

SUMMARY

PSYCHO- CYBERNETICS

MAXWELL MALTZ



Summary of “Psycho- Cybernetics” by Maxwell Maltz

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Unlock the super-computer of your self-esteem.

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Introduction

How would you define yourself? Would you say you're a talented athlete or a good friend? Or would your self-assessment be a little less charitable? Would you instead consider yourself to be a toxic person, a selfish partner, a lazy slob? Although we're inclined to think that our views are our own, they're more heavily influenced by the impressions of others than we would like to admit. And whether those impressions were passed to us from a positive source like loving parents or supportive friends or a negative outlet like our childhood bullies or an abusive partner, others' assessments often worm their way into our worldview, distorting the way we see ourselves.

So, over the course of this summary, we'll conduct an in-depth analysis of the stories we tell ourselves and the narratives that construct our personal worldviews. And as we analyze these stories, we'll investigate the toxic tropes and misperceptions we unnecessarily apply to ourselves and learn how we can re-write our life stories to give ourselves happy endings.



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What is Self-Image?

This might sound like an overly obvious answer, but self-image is exactly what it sounds like: it's an image we construct about ourselves to help us figure out who we are. It's kind of like what you would do if you were a writer and you were brainstorming a new character. To help contextualize that character for yourself and for your reader, you would identify a few key characteristics about her, like, "She's passionate, funny, determined, and she loves cheesecake. But she also struggles with anxiety, being chronically late, and tells a lot of white lies to protect the feelings of people around her."

Already, you feel like you know that person, don't you? You can imagine what she might be like to be around, what kind of friend she might be, and what her successes and pitfalls are. She feels human and believable because you can see that she's not perfect and struggles with some relatable problems that many humans face. So, just as I've constructed that hypothetical character for the purpose of this analogy, every single living person does the same thing with his or herself. They construct a set of core beliefs, traits, values, and definitive experiences to help themselves understand who they are.

But sometimes we unintentionally misdirect the story, painting an overly negative picture of ourselves. The worst bit is that-- like most lies-- the lies we tell ourselves are often grounded in truth and that's what makes them believable. For example, if you fail a semester of college as a result of mental health struggles, you might tell yourself that you're a complete failure, a loser who can't do anything right. This is an example of "all or nothing thinking," which is exactly what it sounds like. Unable to process the shades of grey that characterize most human experiences, people who practice "all or nothing thinking" think on a spectrum of extremes: they are either the worst person in the world or the best. The truth, of course, is far more complex and a lot less severe than that; in the example we just discussed, the truth is that you failed one semester. Sure, it's disappointing

and it's not the outcome you hoped for. But it doesn't mean you're a failure at everything and it definitely doesn't mean that you're beyond hope. So, rather than re-writing our self-image to fit with this definition of failure, a better response is to acknowledge that this is simply a bump in the road and one you can overcome.

To bring this example home, the author considers the story of a man he once knew who was insecure about his appearance. We can all relate to that feeling, after all, because who doesn't feel insecure about themselves from time to time? The difference in this case was that where someone else might view those unpleasant feelings as a temporary crisis of self-esteem or something they needed to shrug off, this man sadly assumed that "being ugly" was just part of his identity. And because he couldn't get past his own feelings about his appearance, he assumed everyone else was focusing on them too. Every interaction, every life experience he had was filtered through the lens of "people must be judging me because I'm ugly." But in reality, he was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy! No one treated him differently because of his looks; in fact, most people didn't even notice them or consider him to be ugly. But because he expected everyone to reject him, he was constantly on edge and unpleasant to be around and people responded to his unkind demeanor rather than looks! Failure to realize this vital distinction meant that he assumed everyone was behaving exactly the way he thought they would and his life went on in a vicious cycle of sadness and misunderstandings.



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The Power of Negative Thinking

We've heard about the power of positive thinking, but what about the power of negative thinking? The truth is that both can change your life if you give them the freedom to do so, whether for good or for evil. To prove this point, the author references the example of a man named Dr. Alfred Adler. As a high-school student, Adler struggled with math and his teachers assumed that he was completely stupid when it came to arithmetic. This opinion was readily apparent in their interactions with Adler and he got the message loud and clear: he was stupid at math, he would never understand it, and he shouldn't even try. But of course, as you've probably already guessed, the truth was that this was simply another of the lies we tell ourselves, an unnecessarily negative assessment that Adler erroneously wove into his identity.

But when he one day realized that he understood a complicated math problem, he was stunned! He must have gotten it wrong, he assumed; it couldn't be that he really understood math. But he did and his teacher confirmed that he had indeed hit upon the right answer. The realization that dawned on him in that one moment had a profound impact on Adler's life. When he understood that math problem, he realized that maybe the problem wasn't with him; maybe he wasn't stupid or incapable of understanding math. Instead, perhaps the problem simply hadn't been explained to him in the right way before! Realizing that the right tools could help him grow, learn, and unlock an ability to understand math made all the difference for Adler's confidence. And the same is true for any negative beliefs you hold about yourself.

If you believe that you are unlucky or unlovable or untalented, recognizing these negative beliefs for the lies they are can help you to break free! The author believes that you can overcome negative thinking with the freeing power of rational thinking. The first step is to recognize that what you believe about yourself is a feeling rather than a statement of fact. For example, a fact might be, "I asked that girl out on a date and she turned me

down. I feel sad.” As a result of this circumstance, you might experience a thought or feeling like, “No one will ever want to go out with me. I’m ugly and unlovable.” But as you can see from the differences in these examples, the latter is a feeling, not a fact. And because it’s only a feeling, it should never be absorbed into your identity as an intrinsic part of your self-image. Instead, you should seek to accept that it’s a fleeting feeling, one which will pass, and one which means nothing about your identity.



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What is Psycho-Cybernetics?

Now that we've explored the foundational principles of self-esteem and how it works, it's time to take a closer look at the author's theory about them. Put simply, psycho-cybernetics is a theory which conceptualizes the human brain as a type of computer and self-esteem as the sort of software it runs on. The name comes, of course, from psychology or the study of the human mind; that's where we get the 'psycho' part. And 'cybernetics' is the study of machines and how they operate! So, in short, psycho-cybernetics is the study of how the mind runs like a machine.

The author believes that if we can simply program ourselves to think the right things or reboot our self-esteem, we can create a better and happier life. Take, for example, the issue of being happy. No matter what differences divide us in life, one thing is pretty universal: every human being on the planet wants to be happy. But much like we misconceptualize our self-image, we also draw inaccurate conclusions about happiness. In fact, most people tend to embrace one or two key fallacies. We often assume that happiness is both a state of being and/or a future hope. Put simply, we sometimes believe that happiness is the long-term absence of sadness or that it can be engineered by a certain event. For example, we might think that if we get that big promotion, we will finally enter a state of permanent happiness that will wash all our worries away. If you have that promotion, then you'll have more money and more career satisfaction, and therefore you'll be happy. And if you're happy about every aspect of your life, then presumably, you won't be sad anymore!

But of course, neither of those beliefs are true. While it's true that events like getting married or getting a promotion can indeed bring us a fleeting moment of pleasure, we can't depend on our circumstances to bring us lasting happiness. That's because they simply can't do it; circumstances are nothing but temporary cycles of pleasure and pain and if we try to rely on them for emotional stability, we will simply find ourselves caught in a pointless loop, chasing one experience after the other and hoping it will fill

the void in our hearts. Similarly, it's also true that happiness is a state of mind. But that does not mean it's the complete absence of sadness or that we should be striving for an existence in which we're blissfully happy all the time. In fact, that's totally unrealistic! Rather, we need to recognize that happiness is a choice. We can't control our circumstances, but we can control how we respond to them. And choosing happiness is the most important thing we can ever do. If we choose to look for the best in every situation, to be content with what we have, and to embrace joy, we can improve our quality of life!



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The Key to SUCCESS

What's the key to success? Everybody asks that question at one point or another. Whether we seek to be successful on a test, in a relationship, or in our careers, we all want to know the secret to success. We often assume that some people know this secret and others don't, in the same way that we assume some people are more talented, more fortunate, or more likely to get what they want. But the author invites us to remember that success is not an arbitrary, magic force that visits some people and not others. Instead, success is a source of potential that lives within all of us; we just have to know how to access it. To that end, the author has developed an acronym to help you discover the universal keys to success that will enable anyone to thrive. As you've probably already guessed, that acronym is SUCCESS! So, let's dive into its meaning.

The first S stands for "Sense of direction." A sense of direction is important because, as humans, we need purpose to thrive. Without a goal to pursue, we will flounder through life feeling lost and meaningless. So, the first step is to seek your sense of direction and allow this purpose to guide your life.

The U represents "Understanding." Understanding is crucial to succeeding as a human being because without it, you can't hope to make connections with others. Understanding enables you to empathize with someone else and see their point of view, which will help you become a better communicator, partner, employee, and friend. Understanding can also provide you with personal clarity and peace of mind! That's because misunderstandings are often at the root of our stress and anxiety. Whether it's because we got the wrong vibe from a social situation, causing us to assume the worst, or because we misunderstood the threat level of something we fear, a lack of understanding can keep us in a perpetual state of anxiety. So, cultivate your understanding and watch your peace follow!

Next is "C," which stands for Courage. If you want to succeed in any area of life, you need courage to make bold decisions and try new things.

The second “C” is for “Charity,” which reminds you to be charitable towards your fellow human beings. But charity doesn’t always mean giving financially. You can be charitable in your assessments of others by being kind or giving them the benefit of the doubt. You can also volunteer your time or perform acts of service that will bring joy to others.

Next is “E,” which stands for “Esteem.” As you’ve seen throughout this book, self-esteem is crucial because it dictates the story you tell yourself. So, pay attention to your self-esteem and concentrate on developing a narrative that tells yourself, “I can do it!”

Now we come to the next “S,” for “Self-confidence.” Similar to self-esteem, self-confidence is all about the story you tell yourself. Although you might think self-confidence is predicated on a history of success, the truth is that it doesn’t matter if you don’t have a long track record of success that inspires you to believe in yourself. Instead, self-confidence is all about knowing that you have the power to succeed. So, you can rely on self-confidence to tell yourself, “Yes I can!”

And lastly, we come to the final “S”: Self-acceptance. This is a big one because many people struggle with it. But self-acceptance is important because it enables you to find peace through relinquishing pressure. Let go of the pressure to be perfect and accept yourself for who you are. Recognize that everyone has flaws and it’s okay if you do too.

If you can implement these seven practices in your life, you’ll be on the path to success!



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Final Summary

It can help to think of the human brain as the most powerful supercomputer in the world. Your brain might not be digital or mechanized in the same way as a computer, but we can still think of it in similar terms to understand how our brains function. We can then use this knowledge to reconfigure the self-esteem “software” our brains need to run properly. By applying our understanding of psycho-cybernetics in our everyday lives, we can rewrite the stories we tell ourselves, boost our self-esteem, and unlock the secret to SUCCESS.



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