

part one:

FROM INSIGHT TO OWNERSHIP

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Chapter One

NEW EYES: NEW LANDSCAPES

You, the viewing and the doing

If the doors of perception were to be cleansed everything would appear to [humankind] as it is, infinite.

William Blake

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

In the field of observation, chance favours only the prepared mind.

Louis Pasteur

DIPPING A TOE

Preview: In this chapter we ponder the basic principles of how we make sense of the world through the way in which we process information. Inevitably, how we view the world influences what we do in the world and vice versa. We consider the relationship between perception and experience and how we can use this as a basis for creating positive change.

SENDING OUT AN SOS

Our hopes, dreams and wishes are the compass readings for our ideal destinations. Knowing where we want to go is half the battle. The only thing we have to work out is the means to get there! The SOS message in the bottle is passive: 'save our souls'. We sit in hope and wait. But this is too important to trust to fate. So how different would things be if we decided to 'save our selves' by 'supporting our strengths' and 'seeking out solutions'?

At the close of the introduction I asked you to imagine that some magical changes had taken place in your life. So, what will those changes be? This deceptively powerful technique is a variation of *miracle question* used in solution-focused counseling. The aim is to engage our imagination in order to shift perceptions and concentrate attention on positive outcomes. This chapter is all about exploring your perceptions and the impact they have on the way you view the world, the way you live your life and how you learn.

Often we take for granted the complex mix of psychological processes which we use to go about our everyday lives. We all share a basic psychology of how we make sense of the world. There are certain principles to which we all adhere. On top of this we overlay our individual take on the world. As you read these words you are using your attention, your memory, perception and ability to make sense of language. At the same time as you tune into the words on the page you are filtering out unwanted noise and distractions. So, in order to make sense of things, our attention needs to be selective. In short we have a filtering system that is a mixture of shared values and individual perceptions. Our view of the world and of ourselves

is shaped by what we pay attention to, what we allow to filter through and what we filter out.

Self-help books often pose the question: ‘are we what we focus on?’ This is another way of asking, ‘are our lives shaped by attention and perception?’ *Insight* into these basic processes will help you take *ownership* of the way you view the world and lead to *action* in support of your goals. This chapter aims to answer this question and will form the basis for exploring your own personal psychology in subsequent chapters of this section (learning style, values and strengths). So, let’s begin by considering this process of selective attention.

**YOU ONLY HEAR WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR;
YOU ONLY SEE WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE**

The words of William Blake, in the opening quotation, suggest that we can change our view of the world if we clean up our perceptions. Everyday we filter our experience of the world by selectively tuning in and switching off. To get a better idea of this process, let’s start by having a party.

The cocktail party phenomenon

Let’s imagine you’re on that ship you’ve been waiting for and you’re having the time of your life. Picture a glamorous cocktail party and you’re enjoying the most enthralling conversation with someone. You’re laughing and joking and feel that you’ve known this person for years. You’re totally at ease and absolutely oblivious to everything else going on around you. Amidst the cacophony of voices and the strains of an inebriated pianist, who sounds like he’s playing the cracks, you are able to focus only on the sound of that silky, sensuous voice.

Those honeyed tones are simply music to your ears, which is more than can be said for that pianist! Oh yes, and if that wasn't enough, this person is drop-dead gorgeous, and flirting. You just know it's leading somewhere and you love every minute of it! Suddenly someone across the room just barely whispers your name. What happens next?

More than likely at the mention of your name your undivided attention will be more than divided. You will totally switch your concentration, cutting the drop-dead gorgeous one dead in mid-sentence and turning around to see who's talking about you. And you wonder why you always strike out at cocktail parties! Don't worry; you're not alone. Chances are, we'd all do the same!

First discussed by cognitive psychologist Colin Cherry in the 1950s, it's known as the *cocktail party phenomenon*. It shows our attention is selective and that we filter information based on personal relevance. Names have a high priority. Just the mere mention of ours can make us switch, even if we're having fun and flirting. So what are you switching off right now?

Exercise: background noise

Pause for a moment and tune in to the sounds and sensations that you are filtering out.

- *Look around and just focus on the ordinary things.* Scrutinize your environment. What can you see that you have overlooked before? Have you spotted something that needs painting or cleaning? What about an interesting pattern in the wallpaper you've never noticed before? Look at a clock. Are there people around you hadn't noticed? What else?



- *What can you hear now that you weren't paying attention to before?* Is it the ticking clock, the dull roar of the air conditioning, church bells or a car alarm in the distance? Can you hear the traffic, a dog barking or children playing? Can you hear the hissing of a bus's breaks, an aeroplane overhead or the siren of one of the emergency services? What else?



- *Now bring your attention to sensations and feelings.* What do you notice? May be you have suddenly become aware of the feel of your clothes, the pressure of the seat, or aches and pains. Maybe it's a cold draught you'd been ignoring. What else?



- *Now focus on your other senses of taste and smell.* What do you notice? Are there food smells drifting by? Can you smell perfume or body odour? Is there a taste in your mouth and do your teeth feel clean? What else?



This simple exercise demonstrates how we can subtly change our experience of the world by what we focus on. Routinely we tune in to what's important to us and tune out what's not. However, sometimes we just get into the habit of not fully engaging with life.

OK, switch back to the book, enough noise and distraction!

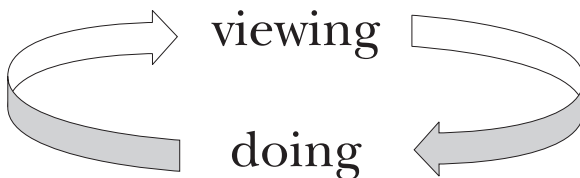
RE-COGNITION

We actively transform the information we receive through our senses. We don't just passively soak up information; we do something with it to make it personally relevant and useable. One of the main features of this is that we just focus on the most important parts and filter out the 'noise'. This is known as *selective attention*. We experience this when we become engrossed in a book or television and block out the distractions. We become oblivious to what's going on around us. It is only when a person uses our name or asks 'do you fancy some chocolate?' that we switch attention. So, the next time you get annoyed when people ignore you, remember it's just the result of selective attention. Well, either that or they are downright rude!

Attention and perception belong to the realm of cognitive psychology, the study of how we process information and make sense of the world. We refer to these processes whenever we use the word ‘recognition’. In effect we go through the same process that got the information into our heads in the first place. It’s not the sexiest area in psychology but it contains a wealth of material on how to make learning easier and more effective. As a student I learned, that with the help of some basic principles I could study smarter rather than harder, if I went with the natural flow of my innate abilities.

The fact is that our attention span is a lot shorter than we think. We can only pay full attention to something for about 20 minutes. After that it becomes more difficult to maintain optimum attention and retain information. This means that if we have a long task to tackle then short intensive bursts of activity are the most effective. This was music to my ears; it meant more breaks *and* it was psychologically justified!

As the saying goes: ‘when we know better we do better’. By working with this simple psychological insight I took greater ownership of my perception of what studying for exams meant to me. It ceased to be so boring and my recall of information improved dramatically. Essentially, I had stumbled across a simple law of human perception and experience: *the viewing influences the doing*, and vice versa.



Our perceptions change our experience of the world which in turn reshapes our perceptions, and on it goes. So let's continue by looking more closely at our selective attention.

THE COST OF SELECTIVE ATTENTION

So why is our attention so selective? And why is the human attention-span so short? To answer this I want you to imagine what it would be like if you had to process every bit of information that came your way. Well, either it would cause a massive information overload or else our brains would need to be huge. This means bigger heads and chaos at weddings with hats the size of ocean liners!

Instead we have a limited capacity to process information, and we're hard-wired for speed and *cognitive economy*. Each piece of information to which we pay attention incurs a processing cost and we only have limited energy. Therefore, we need to make sure it's going to be worth it. This selectivity is based on what is personally relevant to us to maintain consistency in our world.

However, one of the pitfalls is that if we are too selective then we block out new information. Therefore we have a competing drive for novelty. In effect, we are torn between the two. On one hand we have 'go with what you know' and on the other hand it's 'Hey, over here! Look at me!' This helps maintain the balance between fresh input and what we are used to.

Our need for novelty also helps out in the area of cognitive economy. Information about the world comes to us through our five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell). Each sense has a reservoir of 'attention energy' assigned to it, rather like a rechargeable battery. If we focus on one task that

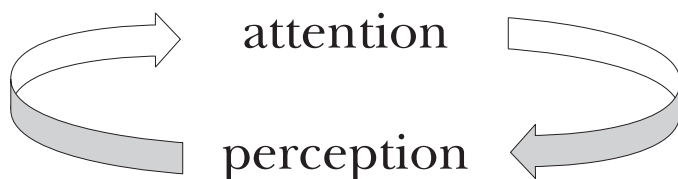
requires one particular type of attention, and for extended periods of time energy, we tend to experience fatigue. More effort is required to 'squeeze out' the processing power and so we tire or make errors. This is why simple, repetitive tasks are more tiring than ones with variety. In order to recharge our resources all we need to do is take a short break, or switch to a different type of task with an emphasis on a different sense. A change is indeed as good as a rest. So rather than being easily distracted, our brains are actually hard-wired for distraction. And no, it's not an excuse!

If you cast your mind back to when you were an infant, think of the incredible amount of information you acquired in a very short space of time. Alongside that, you were trying to gain a sense of predictability in the world even whilst you were captivated by novelty. If we forsake novelty and become too set in our ways then we limit our options for new learning experiences. As a result we become inflexible and closed-off and tend to respond to the world in predictably comfortable ways. If the novelty takes over we never settle, commit or achieve anything. The push and pull of these competing demands helps to maintain a productive balance.

Advertisers are expert in manipulating messages to grab our attention with the aim of getting us to select their message from amidst the competition with a hope that it will influence the choices we make. They hit us with a double whammy. They appeal to our need for novelty and our need for predictability or consistency in the world. Their messages tend to be bigger and brighter, will play on creating contrasts, may take us by surprise, but will also play to our emotions and to our sense of values. So the next time you feel tempted to buy something

you can't afford, consider which buttons are being pressed. It will certainly help you to work out the financial cost of your selective attention.

Our perceptions are shaped by what we've paid attention to. Working together, attention and perception shape our view of the world.



New information is based, to a large degree, on personal relevance. We are, in effect, cognitive cherry pickers – collecting information that is most relevant to us and filtering out the rest. Based on culture, background, learning, mood, context, time of day and individual idiosyncrasy, personal experiences, motivations, likes and dislikes, we continue to shape and re-shape our view of the world based on what we value and what we're used to. In effect we only see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear! The rest gets filtered out. This creates what is known in psychology as a *perceptual set* (similar to everyday 'mindset'). This set of perceptual filters is like security staff at your private party. Information only gets in if it's 'on the list' or if it has the element of surprise. Popular psychology often states that it is our perception that creates the reality and, to a large extent, this notion is supported by academic psychology.

Let's consider the content of our perceptual filters in greater detail.

FRAME OF MIND: EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

'I filter therefore I am'

We take for granted many of the factors that influence our perceptions mainly because we spend very little time thinking about them. Some factors such as gender, race and attractiveness shape the entire course of our lives and we are never allowed to forget them. Invariably they set up a lifelong chain of expectations in terms of our behaviour, how we relate to others, our sexual encounters, prospective partners, economic prosperity and even our personality. And although we may not be able to change barriers in our lives, we can certainly change our perception of them.

Let's take a more detailed look at the major perceptual filters that shape our lives.

Filters in a major key

The groups and categories to which we belong colour our perceptions and shape our view and experience of the world. Let's consider these major perceptual filters. So, for each of the following categories ask yourself these questions:

- What are the benefits and limitations of belonging to this category/group?
- If you 'switched sides' or belonged to another group, what would be different for you?
- How would this change or affect your view of the world?

DON'T WAIT FOR YOUR SHIP TO COME IN ... SWIM OUT TO MEET IT

- How would switching groups affect your choices and opportunities, for better or worse?
- How does belonging to a particular group affect your attitudes and values?
- Would your values change if you could switch groups?

Gender (being a masculine man, a feminine woman or something else)	
Culture and ethnicity	
Sexuality (gay, straight, bisexual, hetero, homo, or defies classification)	
Age (young, older, old, middle-aged)	
Social and peer groups (and any other group that you feel defines your identity)	

Now imagine reading the newspaper, in particular some hot political issue. How will these factors impact on your views? Will some pieces of information be more important to you than others?

Now consider these following factors too. How would your view of the world change if things had been or were different now?

Upbringing, childhood and adolescence	
Education (type and level)	
Home and environment	
Health	
Wealth	

Now consider:

- How do all of these things contribute to your values and what you stand for?
- What do you hold dear?
- What social issues are important to you?
- How do your values contribute to your view of the world?
- How has your view of the world changed over time?
- With whom would you swap places for a day to have the most dramatic change on your view of the world?

To get an idea of how perceptions change over time we only have to consider the field of fashion. Our old photograph albums provide ample evidence. I'm guessing that you have pictures in there that make you squirm with embarrassment. I know I do. What was I thinking at the time? Fashions come and go and with them our sense of what looks good. What was cutting edge at the time now looks like a fashion disaster until everything goes full cycle and the disasters become next season's new thing. Fashion is just a matter of perception. It's just that sometimes we have to stand back a little to gain a sense of how our perceptions are altered.

As if that wasn't enough to contend with, we have a whole set of minor filters that colour our perceptions.

Filters in a minor key

Mood swings, different situations, the time of day, and biological cycles all colour our perceptions and experience to varying degrees. Added to these are likes, dislikes, motivations, wants and needs, and so on. Take time to work through these questions and make notes in your journal before moving on.

Our minds do indeed play tricks on us as we distort perceptions in line with our needs such as hunger and thirst and the need for security. You've probably seen cartoons where hungry characters see everything in the shape of food. This also happens in the real world. Research has shown that hungry people perceive food photographs as brighter than neutral ones. Children draw larger pictures of Santa before Christmas as compared with pictures after. Our sugar levels fluctuate throughout the day and this affects our mood which means we may react differently to jokes or comments from others. Then there are the effects of confidence, self-esteem or a myriad of other personality factors. Individual physical characteristics such as height, weight, hair colour, eye colour, and attractiveness may also have an impact on our perceptions and the people with whom we interact. Other people's perceptions of us affect our perceptions of ourselves. This may affect our actions which in turn affect our perceptions (the viewing–doing cycle). It's a complex process. It's not just beauty that's in the eye of the beholder. Reality is too!

All this means that we are primed to respond automatically. Our perceptual filters create the expectation and trigger pre-packaged sets of responses all ready to go. Much of the time our filters serve us well, but if fresh input never gets through we jump to conclusions based on prior expectations. We fill in the missing gaps, simply seeing what we want to see.

Self-fulfilling prophecy

We adjust our behaviour in line with the expectations of others and of ourselves. When we use the phrase 'self-fulfilling prophecy' it is most often in a negative context. We internalize expectations or predictions and then set out to make sure they

come true. For instance, we may predict that we will fail at a test and then unwittingly sabotage events or our behaviour to make sure the prophecy comes true! These expectations can be so powerful that they can cause us to deny the evidence of senses.

Consider an everyday example when you're late for work and say to yourself 'I bet I won't be able to find my keys'. That prediction turns out to be true and it certainly doesn't help when some bright spark asks 'Where did you leave them?' Of course you first looked in the place where you always leave them and they weren't there. So you continue frantically to upturn the whole house in search of the keys. In desperation you return to the place where you thought you left them. They aren't there and so more frantic upturning follows. You take a moment to pause and say to yourself emphatically 'Yes they are where I usually put them. They must be.' Miraculously you return to the place you had searched a dozen times before and there they are. They had been there all along!

Given the power of perceptions and expectations over such a mundane task as finding our keys, just imagine the impact when faced with our goals. This example is particularly pertinent to me as I write these words. I reached a stage where my head was spinning (not literally, just metaphorically; it wasn't that distressing). I was stuck on an early chapter and said to myself, 'I'll never get this right'. Sure enough I continued *not* to get it right. Knowing that I was stuck a friend sent me a text (SMS) message. It read:

The day will come when
 u have ur epiphany, and
 then shores of paper
 will be awash with
 the inks of your heart.

Yes he does speak like that! The message made me LOL (text speak: 'laugh out loud'). Something so simple put a smile on my face and created a shift in perception. I resolved to get up early the next day and finish the chapter. By 10 a.m. the next day, simply by moving a few paragraphs around, the chapter began to work.

So, what limiting attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and expectations do you have about your own ability? Have you set yourself up for failure before you even start? Do you tell yourself 'If I don't expect much out of life, I'll never be disappointed?'

WYSIWYG

Are we defined by what we focus on? From a psychological perspective, the poet Horace's hypothesis that 'Life is a matter of expectation' is largely true. WYSIWYG (pronounced 'wizzy-wig') is a computer acronym meaning **What You See Is What You Get**. In other words what you see on the screen is what you will get when you print it out. Our perceptual filters work rather like the automatic features in a computer word-processing program. These features try to predict what you want to do based on a mixture of what most people want to do, and on

past performance. Type one bullet point and before you know it your page looks like a shoot-out in a Tarantino movie. However, knowing a little more about computers enables you to switch off the automatic features or create new features of your own. You can shape the computer's automatic features to your needs. The same applies to predictive text on mobile phones. When you first get your phone it tries to guess what you want to type on the basis of the most commonly used words. As you go along you can add new words into the dictionary. In doing so, predictive features reflect more accurately the way you use language and your view of the world. Each chapter of this book – following the principles of *insight*, *ownership* and *action* – aims to help you consider the predictive features of your perceptual filters, challenge them and, where appropriate, make changes to get your perceptions working for you, not against you.

THE 'YES BUT' JUNKIE

Maybe the views expressed so far are a little bit too Pollyanna for you. You may argue 'Yes but ... it won't work in the real world.' To which I reply 'Yes but ... I'm talking about the *perceived* world.' Lost your keys recently? Did they disappear in the real world only to reappear in the first place you looked? No, of course not.

'Yes but' means NO! The perceptual shutters are down to solutions and locked into problems. Give the 'yes but' junkie a 99 per cent solution and they'll wrestle you to the ground over that elusive one per cent! And for as long as the 'yes but' filter is switched to maximum, there will never be any possibility of solutions. Whatever you choose to focus on, you'll get more of it. Problem seekers are rewarded with ever mounting problems. Solution seekers are rewarded with solutions.

The aim of this book is to balance the need for familiarity and predictability with fresh input and perspectives. The tools and techniques are designed to switch off automatic ‘yes but’ filters, in order to give our solution-seeking filters a chance. It’s not a book of answers but rather a book of possibilities. You apply the tools and get your own answers. You can start this process at anytime by asking the simple question: ‘How would this work for me?’ This book is a blueprint for you to create a *personal development* system that lives up to its name: *you develop as you develop it!*

So, to return to the question of, ‘Are we what we focus on?’, well, we have seen that attention and perception, to a large extent, shape our view of ourselves and of our world. This affects how we behave and how we think, which in turn affects our attention and perception. This circular process goes on and on. The good news is that we can interrupt this cycle and actively take control of what we pay attention to. This will have a knock-on effect in terms of how we view ourselves and our world. So, let’s get personal and put this to the test with the first experiment.

A PERSONAL EXPERIMENT IN ATTENTION AND PERCEPTION

This simple experiment is designed to test the idea that we can retune our filters and change the way we view the world. For the experiment you’ll need your journal or notebook.

Gratitude and anticipation

- 1 Before you go to sleep tonight write down a minimum of three things that have happened today for which you are grateful. In effect you are counting your blessings.

- 2 Now add three people to whom you are grateful today, for whatever reason. It can be a lover, a friend or the person who works at the corner shop.
- 3 Repeat for the next 27 nights.
- 4 When you awake tomorrow, list a minimum of three things you are looking forward to during the day (however small). It could be a trip to the gym, a nice cappuccino or getting to grips with a new project.
- 5 Repeat this for the next 27 days.

The aim is to continue this practice for 28 consecutive nights and days. The duration is arbitrary, but it needs to be long enough for you to gauge the results. So, if you can't manage a month, try it for at least one week. Don't worry if you miss a day; just start again until you have completed the experiment. At the end of the 28 days read back over your journal or notebook. Did the experiment have any effect on the way you view your life and the world in general? Were you able to exert control over what you focused on? Do you think you might feel differently had you spent 28 days focusing on negative things? If you focus on gratitude and anticipation then you will notice more things for which you have to be grateful and focus on the things to which you look forward. This is only the starting point for creating positive outcomes and lasting change. It's a way of tuning in on new possibilities, new landscapes and new horizons.

NEW HORIZONS

Nothing broadens the mind like travel. One of the main reasons is that it allows us to grasp how other people in other

countries make sense of the world. We may find foreign customs fascinating or frustrating. However, by travelling we hold a mirror up to our mental filters and learn something new about ourselves. So, the next time you think you can't afford that holiday, you have another reason to try to make it happen. 'Darling I really *do* need that world cruise this year – how else will I explore the limitations of my perceptions?' It's worth a try.

For the time being, however, you may have to settle for the voyage of discovery in this book.

DRYING OFF

Review: In this chapter we have pondered the question 'Are we defined by what we focus on?' We have considered the concepts of attention and perception, their roles in shaping our view of the world and how we relate to it. In short, the viewing shapes the doing and vice versa. On the one hand, our perceptual filters help to focus our attention to process information quickly and economically, homing in on the stuff with greatest personal relevance. On the other hand, the downside is that we run the risk of missing fresh input when we need a new perspective on things. We may just end up getting more of the same. Insight from cognitive psychology shows that we can intervene and retune or reprogramme our perceptual filters to our advantage.

In the next chapter we deepen our understanding as we consider more psychological principles of learning.

