

# Essentially Alone



# Essentially Alone

Overcome Unauthentic Relationships  
and Change Your World

**Charles R. Wang, MD**



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*Essentially Alone:  
Overcome Unauthentic Relationships and Change Your World*

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*This book is dedicated to my parents, my wife, and my two daughters.  
They are my sources of emotional connections which fuel the work that  
I do. Special thanks to my wife for the invaluable support and assistance  
in completing this manuscript.*

The information in this book is accurate to the best of our knowledge. The work presented here is intended as a general guide to the treatment of the pathology of the self as described and not meant to replace sound medical and therapeutic advice from mental health providers. Each case history is an amalgamation of a number of people and does not represent actual persons, living or dead. Any resemblance to any actual person is unintentional and purely coincidental. All recommendations herein are made without guarantees on the part of the author or the publisher. The author and publisher disclaim all liability, direct or consequential, in connection with the use of this work.

Also by Charles R. Wang, MD  
*Profound States of Despair:*  
*A Developmental and Systems Approach to Treating Emptiness*



# Contents

<b>Chapter 1: A state of discontent</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Manifestations of emptiness</b>	<b>11</b>
Emptiness today	11
Problems in the schools	15
Problems with creativity	25
Problems in the workplace	26
Problems in the political sphere	30
Problems with despots and terrorists	33
Problems in the place of worship	37
Problems of intolerance and hate crime	41
Problems of mass killing	42
Problems of loneliness and meaninglessness	51
Challenges in the treatment of depression	53
The hidden element in addiction	56
A new look at obsessions and compulsions	58
A secret in eating disorders	61
Bipolar confusion	64
ADHD in a frenetic world	66
The challenges in getting help	67
<b>Chapter 3: The common denominator</b>	<b>69</b>
The overwhelming complexity of treatment	69
Common denominator in law enforcement	72

Reducing recidivism	74
Making sense of chronic medical issues	76
The central focus of psychotherapy	79
Updating a classical view	80
Starting with connectivity	84
From poor connectivity to emptiness	86
5-item subjective emptiness scale	87
From emptiness to disorders	88
The timelessness of emptiness	89
The search for effective solutions	91
DSA treatment approach	92
<b>Chapter 4: A cloud over connectivity</b>	<b>95</b>
The phony connection	95
The rescue exhaustion	96
<b>Chapter 5: The 3 boxes</b>	<b>105</b>
Box 1: Connect for survival	106
The fundamentals of connectivity	106
Assembling the cup	111
In good functioning	112
Probing barriers to connectivity	114
Autism spectrum as a prototype of poor connectivity	115
Trauma, abuse, and neglect block connectivity	116
Genetics determine our requirements for connectivity	119
Distractions in daily life as hurdles to connectivity	121
Despair can impede connectivity	122
Secrets and lies suppress connectivity	124
Crisis and connectivity are mutually exclusive	126
Drugs and alcohol hinder connectivity	130
The digital conundrum in connectivity	132
The multigenerational problems of connectivity	133
When connectivity fails	137

Box 2: Trust, security, and belonging	139
Trust versus mistrust	140
Insecurity	141
Loss of belonging	143
Feeling adrift in the grade school years	145
Box 3: The onset of emptiness	147
Emptiness as a universal human feature	147
From an embryonic cup	149
Punctures to the third box	150
Probing emptiness	151
Misinterpretation of emptiness	154
In mild emptiness	155
Emptiness without overt trauma	157
Displacement as coping	160
Loss of productive activities	161
Loss of creativity	164
Lack of empathy	165
Addressing clinical psychiatric conditions	166
Insatiable filling	169
Becoming paranoid	173
Filling the void with intense activities	174
Awakening of anger	182
Externalized acting out	183
Tolerance and risk taking	187
Death is around the corner	189
Interpersonal paralysis	199
High risks in treatment	204
A most pernicious condition	209
Psychosis	215
The denial	216
The concept of connection is perplexing	219

<b>Chapter 6: Healing—The 3 steps</b>	<b>221</b>
Step 1: My feeling—accept and contain	223
Step 2: My soothing—Let time pass	228
Step 3: My connection	238
Making amends	245
Enough is enough	247
Babies do the 3 steps	252
Focus on safety and problem solving in times of crisis	255
3 steps in daily life	256
Not all cases work out as planned	258
Now you are healing	263
Constitutional connectivity	264
<b>Chapter 7: The therapist’s role in DSA</b>	<b>267</b>
DSA as a treatment starting point	268
Describing feelings earnestly	270
Original anger engenders emptiness	274
Connectivity first—everything else follows	277
Borderline and narcissistic personality disorders	279
Therapists can’t always connect	283
Family system in DSA	284
In summary	286
<i>References</i>	295
<i>Index</i>	307
<i>About the author</i>	311

# Prologue

Life is changing faster than we can emotionally cope. Scientific and technological advancements have improved health, longevity, and quality of living but not necessarily the quality of life. War, terrorism, intolerance, and crime can all be barometers of discontent. Widespread anxiety, depression, suicide, and addiction speak to our collective unhappiness. Due to survival, humans have evolved the requirement for strong emotional connectedness. On the contrary, modern living is often a departure from our constitutional design. The human need for connectivity is at odds with our helter-skelter life. Developmental and Systems Approach (DSA) is a template for effective living and the understanding of emotions that embroil us. It is also an outline to contemplate the problems of our world.

The work presented here is for those who are looking for a way to comprehend the perplexing emotional challenges that we all face in daily life. Whether it is the baffling low mood that stubbornly refuses to lift, the persistent feeling of loneliness, the confounding addiction that defies conventional treatment, the inexplicable lack of motivation for work and school, or the befuddling frustration in relationships, we all need a more satisfactory explanation and insight about these issues. Furthermore, this is a parenting book to help your child develop healthy independence and confidence. This is also a manual for any endeavor that requires high performance. The national security agencies and law enforcement can better consider the criminal mindset and terrorist impetus through this conception. This discussion sits at the intersection of the bio-psycho-social study of human emotions in order to enhance mental health through overcoming unauthentic relationships.

Many have wondered if our individual unhappiness may forewarn a deepening discontent of civilization. In the developed world with food,

shelter, and life security, we now have more time to engage in leisure activities. In spite of our feverish searching, most of us are still struggling with a lack of meaning in life. When meaninglessness is underscored by emotional impassivity, it changes from an existential issue to a mental health problem. Through this work, we will differentiate emptiness from meaninglessness and attempt to discover the profound grip emptiness has on humanity.

Thongs of individuals, blaming their unhappiness on external factors, may act out against parents, spouses, children, schools, communities, nations, and the world. Such deeds will of course trigger anger and vengeance, which fuel the endless frustrations on a planet that cannot find peace; we read about these stories in the news every day. When an individual commits an act of travesty in our society, we become engrossed in media hype and react with all degrees of revulsion. We then turn to professional pundits for answers only to hear the same collective sigh that it is unspeakable evil assaulting the foundations of our religious, social, and cultural institutions. Subsequently, in the name of justice, we take retribution and blood continues to spill.

A more enlightened approach may look like this—societal peace will not happen without general satisfaction, and general satisfaction cannot be realized without individual emotional contentment, and individual emotional contentment will elude us without connectivity. From a DSA perspective, the problems of our external world run parallel to the problems of our internal world. The solution to individual serenity and social harmony is hidden in plain sight. Human beings have suffered from aversive inner tension (the feeling of emptiness) for as long as we have been aware of ourselves but have never given it the rightful attention. It is perhaps this sort of unsettling quandary that has launched many mystics in the search for purpose and meaning to life. Yet, the quest to understand this diffuse hollowness belongs to all of us.

DSA explores the necessity for a paradigm shift in our current ways of thinking regarding emotions and behavior. Importantly, we need to redefine what constitutes baseline mood tones and what role feelings play in our daily life. For many, their “normal” baseline can be the state of constant *insidious tension*. In this work, DSA delineates a broader way of looking at emotional problems by taking aversive inner tension (AIT) into

consideration. This notion applies not only to those diagnosed with psychiatric conditions but also to anyone who feels frustrated and ineffective in daily life. The *emptiness conjecture* suggests that defining and confirming the existence of emptiness are beyond the scope of our capabilities today, but its presence lives in the countless stories shared by writers and thinkers throughout human history. Therefore, we must know how to listen to these voices and work on an approach that resonates with our internal state in order to discover true fulfillment.

The inner tension variously known as feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness, and chronic boredom can also be intensely felt as numbness, lifelessness, and emptiness. This distress disguised as anguish misleads us into blaming others for this toxic irascibility. What if most misdeeds can be traced back to a form of subtle emotional tension? Such is the manner in which the most harmful emotional state and the most pernicious social issues are wrapped up in stealth cloaking, go unnoticed, or are misidentified. Many in our community and even seasoned mental health professionals would find this notion difficult to embrace, but to reorganize our thinking beyond establishment ideas will be controversial in the outset. Then, we must exercise the will to address the basis of emptiness even if it is unsettling. Making cognitive and behavioral changes will not contribute to lasting contentment without concurrently acknowledging the inner strife we call emptiness.

When putting out a forest fire, one must understand the accelerant, the dry underbrush, which contributes to the spread of this fire. Otherwise, one will put out one fire only to find ten more on a nearby knoll; this is true of doing psychotherapy as well. Psychotherapeutic processing about the troubles of everyday life can be invaluable, and in-depth exploration of past stories may yield new insights, but there is a need for a unifying approach that can tie together the biological, psychological, and social factors to explain the broader human suffering. DSA places an emphasis on the loss of connectivity and the resultant feeling of emptiness as the primary axis of treating a range of mental health issues as well as comprehending the widespread discontent in our society.

Many people make the presumption that they connect well in life; they maintain this stance even when their relationship world is obviously unfulfilling. Are we so prideful that we are prepared to cling to questionable

fellowship? With a little imagination, we can all picture how an array of life issues may potentially obstruct interrelationship. Will our walls come tumbling down if we face the possibility that our connections are faulty? Finding out the truth of interpersonal disjunction is the least of our problems in proportion to our suffering.

A life renewed is within our grasp. The social synapse can be bridged. As humans, we have inherited a basic requirement to live in a manner that is consistent with the biological demand for adequate connectivity. The study of affiliation will allow us to achieve top performance and boost contentment. This special method is specific and compact in order to be easily useful to people of all ages. Many treatment programs claim to be evidence based, offer life-altering changes, or at least help you cope. One spiritual guide aptly wrote, “How do we know that what we are hearing is actually trustworthy? Perhaps we are wasting our time or being misled. Perhaps we are involved in a fraud. There is no answer to such doubts, no authority that can be trusted. Ultimately, we can trust only in our own basic intelligence” (Trungpa 1976, p.130).

“Every book, if it is anything at all, is an argument: an articulate arrow of words, fledged and notched and newly anointed with sharpened stone, speeding through paragraphs to its shimmering target” (Lewis et al. 2000). DSA is a therapy modality that seeks to bring transformation through interpersonal collaboration. It is based on the integrated nature of human interactions and draws strongly from our knowledge of the family system. Emotional growth cannot take place in an atmosphere of blame and reactivity. DSA advocates approaching life with purposeful anticipation and pro-active planning, as opposed to *simply coping* when things turn out poorly.

Without meaningful reciprocal interpersonal connectivity, we are all essentially alone. This has serious implications for our mental health. The greatest hope for individual happiness and societal stability rests in the daily work addressing aversive inner tension from a developmental perspective. We need to dream about and then engineer a conduit for global social synapse that will truly fulfill our manifest destiny. DSA has not only been successfully applied to treatment for depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, eating disorders, and addictions but is also relevant in understanding malevolence and geopolitical clashes across our planet. As a construct for better mental health, DSA seeks to identify feelings accurately, develop motivation for change, and foster a return to connectivity.

## Chapter 1

# A state of discontent

“The conscious life of the mind is of small importance  
in comparison with its unconscious life.”

—Sigmund Freud

From antiquity to the present time, many philosophers, writers, thinkers, and scientists have striven to understand the operations behind human emotions. The mammalian brain is distinctive in the ability to appreciate feelings. Most mammals care about their progeny and will protect even at the price of self-sacrifice. Beyond basic survival, mammals exhibit emotions, have companionship preferences, and experience love (Bekoff 2000). Many primates raise their young together, forage side by side, and seem to really enjoy each other’s company, the result of evolving beyond the reptilian brain (to run from potential threats) and developing the limbic brain (the ability to survey the mental state of others). With the combination of the limbic brain and the new brain (neo-cortex), humankind became a creature that detested loneliness. In conscious and subconscious manners, we all react to perceived disruptions in relationships with powerful aversion. The following is a story of fractured connectivity and chronic discontent.

**Vanessa**, a 72-year-old woman in an alcohol detox program, conveyed with glistening eyes that she felt a great deal of regret for “not living right.” She went on to explain that “I worked hard all my life, and now in retirement, I am not able to relish the peace that I deserve.” Early in her teaching career, feeling bored by conventional jobs, she set out on a globe-trotting adventure to teach all over the world. She travelled extensively

during every school break. Trouble began when she lubricated her daily life and those fancy trips with alcohol since college. She felt easily bored and drowned out the desolation with alcohol. Vacations and travel were convenient excuses for her to be further inebriated. She did not realize the seriousness of her problem until recent years when she could no longer physically tolerate drinking anymore.

In this setting, she came face-to-face with a feeling that she had not wanted to confront through most of her adult life. Despite being a former teacher, she was at a loss for words to describe the emotions she tried to numb with alcohol for so long. "I could never feel content. I left my family and friends behind to work in foreign countries. From then on, I kept moving from one country to another and still could not find the 'it' that I wanted." She diffidently added, "Well, drinking was part of the social scene, the travel, and the culture. It was a lifestyle." Of course, through the fog of it all, she seemingly had a good time, but in her retirement, she resigned herself to a life lived without true passion or worthwhile memories, no wonder the regrets. As her physical health failed her, she was advised to stop the use of alcohol, but travel absent the prospect of drinking felt like a feckless exercise. The truth was that life minus the exaggerated effect of alcohol allowed the morose deadness within to surface towards her consciousness.

As a youngster, Vanessa grew up in a middle-class neighborhood with her parents and three siblings. In spite of the external appearance, this was not a happy family life. She had an older brother who was frequently in severe conflict with their parents. He was often angry and defiant, and this would inevitably lead to loud yelling and screaming from all involved. She recalled running to her room, closing the door, and then hiding in her closet to get away from the intensity of emotions just outside. Even then, she could still hear all the scary and hateful words being thrown around like daggers. In this environment, she retreated into her alternative reality and spent much of her time reading and dreaming about a perfect world in which there were only exciting places and friendly people.

Well, things did not work out so well. Vanessa was happy to be at college and tried to be a good student. Away from home, life was far quieter and could even be described as tranquil. However, the calm was eerie and discomfiting. She was listless and unfocused. She often left her studies to the last minute and then crammed with huge intensity; in this manner, she was less likely to experience disinterest, get distracted, or quit. This way of getting through school gave her a lot of time on her hands. It was during this period that she discovered her constant boredom, restlessness, and discontent could be alleviated by alcohol. She was 18 and drinking became a core part of her life.

**Discussion:** Without confronting the feeling of emptiness, it remains an emotion that lives at the edge of one's consciousness. The enduring essence of negative inner tension, that we call emptiness, is with us until such a time that we release it through purposeful treatment. For Vanessa, it was not until a chance encounter through a psychiatric consultation, while hospitalized for detox, that she talked about this perpetually uncomfortable feeling of angst. She would never describe herself as anxious or depressed; nevertheless, there was *a sense of mild tension* within that she could not banish except through alcohol.

Growing up, Vanessa suffered from severe rupture in her ability and willingness to authentically connect with important people in her life. Such disruptions can result from the lack of being treated with sensitivity and validation or from the truly egregious maltreatment and traumatic events in life. Most people react to abuse with total or partial emotional shutdown and the associated loss of affiliation. From a developmental perspective, we must account for the neurobiological design of our brain to understand that poor connectivity and loneliness can contribute to the formation of chronic emotional emptiness. Vanessa's parents were not able to provide the sort of sensitive and attentive parenting while distracted by chaos in the household. The purpose of this story is not to blame but to emphasize that we must be mindful of persistent disharmony. A lifetime of unhappiness may follow the inadvertent loss of meaningful relating and connecting.

At one time or another, we have all wished for more contentment in life. Do you feel tired, bored, and aimless? Do you question the meaning of your existence in the context of your suffering? Do you feel lonely even when surrounded by people? Do you want to feel more assured about who you are? Do you want to appreciate others for who they are? Do you want to be able to enjoy and relish the little things of daily living? Do you want fulfillment without searching for the extremes? Do you want to be more effective in learning and at work? Do you want to find greater creativity? Do you want to feel happy about what you have achieved and have the confidence that you will accomplish more? Finding satisfaction in all of the above can be contingent on one crucial element that we take for granted.

Surprisingly, what ails us may be something very subtle and ephemeral. "Let us consider, for instance, 'Sunday neurosis,' that kind of depression which afflicts people who become aware of the lack of content in their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves becomes manifest." "Such widespread phenomena as depression, aggression and addiction are not understandable unless we recognize the existential vacuum underlying them" (Frankl 1984, p.112). Interestingly, in my own clinical work, it was a 13-year-old boy who first brought up the phrase "Sunday feeling" when we were talking about his general sense of malaise.

Then there are the age-old clinical issues. Many people who suffer from psychological, behavioral, and addiction disorders have undergone numerous psychotherapeutic efforts as well as pharmacologic treatments. Abstaining from use and attending support groups may be insufficient to maintain sobriety. Practicing positive thinking and correcting thinking errors still may not generate compelling behavioral changes. Uncovering underlying insecurities has not translated into effective living. Processing past trauma and acquiring valuable insights may not improve functioning. Frequently, while forcing corrections into place, one discovers that true inner peace and happiness are still lagging. People often complain, "My therapist expects me to think myself out of my conundrum and use my coping skills. I try to do that, but I still don't feel better." Coping is only a part of the solution and is primarily for the short term; healing comes from meaningful interpersonal collaboration.

**Frederick** at 17 years of age was an articulate boy who presented with an air more consistent with a man of 25. He was quite

social but complained of often feeling “awkward,” as if he did not belong amongst his friends. Despite his pessimistic outlook, all evidence pointed to the contrary; people experienced him as confident, likable, and humorous. Yet, his feelings of unease had prompted him to seek help from several therapists over the years. With each round of psychotherapy, he grew more restless and discouraged by the lack of progress towards relief from the “grayness” within. His family and friends had increasing concerns; their initial view of him as a curious teen, in search of the self, turned into genuine alarm when his general discontent took on a melancholic tone.

He exuded palpable despair when speaking about his constant vague discomfort. Interestingly, despite his report of feeling vacuous, his overall ability to function socially and academically was largely intact. He still maintained a smiling and cordial outward appearance. He slept well, and his appetite remained good. In fact, eating was one of the few joys he had in life. He denied feeling hopeless, and suicide never crossed his mind. By clinical criteria, he seemed unlikely to be suffering from depression. One could argue that he in fact suffered from dysthymic disorder or bipolar disorder type II, although none of these labels quite characterized the despondence he depicted. Sometimes his family and friends wondered if “he is just looking for attention” or that “he is a glass-half-full person.”

Hence began his long odyssey through the world of psychotherapy at this young age. As he told his story to each therapist, he had a doubtful sense that they were able to relate to or comprehend his suffering. He could not portray his emotional pain, and they were unsuccessful at guiding him towards verbalizing his feelings. What he really wanted to say seemed maddeningly out of his reach. Labeling his feeling as depression felt overly simplistic and amiss.

Finally, treatment from a DSA perspective allowed him to describe his emotional experiences to a satisfying degree. Continuing in this approach to treatment, he became more comfortable with himself as he recognized the roots of his discontent. Applying words to a sense of inconsequentiality took

the murkiness out of relentless frustrations. Next, he had to learn to mollify and heal this malaise. His work in this respect involved his family and friends to their delight and relief.

Through this effort, Frederick and his family learned that no one was at fault for his suffering. They came to realize there were the vicissitudes of life situations that, in combination with individual design, could infringe on true togetherness. For example, Fredrick longed to process feelings and conflicts, while his family abhorred talking about emotions which they viewed as sentimental and frivolous. As a result, he often carried resentment over feeling invalidated and turned inwardly for solace. Under such circumstances, the disjunction of inaccurate or inadequate attunement proved exceedingly painful. After all, the need for affiliation has been etched deeply into our DNA. Upon understanding the nature of his unease, he can now set forth in earnest to conquer his emptiness.

**Discussion:** Frederick's story had a good treatment outcome. He had the keen emotional sensitivity to realize the subtle feeling of inanition at a youthful age and had the survival curiosity to seek corrective measures. Under the guidance of his DSA therapist, he learned to differentiate between the chronic aimless feeling of emptiness and the time-limited symptoms of clinical depression. Having had this introduction to treatment, he was better prepared to work in renewed vigor.

Periodically, individuals in therapy come away feeling further misunderstood by the world. This frequently happens when all the discussions about feelings revolve around big emotions such as anger, sadness, worry, jealousy, happiness, excitement, and so on. Many people inflicted with a sense of emptiness are aware that something more than an ordinary mood is involved. If unguided, some people may misidentify the emptiness ache as "depression," although in doing so, much confusion comes into play in treatment. Emotional hollowness can take place as a single entity but may commonly run parallel to major depressive disorder. Clinical depression most often arises from genetic predisposition occurring jointly with acute situational crisis or history of trauma; at times depression can be attributed to

chronic emptiness. On the other hand, emptiness, as a stand-alone entity, principally portends developmental emotional retreat. Thus, treatment for depression and vacuousness can take different tracks.

People who can benefit from this work are not limited to individuals suffering from major mental health symptoms. Many people feeling unhappy and discontent come to think, "There must be something wrong with me that I should feel this way." Even so, their boredom and inattention seem mild in comparison with disorders such as depression, anxiety, panic, psychosis, and manic/depressive mood swings; as a result, many people hide their true misery and suffer quietly. No wonder these individuals feel misunderstood and forsaken. Often underestimated, living with emptiness is an invisible internal torment no less than other psychiatric ailments.

DSA was developed for individuals with major psychiatric conditions as well as those who experienced chronic discontent and unhappiness. In some sense, those living with ponderous emptiness feel marginalized because limited help has been available to them. Frederick represented such an individual. DSA therapy worked for Frederick because he could satisfy his need for validation without taxing the emotional quotient of his family.

When we ignore the issues of loneliness, we are inviting a host of complications into our lives (Table 1.1). Unfortunately, in society today, alienation is becoming an endemic issue that few have the courage to name. We prize independence and individualism to the point that anything less is shameful; thus, we would rather endure solitude in order to feign stoicism. The encroachment of desolation can be difficult to recognize until isolation causes serious trouble. Quite often, people say, "I have loving friends. We are always in touch." Sometimes we use "love" in the context of coercion or cultural expectation, but love as well as care, help, support, empathy, and compassion may not equate to reciprocal attunement. Currently, a common mantra to refute loneliness sounds like this, "I am not alone. See how many friends and social media followers I have." We are so used to describing our relationships on such superficial terms that we start to believe the

statement “if it is said, then it must be so.” This explains how one can feel so “close” to everyone yet feel so lonesome.

Look at humanity objectively and you will see far more unhappiness than is apparent on the surface. Only a miniscule number of troubled people look for professional help; everyone else limps by silently. We are a global society that is mystified by the loss of peace and tranquility. Our collective anguish is translating into endless wars and evil doing. Understanding that there are issues related to race, economics, religion, natural resources, and power play is important at one level, but many of these problems are exacerbated by some degree of underlying emotional moroseness that plagues all humankind. In our world, relationships are inherently intertwined so that happiness for the individual will not happen until there is aggregate contentment. No one can be truly gratified living in a war-torn country or a highly polarized state.

The quest for the individual to seek happiness and fulfillment in a vacuum is irrational in the DSA framework. People who hoard, swindle, and rob from individuals of lesser means or power may achieve momentary satisfaction, but they suffer from intense neurosis in a lonely and paranoid world. The same sentiment can be said of a person seeking psychological help for self-improvement; one cannot achieve maximum benefit without including one’s family and social system.

The disposition of interdependence is not the same as dependence. Dependence causes others to be leery of one’s motivations and usually invites artificial caretaking out of sympathy or compassion but offers minimal attunement. The result of dependence is usually emotional disjunction. DSA teaches that through healthy independence we can achieve quality interdependence, accomplished with authentic connectivity.

The idea of giddy happiness is not our purpose here. How “happy” you are is dependent on your personal expectation and constitutional makeup. Some people have a cheerful outlook about life, can laugh at themselves when appropriate, and are able to enjoy every small thing in life to the point that they appear joyful all the time. Study them carefully and you will find that they embody what DSA suggests about best practice for living and more. However, for the rest of us, adequate contentment is already a worthy goal to achieve. Gifted psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor Dr. Viktor Frankl reminded us “...man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life.”

**Table 1.1****Are you experiencing nagging dissatisfactions about life?**


---

• I am bored and restless at work/school.	• I can't find my creativity.
• I never like my jobs.	• I keep quitting relationships.
• I have trouble with my co-workers.	• I am never satisfied with what I have.
• I don't feel like a part of my family.	• I feel lonely even when I am around people.
• I don't really trust anyone.	• I don't like myself.
• I can't focus on any one thing.	• I am jealous of what others have.
	• I can't find the meaning to my life.

---

Recent theories of brain development proposed that our sophisticated brain came out of the necessity to navigate the intricacies of social negotiations. If so, we might presume that our ancestors spent much of their energy on carefully observing, monitoring, sensing, communicating, and tuning into one another in order to assure simple survival. From the earliest time, the individuals who were unskilled at establishing camaraderie would perish or fail to reproduce. Those who did well in connectivity would ultimately be rewarded by protective alliance and the opportunity to pass on their genetic material to future generations. This fundamental social evolution is Interpersonal Connectivity 1.0.

We are currently living in Interpersonal Connectivity 2.0. Overall, this period is probably only a few hundred years in comparison with the eons involved in Interpersonal Connectivity 1.0. In the pre-modern and modern era, we have begun to experience many societal changes. With rapid and dramatic shifts in transportation, energy, communication, entertainment, industrialization, and food production, we do not need the same communal structure in everyday life anymore. This progress changes our social contract with one another; our survival no longer requires close family ties and village cooperation to raise the barn or keep food on the table. This sets the stage for Interpersonal Connectivity 2.0.

Researchers in psychology and neurobiology have been delving into the workings of the mind to understand severe emotional problems and better dissect the wide-ranging discontents of civilization. Clinical evidence suggests that aversive inner tension is a chronic condition contributing to persistent mental and physical suffering; many people describe this