

YOU ARE NOT YOUR BRAIN

THE 4-STEP SOLUTION

for Changing Bad Habits,
Ending Unhealthy Thinking,
and Taking Control of Your Life

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The cases discussed in the book are based on real patients and real situations. The quotations are real; however, the details have been changed significantly and cases have been merged together to protect the patients' privacy with one exception: Connie Smiley, the stroke survivor highlighted in chapter 2, gave us express permission to use her name and story.

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To my mom, who has been my biggest advocate and ally—I couldn't have written this without you; and in memory of my grandmothers, Bertha E. Dow and Virginia Gladding

—Rebecca Gladding

To the people of Pacific Crossroads Church

—Jeffrey M. Schwartz

To all in need of faith, hope, love, and courage

Habit, if not resisted, soon becomes necessity.

—*Saint Augustine*

INTRODUCTION

There are only a few true necessities in life, but for many of us, it doesn't feel that way. A lifetime of habits, ingrained by repetition, can seemingly make us slaves to a not always beneficial master—our own brain.

Nothing is more confusing or painful than when your brain takes over your thoughts, attacks your self-worth, questions your abilities, overpowers you with cravings, or attempts to dictate your actions. Have you ever felt that something is compelling you to “go” places, mentally or emotionally, where you don't want to be? Do you find yourself acting in uncharacteristic ways or doing things you don't really want to be doing?

The reason is simple: *Deceptive brain messages* have intruded into your psyche and taken over your life. Left to its own devices, your brain can cause you to believe things that are not true and to act in any number of self-destructive ways, such as:

- Overthinking problems and fretting over things that are out of your control
- Getting stuck or panicked by unfounded fear and worries
- Blaming and chastising yourself for things that are not your fault
- Engaging in unhealthy behaviors to escape life's daily stresses
- Reverting to past patterns when you are trying to make a change

The more often you act in these unhealthy ways, the more you teach your brain that what is simply a habit (a learned behavior) is essential to your survival. Your brain does not distinguish whether the action is beneficial or destructive; it just responds to how you behave and then generates strong impulses, thoughts, desires, cravings, and urges that compel you to perpetuate your habit, whatever it may be. Unfortunately, more often than not, these behaviors are not ones that improve your life.

Clearly, the brain can exert a powerful grip on one's life—*but only if you let it*. The good news is that you can overcome the brain's control and rewire your brain to work for you by learning to debunk the myths it has been so successfully selling you and by choosing to act in healthy, adaptive ways. That's the mission of this book and the cornerstone of our approach: to share our

innovative, empowering method of learning how to identify and demystify deceptive brain messages, so that you develop healthy, adaptive brain circuits that enable you to live a fulfilling life free from these unwanted, unhelpful, and false intruders.

It will be *your* life, the life *you have chosen*, with the brain *you have sculpted*—not the old path of troubling actions and behaviors imposed upon you by deceptive brain messages.

How can you achieve this? With our Four Step method, which teaches simple skills you can use and *practice* every day and apply to any unsatisfactory part of your life. The result will be a lasting change in perspective, courtesy of a source that has been seriously stifled by the deceptive brain messages: your intelligent, caring inner guide. This friend will help you counteract deceptive brain messages and act in concert with your own goals, values, and interests. You will finally see *who you really are*—not who your brain has been *telling* you that you are—and put your true self in the driver's seat for the rest of your life.

Sound difficult to accomplish? You won't think so after you read the stories of others who have successfully employed our Four Step method to turn their lives around. *You Are Not Your Brain* touches on intimate personal journeys of several people whose lives were once plagued by deceptive brain messages and who managed to break the cycle—like Sarah, who struggled with depression and self-doubt; Ed, who was paralyzed by fears of rejection; Steve, who used alcohol to relieve stress; Liz, who worried about her future; Kara, who felt she was unlovable unless she was physically perfect; John, who repetitively checked e-mail as a way to assuage his fear that his girlfriend was leaving him; or Abby, who constantly worried that something bad would happen to someone she loved.

While your situation may not be as dramatic or intense, some form of deceptive brain messages impacts almost everyone at some point in life. Even if our lives usually run smoothly, when we are stressed or feeling down these false thoughts and unhealthy actions find a way to sneak in and cause havoc. They can shake our confidence, make us find ways to escape reality, use drugs or alcohol, overeat, spend money we don't have, avoid people we care about, become angry, develop excessive expectations of ourselves, not say what we really think or feel, limit our range of experiences, worry excessively . . . you name it. Even in the most benign situations, giving in to deceptive brain messages causes us to lose time that would have been better spent elsewhere. At its worst, we end up acting impulsively—in ways that are not representative of who we really are—and falling into grief and regret.

Most encouragingly, however, this powerful approach will help you identify and deal with the majority of your problems, not just one symptom, because we

focus on the underlying, unifying cause of your distress: deceptive brain messages. In short, *You Are Not Your Brain* will empower you to approach life's ups and downs in a skillful way, using just four easily learned steps. You will find that repeated practice with the Four Steps will transform your life—and your brain—giving you the power to become the person you want to be.

How This Book Is Unique

A critical component to getting better—in the long term—is to understand that these highly deceptive intruders are coming from the brain (not you!) and that these false messages are not indicative of who you are or of the life you could lead. Other popular therapies have failed to focus on this crucial distinction between who you *are* and the *symptoms* you are experiencing. Although some methods may teach how to change the meaning of your thoughts (as in cognitive-behavioral therapy) or how to become aware of your thoughts (mindfulness), they do not emphatically tell you that these brain-based messages are not representative of who you really are and that you do not have to act on them.

In contrast, this book combines the best of cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness while simultaneously helping you bolster your belief that you deserve to be free of these unwanted intruders. In so doing, you learn that to truly change your life and your brain, you must reevaluate the deceptive brain messages and *engage your mind to focus your attention on new, healthy actions and behaviors*.

So, not only do we teach you *how* to notice your deceptive brain messages and how to change your relationship to the deceptive brain messages, we also empower you by showing you that you have within yourself an intelligent, loving guide (your Wise Advocate) that knows that your *brain* has been the problem, not you or your mind.

The Four Steps Change Your Brain Wiring in Healthy, Adaptive Ways

The goal of the Four Steps is to teach you how to sharply focus your attention so that you rewire your brain in healthy, positive ways. How do we know this happens? We've already done the research at UCLA and proven it in people with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Drawing on our strong belief that the mind can change the brain, we asked people with OCD to participate in a research study where they either took

medication or learned our Four Step approach to dealing with the intrusive, negative messages they were bombarded with on a daily basis. Our team scanned people's brains before treatment and ten to twelve weeks after they had been following our method or taking medications.¹ Much to our delight, we found that the people who used our Four Step method had the same positive changes in their brains as the people who took medications to treat their OCD. These incredible brain changes occurred because of our mind's ability to change our brains (i.e., how we focus our attention). You can see the results for yourself in the images in figure I.1 below.

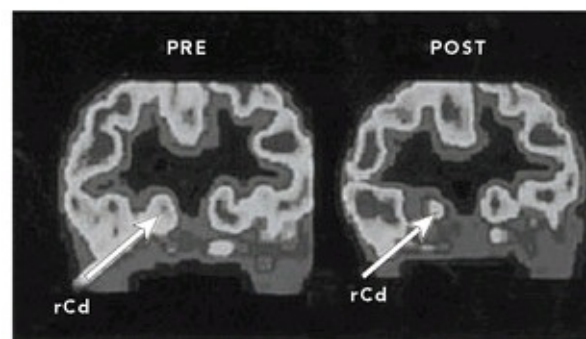


Figure I.1. Success with the Four Steps

PRE shows the brain before using the Four Steps and POST shows the brain ten weeks after using the Four Steps. Notice the decrease in the size of the rCd (a part of the brain that is overactive in OCD) once participants had been using the Four Steps for ten weeks. Copyright © 1996 American Medical Association²

Encouragingly, recent research in Germany replicated our findings. Those researchers found that OCD patients' symptoms decreased significantly *when they simply listened to an audio CD* that explained our treatment method. That bears repeating because it is key to the path you are about to embark on: No other interventions were given to these participants—just an audio CD, their commitment, and their effort to make progress by following the Four Steps.

THE FOUR STEPS

Step 1: Relabel—Identify your deceptive brain messages and the uncomfortable sensations; call them what they really are.

Step 2: Reframe—Change your perception of the importance of the deceptive brain messages; say why these thoughts, urges, and impulses keep bothering you: They are *false brain messages* (It's not ME, it's just my BRAIN!).

Step 3: Refocus—Direct your attention toward an activity or mental process that is wholesome and productive—even while the false and deceptive urges, thoughts, impulses, and sensations are still present and bothering you.

Step 4: Revalue—Clearly see the thoughts, urges, and impulses for what they are, simply sensations caused by deceptive brain messages that are not true and that have little to no value (they are something to dismiss, not focus on).

With our Four Step method, you will learn how to focus your attention in beneficial ways—just like these people did—so that you can retrain your brain while simultaneously bolstering and empowering your true self.

Whom This Book Is For

Given that deceptive brain messages affect all of us at some point, this book can help anyone with excessive nervousness, worry and anxiety, tension, depression, anger, substance abuse, other addictions (including gambling, gaming, and sex), relationship problems, or other automatic behaviors and habits that are causing problems in your life, such as overeating, repeatedly checking things like texts/e-mail, excessively researching information, overthinking and overanalyzing situations and events, or avoiding important aspects of your life.

You do not have to be diagnosed with a disorder for the Four Steps to help you. Rather, you just need to have had the experience of being stressed out and overrun by your brain—which can include thoughts, urges, impulses, repetitive behaviors, or uncomfortable physical or emotional sensations—and want things to be different in some way. Wherever deceptive brain messages surface and cause you to not trust reality or to do something you do not want to be doing (i.e., it is bad for you in the long run), the Four Steps can help.

As a self-treatment method, the Four Steps work extremely well in those with mild to moderate symptoms—people who are functioning in the world to some extent (e.g., working, volunteering, going to school, caring for others) and are bothered by what their brains are doing. For example, you may get easily distracted and may have trouble getting through your day, but you can focus your attention some of the time, are able to consider the fact that your brain is causing these symptoms, and are ready, at least to some extent, to put forth effort to make changes in your life. If you are already in therapy, you can work with your therapist to integrate the Four Steps into your therapeutic plan.

The Four Steps do not work well enough on their own (i.e., self-treatment) in people with debilitating symptoms—those that severely limit their ability to focus their attention and function in their day. People with severe symptoms likely need extra help by using medications or more intensive therapy (including weekly therapy or a structured program). Why? With severe symptoms, people are not able to focus their attention well enough to use the Four Steps and do not have the ability or insight to see that the deceptive brain messages *might* be false. The whole point of the Four Steps is to take you from believing so strongly in your deceptive brain messages to seeing their falsehood, so if your symptoms are at the point where you cannot even entertain the possibility that the deceptive thoughts are created by your brain, you will need some extra help. Similarly, we

want to make sure you understand that the Four Steps do not treat severe psychiatric disorders where insight is severely compromised in a chronic fashion, such as schizophrenia, where the brain's influences are too strong, such as mania in bipolar disorder, or when chronic thoughts of suicide are present.

Structure of the Book

We have chosen to divide this book into three parts so that we can emphasize how your sense of self gets fused with the deceptive brain messages (Part One), the skills you need to learn to untangle that unhelpful web of thoughts, emotions, and actions (Part Two), and how to apply the Four Steps to your life (Part Three). Note: If learning the skills, rather than knowing the theory and science, is your primary goal, you may want to read chapters 1 and 2, then skip to Part Two (chapter 6). You can always come back to the rest of Part One later.

PART ONE. A SENSE OF SELF

Given our emphasis on separating your sense of self from deceptive brain messages, we begin by teaching you what deceptive brain messages are and help you identify the ones that are bothering and impairing you. Then, you will see how the mind can powerfully and unexpectedly change the brain in positive ways when you intentionally direct your attention. From there, we explain why habits are so hard to break on a biological level and what happens inside your brain whenever deceptive brain messages surface. We also discuss how your sense of self fused with the deceptive brain messages.

PART TWO. THE SKILLS

We begin by discussing where many of your deceptive brain messages likely came from, then provide you with a brief overview of the key points you need to keep in mind as you begin learning the Four Steps. These are the tips and tricks our patients wished they had known from the start and that they thought we should share with you. With that background, we teach you each of the Four Steps, including how to become more aware of your deceptive brain messages with Step 1: Relabel; why deceptive brain messages bother you so much and lead to thinking errors with Step 2: Reframe; how to sharply focus your attention with Step 3: Refocus; and how to change your perspective of yourself with Step 4: Revalue. In these chapters, we will include many exercises to help you learn how to use the Four Steps effectively, and we discuss the major stumbling blocks others have encountered when trying to learn the Four Steps.

PART THREE. APPLYING THE FOUR STEPS TO YOUR LIFE

In this final section, we review various ways the Four Steps can be creatively applied to your life and explain the difference between true emotions (those that reflect your true self) and unhelpful emotional sensations (emanating from deceptive brain messages). We also explain how Step 3: Refocus can be used to help you deal with deceptive brain messages in relationships, when you are experiencing powerful cravings (such as stress eating), when you feel depressed or fatigued, when you are not getting out into the world because of fear of rejection, or when you have excessive expectations of yourself (i.e., perfectionism). The final chapter of the book is devoted to helping you develop your Four Step plan and living your life in accordance with your true self.

The encouraging message from our more than twenty-five years of research and clinical practice is that you *do* have control over your responses to these deceptive brain messages and you can use your understanding of how the brain works to your advantage by using our Four Step approach.

Let's begin!

PART ONE

A Sense of Self

CHAPTER 1

You Are Not Your Brain

Nothing is more confusing or painful than when your brain takes over your thoughts, attacks your self-worth, questions your abilities, overpowers you with cravings, or attempts to dictate your actions. “It’s like the invasion of the brain snatchers,” says Ed, a talented Broadway performer whose career was on hold for years because of his intense stage fright and fears of rejection. Running on autopilot in a most unhelpful way, Ed felt like his “brain just took over,” filling him with self-doubt and anxiety. “It was horrible and humiliating . . . it told me all these things about me that just weren’t true. That I was no good, a second-class citizen, that I didn’t deserve anything.”

What’s worse, those deceptive brain messages about Ed were dead wrong. The truth is that Ed is an accomplished performer who is revered and loved for his wit, ability to engage a crowd, and unshakable confidence on the stage. People are always excited to see him and are moved by his performances, yet his deceiving brain would not let him accept their rave reviews. Rather than believing in his inherently wonderful qualities and impressive skills, Ed’s brain was programmed to ignore his positive attributes and instead focus on what he *might* have done wrong or how people *might* perceive his mistakes—in essence, to home in on his minute flaws and imperfections.

Where did these negative beliefs and doubts come from? Although he sees that most of his deceptive brain messages took root in childhood, one specific experience changed everything for him. It all began, he remembers, when he was standing before a famous Broadway producer at age twenty. As he prepared to run the scene, Ed became dazed and paralyzed. “I just left my body,” he says. “It was the most horrifying experience.” The event haunted his dreams and, by the time he was thirty, it began to plague his days. “I was no longer having nightmares about being onstage naked, I was having that feeling more or less whenever I went to an audition. I felt exposed and raw.” Beneath that competent and tranquil façade, Ed was gripped by a fear of rejection and was in turmoil. Taking his deceptive brain messages completely at face value, Ed avoided auditions altogether, believing that his career was over—that his anxiety and fear had won.

DECEPTIVE BRAIN MESSAGES

Any false or inaccurate thought or any unhelpful or distracting impulse, urge, or desire that takes you away from your true goals and intentions in life (i.e., your true self).

Even if you are not dealing with overwhelming anxiety, you may recognize the feeling of being assailed by deceptive brain messages. Consider the case of Sarah, a twenty-nine-year-old public relations specialist who struggled with depression and perfectionism for many years before starting our program.

Like so many of us, she was afraid of not living up to expectations and questioned her abilities often. Even more troubling, Sarah was exquisitely sensitive to others' comments and actions, which caused her to often over-personalize interactions with friends, family, and coworkers. For example, if she was talking with a friend and he "paused, even for a second," she says, she would assume that she had said something wrong or upset the other person in some way. She would not be able to step back from her deceptive brain messages and look for an alternate explanation for why her friend responded as he did or realize that it had nothing to do with her. Instead, she would become instantly anxious and replay the seemingly botched interaction over and over in her head, hoping to come to some sort of resolution. Her brain would run in endless loops, asking numerous questions and envisioning various scenarios in a desperate attempt to control her anxiety.

No matter what she did, Sarah couldn't figure it out or make the terrible feelings of anxiety go away. Inside, she felt like a failure and somehow ended up believing she was the problem. She hoped and pleaded with herself: If only she could figure out what had happened, she could prevent a similar situation in the future and avoid this uncomfortable feeling and the associated negative thoughts. Unfortunately, she never did. Instead, she would get more anxious and continually overanalyze the situation until she was exhausted.

What Sarah didn't know at the time was that her brain was sending her the destructive message that to receive love, acceptance, and adoration, she had to be perfect and take care of everyone else. In essence, she had to ignore her true self and focus on others, no matter the cost to her.

TRUE SELF

Living according to your true self means seeing yourself for who you really are based on your sincere striving to embody the values and achieve the goals you truly believe in.

It includes approaching yourself, your true emotions and needs, from a loving, caring, nurturing perspective that is consistent with how your loving inner guide (Wise Advocate) sees you.

Sarah's deceptive brain messages became so overwhelming at times that she would stay in bed and try to shut out the world. She developed physical symptoms, including headaches, body pains, and a complete lack of motivation. It was as if a blanket of sleepiness had descended upon her and coated her entire being. As the depression progressed, Sarah stopped interacting with her family and friends, lost interest in her normal activities, and stopped exercising.

The more her brain churned out these negative messages, the more Sarah believed, as she says, that she was "a loser." Unable to resist those false thoughts or believe in herself, she fell deeper and deeper into despair until she was convinced that she was utterly worthless and that life was hopeless. Her depression came to inaccurately and inappropriately define her. "This is me," she thought, "a depressed, negative person who is not worthy of anything."

Similar to Sarah, Abby also struggled with a tendency to overanalyze. Rather than questioning her self-worth, Abby's deceptive brain messages caused her to constantly worry about the safety of her friends and family—and then repeatedly doubt whether she should say or do anything. Although she was fully capable of stating her views with clarity and conviction at work, Abby couldn't ever quite tell the important people in her life what she really thought or how she felt. "I just never know if I am doing the right thing," Abby said when she was in the thick of her symptoms. "How can I ensure the best for my family without making them feel like I am being overprotective or smothering them? What if someone gets hurt or makes a mistake and I knew it was a bad idea? How could I live with that, knowing that I could have done something to prevent that outcome?"

Abby's "guilt machine" often kicked into high gear when she did state her concerns, views, and opinions. For instance, if she put her foot down and forbade her children to do something, she would feel that she was disappointing them or depriving them in some way. As she explained, "I don't like conflict, but I don't like the results of staying quiet or being passive either." It was a veritable catch-22: She could not live with the guilt, yet she felt anxious and scared when she did state her views and beliefs.