



Sober Buddha  
—Counseling—  
(949) 212-4149 | www.soberbuddha.com

## PARADOXICAL INTENTION AND BRAIN CHEMISTRY

### THE LEARNING BENEFIT:

The mental technique of paradoxical intention helps you replace addictive thoughts and actions with healthy thoughts and actions that build new neural pathways in your brain. Your brain becomes more efficient as you shift from inactivity to action, building a stronger mind-body connection and elevating your mood. Paradoxical intention is the single most powerful non-pharmaceutical technique for improving mood.

### THE FACTS:

Depression is often mistakenly diagnosed as a pathological state of mind and body, when it is often just a natural "resting" or recuperative state of the brain. Just like a skeletal muscle, the brain requires periods of rest after it has drawn heavily upon its fuel sources. Dr. Yi Jin of the University of California at Irvine Neurological Science department explains:

"The pace of modern life does not allow for adequate periods of mental rest, and people then mistakenly label the brain's slow down demand as a negative and depressive incident, when actually it is natural and should be allowed."

### Interrupting Negative Cycles

An overstimulated and exhausted brain produces inadequate dopamine. Pleasure decreases and eventually a sense of anhedonia (lack of enjoyment) arises. No matter how much new stimulus is brought in from the outside, the exhausted brain cannot generate a pleasure response. In this state, the brain under-performs, entrained with repetitive, non-imaginative, discouraging thoughts. These habitual thoughts lead to repetitive substance abuse in an attempt to jolt the brain into a pleasure cycle. Unfortunately, this never works.

Paradoxical intention is the mental skill that allows the addict to break old entrained habits and create new neuronal pathways leading to new peaks of mental, emotional and physical experience. Like the famous alchemist, Richard Dorn of the 1450s, who believed lead could be turned into gold, people who practice paradoxical intention actually convert baser patterns of thinking into higher forms of thinking. Dorn and the alchemists believed that gold was one of the purest forms of matter, the "philosopher's stone" of material, of which all life was made. Paradoxical intention is our modern version of that ancient process.

## **Paradoxical Technique**

Paradoxical intention should be practiced when you feel depressed, anxious or afraid. When you feel vegetative and unmotivated or when you are confused about what action to take in a certain situation, this technique pulls you out of the stuck place.

Let your negative schemas "talk" to you in words or images about your situation. Just sit and listen for a while. It will not be pleasant, but it is the content of your own mind, so you might as well get familiar with it. Wallow in your misery if you have to, but listen to it.

EXAMPLE: *"You flunked the entrance exam. See? You'll never get into that school. The test is just too hard for a dummy like you."*

If you listen carefully enough, you will notice that the negative voice says you cannot do what is needed to get out of your slump. Negative schemas always make excuses for why you should not bother to get up and try to do something positive. Depression wants to protect its neuronal pathways in the brain and tells you to vegetate, to do nothing. Anxiety tells you that if you take the action you fear, it will result in disaster. Both paralyze you.

EXAMPLE: *"There's no reason to keep trying. It's just so darn depressing. I'm just going to get some beers and watch ESPN until I pass out."*

Depression and anxiety actually give you the key to waking up your brain. You simply go ahead and take the action they tell you not to take. You act "para" or counter to, their "dox" or opinion about what should be done. You think and act in contradiction to the wishes of depression and anxiety.

This could mean something as simple as getting off the couch and going to the gym when depression tells you that one exercise session is a futile waste of time and anxiety says you don't have the self-control to get in shape in the first place. But, by actually thinking paradoxically, getting up and going to the gym, you have broken the old brain entrainment and actually started to create new neuronal connections around exercise, self-control and personal confidence. Repeated often enough, paradoxical intention becomes as habitual as your former fear and lassitude. Thanks depression and anxiety, for giving me the key to booting you out of my head!

## **THE WRITING EXERCISE:**

Because of anxious depression and craving, addicts constantly feed themselves the most immobilizing kinds of self talk. "I am worthless, helpless and hopeless" seems to be their negative automatic thought mantra. Because they feel worthless, they assume they deserve to be stuck. Because they believe they are helpless, they think they cannot take any positive actions to change their situation. And because worthlessness

and helplessness leave them feeling hopeless, even entertaining the thought of alternative thinking is impossible. The emotional weight of all this negativity maintains the vegetative reality of depression.

Examining their fears objectively through the microscope and launch pad of paradoxical intention reduces the negative emotional content of their thought and leaves psychological for alternative thinking. Pick an action that you know will help free you from your addictive patterns and analyze it according to the following five criteria:

- 1) What is the action?
- 2) Why do you fear taking the action?
- 3) What is the worst-case scenario following taking the action?
- 4) What is the best-case scenario?
- 5) What is the cost of not taking the action, but remaining the same in thought and behavior?

Work through this exercise repeatedly and you will quickly see that the cost of not paradoxically intending to do something positive you fear to do is much greater than any possible downside.

### **Paradoxical Intention Analysis**

1. The action I am most afraid to take is:

---

---

---

2. I am afraid to take this action because:

---

---

---

3. If I take this action, the worst outcome might be:

---

---

---

4. The best outcome might be:

---

---

---

5. If I do not take this action, the most likely effect on my life will be:

---

---

---