

# CHAPTER 14

## Using the Four Steps to Help You Move Forward in Your Life

Now that you can reliably identify your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations with Step 1: Relabel, can change your perception of their importance and accuracy with Step 2: Reframe, can sharply focus your attention while the uncomfortable sensations are present with Step 3: Refocus, and are beginning to change your perspective with Step 4: Revalue, you are ready to use the more advanced Four Steps techniques. As we mentioned in chapter 11, we did not want to teach you too many advanced methods for dealing with deceptive brain messages until you had practiced with regular Refocus and Regulate & Refocus for a while. Our primary goal in delaying this information is that we wanted you to *experience firsthand* what it is like to deal with these bothersome, upsetting physical and emotional sensations in a new way—by becoming comfortable with allowing the sensations to be present while directing your attention elsewhere (i.e., Step 3: Refocus). The second reason for waiting until now is that you needed to have a solid understanding of true emotions versus emotional sensations so that you could design appropriate Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness activities that will help move your life forward in positive ways.

What follows is a description of several creative ways you can use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness and the Four Steps to your advantage. We have divided them according to general deceptive brain messages or themes, including:

- Standing Up for Your True Self in Relationships—Saying What You Really Think and Feel and Acting in Accordance with Your True Interests
- Resisting Momentary Rewards—Withstanding Cravings and Desires
- Perfectionism and the Fear of Rejection—Learning How to Make Small Mistakes
- Dealing with Apathy, Depression, Boredom, and Fatigue

- Achieving Optimal Performance
- Changing Unhealthy Habits

## **Standing Up for Your True Self—Saying What You Really Think and Feel and Acting in Accordance with Your True Interests**

As you have seen, when your brain *ignores, minimizes, or dismisses* your true self, you end up neglecting your needs, goals, and values. In some cases, you may not even notice what is happening, but the cumulative effect of living your life this way can be substantial. When it becomes more of a repetitive approach toward yourself, you end up putting others first at your expense, just like John used to do. In his case, his repetitive fear that Alicia would leave him resulted in his not caring for himself well and putting virtually all of his attention on Alicia and her well-being. Although it's understandable why he had these fears and insecurities (e.g., his interactions with Coach), John's near-constant focus on Alicia clearly was not healthy for him and was not a balanced way to go through life. As he was able to bear witness to his own destructive behaviors and brain messages, he realized that he needed to make changes in his life, but he was not sure how to do it. The answer was to use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness. Here's an example of how Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness could have helped him.

To begin the process, John needed to develop a Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plan similar to Ed's in chapter 11. His first goal was to think about what self-care situations would distress him or keep him from doing things that were beneficial to him. After he completed such a list, he rated the situations based on how much it would upset him to engage in those activities. Here's an example:

### **JOHN'S LEVEL OF DISTRESS RELATED TO ATTENDING TO HIS NEEDS AND INTERESTS**

Activity	Distress Level
Doing something Alicia likely will disapprove of or not like	100
Doing something for myself when Alicia says she wants to spend time with me or needs me	100
Checking e-mail/text every hour instead of every five minutes	95
Saying what I need	85
Checking e-mail/text every thirty minutes instead of every five minutes	80
Saying what I want to do	75
Waiting fifteen minutes to respond to Alicia when she calls/e-mails/texts	70

Activity	Distress Level
Making a decision	50 (inconsequential/no impact on Alicia) 75 (somewhat important/might impact Alicia) 90 (very important/very likely to impact Alicia)
Checking e-mail/text every ten minutes instead of every five minutes	55
Doing something for myself when Alicia is free but has other things to do	50
Doing something for myself when Alicia is busy	30

Once John completed the table above, he needed to think of enjoyable things he would like to do whenever the urge to care for Alicia or neglect himself might strike. Some of the things on his list included playing basketball with his friends, going to the gym more often, reading a book, watching “guy stuff Alicia doesn’t like” (such as action movies and sports) on TV, and so on. With this in mind, he then could make a list of activities that he could use as Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness exercises. Here’s what his list could have looked like:

## JOHN’S REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE

## MINDFULNESS LIST

1. At least once a week, do something for myself (e.g., exercise, meet up with friends) when Alicia is free but has other things she could be doing. With time, increase the length of time I spend in activities for myself or the frequency (up to something reasonable for both of us).
2. Check e-mail every ten minutes, then increase to fifteen minutes, thirty minutes, and so on until I am only checking personal e-mail twice a day. Let people know that if they have an urgent issue, they should call me. Put my cell in the “phone only” mode so that I do not hear when texts come in.
3. Unless it’s an emergency, do not immediately respond to any texts or e-mails I receive. Rather, wait at least fifteen minutes and slowly increase the delay in response time for personal contacts during my workday. On the weekends, only respond a couple of times a day unless it’s important or urgent. (Note: As you check personal e-mail less often, this will become less of an issue because the Habit Center’s drive to immediately respond will not be as pressing.)
4. Make inconsequential decisions at least once a day. With time, increase the number of decisions and importance of those decisions. When I make decisions about where to go, what to eat, which movie to see, base them on *my* interests, not on trying to please someone else or guess what they want to do. Work toward making bigger decisions or stating my opinions over time.
5. Whenever possible, make plans with others based on what is convenient and works well for my schedule. Do not check in with Alicia about every little plan—she will tell me when important things need to be marked on my calendar. Do not wait to see what she’s doing first—just make plans and live your life.

Since John’s biggest problem was rarely putting himself first, his priority needed to be on pushing himself out of his comfort zone with Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness and doing things that would seem more self-directed than he was used to. Unsurprisingly, his deceptive brain messages tried to resist this plan at first, asserting that taking care of himself was “selfish.” When we asked him to invoke his Wise Advocate with such thoughts, he reminded himself that his grandfather had outside interests and was well adjusted and balanced because of it. His grandfather never ignored his wife and he coordinated plans

with her, but he did not live his life *solely for her benefit* the way John was doing with Alicia. John's problem was not being thoughtless toward others, it was being that way toward himself. Therefore, Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness in his case meant letting go of the strong pull and desire to care for Alicia at his expense. Of course, if his problem were the opposite—that he did not spend enough time with Alicia or did not attend to any of her needs—his Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plan would look very different from this and involve his spending more time with her, not less. However, since this was not the case for John, his goal was to learn how to be more independent in making decisions and living his life while still being connected to Alicia.

## **Resisting Momentary Rewards—Withstanding Cravings and Desires**

One of the most difficult patterns of behavior to change are those actions that involve the Reward Center, such as eating excessively or unhealthily, drinking too much alcohol, engaging in risky or dangerous sex, gambling, gaming, smoking, over-shopping, or other momentarily pleasurable activities that end up harming you in the long term. How can you learn to decrease the cravings over time and how do you deal with the strong impulses associated with the behavior, especially when you are feeling stressed out, uncomfortable, or upset?

The answer, in most cases, is to use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to learn how to withstand the cravings—to see them for what they are—and to not act on the impulses whenever they arise. By using Relabel and Reframe, you can more easily identify the cravings for what they are—a desire to feel better right now. Then you can begin to see that strong impulses coming from your brain do not have to be acted upon. That's when you can make a free choice regarding what you actually want to do (rather than mindlessly following the impulse).

How does Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness fit into this? Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness, when applied to cravings, helps you safely evoke the emotional sensations (e.g., cravings, desires, impulses) while simultaneously encouraging you to not act in ways that will harm you in the long run. Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness also does something else: It acknowledges the strong biological forces involved in generating cravings and helps you teach your body and brain to work for you, rather than against you. It does this by

helping you to decrease your unhealthy or unhelpful behavior *slowly* over time, rather than all at once (i.e., “cold turkey”), so that the brain pathways associated with those cravings and actions wither. It’s the exact same process we’ve talked about before with Hebb’s law, Quantum Zeno Effect, and Self-Directed Neuroplasticity: The less attention you pay to something (either with your thoughts or through your actions), the weaker the brain circuits associated with that sensation or action become.

Consider the case of Nicole, a mid-thirties woman who smoked tobacco daily and responded to stress by overeating. She had tried to change both of these behaviors many times throughout her life, but always to no avail. Why wasn’t she having success? In the past, whenever January 1 would roll around, she would resolve to quit her unhealthy habits all at once. On the same predetermined day, she would stop smoking and go on a diet. At first, this approach seemed to work. She would go many days without overeating and would not smoke. Unfortunately, these positive results never lasted. After about a week or two, her cravings would ramp up to the point that they were no longer tolerable, and Nicole would give in because of how overwhelmed and pained she felt. This left her feeling defeated and sure that no program or approach would ever work in the long run—at least not for her.

What else could Nicole have done? She could have started by tackling *one* of her behaviors, rather than both of them at the same time, and she could have decreased her intake slowly, rather than cutting herself off all at once. By doing this, her cravings would decrease slowly as she paid less attention to those impulses and desires—and, in the process, her brain chemistry and the pathways supporting those cravings would decrease as well.

What was Nicole’s first step? She looked at her current behaviors and decided which one was more important to change first. In her case, smoking was having more of a negative impact on her life and was the higher priority. To quit smoking in a way that would ensure her cravings would not skyrocket out of control, Nicole needed to slowly decrease the number of cigarettes she smoked each day. When she started out, she was smoking about a pack a day (twenty cigarettes). Although her impulse was to just quit, without a taper plan, Nicole agreed to try to cut down by five cigarettes per week. She could do this in a number of ways, but realized that Thursday and Fridays tend to be her most stressful days. Given that she knew her cravings increase dramatically when she’s stressed, she chose to cut out one cigarette a day Saturday through Wednesday, and then remain at the same number of cigarettes on Thursday and Friday. She did this for the first three weeks, and then more slowly decreased the remaining cigarettes in the last two weeks. Her taper plan looked something like

this:

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Saturday: 19	Saturday: 14	Saturday: 9	Saturday: 4	Saturday: 1
Sunday: 18	Sunday: 13	Sunday: 8	Sunday: 4	Sunday: 1
Monday: 17	Monday: 12	Monday: 7	Monday: 3	Monday: 1
Tuesday: 16	Tuesday: 11	Tuesday: 6	Tuesday: 3	Tuesday: 0
Wednesday: 15	Wednesday: 10	Wednesday: 5	Wednesday: 2	
Thursday: 15	Thursday: 10	Thursday: 5	Thursday: 2	
Friday: 15	Friday: 10	Friday: 5	Friday: 2	

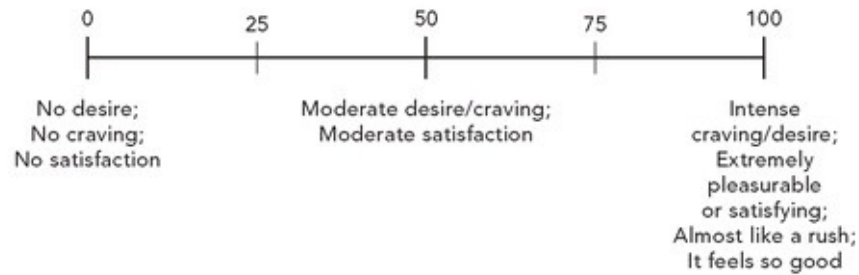
Regardless of how she chose to slowly taper off of cigarettes, we told her, *she needed to stick with her plan until she achieved her goal—that, in essence, was the Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness: to continue on with her planned changes no matter how strong the cravings became and to Refocus her attention whenever the impulses or urges to smoke struck.* (Or, if she did give in, analogous to the fifteen-minute rule, try to only smoke part of a cigarette, not the whole thing.) If she continued to do this, she would see noticeable changes in her cravings over time.

The key to staying on course with these kinds of changes is to chart (and celebrate) your successes and to notice that the cravings *do* decrease with time when they are resisted and not focused on.

Note: This approach works well for almost all behaviors, except for highly dangerous activities. As we've told you before, you should never use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to put yourself into a situation that will evoke strong urges to do something highly destructive, such as going to a bar when you are an alcoholic or attending a party where others are using drugs. Clearly abstinence, going to Twelve-Step meetings, and using regular Refocus or Regulate & Refocus in most of those situations is the best course of action.

Spurred by her successes with quitting smoking, Nicole then decided to move on to her eating habits, especially her tendency to overeat when she was stressed. To change how she ate in general, and especially in response to stress, she needed to engage in a process very similar to that used by Ed or John, with one twist. Rather than looking at how much she avoided a situation and how much distress it caused her, Nicole needed to assess how intensely she craved certain foods (especially when she was stressed) and how much they satisfied her. Figure 14.1 shows what the scale in the case of cravings and desire looks like:

### Distress and satisfaction scale



*Figure 14.1. Craving and Desire Scale*

To begin developing her Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plan, Nicole first needed to figure out the following:

- Which foods did she crave and in what amounts? What about when she was stressed?
- Which foods were better for her that she did like?
- What foods were better for her that she didn't like as much but possibly would eat?
- Did she have any specific goals in mind (e.g., eating more fruits or vegetables? Cutting down her saturated fat intake?)

As she was pondering her goals, she kept a log of what and how much she ate during the course of one week—without altering her eating patterns during that week—so that she had a good sense of how she currently was eating. She also charted her stress levels on a 1 to 10 scale (1=no stress, 5=moderate stress and 10=intense and overwhelming stress) throughout the day and noted when her cravings increased, so that she could see how strongly stress influenced her eating patterns. When she completed this task, she reviewed her log and goals, then devised the following list of foods (with portion sizes) and rated them based on how much she craved them or they satisfied her:

### **NICOLE'S LEVEL OF CRAVINGS AND SATISFACTION FROM CERTAIN FOODS/PORTIONS**



Food Item	Craving Intensity/ Satisfaction Level When Eaten
A pint of ice cream	100
3 portions of pasta and meatballs	90
4 slices of a large pizza	90
Double hamburger and large fries	90
Steak with mashed potatoes	85
2 portions of pasta and meatballs	75
½ pint of ice cream	65
2 slices of large pizza	60
Favorite healthy, well-prepared salmon dish (one portion)	50

Lean chicken, veggies, and rice	35
Salad with blue cheese or bacon	30
One slice of large pizza	30
¼ pint of ice cream	25
1 portion of pasta	25
Salad without blue cheese or bacon or excessive dressing	15

From her knowledge of the Reward Center, Nicole knew that the more she ate a particularly satisfying food, the more her brain and body would crave it—and the more of that food she would eat. This meant that she had to change her eating habits slowly and remain aware of her cravings with the Four Steps, especially in times of stress. Otherwise, the desires and cravings would overpower her and cause her to give in (i.e., overeat or eat unhealthy things she craved)—thereby sending her craving and her brain in exactly the wrong direction, back toward square one. The key was to gradually alter her eating habits according to her goals and to stick with her plan. As she did this, she would rewire her brain such that her Habit Center’s drive to overeat and her Reward Center’s cravings for highly desirable foods would decrease over time.

To begin actually making changes, Nicole needed to define her goals and come up with a reasonable plan she thought she could follow. This is an example of the things she aspired to change:

- Become aware of her cravings and tendency to overeat when stressed
- Eat more healthy foods each day
- Consume less fat and fewer calories each day (Note: She had been eating almost 3,500 calories a day when she was stressed—approximately 1,500 more than her body actually needed!)

With these goals in mind, we devised different commonsense ways Nicole could make changes to her diet based on the medical principle “Start low, go slow.” In the case of changing her diet, this meant making small changes at first, rather than cutting something out entirely (i.e., starting with *low* expectations), and making those changes slowly over time, not all at once. For example, with foods that are highly pleasurable, cutting down the portion sizes first, then decreasing the frequency to ensure her cravings did not skyrocket out of control would best serve Nicole and her brain. In contrast, to incorporate more healthy foods, she needed to slowly substitute in the less desirable, but good-for-her foods (like salmon and chicken) for the higher fat, higher calorie favorites she normally would consume (like pizza or hamburgers).

Clearly, she could use the same approach she used with smoking—to slowly cut down the amount she ate by approximately one-quarter per week. She could also use one of the approaches in the table below.

### WAYS NICOLE CAN USE REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS

Decrease the Frequency	Substitute Healthier Choices
Example: She eats pizza, hamburgers, or steak almost every night, which is increasing her cholesterol.	Example: Less pizza and red meat and more salmon, chicken, and veggies.
Strategy: Slowly decrease the frequency over several weeks, not all at once.	Strategy: Choose a healthier option that still is somewhat appealing to you even if it does not satisfy the craving as fully.
Change eating hamburger and fries/steak to no more than three times a week for two weeks, then . . .	Start by identifying foods you want to avoid, like fried chicken.

Decrease frequency to twice a week for two weeks, then . . .	When the craving for fried chicken hits, eat a lean, low-fat version of chicken instead.
Decrease to once a week for two weeks, then . . .	When you have a craving for a big steak, choose the salmon that satisfies 50 percent of your craving instead.
Decrease to once every two weeks, then monthly and so on.	When you can't get the thought of pizza out of your head, eat one portion of pasta with meatballs or one slice of pizza instead.

Nicole was successful because she *gradually* made these changes—not in days, but over weeks, and sat with the cravings and desires that arose. Why was this important? It takes time for the Habit Center to rewire and for the brain to “turn off” the strong cravings and impulses for highly desirable foods (or any substance or behavior that releases dopamine or other pleasure-inducing chemicals in the brain) emanating from the Reward Center. Along the path to change, the cravings can be quite intense, which is why slowly decreasing highly desirable foods and incrementally introducing healthier options with Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness is best. As Nicole found out, there were many days when, she says, “the cravings were really strong and I wanted to give in, eat that very thing I was trying to cut down, but I just didn’t because I knew what would happen. Instead, I had to sit there with that interminable pain and desire and wait for it to pass. As long as I used the fifteen-minute rule and Refocused on activities I enjoyed and that kept my mind active, like yoga, talking to friends, and the like, I was okay. I just had to keep reminding myself that even though it was painful, I was doing something that would rewire my brain in helpful ways.” It does not happen overnight, but with time, as we described previously, the desires and cravings have less hold over you.

In fact, by regularly charting her progress with the desire and satisfaction scale (i.e., seeing how much her cravings ratings changed over time), she could see that her desire for healthy foods increased while her cravings for unhealthy ones decreased over time as her brain rewired. Most encouragingly, she noticed small decreases in her cravings within a few days and clearly noticeable ones within the matter of a few weeks.

The bottom line is this: *Gradually cutting down the activity and sitting with the discomfort that arises—without overidentifying with or excessively focusing your attention on it—is your best option.* As with all uncomfortable physical and

emotional sensations, you need to Relabel that craving, Reframe it, and then Refocus on something that is healthy for you without pushing the discomfort and pain away or overly attending to it. Then, whenever possible, Revalue the pain and unsettling sensations as related to craving so that you can skillfully deal with it. Determine whether the sensations are related to your true self (i.e., you are grieving the loss of something that is important to you) or are generated by strong biological forces related to deceptive brain messages. Although it is difficult, using Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness in these ways will help you learn to withstand strong cravings/desires/longings, deal with your true emotions, and get to the other side with healthy, wholesome and constructive behaviors.

## **IN MOST CASES, MODERATION IS KEY**

In contrast to smoking or other clearly harmful activities, eating is something we have to do every day. It can also bring us great pleasure that can get us into trouble, including increasing our weight, increasing cholesterol, or causing diabetes. The same goes for alcoholic beverages, playing video games, or any other pleasurable activity that can, if overindulged, lead to you slavishly following cravings and impulses to your detriment.

The truth is that very few foods or drinks are “bad” in and of themselves when taken in moderation and savored as a special treat. There is nothing wrong, for example, with eating pizza once in a while, sharing a bottle of wine with friends, or playing video games a couple times a week. Medical science regularly shows us that foods and even alcohol in moderation can have positive effects for the body. The key, though, is moderation.

As you’ve seen with Nicole and Steve, when the special treat leads to overwhelming cravings, problems generally ensue. The more they focused on those activities and associated them with significant stress relief (rather than walking, going to yoga, talking to friends), the more automatic and mindless their behaviors became.

When dealing with strong cravings, the goal is to learn how to resist the cravings and see them for what they really are: erroneous biological messages with no real meaning that do not need to be followed. Remember, the cravings become stronger when you

continually indulge them. Each time you do this, you are increasing the chances that you will set up strong, enduring brain pathways that cause you to act in automatic, habitual ways that are not always beneficial to you.

This is why we often say with respect to deceptive brain messages: Don't believe everything you think or *feel*. Your body and brain can trick you into thinking that you will feel better if you just act on the craving. While this is true—you will experience a momentary relief or pleasure—giving in can cost you dearly in the long run, as you've seen with Steve.

So, how do you still enjoy some of life's finer pleasures but not set yourself up for unending cravings? Moderation. When you eat pleasurable foods occasionally (as opposed to daily or every time you are stressed), your brain will not ramp up its cravings for those foods and you will be able to resist giving into them automatically. You will have a *choice* in what you do because the craving will not overpower you. You will not be desperately seeking relief or pleasure, but will be enjoying the food because you want to.

The key is to ask yourself: What am I about to do and why? Is it because I feel overwhelmed, sad, stressed, angry, or down? If the answer to that second question is yes and the reason you want is to eat or drink is to decrease your uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations, then you should use the Four Steps and Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to help you withstand the craving. In contrast, if the answer to that second question is no and you want to eat or drink for social reasons, for enjoyment, or to celebrate, then use moderation and mindfully enjoy the experience.

## **RELATIONSHIPS—DON'T DIVE IN OR NEGLECT YOUR TRUE SELF BECAUSE OF CRAVINGS AND LONGINGS**

Just as people can be “addicted” to food, drugs, alcohol, video games, sex, or gambling, they can very rapidly become addicted to relationships, too. Whenever you enter into a relationship—romantic

or otherwise—solely out of desire (either for something the person possesses, for how you feel when you are with that person, or to avoid the pain of loneliness) and do not see the person for who he or she really is, you are putting your true self at a serious disadvantage because you likely will end up neglecting your needs, thoughts, or values in some way. Like John, you may end up not telling the person how you really feel or push aside your own interests, or you may act like Sarah and continually replay interactions in your head so that you can figure out how to “fix” yourself, thereby ensuring that people like you.

To avoid this brain-based trap, use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness in the ways John did and acknowledge that, like Nicole, feeling pain related to strong cravings is part of the human condition, but not something to run from or cover up with unhealthy habits. Instead, rely on your Wise Advocate to help you figure out how to constructively deal with people so that your needs are balanced with theirs in a healthy way.

## **Perfectionism and the Fear of Rejection—Learning How to Make Small Mistakes**

Clearly social bonds and acceptance are important to all of us, but there are times when the brain takes over and distorts situations in ways that cause a person to become overrun with fear and insecurity. Sarah and Ed are two clear examples of perfectionism leading to narrowed and chronically stressful lives. In both of their cases, fear of rejection or negative evaluation kept them from living full, active lives. To counteract the deceptive brain messages in their heads and learn how to deal with the ensuing anxiety, they used Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to help them see that making small, relatively inconsequential mistakes (Sarah) or putting themselves out there (Ed) would expand their worlds, not limit or diminish them. For Ed, this meant that he had to practice asking women out and being more social, even when he was scared to do so. For Sarah it meant that she had to practice deliberately making small mistakes or not rechecking things multiple times and then sitting with the anxiety that arises.

Below is an example of how Sarah used Refocus with Progressive

Mindfulness for her perfectionism.

## **POTENTIAL REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS LIST FOR SARAH**

Write an e-mail to someone and deliberately spell a few words incorrectly. Do not send the e-mail, but do not fix any of the words or problems in the document, either.

Go to the grocery store and separate your items into three separate checks. Ask the checker to ring up each group separately in the same visit. This may cause the people behind you in line to become impatient—sit with the anxiety this causes but continue to have the clerk check you out in three separate bills.

Write an e-mail to someone you trust (e.g., friend or family member) and do not check to see if you made any errors when you wrote it. Just write it and send it off. Do not look at or check the e-mail after you send it.

Write an e-mail to someone you trust and deliberately make some mistakes in the e-mail. Send it off without correcting it and sit with the anxiety that ensues. Talk with a friend whom you trust and possibly who knows what you are doing. Deliberately pause several times in the conversation for no reason, or look away from the person many times, as if you are not paying attention.

Complete a project at work and check it only once (rather than five times), then hand it in.

While Sarah's list focused on making mistakes that would induce her anxiety, Ed's list focused on ways he could meet people and be more social while experiencing fear and insecurity. One important aspect of his Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness list is that it is based around *achievable behavioral goals*, rather than specific results that depend on another person's response. When dealing with potential rejection in social situations, achievable behavioral goals allow you to see your progress even if the person is not interested in talking with or dating you. In Ed's case, this meant talking to someone or asking for (but not necessarily receiving) her phone number. In this way, the "outcome" is the achievable behavior (something that is based on Ed's actions), not a

specific result that is contingent upon another. Therefore, Ed’s Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness list would include many achievable behavioral goals—things that would get him out of the house and meeting people—rather than focusing on how someone may or may not respond to him. (Note: This Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plan could be merged with the other Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plan Ed devised in chapter 11 related to avoiding auditions, or they could be done separately.)

### **POTENTIAL REFOCUS WITH PROGRESSIVE MINDFULNESS LIST FOR ED**

Answer an online dating ad (but do not expect a response).
Go to a coffee shop, bar, or other social location and talk with someone.
Take a class where you likely would make mistakes or could be evaluated by others (e.g., foreign language, dancing, group exercise). The achievable behavioral goal is going to the class and participating in it, not anyone’s responses.
Go to a social location and ask a woman for her phone number or e-mail address. Do not focus on whether she gives it to you or not—simply ask and you have achieved your goal.
Participate in a speed-dating event. Make your goal learning one fact about each of the women you meet. Again, do not focus on whether you get any phone numbers or dates from the evening, just that you learned one thing about them.

## **Dealing with Apathy, Depression, Boredom, and Fatigue**

As with cravings, you need to begin seeing the low energy, tiredness, diminished interests, and lack of motivation powered by deceptive brain messages as a physical sensation and not a reflection of your true self. Although it may be true that you are tired and do not feel like doing something, you need to acknowledge that these physical sensations are holding you back in some way. They may keep you from completing important (but possibly boring or tedious) tasks, dissuade you from exercising, convince you that staying home is better than hanging out with friends, and so on. In all cases, these kinds of physical and emotional sensations are driven by deceptive brain messages that prevent you from achieving what you want or need to do. In Sarah’s case, the “deenergizing” feelings related to her depression caused her to stop exercising, isolate from



friends and family, and slow her down at work.

The solution to dealing with the kind of physical inertia Sarah described is to literally move your feet—to get going and get out there. When you are dealing with depression, the best plan is to simply choose something you normally enjoy and go do it. Even if you do not get the same level of pleasure out of the activity as you usually would or do not feel like going, engaging in any kind of physical activity you typically enjoy will help get you out of the rut you are in and back into your normal, healthy routines.

Similarly, Michael, a forty-four-year-old musician and songwriter, found that even when he was interested in his current music project there often were times when his attention would veer off or something would happen in his life that would “deflate” him. In those moments, he would not *feel* like playing or writing, even though he needed to get the job done on time. To combat his brain-based messages urging him to go take a nap or watch another episode of *CSI*, he would Relabel the sensations as fatigue; Reframe them as related to boredom, something else bringing him down emotionally, or a false brain message; and then Refocus by going back to the music he needed to finish. He found that within a few minutes of Refocusing he was back in the groove and those false feelings of fatigue would dissipate on their own.

From Sarah’s and Michael’s stories, one thing is clear: It does not matter whether the drive to isolate, sit on the couch, or not act is related to depression, boredom, apathy, or wanting to avoid dealing with something. The end result is the same—you withdraw from the world and neglect an important part of yourself. So, whenever lethargy, apathy, boredom, or fatigue strikes, use the Four Steps to constructively deal with it and get moving in some way.

## **Achieving Optimal Performance**

Similar to using constructive “should” statements to motivate you, the Four Steps can assist you in getting work done on time and keep you from excessively worrying about things that are beyond your control. For example, Christine is a twenty-eight-year-old office manager who effectively deals with many crises each day. Sometimes, late at night or early in the morning before going to work, she will worry about what the day will bring and whether she will be able to get it all done on time. The more she goes over potential scenarios in her head,

thinking about all the ways something *could* go wrong, the more false expectations she generates and the more anxious she gets. Heading out the door with those negative expectations firmly set in her brain, Christine dreads work and assumes that the day will end up exhausting and overwhelming her.

Rather than engaging in these self-fulfilling prophecies, Christine uses the Four Steps to see the deceptive thoughts and Refocus in ways that make her more productive. For instance, when she is up against a deadline, Christine can view the tension in her body and her quickening heart rate as a friend that is helping her stay more alert, improve her problem-solving skills, allow her to think more clearly, and work more efficiently, not a sign that something is terribly wrong or that the worst-case scenario she dreamed up over her morning coffee is now coming true. By combining this healthy, temporary stress with helpful “should” statements, she will drive herself forward and use her body and brain to support her goals and actions. Then, when things calm down, Christine can balance her work schedule by engaging in a slower, more relaxed pace during the rest of the day (or the next day, depending on her work demands) by taking the entire hour for lunch, focusing on her breath for five minutes around three p.m., getting outside for a ten-minute walk to clear her head, and so on.

## **SET A TIMER TO REMIND YOURSELF TO MAINTAIN A BALANCED LIFE**

Diana Winston, director of the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC) and coauthor of *Fully Present*, recommends setting a timer on your computer or phone to go off every hour during your workday. When the timer goes off, she says, take a few moments (e.g., a minute or two) to remind yourself to focus on your breathing and to gain perspective. These short respites each hour will allow you to tune in to your experiences and ensure that you do not get caught up in endless thought streams that lead to anxiety, excessive (nonoptimal) stress, or other uncomfortable physical and emotional sensations.

Try it and see what happens.

Again, the key is *balance*, not perfection. Working at a breakneck pace all the time or acting in a lackadaisical way most of the time (i.e., not putting in the

effort when it's needed) won't work well and will keep Christine away from achieving her true goals in life. Rather, allowing herself to push forward when it's really needed—to take advantage of her body's response to the stress in a healthy way—and to slow her pace when things are calm provides Christine with an optimal performance strategy that benefits her body, brain, and mind.

## **Changing Unhealthy Habits**

As you saw with Nicole's and Michael's examples, you can use Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness to change virtually any unhealthy habit you have. The key is to clearly define reasonable goals you believe you can achieve and to stick with it even when you experience strong cravings (like Nicole) or when you just don't feel like doing something (like Michael). For example, if you want to start exercising on a regular basis, but are tired at the end of the day, find a truly motivating reason within yourself, such as wanting to sleep better or wanting to be in better shape. As long as the reason is a positive one, based on your true self, not a negative, shame-based reason related to deceptive brain messages, that motivation will help sustain you even on the days you do not feel like going for a run or to the gym. Similarly, if you decide you want to follow a specific diet or exercise routine, you can use that to plan your goals while using the Four Steps to ensure that you remain on your path.

## **RELAXATION IS GOOD , TOO**

We've spent a lot of time telling you to continually apply the Four Steps to deal with deceptive brain messages, uncomfortable sensations, and unhealthy, maladaptive habits. While that is absolutely sound advice, we want to make sure you do not take away from this message that relaxation is bad or that using the Four Steps means you can never take a break.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, if you really listen to your true self, we bet there is a part of you that sees the value in relaxing and knows how important it is. Relaxation helps us recharge

and unwind, which is critical to maintaining balance and restoring our energy levels.

So make sure you spend some time each day relaxing and doing healthy, wholesome things that bring you pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfillment.

## **The Role of Medications**

Our discussion of moving forward in your life would not be complete if we did not address the potential role of medications in assisting you on your path. In general, we take a minimalist approach to psychiatric medications and only advocate using them when you cannot recognize that the deceptive brain messages *might* be false or if the struggle to resist acting on deceptive brain messages is causing you significant, marked distress. In other words, medications are necessary when the intensity of the discomfort caused by the deceptive brain message is difficult for you to tolerate or inhibits you from using the Four Steps.

What we do not want you to do is use medications as your only treatment. When medications are used as *the answer*, not as a bridge to self-improvement with therapy (either with a counselor or self-directed with the Four Steps), people often become complacent. This can happen because they feel better with the medication or because they buy into the deceptive brain message telling them that they are now dependent on medications for the rest of their lives.

We can tell you from our countless hours of clinical experience that using medications in this way is a mistake, unless of course you are dealing with a condition that is potentially dangerous when unmedicated, such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, chronic suicidal thoughts, serious problems with mood or thought patterns that significantly impair your day-to-day functioning. Therefore, we would prefer you to try the Four Steps without medications unless:

- You are having significant difficulties conceding that the deceptive brain messages *might* be false (i.e., lack of or impaired insight) or
- You are having significant problems functioning without medications.

In those cases where medications are warranted and necessary, use the lowest possible dose to increase your ability to see that the deceptive brain messages possibly are false or to enhance your functioning. As you improve, try to lower the doses with your doctor's permission while continuing to use the Four Steps.<sup>31</sup> Do NOT stop any medications without first talking with your doctor. You will generally find that over weeks and months of using the Four Steps, you may well be able to decrease your dose or be better able to tolerate the upsetting feelings that deceptive brain messages can cause.

Remember: For mild to moderate symptoms, medications should be used as a *bridge* to help you put forth the effort needed to improve your life with the Four Steps or any other kind of therapy. *Medications are helpful, but are not the answer in and of themselves* (again, unless you have a serious and potentially life-threatening psychiatric condition when not properly managed). As we mentioned earlier, even if medications are used, we frequently find in clinical practice that you may well be able to decrease the dose after weeks or months of using the Four Steps.

## Summary

As you have seen from the examples in this chapter, you can use the Four Steps to assist with a wide variety of situations, so use your creativity and knowledge of your deceptive brain messages to design Refocus with Progressive Mindfulness plans that get you engaged in the world and following the path of your true self. The key, as Connie learned years ago, is to keep yourself motivated by defining goals that matter to you and to remind yourself that whenever you say, "I can't," what you are really saying is "I won't."

So, continue to Relabel, Reframe, Refocus, and Revalue those false, unhelpful brain messages and keep moving toward your goals. With time, you will rewire your brain in such a way that those new activities become a regular, routine part of your life and those unhealthy habits will increasingly become a thing of the past.

In the final chapter of the book, we will review how to use the Four Steps to enhance your life.

# CHAPTER 15

## Putting It All Together

We know that learning the Four Steps and aligning your actions with your true self are no easy tasks, but with the skills you have learned in this book, you are well on your way to achieving your goals and shaping your life and brain in the ways you want. Let's review what you have learned.

We started out by introducing you to the concept of deceptive brain messages and how following even seemingly benign deceptive brain messages can result in rewiring your brain in unhelpful, unhealthy ways. From there we emphasized that you are not your brain and that you can and must make healthy choices on your behalf. We taught you how the brain works and showed you that it can be rewired to work *for* you—rather than *against* you—with Hebb's law (neurons that fire together wire together), the quantum Zeno effect (focused, directed attention holds neurons in place so they can fire and wire together), and Self-Directed Neuroplasticity via the Four Steps (sharply focusing your attention shapes your brain to support you). In addition, we explained how the brain learns to ignore, minimize, and neglect many of your true needs and true emotions in childhood and how that process leads to many thinking errors.

To help you along the way, we provided you with two allies who believe in and support your true self:

- Your mind, which enables you and gives you the power to choose what to focus your attention on
- Your Wise Advocate, which empowers you to see yourself from a loving, caring perspective and helps guide your true self in making choices about how to focus your attention

When they work together in your best interest, they are a very powerful twosome and great team advocating for and caring about you!

Combined, this information set the stage for you to learn our powerful Four Step method and find ways to apply it to your life. In Part Two, we drove home the point that while you are not responsible for the thoughts, urges, impulses, sensations, desires, or cravings that arise, you are responsible for how you act

and how you focus your attention. We taught you a powerful way to notice your deceptive brain messages and uncomfortable sensations with Step 1: Relabel and explained why they bother you so much with Step 2: Reframe. From there, we again stressed the point that the power is in the focus and that the more you direct your attention toward healthy actions by refusing to let your attention be grabbed repeatedly by the deceptive thoughts, the more you will change your brain in adaptive, wholesome ways.

As we repeated often, Step 3: Refocus is the key to empowering you to change your own brain so that it rewires to work *for* you, not *against* you, because it (along with your Wise Advocate) encourages you to choose constructive, healthy actions that engender supportive brain messages. When these kinds of healthy messages are focused on, they lead your brain to rewire in ways that support positive automatic responses.

In Step 4: Revalue, we explained that progressive mindfulness, the ultimate goal of the Four Steps, is an experiential process that results in you seeing the deceptive brain message as nothing more than a deceptive brain message—something that is inconsequential and not worthy of your attention. Revaluing also helps strengthen your Wise Advocate and its healthy messages, which enables you to further align your actions with your true self.

In the final section of the book, we clarified the difference between emotional sensations and true emotions, explained when “should” statements are helpful, showed you how to use Refocus to its fullest, and discussed the role of medications. Throughout it all, our goal has been to teach you how to notice what happens in your brain so that you can make informed choices about where you focus your attention and thereby shape your brain so that it supports you in healthy, helpful, and adaptive ways. In this final chapter, we will discuss how to begin your work with the Four Steps and how to nurture your true self.

## **Recommendations for Starting to Use the Four Steps**

For the first week or two of using the Four Steps, we recommend that you simply practice Step 1: Relabel and the breathing awareness exercises. While you are working on Step 1, keep the following guidelines and tips in mind:

Relabeling means calling the deceptive thoughts, urges, impulses,

desires, and sensations what they are.

- Use mental notes whenever possible to increase your ability to Relabel your deceptive brain messages. This strengthens your powers of observation.
- Identify all the deceptive thoughts, urges, impulses, desires, cravings, physical sensations, and emotional sensations that arise.
- Be vigilant to notice when you are lost in thought and use breath awareness to pull you back from the endless loops and spirals of thinking that can easily get out of control.
- Being aware of your thoughts, sensations, and experiences takes effort—it is an activity, not merely a state of mind.
- The more you Relabel, the more active your Assessment Center becomes, which helps it quiet the unhelpful parts of your Self-Referencing Center and Uh Oh Center.

Once you are able to effectively Relabel many of your deceptive thoughts, you can start Reframing them with Step 2. Here are a few things to remember:

Reframing asks you to change your perception of the importance of the deceptive brain messages.

- Your default mode has been to see the deceptive brain messages as “a part of me,” which makes you unable to see how false your deceptive brain messages are.
- Your goal with Step 2: Reframe is to say *why* these thoughts, urges, impulses, and desires are bothering you so you can change your perception of them.
- To do this, you must use your knowledge of how the brain automatically ignores, minimizes, and neglects your true emotions and needs, how it processes social pain, and how it generates thinking errors so that you can correctly identify what is happening and why you are bothered by these experiences.
- You can Reframe in many ways, including
  - It’s the brain, not me!
  - Thinking errors, including: All-or-



nothing, Catastrophizing,  
Discounting the Positive, Emotional  
Reasoning, Mind Reading, and  
“Should” Statements

- False expectations
- Faulty comparisons
- Social pain
- Trying to “get” the 5 A’s  
(Attention, Acceptance, Affection,  
Appreciation, Allowing) from  
others

- Reframing can change your Self-Referencing Center from a nagging scold to an empowered enabler, thus calming the Uh Oh Center in the process.

Then, Refocus your attention in healthy, constructive ways with Step 3:

Refocusing means directing your attention toward an activity or mental process that is wholesome and productive—even while the urges, thoughts, impulses, and sensations are present and bothering you.

- Never try to make the feelings go away or try to alter them in the short term.
- With deceptive brain messages, it’s not what you think or feel that matters, it’s what you do that counts.
- Notice where your *attention* is focused—this is what changes your brain.
- When possible, choose Refocus activities that are enjoyable or strongly engage your attention and interest.
- Ways to Refocus include:
  - Regular Refocus—any activity that is wholesome and captures your interest in a positive way.
  - Regulate & Refocus—