in a way
that's denigrating
and awful for others,
but to themselves too.
I hear people say this
most often to themselves.
Why am I not just different?
I want to be different.
What's wrong with me that I'm not?
It's like everything else.
You have to apply understanding
and effort. The good news is
you can get to whatever change you want.
A person can get to whatever reasonable
change that person wants.
I'm 54 years old
and I'm not going to climb Mount Everest.
I'm not a mountain climber.
I want to climb some mountains.
I can go do that.
The same thing is true with our mental health
goals,
but not at the snap of a finger,

not by magic.

It's through applying the same science combination of science and common sense that we apply to other things.

That's why we go through this procedure of unconscious mind, conscious mind, the structure and function of the self because that's how it's done.

That's how the after snapshot looks different than the before from the mental health perspective as well.

That's very helpful and I think it's going to be very helpful to a lot of people in thinking about what to think about.

What sorts of questions to address maybe even

whether or not to get therapy and hopefully we'll remap their notions of therapy. Of course this critically relies on the therapist being good to excellent

and I think in the previous sit down we had

in the episode on trauma specifically you mapped out a number of the features of quality therapy so we can refer people to that if they're thinking about it's time stamped in that episode. What to look for in a therapist, how to assess whether or not it's going well or not, whether or not to move on or stay put with that therapist and so on.

You've been telling us a lot about the structure of the self.

Unconscious mind, conscious mind, defense mechanisms, character structure self.

We haven't talked so much about the function of self. I realize it's been woven in here or there. Yes.

Could you tell us about the function of

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self, the functions of self

verb actions?

Are these things that we are all doing

right now that reflect our character

structure?

Are these things that we can change

more readily than

trying to snap our fingers and say okay I'm now

going to be a more altruistic person

because I can decide that right now but then

ultimately I have to engage in some altruistic

behaviors

to lend support to that.

Again staying with the parallel

that I can't just snap my fingers and say lower blood

pressure. I have to do some meditative practices

some cardiovascular training

and things of that sort.

What is this function of self

thing? What goes into the functions

of self?

Just stepping back

to the framing.

There are these two pillars upon which

we build our

lives. The structure of self

and the function of self

and we've been talking as you said more about

the structure which is more the nouns

of it like there is an unconscious

what is in that unconscious

for example there are defense mechanisms

how are we using them? It's not all nouns

but it's more what are those things

and then we start talking about how we put

them into practice. The function of self

is much more the verbs.

If the structure is more nouns the function is

more the verbs.

The actual engagement.

That would start with an

awareness of I.

There is a person

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there is a me
that is separate from
others
and I have responsibility
for this I. It is me
no one else is guiding it.
It's me. I know there's a me.
Then on top of that
we start seeing defense mechanisms in action
because we're thinking about function
we're aware that there's an I
but the first thing that starts happening
to that I are unconscious things
so the defense mechanisms
because we're not choosing them
they start doing things
automatically so if
for example I have
a defense of avoidance
then I'm not thinking
I'd like to meet a new person
but I automatically am
shying away
then it's not good
it's a factor
but it's a factor I'm not aware of
until I start this process of introspecting
so the defense mechanisms
are then determining the lay
of the land
in that example
sorry to interrupt
but in that example
they're turning away
you describe as reflexive
someone who would like to have a romantic
partner or meet somebody
have a companion and
they go to the grocery store
and somebody says something as they're reaching for the milk
there's that moment of opportunity
something back but instead they just kind of go
thanks and then they kind of move away

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and then the narrative in their head might be
oh gosh that was
silly but they don't really
think about the alternate possibility
or there might be no narrative
they just head off
they head off to the produce section
and then they go home and someone says
oh did anything happen to the grocery
you mean they want the grocery? No
it's all unconscious
now again can we explore that
and change that? Yes
but it's important to understand that whatever
that nest of defense mechanisms
is like that's what I've got right now
right and I'm living through that
right now
it's performing a function
just because it's an unconscious function
doesn't mean it's not a very very important
function
I can see in that example how it protects
the conscious mind from risk because there's always the possibility of rejection
there's a possibility
of over interpretation of what the other person
is talking to them for
is the person interested in them or whether or not
this is just friendly banter
or the sort that
anyone would have next to anybody that is not
special to them so you can see how
the unconscious
turning away is protective
against all the negative possibilities
and in some sense
is pretty rational because
the probability that that one interaction
could ratchet up to a life
of companionship and romance with somebody
is
exceedingly small really
although you could imagine a set of data points

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where you string together
like five second clips
all like the time something like that
has happened right so maybe this is a person
that
intermittently like people are interested
in them or saying hey or saying hello or showing
interest you could string all those together
and the person hasn't noticed one of them
right and then could have a very negative see
nobody, no one wants me
no one's interested in me or whatever the person is saying
but
it's different if you see from the outside
like it's objectively different
but that person doesn't know
and that's why after
an awareness there is an I
the next thing that I
think of in the function of self
is the defense mechanisms
in action
What are some other examples of defense mechanisms
in action because I think
there's immense interest in this
you know the idea that we have
unconscious
processes in us that are reaching up
out of the iceberg and preventing us
from seeing our life
and ourselves the way that it actually
is occurring
and perhaps preventing us from achieving
these ideals of agency
and gratitude, empowerment and humility
you know I mean
these seem like very powerful and important
forces and
I and I know many other people out there
want to understand whether or not
what we're doing and what we're feeling
and experiencing whether or not
that is serving us well or not

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So I think the place to start is to say that there's something very, very complicated going on the part of the iceberg underneath the surface that biological supercomputer that's running at a million thoughts and a million actions and a million internal processes a second is constantly shifting our defensive structure so it's complicated and you can almost imagine that one leaves and another comes in and they're shifting and there's a little bit of one and some of another so it's a very complicated process but we can look at it and understand so an example of a defense mechanism that's very common and can cause us a lot of problems is projection so I'll give two examples of projection so one is the experience of sitting in a car and being stuck in traffic, being a little bit late and feeling beleaguered I mean this has happened to me more times than I can count but at some point I started through my own therapy looking at what's going on in me when I'm doing this so the thing about feeling beleaguered as if what does that mean? There's something called traffic that exists and has a mind and wants to thwart me. Is it individual cars? Is it the people in the cars? What's going on? I'm having a perception of hostility I feel beleaguered but it's anger and frustration inside of me. I'm the one

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feeling angry and frustrated
there's no one and nothing but
me that's feeling anything about this
but I have this sense
of the world around me being
hostile because I'm projecting
my anger outward
now I think this isn't
good because instead of sitting in
traffic and saying
maybe it totally makes sense
that I'm stuck in traffic
and that I'm not happy
maybe I should leave a little bit earlier and I wouldn't be late
or I'm going to work
should I live closer to work? I could make a whole
set of decisions that I'm not
making or maybe
I thought it was going to be a 15 minute
drive and there was an accident
and okay there are things that I can't control
I'm not supposed to control everything
if you think about what can I control
if I'm being aware of that and what can I
not control
then it can make the situation much better
so this doesn't happen with this frequency
and it also takes away
the anger and the frustration
so I think that's a good example
because it happens a lot
it's very very common but projection
then also happens with people
so let's say you and I work together
and we're going to do something collaborative
together and
I'm just not having a good day
that happened before I came to work
and you know I'm not at my best
and I'm a little bit irritable and frustrated
this happens all the time
when the person sits down with someone
and then I'm being irritable and frustrated

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which doesn't feel good to you
and you may become irritable
and frustrated and then I say
oh look he's irritable and frustrated
but even if you don't the fact that
I feel that way
that projection often
would lead me to think that it's you
who's that way here I come wanting to do this job
and you're not at your best
it's me who's not at my best
but we do this all the time
and then we make incorrect
inaccurate attributions
so projection is an example
of a defense mechanism
that can cause us a lot
of
trouble
another can be displacement
where
if I'm feeling anger or frustration
say in a certain
realm then the idea of
feeling it at work and then kicking the dog
it's not good that we do that
we're not acknowledging what's going on inside of us
at work what we could change, what we could make better
and the dog doesn't want to be kicked
and the dog is often
also the family
and it could be physical or it could be through words
but the idea that
there's something negative being generated in us
but inside
we're perceiving
that it's coming from somewhere else
the thought would be
it's all things to lead us astray
when there are negative defenses
there can be positive defenses too
such as altruism
that someone could do something negative

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to me
and instead of me passing that along
I could decide I'm going to do something
I'm going to do something nice for the next person
I have an opportunity to do something nice for
that's a defense
and sometimes we could think of it and decide that way
but there are people who react that way
there's something negative that happens
and they respond with something
that's different from that
so defense mechanisms can work against us
they can work for us
they're complicated, they're combinations of them
but we can look inside and say
for example if I'm using projection
all the time
and I think everyone around me is kind of always angry
and frustrated
and there's always bad traffic
but then as we start to talk about it more
and more and more
and I don't agree about
but I'm not aware of it
then reflection or therapy
or a good friend we're talking to
can help us see
that this is going on inside of me
and that can really help us
same with use of humor
if I'm using humor
and I'm kind of decompressing
uncomfortable situations or things that make me feel uncomfortable
maybe that greases the wheels of social progress
but maybe
I'm using humor in a way that's self denigrating
that's not so good
anymore
but I may not be aware
of the shift just because I can maybe be funny
in certain situations that I'm now
not using that for myself anymore
I'm using it against myself

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and by talking to people by reflection
we can be aware of the defensive structure
that's going on inside of us
and then there's not an automaticity to it
if you point out that I'm
using projection a lot
I can start to be aware of that
just like
let's say you were with me at the grocery store
and someone says something nice
and I shy away and you say
we're not even aware someone said hello to you
and then I say
I want to be more aware of that
I don't want that thing to happen unconsciously
so maybe now I think
anytime someone I don't know says something
I'm going to just stop and think
what's going on here
is that person being friendly to me
is that person exchanging money to cash register
what's going on so we take what's unconscious
and we make it
conscious so that we can change it
sounds to me like
exploring and thinking about our reflexes
is what's really key here
the example
of displacement that you gave
kicking the dog
I couldn't help but smile
not because I think it's a good thing to do
I never once kicked my dog by the way folks
terrible thing to do
it would have injured me more than it would have
injured him but I never would do such a thing
however in academia
there's this
phenomenon that's very common
that I refer to as trickle down anxiety
where the person running the laboratory
is inevitably under a tremendous amount of stress
grants and papers etc

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and graduate students and postdocs will immediately be familiar with what I'm describing but for those of you that haven't gone to graduate school this will be a little bit foreign of other examples where when the lab head is under stress it's incredibly common for lab heads to walk through the laboratory and start asking about experiments and telling people to do additional experiments and basically just assigning busy work to people or pressuring what simply cannot be moved along any faster and when I was a graduate student I worked for somebody who was the exact opposite of this phenotype when I was a postdoc frankly I worked with someone who was a little bit of that phenotype although I still liked working for him very much but I used to have a response that at least for me was adaptive which I would always say I'm working as fast as I carefully can because no scientist ever wants somebody to cut corners no good scientist anyway but trickle down anxiety is common in every occupation I think we see this sort of displacement all the time where someone's anxious and so they go start creating anxiety for other people I mean you can just as you're describing I was just seeing how pathologic is for everybody involved. So the academic the trickle down anxiety that you were just talking about is it's a related but it's a different defense mechanism and it's projective identification which is causing others to feel the way that you feel in order to get your needs met. Is this a form of projection

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and actually perhaps you could clarify the definition of projection versus displacement versus projective identification. So projection is when you don't own it so it's not me who's mad it's you. So I don't own that I'm mad at all. I just think that it's you even though I'm the one who's mad. Displacement is what comes out of us or what our attribution can shift. It's not this person who's making me angry it's that person because that's a safer person to be angry at or if I'm then going to take out my anger instead of metaphorically kicking the person who might respond to me in a way I don't want maybe I kick the dog that's helpless to respond back. So that's displacement. Projective identification is there's an expression of an emotional state inside of a person that then becomes contagious to other people even though the person isn't trying to do that. The person says I'm going to make you anxious that's not a defense mechanism anymore. So here's an example I think this is the best example of projective identification so for a little bit of time at work I would occasionally lose my keys so now I'm trying to go and I can't find my keys so they say oh I don't know where my keys are so I start expressing something and I'm anxious and I'm tense. Now people around me hear that and what do they start feeling? They start feeling anxious and tense the way that I do and now they're like well now they

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want to find my keys. They want to help me so that I stop spreading anxiety and tension into the whole environment around me. So then they help me find my keys I say thank you my own emotional state comes down and upon reflection I think look I don't want to do that. I'm getting my needs met by making other people feel in a way that's not a good or comfortable way to feel so here's a way around that put my keys in the same place every day. So then I can avoid that because it doesn't feel good to me then if I get out to my car I find you know I'm a little bit I'm breathing a little heavy like I don't doesn't feel good because I was just agitated right and I did that to other people too right so it's an example of how projective identification works and it's kind of a simple example but it shows it's happening all the time you know all these things are happening all the time but we can become aware of it then I don't lose my keys I don't have to feel bad about I don't have to activate myself for no reason and I don't have to activate other people for no reason so sort of thinking and reflecting like change that thing is better and it can do it with much bigger things too. Thank you for those clarifications I'd like to touch on humor for a moment. Obviously humor is a wonderful thing or it can be a wonderful thing. I've also seen a lot of examples of where very smart and or accomplished people because those are not always the same thing use sarcasm

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as a form of
humor and it can be very funny
but I have to imagine
based on everything I'm hearing from you today
that there's a form of sarcasm
which is an unhealthy defense
I'm thinking of the person that
no matter what someone else says
that's positive or
no matter what someone does that could
be viewed as positive
they find some way to diminish it
by like
through sarcastic humor
I see this a lot and I think
closely nested with sarcasm
is cynicism
in fact
I have a family member I won't name who they are
to protect the not so innocent
who used to be very cynical
and I want to ask
what is the thing about cynicism and they said
well I have had a particular
genre of
schooling growing up a formal
schooling where if anyone
behaved too
happy expressed too much happiness
rather too much delight
they were viewed as stupid
like as if to be happy is to
be unaware of
the sophistication and the
importance of things in life
right and
I hope that this is unrelatable to most people
listening but I do think that
sarcasm is a double edge
blade in this sense
and that cynicism is perhaps
double edge
blade as well but that it might even

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be worse than sarcasm because
it's a way of really
reflecting back what's
by definition what's not good about life
what's not good about what's happening
and it does seem
protective right it protects one from
disappointment if you're already disappointed
how could you be further disappointed
it also seems to me like a bit of a power move
it's like you're going to be happy well I'm going to take
that away from everybody
as something that's like for myself
I mean
is any of this actually hold in
side of the clinical literature
because again I enjoy a good
sarcastic joke in fact there's
a collaboration around a sarcastic joke
it can be truly funny to everybody
but sarcasm
and cynicism I feel like
are often used to cut down
what would otherwise be
benevolence or
bonding experiences yeah absolutely
I grew up in central New Jersey
humor is a weapon
right or it certainly can be
right and people can be very aggressive
through humor so
acting out which is letting our
aggression flow right that's a defense
right so just being aggressive
and pushing someone back
right however that means
like if I don't feel good about myself
I want you to feel not so good about yourself
right is where we start getting into
envy right and humor can be used
that way so that that sort of
biting sarcastic humor
is a form of acting

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out it's a form of aggression right it's not humor as a healthy defense right we can call it the same thing but we could also call it different things it's just a nuance of our language right if humor can be a defense like I trip and fall I make a little joke people are laughing with me instead of at me right hey humor is a good defense I may myself feel better may things flow more easily but if I'm using sarcastic humor to assail someone right then that's not it's not that thing anymore right you know now it's a manifestation of aggression right and the idea that cynicism you know is is more then let's talk about a world view right like sarcasm is something that can be done now like we can make a sarcastic joke funny or not then it's over right but cynicism is is a way of coming at the world is a different kind of defense right the idea that hey it's like the fox in the sour grapes like I don't I don't think there's anything good to be had anyway right so you can't take anything away from me can't make me feel worse right I already feel very very bad about the world and about everybody in it and I'm protecting myself that way like that's then an unhealthy defense because what does that lead to at least the isolation at least to mistrust you know we know that people are happy if they live through altruism and gratitude and they're well connected with others so so the cynical point of view which again to some degree being in the world build some cynicism in us right like that that's okay that's part of that's just a part of

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awareness in some sense but I think
what you're talking about is a very pervasive
cynicism that
is an unhealthy defense that is very harmful
to others right the idea
that I feel lousy about everything
and if you don't I'm going to try and bring
you down right like too much happiness
we'll label that as something right we could label
it as stupid right so now it's like it's not
okay to be happier than
some sort of cynical baseline right and
and there's nothing about altruism
and gratitude that's not happy right I
mean who's happy in that situation
the people who are overly cynical are not
happy and the people around them are not
happy nobody's happy
thanks for the clarification
on New Jersey a good portion
of my biological family is from
New Jersey come out well armed I adore
them but it's true I there was once
a moment at a family gathering
where somebody said oh
let's let's hug
or something and the reaction was like oh
we're gonna hug now
it was
it was entirely sarcastic
and cynical and like and the hug
that resulted from that was this like little
like like distant past kind of thing it was
now I'm laughing about and it's funny
and they're very loving people but you're right
it's a it's a different style
of humor and discourse
so you've been talking about these two pillars
of the self and who we are
and how things play out in the world for us
as the structure of self and
the function of self and
in terms of the function of self

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you described self-awareness this notion or this realization that there is an eye there's a me and then we've been talking about defense mechanisms in action and how these play out in the real world both positive and negative seems to me that a lot of what is happening here in terms of understanding the function of self has to do with like what we pay attention to and like where we place our efforts or choose to not place our attention and not place our efforts do I have that right? salience is a huge concept in human existence right I mean there are thousands upon thousands of things that you or I could be paying attention to right now right but we're not paying attention to anything except what we're doing right here so we are gating out so many other thoughts ideas narratives inside now something where to shift very quickly if we heard a loud noise right our attention would shift right so so our attention is its focus we're salient to one another because this is what we've chosen we're focusing our minds and we are also somewhere inside of us aware that we could shift away from it if something more important like something dangerous like where to happen right so it lets us be here and be salient to one another and have this conversation right but in the course of life what's salient to us it's so complicated and determined by so many factors that is

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absolutely worth a lot of attention to so one example is so many people have a negative internal dialogue that's running in them over and over again or they're running through images events you know they may be traumatic events or things that they're not happy with images of themselves in negative ways that that these internal narratives or internal images can become so strong that there's no room for anything else so you know an example would be a person who really really loved music right and could have in addition to enjoying music like had like good thoughts while listening to music like you know what I could go do this right and and had a history of like that really working out well like following his interests and like really creating sort of goodness in his life right who now was going for long drives like longer than would be needed to go somewhere get something like why the extra time in the car and I had had a presumption okay the person's listening to music and thinking but but it didn't quite add up and then I learned that the person is not listening to music right that they're using that time so that the internal narrative right which was a very very negative repeated internal negative you're not going to get anywhere you're not going to make anything of yourself right it could be there in his mind right so it was a form of self punishment

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right it was a form of taking the anger and frustration inside and enacting it towards himself and that was so salient that this person could not see his way to any goodness like nothing could change nothing could get any better like felt very sure and very resolved about that and the answer was yeah that's right nothing can get any better with this constant mantra running over and over again but things can get better right if that becomes less salient over time and your own thoughts and reflections become more salient so at the other end of that shift that narrative that was still there but it was weakened right because it takes time to really change things so it was very much weakened the person was listening to music again those thoughts had kind of come back to the surface and they were being sort of jumbled you know in ways that brought new and interesting thoughts coming from them and the person was in an entirely different place and like completely changed their life right I mean this is true right it's a dramatic example but dramatic examples inform us where the salience shifted and then the life shifted after that what you're describing in terms of this specific example doesn't resonate with me in terms of my own experience although as you point out it's very striking it's very dramatic but it resonates with me from a different perspective

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I'm not seeking a free clinical session here but but to give meat to the example I'm about to ask you for insight on you know I've never allowed myself to stay in a bad professional situation for very long you know when things didn't feel right and I sense someone I was working with or for wasn't the right situation I got out despite if I were to really think about it that could have been pretty severe long-term consequences fortunately it all worked out in fact so much so that I would say you know I pay attention to whether or not people I work with and for are of the sort that I want to be working with and if I sense a particular type of danger I'll look at that and I'm a hundred percent so far knock on wood but a hundred percent so far on recognizing later that it was a great decision to move on and on the flip side of it I've made I believe excellent decisions in terms of who to work with in terms of my podcasting in terms of my academic career etc but I've had to move away from people that just weren't right for me I don't think they were truly bad actors but thank goodness I moved away and thank goodness I found these other wonderful people to work with however there are circumstances that have been repetitive in my life where I've just be honest repeatedly made

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not good decisions about
who to be involved with
over fairly long periods of time
and there can even be an awareness
or I should say there has been an awareness
like this isn't a good situation
and yet I'm persisting in seeking out this
and similar types of situations
I consider myself at least partially rational
human being with some degree
of introspection
you know
when I look at this and I think okay
this is a choice
to focus on placing myself in
I have to assume it placing myself in situations
that are challenging for me
in a way that I know
is preventing me from living in certain ways
that I want and from being
happy in certain ways that I want
when you hear a scenario like that
I can do it over here
but I can't seem to do it over here
in fact I see myself
doing it the wrong way here
a little bit different than the example you gave a moment ago
because I was driving to work not listening to music
but it wasn't putting two and two together
about what was going on
but when somebody can see what's going on
I think this might even be called the repetition
compulsion or sometimes
what is that about
are people trying to
work out something specific
deliberately creating some friction
to accomplish something else
I mean
I realize this could be infinitely complex
and again I'm not trying to extract
the clinical insight
for my own sake

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I started the clock on that
thank you
but I think a lot of people do this
they do what they know
they shouldn't be doing
they know they shouldn't be doing it
duh
two ways
but they do it like it must serve them in some way
you know
you think about
when you get a dog and you talk to a dog trainer
they say you know
dogs do what works
they get a reward for doing something
they're going to continue doing it
you apply that to the same sort of thing I'm describing for myself
that I've observed in other people
and you must say it must work for them
you hear this in kind of pop psychology
it must work for them
I'm not trying
why the hell do I do this
why do people do this
is it real pathology
or is it a roundabout way to get to something else
that's actually pretty adaptive
I mean instead of defining it as pathology
I would not define it as pathology
I would define it as humanness
if humanness is not in and of itself
pathological then all you're doing there
is describing something
that is common widespread
across human beings
and we can't understand it and make it healthier
I work in a discipline
that wants to put a number on everything
label it as something
and then do something about it
that's more often than not ineffective
because we're not looking at things
in a top down way of what is human experience

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what are the natural
aspects of human experience
that are less than ideal
that we can then understand and make better
if we come at it that way
then we see this is a great example
because here's where structure meets function
so on the structure side
there's defense mechanisms
and we imagine the branches
coming up from the unconscious mind
and here it meets function
defense mechanisms in action
on the function side
then determining salience
so what I would imagine in your example
my image is that
your defensive structure
when you're doing the thing that's effective
the professional decisions
there's harmony
to where those branches are
the consciousness is sitting in between it
you can see the elegance to it
that I can just imagine
shifting
when you're not doing
the thing effectively
because now you're using
an entirely different defensive structure
which is going to function differently
and create different salience
and I imagine that it's convoluted
that it's sort of piecemeal
but it's not something elegant
so you say what does that actually mean
let's translate it into
what are the actual defenses
so let's think about what you're not doing
when you're making good decisions
in the professional realm
you are not using denial
or avoidance

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or rationalization
or projection
or projective identification
or acting out
there are all these things that you are not doing
to us like wouldn't it be easier
to kick the can down the road
wouldn't it be easier to just
everything's going to work out
wouldn't it be easier
instead of being angry at one person
who is really intrinsic to the environment
it's actually somebody else
or you're displacing and projecting
that's how we get ourselves
into trouble
and if that's going on
then that set of defense mechanisms
in action
creates
something that obscures
the ability to make good judgment
but with none of those things going on
then what are you doing
you're applying your intelligence
you're applying your discernment
you're applying your desire to make things better
you're able to look at it
you're able to bring diligence
perseverance
you're able to bring healthy aspects of self
to the question and decide like
oh I don't want this and it should be different
what's going on there's a complexity under the surface
but now we're coming up
towards simplicity
we're coming up towards the things that are healthier
that are simplistic if we look then
okay what's going on if you're making the same
mistakes over and over again
well we could
we would dive under the hood and really look and say
okay what are you doing there

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but it has to be an array of unhealthy defenses
there's no other thing it could be
so we would say okay
are you using avoidance
or maybe a lie what about denial
what about rationalization
what about projection
you go through the unhealthy defenses
and you see what is it
that you're bringing to bear
that is leading you astray
of course the goal
is to use the role modeling
and you role model for yourself
how to be healthy right
so let's take that role modeling
and apply it to the thing you're sort of carving out
and treating differently
and when people talk about repetition compulsions
you know that's it's not a formal term
because
because what we're really talking about
is repetition right and we're interested
like why do we repeat things
now that's one
reason right because we bring
an unhealthy set of defenses
and then at the end of the day things come out
the same because we're bringing
an unhealthy set of defenses right
there can be other motivations that are
related to all of that
and there's again this complexity to it
but the compulsion part can be
that we can re-enter
situations that didn't go well
with the idea that we're going to
we're going to fix what happened in the past
we're going to make ourselves feel better
we're going to take away the mark of trauma
because remember trauma doesn't care about the clock
or the calendar so that's why
you'll see someone who has had

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say five abusive relationships that looked very much the same and is about to enter the sixth right and you say it's not because hopefully in most cases not because that person like wants to be hurt right I mean sometimes it's a different problem right but there can be a drive inside of us to try and fix something if I can make it work this time I won't have to feel so bad about the other five right so an attempt to change the past through one's current actions right which is rooted in the limbic system and how and how trauma affects us and how again it's outside the clock and the calendar so that kind of magic so to speak can happen so the brain can seek that magic but again there are unhealthy defenses coming into play there has to be denial otherwise the person would map if the same thing happened five times and this looks the same it's probably going to happen now right so anytime you think a person most often it's us is smart enough or worldly enough to like know better which it happens all the time right then look for the answer shouldn't that person know better than to get into the six abusive relationship the answer is like yes right like because it's not that hard if you saw a set of circumstances five times to map that the six is going to have the same outcome right the person would do that in other scenarios right so then you say right that is true so now let's look for why

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the person doesn't recognize
that and again we go down into
the structure of self and the function of self
defense mechanisms in action
salience of things that we're talking about
now does that fit
yeah it makes sense and what comes to mind
is the idea of getting
into a car that you know is going to get
into an accident over
and over and over again
but being quite
cognizant of safety and its importance
in every other domain of life
yes not even jaywalking
right but
like if certain ubers arrived
with a little flashing light that said
this ride is going to have an accident
it's like getting into that
vehicle and I see this in others as well
and it raises all sorts of
questions like
is the person actually
unconsciously afraid of
the vehicle arriving where they want
to go because then like
are people actually afraid of things working out
I mean this gets to something that
I'm so sorry can I say
that's why I have to know the person
right like who is that person
right why do they not want to get in that car
right are they afraid they're not going to get
similar they're afraid they're going to get somewhere
but ultimately we're looking for
unhealthy defenses and I
so want to emphasize that that
I will often think that the aspect
of my education that's most helpful
in me doing my job
when I'm in the job as
a practicing psychiatrist is

actually my mathematics minor
because there's a lot more math
to this right people tend to think
oh mental health it's all esoteric
and you can sort of say anything
you know anything you want and there's no way of
proving or disproving it's not like that
at all right there's a mathematical
aspect to it so if you
do the correct logical
common sense thing
right in all aspects of your life except
one and you're like
a hundred times more intelligent than you need
to be to figure it all out right
then if there's a carve out
we say look that's a huge
interest right I mean the probability
that we're going to find something interesting
there's a hundred percent right because
we know that you know better we know that
you do better but but why
here so like that's so interesting
right like that's where the X marks the spot
like let's go dig there right so then
when we go and dig there like we're going to
find something right and
and we'll say what is that like do we find
that like oh it's an array of
unhealthy defense mechanisms maybe
we find that do we find that there's a deep
unconscious motivation right
like we might find that too right
there we might find a lot of things
right but we're going to find
them if we go back to
what is the structure of self
what is the function of self if we go and look
like that X marks the spot means
there's pay dirt there right and then
when we figure that out
then we go through and we can make things
change so if it's a deep

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seated trauma driven unconscious
motivation that is resulting
in an unhealthy array of defense mechanisms
well let's go look at that
right let's look at the trauma let's take the thing
that's unconscious and and bring it to
consciousness right then we can make that
better and that array of
unhealthy defenses again we're not going to change it
overnight but can we change
it very very significantly
pretty rapidly probably yes
and we can almost entirely
change it across time so
there's a mathematical aspect of this that
I think is so important
to point out because
you know mental health even as
a field right just met we all want to be mentally
healthy like there's a rhyme
and reason to it that yes it follows
science and yes it also follows
common sense and if we apply
those things we get to answers
very reassuring
thank you
thinking about the functions of self and
again just to remind
myself and and other people
it starts with self-awareness
both defense mechanisms in action
then there's the salience
piece but paying attention to what's
inside of us as well as what's external
and then
you're now describing a lot of
your choices choice making and behavior
and action in the world
I have to assume that for
the person trying to improve themselves and get
to agency and gratitude
that paying attention to all of these
is important but of course

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if a defense mechanism
is unconscious we can't simply decide
okay I'm going to see the unconscious defense mechanism
does that mean that we should ask ourselves
about what is most salient to us
or
should we be focusing on our behavioral
choices I mean in the example I
just gave I'm aware of my behavioral choices
making certain decisions to
engage with certain people and
not with others
but
should I be asking for instance
you know what's salient like what are the
thoughts leading up to that decision
in other words how does salience
of internal and external
cues and
processes relate to behavior
and which of these should we be
paying attention to if our goal is
to eventually change our behavior
so
think about what we're starting
we're starting at the bottom right so we're starting with
okay there is an I right and
that's just not just an apprehension
right there's a lot to that right
so for example I know someone who
is doing some mirror meditation
staring into the mirror right looking
back itself with an with a desire
to be aware like there is a me
like this me is in the world right
this is the first I've ever heard of such
a practice
except when I was in elementary
school maybe it was the ninth grade I had a teacher
who talked about look
he gave us an assignment to look in the
mirror and ask ourselves questions
but if I understand correctly you think

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there's utility to people spending a few minutes or more looking in the mirror and thinking about oneself in the eye as a way to build up this self-awareness do I have that right if you want to take the best care of yourself that you can right you want to understand yourself the best you can you want to make your life the best it can be right then if there are answers right let's say the answers are in five or ten different covers right look in all of them right I mean that's the idea right that if we want to know something look everywhere for it and also realize what we are building what we are creating maybe a recipe there may be things from different covers that overlap so the way to translate that practically is to say to find the answers to what what is either ailing us why we're repeating things we don't want to repeat or even if things are going okay but we want them to be going better because we don't quite feel the peace and contentment we want to feel then look everywhere so in the function of self in the function of self start with the eye right there are ways of increasing self-awareness you know they can range from contemplation of self to meditation to looking in the mirror right there are things that we can do to more strongly emphasize to ourself that there is an eye and this eye is going through life right then we know that there are defense mechanisms and that they're present they're acting in us right we can't just see them because they're unconscious but if we start thinking about them

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we can learn about them right
and that's where salience comes into play
salience kind of points both ways
salience can point us towards
the unconscious mind
I realize I'm doing this over and over again
or I'm saying this thing to myself over and over again
where is that coming from
we start becoming curious about ourselves
and we look to the unconscious mind
and then we also look to the conscious mind
that's why after salience is
behavior like what am I
doing right and a lot of
times we don't know just
examples of we don't know why
we're doing things right someone who wants to lose
weight but always goes to the grocery
store and comes home and is like has some sense of surprise
that there are things there that they don't want to eat
right like why am I behaving in a
certain way why does certain things bother
me when other things don't
right why am I really touchy about one thing
and not another why might
there be things that bother others and not me
or vice versa right so
so you know we're looking at what's going on inside
of us and then how we respond
right because how what may be
upsetting me or what's going on inside
of me both conscious and unconscious
right is then determining how
I'm acting how I'm behaving
in the world around me if I
want a better job but I never
take an interview for another job I'm not going to
get another job if I want a romantic
partner but I automatically
turn away from anyone who smiles at me I'm
not going to have a romantic partner
right if I want life to be better
and there's a certain thing I repeat and I don't

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want to repeat that I want to understand myself better so I can change the behavior and that's why the the function of self ends with strivings right because strivings are into the future I know there is an eye I know there's a network and web of defense mechanisms in action I know that there's salience going on inside of me and I'm only going to pay attention to a few things from the thousands I could pay attention to I want to be aware of that and have more control over that then I'm enacting behaviors I'm engaging in the world around me and ultimately I want things right I want life to be better I want to have that feeling that you can get to I want to be in the state of of agency and gratitude so again these two pillars structure of self function of self that's where all the answers are so there are all the cupboards right there there these five cupboards in the structure of self and five in the function of self and I know there'll be you know we'll have it out there in a PDF because you can go back there and that's where the vast majority of answers are to both understanding and routes to change what you just described is incredibly helpful it's absolutely apparent to me why looking in all the cupboards is so key it's also apparent that many different aspects of psychology and psychiatry at least as I understand them might probe for instance just at the level of behavior you know I think this is the just do it

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mantra well just do the right thing
right you know you're not finding
a romantic partner like you know schedule
three dinners with friends and ask them to invite
over people who are looking for partners sounds really simple
right but
much as with the example of my friend who lost
all this weight through behavioral change
the fear still lives within him
very very strongly and so clearly there's
some stuff happening underneath there now
fortunately he did lose the weight and he's kept
most of it off but it's clear to me that
until he addresses some of these other
issues of salience and
defense mechanisms self-awareness etc
that the fear he's
still experiencing makes total sense
because the foundation of that
change is not nearly
as strong as it could be
maybe right or maybe he doesn't have to have
fear but he's not going to learn either one without
the exploration so he won't
if there is risk he won't be able to avert
the risk and if there's not
risk he's then sort of laboring through
life which is difficult enough without
being worried about something you don't have to be worried about
right so the process of inquiry will
always make that better it's clear to me that
his fear of regaining weight is
absolutely sapping his enjoyment
and his productivity in other domains of
life so warrants attention right because
we're deciding in that sort of mathematical way
like it doesn't have to be that way
doesn't mean it can change overnight but it can
be understood and it can be changed
well it's for that reason and many other
reasons that I'm very grateful that you
explain these two pillars structure
of self and function of self and how these flow

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up to empowerment and humility
and how those flow up to agency
and gratitude you've given
us a set of ideals and
a roadmap of how to get
there and one that we're going to continue with
in a moment here I did
want to reiterate what you said which is that
there is a PDF version of this
structure this roadmap of ideals
and how to get there
that's been provided as a link in the show note
captions so people can refer to them
there in visual form if they like
if you're interested in
understanding yourself
and in having goodness in your life as much
as you possibly can then you're
interested in the structure of the mind
and this means that you're interested in the
unconscious mind in all the
things that go on a million things
a second that we don't know or understand
one by one but that we can
explore and understand better
in total we're also interested
in the conscious mind in being self
aware we're interested in the array
of defense mechanisms and whether
or not they they're elegant
and light passes clearly through them
or whether they're distorting light and creating
misperception if you're interested
in the structure of the mind
then you're also interested in
the character structure like what is
your character structure what is the nest
around all of it how do you interface with the world
and then you're interested in the self
that you grow from that phenomenologically
meaning what is your experience
of self how does it feel to you
these are all important

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parts of this pillar
of health and happiness
the other pillar is the function
of the mind and of course there's
overlap there are different covers but the
covers all contain different ingredients that together
make the recipe right so if we're
interested in the function of the mind
then we want to pay attention that
there's an eye we want to be self aware
and we want to cultivate self
awareness we're also interested
in how those defense mechanisms work
when they're in action right what's salient
inside of us and outside
of us what are we paying attention to
how are we behaving
what are our strivings do we feel hopeful
about ourselves and the world around us
and if we're interested in all of these
things we can't help but
be respectful right of just
how complicated this is
like life is difficult and
understanding ourselves is difficult
you know wonderful
joy can come of living life but
it is hard and it's hard day by
day and trying to understand
ourselves going to these places
these pillars that hold the answers
right they
can't but make in us a respect
for all of it right and the respect
for ourselves
for others brings with it
humility right when we come
to this point of looking at
ourselves and exploring then
yes we become empowered
because we've gained a lot of knowledge
right we're digging where
the pay dirt is and we're figuring things out

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and along with that empowerment
comes humility
a respectfulness for how difficult
all of this is how complicated we are
how we can make happiness
in our lives but how it certainly
isn't easy and we take
with us the empowerment and the
humility and we express
them right and if we're
expressing empowerment and humility
we come to living
through agency
and gratitude so
here both are active
words so agency it's easier
to see it it's an active word
where I'm aware of my ability
to project myself into
the world around me I know that I can't
control everything right
but I'm really trying to understand what can
I control right how can I control
it what do my decisions now
lead to in the future so
agency is very very active
right gratitude is active
too right because we're bringing
an active sense
of gratitude sense of
the amazingness that we're here
and pride in ourselves and others for
being here and and trying to
look forward as best we can
and then we bring that to our interactions
we're much more likely to have
a kind gesture towards others instead of being
angry we're much more likely to have
something compassionate to say including
to ourselves than we are to have
something angry to say that
gratitude accompanies
agency their their active

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words and their active
together and if we're living
life through agency and gratitude
I mean there's a lot of wisdom about this
it's been written and researched about this
and if you look at what is it telling us
right remember things are getting simpler
right as we're getting higher
up the the levels here right
the unconscious mind is most complicated
now we're at hey can we live our lives
with agency and gratitude
at the forefront and what does
it bring for us and I think it brings
what we are seeking
that we might say okay we're seeking
happiness and that can mean a lot of things
you know a lot of different things it can be a very active
thing am I happy in the moment
and we can use happiness sometimes to distract ourselves
like happiness is important
but words when people really
think like what is it that they want
or what is it that they have
if they're overjoyed to be alive
they're finding
a sense of peace
they're finding contentment
they're finding delight the ability to
be delighted
this is what people want
our human history
our searchings tell us this
and our own experiences tell us this
and now it could lead a person
to think well okay what's going on
is this someone who's
levitating at the top of a mountain
is this just a state
is this a state that people are in
and the answer is no
sometimes we could be in that state
where we can feel peace there's no tension

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inside of us right I can feel
to have times when I don't feel tension inside of me
there's contentment there's peace I don't have to drive towards
anything right but it's
not the passive experience
of it because we are living
life it's that
that feeling goes hand in hand
with a drive
within us that when we're in
this healthy place we are
living life the decisions that we're making
what is putting the rubber to the road
it is a generative drive
within us there is a drive
to make things better to understand
to explore
and it's that drive that we access
and cultivate and
synonymous with happiness
it's not just the state
when people want to be happy in that very very
general way yes contentment
peace
delight right but
they're happening as we're living life
right as we're enacting
a generative drive where
we're looking at ourselves in the world around us
and we're interested in understanding
we're interested in making things
better and that's the place
that we're trying to get to I believe
that with all my heart
and my brain
my education training experience
and also experience living
life and for 20 years
doing this work with people
tells me this is what we're seeking
and it's an active way
of experiencing ourselves
and our place in life

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I love that because it merges both
the nouns and the
adjectives and the verbs
you know and this notion of a
generative drive to me is so compelling
because
I have the sense
and I hope I'm right that
we all have some sort of generative
drive within us starting
at an early stage
maybe it even starts as
visual foraging
or touching things with our hands as an infant
and you know exploration of the world
right is what brings about the changes
in the neural circuitry that allow us
to engage even more
and in progressively
on the one hand narrower ways but also
with more richness and more detail
could you tell us more
about generative drive
and how this shows up in different
types of people
is it always positive can there be too much
of it
I certainly know a number of people who
are addicted to work
those of you listening I'm raising my hand
but I would say nowadays I'm not as
addicted to work as I once was in the sense that
I derive far more satisfaction
from less work
now provided that the work
is really in depth
you know I think that there were years
in graduate school where I wanted to publish
a bunch of papers and then quickly realized
through the
not so gentle persuasion of my
mentors that like let's just do the best
possible work we can do and there's so much more

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richness and experience and things to be gained from that so I'm familiar with generative drive as I understand it but maybe if you would if you could flush out a bit of what generative drive is and does it arrive in parallel with or before we are able to access peace contentment and delight can it even be separated out from that you know what is this generative drive yeah so drives are built into us so they're synonymous with our existence like if we exist then we have the drive I mean that's how the drive is defined and we understand going far back to psychodynamic and psychoanalytic roots and when people were really thinking hard about human beings and what's going on inside of us that we've sort of identified and then validated over the period of time since that we have aggressive drives within us and we have drives towards pleasure now this often gets misunderstood so aggression can be it can be active violent aggression for example but aggression can also be a sort of a sense of agency right the inaction of agency like I want to do things I want to change things I want to make the world a different place right that all of that comes under this drive so aggressive an aggressive drive is not a bad thing if we had no aggressive drives the thought is we

would just lie down and nothing else would happen and then we'd all be gone right so there's a way in which this drive within us moves us forward right and of course extremely complicated the ways we can manifest too much of it or too little of it or how our defense mechanisms can intertwine with the drive but the drive is there it's like it's fuel within us that comes with our existence and then how that fuel moves us forward how much of it there is that is determined by the meshing of the drive with how we're living life right and the same would be true of pleasure you know the pleasure drive doesn't just mean that we all want to be hedonists right inside it means that we want things that are gratifying right we want to feel good right this isn't just you know the drive towards physical pleasure like a sex drive or eating food or having comfort like all of that can be part of it but it's a drive for relief right the idea that we don't want to be white knuckling life right searching for pleasure so having aggression within us as we white knuckle life and we search for some pleasure and relief right these drives within us can be healthy they can be unhealthy you know they can be anything right they're well springs within us that then fuel us forward and there's controversy to the idea of is there a generative drive and there's certainly at parts of the field that do not think so

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right but there have been
strong thinkers in the field that have thought
we do have a generative drive that
it is within us to look
around us to be
curious to be amazed
right to think like how
how can I engage with this and make this better
or happier to think outside
of ourselves right to think
if I if I feel good
and you're in pain can I make you feel
better right having nothing to do
with me right the idea of
altruism coming to the fore
and having industriousness with us
within right and
and the idea that there is a generative
drive it's strengthened
when you look at how humans behave
when you know we're not
struggling right that people are interested
in learning you know you think about how
how much of the people give of themselves
to learning right or to serving
others like there's so much of this goodness
in the world around us
now if we shut people away
right they have no you know
imagine you know God forbid someone is in a solitary
confinement from when they're the moment they're born
you know then there's not an opportunity
for the generative drive
to thrive right and we see so many
so many situations where
it doesn't thrive enough
right you know violence in people
surroundings lack of opportunities
right that we can
squelch a generative drive
anyone's generative drive but if we give
ourselves opportunities if you know
if we're healthy that we're not way

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down by trauma and illness and misperceptions of self and we can live life in a way that brings us to agency and gratitude now we're allying with the generative drive that I absolutely believe is within us I think just look at life look at human beings we observe that we have this drive within us and if that drive is at the forefront and that drive naturally of course allies with agency and gratitude then I think we're at the place that is the place we ultimately seek right and that we can find it for brief periods of time so by really pursuing this and really strongly in my own therapy and reflection and attempts to understand I can have periods of time where I can feel that way I can feel outward growth and interest in the world and I feel good I'm not trying to answer some question of like why am I alive or like I'm doing things that I feel good about and I feel good about doing those things and about being in the world and I think this is not uncommon you know it may be far more common in societies that are allegedly less advanced right that is have less distractions or maybe you know less knowledge of all the awful things in the world that can happen to us that are constantly fed to us like this there are a whole bunch of other questions and topics about it but this you know this absolute

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belief that there's this generative drive in us that wants to ally with agency and gratitude and that we all have it within us to bring those to the forefront and to find that thing that we seek whether someone says it's nirvana the other person says it's joy or happiness or peace or numbing you know whatever it is there's something to it where we're not feeling the tension within us we're not feeling the anxiety the pressures but we're feeling a sense of goodness the way you're describing it makes perfect sense why peace contentment and delight be so closely linked to this generative drive the word peace as you alluded to often brings to mind the idea of passivity but generative drive and the inclusion of things like aggression and a drive for pleasure or anything but passive so I think that's important for me and for everyone to understand that peace contentment and delight can really be action terms again moving them from you know from the more typical conception of them to verb states so peace contentment and delight are not passive states there can be periods of time where we can be just very peaceful and very much at rest

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but those words are not
synonymous with inaction
in fact they're synonymous with
action a lot of the time
if we are suffused
with peace contentment
the ability to delight
then what we're doing is we're raising up
the generative drive
we're making conditions that are permissive
for the generative drive
to come to the forefront
to be paramount over
the aggressive and the pleasure drives
and remember we're not trying to get rid of those drives
we just want
the generative drive
in us to be at the forefront
then we'll be able to harness the aggressive drive
through for example
a strong sense of agency
fueling the sense of agency forward
as opposed to destructive aggression
the search for pleasure
which sure can include
physical pleasures in ways that are
good and reasonable and healthy for us
but also the pleasure of learning
the pleasure that altruism
brings that we can take
the aggressive drive that we know is in us
and the pleasure drive that we know
is in us and we can dial
them to the right places
this gets very complicated and it's easy to dial
that too far up and it's easy to dial
it too far down
but if both are serving
the generative drive
because we lift up
the generative drive and we bring it to primacy
by being able to handle our lives
to understand ourselves

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to go back to those pillars and to build upon it
the agency
and the gratitude that then leads us
to peace, contentment
and delight we can put all of this together
and like we're really and truly
living in an active way
in the world
that's good for us, good for the world around us
and doesn't leave us with a sense of yearning
or sense of tension within us
do you think it's also the case
that generative drive
has kind of a
self-amplification
feature to it
what comes to mind as you're describing
generative drive and its relationship to peace
contentment and delight is that
approximately a half hour after I wake up
I start to feel
more physically energized
I'm not somebody who just pops out of bed
and is ready to go exercise or do mental work
but
about 30 minutes or so after waking
my mind starts to wake up
and I've noticed that if I
read a scientific paper
or if I read a chapter
in a book or if I do something
that feels a little bit difficult
cognitively difficult
in particular
that the sense of satisfaction
that I get from that
is immense
and it's not necessarily
the case that I have to learn something that I'm going to use that day
but for me learning
and often learning
and sharing what I learn with the world
whether or not they want to hear it or not

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is part of my
pleasure loop
and I've learned that
if I don't
capture some new knowledge
in a way that's challenging
in the morning time
I feel like
the gears are still turning
but I start to lose energy
whereas if I find something interesting
in particular and
write it down and I feel like I own it
that's what I enjoy so much about learning
it's like it's in there maybe it'll be useful at some point
maybe it won't but it's like
an animal finding a tool that it can maybe use
to forge more effectively later in life
I get such a sense
of satisfaction that then I find
that I have immense energy to do
whatever is next
that's exercise or learn more
or prepare a podcast or write a grant
or work on a paper
and this feature of my mental life
is so prominent that
I almost
have to force myself to do it each day
and there are so many distractions in the world nowadays
that I've come to a place where
I almost have to force myself to
do what I know works for me
but when I do
it feels like
a chemical rocket fuel
and it doesn't make me manic
or crazy I don't need to pick up the phone and call
somebody or tell everybody about or post on
social media it's more of a deep
sense of satisfaction
and I get energy from it
is that the generative drive

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well it's great that that works for you
what you're saying is that
for you like you can prime
your generative drive that way right
and then you prime it you prime the pump
it gets revved up right like and then
and then you know it's really
interesting itself inside of you
I mean there's many different manifestations
of the generative drive as there are
people right so some things
are going to work for some person other things
are going to work for a different person right
but you're saying that hey I know
this thing works for me and even though sometimes
it's not easy to do I do it
and then look what it gets
for me right and
that's really healthy right
it's like knowing that this thing works for you
and then you become committed to it because
the generative drive is really
strongly supported by it
and then you have this sense of good feeling
right so then you have
the peace and you have
just the overall sense of
goodness right
peace and contentment and delight
you're getting that in learning and in teaching
so you're figuring out
like hey this works for me right
and again you don't have to figure it out through this lens
it's if we find parts that aren't working
then we go back and we figure them out
right maybe a good example
maybe is
so let's say you take someone
who really enjoys
gardening and get something out of gardening
right so there are as many generative
drives and how they're measured out as there are
humans but there can be common

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outcomes of them right so the enjoyment
of fostering plants
growing a garden is like that's not uncommon
in humans right so imagine
someone who hasn't
been doing that right they really
want to they have a drive to do it there's a
plot of land in the back that they used to cultivate
right so if they're not
doing it there are any number of reasons maybe
maybe they were depressed and they needed mental health
treatment maybe they just got away from the
path that they were on maybe
their defenses shifted a little bit whatever
the case may be they go back
to the pillars and they figure it
out right and now
they're in accord with themselves
right and they're living
through agency and gratitude
and they feel like right I can go back
out there and I can
till that land I can you know I can get the
hoe out I can you know I can
make the plot so I'm going to put the seeds in
I'm going to nurture like I can go do that
and I can do it even what even though
I was depressed even though somebody
assaulted me five months ago
you know even though I lost my job even though
even though even though right
they overcome the even those right
and the sense of agency tells them right
I can go do that right
and the sense of gratitude no one who's
miserable and hey and and now
is you know is in such an awful
position about life because they were attacked
or lost their job or something bad happened
whatever it may be or they're lost in cynicism
there's no gratitude there
right it's a gratitude for
being in life or having the capability

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of going back and
you know and planting seeds in that garden
that's the alliance between
agency and gratitude and
then the person goes and does
that right so think
of what's going on there they do this
thing they feel good about this thing they
can have they can look out at the garden
feel some peace right feel some contentment
to them be delighted by what they did
remember how much they loved it
before how much it means to them
so yes that goodness comes
that goodness suffuses
us and it raises up the
generative drive that says right it's
good we breathe some life
into it right enough
to get that garden done now
the generative drive is further
fostered forward by the goodness the person
feels so so the example
the difference between the person
who's like wants a garden feels
terrible about themselves they're not doing it
and they feels lousy every time they look
at the window and there they are looking out the window
right the difference between that and having
made a garden looking out the window at it
is a night and day
difference and the
person who's looking out the window at the garden
that they build overcoming whatever
was inside of them because they
went and addressed it and and proved to
themselves that they could
that's what we're after in life right it's
we all know this it doesn't look like somebody levitating
at the top of a mountain right that's what
it looks like the person looking out the window
at the garden and thinking about what
they overcame overcame to create

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the garden and seeing the goodness of it
all I'm
glad you said the word creating because it seems
it's about creating things
real tangible things
but that the process to get there is
every bit as important as what's created
when you create knowledge
that's tangible right like you
create knowledge maybe that person looks down
the row of beautiful flowers and has
the same sense of goodness inside of them
that you do when you're well like right
I just I just went and learned something
as you described that I I'm thinking
I certainly hope so because
for me it's it's an incredible
sense of satisfaction
and one that I enjoy
so much that I almost don't want to look at it too much
because to me it it sits in this
rare domain
of perfect like it's just it just feels
so good and
that and that I can
get back there is very is very comforting
to me right and that's all of this that
it feels so good that's what all
this is it's the generative drive
right it's the it's the gratitude
right it's the contentments like
all that coming together and it's
interesting we could contrast that
to when you talked about a repeated
cycle that's negative right then you're not
feeling that right so
so think about the learning that can come from it
right that you can you can
achieve this and feel this and be in this
state in one aspect of your life
what can you learn from that to bring to the other
place and more yes that's
important it's more it's often

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starting with what's going on in the
place that's not doing well right like
is it why the repetition right so this
is how we we can have
what we're seeking in parts of our lives
even if we don't in others
but if we can have it in parts of our lives
we can have it in others too and we can
become role models for ourselves
we can learn from ourselves
we can learn from what brings the good
to how to raise up the things
that about us and in our lives
that aren't there yet
I often get the question
how from the general public
how can I stop over thinking
you know I have to
imagine based on the fact
I get that question so often that there are
a great number of people who
sense their own generative
drive what are your thoughts on that
thinking can be
wonderful if we're using
thinking to learn right to figure things out
so when thinking is
doing that thinking is great
but a lot of thinking
is just in the service of something else
right and a lot of thinking
works against us
so imagine the person making
the garden right
the person has to think about it
if you think about what seeds to make
they have to think about where the tools are
they have to think about what they're doing
when they're planting, when they're watering
there's a lot to do but
the beauty of it isn't in the thinking
the thinking is in the service
of what is generative

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so that's a different kind
it's just thinking in the service of something
is that you know it's planning
it's projecting we tend to glorify
the planning and the projecting and
it can be great when we're learning
when we're figuring things out
but a lot of that is there so that we can do the things
that are good for us to do
the planning and the projecting around making the garden
where the point of it is the garden
it's not the thinking part
we can also use thinking against us
so much thinking
is repetitive
and not just unproductive
but harmful
that person who's looking out the window
at the garden may be thinking
I mean sometimes they're just pauses
in our thinking but a lot of times
a person must be thinking
and what often goes on there
is just repetitive negative
thinking
gosh I used to have a garden
I remember when that was beautiful
or remember before
such and such a person passed away
and then we stopped making the garden
or I'll never be able to make a garden again
or gosh it's too much
you know it's just something that's
negative and unproductive
I mean what else is there to think
if the person's actually looking out the window at the garden
and they're in this sort of stuck state
they're not in a generative state
then the thinking becomes repetitive
and it furthers all the negative
as we said the more we further the negative
the more we take if there's a four lane highway
that we want to atrophy

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let's not make it into a six lane highway
but we do that when we have this
repetitive thinking which then
can evolve into the narratives
the things that we say to ourselves
so thinking is
wonderful it gets wonderful
but it can also just
subserve something else and it can also be used
against us so what we're talking about here
doesn't glorify thinking
I mean it does if it's in the service of the generative drive
but it doesn't in and of itself
I think
many people
don't
set a time say
9.30 a.m. or 10.00 a.m.
when they are going to begin doing something
that they want to do or know they should do
that's a little bit challenging
could be exercise could be cognitively demanding work
and then
10 o'clock rolls around they say okay 10.15
and they're distracted by
often social media texting
these days I think those are the main culprits really
I don't know too many people
they get distracted by
reading books some do
and doing
complex puzzles or math but
you know social media is
a little bit like mental chewing gum
except that I would add to that that's the
kind of chewing gum that really does
set the appetite in a way
that prevents you from eating nutritious food
unless used correctly
right
and then people feel
bad about themselves because the whole morning
went by now it's noon and then

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they require some food like any
a typical person
and they might need a little nap
for the postprandial dip in energy
and then the afternoon and then it goes on and on
I mean I hear this all the time
I've experienced this before
so I'm not immune to this myself
that's why I try and capture that
early wave of energy whatever it might be
adrenaline nor adrenaline
some combination
the way you describe thinking
and its potential relationship to generative drive
it seems to me it's so important
that we capture those moments
of
potential creation
however small the action might be
to remind ourselves
that we are capable of moving things
from point A to point B
because in the description I just gave
of the person that lets the morning escape
there's really
no external barrier
except these distractions
put differently all the tools exist
within most all of us
to be able to create what we want to create
or at least to create something
right
and yet
many many people just
don't fulfill that
right that they were
and that we've all been given
so let's think about what's going on there
so the person that I'm going to exercise
at 10 o'clock
now they push it back to 10.15
and they do something on social media
push it back to 10.30 it'll be okay

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I'll get it all in
what they're doing is
they're engaging in unhealthy defense mechanisms
right so if we go back
to the pillars right
the structure of self the function of self
there may be other reasons for it
but let's just identify
the unhealthy defenses of avoidance
and rationalization right
and then there's no thinking
going on about that right
they're just unconscious processes and you kick it down
you kick it down the clock 15 minutes
right they're not thinking about it
thinking then is subserving something different
right the thinking is subserving the avoidance
if I'm going to go look on something
read a couple things reply
you know I'm thinking I'm planning right I got to
get the maybe got to get the phone out I got to tap
you know my code into it I got to go to a
certain website like you were doing something that
we're thinking about it I think about what I'm going to write
back but the thinking
is all in the service of the
unhealthy defenses right
so then by understanding ourselves
better we can
bring that right to a
healthier place how
by actually using thinking
for what helps us right so let's
think of what okay what's going let's say
if you're doing that okay what's going on
when you're doing that right
so do you really want
to exercise right but like it's not easy
to exercise and sometimes maybe just problem
solving are you doing a thing you like maybe something
you like more there's lower barrier etc
but let's say we're just working
within the psychological right

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then you can come at that a couple
of ways like I don't want to do that thing that
things hard right I mean I think
that about things in my life sometimes
and it always makes me
makes me weighty and unhappy
right I may as well put 20 pound weights on either
side of me right I mean I can
look at it that way right or
there's a different way of looking at it
that actually fits much
better which is like I'm not daunted by
doing difficult things and I can get out
there and apply myself and
you know and I feel good about that when I do
difficult things it's like part of my
identity right is like part of how I see myself
so right I'm going to go do this thing
and I'm going to feel good about it and isn't
it amazing that I get to do it right like
look here I am I'm alive I'm healthy right
I can go do this thing my health is
good but I want to make it better right
by working out or I'm at least alive
and if I lose a little bit of weight
I'll feel healthier like a come on this is good
right and then I'll feel different
about that right and like
the truth is one or the other it's like
oh both can be true now what will be true
is what you choose right and if
you choose the negative then yes
the unhealthy defenses perpetuate and
even if you get yourself to do it today it's harder to do
it tomorrow that's why sometimes I'll say to a person
like just take a look at it and decide if you want
to do it or not if you don't want to exercise
just decide you don't
right and then okay there's a tradeoff for
everything maybe you're okay with the tradeoff right
but what am I trying to do there right
is bring to consciousness
that that person is making a choice

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right do you want to do it if you want to do it
if you want to do it it's great to just do it
right and if you don't it's great
to not do it at least you're being honest and clear
with yourself and you're not wasting all that time
when you keep kicking at 15 minutes
down the you know down the clock
you know until it's too late does
does that make sense that's I think how
the structure here really does
it works because it's
pulling together what we know from
the biology to the psychology
of like how to understand ourselves and how
to understand when things aren't the way
we want them to be so that we can
make them the way we want them to be
it's not magic it's it's following the sort of
mathematical aspects of
you know going to the factors assessing them
making changes and and then
of course we see the outcome we want to see
the way you describe it does make sense
and I appreciate it because
I think ultimately
it seems to ratchet back to actions
to verbs to bring us to these
feeling states that
you know I think are what people are seeking
you know peace contentment delight
you know through agency gratitude as
active terms right there's yes
you know I think these are universal
desires and again you're providing this
wonderful roadmap for people
to arrive there thank you
I do have a question about some of the
underpinnings of generative drive
in particular this notion
of aggressive drive
I've known people
that seem to have a lot of this
they just have a lot of get up and go

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or a lot of drive to create
in the world or to figure things out
they often do
create great lives to themselves in
work and relationship etc
I've also observed that these people often
don't have the best relationship to themselves
or that they run up against barriers
or frankly sometimes straight into brick
walls in certain
situations of their life perhaps as a consequence
of having too much of this generative
or aggressive drive
and at the same time I know that there are
people in the world many that
have
what seems to be a low generative drive
I don't know if that's the case or not but
that they
they seem to have a hard time engaging
like in doing things and
often you get the impression that they
somewhat are completely given up
they're just like life is just too hard
or
sometimes it's even more subtle
like I know someone who
they like their job but
they've come to the place that
you know like it's just work
like it's a paycheck and that might be
enough but they're always talking about it
so I have to assume that it's not enough
they aren't able to slot their work into one domain
and just focus on the other
aspects of their life that are going well
it doesn't compensate
for them to think about the other aspects of their life that is
so
is there a continuum of generative drives
that exist in us? Are these intrinsic?
I realize there are a near infinite number
of conditions that

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could give rise to one or the other
it could be hardwired, it could be nature, it could be nurture
but what is the
relationship between
I want to say
arousal or
the potential for arousal and aggressive
drive
and these things that we're seeking
if it's okay
I'd like to start
the first principles of the drives
so the theory of drives
came about when
people were observing very closely
human beings and human behavior
individuals
societies, cultures
and identifying
that you can
boil a lot of things down
to a drive
that we call aggressive
is something to impose myself out there
on the world around me
it explains a lot of what people do
and then
the other identified drive
was pleasure
so enjoyment, even relief
of unpleasantness
you can describe a lot of human behavior
and
to understand
what's going on inside of us
that means that we're here
you see that through the lens of
aggressive and pleasure
drives and like that's the answer
to it to how we survive
but I think that is
not the answer to it that
if it were just aggressive drives

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and pleasure drives
there's not a value system around
that like you know somebody who's very
industrious can build or destroy
right and we see this in historical
figures like being very intelligent
and very industriousness has nothing to do
with whether you're building or destroying
right so if it were
just an aggressive drive
and a pleasure drive then
we wouldn't be having this conversation
right because the species
would not have survived
so if you believe that and I believe
that then you look
for something else you say maybe we looked and we found
two things and there are more things
right and then we start thinking about learning
for learning's sake altruism
things that are not explained
unless there's a self-referential
doing something for someone else so therefore
it's selfish like there's a lot of gyrations
around that if you really observe
humans you do see altruism
you see learning for learning's
sake you see people being
benign when everything about a situation
would say that they could
would or should under society's rules
not be benign right and then
we start to see that there is another
drive that how do you explain
that we're here yeah aggression
pleasure and
generativeness or generative
drive the drive to make things better
that's why we build more than we destroy
we destroy a lot right but
we build more than we destroy
otherwise we wouldn't have clothes on our backs
let alone have the technology

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to sit here and to be able to do this
so it's the generative
drive that is
most realized in the healthy person
right and the healthy person
has the strong generative
drive now as you
said there are other factors and this is
sort of what you were asking about they're probably
their natural levels of aggression
or pleasure seeking or generativeness
that differ across people right because we're a
product of you know the complexity
of our genetics and you know
all the complexities of nature and nurture
so we're going to get to a place where
where some of us have more
some of us have less right
the the the conclusion
though is for all of us the generative
drive being at
the helm is what
what leads us to be
to live good lives right to live to
the things that we aspire to the peace and contentment
right so we want the generative
drive to rule
the day right whether a person
is studying neuroscience or growing gardens
right the importance is about being
generative then
then aggression
and pleasure can subserve
the generative drive right and then
the question you're asking I think which is
well what if there's too much aggression too
little aggression right or too much
pleasure seeking too little pleasure seeking
that's when we we can see
problems right and the problems
then lead us back to the pillars to
figure out the problems so
too much aggression

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ultimately becomes envy
right too much aggression means I want
I want to impose myself
on the on the world around me more than
I can more than is reasonable
more than I can do without
impinging upon others right that what
you end up doing is taking from others
right too much aggression
becomes destructive right
maybe a person destroys tear something down
right takes from others
says that the the nasty
comment when it wasn't necessary
and now everyone feels bad right but there's
that too much aggression
start it becomes envy
right and envy is
destructive right
the same thing with too much pleasure seeking
if I say okay I want you know I want my fair share
of pleasure and you know relief of
distress and all that but if I start if I rely
on that too much right we're now
instead of aggression eclipsing the generative
drive now it's pleasure eclipsing
the generative drive then I want more pleasure
and more pleasure and more pleasure and
how long before I want your pleasure right
so so then it's not healthy
right what it becomes is envious right it
becomes destructive because now then
I become covetous of your pleasure or
if I can't get it but I could
bring you down then I'll feel better
about myself that's envy
right so too much aggression
eclipsing the generative drive
too much of the
of pleasure seeking the pleasure drive
eclipsing the generative drive and
we end up in places of envy
and envy is destructive

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and now we're in trouble
I've never thought before about the
relationship between aggression pleasure
and envy but as you're describing it
it comes to mind
the movie American Psycho
where Christian Bale
placed this basically
an 80s yuppie
working in finance in New York
and for anyone that's seen it
it can only be described
as a violent parody
of 80s yuppie culture
it's dark a comedy as there's going to be
yeah it's as dark a comedy as it could be
and don't let your young children watch it
because it's very gruesome and like very
sexual but
the
aggressive features within
the character that Bale plays
are immediately apparent in the movie
like you know violent aggression
sexual aggression
seeking money seeking wealth
all the time a
narcissism too an obsession with like everything
from his skincare routine to
his eight pack abs
and like it's ridiculous
but also an interesting window into
some milder forms of those
features that still exist in many people today
right?
but the envy component starts to reveal itself
a little bit later into the movie
where the scene I recall is one
around where someone hands him a business card
and then you hear the narrative in his own mind
about how much nicer that guy's business
card is than his
and how he hates him so much he ends up killing

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the guy in very violent
and sadistic fashion
that's aggression over generative
and the whole movie is about
this one
aspect of culture at that time's ability
to impose their will on
everyone
at their whim you know basically Bale just does
whatever the hell he wants at any point
goes returns videotapes in between
and you know and there's so much woven into it
and
that is relevant and so much that's
woven into it that's just purely for people's
kind of sick entertainment
but that
I believe it was Brent Easton Ellis
that wrote that and you know is tapping into
the aggression component the pleasure
component but the envy component
is really what resonates as you come
to the end of the movie it's like there's no
satisfying this guy he could
kill or sleep with as many people as he wants
in the movie and he can
have as much wealth as he wants he can have
entire buildings in fact I think he's living in
an entire building at some point he takes over
people's apartments after he kills them it's
it's wild and disgusting
but it really speaks to the
extent to which envy is woven into
absolutely aggression
and pleasure seeking and it's not something
that had really sunk in for me
until you describe it now
because I think for most people
they imagine okay when somebody has
X number of
millions or billions of dollars
that they'll reach this place of peace contentment
and delight right they'll have enough

and in the movie Wall Street
there's that one scene where someone says
you know what's your number like at what point
is it enough and the guy says more
that says all sorts of things about the dopaminergic
system of reward systems in the brain etc
but I think it says a lot
more about envy
and just what and what a pit
of despair envy is for everybody involved
right right look
envy may not be the root
of all evil but envy
plus natural disasters maybe
so
much evil
and destruction arises from envy and it
may be that it's at the root
of all of it
and we so under-appreciate that
we so under-appreciate why
people are destructive
which is why the roots aren't always in trauma
but a significant
aspect of where
envy arises from can often
be trauma creating a sense of guilt
and shame and vulnerability
but wherever a person may come by
and it's a larger discussion of envy
and where it may come from is it drives
destruction
and if the aggressive
drive is greater
than the generative drive or if the pleasure
drive is greater than the generative drive
or if both are greater
than the generative drive it will
drive destruction
and that destruction the vast majority
of times if you look
deep enough you find at its roots
envy that envy may arise

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from guilt and shame within the person
as soon as it becomes about another
I feel guilt and shame and inadequacy
inside of me but then I feel
envy of those around me
it drives the vast majority of destruction
Do you think that's what's happening when we
see these sadly
ever more frequent examples of
active shooters and
school shootings things of that sort
Yes, there are other people who
have life
and that person doesn't feel
envy of you so they want to go
and take it away from them
that's why as long as we have
human tribulation and a lot of guns
it's going to happen
it's a logical
conclusion of enough
people being in places of despair
and how envy can be cultivated
within us and then ultimately
how it blinds people
it creates such
a desire for destruction that then
people will take life away from others
and often people will sometimes take
their own life which
really brings to the forefront
that person doesn't feel that they have a life
certainly not a life worth preserving
so they're then going to take
the lives of others and I think
we're seeing
that is as stark
a portrait of
where envy can lead
I think as we can find on a one person
basis we can look at wars
and destruction on a societal basis
but I think that's the ultimate

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in understanding where envy
can drive a person
what about the other end of the
spectrum when aggression
and pleasure seeking are
too low
the other side of the spectrum
is demoralization
so imagine very very low
aggression so low
self assertion, low agency
there comes a place
where the person is not
then imposing themselves
or believing that they can
in much of any way on the
outside world and that creates
a sense of isolation understandably
a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability
and isolation and that then
becomes demoralizing
which is not the same as depression
we know depression is a
there's a neurochemical imbalance
whether that imbalance came
purely biologically or came
psychologically or because of external
events there's a neurochemical imbalance
here we're not talking about
an illness state as
identified by modern psychiatry
there's not a number in the
book of diagnoses that goes along
with being demoralized
why because it's a state that humans
can be in and too low
of an aggressive drive
and all the things that come of that
it's isolating and it's demoralizing
the same with too low
of a pleasure drive
so an example that may be
relatable is

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to some people is knowing someone who has had a couple of really bad breakups and then says you know what I'm done with that there's no more romance I'm going to be single right and you know like that person has a drive in them they're an interconnected person like they want romance these are things that are important to them but they make a decision I'm not going to have that in my in my life what would be called some psychodynamic sense is inviting death into life a little bit of death by swearing off something that the person has a drive towards the pleasure drive of companionship and of romance that then becomes demoralizing as well so sure those things demoralization can predispose to depression but demoralization is a thing in and of itself where then there's a sense of hopelessness there's a sense of the goodness then isn't accessible anymore and that's the other side of envy can low levels of aggression and the resulting demoralization be coupled with high levels of pleasure seeking so I'm thinking about the person that you know is like very overweight clearly headed for health issues if they don't already have them and you know perhaps would like to remove that weight would like to feel more vigorous doesn't want type 2 diabetes and an early death but at some level they've given up because the pleasure of eating

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is something they really enjoy
they really love it and yet it has
a component to it in their life
where they either
soothe with it or they're just trying to hit
baseline levels of satisfaction with it
and
they allow themselves to
effectively be sedentary
and then the other sorts of trouble start to show up
you know sleep apnea from carrying excessive weight
and then they're feeling tired during the day
and then who can exercise when they're too tired
when you got to work and maintain other life demands
and you kind of see where
this could rise and makes
perfect sense
you can also see where
if there were just a little bit more aggression
it could all be turned around but they don't have it
so is the scenario described
something that you've seen clinically
I certainly observe it in my non-clinical
stance out there in the world a lot
well I think the
most important thing you're pointing out
is that aggression
and pleasure on the high end
we know can trump
the generative drive
but that this can also happen on the low end
so you're describing a situation
this is a great example because it's not uncommon
in the world around us
so the aggression meaning the fuel
to put oneself out there in the world
to utilize the sense of
agency so this is going to be a person
who's a low agency
the aggressive drive
has little fuel then to give the sense of agency
it's further squelched
by negative sense

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of self and negative self-talk
now you find where the aggressive
drive is too low
and too low can also
trump the generative drive
because then that person can't take care of themselves
the generative drive would say
there's a lot of life to live and there can be great things in life
and take better care of yourself
by the way people that you love
and people that love you
there's an animal that you love
so the generative drive
is saying that
but it's not winning the day
because the aggression
is one word we could put to that drive
we could call it an assertion drive
we call it an agency drive
we're using agency in a different way
but that thing is too low
so it wins out over the generative drive
and then in the example you gave
it's not surprising
that the pleasure drive goes the other way
maybe there's a predisposition to that
genetically maybe it's just reinforced
because a person in that place could say
well
think of what the self-conception
would be
I'm in this terrible place
it means I'm a terrible person
I can't make myself better
or I'm not good enough to get better
no one cares about me I can't make anything right
so therefore
no matter
there's no reason to take care of myself
so why would I not do
if I eat that one thing that I enjoy
and it gives me pleasure
even if it gives me pleasure for two minutes

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then I'll eat another one
in a sense so what
because I don't feel that I'm worth preserving
or that I can preserve myself
there's a nihilism to it
that then kind of makes it make sense
to overindulge the pleasure drive
whether it's biologically predisposed
is because
the aggressive drive is too low
and in fact it's low enough
that it's outweighing the generative drive
then the pleasure drive is going to come into
one place or another
if it's also really low
the person does not much of anything
and wastes away which tragically happens a lot
in our society
or if the pleasure drive is high
maybe that person overindulges in things
that provide short term gratification
and then that causes a different set of problems
whether aggression
or assertion again we could put different words
to that drive but what we've been calling
the aggressive drive and the pleasure drive
are they is one or the other
or both high enough
to trump the generative drive
or low enough to trump the generative drive
and I think all problems
that we see like everything fits
into this model
because it honors what we know
it honors what we know about human behavior
and insights into human behavior over hundreds
of years right over thousands of years
the wisdom that we bring forward
and it honors the science
and that's why it fits together
because I think it honors who we are
as what our species is
what we are

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and what it's like
what life is like as we
try and engage with it
I've seen cases of
demoralized people where
they simply
disappear
they hide
they isolate, they slow down
they take terrible care of their health
sadly I've known
several people like this in my lifetime
one of whom killed himself
the other who
just has an immense number of health problems
related to overeating
and inactivity
and knows it and talks about it
but nothing seems to change despite multiple interventions
from a caring standpoint
friends etc
I've also seen examples of people who are demoralized
who seem
to band with other demoralized people
sort of try to
recalibrate the standard that they feel
oppresses them
you know that they
and this isn't necessarily just in the realm of physical fitness
this is also in the realm of
school demands
I went to a very demanding high school
as I've talked about before on a couple of podcasts
I barely finished high school
I was an attentive student
my aggressive and pleasure
drives went into non-academic endeavors
and I regret that
I had so much making up
of learning to do
by time I fortunately got to college
eventually caught up
but

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my experience
high school was that there were these
kids scoring perfectly on the SAT
in early admission to Harvard
and early admission to Yale and all these places
you know a distribution in the middle
and then there was a collection
of kids who were not doing well
knew they weren't doing well
and kind of banded together
around the idea of not doing well
I didn't
consider myself part of that group
because I frankly wasn't there that often
and I was focused on other things
as I mentioned but
what came of that group was actually
quite tragic not just for them
but for a lot of other people
eventually
it wasn't a school shooting type scenario
but they eventually
set off explosives on the
school campus as it was after they had graduated
I don't know where they are nowadays
but things did not go well for them
and they
exerted a lot of
destruction
to other people around them
but before they did that there was this
kind of banding together around there
the fact that they didn't fit in
as I recall that I could be wrong about this
but I've seen this in other
forms too like
if you can't meet the standard
band up with other people
and change the standard
and then you don't feel as demoralized perhaps
I can understand
I can rationalize why this would be
a reasonable approach

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but
I'm seeing this more and more
I'm also seeing by the way
the other end of the spectrum
is overly aggressive and pleasure seeking
and things of that sort
but for the moment I'd like
your thoughts on
how demoralization can
split off into different expressions
depending on how
people feel and who else they're relating to
yeah, yeah
I think the place I would start
is to say
our society rushes headlong forward
in a way that causes our society
to trample people who are vulnerable
and vulnerable people are demoralized people
or demoralized people
are vulnerable people
and our society often tramples them
and then they're not here with us any longer
and that is tragic
but at times they don't get trampled
they get cast aside
they're injured and cast
aside and from that place
tragic things happen
people then stay isolated
I think it's a tragedy that we don't
all band together and go door to door
to seek people
who aren't coming out of doors
in the sense of we let people be
so isolated
and often times that's the
tragic end of someone's story
but sometimes
people do engage
either demoralized
but they can engage
in ways that involve

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an affiliative defense
so sometimes people who are demoralized
can affiliate they can band together
in ways
as I think you were alluding to
that can make things better
so if people are demoralized
because say they're
a group in society
that is chronically very mistreated
then it can be very powerful to band together
both because there's what's called an affiliative defense
that if I feel bad about myself
about something and I'm alone
it's highly likely I'm going to continue feeling bad
about myself about that thing
but if you feel bad about yourself
and then we're together
we help each other feel better
we don't feel so lonely
we don't feel so isolated
we don't feel so ashamed
so an affiliative defense can help
people to say wait a second
there's nothing wrong with me and I'm not going to
take this line down
and to make assertions that create
better rights in the world
around us so very good things
can happen from affiliation
in the context of demoralization
but very bad things can happen too
because people can also
affiliate around things that are very destructive
if I am
hateful of society and I would like to be
destructive and I'm alone
I could do destructive things alone
but if I band together with a couple other people
who feel that way now I'm empowered to feel that way
instead of maybe I feel that way
or there's racism
or prejudice and I don't feel like I can say that

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but then when it's
permissive because other people
are in the same
place then people can accentuate
the hatred within
them so affiliation is
very very powerful
and part of society rushing
so headlong forward and either trampling
or marginalizing people is
that we then don't pay attention
or not enough attention to what happens
with the affiliative groups
how do you guide people towards
being able to affiliate in ways that are productive
how do you give them routes of being
productive how do you try and protect
against the ways that affiliation
can lead to destructive
behavior so I think
these are the natural things that
happen within us but a lot of what we're
talking about now gets
impacted a lot by
society and societal standards
which we of course altogether
determine
and arise from us but
they start to sort of transcend because it's
now people interacting
with a whole social system
going back to the other
end of the spectrum
excess aggression
in particular
was in a conversation with somebody recently
very successful
like beyond
most people's comprehension of
successful financially successful and
seems to just have you know checked
off their goals one
box at a time you know from

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from go
but who described his
underlying
psychology and emotional state as
one in which
much of what he does on a day-to-day
basis is driven by aggression
in fact he
volunteered an anecdote about
the fact that he hates
early morning meetings on zoom
but he shows up to them as sort of
a like an FU
toward somebody that might not even be on the meeting
right and
and so there's a friction point for him that allows
him to engage in a way that he wouldn't
otherwise be able to engage and he
he channels that towards productivity
and clearly it's worked for him
you know I don't know if he's done the sort
of introspective deep dive
I imagine no through the structure
of self and function of self but
you know what are we to make of that sort
of example I mean I
I like the idea that if someone has a
strong aggressive drive
that they would channel it toward good
I mean I have no reason
to think this person is doing anything but good in the world
for themselves and others
certainly not harming anyone at least
not to my to my knowledge
but that seems like a rough
place to live
for me it seems like a rough place to live
and at the same time I'll offer a very brief
anecdote that you know at one point in my career
namely when I was a postdoc
I was in a position by virtue of having left
a laboratory in the nature of the field
at a time where the work I wanted to do

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was directly pitted against
the work of another very powerful
laboratory
except that I was a lone postdoc
working in a laboratory
essentially on my own on this problem
and I remember going to my postdoc advisor
the late Ben Barris and saying you know I think
it might just move to a different problem
because I don't really want to go up against this
Goliath
and he said
you know this is the best
capture Ben's voice he said there absolutely
not like there's no way you love this stuff
you have to do it because you love it and he kept
telling me how much I love it and he reminded me that indeed
I did love the questions
and once I was able to tap back into the love
for and the curiosity around the
questions
I was able to push aside the concerns
enough that we did well
in publishing certain papers they did
well but those five years
frankly were a lot less
pleasurable than they could
have been I think because
much of the script in my head
was that I was in friction with
this like you know at least in my
mind this oppressive force it was
purely competitive and I truly believe that we
can't be in our most creative state
when we are competing with someone else
by definition because then you're
creating against a standard as opposed
to raw creation
so in both cases
a lot of aggressive drive frankly
I have some of that and I had
that but
a desire for revenge

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a component of friction mixed
in you know or
integrated with this aggressive drive
like this picture
like even as I describe it is you know
causing the release of a little bit of adrenaline
it's not a comfortable state
it's not it can't be a state
of happiness right so as
you said people can do good in the world they can do
not good in the world like we're not making a value judgment about what
the person is doing because that's
not what the question is about right
like how are they feeling how are they doing
right what's going on inside of them
right and that can't be happy
right that can't be happy because
if you're built to be pretty
good at competition
right so you can size up what are the factors
you know you can strategize right so
if person is built to be really good at competition
then you know
it sounds pretty good to make everything
a competition right because
you have the highest winning percentage right
and that's good
to achieve some end
right that doesn't have any
feeling intrinsically associated
with it right and if all you're
doing is a series of competitions
then what you're doing then is winning
right and like winning is something
like you know winning is like I won
I beat you whatever that is
that can be part of happiness
but it doesn't have to be right that's not happiness
right so
yes that kind of I'm
really built to compete well and I'm
going to just see a series of competitions
in front of me that's for

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expedient forward
progress right that's very
effective but again expedient forward
progress is nothing
to do with peace contentment
delight like it's not
you know it doesn't have anything to do with that
nor does it have anything to do with doing
good or bad right and I think
the example you gave it in your own in
your career is like it's such a good
example right because you know if you think
about it when
the way that you were sort of framing it inside
is like there's a question
I'm asking there's a question they're
asking right and there's
a competition right and again
it has to be to two to compete
right so so there's
almost an automaticity right that
like deciding the same thing maybe
you know they feel competitive or certain people
there too they were were in our
definitely competitive they know who they
are they're extremely committed and very successful
okay so then
you're like okay I'm in a
competition now again but you never decided
to be in a competition right
but but automatically
right it means interesting right to understand
you're acting as if you're in a competition you're like I don't want this competition
right because like they're bigger than
me it's gonna be unpleasant it's gonna take you
away from really thinking about what you want to do
right it's gonna make it harder to
do a good to do the job you want to do right
because now you're embroiled in
something that's you know that has
aggression behind it right
so so you choose no I don't
I choose not to do that

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right and then Ben Baris
reframes it to the truth
and says what this this isn't this is not a competition
because you're not choosing to
compete right because
Ben pointed out what was important to you
was the questions right so
it's like almost as if Ben remind you no
this is not through the aggressive drive
look at it through the generative drive that's what
wins out on you right and then
you go and apply yourself to it
yeah
and bless him for doing it because
from that point forward I've made
it my
firm mission to always
do things from a place of what
I was thinking about as delight
you know curiosity delight that the things that
give me energy and that give me more energy
from doing them
it wasn't a coincidence I believe that
in those five years when I was operating
from a mix of generative
drive and the competition would
then resurface and you know I couldn't hold
hold it constant that
I was absolutely
exhausted by the end
of that phase I just in a way
that sucked a lot of
the pleasure out of it I still
drive some pleasure but then as I mentioned
fortunately I was able to
pivot back to doing things out
of love you know and
and getting back to peace
contentment and especially delight
right now right and I absolutely
make a value judgment
about that right that what you
did is better right so

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what if you did what if you were
different so think about if we talk about it
through this accurate lens what if you were
different at that time
and the aggressive drive in you
was greater than the generative drive in you
right which would be an unhealthy state
to be in but let's say you were in that
unhealthy state then you
probably would have still done what you did
but you would have done it through the lens of aggression
like I'm going to get that right now you're competitive
with them there's anger in you
there's you know there's aggression
right that you're enacting in fantasy
as you're you know you're thinking about them
and how you're going to win like all sorts of things
go on inside of us and I would say there's
no way on earth you could
have done the science as well as you did
right it couldn't be because
all that stuff is distracting
right it's you know that kind of negative
affect pools for energy
and time from you and also
what seeds would you have planted
in the the microcosm
that you operated right more more competition
right more competitiveness
more badness right so let's look
at what you did do right because
you're healthy or this
particular question about this particular thing
we know for sure because your generative drive
eclipses the aggressive
drive then you set yourself
to the work in a way that's going to be
more effective right your brain isn't
clouded you're not wasting energy
you know plotting some revenge you're plotting
what you're going to do if they come take something
from your lab I mean whatever it is
you know like you're not living in any of that

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so you're going to do a better job at what
what's so important to you to do
and what seeds are you sowing then
right you're sowing seeds of collaboration
right and even then
if someone could say well what does even
that matter right say no it doesn't
matter because what you're doing then
we just follow for the math of it
right is contributing to understanding
that's contributing to human health
right and the better understanding we
have of human health the more people stay alive
and the more people stay healthy which
could mean any one of us just like any
one of us could be the vulnerable person
that society tramples or casts aside
we all have it in us to be that or have been
that at stages of our lives right
we also all have it in us
to be the opposite of that
right we have it in us to be
generative we have it in us to make
good we have it in us to contribute
to health to survival
and that I place a value
judgment upon it's why
doing good is better than doing bad
why creating is better than
destroying and why ultimately is the generative
drive that has to trump
the other drives and when it does
we're happy we're healthy we
make the world a better place we
ally with and are suffused with
the gratitude and agency
in us are fully active and we're
suffused with peace contentment
delight as you said that's
the place to be from that place
we get this thing that
we want and we help to make the world
a better place which helps us to keep

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the thing we want
it sounds so simple
because as you pointed out
the manifestations
of looking at
the right things and doing the right things
are so simple yes
right it's a list
really and again we have a pdf
that includes this list and the
structure of the pillars
and how they flow up to this list but
ultimately it's peace
contentment and delight
undergirded by agency and
gratitude as active terms
very simple at some level
and yet for
many people including myself at certain
times in life the
excess or
lack of aggressive drive
or excess or lack of pleasure drive
can interfere with people's
ability to access these simple
but incredibly powerful
being states
because it's nature and nurture
so you might be built
with a greater or lesser
natural amount of one drive
than I am but then we've had
life experience that creates a delta
around that so
we say okay we're built with different amounts
of all these drives yes we are
but we also have control
right through our decisions
through how we handle our lives to modulate
them so that makes sense
because the thought could be well the drive
is what the drive is and it varies across people
no there's a range the drive is in

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and that range can be very broad
people can do all sorts of things to cultivate
to cultivate the better we all
can so if we look at it
as an unlimited upside
then what we see is I want to know
what's going on inside of me
what are all those other factors
because I want to cultivate the good
I want to cultivate that generative drive
and I want to make sure the aggression and the pleasure
aren't out of balance one way or another
we can actively look at that
and manage it and I think
that's so what we're striving for
because there's nothing here that we don't
have some control over
and the higher we get up
the simpler it gets
the more we have control over it
and for people who feel like
the ideals that
we're providing a roadmap toward are not
accessible for whatever reason
maybe they're feeling a little bit or a lot
demoralized
overly aggressive and not ending up where
they want to go or ending up where they want to go
and not experiencing deep satisfaction
peace contentment and delight
where should they look
in this framework
that includes these pillars at the deep
levels of structure of self function of self
that
give rise to empowerment, humility,
agency, gratitude
peace, contentment, delight
if someone should find themselves unmotivated
or stuck
metaphorically speaking
staring out the window into the garden that could be
and that they want so very much but that they're not creating

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again that should translate to whatever domain
of life you're seeking
or not even in touch with what you really want
infinitely confused
about what to do in relationship
school, work, life
you know and thinking about
all the oppressive forces in the world like
the political chasm
and the you know pandemics
and lockdowns and like and all the stuff
and all the things that are
weighing down on us
what should that person
in other words what should we all do
at that moment you know stop and
what
Each pillar has five cupboards
look in all five
all the clues that you find there
that's the answer
so go back to
structure of self, function of self
ask questions about and engage
in practices that bring about
more self awareness practices
that
draw our attention to what salient for us
ask ourselves you know what am I thinking
about internally what is my internal script
what am I focusing on externally
you know am I spending all day on
twitter looking at accounts that I know I hate
because it activates something in me etc etc
I might have revealed something
about myself I'm just kidding that's not
my behavior but I see a lot of other people doing it
what are my behavioral choices
you know what could bring
about more hopefulness
and strivings do I have that right
right and there's so much of this that say
one could do on one's own right because

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we can think about ourselves and we can learn things if we say well I don't really know that much about defense mechanisms okay look we could read about it right like we can do a lot of this on our own and we can get so much from talking to other people you know people in our lives who are close to us who love us right we can talk with them about what's going on inside of us right and that is such an amazing mechanism of learning and they're also professional resources I mean like the good therapy should encompass like this should be what it's doing right it might come out through one lens or another lens and you know because everybody's different and we can bring different modalities but ultimately that's what good therapy is doing right it's looking in all ten of those cupboards and it's seeing where is the issue let's follow the clues like it's a spirited inquiry right whether we're doing it on our own or we're doing it with other people in our personal lives or we're doing it with someone professionally it's a spirited inquiry to follow the clues because if we follow the clues there are answers right and if we have the answers then we can bring things into better alignment and then we're in a better place those pills are more stable and we can build on top of them what we want to build on top of them and the drives come better into line that we can do that and it can be an iterative process of you know if we attain some better state of mind and like life is better and like we're happy like this happens to people there's a lot of contentment and peace and if things are going well and now

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something isn't as much go back
and look again right it's a
process we can use over and over because
it works because
it fits with the
truths and the reality is we as
we have understood
learn them you know our education
the you know this is learning about humans
that across hundreds of years tells
us this
it makes very good sense to me
in the way that you have
mapped it out for us
so much sense in fact that
I'm just struck by
how divergent it is
from what I think most people
think of when they think of therapy
or that some of the risks of
going to a psychiatrist
which I think it's only fair to
consider in particular
the way that
at least from my outside
non-clinical understanding
these sorts of situations of
high levels of demoralization or excessive aggression
or just people not being in the
place or being able to exert their
their
actions in the world the way they want
or not get the results they want is
they'll start asking questions like
you know maybe have a chemical imbalance
or maybe they'll go to a
clinician maybe a cognitive behavioral therapist
or
psychiatrist and
more often than not it seems they'll get
you know prescription for X number of milligrams
of some
serotonergic agonist or

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dopaminergic agonist and of course
as a neurobiologist I
applaud the
exploration of underlying brain mechanisms
and the involvement of neuromodulators
like dopamine and serotonin but what you're describing
today is very
different I think
than what most people
can expect
if they go to the typical
psychiatrist or typical
psychologist which is part of the reason we're having
this conversation but
I'd love your thoughts on that
and I don't want to make this about me
I only offer this anecdote as
a way to round out a little bit of
the earlier discussion I'll
never share this publicly but when I was
a postdoc and going through that very hard phase
of competition that I didn't
want and having a hard time staying in touch
with that and there were some other developmental
things starting to resurface just by virtue of moving
back to the town I grew up in etc
there I recall
getting to the stairway of the building I was
working in at the time which is the same one
where my laboratory exists now actually
and realizing I couldn't go up the stairway
I've always been reasonably fit
and
just being so exhausted and then
driving home that day on 280
and thinking
none of this matters
what am I doing
none of it matters I could have been exhausted
I don't know what it was but what that ultimately
resulted in was me talking to a psychiatrist
who gave me a low dose
of a

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serotonergic antidepressant
I took that low dose
of serotonergic antidepressant
I don't recall which one it was maybe it was
satalopram would that make sense
and spent that evening staring at my plate
of Thai noodles for about two hours
it hit me really hard
and I hated that feeling and then just stopped
taking the drug
now I'm not this is no knock on
satalopram or the use of serotonergic
agents in the proper context they've saved lives
so the problematic too
but I just you know that
wasn't the route that eventually got me out of it
it was mainly talk therapy
and self-care
but I just
offer that because I you know
even as a neurobiologist I
perhaps especially as a neurobiologist
I thought okay here's the solution right it's going
to shift some internal modulatory system
and I'm going to feel okay
about the situation I'm in and thank goodness it didn't
work even for a short
while because
while I didn't do all the
things that you're describing here of exploring
the function of self because no one has ever laid
this out for me I
I took the route of talk therapy
which I find immensely beneficial
takes time
but immensely beneficial
so what are your thoughts on the
current strategies for diagnosis
where those succeed
where they fall short and
the role of medication in navigating
this you know
simple and yet complex landscape

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right we are
so dramatically
over reductionist you know it's
almost to the point of
unbelievable right I mean
think about getting a medicine
getting some say Psythallopram
because of what happened
right it can't
possibly work
right now maybe a
judiciously chosen medicine could provide
a little more distress tolerance and you could
sort of think about it more and you could find your way
through it but clearly it was an issue
of self right like you're in a situation
that was high stress and you're going to
have to have this competition or not is it going to be good
for you and you know you don't want
that but can you avoid it like there's
something going on that makes you not be able to walk
up those stairs right so
so again I'm not criticizing I don't want the person
what kind of conversations you had about it with
the reason but the idea that a pill will fix
that is like that's insane
right now medicines
can help smooth the way so
let's say
you initially when in the first time you see someone
they say okay we have to talk about this right like what's going on in your life
and you know because normally
you can walk upstairs and go to work right
why can't you now like
we need to think about that we need to talk about that
let's say you start doing that and you're having a lot of trouble
with it or you're just having
really high levels of anxiety you might say look
a medicine can kind of take the temperature down a little bit
you know give you a little more distress
tolerance and then you know
we can you can think about it better inside
of you and we can talk about it better

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but it's medicine in the service of understanding now sometimes medicines are doing things like medicines that can help but prevent bipolar episodes right like they're doing something that is purely biological but we use so many medicines for things that are not biological they're psychological but we we're so over reductionist that we could actually over reduce the problem that you said right like a clear wow that's fascinating right like how many times have you gone up those stairs and now you can't it's so interesting the idea like this is give you a pill I mean it really makes no sense but if we're over reductionist enough you could see how that's the logical end point of an illogical process right I'll give you another example and this is really it's a true story of a woman a young woman comes into the emergency room and she says she can't sleep and you know she looks anxious and she feels very very anxious you know by her description and that's why she can't sleep and and she gets a sleeping medicine and she goes home and then she comes back she comes back a couple days later and she's very very anxious and she can't sleep and she looks like she did before like nothing that seems to be different and she hasn't gotten any sleep at all so the doctor in charge gives her a higher dose of the sleeping medicine and then she goes home and then she comes back yet again and nothing is any different she's still not sleeping she's still anxious and then the doctor concludes that she's drug seeking

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because she wants more and more of the sleeping medicine
okay
what's actually going on
was
she was getting hurt at home
she was terrified to go home
of course she couldn't
sleep right like bad things
were happening
right but no one asked the question
right they thought she cannot sleep
we'll give sleeping medicine right instead of
asking why
right and then she gets home
and when the medicine doesn't work
well now there's something wrong with her
right and if you put
that label on her now she's drug seeking
right then she's not going to get any help
right so I'm not against
medicines I mean I
use psychopharmacology as part of my
practice and I think from a
biologically based perspective about many things
but we have to know what something
is the answer for and what something is not
the answer for
and in the overly reductionist
world of throughput in healthcare
systems people are even being trained
these days that don't know any different
right I'm trying to be overly critical of practitioners
because often practitioners
are working in impossible situations
where the goal is throughput
and that's more efficient in the short
term right it's more efficient today
right but it's of course not
good in anything but the
today term and it's interesting because it's never
good for the person even today it's like never
good for the people in it
right but often these decisions are

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being made based upon business and money and I understand business and money
I'm a capitalist
I'm interested in these things but the way that we have let things get the business and money with a short sighted short term perspective then bonds with the over reductionist ways that we approach medicine and then we have these bizarre things that happen and these kind of bizarre things end lives change the courses of lives fortunately you got what you needed and you figured things out but if you hadn't would you have the career you have? we don't know if someone else hadn't realized let's talk to that woman and see what's going on would she have survived we don't know but the point of that is lots of bad things happen we're rolling the dice too many times with too many people and it doesn't have to be that way and the way that we're doing it now is not only inefficient financially right the thing that we seem to be caring about most it leads to bad outcomes and it also makes no sense right we're looking at it through this sort of bizarre lens then we may find within us the strength to change that and to change it in a way that actually fits the science and fits the common sense I have to imagine that both for people who require medication in order to cope in order to manage their way through these questions about function of self and how they are in the world

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what they're paying attention to etc
and for people who don't
require medication to do this
exploration that this very same
exploration is
the roadmap to feeling
yes agency
gratitude peace contentment and delight
medicines may have a role
so if for example
we go look at the pillars and things are not going
so well and you see
that whenever that person has a bipolar
manic episode while things get
really really damaged and it's
very very hard to they can't recover from that
in the ways they want to then we'd say well let's
we're going to use medicine to help this
right now of course there are other things to use
behavioral changes for example right
but there's a clear
biological role just like we use
medicine to stop seizures right but people
also have to make sure they're not super sleep
deprived there's another part to it too
we can use medicine to prevent bipolar episodes
but there's another part of self
care involved too but it's a role
of medicine right just as
if anxiety levels aren't coming down
too much say for the person to get at the
trauma right they know there's a trauma
they've talked around it you know for 20
years they know it's been impacting them they're not sure
how it's hard to go there they're
with a trusted therapist but it's still it's hard
to put words to it and now you know
they're maybe having a panic attack right
anything okay let's we can use medicines to take
the temperature down to to sort of
ease that person's way forward
so that they can understand something
right that then provides a resolution

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in that part of the pillar and then
you know things are set in a better place so
so the biological aspect
you know specifically
here we're talking about medicines has its place
but the idea that medicines
are a substitute for understanding
just makes no sense
well you've provided us an incredible
framework thank you
this framework really speaks to
all of us right you know
that the components that make us
who we are you know that as you
put it the structure of the self
you know everything from the unconscious mind
conscious mind defense mechanisms character structure
self and the functions
of self you know
these components of self-awareness
defense mechanisms reaching out
from that iceberg under the water
what we pay attention to
our behaviors and hopefully
our strivings and sense of hope
and how those two pillars flow up
into empowerment, humility
agency and gratitude
again as action terms as active
terms and
eventually to peace contentment and delight
in this notion of generative
drive as well as some of the pitfalls
and challenges
that can pull down on generative
drive or occlude generative drive
and you very clearly pointed us
to where we should all look
in terms of understanding
ourselves better and where we could
do better and be better
in the world because this is a series
we have the wonderful opportunity

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to have you tell us even
more about how this structure
plays out both in terms of
its healthy expression and
in terms of its unhealthy expression
you know in different pathologic conditions
that you know most of us are familiar
with at least in name
and I'm sure you're going to tell us more about
what the real
both underpinnings and expressions
of things like narcissism in
extreme and mild form
you know anxiety in its
extreme and mild forms
and also some of the
names and diagnoses that we're more familiar
with hearing about
such as bipolar disorder, obsessive
compulsive things of that sort
but that all relate
back to and really are nested
in this structure and function of self
and where it can all go
so first of all I want to say
and thank you
really an immense thank you
for defining this structure
and making it so clear to me
and to everybody else and as you said
it has its complexity
there's an immense complexity down there at the bottom
but that flows up from
complex to very simple ideals
and a road map to get there
and again the PDF is available to people
as a link in the show note captions
should they want to see this in visual form
I also want to thank you
for assembling this structure
not just as a tutorial but because
at least to my knowledge
no such structure

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or summary of these structures
exists anywhere in the world
and certainly not in any form that the
non-clinician and not
highly trained psychiatrist
could ever access or understand
this is both an immense resource
and an immense gift to us all
thank you so very much
you're so welcome and thank you for having me here
which is a gift
to be continued in the next episode
thank you
thank you for joining me for this first episode
of our series on mental health with Dr. Paul Conti
and I encourage you to keep an eye out
for the second episode in this series
which is going to be about how to improve
your mental health I'll just remind you that
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in the comment section on YouTube
I do read all the comments
and if you're not already following me on social media
I am HubermanLab on all platforms
so that's Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, threads
and Facebook and on all those platforms
I discuss science and science related tools

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some of which overlap with the content of the HubermanLab podcast but much of which is distinct from the content of the HubermanLab podcast so again it's HubermanLab on all social media channels not on today's episode but on many previous episodes of the HubermanLab podcast we discussed supplements while supplements aren't necessary for everybody many people derive tremendous benefit from them for things like enhancing sleep for hormone support and for focus if you'd like to see the supplements discussed on the HubermanLab podcast you can go to livemomentus spelled O-U-S so it's livemomentus.com slash Huberman if you haven't already subscribed to our newsletter it is a zero cost newsletter you get free podcast summaries as well as toolkits the toolkits are brief PDFs that list off the specific science backed protocols for things like improving your sleep improving focus, optimizing dopamine deliberate cold exposure we have a complete summary of our fitness series again all available completely zero cost you simply go to HubermanLab.com go to the menu scroll down to newsletter and provide your email to sign up we do not share your email with anybody thank you once again for joining me for today's discussion this is our first episode in our series about mental health with Dr. Paul Conti and last but certainly not least thank you for your interest in science