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CULTIVATING THE MINDSET FOR CREATIVE OUTPUT

by

ALISON AKELL

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SYNTHESIS*
MASTER OF ARTS
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

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Abstract: Changing habits is a common pursuit whether it is in support of one's creative work or another personal goal. I wanted to take myself more seriously as an artist and to change my procrastination habit towards that work. While solutions can seem simple, the ongoing difficulty of making this change led me seek further understanding of why knowledge of a solution is not always enough. Throughout my study in the Critical and Creative Thinking program at The University of Massachusetts Boston, I started to develop knowledge of the underlying ways of thinking that were affecting my actions. Learning about principles within cognitive psychology helped me understand how my ways of thinking developed. Automatic responses and reinforcement of them through internal dialogue played a significant role in the emotional resistance I had developed to artmaking. I no longer enjoyed the process of painting and needed to cultivate a new mindset for it. Understanding the connections between awareness of thinking, emotions, and reinforced responses provided me with insight about how to change my thinking, emotions, and responses from unconscious to conscious in order to change my mindset from powerless to powerful. Through this project, I found that mindset is of utmost importance—not only for motivation towards work one wishes to do, but as an experience and a foundation. While creative work was the focus of habit I wished to affect, the concepts may be applied to any situation in which change is desired.

* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Learning the Elements of My Resistance	2
Understanding Mindset as the Issue	2
The Power of Automatic Responses.....	5
Preference Reinforcement	9
Understanding the Emotion and Action Link	11
A Closer Look at Mindset and Emotions	14
Developing Beliefs through Experience and Reflection	16
Practicing Awareness of Thinking.....	17
Conscious Reinforcement of Desired Responses	20
Experiencing the Mindset I Sought: Believing in the Power of the Self.....	24
Looking Back and Looking Ahead	27
Conclusion	29
References.....	31
Appendix.....	32

Introduction

Seeking to change habits is a common pursuit whether it is for creating a new habit or ending an undesired habit. Often the status quo of thinking and doing persists despite change being desired, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness and even suffering. Painting was something I once loved doing, but I had stopped painting regularly which created a sense of longing and sometimes, despair. Although it bothered me and the solution seemed simple enough—use free time to paint—I did not take consistent action towards my goals. Much has been written on this very topic in regards to the creative process, but also for a variety of habits that people often wish to but cannot seem to change. I knew I was not alone in my struggle, and I wanted to fully understand this prevalent issue in the hopes of finding profound, yet practical solutions.

During my graduate study of Critical and Creative Thinking at The University of Massachusetts Boston, an exploration of procrastination both in general terms and towards artmaking was my focus for two projects which, along with my other coursework, provided me with insights to build on. Understanding the role that negative thinking plays in procrastination, I came to realize that emotion was at the heart of the matter. With further exploration of the topic for this project, I was able to learn much more about the factors contributing to my resistance to change as well as to my state of mind. I realized that my mindset was the main issue that needed to be addressed. Change of habit or action involves change in thinking so in order to change thinking, an understanding of thinking processes is important. Developing awareness of my own thinking, as well as understanding of how it came to be, also played a role in my ability to change it. I realized I needed to be able to cultivate change in my own life first. I can only

control myself after all, and I came to believe that this concept is the key to realizing my true power to bring about change of any kind.

For this project, I revisited some of the content that I had encountered throughout my Critical and Creative Thinking coursework which could provide insights and applications to the task at hand: a mindset shift. I spent time both experiencing and reflecting on my experiences, past and ongoing, in order to discover the most important elements to support the mindset for creative output that I wished to have. I considered how many of the concepts of cognitive psychology I had learned about could help me understand and affect my own thinking and emotions, and thus, my mindset. While I discovered concepts and strategies through this exploration, I simultaneously used them to maintain engagement with the learning process that I was undertaking; practicing awareness of thinking, reinforcing desired responses, and self-regulating emotion developed as the key elements to my desired mindset. Actively engaging in the process helped me to experience personal power and internalize beliefs about the self as the foundation for cultivating the mindset I sought. The nature of this project has been learning, experiencing, and reflecting in order to develop a mindset shift. It has been a process which will remain ongoing.

Learning the Elements of My Resistance

Understanding Mindset as the Issue

I had explored this problem through some of my previous coursework which provided me with knowledge to build on for this project. In the spring of 2017, I took the courses Action Research for Educational, Professional, and Personal Change (hereafter called Action Research) and Reflective Practice within the Graduate Program in Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) program (see Appendix). In the Action Research course, I investigated the concept of

procrastination; in Reflective Practice I worked on creating a painting practice. At that time, I was not painting consistently anymore, but I wanted to take it more seriously; painting was one of the things I procrastinated. I was excited to be able to take the time to think and write about painting, and, most importantly, to paint. I looked at art, I read about the creative process, I painted, I journaled. I thought for sure this immersive process would set me up for success. I was hoping that through these courses, I would cure myself of procrastination and my passion for painting would be reinvigorated—lofty goals, but I was optimistic.

By the end of the Reflective Practice course, I had learned to embrace my painting style. Reflection through writing helped me to realize that what I loved the most in other people's artwork is being able to see them. In painting, how something is painted and what is painted is a window into the artists themselves—their unique ways of seeing and experiencing—and is what connects viewers to a piece as well as to the artist's body of work as a whole. Before internalizing this idea, I would judge my work harshly because I could see my hand in the painting. I was equating seeing myself in the work with being an amateur, and I did not like that. However, all I can offer is my perspective, my interpretation and vision, and striving for anything else stopped making sense once I grasped that. I was fighting against something I should have been developing instead. Painter Frank Auerbach reached a similar conclusion: "It only seems an authentic invention when I know that, however nutty it might look to someone else, that it is actually true, for me" (Lampert, 2015, pp. 40-41). "Good" could be judged according to the sentiment of that statement going forward.

I learned meaningful things through my projects, but at the end of that semester and beyond, painting remained a struggle. Sometimes I would find myself enjoying the process, other times it felt forced and unpleasant. I wondered how long it would take for painting to feel

completely natural again like it did when I was young. “Just keeping going” is one possible solution to that problem, but I did not keep going. I went back to my old habits. I painted occasionally when the mood struck. Through my Action Research course project, I learned that procrastination is actually an impulsive act, rather than inaction, and reveals a lack of self-control in that sense. I was choosing to do other things when avoiding the task at hand which for me was painting. I also learned that procrastination is not necessarily a problem unless I feel that it is; feeling bad is a core issue. With that understanding and a shift away from self-judgement, procrastination became less of a problem for me but it did not disappear. I still did not feel in complete control of the situation and that felt bad. I knew what I should do, but I did not always do it. I had learned valuable tools and steps I could take to help me form a new habit. However, one must take those steps and use those tools to make progress and I was not doing that. Just as knowing what to do is not the same as doing it, knowing what to think is not the same as thinking it. We might “know” we should think positively, believe in ourselves, and be more mindful, but that does not make it so. I wanted to understand that. I often think positively and mindfully, but not in all circumstances. I knew I had capacity for self-control and exercised it in many ways, yet for painting and other creative work I did not seem as able.

In the Creative Thinking course in CCT, part of our study involved looking at creative people and the creative process (see Appendix). It is common to investigate highly innovative or productive people to try to figure out what makes them tick. What are their habits? What inspires them? What is in their toolbox? This inquiry can certainly be useful for insights, inspiration, and understanding. However, looking at the mindset, or attitude, which highly driven creative people seem to have is *intrinsic motivation* for what they are doing—enjoyment of the process is primary. In this way, intrinsic motivation and enjoyment are intertwined. Forms of

extrinsic motivation may also be present, but intrinsic motivation being less dependent on changing circumstances better supports perseverance, and perseverance is needed for creative work of all kinds and in all disciplines. For some, this mindset comes naturally, but in the case of artmaking, it did no longer did for me. I realized that to take the steps I needed to take, the mindset of intrinsic motivation was needed.

Even though I wanted to be painting, the reality was that I no longer enjoyed painting. I was clearly not driven to do it. I rarely made time for it. Sometimes, as is the case with procrastination, one wants or needs to do a task that is not naturally enjoyed. I came to understand that if there is something I want to do, but I am not doing it, I do not enjoy it—but I do *wish* to enjoy it. Can I decide what I enjoy? That became a guiding question for me.

The Power of Automatic Responses

To understand what leads to enjoyment and intrinsic motivation for the creative process—the mindset I sought—my existing mindset was an important inquiry. I reexamined some key principles and mechanisms of cognition I had learned about in the Advanced Cognitive Psychology course in CCT (see Appendix) in order to reorient myself about how the mind works. This review helped me to contemplate some of the subtle and sometimes unconscious mind mechanisms that were influencing my emotions and my actions. I wanted to understand what can make change difficult on a deeper level. I had learned throughout the course that efficiency wins out over accuracy time and again within our cognitive processes. It is more efficient for things to happen automatically, and that is a good thing—but it can make change difficult.

Automaticity in cognitive psychology can be thought of as a process that allows for mastery of skills by freeing mental resources for further use (Reisberg, 2013, p.154). We are in

constant stimulation, so automatic processing of stimuli is extremely useful. To actively and consciously process all of what is happening at any given moment is unimaginable. One can look at the complexity of seemingly simple tasks and realize how valuable it is to be able to learn and have cognitive processing begin to happen automatically. Reading is one example of how automatic one's responses can become through practice and how useful that process is. When learning to read, one has to begin to recognize letters through their shape, then understand what sounds are associated with the letters, and then link them together for words and word meaning. Luckily, it is possible to move past that stage and processing can become so efficient that recognizing words and concepts occurs in split seconds, and reading comprehension becomes possible at a rapid pace. Eventually, it is not even necessary to see the whole word visible in order to recognize it, or see every word in a sentence to understand the meaning and message. This would not be possible without the ability to process automatically (Reisberg, 2013).

In reading about cognition for the Advanced Cognitive Psychology course in CCT, an example of playing tennis is used to illustrate the usefulness of automatic processing. When first learning to play, the focus is on learning how to hit the ball. With more practice, that becomes second nature and the player can begin to aim and develop strategy if hitting the ball is no longer as resource intensive. Cognitive resources become freed when we can do things automatically. While practice makes performance of a task easier and better, it can make control of that task more difficult (Reisberg, 2013, p.154). The same principle is true for our thinking in general; taking conscious cognitive control within automatic thinking habits is also difficult.

The function of the central executive in cognitive psychology is to govern the sequence of thoughts and actions when there is desire to rise above routine or habit. The concept of the central executive is an element of the working memory and is itself a set of processes and

mechanisms that manages cognitive processes (Reisberg, 2013, pp.176-177). It is commonly understood that biological needs can impact our thinking—needs for food, water, and sleep, as well as “fight or flight” responses will assert themselves as useful survival mechanisms. However, we often blame ourselves when our automatic response takes over in less dramatic situations such as choosing to procrastinate or making an unhealthy choice. Taking over is part of this mechanism’s function, so it is more useful to view this process objectively. Our responses and processing become ingrained through automaticity. Without understanding of how they came to be, it can be difficult to imagine how to change these responses.

Enjoyment can very easily get left to habits of thinking. I was unknowingly waiting for positive feelings to occur via my automatic thinking patterns in response to various stimuli. I had hoped that painting would naturally become more enjoyable when I attempted to form the habit in various ways. However, how I (or anyone) responds is almost always going to be a result of what has played out before—emotionally, analytically, and otherwise. In this way, much of what is liked or enjoyed has been developed from the history of responses, and what is familiar in some way. Similarly, what we do *not* like has largely been developed in the same manner. It is not a problem to have preferences, unless it is seen by the individual as such; if we prefer things we know are harmful, for example, and *we ourselves* (not at the imposition of others) wish not to prefer them. It is a problem when we have a strong desire to be doing other things and making other choices, but tendencies and preferences are keeping habits status quo. In some instances, the status quo can revolve around going through the day by routines, making attempts to force a change, then experiencing negative feelings when change does not occur. Meanwhile, time flies by and harnessing one’s true power can remain elusive. My preference for things I experienced as more enjoyable than painting became my go-to during free time; I felt powerless about it.

Rising above habit theoretically takes up more cognitive resources than automatic processing—it is why automatic processing takes over. I had learned in the past that willpower might be a limited resource due in part to this idea. However, previous research about willpower has been challenged in recent years. A new idea is that willpower may only be a limited resource if one *believes* that it is limited (Eyal, 2016). The latest hypotheses about willpower actually support the proposition that mindset and attitude have significant impact on action and change. Willpower may depend on how it is perceived by the individual—whether it is viewed as a strength or a sacrifice could make all the difference in the frequency of use. However, when someone is told to “snap out of it” or “just do it” in regards to how they feel or what they want to do, the power and importance of innate cognitive processes is to some degree being ignored. When one can realize it is normal for automatic thoughts to take over, it can help in seeing struggles with change not as a person shortcoming but a normal cognitive process. This knowledge is helpful in understanding that trying to change a habit by force alone can sometimes be a recipe for disaster and dramatically *increase* feelings of powerlessness when failure to change occurs.

People do make changes using force or willpower, but depending on viewpoint and belief, doing so can lead to unstable habits. People may quit smoking, for example, but until their views about enjoying smoking and beliefs of their own power to choose have changed, there is a higher chance of going back to the habit when circumstances change, such as a high stress event. When the person actually *prefers* not smoking and does not fear going back, the new habit is more stable and less dependent on circumstances. For this reason, beliefs about preferences can be seen as very important when it comes to making the changes one wishes to make.

Preference Reinforcement

The term confirmation bias often comes up in regards to confirming our beliefs when looking for information in research and even in conversations with others. However, less thought about is the role confirmation bias plays in one's own mind regarding what is enjoyed—how information about preferences is presented to the self. It is often an unconscious process guided by automatic responses. If I go into a task with a negative attitude, there is a high probability that I will not enjoy it. If I dread a long flight, I will likely be anxious for it to be over while in the air. Conversely, if I am thinking of a long flight as an opportunity to read, write, or relax, it might be enjoyed. In some cases, our natural reaction will differ from our original attitude such as being pleasantly surprised by something, or disappointed due to overselling. However, reinforcement of our natural reactions is powerful and ongoing. These reactions can quickly lead to beliefs about the self including the idea that what we enjoy is fixed. Such a belief is self-limiting. This idea limits openness to experience. Likewise, if what I enjoy (or do not enjoy) is leaving me feeling bad or powerless in some way, then a belief that what I enjoy is unchangeable becomes increasingly harmful. I was reinforcing feelings about painting in my mind without realizing it. I was reinforcing that I did not enjoy it, and that left me feeling powerless because I resisted what I wanted.

In the Advanced Cognitive Psychology course, looking at priming effects helped me understand the connections the brain makes to facilitate both memory creation and retrieval. The concept of priming in cognitive psychology is akin to a warmup. Familiarity alone creates a priming effect—what we have experienced most often, as well as most recently, is more readily accessed. Familiarity supports automatic thinking; when something is familiar, our brains recognize it as special and more “true” (Reisberg, 2013, p. 220). Another aspect of priming is the

connections of words and concepts through the process of memory creation. A trial evaluating speed of recognition of the word “butter” after the word “bread” is presented in the text as an example of how related concepts in the brain are triggered (or primed) by other words (Reisberg, 2013, p. 210). While “bread” and “butter” might be neutral (though it depends on personal experience), I realized that words and concepts used within my inner dialogue could be having an impact—words I did not realize were negative because I had never thought about it. A single word can elicit emotions. The concept of a euphemism exists to explain how words can be used to elicit different feelings. Language is very powerful. Just as the word “bread” sets off connection pathways in the brain for related concepts such as “butter” (or other culturally relevant concepts), the word “should” also has a lot of associations. Saying “should” to myself instantly triggered feelings, however unconsciously. “Should” inherently implies that I do not *want* to do something. A connotation of obligation overshadows enjoyment within this one little word, and there were ramifications. My automatic responses to “should” became resistance (“I’ll do it later”) and seeking out fairly insignificant enjoyment tasks.

In cultivating the mindset for creative work, habits of internal dialogue can greatly affect intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of a task. Understanding this helped me to see that with painting, I was reinforcing that I did not *want* to paint by putting it in the “should” category. I put many things in the “should” category. I always had a large mental to-do list which became overwhelming and subsequently reinforced a kind of paralysis due to increased automatic responses of resistance. The “should” list grew, and I felt bad about my apparent inability to take desired action or make any significant, lasting changes in forming a creative habit. How did painting, something that I used to love, find its way onto my “should” list? Reflecting on that

question, I was able to notice other thinking habits I was unconsciously reinforcing which caused further opposition to something I once enjoyed.

It is common to look towards accomplishing things as a way to feel good, but trying to control circumstances—which are never truly in our control—in order to control feelings, is an indirect pursuit. However, the “I’ll be happy when” mentality was something I experienced in a variety of ways. Setting goals can be a good thing, but goals have the potential to create a less than ideal situation within habits of inner dialogue. Making art as a child, the process was of primary importance—I just liked doing it. I had intrinsic motivation for it. But as time went on, I started to view accomplishment through producing—something “good” to show—with ever growing importance. Accomplishment is an extrinsic motivator, and it is an effective one in that it can get people to do things. However, when an achievement goal leads to a loss of enjoyment of the process—in essence, the moments of one’s life—the goal is no longer as useful. Ideally, the goal will *serve the process* and vice versa.

Painting was not as enjoyable an experience when I looked forward to being finished and accomplishment. I thought of other things that I could be doing (and enjoying) instead, which pulled at me as ideas such as “painting is difficult” permeated my thoughts. Enjoyment became something somewhere in the future instead of the present. This can happen with any and all tasks and experiences. Looking forward to five o’clock or the weekends can slowly reinforce dissatisfaction at work. Looking forward to sunny days can reinforce gloom on rainy ones. We are constantly reinforcing ideas and the intensity of subsequent thought trajectories and levels of impact and belief will be different for everyone. Some may not internalize things as much as others. I can now reflect back on the fact that I was not living in the moment as much as I could

have been, though at the time I did not realize it. I did not know any different. I knew I felt bad and powerless in some ways, but I did not truly know why or what to do about it.

Understanding the Emotion and Action Link

Through my projects and study within CCT, I came to understand that a lack of intrinsic motivation, or lack of enjoyment, was a main factor of my procrastination of painting. I learned that procrastination is at its core, a problem of feelings—avoiding negative feelings, but also creating negative feelings when failure to take action occurs. I thought about the idea that habits are more stable when there are multiple feelings supporting the process or action—such as if someone likes doing a task and also dislikes *not* doing the task. An example might be those who like the clean feeling associated with brushing and flossing their teeth, and simultaneously dislike the unclean feeling associated with not brushing and flossing. I disliked the feeling of not painting in the long term, but that alone was not enough to support a habit. The lack of enjoyment for painting as a *process*, which I had unconsciously reinforced through my automatic thoughts, was the primary problem.

In a stable habit of an intrinsically motivated person, feelings associated with a task can help to support it—seeking a positive feeling and avoiding a negative one. With procrastination, people are also seeking to experience positive feelings and avoid negative feelings—*the very same thing* intrinsically motivated creative people are doing. We are all doing this. The difference lies only in what is felt about tasks. In this way, emotion is implicated in all motivation and lack thereof.

Albert Einstein is famously quoted as saying, “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious”. Einstein felt that his only talent was curiosity—in essence, he enjoyed

learning. I will not debate whether or not Einstein had exceptional cognitive abilities here.

However, in reading for the Advanced Cognitive Psychology course the following passage stood out to me:

Perhaps, therefore, the people we call intelligent are those who literally have better control of their own thoughts, so they can coordinate their priorities in an appropriate way, avoid distraction, override errant impulses and in general proceed in a deliberate manner when making judgements or solving problems. (Reisburg, 2013, p. 479)

This passage helps to illustrate some of the important ways having greater self-control of one's thinking can affect how a person operates. Of similar weight is the idea that what people enjoy can lead to greatness in some scenarios or suffering in other situations. Therefore, the power to choose or affect one's own enjoyment has huge potential. Empowerment through enjoyment can aid in reaching not only one's goals, but in achieving increased wellbeing.

I used to feel envious of the relationships with art or creative pursuits that others had—their passion, their confidence, their abilities, and more. I started to think about jealousy and realized that my jealousy has been fundamentally about what I *think* other people *feel*, and my desire for those *feelings*. Remaining are the circumstances that are believed to support or contribute to those feelings. As stated previously, trying to control feelings via circumstance is quite indirect and potentially futile, yet it is a common pursuit. If attempting to affect circumstance to produce feelings is not direct, then an attempt to directly affect feelings seemed a more logical pursuit. A 2005 review of research on happiness indicates that success is not the only deciding factor in what makes people happy, but people with positive affect tend to find greater success and tend to be more productive (Lyubomirsky, Kind, and Diener, 2005). This research challenges the notion that success or circumstance leads to happiness. While I did not

consciously believe that success leads to happiness, I was living that way to some degree with my focus on the future and seeking accomplishment in some areas of my life.

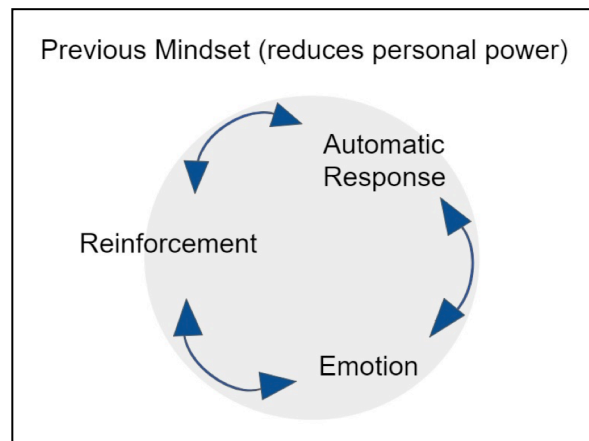
Seeking positive feelings and avoiding negative ones, no matter how unconsciously, kept me doing the same things in order to maintain enjoyment—even though I was not happy with the situation! I would choose things such as watching TV over painting, even though watching TV was not a dream or goal of mine. I avoided painting due to negative feelings, and I also feared that painting would never be enjoyable again. Essentially, I feared that I had no control over my feelings and that circumstances I cannot control will cause negative feelings. I am more afraid of flying than driving, for example, because of the potential for *feelings* in the event of a crash. It is only considered a comparatively irrational fear from the standpoint of statistics, not from one of feelings.

Fear of negative feelings is a powerful factor in determining behavior. Again, it is only a problem if I am avoiding things I want to be doing due to this fear. Fearing the things one wants to do as unenjoyable is a strange thing, but it is a common problem.

A Closer Look at Mindset and Emotions

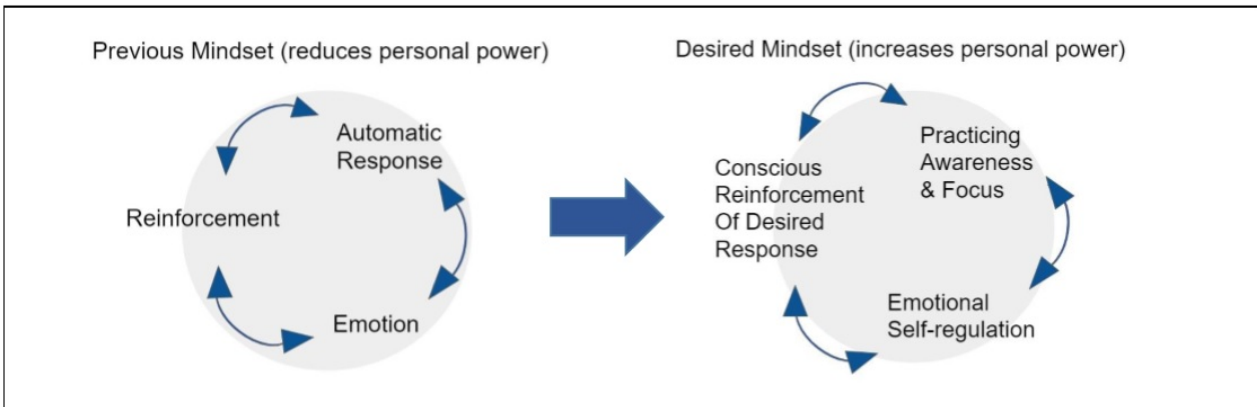
Through reflection on the cognitive psychology concepts I had reviewed, I began to understand that my existing mindset was one in which my emotions were largely a result of my automatic responses and the reinforcement of those responses. My automatic responses became more ingrained by the reinforcement of associated emotions. Emotions and repeated automatic responses led to further reinforcement. The diagram below represents a very common experience where there is little awareness, reflection, or understanding about what is happening within the mind on any regular basis. There is also little room for individual control in this

situation. Therefore, change in this cycle is dependent on whether circumstances and automatic responses line up to support it.



I had unknowingly been reinforcing my automatic response for painting to be resistance out of fear of negative feelings and also fear of sacrificing positive feelings. If I could be doing something that I enjoy more than painting, but forced myself to paint, I experienced a loss of enjoyment. I stopped seeking out painting due to my reinforcement of those negative emotions in relationship to the circumstance. I did not feel in control when my emotions were manifested and reinforced by my automatic responses. I did not know how to affect them. I did not see a way out of this experience when it came to artmaking, but also in a general way.

With understanding that I had been experiencing emotion based on automatic response in the original mindset model, I could see how the desired mindset would involve experiencing emotion based on awareness and desired responses. In the new mindset, all elements are practices and experiences of personal power, and each may be consciously reinforced as the desired response in order to enjoy and thus seek out of each of these processes. Logically, it feels good to be in control of one's emotions, so seeking to develop such an ability is a much more direct route than seeking to control circumstances as a means to experience positive feelings.



Positive feelings can happen naturally when things align—when what we have reinforced as enjoyable comes to fruition. Positive feelings also occur when we create them—when we can find and focus on value in our experiences. Feelings are at the heart of many choices and actions, therefore the ability to control or affect one’s own feelings has the potential to be one of the most empowering. I had to experience it to believe it.

Developing Beliefs through Experience and Reflection

I had learned that many aspects of thinking can become so automatic that awareness of thinking does not tend to occur without purposeful attention. Upon gaining a more thorough understanding of the thinking mechanisms at play, I could internalize how important a practice of awareness of thinking is for making changes of any kind. After all, change of action requires change in thinking. The powerless mindset I had was one where my automatic responses were being unconsciously reinforced and were often leading me in a direction I did not want—towards things that brought superficial or short term enjoyment, and also reinforced powerlessness. With the knowledge that seeking positive feelings often directs action, I knew I needed to consciously affect my automatic responses for preferences I desired if I wanted to change my mindset and actions. I reflected on times where I had made such a shift and applied the concepts I had

learned about both in my CCT coursework as well as through my own experiences, to the actions I wished to enjoy. But I also knew there was more to it; I would need to remain conscious in order to maintain my new idea. I began to not only practice awareness of thinking regularly, but consciously reinforced my positive feelings associated with practicing awareness, focus, and choices of preference and emotion.

Practicing Awareness of Thinking

It makes sense that literally, deliberately, and directly practicing awareness of thinking helps to develop increased awareness of thinking, but somehow the usefulness of this concept did not fully click for me until recently. Speaking with others, common responses to the idea of meditation include “I can’t do that” or “it seems boring”. I will readily admit that my initial automatic reaction to the idea of meditation was that it is probably a very useful tool, but also that it seemed a little boring. It was another thing that I knew I “should” do, but like with all other “should” things, enjoyment was not the primary association, so I was not driven to do it. In the Action Research course, I had researched mindfulness as a tool for procrastination, and believed it was useful. At that time, I had not internalized it as enjoyable, but rather something I would try to remember to do—and I did, just not with any regularity or conscious reinforcement. However, meditation as well as mindfulness consistently came up throughout my CCT studies as being helpful for supporting positive change in various situations. When first thinking about this project, I realized I needed to be aware of my thinking and automatic responses in order to affect these processes more consciously. Upon internalizing the potential value of mediation as a foundation for new thinking, I began to take it more seriously.

A common conception of meditation is that is an attempt to clear one’s head of automatic thoughts. There are different ways of practicing, but the one that I learned from my classmate

which I have continued to use is called Vipassana (Paradiso, 2015). My understanding of this practice is that focus is directed to breathing or sensation of the body as often as possible. My experience with this practice of meditation has been that it is a great way to *understand* the power of our automatic thoughts, as well as to develop greater awareness of them. When trying to focus thoughts on breathing for example, thinking will deviate as soon as allowed. In this way, meditation can act as a metaphor for what can happen when trying to make changes in thinking and actions on a daily basis—more ingrained responses will return, and they will return quickly and powerfully.

Just as it is difficult to maintain focus completely during a meditation or mindfulness exercise, it is difficult to fully harness things that we have learned and even things we “know” because of the overwhelming power of automatic responses. In my work as a dental hygienist, I have had many patients tell me that they “forget” to floss. Do they really forget? Many patients report that they started to take better care of their mouths immediately following their previous visit with me. But they also report that after several weeks, they return to their old habits. What they forget is that flossing was important to them, and motivation is subsequently lost. I have experienced this in many instances of being inspired; once an inspiring stimulus is out of mind, it ceases to affect action. I had experienced a similar scenario with my first consistent attempt practicing meditation.

In Advanced Cognitive Psychology, part of the coursework involved experiments to test hypotheses regarding cognitive processes. In one of my group’s projects, we practiced Vipassana meditation for fifteen minutes per day for one week to individually observe the effects, if any, on our focus. It being for school and with commitment to my group members, I was motivated to do the meditation each day. The experience was the first time I had practiced

meditation consistently or with that duration per session. I continued the practice after the project was over, excited by my observation of perceived effects—I had felt that there was something “there” and that it had had a positive effect on my mode. However, after a few weeks, my practice started to decrease and eventually trailed off. I had in essence forgotten how important it was to me, and I went back to my habits. It is a pattern I had experienced with painting as well. I would be inspired by seeing an art exhibit, for example, which *might* get me to work on things—but the motivation in those instances lasted only short time. Feeling inspired is not always enough to translate into a new habit because of the power of ingrained responses. In the case of meditation, my response went back to “should”, “I don’t have time.”, and other forms of resistance. Fortunately, I realized that meditation provided a way out of the cycle through developing awareness of the cycle itself, as well as the practice necessary to change it. Metacognition within meditation is a tool that may be used to experience the dynamic between one’s automatic thoughts and central executive control. Automatic thinking is amazing and also critical. We don’t want to stop automatic thinking in our lives or view the process as something to battle against. Perhaps thinking of it this way could be of value: Our automatic thinking mechanism can support the central executive *and* the central executive can support the automatic thinking mechanism.

We are constantly learning and affecting the pathways of our thinking, but understanding how to navigate within our own cognitive processes has the potential to dramatically increase personal power. The understanding that the ability to think and process automatically is essential helped me to realize when it is *not* as useful: when what I’m doing (or even thinking) is not matching what I want. If meditation is used to practice awareness of automatic thinking, then awareness of automatic thinking in other situations may also be developed over time as it

becomes more familiar and thus, more automatic. In this way alone, meditation, or another form of practicing awareness of thoughts, can be thought of as a tool which supports cultivation of new thinking and learning. If we are not aware of our thinking, changing it (if change in action requires change in thinking) will be more random. Over time and with practice, my ability improved and awareness of automatic reactions started to become more automatic. On another note, acknowledging automatic reactions for what they are can be very useful for reducing the emotional power of responses to circumstances.

Conscious Reinforcement of Desired Preferences

Deciding what we enjoy may be another way of describing what psychologist Dan Gilbert called “synthetic happiness” in his 2004 TED talk. In his work, Gilbert has found that change in circumstances has less effect on how people feel than they imagine it will. People can still be happy when things do not go as planned—when they do not get what they wanted. However, we might “know” we should synthesize happiness—focus on the positive rather than the negative—but that seems to come more naturally to some, and as Gilbert notes, it can appear inauthentic to others. “Natural happiness” is the term Gilbert uses to describe the positive feelings experienced when you *do* get what you want—when you set a goal and reach it, for example. His contention, however, is that it *does not matter* how positive feelings came to be with regards to authenticity—that synthetic happiness is “real” (Gilbert, 2004).

My preferences did not align with what I wanted; I wanted to enjoy painting but I did not enjoy it. Reflecting on whether or not I could make that happen within my mind, I realized that I had personally experienced cultivating enjoyment in the past. The task in that instance was running. A few years ago, I had decided that I wanted to run and while at first it was difficult, my desire to run persisted long enough for me to keep at it. But as time went on, running was

not getting easier and I found myself needing to create accountability by signing up for races in order to keep my new habit going. That strategy worked in that an upcoming race would get me out the door, but running remained an unenjoyable experience. I felt good after I finished running, so that bit of enjoyment was the motivation. Thankfully, I was told by several people at the time to run slower if it was still difficult—to run easy enough to have a conversation. Once I took that suggestion to heart and tried it, running did become easier. Before that, I was trying to run fast in order to improve. As with painting, I was too focused on results and unconsciously reinforced to myself that the running experience itself was not, and may never be, enjoyable.

At that time, another thing happened. Without realizing the cognitive psychology supporting it, I started to more purposefully prime my excitement for the process of running itself with my internal dialogue rather than focusing only on finishing a run for the feeling that comes after (the “I’ll be happy when” mentality). Once I stopped to think more logically about the fact that running was something *I* had chosen, I thought about the things I liked about the *idea* of running such as the sensation of freedom and the experience of being outdoors on a beautiful day—some of the reasons why I chose to start running in the first place. I reinforced those ideas in my own mind *while I ran*, and also when I thought about running and spoke about it with others. Instead of a “should” on my to-do list, running became a “want”—a “love to do”—and a more stable habit. I enjoy running and dislike pausing for extended periods of time. Meanwhile, pausing no longer feels like a personal failure but rather an issue of priority—which does not carry negative emotional weight. My 5K race time improved significantly last summer as I willfully increased my distances, all while running “slow”. I ran more because I enjoyed it; I got faster by running slower; I improved when I enjoyed the process.

Realizing that I had been successful with creating a mental shift towards enjoyment for running, I decided to try this strategy to affect my feelings about painting. I first let go of productivity goals. For this synthesis project, I had originally planned to work toward a painting exhibition. However, a part of me feared it would be another temporary solution since I had tried a similar endeavor in the past without success. Fortunately, I was able to realize that accomplishment had not proven to positively affect my *experience*. I felt good when I finished things, yes, but the process had remained something I procrastinated. After becoming aware of my internal dialogue surrounding painting, rather than accept my negative feelings, I wondered if I could use language and logic to flip them. With the example of running under my belt, I knew I had the ability and knew that exercising that ability creates “real” feelings. I knew I did not fool myself with positive affirmations, but instead through reflection understood that running was not a “should” but a “want”. With increased practice of awareness of thinking, I removed painting from the “should” list, which I had started to dismantle with my new awareness of it. As with running, there was a reason I chose painting to begin with—I believed there was the potential of positive feelings for me there. Stripping away “should”, one is left with either “want to” or “need to”. I realized many “need to” things can also be broken into “wants”, but painting was fundamentally a “want”. I was the one who gave painting emotional power over me, nobody else did that. I started to think about what I loved about painting in the past. Very similar to running, painting was a “place to go” to feel free. Creation through attempts to visually interpret feelings and places had once been a joy. Entering that world was the reward, the process of figuring it out was fun. I thought about those ideas and as I had done with running, I began thinking about my positive feelings for painting before, during, and after the process.

Since awareness of thinking is an important element of the empowered mindset, practicing it is important too. With my increased understanding about emotion and action, I knew I needed to *enjoy* practicing awareness and focus in order to continue to seek it out. Using what I had learned about how to cultivate enjoyment, I removed meditation from the “should” list and began to reinforce positive thoughts about it. These positive thoughts about meditation included viewing it as a “place to go” to feel free—an opportunity to experience the power of my own mind directly. Through repeated acknowledgement of my ability to exercise awareness of thinking and emotional regulation in meditation—even if only for a few seconds at a time—belief in my ability increased. As stated previously, from a cognitive standpoint, familiarity can create truth. Metacognition in meditation can be used to reveal the powers of our minds and to experience redirection of thinking, emotional regulation, thought observation, and more. Practice *reinforces* these powers as well as whatever else one chooses to reinforce. The more I practiced awareness of thoughts and reinforced the desired response over the automatic, the more familiar and “real” I experienced my ability to be. It is the *belief* in my ability to develop awareness of thinking through experiencing it and knowing the availability of it which changed my viewpoint.

Mindsets may be defined as attitudes, but also beliefs. The following passage illustrates the potential impact of one’s mindset:

Mindsets aren’t just any beliefs. They are beliefs that orient our reactions and tendencies. They serve a number of cognitive functions. They let us frame situations: they direct our attention to the most important cues, so that we’re not overwhelmed with information. They suggest sensible goals so that we know what we should be trying to achieve. They prime us with reasonable courses of action so that we don’t have to puzzle out what to

do. When our mindsets become habitual, they define who we are, and who we can become. (Klein, 2016, para.8)

Just as having greater control over one's thoughts may have effects on perceived intelligence, having a mindset based on the belief of one's individual power contributes to a life approach which is less encumbered by distraction and fear.

Experiencing the Mindset I Sought: Believing in the Power of the Self

Nobody wants to feel powerless. In this way, enjoyment and power are linked; feeling powerful feels good. Meditation provided me a way to experience and exercise autonomy within my own thinking. In whichever way meditation is practiced, it involves choice of focus and proves this ability and thus the power of the individual one moment at a time. Choices nearly anyone can make, however—choices within one's own thinking—do not always elicit excitement. The notion of getting rich by desiring less is met with eye rolls. It does not feel “real” unless the circumstances of the concept align with one's prototype definition. Choices in our own mind and the associated feelings may be thought of as *more* “real”, however, because they are based upon the desires of the individual rather than chance. As Dan Gilbert suggested, synthetic happiness *is* real happiness. “Happiness” may be the knowledge or *belief* of one's power or ability to emotionally self-regulate—to not fear circumstance controlling one's feelings. This idea can be thought of as a path to becoming *more* one's self, not less, with the ability to pursue the aspirations one holds without fear of negative feelings or fear that enjoyment will be lost. With the knowledge, belief, and practice of one's power, seeking positive feelings at the expense of ourselves or others can begin to decrease.

Feelings associated with tasks drive people to either seek them or avoid them.

Understanding more fully that seeking feelings through circumstance was inefficient, I was

able to focus directly on feelings, how they manifest, and how to more consciously affect them in varied circumstances. In my experience with running, I focused on reinforcing the positive feelings I associated with the activity, which led to my seeking out that activity more often. The logical presentation of information to myself in regards to running being a “want” and my focus on positive feelings came somewhat naturally. On reflection, however, I recognized my change of heart as something which I did consciously affect; I had decided to shift my thinking in order to increase enjoyment. In the case of painting, conscious reinforcement of my desired response started from the *belief* that the choice of enjoyment was mine—the power to choose feelings was mine. It stopped making sense to wait for feelings to come to me randomly when and if things lined up based on my automatic reactions. It began to make much more sense for me to take the power that is always there—choice within thinking. Through this experience, I understood that power need not be sought, only experienced. I also understood that practicing my desired mindset is not something I “should” do, but rather it is a way to experience the self as a source of power. Denying the self as this power source is, in essence, self-doubt which leads to suffering and fear—fear that circumstances alone determine feelings and wellbeing. When reflecting deeply on this concept, I came to realize that experiencing freedom at this level is what I was ultimately seeking. Everything else was how I thought I could get there.

Practicing awareness of thinking helped me internalize that I had the ability to affect it. I experienced choosing focus while practicing meditation, such as the choice to focus on breathing, as something that is available to me. I could see that my thinking was mostly automatic, but I could always choose when I became aware. Similarly, I will have automatic reactions to things in my life based on everything I have experienced thus far. Those reactions are normal, just as it is normal for my thinking to wander when attempting to focus.

The belief in my ability to choose, however, continued to develop the more I practiced it. A lighthouse is a useful metaphor, I think, for explaining the internalization of this belief. I will have reactions, but the belief in my ability to choose focus is there for me now like a beacon of light. Experiencing that belief has been life changing in reducing fear of negative feelings. It does not mean that I will never feel sad or experience grief, only that fear of feelings will never control me. Choosing responses is not only about thinking positively or using positive affirmations, but rather the *belief* that my choice of response is real and is in fact, power and freedom—the opposite of fear.

We cannot control what others do, but even our reactions—including not giving others power over us by way of our feelings—is affecting outcomes. No matter what, we are all influencing each other for better or for worse—constant chain reactions of which we will never know the immeasurable results. We are all very powerful in this way. My inquiry has been about cultivating enjoyment of things one *wishes* to enjoy, however, I do think this idea has the potential to reach further. I knew I had self-control in many ways, so the idea of developing self-control did not seem necessary at first. Self-control is something that can be interpreted as willpower—a rising above routine that requires increased energy and thus, something naturally avoided from a cognitive resource standpoint. However, if one can see self-control, such as emotional self-regulation, as a desired power, one can see the value and potential for enjoyment of it. In researching willpower, how willpower is viewed or experienced might be the deciding factor of how much someone has (Eyal, 2016). Upon reimagining greater self-control as not only enjoyable, but the essence of what I was ultimately seeking, I understood how positive it felt to experience personal power in more situations; I started to see that the connections and feelings I sought were available to me nearly

everywhere. I “knew” this, but “forgot” it in many ways. The truths I wanted to live by had not been guiding me at every step and understanding why has been life changing. Previously, I did not see a way out of the reactionary mindset I was in. That has finally changed.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

I am lucky to have learned and experienced what I have. Changing one’s thinking is rarely, if ever, a “snap out of it” experience. Like most people, I could learn certain things, apply them, and make changes in many instances. However, ingrained *ways of thinking* are not as readily changed; change in this case is a learning experience. I was almost completely unaware of the powerful ways of thinking which drove my choices on a more unconscious level; I was also unaware that those ways of thinking could be changed—I had not given it much thought. I was able to learn the things I did by giving this issue sustained attention and value through my studies in the Critical and Creative Thinking program. Professors Peter Taylor and Jeremy Szteiter coauthored the book *Taking Yourself Seriously: Processes of Research and Engagement* (2012) outlining an approach to research in which researchers choose focus based on what is important to themselves. This concept from my perspective, reflects the CCT program as a whole. Trust is placed in individual interests; choice of focus is supported. Through repeated experiences of learning and reflection, personal power is revealed to the individual, reducing the need to seek power outside of the self while developing the self as the source of power to affect change. My project this semester has been a mirror of that process which further revealed to me the immense power which exists within learning, thinking critically and creatively, and taking the self seriously.

For this project, I was looking at how to cultivate the mindset *for creative output*—but

mindset is the most important piece of this puzzle. I am experiencing a love for the process of painting once again, but the more meaningful outcome for me is that I no longer have fear thoughts in regards to painting—I know that enjoyment in this situation is my choice. I also know that fulfillment in life is not dependent on painting or any one thing for me. Defining success in the past was accomplishment and productivity, but that has changed. I value accomplishment, but I do view it differently. I see accomplishments as shared with others and that changes the motivation for working. My motivation is now intrinsic and not based on setting myself apart from others, but rather taking seriously my power to affect people positively in whatever I am doing, myself included. I now see the potential for painting under this umbrella.

This has first and foremost been a learning experience for me and my learning will not stop here; the nature of awareness is the present, so practice is continuous. Writing has also been a meaningful part of my reflective practice for learning over the last few months and I feel driven to continue that work as well. Taking part in this project has allowed me to experience the potential I have to affect others through communicating what I have learned—by the way I live my life and other more direct ways that I will continue to develop. I previously understood my personal power to affect others in some ways, but not others. I did not automatically translate my experiences or abilities to every situation. However, I can build on what I have learned through practice of my new mindset in order to continue to experience the feelings associated with it. When I started to experience my ability to affect change towards the feelings I was ultimately hoping to have, I was able to recognize my power instead of seeking it outside of myself. Through practicing awareness of thinking, I saw my automatic reactions lose their power when I decided to override them through understanding my true

wants and my enjoyment of experiencing a powerful mindset.

Conclusion

I started researching this topic because I could not seem to make myself paint and I felt bad about it. Even though mindset was my focus, I was also looking for *results*—circumstances that would make me feel good—the creative output. Just as seeking to change habits is a common pursuit, seeking to change circumstance in order change feelings is also a common pursuit. I needed to experience the alternative in order to change my viewpoint and also my belief. Mindset was what I had been seeking and is what I discovered to be the ultimate reward. I had previously sought circumstances to change my emotions; I also allowed circumstances to determine my emotions and subsequent actions at times. When I attempted to more fully understand the actions I chose to take and why, I was able to recognize that emotion was the most important element driving my behavior. With that understanding, I shifted my perspective regarding what I needed to focus on changing more directly. As I focused on feelings and understood the thinking that was influencing them, I was able to start purposefully affecting how I felt through practicing awareness of automatic thoughts and conscious reinforcement of my desired responses; my thinking and emotions shifted from unconscious to more conscious and my mindset shifted from powerless to powerful. I learned that the mindset, or belief, I was looking for was imbedded in knowledge of my ability to control and focus my own thinking, including but not limited to emotions. Through practice, experience, and reflection, I developed this knowledge and belief. I also learned that the feelings I sought could actually be found *within the practice* of this mindset. The power and freedom the practice provides continues to draw me in. I am excited to continue my learning in

order to build on it. One of the key elements of my learning has been that it is a *process* which is ongoing. I also know this learning process is what I want and something I enjoy.

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Appendix

Course Description: Action Research for Educational, Professional & Personal Change

This course covers techniques for and critical thinking about the evaluation of changes in educational practices and policies in schools, organizations, and informal contexts. Topics include quantitative and qualitative methods for design and analysis, participatory design of practices and policies in a framework of action research, institutional learning, the wider reception or discounting of evaluations, and selected case studies, including those arising from semester-long student projects. (University of Massachusetts Boston, 2018)

Course Description: Reflective Practice

Reflective practitioners in any profession pilot new practices, take stock of outcomes and reflect on possible directions, and make plans to revise their practice accordingly. They also make connections with colleagues who model new practices and support the experimenting and practice of others. Students in this course gain experiences and up-to-date tools for reflective practice through presentations, interactive and experiential sessions, and, optionally, supervised pilot activities in schools, workplaces, and communities. (University of Massachusetts Boston, 2018)

Course Description: Creative Thinking

This course seeks to increase the participants' understanding of creativity, to improve their creative problem-solving skills, and to enhance their ability to promote these skills in others, in a variety of educational settings. Students participate in activities designed to help develop their own creativity and discuss the creative process from various theoretical perspectives. Readings are on such topics as creative individuals, environments that tend to enhance creative functioning, and related educational issues. Discussions with artists, scientists, and others particularly involved in the creative process focus on their techniques and on ways in which creativity can be nurtured. (University of Massachusetts Boston, 2018)

Course Description: Advanced Cognitive Psychology

This course gives a survey of the field of cognitive psychology from an information-processing viewpoint. The course considers how people encode, organize, transform, and output information. Emphasis is given to such topics as concept formation, problem-solving, and creative thinking. (University of Massachusetts Boston, 2018)