

Obesity, bad driving, and our national character

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There's been a lot of attention paid to the growing incidence of obesity in this country. In a recent Public Radio broadcast an expert discussed the problem. He gave some alarming statistics supporting the fact that obesity is an epidemic that is spreading throughout our population. The increased rates of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease were cited. Our increasingly sedentary lifestyle was mentioned as a contributing cause. He gave proper emphasis to the fact that even poor people in our country now usually have access to an abundance of food.

The connection between poverty and diets of highly processed, calorie-rich food was discussed. Obesity was likened to a chronic disease and the importance of long-term management of the disorder was stressed. But it was curious to see his reaction when the issue of character was brought up. The expert took great pains to distance himself from the idea that a change in the character of our citizenry might be involved in this national epidemic of obesity. Attributing any of our current problems to "character" is apparently a topic that only a fool would take on. Look no further.



"You say 'meek,' but your records say 'passive-aggressive.'"

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There are good reasons why the issue of “character” is such a touchy one. Most mental illnesses are sort of like having a pebble in one’s shoe. The discomfort can be awfully intense yet those around us can’t understand what all of the fuss is about. Character problems are just the opposite. They’re more like having really bad body odor. We can’t smell it ourselves but it’s upsetting to everyone around us. And nobody likes to be told that they smell bad.

The human tendency to draw sweeping conclusions is further cause to avoid discussions of our character. It goes without saying that some fat people have a wonderful character structure and some thin people are weasels of the lowest order. But any connection between the increasing incidence of obesity and changes in our character will immediately be met with defensiveness, as though it’s unfair to even raise the issue or that to do so is to mount an uncalled for attack on the overweight.

It does seem strange to think that we would undergo massive changes in the way that we live our lives and raise our children without a corresponding change in our national character.

"Temperament" refers to the personality traits that we’re born with. "Character" is a product of the interaction between temperament and our experiences with the environment. The term refers to our habitual ways of seeing the world and reacting to it. How we regard our work, the nature of our relationships with others, whether we can find enjoyment in life, our openness to new experiences- these are all largely influenced by our character. Character is destiny.

If there are significant changes in the environments that we are raised in there *will* be resulting changes in our character. The question is not “if” there will be character changes. "What changes can we observe?" "What factors might we attribute these changes to?" "Is our national character developing in a way that we can feel good about?" "What can we do about the changes that we see?" These are the sorts of questions that we should really be asking. It would be a shame if it turned out that as a people we Americans have already passed our peak, with nothing before us but continued decline.

A Rorschach test for the masses



Of course, if there are really changes taking place in the character of our populace there should be other evidence of this besides our expanding waistlines. We need look no further for such evidence than our nation's freeways.

Our driving habits serve as a stunningly accurate "Ink Blot Test" with which to look at ourselves. Ordinary restrictions on the types of behaviors we will share with other humans are left aside when we get behind the wheel of our beloved automobiles. When we drive we are dealing with people that are nameless, faceless, and unlikely to ever be encountered again. In our minds we can turn them into whatever we need or want them to be. Our fellow drivers become the target of all of the repressed feelings and strivings that we carry around all of the time but cannot act on. Our secret competitive feelings, rage, sexual wishes, and exhibitionistic tendencies are all easily visible on any freeway in America.

Our complaints about the other drivers on the road have some consistent themes these days: Everybody is only looking out for himself. People drive as though they own the entire road. No one feels the rules apply to them anymore. Turn signals and traffic lights have become optional. Everyone is in a hurry. Even though driving fast and recklessly is only likely to shave a minute at most from a daily commute we see people jockeying for position like aspiring stock car racers every day.

The irony is that people are usually rushing to get to a place that they really don't want to

be in the first place. Their jobs. The same people who will risk the lives of those around them to get to work thirty seconds earlier are buying Powerball tickets when they fill up their tanks, fantasizing about how wonderful it would be if they no longer had to go to work at all. In truth, if we were forced to drive to our own executions we'd be trying to pass others on the way there.

Other suggestions that that the American character is changing for the worse aren't hard to come by.

Observers of the current political climate will tell you that the divisiveness that exists between the left and right today is unprecedented in our history. We've always had disagreements but nowadays the opposing camp is viewed with a disdain and hatefulness that we've never witnessed before. We cannot imagine that people who don't agree with us might have any redeeming qualities at all.

It seems to some of us that this polarity between the parties has fueled a new ethic in American politics. Leaders barely even pretend to be motivated by any thoughts of doing what is right or honorable anymore. The new mantra in both the political and business worlds is "what can we get away with?" It's easy to feel that the end justifies the means when we view the opposition as somehow less human than ourselves. And seeing those that don't agree with us as lesser humans is truly at the heart of the matter. That dynamic raises its ugly head in all sorts of ways these days.

Looking at the behavior of humans under difficult conditions provides another window into our collective soul. A recent hurricane that left thousands of Floridians homeless resulted in a flock of vultures descending on the area in hopes of individual profit. The suffering were charged hugely inflated prices for the basic commodities that they needed to survive. Tales of ten dollar bags of ice and 20,000 dollar estimates to have a tree limb removed from a rooftop abound. Do people in other "civilized" countries treat each other this way in times of trouble? Is this the way that Americans have always behaved towards each other? Or are we seeing further evidence that we're changing as a people.

Some of us will be able to acknowledge that these sorts of changing are taking place - in others. We've become increasingly anxious, impatient, and self-centered these days. We're more edgy, unfulfilled, and frightened too. These traits can make us irritating to each other. But more serious problems may underlie these changes. Our basic issues may have more to do with deep-seated feelings of insecurity that permeate every aspect of our lives.

Oral character traits and how to acquire them



Psychoanalysis has fallen out of favor these days, replaced by brief visits to the psychiatrist that always end with the writing of a prescription. But those strange men with their funny accents and oddly shaped couches discovered a lot about the character of humans. One of their concepts - the ***“Oral Character”*** seems particularly appropriate for a reappraisal.

Every human starts out at an "oral" stage of development. The important things in the world come through the mouth at first. Since we can't move or talk there really aren't that many options. Even when babies learn to move their hands in a purposeful way it's mainly to bring things to the mouth to be checked out.

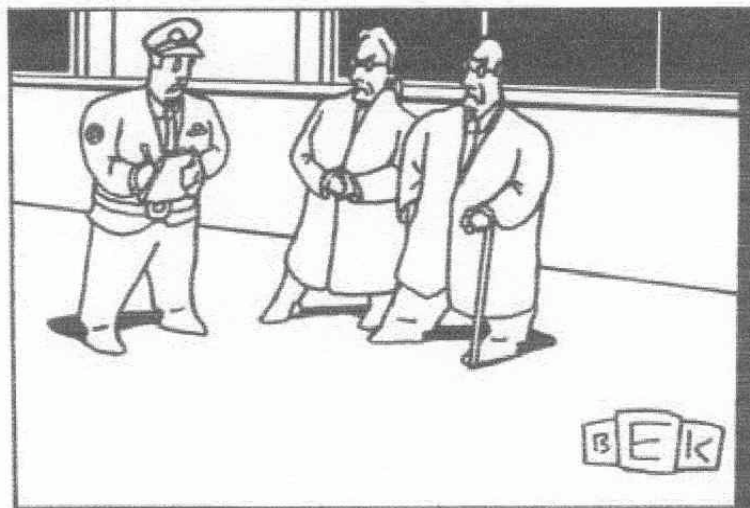
Of course "orality" is largely equated with hunger. Many laypeople would be tickled to sit in on psychoanalytic presentations. Most of the words that would be understandable refer to the breasts. Analysts talk about good breasts, bad breasts, introjected breasts, the withholding of the breast, the desire to own the breast, and so on to a point where you'd wonder if they don't have some sort of fixation themselves. But the idea is that much of our initial impressions of ourselves and our world are first laid down in response to issues around feeding.

Will Mom be there when the hunger starts? Will she be there every time or just sometimes? Will feeding be a time of gentleness and love or a task to be disposed with as quickly as possible? Are the needs anticipated or is it necessary to do a lot of screaming

to get fed? A lot of the basic symbols that we use to construct our adult worlds and determine our basic sense of worth are first created in regard to feeding.

The infant is the center of his world. He has no feelings of responsibility to anyone or anything else. Only his needs matter. "I want it and I want it now" is always his stance. Babies don't come into the world with the capacity to delay gratification and there are no guilty feelings about being demanding. In evolutionary terms there was actually a survival advantage to having a cry that was so irritating that the mother would drop everything else she was doing in the cave just to make that infernal racket stop. Since babies are completely dependent upon adults their insistent demands for instant gratification are a matter of life and death.

It only makes sense that the strong bonds that develop between the baby and its caretakers (whether politically correct or not, "caretaker" still usually translates to "Mom") are created around feeding time. Looking at Mom's face while the milk is taken in builds neural connections that are never rivaled during our lifetime. The idea is that if something goes wrong with this process of attachment - if the mom is too busy or too distracted or too angry or too unavailable - the child's development is affected. If the "oral stage" is not successfully negotiated or if it ends too soon the adult human maintains some of the characteristics of the baby.



"Did he have any distinguishing characteristics besides a strong sense of entitlement?"

Adults with "oral character" traits are seen as excessively self-centered and demanding. They remain focused on "taking things in" from the environment rather than a mutual give and take. There is a powerful wish to be admired and an expectation that the admiration should come without having to earn it in any way. Self-importance and impatience are never far below the surface. The "good" people are the people that like them and are like them. People that are different or don't seem to like them are summarily

labeled as "bad people". And lots of negative emotions can get attached to the "bad people".

The fact that the adult world does such a poor job of satisfying our lingering infantile demands leaves these people disappointed and depressed. We may go through life as though there are always powerful parent-like figures who could make everything better if only they cared enough about us. A stable sense of self-esteem does not develop. We don't feel responsible for our own lives. We're left feeling lonely even when others are around. Being truly alone can feel dangerous and produce extreme anxiety.

"Oral aggression" is another result of problems in that attachment phase. We adults often discharge our painful feelings of longing and disappointment through our mouths. Yelling or saying hurtful things to other people are obvious examples. Soothing ourselves by taking things into the mouth or through constant talking are other ways to express these oral needs.

So what did that ink blot test show Doctor?

Consider the traits that we deplore in other drivers. Their extreme self-centeredness (when it should be *us* that is at the center of everything). Their profound impatience and willingness to take life endangering risks that may only save a couple of seconds. Those feelings of specialness and the insistence that we admire them simply because they were willing to pay as much for a Humvee as some people pay for their homes. The idea that they're so superior and their needs are so important that ordinary rules don't apply to them.

Think about the ridiculous demonstrations of rage that drivers exhibit when someone intrudes upon what they see as their "territory". People act as though the fifty yards immediately in front of and behind their vehicles belong to them alone. We speed up to make sure no one gets into the space ahead of us and get furious when someone actually does. Our infantile frustrations are often expressed verbally but since people in other cars can rarely hear us we use the next best thing - hand signals. People are killed because of road rage all the time.



"I have to hang up now. You just walked through the door."

Here in Minnesota people are still allowed to drive while using cell phones, despite substantial research showing that talking on a cell phone increases the risk of accidents at least as much as does being legally drunk. Remember that the excessive need to talk is another "oral phenomenon". Certainly there are some people that conduct important business on cell phones. "Would you bring home some milk honey?". "Who's going to pick Junior up at daycare?". And so on. But as any eavesdropper knows, a lot of this preoccupation with talking on phones has very little to do with the actual content of the conversation. It's often really about satisfying an "oral fixation". Words are used for their soothing effects rather than to transmit information. This is directly akin to the baby cooing in his crib.

Look at all of the eating and drinking that goes on in automobiles now. Or everywhere else in America for that matter. Everybody carries water around nowadays. This is not a response to actual needs for hydration. That "requirement" for eight glasses of water per day was exposed as a myth some time ago. This new fixation with carrying liters of water around (and yes, it's often drawn from the same sources as the tap water that we now scorn) is not really a response to thirst. It has more to do with the calming feelings that can come from putting something to the mouth.

"Primitive defenses" and their far-reaching effects

"Implications of the Emerging Model" contains an attempt to explain the way that character is shaped by the sorts of "defense mechanisms" that we use to protect ourselves from painful emotions and impulses. When we're raised in ways that - at the very heart of the matter - leave us as insecure adults we have to go to greater lengths in order to feel safe. This often involves using defenses that are considered "primitive" because of the

fact that they depend on a distortion of reality in order to accomplish that feeling of security. Two of the basic primitive defenses include denial and projection.

People that use projection are able to see unwanted or unacceptable parts of themselves as coming from outside. The classic case is the paranoid who projects his angry and hostile feelings out into the world, ultimately concluding that everyone is against him or means him harm. Our daily commutes can leave us feeling the same way. But a lot of things can be “projected”. And in the case of oral characters these disavowed aspects of the self can include feelings of powerfulness and a sense of personal responsibility for their own lives.

We Americans are often quick to conclude that we aren’t at fault and that others are in the wrong. If we have problems it must be because more powerful others - whether the government or our parents or “God” or whatever - haven’t adequately taken care of our needs. The projection of responsibility for raising our children is another area we’re becoming good at.

Ultimately it’s denial that costs us the most as a people. We’re faced with all of the insecurities that come from living in a world that is increasing in complexity faster than our nervous systems and child rearing practices can adapt to it. And at the same time our life expectancies have grown longer as a result of abundant food and better medicines. It’s a set up for the denial of our own mortality. We live our lives as though we expect to live forever and that cheapens our very existence.

For an example let’s go back to our favorite ink blots.

The realistic dangers of driving on a freeway are actually pretty terrifying. If a stranger suddenly moves his hands one inch in the wrong direction a lethal accident can readily occur. All sorts of humans die on the highway every single day. Yet we drive to work each day blissfully unaware of the possibility that this commute could easily be our last. It’s common to see people eating, putting on makeup, and even reading while piloting their potentially deadly vehicles. Our denial of death is so complete that we rarely give a moment’s thought to the dangers involved.

It’s fascinating to see what happens when our denial of death is punctured by an actual accident. Traffic slows to a crawl if there’s even someone changing a tire on the roadside as drivers crane their necks to see if someone was hurt. And if there is a real accident, with real blood, you can guarantee that traffic on both sides of the road will come to a standstill.

The same guys that were in such a hurry a minute ago now don’t care how long it takes to reach their destination. It reinforces our sense of immortality to know that the reaper didn’t choose us. Then when we get to the office we’re greeted almost as heroes as we tell the story of our little brush with death. When we turn on the evening news at home we can also count on getting our daily dose of death. If nobody died that day the broadcasters will dredge up films of deaths past. Everyone wants to see death, as long as

it happens to the other guy. Keeping death in discrete sanitized packages allows us to live the bulk of our lives without giving it a moment's thought.

There are a host of effects that result from the denial of our mortality besides the fact that it makes us lousy drivers. It certainly contributes to our eating habits. People truly eat as though nothing bad will ever happen to them as a result, even though the statistics clearly indicate that being overweight will take years of our life away from us. The same holds true with smoking, drinking, and other oral endeavors.

Living as though we have unlimited time on this planet causes humans to surrender the one thing that we actually have to hold on to - this very moment that we are living. When we assume that our moments are unlimited - and deny that an accident, a heart attack, a ruptured aneurysm, a fatal arrhythmia, cancer, or some other nasty death might be right around the corner- we feel that it's OK to sacrifice the present one.

Instead of really living our life to the fullest we daydream about another time. About the things that we hope or fear might take place in the future. Worries or regrets about our past. What someone else might have thought of us. About how things could have or should have been. We live in a constant state of internal dialogue about these topics, rarely taking note of our surroundings or participating fully in them. We live our lives in unsatisfying routines that allow us to be only half- present mentally.

Believing that we are invulnerable touches every aspect of our lives.

Are we strong enough to bear the truth?

A recent trip to the tropics highlighted some of the problems that occur when death is faced as a reality. We selachophobes (people who are irrationally afraid of sharks) like to convince ourselves that we can maintain our safety as long as we stay out of the water. Then, right before embarking on a tropical vacation, it was learned that many more people die each year from being hit with falling coconuts than from shark attacks. Suddenly neither sea nor land was safe anymore. There was no choice but to huddle in the relative safety of a hotel room, hoping that death wouldn't find a way to visit. Thinking about death too much can be incapacitating.

It's hard to get past an underlying sense that we've somehow been cheated out of something. When kids first learn that they will die someday their reactions are usually of protest and disbelief. One obese woman finally revealed, after several years of intensive therapy, her belief that it "just wasn't fair" that she couldn't eat as much as she wanted to without having to gain weight as a result. Reaching her genuine feelings of anger about this didn't, as she had long feared, destroy her. Instead it served to energize her in many other areas of her life. Her character was actually changed as result of her ability to gradually see through the distorted beliefs and expectations that she'd been struggling under for so long.

The same sorts of increases in energy and freedom can come when we can summon up the strength to deal honestly with our own mortality. The fact that we have to die might not seem fair but acting as though that rule shouldn't have to apply to *us* requires enormous amounts of mental energy.

People really don't like to consider their own death and rarely express gratitude when a therapist brings the topic up. But the idea in psychoanalytic theory is that breaking down primitive defenses results in a healthier emotional life, with improved relationships, a new approach to work, and a greater capacity to experience genuine joy.

The uninitiated often think that analysis is about remembering forgotten items from one's past. The real therapy comes, instead, from recreating those insecure attachments with the psychoanalyst and learning about the ways that repeating the patterns established in childhood get in the way of the things that we want as adults. People used to pay those guys big money to lie on those couches five days per week for years on end. They must have been on to something.

Looking in the mirror can be painful

We can predict that this pointless attempt to expose some of the character problems that our country is suffering from will be met with rejection and denial. We are, after all, "the strongest nation on earth". No other nation has such an impact on how the rest of the world is developing. We're still a relatively affluent country. And a lot of our people *are* reasonably self-confident, with happy and productive lives. So does our society really have a problem?

You can tell a lot about a society by the frequency and severity of the disorders that afflict it. The epidemic of obesity that America is facing is unprecedented in human history and is showing no signs of slowing down. That fact alone should raise a sufficient red flag. But there are other indications that problems are afoot.

Look at the increasing incidence of Attention Deficit Disorder in this country. If we're going to be absolutely frank about this it's likely that we're really dealing with two kinds of Attention Deficit Disorder. In one the disorder is named after its primary symptom. Some of those kids seem to have a genetic problem or at least one that developed as their brains were forming. As a result they have significant problems with paying attention, have unstable emotional systems, and often lack impulse control.



In the other type, “Attention Deficit Disorder” is actually referring to the *cause* of the problems rather than the symptoms. There are an awful lot of children in our society who simply don’t get adequate amounts of loving attention from their parents. Parents may be too busy or too poor or too self involved or whatever but the end result is that the children aren’t getting the things that they need to build stable brains and secure self esteem.

These kids are hungry for attention of any kind. If acting badly is a way to obtain that attention they’ll do what they have to do. For young humans even “negative” attention such as punishment is preferable to being ignored. When we invest insufficient time and energy in raising our nation’s kids there are a whole lot of predictable results including obesity, impulse control problems, substance abuse, inability to form loving relationships, and incapacity to engage in productive work.

Unfortunately, ignoring our kids is not among our most serious offences against them. Has there ever been a society that has been so willing to use its own children as sexual objects? Child abuse has become rampant. The immediate needs for gratification of the adult outweigh the decades of misery that the child may suffer. The fact that the vast majority of sexual abuse takes place within families further points to real problems in the quality of the attachments that we are forming. And the overt sexual abuse is not the only way in which our country's kids are being preyed upon.

The greediness of adults drives our willingness to steal from our children. We do this when our society mounts trillions of dollars in debts. We are, in effect, charging the things that we want today to an account that our kids will have to pay off later. It's not enough that we expect them to care for us on our old age. We want their future money now.

The same principle applies to the way we use our national resources. There are people who would drain every last drop of oil from the planet today if they could get enough money out of the deal. We're plundering the earth without any concern for what will be left for our children. The argument that "justifies" this is always an economic one. Somebody somewhere needs the money so whatever we do is OK.

It's not like this fixation on feeding our greed has made us a happy people. America is the clear gold medal winner when it comes to slaughtering its own citizens. Frightened and insecure people are walking our streets armed to the teeth. Any little threat to their imaginary self-importance can result in gunfights. Stealing from each other has become a blood sport. Human life is given no value in comparison to the immediate discharge of emotions based in greed, fear, or competitiveness.

Has there ever been another nation on earth in which "Compulsive Shopping" was a widespread disorder? Like so many other human problems modern psychiatry has dealt with this one largely by throwing antidepressants from the Prozac family at it rather than trying to understand it. This problem seems to be clearly related to the abundance in which we Americans live.

In a land in which most people have plenty of everything buying things can become something that people do to satisfy underlying feelings of anxiety and discomfort rather than to acquire something that they really need. Some people - oftentimes affluent women - even need to take things a step further and steal the items rather than pay for them. Both compulsive shoppers and kleptomaniacs will describe a mounting sense of anxiety and tension that's only released by obtaining the goods.

A similar mechanism is underneath the obesity that many Americans suffer. Millions of us never experience actual *hunger* at any time in our lives. We always carry around enough extra bodyfat to live for quite a while in the absence of food. Instead we eat to satisfy other uncomfortable feelings that we mistake for hunger. Usually these feelings come at times that our bodies have learned to associate with eating.

Most people eat three meals per day at regular times. As the clock approaches mealtimes our bodies prepare for the food that they know is coming. Stomachs rumble, gastric juices are released. "Boy am I starving" is a common comment if feeding is delayed by even an hour or two, as though we'd have any idea what that feeling is like. We get increasingly anxious and don't feel right again until we've eaten.

Anxiety and boredom are the triggers to eat that have replaced genuine hunger in our culture. People stroll back and forth from the TV to the refrigerator, looking for something that neither one can possibly provide.

We Americans seem less and less comfortable with the way that we feel these days. And if food doesn't take away our discomfort we find other things to take into our mouth. Smoking. Drinking. Taking drugs - whether prescription ones or the fun kind. There's just something inside us that we're having a hard time coping with. And developing the long awaited pill that we can take to prevent ourselves from getting fat isn't going to change that one bit.

How do other cultures see us?

If we need further proof that our national character is changing we need only ask people from other countries what they think of Americans these days. Of course to even ask the question or care about the response is now considered strangely "un-American". As our critics have grown abroad we've dealt with this by convincing ourselves that they must be inferior to us. The derogatory terms that we use for people that don't like us or aren't like us are always rooted in the belief that they are a lower form of human than we are. No country that dares to disagree with us is immune from the phenomenon. There is no way that we're going to admit that *any* country's criticism of the American character could possibly have any validity. Remember, the *good* people are the people that *like us*.

People that travel abroad a lot are often aware that even the countries that have traditionally loved Americans are starting to wonder what's up with us. Something has changed in us and they're seeing it. We're no longer the bold adventurers or protectors of the weak that we once prided ourselves on being.

Americans are now becoming known as the people with the large behinds and pot bellies. We typically interact with foreigners with sort of a superficial good nature that can quickly give way to a whiney demandingness. We're quick to conclude that strangers are trying to cheat us out of something. We always assume that everyone, everywhere, should speak our language and rarely take the time to learn a few words of anyone else's. Many of our interactions with the locals, especially in the third world, are pretty condescending and rooted in convictions of our superiority.

Sometimes the word "bully" is used to describe our country now. "Greedy" is another term that people use. The fact that people - even our friends - would see us in these ways should be disturbing. Our tendency is, instead, to deny that these terms (which refer to such common elements of the "oral character") have any basis in truth about *us*.

Our willingness to write off these opinions as the result of character problems in our critics provides yet more support for the idea that our national character is changing for the worse. When we look in the mirror and see that we've become so preoccupied with our own desires and insecurities that we can somehow justify killing innocent children that should be at least a little disturbing too.

The medicine doesn't taste that bad

Any psychiatrist will tell you that an awful lot of people don't like our treatments. Patients don't take our medicines regularly, if at all. They often don't show up for appointments or therapy groups. But in the treatment of the character problems of our national "patient" our antidotes should have some real appeal.

First and foremost we must find ways for parents to spend more quality time with their children during the important formative years. The way kids are by the age of five or so pretty much determines how their lives are likely to turn out. Anything that we can do to promote deep-seated, secure attachments between babies and their parents will be crucial to developing adults who will be more secure and productive. No investment in our young people can be too great.

This attention may take the form of more support for working parents to be with their kids. The Family Medical Leave act was a noble effort but ninety days of unpaid parental leave doesn't go anywhere near far enough. More flexible work schedules, better day care programs, child care at the work place, and more education for parents are all needed.

We need to stop using television as a babysitter for our children. We must quit using food as a pacifier. We adults can certainly do a better job of modeling restraint and self-discipline. There are plenty of wonderful parents who work yet still make spending time with their children a priority. If we're not prepared to or able to make that sacrifice for our children we really shouldn't be having them. Little humans are too precious to be ignored.

There is ultimately no excuse for having so many of our children living in poverty and having lousy diets while they're forming their brains. And putting vending machines filled with high calorie snacks and drinks into our schools is truly ludicrous. Kids need a good diet, with sufficient Omega III fatty acids and many other essential nutrients, if they are to have any chance of constructing the best brains that their genes will allow.

"Penny wise and pound foolish" certainly applies here. Even if the humanitarian arguments leave us untouched we should provide the things that all of our children need - healthy diets, secure relationships, stimulating activities, and a level educational playing field - *for selfish reasons alone*. Kids that are given good opportunities grow up to become productive, taxpaying adults. Many children that our society fails end up costing a whole lot more money in the long run. Prisons, mental hospitals, and homeless shelters are all expensive to run and the people that live in them don't pay taxes.

Obesity costs all of us a lot of money too, often in ways that we don't think about. The tax dollars going for the treatment of obesity-related illnesses in public hospitals and clinics take up a large chunk of our health care budget. And there are all sorts of less obvious expenses.

Every time we buy something that's made in America part of the price tag goes to pay for

health insurance for the company's employees. Something like \$1400 of the cost of the average car goes to health care. Obesity and its associated health problems drive up the cost of our products by driving up insurance rates. These costs make it hard for American companies to compete in the global marketplace. There is an increasing push to outsource labor to overseas companies that aren't saddled with the cost of health care for their workers. Fewer good jobs at home results in more poverty and stress. Parents have to spend more time working at lower paying jobs just to get by. There's less time for the kids and less money for healthy food. And obesity continues its relentless advance.

Of course this whole mess also points to the screaming need for a single-payer, national health program for all Americans but that's another story. The fact that we could provide sound, cradle to grave health care for all of our citizens for much less than what we pay for the cumbersome, fragmented, profit-oriented system that currently leaves millions uninsured is one of the cruelest ironies of modern America

When it comes to improving the mental health of our grown ups things are a little more complicated. The first step to addressing our problem is to admit that we have one in the first place. None of us like to admit that about ourselves. But if we do there are some simple things that we can do to make our lives better. And that's ultimately what the medicine is intended to do.

Just about all of us could use more novelty in our lives. Our brains need new experiences and challenges if they are to function at their best. This may involve taking a careful look at our days to see where we have allowed things to become so routine that we no longer attend to them anymore. Once we have discovered what our routines and habits are we can start to go about changing them.

Even tiny things like driving to work by a different route, eating lunch at a different time, or even putting on our clothes in a different order can shake things up. They can force us to become more aware of our present realities and to more fully take part in them. The consequences of making small simple changes in our daily routines can add up to produce enormous benefits.

Just about any kind of travel is good for our mental health. Exotic locales are wonderful but even going to a different part of town can have some of the same effects on our perspective and our brains. And while many Americans can't even bear the thought of eating dinner in a restaurant by themselves, traveling alone has many unique advantages. It allows freedom from all of the usual activities, obligations, and attitudes that can keep our lives in a rut.



"What you hate is walking. This is hiking—hiking is different from walking."

As has been stressed elsewhere, the benefits of physical exercise are among the most impressive of any “treatment” that modern medicine can offer. Depression, diabetes, anxiety, heart disease, insomnia, cancer risk, sexual problems - you name the problem and exercise is pretty good for it. Obviously that holds especially true for obesity. Even walking around the block after dinner is a good place to start.

We're prone to thinking about self-discipline in big, all-or-none terms. Every New Year we make impressive resolutions about the new and improved person that we'll become. But that's not how control really happens. It comes in the little details. The diets that have the best chance of long term success are those in which we lose a couple of pounds per month. There are a lot of ways to accomplish this if we're serious about it.

Simply leaving a little food on the plate at the end of a meal reinforces our ability to say "no" to ourselves. It often highlights irrational concerns that we have about "wasting" food as well. Just walking away from the refrigerator empty handed one time per day can easily drop a pound per month. Taking in the bulk of one's calories during the morning can make weight control easier. It starting to look like the actual amount of bulk that we take in has a lot to do with giving signals to our brain that we're full. Eating more foods that provide bulk without a lot of calories can be very helpful. Taking a large glass of water with a few saltines before meals can lead to weight loss, as can simply eating more slowly and starting to enjoy the taste of our food.

There are all sorts of things that work. Of course we're likely to reject each and every one of these suggestions because we still feel at some unconscious level that it's not fair that we'd have to change at all.

As terrifying as this might sound, it's not a bad idea for Americans to learn what actual hunger feels like. Until we do we just keep on misreading all of those bodily signals as something that they aren't. Fasting, even for just a day or two at a time and with appropriate fluid intake, allows us to gain a new perspective and understanding of the phenomenon of hunger. And it helps to remind us who is really in charge.

We often pretend that it is not ourselves that is making the decision to eat - as though our body somehow belongs to someone else. Maybe the real goal is to enlarge what we think of as "self" - to reclaim parts that we have experienced as not being us. Many of us have such a distant relationship with our bodies that we essentially go through life as though we are disembodied heads.

Anything that can be done to still that relentless internal dialogue - even for a few moments - will result in our more fully participating in our lives rather than living exclusively in the alternative world of thoughts. Learning to live more fully in the present is less confusing for the emotional centers of our brains. They don't have to balance the attachment of emotions between "the now" and "the what if?". Ultimately anxiety, stress, and depression are reduced.

While people are often quick to protest that turning off their thoughts is something that they just cannot do, in actuality this is a skill that can be learned like any other. It takes practice and a desire to learn. Nobody is good at it in the beginning. But even quieting the mind for a few seconds makes it easier to do the next time. This is another area where something seemingly small can have profound and unanticipated consequences over time. If you're the kind of person who prefers formal instruction or doing things in groups there are plenty of opportunities to take classes in meditation, yoga, tai chi or Zen Buddhism.

Another way of stopping the constant internal dialogue is to engage ourselves in activities that are engrossing. In fact if one compares people that are considered very healthy emotionally to those that are "mentally ill" the biggest single difference is that the healthy group has a lot of activities, relationships, and interests that occupy their time and energy. We really don't know for sure what is cause and what is effect.

It doesn't matter much what a person does to truly engage themselves in the moment. Sports, hobbies, reading, jobs, friends and family, crossword puzzles, gardening-whatever works. The more of these activities the better. Anything will help as long as it can capture and sustain our interest. Activities that demand something of us or require patience and planning are probably the best.

Television has become the American substitute for doing things. At its best it can capture attention for a while but the way we watch it is increasingly in short little bits before flicking to the next channel. As was mentioned in an earlier chapter we're learning that exposing our kids to a lot of TV when they're little increases the risk of Attention Deficit Disorder when they're older. There is no reason to think that excessive television would

be good for adult brains either.

Americans - especially those of us with a healthy dose of the oral character - don't like to hear about changes that develop slowly or require work on our parts. If there's something wrong we want someone to fix us and fix us now. We want it to be easy and we don't want it to hurt. And we'd prefer to start tomorrow since we really do have all of the time in the world...

Scientists know that when they send rocket ships to far off planets the initial trajectory has to be just exactly right. A mistake of only half a degree in trajectory can end up with the spaceship missing its mark by millions of miles. We can use this same principle to our own advantage. Anytime that we do little things to change our lives they alter our life trajectory. We end up in a different place than we would have without the change.

What should we expect? - We're primates

Coming to terms with the fact that we're basically a taller version of chimpanzees isn't so easy. Many of us have been so indoctrinated with ideas about the exalted place that mankind has among the earth's creatures that any evidence of our primate nature must immediately be projected onto others and despised. These unrealistic expectations of ourselves are the cause of a lot of our problems. Strangely enough, living our lives in a way that is more in tune with our animal natures provides the best way out of our dilemma.

"Altruism" refers to the idea that we should live our lives in a way that is unselfish and designed to make things better for others. Some of us think that this might be a bit too much to ask of humans. As an example, imagine that a hand grenade is tossed into a crowded room, with no time to remove it before it explodes. Is the guy that jumps on top of it to save everyone else truly acting for altruistic reasons? Or does he do so because he knows he's going to die anyway and by saving others he is living in accordance with an underlying view of himself as a heroic person? To humans our self-image is among our most precious commodities. When we act for the greater good it can provide all sorts of benefits to us in terms of the way we feel about ourselves and our lives.

The fact is that we're just wired to be selfish. We should accept that about ourselves. The secret is to be smarter about the ways that we're selfish. The concept of "Intellectual Altruism" holds that even though our true natures are selfish it is in our own best interests to behave as though we are not.

It is truly in our own best interests to create a society where everyone has access to a decent quality of life. It would allow us to walk our streets without having to deal with anxiety and the stress hormones that are so difficult for our brains to tolerate. Living as though we're surrounded by subhuman enemies comes at a terrible personal cost.

It's in our selfish interests to spend time with our children and loved ones too. There is no greater determinant of personal happiness than the quality of one's relationships with other humans.

Treating other humans well provides other benefits. When we act dishonorably or dishonestly that carries a cost whether we admit it to ourselves or not. Our underlying self image changes. We have to think of ourselves as the kind of person that would cheat others, or lie, or take advantage of the weak. All of those self-concepts make us uncomfortable and the discomfort must be dealt with in some way.

The businessmen or politicians who act solely out of greed are not happy, fulfilled people that love their lives. And psychiatrists can tell you that child abusers and thieves are among the most miserable people that we deal with. Acting badly only reinforces an underlying sense of our inherent badness.

Imagine what our freeways could be like if humans actually drove in a way to further the common good. If everyone felt responsibility for the overall flow of traffic things would be markedly different. People could merge smoothly into traffic if this were a cooperative endeavor instead of a competition. They would anticipate having to exit and would do so without making others hit their brakes. Drivers would conduct themselves with regard to the safety of the group and would leave their competitive and exhibitionistic feelings at home. Driving on our freeways would become a faster and more enjoyable experience for everyone.

When Americans hear about Germans driving on the autobahn at speeds over 150 miles per hour we may mistakenly assume that the roads must be a lot better than our own freeways. We're often surprised to see that the actual roadways are no different than our own. The differences that permit these sorts of speeds are actually in the behaviors of the drivers. A more cooperative attitude and an obligation to always let faster drivers pass on the left have enormous effects on the ways that the traffic moves along. Is there anyone in this country that is happy about the way that they feel during their rush hour commutes?

People who have traveled to other, more enlightened countries know that things can be better for everyone concerned. In Denmark you can walk anywhere, at anytime, without feeling that you should be carrying a sidearm. Health care is regarded as a basic human right. People can pretty much live their lives the way that they want to as long as they aren't bothering others. The differences between "classes" are almost nonexistent. As a result the Danish people are much more relaxed and good natured than we Americans. They seem to laugh more and get more enjoyment out of their lives. Isn't that what we really want for ourselves?

Of course, the changes that we Americans need to make aren't really about losing weight or getting to work feeling less harried. They're about treating our own lives as though they are infinitely more valuable than we usually assume them to be. About gradually becoming more secure within ourselves and better able to love others. About taking more responsibility for the way that our lives turn out and enhancing our curiosity about the wonder of the world around us.

We need to stop taking ourselves so seriously. To lighten up a bit and have more fun and laughter in our lives. We should visit new places and do new things. And we really should admit to ourselves that simply making an automobile go fast requires no particular skill or talent at all.

Above all we should be aware that, under the best of circumstances, our time on this beautiful little planet is going to be far shorter than we'd want. And that it could end - quite literally - at any moment. We should make the best of things for the brief time that we're here. And we really should try to leave things better than we've found them for the next generations of humans. We'll feel better if we do.