

Chapter 7

Life is not fair.

Accept it, stop whining about it, and refer to Law # 1.

Life is not fair. Often it is extremely unfair! Unjust outcomes, situations, events and results are perpetrated on us by random chance, people acting unjustly, our genetic inheritance, and just plain old bad luck. Some brand new babies are handed horrific medical conditions with which they will have to struggle and to which they may succumb long before their normal lifespan is reached. Children may be born into and have to live in crushing poverty in disease-ridden parts of the world. People of all ages in northern Ukraine were exposed to tremendously high levels of radioactive fallout blown into the Russian sky as part of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. They did not know about the extreme danger posed by the fallout because the Russian authorities did nothing to warn them. The radioactivity and the destruction it was to bring was both unknown and unseen as it fell on their land, their animals, and their sources of drinking water. It entered their food chain and that of their livestock. Radioactive particles also fell on the people, poisoned the air they inhaled, and covered everything they touched. Soon the cancers began to appear, deformed children and animals were born, and the horrible effects continue today and into the future. Is that fair?

In your own life you probably have nothing quite so horrible as radiation poisoning but there are, no doubt, situations or outcomes you feel are unfair. You may feel unhappy with any number of the cards life has dealt you and consider one or some combination of them unfair. No one asked you what race or sex or even sexual orientation you'd like to be at birth did they? Similarly, you did not receive, prior to conception, a detailed questionnaire on which you were asked to indicate who you would like as your parents, their level of income, education, personality, dispositional or character traits, appearance, parenting ability, or even the year in which would prefer to enter this world. Think about all these details for a moment—if you HAD been asked about your preferences for each of these what would you have said?

Did you enjoy thinking about it? If so, good, because that's about all you are going to be able to do about these unchangeable historical facts of your life. Your history is your history and you can't change it because, by definition, history is about what happened in the *past*. Your power does not lie in the past but in the present moment only. That is where you can make choices that change your *present* life and create the kind of *future* you would like but let's save that for a bit later in this chapter.

So there you are—you came into the world with lots of things already determined for you and completely without your input. Then you start living in this unfair world and experience the unfairness life soon begins to give you. But, you see, “unfair” is an unbiased condition. That is, “unfair” can work both for you or against you. Some of the things you have experienced are *unfair* in the sense of negative, undesirable things that happen that are undeserved, like all the situations described at the beginning of this chapter. “Unfair” also means, though, that things may happen to you that are actually positive but are also undeserved. That is, good things may happen to you that you did nothing to merit or

deserve. Or things that would seem unpleasant indeed, like the Chernobyl fallout, DON'T happen to you. Stop reading for a minute and think about all the horrible things that *could* have happened to you, but did not. Hmmm. So “unfair” is a much more complex idea than most of us have thought, isn't it?

Fairness as Equity

You and I usually use the word “fair” to mean “equitable”—a balance between what is owed and what is paid, a condition that is not adverse to either side, equally favorable to all. If you call a plumber to fix your leaky toilet and you agree, ahead of time, that it will cost you \$75 then, after the repairs are done, he will expect you to pay him \$75. If you were to say “well, you fixed it pretty quickly and it didn't seem all that hard so I'll just pay you \$50” he is going to reply, quite understandably, “that is unfair.” You two had an agreement, he kept his side of the bargain, and now you are welching on yours. What is owed is being *under* paid—it is unfair and you better pay up or he will likely return your toilet to its former leaky condition and may remove a few essential parts to take home as souvenirs. Now, think of the very same scenario: you call the plumber, agree on a price, he does the work, and you say “what a great job you did, I love the way you cleaned everything up, I am going to pay you \$100.” What is owed is now being *over* paid and, according to the definition of “fairness as equity” that also is unfair, isn't it? But we don't think of it that way do we? The plumber doesn't either. If we get more than we have acted to deserve we call that “luck” or “good fortune”. The plumber calls it a “tip” and may happily accept it. No matter our term for it, it is also, according to the technical definition of “fairness”, unfair.

When luck, good fortune, and unexpected gains happen in our lives we don't think of them as unfair. In fact we often justify them as payback for some unfairness (in the sense of an undeserved loss) that we think happened to us in the past. We take an undeserved fortunate event and tell ourselves that somehow we actually do deserve it because of past undeserved losses we feel we have endured. By doing so, we take something that is actually unfair to us on the *positive* side and mentally make it fair. But, interestingly, we don't do that the other way around do we? If some undeserved loss happens to us we don't say “well this is payment for that undeserved gain I got last Tuesday”. No way! We moan, whine, and complain about this new loss, we call it “unfair” or “unjust” and we even sometimes scream skyward, “what did I do to deserve this?” We think of ourselves as the most slighted creature. Have you ever pitifully lamented, “what did I do to deserve this?” when some undeserved *fortunate* thing happened to you? Unlikely. Like most of us, you pocket the goodie and run!

You can see, then, that not only is *life* unfair, our *conception* of what is and what is not “fair” is also, well, unfair. To make matters more complicated, our *assessment* of the fairness/unfairness of events that occur in our lives is also unfair because it is based on our unfair conception of “fairness”. Fair enough? This can be confusing so read this all again if you need to and really think about it. You and I are just as unfair, at least in how we think about the situations in our lives as life, itself, is unfair in doling out these situations. And we are also quite unfair when we do not admit how very much we have

contributed to some of these situations occurring in the first place. Not all, mind you. Rotten things do happen to us all without our setting them up. But, to be honest, terrific things also happen without our prior participation. The difference is that we tend to think of the good things as “deserved” and so we don’t remember them as “unusual” like we do the rotten things which we are absolutely convinced we don’t deserve. We also tend to overlook the fact, as suggested earlier, that NOT having something misfortunate happen to us is, actually, a fortunate thing!

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in August 2005, I volunteered four or five days of my time to go to the coast of Mississippi and help with relief efforts. I didn’t do work there as a clinical psychologist or organizational consultant (my specialties). I cut trees. Lots of trees. Trees had fallen everywhere and were a huge safety hazard, blocked disaster response vehicles from entering neighborhoods, and caused roof damage to houses such that people couldn’t live in what was left of their home. So, I worked on the tree crew. I also worked distributing food, clean water, and basic medicines and toiletries to people who had lost everything. I was one of thousands of volunteers who did whatever was needed to help the people on the Gulf Coast recover and rebuild their lives.

I saw clearly that it was not “fair” that Katrina hit one of the poorest and least equipped states, Mississippi, and brought so much devastation to Gulfport, Biloxi, Waveland, New Orleans and all the other places on the coast some of which were really wiped from the map. But what if you had lived on the Gulf Coast of Florida, eastern coastal Alabama, western coastal Louisiana, or anywhere on coastal Texas when the eye of Katrina hit Waveland, Mississippi? I’ll bet there was a collective sigh of relief, a “thank God it’s not us” feeling all along those untouched coastal areas. They dodged this bullet. They were not subjected to the devastation and loss. They were fortunate. Technically speaking, though, and according to the definition of “fairness as equity” not being broadsided by the hurricane was actually just as unfair as it was for Mississippi to be directly hit by it. The people in Mississippi did nothing *to deserve* nor did those in the saved coastal areas do anything *to not deserve* what happened or did not happen to them, respectively. Often things just happen in our lives, too. When positive events that we did nothing to deserve happen we enjoy the good fortune. When negative events happen that we did nothing to deserve, we howl. Our response, then, is just as unfair as life is in supplying these events to us.

Letting go of the Fantasy

So, what to do? We are probably not going to change much in terms of preferring positive over negative outcomes or events. That’s understandable. Who wants more difficulties? We might really benefit, though, from changing our unrealistic expectation that “life is supposed to be fair” and improve how we deal with those seemingly “unfair” negative things that bug us. The first thing we need to do is take a good, hard look at our underlying assumption that life somehow “should” be fair. We’ve already learned that Should Statements are cognitive distortions that get us in trouble and this one, that life “should” be fair, is a massive distortion that has caused no end of pain. We really wish it

were true, don't we? We would really like life to be fair and yet it has never been, isn't now, and won't ever be. This wish won't make it so. Life is what it is. At base, life is a certain amount of time as a human on this planet during which we find ourselves in innumerable situations requiring our response. Some of the situations are wonderful, some good, some not as good, and some downright awful. The way we *think* about them and *feel* about them (see the 6th law of life) and, even more importantly, what we *say* and *do* about them (see the 1st law of life) now determines what the next phase of our life will be for us. Face it. You and I are handed or we create events and situations we don't like. Fine. Now what will we do about them in this present moment? Since we, alone are responsible for our behavior, for our choices, what will we choose?

First things first: let's examine this mistaken idea that "life should be fair" because that simple but deeply flawed notion is the root of much of our pain. Correcting this erroneous assumption, rule, or belief is going to take some work, too, because it is as tightly crystallized and tough as granite. This is the stone against which we repeatedly dash and break our hearts. We simply cannot seem to let go of this ossified falsehood and that suggests its roots are early in life. So let's look there.

Nearly all of us, as very young children beginning in our 1st - 6th years of life were taught that we were to share. Although it ran against our normal selfish interests, we were told repeatedly to "let Susie play with your toys, too," "take turns, play nicely, divide things equally," and "follow the rules of the game." Sharing, turn-taking, equal division, and adhering to agreed-upon rules are all excellent examples of equity and the sense of fairness that it produces. Later, in school and in other venues in which we may have played sports, we learned that the rules of the sport are there to "make it fair" so that the outcome of any game depends only on the skill of the player or team and not on an unfair advantage. Often coaches or umpires helped guarantee fair play by acting as impartial judges when players' behavior seemed in conflict with one or more game rules. Similar dynamics existed in the classroom. "Raise your hand to speak or ask a question," "don't talk at the same time," "you all have 60 minutes for this Algebra exam," "do your own work, no sharing, and no cheating" were all the rules of the classroom designed to level the playing field for everyone so that even learning was fair. After years of messages and instructions about fairness at home, in school, on playgrounds, and on sports fields of all types, we naturally came to assume that other areas of our lives and, by extension, life itself played by fair rules. Somewhere in our life, however, usually in the teenage years, we began to experience and notice lots of inequities. Teenagers are particularly sensitive to and notice irregularities, injustices, unfairness, and hypocrisy. Maybe this is because they are just out of their earlier years of training that all was supposed to be "fair" that, with young and fresh eyes, they notice deviations from fairness that you and I have grown accustomed to and stopped noticing long ago. Disappointed that life operates much more inequitably than they were earlier lead to believe, adolescents and young adults often lurch from earlier optimism to jaded and negative views of their world, others, and themselves. Unfortunately, the overwhelming negativism and despair they sometimes exhibit is just as unbalanced as was their earlier untempered optimism.

Reality lives between the poles of life as “all good” or “all bad”. Maturity comes as we achieve a healthy balance of hope and acceptance. For us, this acceptance ideally involves a dismissal of the fantasy that life is fair and yet a continued hope that we, ourselves, will act as honestly and fairly as we can so that we do not add unnecessarily to others’ experience of the general inequity of life. That is, we accept that life will remain unfair but choose to behave in ways that are fair. We do not give as we receive, but better. The mature person can say with all clarity, “life is unfair but I am not—I cannot change the way life operates but I *can* change the way *I* operate.” This brings us to the second step: how we can respond when unfair situations come our way.

Choosing Our Response

The subtitle of this chapter devoted to the 7th law of life, “life is not fair,” is “accept it, stop whining about it, and refer to Law # 1.” The last few paragraphs have been about the importance of acceptance, of letting go of childhood beliefs, and of generally making a place in our minds for a much more realistic view of life. As we accept the reality of life’s inequity we can, hopefully, stop spending our time wishing it were different or complaining that it continues to remain the same. We can stop whining about it. Many people will be very glad when we do, too, since no one really wants to hear us pine about how “life done me wrong” and “why did this all happen to me?” Complaining, whining, and moaning is unattractive and achieves nothing. It is not inspiring, it drives people away from us, and it moves us backward, nor forward. In the 1st law of life we learned the most fundamental truth possible: *you are responsible*. What you *think, feel, say, and do* is under your complete control and, in fact, is all you can control. Moreover, these four activities are your only ways of interacting with life. If you are to respond proactively to what life dishes up for you, you will have to do so by *thinking, feeling, saying, or doing* something. These are where the action is. It is good, therefore, for us to take some time to talk about them.

Thinking & Feeling

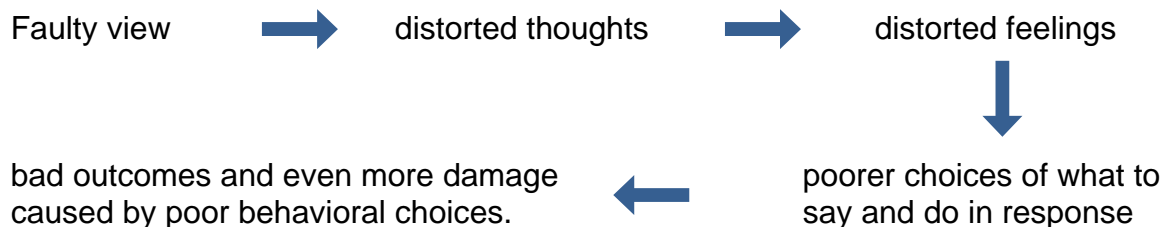
Thinking, like feeling, is a very private activity. Thinking and feeling go on inside your mind, are functions of the cognitive and emotional centers of your brain, and are known to you alone. No one can really know what you are thinking or feeling unless you communicate this to them in some way. In fact, thinking and feeling are sometimes known as the “covert” behaviors because they cannot be seen by others. They are also extremely important activities as we saw earlier in the Law # 6: “what you think determines what you feel”. There we learned *The Cognitive Model* that taught us that the way we *think* about those pesky and unpleasant situations life hands us determines how we respond *emotionally* to (feel about) the situations. Our emotional response, in turn, powerfully influences our *behavioral* response (what we say and do) and how our body responds *physiologically*. We wind up expressing the private activities of thinking and feeling very publicly in what we say, do, and how our body responds. It is,

Covert	Thinking	Feeling
Overt	Saying	Doing

therefore, essential that we guide ourselves well as we think and feel in response to the situations we face.

Here are some very practical steps you can use to ensure that all your responses, covert and overt, to life's tough circumstances will be more effective and positive. You can also adapt the steps outlined in Law # 3.

Step 1: Get Clear. The first step is to ensure that you are clear about the reality of the situation. Do you have all the actual data or are you responding to what you have heard, third hand? Do you really know with certainty what is going on? Ensuring that you do is key to choosing how you will think and feel in response. Try explaining it to a family member or friend. Encourage them to ask you specific questions about it so you can determine where the holes exist in your understanding. Or, you can work alone and write out the situation and, when reading what you wrote, look for gaps in your understanding. Why is getting clear so important? If you misunderstand the situation, your thoughts and feelings about it will be based on an inaccurate perception or faulty view of what you face.



Any time and effort spent on “getting clear”, crystal clear, about the conundrum life has handed you will pay off later. Don’t short-cut “getting clear”.

Step 2: Get Focused. We’ve already seen how powerful our focused attention can be in Law # 3 “what you focus on grows”. Once you are sure you have as much data as you can gather about the unpleasant situation, problem, or issue begin focusing on solutions. When discussing the law of focus, I paraphrased a quote of Einstein’s as “you cannot solve a problem by *thinking about the problem*”. Apply that here. After you have gotten very clear about the problem continued focus of your attention on it will only grow more problem. Focus, instead, on solutions to the problem. How many can you generate? Write them down. I once had a friend who always said, “you have at least five options” no matter what problem I or anyone else presented to him. At cocktail parties, his response to someone who came to him complaining about something was “you have at least five options...would you pardon me? I’m going to refresh my drink” and the person would be standing there, mouth open, drink in hand, watching my friend fade into the distance. He’s right about having at least five options and, actually, you probably have many more than five. To discover them you will need to focus the power of your thought on developing potential solutions. What you focus on grows. Focus on solutions and you will grow more of them. Refer to the steps in Law # 3 for more help.

Step 3: Get Creative. Do not limit yourself. How can you put ideas or pieces of potential solutions together to create something that fits what you need? There you are in one of

life's quagmires and you need to respond effectively. Getting out of it, or at least, dealing with it is going to require some creativity. I recently heard about the fellow who developed the method by which computers count the nucleotides in a DNA molecule. This invention allowed other scientists to sequence the human genome for the first time in history. How did the developer of the idea do it? He focused on solutions. He wondered how he could make each nucleotide light up so the computer could detect it and count it. He then remembered childhood summers when he was a boy and how he used to chase fireflies. He knew fireflies used chemicals to produce light in their tails and he took this insight into the lab and adapted it to light up nucleotides in the DNA molecule. Now the computer could count each. Fireflies helped him help others to sequence the human genome. This is a great example of "getting creative"—looking anywhere for even a tiny part of what might be a solution to the issue you face. Books like Edward De Bono's Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity may help you develop more creative thought skills. Creative people put old things together in new ways without fear that it will seem "crazy". They don't care about "crazy", they care about solutions. Adopt that mindset and get creative!

Thinking and feeling are how you "frame" your life issue. Do not dismiss the power of framing. It is the power of thought "naming" the type of situation and setting up your emotions for their response. How you think about, "frame", the origin of the problem you face also can make a big difference. Life has given you a challenge, maybe an unwelcome one, but a challenge nonetheless. In fact, one writer has suggested "life will give you whatever experience is most helpful for your growth." We know that life is unfair and that things sometimes just happen to us yet what if, even in the unfairness of it all, there is some wacky intelligence behind all this such that we are often handed situations that are designed to help us learn something or develop in some way? You can say, "oh, that's just you looking for some sense to all the randomness of unfair things that happen." Maybe. But since you are, apparently, wanting to respond proactively to undesirable life circumstances, does it matter that you frame it as an opportunity for you to grow? Might that be a way to help you stay positive, focused, and creative as you respond? I mean, you are going to have to respond somehow, correct? It might as well be to something you have framed as "a growth challenge" than as "a situation from Hell." Maybe it's not from Hell... Could it be coming from somewhere else?

Your feelings about a situation you have been handed are important because they represent the energy you will need to fuel your response in some action. As you have become very clear about the situation and see it for what it is, without distortion, you will then respond to your perception of it in a balanced way. Identifying what you feel as you did in the SEAT Method is important because it lets you know where your emotional energy is, how much you have, and which emotions might get in the way of your forward movement. After you have identified your feelings, you will be responsible for managing them using some of the skills you learned earlier. Although we've stated that no feeling, in and of itself, is "bad" or "good" you will respond more effectively if you can expand the feelings that support and energize your positive response and minimize or, at least, contain the feelings that don't.

Saying & Doing

Saying and doing are not private activities. Saying and doing things reveals to others what you have been thinking or feeling. Saying and doing are sometimes known as the “overt” behaviors because they are easily observed. Your overt behavior (saying and doing) expresses your covert behavior (thinking and feeling). This is even more reason to make sure your thoughts are what you want them to be—because thoughts determine feelings and both of these determine words and actions. It all starts with thought. Saying or doing something about your situation is the live application of your thoughts and feelings. As you respond to the situation you face, you will need to use words as you communicate orally or in writing. Much of what you might say or write will be to describe the situation and frame it as positively for others as you already have for yourself. That is a very important skill of leadership, by the way. Helping other people get a “handle” on the challenge at hand and understand why it is important to address the issue forthrightly lays the foundation for helping them follow you as you lead them in executing a solution. I bring this up because you are likely not going to deal with your situation totally alone. At some point, you will need to involve others and so you will need to choose wisely what you say and do. People are watching, listening, and need your leadership. You need your leadership.

Smart leaders, smart generals, and smart people think through the problem, focus on the solutions, and craft them to achieve an overall result that solves the problem and moves everyone toward better circumstances. What is your overall goal in dealing with this issue? Is it just to get through? It is to resolve something important or to achieve something that will reduce or eliminate the problem? Think about your goal and begin to assemble an overarching plan, if needed, for how you will get from where you are to where you want to be. An “overarching plan” is a “strategy” and crafting one is the act of being strategic. I remember, years ago, a very successful businessman, a friend of mine at the time, was upset with me because, in his view, I was not, in his words, “being strategic”. Unfortunately, he never told me what “being strategic” was or how to do it so his evaluation of me lacked any effort on his part to provide me the coaching I needed at the time. That was a big missed opportunity. I am not missing the same with you. “Being strategic” means discerning the goal you want, figuring out what activities will help you get each step of the way to it, and getting others to help you do them. That is what smart leaders do.

It may be that the direction you choose winds up not being the “right” one yet great people who do great things often start out going in “wrong” directions. The truth is, it is easier to change directions if you are *already moving on a plan you created in good faith* than if you are just sitting around hoping someone will come along and plop a solution in your lap. On the list of fantasies, right next to “life should be fair” is the illusion “someone will come along and plop a solution in my lap.” Don’t wait for it. It won’t happen. Start, do the best you can, and adjust as you see you need to achieve your resolution. If this situation was really given to you to provide you an opportunity to grow, getting the direction perfectly “right” immediately out of the chute is much less important than engaging the opportunity and doing the best you can. There is probably no true “right” or “wrong” anyway so don’t

worry too much about it. Starting, changing, redirecting, revising, and learning as you go is how growth happens anyway.

Let's sum up what we've discussed. Life is not fair. It is equally true to say that life is not unfair. In fact, life does not know about *your* rules of fairness/unfairness, does not care about them, and does not follow them. Life simply is what it is. You and I may judge an event of life as "fair" or "unfair" but that is *our* judgment. Others might judge the same event differently but that is *their* judgment. Life operates above and outside all judgments, rules, and human wishes for how it would be, could be, or should be. You save yourself much heartache if you stop judging life and expecting it to conform to your rules. You do much better if you can learn to accept and flow with what is and what happens. That does not mean you don't do what you can to improve things, right what you see is unjust, give what you can to those who need, and help yourself, others, and your world to be better. It does mean, though, that you stop spending time asking why life unfolded in this way rather than that and why it didn't, for the ten thousandth time, meet your expectations.

Let go of expectations and judgments.

Move others and yourself positively forward through life's conditions.

Let go of resisting and fighting what you cannot fight.

Move through the life's events like a streamlined fish through water and do the best you can with the circumstances that obtain.

In the last analysis, the old saw that "life is 20% what happens to you and 80% how you respond", is true. Life will be what it will be and it will never be, in your view, "fair".

You, however, get to choose how you will respond and therein lies all the difference.