

Sid Cormier, Ph.D.

LIFE GUIDE

Keys to Emotional Strength



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Sid Cormier, Ph.D.

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LIFE GUIDE:

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Keys to Emotional Strength

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Human Services Institute
Bradenton, Florida



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This book is dedicated, with unending love and respect, to my parents, Frances and Sidney Cormier.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Beyond Existing

To live is the rarest thing in the world, most people exist, that is all.
-Oscar Wilde

Wouldn't it be nice if, the day you were born, life came with a complete set of instructions telling you:

- Which of your problems are really all inside your head;
- What your feelings are and how to use them to help you;
- How to stand up for yourself and be assertive;
- How to let go of unnecessary baggage from your past;
- What your needs are and how to go about meeting them;
- How to discover and live your values;
- How to use your behaviors to lift your moods and improve your self-esteem;
- How to return your mind and body to their natural state of calm relaxation;
- How to handle seemingly impossible problems;
- What you should and should not worry about;
- What kinds of things you should be thinking, believing, and saying to yourself; and
- How to develop and maintain warm, loving, trusting relationships?

Or in short, not only how to cope with life's most difficult challenges, but how to get happy and stay that way . . . at least most of the time.

Unfortunately, many of us live from one crisis or problem to the next without gaining control over our destinies. I see these

people day after day in my practice: the negligent husband, the nagging wife, the recently divorced man, the continually depressed woman, the senior citizen who feels discarded, the mature adult in a mid-life identity crisis, the compulsive workaholic, the employee trying to deal with an impossible boss, the person who can't kick the drug or alcohol habit, the lost souls who have fallen into the criminal justice system, and more.

These people have much in common. They remain in miserable situations that offer them little if any chance to fulfill their dreams. They block out or hide from distressing emotional experiences. They either let people walk all over them or lash out with inappropriate anger and alienate others. They are often prisoners of past resentment, guilt, fear, and loss. They spend months or years worrying needlessly over things they have little if any control over. They have completely forgotten how to allow their mind and body to return to a natural state of calm relaxation. They have become victimized by their responsibilities and either ignore them completely or assume responsibilities for things they have no business taking on. They continually talk negatively to themselves and set up meager expectations for their future. They have forgotten how to play and have fun, real fun. They have lost touch with the tremendous power of their unconscious mind and write off intuition and imagery as "mystical." Or worse, they've completely lost faith.

They develop anxiety, depression, ulcers, high blood pressure, and other stress-related diseases. They often turn and fight with those they truly love. In frustration they seek escape through drugs, alcohol, workaholism, or other addictions. At best, they just exist. They desperately look for an excuse for their misery. Dysfunctional family? Codependency? Addiction? Abuse? Molestation? Neglect? Mental illness? But what they really want are answers that make sense and that work.

Fortunately these answers exist. With the publication of the *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, William James began what many people feel is the art and science of psychology. In the over one hundred years of its existence, the diverse practitioners of psychology have developed the tools necessary to eliminate most

human emotional suffering and distress. The problem has been that, while the tools are available, they have never been organized into an understandable, practical strategy that anyone can apply not only to solve problems, but also to live life to the fullest.

Unlike many psychologists, I have never been interested in figuring people out. I have been dedicated to helping people live their lives to the fullest every moment. I have kept a keen eye out for what really works for my patients, my loved ones, and myself. I have searched not only within psychology, but also in philosophy, religion, and, most importantly, plain old common sense.

In my search, I have discovered some real answers. Answers that represent pieces to the puzzle of the human condition. Answers that represent a mixture of clinical secrets and common sense. Dynamic answers that, when put together and used, unlock the true power of human potential.

To find answers, an open and receptive mind is required. Some answers become obvious as soon as you ask your questions correctly. Some you already know, but haven't realized their significance. Some may seem hard to understand now. Others may seem even counterintuitive.

To get back on course for living and not just existing, imagine that the following twelve principles represent a set of directions for guiding you through the course of life.

1. Your problems are really not all inside your head. It's virtually impossible to be happy when you are in a chronically unhappy situation. You've got to either engineer your situation into something that's acceptable to you or leave it.
2. Your feelings, both pleasant and unpleasant, are your friends. They are there to help you, and the sooner you learn to recognize, experience, and fully express them, the sooner you'll be on your way to living life to the fullest.
3. To keep from being victimized by others, it is necessary to learn to stand up for yourself and be assertive.

4. Before you can let go of the problems from the past, you must learn from them.
5. You must know what your basic needs are and how to go about meeting them.
6. Your emotions, like your money, are investable. It is not enough merely to *know* what is important. You must *show* it in your everyday behavior.
7. There are behaviors and experiences that are good for your physical health, mental health, spiritual health, and self-esteem. Whether you feel like it or not, you can dramatically improve your mood just by doing the right behaviors.
8. Your mind and body were designed to be calm and relaxed, so quit fighting it and learn how to let go. When you do, you will perform better in all areas of your life.
9. For those problems that seem to have no answer, realize that when your body is profoundly relaxed and remains relaxed, you cannot be emotionally upset, no matter what you think about or experience.
10. You will save yourself much wear and tear by discovering your personal sphere of influence, that is, learning to control the things you need to control, accepting the things you cannot, and developing the wisdom to recognize your boundaries.
11. The power of your beliefs, expectations, and self-talk is crucial in shaping your feelings, behavior and the course of your life. You must get the little voice inside your head—your self-talk—on your side.
12. Perhaps the most powerful key of all is a loving, trusting, warm, honest relationship with another person.

My purpose in writing *Life Guide* is to show you how to use these keys developed by dedicated men and women in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and religion to help you experience the most meaning, excitement, joy and love in your life as possible.

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Situational Engineering

Your problems are not all in your head!

Your problems are not all in your head! They really aren't. As B. F. Skinner put it, "... don't try to change yourself, change your environment." No matter how emotionally stable and well adjusted you are, it is virtually impossible not to go nuts if you stay in a chronically stressful or crazy situation. Some situations can destroy you. There are examples of the overwhelming power of the situation on a person's behavior.

On November 18, 1978, in the dense jungles of northwest Guyana, a healthy young woman takes a last long look at her dead husband and dying friends as she puts a cup of poison to her small daughter's lips and then her own. They cuddle up together, and join over nine hundred others in a convulsive and finally peaceful end to their lives. They have committed their final act of religious commitment to their prophet, the Reverend Jim Jones.

The most powerful instinct in human beings is the need to survive. Yet at Jonestown, people chose to go against the very core of their being. What force can be so powerful to make people take their children's lives and their own?

A situation can be a force of light or darkness, liberating or imprisoning you. Even the most difficult situations can bring out the best in the human spirit. Consider the gallant response of the King of Denmark during the Nazi occupation in World War II. Thousands of Jews were trapped in Denmark and, in order to persecute them, the German high command issued an edict demanding that all Jews wear a yellow star. Upon learning of this,

the King of Denmark, a Protestant, placed a yellow star on his lapel. The rest of his countrymen followed in kind, thereby confounding the German authorities. What force is so powerful to cause people to personally challenge the edicts of a mighty and despotic state?

In the comfort of your living room, reading this book, it is easy to speculate and weigh what you would or would not do under certain conditions. But when you are in the actual situation, there are determinants that impel you in a direction, often without your conscious consent. Psychologists have studied, in controlled scientific experiments, how far people can be pushed.

HOW FAR CAN YOU BE PUSHED?

In the late 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a fascinating series of experiments on obedience to authority. Results showed that the demands of a situation are usually more powerful in determining human behavior than an individual's conscience or force of will. In these experiments, people in a psychological laboratory were told to carry out some behaviors that increasingly came into conflict with their conscience. The main question Milgram asked was how far the participants would go in complying with the experimenter's instructions.

In one experiment: Two people come to a psychology laboratory to take part in a study of memory and learning. One of them is designated a teacher and the other, a learner. The experimenter explains that the study is concerned with the effects of punishment and learning. The learner is led into a room, seated in a chair, his arms strapped to prevent excessive movement, and an electrode attached to his wrist. He is told that he is to learn a list of word pairs; whenever he makes an error, he will receive electric shocks of increasing intensity.

The real object of the experiment is the teacher. After watching the learner being strapped in, he is taken into a main experimental room and seated before an impressive shock generator. Its chief feature is a horizontal row of thirty switches, ranging from 15 volts to 450 volts, in 15-volt increments. There are

also labels that range from *slight shock* to *danger* to *severe shock*. The teacher is told that he is to administer the learning test to the person in the other room. When the learner responds correctly, the teacher moves on to the next test item; when the learner gives an incorrect answer, the teacher is to administer an electric shock. The teacher is to start at the lowest shock level (15 volts) and increase the level each time the learner makes an error, going through 30 volts, 45 volts, and so on up to 450 volts.

In Milgram's experiment, the teacher is an unsuspecting person who comes to the laboratory to participate in a learning study. The learner, on the other hand, is an actor, who receives no shock at all. The main point of the experiment is to see how far the teacher will go when ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim.

Although no shocks are actually administered, the teacher's conflict is intense and obvious, increasing along with the discomfort of the learner as shock levels are raised. At 150 volts the learner demands to be released from the experiment, by 285 volts he screams in agony. On one hand, the suffering of the learner presses the teacher to quit, while on the other hand, the teacher feels compelled to continue by what is perceived as legitimate authority.

Milgram discovered that, while many subjects experience stress and may protest to the experimenter about what they're doing, approximately two-thirds of the subjects will continue to shock the learner up to the final level of 450 volts on the shock generator.

One explanation for this behavior might be that the subjects are hostile, aggressive, or even evil. On the contrary, Milgram's interviews with these people showed that they are ordinary people, just like you and me. They come from all walks of life and may be managers, secretaries, factory workers, or students. Most of the people who delivered shocks at the ultimate level had no history of violent or aggressive behavior and felt genuine guilt over continuing the shocks they delivered. But they responded to situational pressure with behavior contrary to their conscience.

The equation, *Behavior = (f) Organism x Environment*, is a psychologist's way of saying that your behavior is due to factors within you interacting with your environment. Factors within you (the organism) include such things as your temperament, physical abilities, height, weight, intelligence, personality organization, values, and attitudes.

The environment, or situation, includes such things as where you are, who you're with, the air temperature, the noise level, what people expect of you, and what people are telling you to do.

Most self-help books focus on helping you change conditions within yourself. You may be taught to talk better to yourself, to do things that are good for you, to make self-affirmations, and so on. But your situation can be much more powerful in determining your behavior than anything within you.

FORCEFUL OTHERS

A forceful aspect of your situation or environment is the people who are important to you. Most people want desperately to be loved and accepted by those important in their lives. In the late 1950s, psychologist Irving Goffman wrote an authoritative book entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, expanding on this point. Not only did Goffman believe that our behavior is strongly influenced by what we feel other people think of us, he went so far as to say that all of our behavior and personality is strictly a reflection of what we think other people want of us. In short, Goffman's idea was that we are all actors, giving a show for others.

Although I personally believe there's a lot more to people than "how they look to others," Goffman's point is well taken. If you think about it you will realize that much of what you do is measured to fit what you believe others require or expect of you.

Not all forceful others are authority figures; many are our peers. Perhaps the best example of peer pressure influencing behavior comes from the drug culture. For the past several years I have been director of psychology at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. Part of my job is to assess individuals who come in

for treatment. Routinely, I try to find out how they got started using drugs. Almost invariably, I hear the response, "Well it started out just partying in high school with my friends and boyfriend/girlfriend. We liked to party on the weekends, and I had to drink or do drugs to fit in."

Tina is a twenty-six-year-old woman who entered therapy for anxiety attacks following an auto accident. During my history taking with Tina, she told me that she had a long history of smoking pot and taking barbiturates. Tina had never been through an alcohol or drug rehabilitation program but had been off drugs and alcohol for approximately five years. Here is Tina's story:

Well, I started smoking pot when I was about twelve. All my friends were doing it, and I had a crush on a boy who was fourteen and he was a stoner. We would basically get loaded every day during recess, and after school. On the weekends we would go over to a friend's house and all get high.

I guess I was under some pressure at the time from school and my family, but I really wasn't aware of it. To be honest with you, I don't think I really had that many problems, but just fell into a group of people who liked to use drugs. When all of my friends and my boyfriend were using drugs, it seemed only natural for me to use them too. When I was about fourteen, the most important people in my life were my friends. I still loved my mom and dad, but I felt that they really didn't understand me. So when my friends and my boyfriend used drugs, they expected me to use them too. Nobody thought anything was wrong with it. The people who thought drugs were bad we considered nerds. In my school, the people who weren't using drugs or partying were not cool.

By the time I was twenty, I was living with a heroin addict who was going nowhere but down the tubes. When I started to date other guys, I found that all of them were equally going nowhere. Finally I figured out that everybody I hung out with had a drug problem. So I decided to apply for a job in another city. Luckily, I got the job.

When I moved, I found myself surrounded by new people. I was lucky enough to find a boyfriend who was a really nice guy and not into drugs. My new friends at work were also straight and they seemed pretty happy. I've been married now for three years, and overall get along really well with my husband. I haven't used drugs for over five years, and feel no real desire to do so. I really feel the most important thing in getting off drugs is to be around people who support you in not using drugs and make you feel like you don't fit in if you do use drugs.

Tina's self-rehabilitation from a drug problem is a common but little-noticed phenomenon. Often, it does not require extensive rehabilitation, counseling, or structured support groups to overcome a drug addiction, if there is a situational change. A situational change is distinctly different from the "geographical cure" condemned by AA. While a geographical move may help, usually the most powerful effect of the situation is the qualitative aspect, that is, what kind of people you are around and what they expect of you. In fact, AA uses this principle (peer pressure) to help members maintain sobriety.

Another example of peer pressure is gang violence. Psychologists call people who belong to a gang "sociopaths." Nevertheless, it is important to realize that gang members do have a conscience—a strong allegiance to members of their own gang. They are very devoted, protective, and sincere toward each other. The gang members I've worked with think of their gang as a family that gives them the love, attention, and protection they never received from their family of origin. When one of their gang members is shot or killed, it is as though a member of their family has been attacked.

Kenny was an eighteen-year-old former street gang member who had recently moved to Northern California from Los Angeles. Here is Kenny's story showing his escape from a powerful malevolent situation:

I just moved up here because it got too hot in L.A. I knew I was going to be next in line to get shot.

I remember we was sitting on the steps last year and a car drove by and some guys started shooting. Mike and Trevor (gang members) and some lady I didn't know all got shot and there was blood all over and they were killed. I was scrambling just to stay alive. So three of our guys got together, drove by their spot, and paid them back.

It's like you always have to watch your back. You know somebody's gonna be comin' for you. If you don't get them, they gonna get you.

Kenny's story is an example of adaptive paranoia. He had been in a street gang where the situation dictated kill or be killed. Kenny had a history of neglect by his original family and had taken the gang as his family. Kenny's gang provided him with a sense of love, belonging, attention, and protection that he never received from his parents.

While research, headlines, and stories like Kenny's demonstrate the power of situations in bringing out the best or the worst in people, situations also exert a pervasive effect over the course of your life.

GATEWAY SITUATIONS

Certain situations mark and guide the developmental progression of your life. These are what I call *gateway situations*. They are likely not only to affect your behavior and your feelings, but also to alter your life's course.

Education

Ever since the age of five or six, you have been involved in the most powerful and pervasive series of gateway situations in our culture: the educational system. As a child you learned to sit when told, raised your hand to ask questions, asked permission to go to the bathroom, did homework assignments, tried to please your