



The Upside of Your Dark Side

Why Being Your Self - Not Just Your "Good" Self - Drives Success and Fulfillment

by **Dr. Todd Kashdan and Dr. Robert Bis-Diener**

Those of you who read this column on a regular basis know that its primary focus is in keeping alumni and friends of CIMBA informed about the progress of the CIMBA Leadership Development System. A common, often implicit, thread through all of those discussions has been: Change is difficult. While widely cited and certainly open to criticism as being anecdotal, change efforts are reported to fail in some 75 percent of cases. Most of us can relate to that assertion through a simple reflection upon the number of personal change efforts we have attempted in our lifetimes. Perhaps the fact that we are rapidly approaching the "New Year's Resolution" season makes such a reflection a little more real than most of us would prefer. In this ABC, I would like to look at "Change is difficult" expressly, and particularly at the "difficult" part of the equation. To assist us toward this end, I encourage you to consider a very interesting book on the subject of "difficult" by Dr. Todd Kashdan and Dr. Robert Bis-Diener entitled: *The Upside of Your Dark Side: Why Being Your Self - Not Just Your "Good" Self - Drives Success and Fulfillment*.

The authors' basic premise is that every human emotion is useful, that all physiological states have some adaptive advantage. To quote the authors directly: "people who are able to use the whole range of their natural psychological gifts - those folks who are comfortable with being both positive and negative, and therefore draw from the full range of human emotions - are the healthiest and, often, the most successful." Interestingly, the authors' phrasing brings to mind an often cited quote by Albert E.N. Gray, given at a life insurance convention of all places, in a speech entitled "The Common Denominator of Success" in 1940: "The successful person has the habit of doing the things failures don't like to do. They don't like doing them either necessarily. But their disliking is subordinated to the strength of their purpose." Remarkably, it has taken nearly 75 years for this basic notion to take a serious foothold in our thinking about personal development and growth. The authors attribute this to the introduction of sophisticated neuroscience, advanced statistics, mobile devices that allow for better sampling of daily experiences, and other methodological and technical breakthroughs, a rationale with which we are in full agreement. Such a person, according to the authors, exhibits emotional agility (the capacity to experience both positive and negative emotions about their lives), social agility (the ability to recognize how

one situation differs from another, and to adjust behavior to match those changing demands, what we would call "mental complexity"), and mental agility (the ability to switch between mindlessness and mindfulness as circumstances demand, what we would define as having the ability to consciously move from System 1 to System 2 thinking).

In a particularly compelling illustration of their proposition, they make the argument that long distance running, like life itself, involves two experiences that are taking place at much the same time. They make note of the fact that many athletes distinguish between the beginning, middle, and end portions of the race, with the beginning characterized by intense focus (positive emotion), the middle by deep self reflection (positive emotion), and the end where athletes are likely to use anger, self castigation, and other negative states to drive performance. Their summary of this is particularly interesting: "If positivity and optimism account for 80 percent of success, then tapping the whole range of experience offers that remaining 20 percent edge." Upon this notion, the authors present a variety of evidence strongly suggesting that we as a society are working overtime to dampen down "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" and thereby making it increasingly difficult for individuals to become the person they really want to be. I could not agree more.

In an effort to bring the book and the CIMBA Leadership Development System together, I would like to begin with the thinking of Dr. Albert Ellis who the American Psychological Association named as the second most prominent psychologist in the 20th century and who is recognized as the founder of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. As the authors rightly point out, Dr. Ellis argued that three major dysfunctional beliefs directly ramp up distress and destructive behavior:

1. "I must do well and win the approval of others to be accepted."
2. "Other people must do "the right thing" or else they are no good."
3. "Life must be easy, without discomfort or inconvenience."

Those familiar with our System will have little difficulty recognizing points (1) and (2). The concepts of deceptive brain messages, System 1 versus System 2 thinking, self-awareness, social awareness, among others as well as the use of our 6-Columns Personal Development Assistance Tool in addressing issues associated with those concepts easily come to mind as you read through and reflect upon those first two points. Increasingly, our coaches and facilitators are beginning to sense the importance of point (3), and particularly as it embraces our notion of self-regulation as an ability and the motivation required to activate or arouse that important ability. From a motivational perspective, there is little question that point (3) is highly interrelated with the other two points; an individual's basic need for comfort and pleasantness (which is very likely an

automatic and unconscious System 1 habit) will make it difficult - there is that word again - to consciously achieve a goal to overcome a real or perceived fear of rejection.

For those of you who are familiar with our LIFE experience, you may recall the "Stress" video to which we referred you. That video, which can be found [here](#) on Youtube, stands for the proposition that the solution to stress is to take on more stress. This is a basic tenet of our coaching system and our 6-Columns Personal Development Assistance Tool. It is also a basic tenet of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and, not surprisingly, also of this month's book suggestion. The authors are quite articulate in making the argument that our basic need to avoid unpleasantness is causing us far more harm than good. The notion that by somehow avoiding failure and other forms of "painful" personal growth and development is somehow beneficial to self-esteem and personal achievement is repeatedly demonstrated to have the opposite effect as the authors take you through study after study.

The basic premise here is one that we observe in all of our participant groups -- undergraduates, MBAs, and executives. Becoming a more effective leader/manager is a very attractive goal. Rarely do we have a participant who enters our program without the expectation of achieving that goal. While the goal motivates them to join the program, a number of them discover very quickly that: Change is difficult. Understanding the essence of existing habits, testing the assumptions upon which those habits are based, and then practicing through those old habits to create new ones ("The solution to stress is to take on more stress") is, well, unpleasant. More succinctly, our efforts to overcome our habits in points (1) and (2) are overridden by a point (3) sense of unpleasantness or inconvenience. Again: Change is difficult.

So from where do we find the motivation to overcome the unpleasantness so directly associated with change? One would think that a traumatic health event might be sufficient motivation, but studies have shown that only one out of nine people will adopt more healthy dietary, exercise, and sleep habits after open-heart surgery necessitated by unhealthy habits in those same areas (and costing more than \$200,000). Job loss is another often traumatic event, but one for which society has dampened the unpleasantness through a variety of entitlement safety net programs. Loss of an important relationship is another often traumatic event. Most of us have either experienced the divorce of a friend or had the unpleasantness of experiencing it first hand. Unfortunately, if current statistics on the rate of marriage and family formation are to be believed, the motivation in confronting such loss has been directed more toward the "Why get married in the first place?" and away from the more difficult "Why not work harder to make the marriage succeed?" Again: Change is difficult

Most researchers embrace the notion that change involves learning. Learning involves the acquisition of knowledge with the intent to use that knowledge; personally, as an educator, I would like to believe that the intent is to use that knowledge in productive, constructive, creative, and healthy ways but we can all readily point to situations where that has not been the case. Still, within this sense of knowledge acquisition we have found it convenient to look at knowledge as being accessed through either (1) biologically primary or (2) biologically secondary learning environments. In looking to achieve an adaptive solution to a personal competency shortcoming, biologically primary learning environments which by definition provide a combination of emotion and cognition bring about the desired result. To the brain, such situations often take on a "survival" connotation. For example, learning your first language, basic problem solving skills, facial recognition, and basic interactive skills would all qualify as being biologically primary. Importantly, and in contrast to biologically secondary learning environments, the presence of a teacher or professor or trainer is not necessary for learning to take place. In fact, a cognition-based course purporting to deliver such adaptive learning - we would say, providing a "technical" solution with the intent to "fix" an "adaptive" competency shortcoming - is very likely going to fail (particularly, as we have discussed before, in those environments where vocal, low self-regulatory, individuals are present who will stomp their feet at the very notion of change). Knowledge that is biologically secondary in nature (consider, for example, a course in finance or accounting -- no offense to my finance and accounting friends) necessitates the presence of a teacher or professor or trainer who provides the motivation for student accomplishment. Not being needed for "survival," the brain needs instructor motivation (and peer pressure) to overcome the unpleasantness of learning. One only needs to look at the stratospheric dropout rates for online courses to see evidence of this phenomena; taking an online course "by yourself" is so sufficiently unpleasant for most people that dropping out becomes a relatively easy course of action (In such situations, one should be asked: "Where else is this respond to developmental "pain" showing up in your life?"). By contrast, the programmatic structure of an "in-person" course, the presence of the professor or teacher or trainer, and, importantly, the presence of others provide additional motivation, at least sufficient motivation to remain in the class. The unpleasantness of the course is exceeded by the unpleasantness brought about by the others witnessing your unwillingness to continue. Again: Change is difficult.

In this sense, we might be tempted to use the phrase "motivational environment" to differentiate the two learning propositions. The challenge confronting teachers, professors, and trainers in overcoming the unpleasantness and inconvenience of change is to create sufficient motivational environments. At the organizational level, as we have observed over the years in our full-time MBA groups, the more impactful the motivational environment, the more likely are we to see significant, sustainable personal development and growth. Those MBA classes who worked hardest at creating their motivational environment by openly setting goals and then in providing

continuous support for each other are hands down more successful after the program than MBA classes who fail to implement and nurture the needed motivational environment. In other words, those classes that create the equivalent of the "online" motivational environment are the quickest to back away from change when it becomes unpleasant or inconvenient. Conversely, those MBA classes that openly embrace cooperation instead of competition on all fronts are both more successful professionally but also score more highly on relevant measures of life satisfaction. Change is difficult -- but very rewarding.

In our ongoing efforts to provide the components that drive motivational environments, while encouraging goals and support as being fundamental in the larger sense, we are finding that individuals often find motivation in data. By data, I want to emphasize that I mean something in meaningful addition to self-report data. If you ask a group of individuals to raise their hands if they believe they are below average in their ability to drive a car or manage stress, it is rare to see even a single hand being raised. While such a belief in oneself perhaps benefits the psychological immune system, it provides a major contribution toward the rationalization too many of us use when confronted with a personal development challenge that is unpleasant or inconvenient. Data, in combination with a coach who can assist you in making sense of the data, is an important ingredient in creating a personal motivational environment.

As we have discussed in prior ABCs, we long ago rejected the "ego depletion" notion for failings in self-regulation and adopted the more robust "self-regulation as an ability activated by motivation" point of view. From this perspective, an individual is less likely to back away from a personal development challenge solely on the basis of its unpleasantness or inconvenience. More specifically, by enhancing our awareness of those situations and particularly the people in those situations, by elevating our self-regulatory ability so that in such situations we are able to slow the brain down and make better decisions, we significantly enhance our ability to bring about long-term, sustainable change in our behavior. As to tools for assisting in raising an individual's self-regulatory ability, we are strong believers in the practice of mindfulness and in focused brain exercises that serve those purposes. It is important to note that on the issue of mindfulness, I do not fully agree with the authors who draw an awkward line between mindfulness and mindlessness and our ability to switch between them. I am not sure the authors fully understand the construct of mindfulness but it does not subtract from the strength of their important message.

One final point of particular relevance is our experience in using our 6-Column Personal Development Assistance Tool. As participants begin to understand that it is their brain's System 1 self protection goal to avoid their fears, concerns, worries, anxieties, and other unpleasanties, they are then provided with the means to test the assumptions upon which those unpleasanties

have been based. In an overwhelming number of cases, participants find their assumptions to be false. In fact, while the pathway to achieving their goal may still involve unpleasantness and inconvenience, the test - driven by data - shows them that the goal will deliver far more pleasantness than their current alternative. Without question, change is difficult. The process of change involves unpleasantness and inconvenience. Fostering the motivation to push beyond the unpleasantness and inconvenience allows us to take personal risks, to confront personal challenges, to become the person we were really meant to be.

I strongly suggest that you take advantage of this holiday season to be thankful for those around you are willing to assist in creating your motivational environment. Encourage one of them, perhaps that most important person in your life, to gift you a copy of *The Upside of Your Dark Side* as you celebrate the Christmas holidays. And then, with those key ingredients in place, put them to work by reinvigorating your New Year's resolutions.

Happy Thanksgiving!