Self-defeating kids fight losing battle for control of lives

By Lawrence Kutner/New York Times

Neither his parents nor his high-school track coach understood what was going on.

The boy would do extremely well during practice, often performing at championship levels. The local papers were full of articles about his athletic potential and predictions of his success.

Yet he would do very poorly in competition.

"One day he came to his psychotherapy session with a stack of newspaper clippings about him," said Steven Berglas, a clinical psychologist at the Harvard Medical School and the author of "The Success Syndrome: Hitting Bottom When You've Reached the Top" (Plenum, $18.95).

"He spread out the clippings and said, 'They're telling me to perform, and I won't!'"

Children who appear to be self-defeating are often fighting a very personal battle for control over their lives, a battle fraught with ambivalence and symbolic communications.

The issue of personal control is most clearly seen in young children.

A child who has been punished for spoiling something will sometimes deliberately do the same thing again and will then gruffly tell himself, "Now clean this up!"

"It's a way of telling his parents that he's going to take away their power over him by saying these things to himself," Berglas said.

Among adolescents, the theme is the same, but the behavior is more complex.

A teen-ager who suddenly stops studying or handing in homework assignments has actually gained more power over his grades than when he was working hard.

Yet if you ask that child why he isn't performing better, his answers will be vague or tangential: "I hate the teacher. The class is stupid."

"We see this a lot in children of upwardly mobile, ambitious, very intelligent parents," said Dr. Robert Hendren, director of the Division of Child and
In Chapter I we described the experimental control of migraine headaches through biofeedback training. Shifting of the blood flow away from the head seemed to be accomplished by increasing the flow to the hand, “warming it.” Patients have, however, often had difficulty in learning to raise the temperature of the hand. After a week of being unable to produce a response on the temperature meter, one patient became “furious with the machine” and felt like smashing it, like “throwing it out of the window.” He gave up trying to “make” it go up and, surprisingly, it immediately began to respond. Giving up the willful effort to influence vascular response seemed paradoxically to bring control. After ten days of this practice he could increase his hand temperature when he chose, without further need of the meter.1

Another patient tried willfully to increase temperature in her hands with no success. She also became frustrated and began to “give up.” Just as she gave up in despair, the temperature in her hand rapidly climbed five degrees Centigrade. Her response was euphoric. “It seemed she could ‘feel’ the difference between the states associated with decreasing and increasing temperature. The feeling of giving up in this case seemed to be associated with detachment and objectivity, and the meter immediately responded.”2

This paradoxical sort of gaining control by giving up strenuous effort is often reported by those participating in such experiments. Subjects in biofeedback training discover that the more they try to produce a particular effect, the less successful they are. Trying leads to tension and frustration. When they relax and observe the changes in the instrument recording the biofeedback effects, they find that they become successful in controlling internal processes and even brain waves. This kind of control is linked to tranquil detachment and the term “passive volition” has been used to describe it.

Passive is synonymous in this context with detached, objective, non-emotional, non-anxious... Active volition is “turned off”... One of the... trainees who had suffered from migraine headaches for over forty years went through several stages of increased amelioration, terminating in an unusual degree of control through passive volition. Upon sensing an incipient migraine
draw in order to gain access to their higher integrative tendencies. There is a sort of spatial logic that guides the use of picture thinking that transcends the narrow verbal reasoning of the ego.

It is the first access to a level of observation and expression that extends beyond the materialistic thinking of the ego-state. In yoga psychology, this is just the first hint of higher levels of consciousness. But it is very important in that it gives one some notion that there are other kinds of awareness that lie beyond the usual verbal thinking.*

Researchers have suggested that when one wills a certain physiological change while maintaining a tranquil, detached state of mind, the body responds in the way that is being visualized. In the move to this new level of control, the decision-making power has become more refined. There is a shift to a "passive" from "active" volition, accompanied by a shift in the use of and manipulation of images rather than of words and ideas. This new way of controlling physiological processes brings what was before unconscious within the scope of a higher perspective. The conscious and a portion of what was before unconscious are now simultaneously held in awareness. By definition, then, a new level of integration has appeared.

Brain Waves and Higher Volition

Beta waves on the EEG correspond to normal waking consciousness while alpha indicates a more relaxed, tranquil state. The consciousness correlated with theta waves, which are even slower than alpha, is characterized by a dream-like or "reverie" state during which one is immersed in a world of images. It has long been known that these dream-like states (called "hypnagogic

* The use of a non-verbal exercise as an introduction to the exploration of higher consciousness is beautifully described by Eugen Herrigel, a German philosopher who studied archery under a Japanese master, in a little book called Zen and the Art of Archery (Vintage Books, New York, 1971).
body cannot be manhandled. It cannot be forced beyond its limits to serve the narrow purposes of the ego's limited "I." What Proscauer called "living too intentionally" is associated with uncoordinated use of the internal organs or "psychosomatic disease." At the "ego-level" of development the unconscious mind easily gets into power struggles with the body or with parts of the personality which are outside its awareness.

Only when a higher level of integration comes into play can this struggle within be consistently avoided. Otherwise the attempt to control can produce only inner conflict. From this perspective it is clear, as pointed out by Assagioli, that:

will does not produce results by means of sheer force (as the "Victorian" conception of the will maintained), but through the regulation and harmonizing of the other psychological functions, which it "steers" toward the chosen goal.
Spirituality can be the secret ingredient

By William Raspberry
The Washington Post

Washington
For 20 years, says Robert L. Woodson Sr., he had been observing the phenomenon but not really seeing it. "People, including me, would check out the successful social programs — I'm talking about the neighborhood-based healers who manage to turn people around — and we would report on such things as size, funding, facilities or technique.

"Only recently has it crystallized for me that the one thing virtually all these successful programs had in common was a leader with a strong sense of spirituality."

Woodson, founder and president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise in Washington, still isn't sure where to go with his insight. He gets nervous over the idea of government agencies funding religion, and he fears that some private funders might be seduced into backing programs that, though run by religious people, have no chance of producing results.

"I'm not saying the spiritually based programs always work, only that the successful programs almost always have a spiritual base," he said.

Furthermore, he's known it — or should have known it — for a long time.

"Several years ago when I was working with (Philadelphia's) Sister Fatah, who was doing such a wonderful job with gangs, I kept trying to figure out how she could compete so successfully with the traditional programs, government or private, that were able to offer jobs and other benefits," he said.

"Then I started asking the kids themselves. I'll never forget this one youngster, a reformed gang leader, who told me 'Sister Fatah taught me the meaning of life.'"

"When I asked him to explain what he was talking about, he told me: 'She set an example by the kind of life she led. She was always available for me — for family funerals, when my mother was sick, on a Friday night at 10 o'clock when I was feeling frustrated. I put her through some things, but you know even when I rejected her she didn't reject me. Finally one day, a light came on."

It is that light that intrigues Woodson. He has seen it come on in the drug-ridden neighborhoods of Detroit, where the Rev. Lee Earl does his rescue work. He has seen it in the eyes of the young Cleveland fathers, who, thanks to the influence of Charles Ballard, have assumed responsibility for their out-of-wedlock children, often marrying the mothers of those children. He acknowledges that programs designed to deliver specific services can work without regard to the deeper motivations of the service providers. His interest is in the community-based workers who can trigger the life-changing experience — the light that comes on.

"The thing I'm talking about may or may not be specifically religious," Woodson says. "It can happen with people who don't even go to church. But it's spiritual, and the people who are touched by it know it.

"I should have known it, too, but it took me a long time to see it. You see, I was trained as a social worker, and part of our training is professional separation — don't get emotionally involved. You must always remain in charge. That seems to be the essence of the professional relationship.

But not of spiritual ones. Woodson remembers asking Carl Hardrick, who used to be known as "the mayor of the ghetto" in Hartford, Conn., what he got out of his work with young people. Hardrick recalled the time when his own brother was brutally beaten in a gang assault that left him paralyzed for life. He explained the situation to the young man he'd been working with, armed himself, and was about to go looking for the man who had hurt his brother.

Then, according to Woodson, this kid who had been a gang leader spoke up: "If what you've been teaching us doesn't mean anything, I'll get a gun and come with you," he said. "If it does, let's call the police."

That's spiritual, says Woodson, ar it is profoundly effective. But doesn't get mentioned in the surveys and evaluations and requests for funding. There are no blank forms for spirituality — only for such things as resources, methodology and credentials. And what the form don't provide for is dismissed as insignificant, even by those who know better.

What are the implications of Woodson's insight for social service programs? "I'm not sure I know yet," he admits. "I do know that the hunger sense in America is not a hunger for goodies, but a search for meaning. We don't yet have the scales to weigh the ability some people have to supply meaning, to provide the spiritual element I'm talking about.

"I don't know how the details might work themselves out, but I know it makes as much sense to empower those who have the spiritual willingness to turn lives around as to empower those whose only qualification is credentials."
Buddha Lessons

A technique called 'mindfulness' teaches how to step back from pain and the worries of life

BY CLAUDIA KALB

FOR DECADES, DALIA ISCOFF has suffered the agony of rheumatoid arthritis—joint pain, spinal fusion, multiple hip surgeries. Painkillers dull the aches, but it wasn’t until she took a course at the University of Maryland’s Center for Integrative Medicine that Iscoff discovered a powerful weapon inside her own body: her mind. Using a meditative practice called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR, Iscoff learned to acknowledge her pain, rather than fight it. Her negative and debilitating thought patterns—"This is getting worse," "I’m going to end up in a wheelchair"—began to dissipate, and she was able to cut back on her medication. The pain hasn’t gone away, but "I view it as an ally now," she says. "Mindfulness is transformational."

With its roots in ancient Buddhist traditions, mindfulness is now gaining ground as an antidote for everything from type-A stress to chronic pain, depression and even the side effects of cancer treatment. At the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where MBSR was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leader in the field, 15,000 people have taken an eight-week course in the practice; hundreds more have signed up at medical clinics across the country. Studies have shown that mindfulness can reduce pain and anxiety. Now researchers are using brain imaging and blood tests to study its biological effects, and early results are intriguing: this spring, the National Institutes of Health hosted its first conference on the topic. "People in the scientific community used to think that this was a lot of mystical mumbo jumbo," says psychologist Ruth Baer, of the University of Kentucky. "Now they’re saying, ‘Hey, we should start paying attention!'"
What is forgiveness? How does forgiving another help us? And how can we cultivate forgiveness in our lives?

The body of research on forgiveness has grown in the last two decades from nearly nonexistent to hundreds of studies and dozens of books. Researchers are finding a powerful connection between forgiving others and our own well-being.

What is forgiveness?

Researchers who study forgiveness and its effects on our well-being and happiness are very specific about how they define forgiveness.

Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky calls forgiveness “a shift in thinking” toward someone who has wronged you, “such that your desire to harm that person has decreased and your desire to do him good (or to benefit your relationship) has increased.” Forgiveness, at a minimum, is a decision to let go of the desire for revenge and ill-will toward the person who wronged you. It may also include feelings of goodwill toward the other person. Forgiveness is also a natural resolution of the grief process, which is the necessary acknowledgment of pain and loss.

Researchers are very clear about what forgiveness is not:

**Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.** Forgiveness is one person’s inner response to another’s perceived injustice. Reconciliation is two people coming together in mutual respect. Reconciliation requires both parties working together. Forgiveness is something that is entirely up to you. Although reconciliation may follow forgiveness, it is possible to forgive without re-establishing or continuing the relationship. The person you forgive may be deceased or no longer part of your life. You may also choose not to reconcile, perhaps because you have no reason to believe that a relationship with the other person is healthy for you.

**Forgiveness is not forgetting.** “Forgive and forget” seem to go together. However, the process of forgiving involves acknowledging to yourself the wrong that was done to you, reflecting on it, and deciding how you want to think about it. Focusing on forgetting a wrong might lead to denying or suppressing feelings about it, which is not the same as forgiveness. Forgiveness has taken place when you can remember the wrong that was done without feeling resentment or a desire to pursue revenge. Sometimes, after we get to this point, we may forget about some of the wrongs people have done to us. But we don’t have to forget in order to forgive.

**Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing.** Forgiveness does not minimize, justify, or excuse the wrong that was done. Forgiveness also does not mean denying the harm and the feelings that the injustice produced. And forgiveness does not mean putting yourself in a position to be harmed again. You can forgive someone and still take healthy steps to protect yourself, including choosing not to reconcile.

**Forgiveness is not justice.** It is certainly easier to forgive someone who sincerely apologizes and makes amends. However, justice—which may include acknowledgment of the wrong, apologies, punishment, restitution, or compensation—is separate from forgiveness. You may pursue your rights for justice with or without forgiving someone. And if justice is denied, you can still choose whether or not to forgive.

Forgiveness is a powerful choice you can make when it’s right for you that can lead to greater well-being and better relationships.

Sources
The How of Happiness, by Sonja Lyubomirsky