

# Eli Bower – Reflections After a Heart Attack

In 1987, Eli Bower was scheduled to be a part of the Midwest Symposium keynote along with William C. Rhodes and Mathew Trippe - all three pioneer figures in our field. By the time Bower arrived at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, he knew something was seriously wrong and was taken by ambulance to nearby Trinity Lutheran Hospital. He had suffered a major heart attack and would remain in Kansas City recovering for several weeks. After his recovery, Bower returned with his wife to Kansas City the following February to visit and thank his hospital caregivers and to deliver the keynote planned a year earlier.

Eli Bower was a pioneer in the education of children with emotional/behavioral disorders. Originally from New York City, he completed a PhD at Stanford and spent most of his career in California. He led state-wide studies and initiatives related to the education of children with disabilities at the University of California-Berkeley where he was a professor of educational psychology. He also worked at

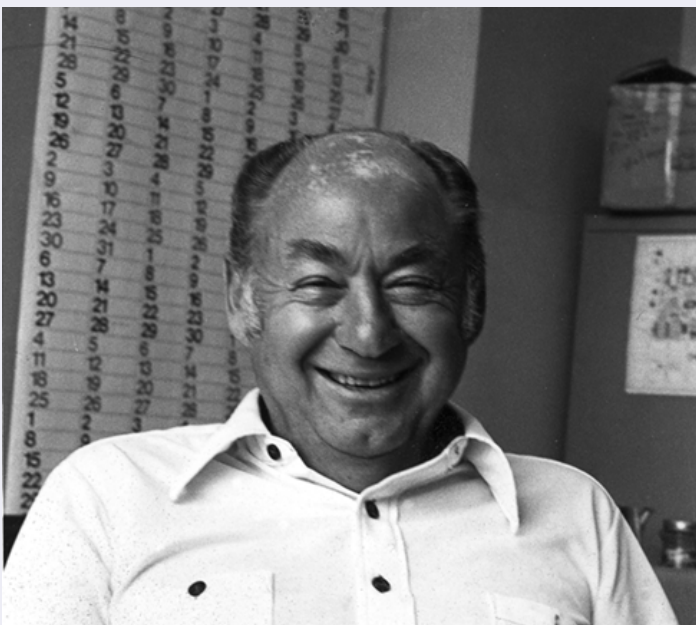
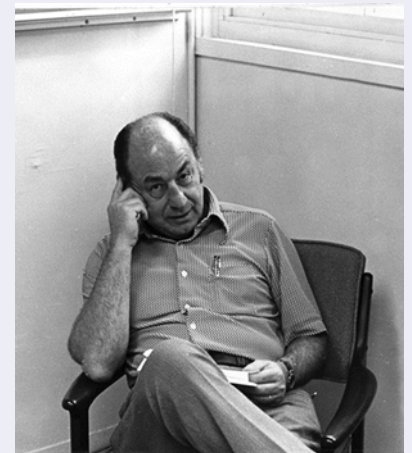
the National Institute for Mental Health in Washington.

Bower's enduring legacy is as the author of the official terminology and definition of "emotional disturbance." The Bower terminology and definition was an outcome of a state-wide task

force he led in the late 1950s to determine educationally relevant characteristics of students with "emotional handicaps." The core of his definition was:

- An inability to learn not explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers
- Inappropriate feelings or behavior under normal circumstances
- A general, pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fear associated with personal or school problems."

These five components were adopted in federal special education legislation in the 1960s as well as the "Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975" (now IDEA), although some stipulations (such as excluding "social maladjustment" which he did not support) were added later in the legislation. The word "seriously", which had been added to Bower's terminology in federal legislation, was later dropped.



Over the years, there has been considerable discussion of the merits and shortcomings of both the definition and terminology. Bower disagreed with the clause excluding students who were “socially maladjusted” from being considered “emotionally disturbed” saying that students who were emotionally disturbed were clearly also socially maladjusted. He recognized that disturbed emotions and behavior can only be considered in the contexts of the families, peers, and the school where it occurs.

In his 1988 return to Kansas City after his recovery, Bower shared 10 reflections on the field of behavior disorders. He was witty and humorous. He argued that special education should not be (considered) more “restrictive” than regular environments. Instead, he said that special education should place *fewer* restrictions on children’s learning and development. He drew distinctions between behavioral “differences” and “dysfunctions,” and he encouraged more opportunities for children to have “recess” and play. His final reflection #10 was to “Start each day with a laugh!”

Bower published an account of some personal and medical aspects of his heart attack:

Bower, E.M. (1988). I got to Kansas City on a Thursday, by Friday..., *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 31



(3), 381-390. *Project MUSE*, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/402147>.

The video of Bower’s keynote speech when he returned to MSLBD in 1989, “10 Reflections”, can be found on the MSLBD website: <https://archive.org/details/EliBowerOnEbd&reCache=1>. A version of this speech was also published in the MSLBD publication, *Behavior In Our Schools*, December 1988.