



What WORKS



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The Nature of What Works

One of the advantages of getting older is the experience we gain in learning what works and what doesn't. I've had the honor to work with thousands of students and clients who have made significant improvements in their lives over the past thirty-eight years. Some things worked, some didn't. Reflecting, learning, and adapting over time helped me sort out what makes sense and was helpful in resolving a wide range of struggles and stressors that diminish our effectiveness and satisfaction in activities and relationships.

I was fortunate at age twenty, to have a professor who implanted the idea of making improvement a priority. Every conflict, mistake, frustration, loss, and disaster becomes a learning opportunity (once we have properly apologized, recovered, mourned and repaired the damage, of course). Forty years of regular reflection on lessons about how to manage life's challenges more effectively revealed consistent patterns of what seems to work and not work in various circumstances.

Improvement can become an attitude and an integral part of how we view problems and difficulties. When that happens, our quality of life becomes less dependent on the kinds of challenges and setbacks we face, than on how well we learn to handle them. Over time, it is not the cards we are dealt, but how we play them that matters. When improvement becomes a habit, each year is better than the previous one. Life becomes easier and more fulfilling as we age.

One thing that works consistently, from my experience, is to provide a clear, simple explanation of what is happening in our body, mind, and emotions when we struggle

with stress, anxiety, depression, relationship conflicts, chronic pain and a host of other difficulties. Having a clear picture of *how things work* provides the understanding and motivation to follow through on *what works* to resolve these issues. New developments in brain research and body chemistry have supported what made sense in helping people in my classrooms and practice understand and resolve their difficulties.

A common theme that weaves through what I have learned in helping people solve problems and improve their lives over the past four decades is the power of nature in healing and recovery. We often hear the comment "That's human nature" to describe weakness, frailty, greed, or impulsiveness. These are common human responses, but they are influenced by context, personal history, culture and perception. Holding onto the attitude that we are essentially flawed creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where we dismiss our shortcomings as "being human" and don't address them because "you can't change human nature." Its like saying that the nature of an oak tree is to be stunted and spindly based on seeing some of them grow on the north side of a dry, rocky slope with little sun or moisture. The true nature of an oak tree (when it receives proper nourishment) is to send roots deep into the earth and to develop a solid trunk that creates a strong foundation for tall, arching branches that reach for the warming rays of the sun.

I believe that nature is a driving force in recovery from a wide range of mental and emotional disorders. The build up of stress and tension, anxiety, depression, hostility, impulsiveness and most problems in human relationships can be traced to

distortions in what I believe to be our true nature. Our natural state is to be healthy, open, and receptive. The natural state of relationships is to grow and deepen. In my experience, recovery from mental, emotional, and relationship disorders involves understanding and removing obstacles that distort our nature. Our body, mind, and emotions are able to naturally heal from trauma if we eliminate obstructions and provide time and space for recovery. This becomes a relatively simple process to the extent we understand how nature works and how we can work with it.

I was asked to write this column by a former student who stated that the approach she learned had "helped immensely in (her) life." Future columns will describe what works both in general terms across a wide range of stressors and struggles, as well as with specific problems such as anxiety, depression, chronic pain and stress. My hope is that others may benefit from what we have learned and, more importantly, that we can join in a process of exploring and discovering what works and what doesn't in reducing stress, tension, and conflict as we work to restore health to our world.

About Bob VanOosterhout

Bob Van Oosterhout is a Licensed Masters Social Worker and Limited Licensed Psychologist who provides counseling to patients at MidMichigan Health Park - Houghton Lake. He teaches Stress Management both on-line and on-campus in the Physical Fitness and Wellness Department at Lansing Community College. Additional writing and resources along with previous and future articles in this series can be found on his website at www.bobvanoosterhout.com