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Understanding Stress

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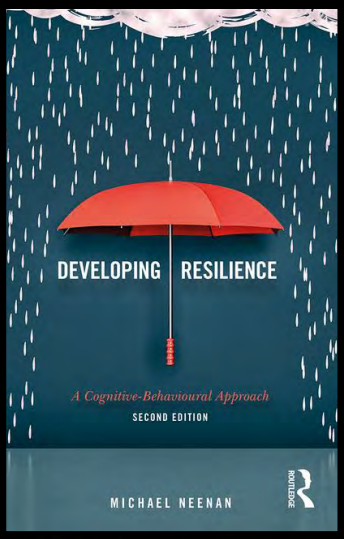

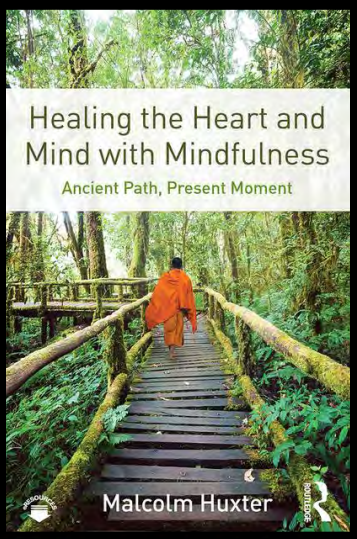

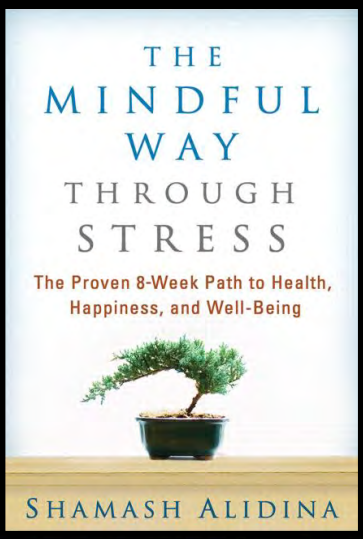

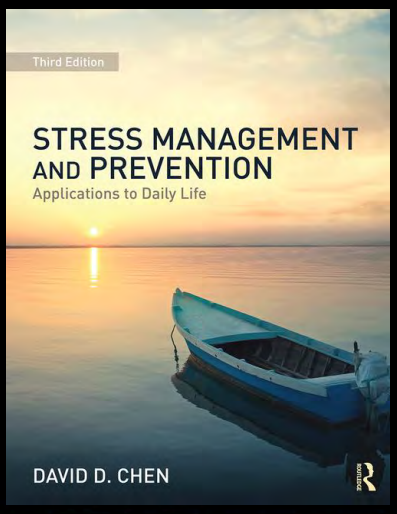

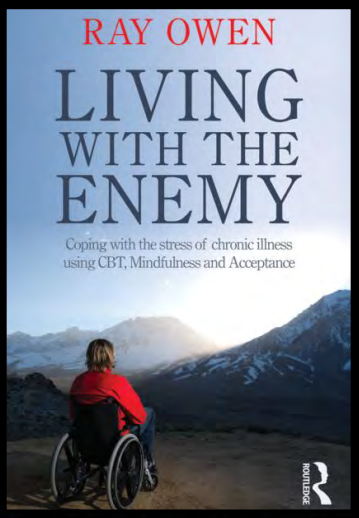

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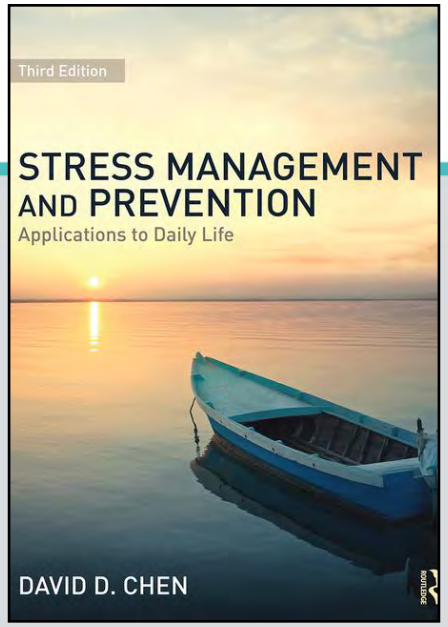
CHAPTER

1

THE MEANING OF STRESS



This chapter is excerpted from

Stress Management and Prevention

by David D. Chen.

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THE MEANING OF STRESS

Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

It is Monday morning and the sun is just beginning to peek over the horizon, casting a dim shadow through the slats of the window blinds. In the mostly darkened room you can see the barest outline of a body sitting at a desk with his head cradled in his arms, resting near a laptop. The surface of the desk is littered with papers, cups half-filled with coffee, crushed cans of caffeinated energy drinks, and the remnants of pizza crust. If you look closer you can see that the person, although half-dead to the world, is not quite sleeping: his eyes are barely open, red and blurry. It has been a long night without sleep and Blaine has been prepping for an exam scheduled that morning, as well as a paper due in the afternoon.

Somehow, some way, Blaine has got to regain some energy to get through the day, stay awake through his classes, and then show up for his part-time job. It's been especially tough lately with money so tight and getting worse. He can't afford to miss a day of work or he'll risk lowering his main source of income. With problems of their own, his parents are in no position to help him much.

To make matters even more challenging, Blaine and his girlfriend have been fighting lately. She complains that they never seem to have much time to be together anymore —and when they do hang out, he is so tired that all he wants to do is watch TV or play computer games. In addition, he just hasn't been feeling well lately. Headaches have been occurring with greater frequency. He isn't sleeping well—when he finds the time to sleep at all. His grades are slipping because he can't find the time to study as much as he'd like. About the only thing that gives Blaine some relief is drinking beer with friends, but then he has trouble waking up the next morning to make his early class. He wonders how he will ever dig himself out of this hole.

Although this scenario is not exactly uncommon among college students, we hope that it isn't too familiar to you. Unlike some people you may know whom stress has buried beyond recovery, Blaine actually made significant progress in regaining control of his life. A friend had recommended that he take a stress management class so they could coordinate their schedules. As it happened, Blaine agreed, mostly because it was offered at a convenient time and seemed like an easy grade. But once he began learning about the cumulative effects of stress on his body and well-being, Blaine began experimenting with some of the methods introduced in class and his text. More than anything else, it was the social support he felt from others in the class that encouraged him to incorporate the new stress reduction strategies into his life. Regardless of your particular age, gender, socioeconomic

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background, major, family situation, and the college you are attending, managing stress effectively is perhaps the single most important skill to get the most from your experience and perform at the highest level. Among "nontraditional" adult students, who represent one-third of college enrollment, there are added challenges to balance school with jobs, family, and personal responsibilities (Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009). According to a number of surveys of college students conducted by the Associated Press (2009), the American College Health Association (2009), and the Chronicle of Higher Education (2008), 85% report that stress is a major problem and the single greatest obstacle to success. Apart from actual performance in classes and grades achieved, excessive stress affects almost every aspect of life satisfaction. In recent times, economic problems have led to cutbacks in classes, staff, faculty, and services on campus. Scholarships have been reduced during a time when three-quarters of all students graduate with debt (Berg-Gross & Green, 2010). Stress means different things to different people. To some, it represents a complete breakdown in their lives; to others, it means a minor annoyance that is best ignored, or tolerated; and in some circumstances, stress means an opportunity to rise to new levels of performance in a variety of areas. Some people tolerate stress reasonably well, some fall apart, and others hardly seem to notice the pressure in the first place.

KEY QUESTIONS IN THE CHAPTER
What are the different ways that stress can be defined and conceptualized?
What are the different ways that people respond to adversity in their lives?
How can you assess the signs and symptoms of stress as they occur in yourself and others?
Stress is ordinarily thought of as a fairly negative state, something to be avoided whenever possible. But how can stress be highly functional and operate as a survival mechanism?
What is the general adaptation syndrome (GAS) and how does it function during times of stress?
What is the primary goal of stress management? Can such a program completely eliminate stress?
What are major sources of stress and how are they recognized?
How do you interpret the following statement: "Stress is not what exists on the outside, but how you perceive a situation on the inside?"

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Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

What Is Stress Anyway?

This may seem like a rather obvious question. Everyone knows what stress is, or at the very least, knows when they are experiencing it firsthand or witnessing its effects on someone close to them.

Stress is that feeling when you can't seem to sit still, when your thoughts are racing and you feel out of control. Your body feels tense, as if tied into a knot. You feel revved up but can't figure out where to direct your energy. Time pressures weigh down on you. Concentration seems difficult.

Intense pressure: you feel it in your neck, in your back, in your belly. You notice your jaw muscles are clenched. There is, perhaps, a throbbing in your head. Your heart rate has increased, and your hands feel clammy.

This is stress, or at least some of the symptoms. As you will learn, there are many others that you will learn to recognize, and understand how they develop. There are also different kinds of stress, some of which break down your body and mind while others actually help you perform at peak levels.

One definition of stress is that it represents both a psychological and a physiological reaction to a real or perceived threat that requires some action or resolution. It is a response that operates on cognitive, behavioral, and biological levels that, when sustained and chronic, results in significant negative health effects (Linden, 2005).

Stress is, therefore, what happens when life exerts pressure on us, but also the way it makes us feel. According to landmark brain researcher Bruce McEwen (McEwen, 2002; McEwen & Wingfield, 2010), it is both a stimulus and a response.

A more humorous (and perhaps accurate) description of stress is offered by Elkin (1999, p. 24) as the condition created when "your mind overrides the body's basic desire to choke the living daylights out of some idiot who desperately deserves it" (Note: There is a high likelihood that your friends and family are going to ask what you are learning in "that stress class you are taking." Please offer them the first definition rather than the second one.)

Stress is actually a survival mechanism, programmed a long time ago, to increase internal awareness of danger and transform all the body's resources to a heightened state of readiness. It is, essentially, the experience of perceived attack. It doesn't matter whether the threat is real or not; the autonomic nervous system

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(think "automatic") is activated. This system works well only when it turns itself on and off within a reasonable period of time so as to not wear out its welcome (and deplete your energy). Unfortunately, half of all Americans report significant stress in their lives. Even more disturbingly, according to a recent survey, most people don't intend to do anything about it (Schuler, 2006).

There is a fairly good possibility that you are experiencing some degree of stress in your life right now, perhaps this very minute. How do you know when you are stressed? Stress responses have some common symptoms and signs, but they are also highly individualized, impacting your body, your internal thoughts, your emotional reactions, and your behavior (see Table 1.2 later in the chapter).

Stress symptoms are the body's way of getting your attention to tell you: Look, you've got to get your act together. I'm a little tired of you running me ragged. I'm going to annoy you until you do something about this situation. And if you don't pay attention to me, well then, I'll just have to figure out more ways to get to you.

If your body could talk to you, it might communicate this message. The problem is that stress symptoms are not always obvious and direct; sometimes they can become disguised or rather subtle and their messages somewhat clouded.

Meanings of Stress

Trey thought he had things under control. He was well organized and intentional in almost everything he did. He had a plan for his life and clear ideas about just how he wanted to reach his goals.

In addition to his college courses, Trey had a good job and was well respected at work. There were opportunities for advancement within the company and almost no limit to how far he could rise, especially after he completed his degree. He was involved in a long-term relationship with Mia, whom he had been seeing since they were both sixteen. Trey was doing well in school, enjoyed a good social life with friends, and was getting along well with his family. He was in good health, exercised regularly, and—except for a fondness for Hawaiian pizza with extra ham—monitored his diet.

So it was all the more surprising, given how well everything seemed to be going in his life, that he suddenly (or maybe it was gradually—he couldn't remember) started to lose control. First the headaches started, and this was highly unusual for

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him; he was almost never sick. He tried to ignore them and, when that didn't work, starting eating up to a dozen aspirin a day to reduce the throbbing.

Eventually, Trey decided to visit his doctor, but after a thorough physical exam, no physiological cause was found. His blood pressure was a little high, as was his cholesterol, but otherwise he was in reasonably good shape.

"They seem to be stress headaches," the doctor suggested to him. "Are you under a lot of pressure lately?" Trey shrugged. "Not really," he replied. "Everything is going pretty well in my life. I've got everything under control." These were the mantras of his life, his trademark responses every time anyone asked him how things were going. Indeed, Trey was much admired by friends and family alike for his calm, controlled demeanor and ability to keep things under control.

Here is the key question: what is the particular meaning of Trey's stress symptoms? Later, when he was asked this question by a friend who had taken a stress management class, all Trey could do was shake his head in frustration.

It turned out that Trey's strengths were also his weaknesses. He was absolutely relentless in his desire to maintain control and keep everything on course to follow his plan. He would be graduating in two years (19 months to be exact). He and his girlfriend would then get married and have four children, two of each gender. By then he would be a regional manager for the company. They'd own a home in a particular neighborhood that appealed to him. He even knew what kind of car he wanted once he had achieved his success.

So, what's the problem? And why would a stress response like headaches emerge just when things seemed to be so under control? What was the meaning of stress in Trey's life? How were these symptoms trying to get his attention to look at something he was ignoring? (See For Reflection 1.1.)

Avoiding the situation did not work for Trey, nor did medicating himself first with aspirin and later with increasing quantities of beer. The headaches worsened. Then other symptoms developed, including a skin rash.

It took some time before Trey confronted what was going on in his life. He realized eventually that he so over-structured and controlled his life so he didn't ever have to think about where he was headed and whether, in fact, he actually wanted to reach the goals that he had declared. As it turned out, he was very fond of his girlfriend but he didn't love her, and he certainly didn't want to spend the rest of his life with her. But for years he hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings. He wanted to

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do the right thing, so that meant continuing to live a lie.

And this great job he had, and bright future with the company? He never really wanted to be in business. That was the influence of his father, who was so proud of him. Now that he realized it, Trey had no idea what he wanted to do with his life because it had never seemed like he had a choice.

Now that the headaches had forced him to stop doing what he was doing, Trey had the opportunity to actually consider where he was headed and whether he really wanted to go there. Once he discovered the particular meaning of stress in his life, the headaches went away (although the skin rash stuck around for almost a year afterwards, a residual reminder to follow through on his new commitments). Finding meaning in stress is thus not just an academic exercise but often is absolutely necessary to put life challenges in perspective and allow you to restore feelings of well-being after experiencing disappointment or trauma (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2005).

What's in a Name?

Stress is the name given to the pressure that cracks bridges or the force that places strain on an object or body. It is synonymous with tension, fatigue, failure, trauma, or difficulty. The word is derived from the Middle English stresse, meaning "hardship," and the Old French estrece, meaning "oppression." More often than not, the subject of stress is thought of in the most negative terms possible—it is something to be managed, or at least tolerated, but rarely understood.

The term has cropped up in medicine since the seventeenth century, recognized by physicians as the cause of physical illnesses that might result from social pressure. It came into common usage during the 1950s when a Canadian biologist, Hans Selye, first published a book that adapted the concept of strain on physical structures from engineering to describe what happens to the human body during times of crisis. In retrospect, Selye didn't much like the term after it became popular—much preferring "strain"—but by then it was too late (you can't exactly issue a word recall).

The seventeenth century of Rousseau, Descartes, and Locke was called the "Age of Reason"; poet and essayist W. H. Auden announced in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning verse of the same name that the twentieth century was the "Age of Anxiety." This

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catchphrase soon became popular, resulting in dozens of books about how to find the balanced life during a time with so much daily pressure. In 1983, the cover of Time magazine proclaimed that we now live in an "Age of Stress." Our lives are "consumed by demands for our resources and threats to our well being" (Hobfoll, 1998).

FOR REFLECTION 1.1

What ideas might you have as to what stress could mean in Trey's life? What might he be ignoring that needs attention? What are the principal repeating themes in this narrative?

Given that control and (over)planning are such an ingrained part of Trey's life, is it any wonder that this might suppress other desires and dreams that he does not allow himself to think about?

There are several important questions that are useful in identifying the meaning of disguised or subtle stress. Consider each of them in response to Trey's situation.

1. What does Trey need to look at that he might be ignoring?

2. How are the stress symptoms capturing Trey's attention?

3. What might the symptoms be communicating to him?

4. What would it be like if he tried doing something else, or followed another path?

Think of a situation in your own life in which you feel perplexed by chronic symptoms of distress that won't go away no matter what you do. Ask yourself some of the same questions that you applied to Trey's case: what particular meaning does the problem have in the larger context of your life? In other words, what function might it be serving to get you to examine something important that you might be ignoring?

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Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

Judging by the hundreds of books and thousands of articles published each year on the subject, stress has become the obsession of our time. Doctors warn about the epidemic of health problems that result from excessive stress. Employers worry about the effects on absenteeism and work productivity. Relationship experts cite stress as a main factor in divorce and other interpersonal conflicts.

The problem of stress has become so pervasive that people flock to courses on stress management, meditation, and yoga. Individuals hire personal trainers and join health clubs, while businesses hire consultants to reduce stress in the workplace. Stress has become the universal challenge of our time, the condition that can suck the fun out of life and kill us just as surely as any plague we faced in ancient times.

How Is Stress a Problem?

It has been estimated that 75% to 90% of all visits to a primary care physician are because of stress-related disorders (Rosch, 1991). These include stomach ailments, tension headaches, high blood pressure, addictions, and almost any other disease you can think of.

Nine out of ten adults report that they have experienced serious stress at some time in their lives; almost half of these people say that their symptoms were serious enough to disrupt their lives. Some people experience stress to the point where they cannot function well on a daily basis, cannot enjoy a decent night's sleep, and feel ravaged by the effects in such a way that their relationships are impaired and their productivity compromised.

Consider yourself fortunate if you are managing to cope reasonably well with the stresses you face in your life. Rest assured that there will come a time in the near future when you will be tested in ways you never imagined. Preparation is the key to preventing serious problems; hence, the purpose of this text is to equip you with those skills you will find so helpful during times of crisis.

Stress as a Stimulus or Response

In both the physical and psychological worlds, stress implies a judgment that something is damaged as a result of extreme pressure. For our purposes, in talking

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about stress in relation to human functioning, it is most often thought of as either a stimulus or a response. In the first case, stress is the description we give for someone or something that is putting pressure on us to do something that feels beyond comfortable limits. It is an external pressure ("Could you help me write this paper?"), event (earthquake), or incident (car accident) that produces a response.

In the second case, with stress as a response, it represents the result of internal or external pressure. Regardless of what happened in the outside world, the internal mechanisms of the body and mind activate stressful reactions.

In both instances, you can see a clear linkage between something that happens in the world and how the person responds afterwards. Stressors are those stimuli in the environment or daily life that result in perceived pressure. Perception is a key factor in this definition because people respond in such different ways to exactly the same stimuli. For instance, imagine the following: your instructor announces that she has changed the requirements of the course and now expects you and all your classmates to come up in front of the room and tell a story about the time you each felt most stressed in your life. We're willing to bet that some people might respond to this invitation with abject terror ("Oh my gosh! I can't do that!"). And yet, there are a few others who would rub their hands together with glee, thinking to themselves: "What fun! That sounds so interesting."

There are some stressors that would likely produce anxiety in almost anyone (death of a loved one, catastrophic illness, divorce in the family, loss of a job, failing a class) and others that depend on a number of factors including a person's prior experiences and history, personality style, resources available, and resilience. Regardless of these variables, research consistently finds that certain life events act as stressors to produce extreme emotional reactions that include anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions.

TABLE 1.1. Stress as a Stimulus or a Response

Stimulus	Response
• *She's stressing me out with her demands.*	• *I am so stressed after the exam.*
• *The deadline is putting stress on me.*	• *I feel the stress in my shoulders and my neck.*
• *This class is so stressful the way the instructor organizes things.*	• *When you said that, you made me so upset afterwards.*

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Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

A Selected History of Stress Research

It is only relatively recently in human history that stress has become a major issue of discussion—in the previous centuries people usually died before the ravages of stress-related illnesses could take a toll. Yet stress has been with us since the first humans dealt with the life-threatening challenges of hunting—and avoiding being the hunted.

Ancient Contributions

Our ancestors developed coping mechanisms to handle the stressors specific to their times. In a Chinese medical classic, Yellow Emperor's Classic on Internal Medicine, written more than 2,000 years ago, the principles of moderation and balance in living were presented. Just as adherence to these guidelines would promote health, their violation was believed to cause sickness.

On the other side of the world, at about the same time, the Greek physician and father of modern medicine, Hippocrates (460–377 bc), observed that the experience of disease offers some benefits in that the pathos (suffering) is always followed by the response of the body and the ponos (the toil of being sick). Hippocrates was also among the first to observe that emotional stress might put pregnant women at risk for miscarriages and so cautioned them to remain as calm as possible.

Modern Era

Advances in medical knowledge during the past 150 years have made it possible to track the ways that stress affects the body systems.

Claude Bernard (1813 –1878), who lived in the age of steam engines and other mechanical inventions, used a metaphor for understanding the workings of the human body. He noticed a remarkable similarity between a steam engine and a living organism in that both require the process of converting stored energy through a combustion process in order to move some mechanical parts to generate motion. To explain how a living organism could move itself without any external assistance, he developed the concept of internal environment that caused the step-by-step processes living organisms employ in moving themselves.

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Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

Bernard believed that complex living organisms depend on both the external environment and the internal environment. Based on his thinking, one major function of the internal environment was to keep the body constant in the face of the changing external environment through various chemical and physical responses. This concept of homeostasis states that all the physiological systems work in unison to keep the internal environment stable and balanced. If the body's core temperature, for example, should move beyond relatively small established limits, then immediate efforts are made to lower the temperature through sweating, or raise it through shivering. Likewise, if the body should become activated during an emergency, it will attempt to stabilize itself after the emergency has passed.

About the same time that Bernard was exploring the nature of balance within the body, Charles Darwin was sailing around the Galapagos Islands in South America, charting the nature of evolution. Based on his years of study—first of the ways that animals developed adaptive responses to their environment, and later applying these observations to humans—Darwin was among the first to theorize that fear and stress are useful or otherwise they would have extinguished themselves a long time ago. According to evolutionary theory, fear responses are passed on from one generation to the next because they serve as a survival mechanism. Darwin further noted that humans could display a range of stress/fear emotional responses, describing the behavioral changes that take place, including facial expressions and physiological changes.

A few decades later, into the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud presented the most coherent theory of emotions, making a clear distinction between fear and anxiety. The former could very well be part of what Darwin considered adaptive stress, while "neurotic anxiety" is a chronic condition of permanent apprehension. Freud eventually developed a whole theory of psychological disturbance based on the conscious and unconscious fears that motivate behavior.

A contemporary of Freud's, Walter Cannon (1932), was the first physiologist to begin talking about stress in the context of emotional responses. He worked with the homeostasis concept developed by Bernard, that humans develop coping mechanisms to keep the internal environment constant and secure the integrity of the cells and organs inside.

Cannon's contributions went far beyond the mechanisms of how the nervous and endocrine systems regulate internal stability. He believed that psychological

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disturbances and emotional distress can compromise the system in such a way that it fails to respond appropriately and can compromise health. He also gave a name for the stress response that becomes activated during perceived threats: the fight-or-flight reaction. This will be discussed in detail a little later in the chapter.

General Adaptation Syndrome

Hans Selye, an endocrinologist (someone who studies the glandular system) from Canada, built on the work of Cannon and others to give the area of stress research greater legitimacy. Selye is recognized as one of the parents of stress research, a title that he earned through the most serendipitous of circumstances.

In the early stages of his career, Selye was investigating hormonal processes by injecting rats with various chemical substances. Alas, he may have had a brilliant mind but less than nimble dexterity. He was terribly inept at injecting his rats, at times mishandling them, even dropping them accidentally, then chasing them around the lab. Once he relocated his subjects, he discovered that they had suffered a number of physiological changes that were different from those that had not been terrorized: their immune systems malfunctioned and they developed ulcers. Much to his surprise, Selye learned that psychological trauma could actually stress the body to the point that it makes rats (and humans) sick.

Selye experimented with placing the rats under various challenging environmental conditions. He subjected some to Sahara-Desert-like conditions, and others to a simulated Arctic environment. He introduced toxins into their cages and tried isolation, then extreme crowding. Eventually, a consistent pattern of bodily changes emerged. The rats' adrenal glands became enlarged from overwork. Other organs such as the thymus, spleen, and lymph nodes changed dramatically. Selye called this consistent pattern of changes in response to demands in the external environment the general adaptation syndrome (GAS). This means that when someone is stressed by a crisis, perceived danger, or threat, the brain activates more than 1,000 different chemical responses to deal with the situation (see Figure 1.1).

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Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

FIGURE 1.1 General adaptation syndrome.

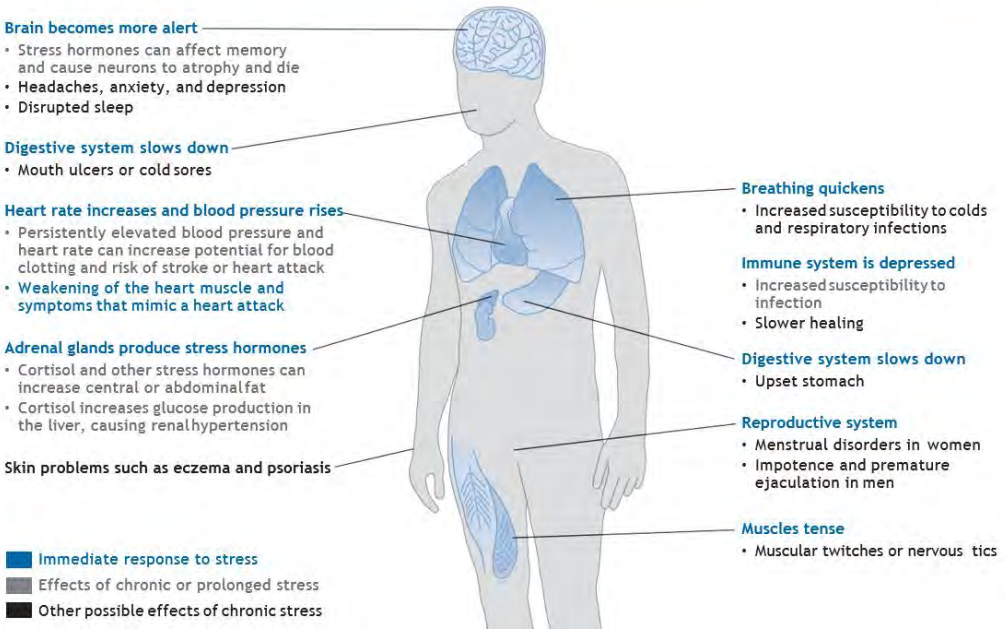

TABLE 1.2. Stages in the General Adaption Syndrome

Phase 1: Alarm reaction
The body's first exposure to the stressor that disrupts its homeostasis starts a series of physiological reactions through the autonomic and endocrine systems. The endocrine system will produce corticosteroids that will supply the body with resources to fight or flee. Unfortunately, these corticosteroids may weaken the immune system.

Phase 2: Resistance
The continued presence of the stressor will activate the stage of resistance during which the purpose is to sustain life and make necessary adaptations as long as the required fuel and biochemical material are available. It is like a gun that keeps firing over and over until it runs out of ammunition, or the shooter's finger cramps to the point it can no longer function.

Phase 3: Exhaustion
If the stressor remains present (or is believed to be present), the body will deplete its stored energy to the point that it is no longer capable of mounting any resistance. Mental and physical energy are on empty. Exhaustion sets in. Permanent damage will result, leading to illness or even death.

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The general adaptation syndrome (see Table 1.2) goes through three phases, if necessary, each one activated if the previous stage fails to be adequate. The first phase signals an alarm reaction—the fight-or-flight response described earlier. This is a short term, quickly mobilized system to deal with threats as quickly as possible. The second phase is initiated once the body realizes that this will not be a sprint, but a marathon. Long-term reactions are launched to try to keep the system functioning in the face of enduring assaults. At this juncture, either homeostasis is restored or the third phase begins. Finally, exhaustion sets in with the body systems depleted. This explains, in part, why people subjected to long-term stress develop various illnesses and chronic problems: their defenses have been breached.

The result of Hans Selye's research was not all bad news. He also discovered that an animal's ability to handle stress could be enhanced if it was repeatedly exposed to mild or moderate challenges presented at incrementally higher levels. This is exactly the strategy that is now used by psychologists to treat phobias using **systematic desensitization**. Someone who is irrationally afraid of mice, for example, would be gradually exposed to tiny, non-threatening cartoon character mice, perhaps even Mickey Mouse. Using relaxation training (described later in this book), the subject is taught to stay calm while increasing tolerance for progressively more stressful stimuli. This could include a photograph of a mouse, then a movie of a mouse, then a mouse in a cage at the far end of the room, then a mouse being held by someone else, until such time as the person can actually hold the mouse himself.

We can strengthen our capacity to deal with stressors in the future by preparing and training for them. This is just what coaches and performance experts try to do with athletes so that they can remain in Phase 1 of their GAS without suffering lingering side-effects.

It can be concluded from Selye's findings, and subsequent research, that exposure to stressors can have long-term consequences, which are harmful and even life-threatening or in some circumstances can be beneficial. Other investigators have since found that the extent to which the stressor impacts the body for better or worse depends not only on the intensity and magnitude of the stressor, but also on how we perceive the stressor and our ability to cope with it (Ganzel, Morris, & Wethington, 2010).

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Allostasis

The concept of homeostasis developed by Cannon implies that once the balance is restored, the body will return to its static and unchanged pre-stress state. Selye pointed out that chronic stress brings certain costs to the organism when its resources for coping are depleted.

Noting the cost of achieving this homeostatic balance in the face of stressors, Sterling and Eyer (1988) coined the term **allostasis** to mean the combined physiological and psychological adaptation to the experience of threats or adversities. In other words, the body will experience wear and tear and decreased capability to cope with future stressors as long as the threats continue and the need to maintain homeostasis still exists. Bruce McEwen, a renowned neuroendocrinologist, expanded the idea of allostasis by creating the concept of **allostatic load** to describe what happens when the same adaptive (GAS) system that was designed to protect us actually tears us apart (McEwen & Stellar, 1993; McEwen & Wingfield, 2010). The allostatic load comes out of balance when there is a systemic malfunction that occurs either by repeated exposure to perceived threat, or poor health and lifestyle choices on the part of an individual. This would be like someone constantly revving the engine of a car to the highest RPM, overheating the engine, and never changing the oil or adding lubrication.

McEwen (2002) cites the example of spawning salmon as an extreme case of what can happen when the allostatic load becomes excessive. Chinook salmon of Alaska will swim up to 60 miles per day, upriver, against the current, even jumping up waterfalls, in order to lay and fertilize their eggs. During this heroic and improbable journey, the salmon rely on every possible reserve of hormones and energy to complete their task. In the end, the constant stress on their system, plus the draining of their reserves, kills them. They literally die of overstress.

This phenomenon of death from overstress occurs within our own species as well, mostly in the form of suicide. Some of our most creative geniuses imploded as a result of internal and external pressures that pushed them over the limit of what they could stand. In studies of such lives (Jamison, 1993; Kottler, 2006), of innovators in art (Mark Rothko, Vincent Van Gogh, Arshile Gorky), literature (Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway), and music (Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Kurt Cobain), it can be found that consistent exposure to chronic stress, combined with feelings of perfectionism, often leads talented people to drain their reserves like salmon.

THE MEANING OF STRESS

The concept of allostasis has further enriched our understanding of adaptive mechanisms in the face of life's threats or traumas. It emphasizes that even minimal stressors can cause long-term damage to your health when they endure, demanding ongoing coping responses from the body.

Responses to Stress

There are a number of ways that people respond to stressful situations in their lives, depending on their personalities, their cognitive style (characteristic thinking patterns), their background and prior experiences, their gender and ethnicity, and a host of other factors. These responses may be grouped according to physiological reactions (covered in Chapter 2), emotional reactions (reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4), cognitive reactions (discussed in Chapter 6), and systemic reactions (presented in Chapter 12). Stress responses occur on multiple levels, and within many systems, in the body and mind (see Table 1.3).

TABLE 1.3. Major Responses to Stress

Physiological	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral
Heart palpitations	Impaired memory	Fear	Crying
Sweating	Disorientation	Worry	Rage
Dry mouth	Unrealistic demands	Panic	Withdrawal
Fatigue	Disasterizing	Guilt	Substance abuse
Insomnia	Illogical thinking	Anger	Self-medication
Nausea	Externalized blame	Denial	Impulsiveness
Dizziness	Obsessiveness	Hopelessness	Phobias
Loss of appetite	Loss of humor	Numbness	Hyperactivity
High blood pressure	Suicidal ideation	Depression	Lethargy
Personality traits	Surrender	Despair	Aggression
Weight loss or gain	Excessive fantasies	Impatience	Rambling

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FOR REFLECTION 1.3
How do you know when YOU are stressed?
Everyone reacts to stress in different ways, even if there are some common signs and symptoms. Some people have difficulty sleeping or lose their appetites, while others sleep too much and go on eating binges. Some people have thoughts of doom and gloom, imagining the worst, and others keep an upbeat state of mind. Review Table 1.3, then consider how you characteristically respond to stress in your life, in the past as well as the present. What are your typical reactions?
Where do you feel stress in your body?
What is the usual way that you think when first confronted with a crisis or stressful situation?
How do you respond emotionally to stress? Which feelings are dominant?
How do you typically behave when confronted with stress? If you are inclined to act out," or respond dysfunctionally in some way, what does that look like?

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Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

Biologist Robert Sapolsky (2004) talks about the uniquely human response to danger as compared to herd animals. Whereas zebras become stressed only during times of immediate threat from a predator, we are the only species that gets upset over the future. We spend more time worrying about things we can't control than we do actually preparing to meet the challenges. Imagine a zebra, or a penguin for that matter, thinking about where she is going to vacation during spring break, and how she's going to pay for it. You get the point: animals do experience stress when they are subjected to life-threatening situations but we are the only species that literally kills ourselves out of imagined fears.

Fight-or-Flight Response

There you are stalking your prey. Outfitted in your recently acquired skins made from a mammoth you killed the previous week (with others from your clan), you are hot on the trail of a woolly rhino that had been spotted by scouts. You are fleet on your feet and an excellent spear-thrower. At 19, you are rather experienced and old compared to others among your people, where the average life expectancy is in the early twenties.

Like any self-respecting member of the Paleolithic Era, you are rather hairy and squat (but good news: so is your spouse). You are hiding behind a huge boulder, club in hand, ready to attack any animal that might come through your ambush spot. Your senses are heightened, especially your senses of smell and sight and hearing. Because of this state of hyperarousal, you hear the soft rustling of foliage on a cliff above your head. Your heart begins pounding in your chest but you force yourself to remain still and calm. You slowly turn your head and glance upward. Your worst fear has been confirmed: a saber-toothed tiger appears to be stalking you, ready to pounce. In your last conscious thought, you notice that one of the cat's eight-inch-long teeth is chipped at the end, not that this observation will do you much good.

If we could freeze this moment, and glimpse inside the body of this hunter from 20,000 years ago, we would observe a number of changes taking place. Within the span of a few seconds, the hunter (let's call her Pela) has a decision to make: she has one of two choices in order to save herself—to run or to fight. Whatever Pela chooses—and her life depends on making the right choice—her body is preparing itself for either option. And it turns out that this fight-or-flight response is going to

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give her every advantage possible under the circumstances either to escape the danger or to win this battle.

Now, if you could manually customize the systems of Pela's body (or anyone else's under similar circumstances), what might you do to give her the best chances of survival? (See Table 1.4.)

TABLE 1.4. Summary of Majoy Fight-or-Flight Responses

1. Eye dilation
2. Increased blood pressure
3. Increased heart rate
4. Muscle tension
5. Heavy breathing
6. Sweating
7. Adrenaline surge
8. Increased serum glucose
9. Release of free fatty acids
10. Vasodilation of arteries in arms and legs
11. Digestive system shuts down
12. Inhibition of sexual desire and reproductive capability
13. Immune system shuts down
14. Blood coagulation

She is going to need maximum sensory acuity. The eyes dilate to better perceive danger, increase night vision, and judge distances. The blood pressure increases, along with the heart rate, to deliver more nutrients to the muscles that will be needed during a sprint or a battle (that is why her heart is pounding in her chest). Muscles tense in preparation for a quick movement, to either dodge an attack or get out of the way. Pela starts breathing heavily, pumping as much oxygen into the blood supply as possible. The body begins to perspire freely, cooling off the skin and core body temperature so that things don't overheat with all the fuel that is being burned. The endocrine system kicks in and provides a surge of adrenaline that will augment strength. And finally, serum glucose levels spike to supply sugar, a fast energy source. This is supplemented with a release of free fatty acids that help sustain endurance.

As if it is not amazing enough that the body can turn on these systems when needed, Pela's body also shuts down those systems that won't be needed during the next few critical minutes, saving energy and increasing endurance. Arteries

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restrict to prevent excessive bleeding if Pela should be wounded. The digestive system shuts down since she is not planning on a snack or bowel movement during the next few minutes. Likewise hormones related to sex and reproduction are inhibited, since sex is the *last* thing on her mind at this moment. The immune system will not be needed either during this temporary emergency. Lastly, the blood thickens so as to provide maximum coagulation in the event of a wound.

It turns out that this was a false alarm. Much to Pela's relief, the long-toothed cat had already eaten a meal earlier in the day, so rather than pouncing he had been more interested in finding a nice spot in the sun to take a nap.

Pela sighs with relief and then an interesting phenomenon takes place: once given the "danger over" signal, all the body's systems begin to return to normal. This homeostasis will take time to complete but eventually things will return to previous levels.

As Pela backs slowly away, her breathing returns to normal and the danger signals shut down. She does notice, however, that her palms are so sweaty she can barely grip her club. Her legs and arms are shaking from the surge of adrenaline still coursing through her arteries. Her stomach feels queasy from having been shut down.

Does any of this sound familiar? It is exactly what happens during an encounter with stress. Picture approaching an attractive classmate you like. Imagine that the instructor announces a pop quiz for which you are minimally prepared. Recall walking in the dark and being startled by a weird sound. In each case, your body receives a danger signal from the hypothalamus, that part of your brain that alerts the appropriate systems to prepare for a potential threat.

The only problem is that most of the time in contemporary life we get false alarms. We aren't really facing life-threatening dangers, even if it sometimes feels that way. Our culture has evolved over thousands of years but our neurological systems are essentially the same as they were during Pela's time. They still see saber-toothed tigers and woolly rhinos behind every rock. We mentioned earlier how Walter Cannon described this survival response almost a hundred years ago by observing the ways that animals respond to perceived threat. All the bodily systems just described become activated in response to a danger signal (a human scream, the sight of a predator, the smell of fire burning, the taste of poison), and they remain engaged until such time that they are given the "all clear" signal. However, it doesn't matter to the body whether the danger is real or just seems that way. It

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could be an actual threat, or a hallucination of one: the body reacts the same way.

Twenty thousand or more years later, our culture has evolved significantly. Our lifespan has increased from 23 years to nearly 85. We have moved from caves into condos. Now about the only danger of predators we face is from our own kind in certain parts of the city that are to be avoided if possible.

Recall what happens when the brain turns on the danger signal that sets in motion all the physiological changes needed to fight or flee. What happens if this system, designed for brief flashes, stays on almost all the time? More specifically, what happens if your immune system is suppressed for long periods of time while you fight imaginary battles during a sleepless night of worry? What are the effects of straining the body's system in ways for which it was never designed? The answer is that you can become sick.

Types of Stress: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Like most phenomena that have been identified and studied, stress comes in different flavors. There is **short-term stress**—the kind activated by a sudden threat or danger. Imagine, for example, that you are driving in traffic and another car swerves into your lane, or a situation in which you are asked to make an impromptu presentation in front of a large audience. Under such circumstances, you will no doubt feel the familiar surge of a stress-hormone response, activating the fight-or-flight system described earlier. This is usually followed by deactivation producing a relaxation response, at which point you begin to calm down and all systems return to normal. Short-term arousal like this does not usually create problems; if anything, it keeps the system in working order, so to speak.

Long-term stress is another story altogether. This is when the system is turned on at high volume, and then remains that way even when the initial danger has passed. There is the sort of wear and tear on the body and mind you would expect when a mechanism that was designed for "sprints" is told that it has to run a "marathon." Invariably, parts start to break down and the system fails. This is a different sort of marathon than practiced by those who use running as one of many ways to manage their stress, burning off excess energy, distracting them from worries, and better conditioning their bodies (see Voice of Stress Management 1.1).

Prolonged stress affects the body in a number of predictable ways that can be

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deduced from your prior understanding of what happens during arousal of the fight-or-flight reflex.

1. Muscles tense to prepare for battle or flight. Over time this can lead to muscle fatigue, cramps, and chronic back pain.
2. Digestion shuts down since it won't be needed. Over time, the system can develop ulcers, colitis, spastic colon, irritable bowl syndrome, and acid reflux.
3. Increased blood and oxygen flow brings more nutrients and hormones that can be mobilized. This can create high blood pressure over time.
4. Blood vessels constrict to prevent bleeding in the event of injury. In a chronic state, a person can experience dizziness, blackouts, headaches, and skin lesions.
5. The liver produces and distributes sugar and nutrients in order to provide energy to combat the perceived danger. Over time, hypoglycemia or diabetes can result.

VOICE OF STRESS MANAGEMENT 1.1

Note: Throughout the text there are a number of "voices" that speak about struggles with stress, as well as ways that people manage the challenges they face.

Thirty-year-old female teacher

I would say that I am a bit insecure. I am often concerned with how others see me and feel that they may judge me. I get nervous really easily. I have been successful in coping with the stress in my life, but I used to let it rule my life. After getting divorced a few years ago, I felt lost and lonely. I joined a group for people coping with divorce. It really helped to talk about what I was going through and hear that others had similar problems. I also took up running. It was a wonderful way for me to focus my attention on something other than all the things that I worry about. When I run, I look at my surroundings and simply enjoy being out and active. It's a great way for me to release my tension. I even started running marathons!

My insecurities are still there but I am just able to escape them with more frequency. I run six days per week and feel exhilarated each time. I have a new circle of friends with similar interests. It is wonderful to have others with whom to share my sport. Many of my fellow runners find that it is a great way to relieve the stress caused by their hectic lifestyles. Of all the things I have done to relieve stress, running has really been the most rewarding for me. Besides the exercise, most of all it is a mental break.

Hans Selye coined a number of specific terms to distinguish between "good" stress and "bad" stress. Like most things in life, too much is not particularly healthy. The term hyperstress means an excessive amount that overloads the system, while hypostress is not enough to keep the body tuned and ready for action.

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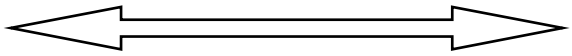
Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*



Distress	Neustress	Eustress
Pop quiz for which you are unprepared	Poor economic news in another state	Supportive friends cheer you on during a game

Distress is what you usually associate with the word "stress." This is the destructive and harmful sort that means trouble, especially if it moves beyond acute arousal to a chronic condition. Distress occurs when our ability to cope with stressors is insufficient. Distress causes anxiety and confusion and decreases your performance in daily activities. Distress is often associated with stressful events that occur unexpectedly. Even when good news strikes too suddenly, it may shock the recipient and cause stress. Distress also may occur when you try to manage too many things simultaneously and lose control of the situation. The degree to which you feel you can control your life influences the valence of stress.

Neustress is, just like it sounds, rather neutral. It has little impact, or lasting effects, one way or the other. It might be upsetting for others, in another location or context, but has little measurable effect on your life. Alternatively, you might find yourself in a performance situation in which the added presence of an audience is below your radar because you are concentrating so hard on your job.

Eustress is the kind of stress that inspires or motivates you to go beyond present levels of functioning. This is what happens with the so-called "clutch" hitter in baseball, or the "pressure player" in other sports: the presence of an audience, combined with high stakes on the line, motivates the athlete to unparalleled performance. The same could be true for artists, actors, writers, and others who are required to perform under pressure.

Eustress stimulates the systems of the body to function at peak levels; this can even be the case for the kind of growth that can take place for some people after a crisis or trauma (Orloff, 2009). It should therefore make sense that although moderate doses of stress can be good for you in creating excitement, enhanced attention, improved performance, or healthy competitive instincts, the other side of the coin—boredom—is almost never desirable. At the very least, stress signifies intense engagement with life and what you are doing whereas boredom means you don't find meaning or purpose in activities or daily life (Oz, 2010).

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Excerpted from *Stress Management and Prevention*

Sources of Stress

Another way to categorize stress is based on the source. Typically, stress can be activated by (1) an external source, (2) an internal source, or (3) the interaction of internal and external sources. In addition, stress can be manifested as a physical sensation (pounding heart), a psychological experience (feelings of panic), as well as biochemical and other processes.

Physical stress occurs when the human body is affected by sleep deprivation, overworking, excessive physical exertion, physical injury or trauma, viral or bacterial infections, inflammation, physical disease, or chronic pain. It is under such circumstances that the body begins to lose functioning and to break down.

Psychological stress is often used synonymously with mental stress or emotional stress because they share many common features. Psychological stressors are related to how we interpret the events in our life; they are determined by our values, beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies of life. Given the same situation, different people may react very differently due to their outlooks on life. Emotional reactions such as anger, fear, low self-esteem, and hostility are also influenced by our beliefs. The good news is that you can change your thoughts (Chapter 6), thereby changing your reactions to the events in your life. The bad news is that some thought patterns have been deeply engrained in your psyche and they require a consistent effort to be modified.

Psychosocial stress arises from interactions with people and the society in which you live. Individuals must make constant adjustments to the demands imposed on them by the environment and culture, especially during times of economic, environmental, political, and social challenges. Think about how the effects of a recession, natural disaster, crowding, trauma, war, poverty, abuse, family conflict, neglect, or other factors can create tremendous stress.

In addition to these sources of stress, there are biochemical triggers that result from excessive use of substances such as sugar, nicotine, caffeine, or alcohol, as well as food preservatives. Stress reactions can also be activated from exposure to substances in the environment such as mold, dust, allergens, industrial pollutants, environmental toxins, pesticides, and automobile exhausts. We can suffer chemical stress from using contaminated foods, such as tuna that contains mercury or shellfish that is laden with cadmium. It is important to be able to identify the

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sources of stress in your life, and their origins, before you can develop a plan to prevent and manage the negative effects. This is easier said than done considering that there are often complex interactions between all the sources. For example, I (Jeffrey) once worked with a man in psychotherapy who was having panic attacks characterized by uncontrollable feelings of losing control. His heart would begin racing, his breathing would accelerate and he felt on the verge of passing out. Even more disturbing, there was no identifiable trigger that would begin the cycle; the episodes would begin suddenly without warning.

Whereas sometimes this condition can be treated with medication, the preferred first strategy is to use counseling to identify the underlying problems that are being brought to attention. Although the man was very grateful for our work together over a period of several months in which he learned a lot about himself, the symptoms were never really reduced. I only learned from him months later that these so-called panic attacks were actually the result of a leaky furnace in his home!

It is important for you to have an accurate picture of not only what you find most stressful in your life, but also the origins and causes of these challenges. This takes considerable investigation and commitment to find out.

Self-Assessment of Stress

This book emphasizes prevention as well as treatment of the stress problem. It is far preferable to minimize risk for the future rather than waiting until it is too late.

As a general rule, the earlier you can detect signs of danger, the more likely you can do something to avoid it. If you have advance warning that there is a traffic pile-up on the highway ahead of you, you can begin to reduce your speed and prepare for a sudden stop. If you know that that you are going to be asked to make a toast at a wedding, you can think about what you want to say, rehearse your speech, and visualize things you want to remember. Early warnings can be just as helpful in stress prevention. If you can learn to recognize some of the earliest signs of chronic stress, then you are in a far better position to take remedial steps to make needed changes in your thinking, behavior, or lifestyle. What are the sorts of things you might look for? The answer depends, in part, on what is normal for you.

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FOR REFLECTION 1.4		
Self-assessment of stressors Identify the top five stressors in your life. Describe how you have coped with them. Rank how effective you've been in dealing with these situations (1 = least effective; 5 = most effective).		
Stressor in my life	**Coping strategies**	**Ranking**
1. 2. 3. 4. 5.		

Overview of Stress Management and Prevention

Understanding the nature and meaning of stress is an important part of implementing a comprehensive program of stress management and prevention. You have learned already that stress is a dynamic process that consists of a stressor and stress response. You have also learned that a stressor can be any severe challenge, real or imaginary, that disrupts normal functioning. This can be anything from a flat tire to traveling to a foreign land.

Management of stress involves neutralizing or reducing the magnitude of your responses to stressors, while prevention focuses on shaping, modifying, or eliminating stressors in the first place. The first part of the text is devoted to understanding the nature of stress while the second and third parts will be devoted to interventions.

The model of stress management and prevention presented in this text (see Figure 1.3) is based on the research of many professionals, all of whom conclude that multiple and varied techniques are required that address all facets of the problem. Our model depicts a four-stage process of stress development. Before

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each stage of stress development occurs, you have the power either to prevent its occurrence in the first place or, at the very least, to reduce its momentum. The best scenario is when you can prevent a full-blown stress episode by stopping it in its embryonic stage. The second-best situation occurs when you have developed sufficient coping mechanisms that the demand for change can be easily met. Once the perceived threat is met, the body's alarm will be turned off and homeostasis will be restored.

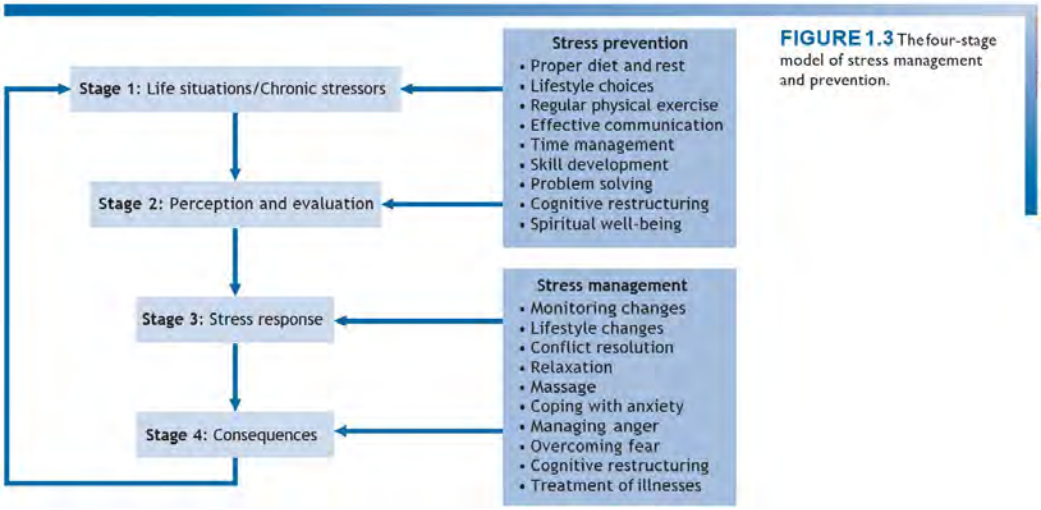

FIGURE 1.3 The four-stage model of stress management and prevention.

Stage 1: Life Situations/Chronic Stressors

Before a major event disrupts your life, you need to do everything you can to prevent the formation of a stressor. You may have heard the saying, "Discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons." An exam is a major stressor for those who are unprepared and for whom it may have a serious consequence, while it may be a minor annoyance, or even a fun challenge, for those who are prepared.

No matter how hard you try, certain adversities and traumatic events will inevitably occur in your life. In most cases, you will not have a choice about whether you are subjected to the stressors but you can choose, to some extent, how you respond to them. Obviously, a pleasant stressful situation such as getting married (eustress) will be handled with more ease than a negative stressor like a divorce (distress).

In this first stage it is critical that you have an accurate and comprehensive view of the stressors in your life, as well as the characteristic ways you respond to them. It is important to know where and how you are most vulnerable.

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Stage 2: Perception and Evaluation

As mentioned earlier, people will perceive the same stressor in a variety of ways and, therefore, react to it differently. An event will be overwhelming to one person and exhilarating to another. For some people, the fear of speaking in front of a group is greater than that of death. Others live to get up on stage in front of a crowd.

Your perception of a situation or a chronic stressor also depends on your personality type, your resilience, life experience, health status, and mental and emotional resources. In general, healthy, competent, and optimistic people will cope with stress more successfully than those who tend toward pessimism and negativity (Brooks and Goldstein, 2003).

In this second stage, it is critical for you to have a solid background in the theory, research, and mechanisms of stress so that you can better prepare yourself for what lies ahead.

Stage 3: Stress Response

This stage will demonstrate an individual's emotional, psychological, and physiological responses to the perception of the stressor. The magnitude of the responses from the endocrine and autonomic nervous systems depends on the perception of the response. Your major task, in the face of stress, is to reduce pressure and release excessive physical and psychological tension through a number of options (such as meditation, exercise, and other relaxation techniques described later in the book). It is not enough to merely know how to apply stress management and prevention strategies; you will have to practice and rehearse them on a daily basis so they will become part of your repertoire when you need them most.

Stage 4: Consequences

At this stage, you experience the frequent results of stress responses. These can range from behavioral consequences such as accidents to physiological consequences such as a heart attack or ulcer. The final stage of stress development

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feeds back to the first stage and then repeats the cycle.

Without proper prevention and management interventions, the cycle will perpetuate itself to the point where you feel like one of those Chinook salmon swimming upstream until the point of collapse. Unlike this fish, however, you have choices along the way that allow you to change direction, take a snooze onshore, or take a boat, or even decide you don't feel like spawning after all.

In this textbook we advocate a holistic and comprehensive approach to stress prevention and management. What does this mean? The following principles will allow you to learn and apply the concepts of stress prevention and management more effectively.

1. *Prevention is more effective than management.* Prevention is a more proactive approach since you start to change your living habits before you have serious health issues. Prevention is also cheaper than treatment, as it is well known how expensive it is to treat a serious disease. Once stressors strike, manage your reactions to them and tap all your resources to deal with them; don't allow them to become a chronic condition that wreaks havoc on your body.
2. *Small changes can lead to big effects.* Mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz coined the term "the butterfly effect" to refer to the notion that a butterfly flapping its wings in a remote place such as Beijing, China may cause a hurricane in Texas, USA (Hilborn, 2004). In other words, small changes in the initial condition of a system can lead to a chain of events that will produce large-scale alterations to the system. If you apply this idea to stress prevention and management, a small change in your lifestyle may have a long-term benefit to your longevity and well-being. Since many of your health habits are deeply engrained, it can take considerable effort to initiate and maintain changes. But starting small will eventually lead to a fundamental change.
3. *Don't count on a magic solution for solving all your stress problems.* Good health and well-being characterized by abundance of energy and low stress come from the interactions of all the body systems and a harmonious relationship between you and your environment. There is no single panacea that, once learned, will make all the difference. It takes discipline to make systemic changes in every aspect of your life. This course offers a comprehensive way to prevent and manage your stress that is designed to

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keep you healthy throughout your lifetime.

4. *Tailor a program to your own schedule and means.* You hear people tell you all the time that you should do what they're doing, but often such advice is not particularly helpful. Everyone is unique and you must adapt any program, no matter how successful, to your particular lifestyle, values, interests, strengths, and resources.
5. *Develop a comprehensive plan for stress prevention and management.* Since the sources of stress come from within as well as from without, it is essential that you have a plan to change your thinking, modify your diet, improve relationships, and acquire new skills throughout the lifespan. Like a good mechanic who possesses a variety of tools for different jobs, you also need to develop all kinds of skills for stress prevention and management. You may use one or more techniques more frequently, but being open to different skills offers you more flexibility and resources. Also, you should consider short-term improvements as well as those for the long term. It is always good to have multiple options, depending on your mood, circumstances, and needs.

SUMMARY

Stress represents a psychological and physiological reaction to a perceived threat, whether it is the result of fantasy, exaggeration, or actual danger. In situations where the threat cannot be eliminated or significantly reduced, there are dire consequences for people in terms of physical, psychological, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual functioning.

There are three elements in the definition of stress: the stressor, the response, and the person experiencing the condition. The stressor can be a real physical threat or an imaginary or symbolic one. The same stressor can be good for one person and bad for another, depending on how capable the person is in coping with the situation.

Over the past 100 years, our understanding of the stress response has evolved thanks to the contributions of scientists such as Cannon, Selye, Sterling, Eyer, and McEwen. In the homeostatic view of stress, the stress response is initiated once the body is perturbed by a stressor. Under optimal circumstances, the body returns to a relaxed state once the threat has passed.

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The allostatic view suggests that the stress response can trigger a series of body-wide changes to bring the organism back to a resting condition. This idea also implies that even small, consistent episodes of wear and tear carry long-term consequences for the body.

The stress response varies from person to person. The consequences of a stress response represent the composite effects of the individual characteristics such as personality, health status, and the nature of the stressor. A comprehensive stress management program proposed in this text cannot realistically eliminate all stress in your life. To do so, even if possible, would make for a very dull and dreary existence. Stress can be the scourge of your life, but also the lifeblood for everything you find stimulating and exciting.

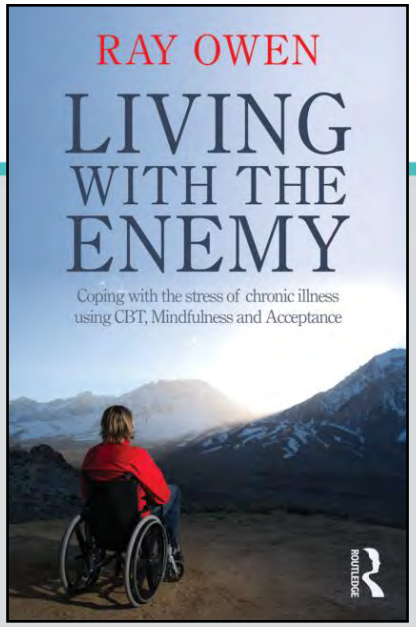
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Define and discuss the concept of stress from different perspectives.
2. Explain when stress becomes a problem.
3. Analyze the different sources of stress in your own life.
4. Differentiate between homeostasis and allostasis. Define the term "allostatic overload."
5. Describe the general adaptation syndrome developed by Hans Selye and the fight-or-flight response.
6. What is the primary goal of stress management? Can we eliminate stress?
7. Describe the four-stage model of stress management and prevention proposed in this chapter.
8. Why did Hans Selye define stress as a "nonspecific response to any demand placed upon the body?" Explain the meaning of "nonspecific." Do you handle eustress and distress similarly in life?

CHAPTER

2

TAKING ACTION



This chapter is excerpted from

Living with the Enemy

by Ray Owen.

Learn more

TAKING ACTION

Excerpted from *Living with the Enemy*

Alina finds her long-distance chats with her friend Evka really useful. It's not simply that Evka is willing to listen to her; it's that she challenges her and doesn't let Alina simply wallow in feeling sorry for herself. In many ways, they almost become therapy sessions, which Evka doesn't mind at all, as she's got quite interested in psychology and has been doing a lot of reading around Values.

When, a few weeks ago, Alina had ended up asking 'What's the point?', Evka persuaded her to start thinking about what things matter most to her. By the end of their next call, Alina had not only a list of her Values but also a sense that things were finally about to change for the better.

Two weeks later, they speak again; Alina is demoralised, because the feel-good glow of last time has evaporated, and nothing at all has changed.

We've all seen on TV and in the movies, where a person is having psychological therapy; there will probably be a moment of insight, where they have some sudden realisation of the reason behind all their problems, and that knowledge makes everything change for the better...

That may or may not be a good plot device to move a story on, but my experience of doing psychological therapy for real is that it very rarely works like that. There may well need to be some understanding of how things have been going wrong, and how to move forward; but there will rarely be significant and lasting improvements in a person's quality of life based on changing knowledge alone. Rather, that insight is an important first step to making changes for the better in your life; but without actually making those changes, life won't get much better.

Without action, insight doesn't help much.

8.1 How our behaviour drifts

In everyday existence too, our actions are a key part of our quality of life. If we're frequently doing things we dislike, missing out on doing things that we find fulfilling, or acting in a manner that makes us feel bad about ourselves, then we're bound to be more dissatisfied with life.

Some of the reasons for that 'drift' may be beyond our control: the requirements of a job, or family responsibilities; though if we recognise the Values that doing those things serves ('providing for my family', 'caring for those I love'), then even taxing or

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boring tasks can be more bearable. Not enjoyable, but bearable.

In the case of a person who has a long-term physical health problem (and remember, once we get into middle-age and beyond, that's most of us), there may be other constraints upon our actions. Some may be directly related to physical symptoms (e.g. reduced mobility, fatigue), the requirements of treatment (e.g. needing the facilities to change a colostomy bag), financial (e.g. no longer being able to hold down a wellpaid job) or social (because of the limitations already listed, spending less time with friends).

Caroline has been thinking a lot about the day she helped out at the local fete. She felt more like her old self while she was there, and although her initial reaction was to say it was no real achievement, actually it hadn't been as straightforward as it would have been years ago: she'd had to keep an eye on Geoff throughout it, rearrange seeing her grandson that day, explain (several times over) to her mother why she wasn't visiting, and generally had her routines disrupted.

More striking, though, is the realisation of how much she's been missing out on since she's given up on all this: the camaraderie and gossip, the sense of purpose in organising an event or raising money. And the feeling of being part of a community wider than her own immediate family. The needs of her family and the pressures of her own LTC have been the key reason for dropping that aspect of her life, yet the recent fete proved that actually it is possible to do some of that community work, especially now Geoff's a little more predictable, her grandson has started school and (following the course she went on) she's managing her IBS better.

So why, she wonders, hasn't she just been getting on with it?

As Caroline is right to realise, it's not simply external factors that cause our behaviour to drift away from what we would want it to be. There are many 'internal' tendencies that contribute to that, and if we reflect on the processes we've already discussed in this book, some of the culprits become clear:

- **Fusion** – getting caught up in long-standing thoughts about how you should or shouldn't be acting, and failing to recognise that these are just thoughts. For example, someone having the thought 'If I try studying again, I'll probably fail', and treating that thought as a reality, and so choosing not to go back to college.
- **Avoidance** – letting your behaviour be controlled by the urge to avoid feeling bad. For example, Alina giving up on a social life in order to avoid

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feeling embarrassment at her weight gain.

- **Short-term gains** – we are all, to different degrees, prone to taking a short-term gain even if it leads to a long-term loss. The prospect of another cup of tea and an enjoyable programme on TV (short-term gains) can easily dissuade me from getting to the gym (which is a long-term loss to my health).
- **Getting stuck in old patterns** – sometimes, habits are simply hard to break, even when you really want to act differently. You may have decided to spend more time with your family, but see an opportunity at work which will require extra evening and weekend involvement, and you may have said 'yes' before you realise it.
- **Aimless behaviour** – when someone lacks a sense of purpose, it can be hard to know which way to act; behavioural choices are more likely to be based on shortterm gains or avoidance of discomfort. After all, why would someone choose to do something diffi cult or uncomfortable if there is no sense of purpose or longerterm goal behind it?
- **Indecision** – where we are faced with more than one possible course of action, we can get stuck in the process of decision-making. If the options are finely balanced, we can effectively be paralysed. You may know the legend of 'Buridan's ass' – a hungry and thirsty donkey who was standing exactly half-way between a pile of hay and a bucket of water, and died of hunger and thirst because there was no rational reason to choose one resource over the other. I've done exactly the same when trying to choose which of two equally attractive movies to watch, and have ended up watching neither properly because I couldn't commit to one over the other.
- **Procrastination** – similar to, but distinct from, indecision; this is a more active 'putting off' process. Though it can be for many reasons, a reluctance to do the chosen action may well be at its heart, as procrastination can often be a form of experiential avoidance (avoiding whatever unwanted feeling the task would bring). Yet it often leads to discomfort of its own (regret, self-disgust), and delaying the behaviour in question may make things harder (e.g. talking to your bank about financial difficulties, visiting the dentist).

I'd argue that we all do some of the above, some of the time. And most of the time, it probably doesn't matter too much.

Sometimes, though, it does matter if we're not doing the things we would want to

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– if, like Alina, we know that getting back to her work and her studies, beginning to socialise again and eating a little more healthily would make her life a lot better. Or Caroline, who realises that she should get back involved in her local voluntary work, but feels too overwhelmed by her other responsibilities to make it happen.

What can ACT offer for people in these circumstances (and, to a greater or lesser extent, that's probably all of us)?

8.2 An alternative – Values-driven behaviour

The time we spent looking at Values in the last chapter wasn't an academic exercise or just for interest. It wasn't even there simply to restore a sense of purpose, because that sense of purpose only becomes worthwhile when it guides behaviour. As I said above, without action, insight doesn't help much.

The usefulness of knowing your Values comes in large part from using them to guide your actions – perhaps not exactly a 'moral compass', but a instead a 'purpose compass'.

The simplest example of that is probably when faced with a choice of actions – we can ask ourselves, 'Which Value(s) would that be serving?', much as Caroline did in the last chapter when choosing between accompanying her husband to the solicitor and going with her grandson for his first day at school. And, as she found, sometimes different Values are served by different actions. Sometimes, though, there's no real competition if you remember your Values, as Bill found when choosing to celebrate his wife's birthday rather than work extra time at the office.

In both of those cases, the person was presented with a choice, and had to make it one way or another, and awareness of Values certainly can help with that. Indeed, in ACT we'll sometimes encourage you to ask whether a certain behaviour is a move towards your Values, or away from them. My action of having a second cup of tea and watching a bit more of the cricket rather than heading for the gym would certainly count as a move 'away' from my Values around staying healthy enough to be able to contribute as much as possible to my family.

The second way that you can use your Values to guide your behaviour is when you are not presented with a forced choice, like Bill and Caroline, but rather where the initiative rests with you to do something beneficial in your life – to make your life better than it is. That includes choosing what that behaviour should be, actually

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getting round to it, persevering if (when?) the going gets tough, and evaluating it to be sure that it is actually having the desired effect in your life.

When Alina admits to her friend that she hasn't actually done anything with that list of Values that she'd felt good about writing, Evka is ready for what needs doing next.

'OK, Alina, so you Value "making the most of opportunities"; what are you going to actually do between now and when I phone you again next Thursday that's going to be an example of "making the most of opportunities"?'

Alina thinks about this, and says, 'I suppose the diploma in hotel management I've been neglecting for the last couple of months – that should be an opportunity for furthering myself, but if I don't finish this module soon, they'll kick me off. I could try getting on with that.'

With warmth in her voice as well as firmness, Evka replies, 'No – do it, or don't do it; don't say you'll "try" – that's the word we use when we're preparing an excuse for giving up.'

'OK, OK, then,' laughs Alina, 'I'll do it.'

Exercise 8.1: Values and actions
Go back to the list of your Values that you drew up in the last chapter. If you didn't get round to doing it, do so now (you won't be able to benefi t from the remaining exercises unless you do).

There's a form for this in Appendix 1, or you can use a sheet of paper (or in your notebook if you've been using one), and draw up a table of fi ve columns as shown in Figure 8.1. Label the first one Values, and the second one How served in last week. We won't be using the other three until the next exercise.

Copy in your list of Values to the first column. Now, think back carefully over the last week; try to recall specific examples of things you have done which served those Values – even though you probably weren't thinking in those terms at the time.

For example, the first rows of Alina's table might look like this:

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Value	**How served in the last week**		
Being sociable	Made video call to friend (Evka)		
Making most of opportunities	???		

Figure 8.1 Personal Values and action from Exercise 8.1 - example

She can identify one clear example of something she did that fitted (or I'd say 'served') her Value of being sociable. Notice that it's very specific – a particular thing she actually did at a particular moment, rather than a more general category of action like 'kept in touch with people'.

When she came to her Value of 'making the most of opportunities', she genuinely couldn't think of an example of something she had done in the last week that fitted in with that.

OK, now do your table. Take your time if necessary, come back and finish it after a break if needs be – but do it.

***

I'm assuming you've done the task now; so look back at what you've written, and see what you can notice about it, considering the following questions in turn:

- Were you able to identify at least one action done for every one of your Values?
- How hard was it to work out what behaviours serve what Values?
- Where were the gaps (if any) – Values that you don't think you've acted on in the last week?
- Are all your actions specific – describing identifiable things that you did at some point, rather than a vague or general impression (e.g. 'I ferried my children to and from school each day' vs 'I did lots of things for my kids')?

Maybe when you look at that table, you realise that you are already busily serving all those Values to a satisfying degree. Congratulations; that's quite an achievement, and your challenge is going to be to keep that up as time passes and circumstances change. I'd also advise making sure there's some variety in how you

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serve those Values – doing the same thing all the time runs the risk of it becoming a fixed behaviour pattern performed out of habit, and then you can easily stop paying attention to whether it still works or not.

Bill never minded putting lots of effort into his Carly's birthday parties – party games when she was younger, and now lots of pizza and crisps, some new DVDs and a sleepover for her friends. It was worth it to give her happy times and encourage her to socialise.

This year, when he asks how many friends she wants over, and whether she'd like to order the DVDs to watch, Carly seems unenthusiastic. With a little questioning, she finally admits that, much as she used to love the parties when she was younger, they've seemed a bit too young for the last couple of years, only she didn't want to say anything in case it upset him or seemed ungrateful. Was there any chance that this year she could go clothes shopping with her friends and then on to the cinema instead?

For Bill, something that started as a flexible and appropriate way of serving his Value of 'nurturing those you love' became a habit, and he failed to spot when it ceased serving that Value.

Maybe, though, when you did the exercise above, there were some gaps – Values for which you couldn't say you'd done something in their service in the last week or so. That was true in Alina's example, and I'd guess it's true for most of us if we think about it carefully. Of course, when I asked you to do that exercise, there were limitations built in; there are always difficulties looking back to what you've previously done – memory has its limitations and its biases. And even if your recall was perfect, that's only a week's sample – maybe eight days ago you were fully involved in that apparently neglected Value.

Even with all those limitations acknowledged, in my experience, most of us are neglecting at least some of our Values much of the time. The good news is that, once we've realised that, we can start doing something about it.

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Exercise 8.2: Values and committing to action

Now go back to that table you started in Exercise 8.1, and find one of the Values for which you hadn't found a clear action in the last week. If all of your Values had something next to them, choose a Value that you suspect you generally neglect compared with the others.

Now choose an action that you can do **within the next 48 hours** that – in however small a way – will be in service of that Value. Make sure it is realistically achievable in terms of time, resources and your abilities (e.g. 'I will go for a walk in the park', not 'I will climb Everest'). It must also be specifi c – so instead of 'I'll spend more time with my daughter', it could be 'I will read her a bed-time story tonight'.

Write that action in the third column of your table.

Then, as soon as possible after doing that action, write in the fourth column what you felt doing it – whether pleasant or unpleasant.

There are several possibilities for what you may have noticed in doing that exercise.

It's possible that you felt things like happiness or pride. It's also possible that the experience was diffcult – hard work, either physically and/or emotionally. It's entirely possible that both were true at the same time. The point to remember is that you're not doing these activities in order to feel more happiness or less anxiety; you're doing them in order to have a more fulfilled life, a life lived according to your Values. And if it's worth doing, then you have to be willing to experience some unwanted thoughts and feelings in the pursuit of them. That's why, in the original ACT model, this wasn't just called 'action'; it was called 'committed action'.

The next step is to go back to the list and choose one (or more) of your Values and decide what you can do within a month that would serve it. Again, it needs to be specific, and it needs to be realistic.

And then you can continue – pick other Values for the 48-hour or one-month period. Or look at a longer-term goal – a year, maybe. Add a couple of columns to your table to enter them.

Here's Alina's table:

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Value	How served in the last week	Action within 48 hours	Action within one month	Action within year
Being sociable	Made video call to friend (Evka)		Organise to have some friends round to flat for supper	
Making most of opportunities	???	Phone college to check submission date for module	Complete and submit module	Complete management course

Figure 8.2 Values and action plans from Exercise 8.2 – example

Hopefully, you've been able to see the rationale for Valuesbased goal-setting – why it might help you move forward in your life – and have generated some initial goals.

A quick word of warning: just check that it really is your Values that are behind your goals, rather than a familiar old story that your mind is stuck on that tries to set your direction. I've learned (eventually!) that there's a story in my mind about never really fulfilling my potential unless I'm a research academic – maybe it comes from my undergraduate education, maybe from further back. I now know that following that particular track (as vitally important as it is – the evidence for the approaches I'm writing about is mostly thanks to such people) suits me less well than what I actually do professionally – focusing on being a front-line clinician and teacher. My current role suits my Values a lot better – for example, I'm more able to act on 'being present for those I love' if I'm not forever off to conferences or meetings in other cities and other countries. That doesn't mean that I don't hear the siren call of university jobs if I see adverts for them, or that my mind doesn't criticise me for having produced so little research compared with my academic heroes. If your actions are in service of these 'old stories' in your mind rather than your living Values, then even if you do achieve them, you might not find your life getting any better.

Set your goals, then, in accordance with your Values if you want your success to make things better.

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However, if you're anything like me (or most of the people I know), you will have plenty of experience of setting very reasonable and sensible goals, and then failing to achieve them. That's why we must look at some of the reasons people fail to achieve goals they've set themselves, and what can be done about that.

8.3 Barriers to action

8.3.1 Poorly set goals

What are the qualities of a goal that can actually move you forward – making it more likely you'll achieve that goal, and that achieving it will actually make your life better?

There are many books and websites offering advice about goal-setting, whether that's in relation to business, time-management, education, sport or most other areas of human activity, and it wouldn't be appropriate to rehearse all of that here. Many of them will mention the characteristics of a good goal, and may use the phrase 'SMART' or maybe 'SMARTER' goals; these are ways of remembering those characteristics, usually attributed to a writer about management called George Doran. In case you're unfamiliar with this, SMART lists the initials of the qualities a goal should have. Different writers vary the wording slightly, but typically these would be:

S: specific. Is the goal a concrete description of what you will do (e.g. 'I will read to my child at least fi ve nights out of seven this week') rather than a vague aspiration (e.g. 'I will be a better parent')?

M: measurable. How will you know when you've achieved it? Sometimes this will be in numbers ('I aim to raise £1,000 for this charity'), more often you can tell if you've achieved it in other ways ('I'll know I've got fitter if I can walk to the shop without being out of breath').

A: achievable. A goal that is unrealistic ('I will be the fi rst person to walk on Mars') or is out of your control ('I will win the lottery') is likely to lead to failure and disappointment.

R: relevant. The goal helps you get to where you want to be (e.g. 'getting this qualification will help me get a better paid job'); in the terms we were talking about in the last chapter, this means 'in accordance with one or more of my Values' ('getting a better-paid job matters because I Value being

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able to provide for my family').

T: time-framed. Saying when you aim to do this thing, or a deadline you'll have done it by (even if it's long-term). Otherwise, it can be a 'One day, I'll …' kind of dream. And the experience of significant health problems should tell us that we shouldn't keep putting off important things.

And those who use SMARTER rather than SMART would add:

E: evaluate. Take the time to check whether you have actually achieved that goal you set, or not. If you have achieved it, has it had the effects you expected, and what do you do next? If you haven't achieved it, what's happened? Did it meet all the 'SMART' criteria in the first place? Or have you fallen into one of the traps we're going to look at in the rest of the chapter?

R: re-evaluate. Particularly for more important goals in your life, it's worth checking back a few months later to see if you've maintained what you set out to achieve ('Am I still reading to my child most evenings?') or, if it was a more one-off kind of goal (e.g. gaining a qualification) whether you're really making use of it in the way you intended. This may help you decide what you need to aim for next.

So, the first set of reasons why a person may not achieve a goal may be because that goal is vague (not Specific), or you can't tell whether you achieved it or not (not Measurable), or it was unrealistic (not Achievable), or it turned out not to matter that much (not Relevant), or there was no sense of deadline or urgency (not Time-framed).

As mentioned above, these ideas have been widespread for the last few decades; they certainly weren't created within ACT or any other form of CBT (though we should draw on 'what works' from wherever it comes).

ACT does, however, have some useful things of its own to say about how we sometimes fail to achieve the things we want to, and what we can do about that.

8.3.2 Beware emotional goals

What could be more natural than wanting to be happy? Or to stop being sad?

It isn't that these aims are unnatural, unreasonable or immoral. It's just that goals

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that are based on achieving a particular emotional state are likely to be counterproductive. If that seems like a surprising statement, then it might be worth taking another look back at Chapter 4 on 'emotional avoidance'; basing your actions on the avoidance of unwanted emotional states will lead to narrowing your life (avoiding all social contact because it makes you anxious, avoiding relationships in case they bring sadness or loss and so on). Equally, chasing the experience of happiness can easily lead to multiple or superficial relationships (the happiness of meeting new people, new sexual relationships), drinking too much (the happiness of being mildly drunk), spending more than you can afford (the happiness of acquiring desirable things), neglecting things that are less fun but more important (the happiness of leisure), and maybe even taking heroin (which briefly provides an intense euphoria before destroying your life in a dozen ways).

Instead of emotional goals, then, you could choose Valuebased goals, which are likely to give you more of a sense of fulfilment (and maybe happiness) as a side-effect of pursuing the things that matter in your life.

8.3.3 Beware setting 'dead-men's goals'

Goals seem to work better when we specify what we will rather than what we won't do. Instead of 'I won't shout when my wife doesn't understand my physical limitations', we could aim for 'I will explain calmly when she misunderstands, even if I'm feeling wound up inside'. Specifying what behaviour you will do gives you a clearer thing to aim at (and be SMARTER about, if you're using those principles).

The easy way to remember this is to ask whether you're setting a 'dead-man's goal': something that could be performed to perfection by a dead person. A dead person will not smoke this week, or eat fatty snacks, or shout at their partner, or...

You could ask, though, what about those situations where your goal really is, say, to not eat unhealthy snacks – both a dead-man's goal and an important one for your health? Well, a better alternative would be to specify an active goal, such as 'When I feel a craving for an unhealthy snack, I will simply carry on with whatever I was doing and let the craving sit there until it goes away'. Or maybe 'When I feel the craving, I'll have a glass of water/piece of fruit/healthy alternative instead, even though my mind will be telling me how much better a chocolate digestive would taste'.

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8.3.4 Don't tell yourself you'll 'try'

I've mentioned this principle earlier in the book, as did Alina's friend Evka. When we tell ourselves that we'll 'try' to do something, we're generally setting ourselves up for not doing it, or for failing. I'll try to get to that retirement party; this year I'll really try to keep in touch with my friends better.

We need to be careful here, since language always brings complexities, and how we use the word 'try' is no exception, because one use of it is perfectly fine: if we're talking about doing something with the intention of making something happen, but where the success of the action cannot be guaranteed. I can try to mend a bicycle puncture, work hard to the best of my limited experience; whether it works is only partly within my control. That sense of 'try' is OK.

However, when we're talking not about outcomes but about our own actions, then 'try' may not be OK. If a more technophobic friend asks if I can help in getting their computer to work properly with its printer, then as I've already said I can work hard with no guarantee of success – so it would be OK for me to say, 'I'll try to fix it for you.' However, if I say, 'I'll try to take a look at it this evening', then I'm talking about my own actions, which are under my own control; so, I'd be better off saying, 'I will take a look at it today, though I can't promise I'll be able to fix it.' Saying 'I'll try to take a look' opens the gate for never quite getting round to taking a look.

So how would that difference look in terms of LTCs? That while it would be reasonable to say, 'I'll try to keep working until the kids are through college', it would be poor goalsetting to say, 'I'll try to take fatigue-management more seriously from now on.' I either start working at my fatiguemanagement or I don't – in that sense there is no 'try'.

Therefore, unless you're talking about outcomes rather than your own actions, don't tell yourself or others that 'you'll try to ...'. Say what you're going to do, then do it, however successful or otherwise it turns out to be.

8.3.5 'But it feels bad ...'

I think this is one of the biggest unacknowledged reasons why well-motivated people, with the appropriate skills, fail to achieve their well-thought-out goals.

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Excerpted from *Living with the Enemy*

A few years ago, Caroline found herself getting into a terrible state. She was always rushing around, doing things for everyone because they always seemed to ask her rather than someone else. Of course they did; she was good at getting things done, and would always says 'yes' if you explained how important it was!

However, though she'd smile and get on with organising that event, giving a lift to someone or writing the annual report, inside she'd often be fuming because of all the things of her own that she wanted to get on with, but was too busy or too tired to after doing what others wanted. And somehow, when she needed help, people were never quite so quick to agree. At times, she'd get angry and tearful at home, and once in a while she'd snap in public, but then feel terribly ashamed and go back to trying to please everyone, and avoid upsetting people at any cost – even if that person was a waiter who'd brought her a plate of food that had been badly overcooked.

In the end, her husband Geoff – supportive and insightful before he had his accident – persuaded her to go to an assertiveness training class being run at the local college. Although she was very nervous at first, she actually quite enjoyed it and learned lots of useful techniques to help her stand up for herself appropriately (without being aggressive) and not let others exploit her. She enjoyed the fact that the classes discussed actual skills, like how to state your needs and requests clearly without apologising for them, deal with hostility, negotiate an outcome that suits both parties, politely and persistently refuse to give in, and how to back-track if you've slipped up and agreed to something that you now realise you can't – or don't want to – do.

She found that she could see the point of these easily and, when she practised them with one of her classmates, could usually find the right words.

The problem was that, if an opportunity to be assertive cropped up between classes – even something as clear-cut as sending back a restaurant meal that was badly overcooked – she ended up not using all those new techniques.

'I could see what was going on, and how I ought to handle it,' she told the tutor the following week, 'but the prospect of actually doing it made me feel so anxious and awkward that it was just easier to put up with it. Well, at the time it was; afterwards, of course, I hated myself for being so weak again.'

Earlier in my career I would often be working with people who needed to develop the skills Caroline was learning; and the sorts of ideas and techniques I suggested could really help someone to follow the advice of a very useful self-help book of the time and 'Don't say "yes" when you want to say "no" '. Yet, as useful as some of these skills were (and I found myself using them a lot too), many of the people I

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was seeing were failing to put them into practice – not because they didn't know what to do, but because actually doing it made them feel bad. Bad as in anxious, guilty or embarrassed. And as we have seen time and again in this book, the urge to avoid feeling bad is strong; the temporary relief of avoiding feeling bad is very reinforcing (meaning it makes you more likely to do the same thing in the future), and later comes the huge price of doing so: realisation that you've missed out again on something that mattered to you, sacrificed another chance for moving forwards, and a poorer view of yourself. Plus, ironically, you're likely to feel bad about yourself.

The key to success is both to acquire any skills or techniques you lack and then to learn to accept the temporary feelings of anxiety, embarrassment or whatever as the price you need to pay to follow the path that's right for you. Also, remember that you'll gain more in the long term by taking this short-term discomfort.

I've spent a while talking about assertiveness here, but hopefully you'll have noticed that this is a much more general point; any of the goals we want to pursue may involve discomfort along the way – maybe emotional discomfort, maybe physical. If we allow ourselves to get de-railed by avoiding discomfort, then we imprison ourselves in a 'comfort zone': a cage defined by the limits of what we can do without feeling bad in any way. And the walls of that kind of cage tend to get smaller and smaller (ask anyone who has developed agoraphobia), so its status as a 'safe place' is an illusion anyway.

If a goal is worth achieving, it will be worth experiencing some unwanted thoughts, feelings or sensations en route; refusal to accept those will limit your life.

When the type of 'feeling bad' we are talking about is anxiety, there is one complication; very high anxiety levels can be so overwhelming as to interfere with thoughts and actions. It might actually be too much to ask someone with an acute fear of heights to go straight to standing at the top of the Eiffel Tower and accepting the presence of their overwhelming, blinding panic. They might need a programme of gradually building up to something that extreme (looking out of an upstairs window, being at the top of a moving staircase, looking out from a shopping centre balcony and so on). This is similar to a well-established treatment approach for phobias called 'graded exposure' or 'systematic desensitisation'; however, whereas you would traditionally attempt to use relaxation skills to cope with each stage, or alternatively wait until the anxiety burned itself out, you may

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not be surprised to hear me say that ACT has a slightly different idea. At each stage, the goal is not to get rid of the anxiety (actively or passively), but rather to practise allowing it to be there, and noticing that – even with it present – the world does not end, and you can carry on in a direction that matters to you.

This might also be the moment to mention the idea of 'willpower'. One of the things your mind may tell you when you consider doing something that is important and difficult (and especially when you are considering giving up on it!) is 'I don't have enough willpower for this'. I've certainly experienced that, and the idea of willpower as a thing that different people may have in different amounts is widespread in society.

It is certainly true that some people are more prone to put up with temporary discomfort in order to gain a greater reward, and this tendency can show up life-long; you may have heard terms like 'deferred gratification' and 'impulse control' used in this context. The difficulty comes if we accept that willpower is a thing that we have, in large or small amounts, that somehow determines our ability to stick to something that is difficult and important (a healthy eating plan, a course of study, stopping smoking), rather than doing something easier or with more immediate gratification (give up on the study and watch TV instead, eat the fried breakfast rather than the muesli). If we buy that view of things, then failure to follow through on goals is out of our control – it's just down to how much or little willpower we've got, and our mind will have a ready excuse for taking the easier-in-the-short-term path.

If we are going to use the term 'willpower' (and maybe we're better avoiding it altogether), better to see it not as a thing you have but as something you do; carry on towards a goal you Value, even in the presence of uncomfortable experiences, unhelpful thoughts and urges to give up, and do something easier. And that's exactly what we've been talking about throughout this book.

So beware when your mind starts telling you a story about how much willpower you don't have; your choice is still the same – do this thing and have any unwanted experiences that may come with it, or don't do it, avoid the unwanted experiences and move no further forward in the things that matter to you. Your choice. Talking about 'willpower' is irrelevant.

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8.3.6 'I just can't be bothered'

We've all had times when we know what we should be doing, and kind-of want to get on with, but we don't get on with it because we just can't get started. It's so much easier just to sit here a bit longer, and I'll definitely do it later. Or tomorrow. Yes, absolutely a new start tomorrow ...

It may be that the goal wasn't set properly – if the thing you're telling yourself to do isn't actually doable, or doesn't actually matter to you, then your lack of application to it makes sense. So if it's this thing specifically that you can't be bothered to do (but you're as motivated as usual in other areas of your life), then it's worth checking whether the goal is a SMART one, that you've identified which of your Values it serves, and then get ready to put up with whatever unwanted experience it will take (boredom, effort, anxiety, etc.). And just do it.

Sometimes, though, the problem isn't with the specific goal, but with the state you've got into that affects lots of areas of activity. Someone who has been experiencing long periods of low mood (that might be labelled 'depression') may find themselves becoming less and less active generally. Getting started can become harder, and even everyday activities can seem like mountains to climb.

At its worst, this kind of withdrawn inactivity can be hugely disabling and lead to self-neglect (cooking a meal, having a shower or even getting out of bed). Realistically, if you were in that situation, you probably wouldn't be reading this book – or at least you wouldn't have got this far. This is the point (if it persists) at which someone needs professional support; most likely their family doctor in the first instance, but there should really be input from a mental health or psychological care professional. Some would argue that anti-depressant medication should play a part in treatment; I'd argue that, at the very least, any medication should be used alongside an appropriate psychological therapy, and certainly not instead of it.

One of the psychological treatments for this kind of state is called Behavioural Activation, and while it would be hard to self-administer for someone in a very serious state of inactivity, we can use some of its core principles ourselves if we just feel in a bit of a rut, or are finding it hard to get ourselves going with those activities that matter. Here are some guidelines.

Get in the habit of taking action:

- Remember your Values.

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- Make sure that the activities you'd like to re-start are in service of these Values, or at least compatible with them.
- Divide each day into three segments (morning, afternoon, evening). In each segment do one extra planned activity (in addition to what you're already doing).
- Aim small (maybe just a couple of minutes' worth of action), but make sure you actually do those things; for example, it's better to start with 5 minutes of exercise that you actually do than an hour of exercise that you don't.
- Don't give yourself excuses for not doing the thing; if something genuinely crops up and prevents you doing it, then you'll have two to do in the next segment of the day – where there's reluctance, don't reward avoidance.
- The goal is to get into the habit of taking action – not spending too much time thinking about it, reflecting on how you feel or giving yourself reasons for not doing it.
- Getting busy with small, achievable things will make you more ready and able to take systematic action on bigger things that matter.

8.3.7 Others get in the way

Humans are very social beings. The majority of our goals are going to involve other people to some degree or other. The decision to eat fresh fruit rather than cake may sound as if only you and your kitchen cupboard are involved; until, that is, you visit your aunt and she serves a Victoria sponge she's just baked with tea and simply won't take 'no' for an answer.

Harder still, if we're talking about healthier eating (a vital part of minimising the impact of so many LTCs), is trying to improve your diet whilst being responsible for providing meals to a family who don't want to change their own eating patterns; it's hard to stick to salad while cooking sausage and mash.

We can, it's true, get better at explaining what we want from other people, attempt to persuade them, stand up for ourselves in an assertive manner, and they might help us with our goals, or at least not stand in our way. However, there's no guarantee of that, because of this central principle:

We cannot control the behaviour of another human; we can attempt to influence it, but we cannot control it.

And what goes with that fact is this one: There is only one person whose

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behaviour is under your control, and that is you.

So while we will try to get others on our side where necessary, there will be some times when we just have to accept that their choices are their choices, and focus back on our own behaviour. That fits in with some of the SMART goal-setting we looked at before – these kind of goals should be about what you are going to do, not what you hope others are going to do. That still can include attempting to influence others, because the attempt is your behaviour, so long as you recognise that the outcome is not entirely under your control.

Watch out, though, that you're not using their (real) disagreement with what you're doing as an excuse for stopping, when what you might actually be doing is simply avoiding the discomfort of possible confrontation arising from you saying where you stand on this issue. As always, the question is not whether confrontation is in its nature right or wrong, but rather 'Which course of action takes me towards my Values?'

Bill has tried to be open with his daughters Carly and Rebecca about his MS. He wants them to treat it as a matter of fact: something that he has to adapt to and will sometimes affect their lives too – for example, when he can't take part in the fathers' race at school sports day. But he also believes it shouldn't stop them doing most of the things they want. He's been determined never to treat it as a secret or a tragedy, something he finds easier himself since learning how to defuse from his thoughts. And, fortunately, his wife Trish has exactly the same attitude.

Unfortunately, the same is not true of his older sister Sue; she views the MS as some sort of death sentence, still gets tearful when talking about it, and is forever bringing him news of some new quack remedy she's read about in a tabloid or on the internet. Worst of all, she occasionally talks that way in front of the girls.

It comes to a head one Christmas, when, after a few glasses of wine, she emotionally tells Carly and Rebecca to look after their father, pray for him, and that they'll always be welcome to stay with her if Daddy has one of his 'attacks'.

As much as Bill loves his sister and realises she means well, he knows Trish is right when she tells him he'll have to confront Sue about this behaviour once she sobers up. He's going to hate doing it, because Sue never takes criticism well and is bound to be angry, and if she does come to understand what she has done, she'll then be overwhelmed with guilt, which is even harder to put up with. If this was just about his own annoyance, then he'd probably let it go. But this is about Rebecca and Carly's ability to deal with their father's condition, and about managing its impact on their childhood; and what Sue's doing might well harm that.

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So he's willing to experience the anxiety, the guilt and the anger that will no doubt ensue from challenging her if that's what it takes to protect his girls ...

Before we finish looking at the roles of others – and especially families and friends – it's important to remember that they are often your biggest support, and may well be a more important reason for you trying to manage your health than your own personal well-being. While I've discussed the problems of them 'getting in the way' of the action you want to take, much of the time they can help more than hinder – particularly if they understand why you're attempting to do things the way you are. Interference may come from their concern for your well-being, either based on not understanding what's good for you, or (we must consider) based on seeing a risk you haven't recognised in what you're planning to do. Either way, communication is likely to help.

Bill does have the conversation with Sue, and, as he expected, she is initially angrily defensive and then full of remorse and self-loathing for being a terrible sister and aunt. Later, though still a little tearful, she does explain some of her thinking:

'You're right, Bill – I was out of line and of course it's your decision how to handle this for those lovely girls. It's just that ... Carly was talking to me earlier in the day and – completely unprompted – said that one of the hardest things about your condition was that it felt like everyone had to be so positive all the time. She said it was hard to say she was worried for you, had read some scary things on the internet about MS, and wondered what would happen to her and Rebecca if you had a bad attack and Trish was busy looking after you.'

That gives Bill something to think about, and they agree that maybe it would have been better if Sue had come to him after talking to Carly. As awkward as it has been, confronting Sue has been helpful in more than one way.

8.3.8 'My condition stops me achieving my goals'

Alina would have to admit that she's been feeling a bit better since being back at work. What's more, she's getting some sense of achievement from getting on with her hotel management course.

Her mood takes a tumble, though, when she finds a 'Long-term Goal' assignment she had written at the beginning of the management course, where she describes managing a sports and health spa. She had also included details of how she intended to pursue 'fitness instructor' qualifications alongside hotel management ones, as holding both sets of skills would put her in a stronger position to develop such a business.

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Excerpted from *Living with the Enemy*

Even though she has been managing and living with her fi bromyalgia much better lately, she knows that the chances of getting back into peak physical fi tness – let alone training as an instructor –- are remote. After all, a serious pain fl are-up would be more devastating to that work than to general hotel management.

She realises that, through no fault of her own, here's one goal she's going to have to let go of.

As I said at the beginning of the book, long-term physical health conditions put real limitations on people – there's no way of coping or of thinking that changes that fact. For most people with such a condition, some goals that might otherwise have been realistic become unrealistic. And letting go of a cherished goal can be hard, as was discussed in the last chapter, so it will involve experiencing some strong emotions and difficult thoughts.

Remember, though, what we have learned about the role of Values in goal-directed behaviour; the goal matters because it serves an important Value, yet Values are not tied to specific goals. So we go back to the man in Chapter 7 who dearly wanted to teach his son to fish; his LTC meant he couldn't, and that was a genuine loss. Yet by examining the Values underpinning the importance of that goal, he was able to find an alternative that served the same Values.

So, when your condition genuinely does prevent you attaining a goal, you need to find a different goal that serves the same Value, yet is realistic given your actual situation.

Slightly trickier is the *uncertainty* that comes with many LTCs. If you knew for certain exactly how much energy you'd have on a given day, and how long it would last, then you could always make plans accordingly, because you'd know for sure whether or not you'd be able to – for example – go for the big day out in town that your friends are planning. But we all know that's generally not how it works; neither you nor your healthcare team will be able to predict how you'll feel a month from now. Certainly, you can take all the measures that increase your chance of being OK – not do anything over-taxing in the couple of days before, plan rests into the day, make sure you're eating and drinking the right amounts of the right things and so on – but you still can't be certain how well you'll be.

Occasionally (and understandably enough), people respond to this by giving up on planning ahead; you can't say 'yes' to that day out because you can't know if you'll be able to go. The same might go for planning a holiday or committing to a family

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Christmas gathering. It sounds extreme, but people do gradually drift into this state, and the costs are clear: many important things (about new experiences, about family togetherness, about community involvement, about fun) just disappear. And life becomes about getting through each day, hoping tomorrow will be better, and if it is … then not necessarily doing much with it.

The alternative is – as ever – acceptance: acceptance that sometimes you won't be able to do things and not letting that get in the way of doing what you can. Making plans not with a rose-tinted expectation that everything will be fine, but rather with the knowledge that you might be feeling OK, or you might not.

Basically, it's better to make plans, and sometimes have to cancel them, than never to plan anything.

There are things you can do to make planning more successful given this uncertainty:

- If others are involved, let them know what your concerns are; otherwise they may simply assume you're not keen on the idea at all. If they know in advance, you're less likely to feel guilty if you have to withdraw at the last minute.
- Think about 'the most reversible choice'; if you have several options (e.g. of where to go on a short holiday), but there is a concern that you may have to pull out at short notice, then it makes sense to find out if there are any hotel options where there's no cost for a late cancellation.
- Don't just hope it will go well; think through likely problems that may arise (e.g. 'I have a migraine', 'I don't have a migraine, but I'm really tired because I'm recovering from one') and work out what you would do in each case ('Our accommodation needs to be central so I can easily get back to lie down', 'I'll rest in the café while the others tour the museum'). Even these plans may have to be varied, but the very act of thinking ahead this way makes it much more likely that a person will successfully do the things they aim to. In fact, this approach of 'conditional planning' (or 'implementation intentions') is a good way of increasing your chance of sticking to all sorts of plans and behaviour change.

The theme of this chapter has been action. Thinking about things and feeling things are unlikely in themselves to end up with you living a better life – they might be necessary, but I'd argue they're rarely sufficient. At the end of the day, you've got to do something if you want your life to get better in the presence of an

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LTC. Or, actually, if you haven't got an LTC; the same thing's true.

So what are you doing now?

Exercise 8.3: Doing it

Go back to the Values-based action table you drew up in Exercise 8.2. Now that you've read about some of the barriers to action, and ways around them, do the goals you listed – for action within 48 hours, for action within one month, for action within the year – still seem the right ones? Change them if necessary.

Think about possible problems that may arise, and what you would need to do then ('conditional planning').

And then?

Then 'JFDI': Just Flippin' Do It!

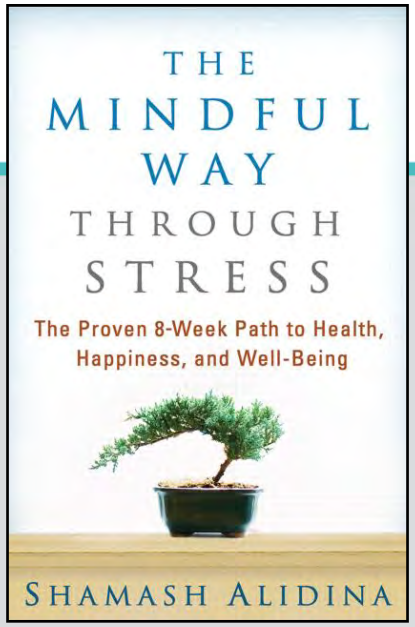
Key points

- Without action, insight isn't much help; it's not enough to understand your difficulties – you have to act on them.
- Our actions can drift away from what we would want them to be for both practical and psychological reasons.
- Practical barriers to effective action for a person with an LTC may include physical limitations, treatment effects, financial impact and social disadvantage.
- Psychological reasons include fusion, avoidance, the dominance of short-term gains, lack of direction, indecision and procrastination.
- If you base your actions on your Values, you know your goals will genuinely matter to you, and you can spot areas of your life you've been neglecting.
- Other barriers to effective action include poorly set goals (remember SMARTER goals), setting emotional goals, dead-men's goals, just 'trying', avoiding feeling bad, lethargy and others getting in the way. They can all be overcome.
- We cannot control the behaviour of another human; we can attempt to influence it, but we cannot control it.
- There is only one person whose behaviour is under your control, and that is you.

CHAPTER

3

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Excerpted from *The Mindful Way through Stress*

> If someone comes along and shoots an arrow into your heart, it's fruitless to stand there and yell at the person. It would be much better to turn your attention to the fact that there's an arrow in your heart.
> —PEMA CHÖDRÖN

Intentions

- To adjust your lifestyle to reduce stress.
- To identify your nourishing and depleting activities.
- To develop a mindful stress management action plan.
- To discover what a "mindful action step" is.

Not long ago a young woman named Valentina applied for one of my online training programs and told me on the phone a lot about her background. She said that after experiencing a string of traumatic events she was so racked with panic and agony that she turned to an array of drugs to try to numb her emotions. Eventually she reached the proverbial rock bottom, with no friends or family willing to continue a relationship with her.

Miraculously, one day she discovered an uncashed check made out to her for a sizable sum, and this presented her with a choice. Describing her decision as flowing from a rare moment of clarity, she invested in rehab instead of funding her addictions. At the rehab center she happened upon a stone bench beside a stream and felt inexplicably drawn to it. Without knowing that what she was doing was actually a form of meditation, she sat cross-legged on the bench and listened to the trick- ling water with her eyes closed, in the midst of a peaceful silence that instantly felt healing.

For Valentina, this was the first step on the road to mindfulness, self-compassion, and new self-awareness honed through meditation practice and daily journaling. As she described her transformation from a hard-drinking, drugging hedonist to a sober vegan yogi, she laughed boisterously and marveled at the fact that people—including those who had once found her impossible to be around—now often point out how cheerful and open she is. Quietly then, Valentina said she thought her friendly personality combined with her difficult history would make her a dedicated, empathetic mindfulness teacher.

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I did, of course, accept Valentina into the course.

In one transformative moment, Valentina chose life rather than the path to self-destruction, and that was an act of self-care. From that important fork in the road, I'm sure there were many moments of choice where she could have gone back to her old lifestyle. But she got through, using mindfulness. That initial choice has led her to eat healthy food, exercise, practice meditation and yoga, and spend time with good company. This kind of nourishing lifestyle has borne such powerful fruit that she has the energy, enthusiasm, and love to share her discoveries with others. Her self-care and self-compassion are spilling over into care and compassion for others in her original predicament. Without caring for herself, this would be impossible.

Looking After Yourself

There are probably many demands on your time and energy, and looking after yourself can easily slip down the to-do list. Perhaps you're a busy mom, a pressured business executive, or recently bereaved. When faced with lots of demands, it's easy to forget to take care of yourself. When you do look after yourself, your feelings of distress begin to turn into positive eustress (see Chapter 7), and you're better able to meet life's challenges with a smile.

Take a moment to think about how caring owners treat their dog. They wash and groom him, give him sufficient and healthy food, ensure their dog is at the right weight, and exercise the dog every day. They make sure they give their beloved animal time and attention and play games with the dog when out and about. At night they make sure their dog is warm enough and has a place to sleep. So dogs are given food, exercise, fun, love, and rest. And in return the dog gives unconditional love to the owner. We humans also need at least the same sort of love and care to meet life's challenges with enthusiasm and hope.

Before you start thinking how little you take care of yourself, take a few moments to reflect on how much your body already looks after you. All day and night, your body breathes for you. Your heart beats over 100,000 times in a day to pump blood containing oxygen, nutrients, and immune cells around your body. Your digestive system processes 1,100 pounds of food a year. Your body urges you to eat, sleep, and move around to keep you alive and well. So in all these many ways, your body is taking care of you.

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Excerpted from *The Mindful Way through Stress*

But you have a role to play too. Taking care of yourself involves eating a balanced diet, sleeping sufficiently, and exercising your body. And just as important, you need to make time for socializing, having fun, and doing things you enjoy. Exactly what you need to do to look after yourself is unique to you, and only you can know what the right choices are. By being more aware of your body and mind, you can learn to take better care of yourself.

For example, one client of mine started getting painful spots on his legs. He tried to ignore them and carried on with his high-pressure job. Eventually they became so painful he couldn't walk, and he had to get antibiotics from his doctor and take time off work. Now he's more mindful of his body, and when the spots appear, he needs to make a conscious effort to practice mindfulness and take a little time off. He hasn't suffered from a severe recurrence of the spots ever since.

For you the warning signs may be a headache, a bout with the flu, painful shoulders, or just dwelling on everything that's going wrong in your life. Use these signs to remind you to be kind to yourself rather than pushing harder or reprimanding yourself for not being perfect.

This week you'll have a chance to look at your typical daily activities. You can then identify what, if anything, needs to be adjusted so that you're nourishing your body and mind, not just depleting yourself. You'll also look at a set of five areas to focus on, to help boost your well-being and build resilience against stressors.

The Challenge of Taking Care of Yourself

If looking after ourselves were easy, we would all be doing it well. But in reality, there are challenges that prevent you from taking full care of yourself. Some of them are external factors, and others may just be attitudes in your own mind. Let's look at a few typical challenges and tips to overcome them.

Lack of willpower is rated as the number-one reason we don't take effective care of ourselves, according to the American Psychological Association.

If you know you need to go to bed on time or go for a run, but somehow end up wasting time, you may need some help to boost your self-control. Here are some tips for increasing your willpower:

- **Mindfulness meditation increases willpower**. Even a few minutes a day can start building up gray matter in areas of the brain that control decision making.

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Excerpted from *The Mindful Way through Stress*

- **Exercise**. People who exercise are more likely to quit smoking, reduce alcohol consumption, eat more healthily, and even be more careful with their spending habits.
- **Sleep**. The closer you can get to about 7½ hours of sleep a night, the stronger your willpower will be.
- **Build good habits**. When you're under stress, you go back to your habits, good or bad. So by having good habits, you will be better able to handle or even enjoy the stress.
- **Being nice to yourself really works**. When you lapse, being self- critical reduces your willpower. One of the most well-tested areas in willpower research is that self-compassion is the most effective way to achieve good new habits. Remember that you're only human and can't be perfect.

Lack of time is a common reason people give for not taking care of them- selves through measures like exercise or cooking a proper meal. If this is the case for you, I'd recommend you spend a week tracking how you spend your time, hour by hour. When I did this, just the act of setting an alarm every hour and writing down how I was spending my time made me much more efficient. I then managed to get to sleep on time rather than surfing online and exercised rather than working unproductively. Many time management gurus recommend time tracking as the first step toward using time effectively.

If you feel overwhelmed with responsibilities, you may feel too pressured to be able to look after yourself well. But even a 5-minute brisk walk a day can start to create small positive changes in your brain and body to help you cope with the busyness of life.

Finally, you may think of taking care of yourself as being selfish. Recall the safety advice on flights: Always put on your own oxygen mask before doing the same for anyone else. By taking good care of yourself, you'll feel better, have more energy, and be able to help others.

"Through mindfulness I realized I was constantly running around looking after my kids and husband and parents. I never had time for myself. Never. I immediately decided things have got to change. That's been a huge relief."

I have struggled with this idea myself. When I first became a school- teacher, I was

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young, full of energy, and wanted to change the world. I gave all my energy to caring for my students rather than myself. I worked harder and harder until I started to get ill. Not spending my free time working on lesson plans, marking books, or doing extra training seemed selfish. But I started to notice a pattern. The harder I worked, the less energy I had for the kids and the less effective I was as a teacher. On the days I rested well, I had far more patience and the lessons went well. Taking care of myself, even if I felt guilty at first, was better for both my students and me. Nowadays, I love taking care of myself!

When to Take Care of Yourself

Seeing to your own needs is not something you do only when feeling worn out, stressed, or tired. If you do it all the time, as a matter of course, you'll be resilient when the next stressor comes around the corner. However, it's espe- cially important to look after your needs when under excessive stress.

Take plants as an example. In winter, when it's cooler, my plants don't need much watering. Once a week is fine. But in the summer, in the relentless heat, daily watering is necessary. Otherwise the plants will wilt and weaken. When the heat is on, more nourishment is required.

In the same way, when the heat of stress is high, take extra care of your- self. After a stressful day, take a few moments or a few minutes to practice your favorite mindfulness meditation. Try to see the practice as a little treat after a tough day. This may help you go to bed a little earlier, eat a bit healthier, or maybe give you motivation to take time to exercise. Even a 5-minute phone call to your best friend can make a world of difference. A little bit of mindfulness following a challenging day will be an investment that pays back handsomely.

A Look at Your Current Lifestyle

Before you start thinking about how great or poor you are at taking care of yourself, let's start by taking a closer look at your current lifestyle. The activities you do habitually will give you a good idea about what's going well and which areas need tweaking. Until you stop and write this down, you may not realize how you currently use your time.

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You'll then rate each activity as either energizing (nourishing) or draining (depleting). This will help you see what proportion of your day is uplifting and what proportion isn't. You can then either look at creative ways of read- justing your schedule or readjusting your attitude and perception so the draining activities aren't quite so draining.

Here's a sample list:

- 7:00 a.m.—Wake up
- 7:15 a.m.—Shower and get dressed
- 7:45 a.m.—Get the kids ready for school
- 8:30 a.m.—(Rush) to school
- 9:00 a.m.—Drive to work
- 9:30 a.m.—Arrive at work
- 9:45 a.m.—Work on new marketing plan
- And so on . . .

Exercise: My nourishing and depleting activities

1. **Create your own daily lis**t of activities you do in a typical day.
2. **Add a +** for activities that are nourishing, uplifting, or energizing for you. These are the activities that make you feel good.
3. **Add a –** to activities that are depleting or make you feel drained or tired. These are the activities that make you feel worse.
4. **Which positive activities can you do more often?** Go through the list and see which ones you could do more of. For example, going for a walk, reading a story to the kids, waking up a few minutes earlier to have time for a nice cup of coffee.
5. **Which negative activities can you reduce?** For example, cut check- ing social media sites to only once a day, doing fewer chores by del- egating, such as training the children to wash the dishes after dinner, or making some activities less stressful by, for instance, listening to your favorite music on your morning commute.

VARIATION: Compare your thoughts with reality. Record how you felt as soon as you can after doing the activity and how strongly you felt on a scale of 1–10 (1 being very mild and 10 being very intense)—for example, happy 7/10 or annoyed

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8/10. See if the activity really was nour- ishing or depleting for you. For example, people think they enjoy watch- ing television for hours, but when they actually do this, they rate it as just about as interesting as sitting in the bathroom!

GOING DEEPER: : If you enjoy this process and want more detail, try recording your daily activities for a full week, including the weekend, to get a clearer picture of what you do. And jot down your mood every hour or so to see if you can spot any patterns.

Tips

Some activities may seem energizing at the time, but later on you find they have depleted your energy. For example, drinking several glasses of wine may seem to make you feel good at the time, but later on in the evening, you may regret it. In that case, you may choose to label it as depleting.

Other activities may feel draining but actually energize you. For exam- ple, exercise may feel like it's depleting your energy at the time you do it, but afterward, or perhaps the next day, you may feel more energized.

I recommend you record your feelings as soon as you can after the experience, but look out for these patterns in your journal, described in the drinking and exercise example above.

Reflection

Did you make any new discoveries through this exercise? What changes in your schedule, or perhaps your attitude, can you make? Small changes like that can have a surprisingly big impact.

For example, one of my clients who used to find it depleting to listen to her mother on the phone practiced mindful breathing as she listened. The phone calls became meditation time rather than criticism and fight time, and she felt less overwhelmed by the stress as a result.

Tales of Wisdom: How to Walk on Water

Three monks were sitting by the side of a lake in meditation. Suddenly, the first monk got up and said, "I forgot to put my underwear out to dry!" and miraculously walked on the water, across the lake, and into his hut, before promptly returning.

Before long, the second monk jumped up and said, "I forgot to flush the toilet" and immediately got up and strolled on top of water, into his hut, and came back again,

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in the same amazing way.

The third monk thought, "These monks think they have some sort of superior meditation technique and are just showing off. I can do that easily. I'm a far better meditator then they'll ever be." The monk stood up, attempted to confidently walk on water, and immediately fell into the lake. He got out, psyched himself up, and tried again. The same thing happened. Before long, he was completely soaked.

The other two monks calmly watched the scene, and then one monk said to the other, "Shall we tell him where the stones are?"

What's the moral of the story for you?

When Stress Overwhelms

The following practice is a three-step exercise you can try using when you feel overwhelmed by stress.

PRACTICE: The Mindful ABC

The exercise is made up of steps A, B, and C to make it easier to remember. A stands for awareness, B stands for breath and beliefs, and C stands for choosing a mindful action, as explained on pages 245–246 and illustrated in the diagram below.

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Step A: Awareness

Become aware of your stress signs. These are the thoughts, feelings, and sensations in your body and behavior that you notice when you're too stressed.

The signs vary for different people. For me, I feel a slight twitch in my eyelid, I don't feel like talking to my friends, I have a tension in my shoulders, and I get irritated by the slightest disturbance. I'm reluctant to talk to others. What are your signs? Look back at Chapter 5 to remind yourself.

Step B: Breath and Beliefs

Breath

Take a few slow, deep mindful breaths. Then allow your breathing to be as it is and feel its sensation. Expand your awareness to your body and feel all the sensations there, accepting them as they are. Recognize any tight or tense bodily sensations as part and parcel of the stress response if that's what they are. No need to try to change the sensation—just watch and, if you can, accept them.

Beliefs

Now ask yourself: "What exactly am I stressed about?" Your answer may be "I'm concerned that I won't finish the report on time" or "I'm wor- ried I'll run out of money this month." Then consider reevaluating your current beliefs about stress itself. It's not always easy, but see if you can give it a go. Think, "This stress is energizing me to prepare to complete the report" rather than just "I must reduce my stress" or "Stress is bad." Remember that stress can be healthy in short bursts as it sharpens your senses, strengthens you to act, releases oxytocin to urge you to be with others, and initially boosts your immune function. You could also reevaluate your stressor—for example, "Yes, I'm scared about running out of money for rent, but I could always borrow from Dad if worse comes to worst."

Step C: Choose a Mindful Action

This step is about choosing what to do next.

Whatever the stressor, you either need to change the situation or accept what you can't change.

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If you decide that you need to change the situation: Maybe you need to call the employment agency, finish that report, or take your child home if he's having a tantrum.

If you decide you need to accept the situation, at least for now, you can:

- Choose to do something energizing. Consider going for a walk, run, jog, running up or down the stairs. The activity may help to burn up your stress hormones, which is what your body is gearing up to do—act. Integrate your activity with mindful awareness rather than just letting your mind worry.
- Choose to do something relaxing. This can be any activity that you have time for and that appeals to you. Here are some examples: have a bath, listen to music, garden, go for a drive, meditation, or yoga. Do the activity with mindful awareness.
- Choose to be mindful in the moment. You may choose just to be fully mindful in whatever you do next. This may be the case if you're traveling or at work or in the middle of a conversation. Just choose one of your senses and fully connect with it. Immerse your attention in the experience. Ideally, I'd recommend you be mindfully aware and have a spirit of kindness to yourself no matter which choice you make.

Reflection

Make a summary of the Mindful ABC Exercise if it appeals to you. When you try it out, write down what effect the exercise had on your state of mind, your emotions, and whether you dealt with the stressor differently from how you may normally have coped with it.

Raising Well-Being to Reduce Stress

If you're feeling even slightly distressed with the pressures of life, you're probably not feeling happy. You may not even believe that happiness is something achievable for you given your circumstances. And yet taking steps to raise your long-term well-being can increase your resilience to stress.

Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health examined 200 studies on well-being and cardiovascular health. They found both positive emotion and optimism to slow the progression of heart disease and halve the risk of a major

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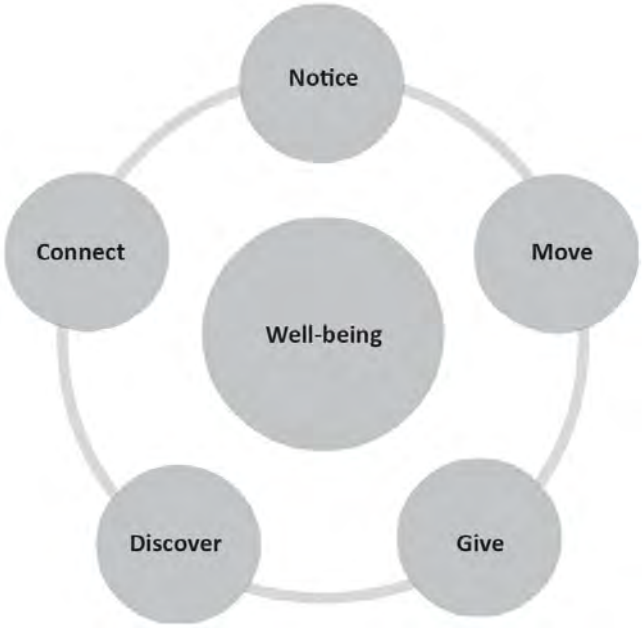
issue with your heart, such as a heart attack. So being happy both opens your emotional heart and heals your physical heart!

A fantastic model that I've been using to raise well-being in recent years is called the Five Ways to Well-Being. This is an evidence-based plan from the New Economics Foundation in the United Kingdom, based on the U.K. government's state-of-the-art research on mental well-being. Everyone's path to a life of happiness is different, but these activities have been found by research to be particularly beneficial for raising people's well-being and reduce distress.

The five ways to well-being, depicted in the diagram below, are:

1. **Connect**—This is about increasing the quality of your relationships with friends, family, coworkers, or even neighbors.
2. **Move**—This area emphasizes the importance of moving your body rather than being sedentary.
3. **Notice**—This is almost directly about mindfulness and how your awareness of your inner thoughts and emotions helps to clarify your values and direction in life. You also notice and appreciate the world around you.



4. **Discover**—This is about learning new things. Not necessarily through just books or courses or by earning certificates, but anything new.
5. **Give**—This is about learning to give of yourself a little bit every day and

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enjoy the feeling of helping others. This too can help to enhance your connections and build the quality and depth of your social net-work.

A very small action in any one of these areas often has a lasting impact, just as a small pebble creates ripples throughout a lake. By improving one area, you'll start to improve them all. And, as you'll note in the descriptions that follow, mindfulness underlies them all.

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

A powerful way of raising your resilience to stress and enjoy greater well-being is through social relationships. Close relationships with family and friends offer love and support. Broader connections bring a sense of belonging. Seek to be close enough to a few people so you can turn to one another at times of difficulty.

> "I didn't notice any changes from practicing mindfulness, but my wife has! She says I'm much less reactive and nicer to be with. And when she says something like that, she means it! I can see it's improving our connection."

One of the great advantages of a conversation with someone you trust, when you're dis- tressed, is putting things into perspective. As you'll recall, one of the core factors that drives stress is how you interpret the situation. If you're in an anxious state, that interpretation is not happening through the wise, calm part of your brain: the prefrontal cortex. Instead, it's a reation arising from activation in the amygdala, the part that wants you to focus on danger and see the negative consequences.

Here are some different ways for developing your social network that you may not have considered for a while:

Ways of Making New Friends

- **Carpool to work.** Your employer may organize it, or just ask colleagues at work. It's a great way to get to know someone.
- **Use online social networks** to connect with your old friends. I've recently managed to get in touch with friends from primary school, and it's been like we were never apart when we met up.
- **Walk a dog.** Dog owners often end up chatting with each other. You could

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even volunteer to walk dogs from a local shelter. A nice oppor- tunity to do some mindful walking too.

Ways of Deepening Your Current Relationships

- **Remember the golden rule**: Treat others the way you'd appreciate being treated yourself.
- **Invest time and energy in your close relationships.** That's the best investment you can make.
- **Give relationships some space**. Balance time together with time pursuing your own interests.
- **Be forgiving**. Everyone makes mistakes; we're all human.

Reflection

Write down who is closest to you in your life. Examples may include family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, mentors, and others.

You don't need to have lots of relationships. Even a small number of close relationships to people you can turn to in times of difficulty is fine. But if it's just one person, consider exploring ways to develop more close relationships with family or friends.

Want to reduce your stress and increase your productivity? At the same time, want to reduce your risk of heart disease, stroke, and cancer by 50%? Then exercise is for you!

Any activity that doesn't involve passively sitting or lying down is a step in the right direction. Going to the gym is not the only way to be physically active. Find activities you enjoy and that are right for your current ability. And if you can do that exercise with others, even better.

Examples of exercise include:

- Walking briskly
- Playing tennis
- Pushing a lawn mower

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- Using a vacuum cleaner

If the activity enables you to break a sweat, you're making your heart work and achieving benefits for your body and mind. Be creative and see what activities you can find that get you sweating!

When you combine these activities with mindfulness, the benefits are not just a physical release of tension, but a brain exercise too—staying in the present moment non-judgmentally while your body moves. If you do your best to be mindful while doing the physical exercise, you're effectively meditating with all the extra benefits that brings.

How much activity should you do? That's a common question, and the best way for me to answer is to ask: How much activity are you willing to do? Even a 5-minute walk up and down your street has been found to have benefits. And there's mounting evidence that short bouts of exercise, like a brisk walk, can build fitness and help you manage stress.

If you don't do any physical activity at the moment, try these tips to get you moving.

- **Ask yourself**: Are you willing to give physical activity a try if it's fun? Physical activity will make you feel happier, healthier, and live longer. It will improve your brain function, make you feel more confident, help reduce smoking, and even lower your credit card bill, as you're less likely to spend money to feel better!
- **Boost your willpower**. You can do this by one of the following: getting to bed on time, practicing meditation, and eating foods with a low glycemic index (GI). Foods with a low GI are generally better for you, as they raise your blood sugar level slowly. With greater willpower, you'll be more likely to create an exercise habit.
- **Spend time with people who do exercise regularly**. You are more likely to think of physical activity positively if you have friends who do the same. They may inspire you to get moving.
- **Make a plan and measure**. By making a basic activity plan and recording what you achieved, you'll be much more likely to stick to it. You could use an app on your phone or simply record it in your journal or other notebook.

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Set a small, manageable goal to start with, like a 5-minute walk every day.

- **Be self-compassionate when you lapse.** On the days you don't man- age to exercise, practice self-kindness. This is hard to believe for many people, but being too strict with yourself when you fail makes it more likely you'll fail again. Forgiving yourself puts you in a more positive mind-set, making another setback less likely.
- **Exercise with a friend.** If you can, find someone else to do your physical activities with. You can then motivate each other, and on the days you want to give up, your friend will encourage you.
- **Reduce your sitting time.** Even if you do half an hour of exercise a day, recent research has found if you spend hours at work sitting, the exercise makes a limited difference health-wise. Try standing while on the phone, having a walking meeting, or going for a stroll at lunch- time. Stand and move throughout the day as much as you can

TAKE NOTICE

Noticing or, in other words, mindfulness, helps you stimulate curiosity and appreciate the world around you. Rather than seeing life in a habitual way, you wake up and enjoy what's going well in your life. Connect with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. Noticing your own thoughts and feelings can also clarify what direction you want to go in life. So you're making conscious decisions, not being set in your old ways.

Apart from practicing meditation, yoga, or tai chi, here are some more unusual ways of improving your noticing skills:

- **Watch for all objects with a certain color** for a few minutes. For example, if I pick green, I can now notice trees, grass, a highlighter pen, a logo on a business card, a part of my teacup, and a pattern on my curtain.
- **Do one task at half the normal speed for just 1 minute**. What else do you then notice? If I try that while typing, I suddenly notice how smooth the keys are and that I'm sitting in a twisted posture.
- **Try doing nothing for 5 minutes a day**. Yup, nothing. Just sit there or lie there and see what happens. If that's really difficult to do, due to time pressure, maybe you need to look at managing your time dif- ferently.
- **Count how many different sounds you can hear when you're wait- ing in a queue.** When I stop to try this, I notice cars in the distance, a boiling kettle,

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a distant plane, and plates being clattered. I wasn't aware of any of that before.

- **Ask yourself three questions:** How do I feel right now? What am I thinking about right now? What can I notice with my senses right now?

DISCOVER

Learning something new raises your confidence. And because whatever you're learning is new, you naturally become more mindful in the process. Imagine learning to paint or drive for the first time—your attention would be fully in the present as you develop the new skill.

Most people associate learning with school. But your brain is built and thrives on learning new things, and you can learn at any age. And when you learn by doing activities, that learning is enhanced.

Here are some ideas for ways you can keep learning to build resilience and mental well-being:

- Ask the people around you more questions.
- Seek to learn one new fact every day.
- Take a course in painting, playing an instrument, or fixing cars.
- Engage in a new role at work.
- Try playing a new sport, listening to a new audiobook, or cooking something different.
- Visit a museum to learn about a period you find interesting in history, art, or science.
- Try that hobby you've been thinking about, whether it's flying toy helicopters, knitting, or writing fiction.

I've recently tried painting. I must say, I had ideas like "I can't paint!" running through my head the first time. But splashing colors on a canvas and making mistakes was highly therapeutic and fun. I just called it modern art. I've been experimenting with meditating before doing the painting to see what effect that has—it made the paintings more serene and calming to look at. Other things I do to boost learning: listen to a new audiobook every couple of weeks, watch talks on *www.ted.com*, visit museums when I can, read blogs on science and psychology, read new books and go to lectures and talks on different topics from time to time.

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Excerpted from *The Mindful Way through Stress*

GIVE

You may be surprised to see giving as a recommendation in a chapter on taking care of yourself. But both small and large acts of kindness can boost your sense of well-being, improve your relationships, and help you manage stress in a positive way. Being kind to others is an act of kindness to yourself. Kind people live longer and happier lives. People over age 55 who volunteer for two or more organizations have a 44% lower chance of dying. That's more effec-ive than exercising four times a week!

I discovered a powerful example of this last week. An old friend visited me. After failing several years at university, becoming stressed and frustrated, he visited his doctor, who diagnosed him with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS). His doctor advised him to find the time to help others rather than just rest. This seems like strange advice to someone who struggles to have the energy to do his own daily chores. But he took the advice and volunteered for a CFS charity. He began to feel grateful for what he could do, and helping others gave his life meaning again. He now also meditates and is far more positive and upbeat about his future. He enjoys the challenges in his life rather than feeling crushed by the stress. It seems that giving of himself has helped him reduce stress and increase his happiness.

Here are some ways you can give:

- Praise a colleague with a short e-mail.
- Open the door for someone.
- Make a cup of tea for a coworker.
- Smile more.
- Consider volunteering for the local community.
- Offer to help an elderly person with his or her bag.
- Invite a friend for dinner.
- Offer to help a colleague with a work project.

"I love the feeling of doing something nice for someone else. That was one of my favorite parts of Shamash's course for me. It gave me permission to be nice just for the sake of itself. It lifted my mood every time! It's amazing that I rarely made time to do this before."

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EXERCISE: Improving One Area of Your Lifestyle

If you feel overwhelmed with all the things that could improve your well- being, stress not! Try the following steps to clarify one action you could do. Just one action is a fine way to start.

1. Look at the diagram of the five ways to well-being on page 247. Rate how well you're doing in each area on a scale of 1 to 5: 1 for lots of potential for improvement in that area and 5 for doing perfectly well in that area of your life right now, in your opinion.
2. Decide which area you want to develop. You may choose the lowest-value one or the one that you'd most like to develop. It's better to choose the area you're most likely to be successful in and would enjoy.
3. In this coming week, take action in the area you've chosen. For example, if it's Discover, see what new things you learn every day already. Perhaps play a new game with your child, rediscover an old hobby, or join that evening class you've been meaning to take.
4. Do your tiny chosen activity in a mindful way. Savor the experience. And watch to see if you begin to cope better with your stress. Finish by recording your findings in your journal. And if you're inspired, take another action next month!

Measure to Motivate Yourself

Measuring your daily activities is a great way to boost your motivation. You can measure not only how much exercise you do but also your heart rate, the quality of your sleep, your weight, your mood, how you use your time, the amount of meditation you've done, the number of steps you've taken in a day, and more. Recently my mother started using a pedometer to record how many steps she takes a day, and it has helped motivate her to walk more.

There is now a whole movement based on measuring yourself to help you achieve your goals. It's called quantified self, and you can start exploring at www.quantifiedself.com.

I'm into technology and for the last few months have used a variety of applications on my phone to keep track, which is motivating for me and has helped me develop healthy habits. I've been tracking the amount of time I spend meditating (insight

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meditation timer app), my weight and eating habits (My Fitness Pal app), the number of walks or runs I do every week and my speed (Runkeeper app), how I use my time (just on Excel), and the quality of my sleep (Sleep Cycle app) and recording my thoughts in my own journal, which I do privately online (www.penzu.com). If you don't like using technology, you can simply keep records using a pen and paper—that's just as good and perhaps less stressful for you!

PRACTICE: Mindful Yoga and Meditation for Life


10 minutes.


30 minutes.

By now, you're familiar with the yoga sequences that have been offered to you. Today you're invited to practice in silence and to start the practice with a 5-minute standing body scan. You can use this body scan to find out which areas of your body are tense and require some attention, and which areas are relaxed. Then engage in whatever yoga postures you feel your body needs. Rather than thinking of the yoga practice as something unusual that you do, allow the yoga stretches to feel like a natural process. Just as you naturally stretch your body in the morning in bed, stretch your body with mindful awareness to meet your body's current needs.

After practicing this for 10 or 30 minutes, depending on whether you're doing the mini or full course, go on to practice any mindfulness meditation of your choice. Again, try doing this without using the audio.

VARIATION: Just for a change, you could try practicing the meditation first and then doing the yoga. Notice what effect that has. Your level of mindful awareness in the yoga may increase.

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Excerpted from *The Mindful Way through Stress*

The Daffodils

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
The thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

—William Wordsworth

Reflection: How Was Your Day of Mindfulness

If you chose to have a day, or perhaps half-day, of mindfulness, how did you find the experience? What did you like or not like about it? What did you discover about your thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, urges, and desires? If you plan to have another such day, do you wish to pop the date in your diary, or just see when it feels right?

Record your reflections in your journal, phone, or tablet.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Excerpted from *The Mindful Way through Stress*

Self-Care FAQs

Q: I'm already doing things for others all the time. Are you really suggesting I give more of myself?
A: If you're already giving your time to help others, you don't have to give any more. For you, perhaps you need to give less by saying no more often. But many people spend their time thinking about themselves and their own lives to feel better when actually seeking to help others would help themselves. This is because the brain is hardwired to reward you when you're generous with your time or energy. As the Dalai Lama says, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

Q: I literally have no spare time for mindfulness with my young baby and job. I'm on the go from morning till I fall asleep exhausted. What can I do?
A: If you have no spare slots to stop and practice a mindfulness exercise like the mindful pause, then don't worry! You can practice mindfulness as you are doing your daily activities. When you're looking at your child, pay attention to her eyes and body and gently smile at her rather than letting your mind get too lost in planning and worrying. When breastfeeding, be there with your child. When driving to the doctor for a checkup, feel your breath and notice the world around you, ensuring you switch off your phone and other distractions. Micro moments of mindfulness make a difference—a deep breath here, a mindful hug there—it all makes a huge difference.

Q: I'm anxious about this course ending. How can I prepare for the end?
A: This course isn't the end, really. If anything, it's the beginning of a journey into a life of greater mindfulness. Seek to join a local mindfulness or meditation group in your area, and if there isn't one, consider an online mindfulness group, either mine or some other one that appeals. Perhaps in the near future, you can start a mindfulness group of your own to support others as well as yourself in the practice.

Q: I love the loving-kindness meditation! Can I just do that one?
A: Yes, you can! You can do any meditation you like. Different people like different meditations. They have all been found to be beneficial, so use what works for you or whatever you enjoy.

Q: Unfortunately, I never really got into the mindfulness practice in this book. I'm not good at sticking to things like this. What shall I do?

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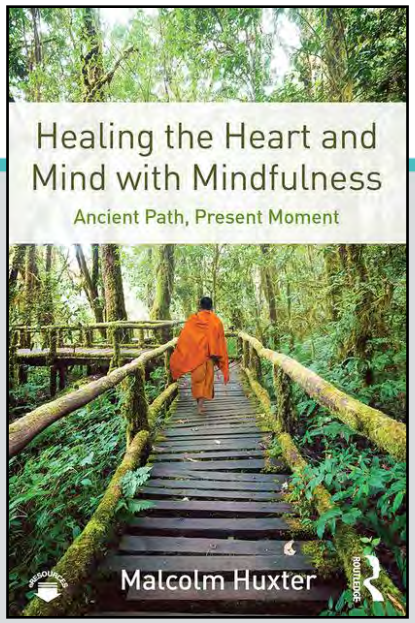
A: That's okay—you're not alone! There are two approaches you could take. You could closely watch your thoughts and find out what ideas you have that are preventing you from practicing the mindful experiments. And then begin by fully committing to doing 1 minute of meditation every day and building up from there. Alternatively, consider what hobbies or physical activity you do regularly and make that activity a mindful one. Even if it's knitting mindfully three or four times a week, that would be great.

CHAPTER

4

EMOTIONS

TAMING THE DESTRUCTIVE AND CULTIVATING BALANCE



This chapter is excerpted from
Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness
by Malcolm Huxter.

Learn more

EMOTIONS

Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

Chapter overview

As the title states, this chapter is about emotions, how to reduce destructive emotions and cultivate helpful emotions. To begin with we will look at what we mean by emotions and explore what we know of emotions from a contemporary scientific perspective and a traditional Buddhist perspective. The chapter will outline how mindfulness can be used to balance our emotions and short-circuit dysfunctional emotions. We will explore anger, fear, sadness and happiness in detail and how mindfulness can be used to understand and balance these emotions. The chapter will conclude by offering some strategies for working with painful emotions.

What are emotions?

The word emotion originates from the Latin emovere, which means to disturb. The first part of the word, 'e' means 'out', and 'movere' translates as 'to move'. When we need to function effectively in a demanding world, emotions move us to action. There is no direct Pali equivalent for the term 'emotion'. Rather emotions are understood as a combination of physical sensations, feelings (vedana), states of heart-mind (citta) and mental and physical patterns. Emotions involve complex body–mind interactions.

Emotions are necessary for our personal development, survival and thriving as human beings. They save lives, motivate behaviour and help us form relationships. Balanced emotions are essential for effective communication and the welfare and wellbeing of our families and communities. Unfortunately emotions can be unbalanced, dysfunctional, painful and destructive. At times, emotions can move us to act unskilfully with dire consequences. Emotions can arise and Emotions pass relatively quickly. Though it is possible to cultivate and reinforce emotions they often come uninvited. That is, they may come up in a way that seems out of our control because they are either 'hard wired' (part of our neurological–biological–mental systems) or they are conditioned. When we experience an emotion it focuses our attention on the task at hand but it can also bias our perceptions. When we are frightened, for example, there may be a bias to see things that confirm our fear. When we are angry nothing seems to go right and it seems as if the world is against us. When we are sad the world seems negative and when we smile the whole world seems to smile with us. If we are happy everything seems fine.

EMOTIONS

Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

Emotions: a contemporary perspective

Paul Ekman, one of the world's leading authorities on emotions, describes an emotion as a process influenced by evolution and our personal past that is triggered when we sense something important to our welfare is happening. This results in physiological changes and behaviours to deal with the situation. Ekman describes an emotion episode timeline as the coming together of: the environment, an emotional alert database, automatic appraisal, a trigger, an affect program and a refractory period.

As the name implies a trigger is something that initiates an emotional experience. Some triggers are 'hard wired' or embedded into our emotional systems due to evolution and our genetic inheritance. For example, everyone will express a fear response when they unexpectantly fall backwards. Such a fear reaction is 'hard wired' because we did not need to learn it. Many triggers, however, are learned due to our upbringing and our own unique individual experiences. The emotional alert database is like our own experience library. It contains hardwired or universal triggers, but is mostly filled with triggers that have been learned. Past emotional experiences are embedded in our memory. We automatically appraise the environment by searching for anything that resembles the memories stored in the emotion alert database. Once the automatic appraiser recognises a trigger the affect program begins. The affect program is our emotional response to a situation. There are many affect programs and they vary depending on the emotion that they relate to. Once an emotion has begun there will be a period of time in which it will continue. This period of time is called the refractory period. During the refractory period perception may be narrowed or distorted and our thinking cannot incorporate information that doesn't fit with or justify the emotion. Focused attention on a problem is beneficial in the short term, but if it outlasts its usefulness it can lead to inaccurate perceptions and inappropriate emotional behaviours. Ekman suggests the refractory period may be increased by lack of sleep, alcohol, work stress, a buildup of unresolved resentments and importing 'scripts' from earlier life experience so that they colour the current situation. Therefore ways to reduce the refractory period include living a healthy lifestyle, communicating clearly and being mindful.

In his research Ekman (2003) identified seven basic emotions hat have universal facial expressions. These are sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt and

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happiness. Emotions can be distinguished from moods, traits and disorders. Emotions and moods can influence each other but generally moods are longer lasting than emotions. Similarly traits are more enduring than emotions or moods and tend to colour a person's perception. Disorders occur when emotions become unbalanced. For example, the emotion of fear may have the corresponding mood of apprehension, which may persist to become a trait of shyness and could result in a disorder such as chronic panic attacks.

Emotions: a neurobiological perspective

We know that emotions are often experienced in the body. Sadness, for example, may be felt as heaviness in the chest and the body and fear as churning 'butterflies' in the tummy or shaky legs. Anger is often felt as a tightening of the arm muscles, shoulders and chest and happiness may be described as a sense of light buoyancy throughout the body. From a neurobiological perspective emotions are visceral experiences directed by the brain involving a cascade of biological responses including neural connections and biochemical interactions. At the beginning of the chapter it was stated that emotions save lives, motivate behaviour and help us form relationships. To do this, emotions function within three interrelated systems (Gilbert, 2009; Hanson, 2013).

1. **Avoid, Survival System** (fight, flight and freeze).
2. **Approach, Resource Seeking System** (pursuing and wanting).
3. **Attach, Relationship System** (bonding, safety, soothing).

The first system is related to our basic survival responses. This system includes emotions such as fear, anger and disgust and responses to threat and danger such as the flight, fight or freeze responses. The main biochemicals related to this system are adrenaline, nor-epinephrine and cortisol. These biochemicals are responsible for changes in our bodies such as increased heart rate, alertness, hyper-vigilance and an increased blood flow to the arms and legs in order to hit out, fight or flee danger.

The second system relates to motivation, pleasure and reward. This system includes emotions related to drive, excitement and vitality. The main biochemical in this system is dopamine. Dopamine plays a major role in reward-motivated behaviour. An imbalance in this system may result in depression at one end of the spectrum and addictions at the other end.

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The third system relates to feeling safe and developing relationships with others. We feel safe when we are protected, our basic needs are met and we have a sense of belonging. The emotions in this system are related to feelings of contentment, safety and connection and are essential for human health, wellbeing and flourishing. The main biochemical of this system, oxytocin, has a function of soothing distress.

The cultivation of loving kindness and compassion are integral com ponents of the Buddha's eight-fold path and represent the development of this emotion system at refined levels.

The three systems are interrelated and when balanced, work together to maintain our safety and wellbeing (Figure 5.1).

Mindfulness of emotions: a traditional perspective

According to traditional Buddhist texts, there are thousands of different states of heart-mind. These range from refined and subtle states of mind, such as sublime peacefulness, to coarse states of mind such as angry rage. Some of these states of mind would be considered as emotions and some would not. As was stated at the beginning of the chapter, in Buddhism emotions are understood as a combination of physical sensations, feelings (vedana), states of heart-mind (citta) and mental and physical patterns. As mentioned in Chapter 3, feeling (vedana) refers to the pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant aspects of all experience. Feelings have the capacity to move us, as when we say, 'that was very moving', or 'I was moved by that'. Feeling, therefore, refers to the aspect of experience that moves us, that stimulates a response.

Feelings in the Buddhist sense and emotions as we understand them in contemporary psychology are not the same. They are, however, related. What they have in common is that they represent the aspect of life that moves us to act. In the context of satipatthana, mindfulness of feeling opens us up to the world of stimulus and response, to the fact *that* we are moved to act and *how* we are moved to act. This in turn can stimulate wisdom, understanding *why* we are moved to act.

Mindfulness of feeling is central to working with emotions. It is also central to short-circuit reactive cycles that often involve emotions. The process of taming destructive emotions and cultivating emotional balance requires the skilful

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application of all four domains of mindfulness. However, the second and third applications of mindfulness are, perhaps, most relevant to emotions.

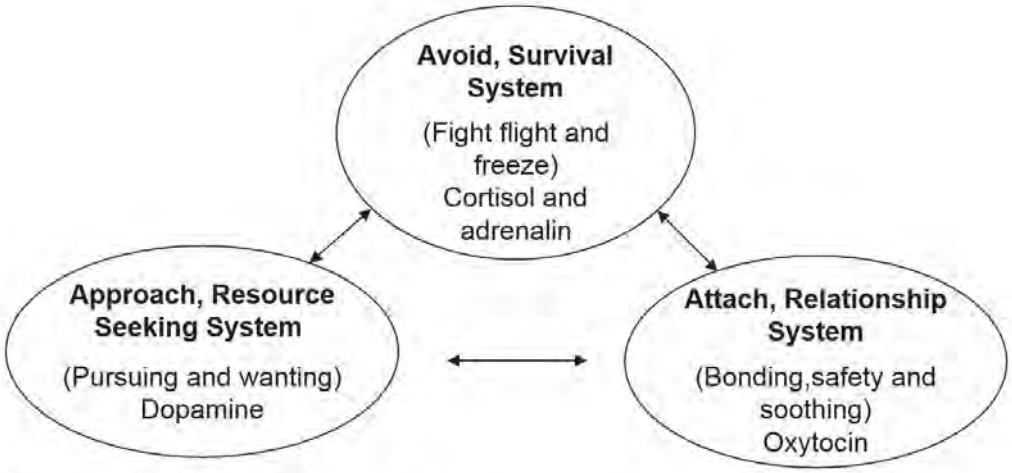

Figure 5.1 The three emotional systems
Source: adapted from Gilbert (2009) and Hanson (2013)

Contemplating feeling: the second application of mindfulness

Feeling (*vedana*) refers to the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral aspects of experience. We could compare feeling to flavour. When we eat, we experience the physical sensations of the food, its hardness, softness, texture, moisture and so on. We also experience the flavour of the food. Although flavour is distinct from these sensations, it is intimately connected with them. It is the flavour that moves us. We are moved to take more if the flavour is pleasant; we are moved to take less if the flavour is unpleasant; and we are moved to indifference if we can't find any flavour. But what moves us, what stimulates a response, is flavour. Feeling is like the flavour of experience.

According to the suttas the Buddha says there are three fundamental aspects of feeling, and these stimulate the three fundamental movements of the heart-mind. These are: pleasant feeling, which moves us to grasp; painful feeling, which moves us to resist or reject; and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, where we don't know what we are feeling, and are moved to dullness, doubt or confusion.

Feelings are not emotions as they are considered in our everyday language, nor are

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they physical sensations. Vedana, the Pali term used for feelings, is often mistakenly translated as sensations. Unfortunately, this translation can be confused with physical experiences of the body such as pressure, heat, movement and so on. Feelings are not solely physical or mental but more like a bridge between body and mind that can be triggered by physical or mental experience.

If we trip and graze a hand and it hurts it may give rise to unpleasant feelings. In this case the unpleasant feelings arise from a physical object. If on the other hand, someone we like smiles kindly at us, and we experience pleasant feelings, it is more related to mental experiences. In some rare cases, what would normally be considered as painful physical sensations, may actually give rise to pleasant feelings. For example, when we get a massage and the masseuse digs into a tight muscle, it may hurt but it also 'feels' good.

Since feelings arise dependent upon conditions that are beyond our control, we cannot control our feelings. We can, however, influence the way we respond to our feelings. Understanding that a feeling is 'just a feeling' can short-circuit the tendency to over-react. For example, pain management may often entail an accepting and peaceful state of mind despite experiencing painful feelings arising from the body. Similarly, as will be clarified in the next chapter, 'urge surfing', which can help substance abusers interrupt the cycles of their addictions, involves mindfulness of feeling.

Contemplating heart-mind: the third application of mindfulness

In the context of mindfulness practice, heart-mind represents our inner state; how we are, at this time. Mindfulness reveals the current situation of our heart-mind, how its naturally transparent awareness is affected by what is arising within it at the time. Is the heart-mind coloured by the wholesome or the unwholesome? What kind of wholesome? What kind of unwholesome? In the contemporary context, this practice entails mindfulness of the thoughts, moods and emotions we find within ourselves.

As explained earlier, contemplation is a translation of the word upassati (Pali) which means to: 'to repeatedly look at' or 'to closely observe' or 'see along with' or 'track'. Contemplating the heart-mind or citta involves tracking our inner centre of subjectivity. The essence of the heart-mind is awareness or consciousness. An

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undisturbed heart-mind is compared to a mountain lake, where the water is clear and undisturbed. A person standing on the bank of such a lake could look into it and see clearly to its bottom, seeing fish, plants, rocks and pebbles. On the other hand, the disturbed heart-mind is compared to water mixed with colour or mud, covered with algae, stirred up by the wind or heated until it is boiling. In these situations, the water's natural transparency is lost. According to His Holiness the Dalai Lama the nature of citta is luminous and aware. It knows, and it illuminates the objects that it knows. It is also able to illuminate itself. It is easy to confuse the nature of heart-mind with the states that it is coloured by. Mindfulness clarifies this confusion.

In the Satipathana Sutta, the Buddha described many sub-domains of the third application of mindfulness. He recommended being mindful of the heart-mind in all its manifestations: wholesome and unwholesome, helpful and unhelpful, gross and subtle.

We have a strong tendency to identify with our heart-mind, to create identity from the movements within it. Contemplating heart-mind helps provide some space from this identification. It reins in the tendency for destructive emotions to run rampant and construct a dysfunctional identity. Mindfully tracking the changing nature of destructive and painful emotions helps us to break reactive patterns often associated with them.

Mindfulness of heart-mind

Ensure that you are at ease with your posture and your body is free from constriction and discomfort. Set the intention that for the next 15–20 minutes you will first ground yourself with mindfulness of body practices then shift your attention to monitoring and contemplating the heart-mind. Know also that being mindful of heart-mind can include being aware of emotions as they arise and pass away, moment to moment.

Let awareness centre on a chosen primary object. The object could be sitting or the rising and falling of your abdomen. It could be strong sensations in your body or sounds. Whatever you choose let that object be like an anchor or a place of reference where you can bring your attention back when you need to. Allow your attention to be open and accepting and be with experience moment to moment. Note whatever is happening inan open-minded, soft, yet clear and distinct manner.

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

(Silence)

Just as a stage may have many performers and props but a spotlight focuses on only one part of the stage, let the spotlight of your awareness focus on the state of your heart-mind. Do not reject other experiences, but let the state of your heartmind be the focus of attention. You can shift your attention to rest around the area of your chest if you wish, but let the central focus be on the state of your heart-mind or the general flavour, colour or atmosphere of your mood.

Just as a caring and kind healer may pay attention to the state of your body, bring kind and curious attention to the state of your heart-mind. What are you experiencing right now in the domain of moods, emotions and mental states? Tune in to your heart and ask yourself what is happening here right now. In a manner that is kind, spacious and allowing, ask yourself what am I experiencing in this moment? Try not to identify with the experience. Do not take it personally but see it as it is as a changing event. Try not to be hijacked by thoughts about the experience and as best you can, tune in to the state of your heart-mind.

Is your heart peaceful and calm, or is it disturbed by craving and longing?
Is the state of your mind contracted and frightened or is it open and expansive with qualities of generosity and kindness?
Is the state of your mind, aversive, prickly, frustrated or angry, condemning and judgemental? Or is it loving, open, kind, soft and accepting?
Is the predominant state of mind, sad, depressed and miserable or is it buoyant, light and joyful?
Is it confused and uncertain, restless and distracted or is it clear, confident, calm and focused?

What is the state of your heart-mind right now? Be allowing and open and try to note and name the state of mind objectively and accurately.

(Silence)

Once you have identified the current state of your heartmind, monitor how it changes.

If there are physical sensations arising in relationship to the state of the heart-mind, tune in to how it feels in your body and notice how this experience changes. Sometimes the state may intensify, and sometimes it may subside. Be content with whatever happens. Try not to grasp after the pleasant or reject and condemn the unpleasant. Simply be allowing and see states of mind as they are without making them more than what they are by thinking unrealistically about them. Notice how the experience arises, changes and passes by.

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

Rest in awareness of the changing aspects of the heartmind. Simply be present for the heart of your experience and let it come and go by taking refuge in the quality of awake awareness.

Resting in awareness you can hold and cradle any painful experience with kindness and care. Simply let painful states of mind be. Remember that they are not you and that they change. Let go of struggle and let the experience be. When you give the experience space it is as if you take refuge in awareness. Firmly grounded in mindfulness you can be deeply peaceful with all experience.

By taking refuge in awareness it is possible to tolerate pain Take refuge in your awareness and allow awareness to be your stable point of reference. It is as if this witnessing is deep and still within the roots of your being. Let awareness be like a solid and stable mountain in the midst of a windy storm. Let awareness be like the still depths of a lake when the surface is turbulent or like a solid island rock in the middle of a rough ocean with strong waves. The states of mind are like waves – coming and going, arising with a distinct energy then rolling on by and changing to something else.

Note the presence of an emotion and name or label it if you can.
Because emotions change they are not you.
Step back, get unstuck from the experience, give it space.
Let it be and let it change. Be at peace with the experience.

(Silence)

Without being caught up, develop curiosity about what is happening when this emotion arises. Also notice how your body feels in response to the emotion. Use noting to help you step back and investigate the experience. Look at and see the experience for what it is, as it is, rather than getting caught up in its story.

If the experience is painful or uncomfortable allow the power of compassion to help you bear and tolerate the distress. Let compassionate awareness be like an open house and see the state of mind like a visitor. Honour it and let it be felt in the body.

But then let the door open and let the state pass through.

(Silence)

Resting in a perspective of awareness, nurture wholesome states of mind. Try not to grasp after them. Without you getting in the road, joy and peace can arise naturally and without effort.

Whether the changing states of your heart-mind are wholesome and pleasant or painful and difficult to bear, be kind and spacious with the experience.

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Simply stay present and note the experience with openness, compassion and care.

Be like a solid rock island in the ocean.
Be like the still depth of a lake.
Be like a solid mountain.
'Be' with the experience and let it roll by.
Be present completely here and now practising mindfulness of heart-mind.
When you lose mindfulness simply remember to focus your attention, notice how things change, then with equanimity monitor the changing states of the heart.

(Silence 2–3 minutes or as long as you need)

In a few moments this meditation session will come to a close. If you have found it useful in any way remember that you can practise mindfulness as you need in yor busy daily activities.

Thank you for your attention and may mindfulness of the heart-mind bring peace and joy to all.

Taming the destructive and cultivating balanced emotions

Emotions can be balanced, constructive and functional or they can be out of balance, destructive and dysfunctional. When they are out of balance they can be excessive or deficient. Out of balance, dysfunctional and destructive emotions are evident in a few different ways, such as when we feel and show the right emotion but at the wrong intensity (e.g. over-reacting), or for an unsuitable length of time. When an emotion is out of balance we may have the appropriate response, but express it in a hurtful way such as with passive aggression. Unbalanced emotions are also demonstrated when an emotion is triggered but it is not the right emotion for the job. Emotional imbalance could also occur when the wrong emotions are running rife. Extremes of elation and depression, hope and fear, adulation and contempt, and infatuation and aversion could be examples of emotional excesses. Cold indifference towards self and others when compassion and kindness are needed may be an example of an emotional deficit.

Related story: Bec tames the destructive

Rebecca, or 'Bec', was a 28-year-old employed artist who was generally happy with her life. She did, however, feel her emotions were out of control. In particular she

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was inclined to frightening outbursts of anger in which she often smashed household objects. Bec was in a relationship and feared that one day she would strike her partner in a fit of rage and thereby destroy a relationship she valued dearly.

Bec was highly motivated to change what she saw as destructive emotions and decided to seek help. She attended individual therapy sessions and a mindfulness programme. In the individual sessions Bec was supported to process painful emotions and memories of childhood sexual abuse. Through mindfulness and compassionate awareness she came to understand triggers for her outbursts such as when she was feeling disempowered. In the group Bec learnt about the four applications of mindfulness and practised both mindfulness and loving kindness meditation. She progressively came to understand her habitual conditioned responses and gained an ability to choose how she would respond to her emotions. Bec learnt how to give emotions space by practising openness, willingness, allowance and acceptance, remembering that acceptance does not mean blindly acting on emotions. She found that she could see emotions as waves coming and going. She neither blocked nor amplified them, but just let them unfold and fade away according to their nature. In this way she practised the second and third applications of mindfulness. Bec progressed to the fourth application of mindfulness in which she explored what fed her emotions and what flowed from them.

In both the group and individual sessions, Bec utilised the practices outlined in the eight-fold path. As she confronted triggers that would normally result in destructive outbursts, Bec was able to remember her intention to avoid harm. Reflecting on her aspiration for peace and happiness helped her to tone down her anger and enhance her wellbeing and interpersonal harmony. Two months after she completed the group programme Bec decided that she was ready to stop therapy. She was very happy with what she had achieved and felt she had gained some freedom of choice in dealing with her angry outbursts.

Balancing emotions

Ekman points out that because emotions are either evolutionarily determined or conditioned to arise under particular circumstances, we cannot control their arising. We can, however, reduce the impact of the triggers, add alternative information to the database, de-automate the appraisers, de-condition the

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program, and adjust the refractory period. Just as when Bec came to understand what triggered her anger and why, she was able to change her response and bring her emotions into balance.

Balanced constructive emotions get the job of survival, wellbeing and welfare done. They lead to cooperation, collaboration and understanding between oneself and others. Balanced emotions are expressed in a way that is timely and appropriate to the situation.

Marsha Linehan (e.g. 1993), the psychologist who developed DBT, once compared emotions to horses. Horses are powerful animals that can serve us if we train them in a kindly manner. But if we just sit in the saddle and provide no direction, the horse will just go where it wants to go according to its habitual tendencies. In order to direct the horse to where we want to go, we need to connect with it, develop a relationship and understand its needs and particular temperament, yet maintain a sense of authority.

It is easy for emotions to lead us astray down destructive pathways that cause harm and some emotions are simply difficult to bear, even painful. Often, in our attempt to manage our emotions, we may suppress them or try not to feel them. The trouble with this is that they may come out in other ways with secondary emotions such as guilt and shame.

When emotions are painful or leading us in destructive directions we need to develop a kind yet firm relationship with them. Taming and training emotions involves learning new skills and breaking old habits. One way we learn is through behavioural rein forcement. Reinforcement, as explained in Chapter 1, strengthens habits. Sometimes destructive emotions are reinforced by allowing them to run rampant and out of control. This may involve becoming over-engaged, preoccupied, consumed or hijacked by emotions. Avoidance can also be reinforcing. Avoidance of negative experiences can include denial, suppression, substance abuse, dissociation and even self-harm. Avoidance can provide reinforcement because it is a relief to not confront or contact something unpleasant. Sometimes people avoid positive experiences because the experience provokes anxiety or because they are attached to habitual withdrawal and inactivity. At times, in order to train and tame out of control emotions we need to restrain or 'surf' our urges. At other times we need to face up to what we are avoiding.

'Response prevention' is a term used in contemporary psychology that refers to not reinforcing avoidance or other behaviours. In other words, if we choose to not act

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on our impulse to avoid emotional distress, the discomfort will eventually change and fade away because it is no longer reinforced. In behavioural sciences a term that is used for when a behavioural pattern fades is 'extinction'.

If we face up to what we are avoiding in a very sensitive and graduated manner, our conditioned reactions and old habits can become extinct. If, on the other hand, we face our pain and fears when they are too overwhelming it can make our conditioned reactions worse. Where physical pain is concerned we should respect the need for avoidance and act wisely. It also helps to understand that purposely facing emotional pain is best done when we are somewhat confident that we can cope and it will not make our reactions worse. There is a window of opportunity for the 'extinguishing' process. Too little distress has no effect. Too much distress re-sensitises us to more complicated reactions. The process of tolerating distress and allowing habitual reactions to fade away is best when we proceed in a sensitive, gradual manner and in a way that is timely, suitable and appropriate.

The process of taming destructive emotions and cultivating balanced emotions involves first getting to know and understand them. Once we know what we are working with we are in a better position to make decisions to either reinforce them or allow them to fade away. All emotions are important for our survival, wellbeing and welfare and they can all be in balance or out of balance. On the following pages I will describe four common universal emotions: anger, fear, sadness and happiness.

Anger

Try, for a few moments, looking into a mirror while pulling your eyebrows down and together. Open your eyes wide staring with your upper eyelids against your eyebrows at the same time as pushing your lips tightly together.12 Do you look unmistakably like someone who is angry? Do you feel angry or are you reminded of a time when you were angry? This expression, according to Ekman (2003), is the universal facial expression of anger. No matter where you go in the world with whatever culture you encounter, the experience of anger is connected with this facial expression. It is a universal sign of anger. It has served a purpose in evolution and, according to biologists, it is essential to the survival of our species that we experience and express anger.

Anger has many grades and variations, from subtle aversion to blind rage. Some

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words for the various gradations of this emotion include:

Aggravation	Exasperation	Grumpiness	Resentment
Agitation	Fed up	Hatred	Revulsion
Annoyance	Ferocity	Hostility	Scorn
Aversion	Fierce	Irritation	Spite
Bitterness	Frenzied	Loathing	Torment
Blustery	Frustration	Mean-spiritedness	Vengefulness
Burned up	Fury	Outrage	Wrath
Dislike	Grouchiness	Rage	

The most common trigger for anger is being blocked from pursuing what matters to us, or being stopped in achieving a desired outcome. The desired outcome could be as simple as being able to change lanes in the traffic or as complex as feeling that others do not perceive us in the way we wish to be perceived. Some people seem to get angry at anything and everything. People get angry at injustice, insult, abuse, having freedoms taken away, not getting what they want, being disrespected, criticised or cheated. We can get angry when we are offended by another's beliefs and values or betrayed, abandoned, rejected, falsely accused or when other people break the rules. We can also get angry with ourselves. The list of possibilities is endless but possibly the easiest way to get angry is for others to express anger towards us, as anger seems to breed anger.

Anger gives us the energy to fight against something that is blocking a desired outcome and remove the obstacle. For example, the energy required to protect a young child can be generated by anger and the courage to stand up against oppression and injustice can also be supported by anger. Anger can also be directed inwards and give us the motivation to change something about ourselves that needs to change. Unfortunately anger can be dangerous because it can quickly drive us to act inappropriately in ways that may hurt and harm ourselves and others. Internalised anger can easily degenerate into the fuel of self-hatred and depression and as anger rarely occurs alone it may lead to an array of secondary emotions such as guilt, jealousy and self-loathing. Excessive anger is detrimental

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to physical health, increasing blood pressure and the risk of coronary heart disease. Unconscious suppression of anger can also increase the likelihood of coronary heart disease and lead to an array of destructive emotional experiences, such as resentment, guilt and depression. 'Anger management' is often a reason for visits to psychologists and participation in self-help courses because anger has a great potential to hurt, harm and destroy property, oneself, other people and our relationships.

There are many strategies for working with anger in contemporary psychology because it is such a desired skill. Assertiveness training, for example, is a popular way of working with anger skilfully so that it minimises harm and demonstrates respect for the rights and wellbeing of all parties. Some other general strategies to work with anger are:

- Being familiar with our personal cues and triggers and knowing what our personal signals for anger are. Ekman says that this type of awareness helps us to 'catch the spark before the flame'.
- Being able to surf the urges to follow aggressive intentions and take 'time out' or do something completely different to acting on anger.
- Applying mindfulness to thoughts so that we know what thoughts may be feeding anger and knowing that these thoughts are not necessarily facts to be believed.
- Being able to note and name anger for what it is, so that we know that anger has arisen in us, but we need not identify with it.
- Choosing not to justify and reinforce violent, harmful and revengeful actions including the way we speak to ourselves and others.
- Practising right speech (including self-talk), which entails not engaging in the types of speech that are toxic to relationships such as shaming, blaming and unwarranted criticism.
- Becoming skilled with exercises that calm the mind and relax the body so that we build up a buffer zone to soften the impact of angry triggers as well as reduce the length of time we are in a refractory period.
- Reflecting on what was helpful and what was not helpful after the episode has passed.
- Cultivating warm friendliness and compassion.

Anger is often the way the hindrance of ill will is expressed. One traditional Buddhist approach to remedy ill will is by cultivating warm friendliness or *metta*. If

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you refer back to the diagrams about the three emotional systems (Figure 5.1) presented earlier in this chapter, you will notice that there is a relationship between the survival system and the relationship system. The relationship system serves to calm and soothe unnecessary reaction and upset in the survival system, demonstrating how anger can be balanced by *metta*.

Fear

The themes of fear can involve imagined, misperceived, expected, anticipated or actual threats of harm. Most humans fear psychological or physical pain. Fear gives us the energy to escape from danger for the welfare and wellbeing of ourselves or others. Fear is essential for survival and it is important that this experience is communicated quickly to others. Hence, there is a universal facial expression for this emotion. When fear is experienced there is a tendency to move the head back as if pulling away from the experience. The brows are up and pulled together, the lips are stretched horizontally, the eyes are open wide and the upper eyelids are also raised and as wide as possible.

Fear is an emotion of avoidance. The levels of avoidance can range from a mild evasion to an extreme desperate escape from whatever frightens us. At extreme levels, fighting, fleeing or freezing are natural survival avoidance responses to danger.

As with all the emotions there are many grades of fear from subtle avoidance to intense terror and some of the words that are used for the family of fear include:

Afraid	Hysteria	Shock
Cautious	Jumpiness	Tenseness
Dread	Nervousness	Terror
Edginess	Panic	Threatened
Fright	Petrified	Uneasiness
Horror	Scared	Worry

When we are confronted with danger and fear takes hold we will experience a

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fight, flight or freeze response. The freeze response is a shut down coping mechanism related to danger. A mouse playing dead in the mouth of a cat, as an example, may increase its possibilities for survival. Sometimes we humans shut down emotionally and dissociate in order to cope with extremely difficult experiences. Sometimes these patterns become habitual and they occur when we no longer need them. When this response is no longer helpful mindfulness can help to break the habit. The fight or flight (FoF) response is a more common response to danger.

Adrenaline is the main biochemical that is released immediately when we are confronted with danger so we can avoid or manage injury, act quickly and move away from danger or be able to fight it. In response to demands some of the following physiological changes occur:

- Breathing speeds up so that there is more oxygen for muscles.
- Blood moves towards the muscles to supply energy.
- Muscles tense in preparation for quick responses.
- Heart rate and blood pressure increase so that the oxygen and nutrients the blood carries can be quickly supplied to where they are needed.
- Perspiration increases, in order that the body is cooled should it be involved in strenuous activity.
- Blood vessels may expand and move towards the skin also in order to help cool the body (thus giving a blushed or blotchy appearance).
- Blood clotting ability increases to minimise blood loss should an injury occur.
- We become hyper-vigilant (on the lookout) for danger so that there can be a quick response if needed.
- Digestive processes are stopped or slowed down so that more important and pressing defensive functions are given resources. This may result in such things as nausea and a dry mouth.
- The immune response also slows down as a result of diverting energy to more pressing needs.

The FoF response is an immediate and natural response to threat or danger. After the danger has passed the body should naturally return to a state of balance. However, if something in this complex process goes wrong then the system gets out of balance.

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

Fear out of balance

As we have discussed throughout this book, fear can be in excess and easily shift from being an important emotion for survival and welfare to an extremely uncomfortable obstacle to living a fulfilling and meaningful life. It some cases, such as with agoraphobia, it can keep us house bound because we fear a panic attack in a situation that we cannot control. With social phobia we may feel desperately lonely because we fear being judged by others. Sometimes fear keeps us caught in meaningless occupations because we fear taking a risk. We may also fear meditation and the insight that it can bring preferring to be entrapped by our own ignorance. At the opposite end of the fear spectrum, a deficiency in this emotion can lead to foolhardy fearlessness.

In many cultural sub-groups fearlessness is often thought of as a desirable state. In the short term, foolhardy courage or self-serving indifference can feel very good, and serve short-term goals such as an adrenaline fix, an ego boost or material acquisitions. Some high risk extreme sports people, for example, could be motivated by an addiction to excitement and a desire to feel fear by participating in dangerous activities. Another example of the problems associated with an imbalance in fear is the harm those who are called psychopaths can cause. As well as lacking compassionate empathy, a feature of a person who fits the psychopath profile is a lack of fear. Like James Bond, they are cool and calm in the face of great risk and danger, thus acting without hesitation in a way that could be harmful to self or others. The psychological profile of a psychopath can also involve no fear of consequences. Fear of negative consequences is, according to Buddhist psychology, considered a helpful emotion. The right fear, in an appropriate amount, in a timely manner consistent with the context and need is a wholesome mental state because it is a disincentive to act in a harmful way.

Anxiety disorders develop when natural functional fear responses become exaggerated, distorted and dysfunctional. When the body's responses to immediate threat are not resolved our systems often do not have an opportunity to bounce back to a state of equilibrium and we become more vulnerable not only to anxiety disorders but also depression and a variety of health conditions. In heavy traffic, for example, when the FoF responses may be at full throttle but we cannot do the things that the body is geared up to do, it may not easily return to a balanced state. If we have repeated FoF responses it can, understandably, affect our emotional and physical wellbeing. When demands become overwhelming, stress responses can

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become chronic. Cortisol is a stress hormone that is regularly released at different times throughout our day in response to demands. When the stress response becomes chronic the levels of cortisol can also become elevated, increasing our vulnerability to long-term illnesses, such as type II diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, and immune deficiencies that may increase our risk of cancer. It can also lead to worsening anxiety and depression, and disrupt memory processes.

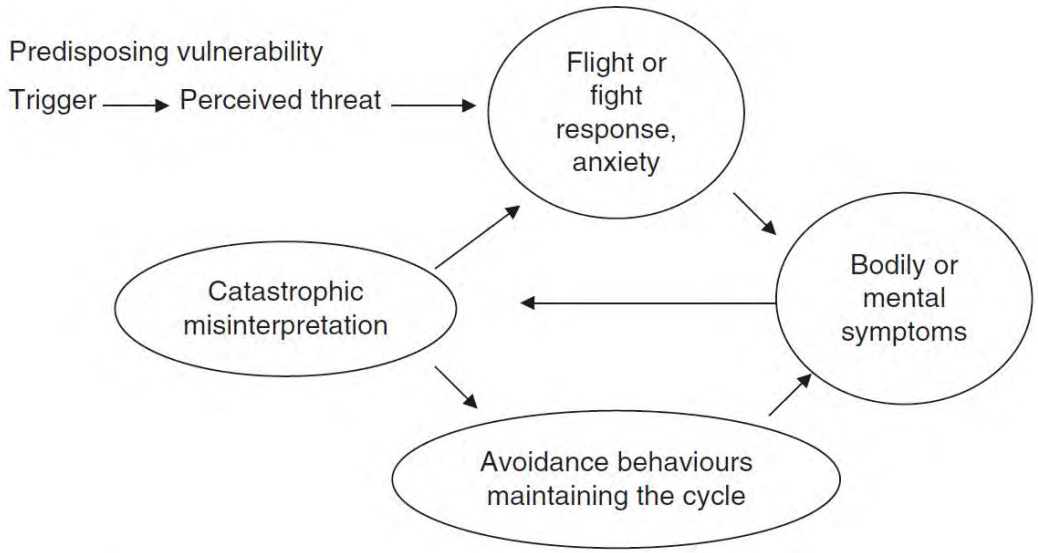

Figure 5.2 The panic cycle
Source: adapted from Wells (1997)

As we explored in Chapter 1, panic is a fear response when there is no need for this response. Panic is like a false alarm to a situation that does not warrant a FoF response. A panic cycle is illustrated in Figure 5.2 to show how panic can be self-reinforcing.

Panic attacks, in panic disorder are examples of when the natural and healthy emotion of fear develops into a disorder.

For the most part, fear and the chain of events connected with fear are involuntary and necessary responses for survival. We cannot stop fear being triggered. We can, however, change the way we react to fear so that it does not hijack us in an out of control manner. We can reduce our fear of fear and we can also reduce the likelihood that unnecessary fear will arise at all.

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Balancing fear

With reference again to the emotional system diagram (Figure 5.1), the relationship system serves to calm sympathetic nervous system responses of the survival system. When we feel safe and a fight, flight or freeze response is no longer necessary, oxytocins released as part of the soothing system stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping the body recover from an incident. Oxytocins slow down our breathing and heart rate and increase the blood flow to digestion. In general they allow our bodies to rest, recuperate and repair. Oxytocins also counter the ill effects of stress and chronically elevated cortisol, improving our health and emotional wellbeing (Kukchinskas, 2009).

As far as psychological treatment for anxiety is concerned, there is an abundance of successful strategies and therapies. Some of these approaches have already been explained in this book. The way the third wave and Buddhist therapies address the excesses of fear are sometimes counter-intuitive. Rather than attempting to get rid of it or eliminate fear and anxiety, the general approach is to embrace and accept it. These approaches provide the opportunity to find freedom from anxiety by understanding it. As far as treating the deficiencies of fear, such as foolhardy fearlessness, there may not be many conventional therapies available or appropriate. Nonetheless, with the cultivation of the heart-mind and the maturation of wisdom, individuals become more aware of imbalances in their lives and begin to realise ways to address them.

Mindfulness is a key if not essential activity to find balance with fear.

Surfing panic with understanding: guided instructions

The following suggestions are strategies to work with a panic attack when it is occurring. These suggestions involve being objective and not reacting to or feeding into a panic cycle and so allowing a panic attack to naturally subside or burn out. The following guidelines follow principles of insight meditation.

- Acknowledge or note the most noticeable experience. You could say to yourself, for example, 'panic . . . panic' or 'panic has arisen'. Remember to be calm with the tone of noting and step back or into a perspective of awareness that is not cut off from the experience but also not lost in it. Be careful not to be hijacked by thoughts about the experience and be as honest as you can about what you notice.

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• Let thoughts about the experience be on the periphery of your awareness and turn your attention to your body and describe, to yourself, what is happening. If your heart is racing note, for example, 'racing heart'. If your body is shaking note: 'shaking . . . shaking'. If you are breathing quickly note 'fast breathing', etc.

• Investigate the experience, and tell yourself something accurate about it. For example, you could ask yourself: 'What is actually happening here?', 'Where do I experience my panic most of all?', 'On a scale of one to ten, how would I rate this particular panic attack?'

• Try to be objective and honest about the experience. Do not note panic if in fact you are not panicking.

• Access your understanding of panic and remind yourself of your insights. Say to yourself statements reflecting your insights such as:

- This is a natural fear response, which is misfiring.
- The brain sometimes makes mistakes; this panic is one of those mistakes.
- This panic is just a false alarm.
- This false alarm is being fuelled by catastrophic misinterpretations
- Any catastrophic thoughts that I may be having are not facts to be believed.
- Just because I am experiencing an intense emotion it does not mean I have to act on it.
- This panic has a beginning, middle and end and it will tend to dissolve more readily if I let it roll out rather than struggling with it.
- Turning attention towards panic rather than reacting and running away from it is one way that I can overcome and heal this problem.
- Making friends with panic is therapeutic. Struggling and fighting panic only makes thing worse.
- Just because this experience of panic may seem overwhelming, I am not panic. I don't need to be trapped by taking this panic personally.
- When I can connect with the part of me that knows and is watching panic, it is spacious and peaceful.
- I can be at peace with panic.

• Cultivate patience with panic. Know that in time it will pass and that the less you struggle with it the easier it will pass.

• Try to be completely open and receptive with your current experience. If this is unpleasant note 'unpleasant feelings' and relax into the discomfort without resistance. The more you accept and allow the closer you come to healing and letting go.

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• Be completely receptive to whatever unpleasant physical experiences arise. Melt and soften with these experiences, knowing that the more you can soften and open to them the closer you come to healing and being at peace with them.

• Be open and receptive to catastrophic thoughts but remember that you don't need to believe them. They are only thoughts with inaccurate messages. Let such thoughts come and go. They need not take hold and hijack you.

• Notice the urge to avoid the experience and remember that the more you avoid the more the cycle is reinforced. Resist the impulse and urge to move away and rather stay with the experience in this present moment. If you want you can note 'aversion . . . aversion' or 'urge . . . urge'.

• Take refuge in awareness with the knowledge that awareness is like the still depths of a lake buffeted by strong winds. The depths are peaceful while the surface is rough and turbulent.

• Hold firm to the confidence that the turbulence will settle.

• Rest in the peace of awareness and let the panic roll out and finish.

• Maintain a stance of presence and let mindfulness be your refuge.

• Be open, compassionate and kind with whatever presents in your sphere of awareness. Find peace and freedom from panic by being courageously present.

Sadness/grief

If you feel confident that you can cope, think of a time when you lost something that was important to you. It could be the loss of a job, your health or your clear vision or hearing. It could be the loss of self-esteem or the admiration of colleagues or friends or the loss of a dream. The loss could be related to a rejection from a friend or the death of a child, spouse, sibling, parent, friend or pet. How did you feel when those important things were lost? How do you feel now when you reflect on your losses? What do you notice happens to your body? What is the facial expression you feel forming and how is your posture and breathing? What types of thoughts arise and what is the strongest emotion you experience? Can you name it? Do the words that come to mind include grief and sadness, or one of the following?

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

Abandoned	Disappointment	Melancholy	Miserable
Anguish	Discontentment	Hopelessness	Neglected
Bereft	Disheartened	Hurt	Rejection
Crushed	Discouraged	Insecurity	Sombre
Defeated	Dismay	Isolation	Sorrow
Dejection	Futility	Lament	Suffering
Depressed	Gloom	Loneliness	Unhappiness
	Glumness		Woe

The facial expression of sadness is unmistakable. Unless we are blind or impaired in some other way we all know the universal expressions of sadness. Again, if you feel confident that you will cope, find a mirror and pay attention to how you look when you reflect on your losses. If you are not looking sad try the following:

> *Let your body sag and slump. Then, if you can, raise the inner corners of your eyebrows up in the centre of your forehead. Move attention to your lower lip and push it up slightly, as if you were pouting. Let your eyes drop and look down. Also let the rest of your face relax and sag with the exception of your cheeks, which if you can, try to raise.*

When you make a sad expression does it also seem to invoke the corresponding feelings? Or if this emotion was already present, does an exaggeration of the expression make the sadness stronger? The relationship of the body to the mind is highlighted in the way an emotion will bring changes in our posture and expressions and vice versa. If we manipulate our posture and expressions (both verbal and facial) it can illicit the emotion that it reflects. When we are overwhelmed with sadness we may feel a sinking heaviness, particularly in our chest. We may also feel as if our body is collapsing in on itself. Our chest may feel tight and aching, as if our heart is broken. Our lips may begin to quiver and, of course, tears may start to flow. The trigger for sadness is the loss of something

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important to us. Sadness is possibly the longest lasting emotion and the boundaries between it as an emotion, mood, temperament and disorder can easily become blurred.

Depression

Depression is the disorder of sadness and we have discussed some of the features of this disorder in previous chapters. The types of losses involved with depression are many and include the loss of hope and meaning, faith and confidence. Possibly one of the most powerful triggers for depression is the loss of a loved one. When the effects of this type of loss emerge it is commonly called grief. As well as sadness, the normal grief response can involve the following emotions, physical responses, thoughts and behaviours: anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, shock, yearning, numbness, helplessness, the heaviness of fatigue, tightness in the chest, a dry mouth, a hollow feeling in the stomach, tightness in the throat, ruminations, obsessions, confusion or even hallucinations, disturbed sleep, social withdrawal, crying, neurotic responses to old possessions and memories, absent-mindedness, searching and calling out, restless overactivity and more.

When you see someone expressing grief, what do you feel like doing? Do you feel like giving them a hug? Interestingly, kind and well-meaning touch stimulates oxytocins, the hormone of human bonding, which is also soothing (Kukchinskas, 2009). One of the functions of the expression of sadness is to get reassurance and comfort from another. From an evolutionary perspective, consoling and helping those who are grieving strengthens bonds and promotes the welfare and wellbeing of our families and communities. When we can practise self-compassion it can help with our own distress (Neff,

2011). In my opinion another function of sadness is to provide an opportunity to process the losses we experience by internalising and withdrawing from our normal way of relating to the world. We come to terms with what it means to be who and what we are in the absence of that person, animal or object that was so important to our sense of identity and wellbeing. When we lose a loved one, the grieving period also provides the time to respect and honour that person's life, the meaning of their life and the impact they had on us.

The effect of grief can be painful and debilitating. If the grief is excessive and not dealt with effectively it can become pathological and the bereaved person is unable to function adequately for months or years. As we have learned throughout

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the course of this book one cause of psychological suffering is clinging and attachment. To the extent that we are attached to things that change, to that extent we will suffer grief. Paradoxically, it is now scientifically accepted that secure attachments to significant others

are essential for healthy human development (e.g. Bowlby, 1988). If a child does not develop an attachment to a carer then that child will be impaired in their social, physical, emotional and or mental development. In addition, if a child perceives and feels that they are not loved and cared for then they also fail to thrive physically and psychologically. Attachment is developed in humans and other creatures that need nurturing because it has a survival value. As attachment is natural, then it is also natural to grieve. In many respects the pain of grief is the price we pay for the joy of love and the commitment we have to those we love and are attached to. Parents, for example, are attached to their children because we know, intuitively, that it is natural and necessary. Most parents wish for their children to grow and develop into healthy and well-balanced individuals.

Grief is the natural and healthy response to the loss of someone who is dear to us. If we notice someone who does not express sadness when a close relative or friend died, then we may think that they are disordered in some way. Sadness, the natural human response to loss, like fear and anger can be excessive or deficient, and therefore dysfunctional. How do we work through the normal grief responses so that the disruption and dysfunction to our lives is minimised? How do we prevent sadness from deteriorating to pathological grief? How do we ensure that sadness is constructive and not destructive and that we process our losses in a healthy and beneficial way?

The treatment of depression is one of the key targets of contemporary psychology and some of the approaches to this common cold of psychological disorders have already been discussed in previous chapters. Contemporary psychology also offers an array of strategies to work with both pathological and normal grief responses. Moving through the normal grief response successfully is often described as working through stages. Different approaches describe different stages. One approach that I have found helpful for people suffering with grief is a task-based approach described by a psychologist called William Worden (1982). The sequence he described is as follows:

- Task 1: Accept the reality of the loss.
- Task 2: Experience the pain of the grief.

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- Task 3: Adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.
- Task 4: Withdraw emotional energy from the deceased and reinvest it in other social activity, without uncertainty or guilt.

These principles of acceptance, willingness to experience, and releasing one's clinging and moving on, as described above, relate to the loss of a loved one but can also be applied to other losses and provide a way to work with sadness in general. In the beginning paragraphs of the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha says mindfulness is very helpful, if not essential, to overcome grief.

Happiness

In Chapter 1, three types of happiness were mentioned: (1) simple feelings of pleasure, (2) the joy of engagement and (3) the wellbeing that comes from engaging in meaningful activities. Happiness can be found in all three of the emotional systems outlined earlier (Figure 5.1). Happiness usually happens when we are free from danger and threat, when we have the pleasure of acquiring something that is important to us and or we have a sense of belonging and connection. Happiness is a broad topic and the cultivation of genuine happiness is one of the main themes of this book.

There are possibly hundreds of words that describe happy experiences some of which may include:

Aglow	Ecstatic	Glee	Rapture
Alive	Elation	Happiness	Relief
Amusement	Enjoyment	Jolliness	Satisfaction
Bliss	Enthralment	Joy	Thrill
Bubbly	Enthuisiasm	Jubilation	Triumph
Buoyant	Euphoria	Light-hearted	Uplifted
Cheerfulness	Excitement	Merriment	Wonderful
Contentment	Exhilaration	Pleasant	Zeal
Delight	Gladness	Pride	

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

One cannot mistake the facial expression of happiness as a smile. It is not just the movement of the mouth, however, as a genuine smile also involves the muscles around the eyes. One can tell if someone is feigning a smile by looking at his or her eyes. With a genuine smile the eyes seem to sparkle with warmth as the muscles at the outer corner of the eyes are engaged. The genuine smile is not a forced smile, or a smug smile, or one-sided (which can be a sign of contempt) or Emotions the grin that arises when we endure pain. A real smile, which is also called the Duchenne smile, seems to clearly demonstrate the pleasure we experience. There are many types of happiness and many reasons (triggers) for people to smile. According to Ekman (2003) the many different types of enjoyment and reasons to smile can include:

- Contact with pleasing sights, sounds, smells, touch and tastes.
- The types of relief we have when a difficult experience is over.
- The types of elation we feel when we see unexpected acts of human goodness.
- The feelings we have when we succeed at something.
- Amusement, even when it may involve ridicule.
- Schadenfreude, which is a German term referring to relishing in another's misfortune.
- Naches, a type of pride and joy in one's offspring.
- The joy of wonder.
- Gratitude.
- Excitement.
- The bliss and rapture of absorption in something.

Happiness, like the other emotions, has survival value and works towards the wellbeing and welfare of ourselves and others. The emotion of happiness provides reinforcement for actions, it can deepen connections to others and it can also enhance cooperation within our families, associates and communities. A mother's smile and her other expressions of approval and joy serve to stimulate oxytocins both within the mother and the child. They also serve to reinforce social and emotional interaction and are essential for the child's healthy development.

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

Like all the emotions, happiness can be excessive, deficient or dysfunctional. Mania, with all the problems that it can create, is an extreme example of when happiness is excessive. Over-excitement is a less extreme example but it can also be the cause of problems such as exhausting and turning friends away, thereby disrupting social harmony and cooperation. An example of dysfunctional happiness would be giggling at a friend's or relative's funeral. A lack of joy is the key feature of depression and a very clear example of when there is a deficiency of happiness.

A genuine smile can heal emotional distress at all ages. The experience of happiness can transform our state of being and be curative for depression. Psychologists will often ask people who are depressed to create a pleasant events schedule. This requires the client to schedule activities into their day that may be enjoyable as well as activities that may bring some sense of achievement. These activities can lift a depressed person's mood. It seems that the experience of happy emotions serves multiple functions in our lives. However, as discussed in earlier chapters, the happiness we get from gratifying the senses is limited. The happy emotions that arise from hedonic pleasures only last as long as the pleasure lasts and unfortunately can become addictive. Sometimes our efforts to realise short-term happiness can bring us long-term misery and unhappiness. Sometimes we become entangled and entrapped by our addictions to fleeting happiness and the pleasure-seeking behaviours that are driven by our addictions. As with the other emotions it is important to find balance with happiness so that we can enjoy a fulfilling and meaningful life without falling into a happiness trap.

Nirvana, the ultimate goal of the eight-fold path, is said to be the highest happiness. But the Buddha also taught how to realise simple types of happiness such as the joy we experience when we work in services that help, when we act kindly to another, or give generously or appreciate and enjoy the fruits of our efforts. The Buddha taught how to live a good life by cultivating wisdom, virtuous actions and the heart-mind. The Buddha was not alone in teaching how to live a wholesome and happy life. Aristotle, one of the great Western philosophers, spoke about the importance of hedonic happiness based on health, wealth and beauty and 'eudaimonia', a more sustainable genuine happiness. The primary component of Aristotle's eudaimonia was a virtuous (ethical) life.

The theme of this book and the teachings of most if not all wise sages is the realisation of happiness, not just as a transitory emotion but also as a genuine and sustainable way of being. Every chapter of this book addresses this topic in some

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way or another and mindfulness is a key strategy to find balance and genuine happiness.

Reflections on mindfulness of emotions

With mindfulness we can get to know and become familiar with our emotional lives. We can become very familiar with the cascade of mental and biological responses that are collectively called an emotion. We can become aware of all the components of an emotional episode and have more choice in how we reinforce or allow our emotional responses to fade away. Mindfulness of emotions includes developing insight about emotions. This involves understanding what triggers them, what fuels them, what quells them, how they can fade away and Emotions

how we can cultivate the ones that best serve the needs and values of ourselves and others. When we are able to track and understand emotions we are in a better position to choose to abandon the destructive and cultivate the constructive. With awareness, resolve and skilful action we can alter the trajectory of a destructive emotional episode so that it is transformed into something helpful and constructive. When we have an understanding of what an emotion is then we are in a powerful position to be able to tame the destructive and cultivate balance.

Remember Bec?

Bec was one of hundreds of people I have had the honour to teach mindfulness to within a group setting. Everyone comes with different stories and reasons for participation in mindfulness groups. For the most part, the motivation for attendance at a group is to work with painful and often destructive emotions. During the session on emotions I usually provide a double page handout which gives participants some strategies to try when they are experiencing painful and potentially destructive emotions. This information can be found on the following pages as a way to conclude this chapter.

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

During formal meditation practices or during daily activities some ways to cope with painful and possibly destructive emotions include:

• Honour emotions. They arise for a reason and they may indicate that we need to act in a particular way. Act on emotions if this is needed and don't force yourself to investigate emotions when they are too overwhelming. Remember always be kind to yourself.

• Note and name the emotions. Say to yourself something like: '_____ (the name of the emotion) has arisen'. Name the emotion with a tone of voice that is not the same as the emotion you are noting. For example, if anger is there, name it with a tone of voice that is not angry. Naming an emotion helps to create space with it. There are lists of words referring to some basic emotions [in this chapter]. These lists can help find words to describe the emotions you experience.

• Give emotions space. As much as possible let them be without rejecting or suppressing them. If it is painful do not suppress the experience. Let it be. Giving space to emotions is like accepting them and embracing them with kindness.

• Step back from falling into and becoming entangled with the emotion. Step back from them into a space of awareness. Step back and get unstuck by being aware.

• See emotions like waves coming and going. In this way try not to block them or amplify them. Rather let them roll on by. Surfing powerful emotions is like staying balanced and not being dumped by them. Sometimes, it also means being able to dive through them before they pound you into the seabed.

• Practise emotional aikido. Aikido is a defensive martial art. Aikido experts are very good at getting out of the road of destructive energy, neutralising destructive energy and even transforming it to something beneficial.

• Remember that we are not our emotions but rather they are changing events passing through like visitors. Remember you don't need to take emotions personally.

• Practise openness, willingness, allowance and acceptance. Remember that acceptance does not mean that you don't take action when you need to.

• See difficult and painful emotions as an opportunity to develop understanding or insight.

• Remember that all experiences change and painful emotions have a natural time frame, and will also change to something different..

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Excerpted from *Healing the Heart and Mind with Mindfulness*

• Be aware of the thoughts related to the emotion but try not to get caught up in them. Relax into how the emotion feels in the body rather than trying to work it out by thinking too much about them. [Practicing softening, soothing and allowing how emotions feel in your body.]

• Enquire into painful emotions. Look directly at emotions and see them for what they are rather than what we construct them to be. Being afraid to look at and investigate destructive emotions can sometimes make them stronger. When we look at them, we might notice that they are nothing to be afraid of, and all the scary parts of them fade away.

• Cultivate the opposites of the painful and destructive emotions, such as, for example peacefulness, kindness, compassion, wisdom, acceptance, etc.

• Unlearn unhelpful responses by not reinforcing old reactive habits. This means that we don't let destructive emotions become the boss of our lives and we make choices to stand up to, and say no to what they are trying to make us do.

• Use helpful self-talk such as: 'it's OK, this will change', 'I am not my emotions', 'this will pass' or 'it is understandable that this emotion has arisen, and I don't need to take it personally'.

• If the emotion is too overwhelming to deal with, use a healthy distraction such as watching a movie, or listening to music. These types of distractions can help the destructive and painful emotions pass by without causing any damage.

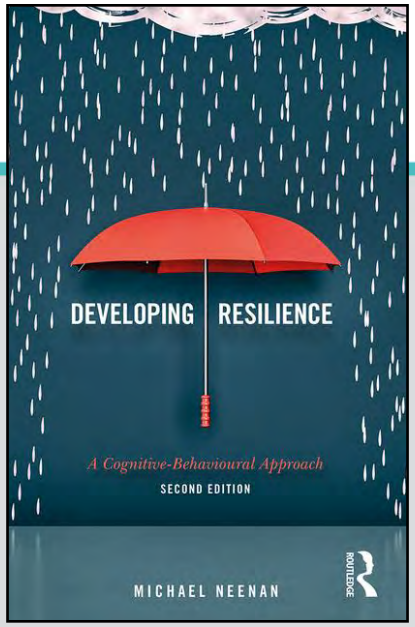
• Find a good friend and talk it out.

• Remember to remember to be here now.

CHAPTER

5

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?



This chapter is excerpted from

Developing Resilience

by Michael Neenan.

Learn more

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Excerpted from *Developing Resilience*

Introduction

Imagine two people working for the same company at the same level and salary, who both love their jobs. Unfortunately, they lose their jobs when the company goes through a 'restructuring process'. They both experience initial bitterness and dejection, 'Those bastards! After all the hard work and loyalty we've shown them. Might as well give up when you've been kicked in the teeth.' But then they begin to show significant differences in dealing with job loss in the days and weeks ahead. The first person accepts, without liking it, that his job has gone and commits himself to finding another one. He welcomes support in this endeavour from his family and friends. Eventually, after several attempts, he secures a new job. The salary is lower, but he is glad to be back in work and the chances of promotion are promising. How did he manage to keep on track during this difficult time? 'I don't know really. No point in staying miserable. That's not going to get me a job, is it? You've just got to get on with it, haven't you?'

The second person finds his initial bitterness strengthening. His drinking increases as he broods on the unfairness of what's happened to him. His wife and children become reluctant to approach him as he snaps at them when they do. He's envious of his friends who have jobs and avoids their company. Attempts at finding a job are negligible. His wife, when she can summon up enough courage to talk to him, suggests that he should see his GP. 'I don't need any help from her! What can she do? She can't get my old job back which is what I want.'

Why didn't both men react the same way (e.g. crack-up or fight back)? After all, the event was the same for both of them. A starting point in attempting to understand resilience is to discover the meaning (attitudes and beliefs) that people attach to adverse life events. The first man eventually concluded, 'No point in staying miserable. You've just got to get on with it', and successfully found himself another job. The second man clung to the idea that 'I just want my old job back'. Mired in bitterness and helplessness, he avoided looking for a new job. People react differently to the same event depending on how they view it. This underscores the point that there's always more than one way of seeing events, even if, at times, it's difficult to discern any other viewpoint than the current one. So being a flexible thinker (or attempting to develop such a mindset), rather than remaining locked into a fixed viewpoint, allows for adaptation to changing (and often unwelcome) circumstances.

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Excerpted from *Developing Resilience*

Understanding your interpretation of events

The crucial importance of how our thinking powerfully influences our feelings and actions is the basis of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and will therefore be emphasized throughout this book. Examining our thinking provides an entry point into our inner world, enabling us to discover whether our attitudes are helping, hindering or harming us in our struggle to deal with difficult times. Self-defeating and goal-blocking attitudes are targeted for examination and change. CBT focuses on the psychological and behavioural factors that keep our problems going, unlike some other approaches which concentrate on uncovering the origins of these problems. The reason for this here-and-now focus is that factors linked to the development of a person's problems usually differ from the factors maintaining them. For example, while it may be true that your parents preferred your older sister to you when growing up, it's your current thinking about these past events ('I'll always be second best in life') and your associated behaviour (such as not speaking up for yourself when you've been unfairly treated) that keep your problems going today. But, due to their ingrained nature, changing beliefs and behaviours can be hard.

Uncovering a person's attitudes may not reveal straightaway who is demonstrating resilient behaviour in times of misfortune; a snapshot of a particular moment in the struggle may not provide a reliable prediction of who will make it in the longer term and who won't. Remember that both men were initially bitter and dejected when they lost their jobs because they both had the same view of the situation. If the snapshot had been taken at this point, could you really say which one would start to fight back and which one would give up? Incidentally, if you admire someone for their upbeat and positive attitude, this doesn't prove they're resilient as they may not yet have faced hard times and had their character put under the spotlight.

Showing hardiness in response to present misfortune doesn't mean you will always be hardy no matter what happens to you. Similarly, falling into despair doesn't mean you'll be stuck there forever. Meaning is not static and therefore likely to change depending on how you're assessing unfolding events. For example, you can keep moving between 'Why me?' bafflement, 'I can't take much more of this' despair and 'Get on with it!' grit in your time of struggle. As I will argue further on, bouncing back from adversity unrealistically suggests the absence of inner turmoil during this time.

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To return to the two men who lost their jobs, flash forward several years and the 'fighter' might be receiving psychiatric help following the end of his marriage ('I can't cope without her'), while the 'giver up' may have his own moderately successful business ('Deep down, I always wanted my own business, so I thought "give it a try instead of moaning all the time". I'm glad that I did').

There's no education like adversity

Some people can have relatively uneventful lives – no traumas or tragedies – and their characters are not cracked open for inspection, as usually happens when adversity strikes. When it does strike, the education you receive about yourself can be unexpected. You surprise yourself by how well you rise to the challenge of tough times and find unimagined strengths within yourself. Once these times have passed, you take stock of your life and move it in a previously unanticipated direction such as training for a new career.

You despise yourself for acting very badly during these times and are shocked that you were capable of such behaviour. You see your behaviour as unforgivable and unforgettable, yet you try to understand why you fell so far below your moral standards. You've never been severely tested like this before and you realize you don't know yourself as well as you thought. In an attempt to put things right in your mind, you seek to make amends and repair the moral damage by spending some of your time helping others through charity work. But the biggest challenge is how to integrate this period of unforgivable behaviour into a new and complex view of yourself that will never forget what you did (your conscience will continue to prick you), but that doesn't also imprison you within self-contempt as you struggle to find some measure of self-forgiveness. Your life has also taken you in a previously unanticipated direction.

With regard to self-forgiveness, some people struggle long and hard to make amends for their wrongdoing and their self-forgiveness is a long time coming. Conversely, other people forgive themselves quickly and easily for their wrongdoing (e.g. 'I've admitted what I did, but now I'm on a journey to becoming a better person'), with the emphasis on the journey and little time spent trying to understand their behaviour and the harmful impact it had on people's lives.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Excerpted from *Developing Resilience*

The mystery of resilience

Resilience is an intriguing yet elusive concept: intriguing because it can provide some kind of answer as to why one person crumbles in the face of tough times while another gains strength from them, but elusive in that the concept resists a definitive definition. Some writers on resilience suggest 'that we will never completely understand it' (Coutu, 2003: 18) and that 'there is little consensus among researchers about the definition and meaning of this concept [despite studying it for the last six decades]' (Shaikh and Kauppi, 2010: 155). No matter how many books I read on the subject, or how much I reflect on the factors associated with it and speak to people who've been through hard times, resilience still remains something of a puzzle to me. Why can one person endure so much suffering and still remain largely optimistic and happy while another person, whose scale of suffering appears much less, retreats into bitterness and victimhood?

Some people who've survived grim ordeals reply in a disappointingly brief way when asked how they did it, such as 'it was there and had to be faced'. They may not be able to explain to themselves in any depth how they got through it, but they also don't want to manufacture inspiring and heroic stories just to satisfy an eager audience waiting to hear them. So their survival remains something of a mystery to them.

Why resilience is important

The philosopher Tom Morris states that if you live long enough and pay attention to what's going on around you, 'you may come to understand one of the deepest truths about life: inner resilience is the secret to outer results in this world. Challenging times demand inner strength and a spirit that won't be defeated' (2004: 1). Resilience is the bedrock of positive mental health (Persaud, 2001).

Bouncing back or coming back from adversity?

The popular view of resilience is bouncing back from adversity. But this bland, feel-good definition reminds me of a childhood toy I had: a blow-up, chest-high

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figure of Yogi Bear which, when punched, fell to the floor but immediately sprang back to the upright position. Bouncing back depicts a rapid and almost effortless recovery from tough times when, much more often, 'suffering and struggle are experienced in forging resilience' (Walsh, 2016: 5). Also, bouncing back from adversity doesn't automatically transform you into a stronger, wiser, better person as some accounts have it. Some people have very mixed feelings about the outcome of their grim experiences, and would find it difficult to point to evidence of personal growth; for example, feeling glad the experiences are over but also facing the sober reckoning of the physical and psychological toll of their struggle.

If a person can spring back so effortlessly, was it a genuine adversity she actually experienced? Can visiting your cantankerous and elderly parent for a day be described as an adversity when compared with being caught in a bomb blast? Researchers studying traumatic experiences have debated whether objective criteria can be established to distinguish between genuine adversity (catastrophic events) and non-catastrophic events, which are the difficulties, demands and discontents of everyday life. From this perspective, you're either facing a genuine adversity or you're not.

A different viewpoint is to see events in terms of subjective severity. For example, for one person, public speaking provokes fear, panic and nightmares ('My mind will go blank and I'll make a complete fool of myself') and she cancels the presentation. Her colleague thinks she's making a fuss over nothing as he would look forward to impressing an audience with his wit and wisdom. Several months later, he descends into depression when he discovers his wife is having an affair ('Trust is destroyed along with my happiness'). So a subjective view of what constitutes adversity allows us to discover which situations trigger a person's psychological vulnerabilities (which can be long standing), and what procedures are needed to address them.

Another point to consider with the bouncing back from adversity image is this: does your life return to exactly the same state before the adversity? Imagine you've been injured in an accident and now suffer from chronic pain which is made barely tolerable only through medication. There is no quick and easy return to your pre-adversity state. In some respects it's gone forever ('I've never had this kind of pain before'), while in others there remains continuities such as seeing the same friends, reading the same newspaper and going to the same pub. In my experience, clients usually, and understandably, get psychologically stuck when looking back to

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how life used to be before, for example, the accident – 'I just want my old life back. What's wrong with that?' This looking back can be part of the problem in adjusting to change, as some of them exaggerate how wonderful life was then compared with their wretched state now.

Eventually, most do turn their minds to coping adaptively with the new and unwelcome circumstances in their life. Bouncing back suggests that little time would be allowed for this often slow process of adaptation and recovery. So, the bouncing back view of resilience is not for me. I prefer the term coming back as it allows for different speeds and pathways to recovery.

'Vulnerability is for losers'

Another unhelpful idea about resilience is that hard times have tempered the steel of your character and it will never break, whatever life throws at you. No matter how robust you've become, you still remain vulnerable to coping poorly with future adversities. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness; no one has an absolute resistance to adversity. Resilience cannot be seen as a fixed personality trait – when circumstances change (e.g. being sent to prison, aggressive new boss, prolonged ill health), resilience alters (Rutter, 1987). In these new circumstances, you might cope badly and believe that your resilient qualities have vanished, having assumed they would automatically transfer from one difficult situation to another.

For example, I was seeing a tough and highly capable manager who'd been involved in a car accident and suffered cuts and bruises as well as shock, but the real shock for him was that he needed a week off work to recover. He had a normal human response to the accident but dismissed it contemptuously as 'being pathetic' and couldn't understand why he wasn't back at his desk the next day. He was bewildered by his actual response to the accident versus the ideal bouncing back response he expected of himself. His fear was that he'd lost control of himself; his toughness had deserted him and he felt ashamed. In discussing and accepting the ideas contained in the last paragraph, he reformulated his view of resilience in more realistic terms: 'Strong and capable, but still vulnerable at times. I need to remember that.' What's also important to remember as you move through your life is that new challenges will emerge which may reveal more vulnerabilities and, therefore, the necessary development of new strengths to tackle them.

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With this compassionate change in his attitude, he took a more helpful and less condemnatory stance towards colleagues he had previously dismissed as losers for complaining of heavy workloads or missed performance targets.

Nietzsche's nonsense?

Many people like to quote the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's maxim – 'Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger' – and assume it's self-explanatory. This is how resilience is forged, getting through hard times will, in and of itself, make you stronger. As the philosopher Julian Baggini remarks:

> To believe that hard times naturally empower us couldn't get Nietzsche more wrong, since his point is precisely that it is all down to us how we deal with difficulty. That which does not kill you may well make you weaker, if you let it.
>
> (2009: 24)

Others find Nietzsche's maxim unconvincing. The writer and public intellectual Christopher Hitchens had to contend with emaciation following a diagnosis of oesophageal cancer when he lost almost a third of his body weight:

> It [cancer] may not kill me, but the atrophy of muscle makes it harder to take even the simple exercises without which I'll become more enfeebled still . . . One finds that every passing day represents more and more relentlessly subtracted from less and less. In other words, the process both etiolates you and moves you nearer towards death. [What one doesn't need in this relentless process are] facile maxims that don't live up to their apparent billing.
>
> (2012: 70–2)

Hitchens died in 2011. Another writer ill-disposed towards Nietzsche's maxim is Julian Barnes who lost his wife to cancer in 2008 and asserts that many things that don't kill us weaken us for ever: 'Ask anyone who deals with victims of torture. Ask rape counsellors and those who handle domestic violence. Look around at those

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emotionally damaged by mere ordinary life' (2014: 84). It's important to examine any aphorisms, proverbs, maxims, sayings, mottoes that you use to guide yourself through troubled times to determine if they do provide genuine wisdom, insight or comfort; if not, cold comfort is all you'll get from them.

Surviving, but not necessarily thriving

The term survivor has heroic connotations: the person is still standing strong and resolute when the storm has passed. A survivor and a person demonstrating resilience are not necessarily undergoing the same process of recovery (from sexual abuse, for example). A survivor can be consumed with bitterness and blame while the resilient person is displaying personal growth and pursuing important goals. As Higgins observes:

> Unlike the term *survivor, resilient* emphasizes that people do more than merely get through difficult emotional experiences, hanging on to inner equilibrium by a thread. Because *resilience* best captures the active process of self-righting and growth that characterizes some people so essentially.
>
> (1994: 1, original italics)

The phrase self-righting means to put your life back on track is akin to a capsized boat being restored to an upright position.

The resilience literature does have terminology grading different responses to adversity, such as survivor (in what way, happily or miserably?), recovery (return to pre-adversity functioning), thriver (post-adversity growth) and resistance (being little affected by life's knocks). But knowing which term to apply in the light of a person's experience can sometimes be confusing. I'm interested in understanding the person's self-righting process as it unfolds over time, rather than getting entangled in terminology about it. On another point, I'm uninterested in using time to draw the line between resilient and non-resilient responding to adversity (e.g. respectively, weeks vs months), as some researchers attempt to do.

Resilience doesn't mean struggling alone

Would you ask for help in times of crisis? If you pride yourself on your sturdy

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self-reliance, you might see help from others as a sign of weakness: 'People see me as a tower of strength. They come to me to help them sort out their problems. What will they think of me if I ask them for help?' (This person assumes that others see her in the same way she sees herself and therefore they would be shocked or derisive if she sought help from them.) In other words, self-righting is supposed to be achieved on your own.

This is untrue. Resilience is not developed in social isolation. If constructive support is being offered, take it. If you know that someone could provide valuable advice in your time of need, seek it. Such support and advice can significantly reduce the duration of your struggle to overcome your problems. Therefore, a balanced view of self-reliance includes both self- and social support. The resilience literature states that positive relationships are one of the most important protective systems over the lifespan as they provide a buffer against stressful times (Masten and O'Dougherty Wright, 2010).

Resilience and emotion

Resilience can be misconstrued as a form of stoicism; noble forbearance in the face of pain and suffering. To show emotion would be weakness of character and thereby impair or undermine your stoical stance. Resilience is actually about managing emotions, not suppressing them. To be fair to the ancient Stoic philosophers, their goal was not to live an emotionless life, but to learn how to experience fewer negative emotions (Irvine, 2009). If there appears to be no emotion in the face of adversity, this may signal incomplete processing of the experience and is likely to perpetuate poor, not resilient, responding to events. For example, Peter fell out with his adult son who threatened never to speak to him again. Peter's attitude to life's difficulties was always to 'roll with the punches', 'If that's the way you want it son, then so be it. I'll always be here if you change your mind.' Friends were amazed at his calm demeanour in the face of his son's announcement. They assured him their own responses would be anything but calm.

However, two weeks later Peter flew into a rage in the high street when a man who looked very much like his son bumped into him. He later confessed that what his son had said to him 'hit me very hard indeed but I couldn't allow myself to feel it or others to see it until I bumped into that unfortunate man and I hope he'll forgive me wherever he is'. The only way that you can have an unemotional

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response to an event is if you truly don't care what has happened to you because the event has absolutely no significance for you. By definition, adversities are negative events which are likely to trigger negative emotions in you for the obvious reason that you didn't want these unpleasant events to happen. So these emotions will need to be worked through in order to find adaptive responses to them; for example, disappointment rather than disturbance about these events.

The popular image of bouncing back from adversity can give the impression of a joyous leap to safety from adversity's clutches. After all, bouncing back does suggest a quick and easy return from one's difficulties. For example, Janet, who liked to see herself as an upbeat person, came home to find that her flat had been burgled. Her flatmate, Sally, was very upset and kept crying. Janet was relieved that her valuables hadn't been stolen, nor had Sally's, so couldn't understand why Sally couldn't stop crying? Janet made herself a cup of coffee, surveyed the damage done to the flat and quietly complimented herself on feeling positive about what had happened: 'Just like me to look on the bright side'.

A few nights later, Janet woke up in a panic thinking there was a burglar in the room. She took time off work, bewildered that she was acting in what she saw as a shameful way. Janet now felt on edge about experiencing another panic attack, as well as the possibility of being burgled again. She was angry that her sense of privacy and security had been violated by the burglar and considered moving out. Sally had stopped crying and was coping better than her. Janet was eventually referred to a psychiatrist for an assessment who then referred her to me. In our sessions, Janet said she forced herself to be upbeat about the burglary as she believed this was her self-image, 'I didn't want to let myself down by revealing my true feelings'.

So resilience is not characterized by the absence of emotion or the presence of positive emotion. As the examples of Peter and Janet show, resilience involves experiencing negative emotions because bad things have happened to you. However, and this is a key point, since resilience requires you to have a flexible response to adverse events, you're not stuck in your negative feelings. They don't paralyse you because they act as important sources of information that things are seriously awry in your life and need your attention, but it may take some time for you to become attentive. For example, after being rejected by his girlfriend, Simon felt gloomy, cried a lot, walked the streets late at night trying to work out where the relationship had gone wrong, and listened interminably to the pop song 'She's

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Gone'. After several weeks of feeling like this, he concluded that he'd 'indulged [himself] enough' and a few weeks later was going out with a woman he'd met at a dinner party.

As I shall discuss in Chapter 2, the way to moderate the intensity of your negative feelings is by modifying the thinking and changing the unproductive behaviour that drives these feelings. In Simon's case, he stopped thinking that the end of the relationship was the end of his world. His world had indeed suffered a blow, but he got bored with self-pity and wanted to 'get back in the dating game' instead of late-night wandering. So negative emotions in themselves are not the problem; they only become problematic when they stop you from taking positive steps to change a situation (e.g. improving your performance at work) or adjusting constructively to it if it cannot be changed (e.g. you're sacked).

Resilience and behaviour

It's hard to know if you're thinking flexibly in the face of difficult circumstances unless there's behavioural evidence to support it; in other words, flexible attitudes are reflected in your adaptable behaviour. For example, instead of immediately defending yourself when criticized, you consider asking for more information about your perceived deficiencies, letting the criticism wash over you, asking for time to consider your reply or agreeing with those criticisms you consider to be true. However, nothing changes in practice as you continue to respond in exactly the same way. Your behavioural inflexibility probably means that you haven't really changed your thinking about the issue – 'How dare they criticize me! I'm not going to just stand there and take it.'

Behaviour can be divided into action tendencies (how you may or may not act in a situation) and completed or clear actions (what you actually did in a situation). This distinction is very important to make as resilience often involves you: (a) not doing what you want to do (e.g. watching the television) and (b) doing what you don't feel like doing (e.g. filling out forms). Developing resilience often means forgoing the pleasures of the moment in order to achieve longer-term goals. For example, if you want to get fit but are not particularly enthusiastic about it, you might consider starting next week and then begin to reach for a book to read (action tendency) but stop yourself – you go out for a run instead (clear action) as you remind yourself what your longer-term goal is.

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Excerpted from *Developing Resilience*

A resilient response to adversity will often involve the experience of emotional pain and it can be very tempting to anaesthetize yourself to this pain with food, drink, drugs or other distractions. If you act on these action tendencies, you may well reduce or remove your pain in the moment, but you'll be storing up trouble for yourself in the longer term as you teach yourself that emotional pain is intolerable and therefore to be avoided whenever possible. Resilience is forged through pain and struggle, and the willingness, however reluctantly undertaken, to experience them. Poor responding is the attempted avoidance of both. Without this reservoir of resilient attitudes and skills to draw from, future adversities will be much harder to deal with.

As resilience involves struggling to find a constructive way forward during tough times, you might believe that you have to win every struggle you're engaged in, otherwise you're not demonstrating resilience. Not so. Like seeking to attain and maintain your ideal weight, being highly resilient is something to strive towards but is never perfectly executed in all adverse circumstances. It's highly unlikely you'll say one day, 'That's it. I've mastered resilience. Now, what's my next challenge to master?' Bearing this in mind, acting resiliently can be seen as a ratio between helpful and unhelpful behaviour in pursuit of your goals; for example, executing helpful behaviour 80 per cent of the time and unhelpful behaviour 20 per cent of the time. So resilience does involve acting self-defeatingly at times, but it's important to ensure that your resilience balance sheet shows more assets (occurrences of helpful behaviour) than liabilities (occurrences of unhelpful behaviour).

For example, Diane described herself as 'very jealous, deeply distrustful of men'. Previous relationships had been destroyed through her incessant interrogation of her partners' behaviour for their presumed unfaithfulness (one had been). She described her current partner as wonderful and wanted to learn to give him the benefit of the doubt that he was being faithful (unless there was good evidence to the contrary). Her struggle was to keep quiet instead of questioning her partner every time she had a suspicion, however slight, in order to develop a better relationship with him and channel her energies into more rewarding activities. In carrying out this plan, she was able to keep quiet 70 to 80 per cent of the time with a consequent improvement in the relationship and more of her time was now spent on studying for a college diploma, 'I feel more of a balanced person now. I haven't felt like this in a long time. I'm hoping to get above 80 per cent.'

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Resilience beyond reach?

Some self-help books on resilience keep providing examples of individuals who have not only overcome great adversity, but have also then gone on to scale the heights of personal achievement in, for example, sport or business. While awe-inspiring, these stories give the impression that resilience can only be achieved by an extraordinary few, not by the ordinary many. Therefore, in this book I want to move away from presenting a dazzling collection of resilience stories and focus on what might be called routine resilience: coping with the vicissitudes of daily life, tackling psychological problems and facing the inevitable adversities that lie in wait. Perhaps having the quiet satisfaction that you're stronger than you think is enough for most people without having to become paragons of resilience as well.

Distinguishing between what you can and cannot change

You cannot change your eye colour but you can change which newspaper you read. That seems straightforward enough. If your partner leaves you and is definitely not coming back, you can decide to react differently to the situation by feeling sad about it (accepting the loss and moving on) rather than staying stuck and depressed (refusing to accept it and seeing only a future of bleak solitude). In essence, what can and cannot be changed goes like this:

- If the situation (or aspects of it) can be changed, then take steps to do so (task focused).
- If the situation (or aspects of it) cannot be changed, then work on changing your emotional reaction to the situation (emotion focused).
- If the situation (or aspects of it) can be changed but your current level of emotional distress stops you from seeing this, then it's important to moderate this distress before you undertake any practical problem-solving steps (emotion and task focused).

Working out accurately which of these three positions reflects your present circumstances is not always easy to do, so seeking the views of respected others can help you clarify where you are in this process. Of course, there's another approach to problem solving which is to bury your head in the sand, thereby hoping the problem will go away or someone else will solve it for you. Even if you do adopt this strategy, you're still likely to feel the problem 'tapping on your

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shoulder' reminding you it's still there. The longer problem solving is delayed, the more problems you're likely to face when you eventually pull your head out of the sand.

Resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary

Grotberg assures us that 'resilience is not magic; it is not found only in certain people and it is not a gift from unknown sources. All humans have the capacity to become resilient' (1999: 3). For example, the majority of people who've been exposed to trauma don't develop PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) but respond with resilience and recovery (Paris, 2013).

The first essential step in developing resilience is taking personal responsibility for guiding yourself through tough times with all its pain and struggle, trial and error (you can, of course, seek support along the way).

Unfortunately, some clients say that they accept responsibility but then expect their path to recovery to be laid out clearly before them like an aircraft runway lit at night; they want to minimize, or even remove, any struggle or uncertainty they will encounter. But by imposing such conditions on the journey, the struggle has already been initiated. This journey is navigated in light of incoming information and, on this basis, corresponding changes are made in your thinking and behaviour; for example, promises of help from friends fail to materialize so you grimly conclude that you'll have to be more self-reliant than you expected. You make a promise to yourself not to succumb to self-pity.

There's no prescriptive way for people to be resilient (apart from that first step of taking responsibility). They can assemble their own resilience-building strategies depending on, for example, their personality style, age, social support available, personal strengths, cultural differences (Newman, 2003); in other words, customized resilience. This is why, to the disappointment of some readers of the first edition, I didn't set out an 8-, 10- or 12-step road to resilience programme as it may feel ill-suited to how you want to proceed along your own path of recovery. So take from this book whatever you think will help you.

Turning adversity into advantage

This can read like a feel-good but empty slogan if you don't believe it, or an

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important truth if you do. Timing is important in conveying this message: say it when someone is in the depths of despair and you'll sound grossly insensitive; bring it up when she is making some headway in dealing with her difficulties and it will probably chime with her own awareness of discovering some unexpected strengths. As Joan said:

> When Geoffrey left me for that woman I hated it, I cried myself to sleep each night, drank too much, swore too much. How was I ever going to get over this? I've never been on my own. And yet six months later I don't mind living alone, it's not that bad. I didn't fall apart, or rather I did, but I didn't stay in pieces. I've sort of put myself back together again with the help of some dear friends and their wonderful advice. I'm certainly more independent and, amazingly, stronger than I ever thought I could be. If you'd told me on the day Geoffrey left that I would get over this and emerge stronger from it, I wouldn't have believed you. I still wonder sometimes how on earth I got from there to here. I thought I could never be happy without him.

No adverse life experience has to be wasted if you're open to learning from each one, but what is learnt usually emerges over the longer term, not immediately, as with Joan.

Drawing on a large body of research into how people cope with tragedy and trauma, Haidt (2006) suggests that people who've gone through dark times derive benefit from them in three principal ways. These benefits are often called post-traumatic growth.

1. *Our self-image is changed*. Rising to meet the challenge of adversity can tap into unexpected abilities which change the way you see yourself – for example, from nervous insecurity to steady determination – which then, in turn, changes the way you view handling future difficulties: 'I'll be able to deal with them. I don't need to know exactly how I'll do it when the time comes. Just the belief that I can do it is enough to make me feel confident.'
2. *The nature of our relationships is clarified and enriched*. We begin to see who are fair-weather and who are all-weather friends. This can be both a dispiriting and surprising experience: dispiriting because some presumed good friends are, strangely, no longer visiting or returning your phone calls, but surprising as friends you weren't particularly close to, or not keen on in some cases, provide invaluable support during your term of trial. As well as

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sifting through friendships, facing adversity helps to strengthen family bonds and draws you closer together:

> When my mum died in her early forties, I was devastated. My dad and me cried together, clung together to get through it. He told me things I'd never heard before about him and mum which made me laugh. I've never been so close to my dad.
>
> (Mary)

1. *Our priorities in life are altered*. It's as if your new perspective following the trauma has cut a swathe through your life, removing anything that's seen as unimportant. Your brush with death has made you acutely aware that time is precious and you don't want to waste this irreplaceable resource.

> Before the car crash I took my family for granted. I kept on saying I would spend more time with them instead of working so hard, but I never got round to it. They were always there when I got home, so what's the fuss? Work was the battleground to prove myself. Since the accident, I've got round to it and apologized for my distance as a father and husband. Family life has never been better and rising through the ranks at work just doesn't have the same appeal now. I feel sorry for those who see succeeding at work as a life-or-death struggle, but it took the accident to open up my eyes to what I was missing in my life.
>
> (Tom)

Taking Shakespeare's phrase from As You Like It (Act II, Scene I: Line 12), the 'uses of adversity' can teach us much to enrich our lives; however, this newly acquired knowledge can fall away once the adversity has passed. If this is the case, the uses of adversity have been used up and are now forgotten.

Looking beyond adversity

So far in this chapter, I've been talking about resilience in the context of adversity.

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But the discussion of resilience has been expanded by some writers and researchers

> to become a primary focus of each person's life, whether or not that person has experienced great adversity. All of us encounter some degree of stress and challenge in everyday life. No one can predict which of us will at some point face unimagined adversity.
>
> (Brooks and Goldstein, 2003: 3)

Resilience skills and attitudes are taught in some schools, thereby adding a fourth R to the traditional three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic).

Reivich and Shatté (2002) suggest that resilience is not just about struggling with hard times (reactive), but also involves improving our relationships, pursuing hobbies, finding new friends and partners, taking risks like becoming self-employed, and enjoying life more (active). So, we have tough times to contend with and brighter times to look forward to if we go after them.

Defining resilience

Given the detailed discussion of resilience that I've presented, it would not do it justice to sum it up succinctly as, for example, 'struggling through hard times'. I have therefore developed with my colleague, Professor Windy Dryden, a lengthy definition of (or mini-essay on) resilience (see Box 1.1) which takes into account some of the points discussed in this chapter, as well as distilling our collective experience as CBT therapists and coaches. A couple of points contained in the definition need clarifying. In the first paragraph, 'acute or chronic adversities' refers, respectively, to those events that are short lived (e.g. stuck overnight in winter in a traffic jam on the M25) and those of long duration (e.g. coping with your partner's Alzheimer's disease). 'Unusual or commonplace adversities' are, respectively, those that are dramatic and often capture world attention such as terrorist bombings or earthquakes, and the everyday events that most of us experience such as job loss, relationship break-up and interpersonal conflict. Finally, attitude is pinpointed as the heart of resilience, which is the subject of the next chapter.

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Excerpted from *Developing Resilience*

Box 1.1 What is resilience? Neenan and Dryden's view

Resilience comprises a set of flexible cognitive, behavioural and emotional responses to acute or chronic adversities which can be unusual or commonplace. These responses can be learnt and are within the grasp of everyone; resilience is not a rare quality given to a chosen few. While many factors affect the development of resilience, the most important one is the attitude you adopt to deal with adversity. Therefore, attitude (meaning) is at the heart of resilience.

Resilience, as commonly understood, refers to bouncing back from adversity. A more detailed and realistic understanding of resilience involves coming back from frequent experiences of pain and struggle, rather than simply bouncing back from misfortune. This experience of pain and struggle doesn't stop you working to rectify those adversities that can be changed, or adjusting constructively to which cannot be changed. Nor does the experience of pain and struggle stop you from moving towards your goals, however slowly or falteringly, or pursuing what's important to you. This forward movement is a defining feature of resilience. As such, being resilient doesn't restore your life as it was prior to the adversity but, rather, what you've learnt from tackling the adversity usually changes you for the better; it helps you to become keenly aware of what's important in your life and, as we said, encourages you to pursue it.

While resilience is the response of you as an individual, its development can be facilitated or impaired, respectively, by factors such as having supportive friends or experiencing violence from your partner. Thus, rather than concentrating on purely internal factors like optimism or self-control, resilience is best understood by taking in the wider context of your life. Finally, the focus of resilience has been widened to include the teaching of attitudes and skills to help individuals deal better with the challenges of daily living. Lessons learned through tackling these challenges also act as preparation for facing the inevitable adversities that lie ahead.