Using Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills to Manage Your Emotions & Balance Your Life

calming the emotional storm

SHERI VAN DIJK, MSW
“In my twenty-two years in the field, I have not encountered a more comprehensive guide to managing one’s emotions. Sheri Van Dijk has taken complex psychotherapeutic processes and broken them down in an easy-to-read, accessible format. If you have ever been paralyzed with intense emotions, this is a must-read. I will be recommending this book to my patients.”

—Jody Joseph Levac, MSW, RSW, PhD, director of mental health at Southlake Regional Health Centre

“Calming the Emotional Storm is simple, comprehensive, effective, and doable. This encouraging book inspires hope without minimizing that it can take a lot of hard work to make the changes necessary to start living an emotional healthy and balanced life. I will definitely recommend this book to my clients. The exercises in the book support understanding by helping readers stabilize emotional reactions while exploring ways to make positive changes.”

—Melanie Williams, registered social worker at Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers and certified trauma specialist

“In a world where emotions are at the root of much pain and suffering, Sheri Van Dijk has written a skillful guide to help us acknowledge, experience, and, most importantly, bear the emotional landscape of our lives. The combination of concise language, clear explanations, accessible exercises and insightful case studies make this an exceptional tool for individuals, families, and clinicians alike.”

—Glenys Smith Elliott, MEd, mental health case manager at York Support Services Network in Ontario, Canada
“Calming the Emotional Storm is a reader-friendly manual that will teach readers how to manage difficult emotions. Each chapter prepares readers for helpful exercises on noticing and validating emotions. The dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) skills taught here are effective tools for improving self-esteem and work and personal relationships that will undoubtedly help readers gain a healthy balance in their lives, even in moments of crisis or stress. Calming the Emotional Storm will be a valuable asset to my clients and help them improve their overall well-being.”

—Barbara L. Anschuetz, EdD, CTS, certified trauma specialist and traumatologist

“Sheri Van Dijk’s new book is a well laid-out, user-friendly manual that can assist people in learning new skills to live a calmer, more effective life. I would recommend it to anyone who feels intense emotions.”

—Cheri Faris, BMgt, MSW, RSW, clinical social worker at the Canadian Mental Health Association

“Many can relate to experiencing the ‘emotional storm’ within. In this book, Van Dijk teaches fundamental DBT skills for helping manage these distressing emotions in a way that is accessible to all readers. The exercises and tips offered make this resource practical and easy to use. It provides readers with the skills they need to feel more in control of their emotions and make their lives more manageable.”

—Diane Petrofski, MSW, RSW, Family Health Team

“This book provides a crystal clear, concise, and lively introduction to DBT techniques for the general reader. It should be helpful for anyone who is interested in growing emotionally and learning how to have a healthier life.”

—Paula Fuchs, PsyD, assistant clinical professor of psychology in the department of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School
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New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
As Always, for my family—thank you for your love and support, without which this book would not have been possible.

And for those experiencing difficulties managing their emotions—may you find calm and peace in your lives.
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Pain is a natural part of life. We all experience disappointments: not getting the promotion we wanted at work; finding out the person we had a crush on is involved with someone else. We grieve when we lose the people we love: when a relationship doesn’t work out, our best friend moves away, or someone we care about dies. We may feel anger when something happens that we feel is unjust, whether it be a killing oil spill, a racist comment, or someone cutting us off in traffic. Anxiety, too, is a natural part of being human; we may feel anxious when we have to give a presentation at work, when we’re out on a first date, or when we’re asking someone for something really important to us.

All of these emotions are painful for us. And yet we understand them, they make sense to us, and so we allow ourselves to experience them and move on. But what happens when the emotions you’re experiencing don’t seem to make sense and you can’t understand them? When the emotions you have are so strong that you can’t manage them appropriately and move on, and instead you act out in negative ways as you try to get rid of them? What
happens when other people don’t understand your emotions either, and these emotions wreak havoc on the relationships in your life? This experience is known as emotion dysregulation.

What Is Emotion Dysregulation?

Emotion dysregulation means that you react emotionally to things that most people wouldn’t typically react to, your reaction is more intense than the situation warrants, and it takes you longer than the average person to recover from it or to get back to feeling like your usual self. People who have difficulty regulating or managing their emotions usually also find it difficult to tolerate their emotions and often have trouble identifying, understanding, and expressing how they feel.

Take Mary, for example. Mary has always had a hard time holding down a job. Many times, she’s gotten lucky and found a job that she mostly really likes. But once she’s been there for a while, feeling comfortable and confident, she always starts to criticize her superiors and how the organization is being run. Inevitably, she has a conflict with someone, and her anger gets out of hand; she loses her temper, says things that she will later regret, and loses her job as a result.

Tim is another good example. Divorced for five years, Tim has been looking for that special someone. He’s been spending a lot of time dating online, but each time he goes out on a date and it doesn’t work out, he finds himself devastated all over again. He can’t help thinking that he’s going to be alone for the rest of his life. Not only does this worry him, but it causes him to feel so sad at times that he doesn’t even want to get out of bed.

Emotion dysregulation is not uncommon. It often goes hand in hand with mental health problems, such as borderline personality disorder or mood and anxiety disorders, but it can also be present in people who have no specific mental health problems. Difficulties regulating your emotions can often
lead to all sorts of other problems in your life. Trying to avoid or tolerate your emotions, you may engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as drinking or using drugs, disordered eating, gambling, overspending, or dangerous sexual practices (such as having sex with strangers). The list goes on and on.

In addition, your relationships and your self-esteem may suffer, as a result of your inability to manage your emotions or as a result of the unhealthy behaviors just mentioned. I work with people on a daily basis who have difficulty regulating their emotions, and I see firsthand the problems it causes in their lives, and all because they didn't learn certain skills to help them deal with their emotions as they were growing up. The good news is that it's not too late. You can learn these skills at any time.

**What Causes Emotion Dysregulation?**

Unfortunately, when it comes to the brain, there’s a lot we still don’t know. With mental illness of any sort, the prevailing theory is that there is no one cause. Rather, it takes a genetic or biological predisposition, along with certain environmental factors, for a particular mental disorder to evolve.

With respect to emotion dysregulation problems, this theory applies as well. There is evidence that the way we experience emotions is hardwired into us; some people are simply born more emotionally sensitive than others. When this is the case, you are more vulnerable to emotion dysregulation problems because you are more likely to be overwhelmed by your emotions.

But our environment also plays a large role in the development of emotion dysregulation, and trauma is a common factor for people who have problems managing their emotions: having been physically or sexually abused or having been neglected as a child, for example.

According to dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), which will be discussed shortly, one of the most common contributing factors to emotion dysregulation is growing up in an emotionally *invalidating environment*, an environment
in which you were taught that your emotions were wrong, inappropriate, or not okay. Whether these messages were direct (such as “Stop crying or I’ll give you something to cry about”) or subtle (for example, your mother gets anxious every time you express anger, so you learn that anger isn’t okay), the lesson is that your feelings are bad. As a result, children growing up in this kind of environment learn to suppress, ignore, and avoid their emotions, causing their feelings to be increasingly foreign, scary, and confusing to them.

How Dialectical Behavior Therapy Can Help

For most people, learning to regulate emotions is something that occurs naturally as we mature. As we grow, we gradually develop these skills, due to our maturing brain and the people around us who teach us how to regulate our emotions. For example, when we fell and scraped our knee or awoke in the night crying because of a nightmare, a caregiver would often be there to soothe us, teaching us how to do this on our own. Or when we were feeling angry, a caregiver would let us know that our anger made sense and was understandable and would then help us figure out what to do to help reduce our anger. As previously noted, however, not everyone receives this kind of teaching, but if you didn’t automatically learn how to regulate your emotions, you can still learn skills that will help you to manage your emotions consciously.

Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is a psychotherapy created by psychologist Marsha Linehan (1993) in Seattle, Washington. Linehan’s work has its roots in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which she was using to treat people with an illness called borderline personality disorder, of which emotion dysregulation is a primary symptom. The basic premise underlying CBT is that our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are all interconnected, and that by changing one of these, we can impact the other two. In other words, by changing how you think about a situation, you can change your emotions and behaviors in that situation; by changing how you behave in a situation, you can change your thoughts and emotions, and so on.
From her work with patients with borderline personality disorder, Linehan came to realize that CBT wasn’t enough, and this led her to create a new therapy. As with cognitive behavioral therapy, DBT skills stem from the basic premise that our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are all interconnected, but Linehan added the concepts of mindfulness and acceptance to this idea. Mindfulness is about living in the present moment with awareness and with acceptance; what this means in terms of emotion dysregulation is that you learn to become aware of your personal experience, including your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, giving you the opportunity to make changes in any of these areas. Also key to DBT is the idea of acceptance, for example, learning to accept or acknowledge your emotions rather than trying to push them away or ignore them.

The DBT Skills

This book focuses on the four sets of DBT skills, all of which target emotion regulation in one way or another:

* **Core mindfulness skills** will help you to focus on living in the present moment. This decreases the painful emotions that come from constantly thinking about the past or the future. Living in the present moment also helps to increase your awareness of yourself—what you’re thinking and how you’re feeling and behaving—allowing you the choice of changing any of these things.

* **Distress tolerance skills** will help you cope with crisis situations in healthy ways rather than in unhealthy ways (such as using substances, overspending, eating unhealthily, or lashing out at others) that have long-term negative consequences.
* Emotion regulation skills will help you to manage your emotions more effectively (for example, reacting less intensely or coming back down from your reaction more quickly) and to tolerate your emotions when you can’t change them or reduce their intensity.

* Interpersonal effectiveness skills will help you maintain or even improve your relationships as you learn to act assertively to balance the give-and-take in your relationships and how to take good care of yourself.

The major emphasis of DBT is to learn to bear emotional pain skillfully (Linehan 1993). For it to be most effective, however, you need to think of DBT not just as a therapy or set of skills but as a way of living. Learning these skills and applying them to your life will help you make positive changes. But you must remember that DBT won’t take away your pain; it will just help you learn to live with it more effectively and act in ways that will result in less pain for you in the long run.

Who This Book Is For

This book is written for anyone experiencing difficulties with the emotions in their life. If you have trouble managing your anger, sadness, or worry, this book can help you. This book is not meant to take the place of a professional psychotherapist. If you work your way through this book and find that you’re still struggling, you may want to seek a professional who can help you apply these skills to your life. If you have thoughts of suicide or engage in self-harming behaviors such as cutting yourself, you should seek help from a professional as soon as possible.

This book will also be helpful for any health care professional who is treating people with emotion regulation problems and who wishes to learn the DBT skills. You may find that these skills not only help you help your clients but that they also help you in your own life.
How to Use This Book

It's important to take your time as your work your way through this book. You may choose to read it cover to cover, or you may decide to focus first on reading the chapters that seem to apply most to your own difficulties. Either way, you’ll get more out of the experience if you’re doing the exercises discussed in each chapter.

Again, you should take your time so that you really absorb what you’re reading. You don’t have to master each skill before moving on to the next—many of the skills presented here will take years for any of us to master, if we ever do—but make sure that you’re comfortable enough with what you’ve learned before you move on.

Last but not least, keep in mind that this book is about changing the way you live your life. So have patience with yourself, be kind to yourself, and when you’re ready, turn the page.
We often live our lives on automatic pilot, going through the motions without really thinking about what we’re doing, and just reacting from our feelings. Do you have times in your life that you wish you hadn’t missed out on? Times when you wish you had paid more attention and been more present, rather than being so caught up in what just happened or worrying about what might happen next? Can you recall moments when you were so caught up in your worries, your anger, your fear, or other emotions or thoughts, that you missed out on what was happening right then and there? This is mindlessness. Instead, to live a more fulfilling and whole life, you want to get off automatic pilot and learn to live your life in the present moment, being fully involved and engaged with life and not missing out on events as they unfold around you.
What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness has been defined as purposely paying attention, in the present moment, without judgment (Kabat-Zinn 1994). In other words, mindfulness is about intentionally being aware of the present moment and, rather than judging whatever you find in that moment, allowing yourself to turn toward your experience.

By focusing on the present moment, mindfulness helps you train your mind to control where your attention goes rather than let your mind control you. It’s about paying attention to what is happening now—within you or around you—and taking an attitude of friendly curiosity, acceptance, and openness toward the experience.

The human mind has been called a judging machine, and for most of us, it’s extremely difficult to experience something without judging it or putting labels on it. For example, when we look at something, we tend to automatically think of that object in terms of whether we like it or not, whether it is good or bad, rather than simply observe the object without evaluating it. Consider the first time you meet a person. You probably find yourself appraising him: you either like the way he’s dressed or you’re thinking there’s something wrong with it. The person might make a good or bad first impression; perhaps he seems “nice” or “strange,” for example, but whatever labels you use to describe him, those labels are there more often than not. As this book will later discuss in greater depth, judging comes quite naturally to us and is a difficult habit to break. Mindfulness helps us to break out of the habit of seeing everything through these labels and helps us to see things as they are.

Mindfulness Research

Mindfulness isn’t new. It’s been practiced in the Eastern world for thousands of years as a form of meditative practice and is a well-known part of spiritual practices such as Zen Buddhism. But in the Western world, we’re
only now discovering how useful mindfulness can be in a variety of ways. In fact, living life more mindfully can increase your enjoyment of life, increase your ability to cope with physical illness, and improve your physical and emotional health, reducing anxiety, stress, depression, and sleep problems, and improving your immune system (Harvard Women’s Health Watch 2004).

Besides addressing specific problems, mindfulness generally fosters self-awareness, improves your ability to tolerate upsetting thoughts, and activates the left prefrontal cortex, a part of your brain that is connected to experiencing happiness and optimism. In other words, mindfulness triggers positive feelings and helps you feel good (Harvard Women’s Health Watch 2004).

How Mindfulness Helps with Emotion Dysregulation

Because mindfulness increases your self-awareness, practicing it over time will help you learn to choose how to respond in a situation rather than simply react when stressful situations and painful emotions arise (Hoffman, Sawyer, and Fang 2010). What follows are the various factors that contribute to this benefit.

Focusing on the Present Decreases Emotional Pain

How often do you find yourself dwelling on things that have happened in the past? Have you noticed the emotions that get triggered when you’re stuck in the past? Usually they’re painful, because we tend not to think of happy things when we’re dwelling on the past. Instead, we usually think about the bad things that have happened to us, what others have done to us, decisions or actions we regret. This kind of thinking brings up feelings of anger, sadness, regret, guilt, and shame.
Thinking about the future tends to have similar results: you focus on the negative rather than the positive. You likely end up thinking about the what-ifs and what the worst thing is that could happen, which causes you to feel anxious. For the most part, people with anxiety disorders are living in the future, experiencing intense worry and anxiety because they experience the things they fear as if those things were happening now.

* Sydney’s Story

When she was seventeen, Sydney was in a car accident that left her with chronic pain. The driver of the other car had been drinking but was let off with a light sentence of probation, and her injuries compared to Sydney’s were minimal. Now twenty-eight, Sydney lives at home with her parents, unable to work full-time to support herself because of her ongoing pain issues. In addition, she’s having to spend a lot of money on physiotherapy and other treatments, trying to get some relief from her pain, because her insurance company stopped paying years ago.

Sydney often finds herself getting caught up in thoughts about the past. She goes over and over in her mind what she could have done differently so she wouldn’t have been at the wrong place at the wrong time, and she gets angry at herself for being in the position she’s in now. She wonders if she didn’t speak well enough at the trial to make people understand how bad her pain is and how the accident ruined her life, and this causes her to feel disappointed in herself. She feels regret for not getting a better lawyer who could have gotten her a bigger settlement so that she might now have more money to continue paying for her treatments, and this causes her to feel more anger toward herself.

Sydney also spends a lot of time thinking about the future. She worries that her pain will never get better and that her physical condition will continue to deteriorate. She worries that, because of her physical problems, she’ll never meet someone to build a life with and she’ll never have
children. She worries that she’ll never be able to move out of her parents’ house and will remain financially dependent on them.

With each of these concerns, Sydney imagines this future for herself. She actually sees in her mind, for example, herself at the age of fifty, living in her parents’ home, perhaps in a wheelchair or even bedridden due to her pain, all alone with no one to spend her life with. Can you imagine the kind of emotional pain this would trigger for her?

Consider for a moment the amount of emotion in Sydney’s life, the emotions that are there not because of what’s happening in her life right now but because of the amount of time she’s spending thinking about the past and the future. Often we have enough pain to deal with in the present moment; being stuck in the past and the future only multiplies the amount of emotional pain we have and makes our pain that much harder to bear.

So you can see that getting caught up in thoughts about the past or the future triggers many painful emotions that wouldn’t be there if you were living more in the present. This isn’t to say that the present moment is always without pain; every life has its painful moments. But even if you have pain in the present moment, it’s more tolerable if you’re living only in the present, rather than experiencing the pain of the present, the past, and the future all at once.

Most people get stuck in dwelling or worry thoughts at times, but if you are prone to emotion dysregulation, it is likely that this kind of thinking preoccupies you, takes up a lot of energy, and interferes with your ability to live life fully. When you’re constantly thinking about the negative things that have happened in your life and expecting the worst in the future, you’re regularly triggering painful emotions for yourself. By focusing so much on the past and the future, you miss out on life as it unfolds around you.

Focusing on the present moment, or being mindful, helps to prevent painful emotions from coming up by helping you to be aware of when you’re living in the past and the future. This increased awareness means that you’ll be quicker to catch yourself when you start to dwell or worry, so you can do
something to prevent yourself from getting caught up in it. Mindfulness in this respect helps you to gain control over your mind instead of allowing your mind to control you.

**Mindfulness Has a Calming Effect**

Although relaxation is not the goal of mindfulness, people often find that mindfulness does have a relaxing or calming effect. Here are a few possible explanations for this:

* Living in the present moment rather than in the past or the future results in fewer painful emotions. Having less emotional pain in your life on a regular basis will result in a calmer or more relaxed experience.

* Doing one thing at a time with your full attention is likely in direct contrast to how you generally live your life. Most people find that when they stop multitasking, they feel calmer and less overwhelmed.

* Once people start practicing mindfulness, they often find themselves focusing on pleasant activities that they never paid much attention to before, like listening to the birds, petting their dog, walking, and doing breathing exercises. These activities are calming, if you’re really paying attention to them as you do them.

* Being less judgmental of yourself and of the people and things around you will also have a calming effect. You will experience more feelings of peace when you focus on accepting things as they are rather than feeling anger and other painful emotions because things aren’t how you’d like them to be.
Being generally calmer, in turn, allows you to regulate your emotions more effectively. Think of your emotions as the water building up behind a dam: the more the water builds up, the more likely it is that the dam will burst. Likewise, the higher your emotional level is on a regular basis, the harder it will be for you to manage your emotions, and the more likely that you’ll lose control. The lower the level of your emotions, the easier it will be for you to manage them.

**Mindfulness Increases Positive Emotions**

Living more often in the present not only reduces emotional pain; as you live more mindfully, your level of positive emotions will rise. Think about the way you’ve led your life up until now: whenever you’ve done things that could have been enjoyable, were you really present for them? When you were playing with your children, walking your dog, sitting outside with your cup of coffee in the morning, were you really there, or was your body going through the motions while your mind wandered to other, less pleasant things? If the latter is the case, your experience is typical. Our minds tend to wander to the past or the future, and we experience painful emotions, even when we’re doing an activity that would bring us enjoyment if we were paying attention to it. So once you start practicing mindfulness, you should notice an increase in positive emotions. Even if the positive emotions are mild and don’t last very long, enjoy them while they’re there!

**Increased Awareness Helps You Gain Control of Behaviors**

Everyone experiences unhealthy or inappropriate urges at one time or another: it could be something relatively unimportant and not harmful, like the urge to bite your nails or the urge to laugh out loud in the middle of a
business meeting, or it could be more serious and bothersome, such as being in emotional pain and having the urge to lash out at someone you care about. Some people naturally learn ways to control their behavior and not act on these urges. But for others, acting on urges can become a habit: in other words, you may have come to relate certain thoughts and emotions to a harmful behavior, and you now engage in this behavior without awareness. It’s become a habit you engage in whenever those strong emotions arise, and you do it automatically.

The first step to changing any behavior is to increase your awareness of it. When you’re unaware of your inner experience—specifically, your thoughts, feelings, and urges—you’re much more likely to act on unhealthy urges and to automatically engage in behaviors that you will likely regret later. If you can increase your awareness of behaviors that you wish to stop, and you can relate your urges to the thoughts and feelings that trigger them, you’ll be much more able to choose how to act and be less likely to fall into your habitual pattern. In other words, if you have a habit of overeating when stressed, you first need to determine what tends to trigger this behavior (such as having an argument with someone you care about, receiving constructive criticism at work, or dwelling on the past). Then, by practicing mindfulness to help you increase your awareness of when those triggers are occurring, you can consciously choose other healthier ways of coping.

**Mindfulness Increases Your Self-Awareness**

As previously mentioned, increasing your self-awareness is especially important with emotion regulation difficulties. Just as you can’t change a behavior until you’re aware of it, you can’t change your thoughts or emotions unless you’re aware of what you’re thinking and feeling. Chapter 3 will further address the connection between thoughts and emotions. For now, it’s important that you understand that practicing mindfulness will increase your
Mindfulness: Seeing Things As They Are

awareness of your own internal experiences—your thoughts, feelings, urges, and physical sensations—which will help you to manage your emotions more effectively.

Mindfulness Improves Concentration and Memory

Mindfulness can have a positive effect on your ability to concentrate and can improve your memory. Although not directly related to emotion dysregulation, this is relevant to your overall quality of life. Many of us take the ability to concentrate for granted. In fact, you may have noticed that during times when you're feeling very sad, you're more likely to forget things or have trouble concentrating. Mindfulness can help with this; by redirecting your focus over and over again to whatever you're doing in the present moment, you're improving your concentration. As for memory, when you're concentrating on something, you're more likely to remember it later. When you walk in the house after a long day at work and you're still thinking about work and the stressful day that awaits you tomorrow, you'll be less likely to remember where you put your car keys later on, because you weren't thinking about your keys when you put them down. Getting yourself off automatic pilot, and focusing on what you're doing when you're doing it, will improve your memory.

The key thing to remember about mindfulness is that it is helpful in many, many different ways. You might not notice a difference immediately, although some people do report noticing positive changes soon after they start practicing. In fact, it's important to note that things might actually seem to get a bit worse before they start to get better; this is because you're opening yourself up to experiencing things that you haven't allowed yourself to experience before, so it makes sense that you'll perhaps feel pain that you have not felt before or, at least, for a long time. But the more you practice, the more likely it is that you'll see positive changes, and the more you practice, the greater those changes will be.
Calming the Emotional Storm

The Goal of Mindfulness

Being in the present often has many beneficial side effects, but these are not the goals of the practice. Indeed, as you practice mindfulness, it’s important to remember that you have no goal other than to spend more time in the present moment with acceptance. Mindfulness has a sense of nonstriving to it. In other words, when you’re being mindful, you’re really just being. You’re allowing yourself to be in the moment, without wishing you were somewhere else, without trying to be anything else; you just are.

After learning about mindfulness, people often will say that they must be doing it wrong because it’s “not working.” If you find yourself evaluating your practice in this way, remind yourself that there is no right or wrong with mindfulness and that the only goal is bringing yourself back, again and again, to the present moment.

How to Practice Mindfulness

The idea of mindfulness may seem relatively simple: focusing on the present moment with acceptance. Putting this into practice, however, is often more complicated. It doesn’t help matters that, at least here in the Western world, we’re taught to practice the opposite of mindfulness from a very young age: we’re taught to multitask (doing our homework in front of the television or channel surfing as we talk on the telephone), and we’re raised with judgments (good or bad, right or wrong). So learning to be mindful goes against a lifetime of learning; that makes it harder for many of us, but it doesn’t make it impossible. When you get discouraged, it can help to remind yourself of all the benefits that will come from practicing mindfulness.

Looking back at our definition of mindfulness—doing one thing at a time, in the present moment, with your full attention, and with
acceptance—you can see that there are actually an infinite number of ways to practice mindfulness. Anything you do, you can do mindfully. Listening to music, watching television, having a conversation with someone, playing with your dog, walking, eating, driving, the list goes on and on. Any of these activities can be done mindfully, if you focus your full attention on that activity, in the present moment, with acceptance. So, while you’re mindfully listening to music, if you hear a song that you don’t like—rather than saying, “I don’t like this song,” and changing the radio station—you simply notice the thoughts and feelings of not liking the song as the thoughts and feelings arise. Or if you’re reading mindfully and your kids are distracting you by being loud as they play, you just notice the thoughts and feelings that arise within you: “I notice that the feeling of frustration has arisen within me. I’m experiencing an urge to yell at the kids.” In both examples, you notice the thoughts and feelings that are arising, acknowledge them, and gently (without judgment) return your attention to the activity.

Of course, sometimes mindfulness is easier to practice than at other times. The important thing to remember is that if it feels difficult, this doesn’t mean you have to stop practicing. On the contrary, mindfulness will help you learn that you don’t have to act on your thoughts and feelings, that you can acknowledge them without doing anything.

Here are a couple of exercises to help you get the hang of this. The first exercise looks at the breath.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR MINDFULNESS PRACTICE**

1. **Choose a focus:** The first step is to decide how you will practice mindfulness. As you learn mindfulness and become more practiced with it, you will find that you are naturally living your life more
mindfully. But for now, you need to deliberately choose what you will do mindfully. You can practice mindfulness in an infinite number of ways, because anything you do, you can bring mindfulness to—breathing, watching television or reading a book, having a conversation with someone, driving, eating, walking—the list is endless. So step one is to choose your activity.

2. **Pay attention:** The second step is to bring your attention to your chosen focus. If you’re walking mindfully, for example, you’ll be paying attention to the feel of your feet as they hit the ground; perhaps you notice the wind against your face; you hear a dog barking; you observe the brightness of the sun and feel its warmth on your face. If you have chosen eating as your focus, you’ll bring your full attention to that activity, noticing the smell of the food, its texture, how your body reacts in anticipation of tasting the food, and so on. Whatever your chosen focus is, bring your full attention to it in the present moment.

3. **Notice when you wander:** The third step is to notice when your attention wanders from your focus. Notice that I say “when” your attention wanders, not “if”! It’s inevitable that your attention will wander: our brains generate thousands of thoughts every day, so your attention will wander at some point. This doesn’t mean you’re doing it wrong; it simply means you’re human!

4. **Nonjudgmentally return to your focus:** Don’t judge yourself for wandering, just notice that you’ve wandered and bring yourself back, redirecting your attention to your focus. This can be difficult, especially if you’re someone who has a tendency to judge yourself; you might find you’re judging yourself for not doing it “right,” for example. Instead of falling back into that habit, see if you can
simply take this as an opportunity to return your attention to the present moment and to the activity you were focusing on. Sometimes having a saying or mantra—like “Oops, I’ve wandered” or “Back to the present”—can help you avoid self-judgment.

5. **Repeat**: The last step is to repeat steps three and four over and over again. In other words, notice when you wander and nonjudgmentally return to your focus. You might find you need to do this many times in the matter of a minute, and that’s okay! Mindfulness isn’t about staying focused, but returning to the present when you notice you’re no longer there.

≈ **EXERCISE: Mindfulness to the Breath**

Breathing is something that happens so automatically that you don’t have to think about it; your body does it for you. So, for the next few moments, pay special attention to your breathing. Be curious about it: How does it feel? Are you breathing deeply from your diaphragm or shallowly from your chest? Are you breathing slowly or quickly? Through your mouth or your nostrils? Now notice how it feels when you take a deep breath; pay attention as you breathe the oxygen in, filling your lungs so that your stomach expands with the air, then slowly exhaling that air, noticing any sensations that occur as you do so. Do this a few times, observing how it feels to breathe.

As you’re doing this, you might start to notice your thoughts wandering away from your breath. You might start to wonder what the point of this exercise is, or your attention might wander to something completely different: thinking about what you’ll have for lunch this afternoon, for example, or worrying about the presentation you have to do at work tomorrow. When this
happens, simply notice that your attention has wandered and, without judging yourself, bring it back to your breath.

This is a mindful breathing exercise: focusing on your breath, paying attention to your breathing in the present moment, and when your attention wanders from this, gently redirecting it to the present moment. Often, people find that this kind of exercise helps them to feel calmer, centered, or grounded. In other words, it helps to decrease the intensity of any emotions that are present so that you can think rationally.

When first learning to do breathing exercises, some people notice that they feel more anxious. If this happens to you, as best as you can, work your way through this anxiety by just noticing what's happening in your body: “My breath is shallow and fast. My heart rate is speeding up. I’m noticing worry thoughts.” If you don’t feel that you can work your way through this, feel free to stop; for people with anxiety, the breathing exercises can be more difficult, and you may find you need to put it aside for now and come back to it later.

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Here’s another exercise that will help you practice mindfulness. This one applies mindfulness to your physical self.

≈ **EXERCISE: Mindfulness to the Body**

For the next few moments, notice whatever is happening physically in your body. Notice your posture, the way your body is sitting in the chair. Notice the way certain parts of your body are pressing against the chair: your bottom on the seat, your back against the backrest, perhaps your arms resting on the arms of the chair or on a desk or table in front of you. Notice how your feet feel as they press into the floor; observe the physical sensations that arise as your fingers turn the page. This too is mindfulness: paying full attention to one thing in the present moment and with acceptance.
Mindfulness: Seeing Things As They Are

*Mental Noting*

When you first start practicing mindfulness, you might find it helpful to break it down into smaller steps, mentally noting events as they occur. This is also called *witnessing*, and Marsha Linehan (1993) calls it *observing* and *describing*. Basically, this skill has you break down your experience, step by step, in a nonjudgmental way. You sense or notice what it is that’s happening, and you describe it, or put a nonjudgmental label on it. The next exercise will help you understand this idea further.

≈**EXERCISE: Mentally Noting the Breath**

On the next in-breath, note to yourself what’s happening in your body: “I’m taking a deep breath. I notice my belly inflate as I inhale. I feel an urge to yawn, and I let myself do so. As I yawn, my eyes start to water. I notice I’m still feeling tired.”

You can probably see why this skill is sometimes called witnessing, since it basically has you narrating to yourself whatever happens to come into your awareness. Remember to let go of judgments and be an objective observer when you’re mentally noting; you’re just narrating the events as you experience them. They’re not good or bad, right or wrong; they just are.

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*Internal vs. External Experiences*

There are two types of experiences to be aware of when practicing mindfulness: *internal events*—such as physical sensations, thoughts, urges, and emotions—which happen inside of you, and *external events*, or anything that occurs outside of your body. You can use the skill of mental noting with any
experience, but if you're someone who tends to ignore or avoid thinking about what goes on inside, you may want to turn your attention to your internal experiences, as you did with the previous breathing exercises. Likewise, if you're someone who is already acutely aware of what goes on inside of you (this is particularly common for people who have chronic pain issues), you may want to turn your attention more to external events for the time being. For example, while you're walking your dog, mentally note what you see around you: “I see a squirrel running across the road. I see the sun shining brightly. I see someone cutting their grass.” This turns your focus away from yourself and onto the things that are going on around you.

If you have difficulty regulating your emotions, the focus can go either way. You may be so in touch with your internal experience that you can't focus on anything else, which magnifies your emotional experience and makes it difficult for you to tolerate it. Or you may try to ignore or avoid your emotional pain, which makes it harder for you to manage your emotions and the behavior that results from that pain. Practicing mental noting with the experiences that you aren't so in tune with can help you find more of a balance. Over time, you’ll find that you’re living your life more mindfully and you’re more aware of both your internal experiences and the external events that are taking place around you.

**Formal vs. Informal Exercises**

From the examples given so far, you might have noticed that there are two different types of mindfulness exercises. There are *informal* mindfulness exercises, which are daily activities that you can do mindfully. Examples would be walking the dog, listening to music, eating, or doing anything that you do regularly. You don’t have to set aside extra time to do these activities; you're doing them anyway, and you simply bring mindfulness to them. In other words, you bring a focused, nonjudgmental awareness to activities that you would previously have done automatically.
**Formal** exercises, on the other hand, are those that you must set aside time to practice. Examples would be the mindful breathing exercises that you’ve already tried. You can’t breathe mindfully while you’re doing something else; by definition, if you’re dividing your attention between two things, you can’t be doing mindfulness (remember: one thing at a time, in the present moment, with your full attention).

It’s important to practice both types of mindfulness exercises, as they help you in different ways. Informal exercises will help you live your life more mindfully, so that you’re no longer operating on automatic pilot. As a benefit, you will be more likely to choose how to act in a given situation and less likely to simply react emotionally. This will give you a greater sense of self-control. Formal exercises will help you develop self-awareness and inner calm and improve your ability to tolerate distressing thoughts and emotions. Over time, this can also give you a greater sense of control and reduce your fear of your inner experiences. Formal mindfulness practice also increases your present-moment focus throughout the day.

**How to Get Started**

You’ll be more likely to continue practicing mindfulness if you start with something that isn’t extremely difficult for you. Think of an activity that you find fairly easy to focus on, something that holds your attention and you can really get engaged in. Perhaps it’s reading or watching television, or it could be something more active, like knitting a difficult pattern, hiking, or playing a sport. Whatever it is, if it holds your attention and engages you, that’s half the battle. The other half of the battle, of course, is not judging whatever your experience is as you’re engaged in this activity. And as it gets easier for you to do this activity mindfully, of course, you will need to work your way to other activities. Remember that you want to live your life more mindfully, so you can’t just stick to one activity because it’s easier.
Calming the Emotional Storm

How Long to Practice

You may wonder how long you should practice. There’s no short or easy answer to this question. On the one hand, the longer you can make your practices, the quicker you will see the benefits of practicing. On the other hand, not everyone can or wants to set aside thirty to sixty minutes every day for this; it just isn’t always practical. While some experts in mindfulness believe that you must conduct lengthy practices to reap any benefits, from my experience in working with people with mental health problems, doing short formal and informal mindfulness exercises throughout the day helps. The most important thing, in my opinion, is finding something that works for you so that you’re getting in some kind of practice every day.

Where to Practice

The answer to this question is short and easy: wherever you’d like and wherever you can! With informal exercises, obviously, you’ll be practicing anywhere and everywhere: in the car when you’re driving, at the dinner table while you’re eating, on the living room couch when you’re watching TV, and so on. For formal exercises, you might want to go to a quiet room in order to minimize the distractions, and some people like to dedicate a room (or a small area in the house) to their practice so they can set it up as a calming environment. But remember that mindfulness is not about clearing your mind; in mindfulness, distractions will just be accepted and acknowledged, so it’s not necessary to eliminate distractions.

Eyes Open or Closed

The experts continue to debate whether you should close your eyes or not when practicing mindfulness. Generally, closing your eyes gives your mind more room to wander, as it’s much easier to get caught up in memories, images,
and thoughts when your eyes are closed. As well, if you have experienced trauma in the past, practicing with your eyes closed may leave you open to flashbacks, which are intense memories of the traumatic event, or dissociation, which is when you space out, zone out, or lose track of time. If this happens to you, you’ll definitely want to keep your eyes open to make these events less likely as you practice.

Again, there is no hard-and-fast rule. You may find with some formal mindfulness exercises, such as when you are imagining something, that it makes more sense to close your eyes. For the most part, however, I would suggest keeping your eyes open, since the goal is really to live your life more mindfully, and this is difficult to do with your eyes closed! If you find it more difficult to practice with your eyes open, I encourage you to close your eyes but also to work toward keeping your eyes open. When keeping your eyes open during mindfulness, it’s helpful if you look in a downward direction, choosing a spot to look at that isn’t going to generate many thoughts for you. When I’m practicing mindfulness, for example, I tend to look at my big toe!

**Remembering about Acceptance**

I often find that people get so caught up in the concentrating part of mindfulness that they forget about the acceptance part. Perhaps this is because accepting what happens tends to be harder for us than concentrating. But you need to remember that mindfulness isn’t just about concentrating on something, it’s about focusing your attention and accepting without judgment whatever happens to come into your awareness.

**Some Exercises for Mindful Living**

 Hopefully by now you’re coming to understand the value of living a more mindful life. Here are some examples of how you can start to live your life more mindfully:
Calming the Emotional Storm

* Think of something that you do several times each day, like checking your e-mail or getting yourself a drink of water or a cup of tea. Make that activity your reminder to return to the present, get yourself off automatic pilot, and really pay attention to what you’re doing while you do it.

* When you lie down to go to sleep, take some mindful breaths. Rather than letting your mind wander to what happened today or what might happen tomorrow, bring your attention to your breathing.

* Try to have at least one mindful conversation with someone you care about every day. When you’re talking with this person, make sure you’re really paying attention; when you notice your attention start to wander, just acknowledge that it is and bring yourself back to fully engaging in the conversation.

* Stop and smell the roses, literally! If you can’t find a rose, pay attention to some small thing of beauty in your life. Whether it’s an insect crawling on the sidewalk, a bird soaring in the sky, a blooming tree, or a wild flower growing in a ditch, stop and notice it.

You can try any of these exercises or use your imagination to create your own. Any activity that you do in your daily life can be an opportunity to live your life more mindfully.

≈ TEN TIPS FOR MINDFULNESS

1. Use the following five steps to practice mindfulness: choose something to focus on; begin to focus; notice when your attention wanders;
nonjudgmentally bring your attention back to the present; repeat steps three and four over and over again.

2. Remember that mindfulness isn’t only about focusing, or concentrating; it’s also about accepting and acknowledging whatever happens to come into your awareness.

3. If you have difficulties beginning to develop a mindfulness practice, start by practicing activities that are easy for you to engage in.

4. Keep in mind that mindfulness isn’t just about staying focused; it’s about returning to the present when you notice you’ve wandered.

5. Keep your eyes open as much as possible; you will be less likely to wander and more likely to live your life mindfully.

6. Recall that the only goal with mindfulness is for you to be in the present moment more often, so when you hear yourself saying that “it’s not working,” review your expectations and revise them.

7. Use mental noting (or witnessing) of your experience to help you accept or acknowledge whatever happens to come to your awareness.

8. Even if it’s sometimes difficult to find time for formal practice, make sure that you practice formally as well as informally. You will benefit most from doing both.

9. Remember that the more time you spend in the present rather than in the past or the future, the less emotional pain you will have in your life.

10. Live your life more mindfully.
Wrapping Up

This chapter has introduced you to the idea of mindfulness. While mindfulness is a skill that will eventually help you manage your emotions more effectively and live an emotionally healthier life, it’s even more useful to think of mindfulness as a way of living your life that is healthier and more effective. Because mindfulness is about living your life in a way that’s likely different from what you’re used to, it may take time for you to reach the point where living this way comes naturally. Have patience and be kind to yourself while you work on making these life changes. It will be difficult, but in the end, you’ll be happier and healthier for your efforts.

In the next chapter, you’ll start looking more closely at emotions and at things you can do to help prevent those emotional reactions that often get you into trouble.
CHAPTER 2

Don’t Just React: 
Choose How to Act

Emotion dysregulation means you tend to react emotionally to things other people wouldn’t typically react to. It also means that your reaction tends to be more intense than the situation warrants and that you take longer to recover, or to get back to your usual self, than the average person. But life doesn’t have to be like this. This chapter will show you how you can choose how to act rather than just continue to react from your emotions.

Three Different Ways of Thinking

We all have three ways of thinking about things: from our emotional self, from our reasoning self, and from our wise self. In DBT, these skills are known as “emotion mind,” “reasonable mind,” and “wise mind” (Linehan 1993).
Calming the Emotional Storm

When you have problems regulating your emotions, you tend to spend more time in your emotional self. However, there are other ways of thinking about things, and you can learn how to get to these states with some practice.

**The Emotional Self**

Max knew that he was a reactive person. He would often feel an emotion and just go with it, acting on his feeling without thinking too much about what the consequences might be. One day, he and his girlfriend Victoria had a disagreement. They lived in a small apartment and they had already been asked to keep down the noise level, because they sometimes got quite loud when they argued. As their disagreement started to escalate, Victoria tried to remind Max of their previous warning about noise, but this triggered even more anger in him, and he began to yell and throw things, eventually even punching the wall. Not only did his aggressive behavior scare Victoria into breaking up with him, but it also resulted in their being evicted from the apartment and having to pay for damages.

Max is someone who often acts from his *emotional self*. When you’re thinking from this perspective, your emotions control your behavior. Rather than thinking about how you’d like to act in a situation, your emotions take over and you simply react. This can happen with any emotion. Like Max, you might act out physically or lash out verbally when you’re angry. When you’re feeling anxiety, your emotional self would have you avoid the situation that’s causing this feeling. For example, you feel fearful about attending a social event you’ve been invited to, so you end up not going. When you’re feeling sad or depressed, generally your emotional self causes you to withdraw from others, isolate yourself, and reduce or even stop your normal activities. You might find that you have this tendency to react from any emotion, or you might find that you can manage most of your emotions but struggle with one or two. Either way, acting from your emotional self is usually not in your best interest.
in the long run, but your emotions make it difficult for you to really consider the consequences of your actions.

Acting from your emotional self can also include acting on positive feelings. Perhaps you can think of a time when you felt so excited about something that you called all your friends to share your news, or you may recall a moment when you felt such a deep welling up of love for someone that it brought tears to your eyes. So even though your emotional self can get you into trouble, you don’t want to get rid of it. Instead, you can learn to find more of a balance in your life and have more control over how you think about things.

The Reasoning Self

Aline is someone who often finds that she acts from her reasoning self. Rather than going with her feelings, she has to really think things through before she acts. In fact, she has a tendency to discount her emotions.

Aline was a teacher in a small town. She enjoyed her job, working at a small grade school where the students were fairly well-behaved. She loved her little house, she liked the neighborhood she lived in, and she had many friends in the area. One spring at a conference, she met the principal of a high school in a bigger town about an hour from where she lived. They spent the day together talking about their schools and what they liked and disliked about their jobs. A few weeks later, Aline received a phone call from this principal, offering her a job at the high school for that September. Taking the job would mean that Aline would either need to relocate or have her commute increase from about ten minutes to nearly an hour.

Aline thought long and hard about this offer. She considered the new experience that would come with this opportunity. She thought about the increase in income that the job would provide and how useful that extra money would be. She considered the fact that the new school was closer to her family and that relocating would mean she could visit her elderly parents.
more often. Based on these things, Aline decided to take the new job. But what she didn’t consider in making this decision was how she felt about these factors. She failed to consider her emotional attachment to her house, her neighborhood, her friends and colleagues, the students she had come to know so well. She didn’t consider how she felt about moving to a bigger school and a bigger town, where people are more anonymous and less connected to one another.

Acting from your reasoning self means that you’re using logical or factual thinking. When you’re in your reasoning self, you don’t usually experience emotions, and if you do, these emotions are small, not intense, and easily disregarded. Aline’s situation is one example of the reasoning self, but some everyday examples would include when you’re writing out a list of things you need to pick up at the store, when you’re balancing your checkbook, or when you’re planning a weekend camping trip with family or friends.

While you can see from Max’s situation that it’s not helpful to think only from your emotional self, Aline’s situation demonstrates that it’s also not effective to consider things only from your reasoning self. Ideally, you want to find a balance between these two states and act more often from your wise self.

The Wise Self

Acting from your wise self is about finding a balance between your emotional and reasoning self and following your intuition about what’s in your best interest in the long run (Linehan 1993). Your wise self has you considering what you think about a situation, what your feelings are about it, and what the consequences of your actions will be, and then basing your decision on these three things. In other words, when you’re acting from your wise self, you’re choosing how to act rather than simply reacting.

When you have problems managing your emotions, it often feels as if you have no wise self or even no reasoning self; everything happens from your
emotional self. But this isn’t the case. Everyone has a wise self; some people simply have more difficulty accessing it in themselves.

First of all, you have to remember that acting from your wise self doesn’t necessarily involve taking a big, important action. It could be something as small as getting out of bed in the morning when you feel so depressed or anxious that you don’t think you’ll really be able to function. It could be making dinner for your family even when you’re feeling so lousy that you just want to curl up and hide. It could be going to work in the morning, even though all you want to do is throw the covers over your head and go back to sleep. It could be biting your tongue when you want to say something really hurtful to someone you love.

It may help to think back to a time when a little voice in the back of your head said, “Oh no, you’re going to regret this later!” or “Stop, you don’t really want to do that!” or “Come on, you know you’ll feel better if you get out of bed and shower.” At the time, you may or may not have listened to this little voice, but it was your wise self, reminding you that you are not at the mercy of your emotions. You can choose how you’d like to act.

Now that you know that this little voice is your wise self, you may find that you’re able to listen to it more often. But if that fails to happen right away, don’t become discouraged. As you continue to read this book and learn about the DBT skills, you’ll get to practice accessing your wise self, and you’ll be able to use it more.

It’s important to be aware that your wise self might feel somewhat like your emotional self, because both have emotions connected to them. But keep in mind that when you’re in your emotional self, you’re reacting from your emotions rather than choosing how to act. You can also tell you’re in your emotional self when the emotions are intense and you feel like you’re caught up in them. When you’re in your wise self, by contrast, you still feel the emotions, but you don’t feel controlled by them. Instead, you feel a sense of calm or peace, or at least a feeling of being in control, even though the emotions are present (Linehan 1993).
Increasing Your Self-Awareness

Before you can change something, you need to notice that it’s happening. In other words, you won’t be able to do anything to stop reacting from your emotional self until you first realize that’s where you are. Unfortunately, you may find that this self-awareness doesn’t come naturally because it’s not how you’re used to living your life. As a result, increasing your self-awareness may initially feel like work, and it will take time and energy. You can start by asking yourself, “What mode of thinking am I in right now?” or “Am I acting from my wise self?” on a regular basis. It doesn’t matter how you phrase the question, as long as it has you checking in to see what perspective you’re thinking from at that given moment.

You might find that you forget to do this; this is a new skill after all, and it’s not how you’re used to living your life. If you find that you have a hard time remembering to do it, put sticky notes up wherever you’ll see them or find ways to incorporate a “check-in” into your daily routine, such as asking yourself the question at specific times of the day, at mealtimes, or when you take a break at work or school. You can also schedule a reminder for yourself in your computer or cell phone so that you’ll be checking in multiple times throughout the day. The more often you check in, the more quickly you’ll be able to increase your awareness, and then you’ll be able to do something differently if you need to.

How to Get to Your Wise Self

Over time, accessing your wise self will start to come more naturally for you. For now, though, you’ll need to put more of a conscious effort into it. The following techniques can help you do this.
Mental Noting with Emotions

With emotion dysregulation, your emotions are like a tornado: when you experience emotions, you get sucked up into them. They take over, spinning you out of control, just like a tornado does with anything in its path. But you can use the technique of mentally noting your emotions to watch the tornado from a safe distance. You will still feel the emotions, just as you would experience the rain and wind, hear the thunder, and see the lightning if you were standing at a safe distance from a tornado, but you won't be caught up in the whirlwind. The following exercise will help you better understand this idea.

≈ EXERCISE: Practicing Mental Noting

In your mind’s eye, picture a recent time when you felt a painful emotion. Perhaps you’ve recently argued with someone; maybe someone cut you off in traffic; or maybe you regularly experience anxiety. Whatever the scenario, imagine yourself back in that situation until you can actually feel those emotions again. Take a moment now to close your eyes and summon up those feelings before you read on.

Once you’re experiencing those feelings again, start to mentally note them. Remember, this is about witnessing whatever is happening and factually relating it to yourself; you can do this aloud or you can just think these thoughts to yourself. It might sound something like this: “My heart is starting to beat faster, and I’m feeling flushed. I’m thinking about the fight I had with my partner. I feel angry with him, and I feel hurt. I have a knot in my stomach. My throat feels tight, and I’m feeling like I’m going to cry. I have a worry thought about him leaving me, and I realize I’m also feeling afraid.”

Simply notice or sense whatever is happening—your thoughts, physical sensations, and emotions—and label them as such. You are not calling things
good or bad; you’re not going back to relive the experience, dwelling on what happened and going over and over the event in your mind. Instead, you remain in the present moment, mentally noting the experience of your emotions.

As you do this, you may start to get caught up in thinking about the disagreement: “He’s such a jerk. He always says such hurtful things. Why am I even still with him?” If so, as soon as possible, simply notice what’s happening: “I’m getting caught up thinking about the past.” And then gently, without judging yourself, return your attention to the present.

By mentally noting your experience in this way, you’re able to stay connected to your feelings by noticing them and relating them to yourself, but at the same time you’re not allowing them to take over. This process helps you to take a step back from your feelings so that they don’t overwhelm you. But remember, it takes practice and patience. It’s a good idea for you to practice as you just did, by imagining a situation that has happened recently and experiencing it again in your imagination. Over time, you’ll find that you can also use these skills in situations that trigger painful emotions for you, and this will help you to remain in your wise self—rather than your emotional self—so that you can act more effectively.

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*Self-Talk*

You may have heard people say that *positive self-talk* will help with your mood and self-esteem, and you may question how what you say to yourself can really affect you. But stop and think for a moment about how you currently talk to yourself. What kinds of messages are you regularly sending to yourself? Do you tell yourself what a nice, kind, intelligent person you are? Maybe this is sometimes how you speak to yourself, but, probably more often than not, you’re telling yourself exactly the opposite. We tend not to be very nice to ourselves but, as the saying goes, are our own worst critics.
You’ll get into this more in chapter 5 when looking at judgments. For now, it’s important for you to know that how you’re talking to yourself can influence how you’re thinking and feeling about things; talking to yourself the way you would talk to a friend can help you access your wise self.

So again, think about that recent situation that was difficult for you and that triggered some kind of painful emotion. As you start to feel that emotion well up inside of you again, try saying things to yourself that you would say to your best friend if he were feeling this way: “It’s okay that you feel like this. You’ve felt like this before, and it doesn’t last forever. You’re going to get through this.” Talking to yourself as you would talk to a friend can help you reduce the amount of emotional pain you’re feeling and get to your wise self.

**Focusing on One Moment**

A final skill that can help you get to your wise self is the DBT skill of focusing on just this one moment, and whatever happens to be in this moment (Linehan 1993). In other words, it’s really about distracting yourself from the painful emotions you’re experiencing by mindfully focusing on whatever one thing you’re doing right now. For example, if you’re lying in bed feeling down or worried, and your emotional self is telling you to stay in bed, you can get to your wise self by just mindfully focusing on one thing at a time: “I’m opening my eyes; now I’m throwing back the covers; now I’m slowly sitting up; I’m putting my feet on the floor...” This way, you’re not getting too far ahead of yourself, worrying about what the weather’s like, how bad the traffic will be, or what kind of mood the boss will be in today. Likewise, you’re not in the past, thinking about the overtime you had to put in yesterday even though you didn’t want to, or getting angry about how you work much harder than everyone else. Instead, you’re just doing one thing at a time, and you’re focusing on just this one moment.

This is mindfulness, and what’s the other part of the equation in mindfulness? Acceptance. So whatever you notice while you’re focusing on this
moment, you also work on accepting it. I recently started working with a young man named Riley and had taught him the skill of mindfulness. He came back to our second session saying that he had practiced mindfulness and found it quite helpful for the most part, but that at one point, as a result of practicing mindfulness, he had engaged in some unhealthy behaviors. He had an argument with his partner and was feeling very hurt and angry. Because he was practicing mindfulness, he told me, the pain had gotten to be too much, and he went out and spent a lot of money that he really didn’t have.

Riley was practicing only one part of mindfulness; he was focusing on the present, but he wasn’t practicing acceptance. If he had been truly accepting of his emotions, he wouldn’t have needed to fall back into that old habit of overspending in order to distract himself from his pain. In his mind, the emotional pain was unbearable, and he went shopping to help himself feel something else. Accepting his emotions would have meant that, instead, he would have called the pain just “pain”—not “unbearable” but just “hurt,” or “anger,” or “fear”—or whatever else was present. He would have labeled the pain rather than judged it. Acceptance would mean that he was acknowledging the presence of the pain rather than trying to make it disappear. Once Riley understood this, he was able to start practicing mindfulness more fully, although it remained difficult for some time.

The skill of acceptance will be covered in even more depth in chapter 8. In the meantime, why not give this new mindfulness technique a try? Whenever you notice painful emotions arising within you, practice focusing on the present moment. Whatever you happen to be doing, mindfully focus on it. If you go out for a walk, bring your attention to your surroundings and accept whatever happens to come into your awareness—whether it’s the emotion you’re feeling, a thought that pops into your head, a physical sensation, or whatever; just notice it and return your attention to your surroundings as you walk. You are doing only one thing in this one moment, and when your attention wanders from that, gently bring it back, without judgment.
So, those are three techniques that can help you to get to your wise self. The rest of this chapter will discuss some lifestyle changes that can help you spend less time thinking from your emotional self.

Balancing Your Life to Reduce Emotional Reactivity

In any effective psychotherapy, there will be a focus on lifestyle factors that feed into your emotional state. In DBT, these skills are referred to as skills that help to reduce your emotional vulnerability (Linehan 1993). Essentially, this is about looking at different areas of your life and making changes in some of those areas so that you are less emotionally reactive, spending less time in your emotional self and moving toward choosing how to act from your wise self more often. Here’s a look at what kinds of changes you might be able to make.

Improving Your Sleep Habits

Getting too much sleep and not getting enough sleep can contribute to your being more emotionally reactive (Linehan 1993). You’ve likely noticed that if you don’t sleep well, or if you don’t get the right amount of sleep, you tend to be more irritable the next day. Similarly, if you sleep too much, you probably feel sluggish, lethargic, and grumpy. In both cases, you probably also notice a lack of energy and motivation. To reduce your emotional reactivity, it’s important to figure out how much sleep you need and to stick to that amount of sleep as much as possible.

You might have heard there is a specific number of hours of sleep that we should all get. The truth is we’re all different, and this is no less true when it comes to sleep. Some people need the typical eight hours, some people need more, and others need less. It’s important to figure out what your ideal sleep
number is, and to regulate your sleep patterns so that you get that amount of sleep on a regular basis. You may already be at your ideal number of hours of sleep. Do you feel refreshed when you wake up in the morning? Do you feel like you’ve had a good night’s sleep and are ready to start your day? Or do you feel like you have no energy and you don’t want to get out of bed?

≈ EXERCISE: Determining Your Sleep Number

Here are some guidelines to help you determine what your sleep number is:

Start keeping a journal in which you record the number of hours you slept, and what you were like the next day. Did you notice you felt relatively good? Were you rested, or did you still feel tired? Did you notice an increase in your irritability? How was your concentration? Keep track of this for about two weeks, at which time you should be able to see any patterns. For example, you might notice that when you get eight hours of sleep, you typically feel okay, but if you get more or less than that, your mood isn’t as good and you’re more irritable.

If you don’t feel rested with the current amount of sleep you’re getting, you’ll want to try adjusting this amount to see if you can improve how you feel. Since the average sleep requirement is about eight hours, it will be helpful for you to work your way toward eight hours. This means that, if you’re currently sleeping ten hours each night (and waking unrefreshed or feeling irritable), then you’ll want to work on decreasing your sleep to eight hours. And, yes, this will likely mean you’ll have to set an alarm! Reduce your sleep slowly—by about fifteen minutes every couple of days—and see how you feel at each sleep number (continue recording this in your journal). Similarly, if you’re generally sleeping less than eight hours (and feeling fatigued or irritable during the day), you’ll need to increase your sleep by going to bed earlier or getting up later, in the same way, by about fifteen minutes every couple of days.
When you get to a sleep number where you feel more rested and your mood is better, you’ll have found your sleep number. Keep in mind that if you have problems finding it, there could be some health problems getting in the way, such as depression or sleep apnea, and you should consult your doctor.

Most people don’t need more than ten hours of sleep per night, and if you’re getting less than six, this probably isn’t enough. If this is a long-term pattern, however, and it seems to work for you, then stick to what works!

It’s also important for you to stick to a fairly regular sleep schedule: getting up at the same time and going to bed at the same time, give or take about a half hour. Even if this means that you have to nap occasionally, this is much easier on your body than having an irregular sleep-wake schedule; but keep the naps to less than one hour, so napping does not disrupt your sleep schedule.

≈ TEN TIPS FOR SLEEP

1. Reduce caffeine and nicotine, as these are both stimulants that will cause wakefulness. If you must have your coffee, try switching to decaffeinated or drink coffee (minimally) only earlier in the day. Remember that caffeine stays in your system for fourteen hours and is contained in some herbal teas, in most sodas, and in chocolate.

2. Avoid going to bed either after eating a large meal (your body has to work to digest it) or on an empty stomach (hunger pains can keep you awake).

3. Develop an end-of-day routine that includes calming, soothing activities that will help you wind down and prepare for sleep (such as taking a hot bath, reading a book, doing a relaxation or mindfulness exercise, or praying).
4. Use your bed only for sleep (or sex). Don’t engage in nonsleep-related activities like reading, watching television, talking on the phone, or working on your computer.

5. Make sure that your bed is as comfortable as possible, your room is a comfortable temperature, and any light coming into your room from outside is minimal.

6. Reduce the noise level in the house as much as possible, or use earplugs if necessary. If you share a bed with a partner who snores or disrupts your sleep in other ways (for example, tossing and turning, talking in his sleep), sleep in separate beds or make other arrangements that are agreeable to you both.

7. Help slow or stop racing thoughts with mindfulness exercises, or help yourself relax with relaxation techniques.

8. If you are unable to fall asleep after about thirty minutes, get out of bed and do something calming, such as reading a relaxing book or watching something calming on television. Avoid stimulating activities at this time, and return to bed when you are feeling tired.

9. If you are wakeful throughout the night, turn your clock around, so you can’t see what time it is. Watching the clock can provoke anxiety, especially when you have only a few more hours before you have to get up, and this makes it harder to fall back to sleep.

10. Try not to put pressure on yourself to fall asleep. Simply accept that right now you are awake, and concentrate on doing an activity mindfully, in order to distract yourself from judgmental or distressing thoughts about not sleeping.
Eating Healthy

Eating healthy is another way to reduce your emotional reactivity (Linehan 1993). Not eating can result in headaches, irritability, nausea, shakiness, and so on, all of which makes it more difficult for you to remain in control of your emotions. But overeating can also trigger painful emotions: you may judge yourself for overeating, or you may also feel lethargic, and the discomfort of being too full can lead to irritability. The solution is to eat three meals and a few light snacks every day, which provides regular fuel for your body and helps keep things balanced. This will improve your mood and energy level and allow you to manage your emotions more effectively.

You may also notice a correlation between your mood and certain foods. One woman I know has found that dairy makes her more irritable. Sugar and wheat are other foods that commonly trigger emotional problems. If you’re interested in pursuing a more holistic approach to managing your emotions, you could experiment by cutting out a certain food from your diet for a time (two weeks is usually a good trial period) and paying close attention to see if this makes any difference for your mood. If you don’t notice anything, you can reintroduce that food into your diet. If you notice that you have more control over your emotions or that you feel less irritable or down, then you might want to consider permanently cutting that food from your diet.

Taking Care of Yourself Physically

If you have a physical illness that requires medication or other treatment (like physiotherapy), it’s important that you take your medication and treat your illness as suggested by your doctor (Linehan 1993). Some physical illnesses can actually make you more emotional, making it harder for you to manage your emotions and making it less likely that you’ll be able to act from your wise self. For example, people with diabetes or hypoglycemia might notice mood fluctuations depending on their blood sugar level; people with
blood pressure problems might notice feelings of anxiety that are actually related to their physical health.

Having chronic pain can make managing your emotions difficult. Pain makes us grumpy; if you’re experiencing pain regularly, you will be more emotionally reactive unless you pay mindful attention to the pain and practice skills to help you manage your emotions.

_Avoiding Drugs and Alcohol_

Illicit drugs and alcohol are known as _mood-altering substances_ because they change your emotional state. You have no control over this change, and it’s not always a positive one. The consequences of using substances vary depending on the type of drug, but they can include the following:

* depression (alcohol is a depressant)

* anxiety

* paranoia

* disinhibition

Disinhibition leads to impulsive behaviors, such as sexual promiscuity; overexpression of emotions, which may result in aggression; dangerous driving; or other risky actions. Using substances can also impact your mood over a longer term. Having a hangover or crashing from a high usually leaves people feeling irritable, tired, and physically unwell. Some people notice that their mood is affected for days after drinking or using drugs. So, if you want to reduce your emotional reactivity and increase the degree of control you have over your emotions, one good way to start is by eliminating or at least reducing your use of drugs and alcohol.
**Getting Physical Exercise**

In addition to just being physically good for you, cardiovascular exercise is a natural antidepressant, triggering the release of endorphins in your brain. So by increasing the amount of exercise you’re doing on a regular basis, you will improve your emotional state. Ideally, you want to exercise for about twenty minutes at least three times weekly, but anything more than what you’re doing now will be helpful.

If you haven’t exercised in a while, you might want to check with your doctor to make sure there are no physical obstacles to exercise. Then find ways to incorporate exercise into your life on a regular basis: walking, taking up a sport, or going to the gym. It doesn’t matter how you do it as long as you’re getting your heart rate up. If you can find something that’s fun for you, it will make it easier to exercise on a regular basis. Also, having a partner can help because having that commitment makes it harder to avoid doing.

**Breathing Well**

Breathing deeply sends oxygen to the thinking parts of your brain, which can help you to access your wise self, even when you are feeling intense emotions. Unfortunately, at some point in our lives, most of us forget how to breathe properly. The next exercise will show you how to do this with abdominal breathing, or breathing from your diaphragm. This is how you are supposed to breathe, and, in fact, it’s how you breathe when you’re fast asleep or completely relaxed. Doing this exercise—breathing as though you are relaxed—sends signals to your brain that you are relaxed, and this actually helps you to relax.
EXERCISE: Abdominal Breathing

Take a moment right now to notice how you’re breathing: are you breathing deeply or shallowly? What’s moving more when you inhale, your chest or your belly? Are your breaths coming quickly or slowly?

Now sit in a chair and lean back comfortably. Place your fingers on your stomach, so that the tips of your fingers are just slightly touching, right around the area of your belly button. When you breathe in, you should see your fingertips rise slightly as your belly inflates; as you exhale, your fingertips will come back together again as your stomach deflates. If you haven’t been breathing like this naturally, it may feel forced or unnatural right now. That’s okay: do it anyway. You may find that you have to push the air down into your diaphragm to inflate your belly; if you have a really hard time, you may want to try doing this exercise lying down, which will make it a little easier to get the air down farther, past your chest. Do this for a few moments, being mindful of your breath, just noticing how it feels to breathe, watching your belly rise and fall with your breath. When your attention wanders from your breath, just notice that this happens and bring your attention back.

Doing abdominal breathing can help you calm yourself when you are experiencing intense emotions, so you can access your wise self when it feels like your emotions are hijacking you. But don’t fall into the trap of using this (or any other) mindfulness exercise only when you need it. If you breathe this way on a regular basis, your body will naturally start to breathe this way once again. That means that your overall level of painful emotions will decrease as you regularly breathe as though relaxed. Of course, don’t forget that the more you practice something, the more it will come naturally to you, so you’ll also have an easier time using this exercise to help you feel calmer when emotions are heightened.
Wrapping Up

Being aware of the three different ways we think about things can really help you gain some control over your emotional responses. Quite often, just knowing about these states and being able to name them can help you become more aware of when you're in your emotional self. Throughout this book, you'll learn more skills to help you act from your wise self. In the meantime, though, you have learned about some concrete lifestyle changes that will decrease the likelihood that you will be controlled by your emotions. Instead of simply reacting, you'll be more likely to choose how you would like to act in any given situation.

A lot of what’s been discussed in this chapter may seem like common sense, but as we all know, common sense isn’t always so commonly acted upon! It’s important to really consider what changes you need to make in your life and to start working on making those changes. They might not come easily, so take your time and be gentle with yourself, but work hard. After you feel like you’ve made some progress with those changes, come back to this book and learn some more.
As a child, you may have missed out on some things that are an important part of managing emotions in a healthy way. Perhaps you have certain beliefs about emotions that are actually only myths. A lack of information combined with misinformation can make it more difficult to avoid acting from your emotional self. So before going any further, it’s important to get all the facts.

What Is an Emotion?

The words “emotion” and “feeling” are commonly used interchangeably, but an emotion consists of much more than simply how we feel. Marsha Linehan (1993) has referred to emotions as full-system responses, because they include physiological reactions (changes in both body chemistry and body language)
and thoughts (triggering images, memories, and action urges), as well as the actual feeling we’re experiencing (such as the feeling of sadness, anger, anxiety, or whatever). For example, when you experience the feeling of anger, it’s not just a feeling; there is that, of course, but you’ll also experience physiological reactions: you might feel flushed, your heart rate will increase, your breathing might speed up, your muscles might tense, and so on. You’ll also experience angry thoughts (again, these could be thoughts about the current situation, as well as images or memories), and you’ll often experience an urge to act (for example, you might want to swear, yell, or throw something). So you can see that emotions are a lot more than just how we feel.

Although some expressions of emotion are universal (such as crying when you’re sad, frowning when you’re angry), no two people will experience an emotion identically. For each emotion, a wide variety of physiological sensations, thoughts, and urges are possible. In fact, you may have different experiences of the same emotion, depending on the situation you’re in, the people involved, the environment, and other factors. For example, the feeling of grief you would experience if a friend died would be different from your experience of grief if a parent or other family member died. Likewise, the feeling of happiness you’d experience upon seeing a friend whom you haven’t seen in a few weeks would be different from the feeling of happiness that you would experience if you hadn’t seen that same person in a year. Rest assured, however, that in spite of these differences, there are commonalities in all our emotional experiences, so you can learn to identify your emotions if you’re not already able to do so.

The Role of Emotions

Emotions serve important functions and are very necessary, even though they can be really painful at times. Think of your emotions as another sense, just like your vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, because they provide
information just like any of those other senses. Here are some of the roles your emotions play:

**Motivation**

Some emotions are prompts for action (Linehan 1993). For example, anger arises when something is occurring that you don’t like, motivating you to act to change the situation. Another example is fear, which motivates you to flee, fight, freeze, or faint in order to survive when you are being threatened (Beck, Emery, and Greenberg 1985).

In these situations, your emotions not only motivate you; they also prepare you to act by causing physiological changes in your body. For example, the adrenaline rush of anger causes your blood pressure to increase and your muscles to tense up, readying you for action; fear also does this, priming you to flee the situation or to stay and fight.

**Information**

Emotions provide you with information about a situation that you want to change in some way to make it suit your needs better (Campos, Campos, and Barrett 1989). For example, anger arises to help you see that there is something you think is unfair about a situation; guilt may arise to inform you that you have done something that doesn’t match your morals and values.

Your emotions may also act as a form of self-communication, providing you with emotional information before your brain has had time to rationally process the concrete information it’s receiving from your senses (Linehan 1993). For example, when you see someone with a gun, your fear provides you with information that gets you moving before you have time to stop and think about how to respond.
Communication

Emotions help you communicate with others more effectively (Linehan 1993). First, because of the universal facial expressions and body language associated with emotions, we instinctively recognize these emotions in others. This means that someone will be able to guess that you’re feeling sad if you’re crying or that you’re feeling angry if you’re frowning and your hands are clenched into fists. When someone recognizes how you feel (or you recognize how someone else feels), that person can empathize with you and act in an emotionally appropriate way, such as consoling you when you’re feeling sad.

Your emotions can also motivate you to communicate with others about something, such as in the earlier example of anger, which could prompt you to try to change a situation that you’re not happy with.

So emotions are important for a variety of reasons. But as important as they are, they can also be overwhelming. To make them less overwhelming, you need to be able to recognize and identify them.

Naming Your Emotions

Have you ever noticed that you are feeling something but you’re not sure what? You know you feel bad or upset, but you can’t actually put a name on the feeling you’re experiencing? Many people walk around in this emotional fog. The problem is that, if you don’t know what you’re feeling, you can’t expect to change it. It’s a well-known fact that people who are able to identify their emotions are more able to manage them. So it’s very important that you become more familiar with the range of emotions that you experience. Over time and with practice, you’ll become more familiar with your emotions and better at identifying them, giving you the opportunity to do something to change them if you want to.
The first thing you’ll need to do is stop saying that you feel “bad” or “upset.” These are generic words that don’t actually describe a specific emotion. You’ll find it easier to name what you’re feeling if you think of your emotions as falling into six general categories: anger, fear, sadness, shame or guilt, love, and happiness. The following sections will discuss these emotions in terms of the physical sensations and thoughts that often accompany them, as well as the situations in which they tend to arise.

**Anger**

For some people, anger is almost a default emotion. If this describes you, you’ll notice that you become angry whenever anything emotional happens. For example, someone dies, and you feel anger rather than sadness; a friend tells you that you’ve hurt her feelings, and you become angry rather than remorseful. Often this anger just gets in the way. So it’s important to first think about when it’s really effective to feel anger; here are some examples:

* When someone treats you disrespectfully (for example, insults you)
* When someone threatens you (emotionally or physically)
* When you are unable to reach an important goal
* When you believe that something is unfair or unjust (for example, that you have been treated unfairly or that something happening in the world is unfair)

Anger causes an adrenaline rush; it’s part of the fight-or-flight response, in which your body gears up to either stand and fight (anger) or flee (fear). So when you’re experiencing anger, you’ll often notice an increase in your heart rate and your breathing, your breathing becomes shallow, you feel flushed,
your muscles tense up, and you feel shaky. Your thoughts tend to become judgmental (you might say to yourself, “What a jerk!” or “This shouldn’t be happening. It’s completely ridiculous!”). As well, you might notice that your mind takes you back to other times when you’ve felt this angry; this is called state-dependent memory, when your mind goes hunting for other times when you’ve had this emotion, and the memories it comes up with increase the emotion you’re currently feeling. Finally, the urges that often accompany anger are acting-out urges, such as the urge to yell or scream, to throw something or hit someone, or to lash out in verbally hurtful ways.

Here are some other words to describe different types of anger: annoyed, irritated, frustrated, bitter, enraged, furious, outraged, mad, irate, aggravated, indignant, hostile, resentful, exasperated, bothered, dissatisfied.

**Fear**

Fear also causes an adrenaline rush and results in the same fight-or-flight response that anger does: your heart rate and breathing quicken, your breathing becomes shallow, you feel flushed, your muscles tense up, you feel shaky, and so on. With fear, you might also find that you become dizzy or light-headed, feel nauseous, and experience chest pain and a tightness or heaviness in the chest.

Because the same fight-or-flight response is triggered when you feel anger or fear, the similar sensations can make it difficult to figure out which emotion it is that you’re feeling, so it’s important to think hard about the situation you’re in when the emotion arises and to think about your thoughts and urges in this situation.

Here are some examples of situations in which it would make sense for you would be afraid:

* When you’re in a new or unfamiliar situation or with people you don’t know
* When someone or something is threatening you (for example, someone picks a fight with you at a club, or a dangerous-looking dog that you don’t know approaches you)

* When someone you care about is being hurt or threatened

* When you think that you may lose someone or something important to you (for example, during an argument with someone you care about, you might fear that the relationship will end; or during a disagreement with your boss, you may be fearful that you could lose your job)

Here are some other words to describe different types of fear: afraid, worried, nervous, scared, anxious, panicked, terrified, distraught, disturbed, stressed, distressed, tense, frantic, overwhelmed, alarmed, disconcerted.

**Sadness**

How does sadness feel physically? The urge to cry often accompanies sadness, so you might experience tightness in your chest and throat. It’s also common to feel tired or run-down, experience a decrease in your energy level, feel lethargic, or want to stay in bed all day. You might find that you don’t get pleasure out of activities you once enjoyed and that you feel empty inside. The urges that accompany sadness are often about isolating yourself and withdrawing from others.

Sadness arises for many different reasons; here are some examples of situations in which you would be likely to feel sad:

* When you lose someone you care about (such as when a relationship ends or when someone dies)
Calming the Emotional Storm

* When you are unable to meet an important goal (such as not getting a job you wanted or not getting into the school you really wanted to go to; being rejected by someone you had a crush on)

* When someone you care about is feeling sad or hurt

Here are some other words to describe different types of sadness: grieving, depressed, hopeless, despairing, heartbroken, glum, unhappy, sorrowful, troubled, despondent, low, miserable, distressed, forlorn, dreary, disheartened.

**Shame or Guilt**

Shame and guilt are two different feelings. Shame arises when you feel that other people are judging you for something. You feel guilt when you are judging yourself. It makes sense, then, that you’ll quite often experience both of these emotions at once: when you’ve done something that goes against your morals and values, you judge yourself for this, and you expect that others are judging you as well. As with sadness, the urge with shame or guilt is often to hide away, to isolate yourself and withdraw from people around you. Here are some examples of when you might feel shame or guilt:

* When you do something you believe is wrong or immoral (you feel guilt) or something that others believe is wrong or immoral (you feel shame). For example, someone who enjoys being dominated during sex may not experience guilt for his sexual preferences because he doesn’t feel he’s doing anything immoral, but he may experience shame if others believe his preferences are immoral

* When you are criticized in front of others
* When you think about or are reminded of something immoral that you did in the past or when someone else finds out that you did something immoral

* When someone whose opinion you value rejects or criticizes you for something you expected praise for (such as doing something you think is helpful for a team member at work and receiving the feedback that you shouldn’t have done it)

Shame and guilt often come with some of the physical sensations that accompany sadness and fear; you might have the urge to cry or might experience tightness in your chest and throat. Feeling a sense of shame, you might blush and experience the nervousness that accompanies fear. Feeling shame or guilt might also give you an urge to try to rectify the situation, such as trying to apologize if you’ve hurt someone.

Here are some other words to describe different types of shame or guilt: ashamed, embarrassed, humiliated, mortified, degraded, disgraced, guilty, apologetic, contrite, sorry, regretful, self-disgust, self-conscious, remorseful, blamed, repentant.

**Love**

Love is an emotion that you feel for other people, your pets, and hopefully yourself, as well. You’re likely to experience love in these kinds of situations:

* When you have developed feelings for someone because you’re attracted to the person physically and emotionally

* When you are a parent: seeing your child do something you’re proud of; watching him sleep; hearing her say she loves you; watching him do something for the first time
Calming the Emotional Storm

* When you have a pet: your dog greeting you at the front door; your cat jumping into your lap and purring; your dog cuddling up with you in bed

When you experience the feeling of love, you'll likely experience a general increase in positive emotions: you feel excited about seeing someone; you enjoy things more; you feel more secure, relaxed, and at peace. If you love a person, you might also notice an increase in your energy level and find that you want to be with this person more often. Your thoughts will often be about this person, making plans for the future, thinking about the times you've spent together, and so on.

Here are some words to describe different types of love: caring, fondness, longing, lust, affection, love-struck, infatuated, connected, accepted, adoring, desiring, attraction, liking, devoted, passionate, cherishing.

**Happiness**

Happiness arises within you when things are going well. When you feel happy, you want to smile, and you want to share your happiness with others. The urges that accompany happiness will depend on the situation that you're happy about: you might want to hug someone you're happy to see; if you've received some news that has made you happy, you might feel excited and want to call others to share that news. Happiness often makes people more active and more social; you have more energy and want to do more things because you feel good.

But happiness is an emotion that we often have unrealistic expectations about: people often believe that they should feel happy all the time and then question why they don't. In my experience, most of us don't live our lives in a state of happiness; we may feel content with life or satisfied or peaceful, but the emotion of happiness is not something that typically lasts a long time.
When you buy a new house, get married, or have children, you’ll feel happy; when you get that job you’ve been working toward, win an award for your work, or reach some other big goal in your life, you’ll feel happy. In other words, there will be events in your life that cause you to feel happy, but for the most part, the initial happiness will fade and turn into the longer-lasting emotions of contentment, satisfaction, or peace.

Here are some other words to describe different types of happiness: joyful, ecstatic, glad, euphoric, amused, delighted, satisfied, proud, pleased, honored, relaxed, serene, tranquil, content, elated, relieved.

≈ EXERCISE: Naming Your Emotions

Sitting quietly or lying down, bring your attention to your body, noticing your posture and becoming aware of any physical sensations that are present. Gradually, expand this awareness to any emotional sensations that are in your body in this moment, and observe them without judging them. Pay attention to what’s taking place in your body and in your mind, mentally noting these experiences, noticing what’s happening without judgment, even if it’s not what you want or like.

Next, gently bring your attention to your breath. Drawing in a deep breath and slowly releasing it, ask yourself the question “What emotion is here?” and just allow your attention to be drawn to whatever emotion makes itself known. Be open to it and curious about it. Describe it in as much detail as you can. Can you put a name on it? If you can, name it. Don’t judge it if it’s a painful emotion, just acknowledge its presence.

You might not have any strong emotions when you do this exercise, and that’s fine; perhaps you feel simply content, curious, or even bored. Whatever is there, just notice it without judgment. Once you’ve identified the emotion, repeat the name of it to yourself in an open and gentle way: for example, “content, content, content” or “bored, bored, bored.” If you find yourself
Calming the Emotional Storm

getting caught up in the emotion or are feeling overwhelmed by it, go back to focusing on your breathing until you feel calmer again.

Continue to do this for a few minutes, simply noticing any emotions that are present and gently acknowledging them. If you can’t find an emotion, it’s okay. If you can’t name it, that’s okay too. Just notice the experience of the emotion. After you’ve completed this exercise, you can review the previous discussion of six basic emotions and see if this helps you to identify your own.

≈

Practicing this mindfulness exercise regularly will help you become more familiar with how your emotions feel. You may want to make notes on how you experience your emotions, especially if you have difficulty naming them. Increasing your objective awareness of your emotions by practicing mindfulness can help you understand the patterns of automatic responding which you engage in and can help you to stop yourself from engaging in those habitual, automatic behaviors (Wilkinson-Tough et al. 2010).

How Emotions, Thoughts, and Behaviors Connect

The following diagram is the typical way in which the connection between emotions, thoughts, and behaviors is described in cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT): how you feel about a situation will affect how you think and behave in that situation; how you think about a situation will influence how you feel and behave in the situation; and how you act in a situation will have an effect on how you think and feel about that situation. Figure 1 shows this relationship:
These three elements are so interrelated, it’s easy to confuse them; for example, when I ask people what they’re feeling about something, they’ll often respond by telling me their thoughts about it instead. Naomi, for instance, had a hard time identifying her emotions; in one session, she was telling me about her job hunt and how tired she was of being unemployed and of having to go through the process of looking for work every day. When I asked her how she felt about this, she responded that she felt “useless and exhausted.” I pointed out to Naomi that these aren’t emotions, and asked her again how she felt about this situation; it took her several tries to identify that she was feeling frustrated and anxious.

One reason for this difficulty in describing our feelings is that our emotions and thoughts happen so quickly and so automatically that we don’t usually stop to think about them before we act. But separating your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors is an important step in managing your emotions more effectively.

When trying to determine how you feel about something, you need to keep in mind the six main emotions: anger, fear, sadness, shame or guilt, love, and happiness. If your emotion doesn’t seem to be described by one of these words, you can try thinking in degrees. For example, you might not be “angry,”
but perhaps you feel annoyed, frustrated, or irritated; or perhaps you don’t feel “fearful,” but you are anxious, worried, or nervous.

Your behaviors are simply how you act: not what you thought about doing or what you felt like doing but how you actually behaved in the situation. And your thoughts, of course, are what you think about the situation. The following story about Marina may help to clarify the differences between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

* Marina’s Story

Marina’s mother was always asking Marina when she was going to find a husband and when she was going to have children. This not only annoyed Marina, but it also got her thinking about the same things, and then she would get down on herself for not having a family yet. So when her mother brought this up yet again, when they were speaking on the telephone, Marina lost her temper and hung up on her. She was furious with her mother and thought to herself, “She’s always trying to make me feel bad about myself. I’m obviously a huge disappointment to my family.”

Looking at Marina’s situation and the argument she had with her mother, can you identify her feelings, thoughts, and behaviors? First, how did Marina feel about this situation? She was angry (what she described as “annoyed” and then “furious”) and probably sad, given what she thought about the situation (“I’m obviously such a huge disappointment to my family”). She also had the thought “My mother wants to make me feel bad.” And her behavior was to hang up on her mother.

According to CBT, if Marina could change her behavior or her thoughts, this might help her feel differently about the situation. For example, the behavior of hanging up on her mother was an aggressive one; if she could have changed this to a less aggressive behavior—such as telling her mother...
that she had to go and then hanging up—instead of acting on her urge to lash out, she might have found that she felt less angry at her mother. Or if Marina could change her thoughts about the situation, she might find she would feel differently as well. For example, when she noticed herself thinking, “She’s always trying to make me feel bad about myself,” Marina could have changed this to a more neutral thought, such as “My mother often asks me these questions, and it frustrates me.”

The Role of Interpretations

It’s also important to recognize that usually we’re not responding emotionally to the situation that’s occurring, but rather we’re responding to our interpretation of that event. In other words, an event takes place, our mind forms some kind of interpretation of that event, and in response to that interpretation, we experience an emotion, as figure 2 illustrates:

**FIGURE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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In Marina’s situation with her mother, for example, Marina isn’t experiencing anger in direct relation to the conversation she had with her mother. Rather, her mother made a statement (the situation), which Marina interpreted in a hurtful way (interpretation: “She’s always trying to make me feel bad about myself”), and this caused her to feel hurt and angry (emotion).

Sometimes, of course, your emotion does happen in direct response to an event: you’re standing on the eighteenth-floor balcony of an apartment building, and you feel fear; or you find out that someone you love has died, and you feel grief. These are some instances where our emotional response is immediate, requiring no interpretation. But for the most part, the emotions we experience are in response to our interpretations. The good news is that practicing
mindfulness exercises that have you just noticing your thoughts and emotions will help you become more aware of your interpretations—and your thoughts in general—so that you can learn to examine these internal events and decide whether or not they are valid.

**Thoughts and Feelings Are Not Facts**

Another important step in managing your emotions more effectively is to recognize that your thoughts and your emotions are not facts; they just reflect your experience or perception of a situation. In other words, just because something feels a certain way doesn’t mean it’s the truth, and just because you think something doesn’t mean it’s a fact. For instance, I doubt that Marina’s mother asked her about her personal life because she was trying to make Marina feel bad; it’s more likely that she was looking forward to being a grandmother and to seeing her daughter happy with a family of her own. Here’s another example to make this point even clearer.

* Bella’s Story

Bella had quit her last job because it had become too overwhelming and she’d thought she was ineffective in her work. She finally found a new job but was quite anxious about starting after being out of work for five months. For the first few weeks, Bella was worried that she wasn't going to be able to do this job either. She was terrified that her employer thought she was incompetent. The possibility that she would fail at this job too was all Bella could think about, and she almost quit a number of times, even though she quite liked the new job, because she thought her boss was unhappy with her.

Bella was treating her thoughts and feelings as facts. But just because Bella was worried that her boss was unhappy with her didn't make it true; and
just because she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to do the job didn’t mean she would be unable to do it. Her thoughts and feelings were just thoughts and feelings—not facts. The fact was, actually, that Bella did quite well in her new job. There was a big learning curve, but she received very positive feedback at her three-month review, and her supervisors continued to express their pleasure with Bella’s work long after that. Her colleagues found her pleasant and professional to work with, and she became a valuable member of the team.

Hopefully, you can see from this example that just because we have thoughts and feelings about a situation, it doesn’t mean that those thoughts and feelings are accurate reflections of what is happening. Another concept that is relevant here, and that can also help you to see why we have such a hard time differentiating between our thoughts and emotions, is what CBT theorist Aaron Beck called automatic thoughts (1976). Beck noted that we have a running dialogue in our minds about what we are experiencing: about what our senses are telling us, about how we feel physically and emotionally, about what we believe about a situation, and so on. Beck recognized that these automatic thoughts dictate how we will feel about a situation, which in turn influences how we will behave. But the problem with automatic thoughts is that they happen so automatically that we’re often unaware that they’re occurring. These thoughts happen very quickly, almost like a reflex, and yet they seem realistic and believable (Beck 1976). The result is that we often don’t stop to question these automatic thoughts; instead, we act as though these thoughts were facts. Here’s an example to help illustrate this idea.

* Tess and Oliver

*Tess and Oliver had recently moved into their first home, and they soon found that they had different ideas about housekeeping. Tess had a tendency to leave her clothes on the bedroom floor, and Oliver was getting tired of picking up after her or of asking Tess to clean up after herself. One day Oliver came home from work to another mess; his first thought was
“She’s only doing this because she knows it drives me crazy.” This thought triggered intense anger for Oliver. He didn’t stop to assess the thought. Once it entered his head, he just accepted it as the truth, and that’s how he acted: like Tess was simply trying to push his buttons.

Since Tess was away, and he was therefore unable to direct his anger at her, Oliver grabbed all of the clothes that were on the floor, took them outside, and burned them. When he had finally calmed down a bit, he realized how irrationally he had acted and that he had acted on that one thought: that this was something Tess was doing purposely to anger him. Oliver felt remorse at that point, realizing that he had overreacted, but of course, by that time, the damage was done.

Note that although your automatic thoughts and the resulting feelings will sometimes provide you with accurate information about a situation, you need to assess your thoughts carefully rather than assume that they are valid. It’s also important to remember that your feelings are always valid: how you feel is simply how you feel. Behavior, however, is another matter. While we don’t want to judge our emotions (see chapter 4), we do have to evaluate our behavior to determine if it’s acceptable or not.

Using Mindfulness to Let Thoughts Go

Oh, if I had a dime for every time someone asked me the question “How do I get rid of these thoughts?” Usually, people don’t like the answer: the way to get rid of a thought is to stop trying to get rid of it. If you’ve ever tried to stop thinking about something, you know it doesn’t work; the harder you try not to think about it, the more you end up thinking about it. As Christopher Germer (2009, 24) notes, “When you resist something, it goes into the basement and lifts weights!” In other words, the more you resist it, the stronger it gets.
Part of the problem is with our brain: when we're trying not to think about something, our brain has to think of it in order to know what not to think about! Confused? Here's an exercise: for the next thirty seconds, no matter what, don't think about pink elephants. Try as hard as you can to avoid thinking about pink elephants in any way, shape, or form. You can close your eyes if this makes it easier for you, but do your best not to picture their big floppy ears, their thick wrinkly trunks, and their long, thin tails.

So how did you do? Most people will have their minds full of pink elephants because trying not to think about them doesn't work. In fact, studies have found that trying to suppress thoughts actually triggers an increase in those thoughts; and that the longer people try to suppress those thoughts, the more they end up thinking about them (Wilkinson-Tough et al. 2010).

These same researchers note that the key to stopping thinking about something is mindfulness, or practicing allowing thoughts to simply pass through your mind without either hanging on to them or trying to get rid of or suppress them. In other words, if you are experiencing thoughts that are distressing to you and that you want to stop thinking about, just acknowledge those thoughts: let them come without trying to stop them; notice, without judgment, that they’re there; and gradually, other thoughts will replace them. Those distressing thoughts, of course, may come back, but as long as you continue to simply acknowledge their presence, they will once again dissipate. Mindfulness helps you to change your relationship to your experience: rather than being afraid of or angry about these thoughts, you accept them; and by accepting them, you give them no reason to stick around.

Some researchers suggest that the self-regulation of attention and awareness, acceptance, and openness to experience of the present moment cultivated by mindfulness helps us to take an objective, observational stance toward our internal experience. In turn, this allows us to accept our thoughts and emotions as just that, rather than taking them as a literal reflection of reality (Wilkinson-Tough et al. 2010).
EXERCISE: Observing Your Thoughts and Emotions

Take a few minutes now to practice the following mindfulness exercise.

Set a timer for no more than five minutes. Sitting or lying down in a comfortable position, begin to notice your internal experience. Mentally note whatever thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations come into your awareness. Label whatever you notice as a thought, emotion, or physical sensation. For example, if you have the thought that “this is a waste of time,” label it as a thought. If you notice you are feeling anxious, label this as an emotion. Observe and describe to yourself whatever you happen to notice, without judging the experience. You might notice that the same thoughts keep coming up over and over again; simply acknowledge these thoughts each time, labeling them nonjudgmentally. Continue to observe and describe your experience in this way until the timer goes off.

Doing this exercise will assist you in differentiating between your thoughts and emotions, accepting these as just thoughts and emotions, and learning to identify your interpretations. Once you become more comfortable with it, feel free to increase the amount of time for this practice.

TEN MYTHS ABOUT EMOTIONS

If you have faulty beliefs about emotions, it will only make it more difficult for you to manage your emotions effectively. The following are some of the more common myths that people believe about the way they feel. Each myth is followed by a brief discussion of why this belief is faulty.

1. **There is a right way and a wrong way to feel in every situation.** This is untrue. Everyone experiences different emotions about the same event,
because their interpretations of that event will vary. Your emotional response will also depend on many other factors, such as your involvement in the situation, your relationship to others involved, your state of mind before the event took place, and so on. It’s important to remember that emotions are not good or bad, right or wrong; however you feel in a situation is the way you should feel.

2. **It’s not good or healthy to feel angry.** Myth. Anger is a natural human emotion; it serves a purpose, as we discussed earlier, and so therefore it is good, and it is healthy. What may not be positive or healthy is the way you’re expressing that emotion.

3. **Happy or emotionally healthy people don’t experience painful emotions.** This is not true! Even the happiest people have pain in their lives sometimes; life is all about the good and the bad, pain and joy. Life is naturally going to have painful moments, and any person is going to experience pain as a result of those moments, regardless of how happy or well adjusted the person is.

4. **Feeling sad (or another emotion) is weak.** Again, this is a myth. Emotions arise for a reason, to motivate you to change something, to help you communicate, and so on. The emotion is normal and healthy. Your response to the emotion might not be healthy, and if that’s the case, that’s what you need to focus on: without self-judgment, determining what would be a healthier course of action that could help you cope with this intense emotion.

5. **Painful emotions are destructive.** False. It’s not the emotion that’s destructive; it’s how you choose to act because of the emotion. For example, feeling angry doesn’t physically hurt you or anyone else; it’s when you choose to act in a physically violent way because of the anger that people get hurt.
6. **If others don't approve of how you feel, you shouldn't feel this way.** As noted in myth number one, people will feel differently about a situation depending on their interpretation of the event and other factors. There is no right or wrong way to feel, ever. If others seem to judge you for the feeling you're experiencing, remind yourself that the way you feel is just the way you feel, and it's okay.

7. **Painful emotions are bad and need to be fixed.** Another myth. Painful emotions are painful, but that doesn't make them bad. Because all of our emotions serve a function, I could actually argue that all emotions are good! They come up for a reason. Granted, once you realize why an emotion is there, you likely don't want that uncomfortable emotion hanging around; there are things you can do to help yourself with this. For now, simply recognize that no emotion needs to be fixed.

8. **Being emotional means being out of control.** Not necessarily true; perhaps right now, whenever you're emotional, you are out of control. But that's what this book is all about: how to manage your emotions more effectively so that you remain in control even when you experience strong emotions.

9. **It's not healthy to express your emotions.** Quite the opposite: it's not healthy if you don't express your emotions! Expressing your emotions in an assertive way is very healthy. Failing to express your emotions, or expressing them in an aggressive or passive way, is not effective and can even be harmful.

10. **Painful emotions will never go away if you don't act to make them go away.** Another myth. The truth is that painful emotions often go away without us having to do anything about them. Trying to make them go away actually keeps them hanging around longer.
Wrapping Up

This chapter covered a lot of information about emotions. By now, you should understand that it’s important to be able to name your emotions and that all emotions serve a purpose. You’ve also learned about the connection between how we feel, think, and behave. All of this information will be helpful as you begin to work on regulating your emotional responses. You should continue to practice the mindfulness exercises presented in this chapter. When you think you’re well-practiced in naming your emotions and feel you’re ready, you can move on to the next chapter. There, you’ll start to look at some skills that can help you manage your emotions more effectively.
CHAPTER 4

Quieting Your Emotions

The last chapter presented a lot of information to help you understand your emotions. In this chapter, you will see how your beliefs about emotions affect your experience of these emotions, and you will explore where these beliefs have come from. You will also learn how to use the skill of self-validation to reduce your emotional pain and help you tolerate your emotions.

Messages about Emotions

We all receive messages about emotions. Sometimes these messages are positive or neutral, but quite often they’re negative. For instance, think for a moment about the messages we receive from society and through the media about emotions, or the stereotypes that are out there about what’s okay and what’s not: Men shouldn’t cry or really even talk about their emotions; they
are the “rational” gender, while women are seen as being ruled by their feelings. An exception, of course, is anger; it’s perfectly okay for men to express their anger, but it’s not okay for women. How helpful are these stereotypes? Not at all, and these are only the messages we receive from society.

Now take a moment to think about the messages you’ve received from your own family. Did you get positive or neutral messages about emotions? That they’re there for a reason, that it’s okay to feel them, that they’re natural? Or did you grow up thinking that certain (or all) emotions are bad, and that you shouldn’t express them or even feel them? These kinds of messages can be blatant or subtle. Take a look at the following stories to help you think about the messages you’ve received in your own life.

* Brad’s Story

Brad was an emotional child. He cried when he was sad or hurt. He would tell his parents when something had scared him. He would call his friends to share his excitement when something positive had happened. As he got older, the kids at school began teasing him, especially when he cried, calling him a “girl” and a “crybaby.” When he told his parents about this, his father lectured Brad that he had to “toughen up,” or kids would continue to target him. After that, whenever Brad cried or was otherwise emotional, Brad’s parents would give him the message that he had to suck it up and deal with it, that he was a big boy now and shouldn’t be crying or that he was being silly for being frightened of something.

Gradually, over time, Brad learned from his parents and his peers that it wasn’t okay to feel these emotions. As an adult, he did his best to hide his feelings because he thought they made him weak. Over time, though, Brad found that he could ignore or push away his emotions for only so long before he’d end up exploding at people, and this was damaging to his relationships.
* Serena’s Story

Serena’s parents fought a lot when she was growing up. Although they made a point of never fighting in front of her and her siblings, Serena remembers hearing her parents argue after her father came home from work late at night. Her dad would start yelling, her mother would start crying, and then her dad would tell her to stop it. “Never mind trying to guilt-trip me,” “Your blubbering is only going to make things worse,” and “I can’t take your constant whining,” he would yell at her mother. Hearing her father get so angry at her mother for crying and being sad and hurt, Serena began trying to hide her own emotions when she was feeling sad and wanted to cry, because she didn’t want to risk her father’s anger.

As an adult, Serena did her best to hide her feelings, especially when she thought that others wouldn’t like how she was feeling. Pushing her feelings away like this, however, caused Serena to feel angry a lot, and she found that since she couldn’t express this anger at others for fear of their reaction, she turned it inward, toward herself. This led to feelings of depression and anxiety, and often had her feeling out of control and acting in ways that she would later regret (like overeating and drinking) to escape her emotions.

* Carlos’s Story

Carlos’s father died when he was quite young, and his mother was left to raise him and his two brothers on her own. For a while after his father died, Carlos would talk to his mom about how much he missed his father, and he would allow himself to cry with her and to talk about his fear of the future, because it helped him feel better. Soon, though, he began to see that his sadness and anxiety seemed to make his mother feel worse; she would become more anxious and sad and would often go to her room to
be alone. Carlos knew his mom had a lot on her plate. She had gone back to work to support the family after his father died, and she often looked tired. He also knew that she must miss his dad an awful lot, and that she must also be afraid, so he decided to stop burdening his mom with his feelings. Carlos started doing his best to hide his feelings, thinking that he had to be the strong one, especially since he was the oldest, and he had to help his mother.

As an adult, Carlos saw emotions as weak and thought that expressing his pain would only burden the people he cared about. Instead, he would hide his emotions from others but, as a result, would frequently have panic attacks and felt anxious most of the time.

You can see from these three stories that we get messages about emotions in different ways. Some, like in Brad’s story, are more blatant, where we’re told outright that it’s not okay for us to feel something. For others, those messages are more subtle. Serena, for example, saw a message in her father’s response to her mother’s emotions, which caused her to change her own emotional expression. Another example is Carlos, who got the message that his emotions were causing his mother pain and stopped expressing them as a result.

It’s important to be aware that, although it’s helpful to see what kinds of messages you received about emotions, this isn’t about blaming anyone for how you learned to express (or not express) your emotions. Usually, the people who care about us aren’t trying to treat us in hurtful or unhealthy ways. Brad’s parents, for example, thought they were helping him by “toughening him up”; Serena’s parents tried to protect her from their arguing by not fighting in front of the children; and Carlos’s mother was obviously in a lot of pain, and she was trying to protect Carlos from seeing it.

As well, it’s important to remember that your parents, caregivers, and other people you learned these things from also received messages about emotions when they were growing up, as did their parents, and their parents before them. This is about understanding yourself better, so you can change those patterns that are no longer helpful for you. Understanding the way you
think and feel about certain emotions can help you change the way you think and feel about those emotions, which will help you to manage your emotions more effectively.

The Impact of Your Beliefs

The messages you receive as you’re growing up—and sometimes even later in life—impact how you feel about your feelings. In other words, you might have learned that you shouldn’t feel angry, that it’s bad, that feeling anger makes you “mean,” and so on. If this is the case, when you feel anger, you’re likely going to judge the feeling as bad, or you’ll judge yourself as bad or mean for feeling angry.

Before we look at the impact that these judgments have, there’s one more thing you need to learn about emotions, which is that there are two types: primary emotions and secondary emotions.

Primary Emotions

A primary emotion is how you feel in response to your interpretation of a situation or event (see figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Situation ———> Interpretation ———> Primary Emotion

The situation could be an external event, such as when you have an argument with a friend, and the primary emotion might be anger you feel toward him for the things he said to you. Or the situation could be an internal event: an automatic thought, an image, or a memory that triggers a primary emotional response.
Secondary Emotions

A secondary emotion is a feeling you have in response to a primary emotion. So again, a situation or event takes place, you respond emotionally to your interpretation of this situation or event, and then those good old automatic thoughts kick in, based on the messages you’ve received about that emotion. The feelings you have in response to those thoughts are your secondary emotions (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Primary Emotion ——> Interpretation ——> Secondary Emotion

To go back to the example of anger: You have an argument with a friend and you feel angry at him for things he said to you. Then, if you’ve received messages that anger is bad, you might think to yourself something like “I shouldn’t feel this way.” This triggers other emotions: perhaps you feel angry at yourself, or guilty, or even sad for feeling angry at your friend. These are the secondary emotions, or how you feel about your feelings. When you judge your emotions or judge yourself for having these emotions, you increase the amount of pain you’re experiencing, making you more vulnerable to reacting from your emotional self.

You can use the following mindfulness exercise, which is an extension of one you did in chapter 3, to explore your feelings about your feelings.

≈ EXERCISE: How Do You Feel about Your Feelings?

Sitting quietly or lying down, draw your attention to your body, noticing your posture, your facial expression, and any physical sensations that are present. Gradually, expand your awareness to any emotions that are present at this
Quieting Your Emotions

time, observing them without judgment. Pay attention to what’s happening within your body and within your mind, mentally noting what’s taking place within you, without judgment, even if it’s not what you want or like.

Gently bringing your attention to your breath, draw a deep breath and slowly release it, asking yourself the question “What emotion am I feeling?” Allow your attention to drift to wherever it wants to go. Take an attitude of openness and curiosity toward whatever you experience. Describe it in as much detail as you can, mentally noting it, without judgment, just acknowledging its presence. What is the emotion you’re feeling? As best you can, describe it to yourself: how does it feel? If you can, name it.

As you put a name on the emotion, notice what thoughts, images, memories, or other emotions come up in response to that primary emotion. How do you feel about this feeling? What are your thoughts about having this feeling? Again, just notice what comes up for you without judging it. If a feeling of dislike or aversion comes up, for example, simply notice that the feeling of dislike or aversion has arisen within you. If you notice an image or memory arise, likewise, mentally note this experience. Taking an attitude of openness and curiosity, open yourself up to this experience as best you can, exploring what’s there. Whatever your experience, it’s already there. You are allowing yourself to become aware of it.

Continue to do this for a few minutes, noticing any emotions that are present, gently acknowledging them, and noticing your body and mind’s response to these experiences. You might find that there aren’t any emotions present at this time, which is fine, or you might find that you’re not yet able to name your emotions, which is also fine. If this is the case, just notice the experience of the emotion and keep practicing. Gradually, you will learn to identify the emotions you’re experiencing, and you’ll be able to come back to this exercise and get to know how you think and feel about your feelings.
Validating Your Emotions

As noted earlier, judging your emotions, or judging yourself for having those emotions, makes you more vulnerable to reacting from your emotional self. The more emotions you’re experiencing, the more likely they will be to control you, and when you’re invalidating yourself—judging yourself for having these emotions—you trigger more emotions. Here’s an example of how this can happen.

* Diane’s Story

Diane struggled with anxiety and frequently had panic attacks. When she felt one of these attacks coming on, her reflex was to try to get rid of it and push those feelings away. She would think to herself: “This is stupid, I should be able to control this by now! or I’m never going to get this under control. This is awful!” In other words, she judged herself for having the anxiety, and she would also have judgmental thoughts about the anxiety itself, about how bad it was, that it was “silly,” and so on. These kinds of thoughts only increased the emotion Diane was experiencing. She would get angry with herself for not being able to control her emotions and for allowing the anxiety to control her life; and she would get more anxious thinking about what this would mean for her in the future, that it would always limit her and prevent her from getting a good job, and on and on.

You can see that Diane’s invalidating thoughts triggered more emotions for her and how having more emotions makes it more difficult to manage your emotions and get to your wise self. Invalidating your emotions actually makes things worse for you in the long run. So what can you do instead? Here’s the hard part: validate your emotions.

Validating your emotions means that you accept them and have the ability to understand them; not that you like those emotions or want them to
hang around, but that you acknowledge their presence, and give yourself permission to feel them.

Think of your emotions as quicksand. The more you struggle, the harder you struggle, the more the emotions will suck you under; they will control you and will cause you to do and say things that you’ll regret later. So stop struggling. Lie back and accept that the emotions are there. This isn’t to say that you like that they’re there or that you’ll be passive and won’t keep trying to do something about your emotions—any more than someone who was stuck in quicksand would give up. On the contrary, if you were stuck in quicksand, you would keep yelling for help and looking around to see if you could reach a branch to pull yourself out. Similarly, with your emotions, you need to keep working on managing them more effectively, you need to ask for help, and you need to keep looking around for tools that will help you pull yourself out of that emotional state. But the key here is that you need to stop fighting those emotions and accept your situation. So, for example, you would say this to yourself: “Anxiety is here right now. It’s uncomfortable. I don’t like it, but it is what it is.”

Validating your emotions will not make them go away—remember, DBT skills aren’t going to make your emotions disappear—but being able to validate yourself will prevent you from triggering extra painful emotions for yourself. Take Diane as an example: as she’s having a panic attack, she thinks to herself all sorts of judgmental thoughts, like how “awful” it is, how “stupid” or “worthless” she is, and that she can’t get the anxiety under control. By making these judgments about the anxiety and herself, she’s triggering more emotions: she’ll likely get angry at herself for feeling the anxiety and for not being able to manage it.

So what would happen if Diane didn’t judge the anxiety or herself for having it? Nothing. Without judgment, no extra emotions would get triggered. Yes, the anxiety would still be there, but if Diane were only feeling anxiety, rather than feeling that initial anxiety plus anger at herself for feeling it, it would be much easier for her to manage because she would have only one emotion rather than several.
Of course, it’s important to solve any problems and address situations if doing so will decrease the emotion or make it go away. But you must validate yourself first, to ensure that you’re not triggering extra painful emotions for yourself, and then you can problem-solve.

**How to Validate Your Emotions**

So how do you stop invalidating your emotions, trying to push them away and not feel them, especially if you’re someone who has been doing just that for such a long time? The first step, of course, is to increase your awareness of how you think and feel about your emotions. If you don’t know how you respond to your feelings, you won’t be able to change your response. You can practice the following mindfulness exercise to help you become more aware of and accepting toward your emotions.

≈ **EXERCISE:** Validating Your Emotions

Sitting or lying in a comfortable position, take a few moments to let your body relax and rest, letting your breath come comfortably and naturally. When you’re ready, bring your attention to the present and begin noticing whatever sensations are taking place in your body, specifically turning your attention to any sensations you have been pushing away or fighting, such as pain or tension. Without trying to change any of these sensations, just let yourself notice their presence; be curious about them and open toward them, without judgment, even if you don’t like what you notice. Each time you notice yourself struggling against an experience, as best you can, let your body relax into the experience and let your heart soften toward it. Allow yourself to open to the experience rather than continue to fight it. Breathe into the sensations and just let them be.

Now turn your attention to your feelings and thoughts, noticing whatever is present in this moment. Again, draw your attention to any specific feelings
or thoughts that you are struggling with, that you are invalidating, judging, trying to avoid or push away. Bring your curiosity to these experiences, being open to them as best as you can rather than continuing to fight them. Breathe into these feelings and thoughts, and just let them be.

Without judging any of these experiences, simply being open to them, allow the struggles you have been experiencing to just be present. Bring your attention to each of them in turn, being interested and curious about them. Each time you notice yourself struggling or fighting with an experience, remind yourself to stay open to it, whatever it is, letting go of the fighting and struggling. Continue to breathe, and let the experience be. Remember, it’s already there, whatever it is. Simply bring your attention to it, without judgment.

≈

**Levels of Validation**

To make the idea of self-validation a little easier, you can break it down into three different levels: acknowledging, allowing, and understanding.

**Acknowledging:** The first and most basic level of self-validation is simply acknowledging the presence of the emotion: for example, “I feel anxious.” By just acknowledging the emotion, and putting a period on the end of that sentence rather than going down the road of judging it, you are validating your anxiety.

**Allowing:** The second level of self-validation is allowing, or giving yourself permission to feel the emotion: for example, “It’s okay that I feel anxious.” Here, not only are you not judging the emotion. You are going one step further, saying, “This is okay.” Again, this does not mean that you like the emotion or want it to hang around but that you’re allowed to feel it.
Understanding: The highest level of self-validation is, of course, the most difficult. In this form of validation, not only do you refrain from judging the emotion, and not only do you say it’s okay to feel it, but you go one step further and say you understand it: “It makes sense that I feel anxious being at home by myself, given the fact that I was at home alone when thieves broke in and threatened me with a gun.”

If you’ve been invalidating your emotions for most of your life, it’s likely that you’ll start out validating yourself at the first level, simply acknowledging the emotion that you feel. Even this may be difficult, so remember to have patience and keep practicing. Over time, you’ll find that you’re gradually able to move on to the next level and then to the next. It’s also natural that you’ll move at different speeds with different emotions. Perhaps it’s easier for you to validate anxiety, for example, than anger, and so you might be at the highest level of validation with your anxiety and still at the lowest level of validation with your anger. Wherever you find yourself, don’t judge it. Keep working at it, and it will come.

Here are some examples of validating statements, using anger as an example:

* “I feel angry.”

* “It’s okay that I feel angry right now.”

* “I’m feeling angry. It’s uncomfortable, but it is what it is.”

* “I’m feeling angry for a reason.”

* “It makes sense that I’m feeling angry, because I just had a fight with my friend.”

* “I’m feeling angry right now, but that doesn’t mean anything about me as a person.”
* “It makes sense that I would have problems with my temper because of the environment I grew up in.”

You’ll likely find it helpful to prepare some validating statements that you can read to yourself over and over when you notice that you’re invalidating your emotions. In this way, over time you’ll be able to change the way you talk to yourself about how you’re feeling, rather than just fall back into those old familiar patterns of negative self-talk and judgments.

Wrapping Up

We all receive messages throughout our lives, and especially in childhood, about how emotions can be “good” or “bad.” These messages, of course, play a part in how we express our emotions (or not) as adults. The skill of self-validation has you examine these messages and, when necessary, change them into healthier messages, which in turn reduces your emotional pain. Being mindful of your emotions is the first step toward validating them. Hopefully, you’re well on your way to practicing mindfulness and self-validation.

Like many of the skills you’ll read about in this book, validating your emotions isn’t easy; if it were, you probably wouldn’t need to read this book! So I’d like to take this opportunity to remind you to be kind to yourself. Many people learned these skills as they were growing up, but many others didn’t have that same emotional education. If you didn’t, you need to think of this as going back to school to learn math. You can’t go too quickly or you won’t get it; and you certainly can’t skip ahead, because all of the tools you learn will build on the ones that come before. So please take your time, have patience with yourself, and when you think you get the hang of validating your emotions—not that you’ve mastered it, remember, as that takes most of us many years, if we ever get there!—then move on to the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

Leave the Judgments Out of It

“Right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad,” “ugly,” “stupid,” “idiot,” “crazy”… how often do you hear yourself making judgments like this, either in your mind or out loud? Do you judge only others, do you only judge yourself, or do you judge both yourself and others? This chapter is about judgments, the impact they can have on you, and how you can manage your emotions more effectively by reducing your judging.

What Is a Judgment?

The word judgment refers to the act of assessing a person, situation, or event. In other words, when we judge, we form an opinion—either positive or negative—about someone or something. When we meet someone for the first time, for example, we form a first impression that she’s nice, he’s cute, she’s
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strange, he dresses poorly, she’s stuck-up, he’s funny, and so on. But when you think about it, most of us are judging constantly throughout the day: “It’s a beautiful day.” “The subway smells.” “That jerk just cut me off.” “That movie was awful.” “This fish tastes really good.” It’s not very often that we can experience something without putting these kinds of judgmental labels on it.

Judgments are so common in our society that it’s very difficult for us not to judge. You likely remember hearing judgments as far back as your childhood: “That was good.” “You’re a bad girl.” “That was stupid.” “What were you thinking?!” Hearing judgments for most of our lives, it only makes sense that we would internalize this habit and grow up judging as well. And it also makes sense, given the extent that this happens in society, that these judgments would often happen automatically or without our full conscious awareness.

The Impact of Judgments

So you might be thinking, if judgments are so common, why are they a problem? If everyone makes judgments, why should you be concerned with them? The short answer to this question is that negative judgments can increase your painful emotions.

Why Judgments Hurt

A series of things leads to an increase in emotional pain when you make judgments. Here’s what happens:

1. First, an event or situation takes place, and your negative interpretation of that event causes you to feel a painful emotion, usually something like anger, fear, or hurt.
2. This painful emotion is what actually causes you to judge. For example, someone cuts you off in traffic. Your interpretation of this event is something like “Oh my God, he could have killed me!” which leads to the automatic response of fear and anger, and these emotions cause you to judge: “What a jerk!”

3. This judgment actually increases your emotions, usually triggering more anger. Although many people rationalize their judgments by saying that judging makes them feel better, doing so actually adds fuel to the emotional fire. Research has shown that venting anger has the effect of increasing anger and aggression and keeps our emotions going rather than calming them down (Koole 2009).

Quite often when I teach the skill of being nonjudgmental, people don’t believe that judgments really add to a person’s emotional load. But when you can reduce your judgments, your level of pain really will decrease, making it easier for you to manage the remaining emotions.

If you’re still not quite sure you buy this, why not do an experiment? For the next week, keep track of your judgments as best you can. You don’t have to write them down, but pay attention to when you’re judging and notice the emotions you experience as a result of these judgments. Note judgments of yourself, others, or situations. Of course, this might sound easier than it really is. Remember that many judgments happen automatically, so you might find it difficult to notice when you’re judging. If this is the case, you might want to enlist the help of family or friends and have them point out to you when you’re being judgmental.

Another trick is to notice when you’re feeling strong emotions, and then check your thoughts and see if you can identify any judgments that are happening. Finally, of course, mindfulness exercises like the one that follows, which have you observing your thoughts and emotions, can help you to become more aware of when you are judging.
Watch out, though. Like a lot of people, you may find that once your attention has been drawn to your judgments, your awareness will increase. Then the trick becomes to avoid judging yourself for judging!

You can practice this next mindfulness exercise regularly in order to become more aware of your judgmental thoughts, as well as of your thoughts and emotions in a more general sense.

≈ EXERCISE: The Gatekeeper

Sitting or lying down in a comfortable position, start by noticing your breath: breathing in, breathing out, slowly, deeply, and comfortably. Notice the sensations you experience as you breathe in: the feeling of the air as it enters your nostrils, passes down your throat and fills your lungs. And then as you exhale, notice the feeling of your lungs deflating as the air passes back out through your nose or mouth.

After a few moments of focusing on your breathing, start to draw your attention to your thoughts and emotions. Imagine that you are standing at the door of a castle wall. You are in charge of who comes and goes through that door; you are the gatekeeper. What comes through that door isn't people, though, but your thoughts and feelings. Now, the idea here isn't that you're going to decide which thoughts and feelings get to come in; if they come to the door, they need to be let in, or they'll just make camp outside that door and continue to bang on the door harder and harder. Instead, the idea is that you greet each thought and feeling as it enters, just acknowledging its presence before the next thought or feeling arrives. In other words, you accept each experience as it comes: “Anger is at the door. Here is sadness. Here is a thought about the past. Here comes anger again.” And so on.

By noting each experience, simply acknowledging what has come up for you, that thought or emotion will pass through the door rather than hang around. The thought or emotion might come back again and again, but you
will see that it doesn't stay long; it just passes through, and then the next experience arises.

≈ A NOTE ON OBSESSIVE THOUGHTS

For some people, not judging thoughts becomes extra challenging because of a condition called obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). With this illness, certain thoughts can become overwhelming: for example, a person might have thoughts that she’s going to hurt her child or other family members; that she’s going to lose control of herself and go on a killing spree; that she’s infected with the AIDS virus or some other terminal condition and is going to pass it on to others unknowingly; and so on. These thoughts, as unrealistic as they seem, can invade a person’s life and make it seem unbearable for her to go on living.

We all have strange thoughts at times. Think about a time you’ve been driving down the road and thought to yourself, “Maybe I should drive my car into that bridge,” or waiting for the subway, thinking, “Just as the subway comes, I could throw myself off the platform.” Just because these thoughts enter your mind doesn’t mean you have any intention of actually acting on them. They’re just thoughts. So, for many of us, when we have a thought like this, we simply acknowledge it in some way (“Wow, that was weird”) and then we dismiss it. People with OCD, however, are unable to do this; instead they obsess and worry about these thoughts (“Why would I think something like that? It must mean something about me as a person that I have these kinds of thoughts”).

If you have OCD, not judging your thoughts is going to be more difficult, but it’s exactly what you need to do to help stop the obsessive thoughts. Remember, the more you try to resist something or push it away, the stronger it will get, so with obsessive thoughts, the more you try to stop thinking about them, the more you’ll end up thinking about them. Instead, you have to
accept that this is the thought that’s present right now—don’t judge it, don't push it away—and just acknowledge its presence.

Judgments Don’t Provide Helpful Information

Judgments are also unhelpful in other ways, including that they provide no useful information. If you tell a coworker that her work is bad, how will she know how to change her work to improve it? If you tell your friend that she’s mean, will she know what behavior you’re referring to that you’d like her to change? Judgments aren’t specific, and they don’t provide us with useful information. Being nonjudgmental is about saying what you really mean: for example, telling someone that her notes could be neater, rather than saying that her work is “bad,” will give her an idea about what she can do differently. Or rather than calling your friend “mean,” telling her that she said something hurtful to you will ensure that she knows what you’re talking about.

In other words, when you’re being nonjudgmental, you’re saying what you really mean rather than just sticking a short-form label on something. Being nonjudgmental is a more effective way of communicating.

Beating Yourself Up with Self-Judgments

You may not believe that self-judgments have much of an impact on emotions or how you think and feel about yourself. But self-judgments are a form of verbal abuse. When you criticize yourself for making a mistake by calling yourself stupid, or worthless, or an idiot, you’re verbally abusing yourself. What would you think, and how would you feel, if someone else
were speaking to you this way? Would you tolerate it? Or, probably a better question, would you speak to your best friend this way? Probably not. So why is it okay to do it to yourself? Speaking to yourself this way over time leads to lower self-esteem and increases your painful emotions.

Self-judgments, though, are usually even harder to catch than other judgments. One reason for this is that we often don’t say them out loud, and it’s always more difficult to catch thoughts than something you voice aloud. A second reason is that quite often the judgments we make of ourselves are habitual; they’ve been going on for a long time. And when something is a habit, of course, it’s harder to change. If you find that self-judgments are a problem for you, I suggest that you start by working on your judgments of others and of situations first. Practice on these because they tend to be easier to catch, and as time goes on, you’ll likely find that you start noticing your automatic self-judgments as well. When this happens, you can start working on decreasing these judgments too.

*Judgments Negatively Impact Relationships*

How many times have you judged someone you cared about during an argument? “You’re an idiot!” “You’re so stupid!” “You’re mean.” Everyone falls into this trap at times: lashing out at someone you care about because you think it will make you feel better. But rather than making you feel better, it will add fuel to your emotional fire and actually make you feel worse.

Chapter 10 will focus on your relationships, so for now I’ll just point out that judging another person will also negatively affect your relationship with him. Most of us know how it feels to be judged; remember this feeling when you’re interacting with others. Reducing your judgments of others will have a positive impact on your connections with them.
Why Some Judgments Are Necessary

Although quite often judgments aren't productive and they make it harder for you to manage your emotions because they increase your painful feelings, sometimes they are necessary. We have to be judged in our performance at work or school; there are times when we have to judge whether a situation is safe or not. For example, can you proceed through the light that just turned yellow, or do you have to stop? Judging or evaluating how you’ve acted or the decisions you’ve made is also how you learn from your mistakes. If you recognize that the results you got from behaving a certain way or making a certain decision weren’t what you were looking for, you’ll know to act or decide differently next time. This skill of being nonjudgmental isn’t so much about completely eradicating judgments as it is about being aware of the language we use when we form evaluations or opinions about things.

So, next you’ll learn how to practice this skill of being nonjudgmental.

What to Do About Judgments

The first thing you need to know about the skill of being nonjudgmental is that you're not trying to suppress your emotions or be passive when you practice this skill. Rather, think of being nonjudgmental as being more assertive; it’s about expressing your opinions and emotions appropriately, without being blaming or aggressive.

Ideally, the goal is to be nonjudgmental, or neutral. In other words, the goal is to be neither positive nor negative. Yes, positive judgments are still judgments. So what’s wrong with positively judging something or someone, you might ask? The problem is that if you judge someone or something as positive, it can turn into a negative (Linehan 1993). For example, if you tell your friend that you think your relationship with her is “wonderful,” if she later does something hurtful or disappointing to you, this could turn into you
judging the relationship as “terrible.” It's healthier if you stick to the facts: for example, you could tell yourself that you are happy with the relationship and enjoy spending time with your friend, or that she said something hurtful and you’re feeling angry with your friend. Notice that in this nonjudgmental example, you’re sticking to the facts and your feelings rather than using short-hand labels.

The following are some guidelines to help you be nonjudgmental.

**Making Nonjudgmental Statements**

When turning a judgment into a nonjudgmental statement, try to remember to look at two things: what are the facts of the situation, and what is the emotion you’re trying to express?

First, examine the facts. Remember, judgments are shorthand labels that we stick on things rather than saying what we really mean. So when you’re trying to be nonjudgmental, think about what it is that you’re really trying to say. For example, rather than using the shorthand label of “jerk” to describe your partner, say what you really mean: “I had a long hard day at work. You said you were going to make dinner tonight, but when I got home, you asked me what was for dinner.”

Then ask yourself, what is the emotion you’re trying to express? Remember that judgments come from our painful emotions, so rather than judging anyone or yourself, say what it is that you’re really feeling. Being nonjudgmental is not about stuffing your emotions or passively not saying what you think about something. On the contrary, it’s actually about learning to be more assertive. So to continue with the previous example of when your partner didn’t follow through on the promise of dinner, you also want to express your emotions, for example, “I’m feeling angry and disappointed.” In this way, you’ve been clear with your partner about which behavior was problematic and how you feel about it. Now it’s up to your partner to decide if he wants to
make changes, apologize, or do something else to make up for his behavior based on the feedback you’ve given him.

It’s also important for you to understand this: when you’re being nonjudgmental, you’re really just taking what you would have said and replacing it with a nonjudgmental statement. So if your judgment is “I’m stupid,” you want to rephrase that statement in a way that isn’t judgmental (“I made a mistake and I’m feeling angry with myself”). This is not the same thing as reassuring yourself (“Someone else might have done the same thing”), cheerleading yourself (“I’ll try it again. I know I can do it!”), or making excuses (“I’m feeling tired, which is why I made the mistake”). Being nonjudgmental isn’t about excusing behavior or coming up with reasons for why things happened. It’s about taking the judgmental statement and making it a neutral one. Here’s another example:

**Situation:** You’re driving down the road behind a truck doing 20 mph under the speed limit.

**Judgment:** “This guy is a total idiot; he shouldn’t be driving.”

**Nonjudgment:** “I’m feeling frustrated because this guy is going so slowly.”

An excuse in this situation might be something like “Maybe he’s an older man and is afraid to go faster.” While this might be true, the message that you’re sending yourself by excusing this behavior is that you shouldn’t be feeling frustrated, and invalidating your emotions in this way won’t be helpful (see chapter 4). Reassuring or cheerleading yourself (“It’s okay because I’ll still be on time”) isn’t addressing your frustration either. Remember, being nonjudgmental is about expressing your emotions and opinions.

This skill, as with the other skills in this book, will not make your emotions miraculously disappear. But being nonjudgmental will reduce the unnecessary painful emotions you’re experiencing, and this in turn will make it easier for you to access your wise self.
Finding Alternate Words for Judgments

It can be helpful if you have some words in your head that you can substitute for judgments. Here are some words that may work well:

* “helpful” or “unhelpful”
* “healthy” or “unhealthy”
* “hurtful”
* “effective” or “ineffective”
* “necessary” or “unnecessary”
* “appropriate” or “inappropriate”

As you practice being nonjudgmental, you’ll likely find additional words that will help you to describe the situation more factually rather than judging it, but hopefully these words will get you started.

The following mindfulness exercise (Brantley and Hanauer 2008) will help you to be less judgmental by having you practice being compassionate toward yourself and others. You’ll start by focusing on having compassion toward yourself, but as you get used to practicing this exercise, you’ll want to work on extending these kind thoughts to others as well. Alternatively, if you have more difficulty turning compassion toward yourself, then you can start with compassion toward others and work your way back to yourself as it becomes more comfortable.

≈ Exercise: Loving-Kindness Meditation

Find a place to sit or lie down in a position in which you’ll be comfortable and able to relax. Once you’re settled, start by bringing your attention to your
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breathing. Don’t try to change how you’re breathing; just notice how your breath feels. Inhale and exhale, and gradually slow your breathing, so that you’re breathing slowly, deeply, and comfortably.

Now, as you continue to focus on your breathing, start to allow yourself to connect with positive emotions: feelings of kindness, friendliness, warmth, and compassion. These are the types of feelings you experience as you greet someone you really care about; when your pet greets you with love at the door; or when you do something nice like holding a door open for someone. Let your memory drift to a time when you’ve experienced that warmth and kindness toward someone, and bring those feelings into the present moment, letting yourself feel the joy, love, and whatever other positive feelings come up for you. As you experience these feelings of kindness and friendliness, gently say the following phrases to yourself, directing them toward yourself:

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May I be peaceful.

May I be safe.

Say these statements silently to yourself, or you can say them out loud. Either way, as best as you can, really feel the words as you say them, putting feeling and meaning into each phrase as you say it to yourself. If you have a hard time directing these feelings of kindness toward yourself, remember that old habits take time to change. In other words, don’t judge yourself or the exercise, but just know that this is something you’ll need to spend more time on. Practice this exercise regularly, and you’ll find that you’re able to take a kinder, more loving, gentler attitude toward yourself and others, which will help you to be nonjudgmental.
TEN TIPS FOR BEING NONJUDGMENTAL

1. Remember that being nonjudgmental isn’t about turning a positive into a negative; it’s about being neutral, neither positive nor negative.

2. Reducing your negative judgments will reduce your level of anger and other painful emotions.

3. Keep in mind that judging is like adding fuel to the fire of your emotion; it only increases your painful emotions.

4. You can often reduce a behavior just by counting how often you’re engaging in that behavior. If you get overwhelmed or discouraged by the thought of stopping your judging, start by counting your judgments first and then work your way toward changing them.

5. Remember that being nonjudgmental will not only help you reduce your emotional pain, but will also have a positive impact on your relationships.

6. We often respond to a situation as though our judgments were true rather than just labels we’ve stuck on something or someone.

7. Remember the learning curve: at first, you’ll notice your judgments only after you’ve made them. As you continue practicing, however, you’ll notice them as you’re making them—before you say them out loud and as they form in your head—until gradually, you’ll find you’re able to form nonjudgmental statements naturally before a judgment arises within you.

8. As with any skill, being nonjudgmental will be more difficult when your emotions are high.

9. Practice observing-your-thoughts exercises to help you become more aware of your judgments.

10. Don’t judge yourself for judging. It’s human nature!
Wrapping Up

This chapter presented the skill of being nonjudgmental, another skill that you can use to manage your emotions more effectively. Being less self-judgmental will have a positive impact on your self-esteem. Being less judgmental of yourself and others will also benefit your relationships, as it will allow you to communicate more effectively with those you care about.

Remember that this is a very difficult skill to put into practice, mostly because judgments are so automatic, which makes them difficult to catch and change. It is therefore even more important that you have patience with yourself. Remember to practice being nonjudgmental of yourself while you’re learning this skill, and don’t judge yourself for judging.

It’s also important to be aware that this process has no end. Instead of wondering when you’re going to get there, you should think of emotional management as a lifelong journey. You’ve got your feet on the path now, but it’s a path you have to keep walking. If you think of it in this way, it will be easier to have patience with yourself.
How often have you looked back on a decision you made, or a way that you acted in a certain situation, and wished that you had done it differently? How many times have you regretted something you said or did that wasn’t helpful for you in the long run? This is what the DBT skill of being effective is about: learning to act in ways that you won’t regret later on.

What Does Being Effective Mean?

In DBT, the skill of being effective refers to doing what works, doing what moves you closer to your long-term goals, and doing what you need to do to get your needs met (Linehan 1993). The first step to being effective is to figure out what your goal is: what it is that you’re trying to accomplish. Once you
decide what’s most important to you in the long term, you must consider what
you could do or how you should act to increase your chances of reaching your
goal. Of course, acting effectively doesn’t guarantee that you’ll get what you’re
after, but it will increase your chances of meeting your goal (Linehan 1993).

Have you ever heard the expression “You’re cutting off your nose to spite
your face”? Basically, this refers to when you do something that might feel
good in the moment (in other words, acting from your emotional self) but, in
the long run, is actually against your best interest because it’s not moving you
closer to your goal. This is the opposite of being effective (Linehan 1993).
When you’re being effective, you’re acting from your wise self: you’re taking
into consideration how you feel, what you think, and what your gut instinct
or intuition is telling you is in your best interest.

It’s important to keep in mind that, although the focus of being effective
is to do what it takes to meet your goals, this is not giving you license to do so
at the expense of others. Remember that being effective comes from your wise
self, so it’s also about acting in ways that match your own morals and values.
Acting against your principles damages your self-respect, which is not in your
best interest in the long run.

Here are two stories about people who acted ineffectively.

* Suzannah’s Story

Suzannah was twenty-seven years old and had been working at an engi-
neering firm for about three months after receiving her master’s degree. She
was excited about the new job and was working long hours. The firm had
recently gained a big client, and Suzannah was eager to prove herself to her
boss so she would be given more responsibility. After a week with very little
sleep, however, Suzannah’s mood became quite unpredictable and she
started feeling a lot of anxiety. Unfortunately, anxiety and problems with
emotions in general were nothing new for Suzannah. She had never
learned how to manage her emotions effectively, and this had often landed
her in trouble; for example, she had often had to ask for extensions at school because she was too overwhelmed to get her work done.

Suzannah ended up on sick leave for a few days, and with some rest, she was feeling much better. Her friends and family advised her to take additional time off to ensure that she was well enough to return to work, but Suzannah decided to go straight back to work because she didn’t want to let her boss down and the firm was very busy with the new client. At first, Suzannah thought she was okay; she was still feeling anxious, but her mood was more stable and she was sleeping better at night. At that point, she stopped worrying, and then she ended up falling right back into her old patterns: working too much, not sleeping enough, and just not taking good care of herself. Two weeks later, she was suspended from work after losing her temper with a coworker, throwing things around the office, and making threats.

Can you see how Suzannah acted in a way that was ineffective? She did what felt good at the time instead of doing what was in her best interest in the long run. Because she was anxious about disappointing her boss, she acted from her emotions, refusing to slow down and take time off from work to stay healthy.

What would have been effective for Suzannah in this situation? Being effective is not about blindly doing what you’re told without question. It’s about doing what’s best for you in the long run rather than just thinking about the short term. So if Suzannah had taken the opinions of her family and friends seriously and considered the possible consequences of her actions, she might have been more effective.

* Mackenzie’s Story

Mackenzie and Rochelle had been dating for almost a year. He was quite happy in the relationship, and at thirty-one, he thought about taking the
relationship to the next level and was considering asking Rochelle to move in with him. One night when they were at his place hanging out, Mackenzie decided to broach the subject and asked Rochelle what her thoughts were about the relationship. He was unhappily surprised by her response. Rochelle told him she had been thinking about this a lot lately and she had decided that, in order for them to move forward in the relationship, she wanted to see him get some help with his anger.

Mackenzie knew he had always had a problem controlling his anger. He and Rochelle had fights from time to time, but until now he hadn't thought it was anything too serious. Hearing her give him this ultimatum not only surprised him but also triggered his anger. Instead of asking her to talk about this, Mackenzie lashed out, yelling and calling her names. He told Rochelle he never wanted to see her again, and when she left, he never did see her again.

Mackenzie acted from his emotional self; he was hurt and angered by what Rochelle said, and he was also probably fearful of losing her. But instead of acting effectively, Mackenzie let his emotions control him, and he lashed out. He cut his nose off to spite his face. He did what felt good in the moment, lashing out at the person who had hurt him. But in the long run, what was he left with? Nothing but regrets.

What would have been effective for Mackenzie in this situation? Again, being effective doesn't mean just doing what you're told, so I wouldn't necessarily expect Mackenzie to just agree to get help for his anger. But acting from his wise self and having a conversation about what Rochelle said would have been much more effective than allowing his anger to control him. The way Mackenzie acted simply showed Rochelle that she was right about his behavior: it wasn't acceptable, he couldn't control it, and she was making the right decision. Being effective for Mackenzie in this situation would have been asking Rochelle why she thought his anger was a problem and clarifying what exactly she would like to see him change in order to stay in the relationship.
Then Mackenzie would be in a better position to decide whether or not he was willing to do the work Rochelle was asking of him.

**Being Effective by Acting the Opposite to How You Feel**

A specific skill that can help you to act in an effective way is the DBT skill of *opposite to emotion action* (Linehan 1993). You identify the emotion you’re experiencing (for Mackenzie, this would be anger), you then identify the urge that’s attached to the emotion (in Mackenzie’s situation, lashing out verbally), and you then act the opposite to that urge (for example, Mackenzie could have told Rochelle he needed a timeout before continuing their discussion and then left the room to cool down). The following chart shows how this would work for painful emotions you probably experience regularly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Urge</th>
<th>Opposite Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>To attack verbally or physically</td>
<td>To withdraw from the situation; to act civilly, so you’re not making things worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sadness</td>
<td>To withdraw from people and isolate yourself</td>
<td>To approach people, ask for support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>To leave or escape the situation causing anxiety and to avoid that same situation in the future</td>
<td>To remain in the anxiety-provoking situation and to place yourself in that situation again in the future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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| Guilt/Shame | To withdraw from others and hide | To approach others, and when guilt or shame is not justified (see chapter 3), to keep doing the activity that triggers these feelings |

It’s important to know that this skill isn’t about avoiding your emotion or trying to make it go away (Linehan 1993). When you experience an emotion, don’t forget, it’s there for a reason. But sometimes our emotions can get in the way of us being able to act effectively. Anger, for example, can tell you that you’re not happy with how your boss is treating you at work. Once you feel the anger and figure out why it’s there, you want to be able to access your wise self so that you can do something about it. Ideally, this would be to express yourself to your boss in a way that’s going to be effective in changing how he’s treating you. If you stay really angry with your boss, that anger is going to get in the way of you acting effectively. Rather than acting from your wise self, you’ll act from your emotional self, perhaps saying things that you will regret later and probably making things worse. So this skill is about helping you reduce the intensity of your emotion, which will make it easier for you to act from your wise self and be effective.

What Gets in the Way of Being Effective

Sometimes, even though we want to act effectively, it’s not so easy. Some things that can get in the way are not knowing what you want, not responding to reality, and focusing on the short term (Linehan 1993).
Not Knowing What You Want

The first and most important cause of ineffectiveness is not knowing what you want in a situation. If you don’t know what your goal is, it will be very difficult for you to know what to do to meet it! So it can help if you take some time, slow yourself down, and give some thought to setting a goal before acting. In many situations, we may have more than one goal. For example, Suzannah had the goal of getting back to work quickly, but she probably also had the goal of staying healthy. When you have conflicting goals, as in this example, you need to access your wise self to help you decide which goal is most important to you, for it’s likely that you won’t always be able to meet them both.

Not Responding to Reality

Thinking about the situation in terms of what’s fair or not fair—or right or wrong—can also get in the way of acting effectively. In other words, you may be responding not to the situation itself but to your judgments about the situation and your thoughts about the way you wish the situation were. For example, say you’re driving down a back road. It’s a pretty straight road, with just a few hills; the area is unpopulated, with only a few houses here and there, but the speed limit is 40 mph. As you drive along, you start to think, “Well this is silly. The speed limit here clearly should be 50 mph.” And you speed up to 50 mph. When the police officer pulls you over for speeding, he’s not going to care what you think the speed limit should be; the reality is that the speed limit is 40 mph, and you were doing 50. Again, in order to be effective, you have to respond to the situation as it is rather than to how you think it should be or how you wish it were.
Using Suzannah’s situation as an example, Suzannah ended up having to take time off work because she was pushing herself too hard. Instead of continuing to take better care of herself, she basically pretended that everything was fine, going back to work right away and falling back into the patterns that had her taking time off to begin with. She was acting according to how she wished the situation were—that she didn’t have problems taking care of herself emotionally and could work as much as she liked—rather than to the reality of the situation, and as a result, she acted ineffectively.

**Focusing on the Short Term**

A tendency to focus on what you want or need in the short term can also get in the way of your being effective. Thinking this way can impact your ability to recognize what will be most helpful for you in the long run. For example, while Mackenzie might have gotten some short-term satisfaction out of yelling at Rochelle, in the long run he lost this relationship and a very important person in his life. While Suzannah might have gotten short-term satisfaction out of going back to work immediately, in the long run, doing so was harmful to her health and probably to her career as well.

In order to be effective in a situation, therefore, you must be able to reach your wise self to determine what your goal is and how you can act in your own best interest to increase the likelihood of meeting that goal.

**What Does This Mean for Your Life?**

Now that you have a better understanding of what it means to be effective, you need to consider what this means for your life. Do you tend to cut off your nose to spite your face? Do you often act from your emotional self, reacting from your emotions instead of choosing how to act? Do you tend to do what feels right in the moment rather than think about what the consequences of
what your behavior might be? How do you need to start acting differently in your life in order to be more effective?

One thing that you can do to help yourself become more effective is to practice mindfulness exercises, like the following, that help you learn to access your wise self.

≈ **EXERCISE: Accessing Your Wise Self**

Sitting or lying down in a comfortable position, bring your focus to your breath. Breathing slowly, deeply, and comfortably, close your eyes and allow yourself to open up to your present experience. Notice any physical sensations, any thoughts, and any emotions that might be present for you in this moment, doing this without judgment. Just sense whatever your current experience is. If you notice yourself starting to think about your experience rather than just observing it, bring yourself back to the anchor of your breath.

When you feel ready, ask yourself the question “What would my wise self do?” Give yourself some time to experience a response to this question; if none comes, ask the question again. Whenever you find yourself distracted or getting caught up in emotions, use your breath as an anchor to keep returning to the present.

≈ **TEN TIPS FOR BEING EFFECTIVE**

1. Being effective is about doing what works, acting skillfully to meet your needs in the long run.

2. Forget about what’s right or wrong, fair or unfair. Think about your long-term goals and what you need to do to achieve them.

3. Effectiveness by definition means that you’re acting from your morals and values, not against them.
4. Remember that even if you act effectively, there’s no guarantee that you’ll meet your goal, although the more skillfully you act, the more likely you are to achieve it.

5. Don’t cut off your nose to spite your face!

6. Being effective comes from your wise self.

7. Practice mindfulness exercises to help you get to your wise self.

8. To meet your goal, you have to have an awareness of what that goal is, so figure out what you want in the situation.

9. How you think the situation should be—or how you wish it were different—doesn’t matter. To be effective, you must respond to the situation as it really is.

10. Think about what the situation is, how you feel about it, what your urge is in the situation, and what your long-term goal is. Then, putting this all together, see if you can think about what you can do to make it more likely that you’ll be able to reach your goal.

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Wrapping Up

In this chapter, you learned about the DBT skill of acting effectively: acting from your wise self to make it more likely that you’ll meet your long-term goals. Like all the skills you’ll learn in this book, being effective takes practice. It may help to think about situations in your life in which you’ve acted effectively and situations in which you’ve cut off your nose to spite your face.
In those situations where you were ineffective, how could you have acted differently to make it more likely that you would meet your goals?

Now consider your life in the present. How can you be more effective in your life? Can you think of some current situations in which you could practice this skill? Don’t forget that talking with someone you trust can be helpful; getting a second, unbiased opinion can help you to access your own wise self and act effectively. Last but not least, remember that judging yourself is ineffective and will only trigger your emotional self, making it more difficult for you to reach your goals. Have patience, and be kind to yourself!
Getting Through a Crisis without Making It Worse

We all have times in our life when we find ourselves so emotional about a situation that we have a hard time thinking straight about what we can do to help ourselves. Pain is a part of life, and there’s nothing we can do to escape it. As Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994, 30) says, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” You can’t stop the problems that will inevitably arise in life, and you can’t stop the painful emotions that accompany these situations, but you can learn how to get through them. Certain DBT skills can help you survive these crisis situations without making things worse by doing things that are self-destructive or otherwise harmful (Linehan 1993).
What Is a Crisis?

Think of a crisis as a problem, situation, or event that is triggering painful emotions of some sort for you: anger, sadness, hurt, and so on. Sometimes in a crisis situation, there’s something you can do to change the situation or solve the problem, so your pain will at least turn down a notch. If this is the case, do it! Solve the problem, and you’ll no longer be in a crisis. Often, though, you’ll find that you have no control in the situation and you have to do something to help yourself to survive the pain.

Here are three examples of how people experience crisis situations in their lives.

* Drake’s Story

Drake was thirty-five years old when he was laid off from his job as a manager at an automotive company because of the recession; his boss told him that he really wanted to keep him, but the money just wasn’t there. This was a real blow for Drake; he had been with the company for about twelve years and had worked hard to get to where he was. Now, not only was he without work, but he was forced to move in with his brother because he couldn’t afford to keep his home. Although Drake was looking for work constantly, the automotive world was suffering, and he wasn’t qualified for many of the other positions that were available; he found himself angry and fearful of the future. This was a crisis situation for Drake, and one that he had no control over. Drake had had problems with substance abuse in the past, sometimes turning to alcohol to help him relax. He knew this wouldn’t be effective for him in the long run and would likely prevent him from finding a new job, so Drake began practicing distracting skills. Every time he had an urge to drink, he would do something to take his mind off the urge, like going to a movie or calling a friend to meet for coffee.
* Tamara’s Story

Tamara’s husband Peter told her after seven years of marriage that he wasn’t sure he loved her anymore and he wanted a trial separation. Tamara was devastated; this had come out of nowhere, and she now found herself taking care of their two young children almost entirely on her own. Sometimes she found herself sinking into despair and feeling so furious with Peter for putting her in this position; at these times, Tamara wanted to just run away and escape it all. Instead, she found herself sleeping way too much and relying more and more on her mother to help her care for the kids. She also started going out with some of her single friends more often, just so she could forget about her problems. They would go clubbing. Sometimes she would drink too much, and often she would meet other guys, who would take her mind off Peter, at least for the night. In the long run, these behaviors only made the situation worse. Not giving her children the attention they needed, neglecting her responsibilities so she could go out with her friends, and having uncommitted sex with a variety of men only made Tamara feel bad about herself.

* Greg’s Story

Greg and Sabrina had been best friends since college. Sabrina had been dating another man for about six months and was starting to get serious and talking about a long-term commitment. As this happened, Greg found that he was seeing and hearing from Sabrina less and less often.

One night, Greg and Sabrina had made plans to go to dinner and a movie. Then, at the last minute, Sabrina called Greg and cancelled on him. At that point, he had had enough. He became furious with her and told her that he never wanted to see her again. Afterward, of course, Greg regretted what he had said, but he didn't know how to take it back. He
spent the whole night worrying that he really would never see his best friend again, and he didn't sleep a wink. The next day, Greg wanted to call Sabrina, but in spite of his fears, he was still really angry with her and he didn't want to be the one to give in. It was just easier to keep avoiding her, so that's what he did. This avoidance only made things worse for Greg in the long term, as he continued to dwell on what had happened, worrying about the loss of the relationship instead of calling Sabrina and trying to fix things with her.

There are many other examples of crises. The death of someone you care about is always a crisis, and it's one of the more difficult ones to deal with, because you have no control over it and the pain is so great. We also lose people in our lives when relationships end for one reason or another, and this can be a crisis if we weren't ready for it to happen. A crisis can also be a more physically traumatic event, such as being mugged or assaulted, witnessing a violent act, or being in a car accident. Crises take a variety of forms. The thing they have in common, though, is that they leave us feeling overwhelmed with emotions, making it harder for us to think straight.

Sometimes, like Drake, you might find you can act wisely and not make things worse. But when you're unable to access your wise self, you might find yourself doing things that might help you get through the crisis but that also have negative consequences in the long run; for example, doing things to help you avoid thinking about the crisis like overspending, using drugs or alcohol, gambling, picking fights with people you care about, withdrawing from the people around you, or triggering more emotions for yourself by dwelling on a situation. What kinds of things do you do to cope that actually make things worse in the long run? What behaviors do you engage in that might help you feel better in the short term but have negative consequences attached to them?

This chapter will help you look at the past to see what has and hasn't worked effectively for you during a crisis. Then it will offer the DBT skills of distracting and self-soothing; these skills focus on finding activities you can
do to help you get through a crisis without making the situation worse in the long run (Linehan 1993).

What to Do in a Crisis

Now that you know what a crisis is and how you might sometimes actually be contributing to crisis situations, think about what you can do in the future that will be more effective. In other words, what can you do to increase the likelihood of you getting through a crisis without making it worse?

Use What’s Worked Before

You can plan to act more effectively the next time something really painful happens, and you can start by asking yourself the question “What healthy (or nonharmful) things have I done in the past that have helped me get through difficult situations?” Maybe you spent a lot of time with people you care about; maybe there were certain people you wanted to talk to or be around. Perhaps you found yourself doing specific activities to take your mind off the pain for a while. Write down whatever things you can remember doing that helped and didn’t have negative consequences attached to them. These are things that you can do again the next time something painful occurs. Keep this list handy, so you can add to it.

Consider the Consequences

Before a crisis occurs, it can also help to consider any problem behaviors you currently engage in to help yourself cope and the consequences attached to these behaviors. Doing this will reinforce why it’s important to find more positive ways of coping rather than fall back into old patterns.
Calming the Emotional Storm

You could do this in the form of a cost-benefit analysis (Van Dijk 2009), where you weigh the benefits and the consequences of acting on an urge and not acting on the urge, or you could simply make some notes about why you don’t want to use that old coping skill again. Whatever technique you choose, it’s best to evaluate your old coping skills before you encounter another crisis, rather than during the crisis. If you’re trying to think of reasons not to do something when you’re having the urge to do it, you’re probably going to have a hard time persuading yourself not to. Once you’ve written your list of reasons not to continue with this behavior, you will want to keep it handy so that when an urge does come up, you can refer to your list to help you not to act on the urge.

Distract Yourself

When you know you’re in a crisis and there’s nothing you can do to fix the problem, it doesn’t usually do you much good to dwell on the situation. Furthermore, trying not to think about something isn’t effective either, since doing so will just cause you to think about it even more. Research has found that having people focus on something else instead of trying to suppress their thoughts greatly increases their ability not to think about those distressing thoughts (Koole 2009). Of course, it’s also important to remember that distracting is actually a type of avoidance, so you don’t want to do this in the long term; it’s meant as a short-term coping skill to help you survive a crisis. If you’re regularly distracting yourself, you’re actually practicing avoidance, which can cause even more problems for you in the long run.

So the point of distracting yourself is to do activities that will get your mind off the crisis for a short while. You’re not trying to avoid thinking about the crisis, mind you. Rather, you’re trying to turn your attention to something else. What things can you do that will help to distract you from the problem and that won’t make the situation worse? Think about what these activities might be for you and add them to your list of what’s worked before. Here are some suggestions:
Getting Through a Crisis without Making It Worse

* Working on a hobby, such as knitting, sewing, collecting stamps or baseball cards, or photography

* Visiting a friend or calling someone to talk about things that will take your mind off your own problem

* Doing something nice for someone else, like baking cookies for someone you care about

* Taking a hot aromatherapy bath

* Taking a nap

* Reading a book

* Taking your dog for a walk

* Cleaning your house

* Doing a crossword puzzle

* Surfing the Internet

* Watching a funny movie

As you can imagine, this list could go on and on. Write down anything that might possibly distract you when you’re in a tough situation. Don’t hold back. The longer your list is, the more helpful it will be when you do experience another crisis.

**Soothe Yourself**

Think about the things you can do that might help you feel a little calmer or more relaxed. When thinking about activities that are soothing for you, consider what might soothe your five senses: taste, touch, sound, smell, and
sight (Linehan 1993). Some of them might overlap with the activities that distract you, and that’s okay. Write them down anyway. Here are some ideas:

**Taste:** Cook yourself your favorite meal; have a cup of hot chocolate or herbal tea; suck on a favorite candy. (A gentle reminder here: if you’re someone who soothes yourself with food regularly and ends up overeating, you’ll want to focus on your other senses instead.)

**Touch:** Snuggle with your pet; find someone to give you a good hug; take a hot aromatherapy bath; put a hot water bottle on your feet or neck.

**Sound:** Put on some soothing (but not sad) music; call someone just to hear the sound of the other person’s voice; put the TV or radio on, since the sound of another voice can be soothing.

**Smell:** Light some scented candles; bake some cookies; put on a favorite perfume or cologne.

**Sight:** Look at photographs; buy or pick yourself a flower; clean your house, or even one part of a room in your house.

Practicing mindfulness, meditation, or relaxation exercises will also help you soothe yourself. Interestingly, these soothing activities will help you get through a crisis without making it worse, but they are also a good way of taking better care of yourself on a regular basis, so that you’ll actually find you have fewer crisis situations arising. When you’re taking the time to soothe yourself with these kinds of activities, you’ll be more able to handle stress and difficult situations, so they’ll be less likely to turn into crises. In other words, don’t just use these soothing skills when you’re in a crisis. Think about how you can soothe yourself on a regular basis so that you’re just taking better care of yourself all the time.
EXERCISE: This One Moment

When in a crisis situation, the DBT skill of being in just this one moment (Linehan 1993) that was introduced in chapter 2 can be especially helpful. There are no special instructions for this mindfulness exercise; it’s simply about being mindful to whatever one thing you’re doing in the present moment. For example, if you’re washing the dishes, just wash the dishes, with full attention and with acceptance of whatever your experience is in that moment. If you’re walking the dog, just walk the dog: bringing your attention back to walking the dog again and again, not judging yourself for wandering or for any of the painful thoughts or emotions that might be coming up.

By focusing your entire attention on what you’re doing in this one moment, you can turn your attention away from the crisis and the distressing thoughts and emotions that are coming up. Doing one thing at a time in the present moment, with your full attention and with acceptance, also helps you to feel less overwhelmed in times of crisis. But remember that mindfulness, distress tolerance, and most other skills are especially difficult to practice in stressful moments, and as best as you can, don’t judge yourself when you find your attention constantly wandering back to the crisis.

TEN TIPS FOR GETTING THROUGH A CRISIS WITHOUT MAKING IT WORSE

1. If you can solve the problem, solve it!

2. Remember that distracting and self-soothing skills aren’t going to make the problem go away; if you’re getting through the crisis without making it worse, you’re acting skillfully!

3. Be sure to make a list of your distracting and self-soothing skills, and use it. When you’re acting from your emotional self, it’s hard to think about how to get yourself through the situation.
4. Keep your list of skills handy, because you never know when you’re going to need it; also, make the list as long as you possibly can in order to offer more options.

5. When thinking of ways to distract yourself, think of activities that will be at least somewhat enjoyable for you. And remember, the point is to distract your attention from the crisis, so if the activity you’re doing isn’t distracting you, try something else.

6. Remember that the way not to think about something isn’t to try not to think about it. When you notice distressing thoughts creeping into your mind, just acknowledge them and distract yourself with an activity; the thoughts will go away on their own.

7. Although more difficult to practice when your emotions are intense, mindfulness can be helpful in getting you through a crisis. Don’t throw it out just because it’s hard!

8. Self-soothing not only helps during a crisis situation but is also good self-care that will help to prevent crises from arising. The better care you take of yourself, the better you’ll be able to manage your emotions, so that even when difficult situations arise, you’ll be more capable of handling them.

9. Before your next crisis, make a list of the reasons you don’t want to engage in your old problem behaviors; that way, when the crisis hits, you can pull out your list and read it to yourself to help you not to act on your urge.

10. Remember that the skills for distracting yourself in a crisis are meant for temporary use only; if you’re using them regularly, you’re no longer distracting yourself in a crisis but practicing avoidance!
Wrapping Up

In this chapter, you’ve learned what a crisis is and how you might be making things worse for yourself during difficult times. It’s important to remember that pain is going to be a part of life; what you do with that pain will determine whether you make your own life harder than it has to be. By using the skills you’ve learned in this chapter, and by planning ahead for the next time you have a crisis in your life, you’ll be able to get through that crisis more effectively, without making things worse for yourself.

The next chapter will offer another skill that will help you prevent things from becoming harder than they have to be and that will reduce the amount of pain in your life.
The last chapter focused on skills to help you survive a crisis: things you can do immediately that will help to not make the situation worse. In this chapter, you’ll be looking at the DBT skill of reality acceptance, a skill that will help to decrease the intensity of your painful emotions (Linehan 1993). When you can reduce the intensity of your emotions, you’ll be able to manage them more effectively, and this will have the effect of reducing the number of crises you experience in the long run.

Pain Vs. Suffering

We all have—or have had situations—in our lives that are painful. The death of a loved one; the loss of a relationship; missing out on that hoped-for job.
Some people experience more painful situations than others, situations that are even traumatizing: physical or sexual abuse; being in a serious car accident; or being caught in a natural disaster such as a tsunami, earthquake, or hurricane. Of course, these situations will cause pain—sadness, fear, disappointment, grief. In life, the pain that results from situations like these is inevitable. But quite often, we add to our emotional burden by not accepting the reality of these events, by fighting that reality instead, and this creates suffering.

As Linehan (1993) notes, suffering is the extra painful emotions that arise when you refuse to accept the pain in your life. Suffering makes it more difficult for you to cope and to function normally. It often results in those unhealthy behaviors you may tend to fall into, as you try to make yourself feel better by escaping through drugs or alcohol, gambling, shopping, sleeping, and so on.

_Do You Fight Reality?_

Think about a recent time in your life when you’ve experienced a difficult situation that triggered pain for you. Note that quite often, difficult situations are those in which you have no control. For example, someone else has made a decision that impacts you, and although you may be able to assert yourself and try to influence that person, the control is essentially not yours. Now think about how you talked to yourself about this situation and about your pain. What were your thoughts about it? Did you simply say, “Okay, I accept this”? Or did you notice nonaccepting thoughts, such as “It’s not fair” or “Why me?” or “This shouldn’t have happened” or “I can’t bear it!”?

As humans, we have a tendency to fight the things that cause us pain, whether physical or emotional. For example, just last week I was stung by a bee in my backyard; as the bee was stinging my finger, my instinct was to fight against the physical pain by swatting at the bee and trying to get it away from
Accepting Things As They Are

me. This instinct to fight often serves a protective function, helping us to survive and stay healthy, but sometimes it backfires and can actually be harmful to us—like trying to swat a stinging bee, which might actually cause us to get stung again.

Often our brain tries to use this reflex to protect us emotionally, as well. When we feel emotional pain, our reflex is usually to avoid the cause of that pain or to fight against it. What our brain doesn’t realize is that this actually works against us, causing suffering rather than alleviating our pain (Linehan 1993). When you have problems regulating your emotions, you might find this tendency is even stronger in your life, but this tendency to fight reality could actually be a contributing factor in keeping the painful emotions alive for you.

In his book *A Path with Heart* (1993), Jack Kornfield tells a story about a man who had been studying meditation with a Tibetan teacher and who decided he was going to pursue enlightenment. The man went off into the mountains and built himself a little hut by a stream. As he started to meditate, he noticed that he couldn’t stop his mind; it was thinking and remembering, and going on and on. It even got to the point that he noticed his mind was singing marching songs in time with the bubbling brook that was right beside his hut. Frustrated with this, the man finally got up and began moving stones around in the little stream, trying to get it to sing a different song!

The point that Kornfield is making with this funny story, of course, is that we often do this sort of thing in our own lives. He says that when problems arise in our lives, “we project our frustration onto them as if it were the rain, the children, the world outside that was the source of our discomfort. We imagine that we can change the world and then be happy. But it is not by moving the rocks that we find happiness and awakening, but by transforming our relationship to them” (Kornfield 1993, 73).

Here’s another example of someone who suffered as a result of fighting her reality.
Calming the Emotional Storm

* Olivia’s Story

Six years ago, Olivia had a fall at work and began experiencing debilitat-
ing pain. Her chronic pain had left Olivia, already a highly emotional
person, with emotional problems that often contributed to the premature
ending of relationships, and she had been unable to keep a job for the last
couple of years.

Olivia continued to look for solutions to her pain problems. After six
years of trying different therapies with different professionals, she finally
found one who had a good explanation for her ongoing problems and,
even better, a treatment that he thought would really help. Unfortunately,
the treatment was fairly expensive, and Olivia was informed that her
insurance company wouldn’t cover the cost. This caused her pain; she
was extremely disappointed, and she was frustrated. But then she got
catched up fighting reality: thinking about how unfair it is, that the insur-
ance company should be paying for her treatment, and so on. “Can’t they
see how much I’ve done to try to get better, and nothing has helped?” she
thought. “They’re being ridiculous and unfair. I’m never going to feel bet-
ter. This pain is ruining my life.” Now Olivia was not only disappointed
and sad, but she was also feeling outraged and hopeless. Olivia turned her
pain into suffering by fighting against her reality.

Can you think of a time you’ve done this? Have you suffered by fighting
against reality?

The Experience of Suffering

How do you experience suffering? What actions do you take to make
yourself feel better? Are they healthy actions or problematic ones? For most
people, suffering leads to unhealthy actions. Some people throw temper tan-
trums, venting their feelings by yelling and screaming, maybe even throwing
things. Some people get stuck in self-pity, allowing themselves to ruminate or wallow in their suffering without trying to do anything to improve their situation. As noted before, some people engage in problematic behaviors such as using substances, or they do other things to try to make themselves forget. Take a few moments to consider what your experience of suffering is typically like. Do you engage in behaviors that make things better or worse?

Accepting Reality Reduces Suffering

So how can you stop or reduce your suffering? Your emotions are already difficult for you to manage, so what can you do differently so that you feel only the pain that is inevitable in a human life? You can stop fighting your reality and accept it. Before we go any further, though, it’s important that you understand that the word acceptance does not mean that you approve of a situation, that you like it, or that you don’t want it to change. Acceptance simply means that you stop trying to deny your reality and you acknowledge it instead (Linehan 1993). It’s putting a stop to the judgments about your experience and saying instead, “It is what it is.”

Again, think of a situation in your life that you fought against and in which you suffered. Now think about what it was like for you after you were able to accept the situation. What changed? How did you feel once you accepted it? Most people say that they feel “lighter” or relieved, like a burden has been lifted.

Usually you’ll find with acceptance that the situation loses the power it once had over you. You don’t think about it as often, and when you do think about it, you find that the emotions that come up are much less intense than they used to be. Most importantly, you’ll find that your level of anger will go down. Remember, the pain will not go away, but your suffering will stop. And when you can reduce the amount of emotion you carry around with you on a regular basis, your ability to manage emotions will increase.
HOW TO ACCEPT REALITY

These are the steps to follow to get to acceptance of a particular situation.

1. The first thing you need to do is choose whether or not this is something you want to work on. I’ve done my best to convince you that this skill will be helpful for you, but you’re the one who has to be willing to give it a try, or it just won’t work.

2. If you decide to work on accepting reality, you must make a commitment to yourself. In other words, you commit to working on accepting this situation from this point forward. Think of this step as if it were the start of a healthier diet or quitting smoking. With reality acceptance, though, the commitment is that from this point forward, you’re going to work on accepting _________________. Fill in the blank with your own situation.

3. The next step is to notice when you’re back to fighting that situation. When your thoughts turn back in the direction of “But it’s not fair” or “Why me?” simply notice that this has happened. Don’t judge yourself. Remember that it’s natural for your thoughts to turn back in this direction, especially when you first start practicing acceptance. Like any skill, it will take time and practice.

4. The final step, once you’ve noticed those nonaccepting thoughts come up, is to reach for acceptance again. Turn your mind away from fighting reality and toward accepting it. Remind yourself that you’ve chosen to work on acceptance and of why it will be helpful for you.

These last two steps are an internal argument that takes place within us. That is, you’ll notice that you’re back to fighting reality: “It’s not fair, it shouldn’t be this way.” And you then reach for acceptance with your mind: “It is what it is. I decided to work on accepting this situation because I don’t want it to have this power over me anymore. I’m going to keep working on
accepting this.” Then you’ll start to fight again: “But it’s not fair that I have
to put so much effort into this when the situation shouldn’t have happened in
the first place.” Again, when you notice those fighting thoughts, you return to
acceptance: “And yet it did happen, and I know it will be to my benefit to stop
fighting it.” And so on.

When you first begin practicing accepting reality, you might have to
reach for acceptance many times in just one minute. That’s okay, because
you’ve reduced your suffering in that minute by not letting yourself remain
stuck in the fighting-reality mode. And gradually, the time that you’re accept-
ing will increase to outweigh the time you’re not accepting. Be patient with
yourself, and it will come.

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Acceptance Is Not Forgiveness

It can also be helpful to remember that you’re not practicing reality
acceptance to benefit someone else. It’s not about forgiveness. For example,
Nigel had a hard time with this skill because he kept thinking that the sexual
abuse he had endured was “just not acceptable.” It took him a while to wrap
his mind around the fact that accepting that it had happened had nothing to
do with forgiving the person who had done this to him. Acceptance has
nothing to do with anyone else. It’s just about reducing your own suffering.
Acceptance is simply about whether or not you want to continue spending so
much time and energy experiencing all of these painful emotions about a situ-
ation. Fighting reality doesn’t change reality; fighting reality is a waste of
energy and doesn’t actually accomplish anything productive.

Acceptance Does Not Mean Giving Up

Some people get stuck on acceptance because they think if they accept
the situation, it means that they’re giving up or being passive about it.
Absolutely not! If you think about acceptance as acknowledging reality as it truly is rather than as you would like it to be, it will hopefully become clear that you actually have to accept something in order to work toward changing it (Linehan 1993). Here’s an example of how this works.

* Tammie’s Story

Tammie had been in a relationship with Sebastian for two years. She wanted to get married and have a family. Sebastian had told her from the start that he didn’t want those things. Even though Tammie really wanted marriage and children, she also really loved Sebastian, and she had stayed with him this long, hoping that he would change his mind. In other words, she wasn’t accepting reality. Instead, she was living her life the way that she thought it should be: staying in the relationship with Sebastian in the hopes that he would change his mind about having a family. The longer she stayed in the relationship, though, the more frustrated Tammie became, because she wasn’t getting her needs met. Her desire to have a family was increasing, and Sebastian seemed no closer to changing.

Two years into the relationship, it finally occurred to Tammie that she had to accept that her partner wasn’t going to change his mind, and she had to decide which was more important to her, staying with Sebastian or finding someone who would give her what she wanted in life.

As Tammie’s story illustrates, acceptance is acknowledging reality as it truly is and making decisions based on that reality. We can’t act to change things until we recognize them as they really are. While Tammie remained in denial, for example, hoping that Sebastian would change, she was unable to do anything to change the situation herself. Once you acknowledge reality as it is, that’s when you have the power to change things. The change you’re then able to make might not be exactly the way you wanted things to turn out, but at least you’re able to take some kind of action, giving you back some control and reducing your emotional load in the long run.
Don’t Forget the “Reality” in Reality Acceptance

Often people have problems with this skill because they’re trying to accept things that aren’t reality, such as the future. The future isn’t reality. It’s the future! If it hasn’t happened yet, it’s not reality, is it? So trying to accept that you’ll never have a long-term relationship, for example, is impossible, because it’s not reality. It might be one possible reality, but if you were trying to accept all of the possible realities in your life, you’d never have time to do anything else. So if you’re not in a relationship right now, and this triggers suffering in you, then you’ll want to work on accepting that you’re not in a relationship right now.

Judgments are another thing people sometimes get stuck on with this skill. I once worked with a young woman who told me she was having a hard time accepting that she was a bad person. You might recall that judgments are not facts; therefore, they are not reality. I explained to this young woman that what she needed to look at was why she thought she was bad: what were the facts that triggered this judgment? She responded that she used drugs, and she had a hard time accepting help from people who cared about her. These, then, were the realities she needed to work on accepting.

Making Your Own List

You may find that accepting reality is difficult. Why? Think about all the years you’ve spent fighting against reality. When you’ve done something for so long, you shouldn’t expect to be able to change it overnight. Upon learning about this skill, some people also find that they have a hard time accepting that they’ve played a part in their own suffering for so many years by fighting reality; they have a hard time accepting their nonacceptance!
It can be helpful to start a list of situations you’d like to work on accepting. Accepting your nonacceptance may be one more situation to add to your list of things to work on.

You may want to start off by practicing acceptance with situations that are less painful, so that you can accumulate evidence that you can accept reality and that it does reduce suffering. By starting with these less painful situations, you’ll build up your level of confidence so that you can then begin to work your way up to the more painful situations in your life that you would like to accept. The following are some suggestions for situations you could start practicing with (Van Dijk 2009):

* The next time you find yourself stuck in traffic, don’t fight it; instead, tell yourself that “it is what it is.”

* When you go to put gasoline in your car, rather than getting yourself worked up about the high gas prices, practice reality acceptance.

* When you find yourself standing in a long line at the grocery store, accept it.

* When you have to change your plans due to bad weather, practice reality acceptance.

Take some time making your own list of situations you want to work on accepting. It might include situations currently happening in your life or things that have happened in your past that continue to cause suffering. Either way, remember to stick to realities. Don’t go into the future, and stay away from judgments. It is also helpful to be specific about situations. For example, rather than trying to accept that you’ve “made poor choices,” be specific about what those choices were that you regret. Perhaps it’s hard for you to accept that you stayed in a relationship with someone when you knew it wasn’t in your best interest.
TEN TIPS FOR REALITY ACCEPTANCE

1. Remember that acceptance does not mean approval! You don’t have to like reality, but in order to reduce your suffering, you do have to accept it.

2. Be assured that acceptance also doesn’t mean that you give up or that you stop trying to change the situation.

3. When you get discouraged, remember that accepting reality will help to reduce the intensity of your emotions. It just takes a while. Keep at it!

4. Remind yourself that acceptance doesn’t happen overnight. The more painful the situation, the harder it will be to accept and the longer it will take to do so.

5. Recall situations in the past that you have been able to accept. This can help you keep practicing reality acceptance, even when it feels hardest.

6. Bear in mind that acceptance is not the same as forgiveness. We work on acceptance for ourselves; it has nothing to do with the other person. Forgiveness is optional; acceptance is necessary for you to move on with your life.

7. If accepting something seems overwhelming, try breaking it down into smaller situations for you to accept.

8. Focus on the present; stay out of the future. We can’t accept things that haven’t happened yet.

9. Don’t attempt to accept judgments; it can’t be done. This is about accepting reality. Judgments are judgments, not facts.

10. Remember that accepting reality isn’t about making your pain go away. It will reduce your suffering, but pain is a natural part of human life.
Willingness vs. Willfulness

Sometimes people notice that even though they understand how accepting reality can help them, they still find themselves resisting it; this is often due to willfulness. *Willfulness* is refusing to do what’s effective and closing yourself off from the possibilities (May 1987). It’s throwing your hands up and saying, “Whatever!” It’s giving up, refusing to play the cards you’ve been dealt, and choosing not to do what you can with what you’ve been given. You might find that the harder something is (like practicing acceptance or other skills), the more difficult it is for you to be willing to do it. Often, it’s just easier to be willful and not try. In the long run, though, that’s obviously ineffective.

Can you think of a time when you’ve been willful? When, rather than doing your best to do something about your situation, you simply sat on your hands and purposely did nothing to improve things for yourself? How effective was that for you in the long term? Did it help you meet your goals?

*Willingness*, the opposite of willfulness, is about taking an attitude of openness toward life, or agreeing to enter into life fully (May 1987). Willingness is trying your best with what you’ve got. It’s doing what you can to be effective, such as practicing reality acceptance with a very painful situation. Willingness is trying to be more flexible (Hayes and Smith 2005) and opening yourself up to possibilities.

Can you think of a time when you’ve been willing? When you tried your best in spite of how hard it might have felt, because you knew you had to do something to help yourself? How did that feel? What was the outcome? Did this help you work toward your goals?

*From Willfulness to Willingness*

So how do you get from willfulness to willingness? In other words, when you notice yourself feeling willful and wanting to sit back and not care, what
can you do to help yourself feel more willing? First, start by thinking about things you might have done in the past that have helped you make this transition from willfulness to willingness. Can you think of anything you’ve done before that helped you do this?

Next, look at your body language. Our body language often impacts our attitude in this way. Have you ever noticed that when you’re feeling willful, your body is more closed off? For example, your arms might be crossed, your fists clenched, or your body language indicative of a withdrawal from the world in some way: your head is head down, shrinking into yourself, and so on. To be willing, it can help for you to open yourself up physically: uncross your arms; unclench your fists; lift your chin; open your hands; practice a relaxation exercise to help you feel less tense.

Your facial expression can also have an effect on you. There is a wise saying that goes, “Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.” In DBT, this skill is called the half smile (Linehan 1993). The idea is that, by slightly smiling, you can sometimes change the way you feel; it can help you to feel more willing. In fact, research has shown that changing your facial expression actually sends signals to your brain about how you’re feeling emotionally (Ekman and Davidson 1993). In other words, your facial expression can impact your mood. So try smiling the next time you notice that willful feeling, and see if you can get yourself to willingness.

The way you talk to yourself can also impact whether you’re feeling willful or willing. Have you ever noticed what kind of conversation is happening in your mind when you’re feeling willful? You’re probably saying something to yourself like “Who cares? It doesn’t matter anyway, so why bother?” In order to help you feel more willing, you can change those thoughts, telling yourself that “I’m going to try my best” or “I can make a difference.”

Willfulness can come up at any time in life and impacts us negatively by preventing us from doing our best to be effective. When you become aware that willfulness has arisen within you, remember not to judge it. Just
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acknowledge it, accept its presence, and then work on changing it to willing-

ness so that you can be more effective in your life.

Using Mindfulness to Reach Acceptance

Mindfulness is an important part of reality acceptance, since you have to
be aware of your fighting-reality thoughts as they arise in order to work on
reaching for acceptance. The following exercise will specifically help you to
turn your thoughts toward accepting reality.

≈ EXERCISE: Accepting Reality As It Is

Sit and simply allow yourself to become aware of what arises, and sense what
is asking for acceptance.

You'll know what is asking for acceptance because it will be something
that continues to repeat itself, a pattern. Perhaps, for example, you notice
your thoughts continuing to return to a situation or person; or perhaps a feel-
ing continuously comes up for you. When these patterns emerge, these are
the things that are asking to be accepted. These patterns remain because, on
some level, we continue to resist them; we feel a fear or an aversion toward
them, or perhaps we’re judging this experience.

To release these patterns you’re stuck in, you must acknowledge what is
present and ask yourself, “What is my experience?” Do you want it to change?
Is there a difficult emotion, thought, sensation, or other experience that you
are blocking, or that you want to be over or to go away? Is there some kind of
attachment or some fear? (Kornfield 1993). In other words, explore within
yourself why you’re stuck in this pattern; when you can develop an under-
standing of this, you can work on letting it go, which is acceptance.

≈
Wrapping Up

In this chapter you looked at why accepting reality is an important skill in helping you to reduce the emotional suffering you have in your life. (Remember, when you can reduce the amount of emotion you’re experiencing regularly, it will become easier for you to regulate your emotions.) We’ve all had situations in our lives that stay with us, causing us to suffer long after we think our suffering should have subsided. This suffering is caused by the fact that we continue to fight the situation, insisting that it shouldn’t be this way, judging it as unfair, and so on. When you can give up those expectations—those wishes for reality to be different—you can be rid of that emotional suffering. Remember that pain is inevitable; suffering is what you create when you refuse to accept the pain in your life.

You also learned about willfulness in this chapter—an attitude that can perpetuate your suffering by preventing you from acting effectively—and how getting to a more willing state will help you to act in more helpful and healthy ways for yourself.

The next chapter will show you how to manage your emotions more effectively by increasing the amount of positive emotion in your life. Before reading on, however, make sure that you continue to think about what situations you have in your life that you need to accept, and continue to practice all the skills you’ve learned so far. And of course, as best as you can, take your attitude of willingness forward with you to help you be effective even when things get hard.
CHAPTER 9

The Building Blocks for Positive Emotions

How to manage your painful emotions more effectively is only part of the emotion-regulation equation. The other part is about making changes in your life so that enjoyable things are going to happen more often, increasing the amount of positive emotions you'll experience. That’s what this chapter is about: how to increase the good things you have going on in your life so that you'll feel better.

Notice the Little Things

If your mood is low, or if you're regularly experiencing anxiety or anger, it's easy to focus on the negative and to miss out on the smaller good things that might be happening in your life. These might be the pleasure of your partner bringing you a cup of coffee in the morning; the peacefulness of sitting on the
back deck listening to the birds sing; the calm of standing outside in the snow, listening to the silence that surrounds you; or the contentment of waking up late on a Saturday morning with the sun shining through the windows. These are all things that would bring up positive emotions for most people, but many of us miss out on those emotions because we’re not paying attention. So here’s your wake-up call. Start paying attention! Stop and smell the roses. Make it your mission in life to notice those little things and the positive emotions they generate in you.

**Plan Positive Events**

Difficulties with emotion regulation often cause people to feel more down, angry, or anxious. It’s hard to feel better unless you have positive things in your life that you can experience and look forward to. Stop for a moment and think about these questions: What do you have happening this week that you’re looking forward to? And what events are coming up in the next couple of months that you feel good about? Perhaps there’s a family gathering for a special occasion, maybe you’ve got tickets to the theater or are planning on seeing a movie that’s just come out, perhaps you are looking forward to a work conference, or maybe you’re planning on meeting a friend for coffee next week. It doesn’t have to be anything huge, but you do need to have things to look forward to, both in the short and long term.

*Finding Enjoyable Activities*

If nothing is on the horizon, start looking for enjoyable activities. If you know that certain activities in the past have helped you feel better, this is a good place to start. But you might find that you really have to brainstorm to find activities that might be enjoyable for you.
If you can’t think of anything off the top of your head that would be enjoyable for you, grab a piece of paper and go through the following steps:

1. Write down anything you can think of that seems like it might be fun or interesting. Don’t limit yourself. Write down anything that comes to mind, even if it seems unrealistic.

2. If you still have difficulty thinking of activities, think about anything that’s ever appealed to you as a possibility. Maybe you recall seeing a television show about hang-gliding, and it looked interesting to you. Write it down! Or maybe you once had a friend who took a photography class, and you would have liked to do this as well but couldn’t afford it at the time. Add photography to your list.

3. If still nothing comes to mind, it’s time for research. If you have access to the Internet, Google “fun things to do.” You’ll be surprised at how many lists are out there that can help get you started. If you don’t have easy Internet access, ask family and friends for suggestions, and don’t forget that your local library probably has free Internet service.

4. Once you’ve got your list, it’s time to decide where you’d like to start. Pick whatever appeals to you and is feasible, and start with that.

The more you have going on in your life that’s positive, the more positive you will feel. And the more positive you feel, the easier it will be to find things to enjoy.

**Making It Work for You**

You might find that some things on your list aren’t feasible in the short term. For example, maybe you want to go on a trip, but you can’t afford it right now. If this is the case, you can still find pleasure in planning to take
the trip at some point in the future. After all, while going on a trip is usually a lot of fun, planning for the trip can be enjoyable as well. You can also think about what you can do to work toward being able to go on the trip. For example, you might start by putting aside $25 from each paycheck, or by collecting all your spare change in a jar. You can think about where you’d like to go, and once you’ve decided, begin researching the destination, hotels you might stay in, and activities you might do when you get there. So, even though the trip itself isn’t doable just yet, you can still get enjoyment out of planning for it.

Another possibility is that you’ll find an activity that you’d like to do but discover that you can’t do it exactly the way you’d like. For example, maybe you’d like to take yoga or Spanish classes, and you find a place to take classes, but you have no transportation to get you there. This is no reason to give up, for you may find other options. Is there someone who can help you out with a ride once a week? If not, you can go to your local library and see if it has books or DVDs that you can learn from; Google the activity and see if there are any resources or groups closer to you that would be helpful; see if anyone you know does this activity and could get you started by teaching you some basics. If you can’t do the actual activity on your list the way you would like to, this doesn’t mean you can’t do it at all. Sometimes it just takes some creativity.

Work on Building Mastery

While it’s important to do things in life that are fun, it’s just as important to do things not necessarily because they’re fun but because they bring you a sense of accomplishment, fulfillment, or purpose. This is the DBT skill known as building mastery (Linehan 1993), and the activities that build mastery will be different for everyone. This skill isn’t so much about the activity you do as it is about the feeling it gives you: that sense of accomplishment and pride in yourself for what you’ve done, regardless of how big or small it might seem.
Building mastery is about challenging yourself and feeling proud of yourself for doing so, regardless of the outcome.

So, keeping these thoughts in mind, what might build mastery for you? For some people, it might be taking on an extra project at work or volunteering at the food bank. For others, it might be taking better care of themselves through exercising and eating healthier.

Building mastery doesn't have to be a big thing. It might be going for a five-minute walk if that’s what gives you a feeling of accomplishment and pride. It could be vacuuming the house if you haven’t been able to bring yourself to do this for a while. For some people, when things get really difficult for them emotionally, building mastery could be something as seemingly basic as showering. Do you get the picture? It’s not the activity, really, that matters. Again, it’s the feeling you get from doing the activity.

If you work twelve-hour days, seven days a week, and don’t get that sense of fulfillment and accomplishment, doing this is not building mastery even though you might be getting a lot of work done. So really give this skill some thought: what’s one thing you can do today that builds mastery for you? In the long run, when you’re building mastery on a regular basis, you’re going to feel better about yourself.

Set Goals

Setting goals for yourself is also important in helping to create positive emotions. Doing this will also help you build mastery, as you feel a sense of accomplishment for reaching the goal you’ve been working toward. You’ll feel some kind of positive emotion such as happiness, contentment, or pride for reaching your goal. You’ll feel good about yourself, and this positive self-regard will have a positive impact on your mood.

Before you even reach the goal, though, it’s important to realize that just having these long- and short-term goals gives you something to look forward
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to, providing you with more positive emotions to enjoy. If you don’t have goals in your life—if you don’t have a sense of where you’d like to be, what you’d like to be doing differently—instead of positive emotions, you’ll experience a sense of being lost or stagnant, staying still instead of moving forward. So take some time to consider where you’d like to be in your life in six months, one year, and five years. You might want to write your goals down, and then give some consideration to how you’ll get from here to there. What do you need to do differently, what changes do you need to make in your life, to get where you’d like to be?

Do It Whether or Not You Feel Like It

“I know I should go out for a walk, but I just don’t feel like it.” “I know if I practice these skills I’ll feel better, but I just can’t be bothered.” “I know my mood will improve if I get out of bed, but I just don’t want to.” How many times have such thoughts gone through your mind? How many times have you said to yourself, “If only I felt motivated to do this, I know it would make me feel better”? I often tell the people I work with that if I could remove one word from our vocabulary, it would be the word “motivation.”

For some reason, many of us seem to believe that we have to feel a drive or desire to do something before we can do it; if we don’t feel like doing it, then we can’t. But think about this for a moment: when was the last time you really felt like doing the housework? How many times in a week do you not feel like making dinner or doing the dishes, and yet you do these things anyway? It seems that we make ourselves do things that we know we dislike doing, even if we don’t feel like doing them at the time. But for some reason we don’t apply this same rule to the things that we do enjoy. Instead we think that, because we enjoy these activities, we should want to do them, so if we don’t feel like doing these things, we don’t do them. Anton’s story is a good example of what happens when we don’t feel like doing something that might be good for us.
* Anton’s Story

Anton had problems with low mood and anxiety at different times throughout his life. Last year when he’d been feeling pretty good, he had bought a boat, thinking that this would get him outside more and would help improve his mood when he was feeling down. Now, though, he was having problems managing his emotions again, his mood was low, and he was feeling angry a lot; he hadn’t been out to the boat at all this season because he just couldn’t be bothered. He thought he would wait until he felt like doing it, but the motivation wasn’t there, so he didn’t push himself, and he ended up not doing something that might have lifted his spirits.

I’m sure we’ve all had times when we’ve done this, but you have to throw out the idea that if you lack motivation for something, you shouldn’t do it! Especially when your mood is low or you have problems with anxiety or anger, you can’t wait to feel like doing things. You often won’t feel like doing an activity until after you’ve started doing it.

Ever notice that you might not feel like doing something, but if you force yourself to do it, it’s not so bad, and you might even enjoy it? So when you notice you’re holding yourself back by thinking, “I just don’t feel like it,” do it anyway. This will go a long way to reduce your painful emotions, as you increase your activity level and the number of positive events you experience in your life.

Another, related pet peeve of mine is when I talk to clients about doing something—for example, going for a walk or getting together with friends—and they tell me that they’ll “try.” Yoda, the famous character from the Star Wars movies, wisely says, “Do, or do not. There is no try” (Lucasfilm 1980). Trying is when you attempt something and are unable to do it. So you really can’t try to go for a walk, unless you have some physical limitation that prevents you from walking. You can’t try to make a list of enjoyable activities. You either do it or you don’t; and if you don’t, you need to take responsibility for the fact that this is a choice you made. So “try” is another word you’ll want to
work on removing from your vocabulary. Don’t think about trying to do something; just make the decision either to do it or not.

**Be Mindful to Your Emotions**

You’ve learned a lot about mindfulness so far in this book and about all the different ways it can help you. Well, here’s another way: mindfulness can help to increase the amount of positive emotion you experience in your life, and it helps you to enjoy those positive feelings when they’re there (Linehan 1993). You already know that being in the present for pleasant events allows you to enjoy those events more: when you’re practicing mindfulness and living in the present moment more often—really experiencing those events as they unfold, rather than missing out on them because you’re too caught up in the past or the future—you’re going to experience positive emotion more often. Here’s what’s also true: with mindfulness, you can increase your enjoyment of those positive feelings, as well.

*Noticing Your Positive Emotions*

The next step is to become more mindful of the emotion itself as it shows up. Think about your experience of positive emotions for a moment: do you tend to even notice them, or do you miss out on them altogether? Because positive emotions are usually less intense than painful ones, sometimes it’s easy to miss them entirely, but if you don’t notice them, you don’t get to enjoy them while they’re there.

Some people have a tendency to disregard positive feelings: “Big deal. I felt a tiny bit better for a whole minute.” Other people worry about when the feeling will end: “Sure, I feel good right now, but as soon as my family leaves, I’m sure I’ll feel lousy again.” Still others worry about whether or not they deserve to feel those good emotions. You will be able to enjoy your
experience if you simply notice your positive emotions and accept them, without judgment.

**Validating All Your Emotions**

Think back to the skill of validation, from chapter 4. Remember the importance of accepting your emotion, not struggling against it or trying to get rid of it? Well, when it comes to pleasant emotions, acceptance also means not trying to cling to the emotion and make it stick around longer. Of course, it’s understandable that if you’ve been feeling down, anxious, or angry a lot, you won’t want a positive emotion to end. But as soon as you start thinking about what you can do to make it stay, you’re out of the present moment and into the future, essentially chasing that positive emotion away.

So as hard as it is, stop struggling against whatever feeling is there and just allow yourself to experience it. If it’s a painful emotion, it will gradually dissipate as you accept its presence and find ways to help yourself cope with it; if it’s a positive emotion, it will hang around a bit longer while the positive experience is happening.

*Anthony’s Story*

*Anthony is a man I worked with recently who was always so busy beating himself up for things he had done in the past that he was unable to accept any positive feelings in the present. Even when he was able to change the way he acted toward his stepson and stopped himself from losing his temper as he usually would, Anthony was unable to give himself any credit for this improvement. Instead, he insisted, “It’s stupid. Anyone should be able to do this. I shouldn’t have to work so hard to be civil to someone I love.” So you can see that, when a positive emotion did come up for Anthony, he would disregard it and give himself the message that he didn’t deserve it.*
Once Anthony learned the skill of being mindful to his emotions—accepting whatever emotion comes up, whether positive or painful, rather than judging it or judging himself for feeling the emotion—he was able to acknowledge his positive emotions more often. This, in turn, helped him to feel better more often, as he felt better about himself.

Like so many of the other skills you’re learning, being mindful to your emotions takes time and effort and lots of practice. But in the end, you’ll find that it improves your ability to regulate your emotions. You become better able to just accept your feelings for what they are, rather than judge them as good, bad, right, or wrong, or worry about when the pleasant ones will disappear, and so on. Being mindful to your emotions will gradually help you increase the amount of positive emotions you experience, and will allow you to experience them more fully.

≈ TEN TIPS TO INCREASE THE POSITIVE IN YOUR LIFE

1. It’s important to have activities that you enjoy in your life; positive emotions don’t happen on their own.

2. If you can’t do something you’d like, it doesn’t mean you should give up on the idea. Brainstorm other ways you can enjoy the activity.

3. Planning something can be just as enjoyable as doing it.

4. Activities that build mastery—giving you a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment, whether they’re actually enjoyable or not—are also necessary to help you feel good about yourself.

5. You need to have a sense of where you’re going in your life, so consider short- and long-term goals.
6. Throw out the word “motivation”; don’t think about whether or not you feel like it, and just do it!

7. Likewise, forget about “trying” to do something. Either do it or don’t.

8. Being mindful to the activities that you’re doing will increase your enjoyment of them, as you’re more fully present for the activity.

9. It’s just as important, though, to be mindful to the emotion you’re experiencing—whether painful or pleasant—rather than judging it.

10. Trying to hold on to pleasant emotions is a sure way of making them disappear; being mindful to your emotions means accepting them as they are, not trying to get rid of the painful ones and not clinging to the pleasant ones.

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Wrapping Up

You’ve learned a lot of skills so far that will help you to regulate your emotions and live a happier, healthier life. Hopefully, you’re regularly practicing the skills that you’ve read about; this is the most effective way of bringing about change. Remember, you can’t expect to simply read this book and feel better. It’s about putting what you learn here into practice and finding different ways of doing things. It’s also important to remember that you’ve been stuck in your current patterns for many years, so don’t expect to change overnight.

In the next and final chapter, you’ll look at the impact that relationships have on you and how you can be more effective in this area of your life, creating healthier, more balanced relationships. This, in turn, will increase your positive emotions and will help you to manage your emotions more effectively.
Ah, relationships. They can have us on top of the world at one moment and in the depths of despair the next. The state of our relationships can play a big part in how we feel. Although ideally we want to be able to separate our relationships somewhat from our mood, it’s also important to maintain good, healthy relationships so that the part they play in our lives is primarily a positive one. This chapter will first help you take a look at the relationships you currently have in your life. Then it will offer some information and skills to help you improve your relationships now and in the future.

We All Need People

As clichéd as this may sound, it’s just a fact of life that we need other people in our lives in order to be happy. The next exercise will help you consider the people you have in your life.
EXERCISE: Who’s in Your Life?

Write down the answers to the following questions:

1. Who is the person you’re closest to, the person with whom you share almost everything? You might not even see this person regularly—perhaps you mostly talk on the phone or communicate via email—but you know he’ll be there when you need him.

2. Do you have friends you socialize with on a regular basis? People with whom you might not share your innermost secrets but with whom you get together now and then to have a fun night out?

3. Do you have anyone in your life you look up to? Someone you hold in high regard, someone you admire and perhaps even strive to be like?

4. How are your relationships with family members? Are they healthy, or do they cause you a lot of pain?

5. Do you have relationships in your life that you need to consider ending because they’re not healthy and they create a lot of negativity in your life?

Based on your answers to the above questions, consider next how satisfied you are with the relationships you have in your life. Do you have enough, or do you need more?

If you aren’t satisfied with the relationships you have in your life, you’ll need to consider what you can do to improve this: do you need to work on improving the relationships you already have, do you have people in your life you’d like to develop deeper relationships with, or do you need to go out and find new people?
Developing New Relationships

If you don’t have enough relationships, take a few moments to consider who you have in your life already whom you might want to get to know better and develop a deeper, more meaningful relationship with. For example, you could engage that person you keep saying hello to at the gym in more of a conversation and over time ask him to go for coffee, or you could ask your coworker if she wants to go see a movie with you.

Alternatively, consider how you might meet new people who could become friends. This is often more difficult because the places we meet people often grow limited as we get older, so this means trying new things to meet new people. Consider what your interests are, and look into joining a club that shares that interest. There are social networking sites that you can join, where you can get together to share a specific activity or goal with others. Taking courses, going to workshops, or joining sports or other activities hosted by your local community center can also provide opportunities to meet new people. Whatever you do, go in with an open mind. Remember that the worst-case scenario would probably be that you do not enjoy yourself, so you leave early or simply decide not to return. Best-case scenario, you meet a new person who could turn into your next best friend!

Taking Care of Current Relationships

Taking care of the relationships you currently have is very important. One of the biggest challenges, especially in old friendships, is to figure out how to continue to nurture these relationships as they change over time.
* Andria and Amelia

Andria had been friends with Amelia since they were fifteen. They met in high school and had remained friends through many trials. Recently, however, Andria felt that they were growing apart. At age thirty-three, they had different careers and goals. Amelia had been dating someone for over a year—her boyfriend and she were spending a lot of time together and were starting to talk about marriage—and Andria was feeling left behind. Amelia hardly ever called Andria. Whenever they talked or got together, it was because of Andria’s efforts, and Andria was starting to resent the fact that she was the only one making an effort to maintain the relationship.

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? What did you do? Did you let the problems pile up, not speaking with your friend or partner about them until you finally got to the point where you said, “Enough!” and ended the relationship? Or did you talk to your friend or partner about how you were feeling so that you could try to work it out before it got to that point? Ideally, of course, you want to do the latter, to address these kinds of problems as they occur, rather than let them pile up until they become unmanageable.

Relationships are like cars: when you own a car, you take good care of it. Hopefully, you regularly have your car tuned up, you get the oil changed, the tires rotated, and so on. And if something starts to rattle under the hood, you take it in to get it checked out.

You need to maintain a relationship just as much as you need to maintain a car: you need to do regular maintenance, which would involve regularly calling your friend, asking about his day, buying him a birthday card, inquiring about the health of his ailing mother, and so on. These are the things you must do to take care of the relationship and prevent it from deteriorating. But you also have to take care of major problems as they arise. This means letting your friend know that you don’t like it when he shows up for dinner twenty
minutes late without calling; it also means apologizing when your judgmental comments about his girlfriend start an argument.

Of course, this may be easier said than done. Many people avoid speaking up when they’re unhappy in a relationship because they’re afraid of the consequences. You might fear the other person will get angry with you for expressing your displeasure or that he might even end the relationship altogether. But again, think about the worst-case scenario: the relationship ends. On the other hand, chances are that if you don’t discuss the problems and your feelings, the relationship will end anyway, as your resentment toward the other person will grow and you will eventually get fed up and end the relationship yourself! But best-case scenario, you discuss the problems with your friend, and you both resolve to work to make the relationship healthier.

**Balancing Enjoyable Activities and Responsibilities**

Part of what’s involved in taking care of your relationships is finding a good balance. But what does finding a good balance mean exactly? You understand the importance of having regular events in your life that are fun, interesting, fulfilling, and relaxing: things you do just because you enjoy them. In our relationships, it’s important that we continue to do these things in spite of the demands that others will inevitably place on us. In other words, we need to work on balancing those enjoyable activities with the responsibilities we have in our lives (Linehan 1993). And this isn’t as easy as it might sound!

Of course, we all have responsibilities—going to work, paying the bills, cleaning up the house, taking care of our children and pets—and these are just as important as doing enjoyable activities in order for us to feel fulfilled. But when our enjoyable activities conflict with what others want us to do—whether this is a responsibility or their enjoyable activity—we can run into interpersonal difficulties.

Think about a time this has happened to you: your partner wants to visit her parents this weekend, but you were planning a night out with your friends.
This is an example of your partner placing a demand on you that conflicts with your enjoyable activity. So what do you do? Do you have a tendency to always do what your partner—or friend or another important person in your life—wants you to do? Or do you sometimes put your own needs first?

This is what is meant by balance: in our relationships, we certainly need to give, but at times we also need to take. Always giving in to the other person’s wishes won’t be healthy for your relationship; in the long run, you’ll end up feeling resentful because your needs aren’t being met and because your partner is always getting her own way, even though you’re the one allowing this to happen! If you feel guilty about putting your own needs first at times, go back to chapter 6 and review the skill of acting opposite to your emotion. Putting your own needs first at times is not acting against your morals and values: rather, it’s taking good care of yourself and your relationship, so keep doing it, and gradually the guilt you’re feeling will dissipate.

On the other hand, in order to maintain healthy relationships, you can’t always put your own needs first, or your partner will end up resenting you. The following section offers some communication skills to help you discuss these kinds of problems as they arise in your relationships.

Communication Is Key

Have you ever found yourself feeling angry with a friend and not wanting to talk to him about it because you don’t want to rock the boat? Do you find that you have a hard time expressing how you feel or what you want from people you care about because of the fear that they’ll get angry with you? So you decide to ignore your feelings, or you decide to end the relationship, since your friend obviously doesn’t care about you that much or he would have noticed there was a problem, right? Wrong! There are lots of things that can go wrong with a relationship when we’re not communicating properly.
Four Communication Styles

Communication usually takes one of the following styles:

**Passive.** If you're a passive communicator, you stuff your emotions rather than express them. It’s often easier to just ignore your emotions rather than speak up and risk the other person feeling negatively toward you. But being passive shows a lack of respect for your own needs, and gradually this will make you feel resentful toward the other person as your needs aren’t getting met.

**Aggressive.** If you're an aggressive communicator, you express yourself through domination and control: yelling, swearing, throwing things, making threats. You're concerned with getting your own way, and you don't really care how it affects others. Being aggressive often ends in feelings of guilt and shame for the way you’ve behaved and makes it more likely that you'll lose relationships that are important to you, when others decide not to put up with being disrespected and abused.

**Passive-aggressive.** If you're a passive-aggressive communicator, you don't directly express yourself but communicate your emotions in more subtle ways, such as using sarcasm, giving people the silent treatment, or slamming doors. You get your message across without actually saying the words, and you do this in a way that’s damaging to the relationship.

**Assertive.** If you're an assertive communicator, you express your thoughts, feelings, and opinions in a clear, honest, and respectful way. You’re concerned with meeting your own needs and meeting the needs of the other person as much as possible through listening and negotiating.

Obviously, assertive communication is the best way for you to communicate with others, but it’s often one of the most difficult because it means acting from your wise self.
**What Is Your Style?**

Now that you’re aware of the four styles of communicating, it’s important for you to start paying attention to what your typical style is. Usually we use different styles at different times, depending on the person we’re interacting with, the situation, and many other factors. The idea here isn’t just to diagnose your communication style but to become more aware of how you communicate so that you can make a choice to change that style if you want to.

Of course, it also takes time to change behaviors, so keep in mind that it will likely be difficult for you to become assertive right away if this isn’t how you’re used to communicating. Like any skill, being assertive takes practice. You may find that acting assertively will feel as though you’re actually acting aggressively if you’re not used to asking for what you want. If you’re like most people, learning to be assertive may be uncomfortable and even scary at times, but gradually you’ll discover that this is the healthiest way of communicating, and hopefully you’ll see positive changes in your relationships.

**How to Be Assertive**

Assertiveness is really about acting from your wise self when you’re communicating with someone. It’s about choosing how to act instead of just reacting from your emotions. Following are some guidelines to help you become more assertive in your relationships.

**Mindfully Listen to the Other Person**

One of the most powerful ways of connecting to someone is just to listen to him. This is important in being assertive, because when you’re asserting yourself you’re trying to meet the needs of the other person as well as your own. So pay attention, and listen to what your friend has to say. Remembering
that mindfulness is doing one thing at a time with your full attention, make sure you’re not doing something else while you’re talking to him; watching television or checking your email, for example, will send the message that you’re not paying attention and that you don’t really care about what he has to say. Instead, listen mindfully, with your full attention, noticing when your mind wanders and gently bringing it back to the present moment.

**Be Nonjudgmental**

Being nonjudgmental will reduce the amount of emotional pain in your life (see chapter 5). This skill is also really helpful when it comes to healthy communication.

You know how it feels to be judged: it triggers painful emotions and often gets you stuck in your emotional self. Being judgmental won’t be helpful for you or the other person, so instead of blaming or judging, stick to expressing the facts and your emotions. Talk to the other person the way you would like to be spoken to.

**Validate**

Just as self-validation is a skill that reduces your emotional pain (see chapter 4), validating someone you’re interacting with will have a positive, soothing effect on her as well. Validating someone else is very similar to validating yourself: the bottom line is that you let the other person know that you understand what she feels. Remember that understanding what someone feels doesn’t mean that you must like it or agree with it. Essentially, you’re simply allowing the other person to have her emotions.

Reflect back to the other person what she’s said to you so that she knows you’re listening and you understand what she’s saying. Ask questions to clarify so that you do understand; let her know that what she’s saying is important to you and that it makes sense (again, even if you don’t agree with it).
Act According to Your Values

When you’re asserting yourself, it’s important to stick to your morals and values (Linehan 1993). Have you ever made up an excuse when someone asked you to do something you didn’t want to do? It’s perfectly okay to say no and, rather than lie, to be honest about the reason, even if it’s just because you don’t want to! Being assertive means you tell the person you don’t want to do what he’s asking of you, and you’ll find that your self-respect will increase (Van Dijk 2009).

Of course, you have to balance this with not damaging the relationship: for example, you wouldn’t want to turn down your friend’s dinner invitation by saying that you dislike his cooking. It would be better to say that you already have plans. When the truth is likely to be hurtful and possibly damaging to the relationship, it’s okay to tell a little white lie; just be cautious that this isn’t happening regularly, or it will affect your self-respect (Van Dijk 2009). Another option is to say no without giving a reason.

One of the most important things to remember about assertiveness, however, is that even if you act completely skillfully, there are no guarantees that you’ll get what you want. What asserting yourself will guarantee is that you’ll feel good about yourself after the interaction for acting from your wise self, maintaining your own self-respect, and not acting in ways that are damaging to the relationship. Hopefully you’ll reach your goals, but if you don’t, the satisfaction of being assertive is rewarding in itself!

The following mindfulness exercise is an informal one that you can practice any time you’re having an interaction with someone.

≈ EXERCISE: Communicating Mindfully

Remember the definition of mindfulness: doing one thing at a time, in the present moment, with your full attention and with acceptance. As you communicate, pay attention to the person you’re interacting with. Don’t do
anything else while you're having this interaction: turn off the television; turn away from your computer; put down your cell phone; close your book.

When you notice your attention wandering from the person, gently bring yourself back to the present; ask him to repeat himself if you missed something. Accept whatever he’s telling you; accept any emotions or thoughts that arise within you in response. Don’t judge yourself for being distracted. Don’t judge the distractions; just be aware and notice these things.

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People do notice when we’re more present and engaged with them; practicing mindfulness in this way will improve your relationships, so bring mindfulness to your interactions with loved ones as often as you can.

≈ TEN TIPS FOR IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS

1. Remember that one of the primary goals most of us have in life is to have other people care about us; needing other people in our lives is part of what makes us human. When you’re putting yourself out there and meeting new people, it can help if you remember that the people you’re meeting are probably nervous too.

2. While it’s important to work out the big problems in your relationships when they arise, it’s even more important to take good care of your relationships on an ongoing basis (like regular maintenance on your car) to prevent the relationship from ending.

3. Not all relationships are salvageable. Take an inventory of the relationships you have in your life and think about how healthy they are. Sometimes we need to end unhealthy relationships when our attempts at making them more positive aren’t successful.
4. Even when you're being assertive, it's important to remember that there are no guarantees that you'll get what you want; acting skillfully will only make it more likely that you'll achieve your goals.

5. Everyone has the right to say no to unwanted requests, and you don't even have to give a reason!

6. Being assertive is very different from being aggressive. If you're used to being more passive, you may feel like you're being aggressive when you start practicing assertiveness, but remember, being assertive is about treating both yourself and the other person with respect.

7. We all learn our communication styles from somewhere, so don't judge yourself if you're an aggressive, passive, or passive-aggressive person. Simply accept it, and work on making some healthy changes in the way you interact with others.

8. The relationships we have in our lives influence how we feel; it's important to work toward having positive, healthy people around us on a regular basis.

9. Work toward having a balance in your relationships so that sometimes you're putting your own needs first. This isn't selfish; it's self-care and will benefit the relationship in the long run.

10. Being mindful when communicating with others will benefit your relationships. People notice when you're present and really engaged in your interactions with them.

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Wrapping Up

We all need people, and having positive relationships in your life will help to improve your mood. Sometimes relationships aren’t healthy, and to live a healthier life, you may need to consider ending an unhealthy relationship. It’s also important to look after your relationships by maintaining a balance; this means meeting your own needs as well as those of the other person. Finally, assertive communication is key to caring for your relationships. This chapter focused on teaching you this important skill.

Remember that the relationships you have in your life can go a long way to influence how you feel emotionally, so it’s important that you have positive, healthy people in your life.
Conclusion

When you’re unable to manage your emotions, you find that your life really feels unmanageable. Your relationships suffer, your self-esteem suffers, and it’s hard to hold down a job, to get to where you want to be in life, and sometimes even to think straight.

The skills you’ve learned in this book can help you change all that. None of this is easy, of course, and you really need to develop the mind-set that these skills are a new way of living your life. You can’t just read this book and expect changes to miraculously occur. It’s up to you to put these skills into practice, to change the way you’ve been living your life. If you can make that choice and stick to that decision, practicing the skills that you’ve learned here—even when things are difficult and you know it would much easier to allow yourself to slip back into your old patterns—you will learn over time to manage your emotions in a healthier way.
Make a Plan

As with anything in life, having a plan of action can make doing this a little easier. You might want to make some notes on a blank piece of paper.

First ask yourself, what changes, if any, have you started making already since reading this book? For example, have you started practicing mindfulness exercises? Have you been noticing what state of mind you’re in? Have you been working on being more effective in certain situations?

If you have started making some positive changes in your life, however small, great! Make sure you acknowledge these changes and pat yourself on the back for the work you’ve done so far.

If you haven’t started making any changes yet, can you think of something that’s prevented you from doing so? What’s getting in the way? Are you afraid? Are you undecided about whether these skills will actually help? If these kinds of thoughts are holding you back, remind yourself that what you’ve been doing so far hasn’t been working; you need to make some kind of changes, so why not start here? If you can think of anything else that’s getting in the way, see if you can work around it. Ask friends and family for help if you can’t figure this out on your own.

You might start by reviewing the chapters in this book and seeing if you can identify one area that you could work on. For example, you might start working on acting the opposite to just one emotion, like anxiety (see chapter 6). Or you might start working on taking better care of yourself with self-soothing activities (see chapter 7). You probably don’t want to pick what seems like the hardest skill for you. Rather, pick something that seems doable. If you can start on something less difficult and have some small successes, you’ll be more likely to continue working, over time, on skills in areas that are more difficult for you.
Be Your Own Cheerleader

Remember that the way you talk to yourself will have an impact on your feelings and behaviors, so be aware of how you’re talking to yourself about the changes you’re trying to make. Instead of reminding yourself of how difficult this is, or pointing out to yourself when you don’t achieve a goal, encourage yourself. You might even want to write out a list of statements to cheer yourself on when you’re struggling, like “Yes it’s hard, but I’m still working at it, and over time I’ll get there.”

Ask for Help

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. In fact, I’m certain that the people who care about you will not only be happy to help if you ask, but they will also be happy to know that you’re working on helping yourself manage your emotions more effectively. These skills are going to benefit the people who care about you, as well, so lend them this book, or teach them a specific skill you’re needing help with, and let them know exactly what you’d like them to do to help you. For example, you can ask them to point out when you’re being judgmental or when you’re acting from your emotional self. Keep in mind, though, that if you ask for help, you have to be willing to accept the help that’s offered, so don’t lash out at your loved ones when they’re doing what you’ve asked.

Be Patient

Changing the way you deal with (or don’t deal with) your emotions takes time. You’ve been stuck in this pattern for a lifetime, so you have to remind
Calming the Emotional Storm

yourself that you won’t likely be able to make these life changes overnight. As hard as it is, you need to have patience with yourself. If you put the effort into practicing these skills, over time, you will see positive changes. Some people see changes sooner than others, of course, and everyone is different. But if you work at it, you can make your life a happier, healthier one. Good luck on your journey.
References


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Learn Skills for Calming Your Emotions and Regain Balance in Your Life

When you have difficulties managing your emotions, it can feel like you’re losing control of your whole life. Anger, hurt, grief, worry, and other intense feelings can be overwhelming, and how you react to these emotions can impact your ability to maintain relationships, succeed at work, or even think straight! If you find it difficult to understand, express, and process intense emotions—and most of us do—this book is for you.

*Calming the Emotional Storm* is your guide to coping with difficult emotions calmly and responsibly by using powerful skills from dialectical behavior therapy. This method combines cognitive behavioral techniques with mindfulness practices to change the way you respond to stressful situations. By practicing these skills, you can stop needless emotional suffering and develop the inner resilience that will help you weather any emotional storm.

This book will teach you how to:

- Establish a balanced life for an everyday sense of well-being
- Let go of unwanted worries and fears
- Become better at accepting yourself and others
- Work through a crisis without letting emotions take over

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