

## COVID-19 – What To Do

We have been asked by many of our training participants what we are doing personally and suggesting to others in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following are some thoughts we are sharing to help leaders, educators, support professionals and family supporters to stay emotionally healthy, compassionate and competent during these most stressful times. Even though we have never felt more inadequate to attempt to say anything that is useful, truthful, kind and timely, we thought it would be helpful to reinforce some of the core Conscious Classrooms (CC) and Conscious Care and Support (CCS) principles.

Special needs of the people and students we support and teach and the staff who we lead will be more prevalent than ever during this time. As we experience sadness and fear as a result of this crisis, we are called to even higher levels of caring and competence to continue to fully meet their needs and our own. Some of this offering will refer to our course resources for readers who are CC and CCS University of Toronto certified graduates. Most of the suggestions are however applicable to all readers.

Some may question the usefulness of such a venture. In times of crisis needs are so varied and changing that at some level it seems pointless to even attempt to answer “What should we do? What can we learn? What’s next?”

We have tried to cover a broad range of options. Hopefully, there will be something useful for most readers. For those mainly interested in immediate, practical action we start with some data-driven essential strategies that can and should be implemented by everyone. The references may get a little “techy,” but by now you know that sharing well-researched data is one of my (Peter) love languages.

Next we offer a little more of what can be done when it seems we can’t do anything. We ask ourselves what can be learned about our self that has been exposed as a result of such radical changes in our work and living conditions.

We have also included an Appendix II for optional reading. This may be most useful later on, when you are ready to focus on the next step of your mind/body/spirit growth process. After writing this Appendix II we questioned whether it is too much reading for such busy people? We decided to include it. You folks know by now that none of our work is sound bite material; it is not designed for anyone in a hurry. We trust that you will know what to take and leave along this broad continuum. For example, you may want to review Appendix II at a later time.

If you find some of these ideas helpful please pass them along. We also encourage everyone to review your CC and CCS Textbook and course training manual in the following, areas.

## 1. Immune System Enhancement Best Practices

Although there is no published research to date on how to protect oneself and others from this virus beyond intensified personal hygiene and social distancing, keeping our natural immune system in optimal condition is a very reasonable and responsible step as well.

In addition to all of the public health recommendations, we suggest exploring implementation of the following three researched immune health strategies.

- **Increase Daily Mindfulness Practice To Boost The Immune System**

Twenty years of research on the connection between mindfulness and building of the immune system continues to be very encouraging. Please review the following:

- ['Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation'](#) – Richard J. Davidson. PhD, Jon Kabot – Zinn, PhD.

*"We found significant increases in antibody titres to influenza vaccine among subjects who completed an 8-week course in mindfulness meditation. These findings demonstrate that a short program in mindfulness meditation produces demonstrable effects on positive brain and immune function."*

- ['Why mindfulness can help the immune system'](#) – Dr. David R. Vago, Harvard Medical School.

*"The majority of empirical evidence for meditation's effect on the immune system support a protection and recovery model. Imagine being caught in a rain storm without a rain coat and without a towel. In a torrent of stress, mindfulness is both the rain coat (preventive) and towel (palliative), so that, at the very least, stress is impeded in its course to reach downstream immune targets."*

- ['Mindfulness meditation and the immune system a systematic review of random controlled trials'](#) – Black and Slavich.

*"Mindfulness meditation and immune system biomarkers: This systematic review of 20 randomized controlled trials, comprising more than 1600 participants, revealed replicated, yet tentative, evidence that mindfulness meditation is associated with changes in select immune system processes involved in inflammation, immunity, and biological aging."*

Visit our [www.centreforconsciouscare.ca](http://www.centreforconsciouscare.ca) site for numerous guided mindfulness exercises for beginners to advanced practitioners.

- **Nutrition and Exercise**

Reference CC and CCS Textbook Need #2

GI, bowel, digestion, nutrition and immune system's treatment.

Remember that two of the major reported killers of immune cell health to fight viral and bacterial pathogens are refined sugar and simple carbohydrates. Please review the Chapter in the CC and CCS book on GI health (e.g. the critical role of vitamin D3 to enhance the immune system) and the great work of [Dr. Derrick MacFabe and the Kilee Patchell-Evans Autism Research Group](#).

- **Human Energy System**

Reference CC and CCS Textbook Need #5

Building, balancing and protection from wireless radiation (RWF) and electromagnetic fields (EMF).

**Solutions to Protect Against EMF Fallout**

Trusting the reports from many international scientists such as [Dr. Martha Herbert, pediatric neurologist from Harvard Medical School](#). Appendix I offers seven suggestions that could help reduce this risk of compromising the immune defense system.

## **2. Brain Wash Your Brain (as often as you wash your hands)**

Because our brain does not know the difference between reality and beliefs about reality, we also suggest having a daily, positive health affirming, mindful self-talk exercise. For example, “I am healthy, helpful, happy and hopeful”. “Others are healthy, ...”.

A couple of mornings each week, before I close my mindfulness practice session I recall and relive a memorable tennis game. I do this to remind my brain and body that it is still in top physical condition. I encourage you to relive any of your physical activities such as working in the garden, hiking or participating in a favourite sport just in case the extensive research on positive visualization is correct. It can't do any harm and it is also fun.

## **3. I Live *as if* This Will be the Last Time...**

This exercise keeps me being mindfully vigilant in valuing relationships with all others. Each time I talk with you over the phone, or my family in person, I imagine that this is the last time I will be doing this. While I have done this exercise long before the COVID-19 risks, this pandemic threat has intensified this relationship-renewing practice. I encourage you to implement this practice for a couple of days and notice if there is not a measurable increase in your valuing of relationships with other people.

## **4. Finding Meaning and Purpose From Helping Others**

At times like this when our vulnerability reminds us that life and emotional stability are so very fragile, we encourage everyone to assess and strengthen life's meaning and purpose. This life-threatening pandemic could offer and excellent opportunity to awaken our minds and hearts to the more important questions of our life. Normally—like only a month ago—for many of us by the end of our day there was just not enough oxygen left in our busy and crowded rooms to take a deep mindful breath and ask “*What is this all about and how am I doing with this?*” One major part of the purpose and meaning exploration process during

times of crisis like this is that it has the potential for deep healing and awakening at several levels.

For example, few of us have hearts sufficiently open to meaningfully relate to the depths of suffering that is happening and will continue to happen in so many lives around us. Fear can open us to more fully relate to others' pain in skilled and meaningful ways if we, even when we don't feel like it ask, "*How can I help?*" This can increase the likelihood that we will experience deeper meaning in life than typically offered for example, from the time we spend with the distractions of electronic addictions, social media or 'trash' TV.

However, turning this potential into action is not a given. Many people only months after this crisis is over will mindlessly return to most of their old *normal* that was revealed as deeply unmeaningful during this time. The following can help to keep the compassion and new-found meaning in our lives sustainable:

1. One to two days each week complete the mindfulness compassion practice Exercise #6:
2. Start each day by remembering three things for which you are grateful. We suggest:
  - End each of your morning mindfulness exercises with statements of gratitude. For example, "*I am grateful for the front line human and health care workers who are risking so much to help us*".
  - Then ask "*What can I do or learn to do for someone else today*"?
  - Next mindfully make specific (who, when, how) positive plans for how you will help others today (e.g. direct caring personal support, leadership and/or anonymously do something helpful for a stranger and 'enemy').
3. Commit to a daily maximum time allocation for social media or TV when it is only entertainment. Replace this time with direct or indirect service to others.
4. You may be discovering how your driven mind up until now in your life fed its addiction to do'n, get'n, hav'n. Numerous people whom I am coaching are evaluating their activities including learning more about personality traits such as ADHD, OCD and the over use of alcohol.
5. As you fall asleep recall and evaluate how you did with these four suggestions. Celebrate your successes and make your failures painful.

*Love and compassion appear as selfless service, yet in mindful care-giving we do not serve the other; we serve "us". Compassion's communion brings us together in a whole. It does not see the world's pain and sorrow as other, it is shared, and it is ours. When we allow our shared vulnerability and humanness, love and compassion are as natural as our breath and without hesitation we act to help.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

## 5. To prevent boredom based anxiety

Before long for many, the **mindless** mind will transform boredom into varying degrees of the anxiety filled condition of solitary confinement. Even though you may not feel like it, it is suggested to set up a regular planned communication schedule via telephone or Zoom with family, friends and also others who you suspect may be lonely. Be sure to check with them if they would like to hear from you. For example some educators and supporters are calling families just a little more often to see if they can help.

Another excellent alternative to transform boredom into *okayness* is to mindfully ritualize all routine activities such as preparing food, cleaning, washing clothes, washing hands, etc. (e.g. do things in slow motion with an acute awareness that you are doing it).

## 6. Stand guard at the doorway of your mind

View enough responsible reporting to stay aware of necessary information, e.g. public health announcements and to become aware of others' suffering to know what you can do to help. However, vigorously discern how much news you will be exposed to. Over-exposure to news can become voyeuristic and can deplete your human energy system – garbage in, garbage out.

Instead, consider redirecting that time to safe volunteering and personal growth and development activities. For example, use it as time to ask yourself the question - What am I learning about myself through this pandemic that is indicating areas where I must work harder to be a better:

- person
- partner
- parent
- adult child
- professional
- responsible member of my local and global community?

Appendix II lists some excellent reasons to implement this process.

## 7. Irritability, Anger and Impatience

I am deeply saddened by the suffering that I know is happening every hour in our local and global community. As a result of this sadness I mindfully cry, sometimes weekly. I am also aware that COVID-19 could eventually infect millions of people and this activates feelings of fear in me. These factors, together with my overwhelming feelings of helplessness in not being able to do more to help relieve this suffering on the scale that I am accustomed to, keeps me feeling quite vulnerable. For many people feelings of isolation and boredom are also significant stressors.

At times of these intense painful feelings, I *catch* unfamiliar thoughts, feelings and body sensations of irritability and anger arising in me in situations that would not normally produce these emotions. You will recall from the CC and CCS training that irritability and

anger are often the nervous system's automatic relief/escape valve from the more awful difficult feelings such as sadness, fear, social isolation or boredom. You too may also notice being more irritable or sensitive (in the easily hurt way) during these times.

### **What To Do? – 3 Options**

**Option C** Mindlessly be pulled into identifying with our human nature's normal reactions to the horror and unprecedented pain and suffering. This is the path leading to emotional and physical burn-out and freak-out.

**Option B** Mindlessly tune-out and become as indifferent as possible; stop caring so much! Armour the heart with anger, withdrawal/depression and distractions as a way to protect oneself from burn-out.

**Option A** To the semi-conscious normal mind and heart, C & B are the only two options. Even for those who have been working to awaken to more complete conscious living, we are experiencing unfamiliar moments when the suffering is just too formidable a challenge. At these times it is hard to not be resistant or self-judgemental even as we do our best. In spite of this, with the following A option we can as a minimum, authentically acknowledge our less than perfect process as we offer positive intentions and our best efforts. It could look like the following as described in the text CC and CCS Part Three:

- **Catch** yourself and label
  - "There is irritability/anger – ahh-llow".
  - "There is sadness – ahh-llow".
  - "There is fear – ahh-llow".
- **Calm** yourself with
  - Awareness and ahh-llowing of thinking, feeling and body sensations. (Mindfulness Exercise #2)
  - Implement one or more of the 15 CC/CCS Awareness -Based Calming Strategies that you learned in the CC/CCS course [www.centreforconsciouscare.ca](http://www.centreforconsciouscare.ca)
- **Clarify**
  - Ask yourself, relative to the 'big picture' are my mood, thoughts and actions reasonable and appropriately intense?
  - Identify and reframe your filters. (*reference CC and CCS text Part 2*)

- **Consciously Connect**

When we fully and consciously connect to any other person or situation, we move beyond what our feeling senses tell us to a place of stillness and wisdom. This guides our every action, not against anything but in harmony with it. From this place of balance and no resistance we know (beyond cognition) and can therefore positively facilitate what must be done to keep everyone motivated, safe, respected, and still deeply connected with us.

- With each person and situation when we are overwhelmed, silently acknowledge feelings of helplessness and inadequacy as normal reactions from our primordial safety messaging system – mindfully remember they are not us when we are conscious.
- Mindfully process the body, feeling and thinking normal manifestations of resistance (*reference CC and CCS textbook, Exercise #4 Stress Rehearsal*)
- Intend self and others wellbeing.

- **Continue to remain mindful throughout this 4 C Step Process.**

Note: If you are becoming more irritable or angry, or you feel you are now ready for your next growth process, as of June 1<sup>st</sup> you can visit [www.centreforconsciouscare.ca](http://www.centreforconsciouscare.ca) and connect to a **free** link to our most recent book, *Stealing Happiness from Life – It’s an Inside Job*.

## **8. Social / Physical Distancing**

Please do not skip this *must do* because you think you understand the importance of social distancing because I didn’t before reading the studies, and many readers probably don’t either. We have drilled down into some of the epidemiological studies and here are my conclusions:

- This idea about modeling to project rates of infections and deaths that are dependent on social/physical distancing seems kind of academic – it is not!

Social distancing, if practiced widely by everyone, will be one of the most significant variables in the prevention of infections and death. Conversely, it will be the cause of thousands of unnecessary deaths if not practiced by everyone – this is a fact!

- According to epidemiologist Jonathan Smith from Yale, probably the #1 cause of this essential link in the prevention chain breaking, will be that good and caring people will cheat.
- Social distancing is subtle but significant. That quick coffee with a friend next door (who also had coffee with someone yesterday), the brief, too-close conversation at the supermarket, the “I got to get the kids out of the house to play with others” are all examples of dangerous cheating.
- So why would good, caring people who know better cheat?

- **Denial** – Our cognitive bias (*reference CC and CCS Textbook Part Two*) will not let these messages of caution become part of your decision-making process.
- **To prevent anxiety** – Social isolation will for most people cause a form of generalized anxiety. The average mind won't even realize that the 'quick visit' cheating is happening to relieve this anxiety. Without exaggeration, if this was war (which it is) our anxiety resulting from the lack of awareness and unskillful processing of social isolation would be COVID-19's nuclear bomb.
- **The Unaware Mindless Mind (UMM)**  
UMM as you know from our work together, has been a silent cause of suffering since our species first started to herd together. As a result, when we (generally good and caring people) cause harm such as violating this fundamental health rule it's because often we don't know what we're really doing.

We have two important reasons for including these comments on social distancing. The first and most obvious is to echo the words of all experts and add one more voice to the plea of "just do it".

The second is to encourage all of us to use this crisis to become more aware of our humanness and in so doing grow to a deeper level of authentic compassion. Please consider the following example, especially readers who struggle with not being able to forgive someone – the cause of much suffering.

Say an average good and caring person cheats on this life-sustaining pact of social distancing. This could be a result of their forgetting, mindless drivenness or some other reason. By this dangerous behaviour they are, in effect, condoning their own cheating in a way that could eventually really hurt others. How is it then okay for that person to self-righteously continue to condemn someone else who, in a different context cheated on them? If this or any other dual standard pertains to you, perhaps becoming aware during or after this cheating will open the heart to forgive those who in the past, due to their mindless drivenness betrayed you.

For some however, in spite of this self reflection the betrayal that happened in the past may still keep the heart armoured with anger. Hopefully some day, if not right now, their healing, as a result of more mindful self awareness will reveal to them everyone's fragile humanness and a small crack in that armour may appear. This could then let in a trickle of light to begin forgiving the unforgivable and loving the unlovable.

As a minimum, perhaps this reflection will help some readers stay committed to the most serious data-based public health policy of social/physical distancing. As an excellent resource, read [Social Distancing: Can you hang out with friends if you stay 6 feet apart?](#)

## 9. COVID-19 – A Very Special Teacher

For those of you whom we have had the pleasure of working with, you will recall one of our most important teachings. This question is so powerful that it can be off-putting to some. If you feel like stretching yourself, consider – ‘what good could come from this tragedy and how could I personally help transform this tragedy into something positive and sustainable for myself and also others?’

More specifically, to leaders, educators of support team members, this is the time in spite of our sadness and fears when we must mindfully and courageously lead and motivate each other to more consistently and even more abundantly bring our ‘A’ Game to people supported. As often as possible ‘catch’ each other being good and acknowledge it.

A question I (Peter) have posed to myself most weeks for many years that is now a daily mantra, is - what if this were my last week to live? – What would I do? Who would I call? and What will I continue to do when or if I survive this?

If COVID-19 influences us to ask and then answer these questions with appropriate action, it will be yet another special teacher gifted to us, all be it in a very distressing disguise.

How will you respond to this ‘what if’ question or anything else that you have read here?

When will you do that? Why not now?

In gratitude,  
Peter & Addy

## **Appendix I**

### **Optimal Solutions to Protect Against EMF and RWF**

- 1. Reduce Inputs:**
  - Turn off WiFi and AC power sources when not in use e.g. 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. (Automatic on/off timer is suggested). Keep wireless devices on *airplane mode* or *off*.
- 2. Hard Wiring:**
  - Hardwire all computer connections, including keyboard, and use WiFi as little as possible.
- 3. WiFi Shielding:**
  - Keep hand held devices in cases that eliminate WiFi skin exposure. Reinforce case with 12x aluminum foil backing and the Harmonic Shield Technology for all wireless devices. Never use a laptop on your lap.
  - Use only external speaker connection with telephone devices and connectors e.g. *safe* ear buds. (Reference Environmental Health Trust and the Bio-Initiative Report).
- 4. Healthy EMF Grounding:**
  - With the advice of a qualified professional (e.g. electrician), select a grounding connection for grounding mats that will not contaminate the process (ideally EMF toxic free in-ground, grounding rods).
- 5. Nutrition:**
  - EMF is basically Positive Ions (PI) – Free Radicals.
  - Negative Ions (NI) are required to neutralize PI.
  - Antioxidants are NI, therefore are recommended by qualified professionals. Nutrition/Supplements to enhance antioxidants could include Glutathione/NAC, sulphur rich vegetables, iodine, melatonin, omega 3, D3 and zinc. Follow the advice of Registered Nutritionists.
- 6. Exposure to Negative Ions (a positive thing to do):**
  - Walk on earth, basement floors, swimming in lakes, salt baths and showers.
- 7. Use AC Outlet Filters as Recommended:**
  - AC outlets have two forms of toxicity – *electric* and *magnetic*.
  - Electric fields are the voltage (pressure/push); magnetic fields are the current (flow) of positive Ions.
  - EMF filters, reduces/balances the pressure/voltage in the electric field. It also generally increases the current in the magnetic field. This increases the magnetic toxicity within about 2-3 feet of the outlet provided the house is wired correctly.
  - As a general rule, provided the house is wired correctly, and the outlet is not within approximately 2-3 feet of human contact, the benefits of the balanced/reduced electric voltage fields, appear to outweigh the disadvantage of the increase in the magnetic field/current.

## Appendix II

As I mentioned above, *Stealing Happiness from Life – It's An Inside Job*, is a new book I have written with my life partner Joanne. Appendix II is an excerpt to help readers who may, as a result of this radical forced awareness, become motivated to commit to the next step in your own growth process.

**While *Stealing Happiness* has not been specifically written to enhance your commitment and competence as a support organization leader, team member or educator, all five tools are directly applicable to improving your skills and capacity to better meet the needs of the people/students whom we support.**

When Joanne and I were about 22 and just starting our family we read about a man who had scribbled a note that was found in his desk after he died. The note said, "In the first half of my life I am going to ethically make as much money as I can, then in the last half of my life, give it all away". We were both deeply moved with this man's vision and values and said at the time, let's commit to that goal as well.

This man was Andrew Carnegie.

This book (*Stealing Happiness*) passes on wisdom from many of our teachers and mentors from throughout our life and our experiences in applying their gifts over our approximately 50 years together. So while the currency is very different, the spirit is true to Carnegie's vision and values as we offer this book (that has been our life's work) at no cost to anyone.

We have also included this link to [Chapter One](#) so you have a better idea of what this book offers. It will be available as a free download as of June 1<sup>st</sup>. If you are interested please leave your request and contact information at [www.centreforconsciouscare.ca](http://www.centreforconsciouscare.ca).

Blessings,

Peter and Joanne

# Stealing Happiness from Life

**IT'S AN INSIDE JOB**

Feel happy for  
no particular reason

Experience emotional pain  
with less suffering

Find meaning and fulfillment  
in caring for and about others

See difficult people  
as your special teachers

Learn the skill of  
conscious coupling

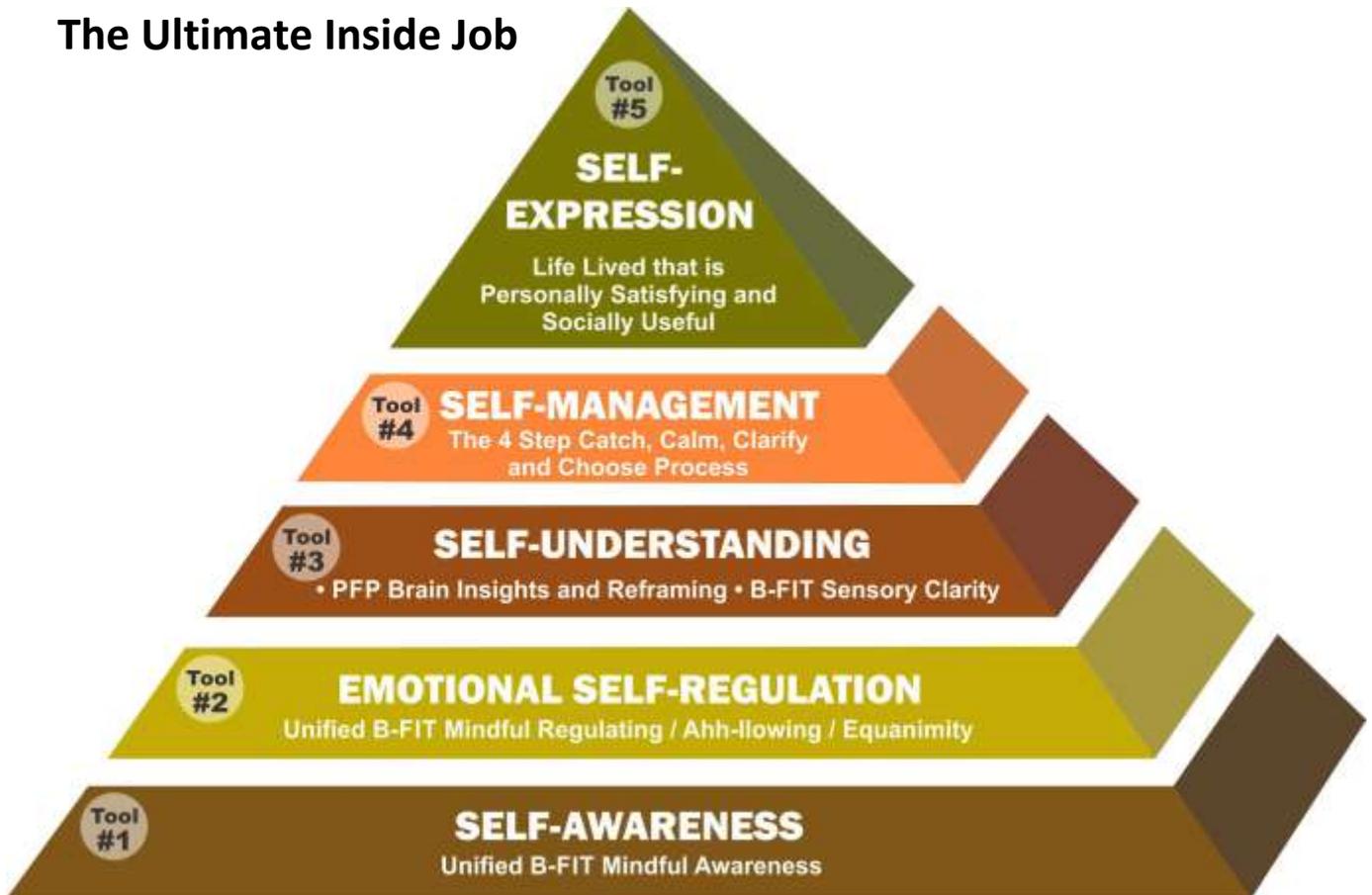


*"This timely collection of teachings offers a beautiful balance of head and heart ways for anyone to become more unconditionally happy and fulfilled. Its potential to be powerfully transformative is due to Joanne and Peter's very skillful integration of Unified B-FIT Mindfulness, neuroscience, psychologies and traditional wisdom, simply and practically applied to life roles using five essential tools."*

**Shinzen Young, Senior Neuroscience and Mindfulness Researcher, Harvard Medical School**

**Peter and Joanne Marks**

## Five Essential Life Tools to Steal Happiness from Life – The Ultimate Inside Job



The next four chapters summarize the most important elements of each of these Life Tools.

We have represented these tools in a pyramid structure to indicate the vital interdependency of each tool. One of our earlier teachers, Stephen Covey strongly advised to “start with the end in mind,” so we start at the top of the pyramid with optimal self-expression which is the culmination of the other four tools. **Optimal self-expression** will, however, not be possible without **skillful self-management**.

**AND**

**Skillful management** will require **deeper self-understanding**

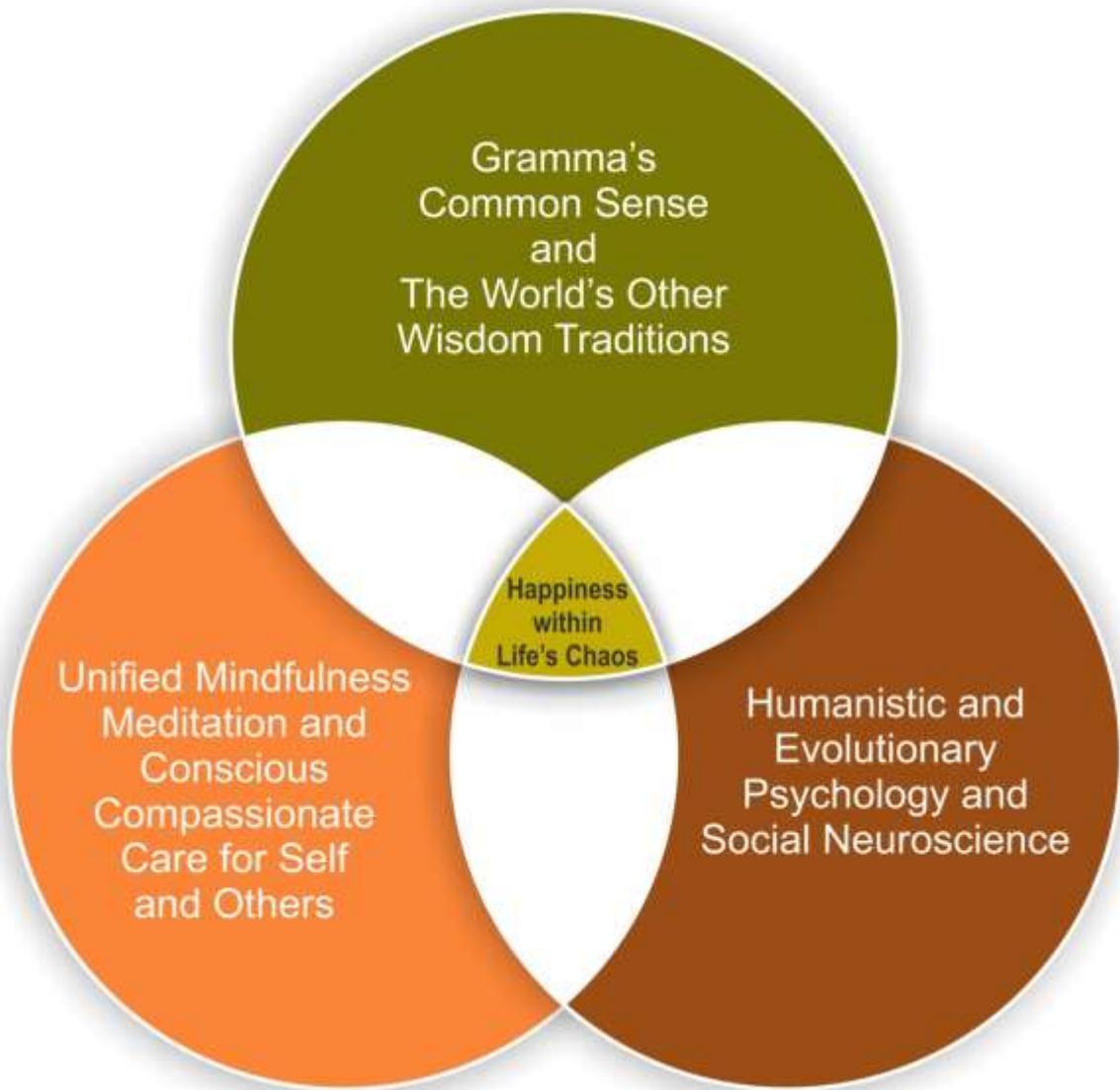
**AND**

**Deeper self-understanding** will be dependent on **emotional self-regulation** (equanimity/ahh-lowing)

**AND**

Without **mindful self-awareness**, efforts to have emotional self-regulation, self-understanding, self-management and optimal self-expression will be inconsistent at best and at worst become the seeds of delusion manifested in burn-out, freak-out, tune-out and/or space-out.

# “Putting It All Together”



## Preface

Welcome to stealing happiness from life – the ultimate inside job.

In the following pages we hope to significantly increase your odds to have consistent success with your happiness hopes. We outline **five essential awareness-based life tools** to both expand your emotional tolerance for the unavoidable difficult times in your life and to be much more fulfilled and happy with the good times. Our promise to encourage you to explore our head, heart and hands suggestions is the very strong probability that:

- you will have significantly more times of happiness, for no particular reason (i.e. less becomes more);
- these times will be more intense;
- they will last longer;
- you will have significantly fewer emotional hijacks in difficult times;
- your emotional hijacks will be less intense;
- your recovery time will be significantly quicker.

For folks who are just starting to explore the fact that sustainable happiness is going to take more than do'n, get'n, hav'n, bigger, better, more, reading even the first 70 pages of this resource will be life changing.

*Finding and sustaining meaning and happiness in life . . . means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a daily deliberate (mindful) organization of life for a purpose.*

Richard Gregg

## Why Should You bother...?

The following reasons are our best encouragement to you to do the work of learning and applying the life tools necessary for you to be more unconditionally happy—and to want to help others be the same.

So read and apply what you learn:

### 1. Maybe you'll do it...

because no matter how good you get at do'n, get'n, hav'n, bigger, better, or more, if you don't develop adequate life tools you will rarely find sustainable happiness or survive the following normal and predictable life experiences – many of which await you.

- loneliness
- insecurity
- boredom
- a challenging, disabled or ill child
- depression/anxiety
- guilt
- grief/loss
- physical illness/disability

- jealousy
- blow ups
- irritation & anger
- resentment
- unemployment
- life-partner betrayals and break ups
- mental health disorders, e.g. ADHD
- financial crisis
- substance abuse
- dementia
- life-threatening illness

**2. Or maybe you'll do it...**

because right now you are happy in your life partner relationship, but you are aware of the fact that every couple who help finance the multibillion-dollar industry of divorce lawyering were once just as happy as you are today.

**3. Or maybe you'll do it...**

because neuroscience and evolutionary psychology unanimously confirm that you were born with a dominant animal brain that is deliberately designed to keep you unhappy and dissatisfied with hav'n. This animal brain rewards you with firing of pleasurable brain circuits much more so when you are do'n and get'n, bigger, better, more versus the hav'n. This happens because our ancestors who lived without shopping malls, marriage contracts and mortgaged houses needed to be continuously dissatisfied so as to be motivated to hunt for food, sex and shelter (which is why happiness must be stolen from life).

**4. Or maybe you'll do it ...**

because even though your life style in North America is better than 95% of the world's population, on average you generally are no more happy than most others who live even in third-world countries. This fact becomes even more alarming when we realize that we in North America who are 10% of the world's population need 40% of the world's natural resources to shore up our bigger, better, more needs and addictions just (often unsuccessfully) to avoid being unhappy.

**5. Or maybe ... you'll do it**

because you spend most of your day lost in thoughts and therefore miss many potentially satisfying moments throughout each day (like how you drive your car but your mind is someplace else). We would strongly suggest that even when you are with someone special to you, if you are lost in some of the 50,000 thoughts that pop into your mind each day, you may as well be with anyone else. Your lack of presence actually means that you are not with the person you think you are with.

**6. Or maybe you'll do it ...**

because **every day** for many of those thoughts you are lost in, you would feel terrible if anyone found out what you are thinking because many of those thoughts are so "bad" and not really who you are. You are asking, "What can I do to not be so driven by them".

**7. Or maybe you'll do it ...**

because you deeply regret so quickly becoming emotionally hijacked with your child, life partner, parent, friend or even a stranger on the freeway over so many *nothing*, first-world problems.

**8. Or maybe you'll do it ...**

because you know that your ability to control your thoughts is virtually your most important skill to be happy but you have recently become aware that you don't even know what your next thought is going to be before you have it. Therefore, you are (or should be) feeling quite vulnerable and wanting some insights and skills to better prevent and manage your vulnerabilities.

**9. Or maybe you'll do it ...**

because you have learned that racism, sexism, and prejudice are mainly artifacts inherited by everyone based on the primitive survival code that "different is dangerous". You are therefore now very dissatisfied when your mindless mind makes you just one more of those self-righteous good guys criticizing those bad guys.

**10. Or maybe you'll do it ...**

because you need to learn the most important ways you can help a loved one during their end of life.

**11. Or maybe you'll do it ...**

Because you are ready to wake up to fuller consciousness. At any second over each 24-hour period we can be experiencing this consciousness at a level somewhere on a 1-10 continuum:

At 1, you are unconscious:

- like when you are asleep in your bed

At 5, you have reached the level of semi-conscious:

- like how you typically drive your car with your mind someplace else: put the key in the ignition and end up at your designation. You relate to people and do most other doings in this same semi-conscious-lost-in-thought way

At 10, you are fully conscious (a.k.a. more awake):

- like when you are paying attention/noticing **what** you are doing *and*
- knowing **that** you are doing it *and*
- knowing how your Body sensations, Feelings and Thoughts are reacting/responding to or are a part of what you are doing.

**If even just one of these reasons applies to you, then investing a few hours to read even some of this book maybe a life changing investment.**

# Stealing Happiness from Life

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*We will not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time*  
T.S. Eliot – “Little Gidding”

## Introduction

The following offerings of musts, musings and maybes have been gifted to us from our over 10,000 mindfulness and conscious-care students and coaching clients, as well as numerous indigenous healers and elders and some of the best carriers of eastern and western wisdom. Added to this rich tapestry of resources is our own five decades of experience as life partners, adult kids, parents, grandparents, friends and siblings. These roles have been the garden where we as seekers of happiness, compassionate action and fun have nurtured these seeds during times of euphoric life celebrations and in times of our own deep, deep suffering from painful losses, clinical depression and life threatening illnesses.

We start in Chapter One by describing the human predicament and the sustainable happiness skills and capacity builders we believe are required to steal happiness from life. We list numerous observations supporting our premise that happiness must be stolen from life because, as one wisdom tradition puts it, “Life is inherently unsatisfactory,” or as one street sutra says, “Shit is always happening”. In Chapter One we give evidence from neuroscience, evolutionary psychology and numerous consensus findings from international research that support these claims that sustainable happiness has to be earned.

In Chapters Two to Six we offer five essential awareness-based tools to steal happiness from life.

Chapters Seven through to Fifteen describe how to apply the tools in the most challenging of all life tasks. (Check out our loot bag on the cover.)

With each of these essential life tools and their applications we offer true personal stories as examples from our five decades of journeying together with thousands of very special people. These folks brought meaning and happiness to our life by welcoming us to be a part of their transformational journey through times of their unbearable pain as we helped them to experience a unique kind of unconditional happiness within the chaos of their life and also during times of joyous celebration.

## Waking Up – O’Natural

For five years Joanne and I were two of several volunteer caregivers/support workers for Bret as he died from Lou Gehrig’s disease (ALS). This diagnosis was the last in a series of lifelong difficulties for him. He truly transformed through child abuse, rage, terror, addictions, loss of his loving wife through postpartum depression and suicide, to forgiveness and peace. Finally at age 39 he completed his healing, dropped his remaining 100 pounds of skin and bone and moved on. His journey was a profound and meaningful gift to all of us who knew and grew to love him.

One day, about three years into his journey, his life was changed forever. With a once perfect 200 lb. athletic body he could now barely walk with his walker. He lay in bed and said good-bye to his support worker whose replacement was to come in about half an hour. Due to an oversight in the scheduling, nobody came until about five hours after his worker left.

Within an hour Bret had a strong need to have a bowel movement. He waited and waited but no one came to help him get out of bed, an ability that he had recently lost. As he attempted to get up on his own, he reached for his walker and using all of his strength almost stood up. Instead, however, he crashed down forward onto his walker, knocking out his front teeth.

There he lay, alone, bleeding, in pain, imprisoned in his own body and helpless to move. His bowel movement came. **His first response was rage**, shouting obscenities to the people who were to care for him and to a God who “made me sick”. As he later told me of this experience, he said that he shouted in rage for what he estimated was hours. “Suddenly,” he said, “my rage stopped and I broke into a **paralyzing panic attack**. I felt the **terror**, even deeper than ever of being trapped in my useless body”. This terror lasted for what he said seemed like an eternity. “I had lost all sense of time and was terrified worse than ever before in my life – like being buried alive in a box”.

He said then *it* happened. As intensely and spontaneously as his rage and terror had come. He told me what happened as best he could (because he had lost much of his ability to talk).

He said that without any thought or even intention, **he flowed into a deep state of peace, comfort, forgiveness and openness**. It was like nothing that he had ever experienced before.

As he lay there in his excrement, blood, teeth and pain, he softened into a state of being (not really thinking, feeling or doing) that he said he “wanted to last forever”.

He asked me what happened. I told him I had no idea and besides he was clearly the teacher.

As the days, weeks and months passed, “without effort it seemed,” Bret said he felt incredibly close to his mother and father. He felt that he genuinely forgave them for all the beatings and abuse that they had given him while growing up until he went to live virtually on the street at age fourteen. He said that although his new found state of being (my words, not his) did not completely stay with him, he did until he died have a profound peacefulness and willingness to “let it be,” accept what he could and do his best with the rest.

For the next two years before he left his body, he mentored many support workers with their problems with partners, parents, children and bosses. He reconciled with his family and others who had made his life hell. He could now see what parts of that hell were self-induced because he had identified with being the victim. His gratitude for his life partner, Diane, and their daughter, Betty, workers and friends who cared for him was like nothing we had ever experienced with him before.

There is no doubt that Bret’s ability to sustain the amazing grace that resulted from his transformational process was complemented by the unconditional love and support that he received from Diane and Betty.

**Although Bret and I talked about emotional growth and development and healing, he never really did deliberately work to develop these insights or practise a lot of mindfulness. He really had no formal growth process. His emotional maturing happened over thousands of lonely painful hours of just being brought to letting go into wholeness by the life force mystery held within the healing power of his pain. His afternoon of rage, terror and peace was a special part of the natural healing process that I have personally witnessed with others and that has been described for centuries in the transformational journeys in all of the wisdom traditions.**

**The day before he died, as I lit his smoke for him and held his lips together so he could inhale, he pointed, waved and gestured (as he could not talk during the last six months) for me to push play on his cued-up CD player. I did what he requested and Louis Armstrong sang us “What a Wonderful World” as we wept together and somehow knew far beyond cognition, what his last five years had really been about.**

## **A Reflection on Bret’s Waking Up**

We share this story and many others throughout the book to show how the five essential life tools are all just accelerating your natural growth potential hidden deep within the layers of who you have forgotten you are.

These kinds of events, when experienced mindfully and with intention, reinforce our sense of waking up to our life's potential for real Meaning, Purpose and Heart - Happiness.

As seen here, our human potential can evolve effectively by just experiencing human pain and suffering more **fully**, as Bret did. We also have personally witnessed many others who have courageously and consistently learned and applied U, B-FIT mindfulness (*reference Chapter Six*) and the other related life tools to everyday life and work situations and evolved in similar ways. **We do not have to experience a threatening illness to heal and grow to our mind, body and spiritual potential and have happiness for no particular reason.**

Bret's process helped several of us experience deeply meaningful moments in supporting him by learning to experience more fully the softening of our own resistance to his suffering and our drivenness to try to change the unchangeable.

This story is not unique. Our inner capacity to naturally heal, mature and transform and to help others do the same is very real.

Ghandi said, "My life is my message". Repeated mindlessly, his statement can sound all too trite. Said with discernment and contemplation, however, it can encourage us to stay committed to our maturing and healing *work ins* for self and others.

This "Happiness Is" guide to a more conscious, intentional and meaningful personal and work life is offered as one way for you to learn to connect with your innate deep wisdom and compassion. It also is intended to encourage you to be willing and able to skillfully help all others do the same.

All of this is possible for those of us who mindfully challenge our self to find and sustain meaning, purpose and heart in each hour of each average day.

*A human being experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. The striving for such achievement is, in itself, a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.*

(Albert Einstein)

## Note to our Grandchildren

Dear Kaelen, Anthony, Olivia, Alyssa, Logan, Brandon & Sophia,

You will remember how many years ago Grammy and Papa taught you how to make maple syrup. Because you learned those skills so well, we decided to write this *Stealing Happiness* collection of our musts, musings and maybes to help you with other life's farming chores now that you are more grown up. As you learned earlier in life on our farm, please eat this mindfully and slowly giving lots of time for digestion, processing and experimentation.

Thank you for teaching us so much about loving and learning.

Blessings and love, Grammy and Papa

### Instructions for Making Maple Syrup, March 1989

Dear Grandchildren,

Did you know that not one scientist in the world has any idea how the sap in trees goes against the laws of gravity every spring. The sap flows and floats a hundred feet up from where she has been sleeping in her tree roots all winter to the top of her tree to nurture her baby buds. She does this at approximately the same time every year.

This little story is to tell you that sap isn't just sap. Sap doesn't believe that it is just sap and so it isn't. This is likely the most important truth that Grammy and Papa will ever share with you. How it comes to us by *being* beyond the laws of gravity is only one of its many mysteries and miracles.

If you will work and play with her, using the following instructions, you will always be discovering more of Mother Nature's secrets and eventually you will know, far beyond thinking about it, that there are no *ordinary* moments in growing, harvesting and transforming sap into something very special.

Ahh, the sacred gift hidden to us, present just under Mother Nature's dark bark. In life lots of special gifts hide in the dark. Should you choose to look—really look—her special energy will flow to nurture you too, just like she nurtures her baby buds at the top of the trees.

Here deep in our family's forest, each spring Mother Nature sings her sacred song. *Silence, splash, silence, splash* as each drip ripples out of her loving body. Grammy and Papa find that we really have to pay attention to hear her. She has now selflessly done her part for another season and awaits our response. We must expect to see nothing more from her for awhile. After giving her sap to us she surrounds our Sugar Shack and waits patiently.

As we mindfully chop wood to fuel the fires that are so necessary to purify her gifts and discover her secrets, we find that it really helps when we mindfully pay attention when we are chopping the wood.

For years Grammy and Papa have experienced difficulty in finding the right equipment, like an open pot for cooking. This year we searched in places that we had looked many times before, in hopes of finding what we needed. One day there it was, right under our nose all the time, the perfect pot that we needed to do the cooking. Other years we even went to many special stores to buy the equipment but what we bought just didn't seem to work. We now think that a lot of the problem was us – just not looking close enough.

So often in past springs, boiling in small, restricted containers we have foolishly attempted to evaporate the sap's impurities only to waste firewood and even create dangerous pressure. This season will be different!

We have also learned the importance of how to carefully start and manage the fire. Mindfully paying attention really helps to manage the fire. Birch bark and small pieces of dry soft wood to start, just little bits at first.

For so many seasons (and reasons) we thought that because it was good for starting a fire birch and softwood could give sufficient heat to bring the sap to a boil long enough to purify it – NOT SO! This was a very disappointing lesson because softwood is so much easier to work with than hardwood. Mindfully paying attention to our disappointments really helped here.

We have now learned that once the fire is started, a consistent, ongoing supply of hardwood like Ash and Maple are required to sustain the heat. Ash and Maple require much more effort to cut and split but the job cannot be done without them!

That's how your Mommies and Daddies have been so helpful to us in doing this job – we could never do it alone. Your Mommies and Daddies will also need help from you children to boil down their SAP – just like they helped Grammy and Papa boil down ours. The more they mindfully pay attention to you children, the more help they will get from you. Grammy and Papa hope that whenever you see them not keeping their fire hot enough you will bring them some *hard* wood to burn.

For some reason, most people don't like to harvest and boil sap to find the special secrets and gifts that it has to give, but Grammy and I really hope that you will keep up this tradition that we learned from our Mommies and Daddies and other farmers many years ago.

All you have to do to know all of the secrets and powers, mysteries and miracles is to believe that sap isn't just sap, agree to keep boiling it each day to discover its many more delicious truths, and mindfully pay attention to what you are doing.

Because ash and maple are so important and require a lot of effort to cut and split, Grammy and I have asked a number of other sap-cooking farmers how to be as efficient as possible in keeping the heat strong with the smallest amounts of hardwood. They taught us five skills to make this happen, and we are passing them on to you in this book. They said the most important thing about the five skills is to learn how to really pay attention to what we do.

Once boiling, the heat just naturally seems to carry off the excess water. The trick is to use all your resources, knowledge, support and effort wisely to keep the sap boiling and purifying.

It's also very important to stay awake. Many times in the past we fell asleep and the fire went out or got out of control. It felt good to sleep at the time, but then we had to start all over to get the sap boiling again. Papa truly regrets some of the times that he fell asleep but these times did teach me important lessons.

Although you will find that the water just seems to evaporate on its own, when the fire is hot enough, many other impurities must be constantly skimmed off. It seems that the more we boil, the more impurities just seem to come to the surface from nowhere. We skim and the brew is clean, we come back a bit later and more skimming is required. Sometimes I need Grammy to help me with the skimming because there are so many impurities I don't even see.

This season we started to boil and everything seemed to be going perfect. The sap was plentiful thanks to Mother Nature and our magic forest. We kept a well-managed hardwood fire, got a more open pot for cooking, but something seemed very wrong. After boiling many hours, the pure clean sap started to turn dark brown. This is not what we expected! We felt anxious, a little frustrated and even a bit embarrassed thinking that maybe our friends would find out that we made a mistake. Now, wouldn't you think that after all these years of learning to get this far along that we would have learned not to get so attached to the way that this purified gift of Nature is supposed to look?

Ahh- so much more to learn!

But mindfully paying attention over and over helps us remember.

We taste the dark brown brew and it is delicious maple syrup; and it's just right, just like we heard it would be.

Sometimes light in colour, sometimes darker—but it always tastes just right. But how can it **be** this good – we added Nothing?

We can hardly wait to have some this year with you children – and give the rest away.

We'll see you in the Forest! You'll find us by the big tree, mindfully listening to the silence in between the splashes.

Love – Grammy and Papa

## Foreword - Shinzen Young

*Senior Neuroscience and Mindfulness Researcher,  
Harvard Medical School*

Every complete growth path involves two facets: helping oneself and helping others. Indeed, one measure of maturity is the degree to which a person realizes the complementary and ongoing relationship between these two endeavors. This book is a hands-on and heart-felt manifestation of that principle. I feel privileged to support its authors, Peter and Joanne Marks. Throughout every section the heart is nurtured by stories and references that help readers to learn how to experience authentic fulfillment from life as a friend, conscious life partner, adult child, parent, community volunteer, caregiver, or professional.

The Unified Mindfulness System is the foundation for the five essential life tools. This System centres around two principles: *Divide & Conquer* and *Connect & Serve*. *Divide & Conquer* is derived from a core principle of science: divide a problem into manageable parts to facilitate its solution. *Connect & Serve* is based on the intrinsic goodness of humanity. This book extends and refines these concepts as the authors apply them to improving all relationships and the quality of life, for self and others.

As a result of Peter's career 40 years ago in the design and quality control of jumbo passenger jets, he brings a unique combination of proficiency in the hard science of engineering to compliment his expertise as an elite level international unified mindfulness facilitator. He has undertaken over 20,000 hours of formal mindfulness exploration of the conscious and subconscious mind and has applied his acquired insights in his roles as director, consultant or facilitator to over 42 dual diagnosis, mental health and addictions, community support organizations and families in Canada, USA and Mexico. This background, integrated so beautifully with Joanne and Peter's approximately 50 years of conscious coupling, parenting and their role as adult children offers an excellent resource to learn from them about how to develop the most critical parts of one's life to be happy.

The Five Practical Life Tools and Essential Unified Mindfulness Based Human Competencies that Peter and Joanne have summarized and applied are a timely collection of skills and capacity builders that offer an excellent blending of science and heart. They speak to every person's basic human goodness and desire to be happy and to want to help others to be happy as well. In short this is a fully modern, simple and practical yet science-based resource to promote the age-old tradition of developing one's self to have a happy and meaningful life and to help others have the same.

***Shinzen Young***