



How to stay sane despite your teachers and parents

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16 March 2005

I'm going to talk a little bit about how to stay sane despite your teachers and your parents. The topic came to me because I remember vividly when I was roughly between the ages of 11 and 18, finding it very difficult, in fact, to stay sane, despite my parents and my teachers. It was a very tough time indeed. I wasn't very popular at school, and popularity seemed to be extremely important between the ages of 11 and 18, and I was always getting into trouble, and I didn't seem to get along with any of the teachers.

As an example of the kind of things that used to happen to me was in the school that I used to attend, they had a school tradition which was that everyone in the fifth form, that's people doing O Levels and GCSE, had in turn to read a passage from the Bible during assembly, and everyone did it at least once, and every day someone would read a passage from the Bible in assembly. I'm not even sure whether you have assembly anymore, but back in my time, a long time ago, the whole school would come together to meet at the beginning of the day. Now, when it came to my turn, in typical rebellious fashion, I decided I wouldn't read a passage from the Bible, but of course I didn't tell anyone that this was my plan. Instead, I thought I would read a passage from my favourite book, which was *The Catcher in the Rye* by J D Salinger. I don't know if any of you have read that book, but it was on the syllabus at the time and I read it out.

It's a great book. It's a novel about a guy called Holden Caulfield, who is at school, in his late teens, and is actually having some kind of nervous breakdown, which may have explained why I identified so strongly with the book. Anyway, the headmaster, of course, was expecting me to read out a passage from the Bible that had been picked for me, but instead I went up on to the stage and unbeknownst to him had hidden *The Catcher in the Rye* within the pages of the Bible. I read out a passage from it, which is a bit at the beginning of the book, where Holden Caulfield, the hero, is getting failed from school, he's being thrown out from school because of failing his exams. He goes to say goodbye to his favourite teacher, and the teacher is a bit worried about Holden, so the teacher gives a little speech to him, and says, "You know, life's a game, my boy, and it's got rules, and it's very important to play the game by the rules." Holden thinks to himself – he doesn't say anything to the teacher because he quite likes the teacher – but he says to himself, "Game? My arse! Life's not a game! If you're on the side where all the hotshots are, then it's a game alright, but if you're on the other side, there is no game." I read this bit out to the packed school hall, and there was some shock, given people had been expecting Ecclesiastes 13.1 and the headmaster was very angry and came up to me immediately afterwards and said, "Right, I'm giving you a detention for that!" I said, and this I think reveals a lot about me as an adolescent in terms of how difficult I must have been as a pupil, I immediately said to him, "Well, what are you giving me a detention for? I read out a passage from a book that's actually on the syllabus. It's in the curriculum. We're meant to be studying this for our O Levels, so what exactly are you giving me a detention for? Reading out a passage from a book that's in the syllabus?" The poor guy was a bit taken aback by this. I think he could imagine the newspaper headlines the next day: "Boy given detention for reading book from syllabus!" So quick as a flash, he said, "No, no I'm not giving you a detention for reading out that passage. I'm giving you a detention for saying the word 'arse' in assembly!" I also pointed out, quick as a flash, that the word "arse" crops up quite a lot in the Bible although obviously in a different context, but he wasn't having any of it, so I got this detention.

Anyway, fast forward 20 years when I become something of a well known figure, and the school invited me back to give out prizes to pupils at the prize giving. I went back, I agreed to do it, and that headmaster who gave me that detention had actually long since retired, but he came back as well on that day. I was asked to give a little speech before handing out the prizes, and just to show you the kind of person I am, the fact that I had got that detention still narked me somewhat – 20 years on! So when I saw this headmaster there on the stage and I had to get up and give a little speech – in fact I knew that he was coming along beforehand – the first thing I said to the packed assembly hall again was that, this headmaster, I referred to him, he had taught us geography, and I was as a result amazed he'd managed to find his way back to the school! And then I said the last time I was standing here on this platform I had read out a passage from *The Catcher in the Rye* instead of reading a passage from the Bible, and I had got a detention, and I still felt very strongly that this wasn't fair, and I want you to decide, and I whipped out *The Catcher in the Rye* and I read the same passage again, placing special emphasis on the word "arse"! He seemed to take it in very good humour. I think that gives you a little illustration of the kind of difficult person I was at school.

I want to talk a little bit about what it's like to be an adolescent in this day and age, and there's some very interesting psychological research today that suggests, as a group of people, adolescents are psychologically very different from the way your parents and your teachers were psychologically when they were your age. There are some dramatic shifts in psychology of the adolescent, according to research, where psychologists measure various parameters of personality. They've been doing that since the 1960s and then following people up and measuring each generation since the 60s. There are four key differences between what you are today to what your parents and teacher were when they were your age, and I'm going to start off with the good news first. The good news is that you are much more intelligent than your parents were when they were your age, because IQ has been going up quite dramatically over the last hundred years since it's been first measured, and it's going up roughly at a rate of one point, one IQ point, every four years. Now what that means is, I'm 41 years old, I've got a son called Satchin who's 4 years old, okay, that means, roughly speaking, he is going to be more intelligent than me on average by ten IQ points, and that's quite a significant IQ difference. IQ is a measure of intelligence, intelligence is meant to be a measure of intellectual ability, and people came upon the idea of intelligence because they noticed that certain people tended to do well generally in exams. In other words, if you did well in maths, you often did well in lots of other exams as well, like English and algebra, and IQ was an attempt to extract that general tendency to perform well cognitively. This IQ gap of ten points, for example, is the equivalent of the difference between people who make it to university and people who aren't able to make it to university but just make it to getting A Levels. It's quite a significant gap. So next time you're having a hard time from your teachers or your parents, you can let them know that actually you are more intelligent, on average, quite dramatically, than they are.

Any thoughts you may have as to why that might be? Why it is that intelligence is going up with each generation so significantly? One theory is better nutrition; that nutrition, when you're in your mother's womb, is particularly vital in brain development. When I was born, back in the early 60s, Britain had only just come out of rationing, so maybe nutritionally your parents and teachers, and their parents were nutritionally deprived and that led to poorer brain development. You've got a big nutritional advantage on the older generation, so that's one major theory as to why IQ is rising with passing time.

Another theory as to why IQ might be going up is computers. We live in a cognitively more complicated environment and it is getting more complicated all the time, and in order to cope with that environment, the brain has to develop more rapidly, and the brain responds to that. Computers are an excellent example. Everyone uses computers as a standard part of their daily process. When I was at school, the year that I left school, which is 1979, the school bought its first computer, and it was a big thing that stood in the corner and it was the size of two or three washing machines, and if you wanted to ask the computer anything, you had to put in punched cards, and then the computer regurgitated punched cards. You'd then take the punched cards away and another machine translated the punched cards, so it took several days from putting the question in to getting an answer out. The university where I now work had, at that time, only one computer for the whole of the University of London, and it was in a building near Senate House, and if you wanted to ask the computer a question, you punched out cards, a van came to the institution, you gave the cards to the van, the van drove to the central office, and a few weeks later, it came back with

the answer. That's only 20 years ago, so see how fast things have moved, and you guys are used to using a computer at your age. My son Satchin, who is four years old, is already using a computer and so maybe cognitive complexity, in terms of the amount of our environment, explains why IQ is going up so dramatically.

Another bit of good news is that, in terms of a personality disposition it's very important, extroversion is going up dramatically. You are more extrovert and dramatically so, than your parents were when they were your age, and by extroversion I mean the personality disposition to be socially confident and to mingle with other people and to be the life and soul of the party. This explains a very interesting recent phenomenon which is reality television. My generation, which is much shyer than your generation, can't get its head around reality TV. We can't understand why anyone would want to expose themselves in the way that you currently see all the time, and one theory that explains the rise of reality TV is a general rise in exhibitionism and extroversion.

One theory about this is that geographical mobility means that your generation has to mingle a lot more and has many more social encounters than my generation did. So if people tend to move more, that means you've got to make new friends. Also a lot of people of your age and younger tend to get put into childcare much earlier, and that forces you to socialise much more. Before, there were bigger families, people didn't socialise so much outside the family, and that may explain why you tend to have superior socialisation skills compared to my generation.

So that's the good news: you're brighter, you're significantly more intelligent, and this explains incidentally why A Level results are getting better and better as well, which is an explanation that's often forgotten, and you are more extrovert and more socially confident therefore than my generation. Now we come to the bad news. The evidence is you're significantly more anxious and neurotic than my generation, and that means you tend to worry more, for example. A worry is a negative anticipation of the future. It's a thought where you imagine something bad happening in the future, like worrying about failing an exam. Anxious people and neurotic people tend to worry more, and worries are probably the commonest averse mental experience, so your generation worries more than our generation did when we were your age.

Why are anxiety levels going up in younger people with each generation since the 60s? There is an element of truth that my generation with its lower IQ can relate to, which is that a comparison effect may be at play. The media is often blamed for the fact that people may compare themselves with their lives as it is, with the much more desirable lives of people in the media, and that comparison effect often makes us feel neurotic about our lives. A very good example of that are eating disorders. For example, why are eating disorders dramatically higher in today's generation, than they were 20 or 30 years ago? May be people compare themselves with very, very thin models or actresses they see on television or in magazines, and that comparison makes them feel bad about their bodies and so that leads to the rise of eating disorders.

Another theory is about the idea that we live in a world that's changing very rapidly, and that leads to greater uncertainty about the future, and anxiety and worries are basically about having to contend with uncertainty and a fast changing world. So may be that explains the rise in neurosis amongst younger people. But no one really knows the answer to that.

There's yet another theory about the fragmentation of the family. There are higher divorce rates, and may be your generation is a bit more neurotic because they experience more instability in terms of the environment in which they grow up.

Now we come to the final bit of bad news, and the most important bit of bad news about psychological change, which is a concept known as internal and external locus of control. This is a very important concept in psychology. Psychologists divide people into two basic groups: internals and externals. Internals

are people who take personal responsibility for their lives, so basically when something happens to them, they assume the reason it has happened to them is something to do with themselves. Externals blame external events for whatever happens to them in life, so they don't take personal responsibility for their lives.

Let's take an example that will explain that concept. Say you go for a job interview and you fail the job interview and you don't get the job. An internal person would say I didn't get the job because I didn't perform very well at the interview and I really must try and improve my interview skills, because that's why I didn't get the job. In other words, they would locate the causal agency for why they didn't get the job internally within themselves. They would blame themselves for not getting the job. An external person would say, you know what, they were really unfair in that interview, they asked lots of unfair questions, and the reason I didn't get the job is not because I'm not good enough, it's because they were very unfair to me and that explains why I didn't get the job. In other words, they're locating the causal agency externally to themselves. This concept is very important because the evidence is that the more internal you are, the more driven and motivated you are, and the more successful you tend to be in life, because you take responsibility for your life. You take responsibility for your life when things don't go well, and you aim to try and improve and make changes. The more external you are, the evidence is, the more likely you are to suffer from depression in the future, the more likely you are to become a criminal, and a whole host of other negative social aspects of life are linked to rising, or greater levels of externality.

Now, given all that, the bad news is that there's been a dramatic shift, since the 60s, with each generation, of young people, becoming much more external in orientation, so much so that the average teenage person today is more external in orientation than 80% of young people of the same age alive in the early 1960s. That is a dramatic shift in externality.

Why are young people today becoming more external in orientation, given this is a very important finding? A lot of scientists believe that one of the reasons for this is the idea that explanations are much more around today that take away personal responsibility. So when someone commits a crime, their lawyers might say, well it was the genes, they had the genetic predisposition to commit crime, or it was their early childhood experience, they had a hard time when they were children, and that explains why they've ended up the way they are today. In other words, there's a plethora of new explanations around to explain behaviour, whereas when my generation was growing up, those explanations just weren't there, and therefore you were left with basically no explanation of the reason why the bad things happened to you.

I experienced this recently. I went to visit a school to interview some school kids about this rise in externality for a radio programme that I made, and they were very alive to this distinction of internality and externality and it was very interesting how adept they were to coming up with excuses, for example, for not doing their homework. So I asked them what excuses they would give and they were just amazing with an incredible number of excuses at their fingertips, and it was all down to technology. They said the key in this is to blame the technology: the modem wasn't working, the printer wasn't working, the computer wasn't working. I found that really surprising because when I was doing homework, 20, 30 years ago, we didn't have computers, so we didn't realise that the key benefit of computers today is that it's a fantastic technology to be able to blame for not being able to hand in your homework. This just shows you how old I am. The favourite excuse we used to have in my time was we didn't hand the homework in because the dog had eaten the homework. They all looked at me very blankly when I gave them that excuse! What's very interesting about people today is they are very aware of this internal/external distinction, and they're very alive to it.

Does it come as a surprise to discover that your generation is dramatically more external than our generation is, or is that something you might have expected? When I put this to people at school, I usually am met with a certain outrage. One person, I think 15 years old, was very upset and said well of course research would show that because the research was done by adults! They were outraged at the notion that adults were ganging up on young people.

Now, let's think about what we can do about making people move back from being external towards being more internal, because being more internal in orientation is a much more desirable place to be psychologically. Basically, there are three key things you need to be able to do from a motivational standpoint in order to achieve your goals, and these are the three things that externals tend not to do and tend not to want to do. These are the three things that internals tend to unconsciously or consciously realise it's vital to do. Whatever goal you may set yourself, be it to do brilliantly at school or achieve a certain status in a certain profession, or to date a certain person or get on better with someone else, whatever goal you set yourself, particularly if it's a difficult goal, these are the three things you need to get right and you need to be doing in order to achieve your goal.

The first thing is what we call in my trade tracking. Tracking means you need to be plotting your progress towards the achievement of the goal, because it's highly unlikely whatever goal you may adopt that you'll be able to achieve it tomorrow or the day after. If it's a difficult goal, it may well be it's a goal you may hit as a target, maybe for example to get very good A Level results in a year or two's time. A classic error that externals tend to make is they don't like to track, and you need to track your progress, and that means measuring your progress and getting feedback on your progress, because only if you are tracking your progress and you're getting feedback on your progress can you alter your performance in the face of the feedback. Externals don't like to track because, amongst other things, externals don't like negative feedback, they don't like bad news about their performance, whereas internals and people who achieve their goals tend to be really interested in tracking, they're interested in feedback, and they're particularly interested in negative feedback. The word that is used in schools is testing, and I think testing is not a useful word. Tracking is a much better word. If you look at anyone who's achieved anything difficult in life, and let's take Kelly Holmes, the girl who won two gold medals in the last Olympics, you will notice that those people have been tracking their progress for years, and they know their performance running around the track to the last a hundredth of a second, and the fact is that they are gripped by getting feedback on performance. One of the reasons why people end up failing exams and are often surprised by failing exams is they've not been doing enough tracking, and they've not been paying attention to the tracking. So tracking, whatever your goal is a vital thing to do. If you want to lose weight, you've got to track your progress. That normally means weighing yourself every day, getting feedback on your performance, and only if you get feedback on your performance can you adjust your performance to improve it and ensure you finally hit your goal.

The second key thing you need to do is to be aware of resources. You'll probably need certain resources whatever goal it is you want to hit, be it losing weight, or doing well in exams. They may be physical resources: you may need a quiet study area, you may need access to nutritional, low calorie food if you're trying to lose weight, but there are probably also intellectual resources and emotional resources. You don't want to be too stressed, for example. It may be that you need enough time and space in which to study. One of the mistakes that externals make is they go about trying to hit their goal but they don't gather the resources first. They tend to gather them too late. So you've got to have a plan, and you've got to go about gathering the necessary resources, and that's the way you'll eventually hit your goal.

The final and most important thing to do is to be clear about your goal, and this is also something that externals are very unclear about. The classic reason why people don't hit their goals is because of a term we use in my trade called goal conflict. For example, if you're trying to lose weight and find that you're not losing weight, it's only because you're suffering from goal conflict. You have the goal of losing weight, but you also have the goal of having a nice time and enjoying the pleasurable sensation of eating food, and if you have those two goals, you're probably suffering from major goal conflict, and you're very unlikely to hit your goal.

I'm going to tell you about an exercise which illustrates this issue about being clear about your goals. One of the really interesting, perplexing issues at the heart of psychology is that people, particularly teenagers, are often very unclear about their goals, and just being clear about your goals is an extremely important step forward in order to achieve them. Now, this exercise may be helpful in terms of being clear about

goals, and it's called a goal clarification exercise. Basically, I ask you to tell me a little bit about your most perfect day. I give you a blank cheque, you could be anywhere in the world, be with anyone in the world, be it Michelle Pfeiffer or George Clooney, you can do anything, but the key point is this: I want to hear in as much detail as possible what you would do on your most perfect day. I don't want it just to be a good day, or a great day; I want it to be absolute perfection, so that at the end of the day, you would turn to whoever you would be with and say this has been the most perfect day of my life.

I don't normally tell people it's a goal clarification exercise because it works more powerfully if people don't realise that. I'll give you an example of how this exercise illustrates this issue of goal conflict. I had a client who came to me once, who was someone who was trying to be a novelist, and he kept starting novels but never being able to finish them. He must have started about 20 novels and never finished them, and yet he said he was very motivated and driven to be a novelist, so he was perplexed by why he was unable to finish his novels. I asked him to do the perfect exercise and tell me about his most perfect day, and here's his perfect day. On his perfect day, he wakes up on his own private Caribbean island in the tropics – and I want to emphasize again that the perfect day, it doesn't matter how bizarre or strange or unusual it is, the key thing is this is an exercise of imagination. So if on your perfect day, you'd spend it in Buckingham Palace with the Queen, then tell me about that. There really is no boundary – that's the key point about your perfect day.

When I ask a British person where they would like to wake up on their perfect day, they never want to wake up in Britain. I don't know what that says about this country, but people are always waking up on their perfect day somewhere abroad, often thousands of miles away, usually somewhere much warmer.

Anyway, so on his perfect day, he's waking up in the tropics on his own private island, and his own private villa, on the beach, and he's woken by the lapping of the waves on the beach, and bobbing gently on a pier by the private villa is his own sea-plane, because in his perfect day, he has a private pilot's licence. In your perfect day, you're allowed any skill or talent that you don't have at the moment. He gets in the sea-plane and he flies to a nearby island, where he has breakfast with the Spice Girls. I will now draw a veil over the ensuing events until we get to about lunchtime, where he scores the winning goal in a tensely fought World Cup final between England and Brazil in Rio de Janeiro, and he scores the winning goal for England in the closing seconds of the game, and of course he's lauded for the rest of the afternoon for having achieved this dramatic feat and he spends the night dancing the night away at a very exclusive New York nightclub, to which again he's been flown in his own private jet.

Now, if we try to deconstruct or analyse his perfect day, does it tell us why he can't finish books? Well, the perfect day is very interesting, isn't it, because there's nothing literary about this man's perfect day. He doesn't mention books once, we don't hear about any books in the villa, he doesn't meet anyone to discuss books, doesn't do any writing, doesn't do anything literary, and yet this is the day that's absolute perfection for him. What this day tells us is this is a man who wants to be wealthy, who wants to be famous, and actually he doesn't care that much how he gets there, but his goals are wealth and fame. The goal conflict that emerges from his perfect day is that he wanted to write books, but the goal conflict he had was one goal he had was to write fiction that was taken seriously by the literary establishment, but the other goal he had was to be wealthy and famous, and you can't usually become wealthy and famous writing books that are taken seriously in terms of the literary establishment, so he had massive goal conflict – either write pot boilers that are at the top of the bestseller list and make you wealthy and famous, or you write serious literature. Once the perfect day illuminated for him the goal conflict, and it illuminated what was really important to him, because in the perfect day he's not being taken seriously by literary figures, he's just being wealthy and famous, it became clear to him what his real goal was, and he went away, devoted himself to writing pot boilers, and now he has his own private island in the Caribbean.

The point is this: the people who have goals but don't achieve them are usually suffering from goal conflict; the people who have goals and they achieve them, particularly if they're really difficult goals, have eliminated goal conflict in their lives, and they've devoted themselves in the pursuit of the one or two

important goals. If you have too many goals, or you have goals that are in conflict with each other, it's highly unlikely you will achieve your goals, and that's a very important lesson when you're at school, where often you are beset by the possibilities of goal conflict.

An illustration of this comes from the fact that when you interview sportspeople who've done very well, people like Kelly Holmes or other people who've won gold medals in the Olympic Games, what you find is something very interesting: when you interview them after they've got the gold medal, they're usually very boring people, and they're boring because they have no goal conflict. They've actually devoted themselves to the achievement of the one goal, they've made massive sacrifices in their lives in terms of any other goals, like looking after their family, having a social life, and for that reason, they've often become very boring people, but they've become very powerful people because the elimination of goal conflict has released them powerfully to achieve their goals.

Basically, what I feel would be most useful psychologically, when people are at school, is to be aware of some of the issues that we've talked about, which is first of all, that you are brighter as a generation than previous generations, and it's very important to be aware of that and to use that intelligence wisely. Secondly, you are more extrovert, you are more socially confident, but that has dangers attached to it. One of the dangers is that you tend to value, for example, being popular, and it is a very dangerous thing for that to be very important to you, because it's popularity and peer pressure that often leads you to do things that may not be so helpful to you in the long run. It's often peer pressure that leads people, for example, to take drugs when that may not be so helpful to them. We know that there are rising levels of anxiety and neurosis, and it's very important to be able to be aware of that and to learn coping skills within which to deal with that. We know that there are rising levels of externality, and I've outlined some of the key things that would be helpful in terms of moving people from being more external towards being more internal.

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