



## About Alan Henley

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**Each** of us have a tendency to believe that we are unique, and indeed we are in a multitude of ways. Our genetic composition, physical appearance (fingerprints), education, family histories, personal stories and experiences are varied and specific to each one of us. At the same time, our underlying commonalities exceed our differences. We all have the same basic needs: food, water, shelter, and basic desires for meaningful relationships and work as well as the satisfaction of our primary instincts. We are all human beings, and as such we have two basic features that are unavoidable in this life- namely a physical body and an ego.

The physical body is much like a machine in that it requires the right fuel and proper maintenance. Given these things it will carry us through this life as it should. The ego, however, is a mental aspect of our existence and such is a different matter. Indeed, unexamined and unchecked it is actually the source of most, if not all, of the problems that we face in this lifetime. In many ways it could be considered the primary cause in the disease of addiction.

For our purposes, the ego is defined as a group mental processes that work to create a unique identity for each person. It could be understood as a software program or app that runs in the computer of our brain that has one purpose: the building of a

separate ‘self’. While the development of a sense of identity has played an evolutionary role for the human species and is important for each of us to function in the reality of this world, it is quintessential to understand that the separate identity is simply a mental construct- a product of the egoic activities of the brain. As we gain a deeper understanding of the ego’s processes, we will see how it is ‘the problem beneath our problems’.

We gather data from our surroundings and use this input to ‘build’ ourselves. The methods used are quite simple and include identification, comparison, competition, resentment, shame, fault-finding (criticism), possessions (acquisitiveness), and secretiveness. If we consider each of these ego processes it is easy to see how they work to separate each of us from each other. Let’s see how this contributes to the disease of substance abuse.

It is a proven fact that our mental state and our physical health are interwoven and interdependent. Our mental state affects our immune system, our circulatory system (e.g. hypertension) and our digestive system (e.g. ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome). Other conditions such as anxiety, depression, addiction, and neurosis obviously originate in the mind. The late sage from India, Nisargadatta Maharaj stated that all disease has a mental origin. It is widely known that we face a silent (or not-so-silent) epidemic of mental health issues in the United States and that we sadly lack the resources to address this issue. Looking at the thought processes of the human ego we will see how they are the problem beneath the problem.

***Comparison – Associated Feelings: Inadequacy, Self-pity, Fear, Jealousy – End Result: Separation, Fear, Suffering***

**Competition – Associated Feelings: Anxiety, Paranoia – End Result: Separation, Fear, Suffering**

**Resentment – Associated Feelings: Hatred, Anger, Tension – End Result: Separation, Prejudice/Violence, Suffering**

**Criticism & Fault-Finding – Associated Feelings: Negativity, Alienation, Cynicism – End Result: Separation, Fear, Suffering**

**Acquisitiveness – Associated Feelings: Greed, Anxiety, Paranoia – End Result: Separation, Fear, Suffering**

**Secretiveness – Associated Feelings: Paranoia, Anxiety – End Result: Separation, Fear, Suffering**

**Shame – Associated Feelings: Inadequacy, Being Flawed, Fragmented – End Result: Separation, Fear, Suffering**

The feelings and end results listed above are generalizations. Not all comparison results in self-pity or jealousy, just as not all competitiveness results in fear and paranoia- however as the ego process come to dominate the mind, left unchecked they can and often do produce these effects. The end result of all of these mental activities are separation, fear, and suffering. As previously mentioned, the body and mind are one system so these states will eventually manifest in the body in one way or another. It is even possible that the chemical imbalances in the brain that contribute to the diagnosis of depression are the result of the mental suffering from the ego processes.

Fear is a baseline feeling that is associated with almost all egoic mental activity. It may be called many things such as stress, tension, anxiety, panic, paranoia, and other names. Even greed could be considered a form of fear. Stress (fear) is one of the greatest contributors to poor health. Hypertension (and associated cardiac and renal disease) can often be traced to stress. It is widely known that our immune system is affected by our mental states and this has major implications in our susceptibility to infectious diseases.

The feelings that are generated by the ego-thoughts are not comfortable. Being in a constant state of fear (anxiety/stress) could be called dis-ease, or in Buddhist terminology, suffering. When an individual is suffering, it is natural that he/she will seek relief- and often this can take the form of unhealthy activities such as drinking, drugging, over-eating, escapism (via excessive TV or video games), or unhealthy sexual activities. Although these things may provide a temporary distraction from the baseline discomfort caused by the ego, they need to be repeated (and often intensified) in order to continue to give the desired result. The deleterious effect on mental and physical health becomes a self-perpetuating downward spiral. The epidemic of obesity and addiction in our country could be largely attributed to this cause.

The major problematic result of the ego processes is separation. Man is, by nature, a social animal. Without awareness and left unchecked, the ego creates an exaggerated sense of 'apartness' from the world around us- including other people, nature, society as a whole, and even our true selves. This is one of the reasons that 12-Step groups are so effective- we come out of a sense of isolation into a sense of connection with like-minded people. In such a setting, the feeling of being 'terminally unique' that has been created by the overactive ego is diminished. The two fundamental aspects of recovery are connection and purpose. These are

incorporated into virtually every effective program that deals with addiction and alcoholism.

It is a widely accepted fact that there are only 2 basic emotions- love and fear, of which all other human feelings are simply derivatives. Reviewing the ego processes and thought patterns, we have seen that they all result in a state of fear. Since it is impossible for a person to experience both love and fear, an individual whose mind is dominated by the egoic processes goes through life in a perpetual state of fear, and thus has no ability to *truly* experience the feeling of love. This fact is nothing short of tragic and can be disastrous in many ways. The healing power of love is impossible to overestimate and yet is untenable for one who is in the grips of the ego.

It is unlikely that we will ever be totally free from the ego processes and the concept of self that is their product. It is actually counterproductive to fight or resist the workings of the ego, however with the cultivation of awareness we can be relatively free from the domination of this aspect of our mental function and its deleterious effects. There exist a multitude of ways to cultivate awareness, and they are beyond the scope of this article, however the problem beneath the problems can only be addressed by each of us. Practices such as meditation and mindfulness are of great value toward detaching ourselves from the agenda of the ego. We can each assume the responsibility of finding our own path, and, as the saying goes- “let it begin with me”