

WAYNE W. DYER

#1 *New York Times* Bestseller

Your  
Erroneous Zones

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Step-by-Step Advice for Escaping  
the Trap of Negative Thinking and  
Taking Control of Your Life



# **YOUR ERRONEOUS ZONES™**

**WAYNE W. DYER**

TO  
TRACY LYNN DYER  
I Love You  
in the special way  
that I've written  
about in these pages.

The whole theory of the universe is  
directed unerringly to one single  
individual—namely to You.

—WALT WHITMAN



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Portrait of a Person Who has Eliminated all Erroneous Zones

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# INTRODUCTION— A PERSONAL STATEMENT

A speaker stood before a group of alcoholics determined to demonstrate to them, once and for all, that alcohol was an evil beyond compare. On the platform he had what appeared to be two identical containers of clear fluid. He announced that one contained pure water and the other was filled with undiluted alcohol. He placed a small worm in the container while everyone watched as it swam around and headed for the side of the glass, whereupon it simply crawled to the top of the glass. He then took the same worm and placed it in the container with alcohol. The worm disintegrated right before their eyes. “There,” said the speaker. “What’s the moral?” A voice from the rear of the room said quite clearly, “I see that if you drink alcohol, you’ll never have worms.”

This book has a lot of “worms” in it—meaning, you will hear and perceive exactly what you want to hear based upon many of your own values, beliefs, prejudices and personal history. Self-defeating behavior and the ways to overcome it are touchy areas to write about. Looking at yourself in depth with an eye toward changing might be something that you say you are interested in accomplishing, but your behavior often speaks otherwise. Change is tough. If you’re like most people, every

fiber of your being will resist having to take on the hard work of eliminating the thoughts that support your self-forfeiting feelings and behavior. But despite the “worms” I think you are going to like this book. I love it! And I loved writing it.

While I do not believe that mental health should be treated in a flip manner, neither do I support the notion that it must be a humorless enterprise, filled with arcane jargon. I have tried to avoid intricate explanations, largely because I do not believe that “being happy” is a complex affair.

Being healthy is a natural state, and the means for achieving it are within the grasp of each one of us. I believe that a judicious mixture of hard work, clear thinking, humor and self-confidence are the ingredients of effective living. I do not believe in fancy formulas, or historical excursions into your past to discover that you were “harshly toilet trained” and that someone else is responsible for your unhappiness.

This book outlines a pleasant approach to achieving happiness—an approach that relies on responsibility for and commitment to yourself, plus an appetite for living and a desire to be all that you choose to at this moment. It’s an uncomplicated approach, a common sense approach. If you are a healthy, happy human being, you may find yourself thinking, “I could have written this book.” You are right. You don’t need a professional background in counseling and a doctorate in the helping professions to understand the principles of effective living. You don’t learn them in a classroom or in a book. You learn them by being committed to your own happiness and by doing something about it. This is something I work on every day, while simultaneously helping others to make similar choices.

Each chapter of this book is written like a counseling session. This approach is aimed at providing as much opportunity for self-help as possible. A particular erroneous zone, or kind of self-destructive behavior, is explored, and the historical antecedents for the behavior in our culture (and therefore in you) are examined. The emphasis is on helping you understand *why* you

are trapped in this self-defeating zone. Then specific behaviors that fall into this erroneous zone are detailed. The types of behavior we're talking about are everyday acts that may seem perfectly acceptable, but are, in reality, harmful to your own happiness. There are no examples from severe emotionally disturbed clinical cases, but rather the daily neurotic messages that we all send out. After a look at the behaviors in the erroneous zone we go on to an examination of the *reasons* for hanging onto behavior which does not make you happy. This entails a hard look at the psychological support system that you have erected to maintain self-defeating behavior, rather than giving it up. This section is an attempt to answer the questions, "What do I get out of my behavior?" and "Why does it persist if it is injurious to me?" As you examine each erroneous zone, you'll undoubtedly note that each of the "payoff" sections has similar messages. You'll discover that the reasons for keeping neurotic behavior are fairly consistent across all of the erroneous zones. Essentially it is safer to hang onto a learned response, even if it is self-destructive. Moreover, you can eliminate having to change and take responsibility if you keep the erroneous zones intact. These payoffs of safety and security will be evident throughout the book. You'll begin to see that your psychological maintenance system functions to keep blame off you and the opportunity for change at bay. The fact that you maintain many self-defeating behaviors for the same reason only makes total growth more approachable. Eliminate these reasons and you'll eradicate your erroneous zones.

Each chapter concludes with some straightforward strategies for eliminating self-nullifying behavior. This format is exactly what a counseling session is all about; that is, exploration of the difficulty and where it surfaces, a look at the self-defeating behavior, insight into the "Why" of the behavior and concrete strategies for eliminating the troublesome area.

Occasionally this approach may strike you as repetitious. That's a good sign—a sign of effective thinking. I have been a

therapist for many years. I know that effective thinking—thinking which can alter self-destructive behavior—does not occur just because something is said. An insight must be repeated, and repeated, and repeated again. Only then, when it is fully accepted and understood, do you begin to alter behavior. It is for this reason that certain themes must be hammered at again and again in the pages of this book, just as they must be brought up again and again in successive counseling sessions.

There are two central themes that wind throughout the pages of this book. The first involves your ability to make choices about your own emotions. Begin to examine your life in the light of choices you have made or failed to make. This puts all responsibility for what you are and how you feel on you. Becoming happier and more effective will mean becoming more aware of the choices that are available to you. **YOU ARE THE SUM TOTAL OF YOUR CHOICES**, and I am just “far out” enough to believe that with an appropriate amount of motivation and effort you can be anything you choose.

The second theme that will be emphasized within these pages is that of taking charge of your present moments. This is a phrase that will reappear many times. It is an essential part of eliminating your erroneous zones and creating your happiness. There is only one moment in which you can experience anything, and that is now, yet a great deal of time is thrown away by dwelling on past or future experiences. Turning your now into total fulfillment is the touchstone of effective living, and virtually all self-defeating behaviors (erroneous zones) are efforts at living in a moment other than the current one.

Choice and present-moment living will be stressed on almost every page of this book. With a careful reading, you’ll soon begin to ask yourself questions that have never occurred to you before. “Why am I choosing to feel upset right now?” and “How can I make more effective use of my present moments?” are the internal queries of a person moving away from erroneous zones toward self-reliance and happiness.

This book concludes with a brief portrait of a person who has eliminated all erroneous zones and is living in an internally rather than externally controlled emotional world. The following twenty-five questions are designed to measure your capacity to choose happiness and fulfillment. Go through the questions as objectively as possible and assess yourself and how you live your present moments. “Yes” responses indicate personal mastery and effective choice-making.

1. Do you believe that your mind is your own? (Chapter I)
2. Are you capable of controlling your own feelings? (Chapter I)
3. Are you motivated from within rather than from without? (Chapter VII)
4. Are you free from the need for approval? (Chapter III)
5. Do you set up your own rules of conduct for yourself? (Chapter VII)
6. Are you free from the desire for justice and fairness? (Chapter VIII)
7. Can you accept yourself and avoid complaining? (Chapter II)
8. Are you free from hero worship? (Chapter VIII)
9. Are you a doer rather than a critic? (Chapter IX)
10. Do you welcome the mysterious and the unknown? (Chapter VI)
11. Can you avoid describing yourself in absolute terms? (Chapter IV)
12. Can you love yourself at all times? (Chapter II)
13. Can you grow your own roots? (Chapter X)
14. Have you eliminated all dependency relationships? (Chapter X)
15. Have you eliminated all blame and fault-finding in your life? (Chapter VII)
16. Are you free from ever feeling guilty? (Chapter V)

17. Are you able to avoid worrying about the future? (Chapter V)
18. Can you give and receive love? (Chapter II)
19. Can you avoid immobilizing anger in your life? (Chapter XI)
20. Have you eliminated procrastination as a life-style? (Chapter IX)
21. Have you learned to fail effectively? (Chapter VI)
22. Can you enjoy spontaneously without having a plan? (Chapter VI)
23. Can you appreciate and create humor? (Chapter XI)
24. Are you treated by others the way you want to be? (Chapter X)
25. Are you motivated by your potential for growth, rather than a need to repair your deficiencies? (Chapter I)

At any given moment of your life, you can choose to say yes to all of the questions above if you are willing to repeal many “shoulds” and “oughts” that you have learned throughout your life. The real choice is whether you decide to be personally free or remain chained to the expectations that others have of you.

A friend of mine, Doris Warshay, after hearing one of my lectures, wrote a poem to me which she titled *New Directions*.

I want to travel as far as I can go,  
I want to reach the joy that's in my soul,  
And change the limitations that I know,  
And feel my mind and spirit grow;

I want to live, exist, “to be,”  
And hear the truths inside of me.

I trust this book will help you to eliminate any “worms” or blinders that may be keeping you from beautiful new experiences and to discover and choose your own new directions.

# TAKING CHARGE OF YOURSELF

*The essence of greatness is the ability to choose personal fulfillment  
in circumstances where others choose madness.*

**L**ook over your shoulder. You will notice a constant companion. For want of a better name, call him *Your-Own-Death*. You can fear this visitor or use him for your personal gain. The choice is up to you.

With death so endless a proposition and life so breathtakingly brief, ask yourself, "Should I avoid doing the things I really want to do?" "Should I live my life as others want me to?" "Are *things* important to accumulate?" "Is putting it off the way to live?" Chances are your answers can be summed up in a few words: Live...Be You...Enjoy...Love.

You can fear your death, ineffectually, or you can use it to help you learn to live effectively. Listen to Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych as he awaits the great leveler, contemplating a past which was thoroughly dominated by others, a life in which he had given up control of himself in order to fit into a system.

"What if my whole life has been wrong?" It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his scarcely noticeable impulses, which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend....

The next time you are contemplating a decision in which you are debating whether or not to take charge of yourself, to make your own choice, ask yourself an important question, "How long am I going to be dead?" With that eternal perspective, you can now make your own choice and leave the worrying, the fears, the question of whether you can afford it and the guilt to those who are going to be alive forever.

If you don't begin taking these steps, you can anticipate living your entire life the way others say you must. Surely if your sojourn on earth is so brief, it ought at least to be pleasing to you. In a word, it's your life; do with it what *you* want.

### *Happiness and Your Own I.Q.*

Taking charge of yourself involves putting to rest some very prevalent myths. At the top of the list is the notion that intelligence is measured by your ability to solve complex problems; to read, write and compute at certain levels; and to resolve abstract equations quickly. This vision of intelligence predicates formal education and bookish excellence as the true measures of self-fulfillment. It encourages a kind of intellectual snobbery



that has brought with it some demoralizing results. We have come to believe that someone who has more educational merit badges, who is a whiz at some form of scholastic discipline (math, science, a huge vocabulary, a memory for superfluous facts, a fast reader) is “intelligent.” Yet mental hospitals are clogged with patients who have all of the properly lettered credentials—as well as many who don’t. A truer barometer of intelligence is an effective, happy life lived each day and each present moment of every day.

If you are happy, if you live each moment for everything it’s worth, then you are an intelligent person. Problem solving is a useful adjunct to your happiness, but if you know that given your inability to resolve a particular concern you can still choose happiness for yourself, or at a minimum refuse to choose unhappiness, then you are intelligent. You are intelligent because you have the ultimate weapon against the big N.B.D. Yep—*Nervous Break Down*.

Perhaps you will be surprised to learn that there is no such thing as a nervous breakdown. Nerves don’t break down. Cut someone open and look for the broken nerves. They never show up. “Intelligent” people do not have N.B.D.’s because they are in charge of themselves. They know how to choose happiness over depression, because they know how to deal with the *problems* of their lives. Notice I didn’t say *solve* the problems. Rather than measuring their intelligence on their ability to *solve* the problem, they measure it on their capacity for maintaining themselves as happy and worthy, whether the problem gets solved or not.

You can begin to think of yourself as truly intelligent on the basis of how you choose to feel in the face of trying circumstances. The life struggles are pretty much the same for each of us. Everyone who is involved with other human beings in any social context has similar difficulties. Disagreements, conflicts and compromises are a part of what it means to be human. Similarly, money, growing old, sickness, deaths, natural disas-

ters and accidents are all events which present problems to virtually all human beings. But some people are able to make it, to avoid immobilizing dejection and unhappiness despite such occurrences, while others collapse, become inert or have an N.B.D. Those who recognize problems as a human condition and don't measure happiness by an absence of problems are the most intelligent kind of humans we know; also, the most rare.

Learning to take total charge of yourself will involve a whole new thinking process, one which may prove difficult because too many forces in our society conspire against individual responsibility. You must trust in your own ability to feel emotionally whatever you choose to feel at any time in your life. This is a radical notion. You've probably grown up believing that you can't control your own emotions; that anger, fear and hate, as well as love, ecstasy and joy are things that happen to you. An individual doesn't control these things, he accepts them. When sorrowful events occur, you just naturally feel sorrow, and hope that some happy events will come along so that you can feel good very soon.

### *Choosing How You'll Feel*

Feelings are not just emotions that happen to you. Feelings are reactions you choose to have. If you are in charge of your own emotions, you don't have to choose self-defeating reactions. Once you learn that you can feel what you choose to feel, you will be on the road to "intelligence"—a road where there are no bypaths that lead to N.B.D.'s. This road will be new because you'll see a given emotion as a choice rather than as a condition of life. This is the very heart and soul of personal freedom.

You can attack the myth of not being in charge of your emotions through logic. By using a simple syllogism (a formulation in logic, in which you have a major premise, a minor premise

and a conclusion based upon the agreement between the two premises) you can begin the process of being in charge of yourself, both thinkingly and emotionally.

### ***Logic—Syllogism***

MAJOR PREMISE: Aristotle is a Man.

MINOR PREMISE: All men have facial hair.

CONCLUSION: ARISTOTLE HAS FACIAL HAIR.

### ***Illogic—Syllogism***

MAJOR PREMISE: Aristotle has facial hair.

MINOR PREMISE: All men have facial hair.

CONCLUSION: ARISTOTLE IS A MAN.

It is clear that you must be careful as you employ logic that your major and minor premises agree. In the second illustration, Aristotle could be an ape or a mole. Here is a logical exercise that can forever put to rest the notion that you cannot take charge of your own emotional world.

MAJOR PREMISE: I can control my thoughts.

MINOR PREMISE: My feelings come from my thoughts.

CONCLUSION: I can control my feelings.

Your major premise is clear. You have the power to think whatever you choose to allow into your head. If something just “pops” into your head (You choose to put it there, though you may not know why), you still have the power to make it go away, and therefore you still control your mental world. I can say to you, “Think of a pink antelope,” and you can turn it green, or make it an aardvark, or simply think of something else if you so choose. You alone control what enters your head as a thought. If you don’t believe this, just answer this question, “If you don’t control your thoughts, who does?” Is it your spouse, or your boss, or your mamma? And if *they* control what you

think, then send them off for therapy and *you* will instantly get better. But you really know otherwise. You and only you control your thinking apparatus (other than under extreme kinds of brainwashing or conditioning experimentation settings which are not a part of your life). Your thoughts are your own, uniquely yours to keep, change, share, or contemplate. No one else can get inside your head and have your own thoughts as you experience them. You do indeed control your thoughts, and your brain is your own to use as you so determine.

Your minor premise is hardly debatable if you examine the research as well as your own common sense. You cannot have a feeling (emotion) without first having experienced a thought. Take away your brain and your ability to “feel” is wiped out. A feeling is a physical reaction to a thought. If you cry, or blush, or increase your heartbeat, or any of an interminable list of potential emotional reactions, you have first had a signal from your thinking center. Once your thinking center is damaged or short-circuited, you cannot experience emotional reactions. With certain kinds of lesions in the brain you cannot even experience physical pain, and your hand could literally fry on a stove burner with no sensation of pain. You know that you cannot bypass your think-center and experience any feelings in your body. Thus your minor premise is lodged in truth. Every feeling that you have was preceded by a thought, and without a brain you can have no feelings.

Your conclusion is also inescapable. If you control your thoughts, and your feelings come from your thoughts, then you are capable of controlling your own feelings. And you control your feelings by working on the thoughts that preceded them. Simply put, you believe that things or people make you unhappy, but this is not accurate. You make yourself unhappy because of the thoughts that you have about the people or things in your life. Becoming a free and healthy person involves learning to *think* differently. Once you can change your thoughts,