

Also by Wassili Zafiris

**Happiness is Depressing: Understanding and
changing the inner landscape of depression**

IK BEN niet alleen op de wereld (Dutch)

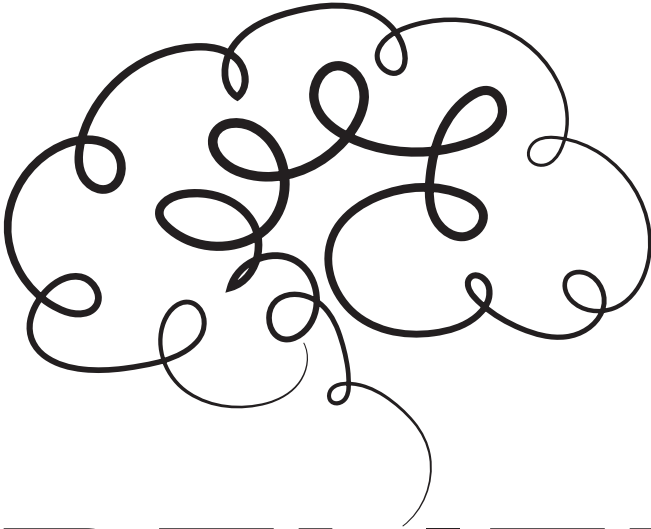
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WASSILI ZAFIRIS



RELIEF

HOW THE PREDICTIVE BRAIN SHAPES OUR
**RELATIONSHIPS, THE WAY WE FEEL ABOUT
OURSELVES AND EVEN OUR REALITY.**

WAAS Publications

Imprint

WAAS Publications

Amsterdam

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www.wassilizafiris.nl/en

First edition: June 2024

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Author: Wassili Zafiris

Editor: Ben de Dood

Cover design: Coco Bookmedia

Interior Design: Coco Bookmedia

Interior Layout: Coco Bookmedia

ISBN/EAN: 978-90-9038644-7

NUR: 770

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Disclaimer

The methods described in this book have been found to be consistently gentle and transformational when tested on myself, and many hundreds of clients and workshop participants from 2017 on. As with any personal development book, readers are advised to use their own best judgement in using the methods provided. For those dealing with significant life issues (abuse, trauma, suicidal thoughts, severe depression), or in the event of any concern about whether or how to use the methods for yourself, we recommend contacting a skilled professional who is thoroughly trained in these methods. The information presented in this book is offered to you as a service. By reading this book you agree that you are responsible for any results of your decisions and actions relating to your use of the information presented. It is advised to consult a specialist when one experiences depressed thoughts and or feelings.

A TREE WITHOUT
ROOTS IS A PIECE
OF WOOD.

**MARIA-ROSA GALLINA
MARCO PIERRE WHITE'S MOTHER**

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FOREWORD

In RELIEF, Wassili Zafiris describes an innovative approach to personal change, development and healing, which breaks with all traditional forms of coaching and psychotherapy.

Based on the groundbreaking work of professor in psychology Lisa Feldman Barret, he illustrates how the main function of our brain is not interpretation, but prediction. Feldman's research has shown how our brain constantly predicts what is about to happen, using the mechanism of interoception (reading bodily feelings). Step by step, Zafiris explains how predictions are not based on external reality, but on physical feelings and the associated meanings as they have developed during childhood. He demonstrates how our predictions create and shape our reality, determine all our actions, decisions and emotions. As such, predictions can make the difference between happiness and depression.

The central role of interoception and prediction is a radical break from traditional paradigms in psychology and psychotherapy. All cognitive therapies, for example, are based on the assumption that it is our thinking that drives our actions and feelings. Thinking differently would be the key to health, happiness and wellbeing. Zafiris proves this assumption to be wrong, or, at least, questionable. He shows how, at crucial moments, *feeling* overrules *thinking* and *prediction* overrules *reality*.

Changing your thinking may help, at least temporarily, but it is the changing of maladaptive predictions that creates deep and lasting relief, healing, and growth.

Another paradigm challenged in RELIEF is the assumption that people have all necessary resources within themselves, and that all change and healing happen from within. The idea is that your relation with others is a complete reflection or result of the relationship with yourself. “To love someone else, you must first love yourself”, is a popular slogan. Zafiris shows this idea to be half true at most, considering that from the moment of conception, we are deeply connected to others; psychologically, physiologically and neurologically. We constantly influence each other’s physical, mental and emotional states, and, more importantly, *each other’s predictions*.

This realization has major implications for both individual and relationship coaching and therapy. Most couple therapies focus on better communication, and offer techniques for improving mutual support, understanding, or loving. Although these things can help, they often fail to tackle the root cause of relational problems: *being caught up in each others dysfunctional prediction loops*. Recognizing and resolving these loops frees a couple from a vicious cycle of blaming, demanding, or even hating, and provides a solid basis for a deep connection and lasting love.

RELIEF provides a wealth of examples from our every day lives and from case studies of Zafiris’ coaching clients, showing how predictions work, how they develop unconsciously during childhood, how they reinforced themselves in the course of time and, last but not least, how they can change. Rather than being another

self-help book, RELIEF is an invitation to explore and understand the fascinating world of interoception, meaning and prediction, and use this model as a key to deep and lasting changes.

Jos van Boxtel - author, therapist, coach and trainer

INTRODUCTION

You may have experienced eating or drinking something that had gone bad. I recall eating a salmon salad sandwich when I was a kid. It tasted great. By nightfall, I became terribly ill. I could not stop vomiting, and this lasted for several hours. From that moment on, I couldn't stand any smell, taste, or even coloring, that remotely resembled salmon. The mere thought of salmon provoked a deep, physical repulsion that lasted for many years.

How does that work? How can a one-time event trigger such a long-lasting physical reaction? And even more to the point, how is this relevant for psychology and personal development? What can we learn from this physical reaction that is, as we shall see, at the core of how we shape reality?

Do you have experience with recurring issues? For example, you have a relationship and the person you love neglects you. After a while, you end the relationship and start a new one. But guess what? Somehow you end up with a person who neglects you. Or let's say you worked on your insecurities. A new situation emerges, and your insecurities return. You may have learned to cope (a bit) better, but the feeling itself is not gone. You have only learned to manage it. Perhaps you've been trying to deal with a chronic issue. But whatever you tried; the issue wasn't resolved. Seeing a therapist, a coach or taking personal development classes helped

somewhat and sometimes, at certain moments, it might have seemed and felt like an amazing experience of transformation. But sometime later, the transformation turned out to be less sustainable than hoped for. I certainly know of such issues and many of my clients and colleagues have reported of similar experiences in their lives.

So, what's the relationship between the physical reaction to eating a salmon sandwich that has gone bad and a recurring pattern in your life? In *RELIEF* we will explore the connection between our psychological and relational wellbeing and new neuroscientific insights into the emergence of emotions and how all of this is grounded in our physiology. You will learn that many issues we call 'psychological', 'social', even 'trauma', have an often-unconscious physical foundation, to be more precise, a *visceral* foundation. Unexplained 'strange' feelings like 'a knot in the stomach', 'restlessness', 'a choking feeling', 'feeling trapped', 'feeling small', 'shivers down your spine', 'feeling down', et cetera, all share a similar physiological background. *RELIEF* sheds a new light on how relational problems as well as issues like stress, anxiety and chronic limiting patterns or feelings emerge. You will learn that a deeper understanding of how we create our emotions, relationships and even our experience of reality can help you change. Change the way you feel, change the way you relate and even change the way you experience life.



PART 1
PREDICTIONS

This is a book about a new idea in neuroscience. This book is about *predictions*. Predictions not only influence your beliefs and assumptions, they do much more than that. As you will learn, predictions have a profound impact on how we feel and the emotions we experience. They are also a determining factor in how we build relationships and connections, and influence the decisions we make on a daily basis. Predictions even influence our health and well-being, and ultimately shape the reality we experience.

We already know about the power of prediction. Rhonda Byrne's bestseller, *The Secret*, promotes the 'law of attraction', and seems to tap into that idea from a different perspective. Many enthusiastic readers have been visualizing wealth, money, a great body and so on, according to the 'law of attraction'. Although this idea is appealing, it is flawed. If it would work the way it's described in this book, everybody would be doing this. Setting an intention and visualizing yourself, rich, wealthy, or healthy does not do the trick, as you might have discovered. However, our brain does consistently manifest, shape and mold our reality. Learning how to tap into that science and use newly developed methods like RETaC¹ may be more effective.

In *RELIEF*, you will learn how predictions are made from a scientific perspective. Reaching an outcome is more complex than merely imagining a positive result. There is sufficient evidence that ignoring negatives can create unconscious barriers. In this book, we don't try to offer coping strategies for dealing with what's not working in your life. We want to explore the *root* cause

1 Relation Emotion Therapy and Coaching, developed by W. Zafiris

of how we shape reality. By understanding how our emotional regulation system creates the building blocks of our decision-making, you can learn to fundamentally alter your unconscious decision-making and thereby influence the reality you experience.

Ordinarily, we talk about how *beliefs* influence life outcomes. There is a lot of scientific evidence for that. But are beliefs the essence, or is there a different mechanism involved? And if we would know and understand this system and could influence it, would it then be possible to influence how we shape our realities?

I have had various experiences in my life with how my beliefs shape my reality. One specific example made me aware of how subtle and pervasive this can be. In 2020, when covid hit the world, shortly before the first lockdown, I separated from my wife. From one day to the next, a full house became an empty house. A life full of friends became a year of solitude. As I was recovering from the shock of the divorce, I took my nine-year-old daughter and our dog Zoe to the coast. On Saturday morning, I woke up at 9:30. Zoe was jumping up and down the room in excitement. I heard the voice of my ex-wife say: “The dog wants to go out.” I went to the living room and saw my daughter playing on the floor with all kinds of puppets in little rooms she had been building that morning. I gave her a kiss and told her: “When you’re finished, we’re going to walk with Zoe.” She nodded and said: “Yes daddy, just one more thing”, and went on playing. I made breakfast, put it next to her on the floor, repeated what I just said and started to read the news. Everybody I knew was in some form of shock about the lockdown, but combined with the sudden divorce I was having a hard time trying to

get my bearings. While I was reading up on the news, every ten minutes or so, I repeated that in a short while we would be going outside with Zoe. Each time my daughter complied with the same phrase: ‘Yes daddy, I’m just finishing up, just one more thing ...’ After an hour or so, I decided to take a shower and told my daughter that after the shower we were going for a walk with Zoe. She nodded and as I was stepping into the shower, I received a text message. In capital letters, it read: THE MANAGEMENT TEAM NEEDS TO MEET YOU NOW, WE ARE IN DEEP PROBLEMS BECAUSE OF COVID CALL! I was taken aback by this message. The capital letters came across demanding, pushy, and unfriendly. Instead of responding directly, I decided to wait, and I got into the shower to focus on my plans for the day. As I came out, I fully assumed that my daughter was ready to go and told her as much. She replied with her exact same words: “Just one more thing ...” Then, something snapped. “Why are you ignoring what I’m saying? I have told you a hundred times now!” As I raised my voice, my daughter turned around and looked at me with big, startled eyes. I realized then, she may not have been listening to my words at all. She may have been totally focused on her dolls and the games she was playing. My *very strong impression* that she was playing with me, combined with the distraught look on her face, confused me. It made me check what I was feeling. And as I checked, I realized that I was not responding to her, but I was responding to the feelings I had about that text message, the whole covid situation, the voice in my head and the divorce. All of these feelings I experienced, combined with my daughter’s behavior, made me predict that my daughter was playing a game with me. Luckily, I checked what I was experiencing. I turned around, apologized sincerely to her, and said that I had some problems myself. “This has nothing to