

# Critically Thinking & Happiness

Want more happiness – think better! The following is an essay based upon concepts from *Stumbling On Happiness*, the book written by Daniel Gilbert – 2006.

## **Improve Your Thinking and Become a Happier Person**

Want to live a happier, less stressful life? Try improving your critical thinking skills! That's right – sharpening your ability to think more clearly and effectively can reduce stress and anxiety and make you a happier, more positive person.

For more than 30 years, **BPI** has sought to understand the way minds work. Recently, we were pleased to have our understanding verified, that using solid rational thinking processes can lead to more happiness! Each Gilbert excerpt is followed with a tie-in to **BPI's** critical thinking process. Learn how to better avoid fear and anxiety and maintain a calm, positive mindset.

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### **Anxiety and Planning:**

"Although patients with frontal lobe damage often performed well on standard intelligence tests, memory tests, and the like, they showed severe impairments on any test – even the very simplest test – that involved planning. Damage to certain parts of the frontal lobe can make people feel calm." (Page 13.)

**BPI Comment:** Our frontal lobes give us both the ability to anticipate the future and our feelings of anxiety. So, it's natural to feel anxious about the future, particularly when the future is uncertain! But planning can significantly decrease anxiety. By creating a clear picture of the future, the mind space that might unconsciously become infested with scenarios of doom is instead offered a positive alternative. A clear plan frames the hope of a brighter future and quiets the mind. Planning is one of **BPI's** key critical thinking processes.

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### **Anticipation and Control:**

"Anticipating unpleasant events can minimize their (psychological) impact" (Page 19.)

". . . people find it gratifying to exercise control. . . human beings come into the world with a passion for control . . . if

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they lose their ability to control things . . . they become unhappy, helpless, hopeless, and depressed” (Pages 20-21.)  
“(the) illusion of control ... seems to confer many of the psychological benefits of genuine control. . . .researchers . . . conclude that the feeling of control . . . is one of the wellsprings of mental health” (Page 22.)

**BPI Comment:** The experience of a hospital team given the responsibility to implement the start-up of a radiation unit confirms this. The team participated in a **BPI** critical thinking workshop. They chose to work on an important but stressful issue in class, applying the **BPI** planning process. This involved them in anticipating potential problems and developing preventive and contingent actions. In a follow-up discussion with the team months after the class we determined that anticipating potential problems and developing contingent actions gave them a psychological edge. Instead of thinking “Oh no, everything is going wrong with this project!” they reported feeling calm and being in control. “We anticipated this and were prepared with alternate plans. We felt in control – even when something occurred that we hadn’t anticipated!” **BPI**’s planning and decision processes helped them complete their project on time and eliminated the earlier stress induced blame-game they had previously been playing.

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## **Brain Priorities:**

“But human brains were not designed from scratch. Rather, their most critical functions were designed first. . . . (E)volution took no chances and designed the brain to answer the ‘What should I do?’ question before the ‘What is it?’ question.’

**BPI Comment:** So, the classic supervisor dictum “I don’t care what you do! Just do something!” is a very human response. At a basic level ACTION trumps ANALYSIS every time. Not surprising but it can lead to big problems nowadays when the thing approaching us is not a vague shadow of an animal but a vague issue, problem or decision! Using **BPI**’s critical thinking processes allows you to have an agreed upon process to think through any issue, preventing

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our prehistoric wiring from taking false starts and making things worse.

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## **Regrets, I've had a few!**

“(M)ost people think they will regret foolish actions more than foolish inactions. But ... nine out of ten people are wrong (Page 179). We are more likely to generate a positive and credible view of an action than an inaction. ... And yet, we rarely choose action over inaction ... (Page 191.)”

**BPI Comment:** Of course, both foolish actions and foolish inactions should be avoided. The more clearly one can assess the reality of a situation the more psychologically ready one is to take effective action. For example, a complex decision tends to be delayed until the decision maker reaches decision clarity. Decision clarity can be greatly facilitated, however, by using a systematic decision tool. We've seen decisions that were delayed for months brought to completion in less than an hour using a step by step decision making process to organize and evaluate the same information that had been bogging them down! It is like the difference between eating a dinner one bite at a time vs. jamming the whole plateful into one's mouth all at once. **BPI's** simple system can process information in an orderly and thorough fashion, saving time overall (and avoiding indigestion!)

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## **Summary**

The Stoics were one of the earliest school of philosophy to assert the connection between good rational thought and calm, centered, feelings. In the current age, thinking clearly and rationally is sometimes perceived to be the enemy of the emotions. If you are interested in experiencing how critical thinking can contribute to you and your team being calmer, happier, more fulfilled people, please [contact](#) us. Visit our [Workshops](#) pages for descriptions of our courses.