

Chapter Four

Why does distress occur?

I have explained psychological problems as the distress associated with unwanted, enduring perceptual activity. It is only sensible at this point to ask the question: Why might people become distressed when unwanted perceptual activity endures?

In order to understand why people might experience problems, it is first necessary to be clear about the psychological nature of people. This just makes good sense. To understand the problems that can occur with a pancreas, it is first necessary to understand what a pancreas free from problems does. To be able to fix the engine of a car, it is necessary to have some understanding of how a car engine functions when it doesn't need to be fixed. That is, one needs to know what a car engine does when it doesn't have problems. In fact, to decide whether anything needs fixing or not it is important to know what the natural characteristics of the thing are when it doesn't need fixing. (I say some more about pancreases and car engines in Chapter Nine). Without knowing the state that doesn't need to be fixed it is impossible to determine whether a thing is in that condition or not. Thus, it is also impossible to know how to return it to that state if that is what is required.

So my first task is to portray the condition of people who are not currently experiencing distress. When I have explained distress-free people, I will be able to describe what goes wrong that results in psychological distress.

WHAT DO PEOPLE DO?

In a nutshell, people control. In fact, all living things control, but for this discussion I'm going to stick with people. I mentioned the idea of control in Chapter Two. Here I'll consider it a little more deeply. In Chapter Three I noted the variability that is a feature of the environments we occupy. To a great extent, however, people only experience a fraction of the variability that they might otherwise know about if they were not so good at controlling. Because of their controlling nature, creatures who live are sometimes referred to as living control systems.

Consider a day in the life of a rock. Rocks don't control. Not even pet rocks. Rocks have to take what's coming to them. When the day heats up, rocks get hot. When the night cools down, rocks get cold. When it rains, rocks get wet. When the earth shakes, rocks bounce. Rocks stay where they have been put. If you put rocks down, you know where they will be when you return. Rocks don't decide.

People are not rocks. People control. Rich people control; poor people control; big people control; little people control. Bad people control and good people control. Even people who don't eat their greens control. When the day gets hot, people cool themselves. When the night cools down, people get snug. When it rains, people stay indoors. When the earth shakes, people leave town. People go where they want. If you put people down, they'll do different things. Some will stay down and some will get right back up again the minute you've turned your back.

Of course, not all people will do what is claimed in the last paragraph. When the earth shakes not all people leave town. In fact some people travel to the town. Similarly, when it rains, not all people stay indoors. Because rocks don't control, what they do in any given situation is easy to predict. Because people do control, it is difficult to predict precisely how any given person will act in a particular situation.

The houses, towns, cities, countries, and planet we occupy would be very different if we did not control. What have you done in the last week to control the state of your appearance? Did you cut your nails, go for a jog, iron some clothes, sign up for a tummy tuck, comb your hair, look in the mirror, refuse the second chocolate brownie? What would the state of your appearance be if you did nothing to control it? Imagine getting out of bed on Monday morning and doing nothing to affect your appearance until the next Monday morning when you looked in the mirror. What would you see? It's a good thing that rocks don't care about their appearances, because rocks don't control.

Control is ubiquitous. For as long as we are alive we control. From the perspective of understanding the process of living: Control is all there is. It is all that we do. As long as we continue to breathe in and out, we act to make things be the way we want them to be.

HOW DO PEOPLE DO WHAT THEY DO?

Since control is all we do, we might suppose that the psychological distress that we experience has something to do with control. It does. Distress occurs when we are unable to control some of our experiences. To understand what problems could happen to the control process, it is first necessary to understand how we control. How do people (and all other living things) control the things they care about?

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, and as Powers explained in the foreword, ever since the 1950s he has been developing an explanation of control by living organisms. This explanation is called Perceptual Control Theory (PCT). In this book, I will explain the bits of PCT that are important to this discussion. If you are interested in knowing more about these ideas, Richard S. Marken, W. Thomas Bourbon, Philip J. Runkel, Dag Forssell, and Kent McClelland are some of the other authors who write lucidly and engagingly about PCT. Samples of their work are included in the reference list, and there is a lot of excellent material on the CD.

What's been said

To live is to control.

From the perspective of understanding the process of living:
Control is all there is.

Our control systems are organized hierarchically.

Conflict occurs when the control of two incompatible experiences is pursued simultaneously.

Conflict involves multiple levels of the hierarchy.

Conflict prevents control.

The big deal

The enduringness and unwantedness of chronic psychological distress occurs because of sustained conflict between perceptual control systems.

Coming up

Reorganization eliminates conflict and restores control.

Reorganization is linked to awareness.