

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TRADING

Tools and Techniques for  
Minding the Markets

Brett N. Steenbarger



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**THE PSYCHOLOGY  
OF TRADING**

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*For Margie,  
who has made it all possible*





# Preface

*In our debts to others, we find the true measure of our wealth.*

If there is a single theme to this book, it is this: *Trading is a microcosm of life.*\* In trading, as in life, we pursue values. In both trading and life, we manage the risks of those pursuits: lost opportunities and realized losses. How we seek values and manage the associated risks will determine our personal and professional success.

Many times, our responses to the uncertainty of outcomes interfere with the achievement of our goals. In careers, romantic relationships, and trading, we find ourselves enacting self-defeating patterns: cutting promising situations short and lingering in unprofitable ones. It doesn't matter that we are virtuous people, hardworking and otherwise successful. It doesn't matter that we have attended all the latest seminars, read the hottest books, and purchased all the best trading tools. If our coping with risk distorts our efforts at

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\*The term *trading* is used in this book to cover all active forms of managing one's financial investments. Anyone who attempts to time investments, whether over hours, days, weeks, or months, is a trader.

pursuing values, we will fail to attain the stature that can be ours—as traders and as human beings.

For the past 20 years, I have provided counseling and therapy services to approximately 130 people a year. Almost all of these people have been high-functioning individuals tackling demanding career fields. I learned during these years of practice that the problem patterns of physicians, executives, students, and traders are surprisingly similar. These patterns arise when strategies for emotional risk management—efforts to minimize pain and maximize pleasure—fail to make it possible to successfully navigate life’s matrix of risks and rewards. Every problem pattern we experience is a once-successful coping effort that has outlived its value. Conversely, newly created patterns that meet life’s present challenges lead to success. We are best positioned to achieve our goals when we can extract ourselves from the mindless repetition of the past and fashion fresh life solutions.

The purpose of this book is to help you identify your patterns of success and failure and exercise greater control over these. My deepest hope is that the case studies, the research, and the ideas contained in these pages will provide you with the intellectual and emotional ammunition to face yourself and to transform your approach to life’s risks and rewards.

The following pages can help you cultivate new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting; but they cannot perform magic. For the trader, no amount of psychological assistance can substitute for concrete trading plans that have been tested across a variety of markets. As Robert Krausz neatly stated in his *New Market Wizards* interview with Jack Schwager, self-help methods by themselves can no more make you a great trader than they can make you a great chess player or baseball star. You can only learn to master the markets by immersing yourself in the markets.

Indeed, there is a sense in which the process of developing and testing your market strategies is the best of all methods for cultivating a positive trading psychology. Many traders fail with mechanical systems simply because they cannot tolerate the inevitable periods of drawdowns or flat performance. When you create and test your own approaches to the market, you develop an inner knowledge of how those methods work. During periods when the market throws a curve ball, your confusion is more readily replaced by the sense of “been there, done that.” *Nothing* substitutes for the confidence born of experience.

Still, it is difficult to underestimate the degree to which traders can utilize identical trading methods and arrive at wildly different results. Possessing the

right tools is necessary, but not sufficient, for success. As Krausz observed, traders have an uncanny knack for acting out their repetitive and destructive emotional patterns in their trading. Such enactments will derail even the most carefully constructed and tested systems.

An important goal of this book is to help you approach trading the way a psychologist approaches his or her clients. I call this “trading from the couch,” which means learning to utilize your thoughts, feelings, impulses, and behavioral patterns as *market data*. Trading from the couch entails an important shift from traditional thinking. Instead of trying to overcome or eliminate your emotions, this self-aware trading calls on you to *learn* from your reactions. Your goal is to turn yourself into a finely calibrated instrument for detecting and acting on the patterns of both the trader and the trading.

Note that cultivating such sensitivity does *not* mean simply going with your feelings in placing orders! As you will see in the coming pages, it often means the opposite: learning to use excess confidence and risk aversion as valuable *contrary* indicators. Surprisingly often—for the trader, as for the therapist—acting counter to one’s initial impulses is the winning move.

In trading from the couch, you become your own psychologist. That is not an easy task in the markets or in everyday life. The rewards, however, are considerable. Trading, like competitive sports, is a powerful crucible for cultivating the emotional skills crucial to life success. In few arenas are the pursuit of values and the management of risk so tangible and immediate. Nothing so drives home lessons in self-understanding as brutal hits to one’s bottom line.

Self-aware trading also presumes a vital symmetry: In mastering the markets, you can further yourself as a human being; and in developing yourself as a person, you can enhance your trading success. *Once you are able to extract the information contained within your emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns, you will be better equipped to identify and to exploit the patterns that appear in the financial markets—and vice versa.*

BRETT N. STEENBARGER

*Fayetteville, New York  
November 2002*



# Acknowledgments

My appreciation for the emotional intricacies of trading expanded exponentially when I began writing trading psychology columns for a web site that was known as WorldlyInvestor and for MSN's Money site ([www.moneycentral.com](http://www.moneycentral.com)). In response to those columns, I heard from traders around the world who were experiencing difficulties strikingly similar to the ones I had encountered in my years of trading. Some of my correspondents were neophytes, trading by the seats of their pants, engaging in little more than gambling. But most were dedicated practitioners, who had dutifully read books, learned trading methods, and undertaken their own research. With remarkable frequency, I heard the plaintive refrain: Inconsistency was robbing them of profits and exposing them to occasional, debilitating losses. It is difficult to express how frustrating trading can be when success seems so tantalizingly close and yet remains ever so elusive.

How is it that we can *know* the right things to do—regular exercising, healthful eating, good parenting—and yet so often fail to follow through? What distorts our trading, preventing us from acting on the information clearly in front of our eyes? These are the questions that have haunted me for nearly two decades as a professional psychologist and market participant. My attempts to answer them have taken me from the literature on trading and psychology to philosophy and leading edge research in cognitive neuroscience. If I have accomplished anything in this book, it is in synthesizing contributions from these fields, contributions that are far worthier than my own.

Authors face a curious paradox indeed: With each intellectual debt accumulated, they are enriched manyfold. In that regard, I feel wealthy indeed, having benefited from the insight and the assistance of many inspiring influences.

My first forays into writing about the markets came through the Speculator's List, an online group of traders, money managers, academics, and accomplished individuals in the arts and sciences. I am forever indebted to Laurel Kenner, Victor Niederhoffer, and James Goldcamp for their role in establishing the List and for their kind encouragement of my many posts to the group.

When I needed to understand the dynamics that distinguished successful from unsuccessful traders, Linda Raschke was incredibly supportive, allowing me to study the many individuals who participated in her seminars. I quickly found that Linda was a worthy model of exemplary trading and an accomplished mentor. I am deeply grateful for her friendship and for her insights into the business and human sides of trading.

Some of my most important influences have been those who have pushed me to write with ever greater clarity and precision. Jon Markman, editor at MSN Money, has been a valued friend and colleague, as well as a role model for his trailblazing research. The book has greatly benefited from my editor at Wiley, Pamela van Giessen, whose humor, practical bent, and commitment to quality have carried me through the long writing process.

To be sure, none of this would have been possible without the salutary influence of my academic colleagues in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at SUNY Upstate Medical University, most notably Roger Greenberg, Mantosh Dewan, and John Manring. My good friends and trading correspondents Henry Carstens, Saurabh Singal, and Steve Wisdom have enriched this book with their inspirations and ideas. I am also indebted to Mark Mahorney for his excellent work on the Great Speculations site ([www.greatspeculations.com](http://www.greatspeculations.com)) and to Frank and Kris Linet, Susan Niederhoffer, and Arnold and Rose Rustin for their warmth, humor, and insight. To Yale Hirsch, Andrew Lo, Sam Eisenstadt, and Jeff Carmen, my hat is off in salute and appreciation for their exemplary research and personal support.

Finally, I gratefully acknowledge my family for their ongoing love and encouragement. My parents, Jack and Connie, have been role models and inspirations for longer than they realize. The support of Marc, Lisa, Debi, Peter, Steve, Laura, Ed, Devon, and Macrae has meant more than I can express. But no single person deserves credit for this book more than my

wife, Margie, who has taught me most of what I know about life, love, and the navigation of risks and rewards. It is my greatest joy to dedicate this book to her.

## A VIEW FROM TALL SHOULDERS

I count July 4, 2001, as a special day. That marked the completion of the first draft of this text. Until that day, I hadn't explicitly identified why I had written the book. Yes, I had wanted to share insights and ideas, but that wasn't the major purpose. After all, I had written the book with no publishing contract in hand. And although I wanted to see it published, it was clear to me that the writing held a personal significance beyond its status in the marketplace.

On July 4, sitting in a Seattle hotel lobby with laptop at my side, I suddenly recognized the source of that personal significance. Feeling the need to capture my insight in words, I took out the laptop and composed the following letter to my friend and mentor Victor Niederhoffer:

Dear Victor,

Nothing is quite so conducive to reflection as travel. The combination of distinctive scenery and breaks from normal, daily schedules helps us think in new ways, see things in a new light. What we vacate during vacation are our routine ways. It is during those breaks from the routine that creative impulses are most likely to find expression.

This was particularly evident to me during this past holiday, as I brought my book manuscript on a trip to the West Coast. I expected that the writing would find inspiration on the road, and I anticipated that the writing would be most enjoyable without the distractions of the workaday world. I was not disappointed in these respects. More surprising, however, was my emotional reaction to the writing. As I crafted page after page, I found myself experiencing a profound humility. I recognized, with a deep emotional certainty, the extent to which so few of my ideas were truly original. With each line I could recognize an inspiration from another source: a teacher or mentor, a

book I had read, a piece of research I had studied, a personal hero. There was little on these pages that was truly my own. Instead, the writing was a synthesis of what I had absorbed from those greater than myself. At a profound level, I could appreciate Newton's statement that if he had seen farther than others, it was because he had stood on the shoulders of giants.

Perhaps this is why the immortals do not write for self-aggrandizement and why charlatans are so quick to credit themselves and deny credit to others. The greats recognize the fountainhead of their inspirations. Their dominant emotion is the humility of gratitude, of having been the recipient of gifts that can never be fully repaid.

In this state of humility, I also gained a unique perspective on your own book. My first reading of *The Education of a Speculator* [John Wiley, 1997] focused on its personal story: the formative experiences that contributed to success in the markets. Upon rereading, I saw the book in a different light: as a tribute to those moral and character influences—particularly those of your father—that made for success as a human being. After this vacation, however, a wholly new reading became possible. I could appreciate your book as a broader tribute to the exemplars in your life. It is a testimonial and a statement of thanks to Arthur Niederhoffer, Jack Barnaby, Tom Wiswell, Francis Galton, and those many others who gave more than can ever be wholly repaid.

And yet, in writing a book of tribute, perhaps we do repay at least some measure of indebtedness. Even the great ones die. Their voices are stilled, and subsequent generations never gain the privilege of sitting by their sides and hearing their words. My children will never directly encounter Artie or Galton and absorb their personal examples. Through a book of tribute, however, exemplary individuals gain a degree of personal immortality. As long as the book graces the shelves of libraries and bookstores, there is hope that the lessons taught by the greats will not be lost, that their examples can live well beyond their years.

This is the beauty of writing a book: In telling the stories of heroes, we contribute to their immortality and immeasurably enrich generations to come. Before I went on this vacation, I vowed to write a book that informed, entertained, and enriched. Now, however, I have



set the bar far higher. I will only be satisfied with a work that does justice to those who have inspired the best within me.

As I sit here now, writing early in the morning, it strikes me with sincerity and gratitude that the only way to stand on the shoulders of giants is to hoist them on our own.

Sincerely,

Brett

Trading, indeed, is a microcosm of life. If you long to develop yourself, as a person and as a trader, search high and low for the immortals. Find the heroes and the heroines who have lived their lives with passion, nourishing all who have come in contact with them. Discover those who have lived, breathed, and studied the markets, enriching the world with their ideas. Then hoist them on your shoulders, remaining ever mindful of your debt. You will be surprised how high you stand, how far you can see.

B. N. S.



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## *Chapter One*

# The Woman Who Could Not Love

*Solutions are the patterns we enact between problems.*

I suppose it's only natural that you would expect a book on the psychology of trading to begin with a description of the various emotional afflictions experienced by traders. In this chapter, however, we are going to approach the topic from a different angle. We are going to adopt what is known as a "solution focus" to trading and explore how many of the answers to our problems are *already occurring*. If you have a template for identifying and understanding what you are already doing right, in life and in the markets, you are well on the way to creating a model for your future success.

## **MANUFACTURING CARS AND SUCCESS**

Many years ago, I read something in a management text that made a lasting impression. At that time, Japanese car manufacturers were making distinct headway in their competition with their U.S. counterparts. On both price and quality, the Japanese seemed to be winning the race.

The account I read described the difference in the management approaches

of the U.S. and Japanese manufacturers. The U.S. automobile manufacturers, it appeared, were very concerned about the possibility of breakdowns on the assembly line. To avoid the disruptive effects of a breakdown, they kept the line moving sufficiently slowly to prevent any glitch from bringing operations to a halt.

The Japanese manufacturers adopted a radically different approach. When manufacturing was proceeding efficiently, they would speed up the line *until a breakdown occurred*. Then they would intensively study the source of the breakdown and institute preventive measures. Over time, they identified many weak links in the production process and improved both their efficiency and their quality.

The U.S. manufacturers looked on breakdowns as failures and on failures as outcomes to be avoided. The Japanese looked at production problems as opportunities for learning and improvement. These were two philosophies of management and two approaches to life, with very different sets of results.

The lesson applies to trading as well as to manufacturing: *Successful market participants seek out their weaknesses and learn when they fail. Unsuccessful ones avoid their shortcomings and, thus, fail to learn.*

## SUE, THE SURVIVOR

When Sue\* came to my office, I knew immediately that she was not the typical Upstate New York medical student. She looked and sounded like a person from the inner city. As we became acquainted, I learned that, indeed, she was exactly as she appeared. From the clothes she wore to her street English, Sue was a student from the 'hood. Little did I know that she was to become one of the most inspiring individuals I have had the honor of assisting. She also taught me a great deal about the power of the solution focus.

At the time of our first meeting, Sue was distraught. Her school perfor-

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\*The names and identifying details of all clients and characters in this book have been altered to protect anonymity and confidentiality. To further protect my clients' privacy, all of the cases and incidents described are composites of actual counseling cases. I have endeavored to preserve the essence of those cases, even as the creation of composites introduced elements of fictionalization into the accounts.

mance was solid, befitting a young lady who had graduated with honors from a highly competitive undergraduate institution. Nevertheless, she told me in no uncertain terms that she was thinking of withdrawing from school. Her grandmother had died a few months earlier, she informed me through tears, and she could not handle that.

Sue, it turned out, had grown up essentially without parents. Her father left the family when she was several months old, and she never knew him. Her mother suffered from a chronic crack cocaine addiction and was unable to maintain a consistent parenting role. When it became clear to child welfare authorities that Sue's mother was selling her body as well as drugs to finance her habit, Sue was formally removed from the home and placed in the custody of her grandmother. Though she was only five at the time, Sue had witnessed a parade of men in and out of her mother's life, several shootings and stabbings, and multiple run-ins with the police.

Sue's grandmother, Nana, was a religious woman with strong ties to her church. The church congregation formed a strong social network, in which people supported one another through poverty, illness, and the suffocating absence of opportunity. Perhaps most important, it was a community that emphasized education, and Nana worked fiendishly to ensure that Sue kept up with her studies.

Naturally shy and slight of stature, Sue could not excel in athletics, so she found early success and approval in her studies. Over the years, she stayed involved in her mother's life and, in a way, became a parent to her parent. Her greatest concerns were for the abusive relationships that punctuated her mother's skirts with the law. One particular man, Davis, put Sue's mother in the hospital several times with broken bones and multiple bruises. Sue could never comprehend why her mother would not press charges, why she would never leave the relationship.

Perhaps because of men like Davis, Sue showed no interest in dating. Her grandmother had warned her many times of the dangers of unmarried pregnancies and the ways in which young men would be out to take advantage of her. The only way to better herself, Nana stressed, was through God and her studies.

"I had good friends in school," Sue explained. "We used to help each other out when things were rough. Tasha's daddy used to drink away the family money, so Nana would have her over for dinner just to make sure she got fed. Nana was like that. If she saw you needed something and she liked you, she'd give you everything she had."

“Are you still in touch with your friends, like Tasha?” I asked.

Sue shook her head. “Tasha got pregnant and dropped out of school. She hooked up with a guy just like her daddy. Daryl got caught dealing drugs; he’s in jail. Rhonda—you don’t want to know about her. She’s worse than my mom. The only one there for me was Nana.”

The other medical students found Sue to be aloof, with an “attitude.” One professor suggested that she meet with me, indicating that the “chip on her shoulder” would make it difficult to succeed in school. In fact, Sue was warm and engaging—once you got to know her. Few people, however, were allowed inside. She had learned to trust no one, especially men. When they approached her, her instinctive reaction was to turn them aside. “I can’t love anyone,” she stated plainly, “because I can’t trust anyone.” Staying aloof was a protective mechanism, and it worked for many years.

“So why are you telling me all this?” I asked Sue in our second meeting. “I’m a man, I’m a white guy, and I’ve never lived in a neighborhood like yours. Why are you trusting me?”

“Cuz you didn’t ask me my MCAT scores right when we first met,” she laughed.

This was an inside joke among the school’s black students. A number of faculty questioned the academic fitness of some of the minority students, though they were too discreet to raise the issue directly. So whenever such a student came in with a problem, the faculty would find a way to inquire about their undergraduate campus of origin and their scores on the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT). Such questions were rarely, if ever, directed to the white students. The implication was clear: You’re having problems because you shouldn’t have been allowed into the school to begin with.

“I need to be able to talk to someone,” Sue said, “and I can’t talk with the people in my class. We had to pair up for work in the anatomy lab, and you should have seen everyone scurry so they wouldn’t have to work with me. One boy told me I would slow him down in the dissection. I told him to stand still, and I’d cut him good to show him how fast I could open a body.”

Sue, I gathered, was not to be messed with. She was a survivor. But, now, sitting in my office, contemplating a withdrawal, she was ready to pack it all in. She could handle shootings in her neighborhood, the slights of racist students, and the ongoing spectacle of her mother’s torture at the hands of a man.

But she could not handle the loss of her Nana.

## How People Deal with Losses

“I was doing this for Nana,” Sue sobbed. “I wanted her to see me graduate. She was so proud of me for making it into medical school. She’d always talk at church about how her little girl was gonna become a doctor. And now she’s not going to be there. It just isn’t fair. Since she died, I haven’t even been going to class. What’s the point?”

For the most part, people can tolerate losses well, whether in the markets or in life. Losing trades, lost business opportunities, lost friends—these are painful but generally not overwhelming. Far more debilitating is the loss of hope. When a trader loses a good portion of capital on a botched trade, it is not so much the dollars-and-cents impact that becomes depressing, as it is the loss of hope that one can ever recoup. I recall one trader pointing out to me that his portfolio was down 50 percent in just three months. “I could double my money now and still not be profitable,” he explained in a flat monotone. Lost was his horizon for success. Like Sue, he could not find a rationale for going on.

Although Sue valued her medical school career, she had much more invested in her education than time and effort. Success in school had come to symbolize her way of repaying her grandmother, of making all Nana’s sacrifices worthwhile. Sue confided to me her fantasies of becoming financially secure someday. “After I paid off my loans,” she said, “I was going to buy my grandmother a new house. I didn’t want her living the rest of her life in a little apartment.” These dreams kept Sue’s hope and motivation alive, even as she endured troubles at home and humiliations among classmates.

What is the significance of one’s life undertakings: one’s education, career, brokerage account, or 401(k) statement? It cannot be reduced to a dollars-and-cents figure. Invested in people’s efforts are their hopes for a successful trading career, their dreams for a secure retirement, and their self-image as individuals competent to navigate the future. What happens when these ideals are threatened, when people’s hopes and visions for the future are shattered? One of my graduate school professors, Jack Brehm, described depression as *motivational suppression*. Once valued outcomes are deemed unattainable, it no longer makes sense to muster the energy and the enthusiasm for their pursuit. Depression is nature’s way of conserving energy, dampening the diversion of resources toward ends deemed unreachable.

Most depressed traders identify losses as the source of their blues. They

forget that many system traders lose money on half or more of their trades and endure occasional strings of multiple, consecutive losses. The difference is that the depressed trader has lost hope as well as money. The mechanical trader pushes forward precisely because losses are built into the system. With no mechanisms for anticipating or handling losses, the depressed trader sees no future and loses all motivation.

Motivational suppression would be an accurate description for Sue's state of mind. School, her longstanding passion, no longer felt like the priority that it had been. The hopelessness that had no doubt engulfed her childhood friends was now descending on her. Why make efforts if they can go nowhere?

"But why withdraw from school?" I asked Sue. "Do you really think this isn't the field for you? What are you going to do for a career?"

Sue looked down, her voice barely audible. "Dr. Steenbarger," she said, addressing me as she might address a parent, "I *have* to go. I'm pregnant."

## The Enduring Pain of Self-Betrayal

I valiantly tried to hide my shock.

"I can't believe I let it happen," she said. "I was weak. Nana was gone, and this guy Kenny was really good to me. I felt I could trust him. And don't get me wrong. He's great. He says he'll go along with anything I want to do, and he says he loves me. But one night we didn't use protection, and that's it. I'm not getting rid of my child, and I can't be a mother in school. No way. I'm not going to do what my mother did. I'm going to be there for my child."

I knew Sue's religion would dictate her response to the situation. She felt that she had committed one sin in her premarital pregnancy; she would not commit another by ending the pregnancy. But I had the feeling this was not the source of her greatest anguish.

"You know," she sobbed, "when I found out, I felt so guilty. I thought to myself that it was good that Nana had died first. I don't know how I would have told her. I couldn't have stood to see the look on her face. She'd have been so disappointed in me. I can't believe how I've ruined everything."

Loss is painful; guilt can be devastating. Worse than losing one's dreams is the knowledge that the loss was self-inflicted. Like many traders that have sought me out, Sue could overcome the dreams that had died, but not the ones she had killed.