

# It's Not About the Shark: How to Solve Unsolvable Problems

*David Niven PhD*

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## It's Not About the Shark



THE SIMPLE PATH FROM  
PROBLEM TO ANSWER



David Niven, Ph.D

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**David Niven PhD : It's Not About the Shark: How to Solve Unsolvable Problems** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised It's Not About the Shark: How to Solve Unsolvable Problems:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Excellent - Expands Your Horizons  
By Alan Lattanner  
This book distills a wide range of published research on motivation, decision-making and creativity into a tactical manual for lateral thinkers. Numerous examples show how people facing difficult problems, both professional and personal, discover innovative and powerful solutions once they move their focus beyond the obvious barrier to progress,

whatever problem that may be. The stories provide the reader with motivation and encouragement to test the author's techniques on their own turf; to reinvent yourself as a solutions expert rather than a problem solver. The basic thesis is that problems are an easy and seductive place to focus effort. We are taught to focus on problems from an early age, to "work harder if at first you don't succeed," to "never give up." Yet that very focus limits our ability to see a bigger picture that likely contains an entirely different and more powerful way of viewing the situation, which most people never consider. Traditional problem solving is linear, probabilistic, and bounded by conventional wisdom or culture. Author David Niven's approach more closely aligns with Edward de Bono's concept of Lateral Thinking, that is, "solving problems through an indirect and creative approach, using reasoning that is not immediately obvious and involving ideas that may not be obtainable by using only traditional step-by-step logic." (Wikipedia)

Key concepts portrayed in this book:- Problems focus effort and limit options.- Step away from the problem. No amount of effort can solve a problem that you put at the center of your life.- Study what is right about the situation, not what's wrong; focus on what is unique, not the common or mundane or obvious.- Working harder rarely works.- Think for yourself. Group think is "the bus to Abilene." (nobody wants to go but we go there anyway thinking everyone else wants to go)- Watch out for the "first answer bias." The first ideas are rarely the best you can come up with.- Burn the first draft. First drafts contain the problem and fail to truly explore and innovate solutions.- You can solve anything if you just stop focusing on the problem. These points are just the tip of the iceberg. Niven's stories and examples bring them to life and help embed them in the reader's memory and, hopefully for this reader, behavior. The book has a very good index, a list of references to articles in professional journals from which the author derived the scientific basis of the book, and a list of chapter footnotes citing magazine and news articles relevant to the examples. There is not a good summary chapter that organizes the many ideas presented. My detailed notes fill that gap for me personally, but I am sure that readers could benefit from a comprehensive summary of the material. Even so, this book is worth reading for anyone who considers himself or herself a problem solver. It expands one's horizon about what is possible and how to get there.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great title By thedrivein This is tough as anecdotes are interesting but having just finished the book it's a bad sign I did not make one note. Which is very rare for me. I get the power of story but not at the cost of no path or even breadcrumb trail towards "HOW TO SOLVE UNSOLVABLE PROBLEMS. I finished it so that says something.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Norm Jones What phenomenal insights Niven gives which lead to really practical application across the board: Professionally, spiritually, etc

It's Not About the Shark opens the door to the groundbreaking science of solutions by turning problems and how we solve them upside down. When we have a problem, most of us zero in, take it apart, and focus until we have it solved. David Niven shows us that focusing on the problem is exactly the wrong way to find an answer. Putting problems at the center of our thoughts shuts down our creative abilities, depletes stamina, and feeds insecurities. It's Not About the Shark shows us how to transform our daily lives, our work lives, and our family lives with a simple, but rock-solid principle: If you start by thinking about your problems, you'll never make it to a solution. If you start by thinking about a solution, you'll never worry about your problems again. Through real-life examples and psychology research, David Niven shows us why:

- \*Focusing on the problem first makes us 17 times less likely to find an answer
- \*Being afraid of a problem is natural: we're biologically primed to be afraid
- \*Finding a problem creates power and which keeps you from finding a solution
- \*Working harder actually hides answers
- \*Absolute confidence makes you less likely to find the answer
- \*Looking away from a problem helps to see a solution
- \*Listening only to yourself is one of the best ways to find an answer

Combining hard facts, good sense, and a strong dose of encouragement, David Niven provides fresh and positive ways to think about problem solving.

David Niven has done it again - a short, readable, entertaining, enlightening, and inspiring book for people who have problems. Don't we all? I got some great insights - along with a few laughs - while reading about ways to deal with bumps in the road of life. You will too.

Hal Urban, author of Life's Greatest Lessons

David Niven will help you think more, panic less, dream bigger, and WIN.

Bob Danzig, former CEO, Hearst Newspapers

You can bury your white flag now, because after you read It's Not About the Shark you'll never surrender to a problem again.

Stephen Pollan, author of Fire Your Boss

It's Not About the Shark illustrates the power of thinking unconventionally about approaches to many common barriers to success. It shows that alternative methods are often much more powerful solutions than conventional wisdom. Written in an engaging manner, it made me want to read the next chapter after chapter. Wow.

Gordon Bethune, former CEO and chairman, Continental Airlines

In this useful tome, Niven gives unusual, yet eminently practical, problem-solving advice . . . This fresh, enthusiastic approach to problem-solving will encourage readers to open themselves up to opportunity and make for a valuable addition to anyone's self-help shelf.

Publishers Weekly

In It's Not About the Shark, David Niven aims to shake up our stagnant notion of how to address problems . . . Niven's book explores what it means to think outside the box, how we look at the problems we face, how we see ourselves and how to be comfortable with the ambiguity difficult challenges can present. He doesn't provide specific solutions here but

instead offers a shining toolkit for more adaptive thinking.” Shelf Awareness; Good anecdotes with interesting data to back up his theory that when we focus on a problem, we get trapped within it and are less able to solve it.” Washington Post

About the Author DAVID NIVEN, PhD, is known internationally for translating powerful research findings into practical advice anyone can apply to their daily lives. David’s *The 100 Simple Secrets of Happy People* — and seven other titles in the series — have sold more than 1 million copies in the U.S., and has been translated in 30 languages around the globe. His work has been featured in USA TODAY, US Weekly, The Washington Post, Reader’s Digest, Redbook, Cosmopolitan, Glamour, and Health. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER 1 Imaginary Philip and the Problem of Problems

WHAT IF THE bumblebee knew it couldn’t fly? We all know what would happen: He’d sit around worrying about how fat he is, and he’d never get off the ground again. But there’s another side to that story. In 1934, when entomologist August Magnan concluded that flying bumblebees defied the laws of physics, he never bothered to tell the bees. And they kept right on flying.

Problems infect our thinking in many ways — but the basic equation is simple. If we let problems define who we are, if we let problems serve as our guide, then our problems tell us what we can’t do. We can’t do this. We can’t do that. Our lives become negatives and absences. A problem, no matter how important, no matter how significant to our well-being, doesn’t belong in the center of our thoughts. A problem is a barrier. We thrive as thinkers, as doers, as people when we take barriers down. Think about any great advance in any field of endeavor: a great thing, a great idea, a great product, a great story, a great cure. That greatness came about because somebody brought down a barrier. A problem is a barrier. You have to bring it down, or it will bring you down. Just like the bees.

THE ODDSMAKERS LABELED him a 300-to-1 shot. Which is a polite way of saying he had no chance of winning the tournament. But the rookie golfer Ben Curtis was just glad to be there, having barely snuck into the field by qualifying two weeks earlier. There were good reasons for the modest expectations. As he teed off at the 2003 British Open, Ben Curtis had never won a professional golf tournament. In fact, he had yet to finish among the top 25 at any event. Curtis even shared the oddsmakers’ views of his abilities. He was there for the experience, he explained, to have fun and to try to get better by playing against the best players on one of golf’s toughest and most famous courses. Still, the joy of a small-town Ohioan incongruously standing on golf’s brightest stage delighted fans and commentators. Their delight was eclipsed only by their shock as Ben Curtis sank his 8-foot putt on the 72nd hole and hoisted the famous Claret Jug as the winner of the British Open. How improbable was his victory? It had been ninety years since any golfer had won the first major tournament he had entered. In the space of a weekend, everything changed for him. An anonymous golfer who had never won anything, Ben Curtis now stood beside the kings of the sport, living out what he admitted was a “fairy tale come true.” He had to clear time on his schedule to visit the White House, because the president wanted to congratulate him personally. And among the many prizes afforded the winner of a major championship in golf, he collected something of the sport’s golden ticket — a champion’s exemption that allowed him to pick exactly which tournaments he wanted to enter for years to come. By 2011, that champion’s exemption had expired. Worse, it had been five years since Curtis’ last win on the PGA Tour, and he was playing just to hold on to the status of a full-time professional golfer. Curtis was desperate to stay on the tour. And the desperation shaped his game. “Every time I walked onto the course I thought to myself, ‘OK, how am I not going to have a disaster?’” he said. His sole focus on each hole was avoiding mistakes. “Out there, I’m trying to do everything I can to not make bogeys and double bogeys,” he said. “That’s what my game has become.” The effort to avoid mistakes clearly had an effect: He made more of them. “What I was doing, the way I was thinking, was adding more pressure on myself,” Curtis said. “More pressure you don’t need.” Worse, he was carrying his mistakes from one hole to the next. “In my head I would see replays of a bad tee shot two holes later. I would think about a missed par putt on the next green,” he said. “Even when I had opportunities to put up a good score on a hole, I would think of ways I might make a mistake.” Staring at the problem left Ben Curtis stuck — exactly where Steven Spielberg would have been if he had kept his focus on his rotting mechanical shark. Fortunately for Curtis, he finally hit bottom. At the end of the 2011 season, having failed to win or even contend for a title, Curtis’ standing on the PGA Tour was reduced to conditional status. He would, in effect, need to ask for special permission from the sponsors of golf tournaments to let him play anywhere in 2012. Each week he sat by the phone, hoping to hear that the tournament director had picked him from among the 50 or 100 players asking for one of about eight late-entry slots into the tournament. Most weeks, the phone didn’t ring. But something happened to him on those weeks when he did get into a tournament. Suddenly, the pressure was gone. Because he had no status to protect, the prospect of a bad round didn’t scare him so much. He began to just play golf again. Four months into the 2012 season, playing in just his fourth tournament of the year, Curtis ended a winless streak that had stretched out over more than 2,000 days. His win in the Texas Open restored his full-time professional status and, more importantly, reminded him of what he was capable of doing. “Golf is that way,” he said. “It will come up and surprise you if you let it.”

YOU ARE AN advanced engineering student. Your class is about to be given what amounts to a pop quiz. In a moment, you’ll be asked to sketch out designs for a product. You rub your

hands together in anticipation. Whatever the task, there's no doubt yours; I'll come up with something great. You smooth out your paper and keep your drafting pencil close at hand. Yours;re asked to come up with a bicycle rack to mount bicycles on a car. You are given various requirements, but the most important objective is to make a rack that is easy to attach to the car and easy to mount bicycles on. You are shown an example of an existing but inefficient roof-mounted bicycle rack. It has metal tubes running across the car's roof. Into the tubes, a bicycler's tires are secured. It is, you are told explicitly, very difficult for users to secure the tubes to the roof of the car. Meanwhile, the center tube is nearly impossible for all but the tallest and strongest users to access. You are asked to come up with as many designs as you can that meet the requirements. You have an hour. Now get to work. You think about bicycles and cars, their shapes and sizes. You think about people having to lift their bicycles and secure them. You didn't become an engineer to be mediocre. Yours;re not trying for a merely acceptable design. You are there to be the best. So you put pencil to paper and get started. You can do anything within the parameters of the task in terms of materials or shapes or approaches. So you spin the paper around to get a look at things from a different angle. Your pencil starts flying. But one image keeps coming to mind. That roof-mounted rack with the tubes. The one with the flaws. Your first sketch looks just like it. So does your second. Try as you might, your designs keep coming back to roof-mounted tube racks—ideal if your customer base is comprised of NBA centers. What you didn't know is that at the same time you were creating variations of that failed design, another group of engineers in the next room was also drawing up plans for bicycle racks. The only difference is that they were never shown the picture of the bad design. And they were never told to try to avoid putting bikes in the middle of the car's roof. They were just told to come up with the best design they could. When researchers David Jansson and Steven Smith lined up all the designs from your group, and all the designs from the other group, the differences were enormous. The group that saw the bad example came up with fewer total designs, far fewer original approaches, and was much more likely to wind up with bikes mounted where no one could reach. It wasn't that the second group was any more talented than the first. They weren't. It wasn't that the second group knew anything more about bicycles or bike racks. They didn't. The difference between the two groups was just this—the first group was asked to solve a common problem with bike racks, and they flailed against the challenge. The second group was asked to design the best bike rack they could, and they did. In the process, they solved a problem they didn't even know existed. Jansson and Smith repeated their experiment with other challenges and other engineers, and each time the same thing happened. When asked to design a measuring cup for the blind, the majority of engineers shown a design problem couldn't solve it. More than 80 percent of the group that wasn't shown the problem solved it without even knowing what they were up against. When asked to design a spill-proof coffee mug, those shown the design problem with the mug were seventeen times more likely to fail than those who weren't shown the problem. These were all very talented engineers. All knowledgeable, capable, skilled, and driven. Yet their likelihood of succeeding varied tremendously based on what they were trying to do. The group that had never seen a bad example let their natural talents carry them to a good design. They wasted not a moment on the problem and spent all their time on the solution. The group that saw the problem wanted to solve it so badly they couldn't think straight. Just like Ben Curtis couldn't golf when he was focused on his flaws, these engineers couldn't design when focused on the problem. But they stayed focused on the problem because problems are so seductive and compelling. It is hard to think about anything else. PEOPLE WHO DON'T hate their jobs, they just look at you with dread, like what you have is contagious and they don't want to catch it, Michael observed. Or, they say, Hey, suck it up, it's eight hours of your day, you can survive it, he added. But the problem with hating your job is so much the eight hours yours;re there, it's the other sixteen. Just like all those engineers who wanted to fix the bike rack problem, and just like Ben Curtis's fear of bogeys, Michael's problem consumed his entire field of vision. Because when you hate doing something, it's all you can think about, Michael said. When yours;re at work you count the minutes until you can leave, but right when you leave you think about how you have to go back again. Sunday's just the day before you have to go back there. Michael knows many people have the same frustrations. A lot of people are bad at their jobs, right? But try being bad at your job in front of an audience. Teaching five sections of algebra at a community college meant thirty-five or so witnesses every time Michael stood at the front of the room, struggling to hold anyone's attention. He knew the formulas, could recite them backwards and forwards, could probably teach this stuff in his sleep. Unfortunately, his students weren't learning much in theirs. I didn't get sleepers every day, he said. Some of those once-a-week night classes—with the double period—wow, I would probably lose half the class by the end. And I don't think they were dreaming of polynomials. It wasn't just a feeling that Michael was underwhelming in his work; there was ample evidence. We use a common final exam across the college, to test how much progress everyone is making, or, for my students, not making. Michael's students consistently ranked fourteenth, fifteenth, or sixteenth out of groups of students taught by sixteen instructors. And the student reviews of his teaching were not exactly encouraging. One student said that they should use Michael's classes as an interrogation technique—forced to sit through one of his lectures, any bad guy would crack and

confess. "The worst part of all this is that I care," Michael said. "I care that my students do well, I care that my classroom be a place where math comes alive instead of where math goes to die." So Michael did what almost anyone in his situation would do; he tried hard to get better. He read every article and book he could find on great teaching. He watched videos on teaching techniques. He went to every teaching workshop on campus and flew to teaching conferences across the country. "By the time I finished being taught all I could find about teaching, I wound up trying just about everything and then trying to undo it. I sped things up, I slowed things down," he said. "I built assignments for people to go at their own pace, then assignments to keep everyone together. I put absolutely every note and problem in a packet and handed it to them so that they really didn't need to show up, and then I tried handing out nothing at all so that everything had to be written down in class." Michael read one book that claimed the only thing that mattered to students was that you were concerned about them. So then he went to great lengths to engage students in conversations about themselves. One student that term wrote in a review that "it's like hers; pretending to be our friend because hers; not a very good teacher." Which, in truth, was exactly what he was doing. "I was like a dog chasing its tail. I was going after something I could not get no matter how fast I went or how hard I tried," Michael said. Michael had run out of new things to try when a chance conversation with a former student turned him around. "She said to me, as delicately as possible, 'Why are you still a bad teacher when you could be a great something else?'" "And I had no answer," Michael said. "I had looked at my failures in teaching from so many different angles, but not from the most basic, the most obvious, one. Maybe I'm just not meant for that kind of work." The wheels started spinning in Michael's mind. He had always wanted to be a paramedic. No, that would be crazy, he thought. Then again, maybe he could still be a paramedic. Granted, he would be the rare paramedic with an advanced mathematics degree, but surely he could work around that. Five years into the job now, Michael still feels the charge of adrenaline every time he steps into the ambulance to begin his shift. "Nobody cares if the paramedic isn't interesting when he comes to save you," he said. "In fact, in this job, boring is a comfort to people." "I WILL NEVER forget the feeling the first time they had us all line up in school to measure our height and weight," Tess said. "Our teacher stood next to an old-fashioned scale, the kind where you have to nudge the little weighted box over the numbers and try to get the bar to stay straight between the lines. And she just kept nudging and nudging and nudging. And everyone in class could see that box had to be moved way over to the edge when she stopped to write down my numbers." Tess vowed that day to lose enough weight so that the next time they measured the class, no one would stare at the scale. Forty-some years later, Tess was still fighting against her weight, trying all kinds of diets and obsessing about everything she ate. Like Michael's struggle against failing in his job, Tess would learn the hard way that no amount of effort can fix a problem that you put at the center of your life. "Try harder," that's what we all learn we're supposed to do when we're facing a big problem," Tess said. But the harder she tried, the worse it was. Because when she kept her focus on food all day long she lost twice over; first, she was miserable every minute of the day trying to avoid every extra calorie, and second, in the end she would give in anyway and feel awful about that. Just as she had as a child, Tess felt very alone in her struggle. As far as she knew, no one in her family or among her coworkers and friends had ever tried to lose more than a few pounds, and none had been trying all their lives. When she saw an ad from a local university seeking volunteers for a research study on eating habits, Tess didn't think she would find any answers, but she thought that she might at least meet some people who understood what she had been going through. At an orientation session, Tess learned that the study she had joined was investigating people eating too much of the wrong foods. "They could do that entire study just on me," Tess joked. "I said that to the woman seated next to me, who just gave me a nod like she felt exactly the same way." The researchers had Tess and the others try out different ways to avoid their favorite junk foods. Some made a list of what foods they would avoid; others had to come up with plans to avoid situations where junk foods would be available or create a list of rules about what and when they could eat. Months later Tess learned the outcome of the study. It turned out that no matter which rules or lists or plans people made, they didn't eat less junk food, they ate more. The effect was ironic, but the logic simple. People in the study spent all day thinking about what they were trying to avoid, until the effort to deny themselves defeated them. Like somebody trying to follow the instruction "don't think about an elephant," they were up against the impossibility of constantly thinking about not thinking about something. When the researchers explained what they had found, Tess was elated. "It was like that instant when light finally peeks over the horizon in the morning," she said. "The problem is the problem. I understood it immediately because that's exactly how I have lived my life: try harder, do worse." Counselors from the university offered help to study participants who sought it. For Tess, the study and the counseling turned her approach to eating and her weight upside down. "Can't and words like that went out of my life," she said. "Instead they helped me deal with food more like I deal with the rest of my life. I don't spend all day long thinking about a manicure, I get one once in a while and I enjoy it, but then I go right along with regular life. And now I am that way with what I eat. I eat real food every day, and I eat a junk food as a treat once in a while." Slowly, but surely, Tess has lost some

weight since the study ended. "More importantly, the cake and pastries monster isn't in control of my life anymore," Tess said. "Now I'm in control." \* \* \* \* \* AS A SCHOOLBOY, Philip Schultz suffered through an almost unbearable routine centered on the problem that defined his life. As Ben Curtis and Michael and Tess's experience showed, as Jansson and Smith's research shows, putting a problem first each day means waging a constantly losing battle. For Philip Schultz, like the others, progress could not begin until he put the problem aside. Each day, Philip's teacher would begin a new lesson and he would be at full attention, sitting straight in his desk, pencil in hand. Each day he would try to do the work. And each day he would fail. Again and again he watched his classmates learn new things while he sat painfully stymied, hoping not to be noticed. His teachers knew not to call on him because he never had the right answer. Over time, they would lose any faith that they could do anything to reach him, so they moved him to the back of the room and gradually shut him out of their lessons and their thoughts. His classmates, however, never lost interest in the slow boy they took such delight in tormenting. School administrators finally took notice of Philip after he lashed out at some of the boys who had teased him. The principal solved the problem by asking Philip's parents to find him another school. Not surprisingly, repeating the third grade in a new school was a joyless process that served only to bring Philip the same frustrations and failures he had experienced the first time. The source of all his difficulties was simple, but especially cruel for a young boy who grew up in a house full of books: Philip could not read. His parents, his teachers, and various tutors had worked with him for years without making headway. Far from actually reading, for Philip it was a losing battle merely to get letters to stand their ground on the page. Though at the time he had never heard the word, Philip was profoundly dyslexic. One tutor saw Philip's inability to read as evidence of laziness. He snidely asked Philip, "What are you going to be in life if you can't read?" Philip gave the only answer he could think of: "I'll be a writer." The tutor laughed, an enormous laugh that shook his whole body. Not being able to read was the central fact of Philip's life. His failures mounted on top of other failures. And he came to believe, in his heart, that he was stupid. Convinced that the stupid boy he had turned out to be would never learn to read, would never succeed, Philip gave up on himself. But he did not give up on the pretend version of himself that he kept in his head. In his head, imaginary Philip would go on to be a writer. Imaginary Philip would succeed in school. Imaginary Philip would get his letters to stand their ground because imaginary Philip knew how to read. While his real life was defined by an insurmountable problem, imaginary Philip's life was defined by possibility and promise. Hidden away in his room, freed from the burden of his limitations, Philip put this new version of himself to work, slowly making headway associating words with the sounds he had heard his mother read aloud to him. And in the process of creating a character with the traits he most wanted to have, and turning himself into that character, real Philip taught himself to read. And true to his promise, he found joy in his love for words and the music of language. Despite his tutor's cackles, Philip Schultz grew up to become an internationally decorated poet. It is telling, for someone who turned his source of childhood misery into his life's work, that Schultz is most famous for a Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poems entitled *Failure*. Nonetheless, looking back at his experience decades later, Philip focuses not on the pain of his condition but on the power of creating a way through it. "I had to stop seeing what everyone else saw when they looked at me. I had to stop seeing my flaws first," he said. "When I did that, I was free." THE TAKEAWAY Constantly thinking about his problem stopped young Philip Schultz on page one. It knocked Ben Curtis off the PGA Tour. It left Michael making himself dizzy squeezing a square peg into a round job. It led Tess to do exactly what she was trying to avoid. Thinking about problems first limits what we can accomplish in real, tangible ways. Thinking about problems first makes us seventeen times more likely to fail. 2 Imagine you are at the circus right now. Your problems are in the center ring—they are the lion tamer and the trapeze artists. You can't take your eyes or your thoughts off them; nor do you even try, because your problems are fascinating and important. But they are also discouraging and intimidating, and draining. Your solutions—transformative ideas that would enrich your life: They are a guy with popcorn, walking slowly up an aisle, clear on the other side of the giant tent. You can see him and even study him if you care to, but the odds are you will never notice him because he's not where you've trained your mind to look. And even if you glance toward him, you won't pay him any attention. But he's right there, and he has what you need. TWO FOR THE ROAD: TWO WAYS TO PUT YOUR PROBLEM DOWN RIGHT NOW Go watch a boring movie. Francis and Jacob won a Nobel Prize for work that revealed how genes make life possible. The central insight of his life's work didn't come to him during the countless hours he spent in the laboratory. It came to him at the movies—more specifically, a "dull" movie that left his mind free to wander about. When you are stuck, find a good distraction that takes you away from your problems and sets your mind free. Be someone else for a while. Looking at a problem the same way over and over again is entirely unproductive. We will fail unless we give our minds a way to look at the situation from a new perspective. Psychologists Darya Zabelina and Michael Robinson found that simply asking their adult study participants to imagine themselves as seven-year-olds vastly increased their creative output on a variety of challenging tasks. 3 You will need to see the same things differently to come up with new ideas, so look at those things the way someone else would. \* \* \* \* \* Copyright copy; 2014 by David Niven, Ph.D.