

Mind & Relationships

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This column will change your life

If only it were so simple to imagine you are no longer a prisoner of your past and can easily grasp a brighter future



Illustration by Thomas Pullin; right, Lo Cole

The standard knock against old-school approaches to psychology - Freud, Jung et al - is they're obsessed with the past. Visit some crusty psychoanalyst and you're sure to waste years picking through your childhood, concluding - surprise! - that your parents messed you up. Modern, self-help psychology starts from the tempting premise that you can skip all that: just change your present-day thoughts and happiness will follow! But now Martin Seligman, the father of "positive psychology", has gone further. The past and present are both distractions, he argues in a book and New York Times essay; the key to happiness lies in humans' unique ability to contemplate the future. "For the past century, most researchers have assumed we're prisoners of the past and the present," he writes. But we're not. For example, depression results not mainly from "past traumas and present stresses, but because of skewed visions of what lies ahead". Indeed, "the main purpose of emotions is to guide future behaviour". He even proposes a new discipline, "prospective psychology", to tackle this paradigm-shifting truth.

I suspect other psychologists may be surprised to learn they've been neglecting the future. There would be no point getting therapy, reading a self-help book or taking an antidepressant if it couldn't change your future. Even Freud saw himself as freeing patients from neurosis so they could live future lives of "ordinary unhappiness". (Jung was even more future-focused: "I am not what has happened to me," he wrote, "I am what I choose to become.") But the problem, for Seligman, is that all these versions of psychology see humans at the mercy of "inner drives", which determine our trajectories, unless we can somehow silence them. In

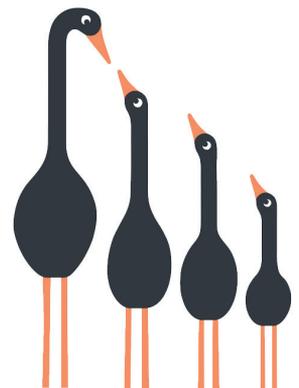
reality, he argues, we don't spend our lives acting out childhood patterns. Instead, our actions stem from how we conceive of the future. The title of a paper he co-authored expresses the distinction: "Navigating into the future or driven by the past?"

Yet the metaphor highlights the strangeness of his idea: a journey by car involves both navigating and being driven. (Try going on a road trip using a satnav but no fuel, or with nobody at the wheel.) The insight of earlier psychologists wasn't

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that we're prisoners of the past, but that the past affects how we approach the future. If you get the message from your earliest relationships that the world is a scary place, you'll approach the future anxiously - and understanding this may help interrupt the anxiety spiral next time it occurs. The past constrains our futures in down-to-earth ways, too: thanks to my genes and/or parenting, I doubt I'll ever be a chess grandmaster. Seligman cites a study in which people were interrupted through the day to record their thoughts. They were thinking of the future much more than the past. But that hardly shows the past didn't matter to them; it shaped how they faced the future. To quote some other outdated ignoramus, the past isn't even past.

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What I'm really thinking The eldest

It could have been any of us, but it happened to be me. A brief 18 months of undivided attention and love as the only child, before three more appeared. The second was a severe blow. Learning the need to share was important, but I had tasted the life of an only child.

Then came years of requests to look after a younger sibling, exhortations of, "You should be setting a better example," seeing the others getting away with stuff I didn't. We each played our roles: the naughty second one who later skipped school to meet boys; the ever so charming third, the boy who could do no wrong; and finally the surprise appearance of the fourth, destined to be spoiled even now. So that left me: the sensible, quiet one who got the grades, did the homework and became a chameleon - skilled at reading a situation and being what was needed.

Then eventually came the chance to be the first to leave and sample life on the outside, not defined by being the eldest. The moment I had waited for. But now, many years later, being the eldest matters again. It's down to me, it seems, to take the lead in caring for our parents. Everything I was made to learn about sharing no longer seems to apply. The others are too busy, too far away, too unconcerned. So dutifully I crisscross the country for hours to provide care and support. Requests

to my siblings to help out more fall on deaf ears. To me, the dutiful first born, it feels like the right and only thing to do: to be there for our parents as they were for us. Sadly, that feeling isn't shared by the second, third or fourth.

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