



MANAGE YOUR INTERPRETATIONS

Imagine a person who wants to get away from it all for a while and take a relaxing vacation. But instead of booking plane tickets, he wallpapers his room with maps of Hawaii. Then he wonders why he's not feeling more relaxed.

Or picture a person who's hungry. In fact, he's so hungry that he walks into a restaurant and starts eating a menu with fancy pictures of food. Then he wonders why he's not enjoying the meal.

These people forget that the map is not the territory and the menu is not the meal.

We can laugh at these ridiculous examples. But many of us do something similar when it comes to using language. We act as if the *words* we use to describe something are the same as the *thing* itself. We forget that the word is not the thing, and that a description is not the thing described.

Take the word *fear*, for example. This word describes certain physical sensations that are different for each of us. Some people feel fear as a tightness in the chest that causes rapid, shallow breathing. Other people feel fear as a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach and weakness in the knees. We use the same word for entirely different experiences. Perhaps we could each find a different description that's more true to our own personal experience of fear.

The sum total of the words we use to describe any experience is our *interpretation* of that experience. To a significant extent, our interpretations create our moment-to-moment experience of life. If we say that we're *exhausted* when we're really just *tired*, we might feel more drained than necessary. If we say that we're *terrified* instead of just *afraid*, we've probably increased our level of upset for the moment.

Happiness could have as much—or even more—to do with the way we *interpret* our circumstances as with those circumstances in themselves. By learning to manage the ways we interpret our experiences, we could dramatically increase our happiness without having to make the slightest change in our circumstances.

Notice your interpretations

One step toward managing our interpretations is simply noticing them. Just watch your interpretations arise, moment by moment, and remember that other interpretations are possible.

Suppose that you greet a friend on the street and she just walks by without saying hello. *What a rude person*, you say to yourself as you feel your anger start to swell.

But rudeness is just one possible interpretation of this person's behavior. Perhaps she was upset about an argument she had just had with her husband. Perhaps she was rushing to a meeting and just didn't hear you. Instead of interpreting her behavior as rude, you could interpret it as preoccupied and feel concerned instead of angry. The two interpretations could have very different consequences for your friendship.

When we interact with people, we make decisions or take actions based on our interpretations of them, which may be quite different from how they see themselves. If we're not careful, we could end up with a world full of rude and unfriendly people. And that's not much better than wallpapering a room with maps of Hawaii or eating a menu for lunch.

Choose useful interpretations

We can do more than simply notice our interpretations. We can also choose from among many alternative interpretations those that are most useful—interpretations that maximize our happiness and freedom. The way we interpret the world is just a habit, and we can change that habit in ways that help us create a more wonderful life.

When my children were younger, they sometimes said things like “I *hate* you! You're a terrible father.” My first reaction when this happened was to feel like a victim. I saw only one interpretation of their statements: *I'm failing as a father*. That interpretation was often followed by an impulse to weep, which I sometimes did.

But that was just one possible interpretation of my children's speaking. I could have chosen another one, for example, *Even when I'm being an effective, loving father, my children will sometimes get angry with me*.

Now, I didn't know if this second interpretation was true. But I couldn't say that my first interpretation (*I'm failing as a father*) was any *more* true. So I chose the interpretation that gave me the possibility of more love in my life and more self-responsibility.

At any moment we can choose new and more useful interpretations.

We could interpret our children as sources of feedback on our parenting skills rather than people who want to make us feel terrible.



We could see human beings as potential friends, doing their best to be loved, searching for ways to become more intimate and connected with all other beings. Or we could see them as potential enemies who are out to win at our expense.

We could probably find hundreds of possible ways to interpret any single event. The point is to take responsibility for those interpretations and choose the interpretations that create the world we want to live in.

Remember four cautions

As you practice managing your interpretations, keep four helpful points in mind.

First, I'm not saying that interpretation is a problem or something to be eliminated. We need interpretations in order to make sense of the world. I *am* saying that at any time you are free to distinguish interpretations from facts, to choose useful interpretations, and then to act on those interpretations.

Second, be careful to choose interpretations that are both useful *and* accurate. We might be tempted to accept interpretations that seem useful because they get us off the hook, let us take the path of least resistance, or allow us to continue believing something we desperately want to believe. If those interpretations deny relevant facts, we are setting ourselves up for problems.

For example, some parents believe that their children can do no wrong. When their children misbehave, these parents find an interpretation that shelters the children from the natural consequences of their behavior. Having faith in children is wonderful. When this attribute includes distorting facts, children are robbed of the opportunity to learn.

A third caution is not to use this strategy as a substitute for appropriate action. A person who is in an abusive relationship can create dozens of ways to interpret that circumstance. In addition, she could improve the quality of her life and possibly save the relationship by leaving for a while and getting professional help for herself, while encouraging her partner to do so as well.

Finally, be careful of the need to find the “right” interpretation. I'm not sure we can ever know the most truthful or accurate interpretation of any circumstance. What we *can* do is to consider a variety of interpretations and choose those that are both accurate and useful—interpretations that will lead to the life of our dreams.





Separate behaviors from interpretations

As you play with this exercise, keep in mind the distinction between *behaviors* and *interpretations*.

Behaviors are observable actions, such as crying, breaking a vase, walking away, or slamming a door. Anybody in the immediate environment can observe these actions directly and report the same facts.

Interpretations are opinions or assumptions about the meaning of a behavior. The words *anger*, *frustration*, *rudeness*, and *jealousy* are examples of interpretations.

For instance, when you see someone shaking his fist, you're observing a behavior. You could interpret this behavior in a variety of ways: He might feel truly angry. He might be pretending to feel angry as part of an inside joke with friends. Perhaps he's simply trying to relax a tightened muscle in his forearm or loosen his watchband. And there are probably many more possible interpretations.

Interpretations cannot be directly observed. They belong to the private, inner world of each person's thinking.

Below are the steps to follow in this exercise.

1. Pick a specific situation in which to observe people. For example, you could observe customers standing in line at the grocery store or people waiting at a bus stop.
2. Writing on a separate sheet of paper, list some of the behaviors you observed in the situation you chose.
3. Now look back at your list and notice if some of the "behaviors" you listed are actually interpretations.

You can apply these steps in other situations. The idea is to spot the difference between behaviors and interpretations in any circumstance. When you notice this difference, you can choose a new and more useful interpretation to maximize your happiness.