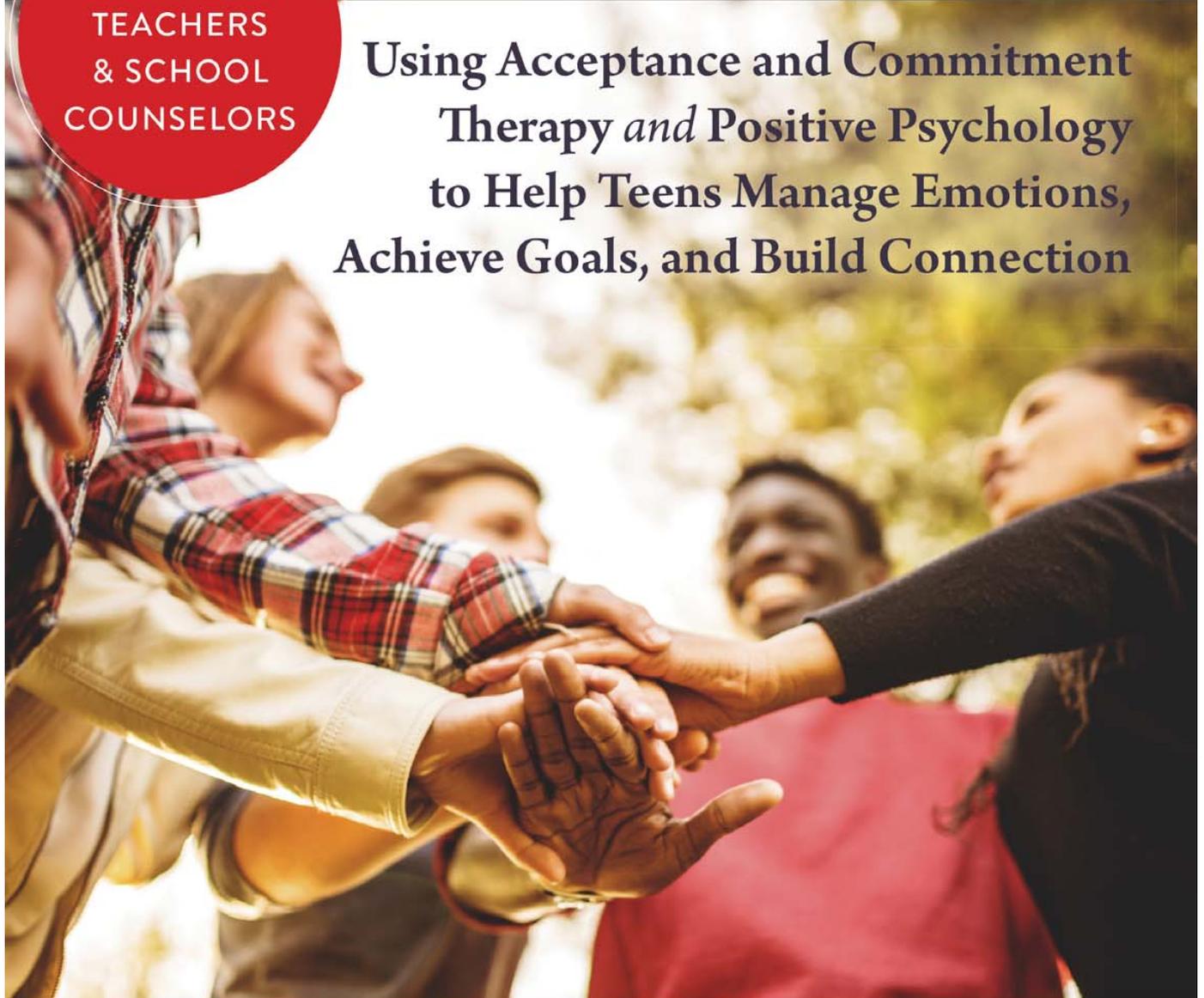


# THE THRIVING ADOLESCENT

FOR  
THERAPISTS,  
TEACHERS  
& SCHOOL  
COUNSELORS

**Using Acceptance and Commitment  
Therapy *and* Positive Psychology  
to Help Teens Manage Emotions,  
Achieve Goals, and Build Connection**



LOUISE L. HAYES, PHD  
JOSEPH CIARROCHI, PHD  
FOREWORD BY STEVEN C. HAYES, PHD

“Reading *The Thriving Adolescent* sets you on a journey into the hearts and minds of young people in a way that is unique, fascinating, and incredibly informative. From the beginning, I felt compelled to reflect upon how, as a therapist, my goal was always to help distressed adolescents adapt to the adult world. This book turns that assumption upside down and asks us instead to help adolescents linger longer in their journey to adulthood by cultivating their abilities to notice what is going on in their world; to detach from destructive, self-focused mental chatter; and to be playful and experimental in their behaviors. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a prosocial approach like the DNA-V model to give us a sense of direction with a distressed adolescent. This book is packed full of revealing insights, interesting case examples, therapist-client dialogues, practical clinical tips, teaching protocols, and worksheets. All of this is done in an easy-to-read, conversational, and entertaining style. *The Thriving Adolescent* addresses the social landscape of adolescence, from the intricacies of developing healthy self-narratives to creating naturally occurring prosocial groups that help adolescents discover the practice of kindness to self and others. This book is a must-read for teachers, school counselors, therapists, and anyone else who wants to help teenagers thrive.”

—**Kirk Strosahl, PhD**, cofounder of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and coauthor of *Inside This Moment* and *In This Moment*

“This book breaks new ground in our understanding of how to nurture the development of adolescents. It translates the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) perspective into a strategy for helping young people develop social and emotional competence. I expect that it will enable schools, families, clinics, juvenile justice works, and communities become much more oriented toward ensuring that young people become caring and productive members of their communities.”

—**Anthony Biglan, PhD**, senior scientist at Oregon Research Institute, and author of *The Nurture Effect*

“This is an excellent resource written by two eminent thinkers and skilled practitioners. Every chapter is filled with creative exercises, metaphors for explaining complex ideas, and scripts that can be fine-tuned for each teenager you’re trying to help. With step-by-step strategies, this book is a road map for leading adolescents toward a better life.”

—**Todd B. Kashdan, PhD**, professor of psychology at George Mason University and coauthor of *The Upside of Your Dark Side*

“This book is not about psychopathology. It is about that struggle for identity and becoming that happens in adolescence. Hayes and Ciarrochi offer a comprehensive developmental approach built on the best available science. It contains well-thought-out theory to ground the work and is packed with tools, transcripts, and real-life examples to make it readily accessible to any teacher, counselor, and health care professional.”

—**Kelly G. Wilson, PhD**, professor of psychology at the University of Mississippi and author of *Mindfulness for Two*

“How I have longed for this book! It’s an invaluable resource for helping teenagers to grow into their full potential and live life full out. This book is an engaging and clear road map with its practical suggestions, worksheets, exercises, and examples. It’s a must-have for teachers, counselors, and health professionals working with adolescents.”

—**Fredrik Livheim**, licensed clinical psychologist, clinical researcher on ACT for teens at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden, and coauthor of *The Mindful and Effective Employee*

“*The Thriving Adolescent* moves beyond traditional behaviorisms to present a new perspective on engaging young people in vitalizing relational ways. The book is rich with ideas at the interface between positive psychology and youth development, and with practical strategies for helping young people identify meaningful goals and life values. Hayes and Ciarrochi map out many useful and concrete pathways for adults to build constructive, facilitating relationships with teenagers that can contribute to flourishing on both sides of the dialogue. Definitely advances the field.”

—**Richard M. Ryan**, professor at the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at the Australian Catholic University

“*The Thriving Adolescent* contains a great deal of wisdom and understanding of young people, and a practical approach to working with them in a developmentally attuned way. There are few clear and practical blueprints for this vital work, and the model the authors have crafted will be a useful addition to the repertoire of clinicians.”

—**Patrick McGorry, AO, MD, PhD, FRCP, FRANZCP**, executive director of Orygen, and professor of youth mental health at the University of Melbourne

“This is a long-needed book. The combination of Hayes’s and Ciarrochi’s expertise in clinical and research work with adolescents contribute to make acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) simple to apply even for those who are new to this third-generation cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) approach. Their DNA-V model is robustly grounded in the ACT research tradition. The authors distill its essence into three core behaviors, making it easy to build psychological flexibility and openness to the world and to any experience (which is basically what is needed by any adolescent in the world). There is no need to be an ACT expert to practice the DNA-V model, but you will become that expert. Exercises and metaphors are specifically tailored within a developmental frame and with adolescence in mind to help the reader become the context that models, instigates, and reinforces DNA skills in young people. This book should be read (and practiced) by any person interested in adolescence, or in being a therapist, counselor, teacher, or simply a parent.”

—**Giovambattista Presti**, associate professor of psychology and coordinator of the undergraduate program in psychology at Kore University of Enna, Italy

“Listen up counselors, teachers, and primary care clinicians. If you care about adolescents and helping them flourish, this book is for you. The authors provide a theoretical basis to support ‘DNA-V conceptualization’ of adolescent evolution, and they make intervention easy with downloadable worksheets. Read it, apply it, and take pride in the fact that you are more able to love, protect, and equip tomorrow’s leaders.”

—**Patricia J. Robinson, PhD**, director of training at Mountainview Consulting Group, and coauthor of *Real Behavior Change in Primary Care*

*Publisher's Note*

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Elements of Thriving

**H**ow can we help young people thrive? We believe that the answer to this question can't come from looking at adult therapeutic models. Such models typically seek to compare "normal adults" to clinical groups and then suggest interventions to make the clinical group more "normal." For example, a number of therapeutic approaches seek to challenge "abnormal," dysfunctional beliefs and replace them with more "normal," functional ones (Beck, 2011; Ciarrochi & Bailey, 2009). From a developmental perspective, this approach makes little sense. It's a bit like trying to figure out how a seed grows into a strong and healthy tree by studying fully grown trees. Such an approach limits our ability to understand the biological and environmental conditions that lead to positive growth in the first place. This book starts with the seed—the child—and seeks to describe the conditions that lead children to develop into strong and healthy young people.

While development is inevitable, thriving is not. As time passes, some young people expand their understanding of the world, while others become increasingly narrow-minded. Some find friends; others retreat into a world of fantasy and loneliness. Some find activities that are challenging and exciting; others find nothing interesting to do.

We can increase thriving. We don't have to settle for a world where a large numbers of young people languish. The world can be changed for the better—and already has been. For example, young people are now safer because society no longer finds it acceptable for parents to beat their children. Young people are also now much smarter than they were in the 1930s (Flynn, 1987), perhaps because of improvements in nutrition and education. What's to stop us from also improving young people's ability to thrive—to develop friendship and love, enjoy the moment, take on challenges, care for themselves, give to others, and have a positive influence on their world?

The last century has seen an explosion of scientific research into the causes of thriving. The key now is to translate that scientific understanding into practice. This book seeks to do just that.

## Developing Flexible Strength

The DNA-V model is shown in figure 1. DNA describes three functional classes of behavior, which we refer to using the metaphorical names discoverer, noticer, and advisor. All three exist in the service of values—the V. DNA behavior is influenced by context, which includes factors in the immediate and historical environment that influence our level of DNA skills, our view of ourselves, and our view of others in our social world. In essence, all of the interventions in this book will teach you how to create contexts that promote DNA skills to build valued behavior.

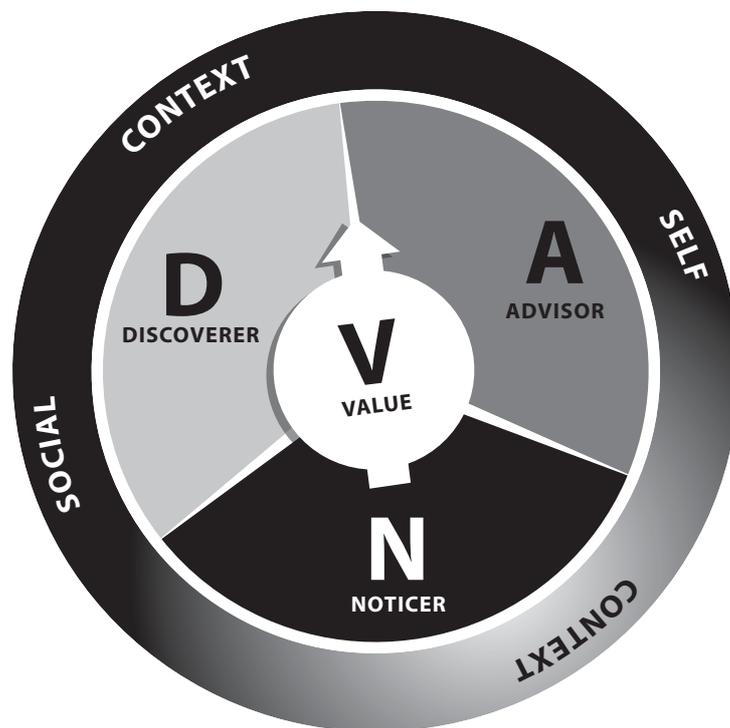


FIGURE 1. DNA-V model.

The ultimate aim of using the skills taught in the DNA-V model is to build psychological flexibility or, to use a term young people can relate to more readily, flexible strength. In adults, psychological flexibility has been described as “the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends” (S. C. Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006, p. 8). For youth, we modify this definition as follows: Psychological flexibility in young people is the ability to utilize DNA skills in a way that promotes growth and builds vitality and valued action.

While our definition is similar to that for adults, it does differ in a few important ways. First, we emphasize growth and the DNA skills needed to grow. We don’t assume

young people have values in the way adults do; rather, they're discovering and creating their values as they journey into adulthood. They're in a stage of learning about thoughts and feelings and what it means to be a human being. They also need to test out new behaviors and explore whether those behaviors lead to valued ends. One of the most efficient ways humans learn is by trying things, so young people must try many new things, and that might include taking risks, trying on new selves, and testing boundaries set by adults.

## This Book's Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations

This book isn't merely a collection of disconnected techniques taken from ACT and positive psychology. Rather, it presents an approach that is grounded in contextual behavioral science, a scientific and pragmatic way of understanding behavior, finding solutions to human problems, and promoting human growth and development. Contextual behavioral science utilizes functional principles and theories to analyze and modify action embedded in its historical and situational context. DNA-V is our distillation of this broad framework into simple processes that young people can understand and apply to their lives. The whole book will unpack this idea, but in the following sections we'll break it down a bit by briefly considering the pillars of the book: evolutionary science, functional contextualism, operant theory, and relational frame theory.

### *Evolutionary Theory*

What if the same simple theory could be used to explain the development of all living things, from humans to algae? Evolutionary theory can do just that (S. C. Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Wilson, 2012). It's based on three principles: variation, selection by consequences, and retention. With these three principles, we can explain how alterations in the environment shape development. More importantly, practitioners can apply these principles to help young people develop their full potential. DNA-V is our user-friendly way of putting these three principles into play.

Let's look at how variation, selection, and retention promote development in two widely different realms: that of rabbits and that of humans. Imagine that one thousand rabbits are released in a snowy area. They differ in color, ranging from brown to white (variation). The lighter rabbits are more likely to survive because they can blend in with the snow (selection). Over time, the lighter rabbits pass on their genes for pale fur to their offspring (retention). In this way, the rabbit population will gradually become paler, with more individuals blending into this snowy environment.

In the realm of humans, instead of looking at development across many generations, let's consider rapid development across just two generations, in the context of one person and her children. Let's say a thirteen-year-old girl moves to a new country. When she

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goes to her new school, the other kids tease her about how she dresses. She desperately wants to fit in, so she tries wearing different types of clothes (variation). Her peers respond extremely positively to some clothes but give her little positive feedback on others (selection). Gradually, she starts to wear the clothes her peers like (retention). She fits in and increases her chances of social success, including eventually finding a mate and reproducing. When she has children of her own, she teaches them the culturally appropriate style of dress through modeling (behavioral transmission) and direct explanation (verbal transmission). Thus, this style of dress is passed down to the next generation (retention). (See Jablonka & Lamb, 2006, for a detailed discussion of the four inheritance systems: genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic.)

This is such a simple theory, yet it's incredibly powerful. It can be summarized like this: We try different behaviors in the world (variation), we are reinforced for doing some things and punished for doing others (selection), and we repeat behaviors that have worked for us in the past (retention). We do these behaviors for the purposes of adapting to our context and, ultimately, surviving. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this theory is that a failure to thrive can be thought of as failures in variation, selection, and/or retention. We'll give you a few examples here, and the rest of the book will illuminate this simple idea.

Young people often become so dominated by their inner experience that they show little variation in behavior. For example, imagine a boy who has one characteristic reaction to social anxiety: avoidance. His anxiety seems to stop him from going to school dances, engaging in extracurricular activities, introducing himself to new people, or trying out for a sports team. He merely sits in his room.

DNA-V provides a way to overcome such rigid responses. It begins by teaching the boy to respond to his inner experience in new ways: to notice such experience and allow it to be, rather than reacting to it. DNA-V then teaches the young person to systematically increase behavioral variation through discovery processes. In the preceding example, the boy may be encouraged to leave his room and begin to contact the physical world. Then natural reinforcers can help him select, or shape, his behavior. He may discover that he loves a particular extracurricular activity and that someone in his class has similar interests. Over time, he learns to live with his social anxiety without letting it restrict his behavior. He changes (variation), learns what behavior works for him (selection), and develops his strengths and grows (retention).

DNA-V teaches young people to select their behaviors based on values rather than on unhelpful impulses or immediate circumstances. For example, a girl might try two rewarding activities: smoking pot and learning to dance. Let's say she can't do both regularly. Which behavior will she select? By clarifying her values, the DNA practitioner can help her think in terms of what she cares about and what sort of person she wants to be. She learns to think about both the short term (*What do I love now?*) and the long term (*What will help me grow and develop a life that's fun and meaningful?*). If she identifies learning to dance as a value, she'll tend to select that behavior rather than smoking pot.

## *Functional Contextualism*

Functional contextualism is a philosophical position that has the defined goal of considering how behavior functions within the context in which it's expressed (S. C. Hayes, 1993). The subject matter therefore is always the behavior in context. Here, "behavior" means anything a person does. This includes overt, visible behavior, and also covert behavior, such as thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories (Ciarrochi, Robb, & Godsell, 2005). "Context" refers to "the changeable stream of events that exert an organizing influence on behavior" (S. C. Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012, p. 33). This includes intrapersonal factors like memories, health, and history; interpersonal factors like social relationships; and situational factors like school and stressful events. It's important to remember that context is not an object or thing. Rather, it's defined always in terms of behavior (S. C. Hayes, Strosahl, et al., 2012). For example, the clock strikes noon and this elicits the desire to eat lunch. One may say the clock is the context that elicits eating behavior. However, if the clock strikes twelve and nobody hears it or sees it, it ceases to be a context for eating behavior.

Functional contextualists assume that all behavior is purposeful—an adaptation to a specific context (S. C. Hayes et al., 2006). That is, all behavior is reinforced in some way, even if it looks entirely dysfunctional from the outside. Without a contextual view, we are likely to make the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris, 1967) of seeing dysfunctional behavior as caused by traits inside the young person, rather than as evoked by stimuli. With a contextual view, we are able to identify why a dysfunctional behavior is reinforcing and help the young person find more functional ways to receive this reinforcement.

## *Operant Behavior Principles*

Operant principles are analytic tools that are widely used to study the behavior of humans and animals (Skinner, 1969). Operant principles might be thought of as the mechanisms that facilitate the evolutionary principles of variation, selection, and retention, discussed previously. According to operant theory, behaviors that are reinforced are repeated and get stronger (selected and retained), while behaviors that are punished are not repeated and become weaker (not selected). Operant principles are essential for understanding how we might shape new behaviors in children through reinforcement, punishment, imitation, and modeling (Patterson, 1982, 2002). Interventions based on operant principles are used in classrooms and families and stand out among the very few well-established treatments for children (Brestan & Eyberg, 1998; Ollendick & King, 2004).

Operant psychology and behaviorism have been famously attacked for failing to account for many aspects of internal life, such as emotion, cognition, and needs (Chomsky, 1967). These attacks have led some people to reject behavioral principles

entirely. One consequence of this rejection is that professionals who work with young people are seldom well trained in how to apply operant principles with them.

We won't go into a detailed discussion of the debate, but note that while some of the criticisms of early behaviorism are fair, it's a mistake to abandon operant principles entirely. This would mean abandoning one of the most reliable and powerful interventions available. Decades of research show that operant principles can reliably predict and influence behavior across almost every situation imaginable (Domjam, 2014). We argue that, far from being peripheral, operant principles should be the very foundation upon which interventions for young people are built.

Yet we need a way to move beyond the old behaviorism if we are to make operant principles relevant to the rich, inner life of young people. We need a theory that can extend operant principles from overt behavior to the covert behavior we commonly refer to as "thought," or symbolic thinking. Relational frame theory meets this need.

### *Relational Frame Theory*

The theory of human language and symbolic thinking upon which ACT was founded is called relational frame theory (RFT; S. C. Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001; S. C. Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, & Wilson, 2004). A thorough explanation of RFT is beyond the scope of this chapter (for a detailed theoretical discussion of RFT, refer to Blackledge, 2003; S. C. Hayes et al., 2001). However, it's important be clear that the therapeutic model underlying ACT arose from this theory of verbal behavior. RFT shows how symbolic thought, such as judging and believing, is under the control of contextual factors (meaning it can be reinforced or punished) and is therefore subject to the same operant principles that have proven so useful in shaping nonverbal behavior.

RFT has added new principles for verbal behavior: arbitrarily applicable relational responding and transformation of stimulus function (S. C. Hayes et al., 2001). These principles explain how verbal behavior transforms our responses to emotions, to our sense of self, and to stimuli in the physical world. To be more specific, "arbitrarily applicable" means that we relate stimuli in a way that is not based on experience or on formal properties of the stimuli. For instance, consider a young girl who receives praise from her parents whenever she brings home a popular friend. Over time she becomes popular herself. She discovers that geeks are good at math and unpopular. Doom strikes for her when she gets excellent math scores and is given the opportunity to take an advanced math class. Her response is "No way!" She fears that she'll lose all of her friends because "geeks" will be there. In this instance, she's made several verbal derivations that are arbitrary, in the sense that they aren't based in physical experience. She's made derivations such as "It would be bad if I wasn't popular" and "Being around geeks will make me unpopular." These derivations lead her to avoid the advanced math class as if it's dangerous. She sees "popular" as a thing she has and can lose, rather than as a symbolic idea that may be more or less useful. (A detailed description of RFT can be found in Törneke, 2010.)

As far as we know, this ability to develop responses to things without any direct experience of them is unique to humans. A dog will never respond with avoidance to the word “geek” unless that word signals the onset of an aversive physical experience, like an electric shock. Humans are unique in their ability to react emotionally to verbal ideas about the future, the past, and themselves, even when there is no physical evidence for those ideas.

## Précis of the DNA-V Model

Having laid the foundations for our model, we will now provide a brief overview of how it works. DNA-V focuses on three major classes of behavior, which, as mentioned, we term “discoverer,” “noticer,” and “advisor.” These terms are used metaphorically and pragmatically and should not be viewed as concrete cognitive or biological mechanisms; rather, these terms are intended to aid you in implementing behavioral principles.

DNA can be thought of as different classes of behavior that serve a particular purpose. When working with young people, we call them skills. The advisor’s purpose is to use past teaching and experience to navigate the present; the noticer’s is to detect psychological and environmental events as they occur; and the discoverer’s is to expand behavioral repertoires. A key goal of the DNA-V model is to help young people move flexibly between these three classes of behavior, or skills, in a way that helps them live with vitality and within their values. The following sections provide a brief overview of each of the model’s parts.

### *Valued Living and Vitality*

The purpose of DNA-V is to help young people develop values and live with vitality. The discoverer, noticer, and advisor provide the means to engage in valued action, supporting the values that lie at the center of the model. Values can be thought of as a compass that guides people through the storms and confusing times of life and toward the things they care about. Values often come from answering questions that boil down to “What for?”

- What do I want my life to stand for?
- What is this learning for?
- What is counseling for?
- What is anything for?
- What do I care about in this moment?
- What kind of person do I want to be?

When we live consistently with our values, we tend to have more vitality. One flows from the other. “Vitality” can be defined as the capacity to live, grow, and develop. It’s characterized by physical or intellectual vigor, energy, and the power to not just survive but thrive.

Practitioners sometimes find it hard to know when to address values in an intervention with young people. We think of values interventions like bookends, being useful both before and after teaching DNA skills. Therefore we have two chapters with a focus on values: chapter 2 explains how to use values early in the course of a young person’s therapy, and chapter 6 shows how to return to values once the person begins acquiring DNA skills.

## *The Advisor*

Our term “advisor” is a metaphor for how humans use language and cognition—how we use relating (the operant) to make sense of the world without needing direct physical contact or experience with things. In lay terms, it’s how we use our inner voice or self-talk to make sense of the past, form beliefs, evaluate ourselves, and predict the future. Thanks to the advisor, we don’t have to rely on experience and trial and error to figure everything out; we can simply advise ourselves using derived relations based in our learning history.

For example, imagine you’re a three-year-old child and your curiosity draws you to eat something out of the garbage. Your mom yells, “No, don’t eat that! It’s disgusting!” You stop and feel disgusted. You’ve never eaten garbage or had a bad experience as a result, but now you avoid eating it. Your mom was able to use her words to transfer her disgust reactions to you contingently (yelling “disgusting” was a punishing stimulus that weakened your behavior). Now anytime you hear the word “disgusting,” your reaction to the salient stimulus changes; you become cautious. Let’s say you’re looking at a pretty flower when the word “disgusting” is uttered. You immediately become cautious because of your history with the word. To go one step further, imagine that a friend uses the word “disgusting” to describe you. Now you can transfer all of the properties associated with “disgusting” to yourself—you become “disgusting.”

This doesn’t happen in nonverbal animals. In order for an animal to be influenced by a word, it has to predict something negative in actual experience. For example, you would have to say “disgusting” when your dog was eating garbage and provide a punishing stimulus (your disapproval), and you would need to do this over and over again. You would also need to say “disgusting” for each and every stimulus you don’t want your dog to eat. Eventually, your dog would learn that anytime you say “disgusting,” he should stop eating whatever it is. Even so, your dog would never learn to generalize the word “disgust” to flowers, people, or other dogs. Dogs must learn by direct experience, whereas humans can learn from words.

We could have chosen among many other names for the advisor, such as the inner voice or the assistant; however, we opted for advisor for several reasons. First, we find

that young people readily understand this personification of their inner voice. They tend to take up this term easily, saying things like “My mean advisor showed up,” “My advisor was trying to figure it all out again,” or “My advisor spent a whole hour trying to tell me I looked fat in a particular dress.” Second, the word “advisor” serves as a metaphor that allows us to talk about verbal content (thoughts) in a way that promotes a more detached perspective toward that content. It allows us to create a space where individuals are *here*, looking at their advisor *there*. A third benefit of the term “advisor” is that it reduces defensiveness. Young people learn to see the advisor as just one part of them, not their whole self. They learn that the advisor often says seemingly unhelpful things, and that this doesn’t make their whole person defective.

### *The Noticer*

The noticer is a powerful process that allows us to connect with our feelings, our body, and the physical signals coming from the world around us. We all start life with this ability to notice. During infancy, the world is what we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. However, once we start verbalizing and thinking symbolically, we can easily lose touch with our ability to notice and experience the world as a physical place.

Noticing has at least four important functions. First, the noticer tunes in to the body. The world gives us signals, and they usually show up first in the body. The noticer is adept at recognizing physical cues that reflect strong emotions, stressful events, joy, pain, danger, and so on. These cues give us essential information about ourselves and how we are in the world. Second, the noticer is aware of the individual’s actions. Without noticer skills, we can’t know how our actions are affecting others. Third, the noticer tunes in to the external world and what it has to offer. This helps us connect with people, things, and places and detect the potential rewards that are available in the environment. Finally, for those who tend to get stuck in difficult thoughts or a critical advisor, the noticer provides a way to reconnect with the physical realm and step out of the symbolic world. The noticer helps us mindfully pause and observe our experience when we’re uncertain whether our self-talk is helping us.

Noticer skills are central. No matter how confusing, difficult, or busy life gets, we can always shift into noticer behavior and find our center and stability.

### *The Discoverer*

The discoverer represents behaviors related to exploring and testing the world. Young children naturally seek out and explore the world. They push a tower made of building blocks and it falls over, and they learn the ways of gravity. So it is with the discoverer. We use discoverer skills to broaden our behavioral repertoire, try new things and assess how they work, find and create values, and build strengths.

Young people are drawn to risk, novelty, and sensation seeking—behavioral patterns that are essential to positive development (Siegel, 2014). However, in some contexts, these same behavioral patterns can be associated with maladaptive risk taking and impulsivity. The goal of the DNA practitioner is not to squash young people’s exploration out of fear that they will hurt themselves; rather, it is to help them harness and direct that exploration so that they build a meaningful and enjoyable life.

## *Self-View and Social View*

The outer ring of the DNA-V model (figure 1) represents self-view and social view—factors that influence how we see ourselves and others. These are higher-order skills that are assumed to emerge from DNA and, in turn, influence DNA. Part 2 of the book will focus on these two areas. Flexible perspectives on self and others are trained through DNA skills.

Self-view involves the ability to see yourself across different contexts, with you, the observer, *here*, seeing yourself, the actor, *there*. For example, self-compassion requires the ability for you, now, to see yourself suffering in the past. With flexible advisor skills, you can see yourself, in the past, changing and growing, or you can envision yourself changing in the future. Another important type of perspective taking is seeing that what you believe now isn’t what you believed in the past (raising the possibility that beliefs aren’t always all-important). Self-view interventions undermine unhelpful self-concepts and help develop self-awareness, self-knowledge, and a sense of hope and self-worth.

Social view focuses perspective-taking skills beyond the self, to relationships and social groups. From evolutionary science and research on human attachment, we know that humans need others to survive and thrive. Therefore, acquiring relationship-building skills is an important developmental task for young people. In the DNA-V approach, we begin with strengthening close relationships and then broaden to social groups. Key skills in social view often involve cultivating flexible verbal perspectives, such as “If I were you, how would I feel?” “If I’d been there in your shoes, what would I have done?” and “In this situation, I feel this way and you feel that way.

## **DNA-V Is Always Contextual**

We use DNA as a metaphor to describe our model because it encompasses behaviors that all young people express, albeit in different ways, just as cellular DNA can be expressed in a multitude of ways. There are at least two advantages to using the acronym DNA. First, it implies that these skills are basic capabilities, a bit like our basic biology. Naturally, there is individual variation, but the same core DNA components are present in all typically developing children.

Second, DNA skills don’t exist in a vacuum. Like biological DNA, the processes in our model need certain environmental contexts for optimal expression. Some contexts

lead DNA to become fully expressed; for example, a supportive parent helps a young person develop the ability to notice emotions. Other contexts suppress DNA; for example, an invalidating parent leads a young person to avoid and lose sight of emotions. This book will help you become the context that promotes young people's expression of DNA skills.

It may seem as though advisor, noticer, and discoverer behaviors are always discrete; that is, if you engaging in noticer behavior, you can't be engaged as in discoverer behavior. However, these skills and behaviors continually overlap and influence each other. In fact, DNA skills can often work together to produce effective behavior. For example, when a young person feels angry at someone, he may predict (thanks to the advisor) that hitting that person will lead to bad things, like getting expelled from school. As a result, he may try a series of new ways of responding (thanks to the discoverer), perhaps ignoring the person, reporting the problem to a teacher, or asserting himself with the person. He may also use noticer skills to gather information, sensing how he's feeling before and after he responds and detecting how the other person is feeling and responding.

There is, of course, a flip side in which different aspects interfere with each other. For example, overreliance on verbal beliefs (the advisor) may reduce the range of behaviors we try, test, and explore (the discoverer). Overreliance on verbal understanding may also reduce noticing skills.

## Conceptualizing DNA-V for Young People

Figure 2 presents a case conceptualization model we use with young people. We'll use it throughout the book to show you how DNA skills are developed. It allows us to examine young people's strengths and weaknesses, formulate case conceptualizations, plan interventions, and reinforce and shape growing skills. (Figure 3 presents a blank case conceptualization worksheet based on this model. The blank worksheet is also available for download at <http://www.actforadolescents.com>. We provide several examples of filled-out case conceptualization worksheets in later chapters, in conjunction with case examples.)

In our model, the environment and DNA behavior are expected to reciprocally influence each other. Improved DNA skills lead to an upward developmental spiral in which these skills help young people improve their circumstances in life; then, in turn, these improvements lead to strengthened DNA skills. For example, emotion identification (a common noticing skill) appears to increase social support during adolescence (context), and social support, in turn, increases skill in emotion identification (Rowse, Ciarrochi, Deane, & Heaven, 2014).

## THE THRIVING ADOLESCENT

### Current situation and presenting issue

Why is the person seeking or needing help?

What are the important aspects of the person's environment (other than social context), such as sleep patterns, medical conditions, a dangerous environment, and nutrition?

### Social and historical environment

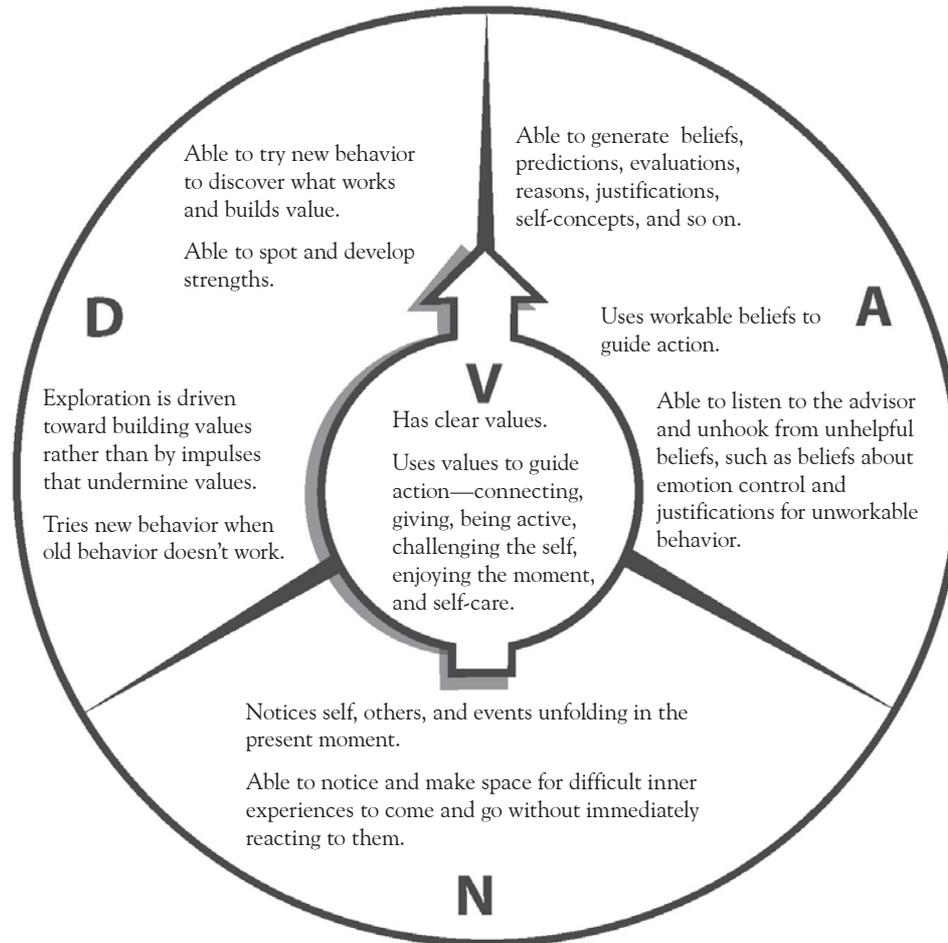
Who is important to the person? Why?

Who can the person turn to for help?

Who is the person in conflict with?

Who is the person disappointed in?

What critical experiences have happened in the past?



### Self-view

Recognizes that self is more than self-concepts.

Can see the self as holding self-concepts.

Sees that growth and improvement are possible.

Doesn't view self-concepts as physical descriptions of the self.

Can view himself or herself with compassion.

### Social view

Recognizes the value of social connection.

Is able to have empathy and compassion for others.

Can cooperate, build friendships, and love.

Sees that history with others influences present interactions, and believes he or she can change.

Sees personal agency: "I can choose" instead of "They made me like this."

FIGURE 2. DNA-V case conceptualization model.

Current situation and presenting issue

Social and historical environment

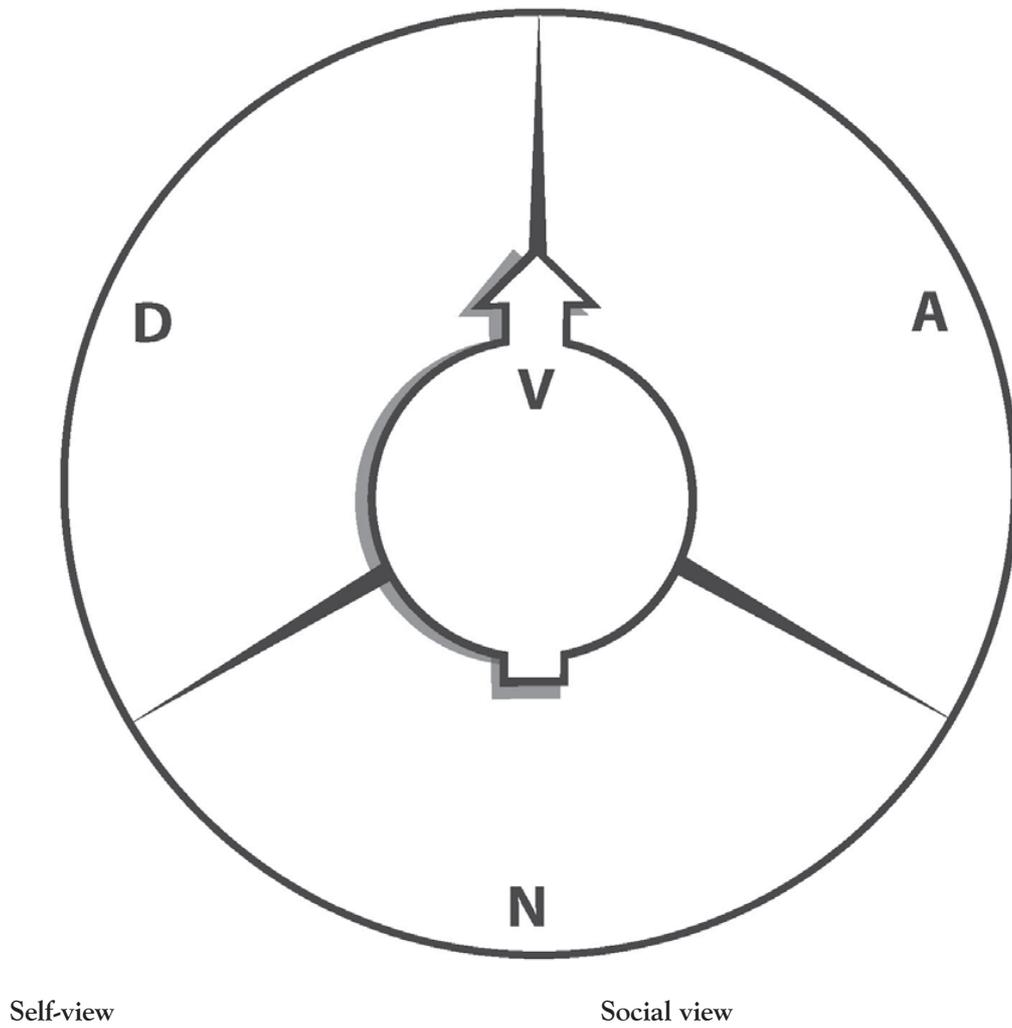


FIGURE 3. DNA-V case conceptualization worksheet.

## Introducing Young People to DNA-V

Each practitioner will develop his or her own style of introducing DNA-V to young people and talking about it in a way that's inspiring. In the following sections, we provide two examples of how we often do this to give you a flavor of how the work looks and feels, and so you'll have a sense of direction as you read on.

### *Taking the DNA-V Walk of Life*

This introduction is done with one person, either a volunteer from a group or classroom or an individual in therapy. You first write the letters D, N, and A on three sheets of paper and place them on the floor in a circle. Space them at least a few steps apart. Don't explain what's happening at this point. Let the curiosity build.

Ask the young person to walk to A with you and, once there, say something like this:

*This A stands for advisor. It's something we all have. I have it. You have it. It's that inner voice in our heads, evaluating everything and trying to tell us how good or bad we are. Have you ever seen a movie where there's a little creature sitting on someone's shoulder, like a devil with a pitchfork, whispering in the person's ear? It's kind of like that.*

*Let's illustrate what the advisor does. We'll both do this together. Think of some critical ways you evaluate yourself, and I'll do the same. I'll write mine first. I'll start with "I'm not good enough. I'm unlovable."*

Write your evaluations on the piece of paper with the A on it, then have the young person write her evaluations, encouraging her to really think about how the advisor evaluates.

Take a moment to just stand there together, looking at the words on the page. Then ask, "What's it like to be standing here?" Seek some descriptions. Then just wait until the person says something like "How long do I have to wait here?" or "What else can we do?"

To this, you might reply with something like "What else *can* we do then?" You're attempting to have the person say she could see what the sheets of paper with N and D are for. If need be, use eye gaze to playfully prompt this. Once she voices that idea, say something like, "Okay, let's walk to N and see what that is." Once you're at N, say something along these lines:

*What we just did is the most important skill in our work. If we feel stuck, we move to something else. Whenever you're stuck, you can move—you can do something new with your hands and feet. Okay, so here we are. N stands for noticing. This is a space we can move to when we feel stuck and want to increase our awareness of where we are and the choices available to us. Let's do a noticing practice right now.*

Have the person take a few slow, deep breaths, just noticing the breath for a moment or two. Then ask her what it's like to be in this space. Also ask whether she can notice a difference between the advisor and the noticer. Explain that we all have the ability to be a noticer and we all have an advisor.

Next, elicit curiosity about D, again playfully using eye gaze if need be. Then walk to D and praise the person for being curious and wanting to see what D is. Discuss how moving around is more flexible than standing and fixating on the advisor's evaluations. Then describe D something like this:

*D stands for discoverer. This is where we try new things and see what works. It's where we discover what we care about. We can be discoverers even when our advisor says we can't be. For example, has your mind, or advisor, ever told you that you can't do something, but you did it anyway? When you did that, you discovered for yourself whether or not you could do it, instead of relying on the advisor.*

*Now let's return to A. I don't want to suggest A is always bad and that D and N are always good. They're just different spaces we can move to or different skills we all have. Can you give me some examples of when the advisor might make some useful evaluations? (Elicit some examples, such as it's a bad idea to drink and drive, or it's a bad idea to put off studying until the last minute).*

Next, say something like "There's something in the middle here, something that drives DNA." Then write a V on a sheet of paper and place it in middle of the circle. Return to D, then ask the person to walk to the new sheet of paper with you. Once there, begin to introduce values:

*We use our DNA skills in the service of what you care about. I call this valuing, or values. Values might be having fun, playing sports, or connecting with others. It just depends on the person. For each of us, everything we do is in the service of this. So everything we do in our work together will be about helping you to have more things you care about and value in your life.*

## *Navigating the World with DNA-V*

This book will present you with many metaphors and different ways to help young people understand what DNA-V stands for and how they can use it in their lives. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, you'll find illustrations that depict the central metaphors of advisor, noticer, and discoverer. You can download these illustrations, as well as animated videos on DNA-V, at <http://www.actforadolescents.com>. In the sections that follow, we provide a bit more information on each aspect of the model for you. For each, we also describe the guiding metaphor and provide questions you can use to help young people contact that aspect of DNA-V.

## THE DISCOVERER

The discoverer finds new ways to be in the world. When people are in discoverer space, they're behaving in ways that allow them to grow, learn, and expand their behavioral repertoire. Verbal behavior is often tied to the physical actions of testing and exploring.

**Example metaphor:** Imagine that you stand at the border of a wondrous country, one that has everything you could possibly find interesting. It has libraries, water parks, fascinating people, music, dance, museums, all kinds of entertainment, parks, zoos, and restaurants with every cuisine. It has forests thriving with a wide variety of animals and plants, many of which you've never seen before. It has every kind of sport imaginable, and you can choose to be a spectator or participant in any of the sports. However, this country also has dangers, such as poisonous animals, con artists, muggers, and hostile gangs. The discoverer has no maps or guidebooks for this new country. Instead, the discoverer must rely on trial and error to find the fulfilling things and avoid the dangerous ones. The discoverer's journey is both exciting and scary.

**Example discoverer questions:** Why do you want to try something new? Why is it personally important to you to try something new? What would happen if you kept doing the same thing you've always done? What do you think the dangers of exploring are? What seems to prevent you from doing new things? What new things can you try? What new directions can you take? How would you know if you tried something new and it didn't work?

## THE NOTICER

The noticer senses psychological events as they occur and uses the five senses to receive information from the environment. When in noticer space, people are behaving in ways that allow them to receive information from the world through sight, taste, sound, touch, and feel, and through their physical reactions and emotions. The noticer allows inner experience to come and go, rather than trying to change it or cling to it. It's essentially a neutral observer.

Noticing creates the space between internal experiences (feelings and thoughts) and outward behavior, offering an opportunity to choose a behavior rather than always reacting when difficult feelings and thoughts show up. When we don't react to our inner experience, we're often able to better choose actions in the service of what we care about. Developing our noticer skills is the key to breaking free from old patterns of behavior that are no longer working. Noticer space can often be likened to a car's neutral gear. When noticing, people aren't necessarily moving forward (discoverer) or looking back (advisor). Rather, they're just taking a look around.

**Example metaphor:** For the noticer, feelings and thoughts are like the weather; he observes them and allows them to flow around him, just as the weather does. The noticer stands back from the scene, witnessing everything that's happening without seeking to change things. The noticer uses all her senses and bodily reactions to take everything in. Her emotions come and go without automatically provoking reactions. Anger doesn't automatically lead to hitting, fear to fleeing, or shame to withdrawing from other people.

**Example noticer questions:** What are you feeling now? Are you trying to control your emotions, or are you making space and allowing them? What's going on around you? What are you doing? How are you reacting to me? How are you acting? How are your actions influencing others?

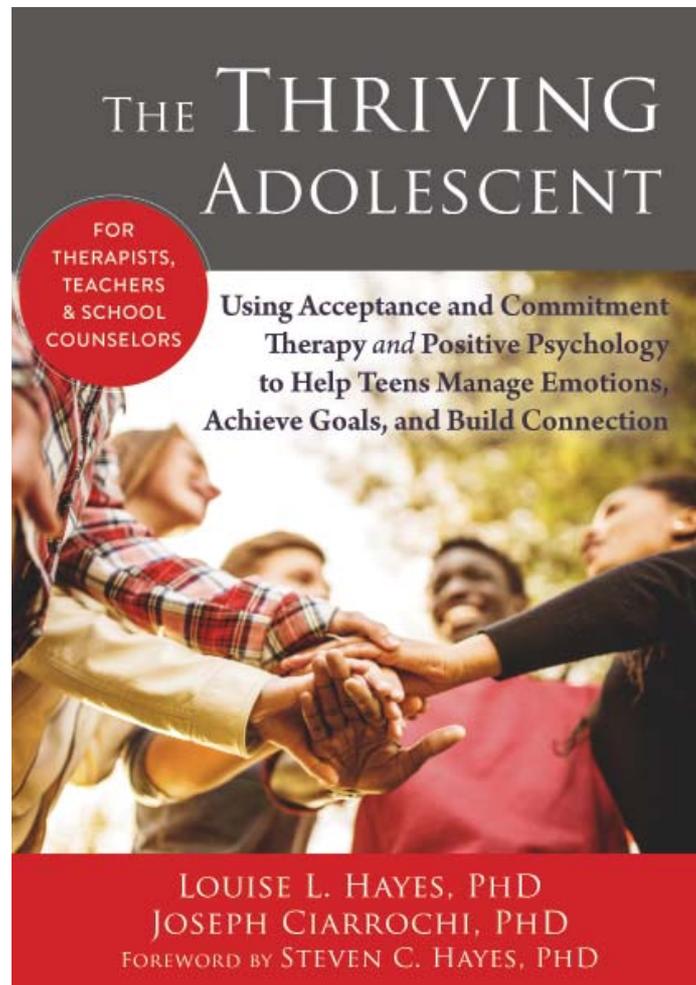
## THE ADVISOR

The advisor formulates verbal conclusions about the present environment based on what others have said or on their adaptations to past circumstances. For example, young people who are physically abused at home may assume that they face the same risk of abuse at school. Consequently they may act guarded, withdrawn, and fearful both at home, where it's adaptive, and also at school, where it's usually less adaptive.

When in advisor space, people avoid engaging in trial and error experience with the world and instead behave in ways that have historically allowed them to gain rewards or escape aversive stimuli. They rely on past learning, teachings, judgments, verbal rules, reasoning, or problem solving. So the young person who's experienced abuse feels she "knows" that people are not to be trusted and therefore avoids relationships and the risk of further abuse. But she also misses opportunities to forge friendships, gain support, and broaden her life.

**Example metaphor:** The advisor is like a GPS in a car. It seeks to guide you quickly to where you want to go. It saves you time by preventing you from going in the wrong direction, and it sometimes helps you avoid fatal mistakes, like driving off a cliff. However, a GPS is sometimes unhelpful. For example, imagine you're using a GPS to get to the beach, but it instead guides you to a swamp. Now what do you do? If you remain in advisor space, you'll act as if what the GPS is telling you is literally true. It says, "You have arrived at the beach." Consequently, you act as if the swamp really is the beach and go for a "refreshing swim" in the smelly, green water.

**Example advisor questions:** Are your predictions, evaluations, and justifications helping you live a vital life? Should you listen to your advisor? Is it a useful guide in this situation? Or should you unhook from your advisor and move into noticer or discoverer space?



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