

Did you defeat your Death Drive today?

By Shailesh Deshpande

A. Thinking about 'personal growth': As someone deeply interested in learning about human behavior, I have been trying to study the subject of personal growth. I think personal growth can be defined as ***'Journey of becoming the best you can be and expressing yourself in a manner that is most meaningful to you'***. It is about developing a deep understanding about our core self and finding the means for highest and diverse expressions of that core. It is about generating multiple and ever evolving creations from our core, without getting constrained by things that are outside us.

B. Challenges and obstacles in journey of growth:

One of the most important aspects related to journey of personal growth is the challenges and obstacles faced by us in it. All of us know that the biggest issue with reference to personal growth is not that we don't know what are the things that we need to do – we certainly have some sense about what these things are – but for some reason or the other, we never end up doing these 'right things'. When we think about our personal growth journeys, we realize that time and again we get distracted, confused, scared or caught in things like 'daily routine', and as a result, do not experience progress, even in our own eyes.

The other challenge that we face – and even the most optimistic and the most idealistic ones among us will concede this – is that the world around us seems to be at best, indifferent and at worst, very hostile to our personal growth. We rarely find people and institutions that support our personal growth. We often encounter friends who don't really understand us, colleagues that are jealous, bosses that are indifferent and organizations that are full of frustrating politics. *(And we like to believe that)* All these things come in the way of our becoming the best that we can be.

The most important question then, is : ***If we all agree that personal growth is such a great thing (and the world will probably be a better place if everyone experienced it), why do we, as individuals often fail to achieve it and why do our institutions (family ,education and workplace) also fail to support it ?*** And while thinking long and hard about this question, I stumbled upon a very powerful insight, which I felt, explains this paradox very well. More importantly, this insight helps us understand the ultimate root

cause behind the factors that hinder our personal growth and understanding this root cause can potentially be the first step towards minimizing its disastrous effects.

THE INSIGHT: *Human beings are fundamentally governed by two inherent drives – one of them is ‘Life Drive’ and the other is ‘Death Drive’. What happens of us and our lives fundamentally depends on the battle between these two drives and the result of that battle.*

From what little I could understand, Freud was one of the first thinkers to talk about these drives. In a letter written in 1933, Freud writes: *‘The ‘death drive’ would serve as the biological justification for all the ugly and dangerous impulses against which we are struggling. **It must be admitted that they stand nearer to nature than does our resistance to them’***

C. Understanding the two drives model

1. The ‘Death drive’ as well as the ‘Life Drive’ are both fundamental drives that exist in human beings. The word ‘drive’ is used here to indicate an internal force that propels us in a particular direction.
 - a. **‘Life Drive’ is focused on self-development, healthy independence, creation, growth, peace and love.**
 - b. **‘Death drive’ is focused on self-annihilation, unhealthy dependence, destruction, decay, violence and hate.**
2. The perpetual and dynamic battle between these two drives is the source of the ambivalence and struggle that we all experience.
3. In a way, the Death Drive is stronger and more predominant of the two drives, because at the base level, it can operate without any additional effort (if we do not take any efforts, decay is a natural consequence). But since the ‘Life Drive’ too is always operating upon us, we keep reaching different states of balance, which are a result of the interaction between these two drives.
4. ‘State of balance’ does not mean that the drives operate with equal force, it is just a stable state and either of the drives could be operating with higher strength. The skew may change from moment to moment or from day to day (or from year to year) – but how we behave / feel at a particular instant is significantly influenced by the relative force of the drives at that instant (e.g. if at a particular instant , the Death Drive is predominant , we may feel extremely fearful and act in a very cautious manner)

5. We are not consciously aware of either of the drives.
6. Both the drives operate in inward as well as outward direction.
 - a. For example, the inwardly directed Life Drive gives us feeling of confidence, peace, self-reliance, coherence, clarity and hope. Outwardly directed Life Drive makes us explore the world with zest, motivates us to create new things and makes us relate with other people in a positive manner.
 - b. The inwardly directed Death Drive generates feelings and actions that make us harm or restrict ourselves – these could be feelings of worry, fear, insecurity, guilt, confusion, dependence and self-doubt. Outwardly directed Death Drive can make us very cautious and suspicious of the external world, it may make us withdraw from other people, be indifferent or even be aggressive and hurtful towards them.

D. Key insights that can be derived from the two drives model

1. Since both the drives are inherent and integral part of us, we can never make either of them completely go away.
2. In the default state, the Death Drive is likely to be stronger than the Life Drive.
3. Achieving personal growth is something that cannot be taken for granted, in fact not achieving personal growth is the default possibility – serious efforts are required to go against this default possibility.
4. It helps us understand many human phenomena and the struggles and paradoxes that we experience – from why we find it so difficult to change bad habits (it's not at all easy to beat the Death Drive) to understanding why people at the pinnacle of achievements sometimes do very stupid things (because Death Drive never goes completely away) to understanding why wars happen.
5. Given this fundamentally flawed nature of human existence, absolute and irreversible state of growth and happiness may not be attainable – but that does not mean there is no hope, because our Life Drive gives us the power to create things that matter to us and forge meaningful relationships – in turn helping us create long and sustained phases of happiness and harmony. To quote the Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa: *'... the world is in bad shape and it will always be so - which is no reason to refrain from doing whatever we can to keep it from getting worse.'*

E. USING THE INSIGHTS FROM TWO DRIVES MODEL TO IMPROVE OUR WORK ON PERSONAL GROWTH

1. **Being watchful of the clever traps used by the Death Drive:** What makes the Death Drive very powerful and dangerous that it is a silent and slow killer. We are often not even aware of the dominance of the Death Drive while being under significant influence of it. It is useful to remember that the Death Drive has a singular purpose – and that is to stop us from growing, expressing our best self, becoming the best that we can be – and it uses any and all means available to it to achieve this mission.

Mentioned below are just the few of the traps used very effectively by the Death Drive.

- a) **State of mild happiness:** *Very few of us experience either of the Drives with the extreme force (Only a few among us manage to be predominantly governed by the Life Drive – and these are often the best creators and noblest beings that we know) – if we were experiencing the Death Drive with extreme force , we would probably be severely depressed (inward driven) or be clinically aggressive (outward driven) , and in these extreme conditions , we are also likely to take efforts to correct the situation. So the Death Drive comes at us with a very clever ploy – it ensures that we stay in a state of mild happiness. This is a very cozy, comfortable (though often very boring) – ‘go with the flow’ kind of a state. Once in a while we do experience the Life Drive nudging us and asking us disturbing questions such as ‘Is this really my best life? , What is my true passion and purpose, how do I pursue it? But the Death Drive creates huge obstacles in form of **inertia, fear, routine** and so on and ensures that we do not follow these questions to logical conclusion. The result is that we stay in this zone of mild happiness – which, is certainly not our best life – but is an ‘eminently bearable’ life. With this trap the Death Drive succeeds in ensuring its predominance over the Life Drive.*

State of stupor and dependence created by abundant material pleasures is a special condition of this state – when you are immersed in material pleasures , the deeper questions about life can start looking quite painful and the mind learns to avoid them (typically by seeking newer materialistic pleasures , to keep the ‘ hedonistic treadmill’ running)

- b) **Cynical worldview (‘world is like that’)** : *The Death Drive convinces us that all this talk about personal growth, living your best life is just meaningless banter of idealistic fools. It tells us that the real world DOES NOT operate like that at all – it convinces us that the real world is ‘*

dog eat dog', power and money are the only things that matter, appearances are more important than content and there is great security in following the herd and doing what everyone else is doing and thinks is acceptable. The beauty of this trap is that once we are convinced about this view of the world, we don't have to take any responsibility or efforts for our personal growth – because we can easily claim that since the world is such a rotten place, what is the point in taking efforts on some idealistic notion of growth?

- c) ***Pitting personal growth against relationships:*** *The journey of personal growth often demands that we truly deep dive into ourselves and do things that our inner voice tells us to do. There is often a need for a certain extent of solitude in this process. Our near and dear ones may find our pursuit of such things little disturbing (at least in the short term). Pursuit of our passions is also often associated with certain 'risks' and the 'responsibilities' that we may have with reference to our families will make us feel very hesitant about taking these risks. Framing this as a conflict and forcing us to choose either relationships or personal growth is another very clever ploy used by the Death Drive. The reality is, that while the path to personal growth may be filled with some risks and solitary efforts, the journey of becoming the best we can be – is bound to give great joy to our true near ones and it is also bound to significantly improve all our relationships. But again by framing this as a conflict, the Death Drive provides us another great excuse: 'I would have followed my heart, but I can't hurt my dear ones or abdicate my responsibilities'*
- d) ***Tendencies for 'self-abnegation' in relationships:*** *Deep, authentic emotional attachment based on mutual respect and care is undoubtedly a fundamental and most beautiful part of human life (and a great manifestation of 'Life Drive'). But in relationships, we often see people going towards unhealthy extremes of (almost parasitic) dependence and increasing self-abnegation. (Self-abnegation simply means giving up more and more of your 'core', thinking that is required to sustain the relationship.). This is nothing but an amazing trap thrown by Death Drive. Here, the Death Drive is simply leveraging and distorting the power relationships have on human beings to further its own agenda.*

(Undoubtedly this is also one of the most complex and sensitive issues to deal with. There is no simple way to judge, even for ourselves what the 'healthy' level of dependence is and

when do we cross the line into unhealthy zone. Few of the signs that indicate that we may be getting into such a situation include feelings such as :

- Not being valued enough' by the other person
- Bitterness and regret about energies invested
- All waking hours are being invested on the relationship for a unusually prolonged period of time,
- Pathological dependence (as if you can't live without the other person)
- We have to change ourselves in fundamental ways to keep the relationship

The most important thing to note here is that when we get into such unhealthy zones (even with our own child or life partner), in the long run it is likely to cause more harm to the other person and also to the relationship.)

- e) **This is not the right time:** At various points in our life, the Death Drive convinces us that now is not the right time to embark upon the journey of growth. It creates very elaborate and convincing logic to tell us why now is not the right time and how later, ONLY AFTER xyz conditions are met (we all know the examples if these conditions – “after I complete my Masters or after I save a particular amount of money or after my children complete school or after I get this promotion or after I move to that town” and so on), will be the perfect time to start such ‘project of personal growth’. This is another great trap, because we don’t feel that we are giving up on our dream – we just feel that we are doing the right thing by deferring it for the important condition identified by us. So time goes by, the Death Drive keeps coming up with newer conditions that we need to meet – and in effect we never even take the first step in our journey of growth and often start becoming a totally different person than what we truly wanted to be. (The reality is that we have the potential and the energy to start this process of transformation at ANY stage and any juncture of our lives)
- f) **Self limitation : Insecurity , inferiority complex, dependence on support , external locus of control :** The reality is that each one of us has substantial sources of energy and strength within us – but the Death Drive convinces us otherwise and we start feeling so weak and dependent on external conditions that we just don’t find the power within ourselves to embark and sustain the journey of growth. Also by making us fearful of experimentation, the

Death Drive ensures that we don't even take the first exploratory step – and hence even the possibility of our finding our core selves and creating from there is eliminated.

- g) **Confuse by throwing multiple attractive options:** *True journey of growth usually needs certain minimum amount of focus and choice making (true polymaths are rare) and deep, prolonged immersion, efforts and experimentation in a few chosen fields. While our Life Drive keeps whispering to us about our true, core passions, the Death Drive keeps tempting us with multiple attractive options - we keep frittering our energies into these options one after another and the Death Drive succeeds in keeping us away from our true path of growth.*
- h) **Victim mindset:** *We often see people who are convinced that something outside of them is the source of all the pain and misery that they are experiencing. The most commonly quoted sources are – family background, lack of money, lack of time, organizational politics, lack of education, unsupportive supervisor and so on. This is another very clever trap used by the Death Drive – the moment we convince ourselves that the thing that stops us from growing is outside of us and we have no control on it, we can conveniently act like martyrs and get lot of sympathy from ourselves and others. This results in our denying all personal responsibility and makes us very powerless and weak. In extreme version of the victim mindset, people even destroy themselves or do things that will cause harm to their own self to take imaginary revenge on the things that (in their minds) have caused them pain. The Death Drive wins here because it successfully stops / hinders our efforts on personal growth. (e.g. an employee who stops caring about own work because he or she is fade up with organizational politics is in reality causing maximum damage to one's own self)*

Every time say “I really wanted to do / be XXXXX (something that is close to our hearts, our true passion) but YYYYYY (anything external) came in the way” we must take a pause and reflect whether we are getting trapped in the victim mindset.

- i) **Entitlement mindset:** *‘They will come to me if they need me’ or ‘ Success , recognition, awards , happiness’ are my god given birthrights and they should come to me no matter what I do’ are classic manifestations of this mindset. This mindset makes us believe that it the responsibility of the world to help us, support us, make us ‘successful’ and reward us.*

This trap helps the Death Drive to win because when we think like this, we don't focus on our own efforts and growth, but expect things to happen on their own.

j) **Addictions:** Addictions are repetitive and compulsive energy draining or passive activities that keep us away from fulfillment. These are agents of Death Drive because they keep us away from our true core, our path of growth. When we think about addictions, we readily think about things such as alcohol and tobacco – but even the things mentioned below, if they keep us away from our core are nothing but addictions and we need to be very watchful about them.

- Watching TV
- Spending meaningless time on internet
- Social media (Facebook , Twitter , Instagram ...)
- Obsessive hero worship
- Mindless hard work
- Gossip

(Only the individual himself / herself can know when something is a genuine hobby and when is it an 'addiction')

k) **Falling for occult:** An individual's choice related to matters of faith and religion is to be respected. However even the staunchest of believers will accept that there is something wrong with the tremendous increase we are seeing in popularity of all things occult (mainly as a tool to achieve wishes and desires that people have) – the list is very long and increasing – from astrology , Vaastu , Feng shui , numerology to all kinds of babas, 'yantras' and tarot cards. This is classic Death Drive because an individual is made to believe that he or she needs blessings of this supernatural power without which he or she is incapable of achieving the goals.

l) **Obsessive jealousy and comparisons:** Increasingly we are coming across people whose entire sense of wellbeing is driven by their comparative assessments. They actually feel miserable when the 'other' that they are tracking gets something and they also decide what to seek based on what this 'other' has. This too is nothing but Death Drive because once we are in this trap we never truly find what our core is and what we intrinsically value.

m) **The ‘all or nothing’ mindset:** *Whatever thing that we value or aspire to create, the death drive will make us believe that there is only one, grand way to do it (e.g. it will make a writer feel that she should one day write a novel or to someone interested in cause of education it will convince that the person should one day open a school). At the same time, the Death Drive also tells us that since this is a grand project, we can’t start it right away, but many other conditions need to be first fulfilled before we begin. This results in our convincing ourselves that after 10 years (or at the age of 45, after saving enough money etc. etc.) we will start this work and till such time, we have to live a mundane, ordinary existence. This is a great victory for Death Drive, because first of all it ensures that this thing that we value (and is a great source of our Life Drive) DOES NOT become a part of our everyday life. It also wins because most often that ‘after 10 years’ time never comes – we unfortunately become totally different people than what we originally wanted to be and don’t even end up trying these things out.*

The reality is (and as the life of any achiever shows) that the process of finding our core and finding the means to express it is usually a long journey – filled with experimentation, iterations, mistakes and discoveries - the person who one day aspires to open a school should actually start teaching on the weekends. (he may discover that while his passion for cause of education is strong, he does not like teaching that much – but would rather design learning materials for children). So whatever it is that we think our ‘thing’ is - we need to start working on it as early as possible – even on a small, experimental scale and keep chipping at it every day.

2. **Understanding the true nature of ‘war’ and respecting the ‘enemy within’:** Once we understand that the Death Drive is an integral part of us and it is so relentless, powerful and crafty (considering all the traps that we discussed earlier) – we need to, first of all, respect its power to influence our lives. This understanding also helps us in realizing that the ‘war’ with Death Drive needs to be fought every day – day after day. Even if we concede an inch of a ground to the Death Drive, within no time it can spread its tentacles and be back in the driving seat – hence we have to be ever watchful.

(The name that writer Steven Pressfield gives to Death Drive is ‘Resistance’. In his book ‘The War of Art’ he says: ‘Resistance’s goal is not to wound or disable. It aims to kill. Its target is

epicenter of our being: our genius, our soul, the unique and priceless gift we were put on earth to give and that no one else has but us. Resistance means business. When we fight it, we are in a war to the death.’)

3. **Be watchful of which drive we are feeding energy to:** At the core of our existence is pure energy. It’s the energy of our body, mind and spirit. What becomes of us depends on which of the Drives we feed energy to. Since both the Drives are such strong forces, whichever Drive we feed more energy to, starts a positive feedback cycle and before we know, that Drive takes us over. Best example of this is people who nurture their Life Drive to high levels – who often say that after a particular point in the journey, their mission itself guided them (instead of the other way round) – as if an invisible force was propelling their journey.

4. **Be watchful of how your environment is getting shaped:** Both the Drives also have the capability to ‘recruit allies’ (Pressfield’s words) – enlisting people, places, things that will further support their agenda. When the Death Drive is in the driving seat, we will tend to seek people who are cynical, insecure and they in turn feed into our negative emotions. If the Death Drive succeeds in roping in enough allies, it succeeds in creating a world around us that confirms our worst fears and makes the Life Drive look like a very unrealistic notion. Similarly the Life Drive also whispers at us when it sees allies and friends, and if we listen to it, it too can succeed in shaping a world around us that can sustain and nourish our growth.

F. Taking responsibility for our choice: Once we understand the nature of the two drives, we cannot avoid taking complete responsibility of the choices that we make. Because now we understand that all the excuses and explanations given by us are often in reality nothing but the manifestation of the Death Drive. Ideally this understanding should enable us to break free and learn to defeat the Death Drive, so that our Life Drive can guide us to path of personal growth. But if we choose not to fight the Death Drive and willingly stay in one of the traps – we should at least do it with complete knowledge and acceptance of the implications. **THE BIGGEST PROOF OF DEATH DRIVE’S TREMENDOUS POWER IS IN THE FACT THAT EVEN AFTER WE BECOME AWARE OF ITS DAMNING EFFECT ON US, WE STILL FIND IT DIFFICULT TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. AND WE KEEP GIVING THE SAME EXCUSES TO OURSELVES AND OTHERS FOR WHY WE CAN’T TRULY WORK ON OUR JOURNEY OF GROWTH.**

(In case you agree with this article, do you think you will be able to work on these insights form this moment?)

Can you do something TODAY to improve your work on personal growth ?

No?

Think about the reasons that you are giving and see for yourself how many of these are coming from your Death Drive ...)

G. Nurturing and honoring our Life Drive : We defined personal growth as : *'Journey of becoming the best you can be and expressing yourself in a manner that is most meaningful to you'* , it can be said that the simple test of whether we are nurturing Life Drive would be whether or not we are continuously 'creating' from our core selves. It is all about creating, producing, building, designing and making happen things (concrete and abstract) that we truly value, from the unique gifts that we possess. Growth in this context is all about continuously expanding our range and producing ever evolving creations. If we stay true to this principle, it automatically requires us to develop a deep self-understanding, experiment with creations, build capabilities, reduce dependence on things outside us and shape our environment in a manner that will enable creations – all beautiful manifestations of our 'Life Drive'.

So I believe that asking the 'TCQ' to ourselves (The Creation Question) is a great way to keep us honest about our work on the 'journey'. Use it if you think it is meaningful:

THE CREATION QUESTION (TQC):

DID I GENERATE AND GROW THE CREATIONS FROM MY CORE TODAY?

* * *

Additional Notes

- *Some of Freud's original ideas and writing have been criticized by modern science. But at the same time, the value of the new paradigm (psychodynamic lens) established by him and scholars who subsequently developed his ideas is well accepted.*
- *This article is based on the author's synthesis and expansion of the 'two drives model'. The ideas presented here may not exactly match with Freud's original writing or other scholarly writing on the subject. (The phrase 'Life Drive' is not very commonly found in the earlier writings)*
- *The reason why Death Drive is the default mode and stronger of the two drives can be found in the theory of evolution – fight or flight is the most fundamental and primal instinct in living organisms. This instinct is the origin of Death Drive. It is very clear that there is no grand design behind human life and no supernatural entity governing our journey – it is just that our evolution as sentient beings with highly evolved consciousness has enabled us to think about growth journeys and values. (The 'broaden and build theory of positive emotions' can be studied to understand evolutionary significance of positive emotions)*
- *Insights about Life and Death Drives can be found in many works of art. The character Ellsworth Toohey from Ayn Rand's novel 'The Fountainhead' epitomizes a person who uses his brilliant understanding of Death Drive to manipulate others and acquire power. The metaphor of 'Matrix' from the movie trilogy of by the same name can also be an interesting way of looking at the Death Drive.*

My deepest gratitude:

To my Teacher, Sulabha Mahajan for teaching me these principles in the first place. (I think now finally I have started to understand their true meaning)

To Steven Pressfield, for the hard hitting book 'The War of Art' – it pointed me in the direction of the two drive's model. This article owes a lot to his writing.

To Ojaswini Mishra and Anurag Shekhar for providing valuable feedback on the early drafts of this article.

To Rahul Inamdar (www.rahulinamdar.com) for the continuing conversations that do so much to enrich and sharpen my thinking.

And to Sonika, for being there ...

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About Life Drive Lab

'Life Drive Lab' is the platform through which I offer my work. My work is focused on themes related to Personal Growth, Leadership Assessment & Development, Recruitment & Selection, Career Development, HR Strategy & Process design, Organizational Development and takes different formats depending on the context and need – from one-on-one coaching, group facilitation, workshops, to bespoke HR & Talent development consulting assignments.

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