

**MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION  
&  
EDUCATION**

**“EPICTETUS”**

**Axiological Cognitive Educational Strategies (ACES)**

**Maria Vassiliadou**

**Foreword by André Tylee**



**Educational Trust for Health Improvement through Cognitive Strategies**

**London**



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**Maria S. Vassiliadou**

**FOREWORD**

**André Tylee**

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MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND EDUCATION, “EPICTETUS”: Axiological Cognitive Educational Strategies (ACES)

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## Foreword

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2001b), mental health problems and health disorders related to stress are a frequent cause of death of young people. Suicide is among the 5 most frequent causes of death for young people aged from 15 to 24 years old. One out of four people of any age suffer from any type of mental disorder. Overall, there is a huge under-presentation to services and this is mainly due to lack of knowledge and erroneous beliefs about mental illness.

Aggression, violent or antisocial behaviour and abuse of addictive substances, often coexist with mild, moderate or severe mental disorder. Loss of working hours, decreased performance in daily occupation and detrimental impact on the quality of life are the results of insufficient use of mental health services or primary care services.

Acquisition of specific mental health skills by both non- psychiatric health professionals and the public is beneficial for the early recognition of mental problems as well as for the provision of appropriate supportive or therapeutic interventions.

Previous campaigns such as the Defeat Depression Campaign in the UK and Depression Awareness Recognition and Treatment of Depression (DART) in the United States have addressed public education, attempts to de-stigmatize illness and education for health professionals (Paykel et al, 1997). The Defeat Depression Campaign was considered successful in changing behaviour by a subgroup of British General Practitioners (Rix et al, 1999). However, a large

scale trial based on such campaigns failed to change GP behaviour (Thompson et al, 2000) and subsequently the emphasis in England recently has been on more androgogic methods such as Trailblazers (Tylee et al, 2004).

New educational programmes have recently been designed and implemented in Athens providing a platform to acquire and share knowledge. With the overall aim of empowering a wide range of multidisciplinary groups who are directly or indirectly involved in mental health (Vassiliadou et al, 2004; Vassiliadou, 2004). Such groups have included the medical, legal, police, military, teaching, and mass media professionals.

Mental health promotion and prevention concerning behavioural disorders and abuse of addictive substances are highly relevant in education (WHO, 2004a; WHO, 2004b).

Mental health promotion enables learners to develop skills which are protective and provide a type of stress immunization for future defense against life's problems. This is probably the most important type of Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Adolescence may be considered as the most important age for mental health promotion. This is a period of life when one has to build one's own identity, develop adaptation mechanisms, and to turn one's creativity towards health objectives.

This book by Dr Vassiliadou refers to skill development crucial for effective prevention of the onset of mental disorders, of the development of behaviour disorders or addiction to substances and alcohol. Skills are classified in three categories; the development of identity, of adaptation and of creativity.

The book describes common difficulties experienced by young people to develop necessary skills and strategies that may facilitate their evolution and maintenance. The methodology used is evidence based.

Development of skills regarding positive assessment of personality characteristics, creative management of life difficulties, and autonomy from any kind of harmful addictions is a basic precondition not only for the promotion of each individual's quality of life, but also for the achievement of healthy relations and of beneficial cooperation conditions among the members of a society and of societies themselves.

Increase of stress and depression levels in modern societies, contemporary social upheavals, antisocial behaviours and terrorist acts constitute some of the phenomena that directly or indirectly threaten life and undermine its quality. Development of proper skills that would help individuals, members of society, to get back their moral identity and reactivate their social and communication skills might provide a solution or become the beginning to a solution in the problem of social conflicts. It might also support individuals, societies and authorities in the most efficient management of any ills that currently menace humanity.

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## **Preface to the second edition**

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*«..I lamented over not having had the chance to become apprentice of any teacher able to teach me, instead of entertainment and composition, rather the path revealed by Socrates and Epictetus leading to blissfulness...»*

**(Adamantios Koraes, 1826)**

Suffering from antisocial behaviours as those related to either heteronomic or selfish attitudes is not a rare phenomenon in contemporary societies.

Antisocial behaviours undermine communication, and threaten quality of life or even actual survival.

Contemporary people seek their identity through communication. Communication is the vehicle and, at the same time, the aim of the means distributing information.

Such means have the capacity to either promote or alter the aims of communication.

The means distributing information are not limited merely to the mass media or to the realm of diplomatic or political negotiations. All individuals, members of societies, participate in the interchange of information, to the degree that they come in contact with the rest members of society.

According to Epictetus, humans have been created in possession of positive personality elements.

As he stated, God has provided each human being with autonomy and natural talents that make him reverent («αιδήμονα»), trustworthy («πιστόν»), upright («ουψηλόν»), undismayed («ακατάπληκτον»), unimpassioned («απαθή») and undisturbed («ατάραχον») (2, 8, 23; Long, 2002, p. 166)

The acquisition of capacities such as of “adaptation” and “creativity” constitute an essential prerequisite for the development of “sociability” and, therefore, for the development of healthy societies. If communication is to fulfill its aims, integrity of the means emitting and receiving information is sine qua non.

Peace and cooperation in contemporary societies demand integrity of the information interchange means.

In cases that, either the means emitting or the ones receiving and interpreting information do not function properly, misconceptions and disagreements may arise. Information is misapprehended and attributed interpretation may possibly mislead the receiver, who reacts according to the exegesis given to the information by him or herself. This latter notion is delivered by Epictetus in his phrase “It is not things that disturb people but beliefs (impressions) about things” (*«Ταράσσει τους ανθρώπους ου τα πράγματα, αλλά τα περί των πραγμάτων δόγματα»*) (Epictetus, Manual, 5, 1, 1).

The incessantly violent bursts of destructive behaviours targeting both the self and the others, such as of contemporary terrorist attacks, offer evidence for the inadequacy of the means interchanging information and, consequently, evidence for the distortion of the information transferred. Insufficient actions to manage natural disasters also constitute evidence for the inadequacy of information interchange and, thus, again, evidence for the distortion of the transferred information, for the inadequacy of communication and, consequently for the ineffective interchange of support.

Moreover, they offer evidence for a seemingly gradual abandonment of arrays of skills that would be able to increase sociability.

It may be suggested that promotion of positive qualities of human personalities is quite necessary for the prevention of such harmful behaviours as the above.

Healthy development of positive personality qualities reflects the need for promoting the skills of “identity”, “adaptation”, and “creativity”.

Accuracy and adequacy in transmitting information demands such transmission being realized in a way intelligible to its receptor or listener. It further demands both the ability and the intention of the receptor to actually accept the integrated information and to apprehend it with empathy as well with the least possible distortion.

Integrated emission and comprehension of information presuppose the development of skills related to:

- a. Mutual respect of both sender and receiver of information
- b. Appropriate function of the mechanisms of both sender and receiver to adapt.
- c. Empathy, inventiveness, and creativity of both sender and receiver during interchange of information

In the following pages evidence based methods for the development of healthy personalities are discussed.

The classification of various skills in all three parts of this book is followed by a description of the main difficulties or obstacles which might prevent their acquisition as well as by strategies necessary for overcoming obstructions.

In part I the notions of “self-concept” and of “self-esteem” are expressed in terms of their relation to the healthy development of “identity”.

Difficulties but also strategies facilitating achievement of self-esteem, of esteem for others and of self- and mutual respect are discussed.

In part II skills necessary for the development of “adaptation” capacities, such as of “communication skills” or skills for beneficially “coping with life difficulties” are also discussed.

Obstructions that might hinder adaptation process, as well the necessary strategies in order to achieve exploitation of experience are mentioned hereby.

In part III specific skills for the development of “creativity”, through the development of both positive personality qualities and of autonomy, are considered.

Difficulties are mentioned together with the ways to actualize the unfolding of creativity. Self-development and autonomy are seen as preconditions for the deployment of creativity.

Given that contemporary societies may offer to adolescents not only adaptation archetypes but, further, models which may prevent their healthy development, the importance of acquiring skills such as the above, appears to be constantly increasing.

The present book borrowed the name of Epictetus for its title for two reasons. First, because the contribution of Epictetus, in formulating principles for the acquisition of skills necessary for the healthy development of individuals and societies has been, since his time and still, a greatly significant subscription to structure efficient education models (Long, 2002). Second, because the name of Epictetus per se («Επίκτητος») etymologically refers to “acquisition” («επί+κτήση») or the “revival” of the skills and virtues that, according to the great philosopher, humans possess by nature (2, 10, 1-11; 2, 8, 23; 3, 3, 2).

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## **Introduction**

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## A. Defining the field

Mental health has been defined by WHO (2001) as *“a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”* (WHO, 2001a, p. 1)

The term “mental health” has been used in the past, and is still used today, as a euphemism for “mental illness”. Health professionals dealing with people suffering from mental disorders are also called “mental health professionals”.

According to K. Tudor (1999) both habitual definitions of mental health, either as the absence of mental illness or as a state of well-being, are reductive since *“to define something by the absence of its opposite is simply a semantic sleight of hand and to define it by substitution is procrastination”* (Tudor, 1999, p.21).

However, one of the characteristics of mental health that might be commonly accepted is its property to possess the capacity and at the same time the obligation to promote itself in order and so as to continue to exist as mental health. It seems also to be necessary that its definition does not include only distinct individuals but should be mainly conceptualized as a state of balance including the individual, others and the environment, so that promotion of mental health may be safely considered as an integral part of public health (WHO, 2004a; Thornicroft and Tansella, 1999). In other words, mental health promotion ought to be integrated in some particular policy in order to be effective, since *“mental health policy is an organized set of values, principles, and objectives for improving mental health and reducing the burden of mental disorders in a population”* (WHO, 2004, p. 49).

In view of the above, mental health may rather be considered as a gradually improving procedure of qualified living than a static condition or a restrictively and reductively defined state of being. Moreover, it could be supported that mental health promotion constitutes a constantly developing effort of humans and societies to redefine selves and others, as well to further improve their capacities of living well together and cooperating effectively.

Given that respective research is still in progress, questions regarding the definite determination of mental health constituents are still unanswered; a most possibly precise conceptualization of the notion of mental health per se may, subsequently, remain under further consideration.

One of the most important recommendations of the World Health Organization (2001) was education of the public on mental health issues, since it was supposed to be beneficial for both public health and the needs of each individual. Three years later it was reported that promotion of mental health as well as prevention of mental disorders, behavioral disorders and substance abuse had been found to be in a large extent related to education (WHO, 2004a; WHO, 2004b).

As a matter of course, training people from different professional environments on mental health issues has been considered as an essential part of the process towards the achievement of mental health promotion basic objectives (Sartorius, 1992). In addition, joint training of key social and community agents, such as of educators, priests, journalists, army and police officers, etc in essential issues of mental health, has been supported to be of a particular importance for the creation of a common language and thus for the achievement of essential goals of mental health promotion and of psychiatric prevention (Vassiliadou et al, 2004). Nevertheless, in order “an ethic of cultivation” (Thrift, 2004, p. 72) to be attempted, it can be suggested that the role of community sectors, such as the

ones mentioned above, has to be taken under consideration, if they are expected to help in engineering an ever progressing theoretical – practical knowledge, able to act in the crucial space and time through building a “politics of affect” (Thrift, 2004, p. 69), so as to simultaneously influence in a positive way humans’ engagements with the world (Thrift, 2004, p. 75)

As it has been shown, education in matters concerning modes of acquiring skills to normally develop a personality, to cope with difficulties of life as well as to increase creativity, contribute, to a major degree, to the achievement of objectives of Mental Health Promotion in adolescence, through the decrease of levels of psychopathology (WHO, 2004b, p. 20-21) as well the reduction of risk behaviours in schools (WHO, 2004b, p. 30).

Education may also benefit prevention of violence and anticipate the harm from addictive substances abuse (WHO, 2004a, p. 36). It has also been supported that education on mental health issues facilitates realization of the high prevalence of mental problems in adolescence and adulthood; consequently, it draws attention to the need of their early recognition and treatment (Greenberg and Kusche, 1998; Goldberg, 1998; Hawkins et al, 2002; Jenkins et al, 2001; Tobler and Stratton, 1997; Weare, 2000)

Despite the fact that relevant research is rather extended, it has not been definitively proven whether psychopathological conditions or even predisposition to mental disease constitute reasons for the decline of the above-mentioned skills or whether the lack of skills acts as a factor related causally to the onset of mental disorders.

However, it has indeed been proven that psychotherapeutic interventions aiming at the development of such skills have a rather satisfactory efficiency in dealing with a broad spectrum of mental disorders and problems (Dobson, 1989; Hollon and Beck, 1994; DeRubeis and Crits-Christoff, 1998). Developing such skills is

exactly the goal of interventions aiming at effective problem solving, creative thinking, developing social skills, etc. Nevertheless, therapeutic interventions targeting the shift from maladaptive beliefs, attitudes or behaviours, found as relating to the prevalence of certain mental disorders, have been shown to be an important factor to maintain and protect mental health (Clark and Beck, 1999).

Mental Health Promotion practices the following means in order to achieve its objectives:

A. Strengthening of the elements of personality that relate to the protection of mental health

B. Modification of factors that relate to the onset of mental diseases.

Education on mental health issues aims at strengthening and protecting mental health not only of the “mentally healthy” but also of “mentally ill” individuals. As it has been supported, promotion of adaptive mental defense mechanisms may create a kind of immunity or at least decrease vulnerability for the onset of a disease, either mental or physical (Quirk and Wapner, 1991; Taylor et al, 2000).

## **B. Mental Health Promotion, Education and Adolescence**

As it has been suggested, mental health promotion educational programmes should refer to the need for biological, psychological, social and ethical treatment of humans as persons and not as “recipients” of illnesses (Vassiliadou, 2004).

Contrary to habitual psychological perceptions dealing with humans as the victims of a mental disease and, as a result, having altered psychology into “victimology” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6), Positive Psychology has turned its attention on the healthy mental mechanisms that might protect people from the onset or the progression of mental problems (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Vaillant, 2000).

Education in mental health issues aims at developing and promoting such positive and adaptive characteristics and skills that humans possess by nature. It can, therefore, be supported that main objectives in adolescence are the healthy development of self-esteem and creativity, as well the promotion of adolescents’ social skills in order to creatively exploit their experiences and build up harmonious relations and co-operations within the society where they live and grow (WHO, 2004a, p. 36-39).

In view of the above, axiological cognitive educational model suggests that educational aims of Mental Health Promotion in adolescence may be summarized in the development of skills regarding the following fields:

- Identity
- Creativity
- Adaptability

The axiological model, in line with Positive Psychology, does not consider adolescence as a period of unresolved internal conflicts. Rather, it perceives this period as a challenge of a major importance for development, during which humans have the opportunity, even via the vehicle of dilemmas and revisions, to improve their natural skills and abilities (Vassiliadou, 1998).

### **C. Axiological Cognitive Model: An evidence-based approach**

The educational principles that this book introduces are not new. The choice, classification and description of the skills herein mentioned, as well as matters relating to their healthy and adaptive growth, derive from essential principles and evidence-based knowledge from the following three scientific fields:

- A. Mental Health Promotion
- B. Cognitive Therapeutic Model
- C. Positive Psychology

What is innovative is the combination of types of knowledge coming from the above- mentioned scientific fields so as to:

- A. Facilitate the most possibly accurate definition of each one of the proposed skills
- B. Comprehend the reasons that demand promotion and further development of the particular skills
- C. Present the obstacles that a person faces when trying to acquire each particular skill or promote or further develop it
- D. Exhibit the most adequate strategies that may facilitate individuals to acquire and develop the proper skills in order to maintain and promote mental health as well as to improve their quality of life.

According to recent announcements, evidence for the effectiveness of a wide range of mental health promotion programmes and policies has already been developed (WHO, 2004a, p.34-48) regarding, in particular, effective school-based interventions, that often serve as both mental health promotion and substance abuse prevention tools (WHO, 2004a, p.38-39).

Notwithstanding, some doubts have been expressed in the past regarding the possibility of accurate identification of model programmes and of the degree of their international implementation (Murray, 2001). Difficulties in the implementation of such programs have been considered to be probably due either to cultural differences or to programmes' adaptation (Hosman and Engels, 1999). Axiological cognitive model, afterwards, has incorporated only the evidence-based consultation principles deriving from the field of Cognitive Therapeutic Model, which it has turned into educational issues, based on the international mental health promotion directives of World Health Organization (WHO, 2001b; WHO, 2003; WHO, 2004a) and of professionals of Mental Health Promotion (Sartorius, 1988; Trent and Reed, 1994; Sartorius, 1998; Jenkins and Ustun, 1998; Tudor, 1999; Sartorius, 2003).

Various skills and strategies have been proposed, the acquisition and promotion of which has been suggested to facilitate the achievement of Mental Health Promotion basic objectives, regarding mainly maintenance and promotion of mental and physical health, as well the improvement of quality of life (Goldberg and Vassiliadou, 2003).

K. Tudor (1999) has considered the development of the following skills as essential for Mental Health Promotion: coping, stress management, self-concept, self-esteem, self-development, autonomy, change and social support (Tudor, 1999, p. 63).

According to the Cognitive Therapeutic Model usually negative perceptions, beliefs and attitudes regarding the ways people think about themselves, the world around them and their future ("self", "world", "future": the negative cognitive triad; Beck, 1976) may accompany various psychopathological conditions and become obstacles to their treatment. The variety of skills proposed from the field of Mental Health Promotion as well as their combination

to the elements of the cognitive triad (“self”, “world”, “future”), have facilitated classification and definition of the skills regarding identity, adaptation and creativity (Table 1), which are presented in the next chapters of the present book.

<b>Mental Health Promotion</b>	<b>Cognitive Model</b>	<b>Axiological Cognitive Model</b>
Self-concept, Self-esteem	Self	Identity
Coping, Social Support, Stress Management	World	Adaptation
Self-development, Autonomy, Change	Future	Creativity

Table 1

A basic principle of Positive Psychology is the awareness of the necessity of not only focusing on psychopathology matters but also on matters regarding investigation, recognition and description of the healthy constituent elements, the natural abilities and the capacities of the human personality (Buss, 2000; Carver et al, 1989; Kahneman et al 1999; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Taylor et al, 2000). Thus, it could be said that Positive Psychology is an important theoretic foundation to support the structures of Mental Health Promotion.

Positive and optimistic attitudes (Scheier and Carver, 1992), as well as certain psychological defense mechanisms or capacities, such as the subjective sense of well-being, happiness, self-determination (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and also altruism, suppression, anticipation, sublimation etc (Vaillant, 2000) constitute the core of the interests of Positive Psychology.

The axiological cognitive model follows the basic principles of Positive Psychology, and, mainly, the principle of focusing on the study and development

of the healthy characteristics of human personality. Based on this principle it suggests a list of positive characteristics (see part one, chapter I) that, according to the cognitive model, concern the person's identity ("self"), one's social skills ("world") and creative abilities ("future"), with the aim to facilitate a more adaptive and positive approach in the self-conceptualization process.

As it has been mentioned above, the axiological cognitive model aims at achieving most of the generally accepted aims of Mental Health Promotion, via the development of positive personality elements and of the skills described by Positive Psychology, according to evidence-based strategies deriving from the field of Cognitive Psychology. Thus, it can be proposed that the Axiological Cognitive model constitutes a "positive cognitive mental health promotion model".

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**PART ONE**

**IDENTITY**

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**PART ONE: IDENTITY**

**Chapter I**

**The definition of identity properties**

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## 1. The notion of self-concept

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**Ancient Greek wisdom has considered «γνώθι σαυτόν» (“gnothi safton” = “knowing thyself”) as an essential virtue for people claiming both the title of citizen and the right of voting or being voted for.**

In terms of Mental Health Promotion the substantial meaning of “self-concept” has been considered to be synonymous to an individual’s capability of evaluating one’s own abilities and limitations, with the minimum of distortions (Tudor, 1999). Evaluation of personality characteristics has been conceptualized as an infinite trial towards the acquisition of a sense of identity which may be produced during an endless effort of observing and comparing one’s own characteristics to a wide range of other people’s identity components within each particular historical and socio-cultural environment (Erikson, 1968; Stern 1985). Self-concept might, therefore, be considered as:

- A hypothetical construct of identity
- produced with the minimum of distortions
- consisting of a developmental continuum of experience
- influenced by a particular historical and socio-cultural environment

In terms of Axiological Anthropology individuals’ efforts towards the perception of one’s own unique personal characteristics such as abilities, desires or

temperaments might be benefited if oriented towards an account of positive characteristics (Table 2) that are potentially able to further develop as individuals grow and mature (Vassiliadou, 1998).

<b>Axiological self-evaluation</b>
<b>Terms</b>
A. Comparison between an individual's positive personality characteristics to those of the society where one lives in
B. Comparison between an individual's positive personality characteristics to some "ideally developed" properties, which are used as archetypes for the individual's psycho-social behaviour

(Table 2)

In other words, self-concept can be defined as the person's less possibly undistorted own evaluation of all the positive characteristics that every human personality possesses, thus, its own as well, to the degree that each one of these positive characteristics has already developed in the particular person's personality.

The degree to which each positive characteristic has developed should occur from its juxtaposition against a corresponding characteristic, deployed to the "ideal" degree, which will serve as a base for comparison.

Each "ideal" characteristic, either from the person's particular historical, social and cultural environment or from any other environment that might influence the person, may be used as a measure for comparison. The person will benefit from utilizing such an "ideal" measure for comparison if the following conditions are met:

- A. The measure for comparison has to be effortlessly acceptable by the person
- B. The reason why a particular characteristic or array of characteristics of personality is selected as such a measure for comparison, has to be easily understood by the person
- C. The measure for comparison should be selected on the criterion of the benefit that its use will bring about for the person



## **2. Impediments in self-awareness**

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### **A. Lack of adaptive comparison patterns and models**

### **B. Negative self-definition criteria**

### **A. Lack of adaptive comparison patterns and models**

It is well known that, rather than evaluating every single natural magnitude, such as velocity, weight and so on, it is quite essential to consider a standard pattern that is fixed by convention.

Comparing the element under consideration to this conventionally standard pattern would result to the evaluation of the particular magnitude.

In case that such a standard pattern did not exist a person wouldn't be able to make an unprejudiced judgment, even if one could gather together the complete and differentiated collection of all and any other available data needing consideration.

In comparison to natural magnitudes it seems to be much more difficult for personality properties or qualities to be assessed, since they are not considered as valid or even beneficial always and by all people.

Naturally, people face a lot of difficulties when trying to objectively assess their own characteristics. Each one has to decide one's own measures in order to be able to build one's identity and evaluate one's personal characteristics such as honesty, goodness, courage, faithfulness, generosity etc (Snodgrass and Thompson, 1997).

People often evaluate their daily acts and behaviours comparing them to patterns determined by the sociopolitical tradition of each particular society (Gellner, 1987). These patterns influence whoever accepts this particular tradition either consciously or unconsciously.

Such patterns or archetypes are often challenged in different cultural environments though usually new ones are alternatively acquired (Navia and Kelly, 1980).

Nowadays there is a "pattern crisis" in the multicultural societies mainly in the developed world. As a consequence, the disarray of evaluation models is getting worse (Brandt, 1998). Lack of archetypes has given rise to an increasing amount of difficulties in the development of self-awareness in humans.

There are cases that virtues such as honesty, forgiveness, philanthropy etc. are considered quite in reverse, as destroyable to one's efforts to achieve material goods or social support and power. As a result, many people try either to decrease or to hide such characteristics which they consider as negative (Horowitz, 1991).

## **B. Negative self-definition criteria**

Modern life is characterized by humans' efforts to perfect the image of their personalities in order to achieve social appreciation and therefore to improve their personal and professional status.

People often make the mistake to try to conceal non- perfection or the imperfections they believe they have, by not expressing their true thoughts and feelings (Conville, 1991).

For this reason the surface personality is, most of the times, the one that is communicated to the others since the authentic self avoids its disclosure and the risk of being evaluated as sensitive or weak and vulnerable. In order to shine and improve their surface traits of personality, people often lack their ability to promote their inner self (Adler and Rodman, 2003, p.204-205).

In other cases, when the effort to conceal "weaknesses" fails, then many try to vindicate the right "to be themselves" according to the popularized pseudo-psychological and over- simplified incitements of the type "be your self" or "follow your heart". In such cases, in order to avoid blame, individuals justify any existing maladaptive behaviour with the argument of the omnipotent dominance of the biological factor in the development of their personality (Pearson, 1993).

They try to convince that the power of genetic elements is capable of determining their behaviour and their emotional reactions in an inflexible and absolutely predetermined way, as if this were not possible to change, even only through learning.

In other words, they prefer, more or less consciously, to consider themselves as predetermined in biological terms, as an animal, and they neglect the important role of the impact of the environmental factors and of learning (Schwartz, 2000;

Abbott, 2001), since they believe that this way they shall manage to avoid possible negative consequences from responsibilities deriving from free will and autonomous choices.

All the more so, these people often try to further convince others that their defects are natural and biologically predetermined and, thus, these should be at least acceptable, if not objects of admiration, since they show the “difference” of the defective against the “regularity” of normal people (Hampson, 1995).

In their effort to promote their advantageous position versus the others they often either do not let others come close to them so as not to reveal their weaknesses, or they use borderline rationalizations preaching that many of their malfunctioning natural characteristics or properties are actually normal (Kunda, 1999).

Such ways make the individuals remote from realistic self-awareness.

Moreover, the excessive and uncontrolled expression of one’s maladaptive thoughts and feelings also prevents the effective estimation of oneself, since such behaviours may easily cause social de-appreciation (Beck et al., 1990).

### **3. Strategies for a beneficial self-definition**

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#### **A. Axiological consideration of available models**

#### **B. Evaluation of positive personality elements**

#### **A. Axiological consideration of available models**

**For a developmental conceptualization of the self to be achieved an axiological evaluation of the models against which the individuals compare their hypothetical abilities or weaknesses has been considered to be useful.**

Models or archetypes set by the social environment are not always suitable for a person's healthy development (Tesser, 1988), since in some cases they are utopian and destructive.

One has to examine not only the surface characteristics of whatever constructs each society promotes as models, but also such models' fundamental strength and tolerance parameters vis a vis the challenge to fulfill the individuals'

realistic needs by offering them a positive long term and effective behavioral template.

It is often quite difficult for a person to distinguish. As a consequence, one struggles for some kind of happiness that never confirms its name.

For this reason, humans, throughout their history, have always tried to construct and label various models as fixed standard patterns or archetypical constants in order to make them the measures to compare and assess each magnitude (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

In order to assess their abilities and weaknesses and decide whether a particular act or subtype of behaviour is beneficial or detrimental, humans made out of the historical figures the holy archetypes for religious people to follow, or the archetypical forms of living for people with a philosophical thought (Allport, 1961).

From time immemorial the mental civilization that people create can offer the aids that will help people evaluate beneficially the models set by each particular socio-cultural environment (Searle, 1995). This might be the main way, which can lead individuals to the radical rejection of harmful behaviours and their replacement by other more realistic and beneficial ones, not only for their own future but for next generations' as well.

## **B. Evaluation of positive personality elements**

**In order for the process of self-evaluation to be beneficial or the least traumatic for the individual, an inventory of positive personal characteristics may be necessary.**

The term “personal characteristics” refers to the combination of properties that predominate and characterize one’s personality.

These characteristics are the ones that are stronger than others and dominate over them.

The ancient Greek thought had considered each human personality to be composed of all kinds of characteristics that are common for all humans, since the difference among personalities had been considered to be located on the degree in which each person is characterized by one or another virtue or malice. The quantity of each component taking part in the personalities’ synthetic structure would, therefore, determine the quality of the synthesis (Inwood, 1999).

For example, if one’s philanthropic characteristics dominate over one’s misanthropic tensions it could be argued that this individual is philanthropic.

In terms of Axiological Anthropology, the quality of a personality depends on the degree that positive traits or virtues take part to its construction. It also depends on the balanced participation of all virtues, since overdevelopment of one against underdevelopment of others could be rather unbeneficial for the individual (Vassiliadou, 2005).

It is suggested that consideration of the degree in which one has developed one's positive characteristics could be proved to be much more productive and beneficial than the efforts towards hiding the negative ones or frivolously self-forgiving (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In order for individuals to be able to evaluate their potential abilities in a developmental and at the same time productive and beneficial way, two main strategies are proposed below:

- a) To test and retest their needs in terms of them being adaptive and realistic
- b) To positively define each characteristic as a potential ability to meet one's adaptive and realistic needs

Checking positivity of personality characteristics, or in other words the degree to which a person possesses each one positive characteristic, is considered as a very beneficial strategy (Larson, 2000), since humans have to decide and develop the sort of abilities that will enable them cope with difficulties and improve their quality of life.

Even when negative traits are detected, such as limitations, vulnerabilities or weaknesses, it has been proved to be beneficial for the individuals' promotion of mental health if they are enlightened by focusing on such traits' improvable properties.

The fact that humans are able to change their behaviour for their benefit, as well as to increase their abilities or reduce their weaknesses, is due to adaptation mechanisms (Vaillant, 2000) which construct the differences or set the limits between the human and other species.

According to fundamental principles of Axiological Anthropology all personality characteristics, such as abilities, particular temperaments or desires

have to be evaluated with regard to their improvable properties (Vassiliadou, 1998).

Aiming at the assessment and development of positive characteristics lessens the danger of overlooking important information referring to the most possible accurate definition of all the abilities and deficiencies that each human conveys (Diener, 2000).

Table 3 provides a list of essential positive traits in order to facilitate such evaluating processes. The proposed list has been elaborated on the basis of literature from the field of Positive Psychology, combined with data from the Cognitive therapeutic model concerning the so called Cognitive triad: “Self, World, Future” (Beck, 1976).

**PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS**

<b>Self</b>
1. Emotionally stable
2. Responsible
3. Original
4. Inventive
5. Calm
6. Tolerant
7. Feeling easily rewarded
8. Feeling easily satisfied
9. Forceful, energetic
10. Able to set limits
11. Able to balance needs
12. Able to hierarchically prioritize values
13. Flexible
14. Adaptive
15. Perceptive

Table 3a

<b>World</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Persuasive</li><li>2. Sincere</li><li>3. Enjoying leadership</li><li>4. Independent, non prone to addictions</li><li>5. Affectionate</li><li>6. Sympathetic (warm, kind, friendly)</li><li>7. Empathetic, understanding</li><li>8. Protective</li><li>9. Good listener</li><li>10. Communicative</li><li>11. Co-operative</li><li>12. Forgiving</li><li>13. Thankful</li><li>14. Non taking advantage of others</li><li>15. Able to discover positive aspects</li></ol>

Table 3b

<b>Future</b>
1. Decisive
2. Risk taking (productive, beneficial, discerning non harmful risks)
3. Open to stimuli
4. Open to novelty
5. Steady
6. Tireless
7. Able to organize things
8. Imaginative
9. Able to plan practical steps
10. Resistive
11. Hopeful
12. Creative
13. Patient
14. Courageous
15. Able to set plans, aims and goals in a hierarchy

Table 3c

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**PART ONE: IDENTITY**

**Chapter II**

**The improvement of identity properties**

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## 1. The notion of self-esteem

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**The notion of “self-esteem” has been considered to be synonymous to a “balanced weighing” of personal traits, since underestimation or overestimation of one’s own personality characteristics may be dangerous or even fatal for one’s mental health status.**

Self-esteem is neither factual nor self-evident; it is rather the outcome of a constant effort for self-improvement. Its most important features seem to be a constant intention for self-improvement followed by a sense of completeness and satisfaction (McKay and Fanning, 2000) deriving from the awareness of the progressively more effective skills stemming from the individual’s ceaseless efforts towards fulfilling one’s own substantial needs and aims (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

It can be argued that a balanced and least distorted consideration of one’s efforts towards self-improvement is an essential prerequisite for the development of one’s healthy self-estimation skills (Table 4), since a permanent and unaffected self-esteem might be considered as a narcissistic obsession rather than as an adaptive process towards further developing of personal qualities.

<b>Improving the self-esteem process</b>
<p><u>Steps</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Definition of one's less or more positive personality traits</li> <li>2. Comparison of the sum of positive against the sum of negative (less positive) personality traits</li> <li>3. Evaluation of the intention of oneself to improve one's own less positive personality traits</li> </ol> <p><u>Prerequisites</u></p> <p>Awareness of the positive traits of others</p> <p>Awareness of the fact that all personal traits are potentially positive and may turn to be adaptive, in case that one strives for self-improvement</p>

Table 4

In terms of Axiological Anthropology, one has to manage to acquire self-esteem throughout one's self-improvement (Table 5) without taking it for granted, without acquiring it effortlessly, or without trading upon it (Vassiliadou, 1998).

<b>Axiological self-improvement</b>
<p><u>Prerequisite</u></p> <p>Focusing on an indefinite further augmentation of positive characteristics</p> <p><u>Limitation</u></p> <p>Awareness of the fact that negative characteristics do not really exist, since they rather reflect the decrease or the lack of the positive ones</p>

(Table 5)

## **2. Impediments in the self-improving process**

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### **A. Difficulties regarding the “Being”**

### **B. Difficulties regarding the “Having”**

**Basic difficulties in achieving a balanced and realistic self-esteem are mainly related to the existence of maladaptive schemas on which an individual bases comprehension of one’s own personal characteristics as well their comparison to the characteristics of others.**

A first step for people to evaluate their personal characteristics is to compare them to analogous characteristics of others whom the individual has considered as “successful in life”. This may help individuals realize, as objectively as possible, which traits of their own character will make it easier for them to achieve their tasks (Massimini and Delle Fave, 2000).

They could, then, mark these characteristics as positive and label them as “abilities”. This way, one could also discover the characteristics that prevent him

or her from succeeding in one's objectives and list them as "drawbacks" and "weaknesses".

Struggling for acknowledgment, some people weigh up their abilities, more or less consciously, often showing off their hypothetical advantages and abilities in a negative manner, aiming at obtaining superiority through underestimation of the capacities of others. Underestimation of the capacities of others is often found to be in step with the unbalanced evaluation of a person's own abilities (Blackburn and Eunson, 1989). Examples of negative expression of abilities are narcissism, reactionary or dominating attitude, antisocial behaviour and so on.

Other difficulties in achieving and improving a realistic self-esteem are related to the existence of malfunctioning interpretive schemas on which the person bases comprehension of the self as well one's own self-valuation.

Such interpretive schemas regard mainly the "being", in other words, the very essence of human nature, or the "having", namely the superficial properties of "being" that relate to the sentiment of adequacy of the person vis a vis the possession of goods.

## **A. Difficulties regarding the “Being”**

### **i. Inflexible estimation of personality characteristics**

#### **ii. Perfectionism**

### **i. Inflexible estimation of personality characteristics**

Adaptive estimation of personality properties that concern the “being” is often disturbed by polarized (McKay and Fanning, 2000, p.64) or malfunctioning beliefs such as the ones mentioned below (Table 6).

<b>BEING</b>
<p><b>Beliefs that are related to a maladaptive perception of self</b></p> <p>Examples</p> <p><i>«Man is born, not made»</i></p> <p><i>«I shall either be perfect or nothing»</i></p>

Table 6

Being biased by such beliefs people may be convinced either that “*man is born and not made*”, or that “*one has to stop trying for improvement, if one is not sure that is able to achieve perfection*”.

In both cases people may estimate their personality characteristics in an inflexible way, since they believe that improvement is either impossible or not worthy if it does not lead to perfection (Sperry, 1999, p. 171).

## ii. Perfectionism

Cognitive psychotherapeutic model assumes that feelings of disappointment may follow every fault or failure in case they are considered as evidential for one's own deficiency or lack of essential abilities (Beck et al, 1990, p. 314-317).

Moreover, it is obvious that disappointment may crucially increase if the individual is convinced that is not able to improve one's personality properties which considers as causally related to one's deficiency of capabilities.

In terms of Axiological Anthropology, both perfectionism and non productive, or inflexible, self-evaluation constitute crucial handicaps that prevent self-improvement which has been considered to be a basic prerequisite for the achievement of self-esteem (Vassiliadou, 2005).

Realizing and accepting the fact that the developmental process towards self-improvement may start with efforts to handle weaknesses and disadvantages, is a prerequisite in order for each individual's self-improvement to be achieved. Some times though, this natural requirement rather than being a stimulus towards productive moves and changes it becomes an obstacle to a person's development. This happens when individuals either underestimate their positive personality qualities or overrate their weaknesses and consider them to be much more numerous or more powerful and robust than they really are (Clark and Beck, 1999, p. 90).

Underestimating personality properties or even abilities is often related to:

- The self-dispute of a person's will to improve one's positive traits
- The immobilization of a person who becomes inert due to the belief that he or she is not "perfect", thus offering an excuse to be counterproductive

In both cases, the person has to decide between productive mobilization and harmful passive immobility.

In cases of psychological immobilization people suffer from negative feelings that are often related to psychopathological conditions such as depression, obsessive compulsive traits, narcissistic traits, etc (Young et al, 2003).

Underestimating one's personal abilities is often connected with overrating other people's abilities.

An individual may envy, blame others or make negative predictions about one's own future, such as that he or she will never manage to get whatever one wishes or that he or she will always be unhappy (Abramson et al, 1989). As a result, these individuals may develop a self-destructive mood and behaviour.

In case that an individual believes that one's own weaknesses are excessive then one has to decide to opt for one of the next two choices:

- a. To productively exploit one's feeling of displeasure that comes from the assumption of having many weaknesses and to try to improve respective abilities
- b. To let oneself to the unpleasant feeling induced by the sense of self-deficiency and resign from every effort for self-improvement

In the first case the person keeps track of other people's acts and behaviour, maintaining a good mood and a spirit of apprenticeship and tries to exploit, as better as possible, one's physical ability for improvement that he or she, just like everyone else, has at disposal (Vaillant, 1999). This way, one replaces one's weaknesses and turns them into abilities to fulfil needs or achieve goals.

In the second case, instead, one avoids offering oneself the chance to improve his or her natural abilities and self-esteem that might derive from noticing the

actual amelioration of skills gained from his or her attempts. On the contrary, they continue to consider one's weaknesses as insurmountable obstacles that prevent one from obtaining objectives; thus they get easily tired and sometimes come to an emotional standstill and become miserable (Sternberg, 1999).

As it has been already mentioned, people often avoid realization and acceptance of the fact that they are not perfect. As far as human sciences are concerned, such perfection is unfeasible (Beck et al, 1990).

Such people often consider that they themselves are responsible only for the achievement of their goals, since they blame other people, or God, or fortune in case of a failure.

They also judge their acts with leniency believing that their intention is never bad even in case they harm others. They are sure that their own behaviour is the outcome of a specific situation, while they consider other people's actions as a result of bad motives, bad intention or disrupted personality traits (Stangl et al, 1985). In fact, these people usually do not easily learn from experience and remain immature for years, suspicious of others and isolated even when they are surrounded by a number of acquaintances (Raskin and Novacek, 1989).

They also face communication problems and often their empathy and understanding for other people's problems is only superficial (Beck et al., 1990, p. 243-244).

Life usually belies their faith in perfection, points out their faults and weaknesses and, as a result, they feel trapped in a blind alley.



**B. Difficulties regarding the “Having”**

- i. Struggling to fulfill pseudo-needs**
- ii. Basing self-esteem on “having”**

**i. Struggling to fulfil pseudo-needs**

Human beings have the ability to adjust to the constantly changing environmental conditions. This ability is based on specific mechanisms that enable humans to recognize the needs which are essential for their survival such as for food, water, rest, etc.

The organism is informed almost simultaneously about its needs and its abilities to satisfy them.

Additionally, human mind is informed, more or less consciously, about the whole organism's abilities or weaknesses to cope with adverse conditions that threaten its existence, such as shortage of food, variation of temperatures, or appearance of enemies and so on.

The information process mechanisms, that all living creatures have, are more developed and sensitive in humans, so as to enable them to recognize, define and further develop their personal abilities regarding the fulfillment of their needs for survival and well-being.

Information process is affected by notions, faiths and beliefs of the social environment in which the person lives and grows up (Vaillant, 1992).

Valuation of personal needs concerning "having" is particularly affected by social requirements in order for an individual to be accepted as able to fulfil personal, social or professional expectations. Beliefs that built the requirements of each social environment are formed gradually by the interaction of concepts among people, who compose the framework of society (Bandura, 1986; Massimini and Delle Fave, 2000).

Promotion of mental health refers to the improvement of personality properties which concern the fulfillment of humans' bio- psycho- social needs (Maccoby, 1988). Therefore, one has firstly to account, as precisely as possible, one's own realistic needs in order to secondly value one's potential capacities to meet these needs.

In various cases, people try to find alternatives in order to satisfy their realistic needs. Striving for power or beauty for example, may substitute or hide other, more realistic needs such as the needs for self-development, or for the development of sociability and creativity skills.

In the short term a number of such substituted needs seem easier to satisfy than the realistic ones.

In reality, these substitutes do not offer the promised feelings of safety, and fulfillment (Buss, 2000), since their results do not last for long. As it often happens in modern societies, pseudo- needs arise daily, and compel humans to criticize themselves if they can not meet them.

Moreover, even if one succeeds to meet them, it is so quickly that these needs give their place to other needs, or that new ones arise along with the latter, that individuals stick to chimerical striving, though suffering at the same time, since they can not overcome this deleterious conceit.

In these cases, individuals face the risk of disappointment or de-appreciation or even blaming by others and themselves alike and may more or less consciously develop self-harmful behaviours (Navarro, 1986).

## **ii. Basing self-esteem on “having”**

Usually there is a connection between underestimating oneself and basing one's self-estimation on requirements for “having”, as these are established by a particular social environment (McKay and Fanning, 2000), in cases that the models of “having” are demanding, chimerical and maladaptive (Table 7).

<b>HAVING</b>
<p><b>Maladaptive threshold of an adequacy sentiment in relation to possession of goods</b></p> <p><i>«I shall either have whatever I want or I want nothing at all»</i></p> <p><i>«There are people who have everything»</i></p>

Table 7

In cases that pseudo- needs concerning “having” are established as leading to well- being, individuals become confused, since they can not feel satisfied even when most of these needs have been fulfilled (McKenzie et al, 2002)

Life offers to individuals, even this way, the chance to re-examine their motives carefully, so that they may find out ways and develop their abilities to meet their real needs efficiently (Marmot, 1998).

### **3. Strategies for a beneficial self-estimation**

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#### **A. Axiological improvement of identity properties**

#### **B. Creative self-criticism**

#### **A. Axiological improvement of identity properties**

**Axiological estimation of personal characteristics presupposes assessment not only of the abilities that one allegedly possesses but, mainly, evaluation of one's own efforts for further improvement of existing abilities and for simultaneous diminishment of weaknesses.**

As it has already been mentioned self-evaluation may be facilitated if personal characteristics are productively compared to other people's analogous qualities.

Such a productive comparison depends on the person's "will" to:

- Listen to others with patience
- Be empathic in order to fathom the meaning of the data, which are revealed through one's contact with others.
- Judge with leniency whatever he or she considers as negative.
- Accept all others' characteristics that he or she judges as positive without feelings of competitiveness or jealousy, but in a spirit of courage and love.
- Be aware that he or she is also endowed by nature to develop abilities in order to achieve his or her own goals.

A productive consideration of abilities, with the aim to actually promote advantages and not merely display their superficial, thus, infertile manifestation (Table 8) is considered to be a basic strategy in the process of self-esteem improvement (Wilkinson, 1996).

### **Axiological self-estimation**

<b>Steps</b>
Estimation of efforts to develop or improve actual abilities rather than evaluating hypothetical abilities themselves Assessment of abilities required for the fulfillment of well defined needs Effective combination of abilities Acceptance of the principle of "discernment" (promotion rather than manifestation of skills)

Table 8

## B. Creative self-criticism

In promoting a healthy self-esteem, creative self-criticism is necessary simultaneously with a decision for controlling or diminishing weaknesses as well as for improving abilities and virtues (Table 9).

### Creative self-criticism

<b>Terms</b>
<p>It has to be simultaneous to the decision to control and diminish weaknesses</p> <p>Requires the improvement of abilities or virtues such as courage, patience, love, modesty, clemency, etc</p> <p>Demands an infinite effort for self-improvement</p>

Table 9

Creative self-criticism is a precondition for individuals to manage an effective and beneficial prevention or administration of the unpleasant emotions that might arise from any frustration or failure (Haselton and Buss, 2000).

This means that in order to discover the most beneficial way to adapt along with maintaining their psycho emotional stability, individuals have to improve the way they perceive life problems and the way they deal with them, and further on to draw attention on their own reactions and judge them (Table 10).

Recruiting and exploiting basic mental functions (perception, judgment, and memory) is necessary in order to achieve a creative and, at the same time, most

possibly realistic self-esteem. Such adaptive self-esteem shall be in a position to produce a positive sense of self for the person, on the condition that it is assessed and re-assessed or judged in a critical way (Bennett-Levy et al, 2004).

**Adaptive, realistic and beneficial perception of self**

Fundamental principles
<p><u>The understanding of the fact that there is no one person without weaknesses, or drawbacks.</u> During life time every one might face moments of dishonor deriving from one's debilities, so that one would probably prefer to remain in secrecy and unknown to others. Everyone though is capable to increase his or her self-esteem through changing drawbacks into advantages</p>
<p><u>The understanding of the fact that there is no person who has never felt pain, disdain or failure.</u> Everyone, though, has the ability to cope with difficulties in a productive manner and manage to turn even the biggest damage to advantage</p>
<p><u>The understanding of the fact that everyone has the right to dream and be optimistic about the future</u> especially in cases that he or she has trained oneself in being creative and able to overcome difficulties in life and has consciously accepted that, like everyone else, he or she alike is able to improve oneself, in the ways mentioned above.</p>

Table 10

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**PART TWO**

**ADAPTATION**

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**PART TWO: ADAPTATION**

**Chapter III**

**Exploitation of experience deriving from life difficulties**

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## **1. The notion of coping**

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**In terms of Mental Health Promotion, coping refers to the abilities of humans to manage life difficulties in an effective way and use outcoming experience for coping with future similar or more complex conditions (Tudor, 1999).**

**In terms of Axiological Anthropology coping refers to the creative exploitation of experiences deriving from life difficulties which may be used as aids to help individuals develop beneficial strategies in order to achieve a kind of mental immunity for future problems (Vassiliadou, 1998).**

Every day people come in contact with a number of stimuli deriving from their external natural or social environment as well as from their internal body environment. In other words, through an enormous number of stimuli humans are provided with information about both, environmental circumstances or events which they have to face and about the functional level of their own

defense mechanisms (Cramer, 1991) necessary for developing beneficial coping strategies.

The information that people receive from stimuli is more or less consciously elaborated in order to provide knowledge concerning possible consequences for one's survival or quality of life.

Each individual reacts in a unique, special way to the stimuli deriving from the environment (Sandler and Freud, 1985; Vaillant, 1992). Individuals' psycho-emotional reactions and behaviours mostly depend on a combination of bio-psycho- social factors (Table 11).

It is therefore self-evident that humans' choices, as deriving not only from interactions among genetic and environmental factors but also from the way people use to interpret reality, are susceptible to alterations through learning.

In case of an emergency, autonomous biochemical changes stimulate human body enabling it, almost directly, to react: either to fight in defense or flight in escape (Cannon, 1932). Individual's sense of fear or anguish, in these cases, shows how such stimuli have been interpreted or appraised, since at the same time this appraisal has given rise to the biochemical changes which take place at the level of autonomous reactions (Joseph, 1996).

These reactions are beneficial, as long as they help people in overcoming dangers effectively.

On the contrary, if reactions are excessive and at once ineffective, they may cause distress and instead of helping they may prevent many of basic daily activities (Selye, 1974; Lazarus, 1991; Clark and Beck, 1999).

Stressful reactions might even menace survival since they often weaken humans' natural abilities to cope or even disorient them from real dangers, drawing attention on possibly fictitious or unrealistic threats.

<b>Factors influencing psycho - emotional reactions</b>
Individual's genetic predisposition
Environmental influences / effects
Individual's perceptions of reality

Table 11

As long as perceptions are realistic and able to promote humans' natural mechanisms of adaptation, people manage to enjoy everyday life as well as to face life difficulties more efficiently.

The phenomenon of life could, therefore, be considered either as a ceaseless struggle or as a creative challenge for the maintenance of humans' bio-emotional balance.

In view of the above, coping might be defined either as an adaptive mechanism promoting life and its quality, or as a psycho-immunity function which is able not only to protect oneself from current life events and threats but also to arm oneself with weapons for efficiently defending one's own self against future problems.



## **2. Impediments in managing life problems**

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### **A. Immature appraisal of problems**

### **B. Maladaptive defense mechanisms**

### **A. Immature appraisal of problems**

According to Behavioral and Cognitive theoretical models, non-realistic or maladaptive beliefs conduce to stressful appraisals of various stimuli and hence to pathological reactions, such as phobias and distress. It has been considered that such negative thoughts, beliefs or “cognitions” concern mainly the three topics “self”, “world” and “future” of the so called “negative cognitive triad” (Beck, 1976).

There is evidence that such perceptions, biased beliefs and convictions instead of promoting rather hinder natural abilities of individuals to adapt. Since they are

related to a corresponding negative perception of reality they constitute an important factor of vulnerability for the development of psychopathology (Clark and Beck, 1999).

According to the theoretical model of Axiological Anthropology, unrealistic conceptions of individuals may be causally related to the decrease of their self-supportive abilities (Table 12). It has been supported that any decrease of such important psycho-immunity functions (Vassiliadou, 1998) may lead to a vicious circle of mutual transference between the decrease of self-supportive abilities and the development of negative attitudes related to psychopathology.

<b>Maladaptive beliefs related to decreased self-supportive abilities</b>
Unrealistic expectations for a life without dangers Maladaptive conviction that events can be avoided if one is always on the alert Overrating negative consequences of a danger or a risk Underestimating human's natural abilities to manage risks

Table 12

According to fundamental principles of Mental Health Promotion, further development of natural abilities of humans to dealing with life problems may act protectively against any type of stressful stimuli and may help maintain mental balance and health (Badura and Kickbush, 1991). It is self-evident that impediment of natural adaptive abilities may bring about completely opposite results.

Research has shown that the troubles of people suffering of some kind of strain in coping with life difficulties are related to a major degree to the maladaptive cognitive schemas (Dattilio and Freeman, 2000) that individuals, more or less consciously, use as the basis to interpret the various problems of life and their consequences (see examples, Table 13).

<b>Maladaptive interpretative schemas</b>
Examples
<i>«There are situations that one can no way cope with»</i> <i>«Our problems gradually pile up and finally kill us»</i> <i>«Being adaptive in life equals to being defeated»</i>

Table 13



## **B. Maladaptive defense mechanisms**

Excessive zeal for obtaining extreme safety measures for self-protection is usually dangerous and leads to failure and disenchantment.

Individuals who waste much of their time in obtaining magnified measures for self-protection are usually addicted to a ceaseless state of alertness considering that this way they shall realize a possible risk promptly.

Excessive striving for self-protection is often relevant to the utopian conviction that there are ways which can ensure absolute protection (DeLongis et al, 1988) that life “is bound” to provide.

Obviously, this continuous state of alert causes problems to the individuals’ personal and social life.

Whoever suffers seems to be rather frightened, acting in an excessive and often unfruitful way (Beck and Emery, 2005, p. 76-77). He or she usually tries in vain to avoid the reason of his or her own anxiety (Block and Block, 1980). Some times one becomes dependent on others who are considered as able to help one’s overcoming fears and anguishes.

As far as the human body is concerned, excessive and chronic stress has been found to be related to a wide number of physical diseases. Biological mechanisms of control remain on alert state with effects on health, since the slightest stimulus may cause functional and biochemical disturbance in case it is considered to be relevant to the individual’s subject of phobias or anguish (Asmundson, 1999).



### **3. Strategies for a beneficial exploitation of experience**

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#### **A. Realistic conceptualization of problems**

#### **B. Promotion of innate coping abilities**

#### **A. Realistic conceptualization of problems**

Accepting the fact that there is no living without dangers and that it is impossible for any human to assure absolutely safe life conditions is a basic prerequisite in order for people to move away from utopian expectations and become strengthened in overcoming life difficulties (Salkovskis, 1996).

According to Mental Health Promotion relevant literature previous thoughts, beliefs or life attitudes which do not favour healthy reactions to life problems would better be gradually replaced by more realistic and effective ones, able to promote health and ensure the higher possible quality of life (Tudor, 1999; Tylee, 1999).

As a matter of course, man's reaction to a stimulus is directly determined by the way one has perceived it, that is, whether one has previously evaluated similar stimuli as desirable, unpleasant, avoidable or indifferent.

Conceptual processing is a complex mental function, aiming at the valuation of various stimuli and their classification as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

As mentioned above, deceptive conceptions are often due to a person's maladaptive thoughts or attitudes, such as refusal to cope with difficulties, or utopian striving for a complete feeling of certainty about the future and so on.

It has been supported, indeed, that the way in which various real facts are perceived affect man's psycho- emotional and behavioral reactions and determine the way in which the same or similar facts will be perceived in the future (Lazarus, 1999, p.97). As a consequence, these kinds of thoughts lead someone to exaggerate in managing whatever one thinks as being risky.

Further, such thoughts may contribute to broaden the spectrum of facts and conditions that the individual considers as dangerous.

Exploitation of an adaptive conceptual function presupposes its healthy development, which is feasible after recovering from maladaptive cognitive schemas concerning the self, the world and the future which are often being perceived erroneously as prerequisites for happiness (Table 14).

<b>Set of utopian prerequisites for the achievement and maintenance of happiness</b>
Being perfect and healthy for ever
Gaining and for ever keeping as many material goods as one might have wished
Dominating upon others for ever
Achieving infinite guarantee that everything one might have ever wished will be fulfilled in the future

Table 14

It may, therefore, be suggested that the more undistorted experience may be retained in individuals' memory, concerning their already developed abilities to solve problems, the more this experience could improve individuals' future responses to relevant problems.

Besides, humans should retain in their memory any wrong choices due to which they have failed to solve problems in the past, since the function of memory, when it is used properly, offers important help in confronting future problems (Williams, 1996).

It is quite beneficial for individuals to train their memory in retaining data that promote problem solving such as patience, courage or other efficient attitudes, even during the course of potentially very hurtful events (Hawton and Kirk, 2000).

Replacing maladaptive thoughts and attitudes by adopting positive ways of interpreting life conditions has been considered to be favoured by the following:

- Trying out new positive interpretations of events as well of alternative coping strategies (Bennett-Levy, 2004)
- Turning one's attention onto other people's coping strategies when facing dangers similar to the ones the person tries to avoid
- Realistic acceptance that something really dangerous rarely happens (Abueg et al, 2000), in comparison to the huge number of times that people are actually exposed to the so called danger (for example, while using the elevator, or other "closed" spaces that some people are afraid of)
- Realistic acceptance that there is no chance that all actual dangers that a person faces in life may totally disappear

- Realistic acceptance of the fact that fear itself and excessive anguish may increase crucially the negative consequences of a threat

## **B. Promotion of innate coping abilities**

Creative exploitation of experience deriving from life difficulties as well as the development of all potential abilities following a healthy conceptualization of reality is very important for facing most life problems effectively (Rouf et al, 2004).

Individuals develop specific techniques and strategies, based in one's own experience, in order to deal beneficially with life difficulties or traumatic events. Such skills have been considered to be the main components of the notion of coping.

R. Lazarus (1999) has considered two main co-related classes of coping techniques. The first one focuses on finding out an immediate solution to the problem per se (problem focused coping) and the second on getting released from embarrassing emotions deriving from the problem's appraisal (emotion focused coping). He suggested that the two types of coping may be used at the same time in order to help individuals react effectively (Lazarus, 1999, p. 123-124).

In line with the above, strategies for a productive exploitation of experience would focus on effective coping, considering the latter to be mainly based on the beneficial management of each life difficulty per se (Table 15), on a realistic investigation of events' consequences (Table 16), as well as on a creative committing to the memory of one's own effective coping strategies having been used in the past.

<b>Basic principles to beneficially manage difficulties</b>
<p>Realistic conceptualization of relating factors as well as of conditions under which a particular difficulty or problem has arisen</p> <p>Realistic assessment of possibilities for a problem to occur again after concluding necessary efforts to change conditions under which the problem arose</p> <p>Locating and recording of the “concealed benefit” that probably springs out from a problem or difficulty</p>

Table 15

<b>Realistic control of the consequences of a problem</b>
<p>Investigating the real cost and consequences of each life event without “overgeneralization” errors</p> <p>Controlling the consequences of the critique coming from the “important others” in times of devaluation</p> <p>Assessing cost- benefit ratio in order to decide a just and beneficial “decision making” in cases of failure</p>

Table 16

Next, the ability of self-control has been found to be one of the basic prerequisites of adaptation and, thus, of coping (Kanfer and Karoly, 1972).

Self-control weakens either because of one's egocentric refusal to decrease faults and therefore to improve positive personality properties or because of one's chimerical refusal to face pains and risks. Such negative or avoidant behaviours may lead individuals to distortions in conceptualization of reality as well to a risky reduction of their primary mental abilities (Meichenbaum, 1977).

The ability of self-control enables humans to double-check daily problems and their solutions, so that both "emotional" and "problem" focused coping may rather be prevented from becoming extreme, and that fruitful impulsive reactions turn to be as safe and beneficial as possible (Dobson, 2003, p. 175-184).

For example, in cases of bereavement creative exploitation of experience refers mainly to the development of individuals' abilities to adjust, thus, to prevent, as much as possible, probable disturbances of adaptation or any other mental or psychological problems that might get triggered by the intense excitements that follow mourning. Thus, the aim of the strategies that could be proposed for a creative management of feelings deriving from an event of bereavement (Table 17) is not to get rid of the normal emotions of grief (Breckenridge et al, 1986) but mainly to increase self-control abilities.

### **Creative management of bereavement**

- Taking responsibility to help others to cope with bereavement
- Accepting the reality that death is for all and may happen to any one in one's environment, even at the very next moment
- Accepting the principle of uncertainty in life
- Becoming aware of the fact that nature equips humans with surmounting capacities, either directly at the gene level or indirectly at the education level, even in the case of the hardest events
- Paying efforts to approach and accept the possible "desire" of the "absent other" with respect and dignity rather than pity

#### Note

Coping with bereavement is a different process for different persons. For individuals that cannot manage to cope and are vulnerable to developing an adaptation syndrome or, even worse, to the expression of a fixation for suicide, the option is a pharmaceutical treatment along with simultaneous follow up, protection and support.

(DeVries and Gallacher-Thompson, 2000, p.196-216)

Table 17

Strategies for a creative exploitation of experience that derives from cases of loss and failure (emotional, social or professional) are presented below (Tables 18, 19), in order to show that the common denominator of both is the demand for self-control to increase and act beneficially for an effective management of such potentially traumatic events (Rokke and Rehm, 2003).

### **Strategies for creative coping with loss**

- Activating natural creativity mechanisms in order to achieve a new objective or a new source of interest
- Recognizing the possible benefit that may arise out from the changes of the conditions that loss creates
- Assessing the benefit arising from the creative coping with loss
- Recognizing the value of exercising in finding creative “alternative” solutions
- Realistically accepting the principal “never forever”, which refers to the awareness that basing one’s psychological balance on something that nobody can guarantee that will last “forever”, is a maladaptive and risky attitude
- Developing the abilities to enjoy the “trip to Ithaca” in spite of any possible danger or loss

#### Note

The phrase “trip to Ithaca” refers to the original traveling experiencing of Homer’s Ulysses when returning home and, hence, metaphorically, nowadays, to the very experience of the “trip” towards any goal that any person may set in life

Table 18

### **Strategies for creative coping with emotions of devaluation**

- Accepting the opportunity to recognize possible errors and to improve the strategies applied
- Evaluating criticism with the less possible distortions, even if it comes from selected persons (“important others”), in order to understand whether this criticism is actually just or unjust and in what degree
- Creatively conceiving the value of criticism as an opportunity for change, in the case that criticism is judged to be just
- Creatively conceiving the value of criticism as an opportunity for improving other abilities of the person, even when this criticism is not judged as just, as, for example, one’s abilities to cope with unjust criticism
- Accepting the opportunity to promote natural abilities and talents, as adaptability, ability to find alternative solutions, creativity etc
- Creatively developing and promoting the individual’s own talent of tolerance via the “dignified acceptance” of criticism

#### Note

Sentiments of devaluation may be related to a strict criticism or disdain coming either from interpersonal or professional environment or even automatically emerging in the framework of a psychological difficulty or disorder.

(Clark and Beck, 1999)

Table 19

The above strategies come from the field of Axiological Anthropology and, therefore, mainly focus on the promotion of the individual's natural abilities in order to achieve the most possibly beneficial self-control and adaptation.

Such strategies, that deal with creative exploitation of both the experience deriving from effective management of negative feelings suffered in the past (emotion focused coping) and the experience deriving from effective management of past problems (problem focused coping), seem to be helpful in order to achieve promotion of mental health throughout the deployment of all available mental or bodily weapons.



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## **Chapter IV**

### **Harmonizing interchange of support in social relations**

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## **1. The notion of communication**

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Each person, regardless whether and to what extent is aware of it, needs support in order to keep on trying for improving the quality of his or her own life, for supporting others, as well as for improving the conditions of one's social environment.

Necessary support comes to an individual either from his or her internal self (self-support) or from people around (social support).

Since the two forms of support constitute prerequisites for one other (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1989), both self- and social support depend on how individuals communicate in order to interchange supportive behaviours effectively.

Effective communication facilitates interchange of supportive behaviours and, in counter balance, it is favored by them.

Communication concerns all life options and activities of individuals. In order to define the sorts of interpersonal activities that are influenced by the individuals' communicative abilities, one has to consider every human relation that requires interchange of informative stimuli.

The interchange of supportive behaviours requires particular skills (Warnick and Inch, 1994) in order for each individual, as well each society, to be benefited by the achievement of an effective and harmonizing communication.

Required skills relate to the development of individuals' abilities (Infante et al, 1996; Hargie et al, 1994) to be able to fulfill prerequisites of harmonizing communication such as the ones proposed in the following catalogue:

1. To decide on the most beneficial thoughts and attitudes that may be helpful in self-improving efforts or in overcoming difficulties
2. To recognize what sort of support he or she really needs from others
3. To find out whether the sort of support which he or she needs from others is really beneficial to him or her
4. To uncover the kind of support others are able or willing to provide
5. To ask what supportive behaviour he or she needs in a clear and tactful way
6. To recognize what sort of support the others really need from him or her
7. To decide what sort or what degree of support he or she is able to provide to others
8. To try to improve his or her abilities and skills in order to offer support efficiently
9. To offer the sort of support that the others need in a tactful way
10. To offer support without expecting any particular return

Main fields for the implementation and interchange of supportive behaviours are family relations, friendly or intimate relations as well as social and professional relations.

It is suggested that essential preconditions for providing and accepting effective supportive behaviours (Jordan and Roloff, 1990; Schaffer, 1971) seem to be, among others:

- a. A careful evaluation of the suitability of particular conditions where mutual support takes place (Table 20). Such a process is considered as necessary so that efforts for interchanging support are not utopian
- b. The elimination of factors, which either psychologically inhibit communication (Adler and Rodman, 2003) or alter and transform it into superficial or virtual (Table 21)

<b>Assessing suitability of conditions for providing and accepting support</b>
<b>Steps</b>
Determining needs and obligations of others, which might inhibit provision or acceptance of support Evaluation of the above considering the result in demand Clear planning of support intervention
<b>Limitations</b>
Provision of support is determined by the will or the abilities of the others to accept it The aim of support provided and the possible benefits from interaction are not realizable if they have not been set from the beginning and have not been realistic

Table 20

<b>Factors related to decrease of efficacy in communication</b>
Negative cognitive schemas
Dependence behaviours
Contrasting interests
Cultural differences
Individual differences
Psychological difficulties

Table 21

Mental or emotional, empathic or critical, verbal or bodily are some of the forms of communication which may affect either positively or negatively all kinds of humans' relations (Stewart and D' Angelo, 1980).

The combination of all available characteristics or properties of communication deriving from all different aspects of communication is useful in order to achieve each objective of harmonization (De Vito, 1986).

## **2. Impediments in harmonizing interchange of support**

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### **A. Maladaptive social cognitions**

### **B. Factors related to ineffective communication**

#### **A. Maladaptive social cognitions**

Communication as well as providing and receiving support is often prevented by various maladaptive cognitive concepts which rather promote isolation than favour harmonious relationships among people in society.

People often employ maladaptive concepts in order to protect themselves from hypothetical bad motives or attitudes of others; thus negative social concepts seem to particularly follow the pattern of behaviour of individuals who are prone to suspecting others' motivations. Such negative social concepts could be considered as related to what the cognitive model represents as maladaptive cognitions or modes when referring to the individuals' relation with their social environment (Beck, 1976).

This sort of maladaptive concepts (see examples, Table 22) is common in current societies and seems to be easily transferred amongst societies' members.

<b>Maladaptive social cognitions that may inhibit harmonious relations</b>
Examples
<p data-bbox="246 451 1044 482"><i>“Being successful in life means that one does not need anyone else”</i></p> <p data-bbox="413 516 877 547"><i>“One has first to take and then to give”</i></p> <p data-bbox="233 582 1057 613"><i>“If one is supportive to others they will take advantage of him or her”</i></p> <p data-bbox="400 647 890 678"><i>“One must never loose through offering”</i></p> <p data-bbox="349 713 941 744"><i>“One has to take as much as one can from others”</i></p>

Table 22

Maladaptive concepts that often arise under challenging relationship circumstances (Beck et al, 1990) may also prevent fulfillment of the essential aims of communication. These sets of concepts are mainly based on unrealistic social perceptions of reality (Hewes, 1994) such as «*the world is a jungle and if you do not step onto dead bodies you cannot achieve anything*», or «*being good equals to being a fool*», or «*You are ridiculous when you love if you are not certain that you are loved*» etc.

It is obvious that in socio- cultural environments, where most people bear ideas such as the above, supportive behaviour is impossible, since others are perceived as threatening or even as rivals.

## **B. Factors related to ineffective communication**

Communication is obstructed due to factors related either to the lack of homogeneity in the way that people convey their thoughts and feelings or to their decreased capacity to locate and visualize their common interest (Coupland et al, 1991; Daly and Wiemann, 1990).

In terms of Axiological Anthropology, malfunctioning models of social behaviour, devaluation of natural human abilities to manage relations' difficulties and dystonia in emotional investment are almost always coupled with isolation and lack of social support (Vassiliadou, 1998).

In line with the above it may be concluded that the next categories of factors can be considered as the most responsible for the impediment of support's interchange:

- Maladaptive cognitive representation of the “world”
- Hypothetical bad motives or attitudes of “all others”
- Susceptibility to easily suspecting other people's motives
- Malfunctioning models of social behaviour
- Dystonia in emotional investment
- Lack of homogeneity in the way that people convey their thoughts and feelings
- Individuals' inadequate efforts to locate and visualize common interest
- Devaluation of natural human abilities to manage relations' difficulties
- Perception of others as threatening or even as rivals
- Maladaptive management of challenging relationship circumstances



### **3. Strategies for the achievement of harmonization in interchanging support**

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#### **A. Evaluation of positive communication skills**

#### **B. Promotion of positive communication skills**

#### **A. Evaluation of positive communication skills**

Essential mechanisms for the achievement of effective communication and, thus, of harmonized interchanging support, are considered to be based mainly on the promotion of positive communication skills such as the following:

- Realistic self-awareness
- Realistic self-evaluation
- Creative self-judgment
- Autonomy of thought

- Exemption from dependencies
- Least distorted axiological judgments
- Improvement of maladaptive interpretive schemas
- Acquiring positive cognitive schemas
- Meta-cognitive control of interpretive schemas
- Least possibly distorted interchange of information
- Empathic understanding of others
- Location and determination of common interests
- Awareness of the fact that it is a very tough task to achieve objective judgment
- Creative coping with difficulties
- Psychological well-being

## **B. Promotion of positive communication skills**

Effects of the communication skills mentioned above as well as of the techniques to promote each skill are respectively commented below.

### Realistic self-awareness, self-evaluation and creative self-judgment

Realistic awareness of personality characteristics as well as of internal tendencies and predispositions constitutes a very important factor in achieving communication goals (Shaw, 1997).

A basic precondition to become aware and as much as possible beneficially assess the particular characteristics of a person is the evaluation and perhaps the ranking of only the positive elements that constitute each personality, since locating and measuring negative elements might be neither accurate nor beneficial in the development of a healthy image of self (self-concept).

The latter may be considered as following from the fact that while the lack of positive elements may be considered as a negative element per se, the opposite, namely, in the case of the lack of negative elements, seems not to be true. For example, when we say that a person is honest, this means that this person is not a criminal. But when we say that a person is not a criminal, this does not necessarily mean that he or she is an honest person. In other words, the existence of a positive element (e.g. "he is honest") is more commonly identified with the non existence of a negative element (e.g. "he is not a criminal") while, on the contrary, the non existence of a negative element (e.g. "he is not a criminal") is not commonly identified with the existence of a positive element ("e.g. he is honest").

The content of a positive characteristic may seem to be more easily defined and quantified in terms of the degree of its expression in a personality. On the contrary, the content of a negative characteristic, as for example, “lazy”, “liar”, etc, can seem to be habitually understood only as a small or large diminution of the respective positive aspects, for example, of “hard-working” or of “sincere”, respectively.

Nevertheless, though, especially for pedagogical reasons, it is preferable to rank only the positive elements, since a low “score” of a positive element is easier to motivate the person towards its improvement. On the contrary, focusing attention on any hypothetical negative constituents of the personality and ranking them seems to relate to a reduction of the person’s self-esteem and of the efforts to achieve goals (Duran and Kelly, 1988).

It is easily understood that no type of communication or interchange of support can be realized if the person cannot first achieve its own self-support. He or she is not in a position neither to offer nor to take support from the environment, since he or she is deprived of any support. Particularly in adolescents, achieving academic goals has been shown to be directly relevant to developed communication skills as well as to the estimation of one’s personal positive characteristics (Rubin and Graham, 1988).

Finally, it has to be noted that focusing attention and dealing with negative elements of the personality constitutes a characteristic of psycho-pathological cases, as, for example, depression. Thus, the pursuance of an educational and simultaneously therapeutic objective might provide ways to assess and promote positive elements that may potentially contribute to the healthy adjustment of the person in society and to the person’s normal socialization, while infertile enumeration of assumed negative characteristics cannot by any means be considered as such an objective.

### **Autonomy of thought**

Avoiding both maladaptive expectations and dependencies contribute to the achievement of creative autonomy of thought.

Elimination of utopian expectations as well as of heteronomic behaviours which usually lead to the development of antisocial beliefs and acts, may significantly favour the aims of communication (Rubin et al, 1988).

### **Exemption from dependencies**

Dependencies frequently create chimerical expectations to the individual and constitute a basic obstacle for communication.

Exemption from dependencies requires maturity of mental functions, as well as a healthy mental status (Horwitz and Scheid, 1999). On the contrary, individuals prone to dependencies and addictions are usually found to suffer due to a mental or psychological problem (Newcomb et al, 1986; Bukstein et al, 1989).

### **Least distorted axiological judgments**

Evaluation of the relation or the ratio of natural or acquired advantages versus disadvantages (of self and others) constitutes an important prerequisite for the settlement of flexibility (Martin and Anderson, 1998) in axiological judgments.

Factors that facilitate the process of “axiological judgment” (Vassiliadou, 1998) have been considered to be the realistic assessment of difficulties in achieving objective judgment, the understanding of the subjectiveness of the perception of

oneself and of others, as well the awareness of relativity of accuracy of available data and conclusions.

### **Meta-cognitive control of interpretive schemas**

Meta-cognitive control of interpretive schemas via which each piece of information is interpreted, defines the resolution or, in other words, the control over the solution of a riddle that might be concealed under any fragment of information.

Meta-cognitive control constitutes the foundation to support harmonization since it is the main vehicle for a healthy, realistic and creative self-judgment and judgment of others as well as for the improvement of maladaptive interpretive schemas that obstruct achievement of communication goals (Motley, 1992).

It can also be beneficial for the most possibly undistorted “reception”, “perception” and “transference” of information as well as for the most possibly precise elicitation of information coming from the deepest wishes of one and others.

Maladaptive interpretive schemas may easily be removed via careful meta-cognitive control (Wells, 2001) since the latter is helpful for unmasking the injurious nature of the former.

Promotion of an adaptive and at the same time positive conceptualization of life conditions may be effectively supported by the contribution of meta-cognitive control mechanisms, since this is exactly the main aim of such mechanisms' existence.

### **Less possibly distorted interchange of information**

Strategies for effective communication are mainly related to the less possibly distorted “reception” of information coming from others and the “perception” of information that is not directly expressed (Stewart, 1991). Effective communication is also related to the most possibly accurate “presentation” or “transmission” of the information that the individual wishes to convey to others. Rational transference, reception and counter-transference of information, as described herewith, may be facilitated by exercising the so-called “Meefiki” method of Socrates of eliciting the meaning that the person wishes to convey via the information transferred as well as the meaning hidden in the information coming from others.

Precise presentation of information that an individual wishes to transfer is conditioned by one’s abilities to control one’s own impulsivity along with acknowledging that the notion and the properties of sincerity totally differ from the characters of impulsivity (Vassiliadou, 2005).

In order to be sincere and honest one has to express one’s authentic self and not an off-handed simulacrum of personal properties, abilities, inabilities or desires.

### **Empathic understanding of others**

Empathic understanding of other persons’ perspectives refers to one’s ability to experience the world from the other’s point of view (Stiff et al, 1988; Adler and Rodman, 2003, p. 42).

Since empathy constitutes a very important factor for communication outcomes, it is considered to be an essential tool for the interchange of authentic self and social supportive actions.

It is, therefore, worthy to develop the willingness towards empathy's most possibly feasible approach, despite the fact that full understanding of another person's point of view is impossible to achieve.

Empathic listening to the other persons' options may importantly facilitate the "Meeftiki" method of Socrates of eliciting the meaning that others wish to convey, along with promoting the interchange of supportive understanding.

### **Location and determination of common interests**

In order to achieve location and determination of common interests, since this is a basic precondition for harmonizing communication, it is necessary that the individual achieves axiological assessment of real needs, desires or interests of oneself and of the persons with whom one communicates (Redmond, 1995).

Ethical values may prove to be of a great importance for a balanced and realistic location and determination of common interests, especially in cases that reverse interests are threatening the aims of communication.

In various cases it may prove to be rather beneficial for an individual to sacrifice a part of one's material interest than letting increase the possibility of loss of some other mental or psychological interest that might derive from the interchange of support.

### **Awareness of the fact that it is a very tough task to achieve objective judgment**

Factors that facilitate axiological judgment and meta-cognitive control of the outgoing (from the person to the environment) and the incoming (from the environment to the person) information that are necessary for communication (Greene, 1997) are related to the awareness of the fact that it is a very tough task to achieve objective judgment. Consciousness of the subjective value of judgments facilitates a more adaptive and, as much as possible, more realistic or least distorted axiological judgment.

### **Creative coping with difficulties**

Optimistic and at the same time realistic assessment of experience deriving from effective management of life difficulties (Clark and Beck, 1999) may function as an effective psycho-immunity factor, able to offer protection against future problems.

Individuals who have succeeded to maintain their self-control under conditions of loss, failure or devaluation, may overcome usually these difficulties in a long - effective way.

As a result, such persons are favored by the improvement of their abilities for developing forgiving behaviours and not getting lost inside the nets of revenge.

Talents of self-esteem, self-control, tolerance and forgiveness, which are considered to derive from creative exploitation of experience deriving from life events, may be the individuals' most helpful weapons for the most possibly effective interchange of support.

### **Psychological well-being**

Factors that facilitate acquiring and maintaining psychological well-being have been considered to be one's familiarization with positive cognitive schemas, positive assessment and exploitation of experience deriving from life difficulties as well acceptance of uncertainty in relation to the achievement of each goal (Ewles and Simnett, 2003).

Psychological well-being is necessary in order to achieve effective communication, since it has been shown that psychological problems constitute one of the most important factors that may inhibit even the smallest sense of communication.

Acquiring positive cognitive schemas based on which reality may be interpreted in a creative and optimistic way is an essential prerequisite for the promotion of quality of life, as well for the maintenance of a constant well-being (Sidell et al, 2003).

Managing to positively evaluate or exploit difficulties, via accepting the reality that no goal has a certain result, are basic conditions for maintaining psychological prosperity.

Finally, for communication to succeed, it is necessary that the individual considers and realistically combines all the above factors.

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**PART THREE**

**CREATIVITY**

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**PART THREE: CREATIVITY**

**Chapter V**

**The creative process of self-development**

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## 1. The notion of self-development

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**Whenever individuals decide about aims according to the structure of their own particular talents and potential abilities, they feel satisfied. They keep on trying patiently for the fulfillment of their expectations and they are not easily disappointed in the case of difficulties. A kind of entelechy relating to each one's own nature follows which leads to self-integration.**

Humans feel satisfaction whenever their plans, aims, or dreams come true. On the other hand, they feel worried and anxious, whenever there are signs showing that their wishes will probably not come true.

Balance in an individual's life on a great extent depends on the fulfillment of aims which reflect productively each one's personal beliefs and deeper wishes (Temple and Robson, 1991).

That means that people have to decide about their aims according to a balanced evaluation of real life circumstances in order for goals' selection to be productive and at the same time realistic (Moreland and Sweeney, 1984; Saltzer, 1982)). In other words, individuals' capability to fulfill their expectations depends on whether they are able to commit to a balanced comparison of their own abilities against the difficulties to fulfill each aim.

Further, evaluation of one's abilities to fulfill aims and expectations has to equally consider the developmental option of these abilities (Albrecht, 1980).

Focusing on the potential increase of abilities one may elevate and improve one's aims more easily. Additionally, higher goals require further development of abilities, since constantly developing abilities lead to further increased goals and expectations and so on.

In terms of Mental Health Promotion, it could be argued that aims' selection may become a robust motive for the constant development of one's positive personality traits related to abilities to achieving life goals (Worchel and Goethals, 1985).

In terms of Axiological Anthropology, achievement of a satisfying quality of life is closely related to constant self-development. Quality of life, therefore, seems to depend on the gradual development of self-properties which might take place at the same time with the establishment of gradually higher goals (Table 23). It only requires the careful and mindful selection of aims on the basis of realistic data that would not disorient individual's innate inclination towards constant improvement and self-integration (Vassiliadou, 1998; Tudor and Worrall, 1994).

<b>The axiological pathway to self-development</b>
Terms
<p>A. Axiological self-development requires the promotion of new abilities</p> <p>B. Promotion of new abilities requires the further development of already existing abilities</p> <p>C. Further development of existing abilities requires a productive selection of aims</p> <p>D. Productive selection of aims requires a further development of abilities</p> <p>E. Further development of abilities requires a constant setting of gradually higher aims</p>

Table 23



## **2. Impediments in self-development process**

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### **A. Unbalanced valuation of abilities**

### **B. Inadequate or insufficient efforts**

#### **A. Unbalanced valuation of abilities**

The natural process for developing humans' abilities to achieving goals is often hindered either because of unbalanced valuation of abilities, in terms of the actual possibilities to fulfill each aim (Rogers, 1981), or because of inadequate or insufficient efforts (Clark and Beck, 1999, pp. 207; McKay and Fanning, 2000, p.65).

Unbalanced valuation of abilities concerns either overrating or underestimating one's own talents or potential abilities (Table 24) in relation to the difficulties regarding fulfillment of such aims. It also

concerns over- or under-estimation of difficulties (Bennett and Murphy, 2001, pp. 27-29; Clark and Beck, 1999, pp. 90, 197-199) that threaten to frustrate one's expectations (Table 25).

<p><b>Underestimation of abilities</b>  <b>is mainly due to combinations of the following</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immature self-concept or self-esteem</li> <li>• Ineffective management of self-frustration</li> <li>• Frivolous condition evaluation</li> <li>• Efforts to substitute weaknesses by non productive surface "capacities"</li> </ul>

Table 24

<p><b>The over- or under- estimation of difficulties,</b>  <b>in relation to one's own abilities in fulfilling one's aims,</b>  <b>is often a result of:</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A psychological disorder</li> <li>• Vanity</li> <li>• Pessimistic attitudes</li> <li>• A disposition of avoiding pains and responsibilities.</li> <li>• A disposition of self-victimizing</li> </ul>

Table 25

**B. Inadequate or insufficient efforts**

After the frustration of an aim often the excuse is that the aim was, after all, too difficult or that despite all required or sufficient efforts its achievement was infeasible.

In every day life inadequate efforts to achieve aims is the basic reason for multiple successive failures, which function in favor of victimization and, further, of the immobilization of the victimized individual.

In other occasions, it is quite possible that insufficient effort in achieving an aim, in order to avoid pain, lies beneath cases of failure, leading also to immobilization of any self-developing efforts (Clark and Beck, 1999, p. 90).



### **3. Strategies for the achievement of self-development**

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#### **A. The escape from vanity**

#### **B. Promotion of maturity mechanisms**

Self-development presupposes mature self-concept and self-esteem and, at the same time, is a prerequisite for their construction (Kihlstrom and Cantor, 1983; Tudor, 1999). It also requires overcoming of vanity-based goals that may either not reflect realistic desires or may disregard the terms for a mature developmental process.

Since both processes for the advancement of self-concept and self-esteem have already been further discussed in the first two chapters, some quotations about vanity and maturity that have been considered to be of great importance in order for a fruitful development of self to be integrated, are presented below.



### **A. The escape from vanity**

Vanity as a motive for a specific task oriented behaviour is not a rare phenomenon in human societies.

The way in which an advantage is displayed brings to light attitudes that characterize the quality of one's personality.

A vainglorious presentation of characteristics, which are considered as advantages, might not bring the desired result but exactly the opposite, showing that the person is characterized by a strong need for appraisal and may further be considered as immature or even frivolous (McKay and Fanning, 2000).

Furthermore, one isolated advantage or virtue is never apt to reflect a person's merit, unless it is coupled with other virtues as well. For example, if an individual is brave but impudent at the same time, then his or her accomplishments would possibly be regarded as results of audacity rather than heroism.

It is thus quite preferable that one presents his or her advantages in a spirit of modesty (Markus, 1980; Campbell, 1990). Showing the patience required, so that the constantly developing characteristics improve one's maturity step by step, will prove to be praiseworthy and actually useful.



## **B. Promotion of maturity mechanisms**

It is quite essential for one's potentially positive personality characteristics, in order to mature efficiently, to change their untried nature into a more flexible form (Paulhus and Martin, 1988).

It is, therefore, necessary to exercise one's natural capacities in cases of difficulties so as to become stronger and more mature.

Exercising this way one's potential abilities, might enable him or her to deal effectively with problems, to develop hope and faith in life (McFarlin and Blascovich, 1981; Buss, 2000), to be virtuous and philanthropist, to understand and forgive, and thus built one's own happiness.

Indeed, it is worth mentioning that, as shown in the previous chapters, a full-fledged development as well as the most perfected and beneficial form that all kinds of personality characteristics and personal abilities may take, seems to be not only of a psychological but also of a moral fabric.



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## **Chapter VI**

### **The creative process of autonomy**

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## 1. The notion of creative autonomy

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**Creative autonomy defines the axiological process towards the development of individuals' creative abilities that enable them to become liberated from addictive behaviours or obsessive attitudes preventing their internal disposition and effort to become their authentic selves.**

Addictive behaviours or obsessive attitudes are enforced during periods that individuals are not yet ready to defend neither their own particularity nor their own natural abilities to discern between profitable and harmful beliefs and behaviours (Campbell, 2003) that concern equally both their own self and the society in which they live and grow.

In terms of Axiological Anthropology, the notion of autonomy seems to differ from the notion of freedom (Vassiliadou, 2005).

Freedom appears to concern mainly the person's becoming independent from external oppressive factors, while autonomy is mainly defined as liberation from any internal psycho-emotional parameters that may possibly oblige the person abandon control of one's self and neglect one's own desires, substituting the

latter by the desires (“wants”) or obligations (“musts”) coming from whoever they have considered, more or less consciously, as the “important other(s)” (Levenson, 1981).

In other words, creative autonomy presupposes awareness of the difference between autonomic and heteronomic beliefs and behaviours, adaptive introduction of “locus of control” (Rotter, 1966; Rotter, 1975) within the limits of the “ego” and creative liberation from any kind of maladaptive psycho-emotional dependences (Table 26).

<b>Prerequisites for creating conditions of autonomy</b>
Differentiation between autonomic and heteronomic behaviour
Realistic integration of «locus of control»
Creative treatment of bio-psycho-social dependencies

Table 26

## **2. Impediments in achieving autonomy**

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### **A. Dependencies**

### **B. Avoidance of negative consequences allegedly attributed to autonomy**

### **A. Dependencies**

Basic difficulties for individuals and societies when trying to achieve conditions of mutual autonomy, which will not oppress personal autonomy on the expense of both the person and the society and vice versa, seem to relate to a maladaptive tendency of people to develop inappropriate behaviours of dependence (Johnson-Laird, 1993).

Dependencies usually have biological, psychological or social origin and character (Table 27) and relate to basic human needs that, in ideal conditions, should be satisfied in ways that should not obstruct normal bio-psycho-emotional development.

<b>Bio- psycho-social dependences</b>
<b>Biological dependences</b> Are mainly related to the needs for survival, growth and reproduction
<b>Psychological dependences</b> Are related to the needs for security, acceptance and wholeness
<b>Social dependences</b> Are related to the needs for love, recognition and support

Table 27

In both cases that either a number of such needs are not adequately satisfied or, at the other end, are over-satisfied on the expense of others, individuals tend to develop attitudes and behaviours of dependence and heteronomy.

In such cases, the process of achieving autonomy might be hindered (Maslow, 1968; Maccoby, 1988), even in ages when the bio-psycho-emotional universe of man matures and the person becomes aware of the tendency towards heteronomy and dependence and the damages that these bring about.

## **B. Avoidance of negative consequences allegedly attributed to autonomy**

Other difficulties that the person deals with, when trying to achieve conditions for developing one's creative autonomy (Table 28), are mainly related to the efforts made to avoid duties and responsibilities (Whitney, 1982), as well as the sense of existential insecurity or uncertainty that some individuals believe that would fearfully rise if one accepts authentic autonomy.

<b>Factors that inhibit the decision to seek autonomy</b>
False emotions of risk that individuals may have when starting seeking autonomy
Maladaptive management of false emotions of insecurity created by becoming independent
Negation of benefit from difficulties that independence might bring about

Table 28

As a consequence, individuals continue, in fear, turning their attention onto persons, things or situations that, more or less consciously, believe that will help them avoid taking the risk of one's own choices.



### **3. Strategies for the achievement of creative autonomy**

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#### **A. Axiological consideration of «loci of control»**

#### **B. Creative management of fears related to the achievement of autonomy**

#### **A. Axiological consideration of «loci of control»**

Strategies that are considered to facilitate achieving creative autonomy relate to the assessment and control of every kind of limitations of autonomy (Rotter, 1990; Cummins, 1989) and the beneficial re-combination of all obligations (“musts”) and desires (“wants”).

The efforts to acquire autonomy are facilitated if the person manages to control and assess cost efficiency (Sarason et al, 1978) of a particular dependence on external “loci of control” or on “important others” (Table 29) and to reject such obligation-centered schemas that, instead of promoting, limit autonomy (Strickland, 1989; Watson and Baumol, 1967).

<b>Consideration of «loci of control» and of «important other(s)»</b>
Terms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assessment of benefit of each external control factor (that creates dependence) in relation to the cost of losing autonomy</li><li>• Rejection of infertile obligation-centered cognitive schemas</li></ul>

Table 29

## **B. Creative management of fears related to the achievement of autonomy**

Fears that emerge when a person claims one's autonomy have been considered as usually related to one's hesitation to face both uncertainty and responsibilities stemming from hopes, dreams and goals (Simonton, 2000). Transcending such fears is facilitated by avoiding basic maladaptive perceptions (See examples, Table 30) that have been proven to relate to limiting or losing autonomy (Lefcourt, et al, 1984; Joe, 1971; Young, et al, 2003)

<b>Maladaptive beliefs related to the fear of autonomy</b>
<b>Examples</b>
<p><i>«It is better not to hope than to hope and be frustrated»</i></p> <p><i>«I wait for the worse to happen in order to be prepared»</i></p> <p><i>«I do not want to make dreams that might not come true»</i></p> <p><i>«I do not invest in goals that do not have a certain result»</i></p>

Table 30

Techniques that are based on the terms of “axiological creative realism” (Vassiliadou, 2005), may importantly encourage development of healthy creativity and adaptive autonomy (Table 31).

<b>The “Adults’ Game”</b>
<b>(Axiological creative «realism»)</b>
The escalation of terms
A. I play with my own weapons B. I learn how others create new weapons from the ones they already have C. I test weapons that others create in order to see whether and which ones are beneficial D. I create beneficial weapons from the ones I already have E. I create my autonomy

Table 31

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