

## Human Givens – an overview

We have become a people divided. Opposing views are taken to loud extremes and those unsure of what to believe, are adrift in uncertainty. Reaching agreement seems a thing of the past, and even in the field of mental health divisions are growing wider. What if there was a set of ideas that nearly everyone could agree on, basic truths that applied to humans everywhere regardless of race, gender, culture or status. Well, there are, called the ‘human givens’ – a set of ideas to which there can be little disagreement; ideas that better explain emotional health.

It is a basic truth, for example, that all humans dream. Perhaps better phrased as all humans experience the rapid eye movement (REM) sleep phase – if they didn’t they would die. No exceptions. No need to argue over that.

So, what’s that got to do with mental health? Well, a lot actually. The REM sleep phase is when mental housekeeping takes place, discharging unfulfilled expectations and freeing up processing capacity for the new day.

What expectations? To answer that I need to define emotion. *Emotion is a preparation for action with an expectation that the action will meet a need.* Let’s say you are threatened by something; you feel anger and are prepared to fight because you need to protect yourself; or you feel fear and you are ready to run away because you need to be safe. However, not all emotions are discharged by action, often we inhibit the action of fighting or running away. Sensible, but the emotional arousal still needs to be discharged, if not by action, then metaphorically during REM sleep. Too many expectations and too little purposeful activity leads to excessive time in REM sleep and waking tired and unmotivated. As you can see, it has a lot to do with mental health.

Another thing you can't argue with is a basic law of organic life: *every living organism interacts with its environment to get its needs met*. No exceptions. If it is alive, this law applies. Now humans have more in mind than staying alive, so their interaction is more involved and their needs are more complex. Sufficient to say that emotional health relies on effective interaction, and needs, particularly emotional needs, being met appropriately. I say appropriately, because one can stay alive with poor sleep, no friends and a diet of coke and chips, but problems will arise. You can be sure of that.

Understanding REM sleep has also told us something else important. It gives us an insight into the emotional brain which is below awareness and before thought. We make sense of ourselves and our environment through a process called 'pattern matching'. We match what we see hear taste touch and smell through our sense organs with a pattern already on file. It's a bit like a bar-code scanner but not that accurate, it is approximate. Sometimes, especially in emotional distress, far too approximate and people either cannot make sense or can't see things as they really are. This can lead to a cycle of poor interaction, needs not being met, lack of purposeful action and poor sleep.

The human givens approach doesn't just provide new insights; this better understanding informs better therapeutic practice. Research in the UK where the approach originated tells us how much better, simple, fast and effective. You are welcome to explore the Human Givens Australia ([humangivens.com.au](http://humangivens.com.au)) site and find out more. You will be surprised at how much sense it makes.