

Can research reduce crime and violence?

We have Solutions: Let's Use Them

The possibilities inherent in the answer to this big question will delight you. That we are not already using what we know will anger you. The solution to crime and violence is a multi-step process. The first step is to raise awareness that there are viable solutions.

It seems logical to think that individuals in the current criminal justice system would be the people who are interested in effective crime prevention research, it is a natural assumption. In a perfect world, it would be the right step. In our world, ordinary people will be the ones who learn the truth and insist upon change.

If this sounds strange, consider these questions:

- *Did the horse breeders and buggy manufacturers invent the automobile?*
- *Did Blockbuster create streaming video?*
- *Did Eastman Kodak take the first digital camera to the market?*

Disruption comes from outside established industries. Insiders don't want to disturb the status quo.

If it isn't the industry, shouldn't it be the politicians?

Criminal Justice is a \$261 billion industry. It employs millions of people who would feel threatened by change. People who feel threatened are fearful; they resist change. That means they won't vote for politicians who are pushing for changes that may affect their livelihood.

That leaves us with a grass roots educational campaign designed to create bottom up demand for change. In 2019, I will [walk](#) from Santa Monica Pier in California to Charleston, South Carolina talking to people and speaking along the way to raise awareness about what we know and how it can be applied to reduce crime and violence.

The short version is that we know, for sure, that happy people treat one another better than unhappy people. Happy people don't commit crimes. We know how to help individuals, regardless of their circumstances, feel better using emotion regulation and advanced and transformational stress management skills. The same skills that increase resilience, increase positive emotions, reduce crime, and reduce the risk of mental illnesses.

In writing this article, I drew heavily upon my fifth book, [Rescue Our Children from the War Zone](#), All the quoted information is excerpted from this source. The purpose of the book was to document the research that shows we can help at-risk children thrive and to provide strategies for implementing what we know. Thriving includes avoiding the school-to-prison pipeline.

Improved behaviors that lead to reduced crime can be achieved even with youth researchers previously considered too far gone to help. No one is *too far gone to help* is a more productive attitude.

Crime Reduction

Chicago youths who were given Cognitive Behavioral Therapy committed 44% less crime than a control group.⁵⁷ Hoffman's review of meta-analyses indicated that ". . . behavioral therapy and CBT appeared to be the superior interventions in reducing recidivism rates, both with medium mean effect sizes."⁵⁸ Even the National Institute of Justice recognizes the value of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Patrick Clark commented, "*One form of psychotherapy stands out in the criminal justice system. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy reduces recidivism in both juveniles and adults.*"⁵⁹

Programs that have a Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) component have experienced significant success at reducing crime and improving academic success. "*The bulk of the research evidence clearly indicates that the programs most likely to produce robust results in reducing criminal recidivism have cognitive-behavioral foundations that target behaviors related to offending and amenable to change, and that use social learning strategies.*"⁷⁵²

Crime is a Symptom; Not the Problem

Crime is a problem but it is not the root of the problem.. Pain from a broken leg is a problem. But addressing the pain does not fix the broken leg. The pain will not stop until the broken leg is fixed. Crime and violence are pain from systemic unhealthy habits of thought that increase stress, decrease resilience, and lead to sub-optimal behaviors.

Looking at crime as a symptom instead of a problem makes it possible to identify the root cause.

The problems of our time are all essentially situations where individuals (or groups) have failed to thrive. Each of the following can be described as a failure to thrive:

- Poverty
- War
- Crime and violence
- Poor mental health
- Drug and Alcohol abuse
- Suicide
- Chronic illnesses and disease
- Drop-outs
- Divorce
- Unemployment
- Abuse
- Hunger and poor nutrition
- Disparate outcomes

By studying a larger question, "What makes humans thrive?" instead of analyzing the symptoms (i.e. poverty, crime, etc.), the root cause is identifiable and solvable. The root cause of these problems is the same. This is the best possible news because efforts to solve one of the symptoms at the root cause positively impacts all the symptoms.

One example where this is clear is the Hoffman study in an area of Chicago that is very high risk for children it reduced crime by 44%; it also increased graduation rates from 13% to

23%. One of the researchers commented, “Perhaps we’ve been giving up on these kids too soon.”

Violence Reduction

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has a small positive impact on domestic violence and . . . a medium to large positive effect on sexual offenders (although surgical and hormonal treatments were more effective for the later).⁶⁸ Butler found that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy was as effective as hormonal therapy, less likely to be refused, and more likely to be completed.⁶⁹

Doctors have been telling us to reduce stress for about fifty years but the available strategies were not highly effective in the past. Advances in our understanding of the purpose and use of emotions changed the options. We now know that our emotions are indicators of how much stress our mind and body is experiencing in response to the thought we are thinking.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy works by helping individuals change perceptions to healthier ways of looking at their experiences. While there are many situations where a therapist remains beneficial and even necessary, knowing whether a thought is more or less stressful is no longer one of the reasons a therapist is needed. This new awareness provides every individual who understands the new definition of the purpose and use of emotions a guidance system based on emotional feedback in response to every thought they think.

The only cost of applying this new knowledge is teaching people about how to accurately interpret their emotions and strategies to adjust their perception by identifying and adopting thoughts that feel better. Once someone has this information, they can lower their stress level, even when the events of their life are stressful. Less stress automatically leads to better behavior. It also has positive influences in every area of life including physical and mental health, all sorts of relationships, and career, sports, and academic success. Better outcomes in other areas reduces stress further.

When you attempt to reduce crime, alcohol abuse, drug use, physical, mental, or behavioral health without addressing stress, you’re focused on a symptom and not the root cause. It’s an uphill battle when you work on symptoms. When you work on the root cause, problems are solvable.

Throughout the years I’ve studied what causes human thriving, I discarded many of the concepts about our world that I was taught as a child. It is not unusual to think that because information is printed in textbooks it means that at some point before it was put in the book, experts agreed that it was true. That seems logical, doesn’t it? Unfortunately, much of what is in textbooks was accepted as fact without scientific verification.

If information was widely accepted, information had a good chance of getting into textbooks, even if it led us to inaccurate assumptions about our world. We’ve never gone back and evaluated these accepted beliefs as new information has come to light. Common unverified assumptions about the purpose and use of emotions, crime, physical and mental health, poverty, and other important areas of life have been accepted as truth.

When these issues are studied, the common unverified belief are accepted as facts. New information is built on a flawed foundation.

Change the Back Story; Prevent Murder

Our mind uses our existing beliefs to explain our experiences and give them a sense of coherence. It does this regardless of whether or not the belief is true. It does this even when our belief hinders our ability to achieve our goals. At a subconscious level, our mind makes up back stories to explain why things happen. Because these back stories originate in our subconscious mind and form the thoughts we think, the tendency is to believe the back story is an accurate perspective about the situation.

The reality is that there are thousands of ways to view a single situation. Some are stressful and some are not stressful. All are accurate from a specific perspective. We have the ability to change our perspective to decrease the level of stress we experience. The new definition of emotions guides us so we know which perspective is more supportive of our goals. The less stressful perspective will be the most beneficial to us.

Considering other possible back stories to explain a situation is an example of psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility is important for good mental health and it is increasingly being considered an essential skill for success.

There were about 13,716 murders in 2013. If the national trend matches Chicago in terms of motive, almost seven thousand of those murders began with an argument—arguments that were caused by back stories that made the situation escalate into senseless violence. What difference could be made if we taught children about back stories and how to create back stories that feel good and support their well-being? Imagine how much difference it would make. What are we losing every year by not doing it?

- *What could those people have contributed to the world if they had lived? What would those who are incarcerated have contributed if they knew more about how their minds worked and it kept them from committing the crime? How much are the families of the victims and the offenders suffering and how much of that could have been avoided?*

One scenario that can lead to a deadly encounter, or a non-event that no one will remember tomorrow. It's a hot muggy night on the edge of Chicago's East Garfield Park. A tourist is lost and can't find his way back to his hotel. He's had a couple of drinks so while he's not drunk, he's sloppy. He sees a man walking on the edge of the park and yells out his open window as he slows down, hoping for directions because he really needs to empty his bladder.

"Hey Dude, how do I get to Wacker Drive?"

Scenario #1:

The mind of the man he asks creates a back story that says this dude is being disrespectful.

He says, "Don't talk to me like that. I'm not your boy. You have no right to demand I answer your question." as he begins walking toward the car.

The man who has been drinking is not aware enough to read the social cues and instead of hightailing it out of there, he argues back, "Dude, don't get hostile. I just asked you for directions."

Now the local perceives the tourist is again telling him what to do. His temper is riled and he pulls out a gun.

Scenario #2:

The mind of the man he asks creates a back story that says this dude is being disrespectful. He recognizes the hit of negative emotion that arrives on the heels of the thoughts that create the back story. Because he's learned what emotional guidance is and how to accurately interpret it, he thinks to himself, "*Well, that thought doesn't feel good. How else could I interpret this situation?*" Hmm, "*This is just a stupid tourist who is lost. If I tell him what he asked for, he'll leave*"

"Make a right at the next corner, then drive straight until you see downtown."

No guns, no violence, no riled temper, and no problem

We live in the best time ever to solve society's most pressing problems—poverty, crime, racism, war, disparate outcomes, addictions, and chronic mental and physical diseases can all be significantly reduced using this new knowledge.

I've named the combination of knowledge and skills required to do this The Smart Way™. It is the best weapon we have for reducing crime and violence.

What About Willpower?

*"Willpower is the most commonly cited barrier to making lifestyle changes. 32% of Americans say a lack of willpower prevented them from making a change."*²¹⁴

Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice reported that "*Inadequate self-control has been linked to behavioral and impulse-control problems, including overeating, alcohol and drug abuse, crime and violence, overspending, sexually impulsive behavior, unwanted pregnancy, and smoking . . . and it may also be linked to emotional problems, school underachievement, lack of persistence, various failures at task performance, relationship problems, dissolution and more.*"²¹⁵

Willpower fails for most people. Emotion regulation skills reduce the negative emotions that lead to undesired behaviors. Empowered beliefs increase our level of self-control. Our emotions will provide positive emotion in response to more empowered thoughts and negative emotions in response to less empowered thoughts. Someone with good emotion regulation skills will appear to possess strong willpower but they are not using willpower. Willpower is an attempt to control a symptom. Emotion regulation works at the root cause. It takes far less effort to control your own behavior when your attempt begins at the root cause.

How are Emotions and Behavior Intertwined?

We all strive to feel better. The first response to being in a lower emotional state than we are comfortable with is not usually crime. Over time, especially if all the ways of increasing our sense of empowerment are exhausted without success, the individual's mind begins viewing crime as an acceptable method of regaining power.

In Baumeister and Beck's book, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty*, they reported that criminals always feel their crimes are justified.²⁴¹ A combination of factors leads to their conclusion. The low negative emotional state narrowed their thought-action repertoire so they literally can not conceive of solutions that someone in a better emotional state would consider. They may have already tried to feel better through other means and failed, leading them to believe a more socially acceptable option would not work.

Suicide and Murder-Suicide Prevention

An individual who has been depressed for a long time and unsuccessful in his attempts to regain power may eventually commit suicide, murder/suicide, or murder. Suicide can feel better to someone who feels trapped in despair. Suicide is something he or she can control so it feels more empowered than feeling trapped. The individual is seeking a more empowered feeling; they are not seeking death. Healthy alternative methods to increase empowerment can bring someone back from the brink of suicide.

It's even better when those methods are used to keep them from ever reaching the brink.

Human Thriving: The Root Cause

These next studies show how outcomes in multiple life domains move in the same direction. Improving one can improve all the areas and create upward spirals in the lives of people who are taught emotion regulation and advanced and transformational stress management skills.

Ed Diener and his son, Robert Biswas-Diener teamed up to write, *Happiness: Unlocking the Mysteries of Psychological Wealth*. In the introduction they summed it up this way, "*Flaubert was dead wrong in his assertion that happiness is stupid and selfish. Happiness, as it turns out, not only feels good, but is often good for you and for society.*"²⁵⁶ They went on to cite specific benefits stating, "*Research shows that happy people live longer, succumb to fewer illnesses, stay married longer, **commit fewer crimes**, produce more creative ideas, work harder and smarter on the job, make more money, and help others more.*"

In *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor mentioned the results of over 200 studies reflecting, "*that happiness leads to success in nearly every domain, including work, health, friendship, sociability, creativity, and energy.*"²⁵⁷

When Tal Ben-Shahar taught the first Happiness class, it was the most popular class ever taught at Harvard University with about 800 students.²⁵⁸ In his book, *Happier*, Ben-Shahar reflected on the relationship between happiness and success, describing it as one where happiness feeds success and success feeds happiness. He said, "*All else being equal happy people have better relationships, are more likely to thrive at work, and also live better and longer. Happiness is a worthwhile pursuit, whether as an end in itself or as a means toward other ends.*"²⁵⁹

Sonja Lyubomirsky and Matthew D. Della Porta provide a good summary of known benefits of happiness in *Boosting Happiness and Buttressing Resilience: Results from Cognitive and Behavioral Interventions*,²⁶¹ which include:

- Superior work outcomes
 - More activity, energy, and flow
 - To live longer
 - Higher levels of resilience
 - More likely to show good coping abilities
 - To have bolstered immune systems
 - Less likely to display symptoms of psychopathology
 - More likely to act cooperatively and pro-socially
 - Associated with relatively stronger social relationships
- Other researchers have also identified:

- Better digestive system function
- Lower stress
- Lower risk of heart disease²⁶²
- More pro-health behaviors²⁶³
- Less likely to commit crimes²⁶⁴
- Lower risk of obesity and diabetes
- Lower risk of depression and anxiety

Perspective; not Circumstances, Determine Emotion

The Academy of Management Perspectives published a paper in 2011 that stated, *“A key conclusion is that happiness and the processes associated with happiness depend on perspective, especially level of analyses.”*²⁶⁰

The Smart Way™ was developed as a practical method of teaching large groups how the mind works, taking advantage of the human focus on self, knowing it leads to outcomes that improve life for everyone. In other words, The Smart Way™ teaches individuals how to consciously choose perspectives that increase happiness.

Resilience and Human Thriving

There is broad agreement that a lack of resilience leads to a wide variety of problems including, *“unsafe sex, poor educational performance and completion, bullying, crime, employment, job productivity and the likelihood of poverty.”*³²⁹

The factors that increase resilience can be learned. In fact, the research that made me decide to write this book found, *“Resilient beliefs predicted positive developmental outcomes, especially among children facing adverse life circumstances.”*³³⁰

Individual resilience plays out on a large scale following adverse events such as prolonged war. *“Public resilience seems to be linked with more beneficial postwar responses, which contribute toward returning to normal life after experiencing the distress of war.”*³²² Public resilience increases *“belief in a better future, and belief in its ability to overcome hardship and to strive for improvement despite current anxiety and distressing conditions.”*³²³

Worldwide this has very relevant impacts. While many would say that this is not true in the United States, for many children being raised in urban poverty, the circumstances of their surroundings are no better than those of children living in war torn countries. In some

cases, the circumstances children in the United States live in are worse than those of children who live in a war zone.

Interventions that increase positive emotions can increase resilience.³²⁴ A panel of resilience experts at International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies concluded that although *“interventions to enhance resilience can be administered before, during or after stressful/traumatic situations . . . Ideally, interventions/training will occur prior to stressful events so that the individual is better prepared to deal with adversity.”*³²⁵ When resilience is high, the amount of time someone spends suffering in negative emotional states following a stressful or traumatic event is minimized.

One study that looked at 230 outpatients suffering from depression and anxiety disorders found, *“cognitive emotion regulation strategies of refocus on planning, positive reappraisal, and less rumination contribute to resilience in patients with depression and anxiety disorders.”*³²⁶

Wingo, Ressler, and Bradley, *“theorize that resilience characteristics mitigate risks for substance use disorders in individuals exposed to childhood abuse or other traumatic experiences via a combination of factors including emotional and cognitive control under pressure, tolerance of negative affect, utilization of cognitive reappraisal, goal orientation, spiritual coping, nurturing role models, or strong social support.”*³²⁷

A study published in International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found that resilience made teens *“less likely to engage in risky behaviors”* including smoking, drugs, and alcohol and they were better able to resist peer pressure.³²⁸

Humans are not Evil

Society has developed a belief that without external guidance, such as rules, human behavior would be unacceptable. This is evinced by the plethora of rules we are expected to comply with in every area of life. Many recent findings in positive psychology, including those by Lyubomirsky, Diener, and Fredrickson, refute the premise that our behavior is uncivilized without rules.^{356, 357}

When individuals are in a positive emotional state, they exhibit behaviors that are better than those society requires; altruism and cooperation increase substantially when higher levels of positive emotion are present.

Negative emotion is associated with crimes and with behaviors that can lead to crime, such as addiction.

Impulse Control

An article in *Criminal Justice and Behavior* reported that both rapists and child molesters have more negative emotions than non-offenders.³⁵⁸ The same article reported that college students who were sexually violent against women, rapists, and child molesters all had low impulse control. The famous Marshmallow experiments conducted by Stanford found that impulse control improves long-term outcomes based on results the children from the experiments had in their SAT scores, educational attainments, health,, and other measurements of positive life outcomes.³⁵⁹ Huntjens reported that impulsiveness is

associated with poor cognitive control.³⁶⁰ In other words, individuals who don't think about what they're thinking (meta-cognition) are more likely to act impulsively. This tendency leads to worse decisions that add up over time to worse lifetime outcomes.

Laws and Rules do not Control Behavior

Baumeister also discounts the need for pervasive rules, citing research that individuals don't actually consider moral rules when determining their own behavior.³⁶¹ The European Journal of Criminology reported "*results suggest that deterrence perceptions are largely irrelevant for those who lack a propensity to commit acts of crime.*"³⁶² Instead:

Decisions are made based on what a person believes will feel better to them.

Moral values will be used in attempts to impose the behaviors they prefer on others and to justify decisions they made.

Helping children understand that listening to their own Emotional Guidance is important and reliable will change our world.

Emotions are Feedback Designed to Guide us toward Self-actualization

Most individuals do not understand how to respond to or accurately interpret their emotions. Understanding how to do this leads to optimal outcomes. It was not until 2007 that Baumeister challenged the prevailing belief that emotions directly caused behavior, a well-accepted but unsupported theory was accepted as fact for nearly eighty years.

It's difficult for people operating on a false premise to adopt best practices when the basis they are working from is flawed.

Emotions are not difficult to interpret accurately once the language of emotions is understood. The best way to gain greater understanding is to focus on feeling emotional responses and being aware of how emotions change in response to deliberate changes of thoughts.

Understanding Emotional Guidance is all anyone needs to make sense of their life, to find deeper meaning, and to cultivate and nurture positive emotions and relationships.

Emotion regulation is a common human reaction to negative emotions. In fact, when Dan-Glauser and Gross attempted to study strategy-specific effects of emotion regulation, they found, ". . . *the natural disposition of our participants while confronted with emotional stimulation could well have been to accept their emotion, even when they were asked to refrain from modifying their emotion in any way.*"³⁶³

Every human breathes but if you speak to experts on breathing, they will tell you most of us breathe imperfectly; some say we breathe poorly. Healthy breathing involves the diaphragm; most people do not take deep breaths all the way into the bottom of their lungs. They take shallow breaths that send a signal to the body that they're stressed. If we consciously hold our stomachs in to make it appear smaller we can't breathe properly. Good breathing draws the breath in through the nose and exhales on a slow 5-count expelling all the air from the

lungs. The key to begin breathing well is to think about how you're breathing and consciously draw in deep breaths and expel them slowly.

In much the same way as most people don't breathe well; most people do not evaluate the quality of their thinking so they can think well. Like good breathing, healthy habits of thought require conscious awareness of what you're thinking and a conscious decision to do the best you can to minimize stress and increase joy. When they say *Happiness is a Choice*, what they mean is you can choose a perspective that increases happiness, or one that diminishes it; you are the only one who can decide what you're going to do.

In *Intuitive Intelligence, Self-regulation, and Lifting Consciousness*, McCraty and Zayas tell us that *"If one's capacity for intelligent, self-directed regulation is powerful enough, then regardless of inclinations, past experiences, or personality traits, people can usually do the adaptive or right thing in most situations they encounter."*³⁶⁴ In their paper, *Self-Regulation and Personality: How Interventions Increase Regulatory Success, and How Depletion Moderates the Effects of Traits on Behavior*, Roy F. Baumeister's team states:

*"It has been shown that the practice of making efforts to self-regulate can produce broad improvements in self-regulatory capacity similar to strengthening a muscle, making people less vulnerable to depletion of internal reserves. When internal reserves are depleted, normal inner restraints are weakened and intelligent decision-making can become compromised through inappropriate behavior, lost opportunities, stress, and damaged relationships. Despite the importance of self-directed control to optimal function, self-regulatory capacity for many people is often far less than many would consider ideal. In fact, failures of self-regulation, especially of emotions and attitudes, are central to the vast majority of personal and social problems that plague modern societies."*³⁶⁵

On the surface, factors that contribute to criminal behavior are as distinct as the individuals involved. When one looks deeper, it becomes apparent that emotional state is a significant contributing factor to behavior. Digging further still, one sees that stress, specifically unmanaged stress, is a systemic issue that leads to frequent low emotional states.

In 2010, Ou and Reynolds undertook a study for The Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota that found common predictors of future crime by adult males was directly related to childhood stressors.³⁶⁶ When positive effect (happiness) increases, stress declines. Using Emotional Guidance correctly increases happiness (positive effect).

In *As a Man Thinketh*, James Allen refers to the power our thoughts have to affect our emotional state:

*Man is made or unmade by himself; in the armoury of thought he forges the weapons by which he destroys himself; he also fashions the tools with which he builds for himself heavenly mansions of joy and strength and peace. By the right choice and true application of thought, man ascends to the Divine Perfection; by the abuse and these two extremes are all the grades of character, and man is their maker and master.*³⁶⁷

The Fallacy of Good and Evil

There is a predominant cultural belief that some people are good and others are evil and that good people do good things and evil people do bad things. This belief arose from an era

before science had weighed in—during a time fraught with superstitious beliefs. This belief can blind us to the truth because our mind creates back stories that support our existing beliefs.

While this may appear to fly against some religious teachings, it strongly supports other religious teachings. If someone feels this information is attacking religious beliefs, I encourage them to learn about the science and then look for what it supports in the teachings of their religion that is not supported by the current teachings.

For example, if you consider Christian admonishments to turn the other cheek. Most people believe that means to be a wimp and let someone walk all over you. But when you begin deeply understanding the research it becomes clear that focusing on the positive aspects of people you encounter rather than looking for every slight and transgression leads to better outcomes.

The belief that some people are good and others are evil is prevalent in our society; it is accepted unquestioned by most people despite copious evidence to the contrary. To dispel this belief, we must look at the effect of emotional state on behavior. Mood affects behavior. Most people easily recognize that when someone apologizes for an unkind remark with the excuse “*I was in a bad mood*” that the mood did impact the behavior. It is the degree of conscious awareness of the relationship between mood and behavior that needs to expand in order to fully comprehend that good moods are a protective factor against crime. Global Advances in Health and Medicine reported, “*emotions . . . can significantly bias or color the cognitive process and its output or decision.*”³⁶⁸

David Winter looked at the profiling information for criminals. In every instance, the worst criminals are assumed to have horrid events in their past.³⁶⁹ However, not everyone with horrid events in their past becomes a criminal. The back story an individual creates has a direct influence on the effects of the experience on future emotional states, which in turn have an effect on future behavior. A child who is repeatedly abused may become abusive or even a serial killer. Another child who was repeatedly abused may work tirelessly to help others recover and thrive. The difference is not that one is good and the other evil. The difference is the perspective the child and later, the adult, takes regarding the experiences. Emotional Guidance is an invaluable tool in guiding individuals to create back stories that are adaptive and supportive of optimal outcomes.

Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener cite strong research that individuals who are more positively focused are kinder to others, including strangers.³⁷⁰ In one of Darley and Batson’s studies, a man of God walked over someone who needed help after researchers primed him with a negative mood and time constraint.³⁷¹ They concluded that negative emotional states restrict our thought-action repertoire making us overlook opportunities to help that we would respond to when in a more positive mindset. Researchers repeatedly find that positively focused individuals are more likely to offer help and provide more assistance than negatively focused individuals. McCarthy reported that happy individuals are less likely to commit crimes.³⁷²

It is not that people who do not help lack compassion or that they don’t care, it is that the way their mind processes the data may not reveal the person’s need for compassion to them.

When Wu, Feder, and Cohen explored childhood trauma, they became one of many research teams that found undesirable behaviors, such as drinking to excess and drug abuse, are usually the result of unmanaged stress.³⁷³ An understanding of one's Emotional Guidance greatly reduces stress and increases resilience. The pathway from alcohol and drug abuse to crime is well documented.^{374, 375}

When stress is reduced, the results include:

- Reduced drug and alcohol abuse
- Increases life satisfaction
- Reduced crime

The stress may be the result of low self-esteem, financial worries, relationship worries, peer pressure, high demands, poverty, environment, abuse, perceived discrimination, low autonomy, or any other cause. The cause of the stress does not matter. Using The Smart Way™ reduces stress in all areas of life.

In every situation, if sufficient information is obtained, there are scientifically explainable reasons why an individual exhibited even the most horrendous undesirable behavior. There are no inherently evil people. There are simply people who have experienced situations that made them feel bad, or disempowered, which led to their maintaining perspectives that did not serve their highest good.

Fredrickson and Branigan found that disempowered perspectives create negative emotional states, which exacerbate challenging situations by constricting cognitive processes while positive emotional states broaden and build thought-action repertoires. *“This research demonstrates that stress, anxiety, and other kinds of emotion can profoundly influence key elements of cognition, including selective attention, working memory, and cognitive control.”*³⁷⁶ Swanston reported overwhelming research demonstrating that early life experiences such as abuse, maternal depression, maltreatment, poverty, family adversity, violence, and other stressors are linked with physical, mental, and behavioral health problems in children and the adults they become.³⁷⁷

While it is not yet commonly recognized as such, crime, acts that are contrary to the love that we are at our essence, are a form of illness, a separation from our eternal nature, with the same root as physical illnesses. That root is stress.

There is great evidence in the scientific research, and in each of our individual lives, that behavior is largely based on our chronic and current mood; better moods elicit better behavior. Yet society continually responds to bad behavior in ways that further reduce the mood of transgressors. We ignore that the reason for the transgressions is the existence of a low mood. It is no wonder that crime has been steadily increasing decade after decade. It is no wonder that crime increases when the economy plummets as reported by Hill and Lapsley.³⁷⁸

The relationship between behavior and mood is evident; the belief that some nebulous evil aspect of personality, genetics, the devil, or fate is responsible keeps our eyes averted from the truth—and the solutions that are available to us when we recognize the truth. We blind ourselves to the solutions and the root cause by pointing at a non-existent figment of imagination—a person who is inherently evil. This is not a truth that requires extensive new

research. There is already sufficient research linking happiness to lower crime and unhappiness to crime to satisfy a discerning analyst.

There is always a Deeper Reason

A review of some of the most notorious murders of all time including Jeffrey Dahmer, Stacey Lannert, and Charles Manson reflect horrendous abuses. *In Construing The Construction Processes of Serial Killers And Other Violent Offenders*, David Winter wrote about Stacey Lannert, “Violence may seem to be the only option to remove the threat.”³⁷⁹

Childhood trauma does not excuse bad behavior, but it does create it in some individuals. Not every child who is neglected, raped, abandoned, or abused becomes a criminal. What is the difference between those who do and those who do not? It is not an inherent goodness or evil. It is how resilient the child is. If the child can find and maintain emotional states that don't feel awful, the child is more likely to lead a productive, and possibly, even a happy life.

Cathy Spatz Widom researches the cycle of violence.³⁸⁰ Children who were maltreated were “almost twice as likely to be arrested as a young offender for a violent crime than children of the same gender, age, and race who grew up in the same neighborhood or were born in the same hospital at the same time . . . Overall, childhood victimization significantly increases a person's risk of arrest by 59% as a juvenile, by 27% as an adult, and by 29% for a violent crime.”³⁸¹ Maltreated youth were also more likely to be convicted after arrest.

Victimization can also result in dysregulation of the [HPA axis](#) as evinced by a study of 242 low-income urban adolescents who had experienced victimization. The youths whose caregivers reported they used emotional regulation skills (i.e. reappraisal) experienced less dysregulation of the [HPA axis](#).³⁸²

Dysregulation of the HPA axis can cause an impaired immune and digestive system, leading to chronic illnesses and diseases that increase stress.

Strains such as unemployment, school exclusion, length of time in care, and instability of placement were significant predictors of involvement in criminal activity among foster youth. Conditioning factors, namely self-esteem and life skills acquired prior to leaving care, tend to mediate the relationship between these strains and criminal involvement. Providing children with skills that enable them to reduce the amount of stress they experience in response to life events reduces the cumulative effect of stress, thus reducing the likelihood of developing aggressive tendencies.³⁸³

Pietrzak and Southwick found that individuals who are more resilient going into combat have fewer problems following traumatic experiences and are more likely to experience posttraumatic growth.³⁸⁴

We have far more control over how we perceive any situation than most realize. We could feel fearful about a situation, which would result in a pessimistic outlook (and a more disempowered perspective than other possible perspectives). Lerner and Keltner reported that if we felt angry about the same situation, we would feel more optimistic and

empowered.³⁸⁵ Voss found that our perspective about any given situation is usually based upon habits of thought rather than thoughtful consideration of the current situation.³⁸⁶

Baumeister may be the world's leading social science researcher in the field of good and evil. In *Human Evil: The Myth of Pure Evil and the True Causes of Violence*, he wrote, "Most people whose acts are condemned as evil do not see their own actions as evil. For example, they may recognize that they harm or exploit someone but believe that the action is justified or that the victim deserved to be treated that way."³⁸⁷

Haidt quotes from Baumeister and Beck's earlier examination of evil from the perspective of both victim and perpetrator in *Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Aggression*, "When taking the perpetrator's perspective, they found that people who do things we see as evil, from spousal abuse all the way to genocide, rarely think they are doing anything wrong. They almost always see themselves as responding to attacks and provocations in ways that are justified."³⁸⁸ This reflects the narrowing of the thought-action repertoire reported in research cited previously. When they can no longer see a socially acceptable path from which to respond to their perceived situation, the only path(s) they can perceive then feel justified.

Perpetuating the Flawed Response

There is a consistent message in the way misbehavior is dealt with that creates an, "I was punished so others should be as well." sense of fair play. This will never end without conscious decisions to end it. Whether a child is made to sit in the corner or spanked for transgressions, a belief develops that punishment is the appropriate response to misbehavior. The argument that the punishment is for the child's own good does not stand up to the known facts. Punishing a child decreases the child's immune, cognitive, digestive, and central nervous system functions if it decreases the child's emotional state. Punishment usually decreases mood, which also means that the likelihood of undesired behavior increases as the result of punishment.

Child Abuse and Neglect on a National Scale

It feels counter-intuitive to help criminals feel better, but only because we have developed a belief that the proper response to undesired behavior is punishment. Gang research shows disturbing information that, if it were fully understood by the public, would show how irrational it is to respond with punishment to someone who commits even violent crimes. Criminals are victims as much as their victims are victims. Wood's survey of 4,664 men from lower socioeconomic and high minority residents revealed the following statistics for gang members: ³⁸⁹

- 85.8% had an antisocial personality disorder
- 66.6% were alcoholics
- 25.1% screened positive for psychosis
- 57.4% were drug dependent
- 34.2% had attempted suicide
- 58.9% had an anxiety disorder

Anyone who understands this background information would perceive this population as needing help. The scientific evidence would predict that without help many of these

adolescents and young adults would commit crimes. Given their mental/emotional state, it is to be expected. Who is responsible for their not receiving the help they needed earlier?

I can't speak for the past, but as of now, when the research so clearly demonstrates what will happen without help, it is not right to hold them wholly responsible and let the greater society that ignores their needs and desperate situations remain unaccountable. If we did not know how to prevent the problems, then fine, society can hardly be held accountable for not preventing something it does not know how to prevent.

That excuse is no longer valid. We know how. We just aren't doing it. That is child neglect on a national scale.

Now that we know, not helping is unconscionable.

Nothing motivates people more than the well-being of children. There is no reason we cannot come together as a nation, and as a world, and share this knowledge and these skills with as many children and adults as possible. With modern technology, we have no more excuses. It's on us now. It is no longer an unsolvable problem. It is a problem society is currently refusing to solve—to the detriment of all.

“In the first century A.D., Seneca exhorted his fellow Greeks:

He who does not prevent a crime when he can, encourages it,

Cicero added,

Every evil in the bud is easily crushed.

Since Seneca and Cicero, the cloak of prevention has been wrapped around a large body of interventions.”⁴⁰⁰ When Emotional Guidance is correctly interpreted, it guides each person to personal satisfaction and happiness which brings us right around to reducing crime.

Crime is an Indication of a Solvable Problem

In the same way that illnesses such as cancer and heart disease are considered something bad that happens to the body of an individual, the inclination and willingness to harm others—physically, emotionally, financially, or spiritually—can also be seen to be a form of illness—something other than a healthy, thriving human. Humans in their optimum state are good to one another. Any departure from that is an illness—of the mind, body, or spirit. We would not seek to punish individuals who develop physical illnesses like cancer and heart disease. Punishment of those who harm others is no more a cure than it would be to punish someone who has cancer.

The entire concept of crime as something other than illness is because of the classification system and labels mankind has applied to it. These labels were applied in the past when we did not understand the fact that a thriving human treats others well. The belief that some people are inherently good and others are inherently evil brought humanity to this erroneous conclusion. It is time to reject that premise in light of overwhelming scientific evidence demonstrating that humans who are happy treat others well. Illness, whether it is in the form of a recognized medical problem or in the form of crimes, is a departure from

our optimal nature and well-being. The root cause is the same in cases. (60 - 99% of all physical illnesses have their root in chronic stress.)

We were designed to function at our best when we feel good. Our functioning in all areas, not just behavior, declines as our emotional state declines. Emotions are guidance to show us our path of least resistance toward our highest potential. When we are moving toward that potential, we feel great. The degree to which we are moving in opposition to our highest potential determines how bad we feel.

It is time for brave individuals to step up and point out that the current system is fatally flawed.

The current system does not achieve society's desires. In fact, it is not achieving the purpose for which societies were formed—making living together safer than living outside society. **Reforms will not fix the problem.** We have to be smart enough and bold enough to look at the situation in an entirely new way, apply cutting edge science to the problem of crime, and move forward with a solution that solves the problem at its root.

It is time for a paradigm shift.

The system is not working because it is rotten at its roots—the belief that man is sinful in nature and will behave poorly if the threat of punishment is not severe enough to control behavior is bogus. The current system is not working well for society as a whole, or for the many millions whose lives are directly affected, whether as a victim, perpetrator, or families torn apart by harm to, or incarceration of, a loved one. The solution requires a global change of perception about man's nature and a new approach to undesired behavior that has its roots in a clear understanding that humanity behaves in life promoting ways when individuals are happy and in life diminishing ways when individuals are unhappy.

It also requires an understanding of the skills that lead to individual happiness including accurate interpretation of one's Emotional Guidance. The global potential for improvement in lives and reduction of costs associated with crime is enormous.

I do not advocate opening the doors of the prisons and emptying their contents back into society; I am advocating that we provide knowledge and skills to every member of society (incarcerated or not) that enables individuals to manage his or her own Emotional State to a high level, thus greatly reducing their likelihood of committing a crime.

The tide of humanity that is heading to prison can be redirected into productive paths where they can thrive.

Research from many esteemed institutions demonstrate that emotional state (happiness vs. unhappiness), or, stated differently (calm vs. stressed) or (empowered vs. disempowered), is the largest factor determining behavior and not an innate goodness or evil.

When you put a good person under extreme stress, especially if the stress lasts a long time, or seems as if it will continue indefinitely, that person's behavior typically becomes worse and may even become criminal. Individuals who live where they experience chronic stress, especially stress that threatens their physical well-being (including food and shelter fears) are far more likely to commit criminal acts. Chronic stress, and the resultant low emotional

state it causes, leads to undesired behavior; not an innate evilness or other flaw in the individual.

This is not an attempt to remove responsibility for their actions away from wrongdoers. That is not the intent. The intent is to point out that without skills to self-regulate their emotional state to good-feeling levels, crime will continue to be a significant problem. The criminal justice system should focus on helping individuals develop these skills. The skills should be taught to all children.

Most of our population is handicapped by the lack of these skills. The problem is not as evident when someone lives in a low crime neighborhood and is able to make a decent living. Increase stress that person experiences and their behavior will deteriorate. We see it in the increase in white collar crime every time the economy goes south. Children raised in poverty, in areas where violence and drugs are commonplace and schools and housing are substandard have little chance to develop the positive mental attitudes that are so critical to success. The knowledge we have now can change that.

A Belief that Effort Makes a Difference is Necessary before Someone Will Act

For years, I wondered why people who could qualify for need-based scholarships did not use them to get out of the ghetto in much larger numbers. It wasn't until I understood the link between emotional state, locus of control, and the necessity to have hope that I realized they don't do it because they don't feel hopeful. People living in poverty tend to have an external locus of control; low emotional states prevent them from the clarity of thought available to observers.

Powerful people with an internal locus of control design programs to help the needy without considering the psychological perspectives that must be present before they can benefit from the programs. From their personal perspective, powerful policymakers don't see why the programs they design don't work. They believe that if they were in the shoes of those they want to help they would use the program to lift themselves out of poverty. It hasn't worked because there are more fundamental needs that aren't being met that must be met before the helping-hand will be seen as a viable option.

It is the same reason many people don't help themselves. Trust is an essential element if people are to work together; individuals living in high crime and drug infested areas are less likely to trust one another. Understanding their Emotional Guidance will help people know who they can trust and foster community cohesion and partnerships that can help change occur from the inside out.

For years people told me you can't teach people who are struggling with poverty, crime ridden environments, and food and shelter fears to be happy. They even tried to tell me such people won't care about happiness because they have greater needs. All along, I maintained that they were wrong, but I only had my theory to stand upon until recently.

I was given the opportunity to teach a group of individuals composed primarily of people recovering from addiction, including a homeless and formerly homeless subgroup. Just like Tal Ben-Shahar's Happiness class at Harvard was the most popular class; my Journey to Joy class is the most popular one at the non-profit where I'm teaching it. I see the difference it is making in the lives of those I'm serving. For example, after using an example I developed to

explain how to stop frequent angry outbursts, one gentleman in the audience commented, “*I think what you said is what my therapist has been trying to tell me, but when you said it, it made sense.*”

Consider how learning to control his temper would help a man from the lower echelons of society who has lived a hard life and developed a hair-trigger temper. Imagine this same man makes a decision that he wants to do better so he gets yet another job, but he brings his hair-trigger with him, so the first or second time someone is rude to him, it sets his temper off and he loses the job that was his pathway to a better life, adding one more short-term job to his employment history. How valuable is training that allows him to get rid of the hair-trigger temper?

Take that same hair-trigger out on a Saturday night in that rough neighborhood. How likely is it that this same man will become involved in a fight, or even a shooting as perpetrator or victim, if he takes his hair-trigger out with him?

The same skills that will help him be less likely to become angry will increase happiness, reduce stress, and make him feel more empowered. One process accomplishes all those goals. Just the other day my mom asked me, “*Wouldn’t it be better to give them housing?*” I used an example from our own family of a woman who inherited a home from a relative that was free and clear to explain that smart thinking processes are an important aspect of keeping that home. The woman who inherited the house with no mortgage lost it within a few years. I don’t know if she borrowed against it and couldn’t pay the mortgage, or if she just didn’t pay the taxes, but whichever one it was, it was not the best thinking she was capable of using. She tended to be negative, which led to her chronic emotional state being low, where cognitive abilities are at their lowest. I can’t afford to give every homeless person housing, but I can help them in other ways that will improve their chances of getting and keeping housing. It’s all interlinked. The sooner we realize it, the sooner we can solve social problems using the best possible methods.

Internal guidance can help a person rise when those around him or her don’t believe in their dream.

“You got a dream, you gotta protect it. People can’t do something themselves, they wanna tell you, you can’t do it. If you want something, go get it. Period.”

Will Smith

Self-limiting beliefs hold many people back from achieving things they want to and would achieve if they believed they could.

“Life has no limitations, except the ones you make.” - Les Brown

Your emotional feedback will guide you to empowered beliefs.

Less Stress Means a Better Mood and Better Cognitive Abilities

An important point to consider is the research that demonstrates cognitive abilities are best when we’re in a better emotional state. If you want to do something about bad things happening in the world, you’ll get happy first so that you bring your best possible cognitive

power to the table. The point that being happy first causes success is so important; [672](#) is why I named my company [Happiness 1st Institute](#).

The re-defined definition of the purpose and use of emotions allows us to move far beyond the capabilities of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) alone. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is expensive; it is usually one-on-one therapy. CBT is like having an expert marksman standing beside you while you draw the bow and attempt to shoot the arrow into the bulls-eye while you're blindfolded. They guide you but you can't see the target clearly. Teaching individuals *The Smart Way™* takes the blindfold off so people can see the target and increase their skill at any time, not just in a weekly 50-minute session.

This article shared the science supporting the concept that less stress leads to less crime. For detailed guidance on understanding emotional guidance, emotion regulation, and advanced and transformational stress management skills, the best resource is [Mental Health Made Easy](#) with its focus on stress reducing strategies.

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