

Critical Healing I: Bias & Irrational Assumptions

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We saw that to meet the challenges of bias and irrational assumptions, we need to be critical thinkers. But thinking alone changes nothing.

We also need a “healing” that can put critical thinking into action, so that the roots of problems are healed. We do this by first thinking critically about certain actions that people tend to favor but which critical thinking reveals as ineffective.

Laws? Typically, we hear all sorts of suggestions about more effective *laws*. People say, “There oughta be a law!” But laws focus only on observable behaviors. They mainly envision preventing people from acting in prohibited ways. But laws cannot prohibit mischievous dispositions, which are a recurring source of problems. Lawbreakers are not uncreative. They typically welcome changes in situations because they open new, unmonitored opportunities for their mischief.

Information? Nor is it enough to provide relevant information to people. People whose intelligence is biased against anything beyond common sense will avoid reading anything that requires in-depth analysis and historical inquiry. Likewise, peoples whose intelligence is biased by neurotic obsession, egotism, groupism, or secularism will readily avoid listening to and reading anything from beyond their narrowed minds.

Ideas? Nor is it enough to come up with brilliant ideas. To say, “I have a better idea” does nothing to people who are already biased against any ideas that might undermine their biases. Egotism and groupism regard the word *better* as meaning only better for me or us, not objectively better. They simply will not see why an idea that doesn't benefit them could be called better. People who value common sense to the exclusion of deep analysis and historical study will not entertain any idea that doesn't have quick, palpable results. People who ignore all wonder about realities beyond the human will dismiss any ideas related to the faith, hope and love of religious believers, despite the believers' claims that God gifts them with moral vision, determined persistence, and forgiving love.

Just as critical thinking spots underlying biases and irrational assumptions, so critical healing aims to undo these dysfunctions of peoples' minds and hearts. The more thoroughly our actions not only improve bad situations but also heal the real source of problems, the more likely will the improved situations continue to improve.

I recommend that you stop here. Let yourself become deeply aware of how shallow the above three "solutions" are. In any course, in any workplace, in any home, you will be expected to comment on problems and solutions. You will naturally think of laws, information, and ideas—mostly because this how most people think of solving problems. Many teachers will encourage you to think this way. But most people do not think critically: they are unaware of how thoroughly bias and irrational assumptions shape their thinking.

In summary, then, a critical healing will be:

- A habit of mind and heart
- Suspicious of bias and irrational assumptions
- Aware of why passing laws, providing information, and sharing brilliant insights are so often futile.
- Actively dedicated both to halting behaviors that worsen situations and to healing the underlying wounds of bias and irrationality.

Notice that critical healing includes the critical *thinking* that habitually is suspicious of bias and irrational assumptions. What critical healing adds is concrete action toward both the recovery of dysfunctional situations and the healing of biases and irrational assumptions that would otherwise continue to worsen these situations.

Healing Bias

We saw that to address problems associated with bias, we need critical thinking to understand the particular ways that obsession, egotism, groupism, commonsensism, and secularism play out in practice. How critical healing of bias works in practice depends on which bias is involved.

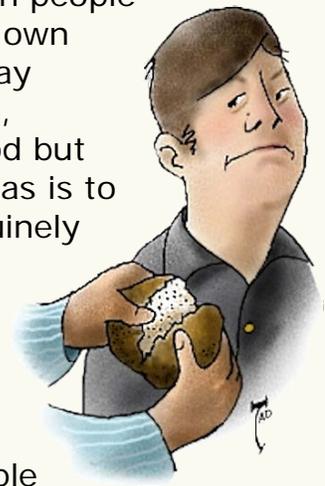
- A critical healing of obsession occurs when it leads neurotics to understand the dynamics of compulsion that distort their priorities. This is particularly effective in an atmosphere of what Carl Rogers called "unconditional positive regard"—whether by paid therapists or by friends and family.

Here, what counts is first extending to them your genuine care. Once a sense of trust is established, the goal should be simply to help them see *that* they are obsessed. They need to take to heart the fact that they are hooked—on computer games, shopping, sex, etc. This is because neurotic obsession works precisely by denial of the question, "Am I hooked?" The next question might be something like, "Do you need to get unhooked?" If they say yes, then the door of their prison is unlocked.

So this is the first step: helping obsessed persons to realize that they are obsessed. Further healing may come from within the healed person because when their habit of letting their subconscious direct their attention has been healed, they rather naturally take more deliberate charge of where they pay attention. On the other hand, further healing may involve deeper analysis and careful guidance by counselors who are familiar with the dynamics of transference, projection, denial, and reaction formation.

- A critical healing can undo egotism by befriending the egotist. When a genuine friendship is established, egotists usually open their hearts to the good of others—beginning with their friend.

Here, genuine care goes a long way. Egotism shows in people for whom *better* means better for me. They put their own reputation and benefits above anyone else's. They may mask it by being outwardly cooperative, but for them, cooperation is not an instrument for the common good but for personal advancement. One way of healing this bias is to draw them into collaborating on something they genuinely enjoy. Get them to taste the "better" sort of joy that comes with working together. Experiences of collaboration like this can open their hearts to a *better* that is beyond better for me.



Of course, befriending the egotist is often difficult because hardened egotists have learned to push people away by belittling, insulting, or mocking them. It takes a strong mind to recognize these efforts as the egotist's defensive mechanism, and a strong heart to find a way around and behind these defenses. This is particularly true of people who have offended you. Your instinct may be to pull back, but this only convinces the offender to take care of themselves above all. It is more effective and caring to make some gesture of forgiveness for the offense you felt.

- A critical healing can dissolve groupism when it engages members of isolated groups in the activities of other groups. As individuals become members of overlapping groups, they typically widen their questions about what is better for the common good.

In groupism we have people for whom *better* means better for *us*. We see it in an unquestioning loyalty to their political party, or religion, or country, or union, or company. Loyalty is good, but unquestioning loyalty is functionally stupid about what is better for all concerned. The normal way this bias is healed is when the group member joins several different kinds of groups. For example, an anti-management union woman who

joins a food co-op, participates in a reading group, and volunteers at a soup kitchen will hear the views of many others about work, supervision, and money. As she listens, any simple myths she has about labor and management are likely to dissolve.

- Critical healing can overcome commonsense pragmatism when a person sees the positive effects that result from in-depth analysis of social systems and from accounts of their histories.

This bias is particularly difficult to heal because we never fully heal. Study is hard. It is often unhelpful. A man who gets all A's in college, soon finds his immediate concerns for his family and job persistently more important than reading articles on economics, history, philosophy, and theology. This is why we stress ongoing learning more than "finishing school." The main healing you or I can do is to keep at it ourselves and aim to engage others in discussing the big issues.

- Critical healing can overcome secularism by raising the question of God. I don't mean the word *God* nor any religious teaching about a supernatural divinity. What I mean is our common experience of being bothered by ultimate concerns.

I mean how history leads us to wonder: Are we fated to just do our best, without much hope that hatred, greed, and power-mongering can be reduced? I mean how by nature we desire complete knowledge, goodness beyond criticism, and being in love without restriction; is such fullness completely impossible? I mean how we find ourselves wondering about human life: Is life actually mysterious? Did I come from God? Are we here by chance? Does our love die when we die? Is death the worst thing that can happen to anyone? Is my dead mother alive to God? Does this unexplainable joy we experience in helping others point to something beyond? And I mean how good music, dance, sculpture, and painting seem to be invitations to a beyond that is absolutely beautiful.

Atheists can reject every answer given by religions. Agnostics assume that we can never answer such questions. But questions like these occur to every adult. To help heal a secularist bias against such questions it is important to start with one's own questions about ultimates. The goal should not be to lead another to religious conversion. It is first to lead another to take seriously the question of God and of the ultimate meaning of human life. The hope is that a well-planted question sprouts naturally in good soil.

Healing Irrational Assumptions

Albert Ellis outlined 12 irrational assumptions about life that he found among many adults.¹ For example, "It is essential to have certain and perfect control over things." And "Happiness can be achieved by just relaxing and doing nothing." Such assumptions all share a single drawback: They resist scrutiny.

In this respect, they fall under the bias we called *commonsensism*. They are not so much deliberately chosen views about life as inherited views we have not bothered to scrutinize. And common sense commonly avoids working through hard questions.

To heal these assumptions requires, first, that we notice them. This is no easy task. Assumptions are not chosen. Sometimes they're inherited from parents, and sometimes they're absorbed from the common sense of our group. In most cases we have never put our assumptions about life into words.

Still, everyone is bothered every day about things they did and said. So it helps to develop the habit of reviewing our behavior every day, guided by the question: What do my actions and words suggest about my assumptions about life?

Once we identify an irrational assumption, an effective next step is to formulate a more accurate and more reasoned conviction about life. For example, instead of assuming that "It is important for everyone to be as competent as possible," one might say, "It is important for everyone to be open to asking for help." In the article, "Critical Thinking I: Irrational Assumptions" I include a workbook table where you identify one irrational assumption for yourself and then compose a "rational conviction" about life that you intend to embrace.

Again, I want to repeat that these are assumptions about life itself, not about how I personally ought to behave. Our personal behaviors are rather easy to scrutinize; we do it all the time. We focus on behaviors that befit us; we adapt ourselves to known situations. But a conviction about life itself affects my personal behaviors in every new, unanticipated situation, and it deeply affects how I encourage, advise, and warn those I care for.

¹ See <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/ellis.html> (From *The Essence of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* by Albert Ellis, Ph.D. Revised, May 1994.)