

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION

FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of December 3, 2003

Dear Reader,

Are you too busy? Do you feel rushed? Is there too much to do? Those of you who are not self-employed may find that you are being pressured to work faster and longer by your employer. People who work in business may now be permanently connected to the office by our new technology, and many who work in government are burdened with ever-growing paperwork requirements. You may know all too well why the government can proudly report that “productivity” has grown. And as you rush to get your work done, you may not share the feeling that news of increased productivity is wonderful. It may be happening at your expense.

Stephen S. Roach, chief economist for Morgan Stanley, confirms your perception in his article “The Productivity Paradox,” in last Sunday’s *New York Times*. He explains that the reports of increased productivity in our economy are based on fallacious methods of measurement. “We aren’t worker smarter, we’re working harder.” Among other problems, the calculations assume a 35.5 hour work week.

What about the self-employed? Homemakers? Children? Many of these people too are influenced by external forces that they feel compelled to respond to. An entrepreneur may fear losing business to competitors. A homemaker may worry about keeping up with the neighbors. A child may feel pressured by his parents to excel academically and athletically. In all of these situations the individual is subject to a negative stimulus: a threat. The entrepreneur is afraid of going bankrupt, the homemaker dreads humiliation, and the child fears parental disapproval and disappointment. For each of these situations, a typical response is to work harder. Because in each instance the threat is continuous, the response must continue. And because its novelty will wane with repetition, the response must increase in intensity or elaboration in order to maintain its effectiveness.

Sometimes the external threat is very realistic. A businessperson may indeed go bankrupt if the competition overwhelms him, and a child may suffer if his parents are rigid. But the homemaker’s fear of humiliation may be imaginary, and the child may be able to change his situation. Another recent *New York Times* article, on November 26, described a student initiative at Staples High School in Westport, Connecticut. Cheating there had become rampant as students responded to parental pressure to get top grades. But when the student newspaper published an article describing and deploring this situation, a school-wide discussion began. Students acknowledged and described cheating, wanted it to stop, and are now considering developing an honor code for themselves.



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In many cases the impetus to work harder comes from within. Originally occurring in response to an external stimulus, it has taken on a life of its own. It has become part of a repertoire of partial solutions that are used to decrease the discomfort of chronic distress. If an individual focuses intensely on thoughts of work, the strength of this stimulus overrides other, emotionally painful, stimuli and they are kept out of awareness. This is adaptive when it is the best available solution to a problem, as was the case when it originated. But because it becomes locked-in as a response, the individual is then unable to take advantage of better solutions that later become available.

When working harder is a response to a specific threat, it is itself a source of distress. When a habit pattern of working harder has become generalized, it is experienced as a given. Some people grow to enjoy it. A businessperson, whether self-employed or not, may get intense pleasure from developing and carrying out a business plan. A homemaker may love cooking or interior decorating. A child may love to play soccer.

If an individual focuses exclusively on one thing, whether forced to by an external threat or motivated by an internalized habit pattern, he or she misses out on everything else that life has to offer. The businessperson may not develop strong bonds with his or her children. The homemaker may remain ignorant of world events. The child is not exposed to a variety of activities and interests that will contribute to a rich mental life.

Whether working harder results from an external threat or an internalized habit pattern, an Inner Guide can solve the problem. It will find a way to alter an uncomfortable situation, and it can create the necessary conditions for an unhealthy habit pattern to be extinguished.

QUESTION:

“Can a mentally ill person benefit from self-hypnosis?”

ANSWER:

Yes, during periods of remission, under the supervision of his or her therapist.

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

Judith M. Davis