

Not Just Coping, but Thriving: Growing Wiser  
Dr. Carrie Bassett, The Wisdom Institute © 2006

Is it possible intentionally to become wiser? Can we learn to cope better with the crises and hardships that befall all of us? How can we draw upon our experiences to benefit ourselves while at the same time recognizing that our own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of the whole?

In this brief paper, I will outline some successful coping strategies that people used who were deemed wise vs. those not so wise. I will discuss the model of wisdom that I have developed and present a variety of strategies and techniques that can help lead farther along the continuum towards wisdom.

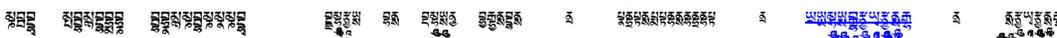
Emergent Wisdom

My study of wisdom was begun about seven years ago with grounded theory research where I interviewed, using a modified snowball method, 24 thoughtful insightful people, ranging from college presidents and professors to public servants to business people, about half female and half male, and mostly white but with a couple of African Americans and one Native American included. As a result of this work and wide interdisciplinary reading in psychology, philosophy, adult development, education, spirituality and religion, and literature (fiction, drama, and poetry), I developed the chart of Emergent Wisdom. I consider emergent wisdom to be a special kind of thinking applied to produce positive results in human life and all that supports it. It gives us new ways of understanding and guides us towards more interdependent behaviors that are beneficial to the human collective and the biosphere upon which the collective depends (Bassett, 2005).

With emergence, the whole is smarter than the sum of the parts, and the system of the component parts interact in complex ways from which some higher level structure (wisdom) can emerge. In the case of wisdom, there is consensus among researchers that it is a multi-dimensional construct, consisting of at least three major dimensions: cognitive, affective, and reflective. My results add a fourth dimension not considered (or named) by others, an active or behavioral one. The chart Emergent Wisdom (see p. 4) lays out the four major dimensions of wisdom, their chief characteristics, the associated proficiencies (what you can do when you have some command of this aspect of wisdom), and the manifestation (what shows up). The learning prompts represent a series of queries that can help people foster their wisdom development. In contrast to the linear chart on wisdom, the Emergent Wisdom graphic, while harder to read in detail, should give you a sense of the flow of wisdom and how each dimension is connected to all the others (Bassett, 2005; Bassett, 2006).

Successful (and Less Successful) Coping

Based on the work of Ardelt (2005) who used her 3D-WS (a three-dimensional wisdom scale) to find more vs. less wise elders, she interviewed three of each group to determine how they coped with life crises and difficulties. These four activities characterized the coping strategies of the wiser group:



1. Mental distancing: taking a step back, calming down, reflecting on the situation, and looking at the problem objectively.
2. Doing what needs to be done by:
  - Reframing: making the best of things and viewing unpleasant events as a challenge that can be mastered or a puzzle that can be solved (or at least resolved).
  - Taking control of the situation. Don't rely on external events to make you happy.
  - Using acceptance as a strategy when you have no power over the situation. However, resignation and fatalism can prevent problem-solving and pro-active behaviors.
3. Applying life lessons: learn from life experiences and expect and accept life's unpredictability and uncertainties.
4. Perceiving the past with gratitude, being of service in the present, and taking responsibility toward the future.

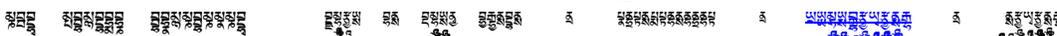
You might be interested to know what are considered some unwise coping skills. They include:

1. Passive coping through premature acceptance of a difficult situation, or reliance on God.
2. Avoiding reflection.

#### Ways to Become Wiser (Possibly)

Here is a list of some techniques and strategies that might help individuals develop their wisdom. The references cited will give you more information than I can in this brief paper.

1. Become more aware of wisdom when you see it and its inverse, folly/foolishness, around you. Practice noticing what you consider wise and ask yourself why you think the behavior of the person ahead of you in the check-out line, on television, in a book, across from you at the table, seems relatively wise or foolish.
2. Look for role models for wisdom, whether real (Eleanor Roosevelt) or fictional (Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*).
3. Have experiences—and reflect upon them: thoughtfully critique the experience and your assumptions about it and then arrive at some understanding of it (make meaning of it) (Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler, 2000).
4. Encounter the Other. Who is different from you? Find ways to engage, even if the experience is disconcerting. The moral imagination is developed through encounters like these. (Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks, 1996).
5. Work towards acquiring the wisdom heuristic (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000). It consists of rich factual knowledge and rich procedural knowledge with three metacriteria:
  - Lifespan contextualism: the many themes and contexts of life including family, work, education, leisure, for example.
  - Relativism of values and life priorities
  - Recognition and management of uncertainty and the limits of knowledge.



6. Balanced interests: self, others, and institutions (Sternberg, 1998).
7. Spiritual practices, such as meditation, often lead to an increase in wisdom because people are more able to see themselves in a larger context.
8. Use the queries that appear on the Emergent Wisdom chart and below. These are questions that you can continually ask yourself, that should run through your head like a mantra or a basso continuo.

Discernment:

- What's really going on here, without my projections or the way I want things to be?
- What's "true?"
- What's important?

Respect:

- Whose point of view am I taking? What would happen if I took \_\_\_\_'s point of view instead? How would I then see the world?

Engagement:

- Where can I use moral courage?
- In this action or decision, whose good am I seeking or serving?

Transformation:

- What are my values and how am I living them?
- How can I see myself more and more as part of systems and less as an isolated individual?

NOTE: Please see my website [www.wisdominst.org/wisdom](http://www.wisdominst.org/wisdom) for a more complete discussion of these ideas in the two papers with links.

Ardelt, M. (2005). How wise people cope with crises and obstacles in life. *ReVision* 28 (1), 7-19.

Baltes, P.B. & Staudinger, U.M. (2000). A metaheuristic (pragmatic) to orchestrate mind and virtue toward excellence. *American Psychologist*, 2, 122-136.

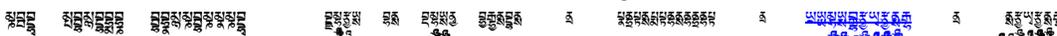
Bassett, C. (2005). Emergent wisdom: Living a life in widening circles. *ReVision* 27 (4), 6-11.

Bassett, C. (2006). Laughing at gilded butterflies: Integrating wisdom, development, and learning. In C. Hoare (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of adult development and learning* (pp. 281-306). New York: Oxford University Press.

Daloz, L., Keen, C., Keen, J., & Parks, S.D. (1996). *Common fire: Lives of commitment in a complex world*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Sternberg, R. (1998). A balance theory of wisdom. *Review of General Psychology*, 2, 347-365.

Taylor, K., Marienau, C., & Fiddler, M. (2000). *Developing adult learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



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WISDOM				
Dimension	<b>Discerning</b> (Cognitive)	<b>Respecting</b> (Affective)	<b>Engaging</b> (Active)	<b>Transforming</b> (Reflective)
Chief Characteristic	Objectivity	Openness	Involvement	Integrity
Proficiency	Insight  Holistic thinking, systemic seeing into complexity  Balanced interests	Multiple perspective-taking  Compassion & caring/ empathy/love  Generosity of spirit/ non-judgmental	Sound judgment & adept decision-making  Actions based on determinations of fairness & justice  Moral courage	Self-knowledge  Self-acceptance  Perspective on self as part of systems
Manifestation	Deep understanding of fundamental patterns and relationships	Sense of gratitude/ Expanded sphere of consideration	Committed action for the common good	Embracing of paradox & uncertainty/ Ability to see beyond the self/ Growing recognition of interdependence
Developmental Stimulus/ Learning Prompt	What's really going on? What's true? What's important? What's right?	Whose point of view am I taking? How does someone else understand reality? How can I relate to them with magnanimity?	What guides my actions? To what ends are my actions directed? What means do I use?	What are my values? How do I live them? Who or what is the "I" that I think I am? What am I part of?
WISDOM				

See my web site [www.wisdominst.org/wisdom](http://www.wisdominst.org/wisdom) for more information on this table. The link for the article in *ReVision* will give you a more complete explanation of it.

