

## **The Battle Between Your Emotional And Rational Mind: The Metaphor of the Alligator and the Wrestler**

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[Guide To Self](#)

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Over a decade ago, at the tender age of 27, I was working towards my Ph.D. at U.C. Berkeley and I found myself in charge of the psychological needs of a middle school of 600 students. I was testing and diagnosing students as fast as I could. Another part of my job was running counseling groups for troubled students.

At every school I worked, I was given the boys with the worst behavior problems in the school. One middle school group was made up of eight boys each of whom was roughly 12 years old. I saw them once a week and chatted with them about things they liked to talk about. I created a connection with them. We had a rapport.

Middle school is interesting because the social hierarchy is so clearly formed by the age of 11. There is a pecking order. There are the cool kids, the geeks, the outcasts, the skaters and so on. And even within this group of 8 boys, there was a pecking order.

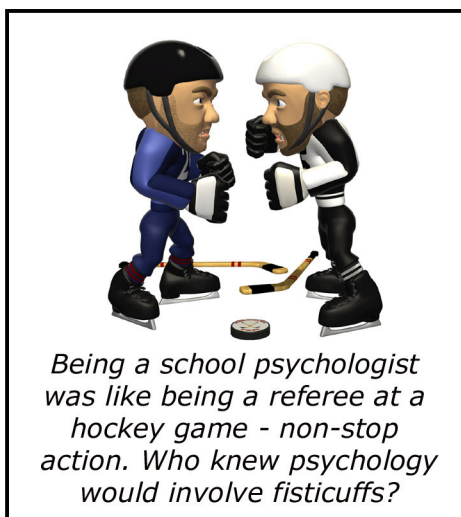
The student at the bottom of the pecking order, let's call him Todd to preserve his anonymity, was the most impulsive of the lot. Todd couldn't stay in his chair, couldn't keep his body still for more than 5 seconds. He had no social skills. He was frequently involved in fistfights with other kids because his mouth would go in motion before his mind caught up. He'd insult a bigger, older student and wind

up getting the snot beat out of him every week. The other students teased him mercilessly causing a gradual build up of anger within him.

Now when I run a group, I try to give these students a different response than what they typically get from adults – anger, contempt, and punishment. So I try to be relaxed, calm, and authentic.

One day, I was running the group as usual and the boys were more stirred up than usual. Todd, in particular, was agitated and wound more tightly than normal.

Towards the end of the hour, for some unknown reason, Todd sprung out of his chair, hopped the table and ran towards me. As he closed on me, he made a fist and took a swing at my face. I did not make any attempt to stop him. Todd's fist stopped an inch from my nose. Apparently, he had some self-control after all.



My eyes met his and then looked down at his fist. I had a choice to make. Do I send him to the vice-principal for discipline or do I take a risk and treat him differently than every other adult in his life treated him? Rather than send him to the vice-principal for discipline, I told him he had a choice: take his seat or return to class. He chose to take his seat.

I turned to the group and asked them, “Okay, now what just happened?” The boys were stunned. It took a few minutes to get anyone to say anything.

Eventually, one boy said he saw Todd take a swing at me and I did not respond. He said he had never seen anything like it. In his world, anger was *always* met

with anger. It was inconceivable to respond any other way, until that moment. And it's true; anger is nearly always met with anger because anger is contagious. You can "catch" anger from someone else...unless you know how to stay calm in the face of anger. Over the next two years, I received calls from nearly every one of those boys' mothers to inquire about private individual counseling. That day had a profound impact on how those boys viewed the world around them. That moment spoke to the emotional part of their minds. And that is a perfect segue into a discussion about the human mind and how best to think of it.

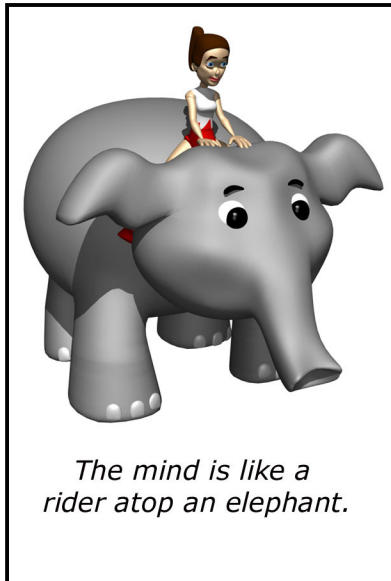
For thousands of years, philosophers, authors and scientists have searched for an adequate metaphor to describe the human mind. In fact, your entire way of thinking is founded on language and metaphor. You are bound by the language you use to describe the world around you. For instance, it's difficult to think about life in the abstract, or even long-term.

However, once the metaphor of life as a journey is applied, the metaphor provides a framework in which you can think about life. The metaphor of life as journey implies that it's a good idea to discover which direction you're headed, who you're going with, and to expect some ups and downs. It is far easier to make sense of complex ideas with the right metaphor – the right language.

Along these lines, humankind has likened the mind to many different wild animals. For instance, Buddha compared the human mind to a wild elephant.

The philosopher, Plato, used an allegory of the human mind as a charioteer holding the reins of two horses where the calm, reasonable part of the mind is

the chariot driver, the soul is the chariot, one horse represents the virtues and the other horse is the animal appetites and desires.



More recently, Jon Haidt, professor of psychology at University of Virginia and author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, compared the mind to a rider atop an elephant where the rider is the rational, conscious mind and the elephant is the emotional, unconscious, automatic part of the mind.<sup>i</sup>

There is a reason that humankind has compared the mind to wild animals for thousands of years – because it's an apt comparison. When I talk of the

human mind, my audiences find it easiest to think of the mind as one of two metaphors:

- 1) A rider atop a wild stallion or
- 2) An alligator hunter wrestling an alligator.

In both metaphors, the person (the rider or the alligator trainer) represents your conscious, rational side of the mind and the stallion or alligator represent your unconscious, primal, emotional, automatic side of the mind.

For the first metaphor, the rider is your thoughts and the wild stallion is your emotional, primal mind. Using the second metaphor, the person training the alligator is like your thoughts and the alligator is like your emotions. Throughout the book, you can



use whichever metaphor works best for you. The metaphor you use should be one that resonates with you.

Personally, I'm partial to the alligator and the alligator wrestler which I think is an excellent metaphor for our mind. It's not so much the alligator wrestler part that I like. I love the alligator as an allegory for our emotions. Alligators lay in wait, just beneath the surface of the water, just as intense feelings lie in wait just beneath the surface of our emotional masks. Both alligators and emotions pounce suddenly, without warning, when their prey comes along. Emotions and alligators are primitive; aggressive throwbacks to an ancient, fierce time. And more, the word, alligator is taken from the Spanish "*el lagarto*" which translates as "the lizard." The emotional part of the brain is considered the limbic system

which is also known as the "lizard brain."



Alligators are known for their death roll. Alligators drown their prey and rip them apart limb from limb by aggressively rolling over several times, back and forth. Rage and fear are also (emotional) death rolls and threaten to end in violent confrontation with others each time they arise.

Alligators have been shown to be an integral part of the ecosystem, creating holes for other animals to live in and keeping and are considered to be an integral species for maintaining the system's integrity. This relationship holds true for emotions as well which are integral for the proper function of humans.

We need emotions. We cannot simply turn off emotion and live as logical cyborg-like beings. We could not exist solely with our rational mind. We would not know how to make decisions, tag events as dangerous or even which general direction to head in without emotion.

I have spent my entire life exploring the hidden terrain of the mind. I have studied philosophy, quantum physics, psychology, physiology, and world religions. I have spoken with the mentally ill and the psychologically resilient. And this book is my attempt to put forth the latest ways to tame your wrestler and alligator – your thoughts and emotions.

For many years, I was able to suppress my own emotions in stressful situations. I had excellent control over the alligator wrestler but little awareness of how to manage the alligator. Despite my Ph.D. in psychology, I struggled to stay on an even emotional keel day-to-day. I would get irritable with my family. I would have an occasional angry outburst at an unsuspecting coworker. I would be overcome with sadness for days or weeks.

Since then, I have found ways to manage my alligator. I have learned to train my thoughts to be more realistically optimistic. It took me a great deal of time and energy searching to find ways to train my thoughts, and release harmful emotions. I have found tools and attitudes to help me remain calm amidst the emotional hurricanes brought on by my clients, my coworkers and my family.

Even more amazing to me was that, within the past five years, my family became easy to love. This was in stark contrast to the frustration and irritability that my wife and children used to create in me.

So what changed?

I did.

I changed my outlook from pessimistic to realistically optimistic. I improved my physical health. I learned how to get rid of unwanted anger, sadness and fear. I discovered how to relax and enjoy life. I stopped my negative, self-defeating, punitive thoughts and replaced them with optimistic and supportive ones. I reduced my contact with life leeches, the people who constantly suck you dry of energy. I began speaking to God more frequently. I slowed my pace down. And I learned to smile more easily.

Despite *having* everything, I used to be irritable and moody. When I became sad, I would stay down for days or even weeks at a time. When something made me angry, I could not shake the anger. Fear gripped me much of the time. People made me anxious. My muscles were always tense. I never took a deep breath. It was like my emotional gas tank was filled to the brim with negative energy – fear, anger and sadness. It was as if the world had hurt me so badly so frequently that I never got the chance to recover from one traumatic blow before getting hit by the next one. I sometimes wonder if all of us aren't stuck in the grieving process somewhere.

From the perspective of an outsider, everything looked fine in my life. On the inside, I was drowning. I tried

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#### Top Mental Bumper Stickers (Humor)

"Out of my mind. ...back in five minutes."

"Laugh alone ...and the world thinks you're an idiot."

"Sometimes I wake up grumpy...other times I let him sleep"

"I took an IQ test and the results were negative."

"He who laughs last, thinks slowest"

"Always remember you're unique, just like everyone else."

"Friends help you move. Real friends help you move bodies."

"Consciousness: that annoying time between naps."

"There are 3 kinds of people: those who can count and those who can't."

everything to escape from my perfect façade of a life – drinking, counseling, overachieving, medication, education – and none of it worked. These did not work because none of them addressed my life as a whole. They were a shotgun approach to a complex problem – the problem of human existence.

Now, things are different. I went from smart to happy. My patience has grown. I find joy in life's little nuances. I live in the present. I am more authentic in the sense that my outer appearance is an accurate reflection of my inner state. I am passionate yet peaceful in my own skin. Most importantly, there are proven ways in which you too can build up your inner reservoir of energy to become more resilient, more balanced, and more content.

My suggestion to you is to approach life from the perspective of a student for whom learning is a never-ending quest; approach life as a novice with an attitude of awe and reverence. Search for meaning in every event and every action. Lifelong learning and meaning-making are two critical aspects to resiliency and will begin your journey towards contentment and meaning.

Recently, Barbara Fredrickson, a professor of psychology at University of North Carolina, made the discovery that *it takes three times as much positive emotion as negative emotion to lead a thriving life.*<sup>ii</sup> My intention is to help you create more positive emotions in your

life, to aid you in reducing the frequency and intensity of negative emotions and in increasing the amount of positive emotions you experience.

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**Psychological Hotline  
1-800-FRUITCAKE**

Hello! Thank you for calling the brand new Psychline!  
If you are obsessive-compulsive, please press 1 repeatedly.  
If you are co-dependent, please have someone press 2 for you.  
If you have multiple personalities, please press 3, 4, 5, and 6.  
If you are paranoid, we know who you are and what you want. Just stay on the line so we can trace the call.  
If you are schizophrenic, listen carefully and a little voice will tell you which number to press.  
If you are depressed, it doesn't really matter which number you press. No one will answer.

My goal is to point you in the right direction; a direction where you can make your own choices from an authentic place. When you begin making choices from an authentic place -- a blend of heart, mind, spirit and body -- you will inevitably make the right choices. And, in this way, you can heal yourself one choice at a time. And, in time, the world becomes a better place to live, one person at a time.

The goal of this book is to provide you with some comfort and inspiration. There is a certain world view expressed in the pages of this book. This world view allows for an infinite number of possibilities. And within this myriad of possibilities lies the inevitability of discovering meaning for your life and those around you. This may mean learning assertiveness, overcoming fear or anger, releasing sadness, breathing deeply, praying, tuning in to your body, or finding forgiveness. The goal is to fan the flames of hope and inspiration within you so that you can pursue peace and move on. And, in moving on, share your new found peace with others.

Peace,

Dr. John  
John@GuideToSelf.com

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<sup>i</sup> Haidt, J. *The Happiness Hypothesis*. 2006. Basic Books, Cambridge, MA.

<sup>ii</sup> Fredrickson, B.F. & Losada, M.F. (2005). "Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing." *American Psychologist*, October 2005, 60, 7, 678-686.