

I don't know of a wiser guide to understanding and managing the "psychological turbulence that accompanies living" than Noam Shpancer. If this book—studded as it is with enlightened suggestions—does nothing else, it will shift your perspective on the sources of well-being and release you from the prison of believing that success lies in perpetual self-optimization.

—**HARA ESTROFF MARANO, BA**, EDITOR AT LARGE, *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY*;
AUTHOR OF *A NATION OF WIMPS: THE HIGH COST OF INVASIVE PARENTING*

This book distills 10 thought-provoking principles for living, grounded in scientific research and enriched by Dr. Shpancer's clinical wisdom. What makes it remarkable is how these ideas resonate beyond theory, offering readers a psychologically healthier, more expansive way of understanding themselves and approaching life with love, connection, and self-compassion.

—**AARON KAPLAN, PhD**, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND HOST OF THE
MIND TRICKS RADIO PODCAST

In *Mental Fitness 101: Principles for Psychological Well-Being*, Noam Shpancer delivers a master class in clinical psychology by weaving together the art and science of contemporary psychological therapy. His wonderfully written book incorporates enlightening anecdotes, creative thought experiments, excellent case examples, and delivers fantastic, immediately actionable ideas for seasoned clinicians and laypeople alike. I intend to enthusiastically recommend it to my patients, colleagues, and trainees. Truly, I wish I had this book 40 years ago when I was a training psychologist!

—**CLIFFORD N. LAZARUS, PhD**, COFOUNDER, THE LAZARUS INSTITUTE,
SKILLMAN, NJ

The 10 principles in this penetrating and absorbing book offer distinctive insights for living healthier, happier, and more engaged lives. Research, theory, and examples from clinical practice inform one another in unexpected ways, revealing new (old) knowledge that invites readers to commit to the work of self-understanding. Some passages are breathtaking in the way they artfully integrate a myriad of pertinent studies—from the origins of psychology to the present day. As a bonus, each chapter presents a postscript with valuable suggestions that distill the findings and propel readers forward in the book and in their lives.

—**ROBERT N. KRAFT, PhD**, PROFESSOR EMERITUS, OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY,
WESTERVILLE, OH; AUTHOR OF *MEMORY PERCEIVED:*
RECALLING THE HOLOCAUST AND VIOLENT ACCOUNTS:
UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERPETRATORS THROUGH
SOUTH AFRICA'S TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

I have known Dr. Shpancer for years as a colleague in cognitive and behavioral psychology. He has written an easy-to-understand book on many of the methods that patients strive to master from cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). He has done so thoughtfully, using a noncookbook approach. Shpancer's writing allows the reader to employ the CBT strategies and to grasp them from the standpoint of mental health, rather than mental illness. His capacity of health framework speaks to the essence of resilience and personal agency, rather than simple reactivity to emotional distress. His book supports the notion that we need not pathologize distress; instead, we can employ our strengths to cope with it. Shpancer balances that framework with plain-speaking explanations of cognitive restructuring or exposure therapy. Please, read this book twice to grasp both the how-tos of CBT and the role of personal agency in living a healthy life.

—**KEVIN D. ARNOLD, PhD, ABPP**, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, LUMATE HEALTH,
INC.; FOUNDER AND FORMER SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE CENTER
FOR COGNITIVE AND BEHAVIORAL THERAPY, COLUMBUS, OH

This book will provide you with the psychological tools you need to thrive by balancing the two fundamental human needs—to belong and to have agency. As a clinical psychologist and university lecturer, Noam Shpancer is your perfect guide, able to mix moving anecdotes with fascinating research.

—**CHRISTIAN JARRETT, PhD**, PSYCHOLOGIST; EDITOR OF *PSYCHE* MAGAZINE
AND AUTHOR OF *BE WHO YOU WANT: UNLOCKING*
THE SCIENCE OF PERSONALITY CHANGE

CONTENTS

Prologue xiii

Preface xvii

About This Book: A Note on Style xx

Acknowledgments xxiii

Introduction: Defining Psychological Health 3

The Dual-Continua Model 3

*Looking for Motives: Instincts, Drives,
and Needs* 6

The Need to Belong 10

The Need to Be 12

To Belong and to Be: A Synthesis 16

Psychological Health: To Belong and to Be 19

Psychological Health: The Primacy of Process 20

Psychological Health: The Power of Principle 23

Principle 1. Knowledge Matters and Competence Counts 27

On the Matter of Facts 27

Science Finds the Killer 30

Check the Facts 33

	<i>Competence Counts: The Centrality of Skill</i>	37
	<i>Skill Acquisition: Mastery, Not Perfection</i>	40
	<i>Skill Acquisition: The Importance of Self-Compassion</i>	42
	<i>Skill Acquisition: Practice Makes Competence</i>	44
<i>Principle 2.</i>	<i>Honor (But Do Not Worship) Your Experience</i>	47
	<i>The Power of Experience</i>	47
	<i>The Limits of Experience</i>	51
	<i>The Trouble With Trouble</i>	53
	<i>Learning From Others</i>	63
<i>Principle 3.</i>	<i>Things Are Not What They Seem</i>	69
	<i>Appearance and Reality</i>	69
	<i>Hidden Truths</i>	76
	<i>The Role of Representation</i>	77
	<i>Defensive Maneuvers</i>	83
<i>Principle 4.</i>	<i>Favor Flexibility</i>	97
	<i>A Rigid Mind Is Not a Strong Mind</i>	97
	<i>When Dogged Determination Won't Hunt</i>	101
	<i>On Boundaries: That Which Separates and Connects Us</i>	108
<i>Principle 5.</i>	<i>Face Your Fear</i>	113
	<i>To Approach or to Avoid, That Is the Question</i>	113
	<i>The Trap of Avoidance</i>	116
	<i>The Case for Engagement</i>	120
	<i>The Approach Approach</i>	123
<i>Principle 6.</i>	<i>Manage Your Emotions</i>	131
	<i>The Challenge of Emotion Regulation</i>	131
	<i>Emotion Regulation: The Role of Behavior</i>	134
	<i>Emotion Management: The Role of Cognition</i>	137

	<i>The Error of Denial</i>	138
	<i>The Error of Obedience</i>	144
<i>Principle 7.</i>	Think (Again) About Your Thinking	149
	<i>Thoughts Are Never Free</i>	149
	<i>Minding the Internal Conversation</i>	158
	<i>Cognitive Reappraisal: Treat Your Thoughts as You Treat Your Shoes</i>	161
	<i>Cognitive Defusion: The Word “Lion” Will Not Eat You</i>	163
	<i>Fix Your Frames</i>	165
	<i>Mind Your Metaphors</i>	167
<i>Principle 8.</i>	Consider Context	173
	<i>The Good Mother</i>	173
	<i>Context Makes Meaning</i>	175
	<i>The Social Context</i>	179
	<i>Social Influence: Conformity, Comparison, Contagion</i>	184
	<i>The Importance of Resisting Social Tyranny</i>	196
<i>Principle 9.</i>	Try to Love	203
	<i>Help Is Other People: The Power of Social Connectedness</i>	203
	<i>Why We Have Sex</i>	209
	<i>The Power of Love</i>	211
	<i>The Power of Love in Childhood: Attachment Figures</i>	214
	<i>The Power of Love in Adulthood: Romantic Love</i>	216
	<i>The Power of Love: The Expanding Self</i>	218
	<i>An Outlandish Gambit</i>	220

Contents

<i>Principle 10. Remember Your Death</i>	225
<i>Loss Is Not the End of the World;</i>	
<i>It Is Just the World</i>	225
<i>Dreaming of Lost (Possible) Worlds</i>	228
<i>The Uses of Terror</i>	233
<i>Death Is Good for Life</i>	236
 <i>Postscript</i>	243
 <i>References</i>	249
 <i>Index</i>	311
 <i>About the Author</i>	319

PREFACE

No one knows how you should live your life, yet many will try to convince you otherwise. I am not one of them. This book, therefore, is not meant to be rigidly prescriptive. Rather, it is an invitation to reflect on yourself and your habits, learn some of what psychological science has so far discovered about our internal architecture, and become more aware and intentional about the principles you choose to rely on as you journey through this life. My aim is pragmatic: to outline the psychological terrain of daily living and to suggest some guidelines about how you can move in that space with a measure of grace.

This book uses insights from psychological science—both classic and cutting edge—along with illuminating anecdotes from my 30 years of experience in the classroom and clinic to present a useful framework for understanding our inner architecture. First, I argue that, viewed broadly, humans share two fundamental psychological motives: The first reflects our desire for affiliation, community, connectedness, and intimacy, what I call the “need to belong.” The second reflects our desire to construct and express a coherent self, imbued with individual identity, agency, competence, purpose, and autonomy—referred to as the “need to be.” I argue further that

psychological health is found in the process of fulfilling those fundamental needs.¹ I then describe, and elaborate on, 10 guiding principles for the successful pursuit of such fulfillment.

Human psychology is complex and may be usefully examined and understood from various angles. In this book, I take a broad-brush approach to describing its various machinations. This approach has both benefits and drawbacks. The benefits, as I see them, are that it allows for breadth of coverage and is more accessible to the lay reader. The drawback is that this approach inevitably sacrifices some nuance and shading. For example, while the concepts and processes defining each of the needs may overlap (e.g., romantic love and group affiliation within the need to belong; autonomy and competence within the need to be), they also possess distinct characteristics, emerge from different paths of influence, and carry separate, unique benefits and risks. Hopefully the discussion here, outlining the broad parameters of the terrain, will do enough to pique your interest and encourage you to dive deeper into the abundant psychological literature that focuses on these issues and provides a more fine-grained picture of the lay of the land.

The 10 principles described in this book concern the proper management of our internal architecture—our mind’s processes and products (thoughts, emotions, and behaviors)—in the service of fulfilling our fundamental needs to belong and to be. The first three chapters are best regarded as promoting healthy mind habits: Follow the evidence and value competence, look beyond your own experience and learn from others, don’t settle too quickly on taking things at face value.

¹The term *psychological health*, as used here, is synonymous with mental health; my decision to use it is based on a personal preference.

Chapters 4–7 concern specific mental health skills shown to be effective in managing the psychological turbulence that accompanies living. These skills—psychological flexibility, behavioral engagement, emotion regulation, and cognitive reappraisal—require practice, effort, and concentration. Yet they will improve over time. With sufficient practice, they are bound to become automatic, and hence robust, seamless, and effortless.

Chapters 8–9 shift the focus outward and address more directly the social aspects of our existence. Chapter 8 aims to raise your awareness of the power our environment—particularly the social environment—exerts over our sense of self, our conduct, and our health. It issues a warning of sorts about how outside social forces, together with our internal socially oriented tendencies of mind, may conspire to undermine both our engagement with the world and our self-appraisal. Chapter 9 narrows and shifts focus, looking at the benefits of social connectedness and homing in on the importance of close, intimate relationships in satisfying our need to belong and enhancing our sense of self—the need to be.

Finally, Chapter 10 engages the deepest existential dread common to all humans: the awareness of our impending doom. It provides evidence in support of approaching this issue with open eyes and seeking to regard death as a teacher rather than a monster. While acknowledging that life is here for you to live it, and that living it well will require your full attention, it shows how periodic, serious reflections on one's mortality may enhance our experience of living, helping clarify our priorities and increasing our sense of meaning.

No single work can fully capture the whole of our psychological complexity. The framework presented in this book is therefore far from perfect or complete. I hope that it can nevertheless prove useful to you, revealing key pathways and highlighting important guideposts for orientation. I believe that the 10 principles outlined here, along with the organizing structure involving the need

to belong and the need to be, will prove useful in advancing your self-understanding and enhancing your engagement with the world. Using these principles, you are bound to fool yourself less, appraise your circumstances more clearly and accurately, and respond more effectively to the challenges you face on your life's journey.

ABOUT THIS BOOK: A NOTE ON STYLE

Over the past 25 years, I have occupied two different yet related professional roles: a university professor engaged in research and teaching and a therapist seeing individual clients in private practice. Perched on the hyphen between scientist and practitioner, I have come to appreciate that the academic and clinical modes of inquiry—the former pursuing generalized principles and objective truths and the latter mining personal narratives and subjective experiences—complement each other, thus enriching our overall understanding of the world and of ourselves.

In tone and content, this book integrates these two perspectives, braiding a discussion of the science on one hand, as one would find in a university seminar, with personal anecdotes, autobiographical recollections, and subjective impressions on the other, of the kinds that animate the therapeutic encounter.² Both perspectives should, in their own ways, engage your curiosity and courage, help shed useful light on your internal architecture, and leave you feeling fortified, more grounded, and more self-aware, even if you do not resonate with every nuance of the encounter, agree with every observation, or follow every suggestion.

²Many of the ideas in this book were first introduced and discussed in various posts on my Psychology Today blog *Insight Therapy* over the past 15 years. The pertinent posts are cited throughout the text.

Years ago, I had the good fortune of spending several summers teaching at a university in Istanbul, Türkiye, and thus had the opportunity to explore the marvels of this fascinating, historic city. One of Istanbul's signature attractions, along with its majestic bridges, ancient domed mosques, and warm, hospitable people, is the Grand Bazaar, a lively labyrinth of shops and stalls offering all kinds of goods, foods, clothing, and crafts. Walking among the bazaar's crowded, colorful clamor, I observed how welcoming it was, allowing one to wander at one's pace, explore hidden side alleys, ogle exotic fruit, or marvel at the touch of a delicate garment. The bazaar is open to all; interesting offerings await around every corner, and there's something for everybody. I wanted this book to have that kind of feel: open, inviting, surprising, and stimulating, with something interesting on every page and something useful for every reader to take home, use, benefit from, and enjoy.