OVERCOMING PERFORMANCE FEARS

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Several years ago I went jogging with a friend in Marin County, north of San Francisco. It was a crisp, bright Sunday morning, and I was looking forward to the six-mile jaunt around a public reservoir.

As we got to the reservoir, we saw that the roadway was blocked to auto traffic by a chain stretched between two posts. My friend, Steve, who always likes a challenge, jumped over the chain. And I, the copycat, attempted to do the same.

What I hadn't counted on was that my legs had lost some of their resilience during the two miles it took to get to the reservoir. I found this out abruptly when in mid-jump my toe caught one of the links, and I tripped. I was more startled than hurt; my slightly skinned knee did not prevent me from continuing the run.

But I left that day with some fears about jumping over chain fences.

Now let's advance time six months. I am running one afternoon around the San Francisco Marina, when it occurs to me that it might be fun

to jog out past the yacht club to the tip of a promontory called Lighthouse Point. I take off on a route that leads me past the rows of moored yachts and powerboats. At the end of the paved roadway the run leads me onto a dirt path. And there, stretched ominously across the path, is a single link chain.

My first instinct is to jump over it. Although the chain is high, it does not seem like it would tax my capabilities. And yet, a moment before I come to the chain, the memory of the earlier mishap rushes to my mind. I chicken out and run around the chain. On my return trip, I do the same.

That night I am bothered by having avoided the jump. It is not unlike the battles I fought in the past with stuttering. Although I used to chicken out many times at the last moment and start my sentences with "um" or "err", I always approached each speaking situation from the point of view that "this time I'm going to say the word without avoiding or substituting."

Now here I am again with a different problem but the same familiar feelings. I know I'm going to make that run again, and I know I have to jump over that chain.

The fears begin. I picture myself tripping and spraining an ankle, or worse. I see myself out at Lighthouse Point with a twisted foot and with nobody around to give me a lift back. Maybe I'd even get pneumonia in the chill evening

air and die. (My mind easily lapses into melodrama over stuff like this.) As much as I tell myself I don't have to jump over the fence, the compulsion doesn't leave me alone. I have to jump over it!

Through the years I've learned a few things about how my mind functions, and I notice now that it's doing a familiar number on me.

It was a book by a plastic surgeon named Maxwell Maltz that first helped me identify this number and at the same time gave me my first useful tool against speech blocks. In his book Psycho-Cybernetics (still in print and well worth reading) Maltz compares the workings of the mind to that of the modern computer.

Maltz points out that the most powerful part of the mind, the subconscious, is an impersonal, problem-solving computer that is set up to solve whatever problems the conscious mind puts before it.

The conscious mind is the "programmer." It defines the problem and feeds it into the subconscious. The programming "language" used by the conscious mind is called "mental imagery."

To demonstrate his point, Maltz describes a golf instructor who taught golf in a very unique manner. In his first lesson the instructor would have the student sit comfortably in an easy chair. He would then demonstrate to his pupil how a golf swing should look; in fact, he'd demonstrate it

over and over again until the student had a clear picture of the total motion. Then he'd say to his student, "practice this swing in your mind each evening for 10 minutes over the next month before we have our second lesson. Just sit comfortably and picture how you'd like to hit the ball."

Invariably, during the second lesson when the student would actually play a round of golf, he'd shoot in the mid-90s, an extraordinary score for a beginning golfer.

WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Maltz explains that imagined experience is essentially no different than real experience. It only differs in intensity. Basically, the body/mind can be trained through imagined experience as effectively as through an actual physical enactment.

All athletes who attain any level of proficiency will tell you that a good mental picture is essential to a good performance. Jack Nicklaus says he never hits a golf ball before first visualizing exactly how he wants the shot to go.

In fact, have you ever watched a world class high jumper before he starts down the runway toward the bar? Sometimes you might catch him close his eyes for a moment. What he's doing is picturing what he wants his body to do; in effect, he's giving directions to his body.

The clear, vivid picture he creates...a picture complete with emotions...is the program

he's giving his subconscious "computer" to solve. He knows that without the proper picture, he'll never get his body to do what he wants it to.

All this was exactly opposite to what I was doing with the chain fence. My fears were creating negative pictures, things I didn't want to happen. And yet, the more I thought about jumping over the chain, the more I continued to create these negative images over and over again...literally programming myself for failure.

Why was I doing this?

Why was I finding it so hard to stop?

OUR GENETIC PROGRAMMING

To find the answer we have to move back in time to the days when prehistoric man roamed the earth. Like the other animals, man was programmed by nature for one essential task: survival.

All his instincts, as well as his bodily functions, were set up to assure his survival in this harsh landscape. Today, although civilization has radically reconstructed our world, our bodies are still programmed for the simple task of survival.

If we're infected by a virus, antibodies rush in destroy them.

If we're cut and bleeding, platelets staunch the flow of blood.

If we're threatened by attacked, the body releases adrenaline and other chemicals to give us added energy so that we can exercise the same options available to prehistoric man -- fight or flight.

Though there are tens of thousands of years that separate us from those prehistoric times, our minds and bodies are still governed by these basic evolutionary functions.

Let's look again at prehistoric man. He lived in perilous times. If he didn't pay attention to the ever-present dangers, he could end up as lunch meat for any of the many marauding carnivores.

Consequently, his mind, like the minds of all animals, was designed to protect him from danger through the process of creating mental pictures of any potential threat. For example, if he were in tiger country, his mind would create visual imagery of threatening tigers. These images would keep him alert to the danger and discourage a fatal lapse of attention.

For if the imagery were not there to keep him alert, he might be surprised...and eaten!

Our minds still function this way. When we're walking down a deserted metropolitan street at night, most of us are alert to the danger of

muggers, because if we're not we could be surprised and relieved of our wallets, or worse.

Similarly, if the tree in the back yard is leaning too far over the house, our fears create a mental picture of a crushed-in roof that impels us to take remedial action before the tree falls. As you can see, then, our minds function in ways designed to perpetuate our survival.

But evolution didn't anticipate modern society. Specifically, it didn't anticipate a new and different kind of danger. A danger that relates, not to our physical survival, but to the survival of our ego in a social situation.

Many of these fears revolve around tasks we have to perform.

How will others judge us? Will they accept us? Or will we die from lack of love and acceptance? If we do perceive our performance in life or death terms, our body/mind will react as if we're confronted with a physical threat. It will force images of the danger into our mind, so we can deal with it.

What are some of these threatening images? Here are a few common ones:

Introducing someone by the wrong name

Hitting the wrong note during a piano recital

Catching your foot on the high bar as you sail

over

Dripping paint onto the carpet

Blocking on the word "big" as you're ordering a Big Mac.

Each of these is an example of a performance fear.

Now, jumping over a 7'2" high bar is not a life or death situation in the literal sense. But suppose your track scholarship, or your national ranking, hung on that jump?

Giving a piano recital to your high school class or a verbal presentation to your boss does not have to be traumatic. But it might be if you cannot live without the approval of your classmates or your boss.

As far as our mind goes, survival is survival. It sees all dangers as potentially life-threatening. And the way it is genetically programmed to handle threats is to project them into the conscious mind so that we can prepare for them.

What happens when we ignore the threat?

Our body/mind is programmed to make us feel vulnerable and unprotected. In other words, we feel very, very uncomfortable whenever we choose not to pay attention to an approaching danger.

This makes perfect sense when we are challenged by a physical danger. (Threat: here comes the dinosaur. Image: the dinosaur is having us for lunch. Solution: pile those boulders in front of the cave entrance so we can hide inside and be protected.) But when we confront performance fears (of which stuttering is just one,) the body's lifesaving process actually works against us.

To understand this better, let's go back to the original example of my having to jump over the chain.

The perceived danger was that, if I jumped over the chain and caught my foot, I'd trip and fall. My mind read this simply as "DANGER! Get ready. Prepare yourself." My genetic programming then caused my mind to project images of this danger into my conscious mind, so I could protect myself.

But hold on. My conscious mind is also the programmer for my subconscious. When I latched onto those vivid mental images of tripping on the chain, my subconscious was alerted.

"Whoopee!" said my subconscious computer. "Here's a new, interesting problem to solve. Let's check the "screen" and see what it is."

And what was on the screen? A picture of my tripping on the chain.

"Well, then," said my subconscious. "If that's the problem, let's figure out the best way

for John to catch his foot and tumble."

Sound crazy?

It's not.

Remember, your subconscious is not concerned with being reasonable. It simply solves whatever problem you put before it. It doesn't differentiate between "intelligent" problems and dumb or irrational problems. It tries to solve all problems with equal vigor and determination.

GETTING OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE

"Well," you say. "That should be easy enough to solve. All I have to do is picture what I do want to happen and let my subconscious solve that problem."

It's not that easy.

Our body/mind has a way of making us pay attention to imminent danger. Try and not notice the big, black spider crawling across the floor toward you. How do you feel? Vulnerable and unprotected and out of control because you're not doing anything about the threat. Most of us prefer to be frightened but prepared than to trust the tarantula's good intentions.

That's how we're programmed to react. We are compelled to pay attention to what threatens us.

This is why, as much as I fought it, I had a hard time ignoring the pictures of myself tripping on the chain fence.

Then why didn't I trip when I finally went over the chain?

Thanks to Maxwell Maltz and his book...as well as years of practicing his visualization skills...I was able to go counter to my natural instincts for self-preservation. I kept forcing myself away from thinking about the danger. Instead, I pictured myself sailing cleanly over the chain. I did this over and over again.

But that wasn't all.

I also didn't resist feeling the vulnerability and general discomfort associated with not dealing with the threat directly.

This was not easy to do.

As I pictured myself sailing over the chain, the doubts would creep in. I would begin to feel anxious. I'd then have to force myself back, mentally and emotionally, to the positive experience of sailing over the chain. That would last for a while until the next round of self-doubts came in. I'd then repeat the process...over and over again. The key was being able to tolerate being uncomfortable.

After picturing successful jumps for a

while, something interesting began to happen. My psyche, which (as Maxwell Maltz points out) does not basically differentiate between real and imagined experience, began to have a positive feeling about leaping over the chain. It's as if I'd actually jumped over the fence many times and was totally successful each time.

I began to have a backlog of successful jumps. That, in turn, made the thought of a real jump less threatening. My fears began to abate. It was easier to concentrate on what I wanted to happen. And lo and behold, the actual leap, when I finally made it, was a piece of cake.

Was everything I did a guarantee that I'd be successful with the real jump?

No. There are no guarantees. But there were two things in my favor.

First, I was willing to live with the discomfort and uncertainty of what I was doing.

And secondly, I made sure that physically I was not doing anything to cause myself to trip. To be successful at a skill, you must use a technique that is capable of bringing about the desired results. I needed to make sure I was not dragging a foot or doing some little thing that was causing me to miss my mark.

THE EXPERIENCE OF FLUENCY

For as long as I can remember, my speech

was subject to the same performance fears we've been discussing. I never just talked spontaneously and unconsciously like my classmates. My speech needed to be "right", because if it wasn't, then somehow, I was no good. My speech blocks were a threat to me -- to my self-image and to others' acceptance of me.

Whenever I had to stand and talk in class or do any of the other speaking chores that frightened me, my mind would react as if I were in a life or death situation.

What was the threat? A speech block.

What did my mind do? It put the threat in my conscious mind, so I could deal with it.

What did my subconscious do? It "solved" the task (that is, the image) I put before it by creating the best way to block. And as far as blocks went, it created some dillies.

How did I get past this?

A long time ago I began to get in touch with how other people must feel when they spoke with pleasure in front of people. They weren't just fluent. They were fluent and they were enjoying themselves.

I remember the first time I attended a Dale Carnegie class. I was 24 years old. I sat in class that night and was swept away by the

excitement of the trainer, because he was swept away by what he was doing. Some day, I said to myself, I'm going to have that experience for myself; not just his fluency, but his experience. Over a number of years these images began to build.

Every time I listened to a particularly good speaker, I tried to get in touch with how he must be feeling. I tried to get inside his skin.

At first the thought frightened me, because being that kind of a forceful, assertive person was not consistent with my own self-image. But over time, that changed. Had I just left it at that, I could have gotten my speech to where it was enjoyable, even though I still experienced blocks.

But I also changed my technique of speaking. Over the years I discovered that I was doing specific things that interfered with my speech. My technique was bad. I would jam my tongue against the roof of my mouth. I would tighten my vocal cords. I'd purse my lips shut. I even held my breath. Any of these blocking techniques could (and did!) interfere with my ability to speak. Most of it was unconscious behavior.

I spent a lot of time observing exactly (and I mean exactly!) what I did when I blocked. I got to know my speech patterns so well that I can still duplicate my entire blocking routine at will. Step-by-step I discovered what it felt like to relax all these tension points, and then I

learned what it felt like to speak with everything relaxed.

One day, very much like the day I first rode my bicycle, it came together. For the first time in a pressure situation I experienced the total feeling of what it was like to do it right. (Among other things it was scary.)

At some point, whatever skill you're trying to master, you have to let go of the technique and concentrate on the total experience. A pianist must practice and practice a new piece, paying conscious attention to how and where he places his fingers on the keys. But when he's finally ready to perform the piece, such detailed observation will inhibit his playing.

Stated another way, once the technique becomes second nature, he must let go of it and concentrate on the total feeling of the piece. He must experience it as a whole. He must allow himself to be swept away. And that means not trying to consciously control what he's doing.

If I have any bone to pick with the various fluency shaping programs, it's that so many of them lead you to believe that you must always concentrate on your speech.

They miss the point.

Focusing on your speech is essential in mastering a new technique. But at some point you have to develop a sense of how it feels when

it all comes together. Then you need to learn how to reproduce that feeling. It is at this point that positive imagery has its most powerful effect.

Those who learn a fluency technique without developing an ability to trust in their own spontaneity may be headed for considerable frustration.

True, they'll know the mechanics of free speech. Yet, each time they speak, they'll still have a compulsion to hold back. They'll be pulled in opposite directions. This is why people who stutter are frequently disappointed when they learn a technique for fluency, only to discover that they are resisting using it.

For the moment let us end with a summary of the basic points:

-- Our bodies are programmed for survival. Our genetic programming makes certain that all threats to our well-being become conscious so that we can take appropriate action.

-- Evolution did not prepare our unconscious survival reflexes to distinguish between physical threats and threats to our social well-being. Our body/mind perceives them both in the same survival terms.

-- Our subconscious is an impersonal problem-solving computer. It solves "dumb" problems with the same energy and thoroughness it solves "intelligent" problems. It will solve whatever we

visualize.

-- Speaking (like any other kind of performance activity) requires us to visualize what we want to happen, as opposed to what we're afraid will happen.

-- Deliberately not visualizing an imminent danger will make us feel vulnerable.

-- We need to be able to tolerate feelings of vulnerability, ambiguity and uncertainty if we are to avoid fixating on at the "danger."

-- Creating positive mental and emotional pictures will affect our nervous system in the same way as real life experiences. The only difference between a real and an imagined experience is intensity.

-- We need to be committed to what we're doing. A strong commitment will keep us pressing forward when the going gets tough.

-- We need to know enough about our speaking techniques to know if we're doing anything wrong. We need to develop a feeling of what it is to do it right.

-- We need to be willing to let go.

Through hundreds of thousands of years nature evolved man into a highly capable, resourceful being. But the one area it never took into account was the fear of asking for a hamburger and fries at MacDonald's.

Performance fears are in a class by themselves. To overcome them, you have to go counter to some of your natural instincts.

But it can be done.