

## **Interview with Herman Kagan, Ph.D. Author of *The Psychological Immune System***

Reader Views would like to welcome Herman Kagan, Ph.D., author of "The Psychological Immune System: A New Look at Protection and Survival." Dr. Kagan is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

**Juanita:** Thanks for taking the time to talk with us today Dr. Kagan. I know most readers have never heard this term, so would you please tell us, what is the Psychological Immune System?

**Dr. Kagan:** I appreciate the opportunity to let others know about the Psychological Immune System and the impact on their lives since it affects the motivation and behavior of us all. Basically, it is a protective-type system that has evolved because it helps protect, preserve, and enhance human survival. It is comparable to the Biological Immune System which has also evolved because it helps protect, preserve and enhance our survival.

Both systems are part of a long chain of evolutionary strategies that have allowed life to survive and multiply for 3.5 billion years. Without built-in protective mechanisms life couldn't continue to exist considering all the catastrophic events that have occurred and continue to occur on earth. Humans face dangers every day and the Psychological Immune System, by using emotional messages, helps people cope with these dangers.

When I was in the army, stationed in Germany, my emotions saved my life by warning me not to ride into town with five soldier friends on a particular day. They were all killed on the way back to the base when the driver couldn't negotiate a turn off the freeway (the Autobahn) and smashed into a concrete pillar. This episode has given me great respect for my emotional feedback.

**Juanita:** Is this system your personal theory, or has there been research in this area prior to your new book?

**Dr. Kagan:** There has been much research by entomologists, biologists and others about how single and multi-cell animals have adapted to all types of different environments; from sunless ocean depths to frozen tundra. There has been much research on how social insects (ants, bees, termites) protect their home and find what they need to survive. There has been much research, by primatologists, on the social order of different primates, their patterns of dominance and submission and their fight for leadership and survival. And there has been much research by anthropologists and paleontologists on the evolution of modern humans and how they used their ingenuity to band together, protect themselves survive and roam the earth.

What I did is put all this knowledge together, in the most sensible way I knew how, and come up with the Psychological Immune System in order to explain why people think like they do and act like they do. It makes sense to me and I believe it will make sense to others as well.

**Juanita:** What can readers expect from reading "The Psychological Immune System: A New Look at Protection and Survival"?

**Dr. Kagan:** Readers can expect an intriguing and in-depth look at our human evolutionary past, what traits and characteristics we still carry around, how our protective strategies are similar to and different than our ancestors, how the development of our consciousness of self and our sense of self are both our virtues and our flaws, the type of protection offered by the psychological immune system and the type of conflicts that can develop and overall, a clearer view of who we are and why we do what we do.

**Juanita:** What inspired you to write your book on this topic?

**Dr. Kagan:** As I stated in the Acknowledgment section, "From the beginning my inspiration for writing this book came from my grandchildren, Jacob and Sarah, whom I dearly love. This love kindled the desire to leave them with things I've learned during my journey in this world, as a clinical psychologist, father and grandfather. Something they could use when they are grown, on their own, have their own families, and want to pass on what they have learned."

These are still my sentiments and I deeply hope that they will make use of the book's contents. Not too long ago my daughter who was going through a very tough time in her life told me that a section in the book helped her a lot. That feedback made all the time and effort I spent researching and writing the book worthwhile. It's an old, old story...when you give, you receive.

**Juanita:** What's the difference between a biological immune system and the psychological immune system?

**Dr. Kagan:** As I stated earlier, both systems have evolved as protective in nature and they help ensure our survival. The biological immune system protects us against the billions of microorganisms we come in contact with every day. It has been estimated that we carry around a concentration of about 25,000 microorganisms (viruses, bacteria, yeast, parasites etc.) per square inch of our skin and our saliva contains millions of microorganisms.

We don't realize the good job our biological immune system does until we get the flu, a cold or some disease. When the biological immune system can't handle a given infection or disease, then we have to rely on the medical profession. The medical profession has come about because we are programmed to protect, preserve and enhance our life and physical well-being. This is one of the principles and components of the psychological immune system. So, when our biological immune system fails us we make use of our psychological immune system.

What else has come about because we are programmed to protect, preserve and enhance our life and physical well-being? Well, how about our weapons and weapon systems. We started out with clubs, then spears, then bow and arrows and finally guns. It may be hard to consider but medicine and weapons have the same root, namely: to protect, preserve and enhance our life. The psychological immune system not only helps protect us when the biological immune system can't but it also helps protect our property and our sense of self from threats and injuries. It works by using emotions to alert us and our ingenuity to figure out ways to avoid, neutralize or destroy the threats we are faced with.

**Juanita:** How much control do we have over our psychological immune systems?

**Dr. Kagan:** That's an excellent question and not an easy one to answer. Like the biological immune system there is an innate (inherited) and acquired (learned) component. Our first response to a threat is a fear reaction and possible panic-type behavior like being frozen, running, fighting, yelling or fainting. The innate component of the psychological immune system is programmed to detect a threat and to avoid it or destroy it.

A strong emotional reaction is not easy to overcome but with our ability to learn and with practice we can stop and override the initial impulse that wants to be expressed. The newer part of our brain, the frontal cortex, has the ability to catch and prevent emotional wrong-headed reactions most of the time.

Police, firemen, emergency response workers and emergency room physicians have to be trained to catch and stop their initial impulsive reaction and to replace it with learned and more effective behavior. But, even with their training they might not be able to contain the initial impulsive reaction of the psychological immune system if, for example, the victim they come upon was a member of their own family. Another example is "road-rage" when the initial emotional reaction takes over and people want to destroy someone.

When I was a graduate student and living in a rented house with my wife I was dozing on the couch while studying for my finals and was awakened by a burglar going through my wallet that I had left on the table. I felt deep-seated fear and uncertain of what to do. My emotions and my mind were racing. What came to me was a lecture in my criminology class where the teacher emphasized that if you come upon a burglar in your home, yell out specific directions of what you want him to do. So I yelled loud, "Get the hell out of my house!" and to my surprise and relief that's exactly what he did. So with a little learning, training and practice we can develop some control over emotional wrong-headed reactions.

**Juanita:** What causes our psychological immune system to not function properly?

**Dr. Kagan:** Proper functioning depends on normal genetic programming. So, if someone is born with a handicap in perceiving danger and threats this will reduce their chances for survival as a

normal psychological immune system will pick up danger and threats. Proper functioning depends on the probability that one will not encounter continual high-level threats to one's life, property or sense of self. This could make the homeostatic process of the psychological immune system malfunction. That is, the system could be over-stimulated and stay at a very active level without the ability to return to a normal or reduced activation level.

This could lead to panic attacks at the slightest provocation, paranoid perceptions and behavior and manic states. Proper functioning depends on having a support system to prop one up and turn to in times of threats and crises. A support system usually comes from family members and groups one is bonded to, or identifies with. These individuals and groups contribute to and make up part of one's sense of self (self-worth, self-esteem, and self-image). Without this, one's psychological immune system may show a deficient reaction, under-react or leave one in a depressive state.

These examples indicate that genetics, upbringing and environment all play a role in whether the psychological immune system will function properly or not.

**Juanita:** On an anthropological basis, how has the psychological immune system influenced historical events and cultures?

**Dr. Kagan:** This is an important question that gets to the heart of evolution's march for change and adaptation. Not too long ago primatologists Dr. Fran B.M. deWaal and Dr. Jane Goodall described a rudimentary sense of "fairness" displayed by chimpanzees when sharing food. Fran deWaal also noted that chimps displayed "moralistic aggression" against others who acted unfairly or failed to reciprocate in kind. Dr. Goodall even detailed a "four year war" against a group of chimps that deserted their original troop and formed a new one.

When we came along with an ability to be conscious of our self and developed a sense of self, this sense of fairness was retained and elaborated on by us so that it evolved into a set of behavior standards, principles to live by, a sense of justice, a compendium of ethics and of morality. Once internalized and distributed by language, humans were able to monitor their own behavior and form larger and larger groups as opposed to the chimpanzee groups of fifty or so members limited by the need for the alpha chimp and his partners to do all the monitoring. Eventually this led to large human groups held together by shared characteristics, values and beliefs ("self-members").

Since the psychological immune system's mandate is to protect, preserve and enhance the life, property and sense of self of individuals and the groups they bond to, tension between different groups soon escalated into confrontation and battles over life, property and sense of self (self-image, pride, reputation, moral high ground). Protection entails the ability to detect threats from other individuals and groups ("non-self members").

So for example, during WW 2 over 100,000 Japanese citizens were uprooted from their homes and placed in detention camps because the government was afraid of disloyalty. Senator Joseph

McCarthy went on a witch hunt looking for communists in the government who were disloyal to the United States. Some cultures believe in "honor killings"-the daughter bringing dishonor on the family-while others do not. Forced sterilization and eugenic programs developed from the need to protect "normal" group members from the "inferior" ones who could contaminate future generations. The Nazis took this to a horrifying level.

This is the background and some examples of how the psychological immune system influenced historical events and cultures. Have things changed that much or is it still exerting its influence on people and groups?

**Juanita:** Would you explain "non-self humans" and how the psychological immune system detects them as enemies?

**Dr. Kagan:** The terms "self-members" and "non-self humans or non-self members" have been borrowed from the terms biologists and immunologists have used for the biological immune system which is programmed to detect and destroy the cells and proteins that do not belong to the body (non-self cells) and accept the ones that belong to the body (self-cells). That's why rejection of foreign tissue (non-self) is such a problem in transplanting procedures.

I envision the psychological immune system being programmed in a similar way so that members who feel they belong to a given group and get part of their identity from the group envision themselves as "self-members" and those that do not belong to this particular group are considered as "non-self members." As outlined above, the psychological immune systems of the group members keep them on the alert for threats and danger to themselves and the members of the group from "non-self members."

This is built-in priority number one. And since people are so good at spotting and magnifying differences in others, "non-self members" can easily provoke anxiety and be seen as a threat. Proof of citizenship, proof of loyalty, proof of a non-criminal record, proof of a valid passport, proof that one is not carrying weapons on a plane, proof that a country is not making weapons of mass destruction and the elaborate spying apparatus that countries have developed all point to the tremendous urge to protect and preserve "self-members" and keep "non-self members" under surveillance. Like the biological immune system's overreactions, the psychological immune system can do the same. In both cases much harm can be done.

**Juanita:** How does the identification with our sense of self, derived from the psychological immune system, influence and motivate our behavior?

**Dr. Kagan:** We are animals that have been given wonderful gifts: the ability to be conscious of our self; the ability to symbolize and conceptualize; the ability to form a self-concept and the ability to develop a sense of self and identity. Injury to our sense of self and identity is felt as hurt and pain.

Since our self, while only an abstraction, is so real to us, we have been programmed to protect, preserve and enhance it. So we are always on the alert for threats and danger to our sense of self and always on the alert for opportunities to enhance it.

Therefore we are motivated to remove or deal with any threat to our sense of self. We try hard to protect the intellectual property that we create and which reflects on our sense of self. We try hard to avoid "nasty" individuals who are always demeaning us or defaming us. We seek out individuals who like us and think we are worthwhile. We read books, go to lectures and follow gurus who tell us how to build-up our self-confidence, raise our self-esteem and go to a higher plane of consciousness and spirit.

We want to believe that we have extraordinary gifts of extrasensory perception, ability to read minds, astral-projection, see into the future, communicate with the dead and communicate with God. We want to be important.

We need to be somebody we can be proud of. There is no end to our pursuit of self protection and self enhancement. The only problem is what happens if we find out that what we believe or what we seek is unattainable? And, are we willing to kill to protect and enhance our sense of self?

**Juanita:** Can the effects be both positive and negative?

**Dr. Kagan:** Dr. Phillip Zimbardo of Stanford conducted an experiment to find out how a sense of power or authority can influence a person's behavior in contrast to a sense of powerlessness or helplessness. He used volunteers from his undergraduate psychology class who, by a flip of a coin, were divided into "prisoners" and "guards." A jail house was obtained to conduct the experiment which was to run for two weeks. Removal of privileges for disobeying the guards included taking away opportunities to read, write or talk to other prisoners. This was extended into loss of meals, sleeping and washing.

The changes in the personality of the "guards" and the "prisoners" became so intense and unexpected and the emotional reactions so overwhelming that the experiment had to be called off after six days. So, who we think we are and our sense of self carry tremendous implications for adapting to situations and maintaining our emotional stability.

One other experiment also brings out the effects of our sense of self. Jane Elliot, a third grade teacher, wanted to conduct an experiment on prejudice. She came in one day and told her class that brown-eyed children are superior to blue-eyed children. She gave the brown-eyed children special privileges and had the blue-eyed children obey stricter rules. Within a day, the blue-eyed children began to do poorly in their school work, became more depressed and angry and described themselves as "sad," "bad," "stupid," and "mean." When Elliot reversed things the next day and proclaimed she had made a mistake and, in reality, blue-eyed children are superior to brown-eyed

children, the same results ensued as the previous day but in reverse. These two examples clearly show the positive and negative effects of our sense of self.

**Juanita:** Dr. Kagan, why do you feel it is important for people to realize this aspect of themselves?

**Dr. Kagan:** Most people, children included, have experienced how emotionally reactive some individuals are to insults and disrespectful treatment. Newspapers, TV, and radio have stories of how individuals have reacted to belittlement and feeling disrespected. The shootings at Columbine High School, the rioting of Muslims when an English cartoonist lampooned Muhammad, drive by shootings from gangs, and spousal abuse all have significant elements of retaliation to insults or feelings of disrespect.

While people are aware of these episodes very few know or realize that humans have a psychological immune system which is programmed to defend one's sense of self by avoiding or neutralizing the threatening or attacking source. While there is a rule at the elementary school my granddaughter attends that children should not push, shove or make body contact with each other there is no rule that says children should not make fun of each other, insult each other or find fault with each other.

It has not reached people's awareness yet that all people, not some people, are programmed to retaliate when their sense of self is injured. To be aware of this truth can eventually save people's lives and help counter the belief that they must be crazy for harboring revenge fantasies because someone insulted them.

**Juanita:** If medicine helps the biological immune system fight the diseases that it can't handle, what assists the psychological immune system?

**Dr. Kagan:** As I stated earlier, the psychological immune system has an innate and an acquired component. Our experiences, what we are taught, our degree of support and our memory go into the acquired component which acts to prevent ineffective and potentially dangerous responses from the innate component.

Emotional experiences make a greater impact on us and stay with us longer. We seem to comprehend life's events through their emotional impact on us and our emotions act as warning signals for the dangers we encounter. What basically assists the psychological immune system is the cultural knowledge that gets passed down from generation to generation and the scientific endeavors that add to the cultural knowledge. It is possible that evolution is still selecting for the degree of control we have over our emotions and future generations may be able to handle threats and attacks on our sense of self with much more emotional control and with less retaliatory fantasies.

Once threats are not thwarted and injuries occur then we have to rely on the social programs set up

by society. Medicine and mental health are two such programs. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder seems to result from severe injuries to the sense of self and identity of individuals. Patience, good support systems, individual and group therapy seem to be very helpful but we have not yet classified mental health conditions in terms of the psychological immune system. This may be a worthwhile future endeavor.

**Juanita:** Dr. Kagan, what do you hope readers ultimately understand by reading your book, "The Psychological Immune System: A New Look at Protection and Survival"?

**Dr. Kagan:** I'm going to try talking directly to each reader to get across what I think each person should learn from reading my book. So I'm talking to "you" as an individual:

You have inherited a psychological immune system which is programmed to protect, preserve and/or enhance your: 1) life/physical well-being, 2) your property/possessions and 3) your sense of self/identity. The system is also programmed to protect, preserve and/or enhance the same three areas of the individuals and groups you love, are bonded to, or identify with.

These principles apply to every person and group you interact with. So, if you're wondering what motivates people to act like they do keep the above principles in your mind or write them down so you can refer to them if in doubt. If you believe someone is lying to you, figure out which component- 1), 2), or 3) - he or she is trying to protect, preserve or enhance. It will help you focus in on the important area.

If you have a conflict with, or get into a fight with a member of your family, try to figure out which of the three areas - life, property or sense of self - is involved. When you read about a conflict between two groups or two nations, think of which of the above areas could be involved. It will help clarify the basic conflict which usually gets covered up with all kinds of superfluous stuff.

Also be very aware that if what you say or do is taken as a threat or insult to any of the three areas mentioned, the other individual, like yourself, will feel the urge to retaliate which may or may not be directly expressed depending on their emotional stability and state of mind. This would be an important principle to pass on to your children or family. The more you practice at putting the principles together with the actions of yourself and others, the safer and saner you and your family will stay.

**Juanita:** Dr. Kagan, how can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

**Dr. Kagan:** For information on me, my book and sale of my book I have used my publisher's (AuthorHouse) website which is [authorhouse.com/bookstore](http://authorhouse.com/bookstore). This information can also be found on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). My own website, which needs much updating, can be reached at: [homepage.mac.com/hkagan](http://homepage.mac.com/hkagan). To reach me directly you can use my e-mail at: [inturn9270@mypack](mailto:inturn9270@mypack).