

# COGNITIVE MINDFULNESS WORKBOOK

## AWARENESS, ACCEPTANCE AND ACTION IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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## INTRODUCTION

***“Freedom is what you do with what has been done to you”***

Jean-Paul Sartre

This workbook focuses on a very interesting and unexpected phenomenon: how the most scientifically validated psychotherapy currently available in the Western world - the various techniques and theories arising out of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) - seems to have naturally converged with and to complement certain other theories and practices that have been practiced in the East for thousands of years, notably mindfulness and meditation.

These Eastern ideas and practices share a general approach and orientation with the scientifically based CBT. Both accept the primacy of experimentation as our guide going forward, to what works and what doesn't, and both teach the need for ongoing awareness of important aspects of our experience (mindfulness). The fact that some of these ideas may historically have been derived from Eastern religious traditions such as Buddhism does not mean that any kind of religious faith is required, any more than faith is required for CBT to work. Both approaches are based rigorously in the scientific method of empirical testing and result.

So please do not take anything I say in this workbook on faith. Take what works and discard what doesn't. What is important here is finding what works for you, based on the results you see. There are a number of different ideas presented and I don't suggest hurrying through them all at once. Instead, try a particular technique and approach over a period of time; give it a good chance to succeed. I am sharing what I know to have considerable evidence of clinical efficacy and what I have seen help both my clients in my psychotherapy practice, as well as what I have seen work for myself, my colleagues and friends in the various meditation and therapy groups I have been privileged to be part of over the years. It is not possible (or desirable) in a short workbook like this to go into more depth in each of the areas covered, my purpose is more by way of an introduction; however, I hope this workbook can act at the least as an introduction and hopefully inspire further reading and investigation. A good place to start is with the reference books listed at the end.

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The workbook is divided up into three sections, awareness, acceptance and action. These broad ideas are an attempt to simplify some of the main ideas in CBT. There are in fact a number of different schools that fall under the CBT umbrella, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Cognitive

Therapy and Behavioral Activation, all of which are represented in this book. Though they have enough in common to belong to CBT, they may also emphasize different aspects of our human functioning, such as focusing primarily on inner thoughts and beliefs as against external observable behaviours or vice versa, or even having apparently different goals, such as learning to restructure our thoughts and beliefs, versus learning to leave them alone and not be so bothered by them so much. There is even a bit of existential and humanistic therapy reflected in the chapter on choice and values.

I am not taking a position here for against any of these schools, and I don't think it is helpful to get side-tracked from the practical business of therapy by largely theoretical questions, which may lead to confusion. What I have found is that some techniques and approaches work better than others for some clients, or some kinds of disorders, and at certain stages in the therapeutic process. Cognitive therapy is particularly good for panic disorder and Behavioral Activation for depression, for example, and if you are having trouble with alcohol, AA is a good place to start. My hope is to present a number of such approaches in the spirit of, as I said above, finding what works best for each individual, as every person is unique and they are ultimately the best judge of effectiveness.

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Indeed, I'd like to encourage you to consider whatever difficulty it is that brought you to reading this now, whether it is new for you or seems to have been around forever, I want you to consider the possibility that it may also be an opportunity. At some point you may even be able to say to yourself that you are thankful for the problem(s), because without them you would not have been able to begin learning some new skills for coping a bit better in life and living it more fully, as well as gaining a greater degree of self knowledge.

After all, we don't tend to worry about what's important in life until things go a bit wrong, no? Time and again in my practice clients have expressed the view that their difficulties have been a blessing, forcing them to do some work and learn something about themselves, and to grow in a way that certainly would not have happened if everything had continued to go along smoothly.

Tom Gibbons

#### ***IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER***

**Nothing in this workbook is intended to be used to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease or disorder, nor should it be used as a substitute for your own independent health professional's advice. Always consult a suitably qualified professional on any specific mental health or medical problem you may have.**

# AWARENESS

**“We are what we think.”**

*The Dhammapada (India, c. 480 BC)*

## CHAPTER ONE

### BECOMING AWARE OF OUR THOUGHTS AND OUR MOODS

#### OUR MOODS

Our everyday commonsense view of the world probably goes something like this: “I’m happy because I just got a raise”, or “I’m angry because I’ve had an argument with my husband”, or “I’m anxious because I have a big exam tomorrow.” In other words, how I’m feeling, what kind of a mood I’m in is in some way *caused* by what is going on in my world at the moment.

Well there does seem to be an obvious connection between the two - what is going on, and how I happen to be feeling. No question about that, but is this the whole story? Let me suggest an additional consideration: isn’t there an intervening layer between what is happening and how we are feeling, i.e. what I am *thinking* about what is happening, and how I am *interpreting* what is going on. Let me give you an example of what I’m talking about.

Imagine two people sitting on a plane when some unexpected turbulence occurs and the pilot turns the seatbelt sign on. One person starts to think, “Oh my God, this turbulence is scary, I wonder if this plane is strong enough to stand up to it, what happens if it isn’t, I’ve heard about structural failures and horrible plane crashes, could this be happening now? I can’t stand it.”

How do you think this person is most likely feeling after thinking these thoughts? Anxious, scared, and would probably like to get off the plane right now, but that’s not possible, and that makes it even worse.

Let’s turn to our other passenger. As soon as the turbulence begins, she thinks to herself, “Turbulence happens all the time on these flights, in fact the planes are designed for it, and the pilots are trained and experienced at dealing with it. Turbulence very rarely results in an accident, so I think I’m just going to go back to the book I am reading.”

How do you think this person feels? A bit calmer, probably, and unlikely to be worrying so much about the flight.

You may have guessed at the point I'm trying to make here, that it not the turbulence that made the first person anxious, or the second person calmer, it's what he or she was *thinking* about the turbulence, how he or she was *interpreting* it. If it was just the event in the world - the turbulence - that was causing the first person to feel anxious, why didn't the second person feel the same way? Obviously something more is at work, and that something is our thoughts.

## AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

This may not seem obvious at first or applicable to us, and there is a reason for this. What we are thinking often happens very quickly without us being fully aware of it, and these are called "automatic thoughts." These thoughts may take a little bit of effort to become aware of, as they often operate just below our normal level of consciousness. These thoughts can occur very quickly, so quickly that we may have difficulty sometimes in believing that they exist, let alone that they are affecting how we are feeling.

But you can find out for yourself right now. Think back to a time when you noticed your mood had changed, it can be this morning, it can be a few weeks ago. Maybe you had become more anxious or angry or uncomfortable. Then cast your mind back to when the mood change began, and ask yourself, "*What was going through my mind at that point?*"

Usually we can get some idea of what we were actually thinking. If this is still elusive, we can ask "what *might* I have been thinking?" and this can also help us get at what was passing through our minds. Another important point here too: it is not just thoughts, but *images* too that are going through our minds that can affect how we're feeling, and which we can also become aware of.

Here's another example: I had a client who came in to see me feeling a bit down and discouraged. "When did this begin?" I asked. "Oh, last night", he said. His wife, who lived in another country, had been supposed to call him at 8 PM the previous evening and she hadn't. He hadn't worried much about it until 10 or 15 minutes later, and then he noticed that he had begun to feel a bit angry, then a bit panicky, and then later in the evening, a bit depressed. He had still not heard from his wife as of the following morning, when I was seeing him, and he felt quite down.

Perhaps it seems normal to believe that he would feel this way, as his wife hadn't called, that these events clearly "caused" his feelings, but let's look a bit closer to what actually happened. I asked him "What started going through your mind when she didn't ring?"

"Well", he said, "At first, I thought she was just being inconsiderate, and I was a bit pissed off, and then I started to wonder if there was a reason why she hadn't called. Maybe she had forgotten, and

maybe her forgetting was a sign that she wasn't that interested in talking to me any more, and I began to feel a bit nervous. She lives next to some members of her family, so I figured there hadn't been an accident or someone would have called me, so if that wasn't it maybe it was because she was losing touch with me, caring less. After all, I have been working abroad and supporting our family for a few years now. Actually, she has been alone a good portion of this time, so who knows, maybe she had found someone else. And then I noticed I was feeling a bit depressed."

All from one missed telephone call! But haven't we all done something like this at one time or other? Maybe we're engaging in some version of this more often than we know....

As it happens, there was a problem with the phone system and she called later in the day, but I think this illustrates very well that it is what we *think* about an event, or missed event, that often determines how we feel, rather than the event itself.

## COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Which brings me to my next important point - and this is easy to see in this example, though it may be more subtle in other contexts – that sometimes what we are thinking can be distorted or exaggerated in some way. So it's not just the fact that we tend to think about things, which after all is unavoidable, but *how* we are thinking about them that may produce the negative feelings.

While studying people who were experiencing depression and anxiety, Cognitive Psychologists noticed that their thinking tended to reflect certain patterns that were not quite so pronounced in persons who were not feeling this way. There are a number of these "Cognitive Distortions" (Burns, 1987) and "Irrational Beliefs" (Ellis, 1996), and I have listed those that my clients and I have found most helpful in our work together.

1. **All or Nothing thinking:** This is possibly the Granddaddy of all distortions, along with #2. Here we tend to see things in black or white categories. For example, if I'm a student and get a low grade on a particular essay, I may believe that this means I'll *never* be a good student.
2. **Catastrophizing/Awfulizing:** This is where we consider absolutely the worst outcomes imaginable, and become convinced of not just their possibility but also their probability.
3. **Mind Reading:** This is where I just *know* that people are thinking about me, and *what* they are thinking, and typically it's pretty negative. But how can I know for sure, might I be mistaken?



4. **Fortune Telling:** Most of us find it hard to say what will happen tomorrow, let alone the rest of our lives, yet we consistently believe we know how things will turn out, how this meeting will turn out, or that relationship, or how I'll do at that public speaking engagement.
5. **Personalization:** When I believe something to be my fault and take blame/responsibility when it's really not, such as for someone else's feelings. Burns calls this the Grandfather of guilt.
6. **Musts and Shoulds:** In his inimitable way, Ellis refers to the tendency to feel we must and have to do this or that as "musterbation." This is not just that I must be able to do everything perfectly, for example, but that the world and others should be a certain way as well. "This shouldn't be happening, it's unfair", or "People should or must treat me better".
7. **Disqualifying the Positive:** We focus on what is wrong, and minimize or even disqualify completely our legitimate achievements and good qualities.
8. **Low Frustration Tolerance:** This is often missed. It is the thought and belief that 'I can't stand it, I shouldn't have to feel this way', when in fact, though it may be unpleasant, we are quite capable of 'standing it'.
9. **Self and Other Rating:** This is the tendency to make global judgments of ourselves and others. It is fine to judge this or that particular behavior, but it doesn't make sense to rate the *totality* of others and ourselves at the same time, though this is often what causes the most pain, and what we tend to do automatically. "I failed my exam; therefore I'm a total failure and generally bad person."

Do you recognize any of these ways of thinking from your own experience?

To return to our example of the fellow whose wife didn't call on time, we can apply these categories and see what we come up with. There seems to be some catastrophizing, when he tells himself that if she hasn't called, he automatically jumps to the conclusion that she has found someone else. Similarly, there might be some mind reading when he interprets the missed call as perhaps meaning she doesn't care anymore.

This demonstrates a very important point about CBT, that it is not so much that we want to replace these negative thoughts with positive thoughts so much as we are replacing incorrect (unrealistic) thoughts with more correct (realistic) thoughts. If we, for example, replace unrealistic negative thoughts with similarly unrealistic and untrue positive ones ("I'm the best person in the world",

instead of “I’m the worst person in the world”), then we aren’t really coming to grips with the issue, are we?

The point is that we want to replace distorted thoughts with more accurate ones, and when our negative thoughts have been unrealistically distorted, this invariably gives us a degree of relief as we realize that things are simply not as awful as we had imagined. We may not solve the ‘problem’ we think we have (though sometimes that happens), but it almost always ‘takes the edge off’ because we are not making an uncomfortable situation into a catastrophic, awful one through our interpretation of the situation. This is the first step in coping better, seeing the situation for what it *is*, and not what we’re worried it might be.

## EVIDENCE

How can we tell if what we’re thinking is a distortion? As I said in my introduction, we are interested in a scientific approach to our experience, and this means looking at the evidence. In fact, in this whole process we can think of ourselves as scientists, examining each of our thoughts and beliefs to determine if it is true or not. And how do scientists go about their business - through looking for and establishing evidence for a *hypothesis*. Actually, we can look at each thought and belief we become aware of and treat it as if it was a mini-hypothesis, and ask what is the evidence, if any, that it might be true (or not), and whether there might be a better alternative explanation.

As it happens, I did precisely this with this client. I asked him whether the fact that his wife didn’t call, was sufficient evidence in itself that she no longer cared about him? For example, was she in the habit recently of missing phone calls or other commitments she had made with you? “No”, he said, “This was the first time in the couple of years that I have been away from home”. Were there any other signs of indifference from her of late, or at all? “No,” he said, “I haven’t seen anything like this, or heard anything from family or friends at home that she might be involved with someone else”. “So”, I said, “if there was no real evidence for some of his fears, what might there actually be evidence for?” Well, we didn’t know for sure, of course, but now that we were looking at this way, he said, “I guess maybe she was delayed by one of the kids or maybe one of the kids was ill, or they got stuck in traffic”. “Right”, I said, “and thinking about it in this way, how does it make you feel?” “Relief”, he said. “I’m still a little worried but I guess it seems there’s more likely a logical explanation, and I don’t need to believe everything I think. I guess I was a little lonely and was worrying too much, its all probably OK”.

## DISPUTING

So what we did together, was to become aware of what he was saying to himself, see how this was affecting how he was feeling, and then *dispute* some of the automatic thoughts, and discover that some or all of them may have been exaggerated or distorted, *and that there are likely alternative*

*ways to explain what happened.* And when these were corrected, the feelings automatically changed from worry and fear, to relief and a greater sense of confidence that while he still didn't know why his wife hadn't called, there was no real reason to think the worst. There may still be a little bit of anxiety about not getting the call, but it is much less than if he believed the various catastrophic interpretations of what might have happened.

To repeat my point, above: when we dispute our distorted thinking, we are not doing so simply by replacing negative thoughts with positive ones. We are replacing negative thoughts with more *realistic* ones, ones that are more likely to be true, even if we aren't in possession of all the facts. This is what makes CBT so powerful, it is not mere positive thinking, though this too may have its place, it is seeing that we have been in some way mistaken in our beliefs and that we do not need to be quite so pessimistic based on a more objective analysis of the facts.

Note on "D" as Defusion: In ACT, we can go through the ABC process, but instead of disputing, the instruction is to "defuse" from our thoughts. We will look into this more in Chapter 4, and eventually the idea is to add another tool that we can use when we encounter difficult thoughts and situations, but for now we're taking the classic CBT approach.

## CHANGING OUR RESPONSES

When we take the time to become aware of what we're thinking - which we can train ourselves to do more and more quickly when we notice a change in our mood or distorted thoughts emerging - something else important happens: we aren't automatically swept along in the tide of our thoughts and feelings, feeling overwhelmed and helpless and at the mercy of the world. There may or may not be much we can do about the situation, but there is everything in the world we can do about our *response* to events.

Just the mere fact of stopping and wondering what's going through my mind when I notice I've become upset is doing things differently from how I might have done it in the past, and helps to slow the thinking process down before it gets a head of steam and I become overly upset at what is occurring, often without knowing how I got there. In a very real sense we *disturb ourselves*, without being aware of it, but if we practice these ideas and use these tools, we may begin to see the process for the first time as to how my moods are created, which in turn begins to allow us to do something about it.

Often at this point, a client may ask, "But my Grandmother died last year, shouldn't I be upset about that?" Absolutely, grief is an appropriate response to that event. There is no cognitive distortion in the thought, "I am sad because my Grandmother died." However, if you are still constantly depressed and grieving a year or two later, we might look for a cognitive distortion, such as, for example, "not only am I sad at my Grandmothers' death, but *that means I'll always be alone now.*" We can

investigate the last part of this statement in particular and see if there is a distortion, and if there is, which seems quite possible on the face of it, we might determine that the extended grieving is due not so much to the death itself as to this interpretation of it - that "I will always be alone". Then we can begin to dispute this 'all or nothing' interpretation to see if it is realistic.

**NB** Beware of the words "always" and "never" in our thinking, they're rarely absolutely applicable to real life though we use them all the time, especially in our relationships: e.g. "You always act that way", or "You'll never change."

## THE ABC'S

Cognitive Psychologists have created many exercises that we can utilize to help us become aware of our thoughts and to challenge them, and I can't stress enough how important it is, especially at the beginning of this work, that you take the time to *write out* and dispute your thoughts. This helps us to learn these lessons in a more thorough way. This is important because CBT is in many ways a 'do it yourself' therapy. YOU are the world's expert on exactly that is going on between your two ears, so the more you slow down and begin to notice in detail how your moods are generated, the more successful you will be in this work. And yes, it takes practice, the more you do, the better you will become at this work, and the more control you will have over your moods, it's as simple as that. Of course I don't want to fall into the trap of 'all or nothing thinking' myself, and say that all your problems will be solved if you do this work, but I can tell you that many scientific studies have shown that the majority of people show distinct improvement across a wide variety of emotional disorders and problems after having commenced and stuck with a course of CBT.

There are various written exercises that different writers and researchers have come up with to assist the learning and disputing process, but one of the simplest and most effective that I have come across is the A-B-C method of Dr. Albert Ellis, one of the pioneers of CBT. We can also go through it mentally when we are having a problem, but it is even better to write it down in this format either around the time it is happening, or later on.

**A = Activating event** - the stimulus that seemed to set off the particular mood I find myself in right now; i.e., when did these feelings start?

**B = Beliefs** - my beliefs and (automatic) thoughts and mental images about A

**C = Consequence** - How I felt (or behaved) after A occurred

**D = Disputation** – challenging the thoughts, beliefs and conclusions I find at B, to see if B contains distorted, exaggerated or unrealistic thoughts and beliefs (and where we apply our list of Cognitive Distortions from page 8/9)

**E = Energization** – A positive message, commitment or action I can make to myself after having been through this process and been able to take a different perspective on the original event.

Here is an example of a person in a relationship with her boyfriend who complained of feeling down after she tried to be affectionate with him.

This is how she wrote an A-B-C on this event (NB See below for worksheet on this topic):

**A** = I tried to kiss my boyfriend David and he seemed cold and distant (This is the ‘activating event’ when I noticed my negative feelings began)

**B** = He didn’t seem interested in me at all. Maybe I’m too fat and he’s lost interest. I did see him talking to that new girl after the lecture, Mary. How could he do this to me anyway, I’ve been a good girlfriend, this really upsets me, its not right. (We’re not going to remember every single thought we may have had even if we’re doing this exercise right after the event, or even during it. However, we can usually get a pretty good sense of what we’re saying to ourselves. Here’s a hint: look for the **hot thought**. There’s usually something about the interaction that bothers us the most. In this case, it’s “maybe I’m too fat”, so zero in on this in particular and see how true this is.)

**C** = I felt rejected, inadequate, unattractive, a bit depressed and angry and so I went out and bought myself a pint of ice cream, even though I was supposed to be on a diet (notice that consequences include not just feelings, but behaviors as well!)

**D** = Well, I have gained a few pounds this year, and I would like to lose it, but is this really why he seemed cold and distant? (Mind reading) David has never commented on my weight, and actually said recently that he liked me the way I was. I’m not all that overweight anyway, so maybe I’m being a bit hard on myself (All or nothing thinking). Now that I think about it, David has been kind of stressed recently about his finals, because he wants to go to law school, so maybe he was just distracted and worried and that’s why he seemed so cold. And Mary is applying to grad school herself, so maybe that’s all they were talking about, and not that they’re romantically interested in each other (Catastrophizing).”

**E** = I don’t know for sure what’s going through David’s mind, but as far as I can tell it seems more likely that he’s worried about other things than me, so I will resolve not to let this bother me, and get on with enjoying my life and not letting this get me down, there’s no real reason to let it. (This is the place for more positive affirmations, but notice that these are based on the realistic work of disputing and challenging our thoughts in D. For E to be effective, we must *first* respond to our

exaggerated automatic thoughts in a rational way. A realistic example of a positive affirmation that could be introduced here is that “I am attractive”).

This ABC exercise can be used any time anywhere, either by writing it down, or doing it mentally (if we’re not able to write it down). It’s also important to note that there may be significant overlap in the various distortions; you may see any number of other categories of distortion in just this small example. The point in general is to notice what we are thinking and see if it is in any exaggerated or unrealistic when we slow down a bit and compare our thoughts a bit more objectively with the facts.

As I said previously, the more we practice these skills, the better we get at managing our responses and our moods. We are not trying to directly *control* our moods here by, say, consciously denying or suppressing them. This work is more subtle than that. We notice that what we are thinking has a direct affect on what we are feeling, so by becoming aware of what we are thinking in the moment, and the connection with what we are feeling, we can begin to dispute the thoughts, and then our moods will begin to change *by themselves*, as what we believe about the situation changes. If the situation is truly not as awful as we thought, it’s impossible for us not to feel a bit better than when we were convinced that something awful was absolutely bound to happen.

We can train ourselves to initiate the procedure outlined in this chapter whenever we notice our moods have changed for the worse. Then we can ask ourselves, “When did this begin, and what has been going through my mind since then?” Usually, depending on how disturbed we feel, we can identify some exaggerated or distorted thoughts, which we can immediately begin to challenge with the actual evidence, and therefore begin to diffuse.

It can also be very helpful to set this down in a schematic form. As I mentioned above, we can do the exercises mentally as disturbing events are occurring, but when we are early in this process we learn most effectively by slowing down and writing down our thoughts later on (though sometimes it is possible to write them down as the events are occurring too, but not always). This may take a bit of time but remember; it has typically taken a few decades of thinking a certain way to get you to where you are today. This is not likely to be reversed overnight, and will take a level of persistence and effort on your part. However if you make this commitment to yourself it will pay off handsomely!

# *DYSFUNCTIONAL THOUGHTS RECORD*

<b>A</b> <b>Activating</b> <b>Event</b>	<b>B</b> <b>Beliefs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Automatic Thoughts</li> <li>• Mental images</li> </ul>	<b>C</b> <b>Consequences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings, behaviours</li> </ul>	<b>D</b> <b>Disputation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenging the thoughts and beliefs in B</li> <li>• Cognitive distortions</li> </ul>	<b>E</b> <b>Energization</b>
<p>I tried to kiss my boyfriend David and he seemed cold and distant</p>	<p>-He didn't seem interested in me at all.</p> <p>-Maybe I'm too fat and he's lost interest. I did see him talking to that new girl after the lecture, Mary. -How could he do this to me anyway, I've been a good girlfriend, this really upsets me, its not right.</p>	<p>I felt rejected, inadequate, unattractive, a bit depressed and angry and so I went out and bought myself a pint of ice cream, even though I was supposed to be on a diet</p>	<p>-Well, I have gained a few pounds this year, and I would like to lose it, but is this really why he seemed cold and distant? (Mind reading)</p> <p>-David has never commented on my weight, and actually said recently that he liked me the way I was.</p> <p>-I'm not all that overweight anyway, so maybe I'm being a bit hard on myself (All or nothing thinking).</p> <p>-Now that I think about it David has been kind of stressed recently about his finals, because he wants to go to law school, so maybe he was just distracted and worried and that's why he seemed so cold.</p>	<p>I don't know for sure what's going through David's mind, but as far as I can tell it seems more likely that he's worried about other things than me, so I will resolve not to let this bother me, and get on with enjoying my life and not letting this get me down, there's no real reason to let it!</p>

## SUMMARY

To recap, what we have been saying here is that a good deal of how we're feeling and our moods (maybe most, sometimes), is due not so much to what is happening in our world, but what and how we are thinking about it, and that the way we are thinking about it may be making things worse by exaggerating and distorting our judgment, usually without us being aware of it. Instead we tend to believe everything we are telling ourselves to be the truth. We end up scaring ourselves and upsetting ourselves unnecessarily, but we can begin to become aware of what is going through our minds when we notice our mood has changed, and see what role **we** may be playing in adding to the discomfort and disturbance. We can see if any of our beliefs and thoughts are distorted, and we can challenge them and make them more realistic. The problem may not necessarily thereby always be "solved" but usually we can at least moderate our responses and begin to feel a bit more in control and a little less overwhelmed.



## CHAPTER TWO

### CORE BELIEFS

Many people clearly see the points being made in the previous chapter, and how their thoughts may be adding to their difficulties, and in many cases even causing them, yet still say to me, “But I keep having the same old thoughts and patterns. I see that these thoughts may be distorted, and that it is these distorted thoughts themselves that may be making me feel depressed or anxious, but it seems like I’ve been feeling this way my whole life, and it’s hard to stop. Sometimes I still believe the thoughts, even though rationally I know I shouldn’t.”

This is a very good question: we can see these negative thoughts, which often exhibit specific patterns for different people, and ask, “Why am I having these particular thoughts all the time? I can see how this cognitive therapy works, but what causes all these negative thoughts in the first place, and why these particular kind of thoughts in my case? Why do I worry so much about not being good enough at my job, but my friend, on the other hand doesn’t worry about that at all, yet she tells me she can’t stop worrying that her husband might leave her?”

The answer to these questions is that there are some thoughts and beliefs that are more basic to our personality than others; they are in some way central to how we think about ourselves. These beliefs are called “Core Beliefs”. We can illustrate the difference by observing that there is likely to be a significant difference between an automatic thought such as “I’m mad at myself because I should have remembered my wife’s birthday”, and a belief like “I’m depressed because there’s something deeply defective about me.”

Please note a few points about core beliefs. First, like automatic thoughts, they are susceptible to being confirmed by the available evidence (or not). After all, even though they can seem so solid, so much a constituent part of us, they are still *beliefs*, and they may be more or less correct when tested against reality, and are thus ultimately capable of being modified. Again we are asking the simple question - “Is it true?”

Second, we will each usually have a few core beliefs, some of which are likely to be good, some not so good. I may simultaneously think I am loveable, and that I am also not a very competent person. When things are going well, our positive core beliefs – “I’m a pretty competent person”, “I’m in control of life” – usually predominate. The negative core beliefs need not be at the forefront of our minds. Actually for most of us they are in the background, and may only come to the fore at times of stress or change, when we may suddenly notice, for example, “Now that I’m starting my new job, I

feel kind of insecure and am worried that I'm not able to perform well enough". Of course, such a thought in this circumstance is very common; it is only when it begins to take over and we can't shake it even in the face of "objective" evidence that we are doing the job well enough, that we probably need to work on it a bit.

Precisely because core beliefs are usually formed during an earlier part of our lives through interaction with our significant caregivers, they are more deeply held and thus resistant to change. Such deeply held convictions as to our inherent worthiness (or not), our self esteem, are one of the greatest sources of ongoing unhappiness, due to the tendency for them to generate negative thoughts about ourselves in a variety of situations.

Lastly, core beliefs are not just about us personally, they will be about other people and the world as well, such as "I can't trust men (or women)", or "the world is an unsafe place for me."

Aaron Beck, one of the founders of CBT, believes that negative core beliefs tend to fall into one or both of two categories, ideas of helplessness and ideas of unlovability. Here is a list to illustrate (Beck, J. 1995):

## Helpless core beliefs

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I am helpless

I am powerless

I am out of control

I am weak

I am vulnerable

I am needy

I am trapped

I am inadequate

I am ineffective

I am incompetent

I am a failure

I am disrespected

I am defective (I don't measure up to others)

I'm not good enough (achievement-wise)

## Unlovable core beliefs

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I am unlovable	I am unworthy
I am unlikable	I am different
I am undesirable	I am defective (others won't love me)
I am unattractive	I am not good enough (to be loved)
I am unwanted	I am bound to be rejected
I am uncared for	I am bound to be abandoned
I am bad	I am bound to be alone

Does anything come to mind when you read these? What might your core beliefs be about yourself? One way to find out is by taking a look at your automatic thoughts (this is where having a written record can be very helpful). Do you notice the same old things coming up again and again, like fear about failure, or of being rejected? This might point to a core belief about being inadequate or that you can't trust others. Another approach is the "Downward Arrow" technique (Burns, 1980), which can be illustrated with this interaction between a client and a therapist:

T: Okay, you say you're nervous about going to the party on Saturday night?

C: Yes, I'm worried that I'll be left on my own; no one will pay attention to me.

T: If that happened, what might it mean about you?

C: That I was unlikable [I am not likeable/loveable = core belief]

Have you been able to come up with any idea of what some of your core beliefs might be? Sometimes it's fairly straightforward, and the beliefs come to us easily, as we may always have been more or less aware of what we think and feel about ourselves. At other times, it may be more difficult to picture our core beliefs about ourselves. In this case, we can adopt the same approach we took when we couldn't easily identify our automatic thoughts: we ask, "What *might* our core beliefs be?"

Usually something will suggest itself to us that will allow us to make a start on the process. It may not be possible to establish clear core beliefs for a while, but we can make steadily closer approximations as we go along, and this is just fine to start our work here. Remember, too, that we have positive core beliefs, so we might end up with a core belief formulation like, “I’m a pretty good person, but I’ll never be able to seriously compete in the business world.” While in this work we want to always be mindful of our strengths (don’t “disqualify the positive”!), it is the latter part of a formulation like this that we would target there.

Once we have conceptualized what our core belief(s) may be, we can start to take steps to investigate them and perhaps begin to modify them.

As I said above, and like our automatic thoughts, whatever our core belief may be we do not have to accept them as given, we can look to see how true they are, what evidence there is for them, and challenge them rationally.

Once we have established a sense of some of our core beliefs, we can ask ourselves, what are the advantages and disadvantages of holding this belief(s)? We can ask of each belief, what’s good about it, does it help us at all, and are there any advantages to holding it? What’s not so good about it, how does believing this contribute to the problems we have in life?

For example, I may have a core belief that I’m not very confident, especially in social situations. The disadvantages seem obvious: I feel uncomfortable in social situations, I don’t enjoy them as much as I might, I don’t approach interesting people to talk, and so I don’t have as many friends as I would like, and so on. But maybe there are some “advantages” too, that I might not be aware of. Maybe it feels “safe” and comfortable not to have to approach people I don’t know, and that way I can’t be rejected. So ask yourself when looking at your core beliefs, what’s good and bad about holding this belief? This is a good entryway into identifying and getting a good feel for our core beliefs and how they have been operating in our lives.

#### ALL OR NOTHING THINKING

A common issue with respect to our core beliefs is that we tend to view ourselves in all or nothing terms. I must be totally successful (notice the “musts” and “shoulds” here), and if I’m not, then I’m a miserable failure. In some basic sense I’m all good or all bad, totally responsible or irresponsible, extremely attractive and interesting or totally boring.

This is ‘black and white’ thinking that tends to be overly simplistic. Might it be true that in some situations I do very well, and in others not quite as well? If there is an occasion where I feel I have not

done so well, does this tend to overshadow all the positive things that have happened and that I have been responsible for? Do I tend to minimize the positive gains and emphasize the negative? Is it OK for judgments to sometimes be more in shades of grey, especially when this is really more reflective of the actual situation?

Take a moment and imagine what it might be like if you were to evaluate yourself in less extreme terms. Think of the core belief along a continuum, where 100 is you believe it completely, and 0 is not at all. Think where you are on one of your core beliefs, how strongly do you believe it right now? As your work proceeds, you will likely see it come down, and this is not only good in itself, if it is a disturbing belief, but also helps us to see that these belief are not often all or nothing, either 100% believed or not believed at all (0%).

Here I would like to turn your attention to an interesting phenomenon. We may think we obviously want to change, to stop believing all this negative stuff about ourselves, but sometimes there is resistance from unexpected quarters. Since this is a belief about ourselves, it feels like it *is* us in some way (rightly or wrongly), so how can we really get rid of this, or decrease it? Actually do I really want to? Does it seem scary to live without some or all of these beliefs?

This reminds me of one of my teachers when I was getting qualified who said that with our clients, they typically present with two deep desires. One wish is to get better, to minimize and hopefully overcome the particular pain they are in; the other wish is *not* to have things change. We may not be aware of this at all, or only vaguely, but change is unsettling, and in a certain way our present condition is safe, we know it so well. There may even be some ways in which we gain from having a certain problem; I may get extra attention or sympathy, and we should be aware of this. If we're not really prepared to change, we probably won't!

Another way to combat the hold of a core belief is to ask ourselves how might others see you? Would they be as strict and judgmental with you as you are with yourself? Indeed, are you this judgmental with others, or do you allow more leeway and maybe find it easier to be a bit more understanding and compassionate with others than you are with yourself? This is important evidence and we should try not to discount it.

Once we have identified the core belief(s), and have perhaps considered the effects believing them have on our lives for better or worse, we can start the process of changing old beliefs and substituting newer, more realistic ones. We might simply ask ourselves, "now that we've seen that our old belief is too broad and absolutistic, what might be a more accurate belief about myself?" We use the same basic approach when we began to identify and dispute our distorted automatic thoughts, so the more practiced you've become at that, the better you'll fare with this exercise. Here is a form you can use, with the example of Sally, a college student (adapted from Beck, 1995):

## CORE BELIEFS WORKSHEET

OLD CORE BELIEF \_\_\_\_ *I'm inadequate* \_\_\_\_\_

How much do you believe the old core belief right now? \_\_\_\_\_ 75%

NEW BELIEF \_\_\_\_ *I'm adequate in most ways (but only human too)* \_\_\_\_\_

How much do you believe the new core belief right now? \_\_\_\_\_ 50%

Evidence that contradicts old core belief and supports new belief	Evidence that supports old core belief (with Reframe)
Did good work on literature paper	Didn't understand concept in chemistry class ( BUT I hadn't read about it and I'll, probably understand it later when I give it a bit of time and thought. That's what usually happens)
Asked a question in statistics	
Understood this worksheet	Didn't go to the Teaching Assistant for help (BUT that doesn't mean I'm inadequate. I was nervous about going because I think I should be able to figure out these things for myself. But why am I in college, it's to learn!)
Got a B on Chemistry test	
Arranged to switch phones, bank accounts, insurance, etc.	Got a B on my literature paper (BUT it's an OK grade. If I were really inadequate, would I be at college at all?)
Explained statistics concept to guy down the hall	
Understood chapter 6 of statistics book	

## COPING STYLES AND CORE BELIEFS

In some ways, each individual core belief needs to be addressed based on its own unique merits. At the same time, there are some characteristics of all such beliefs that help us to understand how they work, and therefore how we can best combat them to the extent that they are creating difficulties for us in our lives.

In response to our beliefs, whichever ones they may be, we tend to develop three types of coping styles to deal with them, surrender, escape and counterattack (Young & Klosko, 1993).

For example, I may have grown up with a very successful parent, and that to be worthwhile at all, I need to be similarly successful, or maybe even more so, in order to feel good about myself. I may feel this is where all my self-esteem comes from. I may feel, in fact, that unless I do something perfectly, it has no value, and that this means that I'm just not good enough.

One of the interesting things about core beliefs is that they're not operative all the time. It's like the icons on my desktop PC. When you're using, say, the word processing program, then it takes over the whole screen, but we also know that there are any number of other programs running in the background available at the touch of an icon. So it is with core beliefs; we may not be thinking about a particular issue most of the time, but certain conditions will activate it, and suddenly it will come to the fore, and take over the whole screen (our mind).

In the case at hand here, I may not spend most of the academic term worrying about my abilities, but when exam time comes around, I feel myself getting extremely anxious, more and more so as the date approaches. It's not hard to see that if I believe that I have to do something perfectly, like get straight 'A's, and if I don't, then I'm a loser, that the exam is more than just about passing an exam, it's about whether I am worthwhile as an individual. The stakes are (or feel) very high, as they tend to be with core beliefs.

There are a number of approaches I can take to my exam dilemma: I can work like my life depends on it, which is what it can feel like when our belief is controlling us. I can become completely obsessed, and allow myself no leisure time to relax, and everything else becomes secondary, including my relationships and my health, as the only way I can feel justified and good about myself is if I do the job perfectly, so everything else gets sacrificed to this. This is *surrendering* to the belief: it is believed completely and is simply allowed to take over, regardless of how bothersome it is to me.

On the other hand, I may begin by making some sort of an effort, but if I get too anxious and it feels just too overwhelming, I may just pretend I don't really care and not study. I may *escape*. Then when I get a grade of 'C', I just say to myself, I don't really care, I only got this grade because I didn't work. I may not even show up to take the exam, and this way my self esteem is protected at least a little bit,

because I can say to myself that the only reason I didn't succeed is because I didn't try, and this at least hold out the theoretical possibility that I might be able to do it perfectly at some other time. Again, there are obvious consequences to this approach that mean that it is not at all a successful way to cope within the schema, though it may allow us some very short term relief from the anxiety.

Lastly, I can *counterattack*. I can go completely in the opposite direction, by say, becoming a rebel. I may become involved with drugs and alcohol, and different social groups that happen to be exactly those that our parents are most afraid and critical of, people who don't care about how well I do at school. This strategy can actually become quite extreme, and can land us in very difficult situations. I am not saying here that all rebellions are necessarily of this kind, but that we need to look to see if this is an attempt to come to grips with an overweening core belief that is fundamentally – though often not fully consciously - still believed, but is not being addressed head on.

With **all** these three typical approaches, we need to point out that they are responses to the core belief that allow it to continue, that even *strengthens* it: in short it is still controlling us. We are accepting its premise: that our self esteem depends on doing things perfectly, and that it is even possible to do things perfectly at all. This is not disputed; all that remains is to find a way to live with it, especially as we only vaguely know its effect on us and as a result, without being aware of it, *we keep the core belief going*.

So if we can't surrender, escape or counterattack without significant and often negative, consequences, what is left to us?

Part of the answer lies in ground we have already covered, and part lies in later chapters. Turning first to ground we have already covered, we should note that beliefs about ourselves are views of the world that can be disputed with the facts. They are often also unconscious, or partly so. So a great deal can be gained by simply uncovering this structure that has been triggered from time to time, and seeing how it takes over and what effects it typically has. Often just this awareness can be sufficient to start the process of naming and disputing the core beliefs.

Once a core belief is "activated", the individual finds it easy, even obvious, to find and believe evidence that supports it, and correspondingly discount, ignore or simply doesn't believe evidence that tends to refute it. One of the main steps we can take here is to begin to see - better yet write down - the evidence against my beliefs that I have been minimizing or distorting, and see how this has played a role in keeping these ideas in place and unchallenged, *feeling* true, even if they're substantially not.

In our current example, the core beliefs include the belief that my self worth comes exclusively from external success and that in order to feel good about myself, I need to do everything perfectly. Hopefully, if you have done some of the work so far, you will see some ways that we can start to



challenge these ideas, which might include writing down the advantages and disadvantages of holding these ideas, and asking whether it is true that all success tends to come from outside of us, and via social recognition. Are there other kinds? What after all is most important to you?

A lot of the most important work has been done simply by being able to see that this belief has been operating in my life with certain kinds of deleterious effects, and now that this has become clear to me, it give me a better understanding and some more choices as to what I can do when these familiar patterns rear their heads. Core beliefs are stubborn and tend to “hold on for their lives”, they want to preserve themselves; or more correctly, a part of us believes that we *must* believe them and behave in a certain fashion or in some way something bad will happen to us, so a good place to start is precisely by disputing this assumption.

As you might imagine, this is not a once and for all exercise, it is the beginning of a process. Compared to automatic thoughts, core beliefs are more deeply held and believed, and will take correspondingly longer to move. As with all the work ideas set forth in this book, I always tell people that the more you practice, the better you get at these various skills. You can begin to nip negative thoughts in the bud quicker and quicker as they begin to arise, and if they are not allowed to flower, so to speak, there will simply be much less disturbance.

It’s like going to the gym to get fit. One trip to the gym will certainly made us feel better, but unless we follow it up with regular visits, we will fall back into old habits sooner or later. We don’t need to become perfectionist about this work, but if we are able to maintain a regular and consistent practice, whether it be doing these exercises or going to the gym, we will become increasingly mentally and physically fit. As I often tell clients, this part of the work in particular is a marathon not a sprint, so you can calm down!

#### SELF-RATING

I would like to make one last observation before the end of this chapter concerning a very interesting point made by Dr. Albert Ellis that involves self-rating and self-evaluation, which obviously bear on almost all of our core beliefs. Certainly, it is our goal to identify overly broad and negative self-concepts and replace them with more realistic and positive ones, but Ellis asks us to consider a further point: *why self rate at all?*

He does not mean that we can’t or shouldn’t rate particular behaviors. I for one want to make sure that the surgeon who is operating on me is competent. Indeed we must rate behaviors, how we are doing at our jobs, as parents, and so on. But Ellis’ point is that a further and often subtle judgment often creeps in that may have no place in the situation. For example, “I didn’t prepare well enough for my exam, and I failed, so I’m a bad person.”

The first part of this statement may be quite correct. I failed because I didn't study enough, and I need to know this so I can study harder next time. But we so often add on the extra line that judges us globally, judges the whole of us as a person based on doing well or not well at this or that task.

But surely, Ellis maintains, this is illegitimate. We are complex beings with many aspects, and maybe we simply can't capture our essence in any one – or more - activity or result. So why do we even need to rate our whole selves, does it do us any good; is it helpful, does it give us any information?

Actually, what exactly are we rating, this rather vague entity called our self? What is this anyway, and what would qualify it as being absolutely good or bad?

Perhaps, Ellis suggests, we can do away with global self-rating of our selves completely. We continue of course to monitor our behaviors, but we don't also add on a judgment of this shadowy thing called our selves. When we realize that we don't *have* to do it, it can be a great relief. When we catch ourselves saying I'm a bad guy or a good guy, we can ask ourselves whether this actually is helpful, or not, and if not, simply see if we can stop it. We may not be able to so easily, of course, but we may nonetheless be able to see when this sort of mental activity is occurring and be more skeptical of its utility.

Instead, Ellis suggests (2000), we can say to ourselves "I do not have intrinsic worth or worthlessness, but merely aliveness. I'd better rate my traits and acts but not my totality or self. I fully accept myself in the sense that I know I have aliveness, and I choose to live and survive as happily as possible, and with minimum needless pain. I only require this knowledge and this choice and no other kind of self-rating."

## SUMMARY

Just because a belief *feels* completely true, as is often the case does not make it so; it takes patience to dispute and change it, and to begin to believe the new formulation. As Judith Beck puts it, core beliefs are "...usually global, over generalized and absolute." They are tenacious, and can feel like they are part of who we are, or we think so anyway, and can thus take some time to shift.

And be patient, these are ultimately just ideas, not unchangeable realities: *feelings are not facts*, as the saying goes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION

“[The degree of awareness and acceptance] we manifest determines the degree of spaciousness and freedom we can bring to life’s events. Imagine taking a very small glass of water and putting into it a teaspoon of salt. Because of the small size of the container, the teaspoon of salt is going to have a big effect on the water. However, if you approach a much larger body of water, such as a lake, and put into it the same teaspoonful of salt, it will not have the same intensity of impact, because of the vastness and openness of the vessel receiving it. Even when the salt remains the same, the spaciousness of the vessel receiving it changes everything.

We spend a lot of our lives looking for a feeling of safety or protection -- we try to alter the amount of salt that comes our way. Ironically, the salt is the very thing that we cannot do anything about, as life changes and offers us repeated ups and downs. Our true work is to create a container so immense that any amount of salt, even a truckload, can come into it without affecting our capacity to receive it.”

--Sharon Salzberg

#### MINDFULNESS

In our first two chapters, we began to examine our awareness of our thoughts and beliefs and how they might be affecting our moods. In this chapter, we extend this awareness even more broadly to encompass what is nowadays being called ‘mindfulness’, which is really developing awareness of the present moment in all aspects of our lives. The value of living in the present can be seen on many levels, but one of the main advantages is that doing so can help combat many problems such as anxiety and depression.

It is said that depression tends to involve thoughts and feelings about the past like sadness, regret and loss, often involving events that we can't change, whereas anxiety is more future oriented and is associated with worrying about what *might* happen, even it hasn't happened yet and may never happen - as Mark Twain famously said: "Most of the things I worried about in my life never happened."

Clearly then, the more we are living our lives in the present, the less we are preoccupied by thoughts, memories and projections of the past and future. Well, that in a word is mindfulness, to become more and more aware of what is going on in our lives as it is happening, as we are actually living our lives. Mindfulness can be defined as the "awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to things as they are" (Williams, et al, 2007). The term "nonjudgmental" is of particular importance, because it is the habit we have of judging our experience, telling ourselves it (or we) should or must be different, which sets us up to struggle with our experience.

We can become mindful of our present circumstances quite quickly by describing what is happening to ourselves, such "I am here, now, sitting in this chair, reading this workbook." This may seem obvious, but if we start to notice on a regular basis when we are present and when we aren't, it may come as a bit of a shock. We have all had the experience of getting in our car, or taking a ride on the subway, then looking up to find we've arrived. Somehow we got there without really paying all that much attention to what was going on around us; instead, we were probably up in our heads, thinking about the future, that meeting we are about to attend or worrying about some interaction that happened last week, or last year. And even when we make the effort to pay more attention in a mindful way, we may find ourselves drawn again and again into old ways of being and reveries – the pull of old habits can be very strong.

## AUTOMATIC PILOT

What mindfulness is designed to expose is our habitual tendency to do things automatically without thinking, to be on automatic pilot so to speak. This may not be a big problem if we are talking about brushing our teeth in the morning, but can really begin to affect us if we are experiencing recurrent patterns such as in relationships or with certain negative thoughts and feelings that we find ourselves in from time to time. Paying more attention, as we have started to do as we examine our thoughts and feelings and how they are related, can begin to slow things down a bit for us so we can see what is going on and how we got where we are. This can be especially important in depression for example, because we may ignore signs that our enjoyment of life has been slowly falling off, and then we are taken aback when we finally take stock that we have become depressed. The sooner we can be aware that our mood and thoughts are showing change like this, the sooner we can take steps to do something about it.

But being mindful is not just about addressing anxiety and depression more effectively, it is something that affects us all, it is about showing up for our lives and living more fully, both the pleasant and the unpleasant, it is all a part of life. The Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh explains mindfulness (or the lack of it) beautifully:

"There is a story in Zen circles about a man and a horse. The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, 'Where are you going?' and the first man replies, I don't know! Ask the horse!" This is also our story. We are riding a horse, we don't know where we are going, and we can't stop. The horse is our habit energy pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit. We struggle all the time, even during our sleep. We are at war within ourselves, and we can easily start a war with others.

We have to learn the art of stopping - stopping our thinking, our habit energies, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us. When an emotion rushes through us like a storm, we have no peace. We turn on the TV and then we turn it off. We pick up a book and then we put it down. How can we stop this state of agitation? How can we stop our fear, despair, anger, and craving? We can stop by practicing mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful smiling, and deep looking in order to understand. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy.

But our habit energies are often stronger than our volition. We say and do things we don't want to and afterwards we regret it. We make ourselves and others suffer, and we bring about a lot of damage. We may vow not to do it again, but we do it again. Why, because our habit energies push us.

We need the energy of mindfulness to recognize and be present with our habit energy in order to stop this course of destruction. With mindfulness, we have the capacity to recognize the habit energy every time it manifests. "Hello, my habit energy, I know you are there!" If we just smile to it, it will lose much of its strength. Mindfulness is the energy that allows us to recognize our habit energy and prevent it from dominating us.

Forgetfulness is the opposite. We drink a cup of tea, but do not know we are drinking a cup of tea. We sit with the person we love, but we don't know that she is there. We walk, but we are not really walking. We are someplace else, thinking about the past or the future. The horse of our habit energy is carrying us along, and we are its captive. We need to stop our horse and reclaim our liberty. We need to shine the light of mindfulness on everything we do, so the darkness of forgetfulness will disappear. The first function of meditation and mindfulness is to stop.

The second function of meditation and mindfulness is calming. When we have a

strong emotion, we know it can be dangerous to act, but we don't have the strength or clarity to refrain. We have to learn the art of breathing in and out, stopping our activities, and calming our emotions. We have to learn to become solid and stable like an oak tree, and not be blown from side to side by the storm."

## RAISIN EXERCISE

When mindfulness is being taught, it is important to realize that learning what mindfulness is about is not principally a conceptual exercise. Rather, mindfulness is very much about the *practice* of mindfulness, and traditionally this has been demonstrated by the so-called raisin exercise.

Take a raisin, slowly and deliberately look at it, and press it between your fingers. What does it feel like? What does it look like? Bring it up closely to your face for a better look, examine all the cracks and crevices and the colour(s). Then put it in your mouth. Slowly run your tongue over it, what does it taste like? What are the sensations you experience in your mouth as you taste the raisin and begin to gently chew, are they different depending on where the raisin is on your tongue, is there anything you notice that you haven't in the past when you ate a raisin?

Most people realize that they have tended to eat raisins - likely all food to some degree - in a relatively mind-less way compared to the richness of this exercise. The point of course, is to show that a very everyday occurrence like eating a raisin can hold much more for us if we pay attention, rather than rushing through our eating in a hasty and automatic way; perhaps it may turn out, very much like we conduct the rest of our busy lives!

Whether or not we do this particular exercise right now, this gives us a flavor of what mindfulness is about: slowing down, noticing what is going on, both inside with our thoughts, feelings and sensations, and outside in our interactions with those around us, and most important, what we may have been missing. The main point to emphasize is paying attention non-judgmentally, accepting and allowing what is coming up for us, without trying to dismiss it or get rid of it, but more in the spirit of being curious and wondering what is going on. After all, whatever is going on inside us is part of us too!

## MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE

So from our discussion of automatic thoughts, and the disturbances we see that they can create in our moods and lives, to their origins in our core beliefs, and then to the practice of mindfulness, we might note that in some sense all of these approaches actually come down to one: *learning some new responses to what is going on in our minds and experience.*

In other words, we are not here trying principally to control our inner experience or other people, though sometimes this sort of control is appropriate (if you are a teacher in charge of a classroom, for example), but often all we really have control over is our response to events.

At this point our inquiry into our mind and our response to our experience effortlessly shades into the ancient practice of meditation. What do we imagine all these Far Eastern meditators are up to as they sit cross-legged by the hour? I believe they are learning an even deeper method to minimize their responses and their reactivity to their experience; a more settled and focused form of mindfulness if you will.

There is a metaphor commonly used in Eastern thought when describing the process of meditation. Imagine as you become a bit quieter and close your eyes that your thoughts and feelings are like clouds in the sky, and that if you watch and observe them come into view, cross your view and then leave your view, that there is no real need to react to them at all. That impulse we have to “do something” in response to particular thoughts and feelings can be very strong, but we can teach ourselves to allow whatever is there to simply be there - we don’t try to encourage any particular thoughts or feelings, not do we reject any.

The more we do this, the more we learn not to react so much to our internal experience. We learn in fact, that we have a choice. If the thought comes up, “This meditation is the dumbest most boring thing I’ve ever done, I’m uncomfortable, and I want to get up and leave...now.” We can watch this thought, and realize, though it may be hard, that we do not have to do anything about this thought, we can simply witness it, observe it. We don’t deny it or avoid it, in fact we are doing exactly the opposite of avoiding - we are allowing it completely without resistance. What is different is that our normal impulse (i.e. that since I am uncomfortable I usually automatically get up or change my position), is not acted on.

Something interesting can then begin to be seen. If I don’t react to particular thoughts and images, they seem to lose some, or even all of their power over time. *It seems as if reacting to the thoughts is itself the fuel that powers the belief.* If I strongly react to a thought and get pulled into it, it seems to gain strength and ends up lasting longer than if I simply allowed it to be. That which is paid attention to grows in importance; by contrast, that which is not strongly reacted to begins to lose its power over time.

If the thought, “I’m a failure,” crosses my mind in the midst of meditation, I may react to it by thinking, “Oh my God, I know I am, this is terrible. I’ve been feeling this way forever it seems, what’s wrong with me, I can’t believe I can’t get rid of this feeling, I shouldn’t have it!” As you can imagine, this strong negative reaction to these thoughts tend to bring them into stronger relief, and create an internal disturbance above and beyond the initial thoughts themselves, and this tends to prolong and exaggerate the process. It may go on for quite a while in fact, and I think we have all had this

experience of internal struggle with our experience, and we will do this in more detail in the next chapter. On the other hand, if we just notice the thought, and perhaps simply label it as a thought, we can watch it come into awareness, then watch it leave as well without further ado.

We can begin to see this as an alternative way to deal with a disturbing thought such as the “I am a failure” thought. One approach is to dispute the thought/belief as in the first two chapters, and here we have another way of approaching the thought – to learn to leave it alone, and not pay so much attention to it. We will go into this way of looking at things in more detail in the next chapter under the section on “Defusion.”

## HOW TO MEDITATE

For a more formal sitting meditation, it is good to pick a focus of concentration, and the breath is often recommended. Take a moment to notice your breathing, and see where your attention seems to naturally settle. Is it at your nostrils, as the air comes in and out, or alternatively watching your belly as it moves up and down with each inhalation and exhalation? Feel free to experiment a bit, take some time to see what feels most comfortable, and after a while make a choice and stick with it.

Find a comfortable place where you can be assured of as much quiet as possible. It is a good idea to choose a place you can use daily; it is better to meditate every day for only 5 minutes than once a week for an hour.

You can sit in a chair, or sit cross-legged. Either way, the important thing is to make sure that your back is straight. Not uncomfortably so, but not slumping either. Then close your eyes and begin to focus on your chosen object. If it is the breath at your nostrils, feel the sensation of the air coming in and out, if it is your belly, the feeling of your stomach expanding and contracting; it is the actual bodily sensation that is the object you are focused on, not the picture you have in your mind of the air coming in and out.

The first thing you will notice is that your mind will not stay on your breath. Almost immediately, your mind will go to what you have to do tomorrow before you have to pick up your son from school, the project that is due next Monday, or the argument you had with your mother last month. This is fine. When you become aware that your attention has drifted, gently bring it back again to the breath, and when you next become distracted, do the same thing again, 1,000 times if you need to, and you will!

It is important to understand that you are not doing the meditation ‘wrong’ if you find yourself constantly distracted, because the primary goal is simply to become aware of what is there without judgment, and if what is there is distraction, then we can allow that too. In fact, that is the usual state of the mind when we begin meditation, and even sometimes after long practice too, and is called in the East “monkey mind,” because the mind jumps around like a monkey from tree to tree.



This is the first lesson of meditation – this is what your mind is doing most of the time, you just haven't noticed it before! After a period of time, the mind will begin to settle down, and from time to time there will be periods when the constant thoughts are not so predominant, and then we can begin to experience corresponding periods of calm and peace. Using another common metaphor, our mind can be viewed like a pond where the mud has been stirred up; the only way to clear the pond is by letting it settle by itself, and if there is no interference, eventually the pond will become clear again.

Like exercise, the more consistently you meditate, the more results you will see, but as mentioned above, it is not just during formal sittings that we should remain mindful.

Experienced meditators can also begin to develop the capacity increasingly to observe their internal life without reacting to it. In a sense they become, if only for a while, an observer self that is witnessing events, rather than being identified with the particular content, this or that thought or feeling. In many ways this is mostly a matter of degree, where we can be more or less invested in our mind contents, or correspondingly more or less able to observe it without being pulled into it. When the observing self becomes very well established, however, a sort of non-reactivity to internal and external events occurs where all events are welcomed with open arms but none is attached to or rejected, and in spiritual literature this is often called the witness.

In a way, this observer becomes our self rather than our typical identification of the contents of our mind, and this is often accompanied by a greater sense of peace as we are not pulled and pushed about by every event in our lives and minds. I don't mean to suggest we trade in one identity for another; rather it is more that as I learn not to react to all those provocations that my mind throws at me, my mind settles down - I don't have to *do* anything to witness everything, I already am doing so effortlessly if I simply get out of my own way and let it happen.

#### DEVELOPING THE OBSERVER SELF

Usually when we think about who we are, we refer to what I will call the "*conceptualized self*," which is basically the self-image(s) we have of ourselves. We all have our own history of self-judgments and ideas about ourselves, which we might call our story. Often this is experienced as quite rigid and static and unchanging, such as when we tell ourselves "I'm such a loser," or perhaps "I'm better than everyone else." Our discussion of meditation and mindfulness has opened the door to the possibility of other ways of looking at ourselves, which ACT calls "*self as process*" and "*self as observer*."

Another way of describing ourselves is not so much in terms of our historical ideas and memories and self-images, but in terms of our actual present moment awareness, our feelings thoughts and experiences right now – "*self as process*." Unlike our conceptualized sense of self based on events in

the past that have long since occurred, this sense of ourselves is considerably more fluid, as current circumstances demonstrably continue to change from moment to moment. Living more from this sense of self, that is to say in the flow of the present, can be very healing and feel alive after a life of living feeling like one is chained to and defined by events and traumas from the past.

Unlike the conceptualized self and self as process, the “*observer self*” is not based on any categorizations of oneself, it is more like seeing from the point of view that sees both the other types of self, as well as everything else, without being defined by what is going on. If you have been able to engage in some meditation, then you will perhaps have seen that allowing all events (including ideas about oneself) to occur without reacting (or even if reacting, being able to allow that too) is really a description of what the observer self is. We saw that we could allow all experiences, whether internal or external, to arise without judgment, whether they be pleasant memories or more aversive thoughts: all could be permitted to arise, seen just as thoughts, and with practice not attached to or identified with.

Hayes and Smith (2005) suggest the following exercise to help understand what we mean by the observer self. Go back in time to an early memory, any will do. See if you can connect for a few moments with what it was like looking out from the eyes of that younger person in the memory. Then ask who is it who is reading this book? Even though your body has changed considerably in the meantime, is the answer any different from the answer to the first question?

The observer self can also be of great therapeutic importance, as we shall return to, because it is a point of view that is always available to us that can allow us to experience difficult feelings without getting too pulled in - after all the observer point of view doesn't change, only the contents of experience do!

## SUMMARY

This chapter introduces us to two new ideas: meditation and mindfulness. Mindfulness is simply the practice of being aware and paying attention to my inner and outer worlds throughout the day, and meditation is a more “concentrated” version of mindfulness in the sense that we sit down for a short time each day and do nothing but practice mindfulness of breathing. These practices are complementary to the CBT techniques we already introduced, and seem to be concerned with similar goals – to allow us some space and objectivity from the contents of our own minds. We now turn to discuss acceptance in the next chapter in a more comprehensive way, though elements of acceptance have already appeared in our discussion of mindfulness and meditation; in fact they are a sort of bridge between awareness and acceptance and we will also find that having developed our ongoing mindfulness will be a very useful, indeed critical, part of acceptance.

## ACCEPTANCE

*What is acceptance? It is being willing to see what we are in reality without wanting to become something else. I repeat, Acceptance is being willing to see what we are in reality without wanting to become something else. Simply calm down so that you can accept a situation that may be painful. Do not go into an inner struggle with part of yourself. Struggle only divides you and leads to inner blockage. Instead, let go of your struggles and accept the reality of your life without tension or any effort to fight. Remember to be kind and patient with yourself, which is the natural spontaneity of all human beings. Fears and other problems are unnatural and unnecessary. The good news is that you can let go of your individual fears and other problems one by one. You do not need to try to become perfect all at once, and should not try to do so because the struggle to be irreproachable will divide, rather than integrate."*

From "Feeling Good, The Science of Well-Being" by C. Robert Cloninger

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ACCEPTANCE AND DEFUSION

Why all this talk of acceptance? Surely I have come into therapy or am reading a book like this because I want to *change* my bad feelings, behaviors and negative thoughts, not welcome them, that's the whole point, right?

I think an answer to this question might be a little different in the case of either feelings or thoughts. As we have seen, cognitive therapy entails becoming aware of our thoughts and then actively disputing them (the “D” in the ABCDE process), so this would not be a simple case of acceptance. However, there is an alternative view of what to do with our disturbing thoughts that comes from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) which suggests that another way to deal with thoughts is to learn to *disengage from them* and not to pay them so much attention, and we will go into this in more depth shortly.

#### EMOTIONS

Acceptance is defined by Hayes and colleagues (2012) as the “voluntary adoption of an intentionally open, receptive, flexible, and nonjudgmental posture with respect to moment-to-moment experience.” We can see the parallels with mindfulness here, and acceptance is also “supported by a willingness to make contact with distressing private experiences” such as negative feelings. So with respect to emotions, this involves accepting and experiencing our feelings rather than, say, trying to avoid or suppress them. We may be able to change our mood and emotions in time through cognitive therapy; however, whenever an emotion, sensation or feeling arises, the advice, as David Barlow and colleagues put it (2008), is that the more we are in contact with our emotions and feel them without trying to push them away or hold onto them, the more we will be able to see that we can handle them and that they actually come and go, and we survive – they are never permanent! To be sure, emotions do not always “feel good” but if we avoid our feelings, they only tend to become bigger and bigger in our mind until they can seem intolerable and completely overwhelming. We will go into this important process in more detail later on in the chapter on avoidance.

On the other hand, allowing ourselves to feel exactly what we are feeling, perhaps with a trusted friend or therapist where appropriate, can allow us to begin to process and understand the emotion. Anger may not just be some burst of energy that I feel uncomfortable about, it may be telling me something important I need to know, about an intimate relationship for example.

And as Barlow points out, accepting emotions does not equate to accepting a situation or threatening environment - acceptance does not necessarily mean approval. Indeed, getting in touch with sadness or fear may be clearly telling me I need to remove myself from a particular circumstance, an unsatisfying job or a difficult relationship, and if I am avoiding these feelings, it may remove a critical source of information and motivation.

## ACT

It is also true that not accepting our feelings and mood can have a more subtle effect on us as our lives tend to become more restricted when we try to minimize or avoid our inner states. To illustrate this ACT suggests doing the following exercise:

Make a list of some of the painful and difficult issues you experience in your life, and then using some of these issues you have just identified, fill in the blank lines of this exercise:

1. If \_\_\_\_\_ weren't such a problem, then I would

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2. If I didn't have \_\_\_\_\_ then I would

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To give you some ideas, this is how the exercise could be done:

1. If \_\_\_\_\_ **My Anger** \_\_\_\_\_ weren't such a problem, then I would have  
\_\_\_\_\_ **Closer Relationships** \_\_\_\_\_

2. If I didn't have \_\_\_\_\_ **So much anxiety** \_\_\_\_\_ then I would \_\_\_\_\_ **Have more friends** \_\_\_\_\_

As Steven Hayes says (2004) of this exercise: “You have just discovered that all your problems provide you with two sources of pain. It is not just your anxiety or depression that creates pain. Your pain is also holding you back from living the life you want to lead. There are activities you would be engaged in if it weren’t for your pain and the role it plays in your life.”

Often (including when we are in therapy), we act on the assumption that only when I have sorted out my social anxiety (for example) will it be possible for me to become more social, and not before. If I can solve my problem then I can really start to live my life, but probably not before. This chapter is about starting to think of this in a different way. Can we start to move towards the life we desire even though all our problems have yet to be resolved, and if so, how?

One of the answers is acceptance as we have discussed - if I accept what is already going on, even if it is unpleasant, then I am less likely to be spending a lot of time struggling with myself trying to change the feeling or berating myself for having it. Not only does this strategy usually not work, but it simply deepens our distress and sense of frustration and being stuck.

## DEFUSION

Another answer ACT gives us is that we can learn to “defuse” from the negative thoughts which might tend to block our progress. A useful way to look at defusion is as an extension of what Aaron Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, called “cognitive distancing,” which turns out to be one of the things we have been developing so far in this workbook. It involves utilizing the “observer” point of view that our practice of mindfulness and meditation can assist us in developing.

One of the things you may have noticed as we started to become aware of our thoughts and the effects they are having on us, and then how the generation of these thoughts comes from deeper beliefs about ourselves, is that we are in some way stepping back, bit-by-bit, from our minds simply by becoming more aware of the contents of our minds – observing what is going on rather than completely believing in and being hooked by what is happening. Previously we might have felt completely and utterly bound up in whatever we were thinking as the complete and total truth of the matter, about which no choice was even conceivable: this just seems to be the way it is, no matter how badly we feel. We can give ourselves more space by stepping back mentally, and this is the phenomenon of “cognitive distancing” which we will take this further in this chapter through the ACT concept of defusion.

What is it about thoughts that make us believe them so readily? It seems that we think they are true solely by virtue of them having been thought by us, and even after we have begun to see that they may not be wholly reliable (to say the least), we still tend to automatically believe what we think to be the truth. The reason for this, in short, is that our minds act as a kind of virtual reality machine (Hayes & Smith, 2005).

Here is an example of what I mean: suppose all the doors and windows in the room you are in right now were locked. How would you get out? Watch what your mind does. As you arrive at some options, you are dealing with real events in a symbolic manner. You are relating to thoughts as if you were manipulating the actual objects to which they refer. This is part of the utility of language that we don't have to try out the various options for escape in reality; we can try them out in our imagination.

Problems arise when this extremely useful evolutionary ability to use our mind in these kinds of ways gets taken to extremes and applied indiscriminately. Cognitive *fusion* applies to the tendency to treat our thoughts as if they are what they appear to be, rather than symbolic stand-ins.

Remember what Ellis said about self-rating? It applies here too. Cognitive fusion and the ability to imagine options and scenarios are very useful when we want to make our escape from the room, but backfire on us when we say, "I'm not good." In these cases we are identifying with and totally defined by the judgment, as if you are in fact your idea of yourself, and a bad one at that!

In the same way, since much of our thoughts are in the form of judgments, as you will likely already have discovered, we may begin to judge virtual events in our minds and confusing them with real events. For example, we may be worried about attending a social event tonight. We may think we will make a fool out of ourselves and that it will go badly. We may have a very clear image of being tongue tied and humiliated in front of others, and begin to feel genuinely anxious and embarrassed...except the event has yet to occur! In truth we don't know how it will go tonight. If the past is anything to go by, it may go quite well, or it may be a bit disappointing, but one thing is for sure, we can't predict the outcome right now (Fortune Telling), yet it feels as if we can, and the point is, we may end up not going out tonight to avoid the pain of this *imagined* scenario.

So if we as humans have a tendency to "fuse" with our thoughts, to identify with them, what can we do to begin this process of disengagement, of cognitive distancing? Hayes calls this process cognitive *defusion*, and there are numerous techniques (including mindfulness and meditation) to address the issue, with the aim being to loosen the hold these thoughts and beliefs have on us.

#### HAVING A THOUGHT RATHER THAN BUYING A THOUGHT

Of course we are having thoughts all the time, this is what minds do, and we are not trying to stop this process, as if we could! We are trying to see the thought in a new way, more looking *at* the thought (observer), than *from* the thought (stuck in the middle of it) - or noticing we are *having* a thought versus *really believing* it is the literal truth.

A famous defusion exercise involves writing down a thought, preferably one that has been bothering you, such as “I’m a failure.” Say this out loud to yourself...how does it make you feel? Likely not to good, because if we say it in this form, which is what many of our thoughts are like, then we believe it. Language and the way we think can bewitch us in this way.

But what happens if instead you say “I’m having the thoughts that “I’m a failure.” How does that feel? Usually there is a little bit more distance and it likely affects us less. This is because we can see that it is just words and thoughts rather than literal truth, this is the meaning of taking the observer position with our thoughts, of looking at rather than from thoughts. We don’t usually notice that at their core, words and thoughts are just pictures, sounds and sensations, but we take them *literally*.

As we practice the skills of taking the observer position with any aspect of our internal life, not just thoughts, we are beginning to get some distance from our thoughts by clearly distinguishing a thought or image *about* something from the thing itself – thoughts and images are simply not real in the same way, though it can feel like it sometimes. This skill – because that is what we develop through practice – can be of great help especially when we are experiencing difficult thoughts and ideas. Knowing that thoughts are just thoughts and not reality can make all the difference and give us some space around what we have believed, sometimes for our whole lives. We can simply allow them to happen, observing them, without getting pulled in and engaged with them. It is simple but not easy, but very much worth returning to and practicing in our everyday lives.

#### LEAVES ON A STREAM

There are actually many ways to develop this ability to observe and not be so pulled in by our difficult inner thoughts. A popular exercise is to imagine a beautiful slow moving stream. Perhaps it is up in the mountains, and there are rocks and eddies and pools. Every now and then, a leaf drops into the stream and slowly gets taken away. Every time a thought or image pops into your head, imagine that it is written on a leaf, and slowly gets taken downstream. The goal is to stay beside the stream and allow the leaves to keep flowing by, without trying to speed it up or slow it down. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the stream. Do this for at least 5 minutes, as it is a very effective way of showing you how your disturbing thoughts can be defused, at least for a while.

There are many ways to defuse from our thoughts, and you can begin to make up your own and see what works best for you when you notice you are having difficult experiences. Follow the “Resources,” under the ACT section at the end of the workbook for more exercises.

#### DEFUSION OR DISPUTATION?

Returning briefly to the “D” in our ABCDE process, now that we know about defusing from our thoughts, when should I dispute them and when should I defuse from them? The short answer is



that sometimes one approach works better, and sometimes the other, and we can find what works best for us, and in what situations. You might find for example, that disputing the thought/belief “I am having a heart attack” during a panic attack is best approached by looking at the truth of it by examine the evidence – disputing it. When we have consulted our Doctor, for example, and looked at other evidence, we are disabused of the notion that we are having heart trouble because we have misinterpreted the fast beating of our heart, and now understand that the truth of the matter is that we are having a panic attack. Highly unpleasant to be sure, but thankfully not life threatening.

On the other hand, if I have recurrent thoughts of being unworthy that get triggered in certain situations, a family gathering for instance, it may be more effective to deal with this by not engaging with it, not disputing the contents, but instead saying to yourself, “there goes my story again, it’s the same old stuff, I don’t need to get pulled into it”, and leave it alone. We are not always able to do this every time of course, and practice is important, but we can experiment with what works for us, the key is being aware of what is happening so you have a choice in how to deal with it.

#### MINDFULNESS BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY (MBCT)

Another contemporary approach that, like ACT, stresses acceptance and “allowing” in our relationship to our experience is MBCT. In their book *The Mindful Way Through Depression*, Mark Williams and colleagues tells us that “At the earliest stages in which mood starts to spiral downwards it is not the mood that does the damage, but how we react to it, and it is our habitual efforts to extricate ourselves which, far from freeing us, that actually keeps us locked in the pain we’re trying to escape.” Through the practices of mindfulness, meditation and compassion (which will be addressed in the next chapter), we can begin to be a bit more gentle and accepting with ourselves.

According to Williams, the source of our harshness with ourselves and our experience comes from the way our brains are structured. Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety are meant to be uncomfortable, to get our attention. “The signals are exquisitely designed to push us to act, to do something to rectify the situation.” Our ancestors would not have survived long if they did not react quickly and automatically when faced with a hungry wild animal on the plains of Africa; similarly, we react without thinking when we see a child of ours playing in the street, and so we should.

However, it is not coincidental that the examples I have used are of appropriate reactions to threats which are external, outside of us. But what of internal threats, threats such as the fear of panic or depression, or feeling worthless, how does the brain react to these, which can seem just as scary and in need of a quick fix as any external threat? It turns out that typically, the brain does not distinguish between internal and external threats, so when we notice that our mood has changed, that we’re feeling a bit more hopeless or helpless, or a bit more panicky, the mind will get out the same tool box it uses for any other problem, and it will try to figure it out.

But is this the best way forward with feelings and emotions? Obviously we can't run away from our fear and sadness like we would a saber tooth tiger, "nor can we eliminate unpleasant, oppressive, and threatening thoughts and feelings by fighting them and trying to annihilate them." The brain circuitry so beautifully and effectively designed to avoid threats in the outside world does not seem so well suited to internal threats, even though the same internal apparatus, the "fight or flight" response has been activated, which leaves us with a clear dilemma.

There may be a particular feeling that we don't like and want to get rid of it, except that our usual way of doing so, to fight it or escape from it, does not really apply to our own inner life. Moreover, this problem can be further complicated if we have a history of the kinds of unpleasant feelings and emotions and thoughts that are arising, because they may remind us of past episodes of depression or anxiety and reawaken past feelings of inadequacy or deficiency without us realizing it.

And to echo the example given earlier in the chapter relating to the locked room and trying to figure a way out, this is pretty much what we attempt to do with negative internal states. In short, we begin to struggle with our experience; we feel we shouldn't be feeling this way, and that there must be something wrong with us not only for feeling the way we do, but also for constantly not being able to figure it out, to master it. This can have the effect of making what might simply be, for example, a passing feeling of loneliness into more of a state or situation or judgment of unworthiness that desperately needs to be changed, which is exactly what we cannot seem to accomplish! We can end up in the "self-focused, self-critical frame of mind" known as *rumination*, trying but failing to "think our way out of our moods by working out what's gone wrong."

Fortunately, there is a way out as Williams and Teasdale tell us: "Evolution has bequeathed us an alternative to critical thinking, and we humans have only just begun to realize its power to transform us. It is called awareness."

What CBT, MBCT and ACT are telling us is that it is often not the feeling or event itself that is the problem, but our reaction to it, often based on past bad experiences that may not be relevant in this moment. For example, allowing a present feeling of sadness or loneliness arise without judgment may allow us to see that it is just that, a temporary feeling that can thus be allowed to naturally arise and fall and be simply observed without judgment, rather than beginning a futile attempt at rumination and control of the emotion that feeds a process of struggle and conflict with ourselves which we cannot win.

As alluded to above, ACT is very clear that therapy and growth are not just about lessening the effects of painful thoughts and experiences, but are also – and perhaps more importantly – in the service of living a more vital and engaged life. We will get into this area of values and action in more detail in the last section.

## SUMMARY

We have come a long way from our first example of the person who became anxious in the plane. We discovered that it was not the turbulence that was causing his anxiety, but his *thoughts* about the turbulence. We were then able to see that a good portion of our moods was caused by our thinking patterns, and these in turn were often reflections of our core beliefs. We outlined a number of exercises aimed at disputing and challenging these thoughts and beliefs. In this chapter, we adopted a different tack. Though we are still going on the assumption that our thoughts are often causing our distress, we saw that paradoxical interventions, such as letting the feelings and thoughts be and not resisting them, could also end up defusing their power over us, and allow us to shift out of feeling stuck and overwhelmed. In short, we are moving towards allowing ourselves to be mindful and accepting no matter how upsetting the contents may be at any particular point.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### COMPASSION AND FORGIVENESS

Compassion is a kind of healing agent which helps us to tolerate the hurt of seeing the truth. The function of compassion in the work is not to reduce hurt; its function is to lead to the truth. Much of the time, the truth is painful or scary. Compassion makes it possible to tolerate that hurt and fear. It is on the side of truth, and helps us to persist in our search for truth. The truth will ultimately dissolve the hurt, but this is a by-product. In fact, it is only when compassion is present that people will allow themselves to see the truth. Where there is no compassion there is no trust.

*A. H. Almaas, Diamond Heart Book 2*

As we have taken our tour through Cognitive therapy, our core beliefs and on to the “allowing” approach of ACT, MBCT and meditation and mindfulness, one way to sum up where this has brought us is that we are developing an increasing capacity *to be exactly where we are*. Needless to say, this mindfulness and acceptance is considerably easier when we are experiencing happiness, love and pleasure than when we are experiencing states such as loneliness and grief, or anger or fear. This chapter is all about how compassion and loving-kindness can help us to stay with strong negative feelings and the self-blame that often accompanies them.

When I was writing this workbook, I found for the most part that it flowed fairly easily, with one exception, this chapter. Why was this I wondered, and after reflecting on this question for a while I believe the answer has to do with the general orientation of our culture towards gaining (or attempting to gain) self-worth through individual achievement. Even with the increasing emphasis on allowing, it is not hard to look at the various exercises and meditations in this book as goals to be attained and skills to be mastered; in other words, we can get good at them (or not), and when we’ve worked hard and things improve, we can feel we *deserve* our success (and even then it may still be hard to accept our success, but in any event certainly not before!).

Sure enough, I noticed that as I was writing this chapter, that there was a little voice that kept telling me that compassion and kindness to myself was just fine (probably), provided I had “earned” it, and not until then. It was just plain hard to feel kind and compassionate towards myself, it somehow didn’t feel quite right. There are a couple of reasons for this: First, it is usually not OK to feel feelings such as loneliness and fear; not only are they inherently unpleasant feelings of course, but we also

often feel there is something wrong with us for feeling this way, and our minds immediately swoop in to figure it out and change it - our inclination is not to be accepting and compassionate. Second, there is a strong tendency to accept ourselves only on a conditional basis. We think that if we achieve this or that, then we will be OK, then we will be happy. This takes us out of where we are because it's not OK to be there, we are not enough, but if we work hard enough then maybe at some point in the future we'll be enough and we'll (hopefully) be acceptable to ourselves and others.

Take a moment and ask yourself if you are completely accepting of yourself right now, see if you believe that you are OK just as you are. If not, ask yourself what you would need to do to feel good about yourself? If you are like most of us, there is a feeling, which can be very strong, that certain work needs to be done and goals achieved before total acceptance is justified. It is just not possible to accept ourselves unconditionally right now, which can set us up for feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction, as we are never quite comfortable with ourselves, and this is where the practices of compassion and loving kindness can be very helpful and freeing.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines compassion as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." We agree with this approach, though would extend that compassion to ourselves as well. Pema Chodron thinks of compassion and gentleness towards ourselves in an even more down-to-earth way: "It's like a mother reuniting with her child; having been lost to each other for a long, long time, they reunite."

When we approach our inner life in this way, with acceptance, gentleness and non-judgmentalism, we can see that this contrasts with how we usually see our negative feelings, which is in an adversarial way. We don't want them, we don't like them and we want to get rid of them! But strong feelings exist, they are meant to exist, and acknowledging and feeling them does not mean we have to act them out or express them. In fact, studies have shown that regular venting of anger can lead to increasing anger in one's life, due to this easy expression. We do not have a choice as to whether a particular emotion appears to us, but we do have a choice about what to do with it that will vary from situation to situation. While regular indiscriminate expression of anger may not be helpful or healthy, anger can also help us stand up for ourselves when we might otherwise be inclined to be compliant when this is not in our best interests. Fear and anxiety give us signals necessary to survive, and grief can be a healthy and necessary part of healing when we have experienced loss. This doesn't make them any easier to bear though, and we often end up struggling with ourselves. In fact, the loss of compassion may often be related to the difficulty we have in experiencing our own hurt and pain, and paradoxically, when we are able to do this, even a little, compassion for ourselves can begin to flow in naturally.

So one of the most compassionate things we can do is give ourselves permission to feel whatever emotions we have without judging ourselves. After all, the feelings are already there, we are not creating them by noticing them and not denying them, which can take a toll in inner struggle. Actually, when we judge ourselves harshly for how we're feeling, what or who is it that is doing the judging? Our egos believe they know what is best for us and we have been trying to live by its ideals

and aims. But hasn't this gotten us to where we are right now, feeling stuck and at odds with ourselves?

Maybe we need to suspend the incessant agitation of our old conditioning to allow us to take a fresh look at what is actually happening to us right now, to understand it in a new way. As A. H. Almaas puts it: "The problem here is not that you want to change but do not change. The problem is that you are not allowing the change because you want it in a certain way." If through gentleness and compassionate non-judgmental awareness we can increasingly allow our feelings and inner process to unfold *in its own way*, we may find new ways out of old dilemmas: we may even begin to realize that the goal is not in fact to "change" anything at all, but to simply be curious and understand – but this will not happen if we believe we already "know" what is best for us, even if this has not worked for us for as long as we can remember!

## LOVING KINDNESS

In her book *"Loving Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness"*, Sharon Salzberg distinguishes between love as sentimentality and love as passion. Passion is "enmeshed in feelings of desire, or of owning and possessing. Passion gets entangled with needing things to be a certain way, with having our expectations met" while sentimentality "is a facsimile of caring that limits itself only to experiences of pleasure." Loving-kindness on the other hand, is "unconditional, open and unobstructed." While compassion is sympathetic awareness of the suffering of others, and ourselves, Tulku Thondup defines loving kindness as "the thought of wishing joy for all beings and the whole universe – without limits and conditions – and putting that wish into practice." Typically, for the reasons already discussed, we often find it just as hard to wish ourselves to be happy and joyful as we do to accept our negative emotions without resistance.

The Buddhist tradition has a special place for the development of loving-kindness, which can be deepened by practice; no matter how hard and dry it can seem to us when we begin. Jack Kornfield in his book *"A Path with Heart"* sets out the ancient practice of *metta* or loving-kindness. Like the other meditative practices outlined in this book, it is best to choose a regular time in a quiet place each day during which to do this meditation, for, perhaps 20 minutes or so. If this is done regularly it can have tremendous affect on both the person herself and her relations with those around her, especially those she might be angry with or resentful of.

Think of a time when you felt really loved and appreciated. It can be from your childhood, perhaps from your mother, but it can be more recent, or anytime at all. It doesn't have to be a big event you are recalling, and the memory can involve anyone/thing at all, such as a beloved pet. Summon up how this felt, emotionally, and feel it in your body and make it as vivid as possible. This may be difficult to begin with, but persist, the more you do this practice, the easier it will get. Then direct this feeling towards yourself, and recite the following inwardly:

*May I be filled with loving-kindness*

*May I be well*

*May I be peaceful and at ease*

*May I be happy*

Recite the phrases again and again, letting the feelings permeate your body and mind. When you feel ready – which may not be for several sessions, begin expanding the focus of your loving-kindness to others. Begin with a friend, and repeat the phrases above, saying to yourself, *May s/he be filled with loving-kindness*, and so on.

When you feel ready, extend the practice next to someone who you regard neutrally, such as a work colleague, someone who may feel indifferent towards. Next, when you feel ready to do so, see if you can extend it to someone who you don't like so much, even someone who you may dislike, or worse. Then see if you can visualize together all the people you've included so far in the meditation, including yourself, imagining extending loving kindness to them all at the same time. Lastly, expand your loving kindness from this small group to your community, then your country, the world and the Universe itself, wishing the best for all beings.

It goes without saying that all or part of this may be very difficult, certainly to begin with. Nothing should be forced here, just do your best, and you may be surprised by how you feel if you are able to stick with this practice for a few weeks, or even decide to make it a permanent part of your spiritual life.

## FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a tricky subject. Should – or can - a victim really forgive his abuser, his tormentor? The answer I always give my clients is there is no need or requirement that a person who has been victimized should or must forgive their oppressor. In fact, the acts of anger, defiance and separation are often an important part of regaining a sense of strength and capability after a history of powerlessness.

At some point, however, many people, whatever the precise nature of the wrongs that have been visited upon them, can begin to feel that a part of them remains in a sort of bondage to their earlier experiences, and wish to find a way of freeing themselves from this attachment. For example, as Salzberg points out, "When our minds are full of anger and hatred towards others, in fact we are the ones who are actually suffering, caught in this mind state." In this event, forgiveness may be an appropriate choice for some, because "When we are held prisoner by our own past actions or the actions of others, our present life cannot be fully lived."

So Salzberg suggests a forgiveness meditation, which can be done daily, like our other meditations in a quiet place for 20 minutes or so. She emphasizes that any forgiveness aimed at here under no circumstances condones or excuses unjust or cruel behavior; perpetrators must continue to be held accountable. What is being suggested here is an internal process voluntarily chosen to allow a person to free himself or herself to live a fuller life.

The reflection is done in three parts: asking forgiveness from those you have harmed, offering forgiveness to those who have harmed you, and offering forgiveness to yourself. Like our previous meditation, begin to recite inwardly:

*If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask their forgiveness.*

Different thoughts feeling and memories of particular people and situations may come up, and if so, release the burden of guilt and ask for forgiveness, *I ask for your forgiveness*. Then if, and only if you feel comfortable to do so, move on and recite the words:

*If anyone has hurt or harmed me knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive them.*

There may be resistance to this, inwardly, and nothing at all may happen. That is fine. As Salzberg puts it, this is about “honoring the great force of intention in our minds” and “paying respects to our ultimate ability to let go and begin again...asserting the human heart’s capacity to change and grow and love.”

Finally, if and when we are ready, we can say to ourselves:

*For all the ways I have hurt or harmed myself, knowingly or unknowingly, I offer forgiveness.*

This can apply to ways we have been unnecessarily hard on ourselves or not lived up to our potential or harmed ourselves through behaviors such as addictions. Take your time - part of being compassionate towards ourselves is to realize we can’t figure it all out right now and that we are doing the best we can. The virtue of patience can be seen in this context; the material we are addressing here will likely have been with us for a while, and we can’t expect it to dissolve overnight!



# ACTION

“Move a muscle...change a thought”

Twelve Step saying

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONTROL AND EXPERIENTIAL AVOIDANCE

We can look at the goals of this workbook in a twofold way, the first is to assist us in reducing symptoms like anxiety and depression, which is likely the main reason any of us would come into therapy in the first place. However, there is another related but separate aim - we wish to live the life we have always wanted. But how do we identify what such a life might look like and what might be getting in the way of living it?

#### CONTROL

By “control” I simply mean the completely natural tendency to try to minimize or entirely avoid distressing situations or feelings. Avoidance and escape are deeply ingrained in us as humans. You may be familiar with the concept of the “fight or flight response” which was alluded to in our section on MBCT, and which refers to our evolutionarily determined predisposition to be vigilant about anything that is deemed – rightly or wrongly - a threat, and then to quickly take action, whether it be fighting or fleeing. Mostly we will be talking here about the “fleeing” aspect of dealing with threats, though it turns out (as we shall see) that even some forms of “fighting” can be ways to avoid how we are feeling, by being compulsively busy for example.

When we say we feel “out of control” this typically means that something is happening to us that we don’t like, and it is unpleasant and scary not to be able to do anything about it; conversely, the belief that I can do something about the circumstances usually makes me feel much more comfortable, I’m probably feeling a bit safer and more secure whether this sense is justified or not.

It’s true - control does seem to work very well in other areas of our lives. Remember in our Chapter 4 on acceptance the point was made that the mind can’t distinguish between internal and external threats and tends to use the same problem solving strategies in both cases? In general figuring things out and problem-solving work very well in the external world, whether it be by way of discovering cures for diseases or avoiding the potential threat of being mugged by bypassing dark alleyways at night. However, the mind takes the view that the same strategy will work with distressing thoughts and feelings as well, that in the same way that we can step out of the way of an oncoming car, we can perhaps do the same with uncomfortable internal experiences such as guilt or sadness. However, as we shall go into in more detail shortly, not only is this not the case, but avoidance of this kind can in fact make many problems worse.

Control is encouraged in our families and culture in many other ways as well. You may have been taught that you should be able to control your thoughts and feelings when you were growing up. For example a parent may have told you that it was not okay to be angry, or to cry (especially if you're a boy); after all, adults are able to control themselves, or it seemed that way when we were younger, so that can become our model of how to deal with feelings. And what does it mean when we call people "cool?" Maybe that they're not so affected by anything like these pesky feelings and vulnerabilities!

And possibly most important, sometimes escaping gives us immediate relief and thus seems to work. An obvious example is the apparent immediate effectiveness of drugs and alcohol in avoiding the painful aspects of our lives, even though the strategies work very poorly in the long-run. More subtle avoidance and control can be seen when a person decides not to attend a party because of the feeling of anxiety that feel it will bring up. There appears to be an immediate "reward," some relief perhaps at not having to go, but as we shall see later in this chapter and the next, patterns of avoidance such as these can have a very devastating effect on the maintenance of ongoing problems and making our lives smaller and more limited than they need be.

As I've said before though, don't take my word for it that experiential avoidance can be pervasive and extremely counterproductive, let's have a look to see how it might play out in your life, even if you think you're not engaging in too much of it.

## AVOIDANCE

Not all avoidance takes the same forms or has the same effect, and everyone will have their own patterns, and what might be avoidance in a given circumstance for one person might not be for another; taking that warm bath may be a way to avoid making that difficult phone call to your mother, or it may be a healthy way to relax after a busy day. In other words, it is extremely personal to each person, and the only way to really find out how much avoidance is occurring is to take a close look on a day by basis. On the next page, you will find a chart to be printed out, and instructions on how to fill it out follow.

# WEEKLY ACTIVITY CHART

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
7-8 AM							
8-9							
9-10							
10-11							
11-12							
12-1 PM							
1-2							
2-3							
3-4							
4-5							
5-6							
6-7							
7-8							
8-9							
9-10							
10-11							
11-12							

Each cell should be filled in with what was done in that hour, plus numbers from 1-10 indicating mood and mastery, how you felt during that hour (mood) and how much accomplishment you felt (mastery), with 1 at the low end of the scale and 10 at the high end. There should be some specificity; it is not helpful to write “at work” when in fact you were at a meeting, or “at home” when you were watching TV on the couch eating chips. Carry the page with you, and try and fill it out several times a day, so the events are still fresh with you. If you try and fill it all out at the end of the day or even the next day, it will be hard to remember all the details. It’s important too, to complete the chart over a week, to really get a sense of what you are doing with your time and how satisfying (or not) particular activities are.

Part of a day might look something like this:

	<b>Monday</b>
<b>7-8 AM</b>	<b>Stayed in bed late, didn’t want to go to work</b> <b>Mood: 3 Mastery: 2</b>
<b>8-9</b>	<b>Arrived late at work</b> <b>Mood: 4 Mastery: 2</b>
<b>9-10</b>	<b>In marketing meeting</b> <b>Mood: 6 Mastery: 6</b>
<b>10-11</b>	<b>Worked at my PC</b> <b>Mood: 4 Mastery: 6</b>
<b>11-12</b>	<b>Ignored my work, surfing internet</b> <b>Mood: 4 Mastery: 3</b>
<b>12-1 PM</b>	<b>Lunchtime on my own</b> <b>Mood: 3 Mastery: 3</b>

As you may have guessed, this is a chart from a somewhat depressed person. But even here, some interesting facts can be gleaned. The person decided to stay in bed late, probably feeling that this would help them feel better (more in control), but the scores for both mood and mastery are low from this hour. And then when he gets to work, where he probably didn’t want to go in the first place – it’s a Monday after all! – the scores actually improve a bit and indeed increase again during the marketing meeting. This is probably not what the person expected; they might have thought that a

day in bed or just at home would help and make them feel better. In fact, getting out and making contact and engaging with their job seems to be helping more, and this is the sort of result that we often find in completing these forms. We may find that some of our strategies for feeling better, for coping, may be having the opposite effect. In our example, avoiding work responsibilities and surfing the internet did not end up feeling as good as attending a meeting.

That is why it is so important to stick with this exercise and fill out the form for a week. Often we may say to ourselves “I know what I’m doing and how I feel, this is ridiculous, I don’t need to fill this out,” when in reality doing this exercise may end up showing us some of the reasons why our life is not working as well as we would like, such as why we keep feeling depressed despite our best efforts. Some of the choices we make for what seems (at the time) the best of reasons, may be backfiring and causing us more problems in the medium and longer terms.

In the same way that identifying our distorted automatic thoughts in the first chapter was the first step in being able to do something about them, so identifying our automatic behavioral patterns and whether they are working for us (or not), is the first step in addressing them. Having done this in this chapter, where do we go from here, how do we take effective action? This is the subject of our last chapter, “Values and Taking Action.”

## SUMMARY

If you are like most of us, you didn’t know that you were engaging in quite as much escape and avoidance behavior as it turns out you were, usually quite naturally and with the best of intentions. However, this exercise is precisely what this workbook is about, to give us some tools to see why we engage in the same patterns year after year, or feel stuck, or simply don’t know what’s going on and why we feel the way we do - we just know things aren’t as good as we would like them to be. This chapter, along with the first chapter on the relationship between our thoughts and moods, gives us two very powerful tools to identify what exactly it is in our life that is not working, as well as what is working, and the results are frequently surprising. We now turn to what we can do about it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### VALUES AND TAKING ACTION

#### VALUES

In this chapter we will be continuing and deepening the process we began in the previous chapter by identifying those activities that proved to be most rewarding and satisfying – though not necessarily the easiest – as well as those that at the time may have seemed like a good choice but which on reflection may only have had a modest, short-term positive effect.

To use language from behaviorism, we will be looking to make more choices that give us positive reinforcement from the environment, and to help identify which choices to make, we need to look further into what it is that we truly value the most in our lives. I will essentially be following the approach that ACT takes in this area of values (Hayes et al, 2012), and they typically begin by distinguishing between values and goals.

Values can be looked at as what it is we want our life to stand for, which is not some project or goal that at some point gets accomplished, but more of an ongoing expression of our being and what is most important to us. An example would be valuing being a good parent or valuing living a healthy life. Generally speaking, the pursuit of our values never ends because they are an ongoing expression of how we wish to live our lives, we are not a good parent this week and then done with it! Goals enter the picture when we wish to make our values more concrete; my value of being a good parent may be expressed by making sure I turn up for all my son's soccer games whether or not this is convenient from the point of view of my work. A goal associated with the value of living a healthy life could be to exercise three times a week, but there are of course other ways to express this value as well. The two are clearly related, but not identical; an important difference is that I cannot "fail" at my values; they just are what they are without any justification needed and while we do the best we can to put them into effect through various changing goals and projects, the values remain just what they are.

Another important point about values is that they are freely chosen expressions of what is most important to us in life not (it must be stated) chosen because this is what our parents or our spouse or the culture at large regards as important - rather, it is truly what is most important to us personally. This choice really should come from the heart and not the head; often we can get caught up in giving reasons and justifications for choosing this value over that value, and while it is fine to

have thought things through in this way, it is critically important to realize that no justification is required or necessary. To give a simple example: if I ask you if you prefer Italian or Japanese food, you may be quite clear that you prefer Italian. If I ask you why that is you may give any number of reasons including “it tastes better.” If I were to ask why Italian cuisine tastes better than Japanese, you might end up saying “it just does” - in other words it is not ultimately about reason giving. And while it may be true that there are subordinate reasons, such as the presentation of the food or the healthiness of the Mediterranean diet, ultimately no justification is needed for your choice, and so it is with choosing your values.

## WHAT DO I WISH TO STAND FOR?

Before we get into some exercises that will help identify our values in various domains of life, there is an ACT exercise that they can be a very powerful way to immediately get in touch with the importance of living a valued life. Take a little time and imagine that by some miracle you are hovering invisible in the air, watching your funeral take place after you’ve died. You will see someone giving a eulogy, and you will see friends and family attending and perhaps reminiscing about their life with you. Imagine what you wish to hear them saying, what you would like the person giving the eulogy to say to those attending. You can imagine what the important people in your life are saying about you, and this is a way of getting to the heart of what you ultimately wish your life to stand for.

It is notable that when people do this exercise, values frequently revolve around relationships with family and friends and the love that we have for these people in their life. How much of a value we put on these relationships frequently appears rather more important than how much money we made or how many newspaper articles we were featured in. This can be a good way of getting a feel for how closely we are living our lives in accordance with our basic values today. For many people this is a very profound and helpful exercise, and helps us to transition to a more detailed approach to getting in touch with our values.

## VALUE IN VARIOUS DOMAINS OF LIFE

Working with many people over the years and helping them to identify their values has demonstrated that values can usefully be identified in various significant areas, which ACT usually lists as follows. Take some time to think about each of these domains and make a copy of the form below and write down a short narrative about your values in the boxes provided below. We are talking about values, not goals here - though we will discuss goals later – so remember that what you put here does not have a completion date, though values may of course naturally evolve over time. The boxes have been filled in by way of guidance for that specific domain.



<b>DOMAIN</b>	<b>VALUE NARRATIVE</b>
FAMILY LIFE (NOT COUPLES OR PARENTING)	What sort of sibling, or son/daughter do I wish to be?
MARRIAGE & INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS	Do you want a marriage or intimate relationship, what sort of person would you like to be in the relationship?
PARENTING	Do you want children, how would you like to act as parent, now or when you become a parent?
CAREER & EMPLOYMENT	This is about the kind of work you would like to do, as well as how you would do it, e.g. how would you treat your co-workers?
FRIENDSHIPS & SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS	What does it mean to you to be a good friend?
EDUCATION & PERSONAL GROWTH	What level of education would you like to achieve? Remember it's never too late for some sort of ongoing education and training. How would you like to act towards your fellow students, now or in the future?
RECREATION & FUN	We are all too serious, how can you enjoy yourself more, what sorts of activities would you like to pursue?
SPIRITUALITY & RELIGION	For some this may mean formal religious practice, for others sitting meditation at home or on retreat, for others artistic pursuits or appreciation, or experiences in nature.
COMMUNITY LIFE	Do you wish to become more involved in your community, how do you see yourself and how can you get involved?
HEALTH & PHYSICAL SELF CARE	Is physical and mental health a value for you? How do you see this?

For many people, this can be truly a revelatory exercise. They may never, or only in a piecemeal way have sat down and thought through what is important to them in such a comprehensive fashion, and the results can be surprising.

The next step is to see which of these areas are most important in your life, how your current life reflects this, and what might be some steps to move your life more in the direction of that value, that is to say, goals.

In the box for current importance, write down how much you are able to devote yourself to this value in your life right now (all scoring here is out of 10, with 10 the highest). This can be contrasted with the box for overall importance, which means how you would ideally like it to look. With the proposed actions, try to be as specific as possible. Some common responses have been added to give a sense of how this could be filled this out; and you will see that often how much we are able to devote ourselves to a particular domain may be less than ideal. This is common – we are all very busy - but at least we can begin to see where we would like to make changes in our lives, and where we are actually pretty happy with things as they are.

DOMAIN	CURRENT IMPORTANCE	OVERALL IMPORTANCE	PROPOSED ACTIONS/GOALS
FAMILY LIFE (NOT COUPLES OR PARENTING)	5	8	Not spending as much time with Mom as I would like, I plan to schedule in more time, at least once a week going forward
MARRIAGE & INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS	7	10	I think I could be more helpful around the house with housework to help my wife out. I will start doing the grocery shopping every week with her, as she has asked.
PARENTING	8	10	I will cut back on my travel for work so I can go to my son's weekly soccer match.
CAREER & EMPLOYMENT	4	8	I think I need to look for a new job in my area of expertise. I will start looking very day in the employment section of the paper and online.
FRIENDSHIPS & SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS			
EDUCATION & PERSONAL GROWTH			
RECREATION & FUN			
SPIRITUALITY &			

RELIGION			
COMMUNITY LIFE	3	3	I'm a private person and don't feel the need to get too involved in the community beyond what I do now, donating money to various charities.
HEALTH & PHYSICAL SELF CARE			

## OBSTACLES AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

Having gotten a sense now of what are values are, and through the last exercise, what valued directions we might want to move in, it is natural to start the process and then promptly discover that it can feel overwhelming and that it is not always as easy to take action as we would like. We can say to ourselves as we look at all these domains and proposed actions that it's all too much! And when we are able to make a start, old habits and patterns of avoidance die hard, not the least because we get something out of them, some immediate comfort or relief, even though we now can see more clearly that these benefits are short lived and indeed may contribute to our living our lives in ways that may not be fully in accordance with our values.

But before we get too self-critical and hard on ourselves for all the ways we think we may be falling short, it is very important to point out that this tendency is universal. How many of us are living our lives in a completely non-escapist and utterly disciplined way in accordance with our deepest values across every area of life? Not many, I'm quite sure, and for this reason the note to strike is what the twelve step groups call "progress not perfection." We can recall here the cognitive distortion of "all or nothing" or perfectionist thinking from Chapter 1, which is highly likely to arise at this point - indeed it may be one of the reasons it has been hard to take action, fear of not being good enough. And now would also be a very good time to practice a bit of that self-compassion that we talked about in Chapter 5!

To combat these fears and concerns, we can use our ABCDE formula or Defusion to see that perfection is not possible for anyone, we don't need to take on everything on our list at once, and that slow and steady progress in accordance with our values is both possible and realistic. Falling back into old ways will inevitably happen, and is not a reason to give up. As much as we would like to have this or that problem removed forever instantaneously or to have overnight success at this or that project, lasting change is typically *incremental and gradual*, and taking a little step today or this week is sometimes all we can manage, and that is just fine; indeed that is our aim.

## MOOD DEPENDENCE

Especially as we consider some of the goals we have written in the exercise above, sometimes we just don't feel like doing what we think we're "supposed" to do (look for the "shoulds" and "musts" here and combat them in the same way with the ABCDE approach and remember that your choices and actions are freely chosen). The belief can be that if I don't feel like doing it, then the motivation will not be there and I have to wait until I feel like doing it before I can; but is this really true?

Could we have it the wrong way around? Sometimes we have motivation, to be sure, but often we may not, or it may feel a bit weak, so what should we do then? Experience with Behavioral Activation has shown that taking an action even if we feel unmotivated, and no matter how small, may actually result in an increase in...motivation! This makes sense. If I have been feeling a bit depressed and my bedroom has become pretty messy, and I really don't feel like making a start on cleaning it up, it may be that taking a small step in that direction can pay off. I'm not talking here about "just do it," the Nike expression, which can suggest I need to clean it all up right now. Rather, if I take a small step, picking a few clothes off the floor, for example, I might find that instead of feeling worse, I have a sense of accomplishment, no matter how small. Then I might find that this step forward can act as a sort of springboard to do a bit more tomorrow, and so on. Apart from anything else, being a bit more proactive can mean we lose less time waiting around for our mood to change on its own.

A lot of motivation, especially regarding activities we are not so keen on engaging in even if they are in line with our values, is like this (an example would be accepting the discomfort and going on a blind date in the service of finding a partner). If we can learn to take small, even tiny actions in the face of discouragement and sometimes an apparent lack of interest, then we may find that we can gradually learn the skill of self-activation in line with our values in the face of resistance and obstacles of various kinds. And if we're lucky, we can see some instantaneous results – don't we often feel good after having finally done something we've been procrastinating about for a long time?

## RUMINATION CUES ACTION - RCA!

Another issue that frequently gets in our way is rumination, which is basically turning something over in our minds again and again, worrying about this and that, and unable to let it go. The word ruminant actually refers to animals like cows that have several stomachs. Food passes to one stomach after it is chewed and gets digested, and then passes to the next for further digestion, and you get the idea. This may be because we believe that if we think about it long enough, then we'll figure out what to do. As we've talked about already, sometimes this may be true, especially relating to circumstances in the external world, but this may be less effective if the "problem" is a particular difficult feeling that we'd like to get rid of it.

Previously we talked about how acceptance can help us deal with feelings that we couldn't get out of the way of, so to speak. We still advocate acceptance of feelings of course, but sometimes with rumination we are convinced that if we just keep trying, an answer will come to us - so how should we deal with this? If you find yourself sitting down and staring out the window and covering the same old ground in your mind that you have been thinking about this past 30 minutes, it might be time to apply the 5 minute rule. Give yourself 5 minutes to consider the pros and cons of a particular problem or pattern that has been bothering you, and if at the end of this time you have made no progress towards resolving it, then consider changing the channel and disengaging from ruminating entirely.

Consider also, the possibility that worry and rumination are themselves acting as an avoidance strategy – if you are wondering for the 100<sup>th</sup> time why you can't seem to get out and meet someone, then the worrying may effectively be taking the place of trying out a new behavior and there may be a payoff for you in not having to take a risk and possibly feeling uncomfortable when out of your comfort zone.

If we find that it seems likely or possible that we are ruminating, then instead of assuming you're not thinking long and hard enough about the problem, consider trying the new strategy of taking a different action, whether it be calling a friend, going for a walk, whatever, it need not be anything dramatic, only different.

In fact, through the ongoing use of mindfulness, we can notice earlier and earlier that we have begun to ruminate, or are otherwise avoiding, and this realization can cue some different action. The sort of action we are talking about here need not be large and significant, but it should be in line with your values. Sometime too, it can be helpful to get a bit more organized about making sure avoidance is not running our lives by scheduling our days ahead of time, whether mentally or even better, in writing, what we plan to do today, or tomorrow that is in line with living our lives as fully and in accordance with our values as possible, even if this might sometimes occasion some discomfort. So if and when you notice you're ruminating, use that as a cue to take some action and do something different. Sometimes this is called acting from the "outside in," taking action regardless of how you're feeling, rather than acting from the "inside out," and waiting for inspiration to strike!

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: MINDFUL ENGAGEMENT

Grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change  
The courage to change the things I can  
And the wisdom to know the difference  
~ *Serenity Prayer*

There may seem to have been a lot of ideas presented so far in this workbook, but I think they can be simplified by looking at them through the lens of the three sections: awareness, acceptance and action. Awareness is not just becoming more aware of where we are at a particular moment, which is a necessary precondition for taking effective action of any kind, but is also about developing clearer thinking and reasoning through cognitive techniques. Acceptance shows us a way to stop struggling with our experience, and also how to develop some emotional tolerance and gentleness towards ourselves, to see that we can have and fully experience our feelings without harsh self-judgment. The section on action is about developing the ability to self-activate and take productive action, even if we don't feel like it.

I think the overall approach this workbook has taken can be simplified even further, using a term I call *Mindful Engagement* – that is, to live our lives with as much awareness as possible, being mindful of our thoughts and feelings (and our avoidance), and choosing to engage more fully in our lives in a valued way: in short to live in a way that is *aware, open and active*.

Living a life of mindful engagement is not just aimed at symptom reduction or elimination, as desirable as this is, but also helps answer the question: how shall I live my life when I begin to feel a bit better, or even right now even though I'm not yet feeling as good as I would like?

The use of the words “develop” and “practice” above mean exactly that: we need to take responsibility for ourselves and work on these skills, because they will not happen by themselves. But we should also remember our compassion for ourselves and watch out for our perfectionism, and not be discouraged when we don't practice as much as we feel we should, or things progress slower than we would like. I have always appreciated the subtlety of the famous serenity prayer quoted above, which I think represents a useful stance from which to view our work: to find a way to know

what we can change (and how to do so), or to be able to accept what cannot be changed and not allow this to get in the way of living an engaged life that expresses what we value.

So while an approach of mindful engagement can be a helpful way to look at how to live our life going forward, we are of course also faced with more acute problems and crises that can - and seemingly often do - emerge without warning, what should we do then?

I suggest the acronym **BOLD** that can be quick way to reference what to do, or not to do, when we are faced with something sudden and possibly overwhelming.

**B** – Just *be* right where you are and *breathe*, this is a guaranteed way to come into the present and also calm yourself down a bit. It is a physiological fact that slow, deep breathing from our belly for a few minutes can effectively reduce anxiety which contributes to a clearer view of what is occurring.

**O** – *Observe* what is going on, internally and externally, without judgment and with as much gentleness and compassion as possible.

**L** – *Listen* to what you hear, to what is happening, whatever it is that is presenting itself, don't assume you know what is going on because it "feels like the same old stuff" - be open to what you see and hear as something new might present itself, especially if you're not convinced you already know the answer.

**D** – *Decide* to take some action – and take it! - which can be disputing (e.g. using the ABCDE model from the first chapter either in writing or mentally) or defusing, or going for a walk, or giving a friend a call, and in general being gently aware at this point of the pull of old habits and avoidance strategies, though if these happen, to remain non-judgmentally aware as they do.

Sometimes "symptoms" can be mostly or entirely removed and we can still feel that something is missing, or maybe we have some residual symptoms, such as anxiety which, while is much better than it was previously, still troubles us more than we would like. In these cases, it is good to remember the ACT approach, which is that these ups and downs are an inevitable part of life for everyone to some degree, and sometimes it is a more effective strategy to shift our approach from trying mostly to reduce or eliminate unpleasant experiences, to living a more engaged and vital life regardless of how we might be feeling on this day or that day. After all, what would life be like if it was the same unchanging pleasantness day in and day out? Like the weather, we welcome the stormy days, which have value in themselves, as well as because they can help us appreciate the sunny days when they do come.

One theme that perhaps more than any other acts as a defining thread throughout this workbook is the importance of awareness and mindfulness. Without some idea of what is going on in my life, what is going through my mind, how I am feeling and so forth, it's hard to see how I can begin to take any effective action of any sort as I am effectively living my life in a virtually automatic fashion. So no matter what is going on, whether we are happily enjoying ourselves or feeling very upset, we start

right where we. As The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche puts it (2013), we can begin to live in and from this place of ongoing awareness, allowing us to live a calmer, less reactive – though no less engaged - life.

We can thus begin to see that the practice of mindfulness and meditation are not just means to living a valued life, but can also constitute a way of living a valued life – an end - in themselves: moving we could say, from living as a conceptualized self to living as self as process (or as observer):

“The goal of [mindfulness and meditation] is to become aware of awareness. Awareness is the basis, or what you might call the “support,” of the mind. It is steady and unchanging, like the pole to which the flag of ordinary consciousness is attached. When we recognize and become grounded in awareness of awareness, the “wind” of emotion may still blow. But instead of being carried away by the wind, we turn our attention inward, watching the shifts and changes with the intention of becoming familiar with that aspect of consciousness that recognizes “Oh, this is what I’m feeling, this is what I’m thinking.” As we do so, a bit of space opens up within us. With practice, that space—which is the mind’s natural clarity—begins to expand and settle. We can begin to watch our thoughts and emotions without necessarily being affected by them quite as powerfully or vividly as we’re used to. We can still feel our feelings, think our thoughts, but slowly our identity shifts from a person who defines him- or herself as lonely, ashamed, frightened, or hobbled by low self-esteem to a person who can look at loneliness, shame, and low self-esteem as movements of the mind.”

As the Buddhists tell us, one of the defining characteristics of life is that everything changes, and we can make ourselves miserable by trying desperately to hold on to what we want and trying to avoid what we don’t; as the writer Bryon Katie tell us, when we argue with reality, we lose - but only 100% of the time! But the good news is that it is very much our response to things that causes problems, not the things themselves, and that’s what this workbook has been about, working on our responses to life and learning to respond in a way that we have consciously chosen, rather than going down the old roads and being completely taken over by automatic reactive patterns.

Good luck on your journey, and don’t be afraid to reach out for some help and support if ever you need it; you may be responsible for your life, but that doesn’t mean you have to do everything on your own!



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## INTERNET RESOURCES

### ACT

<http://contextualpsychology.org/>

<http://www.actmindfully.com.au/>

### COGNITIVE THERAPY

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Cognitive-behavioural-therapy/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

<http://www.rebtnetwork.org/>

### BUDDHIST MEDITATION AND MATERIALS

<http://www.buddhanet.net/>

<http://dharmaseed.org/>

<http://www.pointingoutway.org/>

### GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY AND HELP WITH DISORDERS

<http://psychcentral.com/>

<http://www.apa.org/>