In Mind and Emotions, Matthew McKay, Patrick Fanning, and Patricia Zurita Ona provide invaluable information for people experiencing difficulties regulating their emotions. Not only will readers learn about the factors contributing to their ongoing pain, but they’ll also learn practical skills for improving their ability to manage these intense emotions. I love the fact that these authors were able to reflect real-life psychotherapy by taking an eclectic approach to the treatment of emotion dysregulation.

—Sheri Van Dijk, MSW, RSW, psychotherapist in Ontario, Canada, and author of *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook for Bipolar Disorder*, *Don’t Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens*, and *The Bipolar Workbook for Teens*

This concisely written book offers well-developed, practical tools for readers intent on attending to their emotional needs. There is indeed a synergy in combining the best of cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy—it’s an approach that promises to help readers pursue a purposeful life.

—Patricia J. Robinson, PhD, health care consultant and coauthor of *The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Depression* and *Real Behavior Change in Primary Care*

Many self-help books offer tips and suggestions on how to cope with only one challenging emotion, such as anxiety or depression. Unfortunately, anxiety and depression go together, and most of us who struggle in dealing with one emotion have difficulties in managing others as well. This new and impressive workbook by McKay, Fanning, and Zurita Ona provides a welcome alternative to having to buy and follow separate books for each specific emotional difficulty you may encounter in life. Mind and Emotions will guide you through an easy-to-follow set of skills designed to put you, rather than your emotions, back in charge of your life.

—Robert D. Zettle, PhD, professor of psychology at Wichita State University in Wichita, KS, and author of *ACT for Depression*

Mind and Emotions provides a wide range of strategies and exercises for changing the behaviors and thoughts that contribute to uncomfortable feelings such as anxiety, depression, anger, and shame. This book is practical, well-written, and packed with helpful advice.

—Martin M. Antony, PhD, ABPP, professor of psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto and author of *The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook*

At last! Here’s your chance to clear the clutter off your shelves and get rid of all those other self-help books that don’t work. McKay, Fanning, and Zurita Ona have put
together a single, effective treatment for multiple forms of emotional pain. Based on research and years of success, Mind and Emotions is sure to be the one book people will turn to for help.

—Jeffrey C. Wood, PsyD, clinical psychologist, coauthor of The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook, and author of The Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Skills Workbook for Personality Disorders

Mind and Emotions offers a clear and practical entry into the complex and often confusing world of emotions and emotional pain. The authors are experts in the field of mental health and psychotherapy, and it shows in this work. Their accessible and easy-to-follow practices will empower and promote emotional healing for anyone who takes the time to work through this excellent program.

—Jeffrey Brantley, MD, consulting associate in the Duke Department of Psychiatry, author of Calming Your Anxious Mind, and coauthor of Daily Meditations for Calming Your Anxious Mind and the Five Good Minutes® series

With compassion and clarity, the authors present a universal approach to the universal pain and suffering that accompanies mental health problems. Readers will find much in Mind and Emotions to calm the emotional storms that are barriers to living life fully and passionately.

—Michael A. Tompkins, PhD, San Francisco Bay Area Center for Cognitive Therapy and University of California, Berkeley, and author of Digging Out

This book is beautifully written in simple, clear, and precise language. In very short, highly informative chapters, the best-known techniques for leaning to manage painful emotions are described and then a range of concrete strategies for practicing these strategies is presented. This book can not only be used as part of a self-help program, but also as part of an emotion management skills training group or as an adjunct to individual counseling for emotion management difficulties.

—Kirk Strosahl, PhD, author of Real Behavior Change in Primary Care

Mind and Emotions draws thoughtfully on a transdiagnostic perspective and a triad of evidence-based treatments for emotional problems. Beyond its self-help value to the public, this unique workbook constitutes a rich resource for practitioners seeking to enhance their therapeutic effectiveness.

—Thomas F. Cash, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Old
The tools described in this book are drawn from the most effective therapies for emotional disorders that are available today. Used consistently, these tools can change your life.

—Jacqueline B. Persons, PhD, director of the San Francisco Bay Area Center for Cognitive Therapy and clinical professor at the University of California, Berkeley
Mind and Emotions
A Universal Treatment for Emotional Disorders

Matthew McKay, PhD | Patrick Fanning
Patricia Zurita Ona, PsyD

New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
A Note to eBook Readers

Many of the exercises in *Mind and Emotions* include instructions for filling out worksheets or writing down information. In order for you, the ebook reader, to take full advantage of these, we've made PDF versions of all the worksheets in the book available at http://24748.nhpubs.com. You can download and print these materials to use in conjunction with your reading. You also may find that you can complete the exercises satisfactorily in a notebook or by using the comment function on your ebook-reading device.
For my students, whose desire to understand human behavior and help those in pain has inspired me and taught me so much.

—MM

For the dedicated teachers, therapists, and researchers upon whose shoulders we stand.

—PF

For all those who are willing to try something new despite their pain and struggles.

—PZO
Contents

1. The Universal Treatment
2. The Nature of Emotions
3. The Cost of Avoiding Emotions
4. Values in Action
5. Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness
6. Defusion
7. Cognitive Flexibility Training
8. Self-Soothing
   Midtreatment Assessment Exercise
9. Doing the Opposite
10. Interpersonal Effectiveness
11. Imagery-Based Emotion Exposure
12. Interoceptive Emotion Exposure
13. Situational Emotion Exposure
   Post-treatment Assessment Exercise
14. Relapse Prevention

References
About the Authors
Chapter 1

The Universal Treatment

This book is intended for people struggling with emotional pain, and for psychotherapists seeking an effective treatment for emotional suffering. It offers a universal protocol, meaning that these same treatment steps are effective regardless of the particular emotion that distresses you. It will help you with feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, shame, or guilt. It will also help if you’re struggling with high levels of multiple emotions, a situation referred to as emotion dysregulation.

Why Use a Single Treatment for All Emotional Problems?

For many years, psychotherapy researchers focused on developing treatments specific to each emotional disorder. There were individual treatments for the six main anxiety disorders, several for depression, and several for anger, as well as protocols for guilt and shame. All in all, researchers developed more than two dozen treatment regimens for emotional disorders.

This profusion of treatments had good and bad aspects. On the good news front, psychological science had developed multiple research-based protocols that had been proven effective. They helped people and changed lives. The bad news can be summarized as follows:

- People with comorbidity (more than one emotional problem) had to undergo more than one treatment. Treatments were often done sequentially, so therapy for one problem might be delayed until another emotional problem was addressed.
- Skills developed to cope with a particular emotional problem often couldn’t be applied to others. So, for example, if you underwent a successful treatment for social anxiety in your twenties, that wouldn’t have given you the tools you’d need to cope with depression in your thirties.
- It was hard to evaluate which of the research-based treatments available for a particular problem would work best for a given individual. Each treatment is based on a slightly different theory of what causes the problem, but almost no research has been done on matching treatments to an individual’s traits, characteristics, or typical ways of coping. So we didn’t know much about what works for whom.
- Most of the protocols for emotional disorders were focused on symptoms and symptom reduction. They didn’t address the common underlying factors that create and maintain all emotional disorders. Called transdiagnostic factors (TDFs), these can be understood as dysfunctional coping strategies that start out as attempts to manage stress but backfire and end up creating severe emotional pain. A treatment that targets TDFs—the cause of emotional problems—may be more effective than those focused solely on symptoms. (More on TDFs later.)

These problems were solved with the development of treatments that simultaneously target all emotional problems. Instead of focusing on symptoms, which are clearly different for each emotion, new treatments targeted the underlying causes of all negative emotions—causes such as avoidance, rumination, masking, and negative appraisals. We’ll discuss these causes in detail in chapter 2, The Nature of Emotions.
New Research: Universal Treatments for Emotional Problems

There are currently three research-based universal treatments for emotional disorders. The first is dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan 1993), which focuses on the following key skills for overcoming emotional problems:

- Mindfulness and acceptance
- Distress tolerance
- Self-soothing
- Doing the opposite
- Emotion regulation
- Interpersonal effectiveness

The second is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999), which aims to build psychological flexibility by developing skills in the following areas:

- Mindfulness
- Observing and accepting emotions
- Defusion (observing and distancing from thoughts)
- Values-based committed action

A third universal protocol emerged from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT; Moses and Barlow 2006; Allen, McHugh, and Barlow 2008). It emphasizes the following skills:

- Mindfulness
- Emotion awareness and acceptance
- Cognitive restructuring
- Changing emotion-driven behaviors
- Emotion exposure

The effectiveness of each of these therapies is supported by strong research evidence from numerous randomized controlled trials. All three have been proven to help people struggling with overwhelming emotions. As to the question of which is better, we don’t know. Very little research has evaluated these treatments in head-to-head trials. However, comparing and measuring which of these therapies has the best outcomes may not be terribly important, for three reasons:

- It may take years to get conclusive answers, if the data ever becomes clear.
- There is significant overlap between the three treatment programs. All include mindful observation of experience, some form of emotion acceptance, and exposure exercises to help people face difficult emotions. Each protocol has methods for changing how people relate to their thoughts, thereby making negative thinking less believable. And each treatment helps people learn how to steer away from emotion-driven behaviors, which only make emotional
pain worse, and take more effective action instead.
- The treatment components that are unique to a particular protocol—self-soothing, doing the opposite, and interpersonal effectiveness in DBT, and defusion and values-based action in ACT—can be added to the common components to create a single universal treatment. There’s no reason to have a horse race to see which therapy is better. We can combine them.

So here’s the bottom line: These therapies work, and the combined protocol presented in this book works. You don’t have to learn individual and sometimes complex treatments for each emotional problem you face. You can work your way through a single set of steps and get help with any and all emotions.

In this book you’ll find the common elements of all three universal protocols, plus the most effective unique components of each. These are the topics covered in chapters 4 through 13, and they offer the best help that cutting-edge research has discovered:

- Values in Action
- Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness
- Defusion
- Cognitive Flexibility Training
- Self-Soothing
- Doing the Opposite
- Interpersonal Effectiveness
- Imagery-Based Emotion Exposure
- Interoceptive Emotion Exposure
- Situational Emotion Exposure

How to Use This Book

Before beginning the ten treatment chapters, you need basic information about how much your difficult emotions are affecting you right now, how emotions work, and how you get into emotional trouble. So do the exercise at the end of this chapter, and then read chapters 2 and 3 before doing anything else. The exercise at the end of this chapter will help you establish a baseline score for how much difficulty you’re having with emotion regulation right now.

In chapter 2, The Nature of Emotions, you’ll learn to identify the four components of an emotional response. Developing the ability to observe a problematic emotion is the first step toward regulating that emotion. Later in chapter 2 we’ll introduce you to seven transdiagnostic factors that underlie emotional disorders. Each of these TDFs is a coping strategy that attempts to provide immediate relief from emotional pain, but in the long term all of them only intensify emotions and make the pain worse. We provide a questionnaire to help you identify which TDFs are having the greatest influence on your emotional life. It’s quite possible that you don’t use all of these problematic coping strategies. If that’s the case, you may wish to skip chapters that target a TDF that isn’t relevant to you. By assessing your use of TDFs, you can tailor this program to your own needs.

Chapter 3, The Cost of Avoiding Emotions, helps build your motivation for working with and sticking to this program. You’ll learn to recognize the many faces of avoidance and assess the costs of
Avoidance takes a huge toll on your life and vitality, and paradoxically, it also intensifies the very emotions you’re trying to get away from. In chapter 3 we’ll also discuss the benefits of improved emotion regulation. The payoffs can be dramatic, so it’s worth it to know the benefits before beginning the program (and this will probably also help with motivation).

Chapters 4 through 13 are the treatment chapters. Work your way through these in order, but feel free to skip any that target TDFs you aren’t struggling with. However, do read and work through chapter 4, Values in Action, chapter 5, Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness, and chapters 11 through 13, on emotion exposure, regardless of the TDFs you use. They’re critical to learning emotion regulation and essential for everyone. Also, be sure to fill out the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz and Roemer 2004) halfway through your work with this book and again at the end of the emotion exposure chapters. This will give you an objective measure of how your emotion regulation skills are improving.

The last chapter, Relapse Prevention, is also vital. You need to know how to recognize the signs that emotional problems are reemerging and have a specific plan for what you’ll do about it. This will keep you from slipping back into old, ineffective patterns.

**How to Work This Program**

Just reading about emotion regulation skills isn’t enough. You can only master them by doing the exercises in this book and putting them into practice in your daily life. Changing your experience with overwhelming emotions starts with changing your behavior—how you think and how you act. Casting aside your old coping responses—the TDFs—is essential to creating a new life and a new relationship to your emotions.

We’ll be with you every step of the way, showing you the path, coaching you, and giving you examples of how others have succeeded. We’ll offer helpful strategies and step-by-step guidance, and also provide answers to many of your questions. We admit it: Working this program is work. But if you do the work and change your old avoidance patterns, a lot of your emotional pain will fall away and become just a memory. The research-tested approaches in this program can open the door to a new life.

We encourage you to start now, with the following exercise. The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz and Roemer 2004) will establish a baseline measurement of how much your difficult emotions are affecting you today. Halfway through your work with this book, you’ll fill out the DERS again to assess your progress, and then at the end of the book you’ll fill out the DERS one last time, to discover how far this journey has taken you. Pick up your pen, open the door to your future, and begin the changes you’ve been yearning for.

**Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)**
Please indicate how often the following statements apply to you by writing the appropriate number from the scale below on the line beside each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>almost never (0-10%)</td>
<td>sometimes (11-35%)</td>
<td>about half the time (36-65%)</td>
<td>most of the time (66-90%)</td>
<td>almost always (91-100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. _______ I am clear about my feelings.
2. _______ I pay attention to how I feel.
3. _______ I experience my emotions as overwhelming and out of control.
4. _______ I have no idea how I am feeling.
5. _______ I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings.
6. _______ I am attentive to my feelings.
7. _______ I know exactly how I am feeling.
8. _______ I care about what I am feeling.
9. _______ I am confused about how I feel.
10. _______ When I’m upset, I acknowledge my emotions.
11. _______ When I’m upset, I become angry with myself for feeling that way.
12. _______ When I’m upset, I become embarrassed for feeling that way.
13. _______ When I’m upset, I have difficulty getting work done.
14. _______ When I’m upset, I become out of control.
15. _______ When I’m upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time.
16. _______ When I’m upset, I believe that I will end up feeling very depressed.
17. _______ When I’m upset, I believe that my feelings are valid and important.
18. _______ When I’m upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things.
19. _______ When I’m upset, I feel out of control.
20. _______ When I’m upset, I can still get things done.
21. _______ When I’m upset, I feel ashamed at myself for feeling that way.
22. _______ When I’m upset, I know that I can find a way to eventually feel better.
23. _______ When I’m upset, I feel like I am weak.
24. _______ When I’m upset, I feel like I can remain in control of my behaviors.
25. _______ When I’m upset, I feel guilty for feeling that way.
26. _______ When I’m upset, I have difficulty concentrating.
27. _______ When I’m upset, I have difficulty controlling my behaviors.
28. _______ When I’m upset, I believe there is nothing I can do to make myself feel better.
29. _______ When I’m upset, I become irritated at myself for feeling that way.
30. _______ When I’m upset, I start to feel very bad about myself.
31. _______ When I’m upset, I believe that wallowing in it is all I can do.
32. _______ When I’m upset, I lose control over my behavior.
Scoring: Put a minus sign in front of your rating numbers for these items: 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 17, 20, 22, 24, and 34. Then sum up all your ratings, adding the positives and subtracting the negatives, and write the result here:_______.

This number represents how much your upsetting feelings are affecting your life today, at this moment. This is a baseline figure, so the exact number isn’t very significant. What’s more important is the difference between this number and your score when you do this exercise again, halfway through your work with this book, and your score after you’ve finished the treatment chapters of the book. As you gradually acquire emotion regulation skills, your score will decrease.
Chapter 2

The Nature of Emotions

This chapter examines how emotions work and how they help us survive. It will also give you the tools to observe your emotions and identify the four components of an emotional response. This knowledge will help you recognize how emotions turn into behavior and give you a moment of choice in deciding whether to act on emotion-driven urges.

Unfortunately, the ability to observe and understand emotions isn’t enough to achieve emotion regulation. You’ll have to go one step further and learn to identify the seven dysfunctional coping strategies that fuel negative emotions and trap you in patterns of chronic anxiety, anger, or depression. As mentioned in the introduction, these seven ineffective coping responses are sometimes called transdiagnostic factors because they underlie—and, in fact, cause—emotional disorders.

How Emotions Work

In the course of human evolution, emotions developed for a specific purpose: to spur us toward actions that help us survive. Negative emotions are a signal that something is wrong or threatening and push us to cope. Anxiety pushes us to avoid dangerous situations. Anger drives us to fight back against threats, damage, and hurt. Sadness encourages us to slow down and withdraw, to seek quiet time for processing a loss, or to recalibrate our efforts after a failure. Shame demands that we hide and stop doing what might result in disapproval.

The point is, emotions are useful. They help us change course as we face new problems or new circumstances. They help us adapt to curve balls that threaten to destabilize our lives—or even end them.

Here’s another key point: Emotions, no matter how intense or upsetting, all have a natural life span. If you watch carefully, you’ll observe that all feelings develop like a wave. They rise, crest, and finally recede, and they’re time limited. Seeing an emotion as a wave can help you wait it out, rather than getting swept up in emotion-driven behavior.

When you’re in the middle of an intense feeling, sometimes it seems as if it will go on forever. This is an illusion created by the strength of the emotion, and sometimes by efforts to resist or suppress the feeling. You have multiple emotions each day, and many thousands over the course of your life. Every emotion will end or morph into something else. Learning to be patient, to watch that process, is one of the key skills you’ll gain from this book.

We humans can’t control emotions, meaning we can’t stop them or get rid of them with an act of will. An extraordinary wealth of scientific research has revealed that attempts to suppress, numb, or push away emotions usually fail. What we resist persists. Feelings we attempt to suppress simply go on longer, and often turn into chronic emotional disorders.

To understand how suppression exacerbates and intensifies an emotion, consider the case of a violinist in a volunteer community orchestra who had surges of anxiety during several performances. His response was to do everything possible to control the feeling, including constantly watching for the first signs of sweating or a rapid heartbeat. But the effort not to feel anxious only focused his attention on the symptoms of fear. If he detected any sensations that might indicate fear, he tried to control the experience through avoidance—to the point where he started to think he wouldn’t be able
to perform if he felt fear—and that was a really scary and upsetting thought. The more he paid
to attention to his body and watched for anxiety during a performance, the greater his fear became. So,
remember: You can’t stop emotions, and some efforts to control them will only make them worse.

Components of an Emotional Response

An emotional response is a lot more than a mood state or a feeling. It has four components, and it’s
important to understand and recognize each of them: affect, emotion-driven thoughts, physical
sensations, and emotion-driven behavior.

Affect

The most obvious part of an emotion is the affect: your conscious, subjective experience of the
feeling itself, apart from bodily changes. The affect is what people commonly label as “sadness,”
“fear,” “anger,” and so on. Affect is generated in the limbic area of the brain and produces what
psychologists call a drive state—an urge to some kind of action, such as withdrawal, flight, or
aggression. Negative emotions create a sense of distress and disequilibrium—a sense that things
aren’t right and need to be fixed. The affect part of these emotions is designed to get our attention, to
make us realize that there’s a threat or an imbalance that requires action.

Emotion-Driven Thoughts

The second component of an emotional response is what happens cognitively: thoughts about a
situation in which we find ourselves or about the emotion itself. Thoughts during an emotional
response tend to fall into two categories: prediction and judgment. Prediction is an attempt to peer
into the future and see what dangers might lie there. Predictive thoughts usually ask the question
“What if?”: “What if I lose my job?” “What if the pain in my stomach is a tumor?” “What if my son
doesn’t get into college?” Predictions prepare us for what might happen, but they also have the effect
of triggering anxiety as we attempt to solve a problem that hasn’t even occurred—and may not ever
occur.

Judgments can be directed toward the self or others. When they’re directed toward the self,
judgmental thoughts produce sadness and depression. When they’re directed toward others, they tend
to trigger anger. Either way, a judgment conveys a belief that the object of that judgment is wrong,
bad, mistaken, and somehow guilty of breaking the rules for reasonable living.

Emotion-based thoughts are part of a feedback loop that can both trigger and intensify affect. Predictions and judgments can literally create emotions, and then the surging feelings that result can
produce a new flurry of negative thoughts that further escalate the emotion.

Physical Sensations

Every emotion has a physiological component. Emotions are felt in the body. Anxiety elevates your
heart rate, speeds up your breathing, and can make you sweat, shake, and tense your muscles.
Depression generates feelings of heaviness, torpor, and exhaustion. Anger produces sensations of
heat, along with tension in your arms and legs as you get ready to fight. Shame produces a feeling of
being flushed, weak, and sometimes almost paralyzed.

Like emotion-based thoughts, the physical sensations that accompany each emotion can contribute to a feedback loop that strengthens the affect. For example, the palpitations and sweating that accompany anxiety seem to make feelings of fear worse. You say to yourself, “My heart’s pounding like a trip-hammer. I must be scared as hell,” and the fear intensifies.

**Emotion-Driven Behavior**

The last component of an emotional response is the action urge. Action urges always accompany feelings. Anxiety makes you want to avoid. Depression makes you want to withdraw. Anger makes you want to be aggressive. Shame and guilt make you want to hide.

When you let yourself act on emotion-driven urges, they fuel the emotion rather than regulate your feelings. While there is some survival value to these urges, engaging in emotion-driven behaviors frequently tends to convert episodic emotional experiences into chronic problems. There is abundant research showing the more you avoid anxiety, the more anxious you become (Eifert and Forsyth 2005), and withdrawing when you’re sad makes depression worse (Zettle 2007). There are also studies showing that the more aggressive your response to anger is, the more easily you’ll get angry (Tavris 1989). So emotion-driven behaviors may help you cope with difficult things in the short term, but if you engage in them habitually, they play a huge role in emotional disorders.

**Exploring Your Emotional Responses**

Now it’s time to explore your own emotional responses. The following Emotional Response Worksheet will help you separate your feelings into the four components just discussed: affect (the emotion), emotion-driven thoughts, physical sensations, and emotion-driven behaviors. Over the next week we’d like you to use this worksheet to identify and clarify your emotions. Make copies of the worksheet and keep one with you at all times, leaving the version in the book blank so you can make more copies as needed (you’ll use this worksheet in the next exercise too). Each time you feel an emotion during this period, name it in the left-hand column, under “Affect.” In the next column, “Emotion-driven thoughts,” write down any judgments or predictions that occurred as you experienced the emotion. In the “Physical sensations” column, record any feelings in your body that accompanied the emotion. And finally, under “Emotion-driven behaviors,” write down any action urges (whether you actually did them or not) that you felt during the emotion. If you aren’t sure how to fill out the form or need a little help getting started, we’ve provided a sample worksheet.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affect</th>
<th>Emotion-driven thoughts</th>
<th>Physical sensations</th>
<th>Emotion-driven behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadness and loss</td>
<td>My relationship is going to fall apart.</td>
<td>Heavy, weighted-down feeling.</td>
<td>Tell my boyfriend I don’t feel like seeing him tonight. Shutting down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nothing ever works for me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger and sadness</td>
<td>My boss is an ass.</td>
<td>Stomach tight, agitated, pressure in my face.</td>
<td>Want to tell him off, throw things, trash his office, quit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can’t stand working for him.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He’s unfair.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness and regret</td>
<td>Why did I drop out of school? I was so stupid.</td>
<td>Heavy, numb, collapsed, can barely move.</td>
<td>Want to give up. Want to go home to my parents and collapse in my room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I always make stupid decisions. Now I’m stuck.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>My boyfriend’s angry.</td>
<td>Out of breath, weird electric feeling in stomach, need to pace.</td>
<td>Want to call and get reassurance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m pissing him off.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He doesn’t want to see me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using Music to Explore Your Emotions

This exercise will help you gain familiarity with your emotional responses, and perhaps feel more comfortable with them. The exercise calls for listening to emotionally evocative songs, so the first
step is to identify six or eight songs that have an emotional impact on you. Think of music that really moves you and seems to open something emotional within you. Ideally, the various songs shouldn’t trigger the same feeling. Some of them might evoke sadness, some might make you feel hopeful or excited, and some might even make you feel angry.

Over the next week, play each of these songs at least once. Then, on the Emotional Response Worksheet in the preceding exercise, explore this music-generated affect alongside any other emotions you’re recording during the week. As you listen to each song, turn your attention fully to whatever emotions you feel and try to keep them at the center of your awareness. Whether an emotion is painful or pleasant, look for words that really capture the essence of the feeling. Name the emotion, perhaps also describing some of the nuances or subtleties of the experience. In the appropriate columns, write down any thoughts, sensations, or action impulses that arose while you were listening. Again, here’s a sample to give you an idea of how to fill out the form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sara’s Emotional Response Worksheet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affect</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Song: “The Rose” by Bette Miller</strong>&lt;br&gt;Affect: Sadness and a tinge of anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Song: “Salt of the Earth” by the Rolling Stones</strong>&lt;br&gt;Affect: Sadness and bitterness and also kind of happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Song: “American Idiot” by Green Day</strong>&lt;br&gt;Affect: Anger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Building Emotion Awareness

In this exercise you’ll visualize events from the past to intentionally and temporarily bring on stronger emotions so you can learn about them. Right now, look back over the past six months to a year and identify three different events: one that triggered anger, one that triggered sadness, and one that caused anxiety. On a separate piece of paper, write a description of each situation, including where you
were, whom you were with, and the basics of what happened.

Decide which one you’d like to start with, then visualize the scene. Notice everything about the physical environment. If things are being said, listen to the tone of voice as well as the words. Notice any feelings in your body, and try to remember what you actually did (emotion-driven behaviors) in response to the situation. Now carefully watch the emotion that builds inside of you. Stay with your image of the scene until the emotion is strong and clear and you begin to have words for it. Record this experience on your Emotional Response Worksheet, including the thoughts, sensations, and emotion-driven urges. After you’ve finished writing about the first scene, set time aside to tackle the next two images.

This exercise and the previous two have given you a lot of practice in observing and naming aspects of your emotional life and the parts of your emotional responses. This practice is essential in learning to recognize how emotions affect you and drive your behavior.

**How Emotional Problems Arise**

Emotional problems are often blamed on stress, trauma, early upbringing, interpersonal conflicts, hormones, and genetics. But surprisingly, research shows that another factor is much more responsible for emotional disorders: our coping behaviors (Hayes 2005). We each learn to deal with the stress of life using a repertoire of coping strategies designed to reduce pain. The trouble is, some coping strategies work better than others, and some are absolutely catastrophic in terms of their long-term impact on well-being.

There are seven maladaptive coping strategies that drive most of our emotional distress and turn painful moments into chronic disorders. These coping strategies are called transdiagnostic factors because they are the underlying cause of symptoms across many diagnostic categories: anxiety, depression, chronic anger, borderline personality disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, to name a few. Let’s take a look at the transdiagnostic factors, or maladaptive coping strategies, that lie at the root of chronic emotional pain.

**Experiential avoidance.** People who use this strategy automatically try to avoid painful emotions and thoughts. As soon as they feel something uncomfortable, they try to suppress, numb, or push away the experience. They attempt to put a lid on things so the pain is somehow muted. This coping strategy often backfires because avoidance not only fails to suppress painful feelings, it also makes the pain worse. An example is Harold, who withdrew socially and began drinking in an effort to avoid the sadness of losing his job. But his sadness just turned to depression as he sank into alcoholism and isolation.

**Rumination.** In this strategy, people use obsessive thoughts to blunt the fear of uncertainty, and use judgments in the hope of forcing themselves or others to do better. In the form of worry, rumination tries to prepare you for every bad thing that might happen. In the form of good-bad evaluations, it tries to perfect a flawed self and a flawed world. But these efforts never work. Ultimately, rumination keeps you focused on what’s bothering you, so its net effect is that you feel more anxious, more angry, or a greater sense of loss and disappointment.

**Emotional masking.** The aim of this coping strategy is to make sure no one ever sees your pain. It
arises from a fear that if others saw your emotions, they might be contemptuous or judge you as weak, foolish, or crazy. So the mask must stay on and the feelings that burn in you must stay hidden. The price for this maladaptive strategy is that the real you remains invisible, lost in the effort to look good. You can’t show what you need or feel, so you remain helpless and possibly unfulfilled in your relationships. No one knows what hurts or what needs to change.

Short-term focus. The motto of this coping strategy is “Why do it right when I can do it now?” When faced with emotional pain, many people focus on what can give them relief in the moment. They want to stop or suppress the emotion and will do whatever it will take to build a wall between themselves and their feelings. But while short-term focus may provide a brief moment when the pain diminishes, in an hour or a day or a week it’s back—and it’s worse than ever. That’s because short-term relief strategies often harm people in the long run. For example, drugs or alcohol can numb the pain in the moment but create long-term job, relationship, and health problems that eclipse the original distress. Another example is avoiding an upcoming social event because it makes you anxious. The short-term solution of avoidance temporarily reduces anxiety, but in the long term each choice to avoid increases the level of social fear, while also leading to isolation and risk of depression.

Response persistence. In this transdiagnostic factor, you continue responding to similar situations in the same way, even when it doesn’t work. Sometimes this happens because you’re afraid to try other responses. Or maybe you have inner rules that prevent you from seeking a new solution. Either way, the result is that you become inflexible and always cope with problems the same old way. You’ve heard the adage that every problem looks like a nail when all you have is a hammer. Likewise, every conflict turns into a fight when all you know how to do is get angry, and every little mistake turns into a catastrophe when all you know how to do is brood and castigate yourself about it.

Hostility or aggression. This coping solution helps mask stress, fear, loss, guilt, shame, confusion, a sense that you’re wrong or bad, the feeling of being engulfed or overwhelmed, and a host of other painful emotions. Anger is a big lid that covers a lot of pain and keeps it out of your awareness. This solution is often effective in the short term, but research shows that the more you use anger to cope, the angrier you get (Tavris 1989). Hostility begets even more hostility in a vicious circle that poisons lives.

Negative appraisal. This coping response uses negative evaluations or judgments to help you prepare for failure and bad outcomes, control others, or beat yourself into being a better person. If you use this strategy habitually, you’ll tend to expect things to go wrong and to focus on things that actually are wrong. This attention to the negative may seem to protect you from painful surprises, but you’ll end up feeling more angry, anxious, and depressed because you filter out most positive experiences. An example is a man who stumbled in a speech at his daughter’s wedding and could hardly think about anything else for the rest of the night. Meanwhile, he was missing the joy he could have been feeling.

Assessing Your Problematic Coping Strategies
The seven transdiagnostic factors listed above drive most of the emotional struggles people experience. But which maladaptive coping strategies affect you the most? It’s worthwhile to figure this out because it has a bearing on which treatment approaches will be most effective for you. The following inventory will provide answers, giving you a score for each of the transdiagnostic factors.

The items in this inventory are different ways of dealing with problems. As you complete this inventory, think about difficult or stressful events in your life, including work challenges, family problems, conflicts, and frustrations. Do your best to rate each item in terms of how frequently you use it. There are no right or wrong answers, so choose the most accurate answer for you, not what you think is most acceptable or what most people would say or do. Rate each item on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means you don’t use that strategy at all, and 4 means you use it a great deal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Problematic Coping Strategies Inventory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>I try to keep an emotional distance from upsetting situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>I think about all the bad things that could happen in a situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>I control my emotions by not expressing them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>I tend to do what will make me feel better right away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Once I get used to dealing with something a certain way, I keep doing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Sometimes I hit others or threaten to hit them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>I compare myself negatively to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>I push bad feelings away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>I think about a situation over and over, and what bad things it might lead to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>I try not to let my feelings show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>I want to stop painful things right away, even if it costs me later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>I have my ways of coping with difficulties, and I don’t tend to change how I do things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>I yell or shout to let off steam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>I find fault in myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>When I experience bad feelings, I try to ignore them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>I dwell on problematic events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>When I’m feeling negative emotions, I make sure not to express them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>I go with short-term solutions and let the future take care of itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>I tend to cope with problems the same way, regardless of what happens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>I let my feelings out by saying attacking things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>I judge the ways others handle things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>I try to numb my negative feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>I keep trying to understand or analyze difficult situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>I make sure to show only my calm side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>I do what feels good in the moment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>I deal with problems the way I always have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>I get upset and say mean or blaming things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>I tend to focus on the faults and mistakes of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>I stay away from problem situations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To score the inventory, add the scores for items 1.1, 2.1, 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, and 8.1. This is your score for experiential avoidance; record it on line 1 below. Then add your scores for items 1.2 through 8.2. This is your score for rumination; record it on line 2 below. Continue in the same way to determine your scores for all seven transdiagnostic factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Whenever there’s a problem, I tend to dwell on the worst that could happen.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>I keep my emotions to myself.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>I’m focused on what will happen right away, not later.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>I don’t change the way I deal with things, even if sometimes it doesn’t work out.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>In difficult situations I tend to get angry.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>I tend to see the negative in situations.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>I disengage when things are difficult.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>When something happens that upsets me, I keep thinking about it, reliving it, or trying to understand it.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>I don’t show distress or upset.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>I think about what will help me in the moment, rather than in the long term.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>I find myself approaching difficulties with the same basic strategies.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>I get pissed off when something goes wrong.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>I tend to judge others.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>When something is upsetting, I tend to withdraw.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>When I do something I wish I hadn’t done, I think about it over and over.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>I only let people know about my positive emotions.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>I tend to seek a short-term fix, even if it falls apart later.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>When I run into trouble, I redouble my efforts and keep doing what I’ve been doing.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>I get angry when I’m frustrated by stress.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>I often think things are being handled badly.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>I shy away from upsetting conflicts.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>I find that I tend to worry about things that might happen.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>When I’m in emotional pain, I put on a good face.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>How to feel good in the moment is mostly what I care about.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Sometimes I think I should change how I deal with a problem, but I end up doing what I usually do.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>I fantasize about revenge.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Often I don’t expect things to go well.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from the Comprehensive Coping Inventory © Patricia Zurita Ona and Matthew McKay

To score the inventory, add the scores for items 1.1, 2.1, 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, 7.1, and 8.1. This is your score for experiential avoidance; record it on line 1 below. Then add your scores for items 1.2 through 8.2. This is your score for rumination; record it on line 2 below. Continue in the same way to determine your scores for all seven transdiagnostic factors.

1. Experiential avoidance (1.1-8.1) _______
2. Rumination (1.2-8.2) _______
3. Emotional masking (1.3-8.3) _______
4. Short-term focus (1.4-8.4) _______
5. Response persistence (1.5-8.5) _______
6. Hostility or aggression (1.6-8.6) _______
The higher your score for any of the seven transdiagnostic factors, the greater your tendency to use that coping strategy in response to problems or stress. A score above 16 for any of the factors suggests that this coping strategy is affecting you emotionally. A score above 24 indicates that this factor has a strong influence on your emotional life.

How the Universal Protocol Can Help You

Each of the ten treatment chapters in this book teaches a specific skill, and each of these skills is designed to target and change one or more of the transdiagnostic factors. The table below indicates which transdiagnostic factors are targeted by each chapter, to help you choose where to focus your efforts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Transdiagnostic factors targeted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Values in Action</td>
<td>Short-term focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness</td>
<td>Rumination, experiential avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Defusion</td>
<td>Rumination, negative appraisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Cognitive Flexibility Training</td>
<td>Negative appraisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Self-Soothing</td>
<td>Response persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Doing the Opposite</td>
<td>Experiential avoidance, response persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Interpersonal Effectiveness</td>
<td>Hostility or aggression, response persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Imagery-Based Emotion Exposure</td>
<td>Experiential avoidance, emotional masking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Interoceptive Emotion Exposure</td>
<td>Experiential avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Situational Emotion Exposure</td>
<td>Experiential avoidance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A high score for a particular transdiagnostic factor indicates that you should make a strong commitment to learning the corresponding skills. On the other hand, a low score suggests that you might skip learning a particular skill (as long as you don’t have another transdiagnostic factor that would benefit from developing that skill). So a low score on negative appraisal suggests that you might skip chapter 7, Cognitive Flexibility Training, and a low score on both response persistence and hostility or aggression indicates that you might skip chapter 10, Interpersonal Effectiveness. If you don’t have the time or energy to work your way through the whole program, it’s fine to skip skills you don’t need as much. But if you do have the time and energy, we encourage you to work your way through all of the skills in this book. Each will strengthen you in your struggle with emotions. And the truth is, anyone can benefit from learning all of these skills.
Chapter 3

The Cost of Avoiding Emotions

This chapter describes the most common ways of avoiding unpleasant emotions and discusses why avoidance results in major long-term problems, even if it does offer short-term relief. We’ve also provided exercises to help you identify, assess, and analyze your own avoidance strategies.

Types of Avoidance

The ways people typically avoid painful feelings can be grouped into five basic categories: situational avoidance, cognitive avoidance, protective avoidance, somatic avoidance, and substitution avoidance. For clarity, each type of avoidance is explained separately below. In real life, however, people often attempt to reduce painful emotions using two or three types of avoidance simultaneously.

Situational avoidance. This is the most common type of avoidance. With situational avoidance, you stay away from people, places, things, or activities that tend to trigger emotional distress. For instance, you might avoid crowds or large parties. Or you may try not to make eye contact with people or avoid situations in which you have to interact socially with strangers. Perhaps you steer clear of certain people, such as your brother-in-law or police officers, who make you nervous, or particular places that trigger a panicky feeling, like theaters, elevators, or subways. Or maybe you avoid certain animals, such as snakes or spiders, or certain activities, like public speaking or changing clothes in a locker room.

Cognitive avoidance. This type of avoidance is strictly in your mind. You avoid certain distressing thoughts or memories by consciously suppressing them and actually saying to yourself, “Don’t think about that. Just don’t go there.” You push unwanted mental images away. Sometimes cognitive avoidance takes the form of worry and rumination. You might handle your anxiety about the future and various risks in your life by constantly worrying about what might happen, running various scenarios over and over in your mind in the hope that constant vigilance will somehow prevent anything bad from happening. Another cognitive avoidance tactic is replacing distressing thoughts or memories with other mental content. You might fill your mind with distracting fantasies or daydreams or repeat mental rituals, such as saying certain good luck phrases over and over in your mind. Sometimes ritualized prayers or affirmations serve a similar purpose, with the repeated words and phrases drowning out memories or thoughts that bother you.

Protective avoidance. With this strategy, you attempt to avoid risk and danger through excessive safety behaviors, such as checking locks, light switches, gas stoves, and so on, or by carrying certain objects with you that you rely on excessively for their protective qualities, such as lucky charms, a cell phone to call for help, mace, a whistle, or antianxiety medication. Protective avoidance can take the form of compulsive cleaning, hand washing, or wearing gloves to the bathroom. Perfectionism and overpreparation for classes or work can also be a form of protective avoidance. Conversely, you might try to avoid risk by procrastinating and putting off a feared task or event.

Somatic avoidance. With somatic avoidance, you try not to experience internal sensations associated with emotional distress, such as feeling hot, being out of breath, or getting fatigued or exhausted. You
might even avoid normally pleasant sensations, such as sexual arousal or excitement about an upcoming event, because they feel similar to being anxious.

**Substitution avoidance.** This form of avoidance involves replacing or drowning out a distressing emotion with another feeling. For example, you might replace anxiety with a stronger emotion that’s more tolerable for you, such as anger. Bingeing on food, alcohol, or drugs is a popular way of distracting from and covering up painful emotions. Cultivating an overall feeling of numbness can serve the same purpose. And some people turn to the excitement of gambling, risky behavior, video games, or Internet porn as a way of replacing or covering painful feelings they want to avoid.

**Consequences of the Five Types of Avoidance**

All five types of avoidance have the same basic consequence. Although they offer short-term gain, they lead to long-term pain. In the short term, you avoid an unpleasant feeling in the moment, but soon enough you face the likelihood of the same feeling welling up again, so you try to avoid it again. Meanwhile, over the long term, your life is on hold. The depth, height, and reach of your very existence is limited by your day-after-day, week-after-week, year-after-year attempts to avoid feelings that are, ultimately, unavoidable.

Although this long-term pattern of consequences is common to all types of avoidance, it’s like the melodic theme of a symphony; there are countless potential variations on the theme, and these can make your particular style of avoidance seem individual and unique. Let’s explore in detail how the long-term consequences have played out for different people who have practiced the five types of avoidance:

**Consequences of Situational Avoidance**

Marcy couldn’t abide crowds. In any group larger than four or five people, she felt smothered, short of breath, vulnerable, scrutinized, exposed, and confused as she tried to keep track of everyone who might be in trouble or dangerous or critical of her. Marcy was a smart person with a good fund of psychological buzzwords, so she excused her avoidance of crowds by saying, “I’m too empathetic and intuitive for my own good. I have very porous boundaries, and large groups overwhelm my ability to process all the inputs.” She claimed to be the type of quiet, introspective, spiritual person who prefers intimate, one-on-one communication, rather than consorting with throngs of people.

But in reality, Marcy was simply paralyzed in any large gathering. In the short term, she could avoid the paralyzed feeling by staying off of committees, not joining large organizations, avoiding big parties, and arranging her social life so that she dealt with friends and family one or two at a time. But in the long term she suffered some serious consequences. She missed her sister’s wedding. She didn’t see her daughter in her high school play. When her husband finally got her to Italy, she scarcely saw it in daylight because of the crowds. She holed up in the hotel room with a “headache,” frequented the smaller, shabbier sidewalk cafés, and roamed the cobblestone streets alone at night. In Rome she missed Saint Peter’s Basilica, the Coliseum, and Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. In Florence and Venice it was the same. The sad truth was, Marcy was taking a pass on a lot of her own life.

Oscar also had trouble going out in public, but his fears were all about how dirty the world is.
Ever since he was a kid and saw a TV show about microorganisms, he had a thing about germs and contamination. In the short term, he avoided contamination by washing his hands numerous times each day, changing into clean clothes twice a day, and spending about twelve hours a week cleaning his apartment with his large collection of germicidal products. But in the long term, he was isolated and lonely. His cousin set him up on a date with a really nice girl, but the date didn’t go well. Oscar was a little freaked out about shaking hands with her, and then the waiter served his water in a smeary glass that looked like it was teeming with germs. Oscar tried to joke about having a “thing” about cleanliness, but he could tell the girl thought he was weird. He didn’t bother trying to call her for another date.

For Angela, the thing to avoid was any kind of challenge or change, especially at the junior college where she worked in the admissions office. Her chronic feelings of depression and hopelessness left her with no energy to cope with novelty or come up with solutions to new problems. Most days she could stick to routine and claim to be too busy to make any changes or take on anything new. But in the long term, her boss was increasingly dissatisfied with her progress on adopting new computer software, rewriting copy for the website, and finding additional storage space on campus.

Consequences of Cognitive Avoidance

Penny tried to avoid thinking about the baby girl she gave up for adoption when she was sixteen years old. Whenever she saw a baby or heard one cry, she thought about her baby, and a wave of guilt, shame, and regret threatened to overwhelm her. In an effort to suppress the painful memories of her own child, she deliberately tried to think about something else. She wouldn’t go to movies or watch TV shows about teen pregnancy, babies, or even little kids. She went out of her way to avoid toy stores and schools. Just the sight of a pregnant woman or a kid in a stroller made her feel tense and angry. She only dated younger, wilder guys who seemed unlikely to bring up the subject of having kids.

In the short term, Penny was mostly successful in not thinking about her baby girl, but she devoted a huge amount of energy to not thinking. The more she tried to suppress certain thoughts and memories, the more frequently they came to mind. In the long run, constant suppression of her thoughts and memories was exhausting and depressing in itself. She was also setting herself up for a life without kids, without family, and without any serious relationships.

Stan was devoted to worry and rumination as a way to stay safe. For example, it seemed to him that the way to avoid himself or his wife or son having a car wreck was to put in plenty of worry time about it. Stan took months to buy new cars, poring over Consumer Reports magazines to make sure they got the safest model. He was full of advice about what route to take, how to drive, and what to look out for. Whenever his wife or his son went anywhere, Stan worried the whole time they were gone. Beyond traffic accidents, he also worried about carjacking, floods, earthquakes, snipers, and sudden heart attacks while at the wheel. He’d had a fender bender two years earlier, and he still spent a lot of time ruminating about how he might have avoided it. In the short term, all the worry and rumination seemed necessary to feel safer, but in the long term he was still very frightened. He had a hard time forcing himself to drive on the freeway or make left turns without a green arrow. Plus, he was driving his family crazy and was starting to worry that his wife might divorce him.

Alyssa avoided any feelings of stress, anxiety, or worry with an arsenal of mental rituals and affirmative sayings. Before she opened the mailbox, she prepared herself for bad news by thinking,
“Clean, green, and serene.” When worries about paying the bills came up, she told herself, “Let it go and let it flow” or “I’m manifesting abundance and plenty in my life.” She quelled thoughts about her high blood pressure with “Don’t worry, be happy.” When walking, she kept her mind calm by counting her steps. She counted spoon strokes while stirring soup and brush strokes while grooming her dog and always tried to end on a round, even number, like one hundred. She told herself, “Good news, good news,” when the phone rang, and, “Careful, careful,” when the doorbell rang. When the lights flickered and dimmed, she thought, “Bibbity bobbity … boo!” and at the “boo” the lights were supposed to come on full and steady. In the short term, Alyssa sometimes kept anxiety at bay, but eventually it always returned. In the long term, she was scattered, disorganized, and unable to concentrate and get things done efficiently because of the constant chatter of her mind.

Consequences of Protective Avoidance

Carlos’s avoidance of anxious feelings took the form of checking the locks on his apartment and car doors, turning light switches on and off several times to make sure they were really off, repeatedly checking the stove knobs and furnace thermostat, and so on. In the short term, it seemed to keep him calmer, but it often took him fifteen minutes or more just to get out of the apartment. As a result, he was almost always late for work and appointments. In addition, his checking rituals were annoying to others, and in the long run, this made it unlikely he would ever find a roommate, have a long-term romantic relationship, or even invite a friend over for dinner.

Miriam tried to avoid her fear of germs and contamination by cleaning compulsively and excessively. For example, she scrubbed the grout lines of her tile with a toothbrush dipped in bleach, then scalded the tile with boiling water. For a while this made her feel that the surfaces were clean enough, but then she would imagine the few surviving germs multiplying and evolving into supergerms, and soon she’d be reaching for the bleach and the toothbrush again. In the long term, more and more of her time was taken up with cleaning, and she worried that nobody would want to date or live with someone like her.

Isaac, a draftsman for a large architectural firm, frequently felt ashamed and like a failure. He couldn’t stand the slightest criticism, so he overdid everything at his job, yet he never thought his work was good enough. He put in hours of unpaid overtime, polishing every last detail of every drawing. He missed deadline after deadline because he had trouble letting go of a project before it was “perfect.” In the short term, his overpreparation sometimes paid off in praise for excellent work, but in the long run he was in danger of being fired for being too slow.

Consequences of Somatic Avoidance

Christy was so afraid of having another panic attack that she avoided any physical sensations that reminded her of having a panic attack. She couldn’t stand feeling too hot, so she kept the windows wide open in the house year-round and ran the air-conditioning in the car all the time. Whenever her heart rate increased, she felt like her heart was skipping beats and a panic attack was coming on, so she never did anything remotely aerobic. She wouldn’t play tag or even hide-and-seek with her kids, and she climbed stairs as slowly as her seventy-year-old mother. She tried not to get excited about anything, even nice things like buying a new car or Christmas presents, and she hated surprises. Being short of breath was another panicky symptom, so she stopped having sex with her husband. In the
short term, she didn’t have any panic attacks for months. But in the long term, her daughter started calling her Zombie Mom, and her husband was getting interested in his personal trainer at the gym.

Consequences of Substitution Avoidance

Shareena, a single mother, had two kids under four years old. She was prone to depression and anxiety, but you’d never know it. Whenever she started to feel a little down or nervous, she covered it up with anger, which seemed to give her energy to power through her stressful day (not that she was all that aware of her avoidance strategy). A constant state of annoyance and irritability had become a habit with her, showing up as frequent outbursts of sarcasm, cursing, and the occasional raging tirade. In the short term, her raging was often kind of funny, and her friends said that Shareena had “attitude.” In the long term, it was getting kind of scary, and she suspected that people were avoiding her and gossiping about her.

For Keith, the way to avoid feelings of guilt and depression was to feel nothing. He cultivated a state of numbness that he thought of as “full-body Novocain.” In this spaced-out, insulated, anaesthetized state, nothing could touch him. At least that was the theory. To stay numb, Keith had to avoid socializing with people and stay unemployed. He holed up in the basement of his grandmother’s house and spent a lot of time smoking dope and watching movies he’d seen before or listening to his MP3 player blasting heavy metal and playing along with his unplugged electric guitar. Long term, he knew that his preferred state of numbness wasn’t a viable job description or the way he wanted to live the rest of his life.

Nadia avoided feeling angry at her emotionally distant parents and her verbally abusive boyfriend by dulling her feelings with alcohol and drugs. She had a Paxil with breakfast, beer with lunch, wine with dinner, and brandy and an Excedrin PM before bed—just enough to take the edge off rage and dampen her impulse to lash out at those around her. In the short term she got through her days, albeit in a blur, but as time went on she was becoming more dependent on alcohol and drugs.

Assessing Your Avoidance Strategies

Using the following worksheet, list the difficult feelings you try to avoid, your short-term avoidance strategies, and the long-term consequences in your life. Do this for each of the types of avoidance that you employ on a regular basis. Below, we’ve provided a sample worksheet that combines responses from several people with typical avoidance experiences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of avoidance</th>
<th>Bad feeling I want to avoid</th>
<th>Short-term avoidance strategy</th>
<th>Long-term consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational: avoidance of certain people, places, things, or activities</td>
<td>Feeling closed-in, trapped by people</td>
<td>Stay out of crowded elevators, subways</td>
<td>Can't work downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt about divorce</td>
<td>Avoid my son</td>
<td>Becoming strangers to each other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidated by people watching me</td>
<td>No eye contact or public speaking</td>
<td>People think I’m antisocial and shift</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive: avoidance of certain thoughts, images, or memories</td>
<td>Guilt and depression about growing apart from my wife</td>
<td>Distracting sexual fantasies</td>
<td>Never deal with the relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fears of injury and disaster</td>
<td>Push the mental images away</td>
<td>Getting even more fearful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry about kids getting hurt</td>
<td>Constant ritualized prayer</td>
<td>Distracted and alienating my kids</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective: avoidance of risk through checking, cleaning, perfectionism, procrastination, or carrying lucky charms, a cell phone, mace, and so on</td>
<td>Fear of criticism and scrutiny by others</td>
<td>Perfectionism, overdoing everything</td>
<td>Exhausted, criticized for perfectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of failure or inadequacy</td>
<td>Procrastination, can't get started on papers</td>
<td>Flunking out and depressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afraid of getting robbed or raped</td>
<td>Purse stocked with cell phone, whistle, and mace</td>
<td>Mailed my neighbor by mistake, lawsuit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic: avoidance of internal feelings like fast heart rate, palpitations, being out of breath, overheated, tired, excited, sexually aroused</td>
<td>Fatigue, exhaustion</td>
<td>Never exert myself</td>
<td>Garden and marriage dying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement, rapid pulse and breathing</td>
<td>Downplay every success, stay negative</td>
<td>People ignore or avoid me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual arousal, which feels like panic</td>
<td>Don't go on dates</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitution: seeking stronger, more tolerable emotions, numbness, alcohol, drugs, bingeing on food, gambling, risk taking, video games, pornography, and so on</td>
<td>Depressed and lonely</td>
<td>Bingeing on food</td>
<td>Overweight, depressed, and lonely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boredom, guilt, and shame</td>
<td>Drink too much, then drive and gamble</td>
<td>DUIs, poverty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious about nearly everything</td>
<td>Get lost in computer gaming, eBay, porn</td>
<td>Girlfriend left me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exposure and Its Benefits

In the jargon of psychology, *exposure* is the opposite of, and the solution for, avoidance. Exposure means that you stop avoiding painful feelings and start to actually experience the things that make you feel afraid, depressed, guilty, ashamed, or angry. “Exposure” is a scary word. It sounds like walking into a typhoid ward, being stuck out in the cold or on a steep mountainside, or standing in the middle of a battlefield.

In everyday language, better terms for exposure might be “living fully” or “participating in your own life,” because, in the long run, that’s what it feels like to get out of the vicious cycle of short-term avoidance and long-term disaster. That’s what it feels like to begin accepting your feelings, coping with the inevitable ups and downs of emotion, and moving forward in life on your own terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of avoidance</th>
<th>Bad feeling I want to avoid</th>
<th>Short-term avoidance strategy</th>
<th>Long-term consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoidance of certain people,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>places, things, or activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoidance of certain thoughts,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>images, or memories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoidance of risk through</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>checking, cleaning, perfectionism,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>procrastination, or carrying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lucky charms, a cell phone,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mace, and so on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somatic:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avoidance of internal feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like fast heart rate, palpitations,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being out of breath, overheated,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tired, excited, sexually aroused</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitution:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seeking stronger, more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tolerable emotions, numbness,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alcohol, drugs, bingeing on food,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gambling, risk taking, video</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>games, pornography, and so on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The benefits of exposure are threefold: First, you realize that although painful feelings are inevitable, they won’t kill you and they don’t last. Second, successfully coping with a difficult feeling sometimes gives you a sense of empowerment and a boost in self-esteem that makes exposure easier the next time. Third, and most importantly, you know that you’re showing up and participating in your own life and living according to your true values, not according to your fears and doubts.
Chapter 4

Values in Action

What Is It?

Your values are your chosen directions in life. They’re what you want your life to be about. Your values give your life meaning, vitality, power, inspiration, and motivation. They help activate you to break out of life-restricting patterns caused by anxiety and shame, or the torpor and withdrawal that fuel depression. In this chapter you’ll consider key areas of your life, consider which are most important to you, and uncover what you care about—your core values—in each area that’s important to you. You’ll also describe the barriers you encounter in each area and make a plan for committed action in service of your core values.

Clarifying and acting on your core values is a key component of acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson 1999).

Why Do It?

Putting your values into action will give your life meaning and direction. Values clarification directly addresses the transdiagnostic factor short-term focus, the maladaptive coping strategy that allows the painful emotions you feel in the moment to prevent you from doing what you really want to do in the longer term. You focus on avoiding pain in the short term, even though this has huge costs later in terms of quality of life.

For example, fear of a panic attack might keep you from attending a family reunion, even though you want to be with your family because you love them and you value keeping in touch with your roots. Likewise, it might stop you from accepting an invitation to go out on a date with someone interesting you recently met, even if you want to go on the date because you value companionship and intimacy. This short-term focus on avoiding anxiety (or any other painful experience) constricts your life over time. Getting clear about your core values and making a commitment to act according to your values make it easier to get beyond short-term emotional barriers.

What to Do

Acceptance and commitment therapy makes a clear distinction between values and goals. Values are a direction, and goals are specific destinations or waypoints as you travel in the direction of a given value. Values are a process, whereas goals are a product. For example, honesty is a value, whereas returning something you stole is a goal. Values tend to be expressed as basic, intrinsic, abstract principles, like love, truth, trust, or fidelity. Values aren’t needs, desires, or preferences, such as food, sex, or classical music. Some values, such as creativity, are associated mostly with your own welfare. Other values, like generosity, are directed more toward the welfare of others.
Identifying Your Core Values

The worksheet that follows will help you determine which areas of your life are most important to you and what you care about in those areas. The worksheet is organized into ten domains—common areas of life in which people typically hold strong values. Some of the domains will be very important to you, whereas others won’t be so meaningful. And there may be one or two others you want to add. To help you sort out these different areas of your life, here are short descriptions of the domains covered on the following worksheet. As you read through these descriptions, spend some time thinking about each and considering how important it is to you:

1. **Intimate relationships.** This domain is about your relationship with your significant other: spouse, partner, lover, boyfriend, or girlfriend. If you aren’t with anyone right now, you can still work on this domain in terms of your ideal relationship with some future person. Typical terms for values in the domain of intimate relationships are “love,” “openness,” and “fidelity.”

2. **Parenting.** What does being a mother or father mean to you? You can answer this question even if you don’t have children. In the domain of parenting, many people use terms like “protecting,” “teaching,” and “love.”

3. **Education and learning.** Whether or not you’re in school, there are many times in your life when you’re learning something new. Working through this book is a good example. Terms for values related to learning might be “truth,” “wisdom,” and “skill.”

4. **Friends and social life.** Who is your closest friend? How many good friends do you have? What would you like to be doing with your friends, or how many new friends would you have, if your fear, sadness, anger, or shame didn’t get in the way? Values that underlie friendship might be expressed with words like “loyalty,” “trust,” and “love.”

5. **Physical self-care and health.** What kinds of changes would you like to see in your life in terms of diet, exercise, and preventive measures? In the domain of the physical, values are expressed with words like “strength,” “vitality,” and “health.”

6. **Family of origin.** Consider the importance of your relationships with your father, mother, and siblings. How would you like these relationships to be? Many people speak of their values related to their family of origin with terms like “love,” “respect,” and “acceptance.”

7. **Spirituality.** Are you aware of or connected to something larger than yourself, something that transcends what you can see and hear and touch? Spirituality is wide-open. It can take the form of meditation, participation in organized religion, walks in the woods, or whatever works for you. In this area, people’s values usually involve having a certain relationship to God, a higher power, chi (energy), or the universe.

8. **Community life and citizenship.** Do your negative emotions keep you from charitable work, serving your community, or political action of some kind? Values in the public arena are often expressed with words like “justice,” “responsibility,” and “charity.”

9. **Recreation and leisure.** If you could get past your anger, sadness, guilt, or anxiety, how would
you spend your leisure time? How would you recharge your batteries and reconnect with family and friends in fun and games? Recreation values are expressed with terms like “fun,” “creativity,” and “passion.”

10. **Work and career.** Most people spend a large chunk of their lives at work. What would you like to accomplish at work? What kind of contribution would you like to make? What do you want to stand for in your workplace? What intentions did you have when you started working that you still haven’t put into action? Typical terms for values related to work and career are “right livelihood,” “excellence,” and “stewardship.”

Based on these descriptions, complete the following Values Clarification Worksheet. (Because it’s worthwhile to reassess your values from time to time, you may want to make a copy and leave the version in the book blank for future use.) Start by indicating the relative importance of each domain for you, placing an X under “Not important,” “Somewhat important,” or “Very important,” as appropriate. You may want to add your own domains at the bottom of the worksheet.

Next, for the domains that you marked “Somewhat important” or “Very important,” write just a few words that sum up your core value. A blank worksheet follows the sample version.

The worksheet below was filled out by Phil, a fifty-four-year-old technical writer for a software company, who’s been feeling depressed, anxious, and guilty. Phil has been married to Anna for fifteen years, and they’ve both put on weight and aren’t feeling very interested in each other sexually or otherwise these days. Phil’s dad died two years ago and Phil was the executor of his dad’s will. He borrowed $4,000 from the estate without telling his two brothers and hasn’t paid it back, and he feels guilty about it. On top of all this, he was recently diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, but he hasn’t managed to get on top of checking his blood sugar and changing his diet.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimate relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Love for Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and learning</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and social life</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical self-care and health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Staying healthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of origin</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community life and citizenship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation and leisure</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Values Clarification Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimate relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and social life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical self-care and health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community life and citizenship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation and leisure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Keeping a Values in Action Log**

Use the following log to work on your most important two or three domains from the previous exercise over the next ten weeks. In the first column, write your most important domains and the core
value you identified for each.

Then, in the second column, write your intentions: the things that you’d be doing if you could get past all the painful thoughts and feelings that keep you from acting 100 percent according to your values. Avoid vague, general intentions like “Be more loving” or “Stay calm.” For the purposes of this exercise, describe small, discreet, measurable actions:

- What you will do exactly: actions and words
- Whom you will do this with
- Where and in what situation you will do it
- When you will do it

Next, visualize yourself doing each of your intentions. Close your eyes and really imagine what it would be like, using all your senses: see yourself and any other people, watch what you do, hear the sounds, smell the smells, feel temperature and textures. Imagine what will be running through your mind and what will be happening in your body. Concentrate on the thoughts and feelings that will be barriers and tend to stop you from following through on your intention. When you have a good sense of the typical barriers to each intention, write them in the “Barriers” column.

Finally, commit to putting your values and intentions into action. Use the log to record the number of times you acted on each of your intentions each week. At the end of ten weeks, you’ll have a record of how you did.

Here’s a blank worksheet for your use, followed by an example filled out by Phil. We recommend that you continue using the log for other values and intentions in the future, so make several copies and leave the version in the book blank for future use.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most important domains and values</th>
<th>Intentions (in detail: who, what, when, where, how)</th>
<th>Barriers (feelings and thoughts that keep me from acting on my intentions)</th>
<th>Number of times I acted on my intention during week number ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domain:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Planning Committed Actions

Steve Hayes, father of acceptance and commitment therapy, frequently uses the metaphor of a bus to
illustrate how committed action works (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999; Hayes 2005). Here’s our version of that metaphor: Imagine that you’re driving a bus called Your Life. On the front of the bus is a sign saying where the bus is headed. The sign is a value, like “Being a loving person” or “Doing what I say I’m going to do.” When you turn the bus in the direction of your values, painful emotions and thoughts often pop up in front of you like monsters, and you can’t get around them or run over them. You could stop the bus and wait for them to go away, and that’s exactly what you do every time you put valued actions on hold because of difficult emotions. Unfortunately, those monsters don’t go away, so your bus is stalled by the side of the road.

The solution? You have to let the monsters on the bus and take them along for the ride. They’ll continue to try to cause trouble, yelling from the back of the bus that the route you’re taking is too dangerous, scary, dumb, hard, and so on. That’s what monsters do. That’s their job. Your job is to keep driving the bus in the direction you’ve chosen.

Committed action requires willingness on your part to feel some painful emotions in service of your values. Your values are your motivation. Focusing on the destination posted on the front of your bus takes your attention off of painful feelings. It makes them a little more tolerable and, in time, helps quiet the noisy rabble in the back of the bus.

So, where to start? One way is to pick the easiest, least threatening domain and start there. It’s like climbing smaller mountains before tackling Mount Everest. However, since your strongest, most important value will also be your most powerful motivator, you can make an argument for starting at Everest. It’s up to you and your sense of your own values and motivation.

In whatever domain you choose to make your first committed action, do some careful planning first. Take some time to think about concrete goals: specific actions you can perform, in a series of small, manageable steps, at certain times, in certain places, and with particular people. It helps to plan your action in the format below.

In service of my value of _______________
I am willing to feel _______________
so that I can _______________,
in these steps:
1. _______________
2. _______________
3. _______________

Here’s an example of an action plan:

In service of my value of caring and compassion for my friends,
I am willing to feel nervous and anxious
so that I can drive on the freeway and bridge to visit Marianne in the hospital,
in these steps:

1. Monday 7 p.m., call Marianne and tell her I’ll visit on Wednesday morning.
2. Tuesday after class, gas up car, clean windows, get change for toll, mark map.
3. Wednesday 10 a.m., drive to the hospital and have a great time visiting.
Applications

Values clarification helps with chronic anger by taking your attention away from the outrage of the moment and focusing it on where you really want to go in life. This will prevent you from falling into another cycle of confrontation, recrimination, remorse, and resentment. For example, at work you could plan to honor your values of productivity and teamwork by soliciting and accepting your assistant’s suggestions rather than calling her incompetent and insisting that she do everything your way.

Making step-by-step plans based on your values will lift depression by getting you into action. Instead of eating ice cream in front of the TV on Thursday nights, you can live up to your value of community service by attending and participating in that Rotary committee meeting you’ve been blowing off for the last six months.

Likewise, your values can motivate you to stop avoiding situations that make you anxious. For example, if you value self-expression, creativity, and community involvement, you’ll be motivated to practice performing a song and to sign up for the town talent show.

Getting in touch with your long-term, enduring values will also help you get beyond feelings of shame and guilt. For example, if you value truthfulness and standing up for the underdog, this will motivate you to speak up at a city council meeting to oppose an ordinance that makes it tough on homeless people in your town.

Duration

You can identify your values in a matter of hours, and then begin committing to valued actions right away. Use the ten-week log to track your follow-through, and after the first ten weeks, reassess your values and begin a new ten-week log. In a few months, putting your values into action will become more automatic and you won’t need the log.

As the habit of following through on valued intentions develops over months and years, you’ll start to allow emotions to flow through you (rather than obstructing you) as you ask yourself, “What’s really important to me in this situation? What do my values say I should be doing here?”

From time to time, it’s a good idea to revisit your values. Over time, you form new relationships, take on new responsibilities, encounter new health and career challenges, acquire new knowledge and interests, and so on. Your values will evolve with time, becoming deeper, more complex, and more mature. You should reassess your values every few years as your life changes.
Chapter 5

Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness

What Is It?

Mindfulness has two key aspects. First, it is the nonjudgmental awareness of what is. It is seeing without interpreting, evaluating, or appraising. It is the experience of everything that goes on around you without thoughts about value or worth.

Second, mindfulness is focused attention on the present moment, rather than the future or the past. It is seeing, hearing, and feeling what’s happening now, not getting caught up in what-if thoughts about possible catastrophes in the future or regretful thoughts about losses and mistakes that have already occurred. Mindfulness is attention to the river of now: your ongoing experience of what’s happening in your mind, your body, and the environment that surrounds you.

Mindfulness, with a specific focus on emotion awareness, is a component of all three universal protocols for treating emotional disorders: dialectical behavior therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy.

Why Do It?

Focusing on the future or the past intensifies painful emotions. What-if thoughts about the future make us anxious. Judgmental and regretful thoughts about the past can trigger depression, shame, or guilt. Shoulds—thoughts that focus on what we or others should have done differently—create anger or depression.

Staying in the present moment is an antidote to future- and past-oriented thoughts that can get you in trouble emotionally. That’s why mindfulness exercises are an essential part of the management of painful affect.

Mindfulness targets two of the transdiagnostic factors that lie at the root of emotional disorders: the maladaptive coping strategies of rumination and experiential avoidance. Because rumination is almost exclusively focused on the future or the past, mindfulness of the present moment reduces ruminative thinking. It’s hard to be consumed with what-ifs and judgmental thoughts if you’re focused on what your senses tell you in the here and now.

Mindfulness addresses experiential avoidance by allowing you to observe the way emotions rise, crest, and slowly diminish. Rather than avoiding the emotion, you can watch it, from the first uncomfortable feelings to the tail end, when that particular emotion morphs into other experiences. Watching the emotion mindfully is a huge shift from maladaptive coping strategies that involve trying to numb or suppress it. Now you can see it for what it is: a feeling that has a brief life on the stage of your experience and then fades away.

Mindfulness is crucial to emotion regulation for another reason too. It helps you see your emotions as only one part of the present moment. Whether you’re happy, angry, sad, or whatever, the emotion is just a single aspect of your current experience. There are so many other pieces of the present moment, including what you see, what you hear, what’s happening in your body, and what you’re tasting, smelling, and touching. Emotions are important, but they’re not your total experience.
helps you observe your emotions and situate them in the context of everything else.

**What to Do**

In this section, you’ll find a series of exercises that will help you increase your awareness of the present moment. All of them facilitate shifting from a painful focus on the future or the past to an awareness of the here and now. This moment can be a refuge, a location to recover from some of the dark places your mind takes you, so let’s begin.

**Inner-Outer Shuttle**

This exercise is a good introduction to mindfulness because it teaches you to differentiate between things happening inside your body and experiences in the outside world.

Start by closing your eyes and taking a deep breath. Next, notice any sensations inside your body. Observe any pleasant feelings. Also notice the locus of any pain or tension, but don’t let your mind linger there. Are there other sensations, like pressure, heat, or cold? Notice your breath. Be aware of the sensations in your feet where they touch the floor and in your hips if you’re sitting.

After a minute or two of looking inside, open your eyes and shift your attention to what you see, hear, and smell, as well as feelings of texture or temperature. Just move from one sense mode to another. Look at the shapes and colors around you, then let yourself be aware of small, ambient sounds, like a clock ticking. Also notice sounds that may be coming from outside the room or building. Do you hear the hum of a refrigerator, heater, or air-conditioning?

After a minute or two of external focus, close your eyes and return to an internal focus. Try to notice other, perhaps more subtle sensations than you did before. Let your attention roam throughout your body, noticing what you feel. Once again, if there’s anything uncomfortable or painful, notice it in the context of all other sensations and move on to whatever else there is to be aware of. After a minute or two, open your eyes and switch to outer awareness one more time.

At the end of this second cycle, take a few moments to reflect on the experience. Where are you most comfortable or most at peace: with attention to inner or outer experiences? Where is your mind quietest? In which state are you more likely to have distracting thoughts? We encourage you to do this exercise daily for a while. It’s an easy, nonintimidating way to enter mindful awareness, and it teaches you to pay attention to your senses rather than your thoughts.
Another relatively easy portal to mindfulness is to catalog what each of your senses is telling you. Spend about thirty seconds focusing on what you see, then another half minute or so on anything you can smell. Move on to what you hear, then any sensations of taste, and finally any tactile sensations originating both inside and outside your body, spending about thirty seconds with each. The entire exercise can be completed in two to three minutes. But here’s the most important part: Every time a thought pops into your mind, notice it and then bring your attention back to whatever sense you’re observing. The point of the exercise isn’t to stop your thoughts; your mind will keep chattering, no matter what. The point is to let thoughts go, rather than getting caught up in long chains of judgments and what-if thoughts.

The Five Senses Exercise is a great way to take a break from worries. As soon as you’ve been pulled into a worry rut, just shift to what you’re seeing right now, and then what you’re smelling, hearing, and so on. By the time you get through checking in with your five senses, you may not feel much need to go back to that old painful thinking.

Breathing Mindfully

Mindful breathing quiets emotions because it focuses your attention away from the locus of emotional upset. Instead of being caught up in your thoughts, you’re noticing your breath. Breathing meditations are an ancient tradition that goes back thousands of years, and it’s no accident that these techniques have been around so long. The focus on breathing induces feelings of peace and acceptance, and acceptance is very important in emotion regulation. That’s because resisting emotions only intensifies them in the long run. Acceptance of whatever is happening in the moment, including feelings you might rather not have, is the key to a healthy emotional life. As we mentioned in chapter 2, The Nature of Emotions, whatever you resist persists. The converse is also true: Whatever you accept is allowed to change, morph, and evolve into something else.

Mindful breathing is composed of three simple elements: attending to your breath, labeling the breath, and noticing and letting go of thoughts. You can attend to your breath in several ways. You can focus on the area just below your ribs, where your diaphragm (the sheet of muscle that fills and empties your lungs) does its work. This spot is also considered the energetic center of the body, and attention here facilitates feelings of balance and peace. Another way to watch your breath is noticing
various parts of your body that the breath touches. You might observe the air coming through your nose or mouth, the rush of coolness down the back of your throat, the feeling as your ribs expand and contract, and the sense of release in your abdomen as you start to exhale. You can let your attention roam to any of these locations while you breathe, noticing how the breath impacts your body in different ways at different places.

The second component of mindful breathing is to label the breath. This can be done in several ways. Some mindfulness teachers recommend saying “in” to yourself as you inhale and “out” as you exhale. Others suggest counting the breath. Typically this is done on each exhalation, so as you breathe out, you would count “one,” then on the next exhalation you would count “two,” and so on. Usually you count up to four and then start over at one again. Some people count ten breaths before starting over. Experiment with different ways of labeling the breath, and then do whatever feels comfortable for you.

The third component of mindful breathing is to notice and then let go of each thought. Just as you did in the Five Senses Exercise, when you recognize a thought (perhaps even saying to yourself, “thought”), simply return your attention to breathing and labeling the breath. Never feel discouraged when thoughts show up. This is normal and inevitable. Even the most advanced meditators have intrusive thoughts. The object of mindfulness is changing your relationship to your thoughts, not getting rid of them. Instead of letting thoughts launch you into long chains of worry and judgment, just acknowledge them and then return to your breath. The discipline of returning to the breath teaches you to let go of your thoughts and get into your present-moment experience. When you take refuge in your breath and see thoughts as just thoughts, they’ll simply come and go without pulling you back into the old mental and emotional nightmares.

We suggest that you practice mindful breathing daily. Start by practicing three times a day for two minutes each time. To help you remember to practice, tie the exercise to something you do a number of times throughout the day, such as eating or moving from one place to another. Alternatively, you might set a timer on your watch or another device for times when you plan to practice. After you become comfortable with mindful breathing for two minutes, increase it to three minutes, and then five minutes. Beyond five minutes, you might want to consolidate your sessions to one stretch of fifteen or twenty minutes. These longer periods of mindfulness offer benefits that can last for many hours, far longer than the time you invest in them.

Mindfulness of Emotions

When emotions occur, you can use mindfulness to observe them without getting swept off your feet. Just watch the feeling and label it. Name the emotion, and if it has any shadings or nuances or is a mixture of emotions, give yourself room to describe what you’re feeling and everything you notice as
fully as possible.

Don’t block or resist the feeling. Let it be whatever it is and as strong as it is. Every emotion is like a wave; it will intensify for a while and then gradually subside. Don’t amplify the feeling, hold on to it, or analyze the experience, and don’t judge the emotion or yourself for having it.

As you observe any given feeling, you’ll notice action urges—an impetus to do something. For example, anxiety typically makes you want to withdraw, and anger typically makes you want to attack. Just let yourself watch the emotion and notice the action urges without acting on them.

Here are the specific steps for this practice of mindfully watching an emotion:

1. Acknowledge and label the feeling. Observe it briefly to see how strong it is and whether there are other emotions mixed in.
2. Observe your breath. Bring your attention to your diaphragm while you breathe in and out.
3. When thoughts come up, label them and let them go. Return to an awareness of your breath and your inner emotional state.
4. Allow your awareness to become more expansive, more conscious of the space around you. Let it include your emotions, your breath, and sensations in your body, as well as awareness of whatever is outside your body. Then move further out, extending your awareness to the planet and the many stars and worlds that lie beyond our planet.
5. Let yourself know and hold your emotion in the context of your breath, your body, and an expansive sense of what surrounds you.
6. Stay with this practice until the original emotion begins to subside, as waves do, or morphs into something else, or until you feel you’ve done enough.

The point of mindfully watching your emotions is to let them be what they are—feelings that come and go—and to live in the full context of all of your experiences. You’ve experienced countless emotions in your life. You’re like the sky, and they’re like the weather. The weather keeps changing, but the sky remains constant. And although the weather of emotions sometimes seems powerful and overwhelming, if you observe your emotions you’ll see that they inevitably change and evolve into your next emotional experience.

It’s particularly helpful to use this exercise when you notice that you’re trying to avoid your feelings. Remember, this is precisely what makes them stronger and more enduring. Instead of running away, turn around and use mindfulness to observe that particular wave of emotion. Each time you face a difficult emotional experience, particularly when feeling it in the context of your breath and body and the world outside yourself, you’re taking a step toward acceptance. You’re also giving yourself the gift of the present moment.

**Mindfulness in Daily Activities**
The more you can stay in the present moment, the better you’ll feel. To begin integrating mindfulness into your daily life, choose to apply it to something you do briefly every day. It could be taking a shower, doing the dishes, walking to the bus stop, eating breakfast, or helping your children get dressed. The activity should be physical, not mental, so you can focus on each detail of the experience. For example, if you’ve chosen doing the dishes as an opportunity for daily mindfulness, you’d try to focus on the feeling of hot water on your hands. You’d notice sensations of holding the sponge and feeling the slippery soap. Then you’d pay attention to the texture of the dish in your hands and the sensation of water as you rinse it.

It doesn’t matter what activity you choose. The point is to listen to what all of your senses tell you. What you see, hear, feel, smell, and taste are the cornerstones of mindfulness. When thoughts intrude, take the same approach as in mindful breathing: Notice and label them, then return your attention to the sensory details of the activity you’ve chosen.

Practice doing your activity mindfully for a week. Sometimes it helps to put up signs or reminders to cue you to do the exercise. For example, a plan to do the dishes mindfully is more likely to happen if you put a sign over the sink. A plan to eat breakfast mindfully would be supported by a sign on the refrigerator or on a carton of milk or something else you typically consume at breakfast. If you plan to take a mindful walk to the bus stop, tie a piece of string on your briefcase or backpack as a reminder.

After the first week, add a second mindful activity and use a similar reminder system to help you follow through. Continue to add new mindful activities to your routine every week until you have a number of them peppered throughout your day.

One Thing at a Time

While all mindfulness exercises will help you feel more calm, there will still be moments when you feel vulnerable, even overwhelmed by emotions. Whenever that happens, slow down, make sure you’re doing just one thing, and then pay attention to the physical activity you’re engaged in. Try to notice only that activity and nothing else. Let yourself get immersed in what you’re doing by paying attention to what your eyes, ears, and other senses tell you.

Doing one thing at a time helps slow you down and quiet your thoughts. While it won’t change the fact that something upsetting has happened, it will help you shift from thoughts about the future and past to what’s happening right now. As soon as you do that, you can feel everything begin to ease up, including the emotion that had been so intense.

Applications

Mindfulness is helpful for dealing with rumination—those times when you’re caught up in judging or
what-if thoughts. Start by using the Five Senses Exercise to enhance your awareness of the present moment. If you continue to ruminate, practice Breathing Mindfully to focus your awareness on a core physical experience. Each time you notice a negative thinking pattern, bring your attention to sensory awareness or your breath.

Mindfulness also helps reduce stress. Mindful breathing is a powerful relaxation technique that has an immediate impact on physical tension. Mindful activities reduce stress by shifting attention away from worry and catastrophic thinking. Instead of stewing in what-ifs, your mind is focused on the experience of walking, eating, getting dressed, driving your car, or whatever. Engaging in any activity mindfully will help your mind steer away from anxious thoughts and your body let go of unnecessary tension.

A third application of mindfulness is dealing with any strong emotion, whether fear, depression, anger, or shame. Start with the practice Breathing Mindfully, to bring your focus to this essential, ongoing body function. As you begin to relax, use the practice Mindfulness of Emotions to observe what you’re feeling and watch the wave gradually subside. If you continue to feel distress, use the practice One Thing at a Time to pull your attention into what’s happening in that moment. Notice what each of your senses is telling you about the experience, and stay with it until your emotional reaction begins to subside.

**Duration**

Mindfulness is a way of life. Once you acquire the habit and skill of mindfulness, you should use it both as a daily discipline to induce calm and for the specific applications we’ve suggested. Mindfulness will help you with emotion regulation for the rest of your life, as long as you’re committed to using it whenever negative thoughts and feelings occur. Mindfulness should be your first response to distress, pulling you into full awareness of what your body and senses are telling you in the moment.
Chapter 6

Defusion

What Is It?
Defusion involves noticing your negative thoughts and detaching from them so they’ll be less likely to create or intensify negative feelings. The term “defusion” was coined by Steve Hayes, cofounder of acceptance and commitment therapy. It grew out of his study of relational frame theory, and is somewhat similar to Aaron Beck’s distancing technique (Beck and Emery 1985). Steve Hayes noticed that emotionally troubled people tend to be “fused” tightly to their thoughts, being their thoughts rather than having their thoughts. He developed techniques to “de-fuse,” or detach, people from their negative thoughts, distancing them from the emotional pain those thoughts cause (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999; Hayes 2005).

Why Do It?
Defusion helps you take your mind less seriously. The techniques you’ll learn in this chapter will help you stop buying into your negative thoughts so you can carry on with your life despite doubts and fears. Defusion is a powerful tool for understanding your mind’s upside and circumventing its downside.

The Mind’s Upside

The mind is the human species’ most important survival mechanism. Over millions of years, it has evolved into a nearly perfect language machine. It constantly scans your environment for danger and opportunity and converts sense impressions into thoughts—mental symbols expressed as language. Then your mind manipulates these symbols as if they were reality itself, making all kinds of symbolic connections and conclusions. It does this language trick at incredible speed, all the time, and mostly unconsciously. You hardly notice the language machine at work as it helps you avoid danger and evaluate whether things are good or bad for you.

The Mind’s Downside

The mind’s design as a survival mechanism has some problematic side effects. You tend to automatically trust that your thoughts are true so that you can react quickly to either danger or opportunity. For example, if you see dark and light stripes moving in the grass, your mind converts the sense impression into a language symbol (the word “tiger”), and then correlates the symbol with all of your other associations related to tigers and concludes, “Danger!” This thought causes a flight response in your body, so you run away. If that movement in the grass is actually a tiger, that’s clearly an upside of how the mind works.

The problem is that many thoughts aren’t accurate. Sometimes your sense impressions are wrong: It’s actually a chipmunk or the wind in the grass, not a tiger. More often, the inaccuracy is that you’ve been alerted to something that has nothing to do with reality. Unfortunately, the mind manipulates...
symbols as if they were reality. Perhaps, years ago, you had a bad experience involving a stranger, driving, or your mother. Since then, your mind has been making up symbols derived from symbols derived from other symbols until finally you may distrust all strangers, fear driving, or hate all tall, blond women because your mind has associated them with your mother.

Coping with the Downside

When your habitual thoughts are causing you emotional pain, you can try to uncover the original experiences, the formative traumas that started your mind on its long history of symbol manipulation. This is a core technique of classical Freudian psychoanalysis. But it's time consuming, expensive, fraught with myths and metaphor, and as difficult as unscrambling scrambled eggs.

Alternatively, you can forget about the original trauma and try to detect, analyze, and correct your current mental errors, which is exactly what early versions of cognitive therapy tried to do. But that's also time consuming and difficult because your mind runs constantly. Thoughts tend to be fast and furious, so analyzing them is like trying to drink out of a fire hose, and disputing and correcting them is like trying to work on the engine of a car while it's going ninety miles per hour. Meanwhile, you're suffering.

We think the best approach is defusion. Because it's a way of taking a time-out from believing everything your mind comes up with, defusion is a shortcut to serenity. When you defuse, you step aside from the fire hose of thoughts that are pushing you around. You put in the clutch to disengage from the constantly running motor of your mind so that it stops driving you down the road to depression, anxiety, shame, and other difficult emotions.

Defusion targets two transdiagnostic factors: the maladaptive coping strategies of negative appraisal and rumination. When you can stop identifying with negative thoughts and begin observing them in the context of the many other thoughts and feelings you experience, negative appraisals will become much less powerful, and possibly less frequent. And when you dismiss the thoughts that lead to rumination about the past or worry about the future as “just another thought,” you stop the process of rumination and worry in its tracks.

What to Do

This section contains two kinds of defusion exercises: teaching exercises that allow you to experience and understand fusion and defusion, and simpler, shorter, real-life exercises that you can use in your day-to-day life. We’ve given you quite a few exercises in both categories. If one technique doesn’t work to create distance from painful thoughts, try a different one.

Teaching Exercises

Try each of these exercises in turn. They will give you a good feel for how your mind creates and processes the meaning of words, and how thoughts and images flow through your awareness.
This exercise is a language game that shows how meaning attaches to and detaches from words. It was originally created by British psychologist Edward Titchener (1916) and is now widely used in acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes 2005). It’s very simple.

Find a private place where you can speak without any concern about being overheard.

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that you’re opening a container of fresh, cold milk. Feel the texture of the container, then imagine pouring some milk into a glass. See the white, creamy stream bubble up and fill the glass. Smell the milk, then take a sip. Dwell on this sequence until it becomes very clear to you. At this point, you probably have the faint taste of milk in your mouth, even though you aren’t actually drinking any milk. That’s because your mind’s incredible ability to code sense impressions into symbols works backward as well: it can turn symbols like the word “milk” into imaginary sense impressions.

Now you’ll temporarily turn off your mind’s symbol-sense mechanism for the word “milk.” Say the word “milk” out loud, over and over again. Say it as fast as you can while still pronouncing it clearly. Time yourself and do it for twenty to forty-five seconds.

What happened to the meaning of the word? Write your reactions here: ___________ ___________ ___________

Most likely, the word “milk” became a nonsense sound for you, no longer calling up vivid sense impressions of the wet, cold, creamy substance you’ve known all your life. Did you notice that the word started sounding odd? Did you start focusing on the way your mouth and jaw muscles moved or how the end of one repetition of the word transitioned into the beginning of the next?

Most people find that the meaning of the word “milk” fades after repeating the word for a while. This fading of meaning rarely happens in real life. We’re all so immersed in a stream of talk and words that we rarely notice that they’re just a bunch of sounds.

Negative Label Repetition

In this exercise you’ll apply the MilkMilkMilk effect to one of the negative labels you tend to apply to yourself. As in the previous exercise, find a private place where you can speak without any concern
about being overheard. Start by summing up a negative thought you have about yourself into one word. Pick a really harsh, emotionally loaded, negative word, like “stupid,” “loser,” “wimp,” “bully,” “worthless,” “coward,” or “failure.” A one- or two-syllable word is best; the shorter the word, the better this approach will work. Write the word you’ve chosen in the space below. Rate how painful or distressful it is to think that this word applies to you using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means no pain at all and 10 means maximally painful. Then rate how true or believable the word seems to you at this moment using a scale of 0 to 10 in which 0 means not believable at all and 10 means totally true and accurate.

Word: _______________ How painful (0 to 10): _______________ How true (0 to 10): _______________

Now, repeat the word out loud for twenty to forty-five seconds, just like you did the word “milk.” Notice how much meaning detached from your negative word. Did it become less painful? Did it start to become less true or believable? Rate your word again to see how much it changed.

Word: _______________ How painful (0 to 10): _______________ How true (0 to 10): _______________

Leaves in a Stream

This is a classic meditation practice, used in various forms all over the world to quiet and clear the mind. We thank Steve Hayes (2005) for this particular version. Find a quiet place to practice where you won’t be disturbed.

Sit down, close your eyes, and imagine that you’re sitting on the bank of a slow-moving stream on a warm, peaceful autumn day. Occasionally a leaf falls into the water and floats away on the current, drifting out of sight downstream. Give yourself enough time to form a clear picture of the scene.

Start noticing your thoughts. Whenever a thought comes to mind, sum it up in a simple word or phrase: “boring”…“Johnny”…“sad”…“dumb exercise”…“what’s for lunch?”…and so on.

Put your word or phrase on a leaf and let it float away, out of sight and out of mind.

If thoughts arise as images, without specific words, then place the images on the leaves and let them float away.

Don’t try to make the current flow faster or slower, and don’t try to change what’s on the leaves in any way.

Don’t worry if the stream won’t flow or if you find yourself stuck on a leaf along with a thought or image. Don’t be surprised or worried if the leaves disappear, the whole scene disappears, or you go somewhere else mentally. Just notice that these things happened and then return to the scene beside the stream.
Keep doing this for about five minutes. This should give you enough time to have the experience of trying to let go of your thoughts.

Open your eyes and record your reactions below.

If the stream stopped flowing or you went elsewhere mentally, describe what happened:

____________________________
____________________________
____________________________

If you never really got a clear image of the scene, describe what you were thinking while trying to do the exercise:

____________________________
____________________________
____________________________

This exercise shows how sticky some thoughts are. They can grab you and take you along for a ride even when your intention is entirely otherwise. But this exercise also gives you some practice in letting go of thoughts and letting them drift away. When the stream wouldn’t flow or you were stuck on a leaf with your thoughts, you were experiencing cognitive fusion. When the stream was flowing freely and the leaves carried your thoughts out of sight, you were experiencing cognitive defusion.

White Room Meditation

Like the previous exercise, this is a meditation technique for observing thoughts as they pass through your mind, this time visualizing a simpler, indoor setting. Again, find a quiet place to practice where you won’t be disturbed.

Sit down, close your eyes, and imagine that your mind is an empty white room with two doors. Your thoughts enter through one door and leave through the other.

As each thought crosses the room, dispassionately observe and label it: “jealousy”…“depressing thought”…“thought about Joan”…“mother”…“guilty thought”…and so on.

Notice when thoughts don’t quickly leave the white room and instead hang around in your mind. This happens when you start buying into or believing your thoughts.

As before, record what happened or failed to happen: ______________
____________________________

This exercise gives you practice in labeling or categorizing your thoughts, a key skill for practicing
Real-Life Defusion Exercises

In your day-to-day life out in the real world, you can’t walk around saying, “MilkMilkMilk,” or periodically drop into the lotus position on the sidewalk to meditate. You need shorter, simpler defusion exercises that you can do in an elevator, on the bus, in a meeting, on an airplane, in the shower, in your car, or wherever you find yourself. Here are some approaches you can use in your day-to-day life.

“What’s My Mind Up To?”

This technique helps you defuse from your thoughts by creating some analytical distance. You’ll find that most distressing thoughts fit into the categories of worry, judgment, or planning, so you shouldn’t have to search very long for the right word to fill in the blanks.

When you feel distressed, try this simple technique: Instead of dwelling on distressing thoughts, ask yourself, “What’s my mind up to?” Then answer yourself by labeling each thought as your mind presents it:

“Now my mind is having a _______________ thought.”
“And now my mind is having a _______________ thought.”
“And now my mind is having a _______________ thought.”

Continue in this way until you’ve labeled five to ten thoughts.

Labeling Thoughts

Notice that instead of using statements like “Now I’m worried” or “Now I’m worrying,” the previous exercise uses the phrasing “Now my mind is having a worry thought.” This is labeling: describing a thought as something your mind produces, rather than something you are or something you do. It’s a
subtle distinction, but it lies at the heart of defusion. There are a variety of other ways you can label your experiences. When you have a distressing thought, feeling, or urge, try labeling it using one of these forms:

- I am having the thought that _______________ (describe your thought).
- I am having the feeling that _______________ (describe your emotion).
- I am having a memory of _______________ (describe your memory).
- I am feeling the bodily sensation of _______________ (describe your bodily sensation).
- I am noticing a desire to _______________ (describe your behavioral urge).

**Circumlocution**

The labels above are circumlocutions—longer, wordier descriptions of your thoughts, sensations, or urges that take your assessments off of automatic pilot and cast those assessments as transient creations of your mind, rather than as true facts about you or the world. Circumlocutions help you separate yourself from your mind and also dilute your interior monologue with extra verbiage, slowing down your stream of consciousness so that you can see what your mind is up to.

You can make up your own circumlocutions to defuse from fast, short, sharply painful thoughts. For example, “I’m anxious” might become “My mind is once again having that very familiar thought that I am anxious.” Likewise, “Asshole!” might become “I notice that my mind is having a hateful thought about Jim and calling him an asshole.”

**“Thank You, Mind”**

This is a very brief defusion technique in which you simply thank your mind every time an unpleasant thought pops up. It’s a quick way of reminding yourself that it’s only a thought, that thinking is what your mind does, and that in a minute your mind will be doing something else. It may take several thank-yous to defuse from a persistent train of thought. Here’s an example:
Breathing Mindfully While Observing Thoughts

Many of these brief defusion techniques can be enhanced by using mindful breathing to relax your body while you’re observing your thoughts. When you switch part of your attention to your breathing, it interrupts your thoughts and distracts you from giving them your full attention. In addition to observing your breath, try slowing it down. This calms your body’s flight-or-fight response to stress and sends your mind and body the message that everything is okay. To review the full instructions for mindful breathing, see chapter 5, Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness.

“How Old Is This?”

Each time you have a familiar painful thought, ask yourself, “How old is this?” Recall the earliest time you can remember having the thought. This will remind you that it’s just a thought, that it has come up before, that it will continue to come up from time to time, and that you will continue to survive the thought and carry on with your life, just as you always have before.
Each time you have a painful thought, let go of it by turning your hand over as if you’re letting go of a small stone that you’ve been carrying. Tell yourself, “There’s a thought… Let it go,” as you turn a hand and let the thought fall away.

Card Carrying

Write your most typical bothersome thoughts on a 3 by 5 index card and carry it in your pocket or purse. When your mind comes up with one of these thoughts, dismiss it by saying to yourself, “I’ve got that on the card.” You don’t need to once again dwell on past mistakes, worry about a potential confrontation, or catalog your shortcomings. You’ve already done those things, and you’ve got them on the card.

“What’s That in Service Of?”

When intrusive thoughts plague you, ask yourself, “What’s that in service of? What is my mind trying to get me to do?” For instance, say your husband’s birthday is coming up and you know he’d like to go out to dinner at his favorite restaurant, but every time you think about making reservations, you remember the inner-city neighborhood where that restaurant is located and think, “What if we get mugged?” A wave of anxiety and depression comes over you and you feel overwhelmed.

The next time it happens, ask yourself, “What’s that in service of? What is my mind trying to get me to do?” The fact is, maybe you almost never go out at night because it makes you nervous to be away from home after dark. In that case, you’d realize that your thoughts are in service of immobilizing you until it’s too late to make the reservation.

Seeing the purpose of an intrusive thought—usually to prevent you from doing something scary—is very different from buying into the thought. When you buy into a thought, you’re assuming it’s true. When you see the purpose of a thought, you realize it’s just your mind trying to make you do or not do something.
“And How Has That Thought Worked for Me?”

This exercise continues the theme of the previous one. If you have the thought “What if we get mugged?” and feel paralyzed whenever you consider going out at night, ask yourself, “And how has that thought worked for me?” Chances are, it’s worked to keep you stuck at home alone while your partner or friends go out without you, and your life and relationships have diminished over time as a result.

By asking “And how has that thought worked for me?” you expose the consequences of being your thoughts, as opposed to having your thoughts. You gain a bit of distance from your thoughts and throw some light into the space between what you think and who you are.

“I’ll Take This Thought with Me and Still…”

Here’s the payoff of the two previous exercises. You’ve defused from habitual, painful thoughts by asking what they’re in service of, and you’ve reminded yourself that buying into these thoughts hasn’t worked well for you in the past. Now you can tell yourself, “I’ll take this thought with me and still…”

- make the birthday dinner reservation.”
- finish the report on time.”
- tell her I love her.”
- register for classes on Tuesday.”

This self-statement is shorthand for a major theme of acceptance and commitment therapy, which could be characterized like this: “Yes, I have this thought and it makes me feel anxious (depressed, angry, guilty, and so on), but it need not stop me from living my life. I can have this thought and this feeling and carry on with what I really want to do. As I go forward, this thought and this feeling will come up again, and again I will take it with me. I accept this thought and commit to pursuing what I really value in life.”

Applications

Defusion applies across the board to all the mood disorders, lessening the impact of the worry
thoughts typical of the various anxiety disorders and the judgmental thoughts that fuel depression, anger, and shame. Let’s take a look at the applications of defusion for each of these mood states.

Anxiety

Anxious thoughts come in a wide variety of forms. Here are just a few examples:

- I’m freaking out. I’ll have a panic attack.
- I hope the hotel room isn’t on a high floor.
- Did I lock the back door? Better check one more time.
- I can’t let down my guard or something terrible will happen.
- Everything’s falling apart: the taxes are due, bills are due, the roof leaks, and Jan’s sick.
- They’re all laughing at me because I’m so clueless.

Anxious thoughts generally share two themes: worry about the future rather than a focus on the present moment, and fearful predictions of danger, catastrophe, or embarrassment that vastly exceed the likelihood that those things will actually come to pass. The defusion techniques that involve observing and labeling thoughts can reduce anxiety about the future by helping you detach from your thoughts and allowing you to see how they come and go. Defusion techniques such as Card Carrying and “I’ll Take This Thought with Me and Still…” help reduce the paralyzing impact of dire predictions.

Depression

Depressive thoughts tend to focus on failure, hopelessness, and loss. Here are some typical examples:

- I always screw up.
- What’s the use of trying? Nothing works for me.
- It’s hopeless.
- I’ve failed again.
- Why did I lose______________?

The bleakly judgmental thoughts of depression are best defused by techniques that remind you that thoughts are transient and often just plain wrong. Remember, thoughts come and go, and they aren’t necessarily true; they’re just your mind trying to get your attention. If your depression leaves you feeling lethargic, use shorter defusion exercises that can be done quickly, such as “Thank You, Mind,” Turning a Hand, or “How Old Is This?”

Anger

Angry thoughts are heated, defensive, and relentlessly judgmental. Here are some examples:
• What a jerk!
• How dare she say that?
• I’ll show those bastards!
• Take that!

The best defusion techniques for the violently judgmental thoughts of anger are those that work quickly so that they can have an effect before rage escalates into shouting, breaking things, or hitting. Try Card Carrying or Turning a Hand. If anger has settled into smoldering resentment, you can try techniques that take a bit more time, such as “What’s My Mind Up To?” or Breathing Mindfully While Observing Thoughts.

Shame

Shameful thoughts turn your judgment back on yourself. They also frequently feature rumination on the past. Here are a few examples:

• I’m no good.
• I’m damaged.
• I’m unforgivable.
• I can never lift my head in the world.
• I don’t deserve anything pretty or fun or nice.

The judgmental thoughts of shame or guilt often focus on the past, so use defusion techniques that look back in time: “What’s That in Service Of?” “And How Has That Worked for Me?” and “How Old Is This?”

Duration

You can start practicing defusion right away. You’ll experience some of its distancing, quieting, calming effects immediately. But defusion is more like aspirin than surgery: It wears off and you have to keep taking it. You’ll need to practice various defusion techniques for several weeks or even a few months to develop the habit of using defusion in your day-to-day life. The automatic language machine of your mind has been spewing thoughts at you since the day you learned to say “Mama,” so it will take time to unlearn the old habit of accepting every random thought as true. Defusion techniques aren’t a one-time fix, like deciding to never wear lime green pants again. It’s more like practicing yoga or physical therapy to gradually improve your posture and flexibility over time.

In the long term, defusion has great potential for changing major behavioral patterns. As you learn to successfully defuse from habitual negative thoughts, they’ll become weaker and less frequent. This will improve your mood and make it easier for you to live your life according to your values and preferences, rather than your fears and doubts.

Everybody backslides from time to time. You can count on having some days when you forget to defuse from your negative thoughts for hours at a time. When you do finally notice that you’re caught up in your thoughts, don’t beat yourself up. Just return to one of the simple defusion exercises that you learned in this chapter, and remember that at any moment you can start observing your thoughts instead.
of buying into them. Every moment provides an opportunity to return to having your thoughts, rather than being your thoughts. Also remember that thoughts come and, thankfully, thoughts go. Throughout, you remain constant and can carry on with your life.

Emotional pain is a red flag signaling that you should return to one or more of your defusion strategies. It’s almost always triggered by a process in which one negative thought launches you into a linked series of related negative thoughts. Defusion is the best way to stop this chain of thoughts.
Chapter 7
Cognitive Flexibility Training

What Is It?

Cognitive flexibility training will help you broaden your thinking so you feel less trapped in rigid, negative beliefs and perceptions. Many people find themselves returning to the same negative thoughts over and over: the same judgments (“I’m a failure”), the same images of the future (“Something bad will happen”), and the same interpretations of events (“She doesn’t like me”). They don’t know how to expand their thinking to include a broader array of expectations and perceptions about events.

The transdiagnostic factor that cognitive flexibility training targets is negative appraisal. This maladaptive coping strategy uses one or more of five negative thinking patterns:

- **Making negative predictions** about the future
- **Underestimating the ability to cope**
- **Focusing on the negative** while ignoring all other aspects of a situation
- **Making negative attributions** (assuming negative motives and explanations for events)
- **Thinking in terms of shoulds** (rigid rules about how you and others must behave, and the belief that you and others are bad for breaking these rules)

In cognitive behavioral therapy, negative appraisal was originally targeted with a process called cognitive restructuring (Beck et al. 1979). People were encouraged to reappraise events with more positive interpretations and predictions while an emotionally challenging situation was occurring. The idea was to dispute negative assumptions and cognitive errors and replace them with healthier alternative thoughts. Recently, researchers have suggested that classic cognitive restructuring has two problems.

The first problem is that trying to dispute and replace a negative thought with one that’s positive implies that the negative thought is false and the positive one is more accurate. Couching things in this true-false dichotomy may not always serve people well. In fact, assuming that negative thoughts are distorted sometimes pushes people to defend them all the more (McKay, Davis, and Fanning 2007).

The second problem is that disputing negative thoughts in the middle of a distressing situation can function as an avoidance strategy—an effort to stop painful emotions—and there’s a lot of evidence that trying to block or avoid painful emotions actually makes them more intense and longer lasting. So in the long run, disputing thoughts while you’re upset might only make the upset worse (Allen, McHugh, and Barlow 2008). David Barlow, one of the leading lights in cognitive behavioral therapy, now suggests that cognitive restructuring be done before or perhaps after an upsetting event, not during the event (Allen, McHugh, and Barlow 2008). This way you aren’t trying to suppress emotions during situations that provoke strong feelings.

In light of the above research, plus evidence that disputing thoughts doesn’t always work (Hayes 2005), the cognitive flexibility training presented here takes a different approach from classic cognitive behavioral techniques. It encourages an awareness of multiple alternative interpretations for
events and discourages seeing thoughts as right (positive) or wrong (negative). The more ways you can look at something, the less tied you’ll be to any particular negative thought. It also differs in that it encourages you to broaden your thinking either before or after events that trigger strong emotions, not during such events.

Cognitive flexibility training isn’t about trying to argue with or dispute negative thoughts. It also isn’t about trying to suppress or control thoughts or avoiding emotions as they arise by banishing problematic ideas. It’s about developing multiple ways to look at things that happen to you and exploring alternatives to old negative appraisals.

Why Do It?

Negative appraisals contribute to anxiety, depression, anger, shame, and guilt. Virtually every painful emotion can be intensified and maintained by such thoughts. Although these thoughts are a result of your mind doing its best to prepare you for danger and help you face difficult things in life, the bias toward seeing the negative has a huge cost: You end up thinking that every horror story your mind tells you is true. The world you live in becomes what your mind makes it: scary, sad, or unfair. And you see yourself not as you are, but as the person your mind describes: lazy, bad, selfish, or stupid.

Cognitive flexibility training can loosen the way your mind defines reality. As you learn to develop multiple alternative appraisals, you’ll be less inclined to automatically accept everything your mind tells you as truth. Your new appraisals may not be any more right (or wrong) than your old thoughts, but by virtue of the fact that they are new possibilities, they help stretch your mind and loosen old, rigid beliefs.

What to Do

The first step in cognitive flexibility training is to identify what type of thinking you’re doing. In this section, we’ll help you learn to recognize the five types of negative appraisals, then provide exercises that will help you understand and change each of these thinking patterns.

Recognizing Categories of Negative Appraisal

As mentioned, there are five types of negative appraisals: negative predictions, underestimating the ability to cope, focusing on the negative, negative attributions, and shoulds. It’s important to learn to recognize which of these categories your thoughts fall into, because different cognitive flexibility techniques are effective for each. To help you learn to identify them, here are some example thoughts from each category:
NEGATIVE PREDICTIONS

- I’m going to end up losing my house.
- My boss is going to give me a bad review.
- This heartburn will turn out to be an ulcer.

UNDERESTIMATING THE ABILITY TO COPE

- I’m no good at interviewing; I can’t deal with looking for work.
- I’d be destroyed if my mother died.
- I couldn’t stand it if they were upset with me.

FOCUSING ON THE NEGATIVE

- This vacation is boring.
- Every time we visit my brother, he monopolizes the conversation and spoils the evening.
- My life is nothing but problems.

NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTION

- My sister didn’t come to Thanksgiving because she doesn’t like my girlfriend.
- He’s listening to the ball game because he’s tired of talking to me.
- She was late because she’s mad at me.

SHOULDS

- He should help me and not wait for me to ask.
- I should be making more money at this point in my life.
- I was stupid to buy this car; I should have bought a newer one.

Now we’d like you to practice identifying which of these five categories a particular thought belongs in. Read through the list of negative appraisals below, and in the blank, mark each according to the category it falls into:

a. Negative predictions
b. Underestimating the ability to cope
c. Focusing on the negative
d. Negative attributions
e. Shoulds
1. _______d_______ Example: He didn’t call because he’s losing interest.
2. _______________ I should be married with a family.
3. _______________ I’m not going to pass the course.
4. _______________ My son’s behavior problems are too much for me.
5. _______________ My son’s going to get kicked out of school.
6. _______________ What a lousy day off—a total loss.
7. _______________ My husband was quiet at dinner because he didn’t want to eat out.
8. _______________ I can’t handle another medical problem.
9. _______________ People shouldn’t talk about their family issues.
10. ______________ The whole course was a waste.
11. ______________ I ought to read good books instead of trash.
12. ______________ My friend is calling because she wants something.

ANSWER KEY:

Keeping a Thought Log

To strengthen your skill at recognizing categories of negative appraisals, keep a thought log for the next week. Each time you have a painful emotion, write down the thoughts that accompanied this feeling, then note which category of appraisal this thought reflects. Make several copies of the form below to last through the week, and use the same letter designations as in the previous exercise:

a. Negative predictions
b. Underestimating the ability to cope
c. Focusing on the negative
d. Negative attributions
e. Shoulds
At the end of the week, review your log and note which types of appraisals occur most often. Then spend some time thinking about the emotional impact of these thoughts and what, if anything, you do to cope with or respond to them.

The sections that follow provide exercises targeting each type of negative appraisal. You may find it helpful to read through all of them, but you can focus your efforts on the exercises that target your most typical or frequent types of negative appraisals.

### Cognitive Flexibility with Negative Predictions

The key to cognitive flexibility is developing the ability to come up with multiple ideas about how to interpret an event or situation. With negative predictions there are several ways to go about this. Two of the following exercises will help you assess how accurate your negative predictions are, and the third will help you figure out what purpose these predictions serve.

#### Calculating the Validity Quotient

The validity quotient is a measure that gives you an idea of how accurate thoughts are at fortune-telling. To find the validity quotient for a specific prediction, start by answering the following questions (Moses and Barlow 2006):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought Log</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How many times have you made this prediction in the past five years?
How many times in the past five years has it come true?

To calculate the validity quotient, divide the number of predictions that came true by the total number of predictions. You can also use the validity quotient to assess the accuracy of predictions in general. How many negative predictions have you made, of all types, in the past year? How many turned into realities?

Here’s an example: June kept having anxious thoughts that whomever she was dating at the time would leave her. She estimated that over the past five years she’d worried about this at least 100 times. During the same time period, June herself left several relationships, and one ended by mutual agreement. Her validity quotient was 0/100. June used this analysis to recognize that although her thoughts predicting rejection felt very believable at the time, they were just ideas—and not in the least bit accurate. Far from being certain to happen, they had actually never happened.

Keeping a Predictions Log

In the previous exercise you looked at the accuracy of past predictions. This exercise will help you track the accuracy of predictions as they occur. Every time you seriously start to worry about something and imagine a bad or painful outcome, use the following Predictions Log to record exactly what you fear will happen and when. From time to time, check your Predictions Log and bring it up to date. Did the predicted catastrophe happen or not? In the right-hand column, write the actual outcome of each prediction. You may want to make copies of the log and leave the following version blank so that you can always make more copies as needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictions Log</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prediction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(what terrible thing will happen and when)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Predictions Log will help ease the sense of certainty that so often accompanies negative predictions based on worries. And when these thoughts seem less absolute, they’ll trigger less fear.

Here’s how it worked for Annie. She began keeping a Predictions Log focused primarily on her fears about her six-year-old daughter. Annie wrote down all of her worst-case predictions about medical problems, relationships with other children, and learning and behavior problems. In the space of three months, Annie logged more than two dozen negative predictions. Yet only one of them came true (a lice infestation during a classroom epidemic). As a result of keeping her log, Annie began to take her worries a little less seriously. She started viewing them as possibilities, rather than likely outcomes. Annie’s worries felt softer, less absolute, and less scary.

Finding the Purpose of Your Predictions

Every behavior has a purpose, and that includes mental behaviors—your thoughts. In this exercise, you’ll identify the functions of your negative predictions and gain an understanding of why you keep turning to them. Look back at some of the predictions noted in your Predictions Log or try to recall some negative predictions from the past few weeks. These thoughts are all trying to do one thing: reduce uncertainty. They seek to prepare you for bad things that might happen and somehow keep you safe.

But is this working? Think back and notice what happens when you make negative predictions. Do you feel more secure and more prepared for danger, or are you simply more scared?

For most people, negative predictions leave them feeling more anxious and less safe. In fact, the degree of anxiety people experience is often proportional to the time they spend focusing on predicting. So here’s what you can do: When your mind generates scary predictions, ask yourself, “Is this working for me? Is this helping me deal with an uncertain future, or just frightening me more?” If the answer is the latter, remind yourself that these are just thoughts, not reality. Label your thoughts, saying something like “There I go again with the predictions (or what-ifs or future thoughts).” This will help you notice your thoughts but take them less seriously.

Cognitive Flexibility with Assessing Your Ability to Cope

How would you cope if the worst happened? You may have images of collapsing or being emotionally overwhelmed. Your mind may be saying, “I couldn’t stand it if what I fear actually happened.” Or your mind might serve up a global sense of catastrophe and a vague feeling that you couldn’t take it. The best way to deal with thoughts such as these is to draw up a plan for coping with your worst-case scenario, as in the first exercise below. You may also find it helpful to review how well you’ve coped with difficulties in the past, and the second exercise will help you do just that.
Drafting a Worst-Case Coping Plan

Start by assuming that your worst-case prediction has come true. Imagine facing cancer, a lost job, the end of your relationship, or whatever catastrophe you fear. Imagine that you’re in the middle of the crisis trying to grapple with the event. On the Coping Plan Worksheet that follows, write a brief description of your worst-case prediction. Since you may want to generate additional coping plans in the future, use a copy of the worksheet and leave the version in the book blank for future use.

Now shift your attention to what you’d do to cope, using the following questions to help you generate a plan. Start by considering how you’d cope behaviorally and writing your ideas in the “Behavioral coping” section. What, specifically, would you do to face this crisis? If it was a medical problem, what steps would you take to get treatment, negotiate accommodations at work, or secure support at home? If you were facing an end-of-life crisis, how would you deal with financial affairs, the emotional needs of your family, and limitations as your physical capacities decline? If you fear a financial crisis, outline the steps you’d take to reduce expenses, secure a source of funds, or change your living situation. As you think about how you’d cope behaviorally, also consider what values would guide your choices in the situation. If you feel uncertain about this, refer back to chapter 4, Values in Action.

Next, think about how you’d cope emotionally and record your ideas in the “Emotional coping” section. What could you do to deal with the emotional fallout from the crisis? Think about some of the skills you’ve learned in this book. At this point, mindfulness skills would probably be most effective. Later in the book you’ll learn other skills that will also be helpful, such as self-soothing, doing the opposite, and emotion exposure. As you learn more skills, be sure to integrate them into your coping plans.

Next, turn to the section “Cognitive coping.” Would mindfulness, defusion, or any of the techniques in this chapter help you face your feared scenario?

Finally, move to the section “Interpersonal coping.” Are there friends, family members, or others who might offer support if the feared event occurred? Later, in chapter 10, Interpersonal Effectiveness, you’ll learn other skills that might be helpful here, such as making assertive requests or saying no. Again, be sure to incorporate these into future coping plans. Here’s the blank worksheet for you to copy, followed by a sample.

Coping Plan Worksheet

Worst-case prediction: _______________

Behavioral coping: _______________
_____________
_____________
_____________
_____________
Emotional coping: ______________

Cognitive coping: ______________

Interpersonal coping: ______________

Now that you’ve come up with a comprehensive coping plan, have your feelings regarding your worst-case prediction changed in any way? Has your fear level gone up or down? Does the scenario seem less overwhelming or less scary to think about?

Here’s an example filled out by Anthony, who had an enduring worry that his marriage was in trouble. He and his wife were in couples therapy, but the sessions only seemed to stir up more conflict. He feared they were headed for divorce, and didn’t know how he’d cope if that happened. (Note that Anthony’s plan makes use of some strategies that you’ll learn in later chapters.)

**Anthony’s Coping Plan Worksheet**

**Worst-case prediction:** She calls it quits, says she’s got a lawyer, and is getting a divorce.

**Behavioral coping:** Get my own lawyer.
Try to explain things to my daughter, Jeanie, so she isn’t scared.
Work out a temporary custody schedule.
Look for a two-bedroom apartment so Jeanie can have her own room when she’s with me.

**Emotional coping:** Learn to accept the emotion using exposure techniques.
Spend some time in a beautiful place—Yosemite?
Get support from friends. Do fun things with Jeanie. Get back into photography.

**Cognitive coping:** Remember that I have a plan.
Try to find positives in my new life.
Try to accept that we’re different people with different needs, and that we’ve been growing apart for years.

**Interpersonal coping:** Turn my anger into assertive requests regarding assets and time with Jeanie.

After completing the worksheet, Anthony was surprised to discover that he felt less anxious. He still wanted to save his marriage, but having a plan for coping reduced his panic and sense of being
overwhelmed when he thought about the possibility of divorce.

Remembering Your Coping History

You’ll probably find it helpful to remember that you’ve faced difficult situations in the past and coped with them successfully. Use the following Coping History Worksheet to list five major challenges in the past where you coped more effectively than expected. For each crisis, note the specific ways you coped. Did you do anything that surprised you or seemed different from your usual response to challenges? Are there common threads across these situations in terms of ways you responded effectively?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping History Worksheet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenging situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When Rena, a forty-five-year-old social worker who struggled with self-esteem, examined five challenges she’d dealt with successfully, she noticed that a common thread was assertively asking for what she wanted. She hadn’t let people push her around, as she often did. It was illuminating for Rena to see that she was capable of standing up for herself and did actually possess effective coping skills—she just had to use them.

Cognitive Flexibility with Focusing on the Negative
Focusing on the negative is perhaps the most problematic cognitive habit for maintaining depression. Fortunately, it can be overcome with a few specific skills. One key is to expand your focus and take a different perspective. The first two exercises will help you do that. You may also find it helpful to consider the purpose these negative thoughts serve and how well they’re working for you; the third exercise addresses this.

Using Big-Picture Awareness

Focusing on the negative is like eating dinner and only noticing the food you don’t like. As for the rest of the meal—what you might have enjoyed—you simply don’t pay attention. Negative focus shows up in countless ways. Whether you’re thinking about a vacation, a conversation, a movie, a relationship, a job, a place you lived, or how you’re going to spend tomorrow, focusing on the negative turns it into something dark and sad. You simply fail to notice, remember, or anticipate anything that feels good.

Stepping back and taking a look at the big picture is a way to overcome this cognitive habit. It’s simple to do. After you’ve said or noticed what you don’t like about an experience, add some positive assessments to help balance your perspective. For each negative appraisal, acknowledge two things that you liked or appreciated. Make it a rule not to think or talk about the negative without identifying two positive aspects. When looking for the positive, consider these categories:

- Physical pleasure or comfort
- Positive emotions
- Rest, relaxation, relief, or peace
- A sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, or validation
- Finding something interesting, exciting, or fun
- Learning something
- The feeling of connection or closeness
- The feeling of being loved or appreciated
- Finding something meaningful or valued
- The feeling of giving something

Put these categories on an index card and keep them with you. Then, when you think or speak negatively about something, use these categories to find two positive aspects and balance your perspective.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with having negative thoughts and evaluations, and they may, in fact, be true. But there are always positives in every event and situation, and ignoring them puts you on a one-way street to painful emotions.
For example, Leah hated visiting her mother-in-law. And worse, her complaints about it and reluctance to visit were creating conflict in her marriage. So she decided to try this exercise. When she looked at the list of positive categories, she was surprised to see that several applied: Her mother-in-law served delicious pastries, so visiting often offered some physical pleasure. Leah had fun playing with her in-laws’ collie, and she actually felt a sense of connection with her mother-in-law when they talked about a TV program they both enjoyed.

Looking at the big picture allows you to see that things aren’t all good or all bad. Most experiences have multiple components; some feel good, and some don’t. Seeing each event as an amalgam of the pleasant and unpleasant helps you develop more balanced and flexible thinking.

Seeing Both Sides of the Coin

Nearly every bad or painful thing that happens has embedded in it the exact opposite. Most losses include something gained or learned. Moments of failure and weakness often evoke strength or determination. Right alongside trauma, there’s often an incredible will to survive.

Like most people, you’ve probably experienced many painful moments, losses, and disappointments. Yet if you look, most of these experiences offer something else. The coin has another side. Although a negative focus may keep you from seeing the other side (the positive), it’s usually there. Cognitive flexibility training encourages you to look past the pain and recognize the positive qualities or outcomes usually embedded in even the worst of times. As with the exercise Using Big-Picture Awareness, the positive aspects often show up in specific categories, such as the following:

- Learning something
- Finding new strength or determination
- Gaining greater appreciation of the struggles of others
- Experiencing greater acceptance and an ability to let go
- Discovering new or unrecognized parts of yourself
- Finding love and support you hadn’t known were there
- Gaining confidence in your ability to cope, face things, and survive
- Developing a deeper sense of values and what matters most to you

Try it right now. Below, list three events that seem to be entirely negative, such as serious losses or failures on your part. You’re well acquainted with how painful they were, but now flip the coin over and look for the positive aspects. You can use the categories above or come up with your own characterizations.
Shana used this exercise to look back at the six miserable years she spent in psychology grad school. She’d been depressed beyond belief and almost quit numerous times. But when she looked for the positives, she found there were quite a few: finding unwavering support from her best friend, developing a new sense of willpower and perseverance, learning how to take better care of her body, and discovering a commitment to help others in pain.

Understanding the Purpose of Negative Focus

As we’ve said, all behavior, even thought, has a function. Focusing on the negative usually has one of these four functions:

- Discharging negative affect that has built up in painful situations
- Reducing expectations and disappointments
- Avoiding future negative experiences
- Trying to perfect oneself or get rid of flaws through negative self-evaluation

Think about some of the negative thoughts you return to again and again. Which of the above four functions might apply? You may discover functions for these thoughts other than those we listed; that’s fine too.

Now, for the key question: Are these negative thoughts doing what they’re supposed to do? Are
they discharging pain, reducing disappointment, helping you avoid future pain, or making you a better person? If so, fine. But if not, they aren’t working. The fact is, most people don’t derive much benefit from a negative focus. They feel more pain, not less, and more disappointment because they spend so much time remembering things that went wrong. Paradoxically, they don’t seem able to avoid painful events, but this is actually a function of their focus: negative events are all they pay attention to, so they tend to miss positive experiences. And self-critical thoughts usually have the effect of making people feel more flawed, not less.

So when you catch yourself in a negative focus, ask yourself, “Is this working? Does this help me in any way?” If the answer is no, acknowledge the thought and label it, saying something like “There’s one of my ‘life’s no good’ thoughts.” Then let it go. Of course, it will show up again, but just keep labeling these thoughts and letting them go. Eventually they’ll seem less important and less convincing.

Cognitive Flexibility with Negative Attributions

We humans like to find out why things happen, because if you can explain events you can often control or anticipate them. The trouble is, an event or behavior can often be explained in different ways. This is particularly true of ambiguous behavior, like someone frowning, shrugging, or moving a little distance away. You can’t help trying to interpret such events, even though it’s impossible to know for sure what they mean. And if you have a negative bias, you’ll often interpret ambiguous behavior as a sign of rejection or displeasure.

The need to explain things is especially evident when something really bad happens: Your job is eliminated, you develop a serious illness, or someone you love withdraws. In such cases, a negative bias almost always leaves you at fault. You attribute these events to your own shortcomings or something you did wrong.

When the mind grabs onto explanations, it often won’t let go. Once you have an interpretation of why something happened, you tend to believe it and stick with it. The exercises in this section will help you be a little less absolute about negative attributions. They’ll help you discover multiple plausible explanations for the same event so that you’re less likely to cling to negative attributions with a sense that they must be true.

Finding Alternative Explanations

Whenever you answer the question why with a negative attribution, blaming yourself or someone’s negative feelings about you for the event, fill out the following Alternative Explanations Worksheet. (Make several copies and leave the version in the book blank for future use.) Describe the event
briefly, along with your negative attribution as to its cause. Then brainstorm five to ten other possible explanations. For example, someone frowning could mean that the person was tired, bored, thinking of something to say, having an unpleasant memory, noticing physical pain, wanting to go home, worrying about something, and so on. If it seems helpful, you can rate the probability of each alternative using a scale of 1 to 3 in which 1 means slightly possible, 2 means somewhat likely, and 3 means likely. A sample worksheet follows the blank version.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative Explanations Worksheet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Event:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It’s important to develop alternative explanations every time you have a negative attribution because it helps the attribution seem a little less absolute. Once you’re a bit less convinced of an attribution, your thinking becomes more flexible and you can see the same event from a number of vantage points.

### Sam’s Alternative Explanations Worksheet

| Event: | My company has asked me to identify four smaller accounts I can give to another sales rep. |
| Attribution: | They think I’m slipping, not doing a good job. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative explanations</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New junior reps need some established accounts to get started.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m spread thin over too many smaller accounts and they want me to focus on the big boys.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They’re getting me ready for a management position.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My sales slipped a little and it’s a wake-up call.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone’s sales slipped this year. The company is trying to get the more effective reps to handle only the more productive accounts.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exploring Concurrent Realities

Sometimes it’s helpful to find out what other people think. Maybe they see the same event through a very different lens. When you find yourself seriously caught up in a negative attribution, find other people who witnessed the same event and ask them how they assessed the ambiguous frown, the layoff, the strange remark, or the sudden withdrawal. If you can’t find someone who witnessed the event, pick a sympathetic friend, describe what happened, and ask how your friend would explain the event. If the event hinges on another person’s behavior, you might even consider asking that person why he or she behaved that way. Once you’ve gathered one or two opinions from others, add them to your Alternative Explanations Worksheet for that event and rate their probability.

Here’s an example of how it works: When Sam told another sales rep about having his accounts reassigned, he was surprised to learn that his colleague had experienced the same thing. His colleague thought it was because small accounts were taking too much time and not earning much, and maybe the company didn’t want to service them anymore. Sam thought this seemed somewhat likely, so he added it to his list of alternative explanations and rated it a 2.
Cognitive Flexibility with Shoulds

It’s important to have values: guiding principles that help you live your life in a way that’s meaningful to you. However, values must always be understood in context. Sometimes the value of being open and truthful may have to play second fiddle to the value of being loving if truthfulness would do unnecessary damage in a particular situation. So it’s important to act on your values flexibly, depending upon the needs and circumstances of everyone involved.

Shoulds and rules are often too inflexible. Shoulds insist that you and others always act a certain way, no matter what, and rule-bound behavior can get you in trouble because it often brings you into conflict with other people’s rules or needs. Since rules and shoulds tend to be absolute—thought of as applying to everyone at all times—we often label ourselves or others as bad or wrong when rules are broken and shoulds are violated. This results in a lot of anger, guilt, shame, and depression.

To soften shoulds and rules and make them more flexible, you can do two things: express shoulds as preferences, not absolute rules; and broaden your understanding of why people break rules.

Transforming Shoulds into Preferences

Sometimes simply phrasing things differently can be a powerful way to increase cognitive flexibility, and this is definitely the case with shoulds. Whenever you’re inclined to use the words “should,” “ought to,” or “must,” try using the word “prefer” instead. Here are some examples:

- “You should work harder” becomes “I would prefer that you work harder.”
- “I should never show fear” becomes “I would prefer not to show fear.”
- “I must look confident” becomes “I would prefer to look confident.”
- “You should never be late” becomes “I’d prefer you not be late.”

Notice that “prefer” softens the absolute quality of shoulds and transforms them into an expression of what you personally desire. Start working on establishing this habit right now. Every time the word “should” pops up in your vocabulary, take note of it and immediately restate the sentence as a preference.

Understanding Reasons for Breaking the Rules
Why do people sometimes behave in ways that violate cherished beliefs about how we should act? Why do things happen that shouldn’t? The answer is largely cause and effect. Long chains of events lead people to see the world in a certain way, need certain things, fear certain outcomes, know or not know how to do certain things, resist or dislike certain things, and so on. When you add all of that up (if you actually could), it accounts for most behavior. People do what they do not because it’s what they should do, but because of long strands of cause and effect, often originating in their deep past. It might be useful to move beyond the idea that people *should* do anything. We all do what we do because of a matrix of complex causes.

The Breaking the Rules Worksheet that follows will help you identify people’s reasons for breaking the rules—whether the person is you or someone else. (Make several copies and leave the version in the book blank for future use.) Start by briefly describing a recent situation where you or someone else broke a rule or violated a should. Next, briefly describe the rule that was violated. Then, under “Influencing Factors,” list your speculations about how each factor might have influenced what happened. Each time you fill out this worksheet, you’ll gain insight into how choices get made—and perhaps find more acceptance or forgiveness for those times when people, yourself included, break the rules. A sample worksheet follows the blank version.

### Breaking the Rules Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation:</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule that was violated:</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Influencing Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fears:</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other emotions triggered:</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs:</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pain or pleasure triggered by the situation:</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>History (old experiences that might influence a response):</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs, values, and attitudes:</th>
<th>______________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| The behavior of others: | ______________ |
It’s okay to guess about influencing factors. The point isn’t to be right; it’s to recognize possible drivers for the behavior. Behavior isn’t just a matter of being good or bad, or right or wrong. It’s pushed and prodded by a lot of factors. Learning what some of them are is the key to developing cognitive flexibility around shoulds.

Laura filled out several Breaking the Rules Worksheets before she started to think more flexibly about why people don’t do what they should. This one was triggered by an evening when her mother got angry at her.

Laura’s Breaking the Rules Worksheet

**Situation:** Mom got mad at me for “always complaining” when I said I don’t like cheese on breaded veal.

**Rule that was violated:** People shouldn’t get angry; they should be polite.

**Influencing Factors**

**Fears:** Mom is afraid of disapproval.

**Other emotions triggered:** I think she was embarrassed.

**Needs:** Mom needs to feel like she’s pleasing and taking care of everybody. She feels like she screwed up if I don’t like something she does.

**Pain or pleasure triggered by the situation:** I took away her pleasure in making us a nice meal.

**History** (old experiences that might influence a response): Mom’s mother was the self-sacrificing type. Everything was about doing for others.

**Beliefs, values, and attitudes:** She thinks her main job in life is to make everyone happy; I guess I made her feel she was failing at it.

**The behavior of others:** I think what I said sounded sharp and disapproving.

Filling out the worksheet helped Laura think about the situation more flexibly. It softened her sense of outrage and helped her get over feeling angry about her mom’s behavior. The next day she called her mom to say she understood how her mom felt.

**Applications**

Each category of negative appraisal will influence some emotions more than others. Anxiety, for example, is primarily driven by negative predictions and underestimating the ability to cope. If you’re anxious or fearful, be on the lookout for these types of appraisals and focus on the exercises that target them: Calculating the Validity Quotient, Keeping a Predictions Log, and Drafting a Worst-Case Coping Plan.

Anger is most often generated by negative attributions and shoulds. If anger is an issue for you, focus on cognitive flexibility exercises such as Transforming Shoulds into Preferences, Understanding Reasons for Breaking the Rules, and Finding Alternative Explanations.

Guilt and shame are most often triggered by focusing on the negative and shoulds. Exercises to
emphasize include Transforming Shoulds into Preferences and Understanding Reasons for Breaking the Rules. Also work with the exercises Using Big-Picture Awareness and Seeing Both Sides of the Coin.

Depression can be driven by all five categories of negative appraisal. If you’re struggling with depression, start with the exercise Keeping a Thought Log to see which types of negative appraisal show up most frequently for you, then focus on the cognitive flexibility exercises pertinent to those categories.

**Duration**

It will take at least two weeks to work your way through this chapter and do the relevant exercises. You may be able to skip the exercises for some categories of negative appraisal if they aren’t an issue for you. That may save a little time. For appraisals that you struggle with, you’ll need to work with the exercises for two to four months for new cognitive habits to set in.
Chapter 8

Self-Soothing

What Is It?

Self-soothing is any activity, experience, or pastime you find relaxing and pleasurable. It can be listening to music, taking a hot bath, practicing yoga, going for a walk, doing relaxation exercises such as deep breathing—whatever you like doing that reduces stress. As straightforward and easy as self-soothing can be, many busy, stressed-out people need to learn how to incorporate it into their lives. Another important point is that self-soothing isn’t a license to do anything you like. Dangerous or unhealthy pleasures, such as reckless driving or overindulging in alcohol and hard drugs, aren’t considered appropriate self-soothing.

Self-soothing is one of a set of distress tolerance skills taught in dialectical behavior therapy, which has a long history of clinical effectiveness (Linehan, 1993).

Why Do It?

Many self-soothing and relaxation exercises can be done quickly, in virtually any setting, and without a lot of practice. At the very least, relaxing and soothing yourself give you a chance to rest and recover from stress. In addition, feelings of relaxation and enjoyment become a benchmark of serenity and a point of comparison that will help you recognize more stressful periods in your life. Finally, self-soothing and relaxation are healthy coping strategies because they involve nondamaging pleasure.

Self-soothing addresses the transdiagnostic factor response persistence by providing an alternative to habitual, ineffective ways of reacting to painful emotions. It expands your adaptive repertoire to include new and varied activities that serve as positive coping strategies you can use instead of the negative coping strategy of avoidance.

When Not to Do It

Practitioners of acceptance and commitment therapy consider self-soothing and relaxation exercises to be forms of emotional avoidance that can interfere with learning to desensitize to painful emotions (Eifert and Forsyth 2005). To make sure that you aren’t using the skills taught in this chapter to avoid your feelings, don’t self-soothe in these situations:

- **Don’t self-soothe to avoid the arrival of a painful emotion.** Let’s say a good friend has announced that she’s moving away to a distant city. Every time you even start thinking about her, you suppress your feelings of loss and grief by playing your guitar, watching a video, or firing up your computer to surf the Internet. This is an inappropriate use of self-soothing because it’s an attempt to avoid fully experiencing normal feelings of loss and grief.

- **Don’t self-soothe in place of an appropriate emotional response.** If you’re angry about being passed over for a promotion at work, an appropriate response might be using that anger as motivation to dust off your résumé and inquire about openings in other departments. If you
respond to the first twinge of anger by heading to the break room for a pastry, you might not get around to planning a positive, active response.

- **Don’t self-soothe in a way that interferes with valued or necessary experiences.** For example, if you want to help your daughter with her homework, but every evening you turn on the TV instead, that form of self-soothing is keeping you from an important opportunity to bond with and help your child.

- **Don’t use self-soothing or relaxation techniques during emotion exposure exercises.** Doing so will block your habituation to your feelings and make the exercises useless.

**What to Do**

Self-soothing can take an infinite variety of forms, and what works for different people is highly individual. In this section, we’ve divided the possibilities into two main categories: practices that promote relaxation, and suggestions for a wide variety of sensory experiences that can serve as self-soothing techniques.

**Relaxation**

The exercises in this section will help you learn to relax profoundly. The first involves a specific breathing technique and the second involves relaxing all of your muscles as much as possible. In the third you’ll use a cue word to help you relax, and in the fourth you’ll visualize a safe place. Try all four exercises to see which suit you best.

**Diaphragmatic Breathing**

When you’re upset, your breathing becomes fast and shallow. By consciously slowing your breathing and taking air deep into your belly, you send your body the message that everything is all right and there’s no need to panic or be upset. Diaphragmatic breathing is simple, but its stress-relieving effects are dramatic. The diaphragm is a wide, strong sheet of muscle beneath the lungs. When you inhale, your diaphragm moves down and out, pushing out your stomach and drawing air into your lungs. When you exhale, the diaphragm moves up and inward to push air out of your lungs. Here are detailed instructions on how to practice diaphragmatic breathing.

Find a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed for five minutes. Sit up straight and put one hand on your stomach. Close your eyes and take a slow, deep breath in through your nose. Feel how your stomach pushes out against your hand. Then exhale slowly through your mouth, noticing how your hand moves inward again. Continue to breathe in and out slowly and deeply, feeling your hand
moving out and in with each breath.

Notice how each inhalation expands your stomach like a balloon. Also notice how your body feels more and more relaxed as you continue to breathe this way. Try to keep your focus on your breath. If your mind wanders, you can try counting during each breath to focus your attention on your breathing. Slowly count to four as you inhale, then slowly count to four again as you exhale.

Practice diaphragmatic breathing for five minutes twice a day, or whenever you feel the need to relax.

Body Awareness

The relaxing effect of this exercise relies on the fact that you can’t feel tense and nervous when all of your muscles are in a state of relaxation.

Find a quiet spot where you can lie down and not be disturbed. Lie on your back with your legs uncrossed and your hands at your sides. Close your eyes, take a long, slow breath, and put your attention in your feet. Become aware of any tension you’re feeling in your feet. Say to yourself, “calm,” “relax,” “serene,” “easy,” or another cue word of your choice. As you say the cue word, imagine any tension draining out of your feet.

Next, move your attention up to your calves and shins. Notice any tension in your lower legs, and say your cue word to yourself. As you say the word to yourself, imagine any tension draining out of your calves and shins.

Next, do the same thing with your upper legs—the large muscles in your thighs. Continue moving your relaxing attention up your body: to your buttocks, then your stomach, then your chest, then your back, and then your shoulders. For each area of the body, become aware of any tension, then say your cue word and let the tension fade away.

Next, do the same for your hands, then your forearms, then your upper arms, then your neck, and finally your head, in each case noticing any tension and using your cue word to dissolve the tension. When you’ve scanned your entire body in this way, you will have significantly reduced your overall muscular tension, profoundly relaxing your body.

Practicing this exercise once or twice a day for a week will teach you a lot about where you carry tension in your body. It will also make you much more adept at relaxation.
Once you’ve gained some experience and skill with the body awareness exercise, you can use your cue word for quick relaxation anywhere, anytime. Close your eyes for a just a few seconds and scan your entire body for tension. Notice where your muscles are tight, and then say to yourself, “relax,” “calm,” or whatever cue word you like and let your whole body relax.

Safe Place Visualization

This exercise takes advantage of the fact that your mind and body will react to an imaginary peaceful scene almost as strongly as they would to a real location. Think of a place, real or imaginary, that makes you feel safe and happy. It can be someplace from your childhood, a vacation spot, a church or temple, a setting from a book or movie, or even a historical setting—absolutely anywhere you like. If you can remember the following instructions, just close your eyes and paraphrase them to yourself. Otherwise, you might want to record the instructions in a calm, quiet voice, and play them back until you’ve practiced this technique a few times and are familiar with the process.

Find a quiet place where you won’t be disturbed for twenty minutes. Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet flat on the floor and your arms in your lap or on the arms of the chair. Close your eyes and take a deep breath, inhaling through your nose. Hold your breath for five seconds, and then exhale slowly. Take another deep breath and hold it for five seconds, and once again release it slowly. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply without counting or holding your breath.

Imagine that you’re entering your safe place. Use your sense of sight first, and imagine seeing the shapes and colors of the place. Fill in the details. Are there any people or animals there? Watch them do whatever they’re doing. If your safe place is inside, notice what the walls and furniture look like. If it’s outside, observe the sky, the horizon, the ground, and any plants or water. Continue to observe until you have a clear, vivid visual impression of your safe place.

Next, concentrate on your sense of hearing. Can you hear the wind? Waves? People talking? Is there music? Do you hear any birds or animals? Choose something soothing to hear.

Next, notice what there is to smell in your safe place. Perhaps it’s a scent you remember fondly from your childhood, like flowers or freshly baked bread. If you’re outside, smell the ocean, the grass, or whatever aromas surround you. Take a moment to enjoy the fragrances.

Next, notice what you can feel with the sense of touch. Are you sitting or standing in your safe place? Is there any breeze against your skin? Is it warm or cool? Focus for a moment on what your sense of touch can tell you about this place.

Next, imagine that you can taste something in your safe place. Eat or drink something and imagine how delicious it is.

Continue to enjoy your safe place, breathing slowly and evenly and noticing what you see, hear, smell, feel, and taste. Realize how safe, relaxed, and content you are in this place. This is your
personal, private safe place, and you can return to it at any time. Whenever you feel sad, afraid, angry, or guilty, you can come here for a break and feel this same sense of relaxation and security.

Look around one more time and fix the details in your mind. Now focus again on your breathing. Keep your eyes closed a bit longer, as you remember what the actual room you are in looks like. When you feel ready, open your eyes and return your focus to your surroundings.

You can practice this exercise whenever you need a soothing mini vacation. Once your safe place has become very familiar to you, you can close your eyes for a few seconds during a busy day, visualize your safe place briefly, and feel calmer and more relaxed.

Sensory Self-Soothing Techniques

Below, you’ll find lists of soothing activities organized by the five senses: touch, hearing, sight, smell, and taste. All are designed to give you a soothing moment of peace, but people are different in what they find most soothing. Look over the lists and choose activities that are likely to soothe you, and also be willing to try new activities to see how they work for you. Some people find jazz or classical music very relaxing, while others find it energizing or nervous-making. If you try a suggested activity and it doesn’t feel soothing or actually makes you feel worse, move on to another activity.

Self-Soothing with Touch

The skin is the body’s largest organ. It’s loaded with sensitive nerves, and no matter what the circumstances, you’re always touching something. But it’s easy to forget the sense of touch. Some tactile sensations, such as petting a cat, can be very pleasing, while others, like being scratched by a cat, are painful and important warnings to pull back from potential injury. People differ in their tactile preferences. Check off any of the items below that you’re willing to try, and use the spaces at the end of the list to add some ideas of your own:

- Carry a soft, velvety piece of cloth, a smooth polished stone, or worry beads in your purse or pocket to touch when you need to.
- Take a hot or cool shower and enjoy the feeling of the water falling on your skin.
- Take a bubble bath or a bath with scented oil and feel the soothing sensations.
- Have a massage. There are many types of massage: clothed or unclothed, deep tissue or very light pressure, neck and shoulders only, and so on. Talk to a couple of massage therapists and find one who feels right for you.
- Give yourself a massage. Just kneading and rubbing your own muscles feels good.
Stretch. The sense of touch isn’t just skin-deep; it operates inside your body as well. Yoga or a few runner’s stretches can soothe your body from the inside.

Pet an animal. Research shows that people with pets have lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, and reduced risk of heart disease. And petting an animal just feels good. If you don’t have a pet, consider getting one. You can also visit a friend who has a pet or volunteer at an animal shelter.

Wear your most comforting clothes—that soft sweatshirt, those old jeans, your slipper socks, or the warm scarf your mother made.

Other: ____________________
Other: ____________________
Other: ____________________

Self-Soothing with Hearing

What sounds soothe you? Music, the sea, a babbling brook? In the list below, check off all of the sounds that you’ll try, and also add some of your own auditory ideas if you like:

- Listen to soothing music in the genre you find most relaxing: classical, jazz, folk, pop, world, Cuban, new age, oldies, whatever. Put on your favorites, sit back, maybe with headphones, and let the sounds wash over you.
- Listen to an audiobook. Your public library probably has lots to choose from. You don’t even have to follow the story line; just listening to someone with a nice voice can be soothing. Keep one audiobook going in your car and another one going at home.
- Listen to white noise. You can get a white noise machine that makes a whooshing background sound that drowns out or covers over distracting sounds in your environment—or you can use a fan to do the same thing. Many people find white noise very relaxing.
- Listen to television. Turn the sound down low and close your eyes or go about your activities, using the TV as company or white noise to soothe you.
- Listen to a talk show on the radio, but stay away from politics or news that will make you upset or angry. Interviews of inspiring people or NPR shows about gardening, cooking, or cars are a good bet.
- Listen to sounds of nature. Open a window and listen to natural outdoor sounds. If your neighborhood doesn’t have pleasing natural sounds, go to a park that does or use audio recordings of natural sounds, which are available at music stores and online.
- Set up a mini water fountain. The sound of trickling water from a small fountain on your desk or in a corner can be very soothing.
Recorded relaxation exercises can help you imagine relaxing in many ways. Recordings are available at some bookstores and online, including at newharbinger.com.

- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________

Self-Soothing with Sight

A very large portion of the human brain is dedicated to processing vision, making sight the most important sense for gathering information about the world. Any given visual stimulus can be very soothing or very alarming, depending on your personal associations. In the list below, check off any items that you’re willing to try, and consider adding some of your own favorite visual experiences:

- Make a collage using pictures you like from magazines.
- Carry soothing pictures with you in your purse or wallet to look at any time you want.
- Visit some of your favorite places. Go to a park or museum and just sit and look.
- Hang art on your walls. Put up a painting or photo that you find beautiful and soothing.
- Look at picture books. Go to a bookstore or library and find a collection of nature photos or paintings that you love looking at.
- Draw or paint images that are soothing to you.
- Carry a photo of someone you love, admire, or just like looking at.
- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________

Self-Soothing with Smell

The sense of smell is very powerful in its ability to bring up memories and evoke certain feelings, so it’s very important to find aromas that make you feel calm and relaxed. Look over the list below and
check any that you’re willing to try, and add some ideas of your own as well:

- Burn scented candles or incense.
- Wear cologne, perfume, or a scented oil that makes you feel confident, happy, or sexy.
- Visit places that feature your favorite aromas, such as a bakery, restaurant, or florist.
- Bake chocolate chip cookies or make other foods that smell particularly good to you.
- Enjoy outdoor smells. Go out in your yard or to the park and enjoy the smells of earth, flowers, and freshly mown grass.
- Buy flowers for your home or take a walk and seek out favorites in your neighborhood.
- Hug someone whose scent makes you feel good.
- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________

Self-Soothing with Taste

Taste is also a powerful sense for awakening memories and feelings, and eating foods you love can be very soothing. However, eating may be a problem for you if you tend to eat too much, binge, purge, or habitually restrict your diet. In that case, consider going to a counselor for help with your eating problems and use other senses for self-soothing. If eating isn’t a problem for you, check off the activities below that you’ll try, and add some ideas of your own:

- Enjoy your favorite food, dish, or meal, eating slowly and savoring every bite.
- Carry favorite foods with you to snack on when you’re upset.
- Have an occasional treat like ice cream, pudding, or candy.
- Drink your favorite beverage, such as coffee, chocolate, or tea. Drink it very slowly and don’t do anything else while you’re drinking, so you can really taste the beverage.
- Suck on an ice cube or ice pop and enjoy the cold, melting sensation.
- Eat a ripe, juicy piece of fruit very slowly and consciously.
- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________
- Other: _______________
Once you’ve practiced the various relaxation techniques for a while and identified the soothing activities you want to enjoy, make a plan for incorporating these experiences into your day-to-day life. In the following spaces, list the soothing activities you plan to do at home and away from home. These lists will help you remember to relax and soothe yourself whenever painful emotions persist and you need a break.

Keep the list of skills to use at home in a convenient place where you’ll see it every day, such as on the fridge or taped to your bathroom mirror. Carry the list of skills to use away from home in your purse or wallet so that you have it with you whenever you leave home.

**SELF-SOOTHING SKILLS TO USE AT HOME**

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

**SELF-SOOTHING SKILLS TO USE AWAY FROM HOME**

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

____________________

**Applications**

Relaxation and self-soothing are most applicable to mood disorders involving anxiety and anger.
These painful emotions are accompanied by a racing heartbeat, elevated blood pressure, and rapid breathing, all of which can be countered directly by using relaxation and self-soothing skills.

For depression and shame, some self-soothing activities might be counterproductive, reinforcing a tendency to withdraw, shut down, and do nothing. To help tolerate the painful emotions of depression and shame, choose self-soothing activities that are more active, such as dancing, singing, taking a walk, listening to faster music, and using intense fragrances and textures. And remember: Never use self-soothing or relaxation techniques during emotion exposure exercises.

**Duration**

You can start using relaxation and self-soothing techniques right away. If you’ve been denying yourself pleasure and enjoyment in life, it will take a few weeks to develop the habit of self-soothing. It’s worth doing, because self-soothing is such a necessary skill for emotion regulation.
Midtreatment Assessment Exercise

Congratulations! You’ve made it halfway through the book. You’ve started acting on your values and have acquired some important skills in mindfulness, defusion, cognitive flexibility, and self-soothing.

This is a good time to once again fill out the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz and Roemer 2004). Doing so will show you how far you’ve come and give you a clear idea of how much trouble you’re still having with emotion regulation at this point.

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)

Please indicate how often the following statements apply to you by writing the appropriate number from the scale below on the line beside each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>almost never (0-10%)</td>
<td>sometimes (11-35%)</td>
<td>about half the time (36-65%)</td>
<td>most of the time (66-90%)</td>
<td>almost always (91-100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. _______________ I am clear about my feelings.
2. _______________ I pay attention to how I feel.
3. _______________ I experience my emotions as overwhelming and out of control.
4. _______________ I have no idea how I am feeling.
5. _______________ I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings.
6. _______________ I am attentive to my feelings.
7. _______________ I know exactly how I am feeling.
8. _______________ I care about what I am feeling.
9. _______________ I am confused about how I feel.
10. _______________ When I’m upset, I acknowledge my emotions.
11. _______________ When I’m upset, I become angry with myself for feeling that way.
12. _______________ When I’m upset, I become embarrassed for feeling that way.
13. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty getting work done.
14. _______________ When I’m upset, I become out of control.
15. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time.
16. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe that I will end up feeling very depressed.
17. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe that my feelings are valid and important.
18. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things.
19. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel out of control.
20. _______________ When I’m upset, I can still get things done.
21. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel ashamed at myself for feeling that way.
22. _______________ When I’m upset, I know that I can find a way to eventually feel better.
23. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel like I am weak.
24. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel like I can remain in control of my behaviors.
25. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel guilty for feeling that way.
26. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty concentrating.
27. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty controlling my behaviors.
28. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe there is nothing I can do to make myself feel better.
29. _______________ When I’m upset, I become irritated at myself for feeling that way.
30. _______________ When I’m upset, I start to feel very bad about myself.
31. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe that wallowing in it is all I can do.
32. _______________ When I’m upset, I lose control over my behavior.
33. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty thinking about anything else.
34. _______________ When I’m upset, I take time to figure out what I’m really feeling.
35. _______________ When I’m upset, it takes me a long time to feel better.
36. _______________ When I’m upset, my emotions feel overwhelming.

(Scoring: Put a minus sign in front of your rating numbers for these items: 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 17, 20, 22, 24, and 34. Then sum up all your ratings, adding the positives and subtracting the negatives, and write the result here: _______________.

This number represents how much your upsetting feelings are affecting your life today, at this moment. Compare it with the total from the first time you did this exercise, at the end of chapter 1. If your score is now lower, that’s great. It means you’re making progress and are ready to start working on the skills in the rest of the book.

If today’s score is the same or higher, that’s okay too. It just means you have to ask yourself, “Did I take my time in the first half of the book, carefully doing the exercises, following the instructions, and continuing to practice and use the skills I learned?” If you can honestly answer, “Yes, I did,” then go on to the next chapter.

If your answer is more like “Well, I kind of skimmed through some parts,” then you probably need to go back and review some of the earlier treatment chapters, especially those addressing transdiagnostic factors. If you’re a little hazy on what we mean by “transdiagnostic factors,” that’s another sign that you should go back for a little review, in this case to the chapter on the nature of emotions.

Up to this point in the book, we’ve presented five treatment chapters that teach skills you can learn and practice mostly in the privacy of your own home, and even your own mind. From here on, we get into skills that will eventually require you to do things out in the real world, often in interactions with
others. It’s a little scary, but the best, most important and powerful skills are yet to come.
Chapter 9

Doing the Opposite

What Is It?

Doing the opposite is a valuable skill that is as easy to understand as it is difficult to accomplish: Whatever your painful emotions normally urge you to do, *do the opposite*. For example, when you feel painfully shy and want to be quiet and retiring, instead you smile, make eye contact, and speak up in a clear, firm voice.

Doing the opposite doesn’t make you a phony or invalidate your feelings. Your feelings—all of them—are legitimate and valid. But you can choose not to act on them. You can choose to change emotion-driven behaviors that have been damaging your relationships or keeping you from accomplishing important things in life. Opposite action is a way of regulating your feelings, not denying them. It’s a way of acknowledging your experience but choosing new behavior to modulate or change what you feel.

In repeated studies, Marsha Linehan, founder of dialectical behavior therapy, discovered that giving in to action urges leads to more emotional intensity, not less (Linehan 1993). Psychologist David Barlow adapted Linehan’s strategy of doing the opposite for use in his unified cognitive behavioral protocol and also reported that while emotion-driven behavior might relieve bad feelings in the short run, it intensifies them over time (Moses and Barlow 2006; Allen, McHugh, and Barlow, 2008).

Why Do It?

Doing the same things you’ve been doing in response to painful feelings usually intensifies those feelings. For example, acting on anger with loud accusations might feel good for a moment, but in the long run it damages relationships and leads to more anger, not less. And turning down invitations and staying home when you’re depressed will tend to make you more depressed, not less.

On the other hand, acting contrary to your emotional urges tends to decrease the intensity of emotions. When you feel angry but respond by acknowledging the other person’s point of view and speaking in a normal tone of voice, you short-circuit your anger cycle. If you overcome your depressive withdrawal by maintaining eye contact, asking questions, and acting interested in a conversation, it’s likely to lift your mood.

Doing the opposite directly targets the transdiagnostic factor experiential avoidance, the coping strategy in which you try to avoid painful feelings by avoiding certain situations and activities. Since the situation or activity that you’re avoiding is almost always something you need to do or face in order to feel better, doing the opposite is just what the doctor ordered.

Doing the opposite also addresses a second transdiagnostic factor: response persistence, which is the tendency to cope with stress in the same way, over and over, even if it doesn’t work. Doing the opposite encourages you to act in new ways in the face of difficult emotions, rather than continuing to rely on the same old habitual responses.
What to Do

Before you can start doing the opposite, you need to identify the painful emotions you want to work on and what you typically do in response. In this context, the simple word “do” has far-reaching implications: what you touch or pick up or put down, how you hold your body, where you look or don’t look, what you say or don’t say, the words you choose, and your tone of voice. So, before we move on to exercises to help you start doing the opposite, we want to give you a bit of background on the forms emotion-driven behavior tends to take, and emotion communicators—the ways people tend to express their emotional state during emotion-driven behavior.

Emotion-Driven Behavior

Negative emotions have a tendency to make you do the same thing over and over in an attempt to make the bad feelings go away. The trouble with emotion-driven behavior is that, not only does it fail to make bad feelings go away, it usually intensifies the bad feelings.

If you’re depressed, the emotion drives you to shut down and withdraw repeatedly. In every domain of your life—at home, at school, at work, with friends, with family—you’ll tend to be inactive and nonresponsive. You won’t participate in what’s going on around you, go out, or initiate conversations. It’s easy to get trapped in a vicious cycle in which the more you shut down and withdraw, the more depressed you feel.

If you feel angry most of the time, the emotion drives you to aggressive behavior. You’ll be quick to take offense and short on tolerance. You’ll respond to delays, incompetence, or inconvenience with automatic, explosive, hair-trigger aggression. And contrary to the popular misconception that blowing off steam can be helpful, repeatedly expressing your anger only fuels more anger.

If you’re anxious, the emotion drives you to avoid certain people, situations, experiences, or things. For example, you may seize any excuse to avoid spending time with your boss or your father-in-law. You may hate speaking up in a group situation, or maybe you’d really rather not drive anywhere you haven’t been before, or drive at night, on the freeway, or in certain parts of town. Or perhaps you always avoid heights, elevators, or tight, confining spaces. Unfortunately, avoidance only makes your anxiety worse, not better.

If you’re plagued by guilt and shame, these emotions drive you into hiding, aggression, or defensiveness. You may try not to be noticed by other people and mainly stick to the margins and shadows of life. If you’re caught in the smallest error or inconsistency, you might lash out in anger or become excessively defensive, throwing out a string of explanations and excuses for your mistake. And then you’re likely to feel even more guilty and ashamed.

Emotion Communicators

Emotion communicators are the words, gestures, postures, facial expressions, and tones of voice that communicate how you feel. You may be surprised to learn that words play a relatively small role. Only about 40 percent of your meaning is conveyed by the words you choose. The other 60 percent is conveyed by body language, situation, and tone of voice. That’s why e-mails are so frequently misunderstood: They consist entirely of words, without the body language and tone of voice that
Emotion communicators work in two directions: outward to your audience, and inward to yourself. In addition to conveying information to others, your body language and tone of voice also tell you how you’re feeling. In this way, your tone, posture, and gestures create a feedback loop that reinforces depression, anxiety, shame, and other mood states.

So when you’re sad, saying, “I’m sad,” is only part of the story. The rest comes across in your quiet tone of voice, downcast eyes, slumped shoulders, shrugs, and grimaces. And when you feel your own posture and hear your own voice, you think, “Wow, I’m really down. I am so depressed,” and this deepens your depression further.

When someone is angry, it’s not so much the insults and curses that frighten people. It’s the yelling, the raised fist, the frowning, the red face, and so on. And all of those nonverbal cues are also telling the angry person, “Jeez, look how pissed off I am. I’m really furious,” which heightens and prolongs the rage.

If being on a high floor in a hotel makes you anxious, you might tell the clerk who offers you a room on the thirty-fifth floor, “I don’t think so.” The words themselves are pretty neutral. Your nervousness will be conveyed by the tremor in your voice, the widened eyes, the glancing upward, how you pull your elbows closer to your sides, and the slight protective hunch of your shoulders. And as these bodily cues feed back to you, you tell yourself, “Look how terrified I am by just the thought of the thirty-fifth floor,” and your fear increases.

Guilt or shame might lead a shopper to blurt out, “I’m sorry,” and leave a store before completing a purchase. Again, the words themselves are conventional and almost meaningless in casual conversation. However, the clerk will pick up on the shopper’s feelings of shame and inadequacy through the ingratiating smile that doesn’t match the frowning eyebrows, the wringing of the hands, the falling or sobbing cadence of the voice, the turning away, and the abrupt departure. These emotion communicators will also tell the shopper, “Oh, no! I’m so ashamed I can’t even function like a normal person.”

Unpacking Emotional Expression

The worksheet that follows will help you explore the details of what you do in challenging situations that tend to provoke emotion-driven behavior. It unpacks emotional expression into four key components: actions (including what you say), posture and gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Use the worksheet to analyze, in detail, your emotional expression in three or four situations in which you experience painful feelings. When thinking about which difficult situations to analyze here, choose situations that occur frequently in your life, that result in emotion-driven behavior that has negative consequences for you, and that happen predictably, in circumstances you can plan for. After
the blank worksheet, we’ve provided a sample worksheet that combines responses from several different people. You may want to copy the worksheet and leave the version in the book blank for working with other challenging situations in the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Actions and what I say</th>
<th>Posture and gestures</th>
<th>Facial expressions</th>
<th>Tone of voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
### Sample Emotion Communicators Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Actions and what I say</th>
<th>Posture and gestures</th>
<th>Facial expressions</th>
<th>Tone of voice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Son's room is a mess.</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Grab him, shake his shoulders, say, &quot;Look at this mess!&quot;</td>
<td>Tower over him.</td>
<td>Frowning, jaw and mouth tight.</td>
<td>Shouting, sounding mean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving verbal report at meeting.</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Look down at papers, breathe shallowly and rapidly.</td>
<td>Slumped down in chair.</td>
<td>Lowered eyes, apologetic.</td>
<td>Quiet, quavery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack says, &quot;Let's go for a run.&quot;</td>
<td>Sad, lethargic, hopeless</td>
<td>Lie, say I can't because I'm too tired or busy.</td>
<td>Shoulders down, shake head, shrug.</td>
<td>Rueful smile, rub closed eyes.</td>
<td>Quiet, tired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn't visit Mom again this week.</td>
<td>Guilt, shame</td>
<td>Avoid thinking about it, keep busy, rush around.</td>
<td>Tense, frenetic.</td>
<td>Frowning, wincing.</td>
<td>Silence: Don't talk about Mom or call her.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Planning to Do the Opposite

Now that you’ve broken down some typical responses into concrete details, this exercise will help you plan the specifics of how you’ll do the opposite in terms of actions and words, posture and gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Again, we’ve provided samples after the blank worksheet. You may want to copy the worksheet and leave the version in the book blank for working with doing the opposite in other situations in the future.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 1:</th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions and words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture and gestures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 2:</th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions and words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture and gestures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 3:</th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions and words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture and gestures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation 4:</td>
<td>Old</td>
<td>New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture and gestures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 1: Son's room is a mess.</th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions and words</td>
<td>Grab him, shake his shoulders, say, “Look at this mess!”</td>
<td>Take step back, hands in pockets, and ask, “Do you like it like this?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture and gestures</td>
<td>Tower over him.</td>
<td>Lean against doorway or wall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td>Frowning, jaw and mouth tight.</td>
<td>Smiling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice</td>
<td>Shouting, sounding mean.</td>
<td>Quiet, curious.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation 2: Giving verbal report at meeting.</th>
<th>Old</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions and words</td>
<td>Look down at papers, breathe shallowly and rapidly.</td>
<td>Take a deep breath, look up, and make eye contact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture and gestures</td>
<td>Slumped down in chair.</td>
<td>Sit up straight, lean forward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td>Lowered eyes, apologetic.</td>
<td>Smile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of voice</td>
<td>Quiet, quavery.</td>
<td>Speak loudly and confidently.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now for the hard part: actually doing the opposite. Pick the easiest, least threatening situation to start with, then commit to doing the opposite in a particular situation with a particular person. As the situation unfolds and you feel the familiar anxiety, sadness, or whatever, remember your plan. Take the actions you outlined and say what you intend to say, adopt the posture and use the gestures you planned, force your face into the intended expression, and be sure your tone of voice supports doing the opposite. Afterward, evaluate the experience with these questions in mind:

- How did you do? Be kind to yourself and realize that you won’t get it 100 percent right the first time.
- More importantly, how did you feel? Did your usual feelings decrease or change in any way? Did you experience any emotions that felt new in that situation?
- What did you learn that will help you do better next time? Incorporate these new ideas into your plan.
Use the last question to improve and fine-tune your plan for the next time you find yourself in that situation. If you struggle with doing the opposite, here are some tips that may help:

- Select an easier person or situation to start with.
- Create reminders so you won’t forget to follow through on your commitment.
- Share your plan and your commitment to it with someone who cares about you.
- Do part but not all of what you planned, and then gradually do more.

Work your way through all of the situations you explored, from least to most difficult. In each case, do the opposite, evaluate your results, and revise your plan for that situation accordingly. Continue until you’ve done the opposite successfully in all of the problem situations you described. At that point, you’ll have enough practice to begin incorporating this skill into your day-to-day life. You may want to continue to analyze your old responses and draw up plans for doing the opposite, or you may find that this skill starts to come to you more naturally.

Finding Motivation

If you’re having trouble putting this chapter into practice, consider the threefold benefits of doing the opposite. First, pushing through your painful feelings to do the opposite of your usual emotion-driven behaviors will let you in on a valuable secret about difficult feelings: They are neither permanent nor fatal. All feelings, including anxiety, sadness, fear, anger, and guilt, arise, come to a peak, and then subside and go away, leaving you calmer and more functional on the other side. Second, acting contrary to your feelings will give you a sense of empowerment—a sense that you’re more in control. And third, it will allow you to participate more fully in your life, living according to your values rather than your fears and doubts.

To highlight the benefits of doing the opposite for you personally, consider each of the situations you worked with in this chapter and make a list of the benefits you hope to gain. You might want to make several copies of the blank worksheet so you can use it for multiple situations, or you can just list the benefits on a separate piece of paper.

**Benefits of Doing the Opposite**

Relationship with your spouse or partner: __________________

__________________

Relationship with friends and family: __________________
If you haven’t already started working on doing the opposite, now is the time to make a written commitment to do so. Pick the least threatening situation on your list and write down precisely when, where, and with whom you will first do the opposite. Then follow through on your commitment.

When I’ll do it: _______________
Where I’ll do it: _______________
With whom I’ll do it _______________

Applications

Doing the opposite when you feel anxious is a matter of turning toward and approaching whatever you would normally turn away from and avoid. For example, during the lunch hour at a conference, instead of slipping away on your own to eat a quiet, solitary lunch, you’d accept your coworkers’ invitation to go to a restaurant and, once there, you’d actively engage in the conversation.

If you’re depressed and would normally throw the day’s mail on the dining room table, where it accumulates for weeks, instead do the opposite: Open the mail right away, sort it, pay the bills, throw out the junk, and so on. Keep up with the mail daily and keep the dining room table clear of everything but fresh flowers.

For anger, doing the opposite involves changing your usual gestures, tone of voice, and how quickly you respond to provocation. If you’d normally respond to your father’s political opinions with sarcastic interruptions, escalating to loud name-calling and pounding on the table, instead listen respectfully until your father finishes a sentence. Then keep your hands in your lap and ask a neutral question in a normal tone of voice, for example, “That’s an interesting way of looking at it. How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

If you feel ashamed and guilty you might enter a family reunion with your head down and shoulders slumped, and then slip into a seat in the corner without making eye contact or saying hello to the others in the room. To do the opposite, walk briskly into the room with your head and shoulders up, stride over to your aunt, greet her enthusiastically, and give her a big hug.
It will take two to six months to make a habit of doing the opposite. As you practice this powerful technique, you’ll have surprising successes, occasional setbacks, and periods when you seem to plateau and nothing changes for a while. But over time, you will form new habits of reacting to old painful feelings that lessen those feelings and help make them more short-lived.

Eventually, difficult feelings will become a signal to automatically employ opposite action. You’ll react almost unconsciously, accepting previously overwhelming emotions and allowing them to arise, subside, and flow through you without disrupting your life or controlling your behavior.
Interpersonal Effectiveness

What Is It?

Many painful emotions come up when dealing with other people, especially if you don’t use good communication skills. This chapter teaches the basic communication skills you need to improve your relationships with your partner, family, and friends. When you can hear and understand other people’s desires and feelings and communicate your own clearly and assertively, dealing with other people becomes easier and you feel less anxiety, depression, anger, shame, and guilt.

Improving interpersonal effectiveness skills is a key component of dialectical behavior therapy, and researchers have found that teaching interpersonal effectiveness skills is an important part of treating emotional disorders (Linehan 1993).

Why Do It?

Interpersonal effectiveness leads to healthy, meaningful, and long-lasting relationships. The skills you’ll learn in this chapter will help you feel less overwhelmed by emotions such as anger, guilt, fear of rejection, or sadness about relationships that aren’t working.

Interpersonal effectiveness directly targets two transdiagnostic factors: hostility or aggression and response persistence. When you can recognize your feelings, express your needs, and set reasonable limits, you’re likely to find yourself in far fewer situations where you’re inclined to respond with anger. And because increased interpersonal effectiveness will give you new and better ways to communicate and interact with others, you won’t be as likely to respond to difficult people and interactions in the old, ineffective ways.

What to Do

In this chapter, you’ll learn some interpersonal effectiveness skills that will help you cope with difficult emotions—and help prevent problematic situations from arising in the first place: listening to and really hearing others, figuring out what you want and how to express your feelings and needs, and dealing with conflicts assertively rather than passively or aggressively. First we’ll discuss the various skills and help you understand how to use them, then we’ll offer some tips on how to practice them before implementing them in real-life situations.

Listening Mindfully
In conversations with others, how often do you daydream or prepare your response while the other person is talking to you? Like many people, you may do this quite often, but if you do, you run the risk of missing important parts of the conversation. Not listening closely is a kind of interpersonal blindness that can lead to misunderstanding and confusion.

When you listen mindfully, you apply the skills you learned in chapter 5, Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness, to your conversations, noticing the full details of a conversation, including the verbal content, your emotional reaction, and nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, and body language.

While you could just set an intention to listen more mindfully, you may find it helpful to practice increasing the scope of your observations by reviewing a recent conversation. This exercise will help you get a better idea of the types of information you need to tune in to, beyond the verbal content. We recommend that you do this exercise for several conversations, so make a few copies and leave the version in the book blank for future use.
How did you do? Did you have to leave some parts blank because you hadn’t noticed a lot of the emotional and nonverbal parts of the conversation? Try analyzing another recent conversation and see if you can detect a pattern in the information you tend to overlook. Do you miss the nonverbal cues, or are you unclear about the underlying needs or emotions of others or yourself?

By now it should be obvious that listening mindfully is not a simple task. The next time you have a conversation with someone, pay close attention to all the items covered on the worksheet and then carefully analyze the interaction later. Here is an example of how Diego analyzed his conversation with Deborah, after he had been working on mindful listening for a couple of weeks.
LISTENING MINDFULLY WORKSHEET

When I was talking with: Deborah
About: her relationship with her parents
He or she said (summarize): They won’t keep giving her money each month unless she’s working at least ten hours a week.
In this tone of voice: loud and agitated
With this facial expression: frowning, red
And this body language: leaning forward

His or her need or concern was: She needs the money and is afraid that she can’t get a job.
I said (summarize): I agree it’s a tough time to look for work, but I see her parents’ point of view.
In this tone of voice: soft
With this facial expression: small, sad smile
And this body language: leaning back, hands folded

My need or concern was: to show her that I understand both her position and her parents’
My emotional response was: concern, worry

My emotions were telling me: I have to be careful in this conversation because I want to support Deborah, but I also need to be honest about my agreement with her parents’ position.

Diego’s Listening Mindfully Worksheet

When I was talking with: Deborah
About: her relationship with her parents
He or she said (summarize): They won’t keep giving her money each month unless she’s working at least ten hours a week.
In this tone of voice: loud and agitated
With this facial expression: frowning, red
And this body language: leaning forward
His or her need or concern was: She needs the money and is afraid that she can’t get a job.
I said (summarize): I agree it’s a tough time to look for work, but I see her parents’ point of view.
In this tone of voice: soft
With this facial expression: small, sad smile
And this body language: leaning back, hands folded
My need or concern was: to show her that I understand both her position and her parents’
My emotional response was: concern, worry
My emotions were telling me: I have to be careful in this conversation because I want to support Deborah, but I also need to be honest about my agreement with her parents’ position.

A final hint: One way to stay focused on a conversation and make sure that you’re understanding everything is to paraphrase and ask questions. Summarize what you think you heard, and ask for further information, for example, “So what you’re saying is, your parents never really taught you how to manage your finances, right? How did you learn to handle money?”

Figuring Out How You Feel and What You Want

The problem with ignoring or suppressing your feelings and not asking for what you really want in relationships is that sooner or later your true feelings are likely to show up in ways that can damage relationships. For example, when Rick’s wife told him that she wanted them to spend time together on Thursday nights, his initial reaction was a sense of loss because that was when he had an acting class. However, he suppressed that feeling and went along with his wife’s request. Weeks later, he noticed that he had become quite angry and sarcastic with his wife, not only on Thursday nights but throughout the week.

When you feel stuck in a conflict, no matter how serious, the rule for figuring out what you want is simple: Truly listen to your feelings without judgment. If you can stop judging yourself or worrying about how others might judge you just for a moment, your true feelings will bubble to the surface. When that happens, briefly describe your feeling to yourself in your own words, such as “angry and disappointed,” “jealous,” or “sad and worried.”

Once you’ve labeled the basic feeling, ask yourself what you wish would happen. What do you want more of or less of? What do you want the other person to do or stop doing? Be specific, including details of who, what, where, when, and how.

Use this form to practice these skills on a recent interaction in which you felt bad and unsure of what you wanted:
Who I was with: _______________
What happened or was said: _______________
Where: _______________
When: _______________
How I reacted: _______________
My feelings: _______________
What I really want: _______________

Specifics
Who: _______________
What: _______________
Where: _______________
When: _______________

Here’s an example of how Ariana figured out what she wanted from her coworker Sandra.

Who I was with: Sandra
What happened or was said: She plays loud music.
Where: in her cubicle
When: every Wednesday, when I’m posting bills and calling clients
How I reacted: I couldn’t concentrate or hear on the phone.
My feelings: upset, frustrated, irritated
What I really want: peace and quiet, no music while I’m billing or on the phone

Specifics
Who: Sandra
What: turn off her music or use earphones
Where: in the office
When: Wednesday afternoons

Now that you’ve figured out what you feel and what you want, you’ll need to effectively convey that to the other person. In most cases, the gist of your communication will be a request or saying no. The next two exercises will increase your interpersonal effectiveness in both of those situations.

Making Assertive Requests

An effective assertive request—neither too aggressive nor too passive—can get you what you want with a minimum of resistance. If you’re too aggressive, people are likely to resent you and resist giving you what you want. Yet if you’re too passive, you may fail to communicate what you want, or you may ask so meekly that people will find it easy to ignore you. Here’s a detailed formula for an effective assertive request:
1. **Ask politely to talk** to the other person about the issue, then cover the following points.

2. **“I think…”**: Give the facts of the situation as you see them. Don’t blame or judge.

3. **“I feel…”**: Honestly report your emotions in the situation. Don’t pretend an evaluation or judgment is an emotion, as in “I feel you are lazy.”

4. **“I want…”**: Spell out the who, what, where, and how of what you really want. Ask for one thing at a time, and ask for behavioral rather than emotional or attitudinal changes.

5. **Conclude with appreciation and a statement of the benefits**, helping the person see the advantages of giving you what you want.

Use the space below to compose your own assertive request. You can use the situation you explored in the previous exercise or a different one. If you choose a different situation, use the previous exercise to figure out how you feel about the situation and what you want.

1. **Ask politely to talk**: _______________
2. _______________
3. **“I think”**: _______________
4. _______________
5. **“I feel”**: _______________
6. _______________
7. **“I want”**: _______________
8. _______________
9. **Appreciation and benefits**: _______________
10. _______________

Here’s how Ariana formulated her assertive request to Sandra:

1. **Ask politely to talk**: Can I talk to you for a minute about your music?
2. **“I think”**: I think the soundproofing on these cubicles is worthless. I can hear your music clearly.
3. **“I feel”**: Normally I like it, but I feel distracted on Wednesdays when I’m doing my billing and telephoning.
4. **“I want”**: I want you to turn the music off or use headphones on Wednesday afternoons.
5. **Appreciation and benefits**: It would really help my concentration, and I’d appreciate it very much.

Saying No
Learning how and when to say no is a fundamental interpersonal skill. When requested to do something people really don’t want to do, they often say no in an aggressive manner or give in and agree. Either way, the end result is frustration and, in some cases, escalation of interpersonal conflict. When someone makes a request and you don’t want to do what they ask, you have a right to say no. But it’s not easy, and it can be especially difficult to say no graciously and assertively. Saying no well is a two-step process:

1. Validate the other person’s feelings, thoughts, or opinions.
2. State your preference.

To give you an idea of how this works, here are a couple of examples:

I can see how much you’d like to spend Christmas at your parents’ place in North Carolina. However, I’d strongly prefer to stay home this year.

I understand why you’d like to buy that dining table, but I’d prefer to buy one that’s less ornate.

When practicing this skill, it’s important to keep in mind that the key is to follow the two steps just outlined without justifying or elaborating on your decision. The shorter your statement, the better. That way the other person is more likely to hear what you’re saying and not argue with you.

Now we’ll ask you to formulate a response to a specific request. Think about a situation in which someone asked you to do something you didn’t want to do. Then, in the space below, describe the situation and write an assertive statement of refusal:

Situation: ______________________

____________________

What I really want: ______________________

____________________

My assertive refusal

Validation of the other person: ______________________

____________________

My preference: ______________________

____________________

Here’s an example from Matthew, who’s been friends with Marissa for several years. Marissa has been struggling financially since her parents passed away and often asks Matthew to lend her money. Matthew cares for Marissa and doesn’t want her to have financial difficulties, so he usually agrees, even though Marissa never pays him back. He’s been feeling resentful about this situation for a while. One Sunday afternoon, Marissa asked Matthew to lend her five hundred dollars to cover her rent. Matthew doesn’t want to lend Marissa any money, and particularly not this much, because he doubts she’ll pay him back. Here’s how Matthew completed this exercise.

Situation: Sunday, Marissa asked me to lend her five hundred dollars.

What I really want: to tell her I can’t lend her the money this time

My assertive refusal

Validation: I realize how much you need rent money.
Preference: Unfortunately, I can’t lend you any money this time.

Practicing Interpersonal Skills

Now that you understand conceptually how to listen mindfully, figure out what you want, make assertive requests, and say no, the next step is to practice. There are three ways to practice interpersonal skills before trying them out on real people: using scripts, practicing in front of a mirror, and imagery rehearsal.

USING SCRIPTS

Writing scripts of your requests or statements can be extremely helpful. In writing out your scripts, make sure that your requests are very specific and that they reflect your true feelings and desires. Consider writing them on index cards and carrying the cards with you until these interpersonal effectiveness skills become second nature. Anytime you anticipate being in a situation where you need to use these skills, review the cards just before entering the situation.

PRACTICING IN FRONT OF A MIRROR

It makes a significant difference to practice these skills in front of a mirror. Doing so will help you feel more comfortable when you implement them in real life. Here are the recommended steps:

1. Identify a place where you’ll feel comfortable rehearsing. Ideally, find a place that’s quiet and free of distractions, and where you feel safe.
2. Place yourself in front of the mirror, review your written script, and then put it down.
3. Say your statement aloud and note your expression, posture, and tone of voice. Keep at it until you look and sound strong and convincing.

IMAGERY REHEARSAL

In imagery rehearsal, you practice using only your imagination. This approach allows you to visualize more complex situations, including how others might respond to your requests. Before you begin, write down all of the steps involved in delivering your message: making your scripted statement, the other person’s response, how that response might make you feel, and repeating your request until the other person agrees.

Once you’ve written all of this down, sit or lie down in a quiet place, close your eyes, and relax. Visualize each step until you feel confident that you can perform it or deal with it in real life.

Here’s an example from Donald, who used imagery rehearsal before calling his estranged son to invite him to Thanksgiving dinner. After writing down his statement, his son’s potential response, and how he’d repeat his request, he laid down on the couch, closed his eyes, and took several deep, slow breaths. Then he imagined himself walking out onto the deck, calling his son, and hearing his son say, “Hello?”

Donald saw himself calmly leaning against the railing and saying, “Hi, Rich, this is your dad,” and
then hearing Rich make some typical, sarcastic reply, like “Well surprise, surprise. How many drinks did it take to get up the courage to call me?”

“Actually, I’ve stopped drinking.”

“Yeah, right. How many hours has it been?”

Donald imagined the feelings of shame and anger that might make him want to shout at Rich and hang up, and then visualized himself continuing in a calm, matter-of-fact voice: “I’m four months sober as of yesterday.”

“You don’t say.”

“I called to invite you to Thanksgiving dinner.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

Donald saw an image of himself taking a deep breath and pausing instead of making a sarcastic remark of his own about Rich. He heard himself continue in a calm voice: “I know I don’t have a good track record on family holidays, but I want this year to be different.”

“I don’t know, Dad.”

“Please just think about it. It would mean a lot to me and to your mother if you came.” Donald imagined ending the call on an amicable note, with his son agreeing to think about it and call him back.

Applications

Learning how to listen and communicate mindfully, make assertive requests, and deal with conflict are particularly useful skills when you’re struggling with anger or depression. Both emotions are typically driven by a sense of helplessness in relationships. These skills can also help with feelings of anxiety, shame, or guilt. These emotions become more bearable if you can effectively communicate them to others, ask for what you want, and say no when you really mean no.

Duration

Learning a particular interpersonal skill like mindful listening won’t take long—maybe just an hour—but applying it is an ongoing process that you’ll engage in for the rest of your life. The more you consciously practice these skills, the more they’ll improve. After a couple of weeks of practice, you’ll notice a difference not only in your relationships, but also in how you experience yourself as you connect with others.
Chapter 11

Imagery-Based Emotion Exposure

What Is It?

Imagery-based emotion exposure uses introspection and visualization to observe, label, and experience your negative feelings in a safe, controlled setting. It’s the reverse of the old habit of avoiding these feelings by suppressing, numbing, or masking them. As you observe your emotions and see how they change and subside, you’ll learn that even the most unpleasant emotions are time limited. As a result, you’ll fear your emotions less and have greater tolerance for negative feelings. Exposure will also change your perception of emotions. Instead of seeing them as catastrophic or overwhelming, you’ll view them as simply unpleasant moments that will soon change.

Imagery-based emotion exposure is a treatment component in all three universal protocols for emotional disorders. In the cognitive behavioral therapy approach, it’s seen as key in helping people overcome emotion avoidance (Allen, McHugh, and Barlow 2008). Dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan 1993) uses it, together with emotion awareness, in emotion regulation training. Acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999) uses emotion exposure to develop acceptance of painful feelings and to reverse patterns of avoidance.

Why Do It?

There are two main reasons to do imagery-based emotion exposure. First, it will help you gain awareness of your emotional life and learn how emotions actually work. You’ll see, from your own experience, that observing and labeling your feelings supports the natural process whereby they slowly change and dissipate.

The second reason to do imagery-based emotion exposure is to reverse the patterns of avoidance that keep negative emotions going and often intensify them. Exposure leads to acceptance of your feelings and a recognition that they are temporary experiences that will soon morph into something else. Avoidance, on the other hand, stops the natural desensitization process that helps emotions subside, so you end up stuck on a hamster wheel where every burst of emotion frightens you and keeps you running.

Imagery-based emotion exposure targets two transdiagnostic factors: experiential avoidance and emotional masking. Experiential avoidance is one of the main maladaptive coping strategies that drives emotional disorders. When you habitually try to avoid certain negative emotions, you end up drawing your attention to those very emotions and actually making them worse. Emotional masking is the effort to keep anyone from seeing what you feel. But masking feelings, out of either fear or shame, is just another suppression and avoidance strategy. It tends to make painful feelings build and get more intense. And worse, you end up feeling helpless because you can’t tell anyone what’s upsetting you. When you don’t express what you feel, others are unlikely to respond to your pain and offer support.

Imagery-based emotion exposure prepares you to better express your emotions to others. The fear of saying what you feel out loud to someone you care about diminishes as you learn to watch and
describe your emotions. Likewise, the shame associated with exposing your inner self also begins to fade as you practice saying what you feel.

What to Do

Doing imagery-based emotion exposure requires an understanding of what triggers and maintains the affect for each emotional disorder. (As a reminder, “affect” is the term psychologists use for people’s subjective experience of a feeling, other than bodily sensations.) The following Affect Maintenance Chart summarizes the emotions, triggers, and avoidance strategies typical of various emotional disorders. The left-hand column lists the most common emotional disorders. The second column indicates the primary affect associated with each disorder. The third column identifies the kinds of situations, thoughts, and images that can set off the emotion. These are the types of thoughts and visualizations you’ll use to evoke emotions for exposure purposes. The right-hand column lists the ways you might try to block, numb, or somehow get away from the affect. Here’s a key point: During exposure exercises, you shouldn’t engage in these or any other emotion avoidance strategies.
Though it’s tempting to think otherwise, emotion triggers aren’t what create emotional disorders. Your life is full of thoughts, memories, and experiences that evoke feelings. This is normal and healthy. Emotional disorders are created by the emotion avoidance strategies that interrupt the normal wave of an emotional experience as it rises, crests, and recedes. Avoidance strategies prevent habituation, the process of getting used to painful experiences so they’re no longer upsetting you. If emotions are allowed to take their course, they pass. Even very painful emotions surge and then diminish as you habituate to them naturally. But if you use emotion avoidance strategies, your painful feelings are briefly suppressed, only to roar back as strong as ever. And they keep coming back because they are never fully experienced and allowed to run their course.

Let’s take the experience of sadness as an example. A loss or perhaps a failure triggers the original emotion. Later, merely a memory or thought about the original event can be a trigger for sadness. But what turns a period of sadness into chronic depression is avoidance. People start avoiding social activities, and almost any activity that involves effort. That’s because, initially, these activities make them feel worse—more sad and tired. People also try to numb their sadness with TV, video games,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Affect</th>
<th>Triggers</th>
<th>Emotion avoidance strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Images or memories related to past trauma</td>
<td>Avoiding thoughts and memories. Numbing, distracting, or using anger, drugs, or alcohol to block distress. Avoiding people or situations that function as triggers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)</td>
<td>Anxious uncertainty</td>
<td>Thoughts about danger</td>
<td>Checking, avoiding, engaging in safety rituals, relying on safety devices (for example, a pill bottle), overpreparing, trying to be perfect, or ruminating about danger in hopes of avoiding or controlling it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social phobia</td>
<td>Fear of humiliation or rejection</td>
<td>Social events or images or thoughts about rejection or humiliation</td>
<td>Avoiding social contact, conversation, eye contact, or phone calls. Ruminating about past failures in an effort to avoid future social mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panic disorder</td>
<td>Fear of fear</td>
<td>Places or physical sensations associated with panic</td>
<td>Trying to avoid physical sensations or places associated with panic. Planning escape routes or relying on charms or safety devices. Staying in a safe place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific phobia</td>
<td>Fear of specific objects or situations</td>
<td>Images or the presence of feared objects or situations</td>
<td>Anticipating and avoiding any possible encounter with feared objects or situations. Attempting to escape when confronting triggers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Loss, failure, or thoughts about loss, failure, or a painful future</td>
<td>Avoiding social contact and activities that require effort. Shutting down, numbing, distracting, sleeping, using drugs or alcohol, staying home, or limiting movement. Ruminating about future failures. Ruminating about loss to try to understand it and mute the feeling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic anger</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Thoughts about injustice or victimization</td>
<td>Being aggressive (verbally or physically), using alcohol or drugs, or shutting down. Ruminating about triggering events in an attempt to discharge the anger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic shame</td>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Thoughts or images about shameful behavior</td>
<td>Avoiding situations, people, or behaviors associated with shame. Withdrawing, shutting down, or using anger to suppress shame. Ruminating about shameful situations in hopes of finding something redeeming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
drinking, overeating, overindulging in other substances, or passive behavior. They spend a lot of time on the couch or in bed, trying not to feel anything. The result is that the sadness never gets a chance to resolve and pass, and the avoidance and inactivity only serve to prolong and deepen the feeling, until it becomes chronic.

Anxiety disorders are also maintained by emotion avoidance strategies. Efforts to stop or get away from anxiety only prevent habituation, so you never desensitize to what scares you. Whether you cope by checking, avoiding, worrying, escaping, staying in safe places or with safe people, trying to prevent scary body sensations, or using alcohol, charms, or safety devices, the result is that you get stuck in fear. That’s because it’s always blocked and interrupted before your body and mind get a chance to habituate and let the fear naturally subside.

Enhancing Your Emotion Awareness

An important first step before practicing imagery-based emotion exposure is training yourself to be more aware of your emotions. This is an extension of the work you did in chapter 2, The Nature of Emotions, when you recalled emotion-laden images or listened to emotionally evocative music and recorded your experience on the Emotional Response Worksheet. Now we’re going to take it to the next level. In this exercise, you’ll not only name the emotion, but describe it with as much detail and nuance as possible. To help you find words for your feelings, read through the following Emotion Thesaurus. It will give you a broad range of terms to help you identify the subtle distinctions among feelings.

The Emotion Thesaurus

**Anger:** agitated, angry, annoyed, bitter, contemptuous, disgusted, disturbed, enraged, exasperated, frustrated, grumpy, hostile, irritated, mad, outraged, resentful

**Depression:** anguished, bored, broken, crushed, defeated, dejected, despairing, disappointed, disgusted, dismayed, distraught, disturbed, empty, exhausted, fragile, grieving, hopeless, hurt, lonely, miserable, sad, sorry, tired, vulnerable, worthless

**Fear and anxiety:** afraid, anxious, apprehensive, edgy, frightened, horrified, hysterical, jumpy, nervous, panicky, restless, tense, terrified, uneasy, unsure, worried

**Happiness and joy:** blessed, blissful, bubbly, cheerful, content, delighted, eager, energetic, enthusiastic, excited, exhilarated, glad, happy, hopeful, joyful, lively, loved, pleased, proud, relieved,
satisfied, thrilled, worthy

**Shame and guilt:** apologetic, ashamed, embarrassed, foolish, guilty, humiliated, insulted, mortified, regretful, shy, sorry

To practice describing your feelings, use the following Emotion Log to record your feelings over the next week, describing each emotion you experience as fully as possible. Record the time and situation, then, under “Emotion,” start with a main word to label the feeling. Then expand on your description, using the Emotion Thesaurus to find as many other related words as seem to apply. Make your description as nuanced as possible.

Make copies of the worksheet and try to keep one with you at all times, leaving the version in the book blank so you can make more copies as needed. If possible, make notes in the Emotion Log four times a day: before breakfast, before lunch, before dinner, and before bedtime. That way you’re likely to recall more of your emotions. Remember, try to go beyond a simple word or phrase and give as rich a description as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A second important step before practicing imagery-based emotion exposure is to practice mindfully watching your emotions. Over the next week, devote fifteen or twenty minutes a day to mindfully observing your feeling state. If you’ve forgotten the basics of mindfulness, reread chapter 5, Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness, before doing this exercise. There are five simple but challenging rules you should follow while mindfully watching your feelings:

- **Observe and label.** Watch the experience, as if from a little distance, and use one or two words to mentally label the feeling.
- **Don’t judge the emotion.** Try to accept the feeling for what it is: one of many emotions you’ll have today, and just one of a multitude you’ll have over your lifetime. If you have evaluative thoughts about yourself or your feeling, notice them and try to let them go.
- **Don’t block or resist your emotion.** Don’t try to argue yourself out of it or push the feeling away. If possible, avoid trying to distract yourself from the feeling. Just let yourself have it, for however long it lasts.
- **Don’t amplify, hold on to, or analyze your emotion.** Try not to get enmeshed in thinking about a feeling, figuring out where it came from, justifying it, explaining it, or attaching great importance to it. Just let it be at whatever level or intensity it naturally reaches. Try to watch it with detachment, rather than imbuing it with great significance.
- **Watch, don’t act.** You can notice your action urges, but don’t let them spur you into behavior. Observe your impulses with detachment and acceptance; they’re just part of your feeling and don’t require you to do anything.

Before turning your awareness to your emotions, begin with a few minutes of mindful breathing. Just close your eyes and notice your breath as you learned to do in chapter 5. Either count your breaths or say, “In… Out…,” to help you keep your focus on your breath. If a thought intrudes, notice or label the thought and then let it go.

Once you’re more centered after a few minutes of mindful breathing, let your attention expand to include other physical sensations. If you want, you can briefly scan yourself from head to toe and note physical sensations in each part of your body.

When you’ve observed your physical experience, expand your awareness to your emotions. Watch what’s happening in your emotional life right now. If descriptive words or labels come to mind, that’s fine. But if you start analyzing or judging your feelings, notice and let go of these thoughts. Just stay with your feelings and observe how they evolve and change over the span of a few minutes. Notice if you’re experiencing more than one feeling or a blend of emotions.

Bring a sense of compassionate acceptance to everything you observe. These are the emotions of a human being who struggles yet is trying to carry on and survive. Breathe into the emotion, wherever in your body it seems to originate, and accept it for what it is: a feeling that comes with being alive. Don’t try to fix, change, or suppress the feeling. Relax into it, even if it hurts.

After you’ve observed your emotions for a while (five to fifteen minutes, depending on how much practice you’ve had), come back to mindful breathing. Let yourself focus on the calm, steady sense of each breath.

During this week, try to set time aside each day for mindful awareness of your emotions. If you do, your feelings will gradually seem less frightening or overwhelming. Instead, they’ll become like
passing weather: something to notice, accept, and observe as they change and evolve.

Practicing Imagery-Based Emotion Exposure

Now that you’ve fine-tuned your emotional awareness, you’re ready to start using imagery to induce target emotions that you want to work on. Whatever your target emotion might be—anxiety, anger, sadness, grief, or shame—select a recent event where you felt it strongly and then visualize the scene. Where were you? Try to see every detail of the environment, and also notice who was there, what they were wearing, and so on. Now try to hear what was said—not just the words, but tone of voice. Were there other sounds in the scene, perhaps in the background? Now notice any tactile experience. Were you holding or touching anything, did you feel hot or cold, or were there sensations inside your body?

As you watch the scene unfold, focusing on the details and listening to any dialogue, become aware of any emotions you might feel. Let them grow as you key into the most evocative aspects of the scene. Once you’ve experienced the scene fully, you’re ready to practice emotion exposure, first briefly, and then for a more prolonged time.

Brief Exposure

In brief exposure, you let the painful feeling build to a moderate level, then shut the scene off. Rate the intensity of the emotion on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 represents the emotion at its most intense and painful and 0 represents a complete state of comfort and lack of any painful feelings. Once you’ve brought the scene to mind in detail, keep observing it as the negative feelings rise and reach a level of 5 or 6, then stop visualizing and just watch the emotional wave, noticing how it intensifies, crests, and then diminishes or gives way to a different emotion. Throughout, verbalize an ongoing description of everything that happens.

Here are detailed instructions. If you wish, you can record the instructions, pausing after each paragraph so you have time to observe and describe your experience. In the beginning, you can do these brief exposures for five minutes, or even less. That’s enough time to get a bit used to the emotion or feel it begin to fade.

Find a quiet place to practice where you won’t be disturbed. Visualize the scene you’ve chosen in detail and watch the difficult emotion arise. Notice the feeling and keep your attention on it until a word or phrase comes to mind that labels the emotion. Just say to yourself, “Right now I’m feeling ______________.” Now notice how strong the emotion is. Say this out loud or to yourself. Rate it on a scale of 0 to 10. Also notice whether the emotion is growing or diminishing. At what point in the wave is the feeling—ascending, cresting, or diminishing? Find words for all of this.
Once the emotion reaches an intensity of 5 or 6, drop the image and shift your focus to noticing sensations in your body: feelings of tension, pain, pressure, heat, or cold. Describe these physical sensations in words. And once again notice any changes in the emotion itself. Does it shift in intensity or quality? Is it deepening, softening, or beginning to evolve into some other emotion? Find words for all of this.

Notice any desire to mute, numb, or push away the emotion and put that desire into words.

Find other ways to characterize the emotion. How big is it now? As big as a house, a bus, a bush, or a pebble? Say what size it is. What color would you say it is? What texture does it have? Smooth as silk or gunmetal? Is it lumpy, sharp, or rough as sandpaper or granite? How heavy is it? Find words for each of these metaphorical descriptions.

Again, notice any changes in your feeling. Is the emotion starting to give way to new emotions? Are there new or changing sensations in your body? Where are you on the wave? Find words for all of this.

If you feel an impulse to act on the emotion, notice it and observe what it’s like to not do anything. Describe the experience of feeling this urge without acting on it.

If thoughts arise, particularly judgments, just say to yourself, “Now I’m having (angry, sad, or anxious) thoughts” or “Now I’m having judgments (about myself or my emotion).” Just label the thought in the same way you’ve been labeling everything else you notice, and then let it go.

Keep watching and finding words for your emotion until it begins to soften and diminish, or until you’re ready to stop. Then you can return to mindful breathing as a way to ground yourself again.

Try doing brief exposure with your target emotion once a day for a week. You can switch to other scenes if the original image loses its ability to evoke much feeling. After a week, when you’ve had practice with multiple brief exposures, you can move on to longer sessions.

Prolonged Exposure

Brief exposure is a stepping-stone to longer exposure sessions. As you get more accustomed to observing and staying with your feelings, you can move to this prolonged exposure practice. Three things will change:

- You’ll continue to focus on the emotionally provocative image throughout the entire exposure, not just in the initial phase.
- You won’t describe the emotion. Instead, all your attention will be on inducing the emotion by remembering everything that was done and said in the scene you’re visualizing.
- You’ll extend the duration of exposures, staying with the visualization until you experience a significant reduction in emotional distress. This indicates that desensitization, or habituation, is occurring.

In prolonged exposure, the object is to keep focusing on the visualized scene until your emotional distress has fallen to half or close to half of the highest level in that exposure session. Here’s a summary of the prolonged exposure process:
Induce the emotion by visualizing an emotionally provocative scene in detail.

As the emotion gathers strength, evaluate its intensity using a scale of 0 to 10.

Notice sensations in your body and any changes in the quality or intensity of these feelings.

Keep visualizing the scene, noticing what was done and said.

Notice any impulse to act on your emotion and notice how it feels to not act on your urge.

Keep visualizing the scene and notice any thoughts that come up.

Periodically evaluate the intensity of the emotion on a scale of 0 to 10. When it drops to half or close to half of its highest level, stop visualizing the scene.

Breathe mindfully for several minutes.

Repeat this entire process until the visualization no longer triggers significant distress. Then come up with another distressing visualization that provokes the same emotion. It’s best to use prolonged exposure daily until you’ve achieved some acceptance of the target emotion and find it significantly less upsetting. Remember, the purpose of exposure is to reach a point where you’re no longer avoiding your feelings, and therefore no longer paying a high emotional price for habitual avoidance.

Try not to distract yourself in any way during exposure exercises. For brief exposure, stay focused on the emotion. For prolonged exposure, keep your attention on the upsetting scene. Don’t let your mind drift, and don’t seek reassurance or try to look on the bright side, especially when working with anxiety. This focus is necessary to achieve habituation.

Applications

Imagery-based emotion exposure is appropriate, indeed necessary, for developing acceptance of any of the negative emotions associated with emotional disorders. Each painful emotion is triggered by different types of thoughts, images, or situations, and of course we all have our individual triggers. To maximize the effectiveness of your exposure practices, find the triggers that set off the most intense feelings of anxiety, depression, anger, shame, or guilt for you.

Monroe, a fifty-one-year-old librarian, provides a good example of the entire imagery-based emotion exposure process from start to finish. He experiences significant shame regarding a wine-colored birthmark on his neck and lower cheek and also believes that he’s a boring person who can’t find interesting things to say. Whenever he notices someone looking at him closely, he imagines that the person is disgusted by his appearance, and he feels ashamed as a result. Conversation is another trigger for his shame, and the longer the conversation lasts, the more intense Monroe’s shame grows as he struggles to say something interesting. Cognitive triggers include thoughts such as “I’m ugly” and recalling “stupid” things he’s said. Monroe has a wide variety of strategies for avoiding his feelings of shame:

- Getting angry at people for looking at him or trying to talk to him, which briefly masks the shame
- Constantly watching TV, listening to the radio, surfing the Internet, or compulsively taking pictures so he won’t have to feel bad about how ugly and boring he is
- Trying to shut down emotionally
- Drinking wine in the evening until he feels numb
- Avoiding people, conversations, and phone calls
- Avoiding mirrors
Ruminating about recent encounters, hoping to remember one redeeming thing he said or trying to recall any positive response in the other person but finding only “idiocy”

Trying to mask or get rid of the shame hasn’t worked. The shame persists and strengthens because Monroe has never accepted it or desensitized to it. So now, on top of shame, he’s also struggling with loneliness, depression, a bit of a drinking problem, and a deep feeling that he’s wasting his life (and he’s become ashamed about this too).

Monroe decided to do brief emotion exposure, initially focusing on his birthmark. He used an image of someone staring at his face and maintained the image until the shame was moderately strong. Then he began describing the feeling internally, including details of his physical experience, thoughts, and any changes in the emotion. Monroe tried not to use his typical emotion avoidance strategies, but he noticed that he occasionally began to shut down or think about TV shows and photography. As soon as he observed this, he returned to describing the shame. When the emotion diminished or evolved into a new feeling, he stopped the exposure.

After a half dozen exposures, Monroe noticed a substantial reduction in shame related to his appearance, so he shifted to prolonged exposures. After about a week the distress associated with this long-standing trigger was substantially reduced and hovered around 1 to 2. At that point, Monroe shifted to imagery-based exposure practices targeting his shame about his conversational abilities, visualizing a scene where he was grasping for things to say.

Duration

Mindfully observing your emotions, along with whatever else you experience during meditation, is a key skill in emotion regulation. Make this a part of your daily self-care rituals. Continue practicing imagery-based emotion exposure until the target emotion is less distressing and you are no longer using emotion avoidance strategies with that emotion. This might take anywhere from several days to several weeks, depending on how frequently and effectively you practice.

When you’ve mastered imagery-based emotion exposure, you can move on to the next two chapters: Interoceptive Emotion Exposure and Situational Emotion Exposure.
Chapter 12

Interoceptive Emotion Exposure

What Is It?

Interoceptive emotion exposure is a desensitization process in which you re-create, in a safe and controlled way, the physical feelings associated with distressing emotions. You do exercises that raise your heart rate and respiration rate and make you feel warmer, dizzy, shaky, and so on. This allows you to become habituated to the sensations so that you no longer fear them.

Interoceptive emotion exposure was originally developed by cognitive behavioral therapists to treat panic disorder (Craske and Barlow 2008). People with panic disorder are fearful of the internal physical states associated with panic: rapid heartbeat, dizziness, and feeling out of breath, weak, or hot. David Barlow and his research associates later extended interoceptive emotion exposure to the treatment of all distressing emotions (Moses and Barlow 2006). The rationale is that each problematic emotion has a physical signature—internal sensations associated with that emotion that become distressing in their own right. Part of learning to accept emotions and be less distressed by them is learning to accept the sensations that go with them.

Interoceptive emotion exposure isn’t used extensively in either dialectical behavior therapy or acceptance and commitment therapy. Dialectical behavior therapy wasn’t designed specifically to target anxiety; rather, it focuses on the broader problem of emotion dysregulation. And although acceptance and commitment therapy does target anxiety, it focuses on accepting feelings and sensations, rather than desensitizing to them.

Why Do It?

When you stop fearing and resisting the physical sensations associated with painful emotions, you habituate to them, so they no longer trigger distress and avoidance. Interoceptive emotion exposure targets the transdiagnostic factor experiential avoidance, the maladaptive coping strategy that seeks to avoid painful feelings in the short term but actually worsens them in the long run. You can learn to experience these sensations as merely uncomfortable, rather than frightening or as something to avoid. When these feelings are no longer associated with significant distress, you’ll find yourself altogether less vigilant and concerned about them.

What to Do

What you are about to do is re-create, in a safe way, body sensations that accompany the emotions you’re working on in this book. Interoceptive emotion exposure is done in three stages. In the first, you briefly do twelve specific physical activities, notice the sensations they produce, and then rate how similar these sensations are to those you experience with your target emotions. The second stage involves making a hierarchy of sensations that you rated as 40 percent or greater in similarity to sensations you experience with your target emotions. In the third stage, the actual desensitization process, you briefly induce the sensation for the least distressing item on your hierarchy and rate the amount of distress it causes on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is no distress and 10 is the highest level of
distress. Then you’ll keep repeating the exposure until the distress associated with this sensation rates no more than a 2. At that point, you’ll move up to the next item on your hierarchy and continue in this way, following this same process for each sensation in your hierarchy. We’ll guide you through the process in a detailed, step-by-step way as follows.

**Stage 1: Initial Exposure**

As you first expose yourself to each of the twelve sensations detailed below, use the following Interoceptive Assessment Chart to record the level of distress it causes and how similar it is to sensations you experience during your target emotions. Note that the list provides the duration for each exercise so you’ll know when to stop the exposure.

1. Shaking your head from side to side for 30 seconds
2. Repeatedly lowering your head between your legs and then lifting it for 30 seconds
3. Running in place for 60 seconds (check with your doctor first)
4. Running in place for 60 seconds while wearing a heavy jacket
5. Holding your breath for 60 seconds or as long as you can
6. Tensing major muscles, particularly in your abdomen, fists, forearms, and shoulders, for 60 seconds or as long as you can
7. Spinning while you sit in a swivel chair (not while standing up) for 60 seconds
8. Breathing very rapidly for up to 60 seconds
9. Breathing through a narrow straw for 120 seconds
10. Staring at yourself in a mirror for 90 seconds
11. Hunching your head down while frowning and tightening your jaw for 90 seconds
12. Walking with a ten-pound weight held to your abdomen for 120 seconds

As soon as possible, set time aside to do each of these exercises. At the end of every exposure, rate how distressing it is on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all distressing and 10 is the greatest level of distress. Then assess the percentage of similarity to sensations you associate with your problematic emotion. In case you’re doing exposure for sensations related to more than one emotion, we’ve included two columns for assessing the similarity (and you can add more columns if need be). Fill in the target emotion in the heading for the columns you’re using. However, you’ll still need only one distress rating, because that assesses your level of upset regardless of the associated emotion.
Renee, a forty-three-year-old veterinarian, completed the following Interoceptive Assessment Chart for two emotional problems: anxiety and depression. Here’s what her chart looked like.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Distress (0-10)</th>
<th>Similarity to _____ (0-100%)</th>
<th>Similarity to _____ (0-100%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shaking your head from side to side</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Repeatedly lowering and lifting your head</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Running in place</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Running in place while wearing a heavy jacket</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Holding your breath</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Tensing major muscles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Spinning in a swivel chair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Breathing very rapidly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Breathing through a straw</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Staring at yourself in a mirror</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Hunching head down, frowning, and tightening jaw</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Walking with a ten-pound weight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The assessment was challenging for Renee. It took three sessions for her to make it through all of the activities. But she found the outcome interesting because it helped her see that many of the sensations she associated with anxiety didn’t have much of a connection to depression, and vice versa.

Stage 2: Creating Your Interoceptive Hierarchy

Now it’s time to create a hierarchy of distressing sensations from your assessment chart. You’ll make a separate hierarchy for each target emotion you’re working on. Each hierarchy should include only activities you rated as 40 percent or greater in similarity to sensations that accompany the target emotion. The first item (row number 1 on the following blank Interoceptive Hierarchy Chart) should be the least distressing activity; the next (row number 2) would be the next most distressing item. Just to be clear, the items in the hierarchy aren’t arranged by percentage of similarity to the target emotion; they’re arranged by the amount of distress they cause. You may find it easier to cross out items with a similarity less than 40 percent and then arrange what remains according to distress rating.

Make a copy of the chart to fill out, leaving the version in the book blank for future use. Then, in the
column for trial 1, write the distress level (0-10) you assigned to that item on the Interoceptive Assessment Chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interoceptive Hierarchy Chart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Renee completed two Interoceptive Hierarchy Charts, one each for anxiety and depression.
Stage 3: Practicing Induced Interoceptive Emotion Exposure

Now it’s time to commence actual exposure. Start with the first item on your hierarchy—the one that provokes the least distress. If you need to have a support person present during your first few exposures, that’s perfectly okay. Eventually, however, you need to do the exposures on your own. Here are detailed instructions for working your interoceptive hierarchy:

1. Begin the first exercise and observe the point where you first feel uncomfortable sensations. Continue the exposure for at least thirty seconds after the onset of uncomfortable sensations. The longer you continue, the better, but thirty seconds is the minimum.
2. During the exposure, avoid using any coping strategies or trying to suppress the sensations or your awareness of them. Don’t try to relax or use positive thoughts. Just feel the experience as fully as possible.
3. As soon as you stop the exercise, rate your distress in the box on the hierarchy chart for that trial.
4. Following each trial, let your distress diminish until it rates no more than a 2 on the scale of 0 to 10. If your distress doesn’t drop on its own, do something calming for a few minutes to get it down to a 2 or less. (If need be, see chapter 8, Self-Soothing, for ideas.)
5. Continue doing exposure trials with the first item until you’ve achieved significant desensitization, meaning your distress level doesn’t exceed 2. In other words, when any exposure trial rates a 2 or less, you’re finished with that item and can go to the next higher item on your hierarchy.
6. Continue working through your hierarchy in this way, until none of the items provoke a distress level greater than 2. There’s no formal limit on the number of exposure trials you can do in any given session. When you’re tired, stop, but don’t stop in the middle of a trial.

When Renee began doing exposure trials on her anxiety hierarchy, she started with an item that she initially rated as only a 3: repeatedly lowering and lifting her head. However, trial 2 lasted only forty seconds before she reached a distress level of 4 and wanted to stop. That’s not unusual; distress levels often go up for the first few trials. Between trials, Renee looked out the window and relaxed. By trial 4 her distress was going down and she was pushing the exposure to sixty seconds. By trial 5 her distress level didn’t exceed 2, so she was ready to move on.

Renee managed to get through the first three items on her hierarchy relatively quickly, with no more than five trials for any of them. But the fourth item—running in place while wearing a heavy jacket—was tougher. The feeling of being hot greatly disturbed Renee and triggered significant feelings of anxiety. The second trial pushed her distress to a 9—far greater than during trial 1, the assessment exposure. But she kept at it, relaxing by reading a book between trials. It took eight trials for her distress to reduce even to a 5, and a total of twelve before it got down to 2.

While working with the final item on her hierarchy, rapid breathing, Renee noticed another challenge. She found herself trying to shut down and distract herself from the sensation. It took real perseverance to stay with the feeling and keep her attention on what it felt like in her body. However, after ten trials, Renee had reduced even this, her most disturbing sensation, to a distress level of just 2.

---

**Practicing Interoceptive Emotion Exposure in Daily Life**

In the previous exercise, you practiced interoceptive emotion exposure with induced sensations so you could desensitize to them. In this exercise, you’ll learn how to desensitize to these feelings naturally, as they occur in daily life.

As discussed, all emotions are accompanied by physical sensations. These are an integral part of all affect. So in this exercise you’ll use mindfulness to watch for and accept these feelings whenever
they show up. Here’s what you’ll do:

1. Commit to watching for the target emotion. This feeling will be a red flag for mindful observation. Try to recognize the first signs that you’re starting to feel anxious, angry, sad, or whatever emotion you’re watching for.
2. Once you’re paying attention to the emotion, zero in on the physical sensations. Notice where the emotion is centered in your body.
3. Try to find words for the sensation. How big is it? What does it remind you of? Describe to yourself every aspect of this experience.
4. Keep watching until the sensation fades or changes. Try not to distract yourself from the feeling. Experience it just as it is, with full awareness.

Watching is the best medicine for your emotions because it gives you some distance from what you’re feeling, along with a sense that you are not the feelings in your body. These sensations are nothing more than the changing color of the sea at twilight—now blue, now silver, now ebony. They are nothing more than a flash of lightning between storm clouds. They exist for just a moment in time and don’t define who you are at the core of your being.

When Renee began to observe the sensations that accompanied her sadness, she noticed a feeling of weight and torpor. Everything in her body seemed to slow down, and movement felt like a great effort. She also noticed a feeling of tension, like a hard rock, in her gut.

Over the next few weeks, she experienced waves of sadness that washed over her and lasted anywhere from several minutes to several hours. During these times, Renee focused on her body, describing to herself where the sensations occurred and how they felt. The heaviness and the rock in her stomach seemed fixed and unyielding, but Renee learned that as she kept watching, these feelings eventually changed, giving way to a sense of increased lightness or feelings of release around her diaphragm.

Applications

Use interoceptive emotion exposure for each problematic emotion you experience. The procedure is the same, regardless of whether you struggle with anxiety, depression, anger, or other emotions. Some emotions may trigger sensations that are more distressing. For some emotions you may have more items in your hierarchy, and for some sensations it may take more trials before your distress decreases to a 2. But none of this really matters. All you have to do is develop a separate hierarchy for each target emotion and continue exposure trials until you’ve reached a distress level of 2 or lower. If you keep doing trials until the sensations are only slightly uncomfortable, you’ll have taken a huge stride toward emotion regulation.

Duration

Depending on how frequently you practice, induced interoceptive emotion exposure should take somewhere from several days to several weeks—however long it takes to desensitize to the most distressing sensations caused by the twelve exercises. At that point, you’re finished. On the other
hand, mindful exposure in daily life—watching for and habituating to the physical sensations that accompany difficult emotions—is an important part of taking care of yourself and maintaining good emotion regulation. Facing and observing these experiences, rather than trying to escape them, is a lifelong project.
Chapter 13

Situational Emotion Exposure

What Is It?

Situational emotion exposure is sometimes called in vivo exposure, since it involves experiencing, in real life, what you typically tend to avoid. It’s the logical extension of the imagery-based and interoceptive emotion approaches you learned in the two previous chapters.

Situational emotion exposure is the exact opposite of avoidance. Instead of avoiding scary, depressing, worrisome, or infuriating things, you actively seek them out. But you do it in a systematic, controlled way so your feelings don’t overwhelm you. Over time you become desensitized and habituated to problematic experiences. In other words, you gradually get used to things that you previously thought you couldn’t stand.

Situational emotion exposure is an important component of both acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. Acceptance and commitment therapy researchers call it values-based exposure and have shown it to be effective in situations that relate to a person’s values (Eifert and Forsyth 2005). Cognitive behavioral researchers call it situational emotional exposure and have found it to be effective in reducing avoidant behaviors (Moses and Barlow 2006; Allen, McHugh, and Barlow 2008).

Why Do It?

Situational emotion exposure can help you minimize your emotional suffering and have a fuller, more active, and more satisfying life. Avoiding people, places, things, activities, or situations you find uncomfortable might shelter you from pain in the short term, but it inevitably leads to greater emotional vulnerability and a restricted life.

Lynn, a journalist in her thirties, provides a good example of how this works. Once when she was driving on the freeway, she had a panic attack that was so severe she had to pull over and ask her husband to pick her up. As a result, Lynn developed a fear of having another panic attack when driving on the freeway, so she started spending a lot of time trying to figure out how to get around by driving only on surface streets or using public transportation. This initially seemed like a good idea, but it caused Lynn significant problems in the long term. She started having problems at work because she was often late for appointments or turned down assignments because she thought they were too far away. Lynn’s family life also was affected because she started asking her husband to take side streets when he drove to family events or gatherings with friends. In a period of six months, Lynn received two warning letters from her employer, had several arguments with her husband, missed get-togethers with family and friends, and started experiencing depression in addition to anxiety.

The more you can approach, confront, and tolerate what you find frightening or depressing, the more freedom and, ultimately, enjoyment you’ll find in your life, just like Lynn did. She used the systematic steps of situational emotion exposure, which you’ll learn in this chapter, to gradually reduce her fear, starting by contemplating a trip on the freeway, then actually being on the freeway as a passenger, and ultimately driving on the freeway herself. In three months she was able to return to
driving, as she put it, "like a normal person—sometimes nervous, but not panicked."

Situational emotion exposure is a powerful technique that directly targets the transdiagnostic factor experiential avoidance. Instead of avoiding certain people, places, and things, you learn to cope with your painful feelings by remaining in problematic situations until the feelings run their full course. Indirectly, situational emotion exposure also addresses three other transdiagnostic factors: It short-circuits rumination, turns short-term focus into long-term success, and breaks up the inflexibility of response persistence.

**What to Do**

Situational emotion exposure is a three-step process. First you need to identify the situations you tend to avoid and choose which general area you’d like to work on. Eventually, you may want to use exposure for several different types of situations, but at the outset, you’ll choose one type of real-life situation that you tend to avoid. The second step is creating an exposure hierarchy, similar to the hierarchy of physical sensations in the previous chapter, but this time using real-life experiences. The third and final step is to practice real-life situational emotion exposure, working through the hierarchy you’ve created, starting with the least distressing situation and working your way up.

### Choosing an Area to Work On

The first step in situational emotion exposure is to identify an area to work on—an aspect of life where you avoid a variety of situations. In choosing an area and, ultimately, which situations to list, let your values be your guide. What do you really want to do or get out of life? What have your painful feelings kept you from doing? If you aren’t sure what’s most important to you, you may find it helpful to review chapter 4, Values in Action.

Here’s an example to give you an idea of which areas and types of situations to target. Sylvia, a thirty-five-year-old law student, had both social phobia and a fear of big dogs. She decided to work on her social phobia first, since it was keeping her from participating and doing well in her classes. Being comfortable around teachers and other students was more important to her than being able to tolerate big dogs. If Sylvia had been engaged to a dog trainer or interested in volunteering for a search and rescue team, she might have chosen to work on her dog phobia first.

### Creating a Situational Emotion Exposure Hierarchy
Once you’ve identified the general area you want to work on, come up with a list of specific situations you’ve been avoiding, and enter the items on the following page. Choose situations that you can initiate and repeat yourself. For example, Sylvia felt anxious talking to strangers on the street. At one point she described an avoidance situation in which a stranger asked her for directions, but then she realized that she had no control over what strangers would do or when, so she changed that item to “Asking a stranger for directions,” which she could initiate herself and repeat as often as she liked. If you need some help getting started, an example from Sylvia follows the blank form.

**AVOIDANCE SITUATIONS**

____________________
____________________
____________________
____________________
____________________
____________________
____________________
____________________

**SYLVIA’S AVOIDANCE SITUATIONS**

*Answering teachers’ questions in class*
*Introducing myself at social gatherings*
*Giving a presentation in front of a class*
*Asking a stranger for directions*
*Stating my opinion about a particular topic in class*
* Ordering food in a restaurant in front of classmates*
*Eating in front of classmates*

Now go back over your list and rank each situation according to how difficult it is, using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is no distress and 10 is the highest level of distress.

When you’ve ranked each situation, rewrite your list in ascending order of stressfulness, starting with the least stressful situation at the top and working down to the most stressful at the bottom. Make copies of the blank form so you can use it for other types of situations in the future. Again, an example from Sylvia follows the blank form.
This rearranged list is the hierarchy you’ll use for situational emotion exposure, starting with the situation that causes you the least distress and moving progressively through situations of increasing difficulty. For this progression to be smooth and continuous, you should expand your list until you have between eight and twenty situations. The idea is for each situation to be just a bit more challenging than the one before. Here are four variables you can use to expand and refine your hierarchy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sylvia's Situations to Use for Emotion Exposure</th>
<th>Distress (0-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Eating in front of classmates</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ordering food in a restaurant in front of classmates</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Asking a stranger for directions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Introducing myself at social gatherings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Answering teachers’ questions in class</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Giving a presentation in front of a class</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Stating my opinion about a particular topic in class</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Spatial proximity.** Arrange your hierarchy so that you get closer and closer to the feared situation. For example, if high places make you nervous, you could introduce the following variations: entering the lobby of a skyscraper; taking an elevator up to the fifth floor and going back down; taking an elevator up to the thirtieth floor and immediately going back down; and, finally, taking an elevator up to the thirtieth floor, approaching a window, and looking out.

- **Temporal proximity or duration.** Another way to expand your hierarchy is to make a particular situation closer and closer in time. For example, if you’re depressed and have been evading your
parents’ attempts to come for a visit, you could first talk to them and set a date for them to visit, then make a second call in which you arrange the details of their visit. Then, on the day of their arrival you could see them briefly at their hotel, and, finally, you could have them over to your house for lunch the next day.

- **Degree of threat.** You can also vary the degree of threat associated with a particular type of situation. For example, if you tend to avoid crowds, you can construct several situations in which the size of the crowd gradually gets larger.

- **Degree of support.** Initially, you can ask a supportive person to be present to make difficult steps in your hierarchy less threatening. For example, if you don’t like going to the doctor, you might make that situation less threatening by having your spouse or a friend take you and stay in the examining room with you. Next, you could have your support person stay in the waiting room while you’re being examined. Finally, you could go to a doctor’s appointment alone.

Sylvia used all of these variables to expand her hierarchy to nineteen situations. For example, she expanded “Asking a stranger for directions” into “Asking a woman for directions” and “Asking a man for directions,” since she found it easier to approach women than men. Following you can see how Sylvia’s complete exposure hierarchy turned out. Notice how the levels of distress increase very gradually and evenly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Distress (0-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Calling a friend to arrange lunch together at school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Finding a friend to eat with on campus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Eating in front of one classmate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ordering food and eating in front of two classmates</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Looking at an unfamiliar neighborhood on a map</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Going to a new neighborhood</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Asking a woman for directions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Asking a man for directions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Walking into a reception or club meeting at school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Making small talk with a stranger at the reception or meeting</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Introducing myself to a stranger</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Raising my hand to ask a question in contract law class</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Raising my hand to answer a teacher’s question</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Answering a teacher’s question</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Preparing my presentation on tort law</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Rehearsing my presentation the night before</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Giving my presentation in class</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Discussing affirmative action or abortion law during class</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Defending my real opinions on abortion or affirmative action</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now take some time to carefully work out your own situational emotion exposure hierarchy. Again, make copies and leave the version in the book blank so you can use it for future situational exposure hierarchies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Distress (0-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Practicing Situational Emotion Exposure
Now that you’ve created your exposure hierarchy, you’re ready to start doing exposures. The procedure for situational emotion exposure is similar to what we outlined in chapter 12, Interoceptive Emotion Exposure:

1. Start with the least threatening situation on your hierarchy.
2. Place yourself in that situation.
3. Focus on the uncomfortable emotion that you’re working on.
4. Notice how the feeling shows up in your body.
5. Use the scale of 0 to 10 to continuously rate your level of distress as it rises and falls.
6. Stay in the situation for at least 60 seconds. Don’t retreat from the situation or do anything to distract or distance yourself.
7. Remain in the situation until your level of distress drops several points, indicating that you’re experiencing some desensitization. For an exposure that’s very brief by nature, you may not have time to observe your level of distress declining. In that case, just go on to the next step and repeat the exposure until your distress level is 2 or 3.
8. Practice repeated exposures to the situation until your level of distress ends up at a tolerable level of 2 or 3. Don’t wait too long between exposures. An ideal schedule would be to practice one or two exposures a day.
9. Then go on to the next situation in your hierarchy and work through it using the same process. Continue in this way until you’ve mastered all of the items on your hierarchy.

Once you’ve completed your first hierarchy, you can construct a new hierarchy to work on another area of emotional avoidance.

When you practice situational exposure, you’ll generally find that anxiety or any other painful feeling tends to come on like a wave, building rapidly in intensity and then slowly subsiding and receding. Your goal isn’t to reduce your distress level to 0 in each situation, but to experience each situation over and over until the wave of emotion is smaller and more tolerable—more like a knee-high wave at the beach, not a huge breaker that could knock you off your feet.

In order to more quickly experience the desensitization effect of situational emotion exposure, it’s important to keep focused on the particular uncomfortable emotion you’re working on. Notice shifts in the emotion’s intensity and any subtle ways it might be changing. Above all, consciously resist emotion-driven behavior. Don’t permit yourself to engage in any form of avoidance or withdrawal. This includes subtle things like closing or unfocusing your eyes, thinking about something else, shutting down, or numbing. If you’re working on confronting situations that provoke anger, don’t respond with aggressive words, postures, or actions.

In the 1970s and 1980s, when cognitive psychologists were working out the best way to do situational emotion exposure, many therapists had their clients do relaxation exercises before, during, and after practicing an exposure. People were also instructed to prepare what therapists termed “stress coping thoughts” or affirmations to repeat to themselves during an exposure. More recent opinion is that these strategies aren’t helpful, and that they may, in fact, constitute a subtle form of avoidance that delays the desensitization effect of exposure.

You may want to use the following log or something similar to keep track of your distress levels during each exposure exercise. Alternatively, you could just add notes to the hierarchy itself.
Practice your exposure exercises daily, working steadily through your hierarchy. Situational emotion exposure works best when you practice it on a daily basis, without long breaks between exposure sessions. Sylvia started her exposure exercises by calling a friend to arrange to have lunch together at school, and progressively moved forward on her exposure hierarchy until she reached the situation that caused her the highest level of distress: stating her real opinions in class. Even with spring break and midterms, she was able to complete her hierarchy and significantly overcome her social phobia in seven weeks.

**Obstacles to Exposure**

If you try situational emotion exposure but don’t experience a reduction in your levels of distress, it’s time to become a detective. Look closely at what you’re actually doing in the exposure situations. It may be that you’re somehow avoiding the exposure, either overtly or covertly.

If you postpone experiencing a situation for several days, or if you try it and feel overwhelmed and leave the situation early, before your distress has declined, that’s overt avoidance. If this happens, add some additional, easier steps to your hierarchy so that you start with a less threatening situation. Then follow through, practicing the exposure on schedule and remaining in it long enough to experience some habituation.

Covert avoidance consists of all the subtle cognitive strategies for escaping situations without physically leaving: deep breathing, saying prayers or affirmations, spacing out, entertaining distracting thoughts, visualizing positive outcomes, and so on. Anything that takes your attention away
from your feelings in the moment will interfere with effective exposure. When practicing situational emotion exposure, keep asking yourself, “What am I feeling right now? How is it showing up in my body?”

Applications

Although situational emotion exposure was first developed to relieve anxiety, it works equally well for other painful emotions, including anger, shame, guilt, and depression. Let’s look at some short examples illustrating the approach with depression, anger, and shame.

Here’s a hierarchy of situations involving simple daily tasks created by Roger, a carpenter whose depression made him want to collapse on the couch and do nothing after work and on weekends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Distress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doing the dishes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking clothes to the laundromat</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting all my tools back where they belong</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixing the lock on the back door</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning the slacks that don’t fit</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying a new TV</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying bills</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting some framed posters to put up in the living room</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning checkbook software on the computer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Sophia, her persistent feelings of anger drove her to aggressive outbursts in which she shouted and threw things. She created this hierarchy of situations to practice without giving in to urges to behave aggressively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Distress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking to Linda, who talks faster than a machine gun</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calling the dentist’s office about my bill</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with heavy traffic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting in line at toll booths while commuting to work</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending an evening with my mother-in-law</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saying hello to a coworker who beat me out of a promotion</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calling my brother, who always says something critical</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling my boss that I think my workload is too heavy</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rick’s feelings of shame kept him hiding out and pulling back from life. Here’s the exposure
People suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) typically require more prolonged exposure to desensitize to some of their symptoms. For the phobic avoidance symptoms of OCD, for example, fear of germs or harm, extend situational exposure sessions to several minutes, until your distress level goes down to near zero. With PTSD it also works better to extend exposure to stimuli such as crowds or loud noises—stay in the situation until distress levels fully subside.

**Duration**

Situational emotion exposure works best when you practice at least one exposure session a day and keep moving steadily through your hierarchy. To keep up your momentum, be sure to practice at least three or four times a week. If you have a hierarchy of twenty items and work on it daily, and if each item requires two or three repetitions to become tolerable, you could complete your hierarchy in as little as six weeks, though eight weeks may be more realistic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Distress (0-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking the butcher for exactly the steak I want, not just taking whatever he grabs first</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing a letter to John, despite embarrassment over my writing skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bringing home-baked instead of store-bought cookies to the potluck</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing the bright Hawaiian shirt I got for my birthday</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not wearing a shirt at the beach</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling my new girlfriend about the dysfunctional family I grew up in</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admitting my fear of heights to my girlfriend</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempting something challenging that my girlfriend has asked for sexually</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Post-treatment Assessment Exercise

Congratulations on completing the treatment chapters of *Mind and Emotions*. You’ve come a long way, through many ups and downs. You’ve met and mastered many challenges and, we hope, experienced many exciting changes in your life.

Now is the time to take stock and celebrate. Fill out the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz and Roemer 2004) a third time and compare your score today with your previous scores.

**Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)**

Please indicate how often the following statements apply to you by writing the appropriate number from the scale below on the line beside each item.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>almost never (0-10%)</td>
<td>sometimes (11-35%)</td>
<td>about half the time (36-65%)</td>
<td>most of the time (66-90%)</td>
<td>almost always (91-100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>_______________ I am clear about my feelings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>_______________ I pay attention to how I feel.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>_______________ I experience my emotions as overwhelming and out of control.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>_______________ I have no idea how I am feeling.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>_______________ I have difficulty making sense out of my feelings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>_______________ I am attentive to my feelings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>_______________ I know exactly how I am feeling.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>_______________ I care about what I am feeling.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>_______________ I am confused about how I feel.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>_______________ When I’m upset, I acknowledge my emotions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>_______________ When I’m upset, I become angry with myself for feeling that way.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>_______________ When I’m upset, I become embarrassed for feeling that way.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>_______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty getting work done.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>_______________ When I’m upset, I become out of control.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>_______________ When I’m upset, I believe that I will remain that way for a long time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>_______________ When I’m upset, I believe that I will end up feeling very depressed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
17. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe that my feelings are valid and important.
18. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty focusing on other things.
19. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel out of control.
20. _______________ When I’m upset, I can still get things done.
21. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel ashamed at myself for feeling that way.
22. _______________ When I’m upset, I know that I can find a way to eventually feel better.
23. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel like I am weak.
24. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel like I can remain in control of my behaviors.
25. _______________ When I’m upset, I feel guilty for feeling that way.
26. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty concentrating.
27. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty controlling my behaviors.
28. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe there is nothing I can do to make myself feel better.
29. _______________ When I’m upset, I become irritated at myself for feeling that way.
30. _______________ When I’m upset, I start to feel very bad about myself.
31. _______________ When I’m upset, I believe that wallowing in it is all I can do.
32. _______________ When I’m upset, I lose control over my behavior.
33. _______________ When I’m upset, I have difficulty thinking about anything else.
34. _______________ When I’m upset, I take time to figure out what I’m really feeling.
35. _______________ When I’m upset, it takes me a long time to feel better.
36. _______________ When I’m upset, my emotions feel overwhelming.

(Copyright 2004 by Kim L. Gratz, Ph.D., and Lizabeth Roemer, Ph.D. Used with permission.)

Scoring: Put a minus sign in front of your rating numbers for these items: 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 17, 20, 22, 24, and 34. Then sum up all your ratings, adding the positives and subtracting the negatives, and write the result here: _______________.

Once again, this score represents how much difficulty you’re having with emotion regulation now, today. If this number is lower than your previous scores, congratulations on acquiring some valuable skills that will serve you for the rest of your life.

If this score is the same or higher than either of your previous scores, you still have room for improvement. Most people who are still experiencing significant emotion dysregulation at this point find that they didn’t fully put into practice the techniques in the chapters on emotion exposure. Willingly exposing yourself to whatever frightens, depresses, angers, or shames you is the most difficult task in this book, and it also yields some of the greatest benefits.

If you feel that you need to do more exposure work, go back to chapter 11, Imagery-Based Emotion Exposure, and work through the book from that point forward, taking one small and very deliberate step at a time.

If you feel you gave exposure an honest effort and couldn’t go it alone, consider enlisting the aid of a cognitive therapist or other qualified counselor with experience in helping people with mood disorders.

Regardless of your score on this exercise today, don’t close the book until you read the final
chapter and prepare a relapse plan, just in case.
Occasionally slipping back into your old ways of dealing with painful emotions is inevitable. The skills you’ve learned in this book work well, but they aren’t a “single-dose” solution like the polio vaccine. Rather, you have to monitor yourself on an ongoing basis and apply your skills as needed.

Because you’re bound to experience the occasional relapse from time to time, it makes sense to have a plan for what to do about it. That way you can promptly get back on a more even keel emotionally and spend as little time as possible in distress. This chapter will help you draft such a plan.

The first step is to recognize the signs of relapse. How do you know when you’ve relapsed, anyway? If you’re trying to stop smoking or drinking, relapse is obvious: It happens whenever you smoke or drink again. But relapse in the realm of mind and emotions is more subtle. You have to watch for signs that you’re slipping back into your old habitual ways of thinking and acting.

Learning the Signs of Emotion Dysregulation

As you keep an eye on yourself, here are some signs that can alert you that you’re slipping back into emotion dysregulation. Answer each set of questions as best you can. With time, you may gain more insight into your personal signs of emotion dysregulation. You can always expand on your answers later. If you need a little help getting started, a sample follows the blank version.

**Red Flag Emotions**

By this point in the book, you should have a pretty good idea of what your red flag emotions are. Still, take a moment to list the feelings that bother you the most and that you have the most trouble dealing with:

_________________
_________________
_________________
_________________

**High-Risk Situations**

Now consider your high-risk situations. In what circumstances are you most likely to experience
your red flag emotions? Where are you? Who are you with? What’s happening? In the space below, make a list of the people, places, and activities that are most likely to trigger problematic feelings:

_______________
_______________
_______________
_______________

Emotion-Driven Behavior

What do you do when your emotions are driving you? Yell and curse? Ramble on? Withdraw? Procrastinate? Apologize? Check things excessively? Stay at home every night? Go out constantly? Take a moment to record the things you typically do when your painful feelings are in charge:

_______________
_______________
_______________

Rumination, Worry, and Negative Appraisals

What are you thinking about when you experience intense, painful feelings? What’s going through your mind and bringing up those feelings over and over or prolonging them for hours or days? What past events do you ruminate about? What future possibilities do you worry about? What negative labels do you habitually apply to your experience? Write your usual topics for rumination, worry, and negative appraisal here:

_______________
_______________
_______________

Avoidance and Suppression

How do you try to avoid or suppress painful feelings? Do you limit your life by staying away from certain people, places, or activities? Do you try to keep your mind blank or numb? Do you try to keep painful feelings at bay with certain repetitive mental rituals? In the space below, list the ways you most typically try to avoid or suppress your feelings:

_______________
_______________
_______________

Emily, a recently divorced forty-six-year-old teacher, had two teenage children, and she worried about them a lot. She was behind on her bills and also worried about her mother, who was becoming more and more forgetful and irritable. Here is how Emily listed her signs of emotional dysregulation.
Red Flag Emotions

*Anxiety, guilt, depression*

High-Risk Situations

*Visiting Mom*

*When my kids are away from home*

*Paying bills*

Emotion-Driven Behavior

*Fussing and nagging at Mom*

*Calling kids’ cell phones too much*

*Overspending on the credit card*

Rumination, Worry, and Negative Appraisals

*My wild, reckless youth*

*Envisioning my kids being assaulted or getting in car wrecks*

*Bankruptcy, not having a place to live, and thinking “I’m a failure”*

Avoidance and Suppression

*Keeping the TV on all the time*

*Postponing visits to Mom*

*Procrastinating on the bills*

What to Do

The most important step in dealing with a relapse is recognizing that you’re having a relapse. Once you realize that you’re in a high-risk situation and starting to experience red flag emotions, you can start applying the skills you’ve learned in this book, using the guidelines below.

Curb Emotion-Driven Behavior

If you’re fighting the urge to engage in emotion-driven behavior—or if you’ve already given in to that urge—review chapter 9, "Doing the Opposite." For depression, focus on values-based action (see chapter 4) and stay active instead of withdrawing. For anxiety, use the exposure processes you learned in chapters 11 through 13 to face what scares you instead of avoiding it. With anger, empathize with and validate others instead of venting. For shame and guilt, approach people and situations instead of withdrawing from them.
If your emotion-driven behavior strongly affects your close relationships, also revisit chapter 10, Interpersonal Effectiveness. For healthy alternate behaviors, remember what you learned about building positive, pleasurable activities into your lifestyle in chapter 8, Self-Soothing.

**Reduce Rumination, Worry, and Negative Appraisals**

If you find yourself falling into rumination, worry, or negative appraisals, review chapter 5, Mindfulness and Emotion Awareness, to accept your feelings and let yourself experience an emotion as it comes. Observe the feeling and let it run its course without trying to avoid or suppress it, and without intensifying it with negative thoughts, judgments, or predictions.

Chapter 6, Defusion, is good for reminding yourself about the nature of your mind and how thoughts come and go. Practice exercises such as MilkMilkMilk, Leaves in a Stream, White Room Meditation, Labeling Thoughts, and “Thank You, Mind.” Also consult chapter 7, Cognitive Flexibility Training, for techniques such as Drafting a Worst-Case Coping Plan, Using Big-Picture Awareness, Finding Alternative Explanations, and Transforming Shoulds into Preferences.

**Avoid Avoidance**

If you find yourself trying to avoid experiencing painful emotions, return to the skills you learned in chapters 11 through 13, on exposure exercises for emotion avoidance. The key to avoiding avoidance is to expose yourself to your painful feelings, observing them and accepting their natural rhythm as they arise and subside. Finally, chapter 4, Values in Action, will remind you that your life is about more than your fears, losses, or transgressions and increase your motivation to tolerate difficult experiences in the service of living in alignment with your values.

---

**Drafting Your Relapse Plan**

Take time right now, before you close this book, to draft your relapse plan in the space below.

**WHEN I RECOGNIZE MY DANGER SIGNS**

Red flag emotions: _______________

_______________________

Emotion-driven behaviors: _______________

_______________________

Increased worry, rumination, or negative appraisals about: _______________
Avoidance of these painful feelings: _______________

__________________________________________________________________

I WILL PRACTICE MY EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS

Instead of this emotion-driven behavior: _______________

__________________________________________________________________

I will do the opposite: _______________

__________________________________________________________________

My daily self-soothing ritual will be: _______________

__________________________________________________________________

I will express my needs or set limits by saying: _______________

__________________________________________________________________

I will set time aside daily for mindful observation of my breath, thoughts, sensations, and emotions.
Time or situation: _______________
I will use this cognitive flexibility skill daily: _______________
Time or situation: _______________
I will use this defusion skill daily: _______________
Time or situation: _______________
I will practice one emotion exposure exercise daily.
Situation: _______________
Time: _______________
Place: _______________

Conclusion

Although occasional relapses are inevitable, they are also transient. By being alert to the signs that you’re slipping back into ineffective ways of reacting to painful emotions, you can quickly get back on track by applying the emotion regulation skills you’ve learned in this book.
References


Matthew McKay, PhD, is professor at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, CA. In private practice, he specializes in the cognitive behavioral treatment of anxiety, anger, and depression. He is coauthor of *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook, Thoughts and Feelings, Self-Esteem*, and many other titles. Combined, his books have sold more than three million copies.

Patrick Fanning is a professional writer in the mental health field. He is coauthor of *Messages, Visualization for Change, Thoughts and Feelings, Self-Esteem*, and other books.

Patricia Zurita Ona, PsyD, is a clinical supervisor at the Berkeley Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Clinic and the Wright Institute in Berkeley, CA. In private practice, she specializes in treating emotional disorders and teaching emotion regulation skills.

Find more help online at [cbt-self-help-therapy.com](http://cbt-self-help-therapy.com). **CBT Self-Help Therapy** is web-based therapy for mood disorders, offering individualized, interactive treatment for anxiety, depression, anger, shame, and guilt. It is based on the book *Mind & Emotions: A Universal Treatment for Emotional Disorders*, but the site stands alone. It can be used by clients working on their own, or their therapists can monitor their work on the secure server.

The CBT Self-Help Therapy site combines three evidence-based treatment approaches: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).