

What's True and What's Just a Habit?

We humans have amazing brains! Most of us know that, but we often don't spend much time thinking about why that's so. One of the amazing things our brain does is automate common processes so we don't need to waste the very precious and limited conscious awareness we have on mundane activities we've done hundreds of times before. Consciousness brings one's full attention to some aspect of a task or situation. It would be both a huge waste and terribly overwhelming if we had full and complete awareness of every aspect of our experience. How would you get anything done if you were constantly distracted by sensation each time your clothes moved against your skin or by the individual movements of every single hair on your head! Automation allows us to do even highly complex things, like driving, grasping and manipulating objects, and walking on 'auto-pilot' so we can save our keenest focus for the really important stuff. This is truly an amazing ability, but it can become a problem when we sometimes allow [automated processes](#) to continue simply because they're already in place.



Belief systems are a good example of this because many of them are automated processes that we assume are valid even when they're inaccurate. We are forever taking information from the outside world, comparing it to what we think we know and then adapting, somehow. We say we've "learned something" when we consciously change a pre-existing belief to fit with new information. We say we're "biased" when we discount, dismiss, or outright ignore new information that doesn't fit

with those existing beliefs. Sometimes, we simply stop even thinking that something else might be possible when we've been in the habit of believing it to be a certain way for a long time. We call some of these "core beliefs" because they can become fundamental to who we accept ourselves to be as people.

Core beliefs develop early in life and are usually pretty black-or-white. They can include ideas that "I'm not good enough", "I'm weak", or "There's something wrong with me". Even though they tend to generate a lot of feelings and can have a big influence on the decisions we make (for example, deciding to avoid doing something difficult because we don't think we can do it), they usually don't reflect the whole story of who or what a person is. At this time of year, when so many people rethink the ways they're living and begin to plot a course for the future, it becomes important to really look at those ideas we have about ourselves. Who knows, you might be far more than you've been giving yourself credit for?

Dr. Ian Shulman, Psychologist

We can help you explore and change your core beliefs. Contact Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment to learn how.

[What Are Smartphones Doing to Young People?](#)

Last week, the wonderful, CBC radio program [The Sunday](#)

[Edition](#) featured a discussion between host Michael Enright and guests, psychologist [Jean Twenge](#) and Canadian technology writer [Clive Thompson](#) entitled "[What Are Smartphones Doing to Young People?](#)". Dr. Twenge is the author of [iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy and completely unprepared for adulthood](#) and Mr. Thompson is the author of [Smarter than you think: How technology is changing our minds for the better](#).



They talked about a growing body of data showing that by 2012, about 2 years after smartphones and tablets had saturated the consumer market, research was showing clear spikes in the numbers of teenagers reporting increased loneliness, depression, suicide and self-harming behaviours, as well as decreased reports of happiness and life satisfaction. There remains no clear evidence that any of those challenges are caused directly by cell phone use (or, that any of them directly cause teens to use their phones more often!) but the relationship is now considered to be fact. Until researchers can identify absolute reasons to explain what is happening to our teens, the speakers were left to speculate on their ideas about how the technology might be impacting teens so dramatically.

One possible cause mentioned was that teen users, many of whom spend between 6 and 8 hours each day 'on screens' might be leaving themselves too little time to engage in other activities that actually boost resilience and good mental health, like having face-to-face interactions and sleeping. It is well-known that sleep has a clear benefit on resistance to stress and depression, and close, intimate relationships provide great personal support. They also discussed how the technology giants behind smartphones and the apps they support


are motivated to earn profit and not necessarily to do what is in the best interests of teen users and families.

The speakers offered important tips for parents, including the very basic, but potent direction to simply insist that teens “put it down” and give themselves time to do non-screen activities. They discussed setting daily time limits and tech-free zones, and noted how parents themselves get to make the decisions about at what age they will give their younger children access to their own smartphones and devices. The speakers encouraged parents to be critical consumers of technology themselves and to never forget that they are themselves the primary models their children will look to when seeking examples of hope to use a smartphone.

[Dr. Ian Shulman](#) is a clinical psychologist and is the Clinic Director of Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment in Oakville, Ontario.

Teens and Anxiety

Denizet-Lewis, Benoit. “Why Are More American Teenagers Than Ever Suffering From Severe Anxiety.” *The New York Times Magazine*, 11 Oct. 2017.



**Why Are More
American Teenagers
Than Ever Suffering
From Severe Anxiety?**

Parents, therapists and schools are struggling to figure out whether helping anxious teenagers means protecting them or pushing them to face their fears.

By BENJAMIN SVETKEY / OCT. 11, 2017

[The New York Times Magazine](#) recently featured an article asking the question why so many teens seem to be as anxious as they are. The author cites the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) in describing anxiety as “the most common mental-health

disorder in the United states” and reports that the [American College Health Association](#) found that 62% of undergraduate students felt “overwhelming anxiety” at some time in the previous year. Parents want to know: What’s going on with our kids and what can we do about it?

The Times article goes on to distinguish between the anxiety we all have that functions as a warning system for danger and the overwhelming experience of fear many have that can interfere with daily living. The former is quite normal: When we perceive a threat, the body activates to provide sufficient resources (like, attention, focus and strength) needed to address the problem, then settles back down to rest once the danger has passed. The latter results when people get into the mental habits of over-estimating the dangerousness of situations and under-estimating their own ability to cope. This can contribute to situations where adolescents are “driving themselves crazy”, [always scanning for threats](#) and trying to avoid anything that looks like it might be overwhelming. And that’s where the author suggests social media and smartphones play a role.

Social media, like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat all provide anxious teenagers with limitless opportunities to compare themselves and their lives against their peers – or at least what their peers say their lives are. People are notorious for curating what they post, selecting only the perfect photo, showing the perfect moment and attaching the perfect comment. Even though many teens know (from their own experience) that what they see on other people’s social media feeds isn’t completely ‘real’, it does become the benchmark against what anxious teens try to compare themselves.

Smartphones and other tech also allow worried teens ample opportunity to avoid the direct interactions they fear even though it’s direct experience with social interactions that actually teach teenagers how to manage socially.

This is an interesting [article](#) and worth reading. Parents and teens wanting to learn more about how to cope with anxiety and worry can [contact us here at Shift](#). We see more anxiety than any other clinical issue and teach [proven strategies](#) to help people cope with fear and worry.

[Dr. Ian Shulman](#)

Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment

Fruit Expectations

It can be really frustrating when other people do things we don't agree with and we can find ourselves wishing they would just 'get with the program' and do as we expect them to. It's way too easy to fall into the trap of blaming the other person in moments like that, but staying in a place of blame doesn't get rid of frustrations and can hurt relationships when resentment creeps in. Clients often ask me for dating advice about how to change their partners and, believe it or not, I often tell them to look at changing their own beliefs and expectations first. Your expectations of the people you love might be the thing contributing most to your own frustrations.



I often explain this using the example of fruit. When you go to eat a piece of fruit, you pretty much know what to expect because of past experiences with other pieces of that same type of fruit. Your history guides your expectations of the

future and sets the stage for what you believe will happen each time you peel a banana or bite into an apple. Your satisfaction, your pleasure, even your sense of comfort is directly related to how good the fit is between your expectation of what will happen and whatever actually does happen. We feel reassured and good when there's a good match and dissatisfied or cautious when there isn't.

People tend to feel most ready to change themselves when they feel good enough exactly as they are!

The same can be said about relationships. I often see clients setting expectations for the other people in their lives based on what the clients think makes the most sense – that is, basically, what a person thinks someone else 'should' do in a given moment. Not surprisingly, when those others behave differently, clients tell me they feel frustrated, disappointed and often hurt. Its at moments like that when couples are most likely to argue. As a result, I regularly hear clients wishing that their partner would change, and saying that all the problems between them would just be gone if only the other person behaved differently. While that would be nice, it's probably not realistic. We have very little ability to control what other people do. We get way more traction by changing ourselves and the expectations we have of others. While it's true that your unreliable friend might continue to be unreliable, you might suffer less (and contribute to fewer arguments) by expecting that instead of setting yourself up for continued disappointment by hoping that person will suddenly be different.

This doesn't mean that we should give in or give up on expecting those people in our lives to ever change or evolve. Change does happen, it just happens over time, and when we wait for and allow that gradual evolution to occur, we (and our important people) can feel happier together in the meantime. Interestingly enough, people tend to feel most ready

to change themselves when they feel good enough exactly as they are! Returning to the example of fruit, my expectation of what apples should taste like now is different from what I knew apples to taste like years ago. As the flavours changed over the years, my expectations changed with them – I allowed that mutual evolution to occur by saying “Yep, that’s a bit different from the last one I ate, but that’s still an apple”. So, a piece of advice I can offer on how to improve your relationships is to work at accepting those important people in your life **exactly as they are right now**, even when they do things that differ from what you want. When your loved ones feel like they’re good enough in your eyes, they’ll be most likely to volunteer to change themselves to make you even happier!



[Dr. Kristina Wilder](#)

Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment

We help people make their relationships more successful.

[What I Say and What I Mean](#)



Which way I go depends on me.

The human body's ability to survive is an amazing thing. So many different systems all work together to alert us to possible dangers, trigger instantaneous reactions that automatically sound the alarm, activate the body to deal with threats, then gradually settle everything down and reset it all so the entire system is ready to go the very next time anything seems amiss. Spoken language and logic are important parts of this alarm and defence system, but ones that regularly seem to fade into the background and operate outside of our conscious awareness. This means there can be huge differences between what I say and what I actually communicate to myself.

A trap of language and logic that is typically hidden from view but can activate the body's alarm systems and cause panic occurs with what I call [conditional statements](#). Conditionals refer to situations that can go one way or another, depending on some other variable. You'll know one when you see one because of telltale words like "WHEN" and "BECAUSE".

For example, in a moment of tension, a person who is [afraid of flying](#) might say to herself:

"I will be safe WHEN this plane lands."

If she accepts that statement as true, then the conditional trap means she must also, automatically accept the opposite as

true, namely:

“I am not safe UNTIL this plane lands.”

If she's not safe UNTIL her plane lands, then her brain will immediately conclude:

“I am not safe NOW!”

and her body's anxiety and panic alarms will instantly fire, even when the flight she's on is actually quite safe and fine. All it takes is that one moment of automatic thinking to set off the alarms.

You can learn to cope with your own [anxiety](#) and worry by paying attention to the language you use to talk with yourself. Practice noticing when your mind is making conditional statements like these; notice how they activate your body's arousal systems and then decide – really consciously decide – whether you want to allow yourself to panic or regain your sense of calm. You can't stop your body's alarm systems from turning on automatically, but you can learn to ride out those moments of fear and build better coping skills by paying attention to what you're really saying to yourself.

Let us help you learn to cope better with anxiety, panic and worry.

Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment

[Dr. Ian Shulman](#)

How You View the Bees Matters More Than the Bees

The other day, I was out with friends on a beautiful, sunny, weekend morning. We were on an outdoor patio drinking coffee and eating deliciously sweet cinnamon buns from a local bakery. It was a perfect way to spend a morning, knowing summer is over and cooler, fall temperatures will soon be upon us. I noticed some wasps flying



around nearby were becoming very curious about the cinnamon buns and I decided in that moment to allow them to do whatever they wanted and that I wouldn't interfere with them unless they became a bigger nuisance or a danger.

So, I became curious and decided to just observe them flying about, even when that meant allowing them to land on my food and my hand, and to fly close to my face. That decision, to be curious about them instead of automatically and thoughtlessly assuming they were "DANGEROUS!" enabled me to limit any fears I had about being stung and remain calm. Being calm allowed me to continue enjoying the moment and the company I was with. By contrast, one of the other people there kept inching forward uncomfortably on her seat, reaching out, again and again, to swat at the wasps because I wasn't, and another person couldn't even participate in the conversation because she kept leaping away from the table, frantically flailing her arms every time the wasps came near. She became so upset that, after just a few minutes, she abruptly left for home, complaining about how those "STUPID WASPS" ruined her time with friends. In the end, no one was stung and the rest of us finished our snacks without incident.

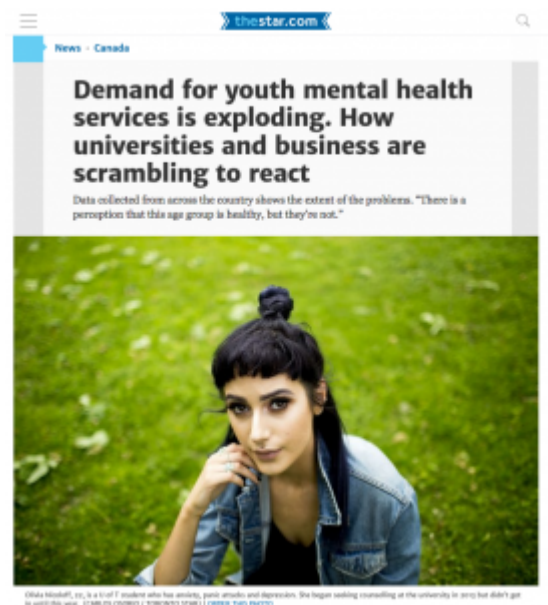
The key here is that the wasps were really just a couple of insects looking for an easy meal and the decisions all three of us made about whether they were GOOD or BAD, DANGEROUS or SAFE were in that moment. We can all cope more effectively with stress, sadness, fear, anxiety, interpersonal conflict, and whatever else we experience in a day by remembering to tune-in to those labels and judgements we make about things, because it's those labels that determine how we feel right then. In any given moment, we can feel positively when we label something as "Oh good!", negatively when we label it with "Oh no!", or neutrally when we just say "Oh."

Let us help you learn to remain calm and deal better with the challenges in your life.

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Demand for Youth Mental Health Services is Exploding

The [Toronto Star](#) featured an article today about how universities and colleges are scrambling to decide what amount of funding will be needed to address the mental health needs of students, quoting a psychiatrist from McMaster University who said the school's counseling service has "lineups out the door and down the hall." The article goes on to describe surveys showing "a 50% increase in anxiety, a 47% increase in depression and an 86% increase in substance abuse" among Ontario university students, as well as a 63% increase in emergency room visits for mental health or substance abuse treatment by people under 24 years of age.



[The author](#) offered several reasons why the mental health needs of today's students might be so much higher. Most related to societal factors, like how this current wave might be the result of years of chronically underfunded child mental health services, or the expected effects of more recent campaigns to reduce the stigma about mental health issues. Others pointed at trends in parenting and the fact that so many young people spend more time interacting with screens and electronics than with each other. Either way, the article was clear in stating that many of our kids feel ill-prepared to handle the challenges of young adult life and that on-campus resources aren't enough to handle the demands.

Anxiety, depression, ADHD and general stress are very common reasons why people see the psychologists and therapists here at Shift. In fact, we see more anxiety and depression than any other issues and teach skills young people can use to become more resilient. We also have an assessment team geared specifically toward exploring why students with academic

issues might be struggling in school. Our services are covered by extended health benefits insurance and we can usually arrange for a first appointment within 1 to 2 weeks. Call us if you're concerned about your student or get in touch [here](#).

www.shiftct.com Dr. Ian Shulman
Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment Oakville is a psychology practice that helps students to succeed.

Filling Time Versus FULLfilling Time? – Dr. Kristina Wilder



As a mother of three young children, I find a frequent challenge in my life is finding time for all of those things I NEED to do and all those things I WANT to do. Many of my clients say they find the same thing in their lives, as well – we live in such a busy world, the time available to do everything feels so limited. Because none of us can create

more time, it's that much more important to ensure that we spend that precious resource on things that feel fulfilling instead of on things that just fill the time.

To understand the difference between fulfilling time versus filling time, I often use the example of watching TV. If your favorite show is on from 8 – 9, how often do you watch the show that comes on at 9 “just because” it's on? In this example, the show you look forward to and get excited by would be the “fulfilling” one and the show after it is just “filling”. Paying closer attention to those choices we make every day can help us cut out things that don't really give us what we're looking for in life and leave more time for those activities and things that really do have a positive impact on mood and quality of life.

So, how do you implement this? One simple way to increase your attention to what you're doing is to periodically check in with yourself throughout the day. When you do, ask yourself “Is this really how I want to be spending my time right now?”. If the answer is no, then you've just given yourself an opportunity to make a positive change. You could also start asking yourself 10 minutes after starting a TV show or activity if you're really enjoying what you're doing just then, or whether you would rather be doing something else.

Increasing your awareness of what you're doing while also keeping in mind what your personal goals are is the aim here. By monitoring your activity “diet” you can see if you are really feeding yourself FULFILLING things, or if you are just FILLING yourself with things that are available but have no real value.

– Dr. Kristina Wilder

#TeamUnbreakable

Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment is very proud to have supported [Cameron Helps](#), a charitable organization whose goal is to protect youth from anxiety, depression and suicide by fostering lifelong exercise through running. Over the past few months, a group of teens attended an after-school program at the [Oak Park Neighbourhood Centre](#) where they



were paired with local runners in a 12-week, learn-to-run program. The group built their endurance, with twice-weekly practice runs, and then competed in the Unbreakable Bold and Cold 5K Run for Youth Mental Health on November 27, 2016. Shift was proud to assist the [#TeamUnbreakable](#) runners by sponsoring the admissions fees for a group of at-risk youth.

More than ever before, we know that exercise is vital to overall health and to good mental health. Research consistently shows that people who exercise regularly have fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety and anger. They have lower rates of psychiatric conditions and report feeling like they have better social connections, another important factor in maintaining good emotional health.

Even small amounts of regular exercise offer big benefits for mental wellbeing. Exercise can restore normal mood when depressed or anxious and because exercise itself is a stressor on the body, regular 'doses' of it leave the body better able to cope when stressful challenges occur in daily life. Exercise also increases the brain's production of serotonin, a

neurotransmitter known to be strongly related to anxiety and depression.

[Support #TeamUnbreakable and Cameron Helps](#) in their efforts to promote mental and emotional wellbeing in youth – and get out and exercise!

Bring Conscious Awareness to Your Actions

Human bodies are exceptionally good at making complicated things routine, like driving cars down busy roadways at the same time that we're singing along to music and adjusting the mirrors. This is really useful because it means I don't have to waste my precious mental resources relearning everyday things, like how to move my hand to some food and bring it up to my mouth. Once I learn how to do it, my body just does it and I'm free to preserve my very precious resource of conscious attention for other really important things, like determining which of those things in the environment is safe or dangerous.

One side effect of this continuous automation system is that once something becomes routine, we basically lose sight of the fact that it's happening. It's almost like it becomes invisible and we forget we're even doing it. This can be challenging when it comes to managing stress. Many people speed up when they feel stressed. They try to cope by getting busier and doing more things more quickly. When we cope like that over and over, without any conscious awareness of what we're actually doing, we can end up making challenging situations even worse.

Here at Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment we work to help you tune in to the kinds of invisible thoughts and pressures that drive you to push yourself too hard, and to those behaviours you might still do even when you'd rather not be doing them. Learning how to pay better attention gives you the chance to make new choices, right now, to decide whether you want to continue performing habits that may be familiar but no longer helpful. Visit us at shiftct.com and see more about how we can help you change behaviours that are getting in your way.

www.shiftct.com

Shift Cognitive Therapy + Assessment helps people to cope with stress, anxiety and depression.