

Tuning in to our natural endowment: the human givens

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Summary

In this article we introduce the human givens approach to psychotherapy and education. Its scientific heritage is drawn from strands of psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience, sociology, anthropology and the more effective therapies, as well as knowledge accumulated outside of those disciplines in the wisdom traditions (which have, of course, existed for thousands of years in most cultures). Where it is being adopted, the human givens approach is having a spectacular impact on how distressed people are helped.

I am the principal of MindFields College, the only specialist psychology college in the UK. Its tutors are all dedicated to teaching people around the UK how to apply practical psychological knowledge to raise standards and effectiveness in healthcare, education and all forms of social service. We teach more than 12,500 people a year from the NHS, social services and teaching professions. I teach, broadcast and write on a variety of health related topics and am co-author, with Joe Griffin, of books on dreaming, the human givens, lifting depression and overcoming addictions.

What are 'human givens'

Every human is born with an enormous amount of innate knowledge that has accumulated over millions of years. This knowledge facilitates our survival and continued evolution. Through familiarity few people are aware of it as knowledge. Once alerted to it, however, we can clearly see it working through the two ways it is expressed: as *needs*, physical and emotional, and as innate *abilities*, which are the guidance systems that help us get our needs met. These needs and abilities together are the 'human givens'.¹

Every innate need is a pattern of knowledge but it is, necessarily, incomplete. It seeks to find its completion by matching up to something in the outside world. For example, from the moment we were born we 'knew' straight-away how to breathe, suckle at

our mother's breast and swallow. We 'knew' how to build rapport with whoever was holding us. We 'knew' how to draw attention to ourselves whenever we were hungry or uncomfortable. All this knowledge is part of our genetic inheritance and we draw on it throughout our life. For example, when a child feels lonely and has need of a friend, that incomplete innate pattern drives the child to make a friend. Then the feeling of loneliness goes away because the pattern has been completed in the environment. Because our emotional needs are partial patterns, and we are driven to try and match them up to complete them in the outside world, every child and adult *automatically* tries to do this. But the process is a metaphorical one. (Nipples, food, exercise, friends and so on cannot be exactly specified because allowances have to be made for varied and ever changing environments, so nature's

instructions to us, in effect, are, 'go and find something a bit like this'. That's why a baby will suck on anything vaguely nipple shaped.)

Emotional needs are all connected to survival and our continuing evolution. They are related to sex and procreation, our relationships to wider groups (we are an intensely social species) and our urge to connect up to reality. These inner patterns force us to seek safety and security, get attention from others, make emotional connections to others, have an intimate close relationship to at least one other person, have volition (to feel one has some control over events), obtain a degree of status within one's family and peer groups, have skills and competences (which ensures that low self-esteem doesn't develop), have access to privacy so as to be able to reflect on and consolidate experience, and to be 'stretched' by how we live and what we do (because being physically and/or mentally stretched gives meaning and purpose to our lives.) All these emotional needs have to be met in a balanced way if a child or adult is to develop well and fulfil his or her potential.

‘Stress’ is what we feel when emotional needs are not met

Innate *physical* needs are obvious: air to breathe, food and drink for nutrition, sufficient warmth for comfort, and the space to move about and grow. When the need for nutrition, for example, is matched up to a mother's milk, all is well. But when such innate needs are not met, we are in trouble. We can all see what happens when children are starved, or fed on a diet of harmful foods, or are not allowed to play in ways that encourage physical activity. We can see immediately when a child is underweight, overweight, hyperactive or listless – whether it has a healthy glow or a sickly pallor. The damage is obvious.

When the inner emotional needs of a child are not met in the environment, the damage can be just as severe but not always as easy to pin down. What can happen is that a child, as it tries to match up its templates for security, volition, rapport, empathy or curiosity, might only be met by uncaring indifference, a TV screen, or continual, crude,

emotional and loud responses, or even violence. Many children have not experienced quiet times. The concept is alien to them, as is delaying gratification for the furtherance of satisfying an even greater need, or considering the wishes of others, both of which need to be taught to the child. Without the more refined templates completed in them, their brain's neural networks adapt to develop in an unbalanced way. Then we start to see the behaviour of an isolate or the dependent, or a simple regression towards aggressive behaviour and violence.

Stress is a reaction to needs not being met

We know these innate needs – human givens – are important because research shows that if any one of them is not matched up in a balanced way by what happens to a person in the environment, they become emotionally disturbed. If this is not corrected, this eventually takes a major toll on that individual's physical and mental health.

'Stress' is what we feel when emotional needs are *not* met and we become anxious, frustrated, angry or depressed. If the situation persists this can be detrimental to physical health and generate even more severe forms of mental disturbance, such as self-harming or psychosis. And some people will try to compensate for their neediness in inappropriate ways, such as by attention seeking or developing an addiction.

In short, if a person with an undamaged brain is getting their emotional needs met well, they will not have psychological problems. There is no more profound statement that can be made about mental health.

We can all recognise this when we think about it. Every baby needs warmth, quiet times to sleep, proper food, comfort and good quality attention to feel safe. It soon shows signs of stress if these needs are not met. This is why every baby is programmed to connect with its mother from the moment it is born. It 'knows' it is totally dependent on her and must do this to survive. Without good parenting it will not flourish and can even die.

Every adult has innate needs that have to be met too. People who are lonely, insecure, feel out

of control of some important aspects of their life (for example, their finances, relationships or health), or have status taken away from them, or are not 'stretched' to learn become distressed. That so often leads to a downward spiral that can only be reversed when the problem is addressed directly. Human givens clinics, drop-in centres, schools and care homes, to say nothing of individual therapists and counsellors using this organising idea, are getting the most astounding results.

Fortunately, to help us meet our needs, nature has given us a wealth of abilities, such as:

- the ability to develop complex long-term memory, which enables us to add to our innate knowledge and learn
- the ability to build rapport, empathise and connect with others
- imagination, which enables us to focus our attention away from our emotions, create complex language and problem solve more creatively and objectively
- a conscious, rational mind that can check out emotions, question, analyse and plan (left hemisphere)
- the ability to 'know' – understand the world unconsciously through metaphorical pattern matching (right hemisphere)
- an observing self – that part of us which can step back, be aware of our self as a unique centre of awareness – apart from intellect, emotion and conditioning (frontal lobes)
- a brain that dreams. Dreaming is nature's way of discharging stress. (Every night we dream, even if we don't remember doing so, and expectations that aroused the autonomic nervous system during the day and were not de-aroused by the necessary action in the environment, are metaphorically completed in dream stories during REM sleep, leaving us refreshed and ready for the new day.)

So, inner resources – like physical and emotional needs – are also 'givens'. They are the tools for survival that nature bequeaths to each new baby – a form of knowledge. All subsequently acquired skills and knowledge are what we gain through

consciously experiencing the world – what people usually call learning and remembering.

The human givens approach to psychotherapy and counselling

There are many hundreds of different types of counselling and psychotherapy models and whether they work or not always depends on how closely they are aligned to biological, psychological and behavioural functioning – the human givens. This is no different from saying that, in the evolution of heavier than air flying machines, the degree to which a new design worked – ie the machine flew – was related to how closely the design was aligned to the 'givens' of the laws of gravity, the laws of physics and the laws of aerodynamics.

The evolution of psychotherapy in the West has, for the most part, been unconnected to the scientific investigation of human nature. Science and psychotherapy have flowed along like two separate currents that only occasionally intermingle.

...more and more people seem to need help in dealing with the rapid changes in society

(This is a pattern common to the early stage of development of many sciences. At one time, for example, the heavens were studied because people had preconceived ideas about the relationship between the stars and human beings – astrology. The observations were made in order to confirm those preconceived ideas. But, in time, astrology turned into astronomy, a true science concerned with what was *really* there.)

We have now arrived at the stage in psychotherapy where we can drop the pseudo-therapy – the preconceived fantastical notions, myths and strange ideas – and just concentrate on investigating and applying objectively established principles to human problem solving. This is happening at a time when more and more people seem to need help in dealing with the rapid changes in society. Depression, anger, anxiety disorders, addiction and other mental problems are on the increase everywhere. Education is in a shambles and

politicians, hopelessly at sea, are succeeding only in making matters worse. What is needed is a new organising idea, which is what the human givens approach offers.

An example: more effective treatment for the seriously depressed

However long they spend in bed, all depressed people wake up tired and find it difficult to motivate themselves. Studying human givens and incorporating what is now known about why we dream, can explain this.²

It has long been known that depressed people dream more intensely than non-depressed people.³ The imbalance between REM sleep and slow wave sleep they experience causes them to wake up tired since dreaming uses up more energy than the recuperative slow wave sleep can replace. In addition, the excessive firing off of the orientation response during dreaming exhausts it, and, since this same neurological pathway is also needed to focus attention while awake, and focusing attention is required for motivating any action or thinking, depressed people find it increasingly difficult to motivate themselves to do anything.

People only become depressed when needs, usually emotional, are not being met and they begin to worry. Worries are expectations caused by misusing imagination: catastrophising instead of solving problems. Any worry not addressed by an action that resolves it, leaves the autonomic nervous system with an aroused pattern of expectation. It is the amount of worrying a person does that creates

the low mood as their dreaming process becomes overloaded with unacted-out expectations.

We quickly discovered that helping depressed people understand how the dreaming process works is greatly beneficial to them. By combining this knowledge with teaching them to use their imagination for deep relaxation, stopping negative rumination and active problem solving to get their needs met, people come out of even severe depression very quickly.⁴

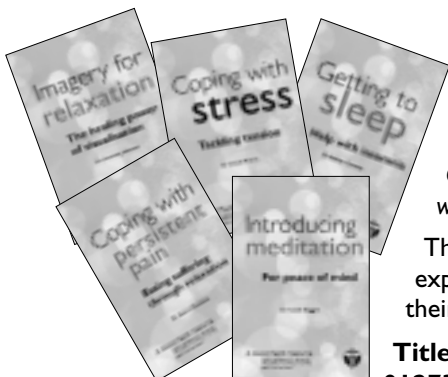
And here is another dramatic example of how useful the human givens organising idea is proving. By using the approach a team of therapists working out of Hartlepool Mind, under the leadership of Iain Caldwell, are successfully helping more than 700 hundred people a year, including many with severe depression, bipolar disorder, sufferers of PTSD, self-harmers, drug addicts and individuals labelled as schizophrenic (see page 31). Psychiatric services are now referring people to Hartlepool Mind when conventional methodology isn't working for their patients because it is so efficacious.

For more information on the human givens approach, see www.humangivens.com. Training in the approach is available through MindFields College, www.mindfields.org.uk.

References

- 1 Griffin J, Tyrrell I. *Human givens: a new approach to emotional health and clear thinking*. Chalvington: HG Publishing Ltd, 2003.
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