

Chapter 3. Elements Of The Mind

The components of the brain, being physical, tangible, and observable, are perhaps more easily conceptualized than the elements of the mind. We can see a frontal lobe, a third ventricle, a motor neuron, or a brain tumor, and we can measure electrical signals and neurotransmitters. A system of consciousness is more ethereal, but the major elements and functions of the mind are familiar to us all: thinking, feeling, memory, needs and desires, expectations, the capacity to produce behavior, as well as conscious awareness itself, both of the external world in the form of sensations and perceptions, and internally in the form of identity and self consciousness. Our minds are not issued with an owner's manual at birth; we gradually develop an understanding of how our minds work, and how to control its functions, some of us more, or less, than others. But these skills leading to improved self insight and self control can be developed deliberately.

A substantial portion of this book will deal with the management of negative feelings, as humans are largely driven by the need to produce pleasurable feelings, or to at least maintain a neutral emotional tone by eliminating negative feelings. But the relationships between feelings and other elements of the mind are essential to this quest, as these other mental phenomena each impact our feelings, often quite directly. Consider for a moment our ability to change thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Which is the most difficult to change, directly and immediately? Feelings right? I can immediately change my thoughts from this paragraph to my next ski vacation, and I can quickly change my behavior from keystriking to walking downstairs to rummage through my refrigerator. But to change my feelings, I have to go through thoughts or behaviors to get there. Let's say that I want to feel more joyful in the next hour. I have to either THINK of something joyful, like my oldest daughter's wedding next year, or go DO something likely to result in joy, such as LSU's football game tonite (hopefully). Feelings cannot be changed directly; they must be changed indirectly. The art of doing so is often complicated and difficult, and requires patience, initiative, creativity, and perseverance. No wonder so many try the quicker and easier route of adjusting our moods more directly via chemicals. Substances are a rapid means of creating positive moods and numbing negative moods, even though the immediate impact is sometimes unexpected, and often accompanied by negative

consequences in the future, particularly if we go to the well too often. The more difficult but ultimately successful route is to learn how to direct and manage our thoughts, behaviors, perceptions and expectations in a way that maximizes positive feelings, while minimizing or neutralizing negative ones. Indeed, cognitive behavioral psychology is a robust field based on this very premise, that we can change how we feel by changing our thoughts and behaviors.

Consider the following examples, each of which foreshadows a later discussion. The more I withdraw when I am depressed, the more depressed I am likely to become. The BEHAVIOR of withdrawal, whether it be social isolation, withdrawal to sleep, or couch potatodom, results in reduced social interaction and support, fewer potentially pleasurable activities, and less productivity, the combination of which is likely to increase depression and its commonly associated feelings of sadness, boredom, alienation, and meaninglessness. The THOUGHT “What if...” is the best manufacturer of anxiety on the planet. The EXPECTATION that others will consistently behave the way we want them to is a sure fire means of producing frustration, which can then be quickly turned into anger if we THINK that they are responsible for frustrating us. Thus, it is important to be conscious of our own, as well as alternative thoughts, expectations and behaviors, and how they impact our feelings, both immediately and later (as these are often opposite!). We will examine these connections in the Managing Feelings section of this book.

Likewise, memory and identity can each have a strong impact on feelings. MEMORY of a traumatic event, such as the death of a parent, or being abused, is associated with intense negative feelings. And such memories can be triggered by a variety of events, external and internal. For example, if you were sexually abused as a child, the SENSATION of the scent of cologne X on your boss, if it is the same cologne worn by your childhood perpetrator, can lead to a rapid downward spiral of memories and feelings. And our IDENTITY can have components that lead us to act differently, depending on which EGO STATE is active at the moment. Far short of the extreme of multiple personality, more subtle ego state shifts can affect our behavior and moods. Say perhaps that you were very compliant and passive during your abuse as a child, but then extremely rebellious as a late adolescent. Depending on which of these two ego states is triggered at the moment, you may find yourself excessively helpless and sad, or oppositional and angry. Such ego states, or subtle subpersonalities, simultaneously guide your thoughts,

PERCEPTIONS (e.g., men as evil), feelings and behavior. Therefore, learning to identify and shift such ego states can sometimes be more effective than trying to change just a thought or a behavior governed by an ego state. Psychoanalytic approaches to psychotherapy can be effective in identifying and resolving traumatic origins of bothersome memories, feelings and ego states. Whether we use the trauma focused psychoanalytic approach, the habit oriented cognitive behavioral model, or perhaps the existential model emphasizing meaning and purpose depends on the nature and source of our distress. Each of these approaches has value, but each tends to emphasize some elements of the mind more than others. We will refer to each of these therapeutic models as we explore how to understand the interactions between and management of the various elements of the mind.