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Contents at a Glance

Introduction ................................................................. 1

Part I: Getting Started with Psychology ....................... 5
Chapter 1: Seeing the Purpose of Psychology ...................... 7
Chapter 2: Making Sense of What People Do: Psychology Essentials .................. 13

Part II: Picking Your Brain (And Body) ....................... 31
Chapter 3: Hardware, Software, and Wetware .................... 33
Chapter 4: Conscious Beings ............................................ 51
Chapter 5: Getting Sensitive .............................................. 61

Part III: Thinking and Feeling and Acting .................... 75
Chapter 6: Thinking and Speaking .................................... 77
Chapter 7: How Does That Make You Feel? ......................... 103
Chapter 8: Barking up the Learning Tree: Dogs, Cats, and Rats .................. 123

Part IV: Me, You, and Everything in Between ............... 143
Chapter 9: Developing an Award-Winning Personality .............. 145
Chapter 10: Catching the First Boat off Isolation Island ............ 173
Chapter 11: Conforming Like a Contortionist: Social Psychology ............ 199
Chapter 12: Growing Up with Psychology ......................... 221
Chapter 13: Modern Abnormal Psychology ....................... 241

Part V: Building a Better You ........................................ 263
Chapter 14: Assessing the Problem and Testing the Psyche ............. 265
Chapter 15: Getting Comfy on the Couch ......................... 279
Chapter 16: Changing Behavior, Changing Thinking .................. 291
Chapter 17: Being a Person Is Tough: Client-Centered and Existential Therapies ................................................. 311
Chapter 18: Stress, Illness, Growth, and Strength .................... 325

Part VI: The Part of Tens ............................................. 343
Chapter 19: Ten Tips for Maintaining Psychological Health .............. 345
Chapter 20: Ten Great Psychological Movies ....................... 351

Index ................................................................. 357
# Table of Contents

## Introduction ................................................................. 1
- About This Book ............................................................. 1
- Foolish Assumptions ....................................................... 2
- Icons Used In This Book .................................................. 2
- Beyond the Book ............................................................. 3
- Where to Go from Here .................................................... 4

## Part 1: Getting Started with Psychology ......................... 5

### Chapter 1: Seeing the Purpose of Psychology .................. 7
- What Is Psychology? ....................................................... 7
  - Whys, hows, and whats ................................................. 8
  - Building a person ....................................................... 9
  - Finding the function ................................................... 9
- Checking the Parts List .................................................. 10
- Troubleshooting ........................................................... 11
- Finding Professional Help ............................................... 11
- Putting It into Practice .................................................. 12

### Chapter 2: Making Sense of What People Do: Psychology Essentials .................................................. 13
- Finding a Framework ....................................................... 14
  - Biological ...................................................................... 15
  - Psychoanalytic/Psychodynamic ....................................... 15
  - Behaviorism .................................................................. 15
  - Cognitive ....................................................................... 16
  - Humanistic and existential ............................................ 16
  - Sociocultural .................................................................. 17
  - Feminism ........................................................................ 17
  - Postmodernism ............................................................ 17
- Working with the Biopsychosocial Model ......................... 18
  - Feeling out the role of the body ....................................... 18
  - Thinking about the role of the mind ................................. 18
  - Observing the role of the outside world ............................ 19
- Resolving the Nature versus Nurture Debate .................... 20
- Branching Off ................................................................. 21
- Seeking Truth ................................................................. 22
  - Applying the scientific method ....................................... 24
  - Developing a good theory .............................................. 25
Researching Matters ................................................................. 25
Understanding descriptive research .................................. 25
Doing experimental research .................................................. 26
Measuring one, measuring all with statistics ....................... 27
Relating variables: Correlation versus causation ............... 29
Doing nothing is something: The placebo effect ............... 29

Part II: Picking Your Brain (And Body) ......................... 31

Chapter 3: Hardware, Software, and Wetware ............ 33

Believing in Biology ................................................................. 34
Recognizing the Body’s Control Room .......................... 36
Tiptoeing into the periphery ............................................... 37
Moving to the center .............................................................. 37
Running Like a Well-Oiled Machine: Body Systems .. 39
Forebrain ............................................................................. 39
Midbrain ............................................................................. 40
Hindbrain ............................................................................ 41
Finding Out About Cells and Chemicals ....................... 41
Crossing the divide ............................................................... 42
Branching out ...................................................................... 44
Activating brain change ...................................................... 45
Finding Destiny with DNA ................................................ 46
Understanding Psychopharmacology ............................. 47
Easing depression ................................................................. 48
Shushing the voices ............................................................... 48
Relaxing .............................................................................. 49
Undergoing No-Knife Brain Surgery ............................. 50

Chapter 4: Conscious Beings ........................................ 51

Exploring the Horizons of Awareness ............................ 51
  Catching some zzzzs .......................................................... 54
  Understanding tired brains, slipping minds .................... 55
Arriving at Work Naked: Dreams ................................. 56
Altering Your Consciousness ........................................ 57
  Mind on the mind (meditative states) ......................... 58
  Getting high on conscious life ....................................... 58
  Falling into hypnosis ......................................................... 60

Chapter 5: Getting Sensitive ........................................ 61

Building Blocks: Our Senses ........................................... 62
  The sensing process ......................................................... 63
  Seeing .............................................................................. 64
  Hearing ............................................................................ 68
  Touching and feeling pain ............................................. 68
### Table of Contents

Smelling and tasting ...............................................................69
Balancing and moving ..........................................................70
Finishing the Product: Perception .........................................70
Organizing by Principles .......................................................72

**Part III: Thinking and Feeling and Acting .........................75**

**Chapter 6: Thinking and Speaking .................................77**
- Finding Out What’s On Your Mind .....................................78
- Thinking Like a PC ..........................................................79
  - Computing .....................................................................79
  - Representing ...............................................................80
  - Processing .....................................................................80
- Exploring Operations of the Mind .......................................82
  - Focusing your attention ................................................82
  - Packing it away in the ol’ memory box .........................83
  - Conceptualizing ..........................................................86
  - Making decisions .........................................................89
- Thinking You’re Pretty Smart ............................................94
  - Considering the factors of intelligence .........................95
  - Getting a closer look ....................................................96
  - Adding in street smarts ...............................................97
  - Excelling with multiple intelligences ............................97
  - Making the grade — on a curve ...................................98
- Figuring Out Language ......................................................100
  - Babel-On .....................................................................100
  - Sounds, bites, pieces, and pieces .................................101

**Chapter 7: How Does That Make You Feel? .....................103**
- Calling on Tony for Some Motivation ...............................104
  - Trusting your instincts ..................................................105
  - Feeling needy ...............................................................106
  - Arousing interest in prime rib ......................................108
  - Getting cheaper long distance is rewarding ..................109
  - Facing your opponent-process theory ............................109
  - Knowing who’s the boss ...............................................110
- Launching Countless Bad Poems: Emotions ......................112
  - Finding out which comes first, the body or the mind? .....113
  - Expressing yourself .....................................................115
  - Feeling the power of love ..............................................116
  - Acknowledging anger ..................................................118
  - Checking out happy ....................................................120
  - Discovering your smart heart: Emotional intelligence and styles ........................................121
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying Yourself</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forging a personal identity</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carving out a social identity</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mustering up some self-esteem</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting Attached</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Realizing even monkeys get the blues</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attaching with style</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cavorting with Family and Friends</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parenting with panache</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embracing your rival: Siblings</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting chummy</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding Person Perception</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explaining others</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explaining yourself</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicating Is Easier Said Than Done</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explaining</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asserting yourself</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 11: Conforming Like a Contortionist: Social Psychology</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing Your Part</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ganging Up in a Group</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conforming</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doing better with help</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kicking back</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remaining anonymous</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking as one</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persuading</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being Mean</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acting naturally</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being frustrated</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doing what’s learned</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lending a Helping Hand</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why help?</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When to help?</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who gives and receives help?</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Birds of a Feather . . . or Not</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding out about isms</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding discrimination</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making contact</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 12: Growing Up with Psychology</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginning with Conception and Birth</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X’s and Y’s get together</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uniting and dividing all in one night</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going from Diapers to Drool</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival instincts</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motoring about</td>
<td>225</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexing their muscles</td>
<td>227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling time for schemata</td>
<td>228</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting your sensorimotor running</td>
<td>229</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning within the lines</td>
<td>230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saying what you think</td>
<td>230</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blooming social butterflies</td>
<td>232</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting on the Big Yellow Bus</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastering the crayon</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being preoperational doesn’t mean you’re having surgery</td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the zone</td>
<td>234</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming even more social</td>
<td>235</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agonizing over Adolescence</td>
<td>235</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pining over puberty</td>
<td>236</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving away from parents</td>
<td>237</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existing as a Grown-Up</td>
<td>237</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at you</td>
<td>238</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting and working</td>
<td>238</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aging and Geropsychology</td>
<td>239</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 13: Modern Abnormal Psychology</strong></td>
<td>241</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figuring Out What’s Normal</td>
<td>242</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorizing Symptoms and Disorders</td>
<td>244</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasping for Reality</td>
<td>245</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizophrenia</td>
<td>245</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling with other types of psychoses</td>
<td>249</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Funky</td>
<td>249</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staying in the rut of major depression</td>
<td>250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riding the waves of bipolar disorder</td>
<td>253</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Scared</td>
<td>255</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing panic disorder’s causes</td>
<td>257</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treating panic disorder</td>
<td>257</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Young People’s Problems</td>
<td>258</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with ADHD</td>
<td>259</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in a world of her own</td>
<td>260</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part V: Building a Better You</strong></td>
<td>263</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 14: Assessing the Problem and Testing the Psyche</strong></td>
<td>265</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming the Problem</td>
<td>266</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documenting history</td>
<td>266</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining mental status</td>
<td>268</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table of Contents**

Checking Under the Hood with Psychological Testing ........................................... 270
  Standardizing ....................................................................................................... 271
  Relying on tests .................................................................................................... 271
  Trusting tests ........................................................................................................ 272
Testing Types ............................................................................................................ 273
  Clinical testing ...................................................................................................... 273
  Educational/achievement testing ......................................................................... 274
  Personality testing ............................................................................................... 274
  Intelligence testing ............................................................................................... 276
  Neuropsychological and cognitive testing ............................................................ 276
Keeping Them Honest ............................................................................................. 277

**Chapter 15: Getting Comfy on the Couch ......................................................... 279**
  Finding Out What’s Really Going On ................................................................. 280
  Doing Analysis ..................................................................................................... 282
  Getting practical .................................................................................................. 283
  Keeping an eye on the ball .................................................................................. 283
  Being (the) patient .............................................................................................. 284
  Getting down to analyzing .................................................................................. 285
  Seeing the overall process ................................................................................. 287
  Transferring to the New School ......................................................................... 289

**Chapter 16: Changing Behavior, Changing Thinking ........................................ 291**
  Weeding Out Bad Behavior with Behavior Therapy ............................................ 292
  Basing therapy on learning theories .................................................................... 292
  Assessing the problem .......................................................................................... 295
  Trying different techniques ................................................................................... 297
  Applying Some Soap to Your Mind with Cognitive Therapy ......................... 303
  Exploring distorted thinking .............................................................................. 303
  Changing the way you think ............................................................................... 305
  Playing Together Nicely: Behavior and Cognitive Therapies ......................... 306
  Being Aware with Acceptance and Mindfulness-Based Therapies ................. 307
  You’re Okay, Now Change: Dialectical Behavior Therapy .............................. 309

**Chapter 17: Being a Person Is Tough: Client-Centered and Existential Therapies ...................................................................................... 311**
  Client-Centered Therapy: Shining in the Therapist’s Spotlight ......................... 312
  Understanding theory of the person ................................................................... 313
  Reconnecting in therapy ....................................................................................... 315
  Being at Peace with Your Being: Existential Therapy ....................................... 317
  Hanging out with your hang-ups: Death, guilt, and anxiety .............................. 318
  Being in the here and now: Time and transcendence ......................................... 319
  Facing freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness ............................................... 321
  Letting go of defense mechanisms ...................................................................... 323
  Claiming responsibility ......................................................................................... 323
# Psychology For Dummies, 2nd Edition

## Chapter 18: Stress, Illness, Growth, and Strength .......................... 325

- Stressing Out ..................................................................................................... 326
  - Considering ways to think about stress ......................................................... 326
  - Stressing to the types ..................................................................................... 328
  - Getting sick of being worried .......................................................................... 329
- Coping Is No Gamble ....................................................................................... 332
  - Discovering how to cope ................................................................................ 332
  - Finding resources .......................................................................................... 333
- Going Beyond Stress: The Psychology of Health ............................................. 334
  - Preventing illness ......................................................................................... 334
  - Making changes ............................................................................................ 335
  - Intervening .................................................................................................... 337
- Harnessing the Power of Positivity ................................................................... 338
- Acquiring the Bionic Brain ............................................................................... 339
  - Doing smart drugs ......................................................................................... 340
  - Hitting the limits of the skull ......................................................................... 341

## Part VI: The Part of Tens ................................................................. 343

## Chapter 19: Ten Tips for Maintaining Psychological Health .................. 345

- Accept Yourself ............................................................................................... 347
- Strive for Self-Determination .......................................................................... 347
- Stay Connected and Nurture Relationships ..................................................... 347
- Lend a Helping Hand ....................................................................................... 348
- Find Meaning and Purpose and Work Toward Goals ..................................... 348
- Find Hope and Maintain Faith ......................................................................... 349
- Find Flow and Be Engaged ............................................................................. 349
- Enjoy the Beautiful Things in Life .................................................................... 349
- Struggle to Overcome; Learn to Let Go .......................................................... 350
- Don’t Be Afraid to Change .............................................................................. 350

## Chapter 20: Ten Great Psychological Movies ...................................... 351

- One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest .................................................................. 351
- A Clockwork Orange ........................................................................................ 352
- 12 Monkeys ..................................................................................................... 352
- Ordinary People ............................................................................................. 353
- Girl, Interrupted ............................................................................................... 353
- The Silence of the Lambs ............................................................................... 354
- Sybil ................................................................................................................ 354
- Psycho ............................................................................................................. 355
- The Matrix ....................................................................................................... 356
- The Boost ........................................................................................................ 356

## Index ........................................................................................................... 357
Introduction

So you’ve bought *Psychology For Dummies*. How does that make you feel? Hopefully, you’re feeling pretty good. And why shouldn’t you be? You’re going to discover all kinds of interesting information about the basics of human behavior and mental processes.

Everybody is interested in psychology. People are fascinating, and that includes you! Humans often defy explanation and evade prediction. Figuring people out can be pretty hard. Just when you think that you’ve figured someone out, bang, he surprises you. Now I know that some of you may be thinking, “Actually, I’m a pretty good judge of people. I’ve got a handle on things.” If that’s the case, that’s great! Some folks do seem to have a more intuitive understanding of people than others. For the rest of us though, there’s psychology.

About This Book

*Psychology For Dummies* is an introduction to the field of psychology. I tried to write this book using plain English and everyday examples with the hope that it will be real and applicable to everyday life. I’ve always felt that tackling a new subject is more enjoyable when it has real-world importance. Psychology is full of jargon, so much jargon that it even has its own dictionary, aptly named *The Dictionary of Psychology* (Penguin Reference Books). This book is for those of you who are interested in what people do, think, say, and feel, but want the information presented in a clear and easily understandable manner.

The information in this reference is not intended to substitute for expert psychological, healthcare, or medical advice or treatment; it is designed to help you make informed choices. Because each individual is unique, a psychologist, healthcare practitioner, or physician must diagnose conditions and supervise treatments for each individual health problem. If an individual is under a psychologist’s or physician’s care and receives advice contrary to information provided in this reference, the psychologist’s or physician’s advice should be followed, as it is based on the unique characteristics of that individual.
Conventional language for psychologists can sound like gibberish to someone who has never had a psychology class. As I state earlier in this chapter, I try to stay away from jargon and technical language in this book. You may come across an attempt at a joke or two. I tend to take a lighter approach to life, but sometimes people don’t get my sense of humor. If I try to crack a joke in the text and it bombs, please don’t be too harsh. I’m a psychologist after all, and I don’t think we’re known for our sense of humor. I hope I don’t come across as insensitive or cavalier either — that is certainly not my intention.

Sometimes, talking about psychology can be pretty dry, so I try to liven things up with examples and personal stories. I make no references to any patients I’ve ever had in therapy. If there appears to be a resemblance, it’s purely coincidental. In fact, I took great care in preserving the privacy and confidentiality of the people I have worked with.

**Foolish Assumptions**

You can find a lot of psychology books out there. Most of them are either too technical and specialized or cover too narrow an area of psychology. Here are some of the reasons why I think *Psychology For Dummies* is the book for you:

- You’ve got a lot of questions about people.
- You’ve got a lot of questions about yourself.
- You’re thinking about going into the field of psychology.
- You’re currently studying psychology or a related discipline, such as social work or counseling.
- You’re interested in psychology but don’t have the time or the money to take a psychology course.
- You’ve got people all figured out, and you want to see if I’m on track.

**Icons Used In This Book**

Throughout this book, you find icons in the margins. They’re there to help you easily find certain types of information. Here’s a list of the icons you see:

When you see this one, I’m asking you to engage in a little psychological experimentation. In other words, you’re the guinea pig when you run across this icon. What would psychology be without its guinea pigs? Don’t worry — the experiments are harmless. No shocks, I promise.
When you see this icon, I’m trying to emphasize a bit of information that may come in handy someday.

With this creative piece of art, I’m trying to alert you to information that is a “must know” if you’re going to learn psychology.

Don’t forget it. When you see this icon I am reminding you of the highlights from that section. It flags the “if you learn just one thing from this chapter” type of stuff, so pay attention.

This icon flags discussions that may rise above the level you need to basically understand the topic at hand. These sections can safely be skipped without harming your comprehension of the main point.

**Beyond the Book**

In addition to the chapters in this print book, you’ll find lots more *Psychology for Dummies* information on the Web at [www.dummies.com/extras/psychology](http://www.dummies.com/extras/psychology). For free!

There’s just too much good information out there, and I want you to learn as much as you can about psychology. But there was only so much space I had to work with in print. So I put the rest online for you.

Check out the eCheat Sheets for quick access to information about the differences between psychologists and other mental health professionals and coping with psychological crises.

You’ll also find three extra online “chapters” — full articles on the following topics:

- “Ten Ways the Internet and Psychology are Intersecting” deals with the psychology of the Internet and cyberpsychology.
- “Applying Psychology for a Better World” covers behavioral economics and forensic psychology.
- “Exploring Human Differences: Culture, Gender, and Sexuality” is a look at the differences that make us unique as individuals and groups.

For fun, you can also take a couple of mock tests to check out your intelligence and personality!
Where to Go from Here

Psychology is a broad field. I think you’ll find that the organization of this book lets you check out what you’re interested in and leave the rest of the stuff behind, if you want.

Use the table of contents and index to see what grabs your interest. If you’re new to the subject, by all means start with Chapter 1 and go. But you don’t have to read it cover to cover. Kind of like a cafeteria — take what you like and leave the rest.

But hey, if I can write an entire book on psychology, I think you can read an entire book on this stuff. Besides, I think you’ll like it. Psychology is a great subject. Enjoy!
Part I
Getting Started with Psychology

For Dummies can help you get started with lots of subjects. Visit www.dummies.com
to learn more.
In this part…

- Understand what psychology is and get an overview of the field.
- Get in touch with your inner armchair psychologist by exploring the concept that we are all “acting” psychologists, analyzing and assessing human behavior every day.
- Find out about the professional practice of psychology with an introduction to its scientific nature and the different approaches psychologists use to investigate and understand people.
- Get to know the ethical guidelines that psychologists are expected to follow during treatment and in applied psychology.
Most people I know have a certain idea in mind when they think about psychology.

I’m a psychologist. But what’s that? Someone who knows and studies psychology, but is that all there is to it? When I get together with family and friends during the holidays, it seems like they still don’t know exactly what I do for a living.

Some of my patients have said, “All you do is talk. Can’t you prescribe some medicine for me?” Still others grant me seemingly supernatural powers of knowledge and healing. I wrote this book to clear up some misconceptions about psychology.

What Is Psychology?

What are some of the ideas that come to mind when people think about the topic of psychology? It depends on whom you ask. Sometimes, I imagine myself as a guest on a television talk show. I’m bombarded by questions from the audience that I can’t answer. My heart starts to pound. I begin to sweat. I start to stand up so that I can run off the set, but then something comes to me that keeps me in my seat. I imagine asking the people in the audience what they think psychology is and why they think a psychologist can answer questions about psychology.
Whys, hows, and whats

Before I provide a definition of psychology, I want you to take a few minutes to jot down some of your ideas on what psychology is.

Why did this book catch your eye?

Are you looking for answers? Looking for advice?

What’s the question you’re asking here?

“Why do people do what they do?” is the question that lies beneath many of the other questions people ask psychologists. Whether you’re a professional psychologist, a researcher, or a layperson, this one simple question seems to be the root issue.

Here are some examples of the motivating questions that drive the discipline of psychology:

- Why did that shooting happen?
- Why can’t I stop feeling sad?
- Why did she break up with me?
- Why are people so mean?

Basically, psychology is a branch of knowledge that focuses on people, either as individuals or in groups.

Other fundamental questions of psychology center on the “how” of things:

- How can I get excited about my marriage again?
- How can I get my 2-year-old to stop throwing tantrums?
- How does the mind work?

Still other questions deal with the “whats”:

- What are emotions?
- What is mental illness?
- What is intelligence?

These why, how, and what questions comprise the intellectual and philosophical core of psychology.

Therefore, psychology can be defined as the scientific study of human behavior and mental processes. Psychology attempts to uncover what people do along with why and how they do it.
Chapter 1: Seeing the Purpose of Psychology

**Building a person**

When I try to imagine all the reasons that people do what they do and figure out how various behaviors and mental processes come to pass, I often run with a “mad-scientist” approach. I’ve always thought that one of the best ways to answer the what and why and how questions would be to build a person. Well, not actually build one like Dr. Frankenstein did — out of parts and brains and electricity — but to create a blueprint of a person’s mind and behavior.

In therapy, when people try to explain a particular behavior or situation to me, I often say, “Can you make it happen, now? Can you show me?” For example, a parent may be telling me how his child hits him when he tells the child to do something. And I’ll say, “Show me. Make it happen.” The most common response is a puzzled or disturbed look on the parent’s face.

The point is, if they can cause it to happen, then they can un-cause it to happen, too. And that means they understand why and how it’s happening. This is a type of reverse psychological engineering for figuring out the “why” and “how” of human behavior.

I envision psychology reaching a pinnacle when it can list all the ingredients of the human mind and all the determinants of behavior. Maybe the field can figure it all out through that reverse engineering process mentioned earlier. Or, at the very least, maybe psychology will figure out people, and all the information that experts gather can be stored or formulated into an algorithm for making people that, one day, a super-intelligent robotic life form can utilize to re-create the human species thousands of years after it becomes extinct. I did say mad scientist, right?

Yes, this is the kind of blueprint or overlay I use to understand what psychology is: What are the ingredients of a person — mind, thoughts, emotions, perceptions, dreams, fears, personality, and brain — and what is the purpose of each ingredient? I’m not alone. Many psychologists engage in reverse engineering of the mind and behavior by looking at all the parts and how they work together to create . . . well, you.

**Finding the function**

A first principle of my mad-scientist vision of psychology is that building a human requires you to know what the person’s function is. After all, engineers don’t build things without knowing what they’re supposed to do. Only with a purpose in mind can you know what to build and what features and materials need to be considered.

So, what’s the function — the purpose — of a human being?
Like all other carbon-based living organisms on planet Earth, human beings are “staying alive” machines. (Admit it; you instantly thought of the Bee Gees, didn’t you, or John Travolta in that white bell-bottom suit?) I’m not saying there is no meaning to life. Quite the contrary; I’m saying that the function of life is to be alive, to stay alive, and to perpetuate life. What’s the meaning of it all? Wrong book; try Philosophy For Dummies or Religion For Dummies.

The field of psychology concerns itself with the study of the “how” of life — the behavior and mental processes of being alive, staying alive, and perpetuating life.

Checking the Parts List

From a psychological standpoint, what does the human machine need in order to fulfill its function of existing, staying alive, and perpetuating? Well, if you’ve ever put together a do-it-yourself piece of furniture, you know that the instructions usually start out with a parts list.

Psychological science has already put together quite an impressive psychological parts list:

- **Bodies** (and all the subparts — see Chapter 3 for more)
  - Brains
  - Hearts
  - Hormones
  - Genes
  - Motor skills

- **Minds** (and all the subparts — see Chapters 4–8)
  - Consciousness
  - Sensations and perceptions, including vision, hearing, taste, smell, touch, balance, and pain
  - Thinking, which manages attending, remembering, forming concepts, problem solving, deciding, and intelligence
  - Communicating, including verbal and nonverbal expressions such as body language, gestures, speech, and language
  - Motivations
  - Emotions

- **Personality** (see Chapter 9)
✓ **Gender and sexuality** (see the free online article “Exploring Human Differences: Culture, Gender, and Sexuality” at www.dummies.com/extras/psychology)

✓ **Social skills and relationship skills** (see Chapters 10 and 11)

Just like putting together that desk from IKEA seemed a lot easier on paper than it actually turned out to be, assembling this list of psychological parts is daunting as well. Psychologists are still trying to understand each component in relative isolation and figure out how they all fit together. It’s the crux of what remains a formidable task in developing a comprehensive human science.

**Troubleshooting**

Imagine that I’ve assembled my human being, switched it on, and let it loose to go about its primary function of surviving. I think I’ve equipped it with all it needs in order to survive.

But then it happens — change. That’s right, something unexpected happens, and my human begins floundering, struggling, and verging on failing to achieve its primary function. How could I have forgotten that the world is not a static place?

My creation is dealing with the environment in ways that I should have anticipated. So I go back to the drawing board to add the following functions and abilities (yep, more parts):

✓ **Learning**: Ability to learn from the environment
✓ **Context**: Ability to grow and develop in response to the environment
✓ **Adaption**: Ability to cope with change, stress, and illness

Humans need parts and procedures.

Whew, this is getting complicated.

**Finding Professional Help**

Often, a person’s parts are all assembled, and he’s learning, growing, adapting, and adjusting to the best of his individual ability — but something’s “off” or he’s just not functioning properly. This is where physicians, psychotherapists, counselors, social workers, educators, and consultants enter the picture.
The tools and procedures that health care providers use to diagnose, fix, and maintain people include the following and other areas of research and practice:

- **Diagnostics:** Among the specialties of diagnostics are abnormal psychology (covered in Chapter 13) and psychological assessment and testing (see Chapter 14).
- **Biomedical therapies:** Treatment for various psychological conditions may include medication and/or physiological therapies (see Chapter 3).
- **Psychological therapy and intervention:** Psychoanalysis, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and humanistic therapies (see Chapters 15–18).
- **Applied psychology:** Using psychological science to solve a wide range of human problems and issues. (See the free online article “Applying Psychology for a Better World” at www.dummies.com/extras/psychology.)

## Putting It into Practice

Psychology is the scientific study of human behavior and mental processes. In case you were wondering (and worried), I am not engaged in an actual “build a human” project. But I’d have a very solid foundation and a good blueprint to get started if I ever decided to try. Each of a person’s parts, processes, and sources of help represents a chapter or section of *Psychology For Dummies, 2nd Edition*.

Psychology began as a type of philosophy, a mostly subjective, speculative, and theoretical way of thinking about human beings. But, as a result of the enormous contributions of such people as William James, Wilhem Wundt, Edward Thorndike, B. F. Skinner, Albert Bandura, Jean Piaget, Phillip Zimbardo, Robert Sternberg, Albert Ellis, and many, many others, it has matured over the last 100 years into an objective science. Psychology’s experimentation methods and statistical analyses continue to grow increasingly sophisticated.

Psychology has evolved from a study of intangible thought and consciousness to the study of material subject matter — as in brains and test scores — thanks to modern technological advances such as psychological testing instruments, EEG, and MRI.

This fascinating field continues to mature as its practitioners become more sophisticated in their understanding of how the environment and human differences (such as culture and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation) impact the mind and behavior.
In a way, each of us is an amateur psychologist of sorts. Professional psychologists aren’t the only ones who try to figure people out. When I started taking psychology courses, I had my own ideas about people. Sometimes I agreed with the theories of Freud and others, and sometimes I disagreed wholeheartedly. I’m not alone. Most people seem to have specific ideas about what makes others tick.

Psychology covers a topic we all have experience with — people. It’s pretty hard to say the same thing about chemistry, astronomy, or electrical engineering. Of course, we all encounter chemicals every day, but I can’t remember the last time I asked, “How do they get that mouthwash to taste like mint?” However, a psychologist may ask, “What happens inside a person so that her toothpaste tastes like mint?”

One of the best places to catch armchair psychologists (people who speculate without systematic evidence) in action is the local coffeehouse or watering hole. People love talking about the whys and the wherefores of other people’s behavior. “And then I said. . . .” “You should have told him. . . .” Hanging out in public social spaces is much like being in group therapy sometimes. People work hard at figuring out other people.

Psychologists sometimes call this armchair psychologizing folk psychology — a framework of principles used by ordinary people to understand, explain, and predict their own and other people’s behavior and mental states. In practice, everyone uses a variety of psychological notions or concepts to explain individuals’ mental states, personalities, and behaviors. Two concepts in particular that people tend to rely on are beliefs and desires. That is, most people
assume that people have beliefs and that they act on those beliefs. So when you wonder why people do what they do, it’s easy; it’s because of their beliefs.

Yet folk psychology isn’t the only tool in the bag of an armchair psychologist. People also explain other’s behavior in terms of luck, curses, blessings, karma, fate, destiny, and other non-psychological terms. Using these explanations isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s pretty hard to explain from a psychological perspective why someone wins the lottery. Explaining why someone continues to buy tickets when they keep losing, however, is a question for psychology.

In this chapter, you find out how psychologists go about their business, including how overarching theories frame the questions they ask and the variables they look at. You also get a look at the various branches of psychology that include more than what people typically think of such as clinical psychology. Finally, you see how the discipline of psychology works to be as scientific as possible by basing its knowledge on research and statistical methods, which shores up its credibility among the other scholarly disciplines.

**Finding a Framework**

At a very basic level, psychology is a branch of knowledge. Psychology exists among and interacts with other scientific and scholarly disciplines in a community-like environment of knowledge, and contributes a vast collection of theories and research to help answer questions related to human behavior and mental processes. A number of other fields of study — physics, biology, chemistry, history, economics, political science, sociology, medicine, and anthropology — attempt to use their own perspectives to answer the same basic questions about people that psychology addresses.

One comment I get from students from time to time is, “What makes you think that psychology has all the answers?” My answer is, “Psychologists are just trying to provide a piece of the puzzle, not all the answers.”

To enable psychology to contribute to the community of knowledge about people, over the years, psychologists as a group have come up with a basic set of **broad theoretical perspectives**, or frameworks to guide the work of psychology. These broad theoretical frameworks are sometimes referred to as **metatheories**. The lion’s share of psychological research is based on one or more of these broad frameworks or metatheories.

Each metatheory provides an overarching framework for conducting psychological research and comes with a different point of emphasis to figure out what people do, and why and how they do it. Other perspectives represent hybridized approaches, such as motivational science and affective neuroscience. But for now, I’m just sticking with the basics.
In this section, I describe the most common metatheories psychologists use when they find a behavior or mental process they’re interested in researching. Work typically begins from within one of these theories.

**Biological**

The biological approach centers on the biological underpinnings of behavior, including the effects of evolution and genetics. The premise is that behavior and mental processes can be explained by understanding genetics, human physiology, and anatomy. Biological psychologists focus mostly on the brain and the nervous system. (For more on biological psychology, see Chapter 3.) Neuropsychology and the study of the brain, genetics, and evolutionary psychology are included within the biological metatheory.

For an example of biology’s impact on behavior, just think about how differently people act when they’re under the influence of alcohol. Holiday office parties are good laboratories for applying the biological perspective. You walk into the party and see Bob, the relatively quiet guy from accounting, burning up the cubicles. Bob’s transformed into a lady’s man. He’s funny. He’s drunk. Do you think Bob will remember?

**Psychoanalytic/Psychodynamic**

The psychoanalytic/psychodynamic metatheory emphasizes the importance of unconscious mental processes, early child development, personality, the self, attachment patterns, and relationships. This approach explores how these mental and developmental processes interact with the challenges of life and everyday demands to affect the person you are and how you behave.

Sigmund Freud founded psychoanalysis in the early 1900s; since then, hundreds of theorists have added to his work. The later theories are typically labeled *psychodynamic* because they emphasize the dynamic interplay between various components of mind, the self, personality, others, and reality. Object Relations Theory and Self Psychology are two specific theoretical perspectives that fall within the psychoanalytic/psychodynamic metatheory. (For more on psychoanalysis/psychodynamics, flip to Chapters 9 and 15.)

**Behaviorism**

Behaviorism emphasizes the role and influence of a person’s environment and previous learning experiences to understanding behavior. Behaviorists don’t traditionally focus on mental processes per se because they believe that mental processes are too difficult to observe and measure objectively.
In the framework of behaviorism, the “why” of behavior can be explained by looking at the circumstances in which it occurs and the consequences surrounding someone’s actions. Classical conditioning and operant conditioning are ways of understanding behavior and they lead to behavior modification, a specific approach to modifying behavior, and helping people change that comes from the metatheory of behaviorism (see Chapter 8 for details on some behavior-modification techniques that are based on classical and operant conditioning).

**Cognitive**

The cognitive framework centers on the mental processing of information, including the specific functions of attention, concentration, reasoning, problem solving, and memory. Cognitive psychologists are interested in the mental plans and thoughts that guide and cause behavior and affect how people feel. Intelligence testing and information-processing theories are examples that fall within the cognitive metatheory.

Whenever someone tells you to look at the bright side, they’re coming from a cognitive perspective. When something bad happens, most people feel better if the problem gets solved or the issue is resolved. But how should you feel if nothing changes? If circumstances don’t change, do you have to feel bad forever? Of course not; in most cases, people can change the way they think about a situation. You can choose to look on the bright side — or at least not look solely at the downside. That’s the gist of cognitive therapy.

**Humanistic and existential**

The humanistic and existential metatheory emphasizes that each person is unique and that humans have the ability and responsibility to make choices in their lives. I’m not a victim of circumstance! I have choices in my life. Humanists believe that a person’s free choice, free will, and understanding of the meaning of events in his or her life are the most important things to study in order to understand behavior. The works of Victor Frankl, Rollo May, and Fritz Perls and the study of spirituality and religion are examples that fall within this framework.

In your own life, have you ever felt like just another nameless face in the crowd? Has your life ever seemed as if it’s controlled by the winds of chance? How did it feel? Probably not very good. Feeling like you have choices — and making good choices — gives you a sense of true being and affirms your existence. That’s the case with most people anyway, and psychologists who work within the humanistic and existential metatheory believe that behavior is simply a result of choice.