

## **NO LIMITS....**


# **More Happiness and Success Than You Thought Possible**

By Gay Hendricks Ph.D.

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overcome  
your **UPPER**

# LIMITS



**Each one of us carries ingrained, unconscious ideas of just how happy and successful we can be. Celebrated psychologist and author Gay Hendricks explains that by learning to identify and transcend these self-imposed "Upper Limits," we can expand our potential for happiness and abundance in extraordinary ways.**

By GAY HENDRICKS, PhD

**M**ichael Dell, founder of Dell computers and one of the youngest self-made billionaires in history, is among the most brilliant people I've ever met. I had the pleasure of doing executive coaching with him and other members of his team at a time when the company was growing rapidly. The quality I most appreciate about Michael is his openness to learning. Many high-level executives I've known are saddled with an equally high degree of defensiveness and a deep need to be right all the time. Not Michael. He doesn't put on the brakes when new learning is coming at him.

Michael wasn't born with this gift. None of us is. To get to that level of undefended openness to learning, we have to practice as diligently as a professional skier or a virtuoso cellist. To make the kinds of leaps Michael Dell makes, we must learn to identify and transcend our Upper Limit, wherever and whenever we encounter it.

I haven't met a person yet who didn't suffer at least a little bit from what I call the Upper-Limit Problem. Even if you're already extravagantly successful, I'm sure that your own version of the Upper-Limit Problem is still holding you back from achieving your true potential.

I discovered my own Upper-Limit Problem early in my career, when I was working as a research psychologist at Stanford University. My work was going well, and I was happy in my relationships. One day, I leaned back in my chair and let out a sigh of relaxed satisfaction. I felt great. A few seconds later, though, I found myself worrying about my daughter, Amanda, who was away from home on a summer program. Was she feeling lonely and miserable? Was she being taunted by other kids? I called

the dorm supervisor where she was staying. She told me Amanda was fine and that it was normal for parents to worry. Indeed, she said I was the third parent to call that day with similar concerns.

"Really?" I said, surprised. "Why do you think that is?" She gave a wise chuckle: "You don't realize how much you miss her, so you think she must be hurting somehow." I thanked her and hung up. I knew that something important had just happened. I wondered, "How did I go from feeling good in one moment to manufacturing a stream of painful images in the next?"

Suddenly, it dawned on me: I manufactured the stream of painful images *because* I was feeling good! Some part of me was afraid of enjoying positive energy for any extended period of time. When I reached the Upper Limit of how much positive feeling I could handle, I created a series of unpleasant thoughts to deflate myself. The thoughts I manufactured were guaranteed to make me return to a state I was more familiar with: not feeling so good.

I applied this insight to different parts of my life, including my relationships and health. Once I saw the pattern, it became obvious how it worked: I would enjoy a period of relationship harmony, then stop the flow of connection by criticizing or starting an argument. I would eat healthy food and get plenty of exercise, feeling great for several days in a row. Then I would go on a weekend binge of restaurant food, wine and late nights that would leave me feeling dull and bloated.

I realized the key problem: I have a limited tolerance for feeling good. When I hit my Upper Limit, I manufacture thoughts and behave in ways that make me feel bad. So, I began to wonder how I might extend the periods →

of contentment in my life. Can I eliminate the behaviors that stop the flow of positive energy and feel great all the time? Can I allow things to always go well in my life?

I owe my life to these questions. In the process of answering them, I was catapulted into an extraordinary place I had never imagined. I believe anyone can experience the same sort of transformation — if they choose to.

## WHY WE SET UPPER LIMITS

Each of us has an inner thermostat setting that determines how much love, success and creativity we allow ourselves to enjoy. That thermostat setting usually gets programmed in early childhood. And, once programmed, our Upper-Limit thermostat setting holds us back from enjoying all the love, financial abundance and creativity that's rightfully ours.

So, how does the Upper-Limit Problem work, and how can we eliminate its negative effects on us? The foundation under the Upper-Limit Problem is a set of four hidden barriers. They all have something in common: Although they seem real, they are based on fear and false beliefs about ourselves. The fact that we unconsciously accept them as real is the barrier holding us back. We take them as real until we shine awareness on them. Then the barriers dissolve, and we are free.

### Hidden Barrier No. 1:

#### Feeling Fundamentally Flawed.

The belief that one is fundamentally flawed in some way is an immense barrier to optimal experience. And it brings with it a related fear: If you did make a commitment to fully using your unique gifts, you might fail. This belief tells you to play it safe and stay small. That way, if you fail, at least you fail small.

Take Dr. Richard Jordan, for example. He had created a successful small business that attracted the attention of a larger firm. The firm offered him \$3 million for his business, plus a generous two-year employment contract. After weeks of negotiation, they were on the verge of signing the deal. Then one morning, Jordan woke up with some last-minute concerns, the main one being that the new employment contract offered him two fewer weeks of vacation than he was used to taking. He got into an angry confrontation with the negotiator over this detail, which resulted in a letter from the company stating that "due to the force of your remarks," they were no longer interested in acquiring the business.

In a letter to me, Jordan said, "In that phone call I waved goodbye to \$3 million in cash, salary, and incentives." Fortunately, he was able to learn from the experience. His letter continued: "Over the next few years I would awaken many nights with a knot in my stomach. Then I finally found the diamond in the dust. After much work and introspection, I discovered that what I was really saying to that man was, 'Wait a minute! Three million dollars! That's way more than I'm worth. I cannot allow this!'"

### Hidden Barrier No. 2:

#### Disloyalty and Abandonment.

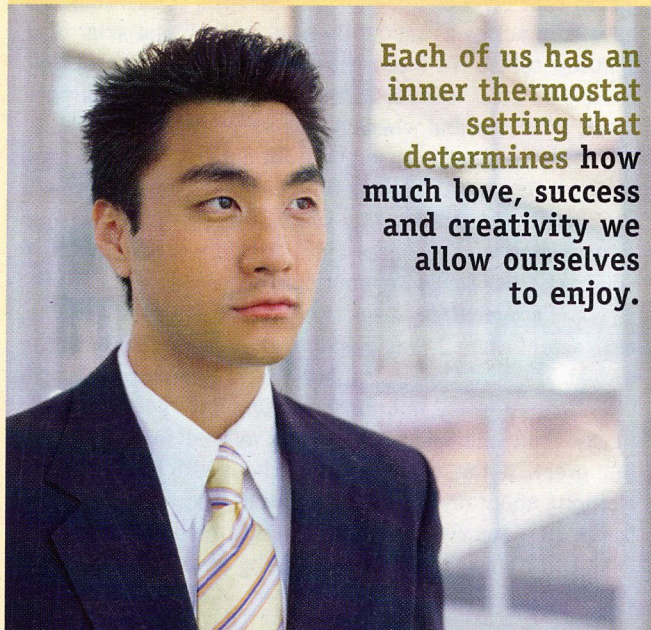
This barrier is the feeling that I cannot expand to my full success because it would cause me to end up all alone, be disloyal to my roots and leave behind people from my past.

Here are two questions that can help you discover if you have this barrier: Did I break my family's spoken or unspoken rules to get where I am? Even though I am successful, did I fail to meet the expectations my parents had of me? If you answered yes to either of those questions, you're likely to feel guilty as you become more successful. The guilt you feel makes you put on the brakes, holding you back from ultimate success and keeping you from enjoying the success you already have.

### Hidden Barrier No. 3:

#### Believing That More Success Makes You a Bigger Burden.

This barrier is the feeling that I cannot achieve my highest potential because I'd be an even bigger burden than I am now. This barrier held one of the biggest challenges for me. When I was born, I was greeted with two mixed messages: You're a burden, and you're a celebration. I was a burden to my mother, but a cause for celebration to my grandparents. My father had died a few weeks after my conception, leaving my mother with \$300, my older brother to raise, and me in the womb. Starting out my life as a combination of burden and celebration caused me to repeat this combination often in adult life. I would have a positive breakthrough, then immediately start feeling I was a burden on the world. But the guilt I felt for being a burden was for crimes I hadn't committed. If we remove the guilt of the crimes our parents and siblings convicted us of before we walked into kindergarten, we are liberated from the Upper-Limit Problem.



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## Hidden Barrier No. 4:

### The Crime of Outshining.

The unconscious mantra of the outshining barrier goes like this: I must not achieve my full success, because if I did I would outshine someone and make him or her look or feel bad. This barrier is very common among gifted and talented children. They get a lot of their parents' attention, but they also get a strong subliminal message: Don't shine too much, or you'll make others feel bad or look bad. One unconscious solution that gifted children devise is to turn down the volume on their genius so others don't feel threatened by it. The other solution is to continue to shine brightly but turn down the volume on their enjoyment of it.

I worked with Joseph, a middle-age executive who had been a piano prodigy as a child. He went on to modest success as a professional musician but then quit music completely because, without realizing it, he kept running up against this barrier. Specifically, each time Joseph had a breakthrough to more success, he would be gripped by guilt and end up feeling worse than before. Even after he quit music, the pattern followed him into his business career.

During our first session, we were able to shine a light on the moment in his past when the barrier first got locked into place. Growing up, Joseph had been close to his only sibling, a sister, who was also a gifted musician. She died of leukemia when she was 8 years old, leaving him and his parents devastated. This loss caused him to throw himself even more passionately into his music.

For his birthday one year, his parents gave him a grand piano. He was seized with joy and gratitude. He hugged his parents and, with tears streaming down his face, sat down at the keyboard. As his fingers were about to touch the keys for the first time, his mother said, "We would never have been able to afford this if your sister hadn't died." Instantly, his joy became suffused with guilt and grief. A pattern was set in motion that would play out for the next 40 years.

Fortunately, Joseph was able to break free. He realized that the crime for which he'd been convicted — being alive and thus outshining his sister for all time — was a crime that existed only in his parents' imagination. Many of you may find an issue like this in your past. If so, you will need to ask yourself if you are afraid to go to your ultimate success because you're afraid of outshining someone from long ago.

Now that you understand the basics of the Upper-Limit Problem and where its root structure is buried, you are equipped with the context you need to identify when and how you limit yourself — and how to transcend your Upper Limits and utilize the full power of your unique gifts. In other words, you're ready to step into your Zone of Genius.



### IN THE ZONE

Your Zone of Genius is the set of activities you are uniquely suited to do. They draw upon your special gifts and strengths. Liberating and expressing your natural genius is your ultimate path to greater success and life satisfaction.

The journey to the Zone of Genius requires "benign vigilance," or paying keen but relaxed attention to what you are doing in every moment — especially when you're exhibiting Upper-Limit behavior. When you're engaged in these behaviors, or "Upper-Limiting," you're crimping the flow of positive energy. Fortunately, there are not that many ways we Upper-Limit ourselves. Pay attention to which ones are familiar to you. The most common one is **worry**.

Worrying is usually a sign that we're Upper-Limiting. It is useful only if it concerns a topic we can actually do something about, and if it leads to our taking immediate and positive action. All other worry is just Upper-Limit noise, designed by our unconscious to keep us safely out of our Zone of Genius. There's a good way to know if a worry-thought is something you should heed. Just ask yourself: Is it a real possibility? Is there any action I can take right now to make a positive difference?

When you find yourself worrying, there is something positive trying to break through. Your worry-thoughts, particularly if you find yourself recycling the same ones over and over, are a flag waving at you from your Zone of Genius. Something is trying to get your attention. Look beyond the worry-thoughts and you will often find a new direction that's being laid out for you.

For example, I'm walking down the street of my town and pass a jewelry store where my wife, Kathlyn, and I have bought beautiful pieces over the years. I admire some of the pieces in the window. About 15 seconds later I notice some worry-thoughts about money. Specifically, the worry-thoughts are about whether we have enough →

money to help a gifted young member of our family go to the private music conservatory she wants to attend. So, I notice the worry-thoughts and let them go. Then I wonder what positive thing is trying to come through. Seeing the jewelry has reminded me how much I love my wife, and how I wish there was some piece of jewelry that could really express the depth of those feelings.

I pick up my phone and call Kathlyn. I tell her the sequence I just experienced, from the glance in the window to the worry-thoughts to the delicious moment of letting myself feel the overflow of love and appreciation for her. I say, "Let's make sure we take more time to celebrate what we have."

Another way we Upper-Limit ourselves is through **blame and criticism**. When we blame someone or something, we're often doing it because we've hit our Upper Limit and are trying to retard the flow of positive energy. Self-blame is part of the same Upper-Limit pattern as blaming someone else.

I once coached a billionaire who often bugged his wife because she bought the most expensive brand of toilet paper. In a situation like that, it's pretty clear that tissue's not the real issue.

I asked him to get out a calculator and figure the actual costs of the toilet paper if his wife went on a binge and bought a hundred rolls a day for the next 50 years. He punched in numbers and came up with the cost of

her lifelong extravaganza: \$1.5 million. I asked him how much his net worth varied from day to day due to ordinary stock-market fluctuations. He said that it would sometimes vary by as much as \$100 million from hour to hour. I pointed out that even if his wife bought 1,000 rolls a day, it still wouldn't amount to a single day's fluctuation. "Given that," I said, "what's the real reason you're criticizing your wife?"

We discovered that, deep down, he didn't feel that he deserved to be wealthy and loved. He had grown up in a wealthy family, and his parents constantly bickered about money. He was carrying on that tradition in his own marriage.

I asked him to call a complete halt to criticizing his wife about money. And when they came in for their next session, they both looked about 10 years younger. They had even taken the assignment to a higher level, both of them deciding to eliminate criticism in general from their relationship. He told me that they had spent a delightful week "celebrating what we have rather than carping about what we don't have."

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Chronic criticism and chronic blame are the behaviors we really need to eliminate. My assignment to you: Become a keen observer of critical statements that come out of your mouth or fly through your mind. Begin to sort them into two piles: Pile One contains all the criticisms about real things you plan to do something about ("Hey, you're standing on my toe! Get off!"); Pile Two contains all the others. I predict you'll discover that Pile Two towers over the paltry stack in Pile One.

**Deflection** is another common Upper-Limit behavior: We crimp the flow of positive energy by avoiding it altogether. Think of how many times you have heard conversations like this:

Joe: You did a great job on that presentation.

Jack: Nah, I ran out of time and had to leave out some of the best stuff.

Deflection keeps the positive energy from landing, being received and being acknowledged. The art of getting beyond our Upper-Limit Problem has a lot to do with developing an ability and willingness to feel and appreciate natural good feelings. By natural I mean good feelings that aren't induced by alcohol, sugar and other short-term fixes. Letting yourself savor natural good feelings is a direct way to transcend your Upper-Limit Problem. By expanding your ability to feel positive feelings, you expand your tolerance for things going well in your life.

**Arguments** also bring you down when you've hit your Upper Limit. If you learn to see arguments as Upper-Limit symptoms, you can move beyond them. Arguments often are caused by two people racing to occupy the victim position in the relationship. Once the race for the victim position is under way, each person must find some way to out-victim the other, rather than find room for compromise.

Finally, when things are going well, some of us have a pattern that is pure Upper-Limit Problem: **We get sick.** To find out whether some of your illnesses are due to the Upper-Limit Problem, take a moment to think back over times when you've fallen ill. Ask yourself if it occurred during or just after a big win in business or a period of good times in a relationship.

Years ago, when I was a university professor, I shared an office for a while with a brilliant colleague named Dr. Smith. Once a year, each of us made a presentation of our work to the other faculty members. In these presentations, we described our current activities and talked about where we were going with our work over the next year. On the morning of Dr. Smith's presentation, he showed up with laryngitis. I expressed my sympathies and remarked that I couldn't recall his ever missing a lecture due to illness. He confided that he and his wife had spent a wonderful weekend celebrating a decision he'd finally made to break out of his university job and work in the private sector. An opportunity had opened up in a neighboring state, and over the weekend he had decided to take the job.

As Monday loomed, though, Dr. Smith had to face sober reality again. He didn't want to tell the university →

# what's your GENIUS?

Here are some key questions to ask yourself to discover your unique Zone of Genius:

**WHAT ACTIVITY** do I most love to do? (I love it so much I can do it for long stretches of time without getting tired or bored.)

**WHAT WORK** do I do that doesn't seem like work? (I can do it all day long without ever feeling tired or bored.)

**IN MY WORK**, what produces the highest ratio of abundance and satisfaction to amount of time spent? (Even if I do only 10 seconds or a few minutes of it, an idea or a deeper connection may spring forth that leads to huge value.)

**WHAT IS MY UNIQUE ABILITY?** (I have a special skill. This unique ability, fully realized and put to work, can provide enormous benefits to me and any organization I serve.)



yet, because there were still some key details to work out about the new position. He was happier and more excited than he had been in a long time, but he didn't want to talk about it yet. Instead, in his presentation he had to appear enthusiastic about research he didn't want to be doing at a university where he no longer wanted to work.

The solution Dr. Smith's unconscious mind came up with was laryngitis. But, halfway through our conversation, the laryngitis disappeared and his voice returned to normal.

Not all illnesses are Upper-Limit symptoms, of course, but if you are keenly interested in moving to the Zone of Genius, you will want to examine everything that brings you pain and suffering as a potential Upper-Limit symptom. So many of us ignore the effect of our minds and emotions on our physical health, but the payoff for paying attention is well worth it. You may find that you can be a lot healthier than you ever imagined.

## A MAGICAL EXPLORATION

The goal in life is not to attain some imaginary ideal; it is to find and fully use our own gifts. The only relevant question is whether you will let it be possible for you. If you are willing to explore and celebrate the very best in yourself by learning to transcend your Upper Limits, you're on the way to experiencing real magic in your life. ●



# Be a LIMITS TESTER

Want to break free of your Upper Limits more often? Start with these tips from Gay Hendricks, PhD:

**1. MAKE A COMMITMENT** to keeping an attitude of wonder and play while learning about your Upper-Limit behaviors. Say this sentence in your mind as often as you like (and strive to embody the attitude it represents): *I commit to discovering my Upper-Limit behaviors, and to having a good time while I'm learning about them. You can learn a lot more with a spirit of wonder and enjoyment than you can with an attitude of criticism.*

**2. MAKE A LIST OF YOUR UPPER-LIMIT BEHAVIORS.**

Here are some of the most common ones:

- Worrying
- Blame and criticism
- Getting sick
- Squabbling
- Hiding significant feelings
- Not keeping agreements
- Not speaking significant truths to the relevant people (If you are mad at John, he's the relevant person to talk to. It doesn't help to tell Fred that you're mad at John.)
- Deflecting (Ignoring compliments is a good example.)

**3. WHEN YOU NOTICE YOURSELF** doing one of the things on your Upper-Limit list, such as worrying or failing to communicate some truth, shift your attention to the real issue: expanding your capacity for abundance, love and success.

**4. CONSCIOUSLY LET YOURSELF** make more room in your awareness for abundance, love and success. Use the resources of your whole being, not just your mind. For example, feel more love in your chest and heart area. Savor the body feeling, as well as the mental satisfaction, of success and abundance.

**5. EMBRACE A NEW STORY** that tells about your adventures in your Zone of Genius. Find a new mythology, or make up one of your own, that shows you enjoying your life in the full radiance of your expressed potential.

Gay Hendricks, PhD, is the author of more than a dozen psychology and personal-growth titles, including *Conscious Living: How to Create a Life of Your Own Design* (Harper, 2001) and *Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment* (Bantam, 1992; coauthored with his wife, Kathlyn Hendricks, PhD). He is the founder of Gaia Illumination University ([www.gaiailluminationuniversity.com](http://www.gaiailluminationuniversity.com)) and the president of The Hendricks Institute, a learning and coaching center for conscious living in Ojai, Calif. This article was excerpted from the book *THE BIG LEAP: Conquer Your Hidden Fear and Take Life to the Next Level* by Gay Hendricks, PhD. Copyright © 2009 Gay Hendricks, PhD. Reprinted by permission of HarperOne, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. Learn more at [www.hendricks.com](http://www.hendricks.com).

