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Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility

By Ellen J. Langer



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If we could turn back the clock psychologically, could we also turn it back physically? For more than thirty years, award-winning social psychologist Ellen Langer has studied this provocative question, and now, in *Counterclockwise*, she presents the answer: Opening our minds to what's possible, instead of presuming impossibility, can lead to better health—at any age.

Drawing on landmark work in the field and her own body of colorful and highly original experiments—including the first detailed discussion of her “counterclockwise” study, in which elderly men lived for a week as though it was 1959 and showed dramatic improvements in their hearing, memory, dexterity, appetite, and general well-being—Langer shows that the magic of rejuvenation and ongoing good health lies in being aware of the ways we mindlessly react to social and cultural cues. Examining the hidden decisions and vocabulary that shape the medical world (“chronic” versus “acute,” “cure” versus “remission”), the powerful physical effects of placebos, and the intricate but often defeatist ways we define our physical health, Langer challenges the idea that the limits we assume and impose on ourselves are real. With only subtle shifts in our thinking, in our language, and in our expectations, she tells us, we can begin to change the ingrained behaviors that sap health, optimism, and vitality from our lives. Improved vision, younger appearance, weight loss, and increased longevity are just four of the results that Langer has demonstrated.

Immensely readable and riveting, **Counterclockwise** offers a transformative and bold new paradigm: the psychology of possibility. A hopeful and groundbreaking book by an author who has changed how people all over the world think and feel, **Counterclockwise** is sure to join *Mindfulness* as a standard source on new-century science and healing.

From the Hardcover edition.



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Editorial Review

Review

“Ellen Langer offers us brilliant insights into subtleties that hold us back in life, and shows the way to shining new possibilities. **Counterclockwise** will change the way you see and think.” — Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., author **Emotional Intelligence** and **Ecological Intelligence**

“**Counterclockwise** makes a strong case for the influence of expectation and belief on how our bodies function, on how we heal, and even how we age. Ellen Langer presents fascinating scientific data to support this view and argues convincingly that we should learn to take greater control of our health through the practice of mindfulness. Her research is innovative and empowering.”—Andrew Weil, M.D.

“Ellen Langer’s work has been an inspiration to me for years. **Counterclockwise**, her latest book, will change the way you think about your health — for the better. It’s simply fabulous.” —Christiane Northrup, MD, author **The Secret Pleasures of Menopause** and **The Wisdom of Menopause**

"Awareness-mindfulness-is the first step in healing. In *Counterclockwise*, Dr. Ellen Langer eloquently describes how becoming more aware of our beliefs and expectations allows us to powerfully transform our lives for the better. A pioneering, beautifully-written book." —Dean Ornish, M.D.

“Take a smart, creative social scientist, without any respect for conventional wisdom and you get Ellen Langer. She is a fantastic storyteller, and **Counterclockwise** is a fascinating story about the unexpected ways in which our minds and bodies are connected. More importantly, **Counterclockwise** shows how a better understanding of this relationship can lead to a better life.”—Dan Ariely, Ph.D., author of *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape Our Decisions*

“**Counterclockwise** presents a new way t...

About the Author

Ellen J. Langer Ph.D. is a professor of psychology at Harvard University and the author of eleven books, including the international bestseller, *Mindfulness*. Among other honors, Langer is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the APA Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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Chapter One

What we need is not the will to believe, but the wish to find out. —William Wordsworth

There’s no way to turn back the clock or to fight the inevitable. We age and the vigor of youth becomes only a memory as we are ravaged by time. Chronic illnesses take their toll, our health and strength diminish accordingly, and the best we can do is graciously accept our fate. Once sickness is upon us, we give ourselves over to modern medicine and hope for the best. We can’t intervene as time marches on. Or can we?

In the 1970s my colleague Judith Rodin and I conducted an experiment with nursing home residents.¹ We encouraged one group of participants to find ways to make more decisions for themselves. For example, they were allowed to choose where to receive visitors, and if and when to watch the movies that were shown at the home. Each also chose a houseplant to care for, and they were to decide where to place the plant in their room, as well as when and how much to water it. Our intent was to make the nursing home residents more mindful, to help them engage with the world and live their lives more fully.

A second, control group received no such instructions to make their own decisions; they were given houseplants but told that the nursing staff would care for them. A year and a half later, we found that members of the first group were more cheerful, active, and alert, based on a variety of tests we had administered both before and after the experiment. Allowing for the fact that they were all elderly and quite frail at the start, we were pleased that they were also much healthier: we were surprised, however, that less than half as many of the more engaged group had died than had those in the control group.

Over the next several years, I spent a lot of time thinking about what had happened. Our explanation was that the results were due to the power of making choices and the increased personal control it affords. Although we couldn't make an airtight case, subsequent research would bear out our original understanding. Our research had taken place at the beginning of what was later termed the "New Age" movement and well before mind/body studies were conducted in laboratories around the country. It raised a nagging question: "What is the nature of the link from the nonmaterial mind to the material body?" Examples of this connection are all around us. We see a rat and show signs of fear as our pulse races and sweat breaks out on our skin; we think about losing a significant other and our blood pressure increases; we watch someone vomit and we feel nauseous ourselves. While we easily see evidence of the connection, it's not well understood. Even we had been surprised: it seemed odd that simply asking people to make choices would result in the powerful consequences that our study showed. Subsequently, I realized that *making choices results in mindfulness, and perhaps our surprise was because of the mindlessness we shared with most of the culture*. I began to realize that ideas about mind/body dualism were just that, ideas, and a different, nondualist view of the mind and the body could be more useful. If we put the mind and the body back together so that we are just one person again, then wherever we put the mind, we would also put the body. If the mind is in a truly healthy place, the body would be as well—and so we could change our physical health by changing our minds.

The next question for me was one of limits. To what extent can the mind influence the body? If I smelled a fresh donut and imagined eating it, would my blood sugar rise? Would people fully convinced that their teeth are in excellent condition have healthier-looking X-rays at their annual checkups? Do men who become bald at a young age and thus see themselves as prematurely old test as older physiologically than men their age with a full head of hair? Do women who undergo cosmetic surgery and see a more youthful self in the mirror age more slowly? The questions may seem a bit "out there," but they were worth asking.

In 1979, several years after that initial investigation with plants and nursing home residents, it seemed natural to continue testing the question of limits with an elderly population. My students and I devised a study—which we would later come to call the "counterclockwise study"—to look at what effects turning back the clock psychologically would have on people's physiological state.² We would re-create the world of 1959 and ask subjects to live as though it were twenty years earlier. If we put the mind back twenty years, would the body reflect this change?

As with many ideas, at first it seemed extreme, but the more we thought about it, the more possible it became. We finally decided it was worth the effort. My students weren't quite as confident as I was because it wasn't your usual study, but they quickly got caught up in my excitement.

To start, we consulted leading geriatricians to find the definitive biological markers of age to measure our results. Astonishingly, we were told there were (and still are) none. Without knowing someone's chronological age, science cannot pinpoint how old someone is. To do our research, however, we needed ways to measure how old people were both before and after the retreat, so we determined which psychological and physical measures were the best bets to use. In addition to weight, dexterity, and flexibility, we planned to measure vision with and without eyeglasses, for each eye separately and together, as well as sensitivity to taste. We would give potential participants intelligence tests, to assess how quickly and accurately they could complete a series of paper- and- pencil mazes, and we would test their visual memory. We would also take photographs that we could later evaluate for the *appearance* of changes. Finally, they would each be asked to fill out a psychological self- evaluation test. All of these tests would help us select participants and give us a way to measure potential improvements at the end of the study.

We advertised the study in local newspapers and circulars, describing the research as a study on reminiscing, where people in their late seventies or early eighties would spend a week at a country retreat and talk about the past. To keep the study simple, we decided to use only one gender in order to make room assignments and other logistics easier. We chose to use men. We wanted men who were not ill and who would be reasonably able to participate in the activities and discussions we had planned for them. Word got out. Many younger people wanted to learn more about the study and how it might benefit their elderly parents. Those selected based on their telephone interviews came to the office to take the baseline physical and psychological tests. The interviews were memorable. At our first meeting, I asked a man named Arnold to tell me about himself and especially how he felt about his health and physical condition. Unlike other adult children who brought their parents in, Arnold's daughter sat back and let him talk without interruption. He told me about his life and the wide range of activities he used to enjoy, both physical and intellectual. Now he never had enough oomph to do much of anything. He had given up reading because he could barely see the words on the page even with glasses. He no longer played golf because it was too disheartening to walk the course as slowly as he did. When he left the house, he invariably caught a cold no matter what the month or how much he bundled up. Food didn't taste good to him anymore, he said. This was as dismal a picture of his life as I could imagine.

Then, Arnold's daughter—whom I had been silently praising for her willingness to let her father speak for himself—spoke up and condescendingly said that Arnold was “prone to exaggeration.” Sadly, Arnold didn't object to his daughter's dismissal of his complaints.

I told him that I didn't know if anything would change as a result of the study, but he might have a good time for a week. He agreed to join us.

As we did more interviews and listened to the participants' complaints about their health and physical limitations, my doubts began to increase. Would we find positive results, and would they be worth the considerable effort of putting together and conducting the study? It was clear to me and my four graduate students that this was indeed a major undertaking, but given the work we had already done, we decided to go forward. We selected participants, divided them into two groups of eight—an experimental group and a control group—and set about putting in place our plans for the experiment.

My students and I traveled to several towns to find an appropriate site for our weeklong retreat. The right spot needed to seem timeless, with few modern conveniences. We eventually found an old monastery in Peterborough, New Hampshire, that was perfect. Our plan was to retrofit it so that it would “replicate” the world of 1959. The ...

Users Review

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Donna Wood:

As people who live in often the modest era should be upgrade about what going on or data even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era which is always change and progress. Some of you maybe can update themselves by reading books. It is a good choice to suit your needs but the problems coming to an individual is you don't know which one you should start with. This Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility is our recommendation to make you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and want in this era.

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This book untitled Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility to be one of several books in which best seller in this year, that's because when you read this guide you can get a lot of benefit onto it. You will easily to buy this particular book in the book retail store or you can order it through online. The publisher of the book sells the e-book too. It makes you more readily to read this book, since you can read this book in your Smart phone. So there is no reason to you personally to past this reserve from your list.

Meredith Bailey:

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